

The Epistemological Development of Karl Barth

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KARL BARTH'S EARLY THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY, often expressed in terms of a negative dialectic or man's acknowledgement of being known, is characteristically founded upon a firm distinction between God and man, wherein the former is qualitatively different and wholly other than the latter. This distinction lies at the foundation of Barth's early dialectical theology and is frequently expressed throughout his commentary on Romans, as well as *Church Dogmatics*. For the early Barth, the extent of man's knowledge of God is aptly summarized in his opening remarks of *The Epistle to the Romans*:

We know that God is He whom we do not know, and that our ignorance is precisely the problem and source of our knowledge. We know that God is the Personality which we are not...The recognition of the absolute heteronomy under which we stand is itself an autonomous recognition; and this is precisely that which may be known of God. (*Epistle* 45)

It is somewhat surprising to find the same theologian, less than a decade later in 1936, claiming that "to know Jesus Christ is to know God, the one and only God, majestic and personal, the Creator and Lord of the world and man" (*Knowledge* 71). This later epistemological claim appears to lack the emphasis on the difference between God and man and even goes so far as to predicate positive properties of God.

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To understand this momentous shift that occurred in Barth's epistemology, one must first understand why he once held the belief that from the principle of man's qualitative distinction from God, it followed that man could only acknowledge God's knowing him. This paper will attempt to show the motivations behind his early negative dialectics as well as the reasons that Barth later came to reject this epistemological approach as inadequate and problematic for engaging in Church dogmatics, which reasons provided the impetus for his revolutionary neo-Orthodox approach to man's knowledge of God.

Barth's rejection of liberal Protestantism, epitomized for him in the work of Schleiermacher, is the primary influence on the structure of Barth's early negative dialectical theology. Through his response to Schleiermacherian theology, he creates the constraints of his theological scope and radical realism that force him to posit this negative acknowledgement. In attempting to avoid Schleiermacher's errors, Barth forced himself into a rigid form of realism, which he saw as the sole means of maintaining the distinction between God and man. In doing so, as will be shown, the affirmation of the distinction led him to deny the possibility of man achieving any other knowledge of God.

Barth interpreted Schleiermacher as fundamentally a realist, though not in the sense that eighteenth-century theology had used the term. Schleiermacher was a realist insofar as he rejected the idealistic unity in the internal relation between God and man's finite mind. At the same time, unlike the perspective of earlier realism, he did not posit an external relationship between the Supreme Being and man's finite understanding (Frei 36). Schleiermacher's realism did assert the direct presence of God to consciousness, whereby "awareness of God and awareness of oneself in relation to God are given together" (Frei 36). In saying this, however, Schleiermacher avoided creating the idealist relationship of identity between self-consciousness and its given object, God. Rather, for Schleiermacher, within the internal structure of faith there is, as its content, a direct presence, an immediate relation of God and the self. The content of this faith is given with its object "in such a manner that every attribute of or quality in the object is qualified by its being a content of consciousness" (Frei 38).

Barth saw Schleiermacher's error as two-fold. First, his version of theological realism erroneously asserted the direct communion between our self-consciousness and God, a unity that can never be posited as the

already given for theological inquiry. Schleiermacher's phenomenological realism included the conviction that we *could* encounter God within the subject-object relationship of self-consciousness, and further, that "the *similitudo dei* between the knower and known *must* take place" (Torrance 155). This communion, while certainly not falling into Hegelian idealism, still went much too far for Barth. To posit God as a given immediacy within one's own self-consciousness failed to respect the distinction between Creator and creature, God and human, that Barth saw at the heart of Christian doctrine. This is further bolstered by Schleiermacher's insistence that there can be no God-consciousness apart from our own self-consciousness. Hence the basis for Schleiermacherian theology turns out to be a form of philosophical anthropology, a conceptual move Barth would later attack as putting the proverbial cart before the horse.

The second error, and the heart of the problem for Barth, concerned the relation of Schleiermacherian realism to the concept of revelation. Schleiermacher's version of theological realism understood revelation as a given, a function of the structure of self-consciousness. For Barth, this was an utterly wrong understanding of revelation that failed to grasp the truth of God's freedom and sovereignty in the act of condescending grace. Schleiermacher's conception of revelation simply could not accommodate this indispensable theological truth. For Barth, in both his early and later writings, the revelation of the Word of God is the primary and initiating free act of God that allows proper theological inquiry to even begin! Schleiermacher cannot accommodate the foundational concept of grace that entails the real freedom of God, a freedom that precludes a relation always and already given. Revelation, for Barth, is not a static relation of immediacy but an address, a Word of understanding that issues from the grace-oriented freedom of God. Revelation can never be understood as given, but rather it is a giving, a miraculous act that refuses to be bound by the "constants of a relational datum" (Frei 52).

