

# Schleiermacher, Realism, and Epistemic Modesty

## A Reply to My Critics<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I hope to answer some objections raised in response to the claims I put forward in my presentation “Metaphysical Realism and Epistemological Modesty in Schleiermacher’s Method” at the Schleiermacher conference in Chicago last fall. I will begin by briefly restating what I mean by 1) Schleiermacher’s realism and 2) his epistemological modesty. I will then flesh out these terms by attending to some of the objections to my thesis put forward by my colleagues during the question and answer period.

In order to avoid confusion, it is important to understand what it is I mean when I call Schleiermacher a *realist*. By this I do not mean that he is any kind of naïve realist, or that he adheres to a correspondence theory of truth. Schleiermacher’s realism is, as he calls it a “higher realism.” Part of my project here is getting straight on what this higher realism amounts to. It is no doubt true that a key feature of Schleiermacher’s project involves careful attention to the role of human *experience* in the apprehension of the transcendent ground. Yet Schleiermacher’s focus on human experience does not ignore the fact that religious experience is, for him, always experience *of* the Absolute, and that it is *to* the Absolute that religious symbols point. From the standpoint of Schleiermacher’s metaphysics, the Absolute is that which establishes and preserves everything that is; it is that which ultimately works in and through history to transform human beings into God-like persons. Schleiermacher’s theory of religion does not reduce religion to mere anthropology; to claim that it does is to misunderstand him on a grand scale.

Nevertheless, Schleiermacher is quite attentive to the *conditions* of human knowing and experiencing. Concern with these conditions was

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1 Another version of this paper will appear as “Metaphysical Realism and Epistemological Modesty in Schleiermacher’s Method,” in *Rethinking the Enlightenment: Philosophy, Theology, and Secularization in Modern Thought*, ed. N. Jacobs and Chris Firestone (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2010). The original version of this paper was presented at the Schleiermacher conference at the University of Chicago under this title.

not new to theology; Thomas Aquinas had already noted: “the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”<sup>2</sup> What was new to theology was the comprehensive character of Schleiermacher’s account of human subjectivity, an account that both recognized and stressed the finite and conditioned character of all human apprehensions. This account, heavily influenced by Kant’s metaphysics and epistemology, went beyond even Kant in recognizing not only the contribution of the human subject to all knowing and experiencing, but the contribution of human communities—themselves historically conditioned—to human knowing as well. These insights were especially applied to religious experience. Because Schleiermacher’s theory begins with a comprehensive account of human subjectivity, it is theoretically equipped to recognize the validity of different religious experiences without degenerating into relativism. This I will call its *perspectivalism*. This paper will be a discussion of these two themes—Schleiermacher’s realism and his perspectivalism—and their significance for a theory of religion.

## 1. A Higher Realism

Schleiermacher called his own brand of realism a “higher realism.” The latter Schleiermacher contrasted his own position with the idealism of Fichte, in which the I knows only itself. Fichte, famously, eliminated Kant’s thing in itself and all of Kant’s dualisms: for him there is nothing distinct and “outside” the self with which the self interacts. There is nothing that is *in itself*, that is, apart from its relation to the subject, unknowable by the subject. In order for knowledge to be possible, Fichte argued, there must be a subject-object identity, and hence, in any act of knowledge, the self only really knows itself. For the mature Schleiermacher, on the other hand, the Absolute really does transcend consciousness: it is distinct from the self, while at the same time remaining the ground of the self.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, other finite individuals are also genuinely distinct from the I. Hence, for Schleiermacher, there are *real* rela-

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2 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, Art. 2, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), 2:1057.

