

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

2021

Bavinck's Doctrine of God: Absolute, Divine Personality

Gayle E. Doornbos

Dordt University, gayle.doornbos@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Doornbos, G. E. (2021). Bavinck's Doctrine of God: Absolute, Divine Personality. *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, 6 (2), 311. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1420

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Bavinck's Doctrine of God: Absolute, Divine Personality

Keywords

Herman Bavinck, doctrinal theology, God, Trinity, scholarship

Disciplines

Christianity

JBTS

VOLUME 6 | ISSUE 2

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES



HERMAN BAVINCK (1854-1921)
A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

*Bavinck's Doctrine of God:
Absolute, Divine Personality
by Gayle Doornbos*

Bavinck's Doctrine of God: Absolute, Divine Personality

GAYLE DOORNBOS

Gayle Doornbos (PhD, University of St. Michael's College) is an Associate Professor of Theology at Dordt University. She has also taught in Calvin Theological Seminary's distance program. She lives in Sioux Center, IA.

Introduction¹

Given the Dutch Reformed Theologian Herman Bavinck's insistence on the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity and the serious debates surrounding the doctrine at the turn of the twentieth century, it is surprising that there remain few extended treatments of Bavinck's doctrine of God within secondary scholarship, especially those situating his theology proper within his theological and philosophical context. While there remains a widespread recognition of the trinitarian nature of Bavinck's theology as well as examinations of the triform structure of various doctrines,² the structure, shape, sources, and context of Bavinck's doctrine of God remains

1. The material for this article is a combination of a paper given for the Advanced Theological Studies Fellowship at Kampen Theological University and the author's doctoral dissertation. The materials have often been altered for the sake of this paper. See Gayle Doornbos, "Absolute Divine Personality: Herman Bavinck and Isaak A. Dorner's Doctrines of God," Advanced Theological Studies Fellowship, June 2019," and Gayle Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology: The Ontological, Cosmological, and Soteriological Dimensions of the Doctrine of the Trinity" (PhD Dissertation: University of St. Michael's College, 2019).

2. Epistemology: Bruce Pass, "Herman Bavinck and the Problem of New Wine in Old Wineskins," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 4 (2015): 432–49; Scott Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism, The Logos Principle, and *Sola Scriptura*," in *Westminster Theological Journal* (2010): 359–90; and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck and Thomas Reid on Perception and Knowing God," *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 1 (January 2018): 115–34. Creation: See Clayton Bryant Cooke, "World-Formative Rest: Faithful Cultural Discipleship in a Secular Age" (PhD Dissertation. Fuller Theological Seminary, 2015), 174–94; Wolter Huttinga, "Participation and Communicability: Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the Relation between God and the World" (PhD Dissertation, Theologische Universiteit van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland te Kampen, 2014), 105–188; and Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, chapter 1. The Pactum Salutis: Anthony Andrew Hoekema, "Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant" (ThD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953), 81–86 (NB: This dissertation follows the page numbers of the re-typeset edition printed on demand from Full Bible Publications: Clover, SC, 2007); Laurence R. O'Donnell III, "Not Subtle Enough: An Assessment of Modern Scholarship on Bavinck's Reformulation of the *Pactum Salutis* Contra 'Scholastic Subtlety'" *Mid America Theological Journal* 22 (2011): 89–106. Ethics: John Bolt, *Imitatio Christi*, 264–66. Soteriology: Syd Heilema, "Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," chapter 3. The Motif of Grace Restores Nature: See especially Eugene Heideman, *Reason and Revelation*, 191–95 and J. Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspratie*, 346ff. Formation of a Christian World-and-Life-View: See especially Eugene Heideman, *Reason and Revelation*, 191–95 and J. Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspratie*, 346ff.

underexamined (at best) and unexamined (at worst).³ Why is this? Syd Hielema's treatment of Bavinck's doctrine of God in his 1998 dissertation "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption" illuminates at least two potential reasons in older scholarship. First, describing the doctrine of the Trinity, Hielema claims that Bavinck's treatment is "certainly not remarkable or unusual *in any way*."⁴ Second, describing Bavinck's development of the divine attributes, Hielema claims that he occasionally lapses into "abstract speculation concerning the nature of God" and "scholastic detours."⁵ While not indicative of all Bavinck scholarship, Hielema's estimation of Bavinck's doctrine of God as unremarkable combined with a tendency to fall prey to scholastic speculation is representative of a line of interpretation that perceived Bavinck's doctrine of God as both unoriginal and continuing traditional forms within his theology proper even as he developed a triform account of various doctrines.⁶ And, depending on one's stance towards classical articulations of the doctrine of God, the unoriginal and particularly scholastic nature of Bavinck's theology proper are grounds for either its *dismissal* or its *utilization* as a rare, contemporary example of classical theism to martial for one's own theological project.⁷

Recent scholarship, however, has started to gesture in a different direction. Following James Eglinton's re-interpretation of Bavinck's organic motif as rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity, Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto have both indicated that Bavinck's doctrine of God might contain more originality than previously thought, particularly Bavinck's predication of God as 'absolute personality.' In Sutanto's, *God and Knowledge*, he notes,

If there is a potential and modest point of uniqueness in Bavinck's treatment of theology proper (outside of the organic motif and characterization of reality in light of God's triune being), it is Bavinck's predication of the divine being as the 'absolute personality' in response to modern theology's emphasis on the psychological depth that attends talks of personality.⁸

3. The main thrust of this author's dissertation was to explore this area of Bavinck's thought. Several aspects of this article are derived or taken from the dissertation. See Gayle Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology."

4. Hielema, "Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 112. Emphasis added.

5. Hielema, "Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 104, 124.

6. While utilized in a few publications prior to *Trinity and Organism*, Eglinton introduced the term "triform" to the discussion of Bavinck's theology. This work is indebted to him for the word "triform," especially its applicability to Bavinck's theology. See James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

7. See, for example, Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 30–31; Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 109–113. James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 9, 57–58, 68–89; and Hans Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009), Chapter 3.

8. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology*

For Sutanto, Bavinck's utilization of 'absolute personality' indicates his engagement with modern conceptions of personality.⁹ Similarly, Brock also notes Bavinck's predication of God as 'absolute personality' in his dissertation and utilizes it to argue for the truly catholic, ecclesial, and ecumenical nature of Bavinck's theology. For Brock, this shows Bavinck's utilization of modern sources within his doctrinal construction and willingness to place traditional doctrines in modern theological grammar. With regard to 'absolute personality,' Brock cites a quote by the German mediating theologian Isaak Dorner and specifies Dorner as the source of Bavinck's predication of God as 'absolute personality.'¹⁰ According to Brock, this utilization and identification of God using the language of 'absolute personality' is enough to suggest that Bavinck used "Aquinas and Calvin" but also "in moments . . . Dorner, Schelling, and others, to construct his doctrine of God."¹¹

While both Brock and Sutanto gesture towards a potentially unique and unexplored aspect within Bavinck's doctrine of God, both are brief and modest. Modest in that neither suggests that Bavinck's predication of God as 'absolute, divine personality' is indicative of a radical shift away from Bavinck's development of a Reformed, historic, and creedal doctrine of God. Brief in that both gesture to this element with Bavinck so quickly that if their treatments of Bavinck were like marvel movies, 'absolute personality' would be considered something like a Stan Lee cameo: important but easy to miss. The lack of in-depth study is understandable given the scope and aim of their projects, but it is unfortunate because the lack of investigation leaves readers thinking Bavinck used the term 'absolute personality'—a favorite of nineteenth-century theistic personalists—when he specifically uses the phrase absolute, divine personality (*absolute, Goddelijke persoonlijkheid*).¹² It also identifies Dorner as Bavinck's potential source for this predication without further investigation. However, even if they do not explore Bavinck's attribution of 'absolute, divine personality' to God in-depth, they do (rightly) indicate that previous scholarship may have missed important elements within Bavinck's doctrine of God—particularly in relation to Bavinck's sources, Bavinck's utilization of modern

(London: T&T Clark, 2020), 29.

9. Besides Sutanto and Brock, there is only one other writer who has mentioned Bavinck's treatment of absoluteness and personality in a significant way: Henry Jansen. In his book, *Relationality and the Concept of God*, Jansen notes that Bavinck talks about God "as Absolute and as personal." See Henry Jansen, *Relationality and the Concept of God*, (Amsterdam: Rodophi, 1995), 48.

10. Cory Brock, "Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Appropriation of Schleiermacher." (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Edinburgh, 2017), 55.

11. Brock, "Orthodox yet Modern," 55–6. Brock notably leaves this claim out of the published version of his dissertation.

12. Bavinck's exact phrasing is: "Absolute, Goddelijke persoonlijkheid." Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, Deel 2 (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1897), 275. Bavinck's first edition of his second volume will be referenced as *GD* for the remainder of this paper. His second, revised edition will be referenced using the English translation of that edition.

theological and philosophical grammar, and whether or not Bavinck's use of modern theological grammar is indicative of substantial developments within his doctrine of God, merely restating classical doctrines in modern dress, *or* something in-between.

This essay seeks to fill this gap in Bavinck studies by exploring three pertinent aspects of Bavinck's utilization of 'absoluteness' and 'personality' in his doctrine of God proper including his predication of God as 'absolute, divine personality.' In doing so, it will seek to show—as Sutanto and Brock have suggested—that this aspect of Bavinck's thought represents a creative appropriation of modern philosophical concepts from within his classical, Reformed tradition in order to develop it in and for the context of modernity. It will do this by focusing on (1) situating Bavinck's doctrine of God within the context of the nineteenth century the philosophical debate concerning absoluteness and personality, (2) identifying a few key places where Bavinck seeks to reconcile absoluteness and personality in his development of theology proper within the *Reformed Dogmatics*; and (3) pointing towards why this area of Bavinck studies is a fruitful area for future study.

Absoluteness and Personality in Context

One of the urgent questions within nineteenth theology and philosophy was the relationship between absoluteness and personality.¹³ Bequeathed to theology by a series of complex developments in philosophical metaphysics running from Descartes through Spinoza and Kant to Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling that increasingly conceptualized God as Absolute and Infinite *in contrast* to that which is conditioned, finite, and limited, one of the most significant questions facing theologians by the nineteenth century was whether or not it was even conceptually possible to affirm an Infinite, Absolute, personal God.¹⁴ Why? In the wake of Kant, Fichte, and others,

13. There is an ongoing debate concerning whether or not the debate was a necessary result of an internal deficiency within the classical Christian doctrine of God. Many contemporary commentators do see it as deeply rooted in a fundamental deficiency in the classical doctrine of God. However, they disagree on which elements within the Christian doctrine of God caused this debate to arise, the reasons why it developed as it did after the Enlightenment, and what doctrine of God should be developed as a result. Barth, for example, argues that the problem is has its roots in the theological tradition's shift to discussing the nature and attributes of God prior to the doctrine of the Trinity. Barth sees the increasing distance between *De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino* as creating a wedge between God's being and his personality that allowed denials of God's personality and assertion of his absoluteness to develop, especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Idealism. Others, however, like Pannenberg and Clayton identify issues within Christian conceptualizations of the divine but locate the origins of the nineteenth-century debate in Descartes. The treatment of the debate in this article will follow Pannenberg and Clayton in locating the specific form of the modern debate in Descartes. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 288; Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), Chapter 2; and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 19.

14. Philip Clayton, reflecting on this issue, has claimed the following: "Let me put it bluntly: after Fichte it can no longer be presupposed that the traditional philosophical/theological doctrine of an infinite personal God represents a defensible conceptual position. (Of course, that there are difficulties with the idea of an infinite personal God does not prove that no solution can ever

personality shifted such that personality was seen as a mode of finite existence, simultaneously including notions of self-consciousness, self-determination, and dependence.¹⁵ To ascribe personality to the Absolute would be to apply a condition to the Absolute, thereby denying the free, unconditioned, and unbound nature of the Absolute.¹⁶ To resolve this dilemma, some Idealist philosophers like Hegel and Schelling sought to conceptualize the Absolute as a Self-positing, Subject who becomes in and through positing that which is other (finite) and reconciling the finite with itself (synthesis).

