

## J.G. Hamann and the Self-Refutation of Radical Orthodoxy

(penultimate draft)

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Commenters on Radical Orthodoxy to date either tend to express bewildered admiration for the range of historical figures its theorists address, or to take up those figures in turn, arguing that Radical Orthodoxy's lineal self-portrayal and the theological program that extends from it amount to misappropriation of the history of ideas.<sup>1</sup> The question of Radical Orthodoxy's construal of the canon tends to be central, for the ethos of the movement, as well as its theological and political imperatives, are drawn from its theorists' delineation of historical developments which, they claim, open the space inadvertently (or more wickedly) for secular theory and practice from within classical and enlightenment thought. The theorists of Radical Orthodoxy read the historical dissociation of religious faith and human reason, and the illegitimate granting of epistemic and political authority to the latter, as a consequence of both unintended and imprudent theoretical initiatives which they spend the bulk of their writing exposing. Yet given the contingency of history, they suggest, things might have gone another way, and the heroes of the movement's historical reconstruction are those who fought against the rationally hubristic, scientific, secularizing

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<sup>1</sup> *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, Edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), is devoted to showing how Radical Orthodoxy relies on misreadings of thinkers from Plato through Derrida. Max Stackhouse's succinct review of John Milbank's *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* for *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 78. No.4 (October 1998), pp.640-641, is discriminating as regards Milbank's historical appropriations. Robin Lovin's review of Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* for that same journal (Vol. 74. No.1, January 1994, pp.113-114) seems instead so enthralled by the "vast body of material" covered in Milbank's text that no critical evaluation of it is undertaken. Again for *The Journal of Religion* (Vol.80. No.2, April 2000, pp.271-298), Douglas Hedley's exceptional article, "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's *Theology beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist*," advances a number of arguments which effectively debar Milbank's utilization of a set of historical thinkers and themes. "Radical Orthodoxy and the New Culture of Obscurantism," by Paul D. Janz, forcefully exposes the historical and scholarly sciolism of the movement, in *Modern Theology* 20 (2004) pp.362-405. Wayne J. Hankey's "Radical Orthodoxy's *Poiesis*: Ideological Historiography and Anti-Modern Polemic" calls Radical Orthodoxy's "falsification of the past" "compulsive" and gives good reason it reject its readings of the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and others, in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80:1 (2006) pp.1-21. In a review of Hankey and Hedley's *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy* for *Ars Disputandi* Vol.8 (2008), Maarten Wisse objects to recurring criticisms of Radical Orthodoxy's use of different historical figures, arguing that critics should focus instead on developing an alternative to the movement. In their Editor's Introduction for *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler provide a forceful account of the theological and philosophy scene within which Radical Orthodoxy has worked over the last two decades. Their portrayal of Radical Orthodoxy's approach to the "postsecular" provides a context for understanding Radical Orthodoxy's response to recent intellectual movements and their historical sources.

tide of their time. These thinkers held fast to a theological vision responsible for exerting the hidden influence behind key enterprises in modern thinking, and they are our guides in challenging the failures of the contemporary world with a genuinely Christian alternative.

Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) is such a hero for John Milbank. Milbank takes Hamann to be the paradigmatic anti-enlightenment “radical conservative,” as such, he is the epitome of the “redescription of Christianity” and the value of “Christian difference” Milbank means to articulate; likewise, the communication of Hamann’s enigmatic but stealthily influential ideas offers a prime illustration of the significance of Milbank’s revealing historical inquiries. For according to Milbank, Hamann is the covert agent whose work causes Kantianism to be so quickly abandoned, and which likewise provokes the rapid rise and fall of the critical projects of Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling; Hamann is the initiator of an approach to language which seismically shifts the course of later modern philosophy; and Hamann’s is the animus that subverts the myth of givenness installed by German idealism and replaces it with uncompromising insistence on our “faithful reception of the divine gift.”<sup>2</sup>

Still, in light of recent efforts to contextualize or repudiate the way in which Radical Orthodoxy reads its historical champions and villains (and the fact that it does so split the world: into good Christians and bad nihilists), the reader would be justified in wondering whether the examination of another of Radical Orthodoxy’s ancestors is worth the effort. One might hope to bracket the question of whether Radical Orthodoxy stands on the shoulders of giants or figments of its own construction, and instead to focus on its fundamental concerns and suggestions, apart from its historical retrievals. Yet it is precisely

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<sup>2</sup> As I will assert in this paper and have shown elsewhere, Hamann is indeed the initiator of a “metacritical” approach to the study of language that is of profound consequence for later modern philosophy. The truth of this claim helps to explain why it would be helpful for Milbank’s case if Hamann also shared Milbank’s theological position, though I will argue that he does not. Milbank writes of the abandonment of Kantianism and of the rapid rise and fall of subsequent critical philosophies in his contribution to *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.22-23. (Hereafter, “RO.”) It is here that he makes the case that Hamann and the radical pietists (Franz Heinrich Jacobi in particular) are responsible for the best ideas of modern philosophy. I leave it to the reader to judge whether Milbank’s assurance that Kantianism was “quickly abandoned” is indicative of Milbank’s level of competence in assessing the history of philosophy. Milbank relates the excesses of Kantianism and the “main lines of the German philosophical legacy” to Nazism, and implies that Hamann and the radical pietists present a track which could have opposed Nazism from within that same culture, in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p.24. (Hereafter, “BR.”) The quote with which this paragraph ends, which attributes to Hamann (and Herder and Jacobi) the creation of an alternative to German romanticism and idealism, which fail insofar as they “isolate something ‘given’ apart from a faithful reception of the divine ‘gift,’” is taken from John Milbank’s *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p.2. (Hereafter, “WMS.”)

because of the way that reading Hamann, and Milbank on Hamann, forces us to deal with the matters of historical retrieval and linguistic portrayal that Hamann's importance to Milbank comes to seem exceptional, and ultimately, revelatory of an internal incongruence within Radical Orthodoxy which deepens the more determinedly the movement suppresses it. Hamann's thought and Milbank's appreciation of elements of it tell us that nothing matters as much as how we interpret and relate history, how we place ourselves within it, and how we may describe and therefore face up to our worldly commission.

### Condescension and the Metacritical Standpoint

Milbank is sensitive to Hamann's contention that insofar as God "speaks" in a manner human beings can understand, he speaks through history and the happenings of the natural world, which must be experienced with human sensibility and interpreted in human terms. As Milbank writes, for Hamann, "we can never have an abstract faith in God as author of nature, sustaining the reality of things, without *reading* these things in their specific, revealed and always *historical* contingency as the primary divine language."<sup>3</sup> History is not only a species of divine revelation for Hamann; he makes the stronger claim that only in the enactment and interpretation of history and nature can anything *like* a divine narrative be read.<sup>4</sup> I emphasize that Hamann describes something "like" a divine narrative because Hamann insists that insofar as anything is revealed, it is in a human language "to the creature through the creature"; we do not encounter, let alone master, the unmediated will or intention of God.<sup>5</sup> Rather, we contend with ourselves, exercising our freedom, and hoping that our projections about divinity strike at a truth we cannot confirm. The crux of faith, for Hamann, is the hope that the relationship we posit between human-created and divine-creator exists in a meaningful way, as we continue to acknowledge, often through rational analysis, the character and conditions of our own hopeful positing.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, for Hamann,

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<sup>3</sup> RO, 27.

