



Barbara Hallensleben,
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Pantelis Kalaitzidis (eds.)

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:
New Approaches and Interpretations



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Verlag

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Abstract

Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) is one of the preeminent theologians of the 20th century whose work is still being discovered and explored in and for the 21st century. The famous rival of Lenin in the field of economics, was, according to Wassily Kandinsky, “one of the deepest experts on religious life” in early twentieth-century Russian art and culture. As economist, publicist, politician, and later Orthodox theologian and priest, he became a significant “global player” in both the Orthodox diaspora and the Ecumenical movement in the interwar period.

This anthology gathers the papers delivered at the international conference on the occasion of Bulgakov’s 150th birthday at the University of Fribourg in September 2021. The chapters, written by established Bulgakov specialists, including Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–2012), as well as young researchers from different theological disciplines and ecclesial traditions, explore Bulgakov’s way of meeting the challenges in the modern world and of building bridges between East and West. The authors bring forth a wide range of new creative ways to constructively engage with Bulgakov’s theological worldview and cover topics such as personhood, ecology, political theology and Trinitarian ontology.



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Sergii Bulgakov: From Grammar to Wisdom

John Milbank

1. Introduction: Bulgakov and the German Legacy

Increasingly, Sergii Bulgakov is regarded as one of the major voices of Twentieth Century theology that sounds even more resonantly in the Twenty-First than that of most of his contemporaries.

One of his most decisive and earlier philosophical works, alongside *Unfading Light* and *The Philosophy of the Name*, is *The Tragedy of Philosophy*.¹ It can be interpreted, as its title suggests, as a theological critique of all philosophy as such, but more specifically it is a critique of German Transcendental Idealism and its three greatest exponents: Fichte, Hegel and Schelling, besides being a critique of the thinker who made this philosophy possible, Immanuel Kant. In these respects, Bulgakov sustained, deepened and intensified the first major Russian critique of Western thought, written by the founder of the Sophiological tradition in which he stood: Vladimir Soloviev's *The Crisis of Western Philosophy*.²

As passages in *Unfading Light* indicate, Bulgakov also conceived this exercise as part of his specifically Russian response to German culture as a whole.³ His attitude to that was thoroughly ambivalent. Negatively, he regarded it as half-barbaric, whereas Russia and the Eastern Church for him sustained a continuous link to the ultimate Greek sources of Western civilisation. By contrast,

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- 1 Sergij Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (New York: Angelico, 2020). This chapter is a re-written version of John Milbank's introduction to this English translation of *The Tragedy of Philosophy*.
 - 2 Vladimir Soloviev, *The Crisis of Western Philosophy: Against the Positivists*, trans. Boris Jakim (Hudson NY; Lindisfarne Press, 1996).
 - 3 Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012).

the Latin West, and still more the Teutons, had half-mangled this legacy, which contained at its core an anthropocentric art and a Platonic philosophy that interpreted this art as epiphanic.

The Teutonic mangling is connected in the Russian theologian's mind with the Arian heresy which had especially appealed to the northern barbaric tribes. Thus he accuses the German tradition of being marked by an 'Arian monophysitism'. A failure to correctly grasp the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation has supposedly engendered opposite and yet complicit tendencies both to a Faustian exaltation of the Human ego and to a pantheistic spiritualism, reducing God to nature. Moreover, this has too frequently taken pessimistic forms, which Bulgakov thinks is connected to a barbaric refusal of a refined sensuality, of sexuality and of the feminine—variously exemplified by Martin Luther, Jacob Boehme and Richard Wagner. German civilisation has either lured us into the echo-chamber of the self or has grimly celebrated blind forceful striving, unilluminated by the disclosures of the beautiful.

All this was surely thought and written not without awareness of the disasters into which Prussian nationalism had led Europe at the time of the First World War.⁴ On the other hand, Bulgakov was of course equally aware of the catastrophe engulfing his own country during the same period. The Russian tradition is mainly castigated by him for an overly Oriental world-refusal which had taken variously quietist and hysterically ecstatic forms over the centuries. In his own epoch, this had dialectically encouraged an unprecedentedly appalling reversal: an immanentism that was sheerly arid, atheistic and mechanical, reducing not only religion but also art to economics.

In the face of these Russian diseases, the West and even specifically the German tradition offered for Bulgakov after all, if not a remedy, then at least a salve. As *Unfading Light* relates, it had to some degree rightly celebrated life in this world: the beauty of nature, participation in politics and the practice of art. Furthermore, it had seen all these things as suffused with the divine. Much of Bulgakov's work can be interpreted as an attempt to do justice to the German sense of immanence while avoiding what he saw as the German descent into a gloomy pantheism, for which the totality of everything discloses literally nothing. It is equally and inversely the case that he attempts to do positive justice to the Western and most of all the German sense of anthropocentrism and subjectivity. Faust was not just to be condemned by the Russian master, but also to be redeemed. It is by no means irrelevant here to think of the great

4 See James Hawes, *The Shortest History of Germany* (London: Old Street, 2018).

novelistic gloss upon Goethe written by his remote relative Mikhail: *The Master and Margherita*.

Of course, this double attitude towards German culture contains considerable delusion besides great insight. Too much is projected backwards in terms of a supposed continuity of Teutonic character: thus, in *Unfading Light* Eckhart is excessively read through the lens of Jacob Boehme, whose mode of mysticism specifically follows Luther (though one could suggest that too many German scholars have themselves made the same mistake). And a pantheistic tendency is traced ultimately and again falsely to the Irish theologian of Aachen: John Scotus Eriugena. Yet in both cases it can seem as if Bulgakov goes on to reproduce different Russian versions of doctrines that he has repudiated in their 'German' guise.

For example, he condemns Eckhart's notion of a *Gotttheit* beyond the God/Creation contrast, but then speaks himself of a deeper 'Absolute' that only becomes 'God' in relation to the world. Or again, he denounces Eriugena's talk of Creation as 'Created God', but then himself proposes *Sophia* for a similar and problematically liminal role.⁵ He notably situates the divine ideas within Sophia rather than within the original Trinitarian Godhead, just as Eriugena places them with the immanent *primalitates*.

One can also observe that Bulgakov somewhat disguises the way in which he is developing (albeit with brilliance) *German* Romantic critiques of German Idealism—especially the thoughts of Jacobi, Hamann, Herder, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel and Wilhelm von Humboldt. To a degree he wants to claim all the 'romance' for the Russian steppes and birchwoods, rather than the Rhineland, the Black Forest and the Baltic coast.

