

Revelation as an Interpretative Category of Faith?

Reflections on the Critique of Theological Extrinsicism

by Lukas Metz

This article situates contemporary theology's characteristic distance from extrinsicism and heteronomization within the wider horizon of the Enlightenment and German Idealism. Tracing parallels between the thought of Saskia Wendel and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, it illuminates both the strengths and the weaknesses of an approach that identifies God's creative act with God's gracious self-revelation. It argues that such a view should avoid over-emphasizing certainty and, in keeping with Wendel's own idiom, maintain that faith is fundamentally an interpretative practice that remains referentially oriented toward an external *Widerfahrnis*.

1. Introduction – 'Hans in Luck' or the Question of Abandoning Inherited Convictions

When Joseph Ratzinger referred to the German fairy tale of 'Hans in Luck' (*Hans im Glück*) in order to denounce the hasty sellout of fundamental theological convictions,¹ reactions were, as is well known, mixed: More sympathetic readers saw in Ratzinger's allusion to this ill-fated fairy-tale figure a visionary warning against the sellout of what is most decisively Christian. Accordingly, the young theologian's remark amounts to a sober *caveat emptor*: precisely when Christian convictions appear cumbersome or outdated, it is unwise to relinquish them in a burst of reformist zeal. Without due caution and restraint, one may 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' and – like the tale's protagonist – exchange genuine treasure for a valueless object of everyday life.

Ratzinger's caution belongs to the immediate post-conciliar period and was directed against unduly euphoric readings of the *Second Vatican Council*. Transposed to the present situation of fundamental theology, the image he invoked with reference to 'Hans in Luck' suggests that the classical distinction between creation and revelation is among those elements of tradition that some theologians would now set aside. Within German-speaking theology, in particular, a lively debate has emerged over whether creation already provides 'everything' and faith should therefore be conceived merely as an 'interpretative category'.

¹ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum. Vorlesungen über das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis, Mit einem neuen einleitenden Essay*, München ¹⁴2016, 27 f. Some were even convinced to have found an allusion to the works of Hans Küng, who seemed to have increasingly distanced himself from the fundamental beliefs of Catholic dogma. Ratzinger himself denied that his remarks were a deliberate reference to his former colleague.

In what follows, I situate this proposal – advanced above all by Saskia Wendel – within its intellectual genealogy and assess it from the perspective of fundamental theology.

2. Some First Explorations Concerning the History of Ideas

The distinction between creation and revelation is actually part of the DNA of Christianity. The biblical testimony (cf. John 1:12 f.; Rom 8:18–23; Eph 2:8–10; 2 Pet 1:4) ultimately led, via patristic and scholastic mediation, to the authoritative formulation of the *First Vatican Council*, which seeks to make a clear distinction between natural knowledge and knowledge by faith.² For the First Vatican Council, therefore, a clear distinction obtains between natural rational knowledge and the gracious perception of faith. Such definitions have long been – and remain – met with skepticism in contemporary theology. At least on the surface, a theology that styles itself ‘modern’ seeks to leave behind a nineteenth-century paradigm whose legacy continues to shape the present. In particular, the perceived dominance of papal authority is often treated as its *enfant terrible*.³ In addition, this form of magisterial self-articulation was often linked to doctrinal ‘extrinsicism’⁴ and ‘interventionism’⁵, both of which were perceived as problematic. A form of theology, which sees itself as an heir to the Enlightenment and an advocate of autonomous reason, wants to distance itself from both.⁶ The advance of historical sciences has forced a retreat of classical apologetics. If one understands the category of ‘revelation’ as referring to miraculous events, this gives rise to major difficulties in terms of logical justification with regard to historical and scientific questions.⁷ The reference to historically verifiable miracles and manifestations of God’s power is – at least in the eyes of many contemporary theologians – widely regarded as implausible.

This theological judgment, often expressed in wholesale terms, is merely an echo of earlier intellectual upheavals. In the course of the Enlightenment and German idealism, not

² Cf. *First Vatican Council*, Dogmatic Constitution “*Dei Filius*” on Catholic Faith (DH 3000–3045).

³ An articulation of the sentiment that is characteristic of German-speaking theology can be found in *Hubert Wolf*, *Der Unfehlbare*. Pius IX. und die Erfindung des Katholizismus im 19. Jahrhundert. *Biographie*, München 2023.

⁴ Cf. *Risto Saarinen*, Art. Extrinsic, in: RPP IV (2008) 780; *James J. Hennessey*, Art. Extrinsicism, in: *New Catholic Encyclopedia* V (1967) 770. According to many contemporary theologians, an extrinsic theology of grace can be found, for example, in the “*Decree on Justification*” (Session VI) of the Council of Trent (DH 1520–1583). For an authority-based extrinsicism, one might refer to the Dogmatic Constitution “*Pastor Aeternus*” (DH 3050–3075). The intellectual efforts of Maurice Blondel, Henri de Lubac, and Karl Rahner represent an attempt to conceive the connection between nature and grace in a more organic and less dualistic way.

⁵ Cf. *First Vatican Council*, Dogmatic Constitution “*Dei Filius*”, cap. III (DH 3009). As an example for an ‘interventionist’ view, we could mention the conviction of the later Pius IX. that Mary had saved him when he fell into the well; cf. *Wolf*, *Der Unfehlbare* (see fn. 3), 33 f., 191.