<sup>4</sup> "Just as nature was given to us to open our eyes, so history was given to us to open our ears" in *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary*. James C. O'Flaherty (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 64.12-13.

<sup>5</sup> "Speak, that I may see you! —This wish was fulfilled by creation, which is a speech to creatures through creatures; for day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge" from *Aesthetica in Nuce*, in *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*, Edited and translated by Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 65. See also *Aesthetica in Nuce* (as well as a number of other of Hamann's writings, translator's notes, and exceptional interpretive essays) in *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism*, Gwen Griffith Dickson (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> For characteristic statements of faith, see for example: "But perhaps all history is more mythology than this philosopher [Bolingbroke] thinks, and is, like nature, a book that is sealed, a hidden witness, a riddle which

we understand our desire and our presumption in the analogical terms available to us. The dyad of “creator-created,” so essential to Christian theology, is sustained by its analogical relation to our everyday experience of creations and their creators. Our experiential and intellectual strictures dictate our reliance on analogy, but whether this analogy successfully applies to the transcendent source it is meant to describe remains the stuff of hope or faith, not the confirmation of evidence. Hamann therefore depicts knowledge and language as a translation, “from a tongue of angels into a human tongue”: insofar as the world appears to us, it is disposed to our expression, even more, it tends to appear *as* expression, to be grasped only insofar as it is expressed, as if the world and its history were a divine language, articulating itself over time, always in a human idiom.<sup>7</sup> In Hamann, the idea that existence as we know it could only be the result of divine self-limitation entails the corollary that the existence we know is a limited phenomenon by its very nature; this shows up pointedly in our faculty of reason, which desires to know its own source and full scope, but which is able to grasp neither. As Hamann puts it in a personal letter, “since Adam’s fall, all *gnosis* is suspicious to me, like a forbidden fruit.”<sup>8</sup> Hamann connects divine condescension to human epistemic limitation without fail; though his descriptions tend to be accompanied by a poetic or mythic imagining of the scene of divine condescension, the bottom line is always the same: we may be known by God, but we do not know him.<sup>9</sup>

Milbank is attracted to Hamann’s persistent defense of history as the site of divine revelation because he takes it to be the forerunner of his own position of “metanarrative realism.”<sup>10</sup> Where Hamann argues that the original condescension of God to the world and

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cannot be solved unless we plow with another heifer than our reason” *Socratic Memorabilia* 65.9-13, (O’Flaherty translation); and “Reason is given to you not that you may become wise, but that you may recognize your foolishness and ignorance” (Hamann to Kant July 27, 1759) in *Immanuel Kant: Philosophical Correspondence 1759-99*, Edited and translated by Arnulf Zweig (University of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>7</sup> See for example the letter Hamann writes Herder after reading a pre-press copy of Herder’s *Treatise on the Origin of Language*: “God throws language *through* people—who doubts it? Who has? ... That he does not throw mystically, but through nature, animals, a pantheon of speaking lutes; that he speaks through the urgency of human needs or wishes—who has taken this up more than I?” Hamann to Herder, August 1, 1772 in *Briefwechsel*, ed. Arthur Henkel and Walter Ziesemer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1955-79).

<sup>8</sup> Hamann to Buchholz June 26, 1785, in *Briefwechsel* (op cit.)

<sup>9</sup> See for example Hamann’s *Biblical Meditations*: “‘Come,’ says God, ‘we will come down from heaven. Let us go down.’ This is the means by which we have come closer to heaven: the condescension of God to earth”; see also the description of Apollo’s condescension throughout Hamann’s *Socratic Memorabilia* (e.g., at 68.32-35; 71.4-7; 71.15-18), and Hamann’s connection of the ignorance that therefore characterizes the human mode of being with the wisdom of Socrates, who begins and ends by recognizing his lack of knowledge. See too Hamann’s reference to Job 36:26: “Behold, God is great, and we know him not,” in *Disrobing and Transfiguration: A Flying Letter to Nobody, the Well Known*, which is representative. In Haynes (op cit.), p.230.

<sup>10</sup> Milbank uses the terms “metanarrative realism” to designate his own interpretative proposal in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1990). (Hereafter, “TST.”)

the fallenness of terrestrial life situate us permanently within an immanent field, Milbank's most vital proposal—that philosophy, social theory, and all of social and political life must return to their theological sources and submit to a renewed theology's judgments and ends—is “ensured” and “justified” by “a genuine metanarrative realism” which is authorized to interpret all of human history in light of the Christian mythos.<sup>11</sup> For Milbank, Hamann is such an important ally because his metacritique of transcendental philosophy both establishes the ubiquity of language in all functions of higher order cognition, and holds that the history of events and ideas constitutes a divine speaking to and through the world which must yet be engaged and interpreted. The human and divine logos are linked, in human forms of expression which project their divine accompaniments. Hamann upsets the “purification” of human reason from language, tradition, and experience; at the same time, he speaks of our most characteristically human possession—language—as a fount of divine being, or our truest access to it.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Milbank's own reliance on historical interpretation, and the essential dogma he lays down for Radical Orthodoxy, expects that the association with Hamann allows it a “metacritical,” linguistic perspective on the failings of philosophy and theory, and by the same token, a “metanarrative about how God speaks in the world in order to redeem it.”<sup>13</sup>

In order to draw out the difference between Hamann's suggestion that history be read as the site of divine discourse, carried out in human terms, and Milbank's assertion that the superiority of Radical Orthodoxy's theological position rests on a metanarrative realism authorized to judge all historical discourses through a set of Christian tropes, it is necessary to describe Hamann's enterprise in some more detail. As I have already suggested, the whole of that enterprise pivots on the notion of divine *Herunterlassung*, God's self-limitation or condescension in creation.<sup>14</sup> Taking up the idea as he first encounters it in Luther, Hamann

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<sup>11</sup> “The *logic* of Christianity involves the claim that the ‘interruption’ of history by Christ and his bride, the Church, is the most fundamental of events, interpreting all other events [...] yet] a genuine metanarrative realism [...] ceases to be *only* a privileged set of events, but rather becomes the whole story of human history which is still being enacted and interpreted in light of those events” (TST, 388).

<sup>12</sup> *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason* in Dickson (op cit.) and Haynes (op cit.). See also *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism*, Edited and translated by Jere Paul Surber (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> TST, 422.