2. Why Fichte?

This ambiguity towards German theology and philosophy is most strikingly apparent in terms of Bulgakov's attitude towards Johann Gottlieb Fichte in the *Tragedy of Philosophy*. His appropriation and critique of this philosopher lies surely at its core. This can seem strange insofar as the thesis of the book is that philosophy inevitably falls into error and contradiction by ignoring the dogmas of revelation and specifically the doctrine of the Trinity. It is well-known that

5 See, for example, Sergius Bulgakov, 'The Sophiology of Death,' in *The Sophiology of Death*, trans. Roberto J. De La Noval (Eugene OR: Wip and Stock, 2021), 117: 'Man, and in him all creation, in uncreated-created Sophia, created divinity, a created god by grace.'

both Hegel and Schelling try to incorporate this doctrine into their respective philosophies: indeed, it is impossible to comprehend them unless one takes this into account. By comparison, Fichte does no such thing: he does not mention the Trinity at all, even when writing at length about religion. For this reason, Bulgakov says that Fichte was in effect the philosopher of a Jewish God, of a pure monotheism.

And yet, it is apparent in this text and in later ones towards the end of his career that Bulgakov much more derives his proposed Trinitarian ontology from an engagement with Fichte than with Hegel or even with Schelling.⁶ Why should this somewhat surprising fact be the case?

First, and very simply, it is because he can more think of Fichte as offering an 'Old Testament' that is nearer to being acceptable so far as it goes. By comparison, Hegel and Schelling are seen as articulating highly heterodox versions of Trinitarian metaphysics.⁷

But in the second place, there is something much more crucial which takes us back to the issue of the Faustian. Certainly, for Bulgakov, Fichte is the 'Luciferian' thinker *par excellence*, trying, like Jonathan Swift's spider in *The Battle of the Books*, to weave all of reality out of his own selfhood. Bulgakov observes that this endeavour in effect goes in the opposite direction from all of philosophy hitherto, including even that of Kant: instead of trying to situate the subject amongst objects or things, or to locate subjectivity in being, it tries to position all things and all of beings within the scope of the knowing self, taken as the 'truly existing.' However, the Russian thinker does not only regard this attempt as demonically perverse (though he does that); he also thinks that in a way this attempt is in continuity with the specifically Christian cultural and conceptual revolution which newly elevated *personhood*. Thus, any metaphysics true to the Bible and to credal faith ought indeed to place the personal subject at the ontological outset. For this reason, Bulgakov *retains* the Fichtean understanding of the self as the 'truly existing'.

What is more, this understanding can be thought of as in keeping with the greater Eastern Christian insistence on the 'monarchic' primacy of the hypostasis of the Father, which Bulgakov, like so many Orthodox theologians, considered to have been too often obscured in the west by a primacy of essence in the Trinity, and by the added *filioque* clause in the Western creed that was in danger of suggesting a secondary and equally potent hypostatic origin in the Godhead. In consequence, the West had been in peril at once of reducing God

6 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 207–36.

7 Ibid., 24–51, 171–205.

to an impersonal essence and yet also of taking a tritheistic approach to the Trinitarian persons. This latter danger had been compounded by a tendency (running counter to an emphasis on their co-relational definition, which Bulgakov supports) to identify the persons with particular psychological faculties.⁸

It is against this background that Bulgakov was inclined to take Fichte very seriously. Other factors were involved also: in particular, his awareness of the proximity of neo-Kantian thought to the Fichtean legacy. In a contemporary philosophical landscape from which neo-Kantianism has long vanished, this can seem to be no longer of relevance and one can readily suppose that Bulgakov's philosophical concerns were already outdated. He makes scarcely any mention, or rarely shows very much awareness, of either Analytic philosophy or Phenomenology.

However, contemporary scholarship (in part based on more detailed textual research) sometimes suggests that Fichte is the most crucial of all modern Continental philosophers: his problematic not only anticipated phenomenology, but also foreshadowed its deconstruction and the more recent Continental turn back towards metaphysics.⁹ It not only took Idealism to a new extreme, but also suggested how neither Idealism nor Realism seem to be entirely coherent. Much of neo-Kantianism, especially the work of Hermann Cohen, can be seen as implicitly a re-engagement with this Fichtean legacy. Moreover, Bulgakov's own simultaneous linguistic reworking and yet critique of Fichte is not without echo in some exponents of the Analytic philosophy of language.

For these reasons, it may be that perhaps only today, in the first quarter of the Twenty-First Century, can we newly appreciate the relevance of Bulgakov's philosophy. What is more, when we realise that Bulgakov was revisiting the problematics that Fichte was trying to resolve in the wake of the critique of Kant, then we can get a sharper sense of the degree to which he proposed a novel and specifically theological philosophy of his own. Indeed, his degree of philosophical inventiveness is perhaps unsurpassed amongst other modern systematic theologians.

8 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 131–55. In reality, Bulgakov ascribes to the whole of Western Trinitarian theology exaggerations which tended to appear only in the High to Later Middle Ages.

9 See, for example, Walter E. Wright, 'Introduction,' in J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowing: J. G. Fichte's 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre* (New York: SUNY, 2005), 1–20 and Andrea Bellantone, *La métaphysique possible: Philosophies de l'esprit et modernité* (Paris: Hermann, 2012), 191–220.

3. Fichtean Complexities

If Bulgakov now appears after all prodigious rather than belated in foregrounding Fichte, then that is primarily because he was aware of the key ambiguities in Fichte's thought, long before they have been more regularly stressed. For a start, he grasped that Fichte's shift beyond Kant to a more absolute idealism was also and paradoxically a move back towards constitutive metaphysical realism. This concerns initially the role of the knowing 'I' in philosophy.

Kant had spoken of a 'transcendental apperception' on the part of the subject as accompanying all of its 'judgements of experience' and Bulgakov commends Kant's awareness that in all our judging we are always dimly aware of ourselves as knower.¹⁰ However, he also agrees with Fichte that this insight does not go far enough. For it is not possible merely to say, with Kant, that we assume our own knowing reality as a logical condition of the possibility of knowing anything whatsoever. This pretends to lock our awareness into a mutually referential circle of the self-conscious cognition of mere appearances, such that it is supposed that our real, ontological and 'noumenal' self is concealed from us. But in reality this is absurd; everything is the other way around. We only know anything besides ourselves because we are, as Descartes said, directly aware of our own reality as thinking beings, aware of our existential insertion in a manner that exceeds the conceptual knowledge of objects. Everything else that is thought is thought 'for us', 'posited' by us as a mode of our own directly experienced and felt self-thinking, else we would not be able to think it at all.

Moreover, Bulgakov points out that Kant falls suspiciously silent even about transcendental apperception at a crucial point in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: namely with respect to his transcendental aesthetic, which argues that space and time are transcendental assumptions of sensory awareness which allow the 'schematisation' of sensory information through the application of rational categories of the understanding.¹¹ By not, in this specific context, pointing out that we are also apperceiving ourselves when we apprehend space and time, Kant is suppressing the degree to which the self only knows itself as something that actually transcends, in some measure, both space and time, inevitably intuiting itself as eternal, since it is always able to imagine itself elsewhere and in another moment, while being unable to think of itself in its simultaneously experiencing and experienced selfhood as dead.

