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EXISTENCE, NOMIC CONDITIONS, AND GOD: ISSUES IN HENDRIK HART'S ONTOLOGY

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The publication of *Understanding Our World* has been eagerly awaited by scholars acquainted with the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.¹ We have not been disappointed. This book is a significant achievement for its author, Hendrik Hart, and for the Institute where he has taught systematic philosophy for more than fifteen years. The first major work in ontology to come from North American students of H. Evan Runner, Herman Dooyeweerd, and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, *Understanding Our World* provides a fresh paradigm for Calvinian scholars in the school of cosmonomic philosophy. Hart's approach is neither provincial nor pedantic, however; he recognizes contributions from other traditions, and he revises cosmonomic categories when these fail to meet contemporary problems.

According to the Introduction, the book has several aims: to help renew systematic philosophy; to 'promote Christian philosophical thinking'; and to 'construct an integral ontology' that is 'dependent on a Christian worldview'. Meeting these aims is required 'to integrate scholarship and to relate it integrally to the rest of human culture' (p. xvii). Indeed, as the subtitle of the book indicates, integrality is the book's main concern, just as integrity is a dominant quality of Hart's philosophical style.

Hart notes several obstacles to integrality. One is a frequent failure among Christians to achieve consistency between their worldview and the philosophical categories employed in their scholarship. Another obstacle comes from the venerable but moribund tradition of considering reason autonomous with respect to fundamental commitments. An additional barrier emerges from the primacy of epistemology over ontology in modern philosophy. To achieve integrality, according to Hart, 'we need to explore epistemology in the context of ontology, and ontology in the context of the history of our deepest convictions' (p. xix). *Understanding Our World* provides such an exploration and precludes an epistemological study on which Hart is currently working.

Given the book's aims and the obstacles to their achievement, we may expect a demanding discussion. Hart takes a 'high altitude' approach. An approach at lower altitudes would have turned each chapter into a separate monograph. Fortunately what the book lacks in detailed analysis and sustained argument is compensated by the coherence and sweep of a comprehensive survey. The *topoi* scrutinized are central to contemporary ontology and cosmomic philosophy. These include universality and order (Chapters 1 and 2), actors and actions (Chapters 3 and 4), relations (Chapter 5), humanity (Chapter 7), and the categories of unity, diversity, coherence, totality, and time (Chapter 6). 'A Concluding Prescientific Postscript' presents Hart's 'ultimate assumptions' and their roles in his ontology.

Aside from a few aphorisms, which either perplex or provoke further thought, the writing is usually clear and sometimes eloquent. Hart is a master of everyday examples. Occasionally these seem quaint, as in the opening sentence of Chapter 1: 'Our universe . . . is populated by little girls, white-tailed deer, yellow lady slippers, planets and many other things' (p. 1). Most often, however, the examples make illuminating connections with human experience. Another strength of the writing is found in the notes and glossary. These Germanic additions to the main text often extend Hart's analysis and clarify his terminology. I do wish, however, that an alphabetical list had been provided for abbreviated titles. Without it the checking of references becomes tedious.

That complaint aside, I find the book reflects solid, painstaking scholarship. The book is significant, demanding, and of excellent caliber. It will reward careful reading and provoke fruitful debate. To contribute to such reading and debate, I wish to discuss several issues in Hart's ontology. These are not the only issues. Certainly they are not the only ones I find interesting or important. But I suspect they are the ones that will shape the initial reception of this book. They will be discussed under the following six headings: (1) the status of an ontology; (2) the question of existence; (3) the reality of nomic conditions; (4) the origin of nomic conditions; (5) philosophy and God; (6) commitment and ontology.

1. The Status of an Ontology

It is no secret that for most of our century metaphysics has been considered dead. Many philosophers have seen it as either a backwater to be avoided by progressive analysis or a barrier to be overcome by original thought. Historians might differ as to whether Hegel or Nietzsche or even Heidegger was the last metaphysician, but few of them would view metaphysics as central in twentieth-century philosophy.

If ontology has been the crux of traditional metaphysics, which itself has fallen out of fashion, then contemporary ontological pursuits require some justification. We have already noted that Hart considers ontology crucial for renewing systematic philosophy and for achieving academic integration. In themselves, however, such considerations offer little more than a pragmatic rationale. Upon reading the high claims made for an ontology's potential contributions, we may wonder about the status of this ontology.

How does it address its predecessors? How is it situated in its own historical context? Why does it develop certain categories and not others? Furthermore we may expect some answers in the Introduction. Thus the brevity of Hart's comments along these lines may seem puzzling or disappointing.

The Introduction mentions Dooyeweerd, Dewey, Polanyi, and persons in the analytic tradition as having shaped the book's 'curious mixture of continental European and analytic approaches' (p. xxi). It becomes clear in the first two chapters that Hart's primary distinction between order and existence reworks Dooyeweerd's distinction between law side and subject side and Dewey's notion of conjugate relations. This is done in conversation with two parts of analytic philosophy. These parts are 'realist' ontologies of universals and particulars (Armstrong, Loux, Quinton, Wolterstorff) and 'deductivist' treatments of laws (Hempel, Popper) and systems (Laszlo) in philosophy of the natural sciences. Although neither a realist nor a deductivist, Hart cannot avoid having such discussion partners set some of his own agenda.

One can only speculate about the shape this book would have taken if it had begun in conversation with Hegel, Nietzsche, or Heidegger, none of whose works are cited in the Bibliography. Many scholars in the humanities and social sciences probably would have preferred a dialogue with Adorno, Gadamer, Habermas, or Ricoeur, whose works are cited but seldom addressed. In any case what seems 'curious' about the book's mixture is that an approach obviously indebted to the continental school of cosmological philosophy can be so ascetic toward other continental approaches and so selective in its dialogue with analytic approaches. There is even surprisingly little discussion of Dewey's work, in which Hart is well-served.