3 Schleiermacher differs significantly from Fichte on this point. Günter Zöller has correctly noted that Fichte “insists on the presence of the absolute in the I. It is the absolute itself that manifests itself under the form of the thinking and willing I.” Zöller, “German Realism: The Self-limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer,” in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 206.

tions between the self and others, and between the self and the Absolute. Even in the earliest edition of the *Speeches* (1799) Schleiermacher recognizes these real relations.<sup>4</sup> While there is no doubt that there are Spinozistic tendencies in his earlier works, the mature Schleiermacher leaves these behind, becoming more consistent in thinking through the necessary conditions for real relations between individual substances.<sup>5</sup>

Famously, in *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher grounds genuine religion in “the feeling of absolute dependence” or what he also calls the “God-consciousness.” This “feeling” is not one feeling among others that can be made an object of consciousness, but is given at the very ground of consciousness itself, in what Schleiermacher calls the immediate self-consciousness. In self-consciousness, the self makes itself its own object, and can thereby distinguish between itself and the world. However, the relation between self and world, between the spontaneity and receptivity of the self, presupposes an original unity of consciousness, a moment given in pure immediacy, wherein the two are one. It is this original unity of consciousness that makes possible the transition between the moments of spontaneity and receptivity. The consciousness of absolute dependence is given in this moment of pure immediacy; it is “the self-consciousness accompanying the whole of our spontaneity, and because this is never zero, accompanying the whole of our existence, and negating absolute freedom.”<sup>6</sup> God is the “Whence of our active and receptive existence” (CF §4.4). However, while the Absolute must accompany all moments of consciousness (since it grounds the self), consciousness of God is not directly given in the immediate self-consciousness.<sup>7</sup> What is given, rather, is a consciousness of the self as absolutely dependent, in particular in regard to its own spontaneous action in relation to the world. The consciousness of absolute dependence is the consciousness that “the whole of our spontaneous activity

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4 In *On Religion* he notes, “All intuition proceeds from an influence of the intuited on the one who intuits . . .” *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24. I discuss this passage at length below.

5 I discuss this issue at length in my book *Transformation of the Self in the Thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially in chapters 3, 4, and 6.

6 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), §4.3. Henceforth cited in text as CF.

7 This has been argued by both Manfred Frank and Robert Adams in their contributions to *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See Robert Merrihew Adams, “Faith and Religious Knowledge” (35-51) and Manfred Frank, “Metaphysical Foundations: A Look at Schleiermacher’s *Dialectic*” (15-34).

comes from a source outside us" (CF §4.3). Consciousness of the self as dependent arises from the consciousness of a "missing unity" in the river of the soul's life as it flickers from spontaneity to receptivity. One of the most insightful analyses of Schleiermacher's understanding of the feeling of absolute dependence is that of Manfred Frank, which is worth quoting at length here:

Consciousness feels itself to be *absolutely* dependent on Being, and this dependence is indirectly represented as the dependence on the Absolute. When immediate self-consciousness (or feeling) flickers from one to the other pole of the reflexive rift, this does not shed light on the positive fullness of a supra-reflexive identity, but rather on its lack. Schleiermacher notes that in the moment of "transition" ([C] 286) from object to subject of reflection, self-consciousness always traverses the space of a "missing unity" (C 290, §LI). Since the self cannot attribute this lack to its own activity, it must recognize this lack as the effect of a "determining power transcending it, that is, one that lies outside its own power" (C 290). The self can only ascribe to itself the ground of *knowledge* of this dependence. Schleiermacher can thereby say that the cause of this feeling of dependence is not "effected by the subject, but only arises *in* the subject" (CF §3.3). However, in feeling, the activity of the self is "never zero," for "without any feeling of freedom a feeling of absolute dependence would not be possible" (CF §4.3).<sup>8</sup>

We can think of this "missing unity" as the horizon or backdrop of consciousness. This horizon comprehends both self and world and is the condition of the possibility of both their difference from one another *and* their relation. It is traversed by consciousness itself insofar as consciousness must move between itself as the subject of reflection and the world that is given to it to know. Consciousness comes to an *explicit* awareness of this missing unity only in reflecting upon the transcendental conditions of the possibility of the moments of self-consciousness, in which there is an antithesis between self and world. Both the immediate self-consciousness and the feeling of absolute dependence are only given along *with* the sensuous self-consciousness; that is, only insofar as the self distinguishes between itself and its world can it arrive at an awareness of the underlying unity conditioning the possibility of its making this distinction. There is an important sense, of course, in which this underlying unity is given in the immediate self-consciousness. However, while the *traversal* of this missing unity occurs at the level of the immediate self-consciousness, one only becomes aware of its implications (namely, absolute dependence on the Whence