⁶ For the typical pro-Enlightenment critique of the traditional understanding of revelation, cf. the overview by *Eilert Herms*, Art. Offenbarung V. Theologiegeschichte und Dogmatik, in: TRE XXV (1995) 146–210, here 169–172. For more information on the project of the Catholic Enlightenment, cf. *Ulrich L. Lehner*, *Die Katholische Aufklärung. Weltgeschichte einer Reformbewegung*, Paderborn 2017; *Jürgen Overhoff*; *Andreas Oberdorfer* (eds.), *Katholische Aufklärung in Europa und Nordamerika* (Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert. Supplementa 25), Göttingen 2019.

⁷ Cf. the summary of objections against a ‘literal’ understanding of divine action by *Matthias Ruf*, »Handeln Gottes«. Zur Hermeneutik theologischer Rede von Gott (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 120), Tübingen 2022, 209–249.

only did the emphasis on human rational autonomy become more pronounced, but the tendency to ‘ethicize’ religion also became increasingly apparent.⁸ On this account, the ‘essence’ of Christianity lies in ethical reflection and the concrete practice of charity. Since a ‘rational’ religion can contain only ‘rational’ content, normative claims that might exceed the practical are, for the most part, bracketed. Appeals to ‘supernatural’ truths and to their attestation therefore appear suspect to the Enlightenment mindset, insofar as they advance claims that outstrip our natural cognitive capacities and cannot be corroborated from a third-person standpoint.⁹ Moreover, any – even merely potential – heteronomization in matters of faith is to be avoided: if human beings were dependent on an external authority for access to ‘supernatural truths,’ they would remain subject to claims they themselves cannot verify. Heteronomy would thus be prolonged, and they would still be bound by the very chains from which they are meant to free themselves.¹⁰ It is therefore not surprising that, in this context, there is a tendency to combine ethical insights with the field of natural theology (*theologia naturalis*).¹¹

On this view, ‘revelation’ would comprise only those truths traditionally associated with the recognition of the moral law (*lex naturalis*, conscience, ‘moral world order’) and with the human self’s awareness of God’s existence. ‘Revelation’ would thus designate, in essence, a rational knowledge that arises through confrontation with the reality of creation and unfolds in accordance with reason itself. Yet the term ‘revelation’ – always attended by an aura of the supernatural – would, on this account, be misleading; it would be more accurate to speak of ‘general rational knowledge.’ ‘Revelation’ would then be reclassified as a category of reflection on, or interpretation of, creation, since the alleged *dicta naturaliter sciata* arise from reflection on the brute fact of our created existence. What initially appears to be a reduction of supernatural revelatory truth to pure rational insight can, however, also be construed in the opposite direction: as an idealistic intensification of natural knowledge. This will become clearer in what follows.

⁸ The criterion for truth in Lessing’s Ring-Parable may be cited as a prominent example for this; cf. Jan-Heiner Tück; Rudolf Langthaler (eds.), „Es strebe von euch jeder um die Wette“. Lessings Ringparabel – ein Paradigma für die Verständigung der Religionen heute?, Freiburg i. B.; Basel; Wien 2016.

⁹ Cf. the critical comments in Immanuel Kant, Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik, in: Kants Werke, Akademie-Textausgabe. Unveränderter photomechanischer Abdruck des Textes der von der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1902 begonnenen Ausgabe von Kants gesammelten Schriften, Vol. II: Vorkritische Schriften II: 1757-1777, Berlin 1968, 315–384.

¹⁰ Cf. the famous saying in id., Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?, in: Kants Werke (see fn. 9), Vol. VIII: Abhandlungen nach 1781, Berlin 1968, 33–42, esp. 35: “Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit. Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen. Selbstverschuldet ist diese Unmündigkeit, wenn die Ursache derselben nicht am Mangel des Verstandes, sondern der Entschließung und des Mutes liegt, sich seiner ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen. Sapere aude! Habe Mut dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen! ist also der Wahlspruch der Aufklärung.”

¹¹ Cf. id., Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft, in: Kants Werke (see fn. 9), Vol. VI: Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft, Die Metaphysik der Sitten, Berlin 1968, 1–202.; Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung (1792), in: id., Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Reinhard Lauth; Hans Jacob (eds.), Vol. I,1: Werke 1791–1794, Stuttgart; Bad Cannstatt 1964, 1–162.

3. A Systematic Exploration

To clarify the objections and systematic possibilities at stake in contemporary theologies, a brief retrospective is in order. In parts of modern theology, a growing concern for ‘practical metaphysics’ is evident, voiced as a plea for the radical autonomy of rational belief.¹² Yet this attitude did not arise in a vacuum; it draws – more or less explicitly – on historical precedents. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, for instance, begins from a moral sentiment that he construes as an immediate apprehension of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.¹³

In an idiom that may initially sound unfamiliar to contemporary ears, Jacobi distinguishes faith from knowledge: the latter proceeds by way of proofs and the reasons they marshal, whereas faith names an immediacy of certainty. It belongs, for Jacobi, to the sphere of those convictions into which we are, as it were, ‘born’.¹⁴ Two points merit emphasis here. First, Jacobi underscores the degree of certainty at stake: what is in view is *immediate* certainty, not an ambivalent judgment. Second, this certainty is not something to be earned through exertion – say, by submitting to external authorities – but something given to us *by nature*.

