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God and Rationality: A Critique of the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance

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American theologians and philosophers of religion do not customarily identify Barthianism with theological rationality; hence the title of Professor Thomas F. Torrance's latest volume, *God and Rationality*,¹ seems curiously provocative. This book is the third in a trilogy which includes *Space, Time, and Incarnation*² and the better-known *Theological Science*,³ winner of the first Collins Award in Britain for the best work in theology, ethics, and sociology relevant to Christianity for 1967–69. Together these works present a fairly coherent, if occasionally repetitious, picture of a gifted and very creative theologian at work trying to develop the Barthian position in new and sometimes intriguing directions.

It would of course be but noting the obvious to say that Torrance is firmly convinced of the essential correctness of the Barthian analysis, but in his recent writings he does concede that Karl Barth did not go far enough in showing the conceptual connections between theological science and natural science, and that he also has not paid sufficient attention to Aquinas's recognition that if knowledge of God is to be actualized in us it requires a rational counterpart in our understanding firm enough to merit philosophical analysis and consideration on its own.⁴

The three works mentioned above deal in large measure with these two issues, and in this essay I shall attempt to evaluate Torrance's achievement. Whatever the outcome, I am convinced that he has raised some very fruitful questions for any contemporary theological method, and I am also encouraged by his willingness to engage in this kind of dialogue. Torrance possesses immense historical erudition and his recent works indicate that he is now developing a constructive position,⁵ making use of the latest developments in logic and philosophy of science, as well as offering thoughtful critiques of Kant, Schleiermacher, Bultmann, and Tillich which are well worth pondering regardless of one's attitude toward Barthianism.⁶

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). Hereafter cited *GR*.

² Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). Hereafter cited *STI*.

³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). Hereafter cited *TS*.

⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Barl Barth," *Religious Studies* 6, no. 2 (June 1970): 131–34.

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

⁶ In order to illustrate this latter point, as well as to avoid unnecessarily alienating or encouraging any readers, I shall deliberately refrain from using Torrance's Barthian or evangelical language whenever possible.

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The point of view of our critique is that of a basically analytic philosophy of religion, and our study will be divided into five parts: A preliminary examination of Torrance's concept of "theological rationality"; its application to the realms of theology and science, theology and philosophy, and theology and history; and a concluding summary comparing and contrasting the "old" and the "new" theology.

THEOLOGY AND RATIONALITY⁷

In *Theological Science*, certainly the most substantial and difficult of the works we shall consider, Torrance makes clear that his primary intention is "to clarify the processes of scientific activity in theology, to throw human thinking of God back upon its direct and proper Object,"⁸ and that he is only secondarily engaged in "apologetics" and in the dialogue between science and theology and philosophy and theology. But, as our author himself admits, these activities are inseparable, and, as I trust my analysis will show, there is a great deal of overlapping of these intentions in his writings. He goes on to say that he is presenting an essay in "philosophical theology calling for objectivity and rationality within the positive and constructive task of theological science."⁹

But how does he use and what does he mean by such terms as theological "rationality" and "objectivity"? For Torrance, knowledge of God is neither subrational nor irrational but the very essence of rationality before which all our other experiences appear only inadequately rational. "By rationality . . . we . . . mean . . . our ability to relate our thought and our action appropriately to objective intelligible realities. Reason is our ability to recognize and assent to what is beyond it."¹⁰ Rationality thus involves the conformity of our reason to intelligible realities existing over against it, it is our "capacity for objectivity."¹¹ God is of course the supreme Object (later Object-Subject) which confronts our reason for Torrance, and it is from our knowledge of God that we learn what true objectivity and rationality really are.

In his attempt to steer between the epistemological extremes of Cartesian dualism (e.g., Kant) and romantic irrationality (e.g., Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Tillich), Torrance follows Barth in insisting that theology must begin with the *actuality* of the knowledge of its peculiar Object and then

⁷ For readers unable to get to the three volumes being considered, may I suggest the following four articles, read in sequence, as containing the essence of Torrance's position: "Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22, no. 1 (March 1969): 1-9; "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth," pp. 121-35; "Ecumenism and Science," *Oecumenica* (1969), pp. 321-36; and "Theological Rationality," *Lovanensium* 27 (1970): 455-73. The last two articles are reprinted in *GR*.

⁸ *TS*, p. xvii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

move to the question of its *potentiality* or possibility. And as preposterous as this sounds to many philosophers of religion, Torrance is quite prepared to defend this kind of “objectivism” in terms of the epistemology of the natural sciences from Francis Bacon to Albert Einstein.

At this point we see right away the close resemblance between the road of theological inquiry and the road that modern science, e.g., quantum physics, is being forced to take in recognizing the impossibility of separating out the way in which knowledge arises from the actual knowledge that it attains. . . . In the nature of the case a true and adequate account of theological epistemology cannot be gained apart from substantial exposition of the content of the knowledge of God, and of the knowledge of man and the world as creatures of God. It is scientifically false to begin with epistemology.

It must be said right away that what is offered in this discussion presupposes the full content of theological knowledge, and is an attempt to set forth the way of proper theological knowledge in accordance with that content.¹²

Although at first glance this looks like the most blatant kind of theological dogmatism,¹³ this is far from Torrance’s intent. For Torrance, as for Barth, autonomous reason is a diseased form of rationality because it loses touch with reality by turning inward upon itself and prescribes theoretical canons of meaning and truth which satisfy its own requirements but bear little relation to the *objective* world upon which it reasons.¹⁴ The reason why a scientific theology must begin with the actual knowledge of God is that otherwise it is tempted to rule out its possibility on a priori grounds.

