

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trinity or German idealism? Reconsidering the origins of Herman Bavinck's organic motif

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Abstract

This essay re-examines the origins of Herman Bavinck's organic motif. Contending with a central claim of the new interpretative paradigm in Bavinck studies, this article problematises the claim that Bavinck's organic motif does not draw on German idealism but derives solely from a classical western doctrine of the Trinity. This essay argues that the denial of Schelling's influence on Bavinck's organicism misconstrues the terms on which Bavinck forges his synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity, and cloaks the degree to which Bavinck allows philosophical constructs to determine the material content of his theology.

Keywords: Herman Bavinck; German idealism; organicism; F. W. J. Schelling; Trinity

The recent renaissance of Anglophone Bavinck studies has been aided not only by the translation of *Reformed Dogmatics* and the subsequent translation projects this initiative inspired,¹ but also by a string of doctoral theses which have appeared in close succession. More specifically, the resurgence in Anglophone Bavinck studies has been resourced by a particular insight. As even the titles of recent publications attest,² James Eglinton's study of the centrality of the organic motif and the relation in which it stands to Bavinck's doctrine of the Trinity lies behind much of the latest research. And much of the enthusiasm for the use of Bavinck in projects of theological *ressourcement* has been generated by Eglinton's central thesis: that Bavinck succeeded in combining orthodoxy and modernity in a unified, indeed, 'organic' synthesis. This new reading overturned the prevailing paradigm in Anglophone Bavinck studies which (rightly or wrongly) generated the so-called 'two-Bavincks' hypothesis, an evaluation of Bavinck as a conflicted and incoherent thinker torn between orthodoxy and

¹Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–8). Major works by Bavinck have since been translated into Chinese, German, Indonesian, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. https://sources.neocalvinism.org/bavinck/?tp=other_lang (accessed 15 June 2022).

²Ximian Xu, 'Herman Bavinck's "Yes" and Karl Barth's "No": Constructing a Dialectic-in-Organic Approach to the Theology of General Revelation', *Modern Theology* 35/2 (2019), pp. 323–51; Nathaniel Sutanto, 'Egocentricity, Organism, and Metaphysics: Sin and Renewal in Bavinck's Ethics 1', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34/2 (2021), pp. 223–40.

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modernity.³ While all of this is to be welcomed, this new interpretative paradigm rests on a significant interpretative error.

The central plank of the new interpretative paradigm is its rejection of a claim that arises in the Dutch reception of Bavinck, namely, that Bavinck's organicism derives materially from F. W. J. Schelling. The importance of this interpretative detail lies in the fact that the new interpretative paradigm precipitates a misunderstanding of the type of synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity that Bavinck strived to achieve. Thus, while it is true that Bavinck achieves his synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity largely by means of the organic motif, the organism is not simply an extrapolation of the classical western doctrine of Trinity. Mislabelling the organic motif thus occludes the ways in which the organism also threatens to disrupt the unity of Bavinck's synthesis, smoothing over very real tensions that lie at the centre of his system. In turn, this hinders the identification of the critical questions which must be posed by those who seek to make constructive use of Bavinck's thought.

Whether the organism derives from the Trinity or German idealism is thus a meaningful question. I will attempt to shed light on this by briefly summarising the train of reasoning which has emerged in the new paradigm. I shall then restate the warrant for Jan Veenhof's claim that the organic motif derives from German idealism, showing that James Eglinton's argument gains little purchase on it. By way of conclusion, I will explore the ongoing relevance that this interpretative detail holds for the projects of theological retrieval. It is worth emphasising, however, that the following analysis is not an exercise in hermeneutical nit-picking. Nor is it an attempt to disparage the gains that have been achieved in the Anglophone secondary literature which has arisen in response to Eglinton's work. Rather, it is an attempt to draw attention to where Bavinck studies, having made these considerable gains, could easily lose it way by failing to scrutinise the deeper rationale of Bavinck's theological project.

The new interpretative paradigm

The crux of the new interpretative paradigm, which heralds Bavinck as an unconflicted and coherent thinker whose synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity derives its unity from the organic motif, is the rejection of observations made by Jan Veenhof in his 1968 study, *Revelatie en inspiratie*. In the course of his analysis, Veenhof states that Bavinck's organic motif is inspired by idealist philosophy, and more specifically, by the thought of F. W. J. Schelling.⁴ The first to query Veenhof was Brian Mattson in an excursus on the origins of the organism in Bavinck in his monograph, *Restored to Our Destiny*.⁵ Noting both the prevalence and importance of the term 'organic' in Kuyper and Bavinck as well as their mutual rejection of philosophical monism, Mattson poses the following rhetorical question:

[H]ave Kuyper and Bavinck, who are ever so vigilant to publicly maintain an anti-theoretical posture to what they view as anti-Christian philosophy, unwittingly allowed that very philosophy to define so critical a motif as the 'organic'

³For a summary, see James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), pp. 27–33.

⁴Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie. De openbarings- en schriftbeschuwing van Herman Bavinck in verlijking met die van de ethische theologie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), p. 268.