Alongside Jacobi, Johann Gottlieb Fichte may be regarded as a ‘forefather’ of contemporary theologies critical of ‘extrinsicism.’ He radicalizes Jacobi’s line of argument: reason is not only thoroughly practical; it is also wholly independent of any external authority. It does not receive its ends from without but sets them from within itself, thereby attaining complete self-sufficiency.

“The practical dignity of reason is its very absoluteness; its indeterminacy by anything outside of itself, and complete determinacy by itself. Those who do not recognize this absoluteness – which can only be found within oneself through intuition – but consider reason to be a mere capacity for reasoning, which must first be given objects from the outside before it can be put into action, will always find it incomprehensible how it can be practical at all, and will never cease to believe that the conditions for the practicability of the law must be known before the law can be accepted.”¹⁵

¹² Cf. Martin Breul; Saskia Wendel (eds.), *Vernünftig glauben – begründet hoffen. Praktische Metaphysik als Denkform rationaler Theologie*, Freiburg i. B.; Basel; Wien 2020; Saskia Wendel, *Kants Metaphysik, in praktischer Hinsicht’ als Anknüpfungspunkt religiöser Selbst- und Weltdeutung*, in: Michael Kühnlein (ed.), *Religionsphilosophie nach Kant. Im Angesicht des Bösen (Neue Horizonte der Religionsphilosophie)*, Berlin; Heidelberg 2023, esp. 233–251.

¹³ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung*, in: id., *Werke. Gesamtausgabe* hg. von Klaus Hammacher und Walter Jaeschke, Vol. 3: *Schriften zum Streit um die göttlichen Dinge und ihre Offenbarung*, Hamburg 2000, 33–136, esp. 61 f.

¹⁴ Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, in: *Werke* (see fn. 13), Vol. 1,1: *Schriften zum Spinozastreit*, Hamburg 1998, 1–146, esp. 115 f.

¹⁵ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Das System der Sittenlehre nach den Principien der Wissenschaftslehre* (1798), in: id., *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth; Hans Gliwitzky, Vol. I,5: *Werke 1798–1799*, Stuttgart; Bad Cannstatt 1977, 1–317, here 68. The translation is mine; the original reads as follows: “Die praktische Dignität der Vernunft ist ihre *Absolutheit* selbst; ihre Unbestimmtheit durch irgend etwas außer ihr, und vollkommene Bestimmtheit durch sich selbst. Wer diese Absolutheit nicht anerkennt – man kann sie nur in sich selbst durch Anschauung finden – sondern die Vernunft für ein bloßes Räsonnir-Vermögen hält, welchem erst Objecte von außen gegeben seyn müßten, ehe es sich in Thätigkeit versetzen könne; dem wird es

Fichte's insistence on the absolute independence of reason finds a quintessential expression in a well-known formulation that serves, *pars pro toto*, for his project as a whole: denying any determination of the ego by the non-ego, he frames the dictum that the ego brings forth the non-ego through a primordially productive act of 'positing': "So, the positing of the ego by itself is the pure activity of the ego. – The ego posits itself, and it is, by virtue of this mere positing by itself; and conversely: the ego is, and it posits its being, by virtue of its mere being. – It is at once the agent and the product of the action; the active and that which is brought forth by the activity; action and act are one and the same; and therefore, I am is an expression of an act; but also the only possible one, as must follow from the whole science of knowledge."¹⁶

In this deliberate act of positing, the ego posits the non-ego and thereby preserves its sovereignty. Everything, on this account, issues from a primordial activity. A superficial reading might suggest that Fichte is speaking merely of the individual human ego, as though it were fashioning a world for itself. Such an anthropocentric interpretation, however, overlooks the fact that Fichte is referring to a transcendental and absolute principle: the primordial activity through which consciousness first arises. The particular human ego emerges only from this primordial structure and remains encompassed within it. This becomes especially clear in the later *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*:

"Just rise to the standpoint of religion, and all veils disappear; the world passes away with its dead principle, and the deity itself enters you again, in its first and original form, as life, as your own life, which you are to live and will live. Only the one, ineradicable form of reflection remains, the infinity of this divine life within you, which, in God, of course, is only One; but this form does not oppress you, for you desire it and love it: it does not mislead you, for you are able to explain it. In what the holy man does, lives, and loves, God no longer appears in shadow or covered by a veil, but in his own immediate and powerful life; and the unanswerable question arising from the mere shadow-concept of God, 'What is God?', is answered here as follows: he is that which the devoted and inspired do. Do you want to see God as he is in himself, face to face? Do not seek him beyond the clouds; you can find him wherever you are. Look into the lives of his devotees, and you will see Him; surrender yourself to Him, and you will find Him in your heart."¹⁷

immer unbegreiflich bleiben, wie sie schlechthin praktisch seyn könne, und er wird nie ablassen zu glauben, daß die Bedingungen der Ausführbarkeit des Gesetzes vorher erkannt seyn müssen, ehe das Gesetz angenommen werden könne."