I do not seek to dispute Hart's style but to ask about the status of his ontology. It seems this is not an attempt to come to terms with the broad, battered tradition of metaphysics. Instead Hart's book is an attempt to develop those ontological categories he considers necessary for a new epistemology and philosophy of science. Hart's central theme is a cosmological concern over rationality and commitment;² his primary challenge is to develop this theme in language intelligible to contemporary realists and deductivists in the analytic tradition. Given Hart's theme and challenge, we cannot expect him to address worries about ontology's reification of Being (Heidegger), the question of human finitude and fallibility (Ricoeur), the linguistic character of human existence (Gadamer), theories of social evolution (Habermas), or the problem of intersubjectivity in social ontology (Theunissen). Given the broader context of twentieth-century philosophy, however, we may wish such topics had been addressed, or at least we may wish the author had told us why they are being omitted. Where one begins, and which categories one develops, are crucial and perennial problems in ontology. At this level *Understanding Our World* may be expected to go further than it does.

2. The Question of Existence

Hart tells us that Chapters 1 and 2 'deal with the problem of how to account for the fact that things are both unique and similar to other things' (p. 5). Against realists he argues that universals do not exist. Against nominalists he argues that apparent universality is not simply a function of names or concepts. Hart associates universality with the law-like conditions central to Hempel's account of deductive-nomological explanation in the natural sciences. Universality is nomic, as are the kinds, categories, properties, and relations normally subsumed under the traditional 'problem of universals'. Calling universality nomic or law-like allows Hart to say universality is real but universals are not.

Summarizing his hypothesis about universality, Hart writes:

Both individuality and universality are real. They are also mutually irreducible and correlative. They are in fact traits of a relationship . . . between the nomic conditions that hold universally for what exists and the empirical existents that individually and subjectively meet those conditions or are subject to them. And understanding what something is, is grasping in a concept what the conditions for its existence are (p. 83).

This summary incorporates a fundamental distinction between 'nomic conditions' and 'subjective existence'. First developed in Chapter 2, the distinction is gradually subsumed under an even broader distinction between order and world, where 'order' refers to 'the totality of all nomic conditions in their coherent interrelations' (Glossary, p. 450). In the context of the philosophy of science, which dominates Chapter 2, Hart postulates

. . . that we all experience an ordered world, that in science we conceptualize and name the order of our world, that whatever it is that we so conceive and name is a reality, and that in appealing to that reality we can both successfully explain our world and account for that explanation (p. 70).

After developing this position in considerable detail, Hart returns to 'the problem of universals' – the question of whether and in what manner universals exist. His position allows us, he says, 'to reject the existence of things which are universals, and also the existence of things which are purely individual. Whatever . . . has the universality of a universal will not be found among the entities, objects, things, that we find in our empirical, subjective world of individual existents. And an individual will bear evidence of universality' (p. 72).

By connecting ontology and philosophy of science, Hart's approach opens exiting avenues for further investigation. There is a sense, however, in which he has not addressed the problem of universals but simply transposed it into the universe of discourse about conditions. Saying that conditions obtain universally allows Hart to deny the existence of universals. Universals, he says, are 'reified conditions characterized by the way in which they relate' to that which they condition (p. 73). In denying the existence of universals, however, Hart also denies the existence of conditions. These are real but do not exist, since existents are subject to conditions but conditions cannot themselves be conditioned. Were this denial simply a function of Hart's peculiar definition of existence as entailing subjection to conditions, we could accept the denial despite its counterintuitive ring. But

there seems to be a genuine problem here. Following the same line of reasoning, for example, we would have to conclude that, since God is not subject to conditions, God does not exist. This, I submit, would be an unacceptable conclusion for Hart's own philosophy.

The problem at stake, it seems to me, stems from an inadequate ontology of existence. If the existence of universals is our initial question, then surely we should get clear what is meant by 'existence'. This is, in fact, one of the oldest problems in ontology. It will not simply disappear when a new definition of 'existence' is posited. Within Hart's own approach there are at least three angles from which the question of existence could be pursued further. The first, and by far the most radical, would be to avoid all talk of existence and reality. From this angle the world and its order would be neither existent nor non-existent, neither real nor unreal. Order would 'order' and world would 'world', and both would do so in irreducible correlation. Unfortunately the clarity of such an approach would be offset by its unintelligibility to most other philosophical traditions. A second angle would be to say that conditions and order do not exist in the manner of entities, objects, and things. Hart suggests this angle at one point (p. 53), but fails to explore other manners of existence. Could it be, for example, that while not existing in the manner of things, conditions exist in the manner of processes? Perhaps Hart's own analysis of time as 'the integral interrelation of conditionality and subjectivity' (p. 252) would make this second angle worth considering. In the third place, we could reexamine the reasons given for distinguishing existence and reality and for restricting 'existence' to whatever is subject to conditions. Since this third angle takes us into the crux of Hart's ontology, let me discuss it at greater length in a separate section.

3. The Reality of Nomic Conditions

Hart describes 'existence' as 'a basic term which indicates the reality of whatever is subject to conditions. Rules obtain, while what is subject to rules . . . exists' (Glossary, p. 444). By 'conditions' Hart means nomic conditions: rules, laws, or standards that obtain universally and necessarily for what exists. The irreducible correlate of nomic conditions is subjective existence. 'Subjective existence' includes everything that exists; according to Hart, nothing can exist except in subjection of nomic conditions. Thus the term 'subjective existence' is redundant: by definition all existence is subjective – subject to nomic conditions – and no subjectivity is non-existent.

The intent of these definitions seems to be to avoid subsuming irreducible correlates (conditionality and subjectivity) under a single category such as existence. Hart does not wish logical operations appropriate to one side of the correlation to be applied without reservation to the other side. To do this would permit the realism he wants to circumvent. It is not clear, however, that Hart's intent has been accomplished. After all, he does apply the single term 'reality' to both conditions and subjectivity, to both order and world.

Let us pursue the matter a little further. Hart's definition of existence is supposed to express the claim that conditionality and subjectivity are ir-

reducible correlates. By 'irreducible correlates' Hart means that we cannot have the one without the other, but neither one can ever be legitimately reduced to the other. In itself this formal description tells us little about the ontological status of conditions.