This analysis of course raises all kinds of questions about the nature and “existence” of the Object of theological inquiry, as well as the appositeness of the analogies with physics and other natural sciences, but before dealing with these issues we must explore a little more fully Torrance’s conception of theological rationality.

In his essay on this subject,¹⁵ Torrance makes it clear that in his view the modern foes of genuine rationality in theology are a mechanistic scientism and dogmatic empiricism which have driven a gulf between theology and experience that has made theological discourse extremely problematic. Unfortunately theological attempts to bridge this gulf by means of existentialism, phenomenology, aesthetics, or even sociology have all turned out to be flights from scientific objectivity which have bogged down in the morass of historical and cultural relativism so characteristic of the modern mind.¹⁶ “If theology is to survive the crisis of these times, it must move out into the full light of day, engage in critical revision of its own theoretic framework,

¹² Ibid., pp. 10–11.

¹³ See the distinction between the proper and vulgar sense of “dogmatism” in *TS*, pp. 337–40; also *GR*, pp. 90–91.

¹⁴ *TS*, p. 26.

¹⁵ “Theological Rationality,” in *GR*, pp. 3–25.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

and go on to fresh scientific construction under the pressure and determination of its own object.”¹⁷

Perhaps we have seen enough now to grasp the nature of Torrance’s constructive effort to rehabilitate theology into a viable “scientific” enterprise once more. His confidence in the ultimate rationality of its Object is roughly analogous to the epistemological faith of the natural scientist or philosopher of science who seeks to discern the connections between thought and being, concept and existent. And his apparent arbitrariness or presumption is traceable directly to his scientific “realism” which maintains that if theology is to be significant at all it must stick to its own Object and not that of other disciplines. How then is theology related to other areas of inquiry, and what kinds of justification can it give for the reality of its Object? Does it make any sense to speak of theology as a “pure science,”¹⁸ or “the science of God”?¹⁹

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

It may help before we go further to think a little of what we intend by *science*. Science is nothing more or less than clear, precise knowledge. Neither in natural science nor in Christian theology do we have an esoteric way of knowing. There is only one basic way of human knowing which is found to operate in every field of human experience, in religious as well as natural knowledge. Science is the rigorous and disciplined extension of that basic way of knowing applied in exact, controlled, and organized ways to different fields of experience. . . . What we are concerned with here, then, is not the contribution of the other sciences in any way to the material content of [theology], but with the [theological] results that accrue from rigorous scientific thinking within theology.²⁰

I have slightly altered the last sentence of this quotation from Torrance’s essay, “Ecumenism and Science,” to make crystal clear how theological science is distinguished from natural science by the difference of its material content, its Object. Torrance stresses again and again that both “natural science and scientific theology operate through a methodological exclusion of one another, for by their very nature they move in opposite directions.”²¹ How then are they related? Here Torrance appeals to the modern notion of “complementarity,” borrowed from quantum physics, “according to which two mutually exclusive ways of knowledge and description are held to be complementary to one another without any possibility of their combination, because in different approaches we have delineated and differentiated the concepts of objective nature at the very source of our knowledge. Therefore the more exactly natural science and scientific theology are pursued, the sharper the distinction but the greater the complementarity exists between them.”²²

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. viii.

¹⁹ *TS*, p. viii.

²⁰ *GR*, p. 114.

²¹ *TS*, p. 102.

²² Ibid.

As is, I trust, becoming clear from the preceding quotations, we are beginning to probe one of the central ambiguities or perhaps dilemmas of Torrance's method, an epistemological or ontological dualism—there are hints of both. Torrance is fully aware of this difficulty and wants to avoid it, but I shall contend throughout our study that he has not yet found a satisfactory solution. What we have seen mentioned so far is either one or two ways of knowing, or perhaps one way applied to two exclusive fields, which are apparently theoretically related in the mode of complementarity while actually remaining objectively quite distinct.²³ Now granted that “complementarity” is not “paradox,” we nevertheless have a traditional problem of the dialectical theologian squarely before us. And Torrance's footnote to our last quotation makes it clear that any desire on our part for further logical clarification of the actual relation between scientific theology and natural science and their respective objects is due to the persistence of intellectual habits appropriate to classical science but not to more recent developments. I hasten to add, however, that this is not intended as an evasion by our author, but rather as an invitation to explore the relevance of some of the newer forms of logic for theology.

Because the special sciences are concerned with generalization and abstraction from the multiplicity of particular events, they cannot grasp the wholeness and uniqueness of the Truth of God as expressed in the Incarnation. The concrete universal cannot be grasped by naturalistic empirical means any more than it can be captured through the analytical methods of formal logic. For Torrance, following Polanyi,²⁴ it is illogical to attempt the proof of this (supernatural) Object by natural tests, for these can only establish the natural aspects of an event and can never represent it as supernatural.²⁵ Torrance agrees with Kierkegaard that, unlike the other sciences, theology is primarily concerned with the individual or “the single” which has to be apprehended on its own peculiar terms.