¹⁶ Id., *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre als Handschrift für seine Zuhörer (1794/95)*, in: id., *Gesamtausgabe* (see fn. 15), Vol. I,2: *Werke 1793–1795*, Stuttgart; Bad Cannstatt 1965, 173–451, esp. 259. The translation is mine; the original reads as follows: "Also das Setzen des Ich durch sich selbst ist die reine Thätigkeit desselben. – Das Ich *setzt sich selbst*, und es *ist*, vermöge dieses bloßen Setzens durch sich selbst; und umgekehrt: Das Ich *ist*, und es *setzt* sein Seyn, vermöge seines bloßen Seyns. – Es ist zugleich das Handelnde, und das Produkt der Handlung; das Thätige, und das, was durch die Thätigkeit hervorgebracht wird; Handlung, und That sind Eins und dasselbe; und [...] daher ist das: *Ich bin*, Ausdruck einer Thathandlung; aber auch der einzigen möglichen [...], wie sich aus der ganzen Wissenschaftslehre ergeben muß."

¹⁷ Id., *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben, oder auch die Religionslehre*, ed. by Hansjürgen Verweyen (Philosophische Bibliothek 640), Hamburg 2012, 70. The translation is mine; the original reads as follows: "[E]rhebe dich nur in den Standpunkt der Religion, und alle Hüllen schwinden; die Welt vergehet dir mit ihrem toten Prinzip, und die Gottheit selbst tritt wieder in dich ein, in ihrer ersten, und ursprünglichen Form, als Leben, als dein eignes Leben, das du leben sollst, und leben wirst. Nur noch die Eine, unaustilgbare Form der Reflexion bleibt, die Unendlichkeit dieses göttlichen Lebens, in dir, welches, in Gott freilich, nur Eins ist; aber diese Form drückt dich

Whereas the *Wissenschaftslehre* employs a comparatively neutral, philosophical idiom, Fichte's later writings are marked by a strikingly religious register. Yet this shift is less a change of mind than an expression of consistency. If everything non-divine owes its existence to an unconditional act of positing, and if this divine positing is to retain its absoluteness, then what is posited must remain *within* that positing and thus be 'in God.' The *Anweisung zum seligen Leben* merely unfolds the implications of this basic claim. At the same time, the tendency toward 'practical metaphysics' is intensified: the positing of the non-divine is already a divine act, and revelation occurs through the lived praxis of those devoted to God. Their existential transformation discloses the world's true 'inner nature': divine life itself.

It is precisely this Fichtean trajectory that Saskia Wendel has recently taken up. She places at the center of the current debate a form of identity theory that identifies creation with an unsurpassable divine self-communication – not as something subsequently added to the act of creation, but as consisting in the positing of the non-divine itself:

"Revelation refers to the conviction that we owe our very existence to something absolutely Unconditional, which has determined itself to be related to something else that comes from itself, and to express itself in this other, indeed as this other itself, to come into being. The Unconditional reveals itself, expresses itself as the conditional and in the midst of the conditional. This concept of revelation corresponds to the concept of *apparitio* (appearance, showing oneself) or that of the real symbol in the sense of the self-expression of the Absolute and thus a concept of the image that differs from the Platonic idea of archetype and image: God sets himself as an other – as an image.
[...]

God's creation and revelation coincide, as do God's promise of salvation, i. e., his sustaining and perfecting action, and thus also God's self-communication. All these aspects ultimately fall into one; they should not be understood as consecutive, but rather as different aspects, dimensions of God's relationship to the other of himself, which he himself has posited, his 'image and likeness', the universe."¹⁸

nicht; denn du begehrst sie, und liebst sie: sie irret dich nicht; denn du vermagst sie zu erklären. In dem, was der heilige Mensch tut, lebet und liebet, erscheint Gott nicht mehr im Schatten, oder bedeckt von einer Hülle, sondern in seinem eigenen, unmittelbaren und kräftigen Leben; und die, aus dem leeren Schattenbegriffe von Gott unbeantwortliche Frage: *Was ist Gott*, wird hier so beantwortet: er *ist* dasjenige, was der ihm Ergebene, und von ihm Begeisterte *tut*. Willst du Gott schauen, wie er in sich selber ist, von Angesicht zu Angesicht? Suche ihn nicht jenseits der Wolken; du kannst ihn allenthalben finden, wo du bist. Schaue an das Leben seiner Ergebenen, und du schaust Ihn an; ergib dich selber ihm, und du findest ihn in deiner Brust."

¹⁸ Saskia Wendel, *Offenbarung – Deutungskategorie statt Glaubensgrund. Plädoyer für eine rationale Theologie*, in: Martin Dürnberger et al. (eds.), *Stile der Theologie. Einheit und Vielfalt katholischer Systematik in der Gegenwart* (ratio fidei 60), Regensburg 2017, 245–259, esp. 258. The translation is mine; the original reads as follows: "Offenbarung bezeichnet die Überzeugung, dass wir uns selbst in unserer Existenz einem schlechthin Unbedingten verdanken, das sich dazu bestimmt hat, sich auf ein Anderes zu beziehen, das aus ihm selbst kommt, und in diesem Anderen, ja als dieses Andere selbst sich auszudrücken, zur Erscheinung zu kommen. Unbedingtes zeigt sich, drückt sich aus als Bedingtes und mitten im Bedingten. Dieser Offenbarungsbegriff entspricht dem Begriff der *apparitio* (Erscheinung, Sich-Zeigen) bzw. demjenigen des Realsymbols im Sinne des Selbstausdrucks des Absoluten und damit eines sich vom platonischen Urbild-Abbild-Gedanken unterscheidenden Begriffs des Bildes: Gott setzt sich selbst als ein Anderes – als Bild. [...] Schöpfung und Offenbarung Gottes koinzidieren ebenso wie Gottes Heilszusage, also sein erhaltendes wie vollendendes Handeln, und so auch Gottes Selbstmitteilung."

