Review Article

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*

Eduardo Echeverria
Graduate School of Theology, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, MI, USA
drechev@hotmail.com

Abstract

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), the Dutch master of dogmatic theology, wrote a systematic treatise in theological ethics. Bavinck is a theistic moral realist whose ethics is deontological and virtue centered. His realism—both ontological and epistemic—is reflected in his understanding of conscience and its relation to the objective moral law. Furthermore, this review article discusses issues in Christian anthropology, particularly the selfhood of the human person, the relation between nature and grace, creation and redemption, and philosophy and theology, and the distinction between objective and subjective religion. It concludes with a brief reflection on Bavinck’s hermeneutics of renewal and reform in the continuity of the catholicity of the Reformed tradition.

Keywords


1 Introduction

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), the Dutch master of dogmatic theology, wrote a systematic treatise in theological ethics. It was recently discovered by Dutch Reformed theologian Dirk van Keulen in the Bavinck Archives at the Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam as an 1,100-page handwritten manuscript. This work has now been published in both English and Dutch. Van Keulen cowrote with John Bolt, the general editor of the English edition, an introduction to that edition of Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* (further references to this work will be cited parenthetically). But he also wrote a separate introduction to the Dutch edition. The English edition of this work consists of three volumes, with only the first volume now published, while the Dutch edition consists of the entire manuscript in an almost 1,000-page work entitled *Gereformeerde ethiek* (Bavinck 2019). Bavinck’s treatise consists of a fourfold division of themes (25, adapted):

1. The essence of humanity in the order of creation before the fall and after conversion, in the condition of sin, conscience, morality, and the moral law; this is the realm of natural ethics. Volume 1, pages 33–235.
2. Converted humanity: the new life in its preparation, origin, aspects, circumstances, aids, blessings, marks, sickness and death, and fulfillment; this is the realm of practical theology. Volume 1, pages 239–493.
3. The moral life in Christ after conversion, which takes the shape of a deontological ethics, an ethics of duty to self, others, and to God, and its ground in the Ten Commandments. Bavinck’s ethics is a version of divine-command ethics. Volume 2 — unpublished in English, but in the Dutch edition pages 328–605.

I limit myself in this review article to the first set of themes in volume 1 of the English edition. The foundational issues Bavinck addresses there should be of particular philosophical interest to the readers of *Philosophia Reformata*: the
structure of creation, particularly the essence of humanity, created good, fallen into sin, and redeemed in Christ; the anthropological foundation of the moral life; the epistemic and ontological foundation of moral judgments; the nature of conscience; and the natural law.

2 Moral Realism

Bavinck distinguishes between morality and ethics. The former pertains to the rules and customs by which people live. The latter is something “deeper and normative.” Bavinck explains: “Morality consists of what is in agreement with the dominant customs. … According to etymological explanations of morality, a moral life is a life that is normatively governed by and in agreement with the customs of the people.” Still, besides the “standardized norms”—that is, conventional morality—“there has to be another, higher, absolute standard” (18); otherwise, we would be left with cultural relativism. Bavinck rejects cultural relativism, and hence, “that which is considered to be normally human cannot truly serve as the standard of ethics” (42). Rather, Bavinck is a moral realist; what is moral in its own right transcends every society’s judgment and hence is “valid for all people at all times” (19). He elaborates: “There has to be a foundation for ethics, a supreme basis, a comprehensive and all-regulating principle that governs all conduct always. … This is the idea of the Good” (19). The supreme standard of goodness is, however, not some general principle or an impersonal idea, such as Plato’s idea of the Good. Rather, it is God himself. “It is only because the All-Good One exists that the good also exists. The moral law rests thus in God, not as sheer will, but in all his perfection, in his being, in his divine mind” (104; see also page 337 in the Dutch edition). Bavinck adds, “God, or, God’s law, is the norm and standard of what is good. Only what entirely and in all its parts agrees with that standard is good” (153; see also 221). Indeed, “God himself is the good and no goodness exists apart from him” (40–41).