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<sup>8</sup> Frank, "Metaphysical Foundations," 31. In-text citations of "C" refer to what Jonas believed to be handwritten notes to the lectures of 1822. These are reproduced in Schleiermacher, *Dialektik*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001).

of our active and receptive existence) through reflection. This distinction should help answer the question put forward by both Robert Adams and Wayne Proudfoot, namely, that of how the consciousness of absolute dependence can be both immediate and have intentional content.<sup>9</sup> The basis for the feeling of absolute dependence is given in the immediate consciousness, but its implications, and hence its intentional content, are only given as one reflects on this experience as a condition of the possibility of self-consciousness.

In the *Dialektik* Schleiermacher asks, “How does it [the immediate self-consciousness] relate to the transcendental ground?” And he answers, “We consider the latter to be the ground of the thinking being in regards to the identity of willing and thinking. The transcendental ground precedes and succeeds all actual thinking, but does not come to an appearance at any time. This transcendental ground of thought accompanies the actual thinking in an atemporal manner, but never itself becomes thought.”<sup>10</sup> The Absolute transcends consciousness so thoroughly that it “does not come to an appearance at any time.” For Schleiermacher, consciousness of God is not given directly in the immediate self-consciousness. As noted above, what is directly given is a consciousness of the self *as* absolutely dependent. Co-positing along with this consciousness is the Absolute itself.

Some Schleiermacher scholars have insisted that Schleiermacher is self-consciously aware that all he has arrived at is a *consciousness* of the Absolute, leaving the skeptical question of whether there actually *is* an Absolute completely untouched.<sup>11</sup> On such a reading, one never moves past consciousness and its objects: on the one hand, there is the *feeling* of absolute dependence given in the immediate self-consciousness; on the other hand, there is its correlate, the consciousness of God or the Absolute, which must be co-positing along with it. But both the feeling and its correlate are, so to speak, mere elements of consciousness carrying no metaphysical implications beyond themselves.<sup>12</sup>

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9 This problem was the subject of Wayne Proudfoot’s presentation at this conference and is discussed by Robert Adams in “Faith and Religious Knowledge.”

10 KGA II/10.2, 568.

11 This anti-realist reading was expressed by several of the Schleiermacher scholars participating in the Chicago conference.

12 Robert Adams recognizes a related problem when he notes, “Can we say then that according to the *Christian Faith* God is not the intentional object of the essential religious consciousness, the feeling of absolute dependence, but only of thoughts that reflect that feeling?” His answer to this particular problem differs from the one I offer below in that it does not rely on the “thick” description of the feeling of absolute dependence that I analyze. However, Adams is certainly correct in insisting that “Schleiermacher is plainly committed to the *correctness* of his interpretative descrip-

There are several reasons to be highly suspicious of such an anti-metaphysical reading. First is the fact that Schleiermacher clearly posits a transcendental ground and its effects throughout his theological and philosophical works; for instance, in the passage just quoted, Schleiermacher clearly tells us that the “transcendental ground precedes and succeeds all actual thinking.” Second, the anti-metaphysical reading ignores much of the work that Schleiermacher is doing in positing both the immediate self-consciousness and the feeling of absolute dependence. And third, the whole of Schleiermacher’s theology cannot be made sense of without assuming his metaphysical realism. It is to the second and third of these reasons that I now turn.