It is not difficult to see that Wendel's formulations correspond closely to Fichte's speculation about a primordial creative act of God. The absolute Ground opposes itself to a non-identical reality which nevertheless remains, in some sense, 'identical' with it and therefore cannot be cleanly separated from it. The Absolute expresses itself in the other of itself in such a way that it comes to appearance in it. Divine reality, as it were, accomplishes a single, all-encompassing act and requires no further addition, because it has already 'given' everything there is to give – namely, itself. The act of creation thus becomes the self-revelation of the Absolute. The usual differentiation between 'nature' and 'grace' is thereby suspended, since nature *is* already grace. The essence of the Absolute comes to apparition in creation. To preclude any misunderstanding, Wendel explicitly clarifies the extent to which, for her, creation and grace are essentially identical: "God reveals himself as other in the image of himself set by him – creative creation and equally creative coming into appearance, *create* and *apparere*, are one and the same."¹⁹

The promotion of this model is clearly motivated by an anti-extrinsicism that resists any external determination in matters of faith. If an ontologically distinct and historically mediated act of revelation were to be added to the fact of creation, human beings would once again be subjected to an external imposition: they would depend on an extrinsic source for the reception of revelation and would thus be heteronomized. The crucial task, then, is to articulate a position – by appropriating Fichte's notion of 'positing' – that, at least at first glance, dispenses with any subsequent divine intervention in creation. Salvation is to be read from the world itself as the *apparitio* of the Absolute. Consequently, revelation is construed primarily as an interpretative category of faith rather than as its foundation, since nothing essential – no *donum superadditum* – is 'added' to creation, which already constitutes the appearance of the Absolute under finite conditions. If, by contrast, revelation were externally mediated and thus the basis of faith, the human being as 'Hearer of the Word' would once more be confronted with a claim initially foreign to her, disclosing what he did not already know of her own accord.

4. Some Critical Remarks

As the foregoing references to Jacobi and Fichte indicate, Wendel draws on a particular strand of idealist philosophy in order to articulate an understanding of faith as free as possible from heteronomy. How, then, should one respond to such idealist exuberance? To sharpen the issue, it is helpful to return to the passage from Fichte's *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*. In a hermeneutics of benevolence, Thomas Schärfl urges that Fichte – and thus, *mutatis mutandis*, Wendel – be read at full strength, without domestication, precisely where the claims are most extreme. Fichte deserves credit for rejecting an intellectualistic,

Alle diese Aspekte fallen letztlich in eins, sind nicht als einander nachfolgend zu verstehen, sondern als verschiedene Aspekte, Dimensionen der Relation Gottes zu dem aus ihm selbst gesetzten Anderen seiner selbst, zu seinem ‚Bild und Gleichnis‘, dem Universum."

¹⁹ Ead., In Freiheit glauben. Grundzüge eines libertarischen Verständnisses von Glaube und Offenbarung, Regensburg 2020, 141. The translation is mine; the original is as follows: "Gott zeigt sich selbst als Anderer im aus ihm gesetzten Bild seiner selbst – kreatives Schaffen und ebenso kreatives Zur-Erscheinung-Kommen, *create* und *apparere*, fallen in eins."

and in places naïvely rationalistic, posture that supposes it could define God's essence once and for all. If God is understood as the living being *par excellence*, and ultimately as life itself, then such conceptual fetishism cannot but remain inadequate: life – and thus God – can be understood only by living. Accordingly, to conceive the world as 'embedded' in God's life is not to collapse God and world into a simple identity, but to articulate an authentic account of the God-world relation that does not dissolve into a concept-driven third-person perspective. With respect to divine revelation in the world, moreover, Fichte explicitly refuses to treat all persons indiscriminately as mediators. He restricts his claim to those 'touched' and 'holy' individuals for whom every veil between themselves and the Deity has been lifted. In this way, he presents his strongly charged notion of divine-human imagery performatively, intending it, in the strict sense, only for those who, through their actions, truly fashion themselves into the image of the Absolute.²⁰

Applied to Wendel's model, a similar concern suggests itself: a one-sided determination of faith by external events or authorities – such that the subject's appropriation is effectively overruled – is scarcely promising. Especially when paired with a purely propositional account of revelation, it risks obscuring what is most characteristic of Christian faith: the 'new life' in God (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 2:20; Col 3:1-4). If God is himself life (cf. Jn 1:4; 5:26; 14:6; Acts 17:25) and communicates a share in that life, it seems inadequate to capture this experience in rigid concepts and thereby objectify it. Grace can and must be encountered as a 'category of experience' – as it were, from within – and thus resists conceptual reification. Yet precisely because the experience of grace is intrinsically bound up with the believer's inner life, it requires interpretation on the part of the subject if the 'life of God in us' is to come to articulation. Where this interpretative character is ignored, grace is imposed *ab extra* rather than lived through and performatively internalized.