These developments in philosophical metaphysics presented Christian theologians with a particularly difficult problem. Classically, Christian conceptions of God affirmed both his absoluteness and personality in its affirmations that the infinite God was also related to his creation. This relation did not bring about a change in God, but it was still ‘personal’ insofar as it was conscious and willed.¹⁷ Thus, several proposals, many of which reworked the doctrine of God, arose throughout the nineteenth century in response. These proposals ranged from identifying the personality of God as purely symbolic—something that is subjectively important for the religious life but not philosophically valid—to trying to recover personality in God by ascribing personality to God in an absolute sense.

Bavinck: Absolute, Divine Personality

To grapple with the relationship between absoluteness and personality was to attend to the philosophical and theological questions of the day. It was within this context that Bavinck wrote and developed his understanding of how to reconcile absoluteness and personality as well as described God as ‘absolute, divine personality.’ As such, it is important to remember that as we look at Bavinck’s own response, he was not the only one who perceived the issues and potentially problematic implications

be found).” For Clayton, Fichte made the classical Christian description of an infinite, absolute personal God an issue to defend conceptually rather than one to accept and articulate. Clayton, *Modern Concept of God*, 447.

15. See J.G. Fichte, “On the Ground of Our Belief in a Divine World-Governance,” in *J.G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798–1800)*, ed. Yolanda Estes and Curtis Bowman, trans. Curtis Bowman, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 21–29.

16. For a summary of this development, see Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, Chapter 3, “Self-consciousness and Subjectivity.”

17. This is not to say that classical conceptions of God were monolithic. However, there were tenants of classical conceptions of God that many theologians shared. One such tenant was that God’s infinity and his unchangeable nature did not exclude the possibility of creating and relating to a non-divine creation. This relation, however, was not conceptualized under the category of God as a singular “person” because “person” was traditionally utilized in reference to the three persons of the Trinity. See Clayton, *Modern Concept of God*, 447, and Craig A. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), Part 1.

of this debate, nor was he the only one who found insights within contemporary philosophy for developing his own theological reconciliation of absoluteness and personality. However, his approach can be classified as a specifically Neo-Calvinist response, as he seeks to develop the Reformed tradition from within for the sake of his modern context.

What's Old is New Again: Absoluteness and Personality . . . A Contemporary Question?

Before looking at Bavinck's articulation of the relationship between absoluteness and personality and the role it plays in his systematic treatment of the doctrine of God, it is vital to examine how Bavinck presents and situates the contemporary debate. Why? Because Bavinck's presentation and estimation that the contemporary debate over absoluteness and personality as a novel manifestation of a perennial theological issue is one of the grounds that he utilizes to draw upon the theological tradition and develop it.

Bavinck's works, from the first edition of the second volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics* (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (1897)) to his 1911 speech "Modernism and Orthodoxy," contain several statements that reveal Bavinck's growing understanding of where the contemporary debate should be situated within the history of theology. There are three particularly illuminating statements—one from the first edition *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (1897), one from the second edition of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (1908), and one from "Modernism and Orthodoxy"—that demonstrate Bavinck's continued interest and awareness of the importance of the debate as well as a subtle development in his assessment of it.¹⁸

First, in the first edition of the second volume of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, following a section that traces the apparent contradiction between absoluteness and personality in contemporary philosophy, particularly following Kant and Fichte, Bavinck makes the following assessment: "at the bottom this antithesis between absoluteness and personality is none other than that which in Christian theology was always felt and expressed in negative and positive (apophatic and cataphatic) theology."¹⁹ In other words, according to Bavinck, the historical Christian affirmation of the unknowability of the divine essence transposed into modern key is absoluteness, albeit with one key difference. Unlike contemporary philosophical

18. The adjective, subtle, is a crucial one here. Bavinck's statements and connection of absoluteness and personality to the duality of God's incomprehensibility and knowability in revelation present in each one of these works. However, his does develop statements through these works that provide clarity or summarize elements implicit within earlier treatments.

19. "In het wezen der zaak is deze tegenstelling tusschen absoluut en persoonlijk geen andere, dan die in de christelijke theologie altijd werd gevoeld en uitgedrukt werd in de negatieve en positieve, de apophatische en de kataphatische theologie." *GD*, 18. The transition above is from the English translation of the second edition, in which this statement remained the same. See Bavinck, *RD*, 2:46.

accounts of the unknowability of the Absolute, Christian theology while affirming the incomprehensibility of the divine essence, does not deny the possibility of knowing God through revelation.²⁰

Bavinck expands this emphasis on divine revelation, found throughout his first edition, in the second, revised edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. Published in 1908, the second edition contains many additions, one of which is illuminating with regard to Bavinck's assessment of the contemporary debate. Already situating it within the perennial theological articulation of negative and positive theology, Bavinck plunks the contemporary question squarely within the waters of Scripture. Following a section tracing the dynamic between the revelation of a personal, relational God and a God who dwells in inaccessible light in Scripture, Bavinck writes: "or to put this into modern theological language, in Scripture the personality and absoluteness of God go hand in hand."²¹ This section makes a clear and striking claim that the duality present in Scripture, translated into modern theological grammar is absoluteness and personality. Bavinck also adds a secondary claim to the assertion that the "moment we step outside of the domain of...special revelation in Scripture... the unity of absoluteness and personality of God is broken."²² Thus, according to Bavinck, the contemporary debate is not novel but a new manifestation of an enduring theological problem of how to do justice the duality revealed in Scripture. Furthermore, Bavinck makes it clear that because Scripture alone maintains the unity of absoluteness and personality, the Christian conception of the divine is the only place where these two can be unified. Outside of revelation the divine is conceived of as *either* Absolute, direct knowledge of whom is unattainable, *or* the divine is made personal, knowledge of whom is equated with human cognition or self-consciousness.²³ To back up this claim, Bavinck repurposes a section from the first edition that he used to trace historical attestation of divine incomprehensibility in non-Christian traditions to demonstrate how the unity of God's personality and absoluteness immediately disintegrates outside of special revelation's domain.