Can Schleiermacher legitimately move past mere reports concerning states of human consciousness? The answer lies in the nature of his analysis of “the consciousness of absolute dependence.” Is this a mere phenomenological report, analogous to, let us say the phenomenological report of the person in a fever who is conscious of feeling cold? If so, then of course Schleiermacher cannot move beyond a report on consciousness and its objects, since in both cases there is no guarantee that the mind actually reflects the real. However, Schleiermacher does not arrive at his description of the immediate self-consciousness and the feeling of absolute dependence through any kind of phenomenological introspection. He arrives at them through an *analysis of the conditions of the possibility of consciousness itself*. And this means that both his analysis of the immediate self-consciousness and of the consciousness of absolute dependence have significant metaphysical implications. As I have argued above, Schleiermacher’s analysis of the consciousness of absolute dependence is grounded in the immediate awareness of the rift that consciousness must cross as it transitions from the subject to the object of reflection. If we can grant Schleiermacher that this rift is a real one, that is, that there *is* a genuine distinction between self and world, then we can also grant him the dependent character of both self and world: both presuppose a horizon conditioning the consciousness of both. But this means the self is conscious of its absolute dependence because it *is* absolutely dependent. And once we posit the self as absolutely dependent, it follows that we can also posit *that* upon which the radically conditioned self depends. We arrive not *merely* at a *conscious-*

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tion of piety as a feeling of absolute dependence. He gives us no reason to think that this feeling can be specified or identified except in terms of religious concepts expressing such intentionality, as Proudfoot rightly points out. And Schleiermacher seems equally committed to the correctness of the inference from absolute dependence to a whence that can be called ‘God’ (Adams, “Faith and Religious Knowledge,” 38).

ness of the Absolute, but on the Absolute as the condition of the possibility of consciousness itself. And the latter, as the ground of consciousness, must be real. To summarize: if it can be shown that *a condition of the possibility of self-consciousness* is a consciousness of absolute dependence (which is itself based the reality of the absolute dependence of consciousness), then the Absolute is a condition of the possibility of consciousness itself. And this is a metaphysical claim.

It seems to me that this reading of Schleiermacher is fundamentally sound, and that Schleiermacher can legitimately move from his “thick” description of the feeling of absolute dependence to the positing of a metaphysical Absolute. What of course still remains problematic—certainly at this stage—is the identification of this Absolute with God. A much less robust understanding of this Absolute—for instance, an identification of it with Being—would still do the required work. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that Schleiermacher understands the “God-consciousness” he describes at the beginning of *Christian Faith* as an abstraction from the Christian God-consciousness that he is presupposing as the primary datum for his theology.

I now briefly turn to my third point: Schleiermacher’s theology makes no sense if we do not attribute to him the conviction that God, and not just the consciousness of God, is real and genuinely effective. Schleiermacher’s theology, like that of Albert Magnus and Aquinas before him, is based on the “way of causality.” He claims in the *Christian Faith* that “all the divine attributes to be dealt with in the *Glaubenslehre* must go back in some way to the divine causality since they are only to elucidate the feeling of absolute dependence” (CF, §50.3). This of course means that Schleiermacher does not claim to have any knowledge of God as God is *in se*. Nevertheless, we do have knowledge of God in relation to us. Of particular importance for this knowledge is the redemption that God effects in us through Christ. This redemption is powerful and transformative not only of persons, but of whole communities as well. What is the source of this redemption? Schleiermacher is clear that it is not something we effect in ourselves; it has its basis in a source outside ourselves, namely in the communicated perfection and blessedness of Christ. And as I have argued elsewhere, Schleiermacher conceived of all the moments of Jesus’ sensuous self-consciousness as utterly conditioned by the divine influence.<sup>13</sup> This influence is the source of Jesus’ transformative power on human consciousness. While Schleiermacher is careful not to make any claims concerning God’s nature as God is *in se*, he clearly posits God as the ultimate author of our

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13 See “Transformation of the Self through Christ,” chapter 7 of my book *Transformation of the Self*.

salvation in Christ. Once again, this transformation is the result of a very real power whose source lies beyond what we are ourselves capable as radically conditioned and finite subjects.