10 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 91–121.

11 Ibid., 159–70. See also Père Serge Boulgakov, *La Philosophie du Verbe et du Nom*, trans. Constantin Andronikoff (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1991), 85–112.

By ignoring this, Kant can suggest that the theoretical self is 'trapped' in spatial and temporal perspectives, even while contradictorily regarding them as 'merely subjective'. Bulgakov's subtle Fichtean point here is that if Kant had considered apperception also in relation to *aesthesis*, if he had more allowed that space and time are encountered experientially always in terms of our sense of selfhood, then he could *also* have seen that, since the self thereby transcends space and time, in consequence space and time rather more objectively and realistically confront the self as something somewhat alien and external to it.

Instead of doing that, Kant tries to secure the merely phenomenal reach of all our theoretical categories by the fact of their supposed schematic applicability only to finite and specifically Newtonian space and time, which are already taken to be sheerly subjective frameworks. Thereby, as Bulgakov argues, the comprehensible is arbitrarily restricted by Kant to the temporarily sequential and spatially relational, not allowing for the equal objectivity of holistic coherence (as with the belonging of accidents to substance—which Kant reduces to an extrinsic relation) that can be readily imagined, as with selfhood, as extending to infinity.

Because he perceived the inadequacy of the doctrine of transcendental apperception, never mind its inconsistent application, Fichte consciously and explicitly returned to Descartes behind Kant. He grounded knowledge not in an 'as it were' subject that is only apparent through his knowing of this or that, but in a directly perceived and fully real subject that is existentially 'absolute' in the sense that it transcends any particular content.¹² This is not in any way to speak of an illusory Lockean 'punctual' self, taken outside and before social and linguistic instantiation, but merely to note that the subject can indeed 'ironically' stand back from any particular content—imagine herself as born elsewhere, undergoing totally other experiences, re-locating across the seas, learning completely different languages etc., which sometimes she may indeed actually do. It is for this reason that we have a sense of the universality of our subjectivity which allows us readily to say 'we' alongside other people, who are the existential possessors of quite different contents of experience.

The paradox of Fichte's position is that this direct realism about the subject is also the basis for his attempted absolute idealism. He argued that we have intuitive insight into the noumenal realm in terms of our own subjectivity: what we are, we also immediately act and will. We are not just 'given' to ourselves,

12 J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowing; The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: CUP, 1997); *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1994).

but are given as self-positing and as 'self-made' in the sense that we cannot stand back from ourselves, cannot refuse to 'go' with ourselves or not play our own part, whatever role this may assume. We are never an object to ourselves, because as soon as we try to look at ourselves we displace ourselves by being exhaustively the self who is doing this looking. To be a self is ineluctably to perform the self—we can assume a role, tell a lie, but it is always 'I' who is doing so.

This is the self as *Tathandlung* as Fichte puts it. By token of the subject's *real* transcendence of any objectivity, we can never exit our own circle: we can always go somewhere else, but only by being ourselves somewhere else. Subjectivity is a permanent metaphysical sentence of absolute lockdown, as it were. For this reason, it further follows that we cannot affirm or 'posit' the reality of anything save as a mode of our own self-awareness, or as in some sense a derivation from our own self-understanding. I cannot know the clock as a clock outside the accompanying reflexive awareness of myself using it to tell the time.

Moreover, we have no reason, as with Kant, to suppose that hidden essences or 'things in themselves' lurk behind phenomena. This is all the more true, since in the instance of our self-awareness we now have a direct insight into the noumenal, which Fichte has extended from Kant's practical to his theoretical reason, while somewhat fusing the two—since to 'be' oneself is also immediately to 'enact' oneself.

These two theoretical shifts, in combination, give the basis for Fichte's absolute idealist project. While he returned from Kant to Descartes and so to a certain realism about the self, he still entertained and sought to extend Kant's 'critical' project, which would found certainty in knowledge and not being, and so in a subjective starting point, not in being in general—as, for example, with Spinoza. It then follows that the 'critical' knowledge possessed by the subject, if it is to be certain knowledge and to overcome sceptical doubt as to its import, must now be an absolute knowledge of things in their appearance as being how they really are. One sees how, in this respect, Fichte can be regarded as a proto-Phenomenologist.

Moreover, since pre-Kantian speculation is still refused, the only way to ground this knowledge with certainty is to see these things in their very manifestness as derived from the subject. It is not that Fichte denied their external reality (as Berkeley is supposed to have done, on the usual mistaken reading), but rather that he affirmed that all of their knowability was derived from the knowing subject. This subject does not actually make things, but he does entirely posit them insofar as they can be known. There is a certain anticipation of both Husserlian bracketing and Husserlian intentionality involved here.

All the same, and as with the neo-Kantians and Husserl in his later phase, the loss of the *Dinge an sich* seems to reduce things to our awareness of them. However, and again as with Phenomenology, there is some ambiguity: just because there is no longer any sceptical gulf between phenomena and noumena, phenomena start to assume a greater quasi-ontological weight than is the case with Kant.

And in fact, a reversion to realism after all goes further than this in the case of Fichte.

From the very outset of his reflections, although the self as absolute must be assumed, and assumed as prior to the contrast of subject and object, I and Not-I—in order that it may be a final ground, that is taken to be more or less the immanent presence of God—Fichte also considers that this self can never directly appear to us, but remains, as it were, unconscious. Thus, for him, *sum ergo sum* precedes even *cogito ergo sum*. As soon as we have started to enact ourselves consciously we are involved with the objective ‘Not I’ with which we are in a co-constitutive relation. The Not-I or the object is for this reason really just as fundamental as the I, even though it *prevents* there being any absolute foundation after all.

Furthermore, since the I only first knows itself in encountering the Not-I, and yet the Not-I is only there at all as grounded in the ultimate and inaccessible *sum ergo sum*, it follows (in a very proto-postmodern manner) that the self is from the outset divided from itself, unable because of a primordial fall into reflection ever fully to know itself or existentially to be at one with itself.

In this way, realism eats deconstructively into the very heart of Fichte’s idealism, which is ‘absent’ just to the degree that it is absolute. But equally, even though he tries to ‘deduce’ all the structures of our knowing of external things from the conditions of our self-awareness, he admits that this attempt is never complete, rather in the way that phenomenological description will later prove ‘an infinite task’. At the core of what we posit is always something that is obstinately just ‘there’, confronting us in all its irreducible density, including Being as such. The latter cannot after all be spun out of our *Dasein*, with a pre-echo of Heidegger’s philosophical dilemmas.

Since these given appearances are for Fichte no longer floating on a sea of noumena with which they may have no intrinsic connection, his position at this point becomes *evidently more realist than that of Kant*. And he says so. The Not-I is bafflingly posited as irreducible for the I, as just given for it in an alien mode. Also, in contrast to Hegel, there is no logical route from the I to the Not-I in Fichte and this is part of why he appealed more to Bulgakov. Nor is this difference between the two poles, subjective and objective, engulfed in

a vitalist sea of nature, as (supposedly) for Schelling. Again, this was attractive to the Russian thinker.