In *Theological Science* Torrance gives an extended and intricate elaboration of the specific similarities and differences between theology and the special sciences which we shall now consider in order to try to pinpoint the source of some of his methodological problems in this area.²⁶ Theology resembles other sciences in eight respects: (1) in its devotion to its proper Object, that is, its “objectivity”; (2) in its freedom from any preconceived

²³ Later Torrance seems to say that the two realities are *actually* related but *theoretically* quite distinct; indeed their theoretical relation becomes quite “mysterious.”

²⁴ *TS*, p. 301. On modern scientific developments Torrance repeatedly acknowledges his indebtedness to M. Polanyi, K. Popper, F. Waismann, C. F. von Weizsäcker, and A. Einstein, among others.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 300. We will treat this whole verification problem at some length in our section on theology and philosophy.

²⁶ Chaps. 3 and 5 of *TS* and chaps. 4 and 5 of *GR* deal with this question. See the convenient summary in the review of *TS* by Alan Willingale, *Evangelical Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (July–September 1970): 187–90, which I am partially following here.

metaphysics, or better, its willingness to call into question any particular metaphysical formulation which it must inevitably and implicitly possess; (3) in its insistence upon rigor and disciplined method; (4) in its search for logical economy, simplicity, and elegance; (5) in its attachment to the “interrogative” form of inquiry which seeks to go beyond the subjectivism of Socratic recollection to the objectivism of submitting oneself to interrogation by the data themselves; (6) in its attachment to the “problematic mode” in which knowledge is advanced by the construction and testing of theories, analogues, or models *through* which it cognizes its object; (7) in its recognition of the boundaries or limits beyond which its inquiries cannot go without inconsistency and error, by which Torrance is referring not only to our abysmal ignorance in the face of the vastness of the cosmos, but principally to the inherent limitations forced upon us both by whatever method of inquiry we adopt and the indeterminate character of the objects themselves; and finally, (8) in the problem of relating scientific and ordinary language when dealing with unobservable or “nonpicturable” realities in the microphysical realm.

The first and last points should remind us that, because of their different objects, no *direct* comparison of theology with the special sciences is possible, and that what Torrance has been doing here is to offer an *indirect* comparison, based on the analogy of proportionality, where no direct transfer of method or language is involved. Indeed at one point, again prompting our questions about his implicit dualistic tendencies, Torrance goes so far as to say that the relation between the two areas cannot be construed logically, analogically, univocally, or even ambiguously since the relation between language and reality (following Wittgenstein’s analysis) cannot be resolved into language alone, though he immediately qualifies this by suggesting the possibility of a kind of supraconceptual or supralinguistic analogy (e.g., the Barthian *analogia fidei*).²⁷

Granting for the moment the unique or odd character of our comparisons, in what ways does theological science differ from the special sciences? Torrance suggests at least six important differences here. (1) There is an epistemological inversion in our order of knowing; we do not observe, examine, “torment,” coerce, or experiment upon God as we do natural objects; rather we are known, questioned, and put to the test by God. Thus, as we shall see, theological statements have their truth in the Reality from which they are derived, to which they respond, and in which “audits” (hearing or heard statements) correspond to “percepts” (observation statements) in the natural sciences. (2) Since God is at once Person and Word,

²⁷ *TS*, pp. 293–94, 244. This linguistic problem is of course not unique to Torrance’s position, or even to theology for that matter, but it nevertheless remains a genuine difficulty for any serious philosophical theology. Torrance wrestles with it more fully in his sections, “Logic of God” and “Logic of Man,” *TS*, chap. 5, which we shall discuss in our next section.

communicating Himself to us in the form of personal being, namely, the Incarnation, theological inquiry is not a dialectical monologue of reason with itself or mute objects, but a dialogical activity (à la Buber) in which its Object eloquently “reveals” itself. (3) The Object of theological knowledge possesses a baffling double objectivity: the ultimate or primary objectivity of God Himself as transcendent Lord, and the proximate or secondary objectivity of God as He manifests Himself in human form in the relativities of space-time. Thus all genuine theological statements have a bipolar reference uniquely appropriate to their object. (4) The cruciality of Christ requires the supremacy of Christology in our knowledge of God. “What scandalizes rationalist man is that in his search for ultimate objectivity he is bound unconditionally to contingent and creaturely objectivity, in fact to the weakness of the historical Jesus.”²⁸ (5) There is a unique form of rationality appropriate to theological science dictated by the nature of its Object. “Theology cannot demonstrate its reality in any way except a theological way, for only a unique demonstration is scientifically permissible in accordance with the unique nature of the Object.”²⁹ (6) Finally, the subject-object relation in theology is characterized by the fact that our knowledge of God starts from a union rather than a disjunction of knower and known, but a peculiar union in which God is not entangled in our subjectivity but instead promotes a reciprocal relation with the inquirer.³⁰ The ability to distinguish subject from object is much easier on the impersonal and macrophysical level of our experience than on the personal and microphysical, and this provides further grounds for Torrance’s assertion that anthropomorphic language is both necessary and appropriate for scientific theology.³¹

By now even the most sympathetic reader must be bristling with questions! If this is *philosophical* theology, why the apparently arbitrary reliance on Christian revelation to control all epistemological questions? Why the apparently unwarranted appeal to a “special” type of analogy, to a “unique” knowledge of Ultimate Reality in addition to proximate realities? Why the abrupt dismissal of logical argument or proof in any ordinary sense? Why the insistence on the actuality of an extraordinary “concrete universal”? Why the facile acceptance of the subject-object distinction in ordinary knowledge and then its “miraculous” transformation in theological knowledge? And, above all, why the massive, redundant, and presumptuous assertion of the actuality of the Object of theological inquiry, God Himself?