⁵Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

metaphor? Or are they, perhaps, knowingly and self-consciously co-opting the language and putting it to different use? If the former is true, it seems difficult to account, on Bavinck's part, at least, for his consistent and relentless critique of Idealism, the history-of-religions school, and, indeed, to a lesser extent, even the Ethical theology. If the latter is true, then Veenhof's conclusion that 'Kuyper and Bavinck employed the concepts of "organism" and "organic" in the universal sense of the time' cannot be accurate.⁶

A particular feature of Mattson's reasoning must be observed. Mattson proceeds from the premise that it would not have been possible for Kuyper and Bavinck to reject idealism yet appropriate some of its concepts. This is made even clearer a few pages on when Mattson anticipates the objection that Bavinck may in fact have done just this. Mattson writes, 'Granted, as is universally acknowledged, it is a hallmark of [Bavinck's] theology that he always seeks the "grain of truth" in other systems; but, keeping in mind his doctrine of common grace, those "truths" are always borrowed caricatures from what he views to be a biblical system of theology, and not vice-versa.'⁷ This conviction that the line of reasoning in Bavinck's acknowledgement of contingent truths always proceeds from scripture to other systems prompts Mattson to trace out the flaw in Veenhof's analysis. Mattson regards Veenhof as having committed the genetic fallacy in tracing Bavinck's organism to Schelling, concluding that 'the organic metaphor is not primarily 19th century German philosophy at all, but rather a fresh appropriation of [the Reformed] tradition'.⁸ Thus, the line of influence is unidirectional from orthodoxy to modernity. 'In a word: Kuyper and Bavinck did not speak from their times to their tradition; they spoke from their tradition to their times.'⁹

Building on Mattson, James Eglinton argues in similar ways. Eglinton maintains that any appropriation of German idealism would compromise Bavinck's theological system: 'failure to clearly define the substance of his organic emphasis contra Hegel and Schelling would be, in context, a tacit admission that his organic concerns are rooted in an Idealist worldview'.¹⁰ Like Mattson, Eglinton also posits the Reformed tradition as the source of Bavinck's organicism.¹¹ Eglinton's argument, however, attains greater specificity. Eglinton argues not only that the organicism is a general feature of Calvinism but that Bavinck makes a unique contribution to the Reformed tradition by means of his derivation of the organism from the doctrine of the Trinity. Eglinton notes Veenhof's awareness of pre-modern organicisms and wonders why he would overlook these in favour of post-Kantian idealism in his search for the source of Bavinck's organicism: 'It is unfortunate that [Veenhof's] account places such a strong accent on the influence of Schelling, while failing to explore the relationship between Trinitarian theology and organic cosmology.'¹²

⁶Ibid., p. 47.

⁷Ibid., p. 50.

⁸Ibid., p. 48; cf. p. 51: it 'was precisely in reaction to his education that he sought – and found – unity for his thought, not in 19th century German philosophy, but in historic Reformed orthodoxy'.

⁹Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁰Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, p. 66.

¹¹Ibid., p. 76.

¹²Ibid., p. 68.

In defence of his rejection of Veenhof's account, Eglinton mounts a negative and a positive argument. Eglinton's negative argument reiterates Mattson's claim that Veenhof is guilty of the genetic fallacy, asserting that Bavinck's organism does not reflect the formal properties of the organism of German idealism.¹³ Drawing on Bavinck's own description of the organism in *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, Eglinton enumerates four cardinal features of the Bavinckian organism: i) unity in diversity, ii) the priority of the whole over the parts, iii) governing role of the idea and iv) teleology.¹⁴ These features, according to Eglinton, do not identify Bavinck's organicism with German idealism. Eglinton writes:

For Hegel, organicism also plays a central role in his absolute idealism. Both fundamental aspects of absolute idealism, its monism and idealism, ultimately presuppose organicism. Monism, in the anti-dualistic sense, is based upon the philosophical organicist thesis that the mental and physical, the ideal and real, are only different stages of development or degrees of organization of a single living force. Idealism rests upon the organicist doctrine that everything in nature and history conforms to a purpose or an end. Does Bavinck's use of the organic resemble this?¹⁵

The implied answer is 'no'. Eglinton maintains that Bavinck's organism does not resemble the organism of absolute idealism.

Eglinton's positive argument presents an essay by the Bohemian Reformed theologian Josef Bohatec (1876–1954) as proof of Mattson's conjecture that the organism originates in the Reformed tradition rather than German idealism. Published a few years after Bavinck's death,¹⁶ this article explores the presence of the idea of the organic in the thought world of Calvin. Eglinton writes:

Bohatec's article is of immediate significance: here, one has an official neo-Calvinist publication voicing the claim that its organic concern has come into their thought world directly from Calvin. This corroborates with Mattson's suggestion that Bavinck and Kuypers drew organic thinking from their Reformed heritage, rather than German Idealism. In short, Veenhof's account (and the reading of Bavinck which has followed) stands or falls in response to Bohatec's article.¹⁷

Having thus dispatched with Veenhof and Schelling, Eglinton explores the interconnectedness of the organism and the doctrine of Trinity as a repurposing of the Augustinian concept of the *vestigia trinitatis*.¹⁸ Here, Eglinton maintains that the organism proceeds from the doctrine of the Trinity and not vice versa. That is, Eglinton is wary of giving the impression that the Bavinckian organism is in some sense a piece

¹³Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 67–71.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶Josef Bohatec, 'De Organische Idee in de Gedachtenwereld van Calvijn', *Antirevolutionaire Staatkunde: Orgaan van de Dr. Abraham Kuypersstichting ter bevordering van de studie der Antirevolutionaire Beginselen*, vol. 2 (Kok: Kampen, 1926), pp. 32–45, 153–64, 362–77.

