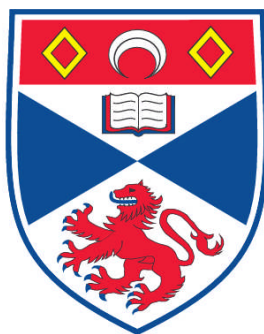# THE TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONS AND THE CONCEPT OF MORAL ORDER:
A STUDY OF THE EVANGELICAL ETHICS OF OLIVER O'DONOVAN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BARTH-BRUNNER DEBATE

Bruce D. Baker

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews

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UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

ST MARY'S COLLEGE

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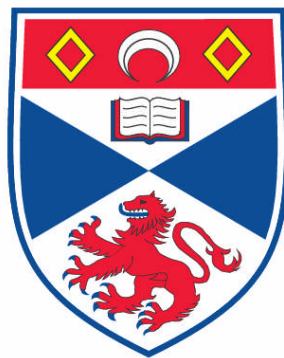# THE TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONS AND THE CONCEPT OF MORAL ORDER:

A STUDY OF THE EVANGELICAL ETHICS OF OLIVER O'DONOVAN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BARTH-BRUNNER DEBATE

A THESIS SUBMITTED BY

Bruce D. Baker

TO THE FACULTY OF DIVINITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ST ANDREWS, SCOTLAND

MAY 2010

Declarations

I, Bruce D. Baker, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 87,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2007 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in April 2008; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2007 and 2010.

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I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of PhD in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the evangelical ethics of Prof. Oliver O'Donovan in order to explore the implications of his "evangelical realism" for theological anthropology, moral knowledge and the concept of moral order. The Barth-Brunner debate regarding natural theology provides a lens onto these issues. Theological case studies are used to test our findings.

Chapter 1 provides an overture to these issues, paying attention to current ideas about human nature and morality, and the growing influence of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology.

Chapter 2 focuses on *Resurrection and Moral Order*, and elucidates the salient factors in its outline for evangelical ethics.

Chapter 3 diagnoses the challenges which a dialectical epistemology presents to the development of a doctrine of evangelical ethics.

Chapter 4 delves into O'Donovan's treatment of the Barth-Brunner debate over natural theology, and discovers therein an illuminating correspondence between O'Donovan's ethics and the concept of a human "capacity for revelation" (*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*), which became a hinge issue in the debate. This provides a helpful lens onto O'Donovan's concept of moral order.

Chapter 5 examines the intrinsic connection between the concept of moral order and the epistemic role of faith. Kierkegaard's treatment of the paradoxical aspects of faith as an event of epistemic access figures prominently in this analysis.

Chapter 6 brings together the results of our analysis and applies them to the thesis that: *the transformation of persons lies at the heart of evangelical ethics*. The cosmology of faith emerges as a critical hermeneutical factor in the development of a doctrine of evangelical ethics. We explore here the doctrinal implications for Trinitarian theology.

Chapter 7 draws out practical implications of our thesis. We see the central place of prayer and worship in evangelical ethics, and point out implications for teaching. Lastly, we show practical applications of our thesis by examining the bio-ethical issues of human reproductive technologies, with special attention to O'Donovan's work, *Begotten or Made?*

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I have been blessed richly by the gift of time and energy to pursue my studies in St Andrews, and I wish to acknowledge the gifts of companionship and encouragement from the persons who have transformed this time by filling it with meaning.

Professor Alan J. Torrance has been the catalyst, guide and visionary encourager of this work. Tim and Kerry Dearborn, my dear friends and mentors in Seattle, were right when they told me, "You must meet Alan!" They were wiser than I knew, and I had already thought them most wise. To benefit from Professor Torrance's friendship, in addition to his scholarship, has been an invaluable gift.

The personal attention of Professor Oliver O'Donovan has been an unexpected and exciting gift which has encouraged me greatly, and has transformed my reading of his work by bringing it to life with a fuller appreciation of his voice. Conversation with his students in Edinburgh also bore much fruit and gave me the gift of perspicacious partners in dialogue.

My examiners, Professors John Webster and Ivor Davidson, gave me a wealth of insight, and our conversation led to significant improvements in the flow of the dissertation and the specificity of the conclusions. I appreciate greatly their attention.

To spend time with friends is, of course, that incomparable grace which brings joy to every season, and I thank my mates at the "Roundel", and especially those in the Melville Room—Jeff Tippner, Luke Tallon, Kevin Diller, Amber Warhurst and Estifanos Zewde—because it is not good to be alone. Other brilliant traveling partners have been Rob MacSwain, Andrew Torrance, and Jason and Judy Goroncy. Paul and Mary Blair have especially enriched our lives by their friendship and faith.

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Back in the States, Chuck Orrestad and Bill Anderson proved to be able and interested readers. My mother Sharon, a teacher of teachers, was the most valuable reader and encourager. Bruce & Marleen Rognlien gave me the generous gift of a haven in which to read and write.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family—to Ryan, Natalie, Jillian and Jacob for being the apples of my eye, and to Linda for her steadfast commitment, insight, and determination to see me pursue my calling and get this job done.

CONTENTS

Abbreviations

Oliver O'Donovan:

R&MO *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*; Second edn. (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1994).

DN *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

WJ *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

39 Articles *On the 39 Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity (*Exeter, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1986).

Karl Barth:

CD *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley, 14 vols., eds. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975).

KD *Die kirchliche Dogmatik: Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes.* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1932).

Nein! *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner*. München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1934. ET: "No! Answer to Emil Brunner", in *Natural Theology*, ed. John Baillie (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

Emil Brunner:

Mensch *Der Mensch im Widerspurch: Die christliche Lehre vom wahren und vom wiklichen Menschen* (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1937).

MiR *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939).

NG *Natur und Gnade: Zum Gespräch mit Karl Barth*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1934.

NT "Nature and Grace", in *Natural Theology*, ed. John Baillie (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

DI *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: The Lutterworth Press, 1937).

D-HE *The Divine-Human Encounter*, trans. by Amands W. Loos (London: SCM Press, 1944).

Søren Kierkegaard :

F&T *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Sylvia Walsh; C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992).

1   THE QUEST OF EVANGELICAL ETHICS

Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Habakkuk 2:4 [NRSV]

Ethics as quest for a Point of Contact

This dissertation concerns the interaction of evangelical ethics with modern concepts of moral order. We find Professor Oliver O'Donovan to be a valuable guide in this regard, for his desire to put evangelical ethics on a secure and realistic footing that remains unabashedly evangelical while engaging simultaneously in fruitful dialog with the ethics of our secular age. It has become popular in western culture to conceive of religion as a suspect idea which has outlived its usefulness. Imbued with a patina of authority based on the ostensible claim to be scientific, modern biological and psychological concepts of the self vie with religious concepts in shaping the pattern of our cultural imagination. By innuendo, then, if not by explicit argumentation, today's popular western culture looks skeptically upon theology, especially dogmatics, as an appropriate vehicle for the conveyance of ethics. The difficulty encountered in the effort to reconcile an evangelical ethics with secular views of the modern moral imaginary is that faith is accused of being an "unscientific" and "closed-minded" epistemological conversation-stopper. "Surely, no one wants to be a fideist", says Bruce

Marshall, "This objection exploits our deep conviction—surely correct and important, as far as it goes—that in order to hold a belief in an epistemically responsible way (to hold it rationally, rather than fideistically) we must be able to offer reasons for the belief."[1] Yet this begs the question: what kind of reasons can these be, shaped and possessed as they are by faith?[2]

Our thesis is that the transformation of persons lies at the heart of evangelical ethics, because moral knowledge is bound inextricably with the event of faith. To understand faith as a transformational event is of the essence in evangelical ethics, though it represents an approach which seems to fly in the face of much thinking which passes for common knowledge. The inseparable bond between faith and moral knowledge presents a challenge to ethical discourse, raising the question of what it means for an ethic to be Christian, and "how such an ethic could be heard beyond the boundaries of the Christian Church".[3] Expressing concern that Christian ethics not be treated like a "faith-ethic" confined within the boundary of an arbitrary closed circle of like-minded believers, and therefore rendered irrelevant outside that closed circle, O'Donovan addresses the challenge of bringing evangelical ethics into dialog with contemporary moral philosophy. He aims to chart a course of well-balanced reason amidst the competing interpretive pressures of moral philosophy and theological ethics.

In seeking to make contact with the precepts of the modern moral imaginary, and speak with relevance in that dialog, O'Donovan develops some ideas about moral knowledge which engender conflict with the confessional affirmations of evangelical faith. The crux of the matter revolves around the concept of a "natural ethic" and the possibility of immanent, natural access to moral knowledge. The challenges of this approach to ethics can be seen also in the polemical arguments of Barth and Brunner during the first half of the last century. O'Donovan cites that debate as a prime example of how easily confused theology can become in the effort to locate a point of contact for moral knowledge.[4] He aims to sort out that confusion by applying his own style of epistemological realism. We shall discover through our analysis that the Barth-Brunner debate presents a valuable lens onto

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[1] Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000) 141.

[2] Cf. Hauerwas: "The task of Christian ethics is to help us see how our convictions are in themselves a morality"; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1984) 16.

[3] John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: the Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) 251.

[4] The term *Anknüpfungspunkt* ("point of contact") figures prominently in the controversy of the Barth-Brunner debate; we shall explore this concept further in Chapter 4.

O'Donovan's work. He admires Barth's epistemological rigor, and expresses sympathy for Brunner's approach to establish a point of contact for moral knowledge, yet finds them each to have been confused by the ontological and epistemological issues in play. Through the lens of this debate, we shall discover how the search for a "point of contact" in evangelical ethics brings together the doctrine of revelation, theological anthropology, the dynamics of faith, and the epistemic event of participation in the innertrinitarian life of God into a stormy convergence of doctrinal implications.

A few preparatory remarks will prove helpful in setting the context for our investigation; this opening chapter serves therefore as an overture to the analysis which follows, touching upon the broad themes that will shape our investigation. First, what do we mean by "transformation"? The answer to this question shall of course occupy the attention of later chapters, but for the moment, I note simply that transformation pertains to the effect and actualization of evangelical faith. Our meaning here must be informed by the biblical witness to *metanoia* as referring to a change in the whole aspect of a person's life, including awareness, understanding, faith, spirit and behavior.[5] The concept of the moral order is one to which we come by faith—we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, our selves, and the cosmogonies of our understanding.[6] Therefore, whatever we know of moral order, if it is to be understood rightly, it comes to us as transforming knowledge. The moral order, though it precedes personal faith and understanding, also proceeds through the moments of this transformation. To speak theologically of the moral order, therefore, is to speak of the

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[5] Rae has articulated the role of *metanoia* with more depth and clarity than we cover in the span of this dissertation. He gets at the core issue for why transformation matters in the present context: "we cannot assume therefore, that an epistemology which serves in science may also be the means of achieving cognitive progress in respect of God"; Murray A. Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation: by Faith Transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 141. *Metanoia* involves new access to revealed truth, as spoken in 2 Tim. 2:25: "God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth" (NRSV).