Bavinck’s ethics is deontological (pages 328–603 in the Dutch edition) and virtue centered: “The good, which is identical to God’s will, binds us and imposes duty on us. Similarly, we possess virtue as we desire and do that which is good” (221). The chief end of man’s moral life in Christ encompasses duties and moral virtues that form the good of the person. In this connection, we can understand Bavinck’s insistence that metaphysics is necessary as a foundation for realist ethics. “We therefore face mutually exclusive alternatives: either (a) good and evil are a priori, independent of our will and thought, and then there is metaphysics; or (b) good and evil become that a posteriori and are determined by us, in which case they are not properly good and evil, but only useful and harmful” (72; see also 197).
Furthermore, the moral life and its practices are not concerned with what is “customarily human.” Rather, the moral life is “normed by the essence of the human” (19). Yes, Bavinck acknowledges—as do Aristotle and Aquinas—that what is essentially human is highly contested. Nevertheless, philosophical ethics searches after the foundations of morality, and this foundation “cannot be in conflict with Christian ethics, any more than the truly human in itself is in conflict with the genuinely Christian” (19).

3 Theology and Philosophy

However, is our human nature in itself, in the order of creation, with its own inherent powers and capabilities, and the corresponding natural morality that it grounds, the foundation of theological ethics? Bavinck holds that the source of philosophical ethics is nature, creation, whereas Christian ethics’ source is Scripture. According to Bavinck, then, theological ethics “does not proceed from a nature in humanity, in a principle embedded in creation, but from a revealed principle that comes from God and his deeds, his words for and to us, deeds and words that lead us back to God and find in him their goal” (25–26). He adds: “Since we are speaking of theological ethics, there can be only one source of knowledge that discloses to us God’s viewpoint” (26). Holy Scripture is the only source “for teaching/doctrine and life” (26). Again, “Holy Scripture is the only source of our knowledge and stands by itself alone; neither a confession nor any other writing stands beside it” (29).

Bavinck’s reflections here are confusing. He is quick to add that “we do need to use . . . Reformed confessions; we may not isolate ourselves from them and withdraw to our solitary rooms to read and explain Scripture” (29). Thus, I can only conclude that he uses the term source in a technical sense because sola scriptura is not meant as an anticreedal or antitradition principle; it does not even exclude our conscience and human reason as sources of knowledge of the moral law (222). I think we can put Bavinck’s position thus: Scripture is the highest authority in matters of faith and life, and tradition (which includes creeds and confessions) is indispensable to the interpretation of the Word of God. “Therefore,” as Bavinck more clearly and explicitly states in the first volume of Reformed Dogmatics, “a tradition is needed that preserves the connectedness between Scripture and the religious life of our time. Tradition in its proper sense is the interpretation and application of the eternal truth in the vernacular and life of the present generation. Scripture without such a tradition is impossible” (Bavinck 2003, 493; italics added). Furthermore, according to Bavinck, tradition plays a significant role
in binding people together, creating community, providing continuity of the spiritual and moral life over time, and transmitting from generation to generation many fragments of truth (however corrupted), hence providing an antecedent context in which all searches for, and knowledge of, God take place (167–168). Concludes Bavinck, “tradition itself directs us to conscience (and to reason)” (168).

Moreover, Bavinck does not dispense with philosophical ethics, as if there is no point to investigating philosophically the anthropological foundation of the morality of human acts (33–75), conscience (165–214), and the moral law (215–235) as a necessary infrastructure to theological ethics. To understand properly Bavinck’s view of the relationship between theological ethics and philosophical ethics, in short, the moral law, we need to understand his view of the distinctness and unity of nature and grace. “Nature and grace are not opposed, but nature is the terrain in which grace works to re-create” (234). Bavinck holds that grace requires nature to build on, and this entails that “re-creation presupposes creation, and Scripture presupposes nature . . . [and] revealed theology is impossible without natural theology” (234). The Christian moral life (and hence theological ethics that reflects upon that life) has “its own basis, content, and goal; a moral life by which human beings can be or become what they should be” (20). This means, adds Bavinck, theological ethics derives from revelation the understanding of the created person that is transformed by grace: “In our ethics it is God who reveals to us the truth about sin, regeneration, sanctification, how we are to live in the state, and so forth” (26). In this light, theological ethics gives attention to “the regenerated human person as the [created] subject and that we consider the regenerate from the perspective of who they are and what they do on the basis of God’s acts” (26; see also 21).