Therefore, we can see how the Fichtean *Anstoss*, or 'push-back' of objective appearances involves much more genuine practical exteriority than the Kantian *noumena*.

All the same, there is nothing straightforward here, and nothing, from Bulgakov's perspective, that clearly overcomes Jacobi's charges of nihilism and atheism as consequent upon the Fichtean attempt (again anticipating Husserl) to turn philosophy into a strict science. Fichte was always trying to overcome these charges, while not surrendering to Jacobi's perceived 'fideism'.¹³ Indeed, as scholarship has now shown, his work was driven as much by Jacobi's simultaneous critique of both Kant and Spinoza as by his attempt to deepen the Kantian critique itself.

Jacobi had charged that any rational foundationalism, in trying to suppress pre-rational presuppositions, tends to deny reality altogether in favour of an empty self-reference or an infinite regress. In order to meet this challenge, Idealism was forced to try to show that the rational subject could indeed do justice to and encompass all of the actually real, including both the subject and the object, both freedom and necessity (beyond Spinoza), both culture and nature, in a complete system.¹⁴

Bulgakov correctly perceived that Fichte's system remained nonetheless thoroughly aporetic, in part because the latter grasped the radicality of Jacobi's challenge. For Fichte, the knowing subject is self-grounded and absolute. In consequence, the drive of philosophy towards full comprehension of everything has to be idealist in character. The recognition of a reality that cannot be subsumed is indeed the recognition of a blockage for philosophy as such, even though it intrudes from the very outset of philosophical investigation. The self must seek to overcome this obstacle even in order to achieve an unproblematic self-recognition, but it cannot do so.

13 Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, 'Jacobi to Fichte,' in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal-Kingston: McGill/Queen's UP, 1994), 497–536. Bulgakov in places accuses Jacobi of producing a surrogate of religious faith as ontological trust, yet surely makes the same move himself. Jacobi is rarely given his due because he wrote in an amateurish, journalistic idiom that makes other more professional thinkers consistently reluctant to admit the devastating direct brilliance of his insights and their crucial role in the later unfolding of all modern philosophy.

14 See Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2005).

Fichte 'resolves' this cognitive and existential conundrum by declaring, somewhat like Kant, though in an altered way, the primacy of practical reason over theoretical. The practical will involves an endless drive to assert its own all-encompassing self-willing and free all-comprehending or positing of all that it knows. Ethics is grounded in this will to absolute and uninhibited self-assertion.

Nonetheless (and here Bulgakov is arguably not quite fair to Fichte and somewhat disguises his more surreptitious borrowings from him) the real barriers that this subjective drive constantly come up against include our encounters with other selves, whose equal absoluteness we are able to acknowledge just because we experience our own subjectivity as something undetermined and so potentially shared in common: the always latent sense of the 'we'. It is for this reason that Fichte faintly sustained (after Jacobi) some sense of the interpersonal or of an 'I-Thou' consciousness. Yet the need to mediate between equally absolute subjective poles gives rise in Fichte to the advocacy of a politics at once extremely liberal and resolutely totalitarian, as the British Hegelian Gillian Rose was fond of pointing out. Nothing can connect such subjective poles save a doctrine of private rights and nothing can guarantee our non-interference with each other's liberties save the most continual state surveillance and policing.¹⁵ Ultimately then, in practice, it would seem that, for Fichte, the shared 'we' is the unlimited political state committed to what Bulgakov would have understood as a total 'economising' of all human life where practical regulation, and not art and culture, is what we thereby fundamentally share in common.

4. Bulgakov's Critique of Fichte

It is, however, already at the gnoseological and ontological level that Bulgakov finds Fichte to be unsatisfactory. He is not content with the theoretically unresolved *aporia*. It is in this respect that he notes that, while Fichte proposes something like a shadow of the human imaging of the Second Person of the Trinity in terms of the 'Not-I', which can also be seen as the inescapable 'predicate' required to establish any reflective and effective 'subject', that he lacks altogether (unlike Hegel and Schelling) any inkling of the Third Person or of the grammatical copula. The I and the Not-I are not conjoined by Being or by an

15 J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

existential judgement, because they always just kick against each other, being caught up in an endless and always unresolved agonistic tussle.¹⁶

Bulgakov refuses this agonism in its ontological import, rather than as a constant but contingent mark of our fallen propensities. He does so essentially by re-instating against Fichte the proto-Romantic and Romantic critiques that were levelled against him and to which he was constantly seeking to respond.

These critiques were basically threefold. First, as we have seen, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi had suggested in relation to both Fichte and Kant that philosophy always arrives too late to secure any rational foundation of thought in subjective self-awareness. By the time we start to reflect, we are already existentially and culturally situated, have already embarked on a thousand ungrounded assumptions that we nonetheless require in order to be able to think at all. Taking ourselves on trust, we equally take on trust and with an equal certainty the real world that surrounds us.

Fichte, with great intellectual respect, half-conceded Jacobi's point, and as we have seen, allows that we cannot really catch up with our absolute selfhood. Yet, unlike Jacobi, he continued to insist that our subjectivity, which we have to assume from the outset, must *in principle* be fully self-transparent and thinkable, even though our doomed failure to do so results in an irresolvable antinomy that we cannot just push to the margins, as with the antinomies of Kant.

Significant here is Fichte's attitude towards religion. Jacobi had suggested that, since we inhabit the real world necessarily 'by faith', actually religious and mythical pre-comprehensions of our subjectivity cannot be displaced and must, to some degree, be trusted. Fichte instead thought that the only revelation that could be accepted was one which did not violate our *a priori* criteria for what a true revelation would be: namely one that did not contradict our absolutely given rational philosophical understanding.¹⁷ In consequence, for Fichte, God is really the finite and unblocked realisation of the Absolute ego: indeed a pure monotheism with no Trinitarian inflection. Arguably, a kind of acosmism seems to ensue, since if the independence of the Creation can in any way 'count' for God, he would be himself caught up in the agonistic tussles of understanding that Fichte had disinterred. It is this latter, Behmenist route that Hegel and Schelling were indeed variously to explore.

It is apparent here that Bulgakov in effect sides once more with Jacobi. Before human beings ever get to philosophy they have already made elective exis-

16 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 223–34.

17 J.G. Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, trans. Garrett Green (Cambridge: CUP, 2012).

tential choices which they express in terms of myths and dogmas. Just because we can never catch up with ourselves, these shared decisions are unavoidable. The Idealist claim to surmount them or surpass them is deluded: either, as with Fichte's honesty, one runs into a cognitive *impasse*, or one succumbs to alternative and heterodox religiosities, as with Hegel and (supposedly) Schelling: gnostic mythologies which hover between acosmism and pantheism, or agonistically combine both at different moments.