The point of these questions is certainly not to refute Torrance’s claims,

²⁸ *TS*, p. 137.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 309–10. One of Torrance’s most persistent criticisms of Tillich’s “irrationalism” is that Tillich tries to transcend the subject-object relation altogether and thus is ultimately thrown back upon subjective “self-understanding.”

because they have in the main been formulated in such a way as to defy refutation, that is, they are so logically odd that they must be simply accepted or rejected, not “refuted.” Rather, these questions are merely challenging the grounds, or more accurately, the lack of sufficient grounds for these claims. Nearly all of these questions, it seems to me, cluster around the appropriateness of the crucial analogy on which Torrance appears to rest his case, namely, his appeal to the “scientific” character of theology. But are not the *differences* he points up between theological science and natural science, between theological rationality and natural scientific rationality, so great as to make the comparison doubtful, even if “indirect” or “proportional”? Are not the “objects” of inquiry so different that to use the same words “scientific,” “rational,” and even “objective” when referring to them is to distort such language beyond tolerable limits? Or does Torrance perhaps think that our request for rational justification along traditional philosophical lines is itself unwarranted?

Certainly the task of Modern theology clearly lies in a unitary movement of thought in which the ontological and dynamic approaches are brought together. If so we must set ourselves to the task of developing appropriate logical tools and an apposite theological language for this purpose—a task not unlike that on which contemporary physicists and biologists are engaged. This will require us to work in close association with them, however, clarifying the different metaphysical and logical levels of thought within each science and *exploring how they are and must be coordinated within the same universe of knowledge*.³²

Surely we have here the basis for a coherent philosophical theology, fully cognizant of the *connections* between theology and the other disciplines, as well as their inevitable differences. And yet just a few pages later in this brilliant historical analysis of the way in which the Church’s understanding of space (and to a lesser extent, time) has influenced its understanding of the Incarnation, Torrance posits such a radical disjunction between knowing and being, and between different kinds of knowing, that one wonders how they could possibly be “coordinated within the same universe of knowledge.” He restricts the theologian to the following sharp alternative: *either* be entirely silent, not even raising the skeptical question (since absolute skepticism, as an assertion, is self-contradictory), *or* ask questions only within the circle of actual (absolute?) knowledge.³³

Now it seems to me that we must challenge two basic points here. First, to what extent are other disciplines utterly silent in their ignorance? And second, just what does Torrance mean by actual knowledge? On one level he seems to have formulated the kind of logical puzzle he objects to so strenuously when posed by philosophers on purely formal or a prioristic grounds, for example, either nothing or everything, something, therefore

³² *STI*, p. 51. Italics mine. See pp. 61–68, 74, 77 f., for an excellent application of this “coherence” model to the Incarnation in almost Whiteheadian language.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–55.

everything. But I am quite sure we are safe in ruling out this abstract interpretation of Torrance's dilemma.

However, if we take it in the empirical, a posteriori sense of scientific investigation, our "silence" and "actual knowledge" are quite slippery creatures, very difficult to pin down. We are "silent" before what we do not know without surrendering our rational right and power to question it (e.g., methodological doubt), and we are "ignorant" before what we do not know without being *totally* ignorant or without a peculiar kind of "actual knowledge." And in our scientific interrogation of nature we certainly do not presuppose the material content of our actual knowledge in advance except perhaps by way of the formal requirements imposed by our mode of questioning. Yet will Torrance allow this kind of interrogation and ignorance in theological science? Apparently not.³⁴ He regularly insists that actual knowledge within theology is knowledge of the Absolute, is christological and trinitarian, and comes full-blown in the historical Christian revelation in a way quite incommensurate with normal scientific discovery. But does this not strain his analogy with natural science on this particular question to the breaking point? And, granted that he is *very* careful about the kinds of comparisons he allows with the special sciences, if these comparisons are to be at all significant for theological science must they not be reconsidered at this point?

Perhaps we can get some help on this matter if we turn to the more strictly philosophical aspects of Torrance's thought.

THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

The best place to begin here is probably with the chapters "The Nature of Truth"³⁵ and "Problems of Logic"³⁶ in *Theological Science*, which contain much philosophical argumentation and definitely merit serious consideration on their own by contemporary philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians.

Torrance begins by suggesting some of the difficulties apparent with theological language. Our ordinary language usually operates on only one level of meaning, that of natural objects, while theological language tries to operate on two levels, referring to both the relativities of the space-time world and the Absolute. Also, our formal logic is suited only to conceptual abstractions, not dynamic actuality, a fact which forced Kierkegaard to

³⁴ See difference 1 (above, in section "Theology and Science"). Torrance presumably would reject my critical approach here as raising "meaningless" questions because it is outside the circle of actual knowledge. But this is precisely the point. Who is outside the circle? I reject his criterion of meaning as really "Socratic" rather than "scientific" in his use of these terms, i.e., it is an arbitrary presumption of what constitutes theological knowledge (see *TS*, pp. 119–20).