<sup>14</sup> I have analyzed Hamann's thinking about condescension, as well as his metacritical position and his theory of language, in more detail elsewhere: “Language and Immanence in Hamann” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* Vol.27; 2, November 2006; *The Immanent Word: The Turn to Language in German Philosophy 1759-1801* (New York: Routledge, 2007); “Is Theology Possible After Hamann?” in *Hamann and the Tradition*. Ed. Lisa Marie Anderson. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, Forthcoming 2011). My discussion of these notions here repeats the findings of those works. There is also considerable discussion of these themes in the literature on Hamann.

returns persistently to the image of the fallen world as a godly self-negation we can neither account for nor overcome; God's inexplicable self-reduction "makes way" for the world and the finite beings who inhabit it. Divine condescension entails a vision of creation as the loss of undivided abundance; the world and its inhabitants are effectively incomplete, and our lack of completion marks our understanding of the world. Unlike his theological precursors, however, Hamann is unwavering in his determination to take the epistemological consequence of divine condescension seriously. Since our creation, such as we can conceive of it, is initiated by a condition of constraint, our form of knowing cannot be comprehensive. The limitation that characterizes our intellectual activities tells us something about the confines of human discursive abilities, but nothing of the world or of God beyond this constraint. The real cause of our limitation cannot, therefore, be conclusively explained: condescension is itself a metaphorical image which makes sense of the inexplicable act of creation. Hamann's greatest invectives are issued against those who claim knowledge of what they cannot know—most especially of metaphysical first principles or the mind of God; his regard is granted foremost to those who maintain and question the limits of their knowledge—thus Socrates is the subject of Hamann's first work and is thereafter his lifelong ideal.<sup>15</sup>

Hamann develops upon the traditional notion of fallenness by arguing that while the cause and full scope of divine condescension in creation cannot be rationally mastered, the encounter with that which exceeds us may yet be detected where language attempts a description of divinity or its creative power, and succeeds only in describing its own attempt. Being, insofar as we can know it and speak of it, shows up as language; yet where traditional ontological argumentation inevitably fails, language necessarily entails and demonstrates its

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I have cited already the interpretative essays of Dickson; for further discussion of the notion of condescension see also W.M. Alexander *Johann Georg Hamann: Philosophy and Faith* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966). For important secondary discussions of Hamann that relate closely to the notion of condescension see O'Flaherty (op cit.); John R. Betz *After Enlightenment: Hamann as Post-Secular Visionary* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Oswald Bayer "Gegen System und Struktur: Die Theologische Aktualität Johann Georg Hamanns" in *Johann Georg Hamann: Acta des internationalen Hamann-Colloquiums*, Edited by Bernhard Gajek (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979); and Josef Nadler, *Johann Georg Hamann. Der Zeuge des Corpus mysticum*. (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1949).

<sup>15</sup> The entirety of the *Socratic Memorabilia* bears this out. For just a couple of examples: "Socrates lured his fellow citizens out of the labyrinths of their learned Sophists to a truth in the inward being, to a wisdom of the secret hearts," and "The ignorance of Socrates was a sensibility. But between sensibility and a theoretical proposition is a greater difference than between a living animal and its anatomical skeleton. The ancient and modern skeptics may wrap themselves ever so much in the lion skin of Socratic ignorance; nevertheless they betray themselves by their voices and ears. If they know nothing, why does the world need a learned demonstration of it? Their hypocrisy is ridiculous and insolent."

own existence. The epistemological limit that follows from recognition of the notion of divine condescension requires that ontology be supplanted with the study of discursive practices.<sup>16</sup>

Several ideas fundamental to Hamann's thinking extend from his argument in defense of divine condescension. The first, as we have seen, is the idea that *what is* shows up as language or expression.<sup>17</sup> Regarding attempts to know the divine and to describe it, these expressive acts may tell us something important about the scope of language, but they do not burst through language into transcendence. As such, descriptions of God, his will, and his doings must have a metaphorical or a regulative function. To believe in God is not to assert that a set of properties belong to him, but to recognize one's own desire for connection with a force one can only imagine. Though our cognitive activities cannot be secured by a transcendent or objective foundation, and though we cannot know that *from which* the "original" translation occurs, we assert a continuity between humanity and divinity and thus establish a tradition of reading human logos as analogous to divine logos. It is this tradition upon which we rely, and which we hope points, in the excess of linguistic meaning, to the excess of human meaning. "Everything divine . . . is also human; because a human being can neither act nor suffer except by analogy to its nature. [...] This *communicatio* of divine and human *idiomatum*," Hamann writes, "is a fundamental law and principle key of all our knowledge."<sup>18</sup>

The second consequence of Hamann's conception of divine condescension is likewise one we have already touched upon: the nature of genuine faith. Hamann cites with relish (in a letter to Kant) Hume's ironic statement that one cannot "eat an egg and drink a glass of water without faith [*Glaube*]" because he agrees with the pronouncement, and takes

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<sup>16</sup> As Hamann writes in a 1787 letter to Jacobi: "What is called Being in your language, I would rather name the Word." Hamann to Jacobi, in vol. 7 of *Briefwechsel*, ed. Arthur Henkel and Walter Ziesemer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1955-79), p. 175.

<sup>17</sup> Hamann does not fully endorse the position later called "expressivism," most famously by Charles Taylor, in a set of essays which credit Hamann for being among the first to develop the position. That position, as has been often noted, is nicely summed in Wittgenstein's dictum "the limits of my language are the limits of my world." I discuss some of the ways that Hamann's linguistic theory blends elements of later "expressive" and "truth conditional" approaches to language in (2006) *op cit*. For Taylor's discussion of expressivism: *Human Agency and Language*, Philosophical Papers I. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and "The Importance of Herder" in *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration*, edited by Edna and Avishai Margalit. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Dickson translation (*op cit*).

it to be an appropriate corollary of Hume's skepticism and of his own.<sup>19</sup> In denying that the principle of causality or any metaphysical first principle can be proven, Hume argues that we form ideas about the connections between events, beliefs which involve the desire for or anticipation of some set of apparent connections. Hamann is not merely being playful when he takes up this Humean notion of *Glaube* and insists on its significance. Indeed, according to Hamann, we get on in the world with faith, or a cognitive impulse which affirms what appears to be present and anticipates its conditions and possible products. If we look candidly for the ground of existence, like Hume, we will find nothing but human habits of inference. Hamann upholds Humean skepticism and denies the rational veracity of traditional metaphysics no less than theology—and he does so over two decades before the appearance of Kant's critical project. Yet, Hamann argues, it is with *Glaube* that we live in the world and make whatever everyday sense of it we do, and this same *Glaube* animates the “determination to believe” in God and the Christian religion. Again, Hamann tells Kant that Hume knew the truth in spite of his jest, for when Hume argues that no reasonable person could believe in miracles or the Christian creed, he is right; as Hume knows, such a person is “moved by faith ... conscious of a continued miracle in his own person.”<sup>20</sup> The faith or belief with which we make everyday assumptions about the world may be unreflective, but once it is examined, and the alternative systems meant to certify the resources of the real are questioned, then honesty demands that we admit the miraculous quality of everyday experience, and it allows us to choose to maintain the miraculous in our will to believe religiously. The choice to believe religiously necessarily entails, for Hamann, this preservation of the miraculous; the miraculous and our open, acknowledged inability to “subvert it to the principles of the understanding” must permanently belie truth claims about the being or intentions of God.