4 Christian Anthropology

When addressing the question of the relation of nature and grace, it is erroneous to ignore both the distinction between nature and grace and their union. Nature has to do with the fundamental structures of reality, in particular, of human reality—in short, the deepest foundations of what God created. How has sin affected those foundational structures of creation? Has the nature of creation been corrupted or completely destroyed by sin, or are the deepest foundations of creation still as God made them?

What has been called the Augustinian principle—and Bavinck embraces this principle—affirms that the nature of humanity persists in the regime
of man’s fallen state. Augustine writes (City of God, book 14, chapter 11): “The natures in which evil exists, in so far as they are natures, are good. And evil is removed, not by removing any nature, or part of a nature but by healing and correcting that which had been vitiated and depraved.”¹ In several places throughout Bavinck’s reflection on the impact of sin upon human nature that renders that nature savagely wounded by the fall, Bavinck affirms the Augustinian principle. “Sin did [not] become the substance or essence of human beings. The human being remained a human being, not a machine, not a wooden thing or block, not a devil, but a human being. But the human became abnormal; though still human, its humanity is cankered and rotten” (42). “The substance of our being has totally remained; it has lost none of its strength, even though it has been deteriorated. In this way, all its capacities [intellect, will, feelings, the body] have remained” (151; see also 216).

By contrast, there is a view of the relationship between nature and grace that departs from the Augustinian principle. It understands them to be opposed to each other in view of sin’s destructive impact on nature. Nature has been rendered a corrupt vessel by the fall into sin and needs to be replaced altogether with something new by grace. Human nature is capable of nothing but sin, with the accompanying loss or destruction of, for example, the natural power of the will to goodness or of contrary moral choice between good and evil. On this view, the deepest foundation of what God created does not persist in the fallen state.

Where does Bavinck stand with respect to the issue of human freedom?

5 Human Freedom

Briefly, according to Bavinck, making free choices, rather than determined or arbitrary ones, is a crucial dimension of the moral life (see 19). “The human will is free, but not unmotivated. It is free of compulsion whether by God or by the world. The will is a spontaneous ability of free self-determination according to the insight, and so on, which the I currently enjoys. . . . The I itself is free in its thinking, feeling, and willing” (49; see also 151). Bavinck sounds like he accepts free choice in the sense of libertarian free will—formal freedom, he calls it (90)—in which people have free choice equally of good and evil, and hence are indifferent, with the agents themselves being the cause of their choice informed by reasons and motives. Bavinck distinguishes formal freedom from determinism where man is unfree given that there exists an antecedent set of

events and circumstances that determine his behavior; but this position is also
distinguished from the notion of an indeterministic freedom, meaning thereby
unpredictability, randomness, or arbitrariness, as if man acts without reasons
or motives.

Bavinck gives us a rich phenomenology of sin (106–145). In particular, he
discusses the effect of sin upon human nature (147–163). He argues that “the
will is . . . totally corrupted by sin.” But “the faculty of the will as such is not
lost through sin; its spontaneity and freedom remain even after the fall” (89;
see also 151). Still, Bavinck claims its “key ethical property, which was natural
to it, was lost” (90). What property is that? Bavinck calls this ethical property
“material freedom” to distinguish it from “formal freedom.” The former
freedom is the “innate, original inclination toward the good,” and it is now lost
because of the fall. “Before the fall the mind was good and thus distinguished
well and caused the will to long for the good. The will was entirely good and
inclined to do good. Moreover, the will had been created in such a way that
it was natural for it to follow the good; it was a natural property of the will”
(89). After the fall, the inclination of the will in man’s fallen state is wholly
ever; hence, it is now “diverted in another direction, is inclined toward evil
and aims at what is evil.” Consequently, as a result of this loss “the will is now
incapable of doing good” (90). Consequently, what is left to man after the fall
is a formal freedom, which is a freedom of indifference—“when our mind
evaluates something and finds as many reasons for as against it and thus does
not know what is good and what is evil. In that case, the will stands between
the two, of course, and is unable to choose. . . . But that is a deficiency in the
will and not something lovely” (90). The will’s inability to do the good is the
result of sin.