For this reason, Bulgakov thinks that no philosophy really escapes from religion: in reality every philosophy is an attempt to think more clearly through various different religious presuppositions. This is what he claims for his own Christian philosophy: it is a reflection on Christian 'myths' and 'dogmas'—in the sense of primordial written teachings or cognitive reflections that have liturgically acquired such a collective status. Given his statement that philosophy is the *ancilla* of religion and not of theology, one can validly conclude that Bulgakov in reality abolished the entire distinction between philosophy and theology. He is arguably the very greatest modern theologian just because he realised, like the Church Fathers, both Greek and Latin, and much later like Meister Eckhart, that the only real Christian theologian is one who directly assumes the philosophical task in the light of the Holy Scriptures.

In another vital and linked respect, Bulgakov effectively agrees with Jacobi against Fichte. If the knowing subject is fully real, as for Descartes, and not just 'transcendental' as for Kant, then we no longer have any warrant for staying with Kant's 'critical' subjectivism. To know oneself as a real living and thinking self is to know oneself as situated in a world alongside other things and other selves with the same immediacy of cognitive trust. For this reason, we need not see the always already co-given 'Not-I' as a contradictory blockage to our understanding, nor even our divided self-hood as entirely irresolvable. We can, instead, think in more originally relational terms of a natural if selective blending of self with other and of different moments of our own self-hood in terms of a narrative coherence (as for Paul Ricoeur or Alasdair MacIntyre), albeit one that it is never finitely complete.

This means that we must engage with the neglected *copula*, ignored by Fichte. At this point, we can invoke the second, crucial proto-Romantic critique of Idealism that Bulgakov explicitly appeals to in *The Philosophy of the Name* and that is equally important for *The Tragedy of Philosophy*. This is the charge that Kant had ignored the philosophical import of language.

In relation to Fichte this means that Bulgakov suggests that everything becomes much clearer if we replace the supposed primacy of *logic* with the real existential primacy of *grammar*. Again and again the Russian theologian sug-

gests that the over-extension of logic in German Idealism from Kant through Hegel leads to all sorts of argumentative *legerdemain*, of which he is as disdainful from the Eastern margins of Europe as the British tend to be from the Western.¹⁸ One should not pretend to be able to deduce even the knowledge of objects from our subjectivity, as Fichte seeks to do, nor imagine that any proposed deduction of ontological categories can be anything more than a 'rhapsody' of classification, rationalistically abusing the categories of Aristotle.

Yet this is now, for Bulgakov, for a more than Aristotelian reason: it is because, prior to any classification of things into substance, accident and relation (these being the crucial extremes of Aristotle's ten categories), lies the already-lived grammatical arrangement of things into subject, predicate and copula. Every predicate is, for Bulgakov, a kind of universal idea, and the hypostatic subject is still more universal and open in character. There exists for him no simple priority between the two, and so the subject no longer plays any straightforward role of substance to which things just accidentally attach. For there can be no real, living subject prior to received and selected attachments, and in consequence any unproblematic sifting between substance and attribute, or between external and constitutive relations, is grammatically disturbed from the outset. Therefore, the *Tragedy of Philosophy* concludes in its very last sentence that 'Substance is a *living proposition* consisting of a subject, a predicate, and a copula'.¹⁹

Bulgakov's case, explicitly following Hamann, Herder and Humboldt, is that philosophy goes astray if it seeks to transcend or escape the cultural, because linguistic mediation of nature. In a sense he reads Fichte as half-conceding this, because the German philosopher had rightly concluded that when we say, for example, 'the table is in the dining room,' we are really saying 'I can see that the table is in the dining room,' in such a way that only by imbuing the table in a certain sense with our own subjectivity are we able to see the table at all. However, Bulgakov adds to Fichte that this circumstance reveals that we inevitably subscribe to a *grammatical ontology* that we cannot seriously refuse without lapsing into incoherence. The subject–predicate–copula structure of all human language reveals indeed that we can only perceive the world at all by symbolically animating it—and for this reason, in *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov cautiously endorsed 'occultist' and esoteric natural philosophies.

18 Though of course one must note that other central European traditions from Bolzano through Frege to Tarski have been equally disdainful.

19 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 236.

However, this ontological ‘propositionality’ also for him tells against Idealism and against Fichte. In a kind of admitted exacerbation of Fichtean insights, which the first fully Romantic current, that of the self-named actual ‘Romantics,’ Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, had already sketched, we need to see that the only available subjectivity that we can inhabit is, in later Lacanian terms, ‘the subject of the statement’ and not the sublimely inaccessible, though always assumed ‘subject of enunciation,’ which is somewhat like Fichte’s *sum ergo sum*.²⁰ If we do admit this beginning always already with the linguistic subject as the only available ‘I,’ then more drastically than Fichte we will see that we have to also admit the equal co-reality from the outset of the ‘Not-I,’ now taken in the mode of the predicate. For it is not just that the predicate always blocks our advance, requiring our integral retreat into ironic subjective reserve, it is also the case (as Fichte already in effect admitted) that without adopting some attachment to predicates, without appropriating them as properties of our selfhood—without, as Bulgakov sees it, *naming* ourself—we will not enter into subjectivity at all. We surpass negative irony, as Friedrich Schlegel taught, when we positively embrace flashes of linguistic ‘wit’ that are fragments of revelatory and participatory disclosure. Then our lives and the reality we inhabit can turn into continuous symbolic allegories.²¹

From such a perspective, there is in fact no easy distinction to be made between the subject and predicate positions, either in grammar or in reality. Thus, in *The Philosophy of the Name*, Bulgakov stresses that every word as an ‘idea’ is transcendently prior to its grammatical position as a part of speech. This also means for him that the inflection of a word is genetically prior to linguistic structure, and that for this reason the older languages are the inflected ones. There is a wholesale fluidity between absolutely individual substance and the universal qualities that attach to it—they can always confusingly change places because they so radically require each other, just as a noun may turn into a verb or vice-versa.

Indeed, Bulgakov maintains that the claimed identity between subject and predicate that allows us to make sense at all, is nonetheless grounded in an apparent nonsense that transcends the Law of Non-Contradiction. In order to achieve *any* locatable identity in the first place, the human subject or the

20 Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Fichte Studies* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003); *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (New York: SUNY, 1997).

21 Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis MN: Minnesota UP, 1997). See also Catherine Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 17–92.

thing taken in the subject-position has to claim that something also *is*, without reserve, what it is not. The table is round and brown etc.; it also is neither of those things and yet without them it cannot really be there at all. Likewise, I am not my name, my history, my location etc. and yet without these things I likewise simply vanish.

In terms of such considerations, Bulgakov declares that *any* name is at once both proper and empty and yet descriptive and universal, with only a series of relative variations of respective emphasis. One could well wonder if this approach does not entirely outflank that of Saul Kripke and his successors.