Hamann emphasizes the supreme human freedom which must follow from divine condescension; human beings are left to interpret a world without the possibility of complete

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<sup>19</sup> Hamann to Kant July 27, 1759: “The Attic philosopher, Hume, needs faith if he is to eat an egg and drink a glass of water. [...] Reason was not given to you to make you wise but to make you aware of your folly and ignorance ... If he needs faith [*Glaube*] for food and drink, why does he deny faith when he judges of matters that are higher than sensuous eating and drinking? [...] If Hume were only sincere, consistent with himself—.” in *Correspondence*, Zweig (op cit.) pp. 41-42. As Manfred Kuehn allows in notes to his description of Hamann's reading of Hume, the final paragraph of section 10 of Hume's first *Enquiry* “might indeed suggest” a reading of Hume consistent with fideism. Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). See too the *Socratic Memorabilia* 73.20: “Our own existence and the existence of all things outside us must be believed [*miß geglaubt...werden*] and cannot be determined in any other way.”

<sup>20</sup> Hamann to Kant (op cit.), p.42.



or conclusive confirmation, yet only on this account are we free. Milbank rightly recognizes the proto-existentialism of Hamann's thinking on freedom, but refuses its consequence. For Hamann, "freedom is the maximum and minimum of all our natural powers, as well as both the fundamental drive and the final goal of their entire orientation, evolution, and return."<sup>21</sup> We are determined ultimately "neither by instinct nor *sensus communis*," Hamann writes, neither by natural law nor human custom, but "everyone is his own legislator." Moreover, without "the perfect law of freedom, man would not even be capable of imitation, the basis of all education and invention." Hamann's defense of the fundamental, existential fact of human freedom is unwavering; he goes on to argue that all cognitive abilities, including the moral conscience, stem from the primary actuality of freedom and are determined insofar as they are freely exercised. It is an act of our freedom when we gather the "determination to believe" which is faith, and only as an ongoing, freely undertaken positing that faith persists. As will be the case with each of these central positions, we must return to the Hamannian portrayal of freedom shortly in order to compare it with the substitute offered by Milbank, in the name of Hamann.

Before doing so, one further differentiation of a Hamannian concept is required. Hamann names his position "metacritical" in his *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*, a brief review of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Hamann takes it that Kant's critical turn begins with the appropriate recognition that epistemic procedures require justification. But he charges that Kant is still shoring up a notion of reason unequipped to justify the epistemological principles he employs, for Kant has emptied reason of its actual dependencies: on tradition and custom; on experience and "everyday inductions"; and, most importantly, on language.<sup>22</sup> So while Kant rightly understands that the continuation of philosophy (qua critical) requires that the foundation for knowledge claims, or the criteria with which they will be judged, be made explicit, Kantian reason is disingenuously put forward as able to describe and adjudge the claims of "subjective universality" as if it were not itself bound by language and the contingencies to which it is otherwise subject. Kant aims to show reason to be independent of language, yet relies upon linguistic analogies to construct reason's ideal propositions. Moreover, Kant fails to allow that language, which belongs to both sensibility and intuition,

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<sup>21</sup> *Philological Ideas and Doubts* in Haynes (op cit.), p.155. The rest of the quotes on freedom in this paragraph are taken from this essay and continue to use Haynes's translation.

<sup>22</sup> See the Dickson translation and well as the Haynes translation (op cit).

is their “shared root.”<sup>23</sup> Hamann’s metacritical position is initially aimed at Kant, but is presented as a review of any metaphysical system unclear about its own conditions of possibility; these include its linguistic dependencies as well as the way in which experience and historically contingent tradition affect its presentation of human thinking. The metacritical position is also a skeptical standard in its own right, in that it holds that nothing—beyond our own natural languages—ultimately undergirds epistemological categories and transcendental procedures. Following from the idea of divine condescension, human epistemic practices are necessarily limited by our inability to know the source or ground of Being; what we can know about are our discursive practices, and these tell us much about the ways in which human reason remains bound to linguistic acts, usage, tradition, and experience—but the history of language and reason is a human history, and if that history has a transcendent source which might authorize its claims, this cannot be rationally ascertained.<sup>24</sup>

Hamann’s problem with Kant’s first *Critique*, then, though he argues it as impishly as usual, revolves around one of the most consequential insights in eighteenth century thinking: the attempted project of dissociating thought and language, with its presentation of the laws of thought as if logic rendered them and the transcendental procedure followed from them, *itself* remains dependent upon the “ordinary” language of everyday experience, which it reproduces in an abstract form obligated by the same problems that led to the attempted dissociation in the first place. As Jere Paul Surber has detailed in his assessment of the metacritical position, Hamann argues that transcendental discourse cannot itself escape the fact that it, too, is a linguistic construction mirroring the concrete judgments of experience.<sup>25</sup> After the metacritique issued at Kant, the key question remains “how are any judgments possible?”—but instead of the promise of transcendental philosophy, it leads us to *Sprachkritik*, with its examination of the historically specific, contingently composed conditions of any given judgment. No judgment, in other words, can be assessed as purified from its circumstance, but each tends to reveal the creative resources of natural language. The metacritical position contends that the only legitimate way forward for thinking involves

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<sup>23</sup> Hamann’s *Metacritique* appears in Dickson, Surber, and Hayes, (op cit., all). Kant allows that “our cognition springs from two fundamental sources of the mind” at A50/B74.

<sup>24</sup> Hamann goes to lengths to argue the exclusively human derivation of language in his *Herderschriften* as well as his personal letters to Herder. See for example the quote from Hamann’s August 1772 letter to Herder in footnote 7, above.

<sup>25</sup> Surber (op cit.), p.14ff.

engaging language as first philosophy, even as the position undermines the possibility of traditional epistemology, along with the newly minted transcendental project. Hamann's metacriticism decisively upsets, by contextualizing, any attempt to derive logically the veritable ground of cognitive objectivity and normative authority.<sup>26</sup>

### **Conservatism and the Mind of God**

Milbank claims Hamann as the primogenitor of Radical Orthodoxy because, he says, Hamann is (along with Jacobi) the source of a “genuinely anti-liberal *radical* orthodoxy.”<sup>27</sup> Hamann and Jacobi are “even greater conservative revolutionaries than Luther himself,” though Milbank's intervention is required by the fact that they have been only ignored or travestied by theologians in general and by Karl Barth in particular. Not only does Barth evade and misconstrue the character of radical pietism, he furthers a dominant trend in the history of ideas which likewise evades and misconstrues the theological source of a great deal of modern thought. In his contribution to the *Radical Orthodoxy* manifesto, Milbank pinpoints in the thought of Duns Scotus the start of the trouble that pietism later addresses, for Scotus disconnects philosophy from theology when he suggests a consideration of Being “in abstraction from the question of whether one is considering created or creating being.” Scotus's proposition engenders the possibility of an ontology and an epistemology independent of and transcendental to theology. During the Reformation, this separation deepens, with philosophy authorizing itself to study Being, and an acquiescent theology deteriorating into labored positivism. Unlike Luther (a point Milbank stresses), Hamann and Jacobi challenge this entire legacy at the root; such is the substance of their description as conservative revolutionaries.