Finally, in "Modernism and Orthodoxy," Bavinck makes a statement that clearly ties his previous assessments together. In the midst of his argument against the charge that he and other neo-Calvinists were neither orthodox nor modern but rather using orthodox terms and filling them with modern content, Bavinck claims in this lengthy statement is worth quoting in full:

20. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:48–49.

21. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:34.

22. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:34. This phrase is an addition to the second edition.

23. Of note in Bavinck's assessment is his refusal to claim that the God of the philosophers is solely the Absolute God whose being is unknowable and distant. Rather it is both the Absolute, unknowable God, distant and distinct from creation (deistic) *and* the personal one, totally knowable and relatable (pantheistic) that Bavinck equates with the God of the philosophers.

One shall soon make the surprising discovery that the *alleged contrariety* [between absoluteness and personality, the God of science and the God of religion] does not exist between Scriptures and contemporary theology and neither does it exist between the old and the new Calvinism but that it appears in Scripture itself and is encountered in every theologian...In principle the question has always been there and it comes down to this...How can the infinite eternal being, that is the power in all power and the life of all life be at the same time the gracious, and the caring Father of his children?²⁴

Here Bavinck claims that the question raised within contemporary philosophy and theology is not a new question but rather one that every theologian must wrestle with because Scripture and God's divine revelation itself presents God as "incomparable, indescribable, infinite and eternal," and "... the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and in him the Father of all his children."²⁵ Thus, according to Bavinck, the seemingly novel contemporary debate is not new. Rather, just like his claim in his *Philosophy of Revelation* that worldviews cycle in "rhythmic waves" throughout the history of thought,²⁶ so too the debate concerning absoluteness and personality is not unique but a recurring challenge for theologians to grapple with. Within the context of "Modernism and Orthodoxy," Bavinck use this to argue that the conflict is not between the new Calvinism and the old nor Scripture and contemporary theology but rather is one found in God's self-revelation that challenges theologians of every age to do justice to the unity of God's revelation of himself as absolute and personal.²⁷ It also shows Bavinck's continued engagement with the questions of absoluteness and personality and his continued development of the concepts.

Bavinck's way of casting the contemporary questions swirling around absoluteness and personality within Scripture and the tradition provides the impetus for him to enter the debate and engage it in a particular way. First, he firmly grounds

24. Herman Bavinck, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," trans. Bruce R. Pass, *Bavinck Review* 7 (2016): 96–97. This translation was recently published along with three other translated articles in Herman Bavinck and Bruce R. Pass, *On Theology: Herman Bavinck's Academic Orations* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

25. Bavinck, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," 97.

26. Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 2018), 30–31: "They rather recur in rhythmical waves, more or less intermingle, and subsist side by side. Thus, Greek philosophy was born out of the Orphic theology, passed over into the naturalism of the old nature-philosophy, and became humanistic in the Sophists and the wisdom-philosophy of Socrates. Plato in his doctrine of ideas went back to the old theology and to Pythagoras; but, after Aristotle, his philosophy gave way to the naturalistic systems of Epicurus and the Stoics; and these, in turn, by way of reaction, gave birth to the teachings of the sceptical and mystical schools. Christianity gave theism the ascendancy for many centuries; but modern philosophy, which began with Descartes and Bacon, assumed in ever increasing measure a naturalistic character till Kant and Fichte in the ego once more took their starting point from man. After a brief period of the supremacy of the theistic philosophy in the nineteenth century, naturalism in its materialistic or pantheistic form resumed its sway, only to induce during these recent years a new return to Kant and the principles of humanism."

27. Bavinck, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," 96–102.

both the problem and the solution within the bounds of revelation. The problem arises because of the unity and duality of God's revelation. God's revelation is one, but he is revealed as both known and unknown, named and nameless, immanent and transcendent.²⁸ Second, his claim that this is not a novel issue allows Bavinck to reach into the past and use the theological tradition as a guide and resource for addressing his contemporary context. Finally, grounding his response in Scripture and the theological tradition also allows Bavinck to incorporate genuine insights from contemporary theology and philosophy.²⁹ While this approach may seem to indicate a tendency to simply parrot the tradition, for Bavinck it actually opens up the space within which new insights can be appropriated.³⁰ Rather it is the opposite; because Scripture provides the framework and the tradition serves as a guide, Bavinck is free to take in and utilize contemporary insights. According to Bavinck, there is no need to pit the theological tradition against theological development.

Bavinck's Absolutely Personal, Triune God

Central to Bavinck's reconciliation of absoluteness and personality is to show how the Scriptural reality of God as hidden and revealed, incomprehensible and knowable, unnamed and named are not contradictory but 'go hand and hand' to create a uniquely Christian understanding of the triune God who is personal and absolute. To do so, Bavinck attends to a series of epistemological and ontological issues throughout his doctrine of God proper. While his specific treatment and engagement with the debate occur within particular sections, the systematic conclusions he draws undergirds his positive development of the divine essence, attributes, and persons.

Bavinck's attempts to reconcile absoluteness and personality begin epistemologically at the beginning of the second volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. He makes two-fold epistemological affirmation that he roots in Scripture: God is incomprehensible yet knowable. According to Bavinck, Scripture attests to the distance between God and creation and affirms the mysterious and ineffable nature of God, but "it nevertheless sets forth a doctrine of God that upholds his knowability."³¹ Scripture does not seek to prove God's existence, "but simply presupposes it."³² It presents God as "a personal being, self-existent, with a life, consciousness, and will

28. See Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 2.

29. Bavinck himself identifies this approach to philosophical conceptions of the divine as derived from the theological method of the church fathers: "The church father already observed that this doctrine [Trinity] rejects the errors of, while absorbing the elements of truth inherent in, Deism and pantheism, monism and polytheism." Bavinck, *RD*, 2:331.