Fortunately Chapter 2 tells us considerably more. We learn that nomic conditions are 'real' in the sense that they 'cannot be disregarded or ignored with impunity' (p. 39). But they are unlike any existents. Against various types of realism Hart argues that nomic conditions, though real, are unlike such existents as things, states, circumstances, or events as well as words, sentences, concepts, and propositions. At the same time Hart insists against nominalists that nomic conditions are known and experienced, and that semantic and conceptual levels of existence are the conduits of such knowledge and experience. To be known and experienced, however, nomic conditions must be present to us in the existences for which they hold. Otherwise they would remain inaccessible. Their reality, which is unlike subjective or existent reality, but which is known and experienced, is the reality of holding universally and without exception for the kinds of existents that nomic conditions make possible. To use Hart's examples, for every frog or for every traffic pattern there is a nomic condition or set of nomic conditions prescribing what it takes for anything to be a frog or to be a traffic pattern of that kind. Through conceptual analysis of frogs and other existents we learn what is required – what conditions must be met – for these existents to be what they are to be.

Hart's account of nomic conditions is fascinating; by pointing out problems I do not mean to suggest otherwise. Still I cannot help continuing to wonder about the 'reality' of nomic conditions. Hart tells us that the term 'reality' simply 'indicates that whatever we name as real must be accepted by us on its own terms' (Glossary, p. 452). What would it mean for us to accept nomic conditions on their own terms? Among the statements Hart makes about nomic conditions are several that are difficult to understand without further explanation or argument. These statements can be boiled down to an epistemological question, a question in the very area for which Hart's ontology seems designed. The question is whether and in what sense nomic conditions can be known to be real.

This question arises at three levels in Chapter 2. In the first place we must find a way to bridge the gap between real conditions and existents, which the conditions are unlike. It would seem that the knowable and the known tend to coincide with existence. We know about frogs and traffic patterns, for example. But how do we move from such knowledge to knowledge of the real nomic conditions holding for frogs and traffic patterns? Even if we suppose that we are talking about two distinct kinds of knowledge, the question remains as to how these kinds are connected. Hart recognizes this problem and tries to address it by distinguishing 'conditions-1' (nomic conditions) and 'conditions-2' (patterns and structures displayed by existents and evidencing the fulfilment of nomic conditions).³ The distinction is not entirely clear, however, nor is the manner in which conditions-1 become known in conditions-2. Hart's account seems open to the objection that the existence of conditions-2 renders superfluous the postulated reality of nomic conditions.⁴ In addition, the displaying of regularity might not in itself provide epistemic access to *regulae*.

Epistemological questions arise at a second level as well. Hart wishes to say that nomic conditions are known and experienced in their reality. An important epistemological question at this point is how such knowledge and experience are possible, a question not unlike the guiding concern of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy. In Hartian language the question would read, what real nomic conditions make possible knowledge of real nomic conditions. The gist of Hart's answer is that such knowledge is made possible by the nomic conditions holding for conceptual and semantic 'experience'. Words and sentences, especially assertions, refer to concepts and propositions, in which nomic conditions are grasped. According to Hart, 'the rules for analysis, its nomic conditions, if met in the actual analysis of x , are destined to lead to the nomic conditions obtaining for x ' (p. 53). This answer makes two major claims: (1) that nomic conditions can be conceptually grasped and semantically asserted; (2) that such conceiving and asserting are made possible by the conditions holding for conceptualization and assertion. Taken together the two claims amount to a version of a familiar epistemological circle: to know that nomic conditions can be conceptually grasped, we need to know that nomic conditions make such conceptualizing possible; but to know that nomic conditions make such conceptualizing possible, we need to have a conceptual grasp of nomic conditions. The circle is not vicious, however, and for the most part Chapter 2 enters and leaves the circle gracefully.

The price for this movement through the circle is to give logic a privileged position among the academic disciplines. For only in logic, according to Hart, does the analysis of certain conditions-2 (such as the rules of inference) lead to a conceptual grasp of those nomic conditions (logical conditions) that make possible any and every conceptual grasp of any and every nomic condition. Although privileging logic in this manner does justice to a large part of the philosophical tradition, I am not sure it does justice to the deepest impulses for Hart's challenge to the tradition. To find out we must await Hart's volume on epistemology, for *Understanding Our World* contains no detailed discussion of logic. The book has even less to say about semantics, semiotics, and linguistics, even though Hart's comments on semantic access to nomic conditions seem to make these disciplines nearly as crucial as logic.

To my mind the privileging of logic becomes most problematic when Hart makes a third claim. This claim is formulated somewhat vaguely. At one point Hart writes that nomic conditions 'are explicitly known only as a result of our conceptual activity' (p. 55). Later he says that 'one cannot focus attention on conditions or principles except by way of words and concepts' (p. 67). The terms 'explicitly' and 'focus attention on' are not delimited further. Perhaps Hart is claiming no more than that we cannot have *conceptual* knowledge of nomic conditions except by way of conceptual activities and results. If so, then his claim would be unproblematic but tautologous.

I take it that Hart's claim is stronger, namely that conceptualizing and assertion are the only ways in which we can know nomic conditions. This claim, or one like it, would be problematic. If nomic conditions are real in the sense that they obtain for whatever they make possible, then why would there be no other ways of knowing nomic conditions? Why, for example,

could we not imagine nomic conditions, and in this imagining come to know them? Is not such imagining of nomic conditions an essential feature of artistic activity as well as of the hypothetical element in scholarship? Or, to use other examples, why could we not sense and feel nomic conditions and in our sensing and feeling come to know them? Why could we not give shape to nomic conditions, and in this formative activity come to know them? I consider these important questions for the simple reason that nomic conditions would hardly seem 'real' if they could not be experienced in preconceptual and presemantic ways. If they were experienced in these ways, then there would be less need to call our experience of them 'indirect' and less compulsion to argue that conceptual activity can 'count as experience' (p. 67). In addition, without, some such modification, Hart's approach threatens to intellectualize the 'reality' of nomic conditions in a manner not unlike that of Plato.

The third level of epistemological questioning pertains to the origin of nomic conditions. Knowledge of their origin would seem to be significant for determining whether and in what sense nomic conditions can be known to be real. Because this topic has peculiar problems attached to it, I shall treat it in a separate section.