Milbank published the Radical Orthodoxy manifesto in 1999; it was reprinted in 2001 without any amendment to the rhetoric of the “conservative revolutionary.” This dating leaves the disposition of Milbank's notion of “conservatism” in question, for in *Theology and Social Theory*, first published in 1990 but also reprinted in 2001, Milbank identifies as conservative those approaches to theorizing he is against. Transcendental idealism is said to be just as conservative as Cartesian philosophy, in that it naively or disingenuously

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<sup>26</sup> Hamann's metacritical position is succinctly described in James R. Walker's review of Daniel Dahlstrom's *Philosophical Legacies: Essays on the Thought of Kant, Hegel, and Their Contemporaries* for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=15006>, January 2009). Walker also handles the metacritical position in his 2004 dissertation, *Hegel's Response to Meta-critical Skepticism in the "Phenomenology of Spirit"* (n.p.: ProQuest).

<sup>27</sup> RO, 23 (Milbank's emphasis). Subsequent quotes in this paragraph are taken from this same essay.

attempts to “conceal the abyss” exposed with the finding that language is a creative, expressive source of meaning, rather than a transparent representation of reality.<sup>28</sup> In this narrative then, it is conservatism which reacts against Milbank’s heroes. Milbank identifies as distinctively conservative the position which, in the face of the “abyss,” attempts to secure meaning and the stability of discourses with a perverse adherence to human subjectivity, falsely making the human subject into the unsullied derivation of language and the particularities of practice.

Other of Milbank’s declarations of value are more obviously those of religious and social conservatism: he maintains that the Christian church is “indispensable for salvation” and that other religions and social groups, however “virtuous seeming,” are “on the path of damnation.” While this sort of rhetoric may seem ill suited to a serious work of scholarship, it is nevertheless how Milbank clarifies his role as a theologian, who must be able to judge, from the perspective of the church, “what is going on in other human societies.”<sup>29</sup> Other schools of theology cannot be trusted to do the work of interpretation, for, as much of Milbank’s work is devoted to showing, these positions sanction secularism and open the gates to nihilism, and have made of the church a “hellish anti-Church.”<sup>30</sup> Radical Orthodoxy, or Milbank himself, is the one able to interpret all other events from the perspective of Christ and the church, and he proposes to submit social theory, political practice, and ontology, to a theology recrowned as “queen of the sciences.” Milbank therefore argues for the articulation of a Christian “cultural code” through which all events and institutions can be read; he criticizes Aquinas, among others, for allowing the Christian church to be understood as separate from the political sphere, and as specializing merely in the inward life of its adherents. That sort of move inappropriately separates the “secular” from the “spiritual,” and forces us to miss, in activities like “tending gardens, building bridges, sowing crops, caring for children,” their true Christian character. And again, it is the supposed defenders of the church who are partially to blame for the loss, insofar as they have argued or allowed for a special “sphere of interest” which belongs to the church, when they ought to have known that since Being itself is permeated by the Christian logos, all extant institutions are extensions of the Christian word and should be read as such. “Better then,”

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<sup>28</sup> TST, 150ff.

<sup>29</sup> This and the previous quotes are from TST, 387-388.

<sup>30</sup> TST, 433.

writes Milbank, “that the bounds between Church and state be extremely hazy, so that a ‘social’ existence of many complex and interlocking powers may emerge ...”<sup>31</sup>

Milbank is especially adroit at calling out any theory which cannot justify its procedures, or which lacks (intentionally or in spite of itself) access to an objective or transcendent source of normative or epistemic authority. This is why, for example, he judges that the “peaceful transmission of difference” in Gadamerian hermeneutics “would be splendid as theology” but remains “specious as philosophy”: for nothing ultimately justifies the transmission for which Gadamer aims.<sup>32</sup> Yet the justification for Milbank’s own positions—the authority of his metanarrative realism and the sanction whereby his interpretation of the Christian logos is known to be the intellectually and morally *right* interpretation of all discursive activity—is based directly and categorically on his appropriation of the metacritical position he claims to take over from Hamann.

Milbank correctly identifies a consequence of Hamann’s metacritical standpoint: since sensuous, historically determined language always already saturates our reasoning, we cannot analyze reasoning apart from its discursive acts, nor can we separate “categories” of cognition from the stuff of experience. As we saw in the previous section, this is how Hamann rejects the conceits of Kant’s critical turn: in effect, he one up’s the level of “critique” in Kant to include the sensuous and contingent conditions of reason’s possibility, thereby upsetting the separation of sensible and intelligible at the heart of Kant’s project. Milbank correctly judges that “this metacritique enmeshes us more deeply in physical finitude than even Kant would allow”; immediately, however, he adds, “but on the other hand, it also makes it less easy to draw the Kantian boundary between ‘legitimated’ knowledge of finitude, and illegitimate pretensions of knowledge in the infinite.”<sup>33</sup> Milbank is gearing up for an incredible assertion, here, one which encapsulates his theological endeavor. Whereas, for Hamann, the metacritical standpoint leads to skepticism about all metaphysics and returns us to our dependencies on language and experience, Milbank claims that a metacritical application grants no less than divine insight. Milbank explains that inasmuch as Hamann proves the dependency of human reason on language and experience, we can no longer claim to know with certainty what the limitations of the understanding really are. Milbank continues, “and in that case, it becomes impossible to demonstrate that the

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<sup>31</sup> TST, 408.

<sup>32</sup> TST, 417.

<sup>33</sup> TST, 151.

‘understanding’, or human discursive thought, is clearly limited to judgment of the finite and must not trespass beyond these bounds.” Presumably, Milbank means that if language and experience are the limiting factors for reasoning, and language and experience (qua unfolding history) are actually divine, then—contrary to being real limitations at all, our participation in language and history link us directly into the mind of God.

Milbank says as much in his *Radical Orthodoxy* contribution: “We correspond to the other only insofar as our expressions approximate the entire expression of the thing by *the mind of God*, which is the thing’s actual existence over against nothing.” Likewise, in contrast to the illegitimate legacy which separates philosophy and theology as well as reason and revelation, for “the Church Fathers ... both faith and reason are included within the more generic framework of participation *in the mind of God*.”<sup>34</sup> Yet it is precisely this sort of rational confidence about the Absolute that Hamann ridicules, in his *Metacritique*, when transcendental philosophy displays it: “Since, after two-thousand years, no knowledge has been gained in the search beyond experience, reason ... promises its impatient contemporaries ... that it will produce that universal and unerring stone of wisdom so necessary to Catholicism and despotism.”<sup>35</sup>

Milbank devotes himself to “the relevance of language for theology,” averring that the “foundations of theology are linguistically mediated,” yet he justifies the notion of a human language that participates in divine language with the allegedly metacritical insight that our knowledge is not really regulated by language at all, but delivered, through language, into a form of knowledge that surpasses the human.<sup>36</sup> Although Hamann goes to lengths (for indeed, this is the sum and substance of his project) to show that human thinking happens within human language, that anything we learn we learn in a language “to the creature through the creature,” and though he routinely chides his contemporaries for making knowledge claims like those he associates with the false “stone of wisdom,” Milbank claims not to transgress the limitations Hamann recognizes as linguistically mediated precisely by claiming access to a divine language that he is certain corresponds with our own. Milbank often toys with the rhetoric of faithful humility to the mysteriousness of divinity, but his claim of access into the divine mind is not a testimonial of personal faith, but a blatant

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<sup>34</sup> RO, 29, 24, my italics.

<sup>35</sup> *Metacritique* (Surber translation).