Does Bavinck mean to state that post-fall man is no longer naturally capable
of doing good? No, he qualifies the corrupting and ravaging power of sin upon
human nature such that the “original power of the will [toward the good] is
occasionally present” (151). It is manifest, adds Bavinck, “in the heroic and
vigorous energy of the great ones of our human race, such as reformers like the
Buddha, world conquerors like Alexander, and scientists like Columbus and
Galileo” (151). But this is as a result of “common grace—being allowed to retain
something of what we by nature possessed in Adam. . . . [These are] remnants,
graciously left behind for us, of what we once possessed by nature” (149). But
it is not clear how the fallen will functions as a natural power to produce good
deeds when the material freedom of man was lost as a result of the fall.
6 The Selfhood of the Human Person

What is man? On the one hand, man exists in a threefold set of relations, according to Bavinck, “to God, to other human beings, and to nature” (50; see also 49–62). Relationality is constitutive of man’s being. On the other hand, man exists in his own right as a self-transcending subject, a fully constituted, self-subsisting individual, who is a unique, unrepeatable, and incomunicable human person. The unity of this self-subsisting individual “lies in his or her I.” Bavinck explains: “That is the root, the center, the kernel, the core of every person. Everything else lies around it and is near to it and attaches to it: I have intellect, feelings, a will, a body, hand, foot, etc., but I am . . . I. Holy Scripture calls this the heart, out of which are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23).” “The heart is the central midpoint of human being and living, and also the seat of self-consciousness” (191).

Furthermore, explains Bavinck, he is neither a materialist nor a dualist. He is not the former because “the soul is essentially different from the body. It is not a property or quality of matter, but something on its own, yet related to the body” (44). He is not a dualist either because he does not see the self as something having or inhabiting a body. Rather, he sees man as a living, bodily entity, a unified totality. Indeed, Bavinck holds to a position he calls harmonism—meaning thereby, as I understand him, that the body of man is irreducible to mere matter: it is a spiritualized body, just as man’s spirit is so closely united to the body that he can be described as an embodied spirit (46). Moreover, Bavinck elaborates, “we are persons because we can say ‘I.’ This I is what forms our humanity in us, what is actually human. This I always and under all circumstances remains the same and identical with itself. The I is a wonder, inexplicable, and simply to be accepted” (46). He continues: “That I has a real existence, it is . . . a being, or rather the being in us (all the others are but revelations of the I).” In other words, all the manifestations of man’s whole existence are revelations of the one same, undivided, individual, and entire I revealing itself. “It is always the one, whole I that reveals itself. . . . It is the same single and entire I which thinks, wills, and feels. It is not one part of the I which thinks and another part which wills, but it is the same I which, when it works, reveals three sides of itself [it thinks, wills, and feels]. All three abilities presume the I, the self-consciousness, the foundation on which the [anthropological] edifice stands” (46–48).

7 Objective and Subjective Religion

Bavinck understands “religion to encompass all human relations to God in their entirety and in all their connections” (54). He has a substantive
understanding of religion rather than just a functional one. Hence, according to Bavinck, “Christianity [is] the only source for determining the essence of religion.” Bavinck does not follow a common-denominator approach to the variety of religions in order to get at the essence of religion. Furthermore, Bavinck is not a religious relativist; he does not hold that all religions are true and hence equally efficacious vehicles of salvation. Of course, he does not deny that there are elements of truth and goodness in other religions, but that “can be determined and measured only by the Christian religion.” God has not left himself without witness (Acts 14:16) in his general revelation, which means that God has revealed himself to all people in and through the works of creation. Of course, the reception of this general revelation is open to resistance and hence to distortion, misinterpretation, and denial (see Rom. 1:18–32). Hence, with respect to the central claims of these other religions, these claims are false because they are logically incompatible with Christian truth claims. These reflections lead Bavinck “to distinguish between religion in an objective sense and in a subjective sense” (56).