¹⁷Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, pp. 76–7.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 81–9.

of natural theology whereby Bavinck reasons from creation to Creator. On the contrary, the logical direction is from above to below and even entails a degree of metaphysical necessity. The organic shape of reality constitutes a creaturely reflection of the trinity of the Creator. In summarising this idea, Eglinton coins the memorable phrase, ‘Trinity *ad intra* leads to organism *ad extra*.’¹⁹

Eglinton’s insights into the organising function of the organic motif and the close relation in which it stands to the doctrine of the Trinity have proven to be generative. Most subsequent studies engage directly with Eglinton’s work, and importantly for our purposes, these studies reiterate Eglinton’s claims regarding the mistakenness of Veenhof’s analysis. For example, Timothy Shaun Price follows Eglinton,²⁰ as do Gayle Doornbos,²¹ Cory Brock,²² Ximian Xu²³ and Changjun Choi.²⁴ Brock’s analysis, however, marks a significant development inasmuch as Brock excises the organism from Bavinck’s appropriation of post-Kantian thought. This is important as Brock’s study is devoted to the significant debt Bavinck owes F. D. E. Schleiermacher. This acknowledgement of the influence of romantic and idealist thinkers on Bavinck and the excision of the organism from what Bavinck appropriates from them also characterises the subsequent studies of Nathaniel Sutanto and Cameron Clausing.²⁵ Sutanto’s study warrants special attention as it focuses specifically on the organic motif.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 80.

²⁰Timothy Shaun Price, ‘Pedagogy as Theological Praxis: Martin Luther and Herman Bavinck as Sources for Engagement with Classical Education and the Liberal Arts Tradition’, Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen (2013), pp. 162–3.

²¹Doornbos affirms the organism derives from Bavinck’s doctrine of the Trinity. Gayle Doornbos, ‘Herman Bavinck’s Trinitarian Theology: The Ontological, Cosmological, and Soteriological Dimensions of the Doctrine of the Trinity’, Ph.D. thesis, St Michael’s College (2019), p. 25; cf. p. 146, n. 92, where Doornbos also affirms the broader claim that Bavinck’s appropriation of modern philosophy is formal rather than material. ‘[I]t is more likely that he desired to connect contemporary insights to the tradition to show that while they may be new, they are not novel. This is even more likely the case because of how Bavinck roots his methodology for incorporating philosophical motifs and concepts in the work of the Church Fathers. In this way, Bavinck’s theology and philosophy of history can be seen as an example of his attempt to follow the Church Fathers in appreciating the truths within various strands of philosophical Idealism while rejecting its errors.’

²²‘The two-Bavincks hypothesis initially profited from a misreading of Bavinck’s organic motif ... Organicism ... is a concept derivative of God’s act as creator that identifies both the unified structure of reality (cosmos) and every individual sphere of reality (the diversity of creation) in its relation to the whole.’ Cory Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern: Herman Bavinck’s Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), pp. 36–7.

²³Xu commends Eglinton’s reading of the organism as more robust than Veenhof’s, denying any derivation from German idealism and affirming its origin in patristic and Reformed thought. Xu, ‘Theology as the *Wetenschap* of God: Herman Bavinck’s Scientific Theology for the Modern World’, Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh (2020), pp. 23–4; cf. Ximian Xu, ‘Gloriously Intertwined: A Bavinckian Account of the Single Organism of Dogmatics and Ethics’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24/1 (2022), p. 81.

²⁴‘While the two Bavincks hypothesis assumes Schelling’s Idealist philosophy, the German history of religions school, and the Dutch Ethical theologians as primary sources for Bavinck’s organic motif, it seems more reasonable that Bavinck’s organic idea is intimately related to the tradition of Reformed scholasticism.’ Changjun Choi, ‘Herman Bavinck and John Calvin on the Doctrines of the Trinity and the Image of God: A Comparison’, Ph.D. thesis, Apeldoorn Theological University (2021), p. 58.

²⁵Here, it is worth noting that Clausing does acknowledge that Bavinck derives the grammar of his organicism from Schelling. Yet Clausing maintains that Bavinck’s organism differs materially and reflects a different organicism. Cameron Clausing, ‘“A Christian Dogmatic Does Not Yet Exist”: The Influence of

Sutanto states that his study of Bavinck's theological epistemology 'prioritizes ways that Bavinck uses his sources by deploying the organic motif in line with the current readings offered by Eglinton and Mattson'.²⁶ Sutanto thus rejects Veenhof's earlier analysis and affirms Mattson and Eglinton's proposal.²⁷ Yet Sutanto is far too sensitive to the many ways in which Bavinck draws on German idealism to restate things in quite their terms. For Sutanto, the organism has trinitarian rather than idealist roots,²⁸ but Bavinck can accommodate the absolute idealism of Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906) within its parameters. Sutanto thus preserves the unidirectional flow of ideas from theology to philosophy that Mattson, Eglinton and others affirm, but subordinates elements of absolute idealism to the control of an essentially theological idea.²⁹ In this way, Sutanto argues that Bavinck is able to accommodate modern philosophical insights within a pristinely Christian worldview (*christelijke wereldbeschouwing*).

It is worth noting how this reading of the organic motif resources Sutanto's thesis. Sutanto takes pains to show that Bavinck is an eclectic thinker and that previous interpretations are mistaken which emphasised Bavinck's appropriation of Thomas Aquinas in order to claim him for a pre-modern paradigm or emphasised Bavinck's appropriation of post-Kantian thinkers in order to claim him for a modern paradigm. Bavinck draws on both and achieves synthesis by means of the organism. Yet because the organism is essentially a theological concept, Sutanto maintains that Bavinck's synthesis can brush aside the Barthian worries about introducing something alien into Christian theology.³⁰ The unity of Bavinck's synthesis, therefore, is predicated on the derivation of the organism from orthodox theology rather than modern philosophy. Yet here it is worth pausing to consider what the implications would be for this reading if Veenhof was actually right. Would Bavinck's system still constitute an unconflicted and coherent synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity if the organism does derive from German idealism?