In terms, therefore, of the three fundamental grammatical and ontological positions, Bulgakov considers that he has exceeded and corrected Fichte.

First, the mysteriously fundamental subject, whose circle we can never exit, is nonetheless a co-situated subject in a sense less inherently problematic than it was for the German philosopher. If it has absolute depths coinciding with the divine presence, then this is not a problematic implied identity with God that we must ceaselessly and hopelessly endeavour to realise, but a given participation in his infinity mediated to us by symbolic nature and by the inspired signs and allegories of revealed religions.

Secondly, predicated objects are radically external to us and yet even their resistance is a gift of shared community in being. Our ceaseless advance towards the perspective of the divine Father is therefore also a quest for the perfectly answering and supplementing other. The Christian revelation has astonishingly shown us that this need not imply a quandary whereby we alternatively lose the world in the absolute divine subjectivity, or else abandon transcendence through an attempted pantheistic dilation. For now we realise that God himself is the infinitisation of our grammatical circumstance: he is only an absolute Paternal hypostasis because he is also Filial and Spiritual subjectivity.

Thus where philosophy seeks to overcome grammar by absolutising one or other of the grammatical poles: either the Subject (Fichte), the logical predicate (Hegel) or yet again the vital being of their combination (Spinoza, Schelling—for Bulgakov—and the pre-Socratics), Christian theology keeps them all in play. The truth is not a logical displacement of our ontological grammar, which already embodied a mode of faith: it is rather the doctrine revealed to religious faith that this grammar and so finite reality remains fully in triple play because it is a participation in an infinite triunity.²²

Thus thirdly, the spiritual moment in God also infinitises the copula. For Bulgakov, the linkage between subject and predicate is neither aporetic (Fichte)

22 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 123–30.

nor governed by logical negation (Hegel) nor yet either fated or darkly willed by nature (Schelling on one reading). Instead, the linkage is one of natural creativity and of specific art in the case of human beings. In all of nature the immanent and actively receptive hypostasising power of God as Sophia is at work to link subject and predicate together as ineffable beauty and to overcome the ugliness of extrinsic matter (as opposed to intrinsic body) that is the result of the Fall. In human beings, as described especially in *Unfading Light*, this is simultaneously the work of conscious self-creation and assisted recreation of nature in anticipation and prospective enabling of the final resurrection.

Our selfhood is not entirely and tautologically self-made as with Fichte, as from the very outset we co-create ourselves alongside our environment, and all of this process is but a participated if active reception of the divine creative act. Nor do we just 'posit' external things according to an intentionality that is merely an 'internal' imaginative creativity which half-accepts these things as resisting us and half tries to deduce them from pre-given *a priori* structures of subjectivity. The only external creativity involved in this Fichtean conception is a sheerly arbitrary attempt to reduce the impact of all external obstacles, to simply will them away, economically to master and control them.

By contrast, Bulgakov's sophiological and more Romantic vision actually *increases*, beyond Fichte, and with Novalis and Schlegel, the sense of an external creativity over things which even, as with Novalis, is granted a kind of 'magical' reach. Thus, we do more than posit those things with which we identify: in re-shaping them and bringing them under our purposive and spiritual (not instrumental) control, we actually 'bring them to birth' in participation of the eternal Paternal generation of the Son.

The somewhat difficult point to grasp here is that the Romantic switch to a greater realism *also* allows a greater external reach for a human creativity which is neither the operation of a pre-given logic, nor merely the assertion of will, but rather the realisation along with things of a shared teleology only intuited in the very process of co-construction. In the very long term one can venture (with some simplification) that Idealism is the remote offspring of Plotinus, who stressed the internal creative action of the soul on the body (which is not to be denied) and Romantic Realism the remote offspring of the later neoplatonists after Iamblichus, who stressed also the creative action of soul-plus-body on the surrounding cosmos as a ritual action which allowed the synergic or 'theurgic' working of the divine descent through ritual.

Bulgakov explicitly understood himself as lying within this legacy via the Christian mediation of Dionysius and Maximus, though he distinguished (however problematically) between the 'sophiurgic' operation of art and the

more humanly passive and solely divine theurgic operation of the liturgy or *Opus Dei*. The redeemed Faust is for him a much more effective, if purely white *magus*, one might say.

5. The Mystery of the Name

It is indeed the theurgic dimension which serves to link Bulgakov's critique of philosophy to his specific mode of Christian piety. *The Philosophy of the Name* is a long and extremely sophisticated defence of the Russian 'Name worshippers' in terms of a complete philosophy of language. It is legitimate, Bulgakov thinks, to say that 'the Name of Jesus is God', though not, like the more extreme onomaphiles (Rasputin?) to say that 'God is the name of Jesus', because this is to confuse Subject with predicate. We should not say that the absolute Paternal hypostasis is exhaustively the name any more than he is the incarnate God-Man, or even the Second Person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the predicate position is not straightforwardly subordinate to the subject position and can even be raised to co-hypostaticity, as most perfectly achieved within God himself—since there it is paradoxically required to exist as a co-subject out of the existence of the primal subject itself. Similarly, I am not my name and yet without my name in the widest sense I am not me at all. Unidentified, I am so lost that I do not really exist, for existence or 'being' is not, as for Hegel, an empty starting point identical with nothing, but instead always arises as the third position of habitual attachment.

To be is for something to be this or that in various modes or degrees. *Not*, for Bulgakov, in the Kantian sense that being is a mere existential copula that is not a predicate, but rather in the sense that the copula is always a judgement as to the real holding in place of the predicate or not—such that one could infer that, for the Russian thinker, 'possible' or fictional Thalers (Kant's famous example) do in fact really exist in some measure or other. For Bulgakov being is indeed not directly a predicate, but it is never detached from the judgement of predication.

Since, as we have seen, a name, for Bulgakov, is indeterminately general or proper, descriptive or vacuously nominative, he insists after Plato's *Cratylus* that no word and no name is ever *purely* arbitrary. Language (following Hamann and explicitly disagreeing with Gregory of Nyssa) cannot have been simply invented by human beings, because everything human already presupposes its existence and we cannot really imagine a world outside our articula-

tion of it.²³ For Bulgakov, it is literally the world that speaks through us, and all language is originally poetic manifestation. Every word is really a disclosure of the 'idea' behind things which things themselves cannot fail to proclaim. In consequence, a defence of the Platonic sense of the universal goes along with a defence of the primacy of language. A forest is not a manifold exemplification of an abstract idea of a tree, nor is it plausibly an accidental evolution. Instead, it is actually more rigorous to think of every tree as really striving to realise one single, absolutely named most proper tree with which it is somehow identical. For were trees only realising a blueprint, then one might ask why they so constantly vary and alter or why they generate in time at all. Similarly, Bulgakov thinks that the Bible is right to speak of languages as fragments of one lost language, rather than being various attempts to express a shared conceptuality.²⁴ Outside language, such a conceptuality is meaningless, so the fact that translation is possible suggests a constant struggle to reunify language and recover a lost shared tongue—which attempt he thinks was initially realised on the day of Pentecost.