A more critical approach would first have to acknowledge that for Fichte – who explicitly declared his belief in the possibility of an 'intellectual intuition'²¹ – genuine and true religion consists in a newly practiced form of immediacy to the Absolute. All veils that could be placed between finite reality and the transcendent glory of the Deity must disappear. Yes, even more: the world itself should pass away in favor of an inner awareness that identifies one's own life with the life of God. Fichte presents himself here as an advocate of an idealistic All-unity, which openly puts an end to faith in order to make room for knowledge.²² In this new All-unity, everything becomes intelligible. God no longer lurks in the shadow of a noumenal 'hinterworld' or even in the form of an ideal of pure reason,²³ but appears in his very essence through the practice of those devoted to him. Practical reason becomes the place of revelation of the divine essence. The transcendence of the *visio beatifica* is made immanent and transferred to the pious self-contemplation of newly awakened morality.

²⁰ For this favorable assessment cf. Thomas Schärfl, *Gott denken – Gott glauben*. Fundamentaltheologische Grund- und Grenzfragen, Regensburg 2024, 772.

²¹ Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797/1798), in: id., *Gesamtausgabe* (see fn. 15), Vol. I, 4: *Werke 1797–1798*, Stuttgart; Bad Cannstatt 1970, 167–281, esp. 216 f., 224.

²² Thus, an inversion of Kant's program is realized; cf. the famous saying in *Immanuel Kant*, *Vorrede zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (B), in: *Kants Werke* (see fn. 9), Vol. III: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2. Auflage 1787, Berlin 1968, 7–26, here 19 (XXX): "Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen [...]."

²³ Cf. id., *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in: *ibid.*, 383–461.

Even if, with Schärfl, one draws a subtle distinction between ‘godlike’ persons and others in order to temper the force of Fichte’s claims, the question remains whether the profile of these quasi-Christological figures is not already overdrawn in Fichte’s own work: let us assume, again in a hermeneutics of benevolence, that a person surrenders to the unconditional love of God and thereby becomes the image of the Absolute. Even in such an exemplary case, would it be legitimate to cast aside every veil between God and the world? And does it make sense to attribute a direct immediacy to the Absolute (even) to selected individuals?

On the one hand, it is worth asking whether Fichte’s exuberance – seemingly dissolving every epistemic impediment – does not culminate in a *contradictio in adiecto*. If the Christological individual becomes the direct interface between world and God, the very structure of immediacy threatens to abolish mediation as such. Precisely because it lifts the ‘veil’ to the Absolute at a determinate point, this form of mediation would render itself superfluous and leaves only two unpalatable options. First, one may retain the mediating role of the Christological subject – but only at the cost of a radical ‘de-secularization’. A person stripped of a mundane ‘shell’ forfeits cultural, linguistic, and social situatedness in space and time and thus comes to ‘float’ above the horizons of meaning that would otherwise co-determine – and, as it were, ‘contaminate’ – its performance; the result would be a peculiar kind of Platonism. Second, one might conclude that a perfect act of mediation must indeed remove every ‘barrier’ between world and God, such that the experience of immanence already guarantees access to transcendence: “Do not seek him beyond the clouds; you can find him anywhere you are.” If one takes this statement seriously, the experience of the world becomes the experience of God. The accusations raised against Fichte in the so-called ‘*Atheismusstreit*’²⁴ would also apply here: Does this not imply that a merely moral praxis supplants revelation? Is the intrinsic worth of faith still intact if the capacities of natural reason are judged with such optimism? And does the systematic flattening of genuine transcendence not ultimately drift into a pantheism of rather exuberant pretensions?²⁵

On the other hand, one must ask whether Fichte’s claim of an unqualified immediacy of divine life does not strain the internal coherence of his own idealist framework. As noted above, his thinking begins from the primordial, pre-reflexive ‘positing’ of the non-ego by the ego. With this ‘speculative creation story,’ Fichte plainly aimed to surmount Kant’s dichotomy between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds.²⁶ By construing everything

²⁴ The dispute was triggered by the following writing: *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, *Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung* (1798), in: id., *Gesamtausgabe* (see fn. 15), Vol. I,5: *Werke 1798–1799*, Stuttgart; Bad Cannstatt 1977, 318–357 (first published in: *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten* 8/1 [1798] 1–20). For a general overview, cf. *Werner Röhr* (ed.), *Appellation an das Publikum ... Dokumente zum Atheismusstreit um Fichte*, Forberg, Niethammer. Jena 1798/99 (Reclam Bibliothek 1179), Leipzig²1991. Fichte himself felt that he was misunderstood in all this. He was not concerned with affirming an atheistic position, but rather with achieving a belief that was as ‘pure’ as possible, based solely on philosophical knowledge, thereby overcoming anthropomorphic images of God.

²⁵ Cf. the critical, almost ironic comments by *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, *Jacobi an Fichte*, Eutin, 3.–21. März 1799, in: Röhr (ed.), *Appellation an das Publikum ...* (see fn. 24), 153–167.