30. Bavinck himself notes that he does not simply wish to parrot the tradition in forward to the first edition of the *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*: "To cherish the ancient simply because it is ancient is neither Reformed nor Christian." Herman Bavinck, "Foreword to the First Edition (volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010), 10.

31. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:30.

32. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:30.

of his own, not confined to nature but highly exalted above it, the Creator of heaven and earth” who can and does “manifest himself” on earth, is personally involved in creation, reveals himself, and can be truly known.³³ God is transcendent and immanent. He is an ineffable, incomprehensible, “adorable mystery,” or Absolute; and he is knowable, or personal.³⁴ He is, according to Bavinck, absolute and personal.³⁵

The problem with contemporary philosophy, according to Bavinck, is not that it utilizes absoluteness and personality but that it rends asunder what Scripture presents together and thereby develops a reductionistic and problematic conception of the divine.³⁶ Contemporary philosophy either renders God as the Absolute—the One who is unknowable and unnameable *or* God as a Person who is fully known. God is either conceived of as Absolute and unconscious but not personal *or* personal and self-conscious but not absolute.³⁷ One leads to agnosticism concerning the divine, and the other leads to rationalism.³⁸ According to Bavinck, these are not just noetic positions but rest in certain ontological commitments that have religious implications. Assessing them, Bavinck identifies each position as the outworking of either deism or pantheism. To assume that God is unknowable is to simultaneously claim that the world is devoid of the divine (Deism), and to assume that God is nothing more than an enlarged human person is to claim that the world is divinized (pantheism).³⁹

33. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:30.

34. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:49. Mystery is an important motif in Bavinck’s work. As Bruce R. Pass’s recent article has pointed out, Bavinck utilizes mystery throughout his corpus in three different ways. First, utilizing the NT sense of the term, Bavinck often defines mystery as that which was hidden by God but now made known to believers. Thus, something mysterious is that which was previously hidden but has now been made known. Second, Bavinck uses the term mystery to denote things that are presently unknown. Bavinck uses this sense to highlight the limits of scientific knowledge. Third, he uses mystery to denote that which can be apprehended by human reason but remain indemonstrable to human reason. As Pass articulates, these three uses of reason are important and prominent in Bavinck’s treatment and are fitting to the epistemological treatment of divine absoluteness and personality found in this chapter. See Bruce R. Pass, “Revelation and Reason in Herman Bavinck,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 80 (2018): 250–51.

35. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:34.

36. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:34–6.

37. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:34–35. Bavinck engages Islam and Buddhism in this section. While he does often mention religion and trace alternative conceptions of various doctrines, he has often been criticized for failing to engage seriously with other religions. On many occasions, this critique is warranted, especially with regard to Bavinck’s development of worldview and epistemological typologies. However, this is a delightful example of his knowledge of and engagement with other religious traditions. See Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 43.

38. There is an overlap here between Bavinck’s assessment of divine absoluteness and personality and his later discussion on Arianism and Sabellianism. Fitting with his assessment that every error in doctrine is at its core an error in the doctrine of the Trinity, Bavinck’s articulation of the inability to reconcile divine absoluteness and personality bears striking similarities to his assessment of Arian and Sabellian approaches to the Trinity. See Bavinck, *RD*, 2:291–96.

39. Bavinck’s use of pantheism needs to be nuanced. Occasionally, he will use pantheism to refer to understandings of the world in which there is no differentiation between God and the world. However, he also uses the term pantheism to describe what is more commonly referred to now as panentheism wherein God and the world are distinct but are part of one, God-world complex.

However, even though Bavinck sees agnosticism and rationalism as the noetic correlates of deism and pantheism, he is quick to point out that they are really two sides of the same coin. Neither can maintain immanence and transcendence, divine incomprehensibility and knowability, absoluteness and personality. And, because neither can hold together what Scripture presents as unified, they constantly merge and collapse into one another. Bavinck is particularly interested in the way agnosticism collapses into and ends up “justify[ing] a pantheistic God-concept.”⁴⁰ In making the world mundane, agnosticism quickly tries to re-divinize the world by claiming that symbolic or representational knowledge of the Absolute is possible. However, it still denies personal consciousness and purposive intent to the Absolute. The Absolute remains unknown, incapable of revelation, even as it turns to a fairly well-defined God-concept.⁴¹ Thinly veiled here is Bavinck’s criticism of approaches that deny objective knowledge of the divine and treat theology’s knowledge as merely symbolic (Schleiermacher). As agnosticism and rationalism, deism and pantheism develop and merge together in the history of philosophy and religion, they present God as either a “cold abstraction that freezes religion and destroys the religion of the heart,” or as “is nothing but an enlarged version of a human person.”⁴²

While criticizing contemporary positions, Bavinck does not simply discard the insights of contemporary philosophy. Most strikingly, Bavinck judges the agnosticism of Kant and Fichte as a helpful corrective to overly rationalistic theological discourse. However, he rejects the corresponding claims that God (or the Absolute) *remains completely* behind the epistemological veil. Bavinck also agrees with Fichte’s assessment that “Personality *is a concept borrowed from the human* realm and hence, when applied to God, always to some extent falls short.”⁴³ According to Bavinck, Fichte’s claim concerning the limitations of all God-concepts is helpful not only as a corrective to theistic philosophers who sought to reconcile absoluteness and personality by applying the new philosophical and psychological conceptions

Bavinck will often categorize panentheistic theologians and philosophers as fundamentally agnostic with regard to the divine. What he is not doing in these cases is arguing that they represent deistic philosophical conceptions. He is, however, trying to show how agnosticism collapses into and often ends up articulating a pantheistic or, in modern terms, panentheistic view of God and the world. For a more thorough treatment and definition of various types of pantheism see John Cooper, *Pantheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

40. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:52.

41. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:52. It is clear throughout this section that Bavinck is far less concerned with the traditional, modernist deists like Descartes, Locke, and Hume. He is much more concerned with the late-modern agnosticism of the Absolute that still claimed to have arrived at some type of God-concept. In this concern, Bavinck is in accord with Kuyper. See Abraham Kuyper, *Pantheism's Destruction of Boundaries*, trans. J. Hendrick de Vries (n.p.: 1893).

42. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:47.

43. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:50. Emphasis added.

of person and personality to God but also as a reminder about the anthropomorphic nature of all human language for the divine.⁴⁴

Fichte's problem, however, according to Bavinck, is that he did not take his argument about human predication of the divine far enough. Thus, he uses Fichte's argument and pushes it further to show that the radical anthropomorphic and analogical nature of *all* human language for God—including the predication 'Absolute.' This argument opens the door for Bavinck to affirm the possibility of predicating attributes to the divine based on God's revelation through a re-articulate the classical Calvinistic doctrine of divine accommodation.⁴⁵ Following that, Bavinck appropriates and redefines absoluteness and personality from within the tradition and situates it within his distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology as he develops his account of God's attributes.⁴⁶ First, God's absoluteness becomes an affirmation of divine incomprehensibility, and aseity and personality become an affirmation of the possibility of attributing positive characteristics to the divine being, relatively, analogically, and anthropomorphically on the basis of the self-conscious, purposive revelation of the divine being.⁴⁷

Furthermore, Bavinck argues, divine absoluteness should not be defined via abstraction and negation; it is not divine boundlessness, lifelessness, or infinite expression in all directions, as in Fichte and other idealist philosophers. God's

44. Theistic personalism represented a widespread and varied nineteenth-century movement to reconcile divine absoluteness and personality. It has also been widely influential in twentieth-century dialogues concerning the nature of the divine. Brian Davies in his book *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* identifies theistic personalism in contrast to classical theism and defines them as the two different approaches to God. While Davies primarily focuses on theistic personalism in analytic philosophy, the contrast between theistic personalism and classical theism is one helpful way to map the landscape of contemporary theological and philosophical dialogues concerning the divine. See Brian Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Chapter 1 "The Concept of God." For a standard treatment of philosophical personalism, particularly theistic personalism and its worldview see Keith Yandell, "Personalism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig (Taylor and Francis), accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/personalism/v-1>

45. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:50.

46. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:128. Bavinck's use of analogy presupposes the distinction and difference between the creator and the creature even as it grounds the possibility of divine predication. The analogy is grounded in God's action of creation by which he communicates himself. However, even as creatures imitate the divine and articulate truths about him by echoing his divine speech in creation, they remain radically different. There is an infinite gulf between the divine and creation, Infinite and finite, eternity and time in Bavinck. The analogy is derived from God's divine initiative, his self-communication in creation. Bavinck uses the concept of God placing the words on human lips as a way to articulate the truth that no knowledge of God is possible unless he has revealed himself. Furthermore, according to Bavinck, even though God remains distinctly different than anything in the world, everything in the world is like him. Therefore, creaturely language is a divinely given gift by which human beings come to know God analogically and anthropomorphically. This metaphor, however, should not be equated with Barth's articulation of the *analogia fidei*. Bavinck is not presenting a view in which God seizes language by revelation and ascribes meaning to it 'from without.'

47. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:49.

divine absoluteness is the fullness of the triune life itself apart from creation. It is an analogical and anthropomorphic description of the fullness of the divine being who is beyond comprehension, or in scriptural language, 'dwells in inaccessible light.'⁴⁸ But God is not just absolute; he is also personal.⁴⁹ God does not become a personality; personality is a description of the absolute Being of God and that which affirms the knowability of God because it includes self-consciousness and self-determination.⁵⁰ God's self-consciousness and self-determination are absolute because it is "equally deep and rich, equally infinite, as his being."⁵¹ Understood in this way, Bavinck claims, God is both absolute and personal, incomprehensible and knowable, transcendent and immanent. Thus, absoluteness and personality become a frame through which Bavinck presents the divine attributes. God is absolute in his personality and personal in his absoluteness. God's divine personality not only grounds the possibility of knowledge because the predication of personality indicates God's self-consciousness and self-determination but also affirms a true knowledge of the divine. God is able to reveal himself in a relative way to creatures that which he knows absolutely in his essence. Personality, however, remains an anthropomorphic description of the divine being, for God's essence is absolute and beyond comprehension or grasp.

Although Bavinck affirms the unity of absoluteness and personality of God and utilizes these concepts to frame and undergird his treatment of the divine attributes, when he moves to his treatment of the divine essence, he is hesitant about defining it as 'absolute personality.' Why? Bavinck gives two reasons. First, he is wary of using 'absolute personality' as a unifying ontological concept because it easily leads to thinking God is 'unipersonal' rather than "tripersonal."⁵² Second, Bavinck argues that describing the divine essence primarily as 'absolute personality' often leads to collapsing the analogical interval between God and humanity.⁵³ Thus, rather than following theistic personalists, like Isaac Dorner, Bavinck prefers to define God's essence as absolute being because he sees this definition as allowing all of the other attributes (fatherhood, personality, love, wisdom, goodness, etc.) to be fully encompassed because they are seen (anthropologically and analogously) as belonging to God's being in an absolute sense.⁵⁴ As such, Bavinck sees 'absolute Being' as

48. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:34.

49. Personality, then, is not just the relatability and knowability of God but the ontological ground that makes knowing and relating to God possible. Key here for Bavinck is the notion that divine, infinite self-knowledge and self-determination are not something God achieves through a dialectical, dynamic process in time, but they are eternally and infinitely present in the divine being.

50. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:49.

51. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:49.

52. Bavinck's judgement here is correct. Many nineteenth-century theistic personalists utilized the concept of personality to develop distinctly non-trinitarian accounts of God. See Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought*, 166–171.

53. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:122.

54. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:123.

being able to do justice to the rich and manifold self-revelation in Scripture of God more than ‘absolute personality.’⁵⁵

While careful not to define the divine essence as ‘absolute personality,’ Bavinck does creatively appropriate absoluteness and personality to develop an Augustinian yet contemporary account of the relationship between the divine essence and persons. Keenly aware of the consequences of applying modern philosophical and psychological conceptions of personality univocally to theological articulations of the divine life, Bavinck appropriates the language of personality in his *De Deo Trino* with constant appeals to the broad historical consensus concerning the doctrine of the Trinity across ecclesiastical traditions. His goal is not novelty; his goal is to communicate the deeply historic, broadly catholic doctrine of the Trinity in and for modernity. However, while significant in his approach, Bavinck’s development here opens the doors for some confusion, particularly because he starts to utilize person and personality in multiple ways.

First, in his *De Deo Trino* Bavinck does not dismiss his earlier usage of personality and affirmation of divine self-consciousness and self-determination. In fact, as he highlights at the beginning of his doctrine of God, “It is certain that God is a person.”⁵⁶ Quick to qualify that this means that God is “a conscious and free willing being, not confined to the world but exalted high above it.” Bavinck seems to equate personhood with intellect and volition. Insofar as these are absolute (as deep and as rich as his being), Bavinck is able to describe God as personal.⁵⁷

Second, Bavinck explores the use of contemporary concepts of personality within the doctrine of the Trinity. In his locus on the Trinity, Bavinck seeks to address how “personality” can be utilized within trinitarian theology.⁵⁸ Building on his previous

55. Bavinck’s description of the divine essence has several overlaps with Thomas’s account of the divine as *actus purus*, pure act. Bavinck does utilize this definition of the divine being in a few places. But, his appeal to this definition is one way that he articulates the divine essence in his writing. Yet, it is not the only way he conceptualizes the divine essence. In this section, he purposively utilizes absolute Being as his description of the divine life to articulate the fullness and richness of the one divine Being. In fact, in this section, Bavinck articulates God as the one in whom being and living coincide. Thus, while Bavinck does show an affinity for Thomas’s account of God as *actus purus*, he does not articulate or develop it in the same manner. Bavinck’s affinity with Thomas here is not surprising as many of the Reformed Scholastics drew on Thomas’s Aristotelian metaphysics in their doctrines of God. Bavinck’s description of the divine life shows his historical rootedness within the Reformed orthodoxy but also his willingness to appropriate it in and for modernity. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger, 1948), I, Q.ii.A.3; Idem *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis et al., ed. Joseph Kenny, O.P. (New York: Hanover House, 1955–57), I, c. 17. See also *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation*, vol. 1 *Disputations 1–23*, eds. Dolf te Velde et al., trans. Riemer A. Faber (Leiden: Brill, 2014), Disputation 1. For a good treatment of Reformed orthodoxy’s relationship to Aristotelianism see Richard A. Muller, “Reformation, Orthodoxy, ‘Christian Aristotelianism,’ and the Eclecticism of Early Modern Philosophy,” in *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 81, no. 3 (2001): 306–325 and Muller, *PRRD*, I, 71–73.

56. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:30.

57. See Bavinck, *RD*, 2:30, 49.

58. Bavinck adds a significant amount of material to this part of his dogmatics in the second

affirmations in his *De Deo Uno*, Bavinck maintains the contemporary conception of personality as that which includes self-knowledge (or self-consciousness) and self-determination. Second, he also adopts contemporary notions of the structure of self-consciousness, especially in its Schleiermachian form. He writes: “Personality in humans arises only because they are subjects who confront themselves as an object and unite the two (subject and object) in an act of self-consciousness. Hence, three moments (constituents) constitute the essence of human personality.”⁵⁹ However, in affirming these elements of modern notions of personality, Bavinck also recognizes the problem that contemporary language (even his own) poses to the doctrine of the Trinity. If God is and has been revealed as a person, or personal, a being having self-consciousness and self-determination, then what does one do with the traditional language person in reference to the Father, Son, and Spirit? Is God both unipersonal and tripersonal? If personality is something that “arises” in and through the distinct moments, does God become? Does personhood imply that the Father, Son, and Spirit each have self-knowledge and self-determination of their own? Is God a one-conscious and triconscious being?⁶⁰

It is here that Bavinck seeks to do two things to maintain the usefulness of contemporary notions of personality and relationality while not opening the door to tritheism or introducing the notion of becoming into the divine essence. First, Bavinck strongly opposes the predication of distinct self-knowledge and self-determination to the Father, Son, and Spirit. The persons *are not* separate personalities who each have distinct self-knowledge and self-volition and become on the ord.⁶¹ In other words, the predication of intellect and volition belongs to the divine essence. Furthermore, Bavinck opposes conceptualizing the persons as mere revelational ‘modes’ of the one divine personality whereby the Father, Son, and Spirit are mere names for the same divine personality. This, according to Bavinck, would lead to Sabellianism.⁶² However, even though it starts to muddy the waters, he suggests that “person” is still the best term theology has for the Father, Son, and Spirit. Appealing to Augustine, Bavinck argues that theology uses the term person “not to express what that is only not to be silent.”⁶³ And, because Scripture reveals God to us as Father, Son, and

edition, showing a development in his thought and further engagement with contemporary notions of personality.

59. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:303.

60. Although Bavinck never states it this way, one can hear why Cornelius Van Til, who drew heavily from Bavinck to articulate his doctrine of God, writes “God is a one-conscious being, and yet, he is also a triconscious being.” Bavinck does not make this assertion, but it could be derived from statements like, God’s personality unfolds tripersonally. See Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Philipsburg: P&R, 2007), 348.

61. Had Bavinck been writing today, he would have likely identified this position as social trinitarianism at best and tritheism at worst.

62. See Bavinck, *RD*, 2:294.

63. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:302. This is a direct citation from Augustine, *The Trinity*, V, 9; VI, 10. See also, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 158.

Holy Spirit, theology cannot be silent but must acknowledge the three-fold nature of the divine being.