³⁵ *TS*, pp. 141–202.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 203–80.

insist that genuine theological thinking involves a “leap” commensurate with the rationality of Truth in Time or in Action, but absurd from the perspective of formal logic. Finally, theologians, like other scientists, are continually tempted to reduce the relation between thought and being to one of thought alone. In spite of these difficulties, Torrance is quite willing to offer an elaborate philosophical analysis, if not strictly in defense of, at least appearing to support and “explain” the theologian’s use of language.

After distinguishing statements, judgments, and propositions, Torrance refashions Hume’s distinction between statements referring to “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact” into *coherence-statements* and *existence-statements*. Existence-statements always point beyond themselves to the object(s) (and not merely object[s] of sense perception) intended, while coherence-statements refer primarily to other statements and seek to establish orderly patterns among our abstract ideas. As we might expect, the evidence for the truth of existence-statements is of quite a different order from that for the truth of coherence-statements. The latter are susceptible to demonstrative arguments or proofs, but the former are “provable” only by assuming what is to be proved, that is, by directly “intuiting” a reality in its objectivity and unity as a whole.³⁷

Again Torrance wants to avoid driving an absolute wedge between existence- and coherence-statements, for that would be a move of sheer irrationality: “[C]oherence-statements are properly made, as it were, at right-angles to existence-statements for that angular relation is the hinge of their meaning. If they are entirely detached as pure abstractions, self-sufficient and self-contained, and do not even have a general ontological reference, they lose real meaning [i.e., they become mere arbitrary *games*]. Existence-statements, on the other hand, are shot through and through with conceptual interpretation, so that unless they yield coherence-statements they are incapable of significance.”³⁸

Torrance goes on to say that the relation between existence- and coherence-statements is not logical but *practical*, that their connection is minimally that of a common usage of ordinary language, but that they also overlap in function and reference. “This means that our statements, whether existence-statements or coherence-statements, have an ambiguous nature, a primary and a secondary reference; the truth reference of existence-statements is primarily to existents, the truth reference of coherence-statements is primarily to other statements.”³⁹

Now this discussion is enough to warm the heart of any philosopher of language, especially the philosopher of religious language who sees several

³⁷ Ibid., p. 165. Torrance is following G. E. Moore’s analysis of Hume in Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (1922), p. 160, on this point.

³⁸ *TS*, pp. 169–70.

³⁹ Ibid.

possible connections with theological discourse as well as a host of potential problems relating theological and ordinary language. But what does Torrance do in this situation? Rather than pursue such a dialogue he proceeds to qualify the entire preceding philosophical analysis in such a way that it becomes almost irrelevant to the examination of specifically theological statements!⁴⁰ Here again we encounter the central ambiguity of Torrance's method: just as scientific analogies were used repeatedly to clarify the meaning of "scientific" theology, and then dismissed as really of quite a different order of things, so now philosophical analysis and theological method are apparently disconnected on the basis of their different "objective reference" or "grounds on which they are based."⁴¹ Torrance wants to make it very plain that theological statements have only formal similarities with other types of statements and are in no way dependent upon philosophical analysis for their validity, but only upon the material content of their objective reference.

Indeed our author even goes so far as to allow some genuinely devastating philosophical criticisms of the purported transcendent reference of theological statements. For example, how can human statements intelligently refer to what is said to be infinitely beyond the limits of human experience? And even if such statements be allowed, how could we represent an essentially nonlinguistic relation in language? Also, if theological statements are in some sense analogical, by what objective standard can we measure the strengths and weaknesses of our analogies? Instead of trying to meet these criticisms by critical reason on their own level, Torrance shifts the grounds of the argument to his analogy with the sciences which, he points out, face the same problems in trying to justify the relation of their existence-statements to their referents which are quite other than the statements themselves.⁴² Once again the alternatives posed are either silent skepticism or actual knowledge. Thus we are left ultimately with an Einsteinian sense of "mystery" or "awe" before the fact of human knowledge of God or his creation. "[The preceding philosophical challenges] need not be taken in a sceptical sense, for their truth lies in the fact that they reveal that in our knowledge of external reality, creaturely or divine, *we cannot account for its comprehensibility*; there is no purely theoretical bridge between our thinking and the objective reality of existence. Rightly taken this does not produce scepticism but what Einstein called 'awe' before a mystery which we shall never understand."⁴³

But if there is no "purely theoretical bridge" between thought and being, perhaps, as was suggested earlier, there is a practical one. Torrance's dis-

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 183–84.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 184. Italics mine.

cussion of the verification of theological statements combines the intuitionist and analogical elements previously mentioned with some pragmatic and existentialist motifs.⁴⁴

Theological statements are empirical statements in the sense that they arise a posteriori out of an actual encounter with objective reality. They do not arise from inference or analogical reasoning on the human side, but they are essentially analogical on the divine side through conformity to the Word and Truth of God. "If God is really God, He comes first, and is the ground of their truth, the determinant in our knowledge of Him as well as its referent."⁴⁵ Thus the verification principle of Torrance's scientific theology is "verification by the Grace of God," which he thinks is no more irrational than Paul's or Luther's teaching on Justification by Grace alone!⁴⁶ Knowledge and action are united in the Truth as it is in Jesus, we must both "live in the truth and do the truth."⁴⁷ "[T]here is no proof of the truth or of our knowing or speaking of Him apart from actual engagement with the Truth, in doing the truth and being true."⁴⁸ The specific mode of rationality appropriate to this Truth incarnate in Jesus Christ is of course *faith*, not faith as an ecstatic activity driving us beyond our reason, but faith firmly grounded within reason.⁴⁹