²⁶ For Fichte’s rejection of the ‘*Ding an sich*’ cf. id., *Fichte an (Jens Immanuel Baggesen?)* (in Zürich?). (1795 April/Mai) (Jena oder Osmannstädt). 2. Briefentwurf, in: id., *Gesamtausgabe* (see fn. 15), Vol. III,2: *Briefwechsel 1793–1795*, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt 1970, 299–301, here 298: “Mein System ist das erste *System der Freiheit*. Wie

in terms of a primordial creative productivity, Fichte's system appears to resolve the outstanding questions concerning the relation between the ideal of pure reason, the thing-in-itself, and phenomenal appearance. Yet, as Dominikus Kraschl has convincingly argued, this solution generates new difficulties: the productive opposition between ego and non-ego issues in a contradiction. How can something remain identical to itself while positing what is not identical to itself? Fichte's initial position thus oscillates between realism and idealism in a manner that might remain ultimately opaque. The appeal to a primordial act of 'positing' does not so much dissolve these aporias as lay them bare.²⁷

This contradiction in Fichte's systematic approach, as discussed by Kraschl, weighs all the more heavily if it is intertwined with the assertion that the 'One' of the Absolute can manifest itself openly in human beings. But how can this 'One' be reconciled with the contradictory existence of the ego and the non-ego? There seem to be only two opposing strategies for resolving this: either one levels the initial duality of the ego and the non-ego and allows them to be subsumed, so to speak, in the epiphanic 'One', or one incorporates this contradiction into the concept of the image itself. The aforementioned quotation from the *Anweisung zum seligen Leben* may serve as an example of the former strategy. The second one could, for example, be based on Martin Heidegger's essay *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*,²⁸ which considers the conditions of the constitution of an alleged clearing in its own unique way. For Heidegger, every work of art – and thus every image – opens a 'fissure' between clearing and enduring concealment. It is never extricated from this ambivalent event, but remains embedded within it. As an 'interface', the work of art thus constitutes a mode of the 'in-between'. With the word Ἀ-Λήθεια, Heidegger attempts to do justice to precisely this ambivalence: every unveiling also involves a concealment.

An integration of these ideas does not necessarily contradict a theology that is critical of extrinsicism. Quite the opposite: Wendel's insistence on the interpretative nature of revelation could be tentatively but organically linked to Heidegger's ontological option. This becomes particularly clear when we consider the Greek and Latin etymology. The root of the verb ἐρμηνεύειν could refer to Ἑρμῆς (Hermes), the messenger of the gods and the god of commerce and travelers.²⁹ He was responsible for communication between transcendence and immanence. In his role as mediator, he bridges gaps and reveals what would otherwise remain hidden. The hidden and the open intertwine. It is also important to note that the etymology of the German word "*deuten*" (to interpret) can be traced back via "*diuten*"

jene Nation die politischen Fesseln des Menschen zerbrochen hat, so reist das meinige in der Theorie den Menschen los von den Ketten der Dinge an sich, u. ihres Einflusses, die [...] mehr oder weniger in allen bisherigen Systemen [...] ihn banden, u. giebt ihm durch die erhabne Stimmung die es [...] mittheilt – [...] Kraft, sich auch in der [...] Praxis loszureißen."

²⁷ Cf. Dominikus Kraschl, *Das prekäre Gott-Welt-Verhältnis. Studien zur Fundamentaltheologie Peter Knauers* (ratio fidei 39), Regensburg 2009, 99–102; id., *Relationale Ontologie. Ein Diskussionsbeitrag zu offenen Fragen der Philosophie* (Religion in der Moderne 24), Würzburg 2012, 110–112, 225 f., with reference to Dieter Henrich, *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht* (Wissenschaft und Gegenwart 34), Frankfurt a. M. 1967, 18, according to which Fichte had never clarified his cryptic talk of 'positing'.

²⁸ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935/36), in: Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe (GA), Vol. 5: *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main 1977, 1–74.

²⁹ Cf. Art. ἐρμηνεύς, Ἑρμῆς, in: Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots* (Librairie Klincksieck. Série linguistique 20), Paris 2009, 356 f. Nevertheless, the etymological link with the name of the god remains an unproven hypothesis.

to “*diutisch*”, which means “*deutsch*” (German). “*Deuten*” can therefore mean “to explain to the gathered people, to make it comprehensible to the public.” From this, the meaning of “explaining processes,” “translating,” or “showing, pointing out” develops.³⁰ Human beings are thus assigned the task of interpretation. Heidegger would infer from this ‘original’ sense that we participate actively in the disclosure of meaning; yet we never attain perfect intelligibility, remaining instead suspended in the space between interpretation and withdrawal. Where everything were perfectly clear and unambiguous, interpretation would have no work to do.

Here, this Heidegger-inspired line of thought once again converges with Fichte’s high regard for the human being as a medium of the Absolute’s self-disclosure. The decisive difference, however, is that this approach no longer trades on the idea of direct immediacy; rather, the ‘veil’ of Being is never fully lifted but remains even over the ‘pious’ and ‘devoted.’ Human beings thus find themselves in an ‘in-between’ and must interpret the ambivalent texture of worldly experience. Such experience calls for interpretation because it does not transparently reveal the presence of the Absolute and yet includes moments of denial, withdrawal, loss, and absurdity. Even so, in and through this very work of interpretation, the believer may come to discern that these negative experiences, too, are encompassed by God’s healing presence.