The warrant for Veenhof's claim

Veenhof gives only a brief sketch of the reasons for which he identifies the organism with Schelling, presumably because he thought it was a fairly uncontroversial claim.³¹ But since Mattson and Eglinton's rejection of Veenhof has been largely accepted,³² it

the Nineteenth Century Historical Turn on the Theological Methodology of Herman Bavinck', Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh (2020), p. 61. It is difficult, however, to see how the passages Clausen cites from chapter 12 of Johannes Scholten's *Geschiedenis der godsdienst en wijsbegeerte* (Leiden: Engels, 1863) support his argument. Here, Scholten sets out a devastating critique of materialism, using the word 'organism' in its biological rather than philosophical sense. Scholten argues that the world is irreducible to chemistry and physics, even defending the Neo-Vitalists against the critique of Hermann Lotze (1817–81).

²⁶Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 13.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁰Bavinck's sources do not reflect a bipolar theologian oscillating between his modern self and his classical, orthodox self – but rather a unified yet eclectic thinker who sought a coherent synthesis of the two milieus on Reformed orthodox grounds.' *Ibid.*, p. 17; cf. similar statements on pp. 30, 36, 77, 142, 164.

³¹Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, pp. 264–7.

³²Wolter Huttinga might count as a possible exception. Huttinga speaks of the organism as 'connected' to the doctrine of the Trinity. He sees the doctrine of the Trinity as maintaining the upper hand, but does not explicitly affirm Mattson and Eglinton's rejection of Veenhof's analysis. Wolter Huttinga, 'Participation and Communicability: Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the Relation between God and the World', Ph.D. thesis, Kampen Theological University (2014), pp. 80–1, 193.

is necessary to set out the warrant of Veenhof's reading in greater detail. It is necessary because the new interpretative paradigm precipitates a serious misunderstanding of the type of synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity that Bavinck strived to achieve. In order to set out the warrant for Veenhof's reading, I will answer Eglinton's arguments on their own terms and draw attention to further features of Bavinck's appropriation of Schelling which do not feature in Veenhof's analysis.

First, Eglinton's negative argument reiterates the claim that Veenhof is guilty of the genetic fallacy and then asks whether Bavinck's use of the organic resembles that of German idealists like Hegel. The two elements of Eglinton's negative argument are best addressed in reverse order. The answer to Eglinton's rhetorical question can only be an emphatic 'yes'. Bavinck's organism closely adheres to Eglinton's description of the idealist organism: 'the mental and physical, the ideal and real, are only different stages of development or degrees of organization of a single living force' and 'that everything in nature and history conforms to a purpose or an end'.³³ The only point of difference is that Bavinck's source of inspiration is not Hegel but Schelling.

In his early *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling defines the organism as a self-generating and self-organising entity.³⁴ In so doing, Schelling draws upon Kant's account of *Naturzweck*, or natural purpose, as set out in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.³⁵ The decisive difference between Kant and Schelling is that Kant restricts the concept of natural purpose to the status of a regulative principle,³⁶ whereas Schelling deploys it as a constitutive principle. That is, in Kant natural purpose functions as a transcendental postulate. Schelling, however, deploys natural purpose as a bridge over the Kantian gulf between the real and the ideal.³⁷ The dynamism of Schelling's solution warrants particular attention. Schelling conceptualises natural purpose as a 'free play' of living forces, or *Lebenskraft*.³⁸ In *Von der Weltseele*, Schelling would slightly modify this concept such that living force is not merely the principle of the organic, but grounds the correspondence of the mechanical and organic.³⁹ As such, Schelling's organicism represents a subtle yet significant modification of the earlier vitalist conception of reality.⁴⁰ The organism, therefore, is both mechanical and teleological from top to bottom. Yet crucially, the organism's final cause is only indirectly realised by its efficient cause. This notion of indirect correspondence is one of the key features that distinguishes Schelling from Aristotle. Subject and object correspond but not directly. Rather, subject and object correspond because they share common origins in the absolute, for which reason they must be viewed as indirectly identical.

³³Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, p. 66.

³⁴F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature as Introduction to the Study of This Science* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), pp. 35–6.

³⁵Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 244–7.

³⁶For the distinction between regulative and constitutive principles, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), pp. 297–8.

³⁷Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), pp. 7–20.

³⁸Cf. Frederick Beiser, *Late German Idealism: Trendelenburg and Lotze* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 36–7.

³⁹F. W. J. Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, 33 vols (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1976–), I.vi.254.

⁴⁰Cf. Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 137–41; Lara Ostaric, 'The Concept of Life in Early Schelling', in Lara Ostaric (ed.), *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), pp. 48–70.

While Bavinck repudiates the philosophy of identity that undergirds Schelling's natural philosophy,⁴¹ he reduplicates the formal properties of the organism to the letter and puts it to the same use.⁴² As does Schelling, Bavinck attributes the unity of the organism to a constitutive principle,⁴³ which is manifest in living force (*levenskracht*).⁴⁴ As in Schelling, the living force of the Bavinckian organism grounds and governs its development.⁴⁵ Most importantly, however, Bavinck's organism, like that of Schelling, is indicative of an indirect correspondence of mechanism and teleology. Bavinck writes:

Viewed from the highest standpoint, all the world is an organic whole, borne by a single thought, led by a single will, and intended for a single purpose; it is an ὄργανον, that is at the same time a μηχανή and a μηχανή, which at the same time is an ὄργανον; a *building*, that *grows* and a *body* that is *built*; a work of art by the greatest artist and by the greatest architect of the universe.⁴⁶

For both Schelling and Bavinck, the world is both mechanistic and teleological from top to bottom. Mechanism and teleology comprise two complementary dimensions of the self-same entity, yet efficient and final causes correspond only indirectly.