Insofar as Schleiermacher affirms the existence of the Absolute, and acknowledges that what is real is independent of our conceptions of it, he is a metaphysical *realist*. His realism can be contrasted with contemporary anti-realism in religion, which affirms that all existence claims concerning God should simply be re-understood as commitments to a certain way of life.<sup>14</sup> For Schleiermacher, on the other hand, all religious expressions point past themselves to the “Whence of our active and receptive existence (CF §4.4).” While for Schleiermacher religious expressions are reflective of human experience, they do not merely refer to human ways of being in the world or to human experience, but also point to the transcendent Ground of all human experience. Hence while the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology might shed light on religion, religion can in no way be reduced to a study of the objects of those disciplines. Moreover, crucial to Schleiermacher’s enterprise is the claim that God not only exists, but that God is also continuously *active* in the providential direction and care of humanity. This is a key point to keep in mind, especially given the high premium that Schleiermacher places on human transformation, which is effected in us by the loving source of all existence.

## 2. Perspectivalism

It is, of course, important to keep in mind that this “Whence” is apprehended *through* human experience. What is revealed is never a proposition mirroring the structure of what is known, but an experience *of* the transcendent ground. Schleiermacher tells us that revelation does not “operate upon [one] as a cognitive being,” for that “would make the revelation to be originally and essentially *doctrine*” (CF §10.3). Furthermore, this experience is completely different in kind from the experience we have of finite objects in the world. It occurs at the level of the

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14 One example of such anti-realism is the position put forward by Don Cupitt, who emphasizes the human world “bounded by language, time and narrativity and radically outsideless.” For Cupitt there just is nothing outside our linguistic practices that constrains them in any way, and as such we must return “science into its own theories, religion into its own stories and rituals—and history into its own varied narratives.” Don Cupitt, *After All* (London: SMC Press, 1994), 17. For a discussion of realism and anti-realism in religion, see Roger Trigg, “Theological Realism and Antirealism,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1999), 213-22.



immediate self-consciousness grounding our awareness of both self and world. As such, the original religious experience is never of anything *in* the world but is, rather given in pure immediacy, at that fleeting moment prior to reflection of the self as distinct from the world. Religious doctrines, beliefs, and practices arise from a culturally conditioned reflection upon this experience, which is always one of finite subjects. Hence the religious experience of other persons may be different from one's own, and yet just as valid. As Schleiermacher notes: "Each person must be conscious that his religion is only part of the whole, that regarding the same objects that affect him religiously there are views just as pious and, nevertheless, completely different from his own, and that from other elements of religion intuitions and feelings flow, the sense for which he may be completely lacking."<sup>15</sup> Hence while Schleiermacher is a *metaphysical realist*, epistemologically he is a *perspectivalist*. God is real, but our cognitive access to God is always finite and conditioned. Not only does our state influence how we perceive and how we can be affected, but our historical and cultural standpoint influences the range of how religious experience can be *interpreted* and its significance expressed.

This range of how religious experience is interpreted can nonetheless be quite broad, since key to the task of interpretation is the imagination. In Kant's system, which clearly influenced Schleiermacher, the imagination mediates between sense and understanding, synthesizing the data of perception and readying it for the application of concepts. But experience can be imagined and re-imagined in different ways. This is especially true, the broader the implications of an experience, which can then be connected with other aspects of human experience in myriad ways. The religious experience, occurring as it does at the level of the immediate self-consciousness, is not the experience of an object existing over against a subject. As such, what is experienced transcends all of our cognitive capacities, and our concepts are never adequate to it. Occurring, as it does, at the level of the immediate self-consciousness, the genuine religious experience is one with global implications. It affects every aspect of the subject's life, particularly how the subject understands herself and her relation to the world. Here, in particular, the role of the imagination is paramount. In *On Religion*, Schleiermacher makes the bold statement that "belief in God depends on the direction of the imagination." He continues:

You will know that imagination is the highest and most original element in us, and that everything besides it is merely reflection upon it; you will