<sup>36</sup> These quotes are taken from WMS, p.2, though Milbank references this same agenda throughout his works.

assertion, made with the full weight of epistemic certitude.<sup>37</sup> Milbank tell us that he knows what the divine logos is about, as well as how to use it to interpret history *in toto* and in all of its manifesting particulars.

This speaks to the incongruence that I have called characteristic of Milbank's thinking. Milbank seems to understand the emphasis on epistemic limitation and empirical embeddedness that are distinguishing features of Hamann's work. He seems also to be deeply attracted to these features, citing them frequently and adorning his texts with similar language. Yet these same ideas require of us a genuine praxis: if one agrees with them, one must abstain from certain kinds of metaphysical commitments, truth claims, and assertions of knowledge. Milbank cites the great "either/or" on which he, and Radical Orthodoxy, stake themselves.<sup>38</sup> Yet the real "either/or" of this narrative is not to be found in the opposition between philosophy and theology, but between an authenticity able to affirm the consequence of the forms of human limitedness it encounters, and bad faith, or a false consciousness which claims that it alone transcends all evident limitations and remains justified by the source of its transcendence.

Milbank is a sensitive enough reader of Hamann to have encountered the reality that is "analogously continuous" in Hamann's work, but not a confident enough thinker to accept the context of the insight, which indicates that analogies are those fully human constructions that allow us to make use of our epistemic limitations.<sup>39</sup> One need not review the awesome resources, beginning with Plato and extending through Neoplatonism and the church fathers, though the German idealists and beyond, marshaled on behalf of the potential of analogical thought, and meant to either establish or question the true derivation of analogy—for Milbank plainly bases his "metanarrative" insights on the thought he knows

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<sup>37</sup> Janz argues that Milbank sophistically plays down the idea of "transcendence" so as to avoid this sort of criticism. Instead, Janz maintains, Milbank prefers to speak of hidden and subterranean "depths," within the immanent, which nonetheless serve as bridges to the transcendent. Janz zeros in on Milbank's insinuation that given the invisible and secreted nature of said depths, his own prophetic efforts are required (op cit., p.399).

<sup>38</sup> For example, at RO, 32, where Milbank writes: "Hence it is indeed for radical orthodoxy an either/or: philosophy (Western or Eastern) as a purely autonomous discipline, or theology: Herod or the magi, Pilate or the God-man."

<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, I have explained how Hamann advocates, on at least one occasion, the climb from analogy to anagogy, or from regulative orientation in thinking to spiritual interpretation and "performative" completion. However, Milbank does not take up the possibility of anagogy as Hamann imagines it, perhaps because, as I have argued, even this openly theological notion is inoculated against theological hubris in Hamann's description: the degree to which one must become an "unknower" on the ladder of anagogical ascent is severe, and the final miracle of revelation is, in addition to being a disclosure of infinite divine power, also a "miracle of such infinite silence, that makes God as nothing ..." In *Sämtliche Werke*. Historische-Kritische Ausgabe, edited by Josef Nadler. Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1949-1957, (Hereafter "N") II 204.8-14. (See my 2006, 2007 op cit.)

to be harnessed by Hamann, and in this thought, nothing can guarantee the analogies, the regulative positing, and the faith upon which we nevertheless depend.

Following Hume, Hamann makes fun of the philosopher's inability to ground the categories of causality, necessity, and relation, for each of these are nonetheless structural features of the natural language upon which we rely. This is the rub for Hamann: when we inappropriately abstract from linguistic features like these, we generate a series of concepts confused about their own derivation.<sup>40</sup> Still, there is sense in speaking of the "linguistic a priori" or the "metaphysics of language," if what we are speaking about are the rules and the context within which a natural language is utilized. Milbank, as we have been following, goes in the opposite direction. He begins by claiming that "we are free to make 'eminent' or 'analogical' use of these categories [causality, necessity, and relation] in imagining the infinite and the relation of the infinite to the finite" and ends by claiming that there is, in fact, "no vantage point from which one can 'round upon' the bounds of finitude and determine what is confined to the finite alone"<sup>41</sup> In other words, Milbank shifts in the space of a few paragraphs from reminding us of our freedom to use analogy poetically, to claiming that because we have *only* analogical and speculative insight into certain categories, precisely these must be the mysterious route into infinity, into the very mind of God. Milbank skips the regulative step in Hamann's path, and thus abandons the modus operandi of the metacritical position. At bottom, Milbank's argument amounts to no more than that very traditional fallacy: the appeal to ignorance. Like the creationist who argues for a "God of the gaps," Milbank is telling us that because he does not know why (or the extent to which) our finitude and fallibility are bound by experience and language, these are ultimately unknowable things. Moreover, it is our ignorance which proves that the hand of God is at work.<sup>42</sup> Milbank's is in fact that special case of the argument from ignorance, the fallacy of

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<sup>40</sup> Cf Hamann's letter to Jacobi of December 1784: "Metaphysics has its scholastic and courtly language; I am suspicious of both [...] I suspect that our entire philosophy consists more of language than reason, and of the misunderstandings of innumerable words, the prosopopoeia of the most arbitrary abstractions ... indeed, even the most common figures of speech of the *sensus communis* have given rise to a world of questions, the posing and answering of which are equally unfounded" in *Briefwechsel* (op cit).

<sup>41</sup> TST, 151-152.

<sup>42</sup> Milbank therefore takes a position no less daft than that recently put forward on one of the premier creationism websites ([www.creationism.org](http://www.creationism.org)), titled "Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), Preacher of Christ in the Wilderness of the Enlightenment." The article is written by Ellen Myers, who tells us that "Hamann realized from the very beginning of his walk with Christ that philosophers who do not take Christ as their starting point are not 'neutral' but rather dedicated to presuppositions of their own. This is why, for instance, they deny the creation account of the Bible, and seek to substitute for it a 'story' of their own which would 'explain creation as a natural event.'" And: "While biblical creation is fundamental and crucial in Hamann's



personal incredulity: he means us to accept the idea that since he cannot imagine how the immanence of human knowledge is imposed by human language, then it is not imposed by human language. Instead, language must grant access to the same transcendent realm imagined by Milbank's own sect of Anglican Christendom. Likewise, Milbank is saying that since he cannot imagine how we, being bounded, can ascertain the real bounds of human finitude, then finitude must not be bounded after all, but must run into infinity. Milbank's position can be summarized: 'if I do not know the nature of the boundary marked by language, then it is not knowable, and therefore, the boundary is meaningless.' It may be hard to believe that a body of theorizing so complex rests upon such commonplace fallacious argumentation, but that does not mean it does not: the form of Milbank's approach, even without the details of his scholarly maltreatments, is self-refuting. Attentiveness to the entitlement of Hamann's metacritical position would have suggested a different track.

Once Milbank's basic move is identified, it becomes readily apparent throughout his work. Milbank refers us to Charles Taylor's notion of the "background dimension" necessary for making sense of experience and "getting right" our contentions, yet from this insight into human cognition that Taylor locates in the thought of Herder, Milbank veers hard to claim that "from this background of the implicit ... it is impossible to exclude the pressure upon us of a transcendent and infinite reality."<sup>43</sup> Once again then, the argument from personal incredulity: 'because I cannot imagine that this allegedly immanent framework truly *excludes* a transcendent right of entry, then it does not; in fact, it necessarily *entails* a transcendent right of entry.'