This feature of the Bavinckian organism is significant for the question of its origin and content. As mentioned above, the ontological gap between the real and the ideal and the epistemological gap between subject and object is what distinguishes Schelling's organicism from pre-modern iterations of the same theme. Moreover, this indirect correspondence of mechanism and teleology – of efficient and final causes – features prominently in Bavinck's formulation of several loci, especially Bavinck's ordering of the divine decrees.⁴⁷ This use of the organism within the ordering of the decree, however, is important for another reason.

Theologically, the deployment of the organism in Bavinck's account of the divine decrees shows that the organism derives as much from God's outer works as it does from God's inner works. That is, it is not merely Trinity *ad intra* that leads to organism *ad extra*. Rather, Bavinck grounds the indirect correspondence of mechanism and teleology in the incarnation, which Bavinck identifies with the organism's constitutive principle. Here, it is especially intriguing to note that Bavinck was cognisant of the controversy among neo-vitalists over whether the cause of life is to be sought in the organism's living force or its governing idea.⁴⁸ Bavinck resolves this dilemma by

⁴¹Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 252, 292.

⁴²For a more detailed analysis, see Bruce Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), pp. 27–31.

⁴³It is the idea that animates and governs the diverse parts of the organism.' Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: Bos, 1904), p. 44.

⁴⁴As soon as we come into contact with an organism, we see at work a force, a principle, a *vis vitalis* or whatever people may term it, which, rather than being explicable by physical and chemical laws, instead governs them, stands above them, not destroying and suspending them in any way, but putting them in service and directing them. That mysterious, hidden power is exactly what comprises the organic, and is the constitutive and supportive principle of the organic.' Herman Bavinck, 'The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System', *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014), p. 91.

⁴⁵Cf. Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 52.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

⁴⁷For more detailed analysis, see Pass, *Heart of Dogmatics*, pp. 124–5.

⁴⁸Cf. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–09*, Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), p. 94.

applying the trinitarian structure of his *principia*. As has been well-documented,⁴⁹ Bavinck draws a distinction between the external and internal *principium cognoscendi*, identifying the former with the Logos and the latter with the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ Accordingly, Bavinck reduplicates this twofold distinction in his organism, identifying the incarnation (or the Logos) as the organism's constitutive principle and the Holy Spirit as its living force.⁵¹

Veenhof, therefore, is not guilty of committing the genetic fallacy. Bavinck's use of the organism bears striking semblance to Schelling. And it is also worth noting that the sources that Bavinck cites for his definition of the organism betray a derivation of these ideas from Schelling. In *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* Bavinck cites numerous passages from the *Logische Untersuchungen* of Friedrich Trendelenburg (1802–72).⁵² The significance of these references is that Schelling is the ultimate source of Trendelenburg's knowledge of the organic worldview.⁵³ Bavinck also cites *Geistige Strömungen der Gegenwart* by Rudolf Eucken (1846–1926) for the meaning of 'organic', a work which traces the organic worldview directly to Schelling.⁵⁴ At this point, however, it is worth recalling Sutanto's modification of Eglinton's hypothesis. Sutanto argues that Bavinck accommodates elements of Eduard von Hartmann's absolute idealism within an essentially non-Schellingian organism. Although Sutanto deftly traces out Bavinck's sympathies with Von Hartmann's absolute idealism, this hypothesis stumbles on the fact that Hartmann himself identified Schelling as the decisive influence on his thought.⁵⁵ Sutanto is thus completely correct when he states that Bavinck 'brings in the organic motif as a solution to the subject-object dichotomy' as it is presented by Von Hartmann.⁵⁶ But Bavinck does not do this, as it were, after the fact. Bavinck's organism already reflects the basic commitments of absolute idealism. Bavinck's affinity with Von Hartmann can, therefore, be explained by their mutual interest in Schelling.

Second, Eglinton's positive argument claims that the conceptual origin of Bavinck's organism lies in the Calvinian tradition rather than German idealism. Although this rebuttal of Eglinton's negative argument already problematises his positive argument, it is important to trace out the connection between the organism and the Reformed tradition. It is true that Bavinck viewed Calvin as an essentially organic thinker. Nevertheless, it is not immediately clear why 'Veenhof's account (and the reading of Bavinck which has followed) stands or falls in response to Bohatec's article.'⁵⁷ In the first place, contemporary sources can be cited that argue in the opposite direction. For example, a few months after Bohatec's essay appeared, one of Bavinck's doctoral

⁴⁹K. Scott Oliphint, 'Bavinck's Realism, the Logos Principle, and Sola Scriptura', *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010), pp. 359–90; Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 229–300.

⁵⁰Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 231.

⁵¹For a more detailed analysis, see Pass, *Heart of Dogmatics*, pp. 32–7.

⁵²Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, pp. 27, 44, 59–60; Friedrich Trendelenburg, *Logische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1862), vol. 1, pp. 5, 6; vol. 2, pp. 17, 19, 29, 30, 79ff., 124ff., 461.

⁵³Beiser, *Late German Idealism*, pp. 32–3.