Allowing for the inevitable distortions which necessarily accompany such a compressed summary, I nevertheless think that the point of the several uses of science and philosophy in Torrance's method is now becoming clear: rather than supporting an advance to new theological frontiers they serve instead as bulwarks protecting a sophisticated Barthian fideism. Now this, admittedly, is a peculiar understanding of "rationality," peculiar to its Object, but is it perhaps so peculiar as to be better called something else? Torrance interprets theological rationality in such a way that its connections with ordinary rationality are by now barely discernible. This is especially apparent in his running controversy with Ronald Hepburn's *Christianity and Paradox*: "This very important point [i.e., that physics requires new concepts inexpressible in natural language] is one that R. W. Hepburn fails to appreciate adequately in his claim that theological language must be continuous with ordinary language—his argument against the theologian's use of language would also rule out what Heisenberg has to say here and reject the proper shift in language that must take place in all scientific thought."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ See Daniel D. Williams, "The Concept of Truth in Karl Barth's Theology," *Religious Studies* 6, no. 2 (June 1970): 137–45.

⁴⁵ *TS*, p. 174.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 198–99.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203. Torrance is here and elsewhere obviously challenging one interpretation of Tillich's conception of revelation.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292. See pp. 179, 187 f., 214, 219, 295, 320.

In the last analysis, however, Torrance does seem to give “natural” reason a little more breathing space when he admits that the truth or finality of such theological statements as “God is love” must be judged by our own reason and a decision made as to the ontological status of the reality in question.⁵¹ Thus we are led through the appropriate analogues to a “shock of recognition,” a repetition of original intuitive experiences, and a direct cognition of the denoted realities and the relevance of the analogues to them.⁵² Unfortunately, however, Torrance does not develop the empirical nature of these a posteriori existence-statements sufficiently to indicate whether they are falsifiable or whether they are perhaps peculiar in this respect also.⁵³

Our entire discussion in this section has revolved around issues traditionally treated under the rubrics of “natural theology” and “revealed theology.” On the matter of the relation of these two areas Torrance follows his model of “levels” of language, logic, and rationality appropriate to different dimensions of our experience. He wants to transform natural theology from a preamble, somehow detached from and yet determining revelation, into an important aspect of revelation. “Theological science is more deeply concerned with this sort of metaphysical thinking than any other science because it has for its primary object not this or that being, but the Source of all being, or the ultimate Ground beyond the ground of being.”⁵⁴ In a separate discussion of four-dimensional geometries and continuous space-time, Torrance puts this metaphysical, antidualistic sentiment thus: “[Natural theology] must . . . be undertaken in an integrated unity with positive theology in which it plays an indispensable part in our inquiry and understanding of God. In this fusion ‘natural’ theology will suffer a dimensional change and will be made *natural* to the proper subject-matter of theology. No longer extrinsic but intrinsic to actual knowledge of God, it will function as a sort of ‘theological geometry’ within it, in which we are concerned to articulate the inner material logic of knowledge of God as it is mediated within the organized field of space-time.”⁵⁵

Once more we see Torrance’s desire to convert dualism into duality in our philosophical reflection upon faith, but my argument in this section has been that he has so far not provided us with tools adequate for the task. In spite of this latter attempt to fuse natural and positive theology by means of an almost Hegelian transformation, it is quite evident that Torrance has not moved very far from his neo-Reformation roots in his understanding of the

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 237.

⁵² Ibid., p. 241.

⁵³ But see difference 1 (above, in section, “Theology and Science”) on the concept of “audits.” Perhaps this notion could be expanded along the lines of his discussion of formal and material verification, *TS*, pp. 198 f.

⁵⁴ *TS*, p. 289. See *GR*, pp. 97–100.

⁵⁵ *STI*, pp. 69–70.

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relations of philosophy and theology. We have been offered some reasons why “proofs” for God are unacceptable, indeed why theoretical justifications of any kind of knowledge are impossible, and hence why apparent irrationality is really rationality when thinking about God. Thus theological science seems to operate quite independently of philosophical inquiry, or else swallows it up in the guise of a transformed “natural” theology. This procedure seems to me to be very similar to that of positivists and reductive naturalists on the philosophical side when they legislate canons of meaning and verification which exclude theology from the realm of significance, or else transform theological statements into psychological, sociological, or anthropological utterances.

Torrance wrestles with another form of this same problem in his critique of the *Historie-Geschichte* distinction.

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Here, of course, the question is just how theological science and historical science proceed with regard to the fact of Christ, particularly in relation to the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Torrance seems to be well aware of the difficulty of establishing the nature of an historical “fact,” as well as the persistent temptation to reduce history to nature.⁵⁶ He tries to be particularly careful to avoid falling into the dualistic difficulties of an idealistic conception of history and a materialistic view of science which he thinks mars the work of Collingwood and Dilthey. A similar mistake underlies the *Historie-Geschichte* disjunction perpetrated by Hermann, Troeltsch, and Bultmann.⁵⁷

The historian, like the scientist, must pass beyond description and narration to *explanation* in his reconstruction of the past, but in doing so he must be careful not to impose modern standards of credibility and significance upon the data.