[6] The language of Romans 12:2 encompasses personal transformation in all of these dimensions, and is not limited strictly to the modern gloss "mind" for νοὸς, as translated in the KJV and many modern translations. Gordon Fee shows that the ethical importance of Paul's exhortation here (μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοὸς) requires to be interpreted in light of the personal transformation which occurs in and by the empowering of the Holy Spirit: "[T]he ethics of eschatological salvation in Christ starts with a renewed mind…Only dependence on the Spirit can enable one to know what is pleasing to God." Transformation in this sense is thus not merely a matter of human cognitive reason alone. It subsists in the transforming relationship of faith, as effected in and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson) 878. Some modern translations express the holistic nature of this transformation more fully; to wit: the *New Living Translation*—"let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think"; the *New Century Version*—"be changed within by a new way of thinking"; and *The Message* paraphrase by Eugene Peterson—"You'll be changed from the inside out."

transformation of persons. We are either being transformed by the renewing of our minds, which occurs in faith, or we presume to have found some other point of contact with the ontological reality of the moral order—a presumption which also requires faith, though of a different sort.

"Explaining Religion"

The presumption that there exists a point of contact with moral reality has long exercised the attention of theologians and philosophers; our present age is no exception. If anything, the presumption of epistemic access to moral reality has grown all the more prevalent in recent decades. This presumption has gathered momentum through the beliefs that give shape to our secular age.[7] Pressure in this direction of interpretation—to view the moral order as an objectifiable "something out there" which is accessible through some point of contact with it—is indicated by the energy spent on a variety of proposals to explain the nature of ethics. These proposals come from many directions, and with increasing audacity. Neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and the human genome project all contribute an aura of scientific credibility to theories that ground human nature in mechanistic, materialistic concepts. Ethics is thereby constrained to be conducted within the premises of non-teleological evolutionary processes based upon chance and necessity.[8] As one indication that momentum in this direction of interpretation is cresting, we can look to the scientific project titled (unusually bluntly for a scientific dissertation), "Explaining Religion". In late 2007 scientists from 14 universities began research to identify the biological causes of moral thinking and religion, and to develop a theory of mind to accommodate their findings.[9] The *Economist* reported

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[7] Charles Taylor gives a masterful rendition of the advent of the Modern Moral Order which shapes much modern thought; Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

[8] Jacques Monod developed famously the non-teleological import of evolutionary theory in *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Knoph, 1971). Donald MacCrimmon MacKay offers a perceptive rebuttal to this view; MacKay, *Science, Chance and Providence*, (The Riddell Memorial Lectures Forty-Sixth Series Delivered at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne on 15, 16, and 17 March 1977; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 30-39. Cf. MacKay's Gifford Lectures published as *Behind the Eye* ed. Valerie MacKay (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1991) 228-9.

[9] The Oxford website describes the project in these terms. The researchers presume, apparently, that moral thinking and religion are linked, if not synonymous—a presumption that turns out to be prescient in light of what follows in this dissertation; though not, of course, for the reasons they would suspect. The 2-million-Euro project is based at Oxford's School of Anthropology. Details are available at: http://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/latest/news/article/date///explaining-religion-conference/.

nonchalantly the reason for the scientific project: "Religion cries out for a biological explanation".[10]

We might describe the cosmogony which results from these influences as "evolutionary ethics".[11] Some theorists claim that, given enough scientific evidence, all moralistic behaviors can be explained within the terms of this non-teleological cosmogony, and therefore the idea that morality somehow derives from a transcendent spiritual reality should be considered incoherent, meaningless and outdated. This interpretation argues that theological ethics represents an incoherent expression of reality, and should therefore be considered to be merely a self-delusional state of mind that either serves the interests of an animal's genetic reproduction, or is a spandrel of those same evolutionary factors.[12] Sobel and Wilson, advocates of evolutionary psychology, represent this point of view—they find no fundamental difference between the altruism of human beings and the reproductive cycle of the trematode parasite *Dicrocoelium dendriticum* which takes the form of a "brain worm" which bores into an ant's nervous system.[13] On this view, compassionate altruism and brain worm parasitism each fulfill the same reproductive purposes.[14] These views of human nature pose a major question for theological anthropology in light of modern pressures of interpretation: What is the conscience? Is it a natural capacity marked by intellectual powers, perhaps even a genetically favored capacity carried in DNA? Is it an aspect of the supernatural soul of a person? Or is it merely an artifact of the experience of consciousness—

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[10] "Where Angels No Longer Fear to Tread", *The Economist*, 22 March 2008.

[11] E.g., Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Pantheon) 327ff, and *The Evolution of God* (New York: Brown, 2009) 77.

[12] This makes altruism a challenging problem within evolutionary explanations. Richard Swinburne observes that "Altruistic behavior is a central feature of animal behavior"; Swinburne, *Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986) 219. In his attempt to reconcile altruism with evolutionary ethics, Swinburne illustrates the degree of imagination required to do so: "A human race which is clever enough to have a morality will be too clever to have for long that apparently incoherent morality which will give the best advantage in the struggle for survival. It will, however, be clever enough to survive despite its more coherent morality being less than perfectly suited for survival" (139ff). He cites the similar view of Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981).

[13] Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolutionary Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 18.

[14] We should not be surprised then that Robert Wright's conclusion extends the problem of altruism to the problem of love. He concludes that love should be doubted, because "After all, love, like hate, exists only by virtue of its past contribution to genetic proliferation"; Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Pantheon, 1994) 340-1. idea that ethical sensibilities are attributable to natural selection is an idea that can be traced back at least as far as Darwin: "the following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts,… would inevitably acquire a moral sense of conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed as in man"; Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, second edition (London: John Murray, 1875) 98.

a name we give to feelings related to certain behaviors? Perhaps it is none of the above.[15]

Following Darwin's lead, Frans de Waal offers an explanation currently popular among

evolutionary psychologists—

> Conscience is not some disembodied concept that can be understood only on the basis
> of culture and religion. Morality is as firmly grounded in neurobiology as anything else we
> do or are.[16]

On this view, conscience is not a thing (i.e., *ding an sich*); but rather, conscience is a

property or phenomenological description of bio-physical states of mind related to behavior

in which the organism (a human being, say) perceives feelings of comfort or discomfort

which it perceives as being related to the decisions involved in behavioral choices. This

concept finds support in the vast and growing body of evidence for physicalist and biological

explanations of human behavior. Thus, evolutionary ethicists and even some theologians

have come to the conclusion that conscience, moral reasoning, religious faith and other

capacities of human consciousness are all to be conceived as phenomenological descriptions

of traits determined by objectifiable bio-physical states. It is hardly surprising therefore that

the Oxford consortium seeks to "explain" religion and moral reasoning in terms of bio-

physics and evolutionary psychology.

Perhaps more significant for our study here are the theologians who would seem to

endorse this same view. The primary difference between the theologians and the evolutionary

psychologists is that the theologians decline the seemingly obvious implication of their

physicalist conjectures: namely, that physicalism, *simpliciter*, equates to determinism, and

therefore presents an indubitably severe obstacle to orthodox doctrines of freedom, sin and

atonement. Of the several physicalist views of theological anthropology which have been

recently proposed,[17] the version of non-reductive physicalism (NRP) presented by Murphy,

Ellis and Brown provides perhaps the clearest example of the issue being raised with respect

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[15] Indeed, John Webster shows that an evangelical concept of "conscience and the moral field" fails to be
defined by such categories. He points to the need for a "theological renovation of conscience", with reference to
the tortuous paths of modern theological ethics; Webster, 'God and Conscience', *Calvin Theological Journal 33*
no 1 (1998): 104-24, 104.

[16] de Waal cites the curious case of Phineas Gage, who in 1848 suffered a "hideous accident" which drove a
metal rod through his head, wiped out part of his brain, and left him with an altered capacity for moral
deliberation. Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 216-7.

[17] Marc Cortez, *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies* (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, 2006)
12, presents a thorough taxonomy of these, including: Nonreductive physicalism (Van Gulick), Dual-aspect
monism (Jeeves), Constitutional materialism (Corcoran), Emergent monism (O'Conner) and
Reductionism/materialism (Dennett, Churchland, et. al.).

to evangelical ethics.[18] Since NRP presumes that all human behavior is based wholly in

physical, objectifiable and ultimately observable states,[19] theological ethics and evolutionary

ethics can be reconciled on the basis of their shared ontological presumptions regarding

human nature and the moral order. The proponents of NRP consider this reconciliation of

theological and "natural" ethics to be a boon for dogmatics. I should like to examine that

claim carefully in the following chapters, paying particular attention to implications for

theological anthropology and trinitarian theology in general, in order to discern whether this

idea of reconciliation has imported epistemological presumptions at odds with evangelical

ethics.

Murphy, again representing the views of NRP, claims that moral reasoning can be

explained in terms of neurophysiology alone.[20] Furthermore, she claims NRP "explains

neurobiologically why an approach to moral analysis and moral education based on narrative

accounts of virtuous lives should be more effective than its competitor [sic]."[21] To conclude

that morality is a function of educated proficiency in narrating exemplary biographies seems

to leave gaping holes in Christological and pneumatological doctrines, if not an outright

denial of the very idea of evangelical ethics. Indeed, the proponents of NRP are correct to

notice that "It could be argued that the experienced sense of moral obligation is an illusion."[22]

This result of NRP is not surprising, however, given that it begins from the same starting

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[18] See: Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress,1996); Warren Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress,1998); Warren S. Brown, "Neurobiological Embodiment of Spirituality and Soul", in *From Cells to Souls – and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. by Malcolm Jeeves (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Nancey Murphy, "Nonreductive Physicalism", in *In Search of the Soul: Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem*, Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2005) 115-152; Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?: Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will* (New York Oxford University Press , 2007).
[19] Warren Brown, Conclusion: Reconciling Scientific and Biblical Portraits of Human Nature', in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature,* Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Malony, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 213-228, 228.
[20] Nancey Murphy, 'Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues', in *Whatever Happened to the Soul* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 127-148, 142.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Murphy and Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress,1996) 16. In this regard NRP seems well suited to provide, ironically, theological encouragement to atheistic titles such as Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006).

principles as evolutionary ethics regarding the need to explain moral reasoning in terms of materialistic chance and necessity.[23]

NRP serves to illustrate the challenging doctrinal implications these new strands of theology present for theological anthropology. In particular, we notice the implications for the idea of conscience. Is conscience merely "the experienced sense of moral obligation", and therefore to be considered a mere illusion? To put the answer in a nutshell, proponents of NRP describe conscience as an *emergent property*. Jeeves sums up the idea of emergence at work in NRP theory—through evolutionary development, the biological complexity of organisms increases to the point where "something approaching the nature of evidence for a conscience emerges". Thus,

> [C]onscience is not some disembodied concept that can be understood only on the basis of culture and religion. Again, to quote de Waal, "Morality is as firmly grounded in neurobiology as anything else we do or are."[24]

The idea here is that conscience and consciousness emerge as properties of any sufficiently complex biological "thinking-machine", which is of course a handy analogy in the computer age.[25] The idea of what it means to be human thus begins to take on properties related to information-processing. This has implications for the doctrine of *imago Dei*,[26] as we shall see in the following chapters, for the computing analogy reinforces the idea that

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[23] Murphy and Ellis sound remarkably close to the intentions of the *Explaining Religion* project when they position the rationale for their book as an effort to meet "the need for an objective grounding for morality"; *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress,1996) 1.