In distinction to general revelation, there is, according to Bavinck, the objective religion of special revelation. Special revelation is about God revealing himself especially in and through salvation history, a history that runs through the events and people of Israel, culminating in the concentration point of that history in Jesus Christ, who is the mediator and fullness of all revelation. Furthermore, jointly constitutive of God’s special revelation are its inseparably connected words (verbal revelation) and deeds, intrinsically bound to each other because neither is complete without the other—the historical realities of redemption are inseparably connected to God’s verbal communication of truth (56).

Traditionally put, subjective religion involves two dimensions in the one act of faith that is at “the center, the core, the innermost point of our being, our I. And because faith resides in the I, it is an act of the whole human person, of mind, will, soul, and strength” (56; see also 59). Thus, faith involves both the *fides qua creditur* (the faith with which one believes) and the *fides quae creditur* (the faith which one believes). Bavinck makes clear how both asserted truth and lived truth—the *fides quae creditur*, the beliefs which one holds to be true, affirms, and asserts, and the *fides qua creditur*, experiential, living, active faith—belong to faith as a whole (350–356). Minimally, therefore, faith involves belief, and to have a belief means that one is intellectually committed to the whole truth that God has revealed. Furthermore, Bavinck is not an experiential expressivist in his view of revelation because “objective religion is not the product, effect, and creation of subjective religion.” He adds: “No, objective religion is already there, contained and described in Holy Scripture” (57; see also 431).
I will conclude by concerning myself with Bavinck’s view regarding the relationship between conscience and the moral law (191–235). “Conscience belongs to the knowing dimension of human life, to the sphere of the intellect” (193). Bavinck adds: “Conscience is universally human; an absolutely conscience-less person does not exist. But conscience possesses an individual character; there are as many consciences as there are people” (213). Of course, conscience has to be properly formed, awakening a moral consciousness or disposition of right and wrong in people, who then feel conscience bound to the law. “Nurture has the task of developing this disposition and forming it into moral character (consciousness)” (229). Bavinck does not open the door here to a subjectivist view of conscience, or individual relativism, according to which what is right for some would not be right for others. Bavinck shuts that door by not focusing on who believes—the individual’s moral formation—but rather on the foundation of the judgments of conscience. Bavinck grounds these judgments in an ontology of law. “The moral law is one, immutable, and valid for all people” (213). Furthermore, conscience is an act of neither the will nor feelings; rather, at its core it is about an awareness of moral truth directing our moral life. The intellect is both theoretical and practical: the former means that the intellect is directed to knowledge of the truth as its goal, while the latter means that the intellect is directed to practical principles that direct our moral life by way of specific actions. Furthermore, as a consequence of belonging to the practical intellect, “conscience does not judge the true and false as such, but judges about the good and evil of the person’s being” (194).

Conscience is an intellectual act of judgment, an act of right practical reason, deriving its validity from its accordance with the law of God. “Conscience in its proper sense is that power or activity in a person’s understanding that, bound to the law of God in the syntērēsis, judges the actions of a person observed by means of the [properly formed moral] consciousness, according to the law” (200; see page 328 in the Dutch edition). A discrete act of conscience is embedded, not only in a fundamental disposition implanted in us at our creation to seek the good and to oppose evil, but also as a set of practical principles implanted in us at our creation by which conscience judges specific actions to see whether they are ordered to the good of the person. “Conscience needs a law to evaluate acts,” and, following the Scholastic tradition, Bavinck calls this law syntērēsis. “If we are to speak correctly, then, this syntērēsis does not belong to the conscience, but precedes it, is its necessary presupposition, without which the [act of] conscience cannot judge. To say that it is not itself part of the conscience is to say that the law by which the conscience judges
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does not lie in the conscience itself but, as Romans 2:15 teaches, in the heart, in practical reason" (196). Conscience is bound not to itself but rather to the “law of God within the syntērēsis” (198). Bavinck adds: “The conscience renders judgment in the form of a syllogism. The syntērēsis . . . provides the major premise, and consciousness [our memory, our recollection] supplies the minor premise. The conscience draws the conclusion and renders judgment” (203).