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15 Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 27.

know that it is our imagination that creates the world for you, and that you can have no God without the world. Moreover, God will not thereby become less certain to anyone, nor will individuals be better able to emancipate themselves from the nearly immutable necessity of accepting a deity because of knowing whence this necessity comes. In religion, therefore, the idea of God does not rank as high as you think. Among truly religious persons there have never been zealots, enthusiasts, or fanatics for the existence of God; with great equanimity they were always aware of what one calls atheism alongside themselves, for there has always been something that seemed to them more irreligious than this.<sup>16</sup>

A person who has a genuine religious experience must continually strive to understand its significance for his or her life. Interpretation of such experience, as well as a grasp of its implications for life as a whole, involves both the imagination and the use of concepts. If the religious experience is revelatory of that which is of ultimate concern, then it must also be capable of transforming priorities in what is worth valuing. Genuine religion thereby implies a comprehensive integration of one's view of oneself and of the world with the understanding of this religious experience itself; in both, imagination and concepts are involved.

Nevertheless, Schleiermacher stresses that in religion "the idea of God does not rank as high as you think." So while Schleiermacher praises the importance of the imagination in integrating and understanding religious experience, at the same time he claims that the concepts used to make sense of that experience *are not* of the highest importance. Why is this? Important here is Schleiermacher's observation that among the truly religious there have never been zealots and enthusiasts. In fact, one of the principal points of the second speech in *On Religion* is that the persecution and spitefulness that "wrecks society and makes blood flow like water" often associated with religion does not arise from genuine or true religion. It only arises when religious experience is systematized in such a way that it is fettered. Those who "inundate religion with philosophy and fetter it to a system" are the corrupters of religion, and it is they, Schleiermacher claims, who are responsible for the perversion of the religious drive.<sup>17</sup> It is, of course, true that some degree of "systematization" is involved in any attempt to take the religious experience seriously and to thereby understand it. Schleiermacher himself wrote *The Christian Faith*, a fine piece of systematic theology. There are, however, two important dangers associated with systems: first, a system can become so comprehensive that it

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16 Ibid., 53.

17 Ibid., 28.

ceases to allow the religious experience to break *through* it. Elements of the system can encompass so many aspects and can be so tightly interwoven so as not to allow any room for anything foreign to these ideas (such as a transformative experience) to break in. Second, closely related with this first danger is the mistaking of this system for ultimate reality itself. Here something finite and conditioned, something human, is taken as absolute. But this is nothing less than idolatry, and from it springs the zealotry and enthusiasm that lies at the bottom of the religious intolerance that can so easily degenerate into religious warfare.

Persons that are truly religious have faith in *God*, that is, in the love and wisdom of ultimate reality. They recognize that God remains God regardless of what ideas one—or others—may have of God. God does not need to be defended, for the Absolute cannot be assailed. It is only all too human ideas that can be threatened and need defense. This is what Schleiermacher means when he says, “God will not thereby become less certain to anyone, nor will individuals be better able to emancipate themselves from the nearly immutable necessity of accepting a deity because of knowing whence this necessity comes.” Accepting a deity, that is, standing in relation to the Absolute, is an immutable necessity. Yet, the religious experience is one that each person must have for him or herself in the inner sanctuary of the soul; the Absolute is always experienced *from* a particular perspective. Religious systems, and the enthusiasm and zealotry of the system builders who take themselves to have a privileged access to the Absolute, can only get in the way of this genuine experience. A truly transformative religious experience thereby carries with it *epistemological modesty*. This epistemological modesty goes hand in hand with Schleiermacher’s *metaphysical realism*. What is real is independent of our conceptions of it, which are always limited and partial. The object of true religion is “the great, ever-continuous redemptive work of eternal love,” not *our* ideas of the real.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. An Objection to Epistemological Modesty, and a Rejoinder

A significant concern with this proposal is that epistemological modesty can too easily turn into what might be called “epistemological nihilism.”<sup>19</sup> Does this position not leave us in a quandary, since according

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18 Ibid., 43.