[24] Malcolm Jeeves, 'The Nature of Persons and the Emergence of Kenotic Behavior', in *Work of Love: Creation and Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 83. Warren Brown emphasizes that "the term "emergent" does not here refer to emergent *entities* or to new physical forces, but rather to emergent *levels of causal efficacy*. On these grounds he is able to defend NRP as being merely the deductive conclusion of "emergent monism"; Brown, 'Neurobiological Embodiment of Spirituality and Soul', in *From Cells to Souls - and Beyond*, ed. by Malcolm Jeeves (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 65. Jeeves prefers to state his own view in terms of "*irreducible intrinsic interdependence*, which manifests *duality without dualism*", in order to avoid some nuances of Brown's theory; Jeeves, 'Toward a Composite Portrait of Human Nature', in *From Cells to Souls - and Beyond,* 241.

[25] According to Hoyle, the answer to "What are we?" is simple—"each of us is a complex electronic computer." Sir Fred Hoyle, *Man in the Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966) 31.

[26] To describe conscience as an emergent property leads immediately to the suggestion that ethics is also a function of emergence brought about through the highly specialized intelligence of *Homo sapiens*. In his Gifford Lectures, Holmes Rolston, III supports this view, and he shows how it leads directly to serious implications for the doctrine of *imago Dei*: "[T]here is a profound sense in which we humans in the twentieth century, in an age of science, turning the next millennium, know for the first time who and where we are." Rolston, *Genes, Genesis and God: Values and Their Origins in Natural and Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 213. Sadly, he also shows how the presumptions of evolutionary ethics can lead to poor exegesis. From his view that altruism is an evolved trait rooted in Darwinian selection, he takes Deuteronomy 6:24-25 out of context and cites it as an example of tit-for-tat thinking which serves the selfish genes of the Hebrews; 218f.

what defines the essence of humanity (i.e., the *humanum*) is the capacity for rational thought. If given sway in theological anthropology, this concept tends to imply that moral reason is a sufficient (if not the sole) means of discernment of moral reality. This idea too will reappear in the analysis to follow.

Dialog within our secular age

Already we can see the challenge that the intellectual momentum of our age presents for communication of an evangelical ethic which can be understood as relevant. Our analysis will therefore face the challenge of discovering how our thesis regarding evangelical ethics and the transformation of persons (not merely of neurons) can engage in dialog with the current strands of theology and science. This challenge seems formidable enough, yet the pressures upon theological interpretation today do not come only from the direction of scientific progress. There is a story to be told also of the tectonic movements in philosophy and the cultural imagination. It's not our task to tell that story here, but rather we shall take note of it as we pay attention to the ways these movements of thought affect the analytical exercise awaiting us in these pages.[27] The modern idea of the "self" (and equally importantly, the "Self" with a capital "S") has serious consequences for the development of theological ethics. Taylor provides a particularly useful analysis of how these modern conceptions of the self express themselves within the social imaginary in terms of the "Modern Moral Order" (MMO).[28] On Taylor's view the modern moral imaginary is shaped by the "disembedding" of the self from the universe of meaning. No longer do identity and moral significance derive from their context in the web of creation. Rather than living in an "enchanted" universe dappled with meaning, we now live in the "disenchanted" universe, wherein each person is defined as an autonomous self and left to their own devices to discover their identity and discern moral reality.

The effect of these intellectual and cultural mindsets is to create an "epistemic-moral predicament" caused by a shift in worldviews, which favors materialistic explanations of

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[27] Others have told the story of the intellectual and cultural imaginary with far more insight and beauty than we could attempt—Charles Taylor, Jacques Barzun, Stanley Hauerwas, Anthony Thiselton and John Milbank, to name but a few.

[28] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

reality and hermeneutical presumptions compatible with modern science.[29] This shift has spawned "a revolution in our understanding of moral order",[30] brought about through the influences of new understandings of what it means to be a self, a human being, a pulsating vessel of genetic information of sufficient complexity to display emergent phenomenological properties such as consciousness, conscience, "soulishness",[31] and so on. The advent of the MMO thus creates a new set of pressures for theological interpretation that are far removed from the influences of those "embedded" in or "bestowed" upon "pre-Enlightenment Christianity".[32]

The emphasis of the MMO upon new concepts of the self affects theological ethics much as it does secular moral philosophy. The modern concept of the self is however far from monolithic in either secular or Christian thought; there exists a "large number of cultural possibilities which compete for the self in the contemporary context".[33] Both are subject to the new pressures to interpret moral reality in terms of the autonomous, rational self. As we have seen already in the very few examples mentioned above, this fragmentation is as widespread in Christian as in secular thought.[34] Because ethics deals with ultimate values and ultimate ends, epistemological presumptions play a crucial role in outcomes. Where you begin is where you end. Thus, our analysis of evangelical ethics will need to keep a weather eye upon the hermeneutical fronts driving the development of theological doctrine, in order to

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[29] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 366.

[30] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 157.

[31] This is the term of choice for NRP proponents who wish to avoid reference to the "soul" in any form that would lend ontological significance the idea. While proponents of NRP do not presume that science can ever prove that the soul does not exist, they do intend to show that rather than having ontological reality, "soul is manifest in the potentialities, characteristics, or attributes that allow humans to be related to others, to the self, and to God"; Warren S. Brown, 'Conclusion: Reconciling Scientific and Biblical Portraits of Human Nature', in *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 225. On this view, it is better to use 'soulishness' as an adjectival noun rather than soul as a nominal reality. Jeeves identifies the distinctive component of "soulishness" as being "the capacity for social relationships [which] is itself, according to evolutionary theory, an evolved capacity…different from those of our nearest, nonhuman primate relatives." Jeeves, 'Mind Reading and Soul Searching in the Twenty-first Century', in *From Cells to Souls - and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 27.

[32] See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, and Linda Woodhead, 'Theology and the Fragmentation of the Self', *International Journal of Systematic Theology 1* (1999): 53-72, 61.

[33] Woodhead, *op. cit.*

[34] David Brooks sums up the prevailing sense of confusion over the location of the moral self: "There still seem to be such things as selves, which are capable of making decisions and controlling destiny. It's just that these selves can't be seen on a brain-mapping diagram, and we no longer have any agreement about what they are"; "The Morality Line", *New York Times,* 19 April 2007.

identify any epistemological presumptions which might be tacitly imported into explanations of the moral order.[35]

There are two salient hermeneutical pressures at work here, each of which is propagated by the impetus of the disembedding of the self from the universe. First, in the new "disenchanted" universe, self-understanding comes no longer through the personal feeling of connection with God's creation—enchanted, as it is, by virtue of its being the source and context of all meaning—but rather, concepts of identity and moral significance in the disenchanted universe are now presumed to be self-determined. That is to say, our cosmogony of meaning has become grounded within a self-derived conception, rather than an objective and pre-existent ontology.[36] The disembedded self thus becomes the autonomous creator of its own identity, as well as the progenitor of its own moral reality. This has the effect of suggesting that morality exists merely in the mind of the beholder. Thus, human capacities of discernment and reason come to dominate the moral imagination. If this capacity is, in turn, considered to be dominated by personal religious experience, it can lead to a voluntaristic form of divine-command morality.[37] In keeping with the scientific mindset of our secular age, however, this personal discernment is typically considered to function through the exercise of the human capacity of reason. In either case, the autonomy of the disembedded self places a premium upon individualism.

Second, the disembedding of the self suggests that the universe may be treated as an objective (or at least, objectifiable) reality, which is, ontologically speaking, separate and distinct from the self. By extension, this means that the structures and orders of the universe may now be presumed to be accessible through the human powers of discernment and reason. This emphasis upon the objectivity of reality also reinforces nicely the dominant scientific heuristic of the age, and it speaks in favor of a point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*).

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[35] Woodhead, *op. cit.,* 69, offers insightful examples to demonstrate that "the contemporary debate about selfhood is an intra-Christian as well as a secular one"; therefore the fragmentation thesis deserves careful nuance.

[36] Douglas Porpora has studied empirically the loss of meaning experienced in our present-day culture and finds it to emanate from just such a disconnection from a sacred ontology. He comes to the conclusion that: "our cosmic disorientation is itself a consequence of an emotional disconnection from the sacred. It is a consequence of our estrangement both from a certain range of emotions and from a vocabulary through which those emotions might be understood"; Porpora, *Landscapes of the Soul: The Loss of Moral Meaning in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 153.

[37] Colin Gunton rightly names the embarrassing issue stemming from the construal of theological ethics as being determined at the whim of personal experience: "How do we avoid the charge of arbitrariness, of sheer assertion?"; 'No Other Foundation: One Englishman's Reading of *Church Dogmatics*, Chapter v', in *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988) 61-79, 74. Gunton links this charge to Barth's emphasis upon "the fundamental reality of … our indwelling in Christ", 65.

Thus, individualism and the objectification of moral reality are the twin offspring of the disembedded self and the disenchanted universe. The synergy between these outcomes produces a new pressure in the direction of immediacy for moral knowledge. That is to say, access to moral knowledge is presumed to be a personal matter not requiring mediation by God or any other party. This effect holds true whether morality is considered to be a personal and subjective matter existing within the mind of the beholder, or an objective reality which is "out there". In either case, the very concept of revelation becomes an embarrassment to the academic discipline of theology as practiced in our secular age.

Sense and nonsense

This is why Colin Gunton is right to begin his treatise on revelation by asking the question, "Why are we embarrassed by the concept?"—the concept of revealed religion, that is.[38] Gunton explains that ever since Hegel, "theology has been dominated by quests for different forms of immediacy".[39] Revealed religion has become an embarrassment. This is the predicament imposed upon theology by the precepts of the moral imaginary in our secular age. Theologians are therefore placed in the challenging and embarrassing predicament of being asked to "say something theological", which as Hauerwas points out, is a challenge in the form of a question that doesn't believe in the possibility of a cogent answer. The implied challenge is this: "Say something theological in a way that convinces me that you are not talking nonsense."[40] The question is phrased so as to rule out the possibility of an answer, for the presumption is implicit—there can be no such thing as revealed truth, because our modern moral imagination disdains (if not rejects outright) revealed truth. Robert Wright represents the view of contemporary secular humanism when he concludes matter-of-factly: "The fact that there's a moral order out there doesn't mean there's a God."[41] The clear implication is that revelation is superfluous to moral knowledge.

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[38] Colin Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 2.
[39] Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 3-4.
[40] Stanley Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological", in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983), 16.
[41] Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Pantheon, 2009) 434. He concludes of the Abrahamic faiths: "Certainly things are looking bad for the traditional claim that they're religions of *special* revelation", 432).