It follows that for him the name Jesus is the name of names and the word of words which unites us to the eternal Word and begins to usher in the eschatological and more final reversal of Babel. Just as the Incarnation is only an abstract affirmation unless Christ continues to be manifest to us through the shape of ritual and sacred images (which themselves bear named inscriptions), so it must also be conveyed through specific language. The name Jesus Christ, like all names, sustains a complex freight of association, including both acquired and buried onomatopoeic resonance. This is why, in the Bible, God names the world into being and throughout its texts naming and re-naming are clearly regarded as ontological and revelatory events.

6. Trinitarian Ontology

All this, for Bulgakov, suggests a Biblical metaphysics, pre-intimated by Plato, which in exalting naming or the proposition exceeds mere rational or logical

23 See John Milbank, 'The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn,' in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 84–120.

24 Other Russian contemporaries of Bulgakov, like the symbolist poet Andrey Bely, spoke of the partial survival of the pre-Babel tongue in the mythical sacred dialect of *Senzar*, in which all the great sacred revelations of the world were supposed to have been first given. See Andrey Bely, *The Magic of Words*, in *Selected Essays*, trans. Steven Cassedy (Berkeley CA: California UP, 1985), 96.

classification. Reality as such, spoken into being by an infinite subject, is itself linguistic or propositional. It is surely highly significant that, somewhat before Bulgakov, the Italian priest-philosopher Antonio Rosmini had come to a similar conclusion in his massive *Teosofia*, also in part through a reflection on Fichte, and also in explicit connection with the elaboration of a Trinitarian ontology.²⁵

In terms of such an ontology however, one might conceivably detect ambiguities in Bulgakov. Is he not too Fichtean after all? In the later long article *Capita de Trinitate* he even speaks of God as a single hypostasis appearing in three subjective moments.²⁶ So is there a lurking modalism here, not so unlike that of the also Fichte-influenced Karl Barth? This, however, would be not to understand Bulgakov's radical purposes.

Throughout his *opus*, one of the intentions of his focus on the divine Wisdom is to undercut any too simplistic a duality of hypostasis and essence, whether in the case of the Trinity or of Christology. Yes, in either case, the difference of the terms is trying to indicate two incommensurable and therefore non-competitive planes, but this must not be allowed to override their nonetheless paradoxical fusion, on pain of impairing the divine simplicity.

Therefore, Bulgakov toys with a certain conceptual inversion: although it is less true than the reverse orthodox formula, it is not quite untrue that Christ is also two persons (as he is an 'atomic' human individual, as Aquinas eventually allows)²⁷ in one divine nature, since God cannot be divided. Likewise, though it is less true than orthodoxy, it is not quite untrue that God is one hypostasis in three natures. Here Bulgakov notably pleads the Cappadocian doctrine of *tropes* in his favour: in some ineffable way the three divine persons possess three different though not divided 'characters', which implies a certain incomprehensible variation of 'kind'. Conversely, the unity of nature cannot be thought of as anything other than the original and absolute hypostaticity of the Father. In a sense, the Persons of the Son and the Spirit are not 'new' persons, but necessary co-original manifestations of one and the same Personhood.

To a degree, indeed, Bulgakov remains Fichtean here—the I itself requires the Not-I and its linkage to it. But as we have seen, he has abandoned Fichtean self-making of the I and mere positing of the Not-I in favour of a relational

25 Antonio Rosmini, *Teosofia* (Milan: Bompiani, 2011).

26 Sergius Bulgakov, 'Capita de Trinitate,' [in three instalments] in *Internationale Kirkliche Zeitschrift* 26, no. 3 (1936), 144–67; no. 4 (1936), 210–30, 35, no. 1–2 (1945), 24–55.

27 See Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2016).

self-making through a creative giving birth to the other which still ‘surprises’ in its upshot its originator—just as a human parent is always amazed by their new baby and it is as if he or she had always been there.

It is for this reason that, in Bulgakov’s theology, the divine essence as Sophia is not exactly impersonal, even if it is not precisely a ‘fourth hypostasis’, except when God reflects on his own essence as ‘loving love’ in an action that is co-terminous with the external creation. The result of this initial reflection and initial ecstatic giving is the bringing into being of the Plotinian sphere of the intellect or *nous*, which for Bulgakov is identical with Sophia as the world-soul—rather as for Augustine it was identical with the heavenly Jerusalem.

But what prevents, in Bulgakov, an unambiguous hypostatisation of Wisdom, either within God or within the Creation, is his important grammatical *qualification* of any outright personalism that would despise the blind witness of *things* and so of sacramentality. It is in this respect very important that his primary *vestigium trinitatis* is *not* social and relational, even though he builds up to that—such that the ultimate ‘predicate’ is the *Thou* and the ultimate copula is the ‘he’, which then allows the sophiological shared essential, but personal ‘we’ to come into being. Rather, his consistently very high valuation of the bodily, the sensual, the sexual, the feminine (as he sees it) and the sacramental, requires him to insist that the personal cannot emerge at all without a sort of sublimated fetishistic attachment to things, which alone supplies us with any ‘character’ or operable content. Adam, he declares, was lost in Eden, which lacked for him any charm till the arrival of the disclosive Eve. He required not simply a companion, but rather an ultimate attachment to another freely self-expressive ‘thing’ like himself, with which he could be corporeally united.

In a lesser way, all our speaking involves a continuous appropriation of things, including of those things that are spoken of in terms of their appropriation by other things, like the inclusion of the table in the dining room. For this reason, Bulgakov declares that the whole of a human life is actually one long string of propositions, or alternatively one long continuous proposition. But this is not just a process of realisation; it is also a further disclosure of the world through its further poetic re-creation. It is ontology as autobiography and shared history, because reality itself is both autobiographical and historical.

In consequence, the second, predicamental moment is first impersonal before it is personal and is even identified with *essence*, with which the primary hypostasis of the self must identify if it is to become a real person at all. This means that, perhaps rather surprisingly, Bulgakov consistently associates essence, both divine and created, with the Second Person of the Trinity, including its created echo. One might say that for him, and in very Johannine terms, we

have to see that the Son is the complete Word and utterance *before* we can grasp the complete import of his personhood and eternal birth.

The essential rather than the purely personal also matters to Bulgakov insofar as, according to Trinitarian doctrine, it is essence, albeit a personifying, sophianic essence, that is *one*, whereas the hypostases are in principle plural. The lurking and somewhat disturbing emptiness of our self-hood witnesses to us that there can be other selves, in a way that the continuity of the earth, air, sea, sky and light does not, nor inversely the absolute specificity of *this* rock, beach, cottage or jug and so forth.