In undertaking this [task of historical explanation] we have to be aware of the changes in modes of thought and behavior that have come over the human race, and therefore have to be constantly on guard against any selection and organization of the facts governed by what modern people think, feel, and accept in case we work up those facts wrongly into a coherent whole by interpolating into them alien thoughts and intentions. Rather must we develop modes of interrogation that subject the source-material to such critical examination that they are made *to interpret themselves to us through their own latent hermeneutic*.⁵⁸

Torrance argues that there is a different kind of rationality inherent in historical events from that present in natural events. The latter are amenable to mathematical representation and the former to intentionality or purpose, a contrast which Torrance develops throughout his writings as the rationality of *number* versus the rationality of word or *logos*.

⁵⁶ *TS*, pp. 313–15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 317, n. 1. To my knowledge Torrance does not deal anywhere with the contributions of Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr to the faith and history debate.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 319–20. Italics mine.

Returning now to the question of Jesus Christ, we must begin by treating this historical event like any other, but we must learn quickly to ask questions in two opposite directions at the same time, in accord with both the nature and acts of God and the nature and acts of man. This will involve an interactionist rather than dualistic point of view with regard to the relation of God and history understood from the axis of Creation-Incarnation.⁵⁹ In his most dynamic reconceptualization of the Christian kerygma, Torrance argues that Christ

cannot be thought of simply as fitting into the patterns of space and time formed by other agencies, but as organizing them around Himself and giving them transcendental references to God in and through Himself. He generates within these connections His own distinctive and continuous “space-time track,” and forms a moving and creative centre for the confluence of world-lines within the plenum of space-time. The movement of eternity into time in Jesus Christ has the effect of temporalizing space, and spatializing time in an orderly continuum of successive patterns of change and coherent structures within which God may reflect and fulfil His own creative and redemptive intentionality.⁶⁰

Within this postmodern portrait of the incarnate yet cosmic Christ Torrance is definitely retaining the freedom and openness of historical becoming, but it does raise some questions about the relation of particular historical events to the Logos’s “space-time track.” How do we determine which events are decisive in interpreting the divine intentionality? What prompts us to ask questions in two opposite directions at once about historical occurrences? Finally, what is meant by source materials which “interpret themselves”?

Torrance’s fundamental answer to these questions is that *faith* is necessary to see the divine action in history, and once again we are up against the sheer theoretically inexplicable “givenness” of the divine in Christ. “We are thus led to interpret the historical events in the light of their own intelligibility in the incarnate *Logos* and in accordance with intrinsic processes of hermeneutic in the work of the incarnate Son . . . [T]he divine and the human are interlocked in one particular historical life that must be understood out of itself, through its own witness to itself, and in accordance with its own self-revelation through word and act in the actual context of space and time in which it was found.”⁶¹ Thus Torrance’s attempted maneuver out of the *Historie-Geschichte* dilemma is to be found in his appeal to the *complexity* of the historical fact itself, “for we are confronted with a *complex fact that includes its own interpretation as part of its facticity*.”⁶²

⁵⁹ *STI*, p. 71.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

⁶¹ *TS*, p. 326.

⁶² *Ibid.* See W. Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969); C. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968); and Helmut G. Harder and W. Taylor Stevenson, “The Continuity of History and Faith in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Toward an Erotics of History,” *Journal of Religion* 51, no. 1 (January 1971): 34–56.

Perhaps we can get a better grasp of this notion of “complexity” by returning to the model of different logical levels which are actually related but theoretically distinct. Torrance uses Gödel’s theorem to assure us that logical systems cannot be both consistent and complete, but must open “upwards” for their explanations. Applied to language this means that existence-statements and coherence-statements can be related without paradox or contradiction if we view them as on different logical levels. Applied to historical events it means that faith can use the Cross rather than formal logic to clarify its understanding of the problem or mystery of evil.⁶³ And it means that we can understand the Resurrection as a “complex” but not incoherent event.

If we abstract the Resurrection event from the “field of force set up by God in the Incarnation” and consider it only under the aspect of the laws of physics and chemistry, it is indeed a genuine stumbling-block. But if we think of it in terms not only of Christ’s life and work on earth, but in terms of his whole “space-time track in the cosmos,” we will be able to think of it in quite a different series of connections which enable us to recognize the inner reality and rationality of the Incarnation.⁶⁴ With the assistance of the Holy Spirit (the “immediate personal energy of the Being of God”) we are able to discern the special operational principles which emerge at this level and which explain this phenomenon without abrogating the boundary conditions operative at the lower level of physics and chemistry.⁶⁵

This ingenious combination of the “emergentist” logics of biology and faith is definitely one of the most intriguing aspects of Torrance’s thought, but in relation to the *Historie-Geschichte* puzzle, his appeal to “faith,” the special assistance of the “Holy Spirit,” and “a *unique* historical process characterized by an inherent duality that arises from the interaction of God with historical agency” which is distinct from the kind of becoming that “obtains in simple or common historical facts”⁶⁶ suggests that his dualistic tendency is still very much alive and influential.

CONCLUSION: THEOLOGY OLD AND NEW

Torrance’s criticism of the “new theology” of John Robinson, Harry Williams, Paul van Buren, and Werner Pelz, and the “God is dead” theology of Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton, is as revealing of his methodological assumptions and theological problems as anything we have so far considered.⁶⁷ Apart from some psychological carping,⁶⁸ Torrance’s major

⁶³ *TS*, pp. 264–65.

⁶⁴ *STI*, p. 85.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* See “The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit,” in *GR*, pp. 165–92.