This is the intellectual climate of our culture into which theology speaks today. If we are to agree that the moral order is *out there*, how then are we to speak with any credibility of Christian ethics and dogmatics, which are based in special revelation? How are theologians to respond to these many and various pressures in the direction of replacing revelation (and especially special revelation) with various forms of immediacy with respect to the moral order? Thus we see that the issue of epistemic access to the moral order lies at the heart of evangelical ethics, for the *euangelion* proceeds by faith. This same controversy over epistemic access figured prominently in the Barth-Brunner debate of the previous century. Though that debate is categorized famously as a disagreement over the concept of natural theology, the crucial issue concerns epistemic access to revealed truth. As we shall see, one particular concept which emerges from that debate deserves our focused attention here—*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, a concept pertaining to the human capacity to perceive moral order, and the capacity of the creation to reveal moral order. These ideas figure centrally in the Barth-Brunner debate, and we shall see how they cast a useful lens onto the course of O'Donovan's evangelical ethics. By means of this focal point, we shall examine the mutual implications of theological anthropology and evangelical ethics. This examination will shed light the questions surveyed above, for it is here that all roads seem to intersect—neurobiology, evolutionary psychology, the social imaginary, and the epistemological presumptions of dogmatics, faith, revelation and the creeds all intersect in evangelical ethics.

High-water marks of polemics & deep waters of epistemological presumptions

In our analysis, we shall need to pay scrupulous attention to the epistemological presumptions contained within the development of doctrine pertaining to a point of contact for knowledge of the moral order. This is for the simple reason that *the very concept of such a point of contact is itself an epistemological presumption*.[42] In terms of polemical energy, I can identify two high-water marks which involved debate over the concept and possibility of

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[42] Gunton warns wisely of the need to avoid fundamentalism, by checking epistemological presumptions at the door: "What is foundationalism? Broadly speaking, it is the belief that there must be universal and common epistemic foundations for anything claiming to be thought, or authentically 'scientific', foundations moreover which are determinable in advance of any particular object of enquiry." Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 48.

an *Anknüpfungspunkt* for theological ethics. The first is the Barth-Brunner debate of the Nazi era, from whence sprung their invectives regarding the possibility of an *Anknüpfungspunkt* and the meaning of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, the *Barmen Declaration*, and the great stream of follow-on references, both in their own works, as well as in the works of many commentators who took up the standards on both sides of the so-called debate over "natural theology". The rubric "natural theology", adopted by so many commentators to refer to the famous "debate" can be perhaps a bit misleading, for although Brunner and Barth did indeed disagree over the viability of "natural theology" (*theologia naturalis*), they focused their remarks upon the underlying issues: doctrines of grace, revelation, *imago*, and the question whether there is a point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*), which pertain to the epistemological premises upon which a *theologia naturalis* might be constructed.[43] Barth gets to the real issue of the debate quickly—

> [W]e must learn again to understand revelation as grace and grace as revelation and therefore turn away from all "true" or "false" *theologia naturalis* by ever making new decisions and being ever controverted anew.[44]

The debate over natural theology does not center on the question of whether order is discernible within the creation (or "cosmos" or "universe", if you prefer to avoid cognates of the verb "create").[45] On this point the Psalmists and New Atheists can all agree: yes, order is *there*. The more interesting question is rather: on what basis do you claim epistemic access to *ethical understanding* of the moral order? The real problem in the Barth-Brunner debate is the doctrine of revelation which undergirds the concept of a *theologia naturalis*. How you answer that question will determine your doctrine of revelation, which in turn has implications for doctrines of theological anthropology, Christology and pneumatology, as we shall soon see. Barth thus captures the essential issue at hand—a doctrine of revelation as grace has implications for the event of personal transformation (i.e., "being ever controverted

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[43] Brunner titles his closing section of *Natur & Gnade*, "The Significance of *Theologia Naturalis* for Theology and the Church", and Barth picks up in his response, "*Nein!*" where Brunner left off, by intoning, "But my soul is innocent of ever even having dreamt of the idea that it was a task of our theological generation to find the way back to a 'true *theologia naturalis*'!" *Nein!* 70.

[44] *Nein!* 71.

[45] Ontological issues related to the structure of the universe, including its moral order, could be addressed within a theology of nature, without challenging Barth's appeal to "revelation as grace". McGrath, for one, has made respectable strides in this regard, though when he claims to offer a "Trinitarian natural theology", he has substantially redefined the term from what concerned Barth and Brunner in their debate of *theologia naturalis*. McGrath's Trinitarian natural theology functions more like a theology of nature. Alister McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

anew") as a component of moral knowledge, and as an indicator of the shape of the moral order. As we have seen in the preceding analysis of the pressures upon direction of interpretation, the tendency is to replace revelation by one or another theory of immediacy as comprising the means of epistemic access to the moral order. Barth has stated crisply what he determines to be the decisive factor—to understand *revelation as grace* and *grace as revelation*, and the implications of this doctrine for personal transformation. The implications of Barth's view will feature prominently in our analysis.

The second high-water mark in polemics has occurred just recently here at the turn of the millennium. The current spate of arguments pits the so-called "New Atheists"[46] against just about everyone else. The New Atheism proclaims religion to be a fatally flawed and dangerous delusion—an unfortunate, deadly, and even "evil", spandrel of the evolutionary process. We need say no more about this new strain of exhortation (or "meme" as the case might be) other than to note how it generates yet one more pressure in the direction of non-teleological interpretation. The New Atheists can claim to draw support from the pretext that the MMO is based in the hermeneutic principles of the objective physical sciences. They claim, presumptively, that whatever moral order is contained within the structure of the universe and the *humanum*, these can be considered with certainty to be accessible to the innate, universal, natural powers of human reason.[47]

Pressing on into evangelical ethics, with Oliver O'Donovan

In the midst of the fractious intellectual climate of the moral and cultural imaginary, Oliver O'Donovan speaks with an interesting voice as a teacher of moral philosophy and Christian ethics who is not ashamed of the Gospel. He directly confronts the challenge to "say something theological" in the midst of these pressures. This is, in fact, his stated goal, which is why he has sometimes been somewhat unfairly accused of endeavoring to promote

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[46] This is the moniker widely applied to the proclamations of Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Greg Epstein offers a variant of this view, expressing sympathy for the New Atheism, yet he proposes Humanism as a better type of atheism, because on his view Humanism avoids nihilism. Epstein, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009). Cf. Taylor refers to the new "hard-line materialistic atheism"; *A Secular Age*, 676.

[47] For a quick assessment of the New Atheists' preaching, see Alan Germani, 'The Mystical Ethics of the New Atheists', *The Objective Standard* 3 (2008): . Germani demonstrates, by non-theological, yet philosophical reasoning, that the message of the New Atheism is "hopelessly non-objective."

Christendom (an endeavor that, as Hauerwas opines, "almost borders on the absurd"[48]), because in the eyes of our secular age, Christian faith is all the more tarnished as a result of accusations directed against the overweening pride of Christendom. O'Donovan parries the accusations of fideism which come from all sides of the debate over the concept of the moral order. He insists that theological ethics must be pursued intellectually in sympathy with the purposes of metaphysics, and yet remain intrinsically and unabashedly evangelical. In this endeavor, he claims to be guided by "systematic rather than apologetic factors."[49] He seeks a path of well-balanced reason through the mixture of interpretive pressures, and tries to remain in dialog with the voices of this secular age. Moreover, he is not afraid to take on the hard questions which crop up regularly in our newspaper headlines, all the while striving to espouse the values of Christendom without embarrassment.[50] He has written cogently and explicitly on just war theory, nuclear deterrence, procreation technology and sexual ethics, for example. All this makes O'Donovan's work most interesting in light of the questions raised by our thesis, both in theological subject matter and with attentiveness to the pressures of interpretation.

Our analysis will focus on *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (1986, 1994),[51] widely considered O'Donovan's seminal work on the subject of evangelical ethics. O'Donovan has followed *R&MO* with *The Desire of the Nations* (1996)[52] and *Ways of Judgment* (2005),[53] completing an ad hoc trilogy of sorts, as he sharpens his focus upon political theology and political ethics, and builds upon the foundation laid in *R&MO*. Two compendiums of articles combined with O'Donovan's responses to his partners in dialog have also appeared, and these also focus on O'Donovan's political theology and political ethics, paying relatively scant attention to the issues of personal transformation and

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[48] Hauerwas, with James Fodor, 'Remaining in Babylon: Oliver O'Donovan's Defense of Christendom', in *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997):199-224, 199.

[49] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Leicester, England: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) viii.

[50] To wit, this closing line from *Bonds of Imperfection*: "We may well shed tears for the nation-state and lament the fragility of its good", Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 320.

[51] Hereafter, *R&MO*, referring to the second edition.

[52] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Hereafter, *DN*.

[53] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2005). This monograph is taken from The Bampton Lectures, 2003. Hereafter, *WJ*.

theological anthropology which concern us here.[54] *R&MO* therefore occupies a prime place of importance in our analysis, and augmented by several of O'Donovan's other monographs and articles.

While O'Donovan has drawn wide attention for his work in evangelical ethics and political theology, the implications of his evangelical ethics have not been particularly well pursued in the directions indicated by our thesis. Bretherton[55] and Burger[56] have each written extensively on O'Donovan's concept of moral order, and touch upon the themes that concern us here, but neither of them has recognized the depth of the issues we will be analyzing here; nor have they dealt fully with the implications of his epistemology, which he labels "evangelical realism", for theological anthropology. No other studies of O'Donovan's evangelical ethics have analyzed specifically the mutual implications of his method and the development of a doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*.

While Burger titles his chapter on O'Donovan "Moral Reality", he does not really explain what that means, digging into neither the ontological implications for theological anthropology, nor the epistemological method employed. Nor does Burger effectively address the significance of O'Donovan's emphasis on *moral* reality for the doctrine of "being in Christ". He states this emphasis clearly enough, but then moves quickly past it without drawing connections to doctrinal implications for theological anthropology. Still, Burger has done a good service by providing a careful reading of O'Donovan in order to expose the strengths and degrees with which O'Donovan plays upon the various notes that comprise the multi-dimensional concept of "being in Christ". Burger also covers the Scriptural references appropriate to his analysis in a full and effective way. Sadly, however, he leaves unexamined the significant eschatological implications of O'Donovan's concept of "being in Christ", not least, the significance this carries for moral reality and the concept of the moral order.