Not only did Schleiermacher's realism fail firstly to respect the gulf of deficiency between humans and God within the subject-object relationship and secondly to properly establish the free sovereignty of God in the act of revelation, it also had a flawed dualism. This dualism claimed that God's presence was found innately within the Christian self-consciousness and experienced in terms of givenness or absolute dependence. However, since such religious consciousness is ultimately "precognitive," Schleiermacher's theology could not have God as its object. Instead, "faith, or Christian

consciousness, is alone its norm and content” (Frei 43). In other words, Schleiermacher’s theology led to a collapsing of faith’s object into its content, causing faith’s object to be constrained by the given structure of faith’s content, as found in self-consciousness. However, for Barth, such a “constraint,” placed upon the Person of God by a philosophical theology, was a direct violation of God’s absolute freedom. He argued that a concept of faith that builds its object into the content of faith necessarily ignored the essential element that its content and form were founded upon. The distinctive element of Christian faith, upon which its form and content are entirely dependent, is its free and unique Object. Barth’s early and later work stressed the importance of faith’s Object over its content or form, thereby affirming the distinction between our knowledge and activity from its radically free and sovereignty Object.

In further response to the epistemological assumptions of Protestant liberalism, Barth borrowed from Kierkegaard the conception of God as “indissolubly Subject” (“Doctrine of the Word” 439), the Being that could not be translated into an object of philosophical epistemology or as the objective givenness found within his own self-consciousness. God is the Eternal Subject, the Actor, the Giver, and never the realized, objectified givenness on the basis of experience. Any attempts to understand God in Schleiermacherian terms were, at best, our grasping for God, or what Barth came to see as the essence of religion (as opposed to true faith). For the early Barth, speaking of the Word of God was speaking “of the subject which, turned into an object, is not what it is; of an object which can only be object for us in strict ‘non-objectivity’” (qtd. in Frei 52–53). However, in the very affirmation of this fact about the nature of God, Barth, operating under the rubric of the subject-object relationship of knowledge, was thereby forced to deny our ability to know God as object. Hence it is us, not God, who is here bring known, never able to turn God into an object for our cognition.

In order to overcome Schleiermacher’s failure to grasp the radical nature of God’s freedom in grace, Barth would have to proceed with a great deal of caution and clarity. His position had to avoid a type of realism that took the revelatory presence of God to humans as given in experience, violating the principle of God’s sovereignty (Torrance 143). In addition, Barth had to avoid falling back into an eighteenth-century realism that relied on an external relation between the Absolute Being and the finite mind, a position Kant’s critique of metaphysical knowledge had

already demolished (Frei 33). At the same time, he had to avoid an idealism that unified Subject and object, God and human, violating the wholly Otherness of God. Hence Barth had to create a radically new theological approach that embraced the realism that respected the qualitative difference between God and human and that also respected God's freedom in grace; the approach that eschewed Schleiermacher's phenomenological realism, the dead metaphysics of traditional orthodoxy, and Hegelian idealism.

The preceding discussion shows how these rigid constraints forced Barth to posit a God who, being utterly distinct from us and indissolubly Subject, could know us, but never be known by us. However, in characterizing the knowledge of God in these terms, Barth was himself committing one of the most grievous errors of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism! By situating his radical realism within the framework of philosophical epistemology, Barth was, in fact, interpreting the knowledge of God from an anthropocentric perspective. Barth's solution to Schleiermacherian theology maintained that God, qua Subject, cannot be known by our objectifying activity. But in his attempt to save God from being something immediately present in our own self-consciousness, Barth was actually limiting the sovereignty of God by failing to consider the possibility of God's choosing to become Object for us. In order to escape this confining problem, Barth would have to move beyond the dialectical reaction to Schleiermacherian theology to develop a new understanding of our knowledge of God, one that did not limit the sovereignty of God but nonetheless remained committed to the absolute heteronomy between God and human.

This transition is most clearly expressed in *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, written in 1930. Barth begins this unique re-reading of Anselm's famous proof of the existence of God by noting the distinction between the grammatical understanding of the Church's *Credo*, available to anyone who is able to understand the meaning and internal logic of the creed's propositions, and the *res* of the *Credo* that is available only to those *in* faith. The difference is between merely understanding the form or content of faith's confession and understanding the *res*, or object of faith. Although this distinction between faith's content and its object has been already been noted, Barth now carries his point a step further. Within Anselm's work, Barth found a call to a unique understanding, to knowing the *res*, that created an essential connection between faith and knowledge, though no longer in the form of a mere negative acknowledgement. Faith, Barth

writes, is “a striving of the human will into God and so a participation (albeit in a manner limited by creatureliness) in God’s mode of Being” (*Anselm* 17).