Or once more, Milbank argues (fairly, I find) that insofar as Hamann and Herder deny the possibility of rationally ascertaining the cognitive or normative ground of judgment, they identify *metaphor* as the origin, genesis, or ultimate resource of discursive activity (in other words, as I have argued, our epistemic limitation entails the fact that, like Socrates, we

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thought, he covers a wealth of other subjects pertinent and profitable from the Christian biblical perspective in the social sciences and humanities." Milbank might also agree with Myers about feeling "greatly blessed by [her] preliminary study of Hamann's valiant and profound contributions to Christian apologetics for his own time and even more strongly for our own. He anticipated [...] yes, the creationist movement since the 1960's." Milbank would certainly agree with Myers on the importance of "the unity between creation and redemption in the eternal Providence of God and the importance of allowing no autonomy whatever to man and man's reason [...] in our own neo-pagan age." (<http://www.creationism.org/csshs/v07n3p19.htm>). Academics who would prefer not to deign to the inanity on display on the creationism website should note that compliance with Milbank's movement already implies their connivance with just that.

<sup>43</sup> TST, 152. Taylor's argument may be found in 1985, 1991 (op cit.).

can say what things are *like* but not what things are). But from this assessment, Milbank concludes that “if metaphor is fundamental, then religion ceases to be a mystery *in addition to* the mystery of humanity itself.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, *that* the ground of our alleged objectivity shows up as a metaphorical construction means nothing of the kind about religion, devotion, or ritual; indeed, if it implies anything about these, it is their basic irrelevance vis-à-vis the cognitive need for metaphor, and their subsumption under the more primary force of metaphoricity.

By creating a body of work that hinges upon just these assertions, Milbank relinquishes the Hamannian metacritical standpoint that he claims to follow.<sup>45</sup> Hence, he continues to play two, irreconcilable tunes throughout his oeuvre, with no means of linking them together. On the one hand, Milbank admits the uncertainty with which human intellectual endeavors are fraught, and he seems to object to attempts to make God or his properties the subject of epistemic claims. God is, rather, “unclassifiable,” while good religion invokes an “openness to the strange.” On the other hand, Milbank claims that because God is “not an object of our knowledge,” no human discourse has “any secular or scientific autonomy in relation to theology,” and Christian theology must get on with its true mission of subjugating all other discourses to its ends.<sup>46</sup> Christian theology is authorized on this front by Christian theology itself, which nevertheless refers to its “transcendent source” for sanction. Should the new theology fail in its mission, and at every moment that it has not yet accomplished it, nihilism prevails, and all that is meaningful in human life ebbs away. So Milbank tells us that Radical Orthodoxy is aligned with that (Hamannian, but also Platonic, empiricist, and pragmatist) tradition that is open to the “strange and unclassifiable,” but his arguments begin and end with the guarantee that we are, after all, a *mise en abyme* in the mind of God, a narrative contained within and justified by the greater narrative of our creator. This guarantee flies in the face of the Hamannian construal of knowledge, faith, and freedom.

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<sup>44</sup> WMS, 106.

<sup>45</sup> When I make the case that Milbank skids inappropriately from the Hamannian retrieval of faith in everyday experience to arguments from personal incredulity about Being, I have not implied that theological modes clearer about their metaphysical commitments cannot claim to be reason-based, but only that Milbank’s alleged metacritical methodology should commit him to a different form of skepticism, and ultimately, of faith.

<sup>46</sup> WMS, pp.2-3.

## Hamann's Leap and Milbank's Guarantee

As Milbank tells it, Hamann radically challenges the Scotist legacy in two essential ways: first, Hamann argues that no finite thing can be known, “*not even to any degree,*” apart from its ratio to the infinite. Second, Milbank explains, Hamann argues that the truth or value of nature rests exclusively upon its supernatural ordination.<sup>47</sup> I have argued that the very notion of “the infinite” is a regulative projection in Hamann; it is something we think about insofar as it can be compared to our experience and insofar as our language limits what can be said about it. When we nonetheless leap with faith into the hope for the existence of the infinite, our metacritical standpoint obliges us to remain clear about the finite, immanent conditions of our assertion of faith. Likewise, Hamann’s discussion of nature consistently focuses upon its sensuousness, which Hamann speaks of most when he discusses the tangible pleasure of human sexuality.<sup>48</sup> To encounter nature is to meet a physically demanding, corporeal reality, which may be read as the very body-being of God, but which Hamann never describes as a mere quotient to be measured out and reckoned in relation to an available “infinity.” When we encounter nature (as we continuously do), we engage with bodies and changing phenomena that are often compelling, as in the case of our own bodily needs. But if we are assured, as Milbank would assure us, that bodies are not really bodies and nature not really nature, nor the limitations of our experience as they appear to be, then that which Hamann considers the site of our embrace of divinity would be emptied of the features which, for Hamann, characterize it.

Milbank seems to consider the possibility that Hamann would oppose the attribution of these arguments to himself, and he even quotes Hamann, in a letter to Jacobi, refusing to allow that Spinozism (or everything contained in the formulation *Deus sive Natura*) leads to nihilism, and calling Jacobi “too otherworldly.”<sup>49</sup> Yet here Milbank only notes Hamann’s “strange peevishness” is refusing to go along with Jacobi and therefore with Milbank’s own reading. Likewise, Milbank admits that if Hamann has a fault, it is in his tendency

“to *replace* altogether a sense of an analogical ascent to God, or of a continuously deepened participation in divine eternity, with the notion of God’s kenotic adaptation to us [...] This ... does not allow for the New Testament notion that

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<sup>47</sup> RO, 24 (Milbank’s emphasis).

<sup>48</sup> For example, in the *Essay of a Sibyl on Marriage*, in Dickson (op cit.).

<sup>49</sup> RO, 26. The letters quoted are those of January 23, 1785 and April 27, 1787 in *Johann Georg Hamann: Briefwechsel* (op cit.).

God became man in order to incorporate us into the Trinity—to make us indeed more heavenly and spiritual ...<sup>50</sup>

Having understood as much, however, Milbank straight away adds that here, at least, Jacobi should be read as “balancing out” Hamann, and the two of them thus taken as a pair, even though “Hamann’s attitude to Jacobi is strange and problematical.”

There is another possibility, however, for Hamann cannot be faulted, accused of peevishness, or of being a strange friend if his own, avowed position is that the contingency of history and the sensuousness of nature *are* the sites of divine being, *insofar as* we can conceive of such things; and further, that we can continue to think about and respond to this conception of divinity in an acknowledged analogy to our own nature, language, and experience.