Bretherton's interests complement Burger's. While Burger is interested in the ontological significance of "being in Christ", which figures prominently in O'Donovan's realism, Bretherton is more interested to address the epistemological pressures entailed in dialog with the secular age. As we shall see, these deserve to be considered together. Bretherton's goal is

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[54] Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Craig G. Bartholomew, et al., *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan*; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, 3 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002).
[55] Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006).
[56] Hans Burger, *Being in Christ: a Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

to "develop a coherently theological account of whether Christians can resolve ethical disputes with their non-Christian neighbours in the contemporary context."[57] He uses O'Donovan's evangelical ethics to critique MacIntyre's more philosophical ethics, in pursuit of the question, whether Christian ethics can find common ground with other ethics in an age of relativism.[58] Bretherton has read O'Donovan closely.[59] He exegetes O'Donovan's evangelical ethics in detail, paying particular attention to the distinction O'Donovan makes between "the ontology of creation" and "the epistemological issues of how we know that order."[60] In this regard, Bretherton comes much closer to the issues of concern in my thesis, yet he does not follow them through to discover their implications for systematic theology. He seems rather to endorse O'Donovan's realism without further critical analysis of its implications. Bretherton concludes logically from his reading of O'Donovan that the economic Trinity is active in "conversion" as the event in which morality is understood coherently. Thus, his conclusion is clear: all other modes of understanding—other than the active cognition grounded in the light of "who Jesus Christ is"—are incoherent. Nonetheless, Bretherton goes on to say something that sounds strikingly contradictory:

> O'Donovan understands nature to have an unmediated authority and Divine authority to be the only secure means by which to determine normative moral thought and action…[61]

How can it be that on the one hand, awareness of "who Jesus Christ is" (or at least awareness that this is the operative question) is the sole criterion for coherent understanding, and yet on the other hand, nature has "unmediated authority"? Is this not a systemically inconsistent approach to knowledge of the moral order? This is precisely the question we must pursue further here.[62]

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[57] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness,* 61.

[58] Bretherton *Hospitality as Holiness,* 72.

[59] Bretherton devotes a full chapter of his dissertation to "Oliver O'Donovan and the distinctiveness of Christian ethics"; *Hospitality as Holiness,* 61-91.

[60] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness,* 64. Cf, "clarification of ontological and epistemological issues in ethics underpins one of the central thrusts of O'Donovan's work." Rather than analysis of this thrust, Bretherton seems to accept it rather uncritically and commend O'Donovan for "separating the ontological from the epistemological issues"; 64-5.

[61] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 70.

[62] To give Bretherton due credit, he does propose an answer to these questions. With apparent concern to clarify what he means by these conflicting statements, Bretherton goes on to explain that there are *two types of morality*—"Morality of itself is grounded in the creation or natural order. Moral action is not"; *Hospitality as Holiness,* 70. Bretherton adds an additional clarification: "The term 'morality' refers to the moral order as a totality"; 70. But does not 'the moral order as a totality' contain both the moral subject as well as moral action? Perhaps Bretherton is proposing here some other ethereal or idealized view of morality as a conception above and apart from the real-life moral deliberations and actions with which we struggle in our daily lives. If so, this

Outline of dissertation

I shall begin by examining O'Donovan's outline for evangelical ethics, paying close attention to *R&MO*. Chapter 2 presents a detailed analysis of his view of the moral order, producing a distillate of the key strands from which a dogmatic statement of moral reality could be developed, consistent with his presentation of moral reality and moral knowledge. Chapter 3 builds upon this groundwork by identifying the implications which arise from O'Donovan's critical methodology—"evangelical realism" is his term for it. Here we begin to see the issues take shape which stem from the direction of the pressures of interpretation to which he responds. These include the perils of naturalism and the risk of arbitrariness that he wishes to expunge from the vestiges of divine command theory and which he finds to linger ominously in the wake of Kierkegaard and Barth. In response to these challenges, O'Donovan articulates the significance of "participation in Christ" as a lynchpin for his method, and we shall pay more attention to the implications of his doctrine here as we view it in terms of the Barth-Brunner debate.

Chapter 4 addresses the issue of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, analyzes its role in the Barth-Brunner debate, and draws out the implications of O'Donovan's realism by comparison with the theological anthropologies of Barth and Brunner. I close this chapter with a case study based on O'Donovan's comparison of Barth with O'Donovan's mentor, Paul Ramsey. This case study addresses O'Donovan's concern over "why there was no analogue to the *humanum assumptum* in his [Barth's] political theory."[63] Here we see the implications of O'Donovan's realism come more clearly into focus.

Chapter 5 examines the intrinsic connection between the concept of moral order and the epistemic role of faith, which presents a challenge to O'Donovan's program of realism. It is here that I diagnose the effect of O'Donovan's realism in terms of "cutting the Kierkegaardian Knot". This pertains to O'Donovan's effort to avoid paradoxical elements of faith which he perceives as working at cross purposes to his evangelical realism. Again, a

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would appear to be a movement away from evangelical ethics, and into metaphysics. In this regard, Bretherton takes his lead from O'Donovan: "It is a matter of finding the *right* qualification for one's general rule of action"; *R&MO*, 96. Cf. "The form of the moral life will be that of an *ordered moral field* of action on the one hand, and of an *ordered moral subject* of action on the other"; *R&MO*, 183; cf. xiv, 119, 127.

[63] O'Donovan, 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', *Journal of Religious Ethics 19* no 2 (1991): 1-30, 27.

case study closes the chapter as a practice of applying the insights gained by the analytical work of the chapter.

Chapter 6 brings together the results of my analysis to present the thesis in full consideration of all the issues examined. This chapter pays special attention to the role of faith and the event of *metanoia* in the perception of the moral order and the acquisition of moral knowledge. Here we see that the cosmology (i.e. cosmogony) of faith emerges as a critical hermeneutic factor in the development of doctrine pertaining to evangelical ethics.

Finally, the concluding Chapter 7 draws out practical implications of our thesis. We see the central place of prayer and worship in evangelical ethics, and point out implications for teaching. Lastly, we show practical applications of our thesis by examining the bio-ethical issues of human reproductive technologies, with special attention to O'Donovan's work, *Begotten or Made?*

The Concept of Moral Order

Love is the lesson which the Lord has taught.[1]

Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti*. Sonnet 68.

In Pursuit of Moral Reality

How is the reality of the moral order within the cosmos to be conceived? Is it objectively immanent and ontologically absolute, standing impassibly aloof and unaffected by the particular vantage of any observer? Or does it move and shift in the psychological and noumenal depths of human experience, emerging ultimately as a subjective and personal perception? The current prevailing winds of subjectivity, whipped up as they have been by modern individualism, create a distinct pressure in the direction of relativism based in the popular presumption that reality exists, like beauty, solely "in the eye of the beholder". Our modern inclination is to be a "buffered self", as Taylor calls it; that is, a self buffered from

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[1] O'Donovan sums up the penultimate chapter of *R&MO* with this Spenser verse, 244.

the fideistic constraints of a greater spiritual reality.[2] This modern inclination "to conceive ourselves as free individuals first", rather than to locate self-understanding of identity and morality within the greater reality of an "enchanted universe" as the source and context of meaning, has profoundly and irrevocably altered our understanding of the moral order. Taylor refers to this revolution as "the great disembedding",[3] because our concepts of self and morality are no longer infused with meaning by virtue of being embedded within a universal spiritual reality. The impact of this revolution in self-understanding is that moral judgment becomes a merely personal matter, subject to the whims of personal experience rather than standing firm as an objective reality which is ontologically prior to our experience of it. Relativism thus becomes the bane of the modern buffered self, once objective concepts of reality are rejected out of hand as being fideistic fictions. O'Donovan sums up the predicament—

> 'Relativism', as the word is commonly used, is simply an aspect of voluntarism. It is a posture of skepticism adopted in deliberative moral thought, in which we declare that there is , in principle, no rational resolution available to our deliberations: … [there is] nothing more than a bare choice, a raw exercise of the will… caught in the relativist *impasse*.[4]

The relativist *impasse* is a direct result of the inclination of the modern "buffered self" to locate meaning in subjective personal experience, rather than in the overarching context of a transcendent and objectively knowable reality. In the extreme, relativism can become so radically existential as to lapse ultimately into a solipsism that denies the possibility of meaningful discourse in theological ethics. O'Donovan captures aptly the sense of the buffered self wherein this radical individualism deconstructs the notion of an objectively real moral order:

> I have not understood the objectivity of my good, given to me in the order of the universe as a reality which I can only acknowledge and welcome. At the heart of my anxiety is the voluntarist supposition that my good is something which I create or evoke for myself.[5]

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[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007) 146ff.

[3] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 131ff. O'Donovan respects the conception of the Tudor Reformers regarding the division of church and state. In contrast, "the modern demarcation of a whole *secular sphere of life*, where the word of God does not rule as of right but finds access only indirectly, shaping the conscience of certain participants" may well "do more violence to the wide-ranging claims of the apostolic gospel than did the mediaeval and Reformation attempts to abolish the line of separation entirely." *39 Articles*, 99-102.

[4] *R&MO*, 220.

[5] *R&MO*, 250.

Existentialism is the root of the problem, not because it presents any challenge to the objective reality of the moral order *per se*, but rather because it can lead to interpretations which obscure the moral order behind a smokescreen of subjectivity. In the extreme case, this kind of existentialism leads into voluntarism, which defeats the effort to articulate a foundation for ethics based on the objective reality of moral order within God's creation. The problem with voluntarism is that by emphasizing personal choices determined through irrational faith at the core of moral discernment, it can render moot the effort to ascertain objective knowledge through rational thought.[6] In the worst case, this type of subjectivity in ethics constrains meaningful discourse to function within a "closed circle" of like-minded individuals who share in common the same esoteric "faith-ethic".[7] O'Donovan rightly names the danger of building ethics upon such an infirm foundation:

> The voluntarist artifice yields evil consequences if it is mistaken for a statement of cold truth.[8]

Voluntarism thus supplants rational moral deliberation, and finds its impetus in the apparently arbitrary and inaccessible personal experience of each observer's private "spontaneity of mood and emotion",[9] thus rendering the entire project of evangelical ethics moot, because it subjugates efforts to communicate moral truth to the authority of esoteric and personal ideas: "opted into by those who so choose, irrelevant to those who do not choose."[10]

It is against these prevailing winds of subjectivism that O'Donovan works to erect the edifice of evangelical ethics as an unshakable objective reality capable of stopping the vicissitudes of voluntarism.[11] This he does by developing a doctrine of the moral order as being objectively accessible to human reason. Yet he does so with a nod to the objective-subjective antithesis, as he pays careful attention to the "antithesis of voluntarist and

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[6] Nigel Biggar recognizes this as the difficulty with Barth's ethics: "the real problem with any concept of divine command such as Barth's is that it transcends rational assessment." Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits*: *Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 24.

[7] O'Donovan traces the formulation of this approach to Kierkegaard; *R&MO*, 16 (see Chapter 5).

[8] *R&MO*, 49. Cf.: "When these voluntarist traditions are embodied in Christian devotion, they make for great scrupulousness and lack of evangelical freedom", 262.

[9] *R&MO*, 119.

[10] *R&MO*, 16. "Western moral thought since the Enlightenment has been predominantly 'voluntarist' in its assumptions", Ibid.