⁵⁴Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 42, n. 52; Rudolf Eucken, *Geistige Strömungen der Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Veit, 1904), p. 135–6.

⁵⁵Beiser, *After Hegel: German Philosophy 1840–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 185 and notes; cf. Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (Leipzig: Haacke, 1902), p. xiii.

⁵⁶Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, p. 127.

⁵⁷Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, pp. 76–7.

students published an article that argues that the Neo-Calvinist concept of organic inspiration does not derive from an Aristotelian organicism but exclusively from Kantianism.⁵⁸ In this regard, it is notable that this article is directly concerned with Bavinck's concept of the organic, whereas Bohatec does not mention Bavinck at all. Nevertheless, the real issue that must be unravelled is whether it is likely that Bavinck would claim a German idealist concept for the Reformed tradition and why he would do this. The best way of approaching this problem is to compare it with other comparable examples.

For example, Bavinck also identifies Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence with Calvin's sense of divinity.⁵⁹ Plainly, Schleiermacher's notion of *Gefühl* is very different to Calvin. Unlike Schleiermacher,⁶⁰ Calvin did not view feeling as a third faculty alongside the intellect and the will by means of which we come into (psychologically) immediate contact with God. And Bavinck was well aware of this. Nevertheless, he regarded Schleiermacher's account of feeling as something which extended a Calvinian insight, modified it in ways he deemed necessary, and incorporated it in his theological system. It is this same logic that stands behind passages in which Bavinck describes Calvinism as organic. This does not mean that the content of these ideas originates exclusively in the Reformed tradition. Rather, Bavinck incorporates an ostensibly idealist idea into the Reformed tradition and modifies it in ways that make it serviceable to Christian theology.

In this regard, it is important to note that Bavinck himself did not view the organism as an idea that originated in Christianity. As most contributors to the discussion are aware, Bavinck himself traced the organism to Aristotle and viewed the idealist iteration of this idea as one of many organicisms that have graced the stage of western thought. Yet few if any contributors to the discussion have recognised how this problematises the identification of a unidirectional flow of ideas from theology to philosophy that insulates Bavinck's organism from the otherwise deleterious effects of an idealist *Weltanschauung*. In this regard, a passage from *The Philosophy of Revelation* is worth quoting in full:

This idea of [organic] development aroused no objection whatever in Christian theology and philosophy. On the contrary, it received extension and enrichment by being linked with the principle of theism. For the essence of it, it appears also in modern philosophy, in Lessing, Herder and Goethe, Schelling and Hegel, and in many historians of distinction. Some of these, it is true, have severed the idea of development from the theistic basis on which it rests in Christianity, and by so doing have reverted to the ancient pre-Christian naturalism.⁶¹

The first statement is striking for the fact that Bavinck thinks of the organism as having been incorporated into Christianity from Greek philosophy, and that Christianity had no scruples about doing this. This alone shows why Bavinck would view a material

⁵⁸Hendrik W. van der Vaart Smit, 'Eenige opmerkingen over de leer der organische inspiratie', *Gereformeerde Theologisch Tijdschrift* 27 (1927), pp. 412–35.

⁵⁹Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), pp. 42–3.

⁶⁰Cf. Julia A. Lamm, 'The Early Philosophical Roots of Schleiermacher's Notion of *Gefühl*, 1788–1794', *Harvard Theological Review* 87/1 (1994), pp. 67–105.

⁶¹Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, p. 10.

rather than purely formal appropriation of Schelling's organicism as entirely unproblematic. Moreover, Bavinck portrays Christianity as improving on a pagan idea. The organism "received extension and enrichment" in Christian theology by exchanging its naturalistic principle for a theistic principle. Arguably, this is not just a description of what the church fathers and medievals did when they incorporated Plato and Aristotle into their compendia of Christian doctrine. It reflects Bavinck's self-understanding as well. Bavinck held no objection to Schelling's account of organic development but extended and enriched it by swapping its constitutive principle for the incarnation. This in turn explains how 'Kuyper and Bavinck, who are ever so vigilant to publicly maintain an antithetical posture to what they view as anti-Christian philosophy' could allow 'that very philosophy to define so critical a motif as the "organic" metaphor'.⁶² Bavinck plainly thought this was not only possible but unproblematic.

The ongoing relevance for projects of retrieval

It is safe to conclude, therefore, that Veenhof was right. Bavinck's organic motif derives from German idealism. Bavinck's organism differs from the kind of pre-modern organicism one encounters in thinkers from Eusebius to Calvin.⁶³ Bavinck's organicism involves much more than a similitude of living things. It presupposes specific ontological and epistemological claims which are then used to structure individual doctrines and Bavinck's system as a whole. This draws into sharp relief the risk to which the new interpretative paradigm exposes both Bavinck studies and projects of theological retrieval. The new paradigm risks perpetuating the two-Bavincks thesis because it banishes it on the strength of the claim that Kuyper and Bavinck only spoke from the tradition to their times and not from their times to the tradition. Yet this is plainly not the case. Bavinck 'enriches and extends' the Reformed tradition by means of an idealist construct. If the success of the synthesis derives from the fact that the organism derives solely from the classical western doctrine of the Trinity rather than modern philosophy, there may be two Bavincks after all.