4. The Origin of Nomic Conditions

With respect to nomic conditions, Hart wonders whether the following questions are legitimate or meaningful: 'How are we to conceive of the origin of . . . conditional order? . . . How are the limits of possibility made possible? Is there a limit to order?' (p. 56). He suggests these are ambiguous questions. If we are asking whether nomic conditions are conditioned, then we seem to have the 'contradictory' assumption that nomic conditions, which can never be subjective or existent, are somehow 'subject to other conditions' (p. 57). If we are asking about the origin of nomic conditions, then we are asking a different question, one which is not legitimately or appropriately pursued in philosophy (p. 71). Whatever we say about the origin of nomic conditions is so dependent on our 'deep-seated commitments' that a philosophical discussion of the origin cannot be simply philosophical. Hart himself wishes to say no more at this point than 'that the positing of the reality of a world order . . . is a reasonable theoretical move.' With respect to origin, the order of our world cannot be explained philosophically, even though 'in our culture, if we cannot explain it, we will not be inclined to accept it' (p. 71). As Hart himself recognizes, by avoiding a philosophical discussion of the origin, his position on nomic conditions risks being unacceptable, no matter how reasonable it might be (see n. 58 and 59, p. 388).

I for one find Hart's position difficult to accept. It seems to endorse truncated philosophy, given the centrality of the question of origins in traditional ontology and epistemology. If explanation were no more than the subsumption of an explanandum under nomic statements à la Carl Hempel, then indeed the reality of nomic conditions could not be explained with respect to their origin. Hempel's account is one of natural scientific explanation, however, and even in philosophy of science his ac-

count is not without plausible rivals. But why would a *philosophical* explanation have to take a deductive-nomological form? To explain need mean no more than to give a credible philosophical account. Surely this is not too much to expect or to receive from an integral ontology.

Our epistemological concern now is all the greater. For with no account of the origin of nomic conditions we are even more perplexed about knowing them to be real. To say they are there without saying how they got there is little more than a deictic gesture. Such a move seems to assume that the reality of nomic conditions can be known apart from knowledge of their origin. Admittedly there is a sense in which we can know things without knowing their origins. We can know a great deal about frogs, for example, without knowing where they came from and how they came into existence. But few biologists have been satisfied with such knowledge. Similarly few philosophers would be satisfied with positing the reality of nomic conditions without having philosophical knowledge about their origins.

As Hart's own questions indicate, two issues merit further attention. The first issue has to do with relationships among nomic conditions. Even if we accept Hart's thesis of an irreducible correlation between conditionality and subjectivity, we may wonder whether there is any order of priority among nomic conditions. Hart postulates that each condition holds universally and necessarily for the existents it makes possible. But this postulate need not entail that the holding of each condition is equivalent to the holding of every other condition. Thus, for example, the conditions holding for frogs would seem to be less extensive than the conditions holding for all animals. Without suggesting that certain conditions limit other conditions, we can still suppose that some conditions hold less extensively than do others, and that these others might be more original. Some such supposition seems to operate in the natural sciences, from which Hart derives evidence for the reality of nomic conditions. A similar supposition seems implied by distinctions among various dimensions of the horizon of human experience in Volume II of Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. To suppose that conditions hold more or less extensively would allow us to refine our picture of the universality with which, according to Hart, every condition obtains. We might also discover the legitimacy of asking whether nomic conditions are limited and how they are made possible.

A second issue worth further pursuit pertains to the real origin of nomic conditions. The traditional problem of universals revolved around the question of their origin or location. Thus we can hardly address this problem without discussing the question of origins. Despite Hart's hesitancy to discuss origins, let me suggest that as soon as philosophers know something about nomic conditions they already know something about the origin of nomic conditions. For example, if we know that nomic conditions are not subjective, then we already know that their origin can hardly be subjective. If nomic conditions are thought never to hold for themselves, then their origin can hardly be thought to be a nomic condition. If nomic conditions are real but not existent, then their origin might be real but probably will not be existent. If the origin of nomic conditions is other than those conditions, then the origin is probably unconditioned. And if the conditions in question are best characterized as being 'nomic', then we may expect them to originate in a reality that can best be conceived along the lines of legal authority.

No doubt such conclusions would have to be kept tentative, be elaborated in dialogue with other ontologies, and be checked against our own 'deepseated commitments'. But there seems to be little reason to cut off philosophical analysis at the point of asking about origins. If we know something about the limits, then we know something about what is beyond them, including their origin. Conversely, if our philosophy cannot say anything about the origin of nomic conditions, then it is questionable whether our philosophy is entitled to say much about nomic conditions. At least the refusal to talk philosophically about the origin casts doubt on the supposed reality of nomic conditions, making us wonder how we can know them to be real.

5. Philosophy and God

Although Chapter 2 refuses to account for the origin of nomic conditions, subsequent chapters employ the concept of origin at crucial points. Chapter 4, for example, says that the modal order displays a reference to the 'origin of all that is relative'. This origin is the 'ultimate unity' of actors and actions (pp. 164-168). Chapter 7 explains the 'exceptional place of humanity' in terms of the functional openness of human experience to the 'origin and destiny of the universe' (pp. 276-280). Later in the same chapter the dualism of body and soul is contrasted with Hart's assumption of 'the fundamental unity of the world in its origin and in its subjection to an order of the same origin' (pp. 312-318). Detailed discussion of origins is reserved, however, for the 'prescientific' Appendix and for a transition (pp. 318-324) to the Appendix. When we finally learn what Hart understands about the origin, we also learn that he considers the presentation of this understanding to be something other than philosophy properly so called.

In other words, Hart does discuss the origin, which he equates with the God of Christianity, but he considers his discussion nonphilosophical. His approach raises two sets of issues, one about the status of philosophy, and the other about the role of 'ultimate assumptions' in philosophy. The issues are indicated by the two lines of argument attached to Hart's insistence on nonphilosophical talk about the origin. The first line has to do with limits to philosophical discourse. The second line has to do with connections between philosophy and commitment. I shall explore the first line of argument first and save the second line for a separate, concluding section. In both sections the question of origins will serve as a test case for Hart's conception of philosophy.

Hart is aware that his opposition to philosophizing about God is not without problems:

Theorizing without commitment is impossible, but so is a theory of the ultimate ground of one's commitment. For this reason I have saved some of my final declarations about important problems for the Appendix . . .

Although we need to be committed in philosophy, we cannot philosophically analyze the ultimate ground of our commitment. How can we resolve this problem? (pp. 318-319).