[11] Voluntarism has continued to draw O'Donovan's attention in more recent works, e.g., O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 15.

rationalist understandings of morality".[12] He highlights the potential for error within each of these opposing approaches, as well as the need to incorporate elements of both approaches if we are to steer a safe course between them.[13] Rationalism and voluntarism thus present themselves as the Scylla and Charybdis of theological ethics, through which O'Donovan aims to steer safely a course of realism to avoid running aground on either the rocks of rationalism, or sinking in the whirlpools of voluntarism. O'Donovan refers to these dialectically opposed poles as two complementary languages of theological ethics: "What the two languages do is to draw our attention to different and complementary aspects of moral claims as we encounter them."[14]

Let us briefly define these two 'languages' of ethics. Voluntarism is the language of ethics rooted in the divine command and its subjective experience. This offers a deontological view of ethics wherein the role of the person as moral agent is to discern God's commands and act on them. This is, of course, a subjective experience, rooted in the agent's relationship with God. This view recognizes rightly the "aboriginal metaphysical fact that human reason is not transcendent"[15]; that is to say, theological ethics will always contain an element of mystery due to the supernatural dominion of God who exceeds human comprehension.[16]

Rationalism, on the other hand, provides a corrective to an overly subjective approach. To the extent that objectivity is the opposite of subjectivity,[17] the rational analysis of objective facts will provide a corrective to irrational, subjective interpretations of personal experiences. On O'Donovan's view, the rational approach is rooted in a teleological conception of ethics, where "teleological" is defined in terms of "pointing to any kind of propriety or order within the world."[18] Thus,

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[12] *R&MO*, 137.

[13] *R&MO*, 139. O'Donovan's keynote address at *The Grandeur of Reason* conference (Rome, September 2008) also touched on this antithesis. Benedict XVI, in his appeal to university faculties, emphasizes likewise these same twinned errors which can derail the integration of faith and reason; Address to the University of Regensburg, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections", 12 September 2006.

[14] *R&MO*, 139.

[15] *R&MO*, 136.

[16] Cf. "At best, of course, knowledge of the whole must be knowledge of a mystery." *R&MO*, p. 49.

[17] These terms are used as opposites in a particular metaphysical sense. As Barth has shown, "objective" and "subjective" are not strictly opposites when they refer to knowledge of God, the "*terminus a quo* [and] presupposition of all Christian doctrine". Thus Barth holds these terms not to represent mutually exclusive epistemologies, but rather to function in collaboration with each other; *CD* II.1, p. 179.

[18] *R&MO*, 138.

> 'Teleological' ethics, on the other hand, derives from the ontological conception of God as the *summum bonum*, in which it was the task of moral reasoning to recognize and respond to the ordered structures of being and good.[19]

Here then is the challenge O'Donovan sets for himself in his project to construct an outline for evangelical ethics—to pursue a path of epistemological realism that navigates the twin perils of voluntarism and rationalism, all the while pursuing "the task of moral reasoning to recognize and respond to the ordered structures of being and good." Implicit in this statement we discern already a predilection to articulate moral reality in ontological concepts of ordered structure, as an antidote to the winds of voluntarism which drive hapless voyagers into the deconstructing vortex of voluntarism.

Love: the shape of evangelical ethics

The Gospel at the heart of evangelical ethics will not be so easily reduced to ordered structures of ontological description. There is necessarily an irreducible mystery contained within the evangelical witness, because the form and content of the Gospel are given in the shape of a divine love—

> Love is the overall shape of Christian ethics, the form of the human participation in created order. It is itself ordered and shaped in accordance with the order that it discovers in its object, and this ordering of love it is the task of substantive Christian ethics to trace.[20]

Thus the task of evangelical ethics is to articulate the "ordering of love". Love is the first and last word. O'Donovan thus identifies the task of Christian ethics as being the pursuit of "ordered structures of being and good", as well as of love as "human participation in created order". Apparently the path of realism must maintain simultaneous consistency with the ontological categories of ordered structures as well as the existential expressions of participation in the mysterious love of Christ which forms the heart of the gospel and the overall shape of Christian ethics.

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[19] *R&MO*, 138.

[20] *R&MO*, 25-26. Cf. his closing sentences(264): "However much our moral decisions strive for clarity, they are never unambiguous or translucent, even to ourselves. But – and is this not the gospel at the heart of evangelical ethics? – it is given to them by God's grace in Christ to add up to a final and unambiguous Yes, a work of love which will abide for eternity."

To describe morality in terms of love as being "the lesson the Lord has taught," as Spenser does in the sonnet quoted above, is to beg the questions: What kind of lesson is this? And how is this lesson learned? There is unavoidable tension in this lesson taught by our Lord—the inescapable tension of faith which trusts in the final and eternal redemption of our moral failures.

O'Donovan paves the way toward answering these questions by pointing to the resurrection as the key to making sense of the moral order. He sums up the radical direction of his book in the claim that the resurrection is the unifying concept and overriding concern of ethics—

> No account of the Christian moral life can be adequate unless it is allowed to point forward to the resurrection.[21]

The reason resurrection emerges as the principle lens onto the question of evangelical ethics is because of the unique witness it provides in looking both forward and backward at the same time. This ability to look through both ends of the telescope at once gives witness to the tensions inherent in the gospel command of love. The Resurrection holds together the ethical tensions of the Gospel—between sin and redemption, and between objective order and subjective experience—without breaking. Witness to the Resurrection fulfills both the Gospel's *kerygma* of hope and the pronouncement of judgment. In this way the resurrection bridges the gap between fallen creation and vindicated creation:

> The resurrection of Christ, upon which Christian ethics is founded, vindicates the created order in this double sense: it redeems it and it transforms it. … So it is that Christian ethics, too, looks both backwards and forwards, to the origin and to the end of the created order.[22]

O'Donovan clearly recognizes the transformational capacity of resurrection to look both forward and backward in time simultaneously, and he demonstrates its pivotal importance for the construction of an evangelical ethic. He shapes his outline for evangelical ethics according to the skeletal structure provided by the resurrection in witness to the tandem acts of redeeming (looking back) and transforming (looking ahead) the creation.[23] In this manner

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[21] *R&MO,* 249.
[22] *R&MO*, 56, 58.
[23] O'Donovan also expresses this polarity of perspectives in terms of 'creation ethics' vs. 'kingdom ethics'— "When I wrote *Resurrection and Moral Order* I was concerned to overcome the confrontation between advocates of 'creation ethics' and of 'kingdom ethics', and I claimed that, in the resurrection of Christ, where

he can develop a doctrine which reveals the transformational power of the resurrection, gives shape to the ontological reality of the moral order, and reveals the teleological order present in the creation.

In the process of developing this outline, O'Donovan does not skirt the epistemological difficulties inherent in such a pursuit. He identifies the questions which arise from the polarity of a creation full of structured moral order, yet held in abeyance pending its eschatological transformation. I shall analyze these difficulties in the following chapters, but first we need to continue to trace the particular emphases of O'Donovan's approach.

Eschatological transformation

As the resurrection points forward to the teleological fulfillment of the creation, it redeems, restores, and confirms the order which God has established in the creation. Looking backward from this eschatological vantage, we can view the resurrection as confirmation of God as the *summum bonum* whose promise to restore his creation gives self-authenticating proof of its inherent goodness and order. The resurrection thus invests teleological significance in the creation, and for O'Donovan the key point here is to ratify the structure and coherence of the moral order as being good from the very beginning—

> [T]he resurrection of Christ directs our attention back to the creation which it vindicates. But we must understand 'creation' not merely as the raw material out of which the world as we know it is composed, but as the order and coherence *in* which it is composed. … to speak of this world as 'created' is already to speak of an order.[24]

Thus, the resurrection demonstrates that the natural order given to the creation at its inception persists and survives, despite the stain of sin, and it maintains continuity with its teleological fulfillment as realized in the resurrection. O'Donovan refers to this process of fulfillment as "eschatological transformation" which "rules out all the other conceivable

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creation is restored and fulfillment promised, ethics had a foundation which embraced the partial truths of both these points of view"; *R&MO* (2nd edition), xv. He claims to end this unconstructive debate by choosing to begin ethics from the resurrection, which has the bi-directional capacity to "sometimes emphasize the newness, sometimes the primitiveness of the order that is there affirmed. But it will not be tempted to overthrow or deny either in the name of the other"; 15. Cf. O'Donovan's earlier assessment of the kingdom-creation divide in ethics: "We would be foolish to allow ourselves to be polarized in this way…"; O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic', in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics,* ed. David F. Wright (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978) 30.
[24] *R&MO*, 31.

eventualities" ensuing from the Fall, including corruption, disintegration and "meaningless flux".[25] Eschatological transformation thus fulfills God's purpose in the very fabric of nature itself. Given that human beings are also formed of this fabric, this implies that we may understand something of the moral order by understanding human nature (and to this enormous issue we shall return in later chapters).

The resurrection thus gives witness to the unifying work of the Holy Spirit in connecting the present reality with the new heaven and earth to come. All things are held together in tension—the continuity and discontinuity between the present and the future, as well as the fallen nature of creation and its redemption—all await eschatological transformation.[26] O'Donovan builds his outline for evangelical ethics upon this capacity of the resurrection to bridge these polarities without erasing or diminishing the immeasurable disjunction between this present world and the world to come.[27] As O'Donovan shows, the resurrection provides the essential theological link between redemption and vindication, and he takes this witness to eschatological transformation as warrant to describe the ontological reality of moral order as established in the creation, and to develop the ethical principles which communicate that order. *Eschatological transformation* thus demonstrates that the resurrection looks in two directions at once: backward into the creation, as well as forward to its ultimate fulfillment. What can and must we say about the moral order based on this view?

One reality: objective reality

Based on the warrant given by the resurrection to look backward from the vantage of eschatological transformation, O'Donovan chooses to begin from the first page of *R&MO* to

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[25] *R&MO*, 55. Cf. O'Donovan's remarks on the teleological import of "eschatological expectation": "Within Christianity one cannot think or speak about the meaning of the world without speaking also of its destined transformation"; O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic', 26.

[26] Luke Bretherton credits O'Donovan's "eschatological framework" with being able to "account for the continuity and radical discontinuity between this age and the age to come… and thus for the continuity and discontinuity between Christian and non-Christian approaches to morality"; Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006) 87. Bretherton shows good insight into O'Donovan's doctrine of "eschatological teleology", but he does not develop the consequences of O'Donovan's epistemological realism (see Chapter 7 of *Hospitality as Holiness*).