⁶⁶ *TS*, p. 324. Italics mine. See the review of *Theological Science* by A. O. Dyson in *Theology* 74, no. 612 (June 1971): 271, which makes this last point.

⁶⁷ This section is based principally on two articles, “The Eclipse of God,” and “Cheap and Costly Grace,” originally published in 1967 and 1968 and reprinted in *GR*, pp. 29–85.

⁶⁸ E.g., *GR*, pp. 29, 41, and 55.

concern is with the dualistic epistemology of these recent theologies which has detached language about God from the Reality of God. The major villain in this piece is Kant, whose epistemological suggestion that we not only frame the questions we put to nature but in doing so also stipulate the answers she returns, has been taken to mean that “the only nature we know is the nature that is formed and shaped in our understanding of it.”⁶⁹ Thus some philosophers of science have been prompted to argue that, in the last resort, science is about propositions, not about realities in the world “out there” independent of us.

But Torrance responds that this approach overlooks some simple facts which stare us in the face and which cannot intelligently be put aside as merely subjective.

When a scientist lays bare the anatomical and physiological structure of the human body, he is not creating and imposing patterns upon it. When you yourself observe crystalline formations in the rocks you are not importing into them geometrical patterns of your own inventing, you think the geometrical patterns you find embedded in them already. That is why our basic statements are formed by way of a conceptual assent to what is there, or by way of recognition of an intelligibility inherent in the nature of things.⁷⁰

This epistemological *realism*, whether in the realm of nature or revelation, is the bedrock of Torrance’s theological method. And he tries to justify it not only in terms of common sense, but also in terms of the metaphysical assertion that science is never concerned with objects that are relative only to subjects, but with objects that are also relative to other objects. It is this interrelatedness of objects to one another that controls our subjectivities over against them. Thus Torrance is again confident that natural science provides a very useful model of “objectivity” in human knowledge.

When applied to the “new theology,” pure objective scientific theology, free from psychological and sociological contamination, is contrasted with new subjective (unscientific) theology which creates its thought out of its own self-expression. What is urgently required, argues Torrance, is an emancipation from imprisonment in ourselves which would enable us to distinguish the reality of God from our own subjective states and conditions. And the Church has always proclaimed that this kind of liberation is possible only through repentance and faith in Christ, which includes our being crucified to the world and ourselves in the light of Christ’s objectivity.

From this point of view the supreme difficulty with the “new theology” is its axiomatic assumption of a radical dualism between God and the world which automatically rejects any possibility of God’s interaction with the world and thus throws religious man back upon his own “self-understanding.” But we must learn to think not in separate spheres but on different levels

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷⁰ Ibid. See pp. 93–94.

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at the same time, and there must be interaction between these levels or else everything dissolves into meaninglessness and irrationality, as the "death of God" theologians have discovered.⁷¹ In any case, Torrance is firmly of the opinion that the "new theology" is simply a peripheral aberration, temporary flight into darkness, and not a true picture of what is going on at the center of scientific theology, which is in fact marching forward.

With this brief summary of Torrance's critique of some recent radical theology we have come full circle on the question of theological objectivity. Now we must ask whether here or in his dialogue with science, philosophy, and history he has made his case.

In the article referred to at the beginning of our study Torrance contends that Karl Barth has often been wrongly accused of theological dualism when he is ultimately an interactionist. "By an interactionist theology I mean one in which God is thought of as interacting closely with the world of nature and history without being confused with it, and by a dualist theology I mean one in which God is thought of as separated from the world of nature and history by a measure of deistic distance."⁷²

Now my contention throughout this essay has been that Torrance's constructive enterprise is caught up in this very same problem. I have tried to suggest that the notions of complementarity and objectivity in science, bipolarity and duality in philosophy, and logical levels and complex facts in history, although quite suggestive in themselves, have not been appropriated by Torrance's theology in such a way as to overcome his latent dualism. I have argued that Torrance has not been willing to integrate the formal aspects of these concepts with the material content of theology sufficiently to fuse them into a dynamic union and thus to use them as justifications for a particular theological method.

Whether I am right or not will of course depend upon several factors, not the least of which is how accurately I have represented Torrance's position. Although distortion is unintentional it is surely inevitable, and I am fully responsible for it. On the other hand, I trust my exposition has offered sufficient textual evidence at least to make my claim plausible, if not definitive or determinative.

Thus, if my analysis is correct, Torrance has been forced to argue for the actual interaction of God and the world without being able to give a defensible account of this divine activity, indeed often pointing to it as a mystery by nature beyond explanation. From the point of view of philosophical theology and the philosophy of religion this approach is ultimately self-defeating. If the "new theology" has severed God from God-language, Torrance has severed God and God-language from any other realm of

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁷² "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth," p. 121.

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discourse in such a manner that theology is forced into utter silence before the questions persistently thrust at it by the “world.”

I quite agree with Torrance’s insistence that contemporary theology must unite the ontological and dynamic elements of its approach, the Being of God in His Act and the Act of God in His Being, but so far Torrance has not been able to provide such a union. He has made a particularly bold stroke in *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, and is one of the few theologians I know at present working so diligently and fruitfully to rid us of our classical prejudices—from which I am sure my critique no doubt suffers!—in order to make sense of post-Einsteinian developments in physics and logic for theology. For undertaking such a monumental task he certainly deserves our gratitude and encouragement. But at this stage his project must still be considered work-in-progress.