We have here a process of reasoning from principles, grounded in the law, to conclusions, which are moral judgments on choices made for specific actions or acts under consideration for the future (202–203).

Bavinck is not a Kantian. He stands against the antirealism of Kantian transcendentalism. Bavinck’s ethics is a version of realist theology. By contrast, ethical Kantianism “loosens the tie between God and the good, situating its binding power in reason, in the inexplicable categorical imperative of the practical reason. It cannot be explained how autonomous people can give themselves such a [moral] law” (220). Yes, according to Bavinck, the intellectual act of conscience is the sole author of its judgment; but correspondence with the law determines its truth. Hence, man is not the author of truth. The ground of moral judgments is not human reason, leaving us with an ethical formalism, but rather the order of creation, or an objective moral law. “Conscience is bound to the law” (216). “The moral law speaks to us in our conscience with an unconditional and all-encompassing authority: This moral law ought to be your very own nature and being” (221). The law reveals God’s will. Lawfulness is the mode of divine governance reflecting God’s forbearance, “the means by which humanity is guarded and prepared for re-creation, for the grace in Christ” (217). This mode of governance reflects the ordered wisdom of the divine plan for creation (page 347 in the Dutch edition).

The boundary between God and man is not the law but the central commandment of love: love of God in an unrestricted manner and love of neighbor (Matt. 22:36–39; Mark 12:29–31). Indeed, “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10). Jesus fulfills the law by bringing out its fullest and complete meaning. He also fulfills it by bringing the finishing or capstone revelation. He radicalizes the law’s demands by going to its heart and center. Jesus says: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:40). Jesus neither replaces nor adds to the moral teachings of the law, but rather he exposes its true and positive, indeed, fullest meaning in light of the twofold yet single, central commandment that we love God completely and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 7:12, 22:34–40; Mark 12:38–43; Luke 10:25–28; John 13:34; Rom. 13:8–10). In that sense, Jesus interiorizes the demands of the law because fulfillment of the law must be measured by that central commandment to love. Because love of God and neighbor is the heart of the law, we can
understand why, according to Bavinck, “love is the organizing principle of the law, its _summa_. And love, therefore, is also the organizing principle of the good. All virtue is one . . . and the specific virtues, therefore, are all manifestations of love, they are all derived from love” (104).

9 Conclusion

Why are Bavinck’s reflections on ethics of enduring relevance? Bavinck was engaged in his work _Reformed Ethics_ in what we would call today a hermeneutics of renewal and reform in the continuity of the catholicity of the Reformed tradition. Dutch Reformed ethicist Theo Boer of Theologische Universiteit Kampen stresses the importance of preserving the continuity of “fixed anchor points” of the Christian moral tradition (Boer 2017). That importance is unmistakably present in Bavinck’s work. These fixed points of reference provide a justification for our moral judgments and choices when we address contemporary moral challenges and issues. The consequence of losing these fixed points of reference is that over time it entails, says Boer, “the end of the entire tradition.” Stated differently, “a tradition must remain recognizable.” He adds: “What is appealing in Catholic thinking is the resolve to test every change by the question of how much change a tradition can endure before it ceases to be a [recognizable] tradition” (Boer 2017, 46; my translation). This concern with continuity is also evident throughout Bavinck’s _Reformed Ethics_.

Although Boer correctly focuses here on the question of continuity, he doesn’t tell us that these fixed points of reference ground the tradition in propositional affirmations of faith and morals that possess a determinate content of truth. This point brings us to the issues of meaning and truth in the hermeneutics of reinterpreting the affirmations of faith and morals. In brief, in order to maintain the continuity of the tradition in alternative formulations and expressions of the affirmations of faith and morals, those conceptual formulations and linguistic expressions must keep the same meaning and the same judgment of truth ( _eodem sensu eademque sententia_ ) in order to preserve the material continuity, identity, and universality of those propositional truths. This hermeneutics grounds continuity in a view of language that has a proper function of referring to reality by virtue of assertions that express propositions which, if true, correspond to reality. Bavinck’s moral realism is an antidote to the _veriphobia_ of our time and its entailments in subjectivism, relativism, skepticism, and nihilism.
References