[27] On this view we do not interpret Paul's language regarding the 'futility' of the creation (Romans 8:20) as indication that the present creation must pass away, only to be replaced by a better creation; but rather the whole creation will be redeemed; cf. *R&MO*, 55. This raises a question to be taken up in the following chapters: How is the doctrine of new creation (cf. Isa. 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1) to be integrated with O'Donovan's doctrine of objectivity and continuity of the created order with the new heaven and new earth?

assert the validity of Christian ethics as a reasoned approach toward discernment and description of the "ordered structures of being and good" which have existed within the world from the beginning. O'Donovan finds warrant within Christian faith to assert the ontological reality and absolute structure of the moral order woven into the fabric of the creation—

> The order of things that God has made is *there*. It is objective, and mankind has a place within it. Christian ethics, therefore, has an objective reference …in accordance with this order …In this assertion we can find a point of agreement with the classical ethics of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics …ethics as a close correlate of metaphysics.[28]

Thus the search for moral order may take confidence in the objective reality of its epistemic goal. The moral order is *there*. Its ontological presence within the creation may be stated assuredly as a steadfast and unassailable doctrine of evangelical ethics. This assertion is not threatened by the subjective, existential limitations of our human experience, whether conceived in terms of spirituality, religion, psychology, or otherwise. O'Donovan offers no quarter for critiques which would make the objective reality of the moral order contingent upon subjective experience.[29] Any such critiques are refuted as being unrealistic, on account of their abandonment of the objective reality of the creation in deference to a hidden reality cloaked in the subjectivity of individual experience. He argues that any such contingency leads to "absolute disorder" due to a flawed metaphysics which devolves into an incoherent nihilism—

> If some [reality] A and some B were related neither teleologically nor generically in any respect whatsoever, there would be two unconnected universes, which is to say, no universe at all.[30]

In the modern era, the predominant challenge to this view has come from the direction of existentialism in a form which emphasizes subjective reality as the only reality we can experience. This existential view identifies subjective reality as the epistemic goal of our ethical and spiritual response. O'Donovan demonstrates how this view of subjectivity undermines any attempt to construct an evangelical ethic, because it infects the ontological

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[28] *R&MO*, 17.

[29] *R&MO*, 11. To clarify his concern here, we may look to his earlier essay where he explains: "It is one thing to say that until the Word became incarnate, man could discern no meaning in nature; quite another to say that until the Word became incarnate nature had no meaning. Revelation is the solution to man's blindness, not to nature's emptiness." O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic', 26. The point is that reality is *there*, regardless of how, or how accurately, we perceive it.

[30] *R&MO*, 32.

implications of eschatological transformation with the psychological implications of subjectivity, resulting in a sure descent into disorder and relativism. This error he attributes to the

> …Idealist polarization of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', in which object and subject lose their primary relational sense… and become overweighted with psychological and ontological implications.[31]

Such idealism is not coherent within an *evangelical* ethic, because it separates reality into two opposing realms: one which is objectively true, and the other which is subjectively experienced. As a result, the discussion of objectivity is rendered moot, and thus unable to convey the ethical content of the Gospel in the form of assured principles of ontological truth. Accordingly, O'Donovan argues that this idealist view will not suffice for statement of an evangelical ethic, because it fails to affirm the objective reality of the moral order realized through eschatological transformation. Thus an *evangelical* ethic must be built upon the foundation of the objective reality of the created order as a truth which extends throughout all times, and is not simply a disjoint new reality which is being held in abeyance until some future time at which it will emerge in a transformed, and ultimately complete form.

Recognizing how easily an idealist view of the subjectivity of human experience can distort the objective reality of the Gospel, O'Donovan is careful to explain how an evangelical ethic will necessarily circumscribe the meanings of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' in the context of moral reasoning. Any apparent differences between subjective and objective realities must be confined to the realm of the personal perspective of the observer; these differences do not reflect the ontological structure of the created order. To ascribe any more substantial content to subjective reality is to slip into the errors of "misleading Idealist implications".[32] Thus to speak coherently of reality, we must conclude that there is precisely one universal objective reality which contains all subjective apperceptions of itself:

> The 'subjective reality' is… no different reality from the 'objective reality.' It is the one reality, the reality of a world redeemed…[33]

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[31] *R&MO*, 102. O'Donovan here notes that he follows "a lead given by Karl Barth" in his understanding of the relational definition of 'subjective' and 'objective' within the trinitarian concept. This supports O'Donovan's view that subjectivity is defined by the relationship of the moral agent as a subject who responds in freedom to God, others and the world.
[32] *R&MO*, 106.
[33] *R&MO*, 109.

The objective order of creation therefore *contains* subjective experience. Subjective experience is not an independent reality; rather, it is an experience formed by, and occurring within, the unity of the one objective reality: the creation "includes us and enables us to participate in it."[34] He thus defines our experience of subjective reality as *participation in the moral order*.[35]

This doctrine of objective reality extends also to the concept of moral 'rightness'. Based on the premise that the structure of the moral order exists independently of human perception of it, O'Donovan claims that the moral attribute of being '*right*' can be applied to moral choices and behaviors, in accordance with general rules which stand as ontological realities independent of subjective knowledge:

> Moral deliberation… is a matter of finding the *right* qualification for one's general rule of action, which will recognize the *truth* about the circumstances in which one has to act.[36]

Are we therefore to understand 'right' and 'wrong' as being categorical attributes to be assigned to moral actions, regardless of how our capacity to discern the structure of the moral order might be affected by the limitations of subjective human experience? O'Donovan seems to move in this direction, as he cements the connection between objective *truth* and *right* decisions. He demonstrates the practical application of such a connection by affirming the belief that the Bible may be read as a source of "a *comprehensive* moral viewpoint" providing witness to objectively real moral principles:

> …We read the Bible seriously only when we use it to guide our thought towards a comprehensive moral viewpoint… We must look within it not only for moral bricks, but for indications of the order in which the bricks hold together.[37]

This reference to "moral bricks" suggests the possibility that theological ethics might be reducible to a codified set of universal principles, as if the moral structure of the universe could be parsed in discrete units. After all, O'Donovan explains that "the items in a code

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[34] *R&MO*, 101.

[35] O'Donovan exegetes Phil. 2:13 helpfully in this regard, to show that our experience of freedom as moral subjects is real; yet our free response remains, as Augustine articulated, always subject to God's initiative, 102. Cf. 76, "Morality is man's participation in the created order."

[36] *R&MO*, 96. Italics in the original. Cf. p. 216: "When we deliberate on something we are about to do, or …have done, we have, in the final analysis, a single point to resolve: is it, or was it, the *right* thing to do?"

[37] *R&MO*, 200.

stand to the moral law as bricks to a building", and "this has an immediate bearing on how we read the Bible"[38]; however, thus would be a superficial reading of O'Donovan's intent. He is walking the fine line here of insisting upon the objective reality of 'right' and 'wrong' actions, while at the same time acknowledging that the criteria of judging 'right' and 'wrong' are not reducible to the status of explicit objectifiable principles, as though they were free-standing tracts in a moral code. There would seem to be an exception to every moral principle; thus, "be there ten of them or six hundred and thirteen" rules or moral bricks in a moral code, they would have no meaning unless there be also a *comprehensive* moral viewpoint to prevail over them and provide them with an interpretive context. To arrive at such a comprehensive moral viewpoint is no simple matter, for such a viewpoint (as well as the epistemic access it provides onto the moral order) can be neither derived from, nor reduced to, objectifiable principles.[39] It requires wisdom to make sense of moral reality— "Wisdom must involve some comprehension of how the bricks are meant to be put together."[40] This would seem to be the perennial challenge of ethics and dogmatics, which begs the larger question: from where does such wisdom descend? Before we can adequately address that question in light of O'Donovan's realism, we shall continue to identify the salient features of his outline.

Holding in abeyance the question of wisdom, we may sum up the importance of objectivity for O'Donovan's doctrine by noting it asserts the existence of right action, and furthermore, that it implies the possibility and freedom to choose the right action in any given situation as an expression of "the universal character of all Christian life". In support of this conclusion, O'Donovan points to Paul's confession of "one Spirit, one Lord, one God" [1 Cor. 12:3-6] as an affirmation of this universal character, revealed in the diversity of gifts, activities and vocations which comprise Christian lives.[41] In the same way, O'Donovan reads Paul's chapter on love [1 Cor. 13] as a confirmation that no matter how wide a variation we may see in Christian lives and vocations, they all serve as windows "through which the universal character of all Christian life may appear."[42] Thus, love represents the universal structure of the moral order within God's creation:

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[38] *R&MO*, 200.
[39] *R&MO*, 199f.
[40] *R&MO*, 200.
[41] *R&MO*, 222
[42] *R&MO*, 222.

> Just as the variety of voices within the church are unified in a common confession, 'Jesus is Lord', so the variety of forms of life are unified within a common form of life according to God's order, the life of love.[43]

Having established love as the core reality representing the universal character of all Christian life, O'Donovan is quick to recognize the need to guard against the currents of idealism which lead into non-evangelical misinterpretations of the universal character of love. To sever love from its source in the incarnate truth of "the historically concrete figure of Jesus of Nazareth"[44], and to treat it as a universalized ethical principle, is to take a non-evangelical misstep away from the objective reality of the moral order. This cannot be permitted within an evangelical ethic, because it leads into Christological errors. To take a step in the direction of defining love as an abstract, universal principle, is to

> … step outside the limits of Chalcedonian Christology. This would have one of two results. Either we would settle for a static Nestorian theism, in which the object of our love was, in truth, simply the divine principle… or, more characteristically of the modern period, we would embrace a monophysite humanism, …the emerging idea of a divinized humanity.[45]

An evangelical ethic cannot countenance such a move, because the Gospel is grounded in physical history, not in metaphysical principles. This presents a challenge to the formulation of a doctrine which states evangelical ethics in terms of objective reality, for the claim of objectivity implies applicability to all times and places—in other words, to be universally applicable. Yet the historical foundation of the Gospel speaks of a unique non-repeatable historical person in Jesus of Nazareth. How is this challenge to be resolved? Again, O'Donovan asserts the witness to the Resurrection as the key to holding this tension together. By virtue of the bi-directional vantage of eschatological transformation, he links the eschatological hope of redemption with the objective shape of the moral order, and thus suggests that evangelical witness to transformation avoids the misstep of conceiving of love as an abstract, universalizing principle:

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[43] *R&MO*, 222.
[44] *R&MO*, 242.
[45] *R&MO*, 242.

> [T]he love of Christ cannot be conceived in such a universalizing way but must be
> viewed eschatologically, as the form which our moral obligations have taken in these last
> days, at the climax of God's redemptive work. [46]

This requirement to view moral obligations from the eschatological vantage point of historical climax guards against the un-evangelical idea that love can be expressed as an abstract principle, but by the same stroke, the emphasis of historical particularity also begs the question: How are we to understand the role of history and the reality of time within the context of moral order and eschatological transformation? How are we to conceive of the moral order as revealing a universally applicable ontological structure, if it remains in some sense incomplete as it awaits its ultimate transformation? We turn next to these questions.

Historicism overruled by teleological order

Historical reality raises the classic question of how to resolve the tension between "already" and "not-yet" in the doctrine of eschatology. Do the unfolding events of history yield evidence merely of the already established moral order? Or do events unfold in a process of fulfillment through which the moral order, though not yet complete, is emerging?

The tension inherent in the views of history as being both a temporal work-in-progress, and also an extra-temporal, eschatologically complete reality, poses what O'Donovan calls, "the unanswered question of creation, the question of what its temporal extension means."[47] In answer this question, he again invokes the concept of eschatological transformation, as realized in the resurrection. This question regarding the significance of temporality gets to the heart of the issue of transformation, because in order to avoid a false dichotomy, two opposing views must be held together in tension: (a) the view that the transformation is awaiting teleological fulfillment, and is thus unfolding as a historical process occurring in time; and (b) the view that transformation is already complete in the resurrected Christ. Again, O'Donovan notes the crucial capacity of the resurrection to hold these opposing poles

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[46] *R&MO*, 242. While O'Donovan here demonstrates the need to ground the moral order in the historical reality of Jesus, so as to guard against falsely universalizing love as a principle, he is also sensitive to the opposite errors of historicism, which would deny the universal character of the moral order by searching for meaning within history itself. Thus he rightly warns of the need to preserve "Christian universalism" by making clear the distinction between the Christ of history and the universal *telos* that Christ has brought into history by his birth, 66.