The problem with philosophy, to reiterate, is that it tries to escape this solidarity of grammar with ontology, whereas the Incarnation of the Word in person reminds the Universal Adam, and so all of us, of the primacy of the propositional judgement. The point here is not simply to rebuke philosophy, to say that it is all a terrible mistake, since even a philosophy that has tried impossibly to shake off its religious moorings, still nonetheless bears a negative and providential witness when it is foundering in the immanentist sea.²⁸ If it is a *tragic* endeavour, then so too for Bulgakov are human art and human economy. The artist is always, like the great poet Pushkin, prey to melancholy, as he realises that he cannot ever produce the work that is within him to bring forth. The economist is equally so prey, because he is always half-aware that what Bulgakov calls his 'gray magic' is an often meaningless substitute for the white Adamic magic of powerful naming, while only half-avoiding the black magic of demonic control of natural forces for the mere sake of such control. As the 'art of concepts', philosophy shares in both frustrations, but can begin to be redeemed insofar as it becomes also an exposition of Christian dogma.

7. Conclusion: Beyond the Critical Turn

As we have seen, Bulgakov's understanding of Fichte is pivotal for his work in both philosophy and theology. His attitude towards the German idealist is at once extremely positive and extremely negative. What does this double stance imply for Bulgakov's attitude towards the modern 'critical' turn in philosophy as such? If the foregoing analyses are correct, then he does not really accept it, and only finds it to be of value to the degree that he can subvert it and turn it metacritically against its own assumed intentions.

28 See Stephen Churchyard, 'Translator's Introduction' to *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, xxxv–lviii.

He finds it to be of value, to reiterate, to the degree that it exalts the human, the subjective and so the personal. But the Russian theologian refuses the post-Kantian assumption that to emphasise the subject is to turn critically away from metaphysics and towards the primacy of epistemology. To the contrary, he emphasises both in *The Tragedy of Philosophy* and in *Unfading Light* that metaphysics itself *first appeared* as a break with the 'physics' and monism of pre-Socratic philosophy, when Socrates started to enquire into himself and linked this inquiry to transcendent, theological origins.

It would then follow that the later deepening of such enquiries from Augustine through Kierkegaard to Bergson are naturally linked (as indeed these three thinkers variously supposed) to a renewed insistence on the metaphysical in an explicitly Platonic or neoplatonic sense. In this context, Descartes is a profoundly ambivalent thinker (as scholarship increasingly attests) who can be read either in terms of a deepening of the metaphysical or of a modern turn to the epistemological. As we have seen, Bulgakov construes Fichte's critique of Kant as a return to the metaphysical import of the Cartesian *cogito* which Kant had incoherently suppressed, while at the same time refusing Fichte's clinging to an absolute subjective foundationalism which inconsistently tries to erect metaphysics within a purely epistemological space that has already been called into question.

That is to say, once I admit that I am, as a knowing subject, fully real, and not just (as for the theoretical Kant of the First Critique) real as knowing, then it is indeed a kind of Satanic delusion to then try to suppress after all the secondariness of knowing to existence (which Fichte embraced to a still greater degree than Descartes, as we have seen) and to ignore the co-primacy in reality of all things and other people around me. For one now lacks even Kant's sceptical excuse to be a sad spider, spinning away in a dusty library corner.

Instead of claiming Bulgakov as a modern, post-critical thinker, one can rather situate him, alongside Augustine and the other named thinkers, as another great Christian theorist who, by re-emphasising subjectivity, also insisted on the primacy of a constitutive metaphysics as a holistic speculation which our very existential perplexity cannot honestly evade.

However, he does this in a novel way which is metacritical as well as pre-critical, since he rounds upon critical thought by stressing the primacy of language beyond the remit of most medieval thinking. Quite simply, the primacy of the modern knowing subject, or the subject of enunciation, is trumped by pointing out that this is always also the grammatical subject, or the subject of the statement. But with the primacy of the statement comes also the co-primacy of the predicated thing and its copulative link to the subject.

This Romantic and metacritical neo-realism is not just identical with pre-critical realism, to the extent that, first of all, it emphasises that our only access to the external real is through expressive appropriation. And secondly, to the extent that it realises (like the early G. E. Moore and Alfred North Whitehead)²⁹ that it cannot actually think any reality whatsoever outside the assumption that all of nature approaches in its structures the subjective and the propositional.

This is not then, a matter of our fated and self-deluded propensity to project. To the contrary, the fluidity of words, as between subjects and predicates, identified by Bulgakov, rather shows that we only begin to be as subjects at all by identifying with predicates already bearing within themselves some mode of subjectivity. A kind of totemism is at work here: I do not wrongly see the stream as a nymph; I only begin to have any sense of self in the first place by partly identifying with the stream, as with stone and tree and plant and bear and so forth.

All this amounts to an implicit claim in Bulgakov that a real linguistic turn *returns us* to metaphysical speculation rather than deepening the Kantian epistemological project. This then constitutes his challenge to Analytic philosophy at least in its Fregean and Wittgensteinian modes.

It is also clear that Bulgakov's preference for Fichte over Kant arises because Fichte's hyper-critique of Kant in one dimension points back towards realism. And following Hamann and Herder, the Russian thinker also applied his linguistic critique to Kant himself. The latter is accused of falsely trying to distinguish 'judgements of appearance' as merely subjective, from 'judgements of experience' taken as objective, in the sense that they fall under shared categories of understanding, especially of causality.³⁰ Thus 'I feel sad' is for this outlook subjective, but not 'he has fallen over' or even 'Mary has caused John to feel sad by spurning his love'. Bulgakov argues that, to the contrary, the fact that we can take simply 'he feels sad' as objective suggests that objectivity is already sufficiently secured by propositional grammar and not by a supposed placing of sensory or affective information under *a priori* conceptual categories. Because all of our understanding is linguistic, every appearance is already, if reflexively, judged as an experience, and nothing not already schematised or categorised by language ever appears to us at all. We have therefore no warrant for distinguishing the purely empirical from the purely rational, the *a posteriori*

29 See Fraser MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals: the Metaphysical Origins of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2018).

30 Bulgakov, *La Philosophie du Verbe et du Nom*, 85–112.

from the *a priori*, or the synthetic from the analytic. In consequence, a more 'internal' event of feeling is just as objective as a more external event of falling over, and the latter is no more certain or purely factual in character.

It can therefore be concluded that Bulgakov's critique of modern, non-religiously-based philosophy by no means accepts its 'critical' starting point, which for him is identical with this bracketing of religion. Instead, he offers us a Trinitarian ontology which newly accentuates the place of the subjective person only because it also newly accentuates the importance of things, of community and of creativity with respect to all of nature, with Humanity as its crown.

Inspired by Bulgakov, a more Biblically-infused philosophy can, in the future, lead us through grammar to wisdom, since the lesson of both is that personhood and essence are to be distinguished, yet never divided.