Barth later develops this positive statement of our participation in God’s mode of Being to be a participation in God’s Eternal Self-knowledge via His Eternal Self-objectification. This participation, in its limited and creaturely scope, is not affirmed on the basis of a capacity within us to apprehend the indissoluble Subject as object for our knowledge. To do that would be to fall back into imposing anthropological constraints upon theology. Instead, Barth affirms this possibility on the basis of *God’s* Self-revelation to us as Object for our apprehension. Herein lies the shift in Barth’s theological epistemology. In exercising *His* freedom God condescends to us as the eternal Subject and yet, through His miraculous gift of grace, allows Himself to be known in faith as Object by us. Barth says,

God reveals Himself to us in Jesus Christ as the One who does not owe us to Himself, but has bestowed Himself upon us... We can therefore describe God as an object of human cognition, and an object of human cognition God, only on the assumption that it has pleased and does please God... to make Himself the object of our cognition. (“Doctrine of God” 206)

This possibility is dependent upon both God’s Eternal Self-knowing act and God’s free gift of grace to know Himself in time as an Object for our knowledge. Barth expresses the magnitude of this miracle: “In His Word He comes as an object before man the subject. And by the Holy Spirit, He makes the human subject accessible to Himself, capable of considering and conceiving Himself as object” (“Doctrine of God” 10). In saying this, Barth has not fallen prey to the dangers of radical idealism; he has not lost the essential distinction between God as the eternal Subject and our knowledge of God as Object. In the first place, one is reminded that the participation in such knowledge is always limited and creaturely. Indeed, at the moment of God’s Self-revelation, God also reveals His Hiddenness, remaining veiled in his revealedness (Cochrane 127–29; Brown 155–58). In addition, continuing from the previous quote, Barth adds:

The real knowledge of God is concerned with God in His relationship to man, but also in His distinction from him. We therefore separate

ourselves from all those ideas of the knowledge of God which understand it as the union of man with God, and which...leave out the distinction between the knower and the known. ("Doctrine of God" 10)

Hence this new theological epistemology, as will be developed later, not only preserves Barth's earlier distinction between God and human, but actually deepens our understanding of this difference by its dependence upon the free act of God's revelation to us as the Incarnate Object-in-time.

It is this basis of knowledge that also leads to the centrality of Christology for Barth. The Object that the Eternal Subject revealed Himself to be is none other than Jesus, the Christ, the Eternally Begotten Word of God, the mediator between God and humans. Further, because of the Trinitarian reality of God-in-Christ, God in Himself and God revealed in time are identical. Thus "it follows that God has not given us a partial knowledge of Himself, but a full and complete knowledge" (Cochrane 126). Hence creaturely and limited knowledge does not entail a quantitatively smaller degree of knowledge of God's being; God is revealed in Christ in His fullness. However, while we know God in His fullness and in His mode of Being, it is not in the manner in which God knows Himself directly; we know Him only indirectly in his creaturely relation to the images and concepts of the apostolic witness. God "reveals [Himself in His fullness] to faith which sees it in its hiddenness, and which therefore perceives the majesty of God in the lowliness and humiliation of the crucified" (Cochrane 127).

It is also important to understand the nature of the Object that God became in Christ in Barth's later epistemology. Obviously, the Self-objectification of God in Christ, which is also indissoluble Subject, cannot be captured by the usual understanding of the subject-object relation. Barth writes,

Therefore [God] is not any sort of object: not an object which can give itself to be known and will be known just like any other object; not an object which awakens love, trust, and obedience in the same way as other objects. Its objectivity is the particular and utterly unique objectivity of God. ("Doctrine of God" 14)

As James Brown astutely points out in *Subject and Object in Modern Theology*, Barth, in describing the objectivity of God in Christ, uses the

term *Gegenstand* where one might normally expect *Objekt*, although both are usually rendered “object” in English. According to Brown, *Objekt* is generally used as the correlative to *Subjekt* and carries with it the usual epistemological dynamics of the subject-object relation. Brown’s contention is that “God, then, [as *Objekt* would] be *Objekt* in the dispassionate, reflective, objective speech proper to theology...*Objekt* is suited to the knowledge relation” (151). *Gegenstand*, Barth’s preferred term,

is the better word for the present reality of God to man in encounter, where God has stepped down into the circle of man’s sight, and stands over against him as commanding correlative, as *Du* and not *Es* (*Thou* and not *It*), as the initiating, controlling Subject who is never at man’s disposal. (Brown 151)

This linguistic point is supported by the previously cited passage wherein Barth distinguishes the Divine *Gegenstand* as more than just a passive object that “gives itself to be known.” The Object that is God is active within the domain of cognitive disposal, not merely an object that the subject appropriates in cognitive fields like a table or chair. Rather, God’s *Gegenstand* is an *activity* of Self-disclosure that reveals to us his true condition and demands from us a response of obedience, love, and trust. In addition, in describing the relationship in terms of *Gegenstand*, as opposed to the subject-object relation, one is blocked from assuming the identity of the knower with the known. In denying this idealist correlation, Barth continues to affirm his earlier distinction between God and humans, even between Revealed God as Object and knowing humans as subjects.