According to Bavinck, then, the term person is used within trinitarian dogma “simply [to] mean that the three persons in the divine being are not ‘modes’ but have a distinct existence of their own.”⁶⁴ Drawing from Richard of St. Victor, Bavinck affirms each person as an “incommunicable existence of the divine nature” in relation to their personal properties.⁶⁵ The difference between the persons is not in essence but in their mutual relations to one another, meaning the distinctions between the persons arise from personal properties known through their mutual relations.⁶⁶ Person does not refer to the individual self-consciousness or self-determination of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Instead, it refers to the distinct existence of each person as they subsist within the absolute Being of God, who is the triune, absolutely personal, God.

Rather than identifying each person in the Trinity as an individuated personality (having a self-consciousness and volition *of their own*) within the divine essence,⁶⁷ Bavinck sees within contemporary conceptions of personality a helpful analogy to understand the relationship between the essence and the persons. Rooting his assessment within the tradition, Bavinck argues, along with Augustine that the divine essence is not derived from the person of the Father but from the unity of the divine essence, which unfolds tripersonally as one, divine, triune being.⁶⁸ Bavinck insists, “It belongs to God’s very essence to be triune. In that regard personhood is identical with God’s being itself . . . Each person, therefore, is identical with the entire being and equal to the other two or all three together.”⁶⁹ The essence is not a fourth thing alongside the Father, Son, and Spirit, but the essence of God *is triune*. Or, in modern theological grammar, “The divine being is tripersonal precisely because it is the absolute, divine personality.”⁷⁰

64. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:302 According to Bavinck, this is the truth that both Boethius and Richard of St. Victor were trying to communicate. He situates his definition closer to Richard of St. Victor, but more significantly he sees any further definition of person within trinitarian dogma as ultimately expressing the simple truth that the persons do not introduce substantive differences within the divine being but that are modes of existence within the divine being.

65. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:302. Bavinck cites Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate*, IV, 21.

66. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:305. Bavinck describes the personal properties in classical trinitarian language: paternity (unbegottenness, active generation, active spiration), filiation or sonship (passive generation, active spiration), and procession or passive spiration. None of the mutual relations add anything substantially to the divine essence.

67. Bavinck’s treatment of the persons of the Trinity does occasionally utilize the term personality to refer to a person within the Godhead. This is particularly the case with the Spirit. This is one of the areas in which Bavinck’s utilization of modern concepts of personality and his desire to maintain the language of person in reference to the Father, Son, and Spirit can cause some confusion.

68. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:305. Unfolding should not be equated with becoming here. Instead, Bavinck utilizes unfolding as a dynamic term to indicate the fullness of the divine life, which is a fullness that exists in three persons eternally.

69. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:304.

70. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:302.

Bavinck sees within contemporary notions of personality two helpful analogies to aid in human, analogical understanding of the triune divine personality. Follows what he perceives as Augustinian logic, Bavinck finds faint analogies of the divine life within contemporary philosophical articulations of the structure of self-consciousness. First, just like human personality unfolds, so too “the absolute, divine personality arises out of and by means of the unfolding of the three persons. Yet, unlike human personality, divine personality arises simultaneously and completely. Second, human personality, Bavinck argues is far too rich to be embodied “in a single individual.”⁷¹ Humanity, according to Bavinck, unfolds the riches of human personality collectively and communally. Each person is a diverse manifestation of what it means to be human, and therefore the unity of human personality only comes in and through the unity of the whole.⁷² In God, however, “the unfolding of his being into personality coincides with that of his being unfolded into three persons. The three persons are the one divine personality brought to complete self-unfolding, a self-unfolding arising out of, by the agency of, and within the divine being.”⁷³ In humans, personality unfolds through time and collectively; in God, it unfolds instantaneously and in his triune being. There is no becoming in the divine essence, but there is an eternal unfolding that “immediately, absolutely, and completely convinces with, and includes, the unfolding of his being into persons.”⁷⁴ In sum, personality and the structure of self-consciousness are *faint analogies* of the divine life. One can hear echoes of Schleiermacher’s analysis of the structure of consciousness as well as Schelling and Hegel’s accounts of the unfolding of the Triune life. But one can also see Bavinck’s efforts to guard against notions of divine becoming as well as anything that opens the door to tritheism even as he describes the trinitarian being of God as tripersonal and absolute, divine personality.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Bavinck’s systematic reconciliation of absoluteness and personality is an integral aspect of his doctrine of God proper. Brock and Sutanto were right to highlight this aspect, and it shows that Hielema’s earlier estimation of Bavinck’s doctrine of God needs to be revised. Even in this brief investigation of Bavinck’s doctrine of God, one can see that Bavinck weaves absoluteness and personality throughout his systematic development and the systematic conclusions he draws undergirds his positive development of the divine essence, attributes, and persons. Bavinck utilizes the grammar of absoluteness and personality to express his two-fold epistemological

71. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:303.

72. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:303.

73. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:303.

74. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:305.

75. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:302.

claim concerning knowledge of God: God is incomprehensible yet knowable. Second, he draws on it within his development of his doctrine of the Trinity, drawing on the language of absoluteness and personality in his description of the relationship between the essence and persons. Throughout his treatment Bavinck seeks to demonstrate how the Christian doctrine of God is unique in its ability to hold absoluteness and personality together. And, as such, this brief exploration shows various ways that Bavinck creatively appropriates modern philosophical concepts from within his classical, Reformed tradition in order to develop them in and for the context of modernity. Thus, more attention should continue to be paid to Bavinck's articulation of the relationship between absoluteness and personality. Some areas that remain to be explored are how absoluteness and personality bear on Bavinck's trinitarian metaphysics, along with an understanding of how it grounds the possibility of divine revelation as well as a more thorough investigation into the sources he draws on to develop his doctrine of the Trinity. Finally, it's also apparent that the cracks that start to form in Bavinck's appropriation need to be further studied. Does his reconciliation ultimately fall apart because of the confusing application of person and personality to the divine essence? In sum, this is a unique aspect of Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of God that is wide open for further investigation.