This, however, would be a premature and mistaken conclusion. As many of the recent secondary studies have convincingly shown, Bavinck is a synthetic and eclectic thinker who strove for a reconciliation of historic Christianity and modern culture.⁶⁴ And it is precisely this that generates tensions in his theological system. The Dutch reception of Bavinck evidences a keen awareness of these tensions. Does philosophy perform the function of a handmaiden as Bavinck would claim, or does it represent the presence of a *Fremdkörper* in his theology?⁶⁵ More recently, Henk van den Belt has noted that it is not always certain whether Bavinck's general epistemology controls his theological epistemology or vice versa. That is, it is not always clear whether the subject-object dichotomy or Bavinck's trinitarian *principia* has the methodological upper hand.⁶⁶ The same can be said of Bavinck's ontology too. It is not straightforwardly clear whether the distinctly idealist concerns of the organism or more theological

⁶²Mattson, *Restored to our Destiny*, p. 47.

⁶³For examples of pre-modern organicism, see Oliver Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Explorations in Reformed Theology* (London: Paternoster, 2010), pp. 173–4 and notes.

⁶⁴Note how Bavinck describes *all* of the factions within Protestant theology as engaged in this same aim. Herman Bavinck, *Modernisme en orthodoxie* (Kampen: Kok, 1911), pp. 15–16.

⁶⁵George Puchinger, *Is de Gereformeerde wereld veranderd?* (Delft: Meinema, 1966), p. 209.

⁶⁶Van den Belt, *Authority*, p. 282.

concerns of Trinity and incarnation control Bavinck's account of the God–world relation. And this is something that projects of theological retrieval need to consider.

In this connection, it is worth noting Barth's reservations about the organism. In his survey of Protestant thought in the nineteenth century Barth writes: "That the truth of revelation must form an "organism," a "tree of life" with root and crown, and that the genetic method must be the real one – this and the whole burdening of the matter with such conceptuality was not taken ... from the Bible."⁶⁷ Barth plainly regards the organism as an extra-biblical idea but his primary quibble is whether motifs like the organism interpret doctrines or illustrate them. That is, does the organism function purely as a handmaiden or does it usurp the queen's rightful throne? This concern extends to its ancient predecessor: the *vestigia trinitatis*. Elsewhere Barth asks, 'Do we not have in this idea of the *vestigium trinitatis* an ancient Trojan horse which one day ... was unsuspectingly allowed entry into the theological Ilium, and in whose belly ... we can hear a threatening clank?'⁶⁸

Here, we come to the nub of the problem. Bavinck would answer this question firmly in the negative: the organism poses no threat to the theological Ilium. In fact, Bavinck even asserts that scripture teaches the organism:

Against this dualistic and atomistic view, Scripture posits the organic. In the one, God comes to all, not in appearance but in truth. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. Yet it depends therefore, as much on his divinity as it does on his true and complete human nature. If one essential constituent in the human nature of Christ is excluded from true unity and communion with God, then there is an element in creation that remains dualistically alongside and opposed to God.⁶⁹

It is crucial to observe how the incarnation – the constitutive principle of the organism – forms the basis of this claim. Because the Word became flesh, Bavinck concludes that scripture teaches the organism.⁷⁰ This claim, however, needs to be considered carefully. The organism entails considerably more than the idea of communicability. The organism entails a very specific view of reality that proceeds from the indirect correspondence of the real and the ideal, of final and efficient causes, representation and idea. And if the incarnation grounds the organic God–world relation, it is difficult to see how it would not require a supralapsarian christology.⁷¹ Does scripture teach all this?

⁶⁷Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 623. These comments are made with reference to the organic motif in the writings of Johann Tobias Beck (1804–78). Veenhof think that the *heilsgeschichtliche Schule* is a probable source of Bavinck's theological use of the organism (Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, p. 267). In this connection it is worth noting that Bavinck also identifies 'the genetic method' of exegesis as the right one and likens a system of theology to a tree with its roots and branches (see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 1, pp. 93–4).

⁶⁸Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), I/1, pp. 335–6.

⁶⁹Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 298.

⁷⁰Sutanto and Shannon are sensitive to the centrality of the incarnation for the organism. Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, pp. 40–1, 45, 49, 59, 60, 134, n. 44, 176; Nathan D. Shannon, 'Ontology and Revelation in Bavinck's Stone Lectures', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73 (2020), pp. 112–25. The Schellingian origin of the organism thus enhances the explanatory power of their analyses.

⁷¹This itself is a noteworthy tension in Bavinck's system, as Bavinck explicitly rejects supralapsarian christologies. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 386, 403–4; vol. 3, pp. 278–80.

In fairness to Bavinck, one ought not understand the claim that scripture teaches the organic view to imply that the organism belongs to special revelation. Rather, Bavinck is gesturing to the way the organism could be compared with other philosophical terms, like *homoousios*. In the same way that it might be affirmed that scripture teaches Nicene orthodoxy without implying that the philosophical category of *ousia* originates in the biblical witness, Bavinck claims that scripture posits the organic view. Hence, in saying that scripture posits the organic view Bavinck is not saying that scripture teaches an absolute idealist conceptualisation of reality. Rather, he is asserting that the organism maintains the witness of scripture in like manner to the way *homoousios* maintains the biblical witness to Christ's deity. Nevertheless, it is precisely because the organism presupposes a specific set of ontological and epistemological claims that further considerations must be taken into account.

Bavinck predicates his use of modern philosophical idioms on the claim that it is possible to separate the idea from the representation without remainder. That is, Bavinck claims that it is possible to appropriate a modern image of the world (*wereldbeeld*) without necessarily adopting the modern worldview (*wereldbeschouwing*).⁷² This claim derives from a strongly representationalist view of reality that acknowledges a gap between the ideal and the real. The importance this representationalism holds for Bavinck's assertion that scripture posits the organic view lies in the fact that Bavinck claims that when he deploys a modern thoughtform he is appropriating only the representation and not the idea. Thus, Bavinck excises the naturalistic *beschouwing* of Schelling's *Identitätsphilosophie* from the organism and replaces it with the theistic *beschouwing* of historic Christianity. And it is for this reason that Barth's worry ought not be dismissed too quickly.