The first approach to a solution is Hart's explanation why God, like the content of other ultimate assumptions, cannot be 'philosophically

analyzed'. The explanation can be reduced to three claims (pp. 319-320). (1) Because 'the structure of analysis is bound by the order of the world', therefore 'it is only possible to analyze whatever is within those bounds'. (2) God could be analyzed philosophically only if God were subject to the order of the world, at least subject to logical order. (3) As 'the origin of order', God is not subject to any order.

Restating the first claim, we can say that philosophy, being subject to nomic conditions, cannot analyze their origin. But why would the subjectivity of philosophy preclude philosophical analysis of the origin? This subjectivity does not prevent philosophy from grasping nomic conditions; why should it prevent the grasping of origins?⁵ In critique of Kant, Hegel has made the important point that for thought a limit is simultaneously an opening beyond itself.⁶ Applying Hegel's insight to the question of God as origin, we could propose that being 'bound by the order of the world' need not exclude analysis from grasping God. Rather, when grasping God, analysis is restricted to doing so in subjection to the order of analysis. In fact following other lines similar to Hart's might force us to conclude that God's presence cannot be sensed, and God's faithfulness cannot be trusted. Sensing and trusting are no less 'bound by order' than analysis. The conclusion of such lines of argument would seem to be agnosticism: human knowledge, being bound by order, cannot in any way know whatever lies beyond the bounds, and therefore we cannot have knowledge of God. This I take to be the gist of Immanuel Kant's position when he said our idea of God cannot be a concept.

Since Hart's own commitment militates against agnosticism, let us see whether his second and third claims lay this problem to rest. Kant wished to allow for thinking about God even though we cannot have knowledge of God. Hart's next claims seem to deny that we can philosophize about God even though we can have knowledge of God. The crux of these claims is the thesis that God is not subject to logical laws. The motivation for Hart's thesis seems to be criticism and avoidance of a certain type of speculation about God: 'If we allow for subjection of God to logical rules, then theology and philosophy will autonomously decide on the nature of God, guided by arbitrary, philosophical, and logical prejudices' (p. 323). One could, of course, share Hart's concern without assuming his thesis to be necessary or effective for avoiding arbitrary speculation. But to understand the thesis we shall need to remember its motivation.

The question of God's subjection to logical laws, like Hart's answer, is too complex to receive its due in this article.⁷ Let me simply summarize what I take to be Hart's position and point out some problems. Hart's position can be reconstructed as follows (pp. 320-322): (1) Valid theoretical assertions and concepts concerning God would require that God be subject to rules of inference, have a nature, and be of some kind. (2) For God to be so subject etc., God would have to be subject to logical laws. (3) As the Creator of logical (and all other) laws, God cannot be subject to them. (4) Since God cannot be subject to logical laws, there can be no valid theoretical assertions and concepts concerning God. (5) As a theoretical pursuit, philosophy cannot legitimately be about God.

To the obvious objection that this position is itself a philosophy about God, Hart's apparent response is that he has simply given philosophical ex-

pression to contextualized, nontheoretical discourse about God, discourse that is tied to God's self-revelation within the order of creation:

So we can experience God concretely and contextually, but when we speak or think generally and out of context we lose the *right* to speak and think. So this makes a theory of God, as a description of the structures which define God, impossible and any statements here become theoretically invalid. My remarks are not simply theory, however, but a means of drawing out the meaning of some beliefs I confess to hold . . . (p. 322).

This response is less convincing than it is illustrative of three problems with Hart's position. Let us see what they are.

In the first place, it is unclear whether all theories about God are illegitimate, or whether merely certain types of theories, those pursued in abstraction and out of context, are invalid or tend to become invalid. It could be that in criticizing a certain type of speculation Hart has hastily shut the door on all theories about God, except his own theoretical criticism. If so, then the onus is on his theoretical criticism to show either its nontheoretical character or its concrete, contextual origins. Whether this is shown in the Appendix I will let other readers decide.

In the second place, within Hart's system there is little reason to think that what he says about theoretical assertions would not apply with equal force to nontheoretical assertions. If all assertions are subject to rules of inference and express concepts and propositions about 'natures' and 'kinds', then how can Hart allow for the validity of any assertions about God? Perhaps Hart's reply is that nontheoretical assertions about God are actually about God's 'creatiomorphic revelation' but not about God as such (p. 321). But then why could there not be valid theoretical assertions about such revelation? Furthermore, would not this restriction argue for a mild agnosticism in the area of assertions, concepts, and propositions; i.e. we cannot validly think about God but only about God's self-revelation?

The third problem with Hart's position is by far the most complex. In arguing against theories about God, Hart assumes the legitimacy of his ontology of conditionality and analysis. Indeed, just as, according to Hart, Wolterstorff's book *On Universals* was written to argue a position on the Creator/creature distinction,⁸ much of *Understanding Our World* might have been written to argue a different position. Hart's discussion of God is heavily dependent on Chapters 1 and 2. To challenge this discussion is to disagree with some conclusions reached in those earlier chapters. The specific focus of disagreement will be whether any reality must be subject to logical laws in order to be the topic of valid theories. The disagreement will not be fruitful, however, unless we are clear about the meaning of 'being subject to logical laws'. On this matter Hart's discussion about God has surprisingly little to say.

From his earlier chapters we may infer that to be subject to logical laws is to exist in correlation with the nomic conditions governing the logical possibilities for whatever is so subject. What types of existences would Hart consider subject to logical nomic conditions? Concepts, propositions, and arguments, undoubtedly, as well as such activities as conceiving and arguing would be subject to logical conditions. But would all the realities about which we think have to be subject to logical laws? Must frogs, for example,

be subject to logical laws? How about the conditions that make possible frog-like existence? Are they subject to logical laws? I do not see how Hart could answer yes without endorsing the logicism he opposes. I do not think he wants to say that any and every existence or that any and every nomic condition is made possible by logical laws. Nor do I believe he wants to claim that we can think about existences and their nomic conditions only because logical laws make them logically possible. If I am correct, then why would God have to be subject to logical laws in order for us to have valid theories about God? The minimum to which Hart's ontology obligates him is that valid theories about God require concepts, propositions, arguments, etc. that are subject to logical laws. This would be a noncontroversial stance.