Milbank’s theological program requires the preemption of what he takes to be the modern philosophical conceptions of finitude, contingency, subjectivity, and material nature, by the properly Christian narrative which places them within a framework that confirms in advance infinitude, certainty and divine omnipotence, the supernatural character of embodied life, and the containment of all individual beings within divine Being. This confirmation makes the world reliable and guarantees the consequence of one’s individual, immortal life. Nonetheless, it is just this sort of guarantee and reliability that bankrupt authentic religious experience, Hamann tells us. What is necessary and reliable is not thereby ennobled, unless, Hamann teases, we would want to say that the “infallible and unerring instinct of insects” trumps human reasoning at every turn.<sup>51</sup> As we saw, Hamann is adamant in claiming, with Job, that “God is great and we know him not.” Hamann also aligns himself with Socrates in this regard: one is wise who knows how little he knows. For Hamann, our ignorance is the condition of possibility for our freedom, not our guarantee of divine intervention. Freedom is, again, the seat of our consciousness, attentiveness, our ability to think abstractly, and our moral conscience; freedom is the human being’s most “perfect law,” making each into his own legislator. For Hamann, the God who condescends to earth is the God who leaves us free. The “gift” of free will is the corollary of divine agency, but its actual recognition and exercise requires that the God who has given the gift becomes a

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<sup>50</sup> RO, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Philological Ideas and Doubts*, Dickson translation (op cit.).

human ideal, for if God's existence is known to be more than *our* ideal, then everything, after all, is guaranteed, and free will becomes a barren concept.

Hamann's thinking about individual free will and the onus to cultivate the self locate him closer to the "liberal-humanist" model of self-creation than Milbank can allow. But Hamann is resolute: we know individuals qua agents, as free, unique expressions of personality, and our agency is not equipped with hidden parachutes, for one either leaps into the unknown, or one never really leaps at all. Hamann does privilege the universality of narrative, and he certainly adores the narratives available in Scripture, but he is sensitive to a point that Milbank, in his role as an adjudicator of the church, must overlook. Hamann understands that we choose to perform a reading (paradigmatically, of Scripture) which characterizes our freedom within a certain narrative, and he recognizes that to narrate freedom is to give it a kind of determination. To articulate the mythos of human free will in a particular way is to express the individuality of one's reading in tandem with the individuality of the theological object.<sup>52</sup> In other words, the interpretation of texts is both an act and an expression of free individuality, and the God about whom one speaks, in such a case, is known as an individual. Each of us therefore creates our own profession of faith, and to attempt to universalize that articulation as doctrine or to enforce it as rule is to make a shift from individual event to authoritarian imposition.

No careful reader of Kierkegaard could be surprised to uncover this Hamannian position, for what Kierkegaard famously lauds in Hamann is hardly the "Christendom" for which Milbank has appointed himself speaker. And like Kierkegaard, Hamann deserves the term "radical"—not because he is an "anti-liberal," "anti-Enlightenment," "conservative revolutionary," but, on the contrary, because his venture weeds out, from the mystery of existence and the unadulterated responsibility we must take for our own, all promises of transcendence, no matter if they are amplified by the church, the academy, or the state.

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<sup>52</sup> I am indebted to the writings of Edward P. Butler for this insight. Butler analyzes neither Hamann nor Milbank; rather, much of his work is devoted to the theological exploration of the agency of divine individuals insofar as it manifests in narrative and iconic representation. See for example "Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold" *Dionysius*, Vol.23, 2005, pp.83-104; "The Theological Interpretation of Myth" *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*, Vol.7, No.1, 2005, pp. 27-41; "Offering to the Gods: A Neoplatonic Perspective" *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, Vol.2, No.1, 2007, pp.1-20; and "The Gods and Being in Proclus," *Dionysius*, Vol. 26, 2008. In "God's Care for Human Individuals: What Neoplatonism Gives to a Christian Doctrine of Providence," his keynote address to *Neoplatonism and Its Legacy: The 2009 Annual Conference on Christian Philosophy*, Wayne J. Hankey utilizes Butler's work to show how engagement with the divine can be understood as an encounter between individuals, in which divine individuality is mirrored in human individuality.

Milbank's greatest fear—or at least the justification for his martial agenda—is, again, the impending threat of nihilism. The reason philosophy must be usurped, other theologies undercut, and secularism in all its manifestations rejected, is that each of these is geared to end in the great Nihil. Yet reading Hamann should tell us that there is an absolute difference between the nihilism of exhaustion and the recognition of individual, existential freedom. Though both the “nihilistic” and the “existential” positions hold that a transcendent guarantee means nothing, only the latter allows us to continue to narrate a life of meaning, and refuses any panacea which eases its difficulties at the cost of denying the mystery of human freedom. Milbank's conflation of what I've called the existential possibility with what he calls the nihilistic threat leads him to issue an ultimatum that he credits Hamann with originating. Milbank relates that sense in which, for Hamann, “to be human means ... that we must reckon with an immense depth behind things.” Milbank continues:

There are only two possible attitudes to this depth: for the first, like Kant, we distinguish what is clear from what is hidden: but then the depth is an abyss, and what appears, as only apparent, will equally induce vertigo. This is why critical philosophy, the attitude of pure reason itself, is also the stance of nihilism. [...] The second possibility is that we trust the depth, and appearance as the gift of depth, and history as the restoration of the loss of this depth in Christ.<sup>53</sup>

By now it should be clear that the Hamann I read, and, I believe, the Hamann who Kierkegaard read, would say that this “depth” is the necessary context of the leap of faith, the only guarantor of human freedom, and as such, the condition of our rational and moral maturity—but only if it remains a gulf, and is not exchanged for the promise of everlasting surety. Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia* tells us that the maieutic art was developed precisely because we do not know what lurks in the depths until it is articulated and analyzed; oftentimes, what has been hiding behind appearances is naïve or politically dangerous. Moreover, the figure of Socrates reminds us that the beautiful-bodied are not always the good-souled, as disappointing as that may be. Rather, our task is to risk vertigo (a fine description of the philosopher's sense upon leaving and returning to the cave), and to provoke and engage the logos that, once born from each psyche, becomes amenable to judgment. Of course, Milbank would remind us that he's already refused philosophy on Radical Orthodoxy's behalf—but then he has also refused Hamann, and with him, the

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<sup>53</sup> RO, 32.

means of connecting this language of appearances and contingency with the hope for a language of presence, staked on infinity.

Milbank would like Radical Orthodoxy to be that theology which transcends the opposition between finitude and infinity, the demands of materiality and the promise of spirituality, in order to recover the primal, persistent generativity of the Christian God. In order to develop his position, Milbank returns to the iterative embeddedness of human reason probed by Hamann, and uses the insight as an anchor for his chronicle of the misbegotten creation of the secular realm. At the same time, however, this very insight, and the perspective on human thought and history it affords, disallows Milbank's advancement of the church dogmas upon which he insists, and undermines his own claims of expertise. Because Milbank's theology cannot suffer critique, contextualization, or even comparison with bodies of thinking that make different use of its favored images, it loses its standing as a study of discourses about divinity. Likewise, having made his central doctrine about the divine presence in human epistemic and linguistic practices dependent upon an argument from personal incredulity, Milbank's theology is left no further resource but the appeal to authority to sustain its claim of access to the mind of God, a claim it uses to insist upon its own mandate to arbitrate social theories and practices. In effect, then, though Milbank seems to see himself as a prophet, his theology ceases to be a genuine theology at all, and must be understood as intricate apologetics for an authoritarian, predictably conservative socio-political agenda.