What Bavinck appropriates from German idealism is not merely a few organic components but a conceptual framework. It is not just a *beeld*, an empirical representation, but a means of subsuming representations under a general concept. Although Bavinck trims away the *Identitätsphilosophie* that undergirds the organism, what remains is not a mere image or representation but the Schellingian notion that reality is governed by a constitutive principle and living force. The distinction between *wereldbeeld* and *wereldbeschouwing*, therefore, seems a little too convenient. What Bavinck appropriates from the organism pertains to the idea rather than merely the representation. Specifically, incarnation and the Holy Spirit comprise the constitutive principle and living force of the organism that is the God-world relation. A philosophical construct has thus made its way to very heart of Bavinck's system.

A key passage from *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* illustrates the implications this holds for the relation of philosophy and theology in Bavinck's system:

It is the same divine wisdom that created the world organically into a connected whole and planted in us the urge for an *einheitliche* worldview. If this is possible, it can be explained only on the basis of the claim that the world is an organism and thus has first been thought of as such, as it is also on this pinnacle of knowledge that subject and object coincide, as the reason that is within us corresponds with the *principia* of all being and knowing.⁷³

⁷²Rolf Bremmer, *Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), p. 134. Cf. Bavinck, *Modernisme en orthodoxie*, pp. 9, 23, 25–6, 28, 37, 39.

⁷³Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 27. The importance of this passage is reflected in the way Sutanto cites it three times in his study. Cf. Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, pp. 1, 101, 141.

Bavinck states explicitly that his profoundly theological view of reality – his Christian worldview – is only possible if one presupposes that the divine mind conceived of the world as an organism. The organism is thus a divine idea. This grounds Bavinck's claim that we come to understand reality as it originated in the mind of God when we arrive at an organic worldview. This is how creaturely reason participates in its divine archetype. The organism grounds the correspondence between divine and creaturely minds. This is a remarkable synthesis of Thomas Aquinas and F. W. J. Schelling, but it is worth pondering whether this very thick metaphysical description of reality is taught by scripture. Might we not hear a threatening clank in the belly of the organism, a concept which Bavinck has granted entry into the very mind of God?

This is the question that projects of Bavinckian retrieval need to ponder. Bavinck claims that scripture posits the organic view, but is it not equally possible that the organism does represent a *Fremdkörper* in his system? This question ought not to be answered prematurely. Bavinck's theological reflection is disciplined by his commitment to scripture, yet there is a speculative element which cannot pass without interrogation. Importantly, Bavinck himself was not unaware of this. Bavinck writes:

[I]n entertaining concepts we are not distancing ourselves from reality but we increasingly approximate it. It may seem that in the process of forming concepts and judgments and conclusions we are increasingly moving away from the solid ground beneath the edifice of our knowledge and are soaring into the stratosphere. It seems strange, even amazing, that, converting mental representations into concepts and processing these again in accordance with the laws of thought, we should obtain results that correspond to reality. Still, one who abandons this conviction is lost.⁷⁴

Since the organism constitutes one of the prime examples of Bavinck's speculative flights of fancy, one must consider whether Bavinck was able to discern the altitude at which his feathers would melt. By dismissing the influence of Schelling, the new interpretative paradigm cloaks the degree to which Bavinck was willing to allow philosophical constructs to determine his theology and thus invites too quick an answer to such a question. This is not, of course, to suggest that the organism should be rejected out of hand, or that Christian theology can make do without philosophical constructs. It is to query whether the organism is simply functioning in the same way that *homoousios* functions in the creed. The conceptual scope of the organism and the range of its application extends much further than the affirmation that God the Father and Jesus of Nazareth are of the same essence. For this reason, one must consider the possibility that the organism is not only the means by which Bavinck forges his synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity but also threatens the stability of that synthesis.

Conclusion

To conclude, the renaissance of Anglophone Bavinck studies that Brian Mattson and James Eglinton have stimulated through their debunking of the two-Bavincks hypothesis is to be welcomed, and it is to be warmly acknowledged that Eglinton's identification of the relationship in which the organic motif stands to the doctrine of the Trinity has deepened our understanding of Bavinck. Nevertheless, the claim that Bavinck's organic motif does not derive from German idealism is mistaken and misconstrues

⁷⁴Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 231.

the type of synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity that Bavinck strove to achieve. Bavinck was indeed a synthetic thinker who could describe his entire project in terms of the reconciliation of historic Christianity and modern culture. Yet his train of thought is not always unidirectional, proceeding from orthodoxy to modernity. There are demonstrable instances in which Bavinck speaks from his times to the tradition, and the organism marks one of these occasions. And precisely because the organism performs so much of the heavy-lifting in Bavinck's system, projects of Bavinckian *ressourcement* need to reflect carefully on the manner in which Bavinck allows this philosophical construct to condition the content of his theology. The idealist origins ought not prejudice one's conclusion for the same reasons that the extra-biblical origins of the category of *ousia* do not necessarily compromise the formulation of the Nicene creed. Nonetheless, the idealist origins of the organism elucidate its conceptual scope, demonstrating that it implies a great deal more than a similitude to living things or an affirmation of unity in diversity. How companionable this content is to a system of doctrine is the question that projects of Bavinckian retrieval need to consider.