Perhaps Hart intended to argue that valid theories about God would require that God be subject to some nomic conditions. This argument would have agreed with his view that conceptualization is the conditioned grasping of nomic conditions. Indeed, this argument is implied by his claim that God has no nature and is not of any kind. Let us assume that the argument 'God cannot be subject to logical laws' really means 'God cannot be subject to any nomic conditions such as are grasped conceptually'. From here we have at least three options. Either we can agree, and then ask Hart to be consistent by excluding the possibility of any valid conceptualizing of God, whether theoretical or not. Or we can agree, but suggest the fallaciousness of any account of conceptualization that precludes valid conceptualizing of God. Or we can disagree, and ask for an account of God that does not force untenable conclusions about the validity of conceptualizing God. In any case, the position advanced at the end of Chapter 7 remains hard to accept in its present form. The purported limits of philosophy with respect to God seem to require further reflection.

6. Commitment and Ontology

We have examined the first line of argument for Hart's insistence on the nonphilosophical character of his talk about God. This line is that philosophical theories about God cannot be valid. The second line concerns the role of 'ultimate assumptions' in philosophy. Hart explains that 'the ultimate assumptions of a theory do not belong to the theory in the sense that they can be theoretically explained and accounted for. They are the foundation for one's analysis and they cannot themselves be analytically justified' (p. 319). Implied by this explanation is an account of connections between commitment and philosophy. Noting Hart's desire for integrality and his indebtedness to Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique, we may suppose that the book stands or falls with this account, even though it is relegated to the Appendix. Rather than analyzing everything in Hart's account, I will again use the question of origins as a test case for his position.

The Appendix connects commitment and philosophy primarily by way of the 'ultimate categories' of an ontology and the 'ultimate assumptions' of an ontologist's 'ultimate commitment' (pp. 325-334). The categories are implied by the ultimate assumptions and 'directly related to' them; the as-

sumptions are reflected by the ultimate categories (pp. 333, 360). Ultimate categories such as 'order' and 'world' are basic and fundamentally irreducible positions in philosophy. Ultimate assumptions such as 'God's sovereignty' are fundamental, nonphilosophical beliefs of commitment. Such assumptions belong to our 'ultimate commitment to the ultimate'. They are 'constitutive' of that commitment, and they provide final grounds for our accepting or rejecting other beliefs (p. 329). Because ultimate assumptions are so fundamental, they cannot be rationally 'explained' or 'justified'; they are held in the trust of an ultimate commitment, and they are already assumed in any discussion of ultimate assumptions. Nevertheless philosophers, especially ontologists, ought to be articulate and open about their ultimate assumptions. Such articulateness and openness are attempted in the Appendix. Hart is presenting his ultimate assumptions not *as* philosophy but *for* philosophy: he is presenting them in order to display connections between his ultimate assumptions and his ultimate categories.

There can be no mistaking the ring of integrity in Hart's presentation. Philosophers, however, being the perennial questioners they are, will wonder about his account of ultimate assumptions in philosophy. At least four questions come to mind. (1) Why ought ultimate assumptions to be presented by philosophers? (2) May such presentations be anything other than philosophical? (3) Are ultimate assumptions as ultimate as Hart suggests? (4) Is ultimate commitment the only nonphilosophical source of ultimate categories? Before examining one of Hart's ultimate assumptions, let's consider each of these questions.

The first question is important for the philosophical reception of *Understanding Our World*. Unless other philosophers learn why any philosopher ought to present ultimate assumptions, it will be easy for them to ignore Hart's presentation as a mere idiosyncrasy. Indeed, they would be justified in so doing. The reason for this is that there is little in the recent tradition of philosophical self-reflection to suggest that ultimate assumptions are as fundamental to philosophy as Hart claims with respect to his own philosophy. When inserting his ontology into this tradition, Hart is obliged to show that the structure of assumptions and categories in his philosophy is not peculiar to this philosophy. Despite a few comments along these lines (pp. xix-xxi, 328, 331-332), Hart does not go far beyond simply depicting the structure of his own position. We receive no sustained argument similar to Dooyeweerd's persistent critique of the 'pretended autonomy' of theoretical thought. Though not without its own problems, Dooyeweerd's approach had the merit of demanding philosophical attention for the purported religious conditions of any philosophy. This demand threatens to become a personal confession in the Appendix of *Understanding Our World*.

It will not be surprising, then, if other philosophers wonder about the character of this Appendix. Hart tells us his presentation of ultimate assumptions is not a meditation or sermon, but 'neither is it philosophy' (p. 334). It is not theology either. What character does his presentation have? Perhaps we may say it has the character of 'worldview' or 'faith talk' (cp. pp. xvii-xviii). But this discourse is unusual compared to most worldview talk. Hart's presentation is not embedded in the making of concrete decisions, adopting specific policies or strategies, or explaining and defend-

ing such decisions, policies, or strategies. Instead the presentation occurs in abstraction from any context other than that of accounting for ultimate philosophical categories. In addition the presentation is plainly systematic, even though its tone is somewhat informal. Do not these characteristics suggest that we are reading a product of considerable scholarship? And can this product be anything other than philosophical?

Hart considers these pages prephilosophical and calls them non-philosophical. His apparent reason for calling them nonphilosophical is to avoid the impression that ultimate assumptions are merely philosophical. This is an important point, one which many other philosophers would accept. But the extraphilosophical character of ultimate assumptions need not exclude legitimate philosophical discourse about them. What we read is discourse by a philosopher in a philosophical book about ultimate assumptions supposedly having profound philosophical implications. Is not such discourse philosophical? May this sort of discourse be anything other than philosophical? These are not idle questions of classification. Their answers would tell us what sorts of expectations are appropriate to such discourse on ultimate assumptions. May we have philosophical reservations and objections? May we require philosophical explanations and arguments with other philosophical positions? Or must we simply accept the presentation as a report on the worldview of one person who, among other things, is a philosopher?