As the foregoing indicates, the unique nature of the objectivity of God means that for Barth’s theological epistemology, it is actually the Object, the Eternal Subject, who informs the subject. This object-determining aspect of Barth’s later epistemology has its parallel in Plato’s epistemological realism, though with the essential difference that such knowledge is not achieved by the proper guidance of our wisdom but is given in the grace-oriented activity of God. This reversal of Kantian epistemology provides the foundation for Barth’s theological epistemology. Within the act of faith, God not only reveals Himself to us within the veiled disclosure of His full reality, but God’s objectivity also enables a fuller, more complete human self-understanding. Barth here inverts the Feuerbachian model, which argued that increased self-knowledge leads to greater God-knowledge; for

Barth such anthropomorphizing is purely within the realm of religion and is utterly alien to the Revealed God in Christ. That is not to say, however, that Barth neglects anthropology in his theology. As alluded to earlier, for Barth, unlike what he perceived to be the trend in Protestant liberal theology, true anthropology must be founded upon a true Christology, not vice versa. Because the indissoluble Subject is also an activity of *Gegenstand*, God's Self-revelation also provides an anthropology that could not be achieved apart from such a gift.

The nature of this anthropological revelation is two-fold. Briefly, we come to know ourselves as we truly are only in seeing our alienation from God. This total depravity is revealed only by God's Word in Christ, and since the depravity is entirely of our own making, God's response of redeeming grace is the ultimate expression of his freedom in our behalf. It is the unqualified freedom of God that condescends to our situation. In Christ, God also reveals "the 'real man' who lives *for* God and *with* his fellow man" (Cushman 220). In Christ, Barth sees God revealing that we are not only willfully rebellious towards God, but suffer in desperate need for communion and fellowship with Him. The ontological status of humans is that of deficiency, of willful failure to fulfill the call to fellowship with God. Our alienation is self-induced (Cushman 219–21). Such an anthropology can be realized only via God's revelation to us; apart from the God-in-time, we are incapable of this self-understanding. Even in matters of self-understanding, our true knowledge of ourselves (apart from a mere scientific or phenomenological understanding) is solely determined by the Christological Object. However, this relation is not symmetrical. Hence Barth can say with confidence: "There is a way from Christology to anthropology. There is no way from anthropology to Christology" ("Doctrine of the Word" 148). The scope of this epistemological reversal is very broad for Barth; its importance for a proper anthropology is only one aspect that space allows in this paper.

I have attempted to show that Barth's epistemological development is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it shows a continuity within Barth's thought that might otherwise be overlooked in the midst of such a radical transformation. The early and late Barth both affirm the qualitative distinction between God and humans, a fact that we come to know as a result of God's revelation. This is founded upon the freedom and sovereignty of God, which remains central in both Barth's early and late epistemology. His early work uses the principle of God's

freedom to reject Schleiermacher's understanding of revelation, and the later Barth uses God's sovereignty to move beyond his previously limited epistemological framework in order to now affirm the possibility of a positive knowledge of God via His revelation in Christ. The relation between subject and object also remains essential to understanding Barth's early and late epistemology, though Barth rejects the Kantian formulation of this relationship in favor of a modified Platonic, object-determining conception.

In addition to these points of continuity, there are also essential differences between the approaches. For the early Barth, a proper theological realism understands God as the absolute, eternal Subject who is never Object for us. Barth later rejects this limitation and understands God's Incarnation in time as God's gift of Self-objectification, thereby creating for us the possibility of true knowledge of God and human qua the Eternal Object. In saying this, however, it is also important to note the uniqueness of this Object, and the radical difference Barth requires between the indissoluble Subject, freely chosen to become Object, and the other objects of our cognition. Barth therefore rejects any attempt to develop an anthropology apart from and prior to a Christ-centered theology. It is the gift of revelation in Christ that provides the basis for an authentic anthropology, one that properly recognizes our sinful alienation and our desperate need for redemptive reconciliation. This momentous shift in Barth's theological epistemology represents his profound deepening from a merely negative dialectician reacting to the defects of Schleiermacherian liberalism to a powerfully positive dogmatician, affirming the Christ-enabled possibility of our knowing God and enjoying Him forever.

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