19 The phrase was used by John Crossley at the conference.

to it, we can never really know God, but only our ideas of God, which are radically historically conditioned? How does Schleiermacher's position avoid the radical implications expressed by John Hick in his *Interpretation of Religion*?

[W]e cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperientable ground of that realm. For whereas the phenomenal world is structured by our own conceptual frameworks, its noumenal ground is not. We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity.<sup>20</sup>

This position leaves us simply adrift, without any real sense of direction. If we cannot even legitimately say that the object of religion is good or evil, purposive or non-purposive, then religion loses its point. This is an important objection that is not easy to overcome. Nevertheless, a correct understanding of Schleiermacher's position shows that he has the resources to answer it.

It is important to keep in mind that Schleiermacher's perspectivalism is a consequence of his realism. In *On Religion* he tells us:

All intuition proceeds from the influence of the intuited on the one who intuit, from an original and independent action of the former, which is then grasped, apprehended, and conceived by the latter according to one's own nature. If the emanations of light—which happen completely without your efforts—did not affect your sense, if the smallest parts of the body, the tips of your fingers, were not mechanically or chemically affected, if the pressure of weight did not reveal to you an opposition and a limit to your power, you would intuit nothing and perceive nothing, and what you thus intuit and perceive is not the nature of things, but their action upon you.<sup>21</sup>

That is, Schleiermacher posits real relations between ourselves and others, and between ourselves and the Absolute. This means that our access to others and to the Absolute arises from their influence upon us. But what this influence is depends on two things: first, the powers of that which influences us, and second, our *capacities* to be affected in certain ways (our own "nature"). It is only because we are capable of being affected in certain ways that we can perceive, but these very capacities play an important role in shaping the content of perception. As such, this very realism and the positing of real relations implies that we do not have access to things as they are *an sich*, but only to how they

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20 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 246.

21 Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 24-25.

affect us. Furthermore, how we are affected by things is then interpreted by us through our own culturally conditioned categories.

At this point it is important to keep in mind a key feature of realism, allowing us to distinguish it from idealism and anti-realism. In a short paper on realism and anti-realism in religion, Roger Trigg defines realism in the following way: "What we have beliefs about is not meant to be *logically* related to them."<sup>22</sup> That is, *what* we have beliefs about is distinct from our ideas about it, and we cannot make inferences from our ideas about something to the actuality of the thing. We can only make inferences from one idea to another. But if beliefs are not logically related to what they are about, then what is our relation to things? Such a relation is a *real* relation, that is, a relation of *influence* where one thing affects another.

How might such realism allay the qualms mentioned above? In *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher affirms that piety is "the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God" (CF §4). God is the "Whence of our active and receptive existence" (CF §4.4); faith then, is the consciousness of being absolutely dependent upon God. It cannot be stressed enough, however, that for Schleiermacher the object of faith is not the consciousness of being absolutely dependent (for then the object of faith would be something human) but rather, this real relation of absolute dependence itself. As creatures, we stand in absolute dependence on God. Moreover, as Schleiermacher would develop in later sections of *The Christian Faith*, God's absolute causality is qualitatively different from finite causality. In finite causality, one thing influences another, and the influence of one thing upon another is always conditioned by the capacities of that thing to be affected by the other. In God's absolute causality, on the other hand, God establishes the very existence of that which receives the divine influence. Hence nothing is left outside of God's power with respect to how the divine influence is to be received. For Schleiermacher, the process of the complete divinization of the cosmos is only a matter of time, and is assured in virtue of God's absolute causality. Given this stress on real relations, Schleiermacher's emphasis is ultimately not on what *we* can know about God, but on God's relation to us, which has real effects on us, namely our transformation and divinization. This transformation is not dependent upon our ideas of God, but rather on God's direct influence upon us.

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22 Trigg, "Theological Realism and Antirealism," 217.