The third question raised earlier is whether ultimate assumptions are as ultimate as Hart suggests. The 'ultimacy' of ultimate assumptions refers to at least four overlapping characteristics: (1) being the most broadly fundamental of all beliefs; (2) being accepted 'not on grounds but as ground' (Glossary, p. 455) – because of the way in which they support our experience; (3) providing final grounds for justifiable beliefs; (4) being directed to 'the ultimate', to whatever is given 'ultimate allegiance'. The first characteristic would make ultimate assumptions similar to Dooyeweerd's three 'transcendental ideas'.⁹ The fourth characteristic would make them similar to Dooyeweerd's 'religious ground motives'. Taken together the second and third characteristics could allow ultimate assumptions to be viewed as basic 'control beliefs' in Wolterstorff's sense of the term.¹⁰ Whether all four characteristics can be intelligibly ascribed to the same type of belief would be worth further investigation.

In any case I wish to ask how ultimate these ultimate assumptions are. There are two reasons for asking. In the first place, it is not initially clear what 'being directed to the ultimate' has to do with the supposedly foundational role of these assumptions within experience and within a network of beliefs. For example, many Christians whose allegiance is to God would not count their belief in God as foundational among their scholarly beliefs. Presumably this situation is the real burden of Hart's talk about ultimate assumptions. He, for one, finds belief in God to be foundational for his philosophy. But do others? Ought they? Must they? These questions are not clarified by assuming that beliefs directed to 'the ultimate' are equivalent to foundational beliefs.

In the second place, I wonder how any belief can be ultimate. If 'the ultimate' is indeed ultimate, then how can any human belief be ultimate? I realize, of course, that Hart is describing certain beliefs with a view to their

role in human experience. I also think, however, that he does not wish to ascribe ultimacy to any part of human experience. Is not some such ascription implied by his conception of ultimate assumptions? For example, Hart says an ultimate assumption is 'much more an accepted belief than an understood fact'. It is accepted not with reference to other things we know but 'because of our commitment', through which the ultimate becomes known (pp. 331-332). Do not such formulations ascribe to human assumptions and human commitment an ultimacy bordering on the irrational? To accept a belief *because* of our commitment would seem to render the belief impervious not only to interhuman discourse but also to ultimate presence.

These potential problems might be compounded by Hart's manner of connecting ultimate commitment and ultimate ontological categories. Without stating it in so many words, Hart leaves the distinct impression that, via ultimate assumptions, ultimate commitment is the only source of his ultimate categories, and perhaps of any ultimate categories. If this is in fact his position, then I must express misgivings. The position would seem not only inaccurate but also detrimental to Hart's own project.

The concern about inaccuracy arises from my hypothesis that philosophical propositions, including 'ultimate categories', seldom have a single source. It could be that ultimate categories are 'implied' by the assumptions of ultimate commitment. But why would ultimate assumptions be the only source of such categories or even the most pervasive or determinative of various sources? Hart's assumption seems to be that, because commitment is a 'terminal level' of human functioning and is characterized by 'ultimate acceptance of what is ultimate' (pp. 182-183), ultimate categories must be derived from ultimate assumptions of commitment. Is this in fact the case? Let us imagine, for example, a philosopher who is a black American woman with a working-class background. Though she is a Christian just as Hart is, might not her ultimate categories turn out to be quite different from Hart's? Must these differences be attributable to differences in ultimate commitment, such as those between a Calvinist emphasis on God's sovereignty and a Lutheran emphasis on God's liberating love?¹¹ Might they not be more plausibly assigned to differences in class consciousness, gender roles, and racial and national experience? If a belief in God's sovereignty seemed to help legitimate an oppressive social order, might not members of an oppressed minority be interested in emphasizing some other belief about God? Would such an interest simply be the outcome of an ultimate commitment? Furthermore, might not such an interest itself help generate ultimate categories that are quite different from Hart's? The point of this example is to suggest that besides ultimate assumptions many other elements of experience 'imply' ultimate categories and are 'reflected' by them. Perhaps Hart would reply that these elements play such a role only to the extent that they enter ultimate assumptions or function as ultimate assumptions. I do not think this is so, nor do I see why this must be so.

Indeed, one of my misgivings is that Hart's emphasis on the assumptions of ultimate commitment might be detrimental to his own project. On the one hand it might prevent his project from establishing contact with kindred criticisms of supposedly autonomous rationality, criticisms not primarily motivated by religious concerns. I have in mind the work of Thomas

Kuhn, Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and others. On the other hand Hart's emphasis might force him to load so much philosophy into his stated assumptions of commitment that few Christians can accept these as statements of authentic Christian commitment. The consequence of overloading the ultimate assumptions might be that the ultimate categories come to seem unacceptable to persons of common commitment. The categories could then be easily rejected for nonphilosophical reasons, even when the rejection is couched in philosophical language.

Hart's discussion of 'the sovereign God' (pp. 335-338) and 'the radical distinction' (pp. 360-363) may serve to test the legitimacy of my questions about ultimate assumptions in philosophy. The sovereign God is one of Hart's ultimate assumptions, one of his fundamental, nonphilosophical beliefs of commitment. In his purportedly nonphilosophical descriptions of this ultimate assumption, Hart makes a number of claims about God. God is the Creator, origin, and supreme ruler of creation. God transcends creation but is not absolute. God is not arbitrary but is faithful to 'self, Word, and work' (p. 336). God is the only source of true knowledge about God and creation. God makes such knowledge available through God's Word, of which God is 'origin, speaker, and author' (p. 336). This Word is the way in which the creation is ordered by God. Because God is not subject to the order of creation, to which human beings are subject, God is beyond our control and grasp. God sets limits and bounds to everything, but no laws hold coeternally with God, not even the laws of logic. 'A belief in such coeternal laws is in conflict with belief in God's sovereignty' (p. 338).