5. As a Conclusion: On the Value of Faith

Altogether, such an approach seems to have more likely covered the *caveat* that Kant had unambiguously expressed, but which was then obscured by the subsequent speculative zeal of German idealism. Kant responded to the so-called ‘pantheism controversy’ between Jacobi and Mendelssohn with his essay *Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?* The philosopher first defends the conviction of a pure belief in reason, which does not have to rely on empirical data, but is, so to speak, ‘automatically’ connected with the natural process of cognition. At the same time, however, Kant emphasizes that the ultimate basis of this belief in reason is merely subjective, corresponding – one might also think here of the merely regulative ideas of pure reason – to a natural need for unity and certainty in all human knowledge.³¹ However, this does not prove the reality of an objective correlate to this *focus*

³⁰ Cf. Art. *deuten*, *deutsch*, in: *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen: A–L*, reviewed and supplemented by Wolfgang Pfeifer, Berlin ²1993, 218–220.

³¹ Cf. *Immanuel Kant*, *Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?*, in: *Kants Werke* (see fn. 9), Vol. VIII: *Abhandlungen nach 1781*, Berlin 1968, 131–148, here 136: “Dies subjektive Mittel, das alsdann noch übrig bleibt, ist kein anderes, als das Gefühl des der Vernunft eigenen *Bedürfnisses*. Man kann vor allem Irrthum gesichert bleiben, wenn man sich da nicht unterfängt zu urtheilen, wo man nicht so viel weiß, als zu einem bestimmten Urtheile erforderlich ist. Also ist Unwissenheit an sich die Ursache zwar der Schranken, aber nicht der Irrthümer in unserer Erkenntniß. Aber wo es nicht so willkürlich ist, ob man über etwas bestimmt urtheilen wolle oder nicht, wo ein wirkliches Bedürfniß und wohl gar ein solches, welches der Vernunft an sich selbst anhängt, das Urtheilen nothwendig macht, und gleichwohl Mangel des Wissens in Ansehung der zum Urtheil erforderlichen Stücke uns einschränkt: da ist eine *Maxime* nöthig, wornach wir unser Urtheil fällen; denn die Vernunft will einmal befriedigt sein. [...] *Sich im Denken überhaupt orientieren*, heißt also: sich bei der Unzulänglichkeit der objectiven Principien der Vernunft im Fürwahrhalten nach einem subjectiven Princip derselben bestimmen.”

imaginarius; – so that the supposed certainty is and remains purely subjective.³² For this reason, Kant believes that a strict distinction must be made between this purely rational belief on the one side and verified knowledge on the other side.³³ The one is not the other. Kant's critical program of 'practical metaphysics' may thus be read as a deliberate tempering of those approaches drunken with certitude. If the 'certainty' thus described as purely subjective nonetheless entails an objective uncertainty as to whether it corresponds to any correlate in the noumenal realm, two implications follow for the phenomenal signature of revelation. First, reason cannot simply draw on itself: it remains dependent on an external source that supplies the 'material' to be interpreted in retrospect. A purely 'intrinsic' account is therefore untenable. Wendel herself underscores this dependence on the *ab extra* of revelation in her appeal to the notion of *Widerfahrnis*.³⁴ On the other hand, following Kant and Heidegger, it must be emphasized that the subsequent interpretation of experience cannot generate absolute certainty. Experience remains ambivalent, and the interpretation of faith is not entirely without alternative.³⁵ If this were not the case, interpretation would no longer be interpretation, and faith would cease to be faith.

Dieser Beitrag verortet die für zeitgenössische theologische Ansätze charakteristische Distanz zu extrinsektischen Überfremdungen und Heteronomisierungen im weiteren Kontext der Aufklärung und des Deutschen Idealismus. Durch Vergleichspunkte zwischen den Denkbewegungen Saskia Wendels und Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sollen die Stärken und Schwächen einer Position herausgearbeitet werden, die Gottes Schöpfungshandeln mit seiner gnadenhaften Selbstoffenbarung identifiziert. Es wird dafür argumentiert, dass eine solche Sichtweise das Moment der Gewissheit nicht überbetonen und entlang der von Wendel profilierten Redeweise daran festhalten sollte, dass der Glaube wesentlich ein Deutungsgeschehen ist, das sich auf ein äußeres Widerfahrnis rückbezieht.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 137: "Allein hierdurch, nämlich durch den bloßen Begriff, ist doch noch nichts in Ansehung der Existenz dieses Gegenstandes und der wirklichen Verknüpfung desselben mit der Welt (dem Inbegriffe aller Gegenstände möglicher Erfahrung) ausgerichtet. Nun aber tritt das Recht des Bedürfnisses der Vernunft ein, als eines subjectiven Grundes etwas vorauszusetzen und anzunehmen, was sie durch objective Gründe zu wissen sich nicht anmaßen darf; und folglich sich im Denken, im unermesslichen und für uns mit dicker Nacht erfüllten Raume des Übersinnlichen, lediglich durch ihr eigenes Bedürfnis zu orientiren."

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 141: "Aller Glaube ist nun ein subjectiv zureichendes, objectiv aber mit Bewußtsein unzureichendes Fürwahrhalten; also wird er dem Wissen entgegengesetzt."

³⁴ Saskia Wendel, Einige Gedanken über das Widerfahrnis, in: Monika Heidkamp et al. (eds.), *Abweichen. Von einer Praxis, die findet, was sie nicht gesucht hat* (Studien zur Praktischen Theologie 6), Münster 2022, 243–254.

³⁵ In this sense, Wendel is absolutely right when she emphasizes the fragility of our interpretative practices of faith; cf. *ead.*, *Kants Metaphysik 'in praktischer Hinsicht'* (see fn. 12), 249 f.