No doubt many Christians will recognize their own beliefs in one or another of Hart's claims. At the same time some of them might hesitate about an emphasis on transcendence rather than immanence. Others might be puzzled about God as sole source of true knowledge. Objections could be lodged against the identification of God's Word with creation's order. And exception could be taken to a view of sovereignty that equates it with there being nothing outside of God's control and nothing that controls God.¹²

It seems to me that these Christians would be entitled to disagree and to frame their disagreements in philosophical language. My reason for saying this is that the notion of God's sovereignty as presented by Hart is not simply a nonphilosophical belief. It is, as a matter of fact, a stance on one of the most troublesome sets of issues in philosophy of religion and Christian theology. The language Hart uses is not simply the language of faith or worldview. 'Origin', 'transcendence', 'Word as order' are philosophical terms with philosophical and theological histories. Furthermore, Hart has presented the notion of God's sovereignty in such a way that it makes one of his most important and contentious philosophical points, namely that God's sovereignty precludes God's being subject to logical order. If my assessment is correct, then it does indeed seem legitimate to ask whether a philosopher's presentation of ultimate assumptions may be or can be anything other than philosophical. At least we may suppose that most ultimate assumptions held by a philosopher will be informed to a significant degree by that philosopher's ontology. On this supposition we may ask that a belief such as one about God's sovereignty be presented in dialogue with other

philosophical positions. Such a presentation could hardly avoid being philosophical.

The ultimate ontological category implied by the ultimate assumption of God's sovereignty, according to Hart, is what he calls 'the radical distinction' (pp. 360-363). In conjunction with other ultimate assumptions about 'the covenant relation between Creator and creation through Word and Spirit' (p. 360), God's sovereignty implies a radical distinction among origin, order, and world. This is 'the ultimate distinction'. It is not a normal categorial distinction 'since the realities named are not susceptible to normal definition or conceptualization' (Glossary, p. 452). Hart claims that on purely philosophical grounds we could just as well hold that the world is its own origin or that the world is either not ordered or not distinct from its order. But on the basis of his ultimate assumptions he considers these three realities irreducibly distinct but not discontinuous. Their continuity is ensured by the claim that the world's origin is related to the world through an order originating in the same origin but holding for the world. Other than these three realities there is nothing else that is real or knowable. These positions, Hart tells us, are 'founded on a prior belief rooted in commitment to God the Creator, God's Word and Spirit, and God's creation' (p. 361).

If Hart were simply telling us how he connects some of his personal assumptions with some of his ontological categories, there would be few philosophical reasons to object, even if one held different positions. The problem is that we would also have few philosophical reasons to take Hart's positions seriously. In light of this problem, I must assume that Hart is not simply making a personal statement but is commending an ontological position as one worth our consideration. I must also assume he is recommending that other Christian philosophers consider whether 'the radical distinction' might not be a good way or even a preferable way to link our ontologies with certain tenets of the Christian faith.

I find many attractive features to Hart's radical distinction. This fact is hardly surprising, given my own training in cosmological philosophy with Hart at the Institute for Christian Studies. My difficulty, which others will no doubt share, is that other Christian philosophers of integrity over centuries of reflection have not found their commitments leading them to this radical distinction. I need mention no more than various Christian realists who distinguish Creator and creature without positing a mediating order. Why have their commitments not led them to the radical distinction? It will not do simply to attribute the disagreement to differences in philosophical traditions, although these differences are significant. Differences in tradition will not help us decide which positions are more or less correct or more or less commendable with respect to Christian faith. Are we simply to check our own commitments to decide which positions to prefer? How are debates at this crucial level of ontology to be waged and adjudicated?

Concerns along these lines lead me to think we may legitimately ask about the ultimacy of ultimate assumptions and about nonphilosophical sources of ultimate categories. It would seem the better part of wisdom and a requirement of contemporary philosophical self-reflection to stress the relativity of our ultimate assumptions and the multiplicity of sources for

ultimate ontological categories. This is said not to endorse relativistic eclecticism but to encourage constructive dialogue. Hart himself wishes such dialogue. The great merit of *Understanding Our World* is that, by laying its confessional cards on the table, it invites other philosophies to do the same. Not only is this an important move, but also Hart's entire ontological strategy is one that deserves sustained scrutiny and discussion.

NOTES

¹ Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984). The book is part of the Christian Studies Today series co-published by University Press of America and the Institute for Christian Studies. References will appear in parentheses in the text.

² The theme of rationality and commitment was already explored in Hart's doctoral dissertation, *Communal Certainty and Authorized Truth: An Examination of John Dewey's Philosophy of Verification* (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1966). Among his numerous more recent writings on the topic are 'Critical Reflections on Wolterstorff's *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*', mimeograph (Institute for Christian Studies, 1980); 'The Impasse of Rationality Today', in *Wetenschap, Wijsheid, Filosoferen*, ed. P. Blokhuis (Assen: Van Gorkum, 1981); and 'The Articulation of Belief: A Link between Rationality and Commitment', in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. H. Hart, J. van der Hoeven, and N. Wolterstorff (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

³ Hart's distinction between conditions-1 and conditions-2 may be seen as a refinement of the distinction between 'structures - for' and 'structure - of' creation, a distinction presented in two mimeographed papers by James H. Olthius at Toronto's Institute for Christian Studies in 1970. The papers are titled 'The Reality of Social Structures' and 'The Word of God and Science'.

⁴ For clues to a plausible reply to this objection, see *Understanding Our World*, p. 365.

⁵ In n. 53 on p. 422, Hart seems to suggest that even nomic conditions are 'beyond the grasp of rationality'. If this is indeed his suggestion, it would seem inconsistent with the analysis of nomic conditions in Chapter 2.

⁶ Compare the comments on Hegel's critique of Kant in Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften* 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 374-377; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), pp. 381-384.

⁷ The exchange between Hart and Wolterstorff about Creator and creature is instructive in this connection. See Hendrik Hart, 'On the Distinction between Creator and Creature', *Philosophia Reformata* 44 (1979): 183-193, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Once Again, Creator/Creature', *Philosophia Reformata* 46 (1981): 60-67.

⁸ Hart, 'On the Distinction between Creator and Creature', p. 183.

⁹ An illuminating analysis of the function of 'transcendental ideas' in Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique can be found in Jong Doo Kim, 'Wissen und Glauben bei I. Kant and H. Dooyeweerd', *Philosophia Reformata* 48 (1983) 2: 3-145.

¹⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 63-84.

¹¹ In n. 29, p. 429 we read that someone could 'initiate a philosophical theory with a central belief in the love of God' rather than God's sovereignty. The interesting question not discussed here is why someone *would* 'choose' such a significantly different ultimate assumption.

¹² An example is Wolterstorff's claim in 'Once Again, Creator/Creature', p. 62, that Hart's notion of sovereignty equates it with an unacceptable 'Plotinian idea of God as condition of everything not identical with himself'.