[47] *R&MO*, 55.

together in tension without breaking, by affirming both the forward- and backward-looking views of reality necessary to hold these poles together in tension. He calls this 'evangelical realism',[48] and stresses the importance of sustaining the dual aspect of the resurrection in this regard:

> The important thing is not which of these two aspects of the resurrection we emphasize at any moment, but that it does properly have both aspects; origin and end are inseparably united in it. The humanity of Adam is carried forward to its 'supernatural' destiny precisely as it is rescued from its 'sub-natural' condition of enslavement to sin and death.[49]

Both the supernatural destiny of Adam and the humanity of Christ are at stake here. To emphasize either of the two poles—either supernatural destiny or sub-natural enslavement—at the expense of the other, is to invite error by diminishing the role of Christ as the "last Adam" [1 Cor. 15:45]. Here again, we see the essential role of the resurrection in maintaining the coherence of an evangelical ethic.[50]

Having outlined his realist approach, O'Donovan addresses the counter-arguments which pertain to his doctrine of teleological order. He identifies 'historicism' as the variety of error which has most frequently emerged in modern controversies.[51] At root, historicism springs from a view of the creation as an imperfect, incomplete reality that is moving through history toward its eventual completion in the *eschaton*. This view of history may offer a coherent teleology, in that it sees history as the unfolding will of God as he fulfills his plan to create the new earth and new heaven, but it brings with it a troubling depiction of the moral order as a "work-in-progress"—i.e., a flawed and incomplete reality that hurtles through time and space as it evolves toward its fore-ordained end or *telos*.[52] O'Donovan finds this view

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[48] This is the term O'Donovan uses to describe his approach to theological ethics, *R&MO*, xviii.

[49] *R&MO*, 57.

[50] O'Donovan employs the bi-directional vantage of the resurrection as the lynchpin which holds natural and supernatural humanity together as poles in tension. This demonstrates his dialectical approach to realism: "We must say that life from the dead is *present* in the risen Christ, and that the resurrection of all the dead must *follow*—and yet not follow as a necessity immanent within history itself, but simply as the implication of his accomplishment. Unless the dialectic between the accomplished end of history and the immanent shapelessness of historical events is sustained, then Christ becomes, as it were, swallowed up into history, reduced to the status of a merely formative figure, "noteworthy", as Kierkegaard complained about the Hegelian view, 'because of his consequences'."; *39 Articles*, 124.

[51] "The turn of modern thought towards what is usually called 'historicism' is no all-pervasive." *R&MO*, 58.

[52] O'Donovan drives home his concern with historicism as he critiques "those liberation-theologies which most blatantly subject the theological enterprise to the sectional perceptions of a single cultural group"; *R&MO*, 91. The problem is that by resorting to particular and circumstantial moments in historical experience, these theologies can be compromised by granting access to any and all forms of "cultural accommodation". On this score, he questions Brunner, noticing how his position in *Justice and the Social Order* supports a flavor of

inadmissible for an evangelical ethic, because it positions history, rather than the transcendent reality of the Gospel, as the source of meaning for the moral order. These forms of historicism tend to undermine the attempt to construct an evangelical ethic, by denying the concept of the moral order as a transcendent and objectively real structure extant from the beginning of creation:

> If there is no locus of value outside history, then history must provide its own critical movements from within, so that the kingdom of God becomes a form without content, an empty 'end'…[53]

In other words, if the original *creatio ex nihilo* did not produce a complete, teleologically perfected moral order, then we would have no basis for assurance in seeking right moral action as an ever-present possibility within the moral order, and we would therefore be left with no alternative but to include arbitrary interpretations of history as bona fide evidence of the teleological process that reveals the moral content of existence. Thus, as a consequence of its failure to ground the concept of the moral order within the eschatological reality of the resurrection,[54] historicism fails to sustain the objective reality pertinent to an evangelical ethic—namely, a transcendent, universal order:

> Classical Christian thought proceeded from a universal order of meaning and value, an order given in the creation and fulfilled in the kingdom of God… Historicism denies that such a universal order exists.[55]

O'Donovan thus proceeds to suggest that the moral order of the universe is teleologically complete and eschatologically fulfilled.[56] The moral order is not evolving or in any way

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Christendom that upset Barth in the midst of the turbulent 1930s; *R&MO*, 90. O'Donovan amplifies his point in reference to the "Southern school" of liberation theology, noting that an emphasis upon "the historical processes of society" can deprive ethics of authority, with the result that "It degenerates into little more than a rhetoric of scepticism" *DN*, 9f. He drives home the point with these rhetorical questions: "Does history need 'transforming', or only to be *acted into* with creaturely integrity? Is knowledge by which human beings 'recreate the world and shape themselves' really knowledge any more, or simply will?" *DN*, 13.

[53] *R&MO*, 73.

[54] O'Donovan points out that while historicism validates the presence of a teleological order within creation, it errors by failing to describe "the Christian view of history as 'eschatological' and not merely as 'teleological'." *R&MO*, 64. Similarly, historicism's "social thought fails equally for lack of a strong eschatology", 71.

[55] *R&MO*, 67. In support of his claim that the transcendent structure of the moral order proves universally applicable, O'Donovan argues that "morality must transcend time-place particularizations. An action of kind X must be good in any time or place, regardless of who does it, when or where of the principles of right action", 39.

[56] Hans Burger interprets O'Donovan well on this score: "The resurrection is not only the restoration of mankind, but also of the created order and of the entire creation." For O'Donovan, eschatological transformation means that the entire creation has been restored, and is complete, because "The eschatological

contingent upon history to reveal its teleological content. This is no way constrains God's freedom to operate in history and reveal teleological order through historical events. The point is that the moral order itself is *not derived from* these historical events; rather, the moral order exists with a "completeness which is already present in the universe."[57]

O'Donovan emphasizes the completeness of the moral order within the natural creation by finding any theory of "continuous creation" untenable in light of Genesis 2:2.[58] On this view, God deemed the original creation to be complete, and we may rest assured that the moral order does not evolve through any process of history:

> Creation as a completed design is presupposed by *any* movement in time. Its teleological order, expressed in the regular patterns of history, is not a product of the historical process, such that it might be surpassed and left behind as history proceeds further towards its goal.[59]

In answer to any opposing interpretations of passages such as John 5:17—"My Father is working still; and I am working"—which might open the door to theologies of on-going creation, O'Donovan draws a distinction between on-going creation and "manifestation" of the "wholeness" of the creation. On this view, the works of Jesus and the Father make "manifest" the objective reality within the created order. Thus, O'Donovan rules out the prospect that God could be acting within creation to augment or move the moral order along in a process of teleological completion; rather, he interprets Jesus and the Father to be performing acts which "manifest" or "vindicate" the "completeness of God's creation" which has existed since the beginning, as attested in Genesis 2:2.[60]

To make sense of this conclusion we must see how O'Donovan draws the distinction between ideas of "process", on the one hand, and "transformation", on the other; the former takes place *within* temporal history, and the latter *transcends* history. Transformation takes

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gift was given once and for all in Christ. The present existence of the children of God is 'a mode of existence which is already ours, yet not fully clear to us, and which is, before it can be our mode of existence, Christ's mode of existence.'" Hans Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008) 471, 485-6. Burger quotes *R&MO*, 260.

[57] *R&MO*, 62.

[58] *R&MO*, 61.

[59] *R&MO*, 63. Italics in the original. For this reason O'Donovan objects to Thielicke's statement that "our Christianity is never something complete and finished but is constantly in process of becoming", 145.

[60] *R&MO*, 62. Similarly, O'Donovan objects to "[t]he modern faith in 'continuous creation'" which he detects in liturgy and theology, 61. Further to this point, O'Donovan argues that in order to safeguard the traditional notion of authority in political theology, history must be viewed as a demonstration and "vindication of creation order as a basis for rational action"; *DN*, 19. In opposition to a view of God as working still in acts of creation which would pertain to the moral order, O'Donovan claims that "the history of divine rule safeguards and redeems the goods of creation"; *DN*, 19.

place on a separate plane of existence, as it were; it represents a "higher grace" which transcends the constraints of historical time.[61] Thus we can see the logic in O'Donovan's view of the moral order as a transcendent and objective reality which is not contingent upon any historical process or movement through time in order to arrive at its teleological conclusion. Its teleological order is already complete, even if not yet fully revealed or fully apprehended. On this view, the moral order has existed as an eschatologically fulfilled reality within the creation throughout all time, and it serves as the context within which history unfolds. By means of this distinction between process (defined as temporal action in terms of historical time), and transformation (defined as a transcendent reality outside of time representing the ultimate vindication of the created order), O'Donovan is able to claim that the moral order is complete, whole, and impervious to the relativizing influences of historicism or subjectivity.[62] Thus he preserves what he considers to be the classical foundation of Christian ethics:

> … a universal order of meaning and value, an order given in the creation and fulfilled in the kingdom of God, an order, therefore, which forms a framework for all action and history…[63]

Ontological priority

Having articulated the character of the moral order in terms of eschatological transformation, objective reality, and teleological order, O'Donovan turns next to the question of epistemology—how is it that we come by this knowledge of the moral order? He deliberately postpones this epistemological question, in order to take it up as a calculated "pause for reflection",[64] which follows articulation of the ontology of the moral order. He explains why discussion of epistemology must necessarily be held in abeyance until the objective reality of the moral order has been apprehended—the epistemological questions

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[61] *R&MO*, 64. Similarly, O'Donovan insists that "there must be order which is not subject to historical change… otherwise history could only be uninterpretable movement", 45.

[62] O'Donovan elsewhere reiterates this point, and refers to the objective reality of the "whole moral vision" provided within the Christian faith, and describes the practice of ethics as the speech and acts of "*interpreting the world* into which we must act in the light of that moral vision"; O'Donovan, *Liturgy and Ethics*, vol. 89, ed. Michael Vasey (Grove Ethical Studies; Bramcote: Grove, 1993) 5.

[63] *R&MO*, 67.

[64] *R&MO*, 76.

cannot be addressed *a priori* for the simple reason that it is impossible to define any epistemological premise without introducing a belief system, whether tacitly or explicitly, into the development of dogmatic content. As O'Donovan explains, "there is no *neutral* account" of moral thought which could provide a *starting* point for discussion of the moral order.[65] Any attempt to begin the discussion by sorting out the purely epistemological questions fails, because truth claims regarding epistemology will necessarily bring with them presumptions of belief. These presumptions are 'smuggled goods' in the sense that they have not been examined, judged and found worthy according to an absolutely objective epistemological standard. No such standard exists, of course, which is why O'Donovan insists upon a clean separation of ontology and epistemology, in order to avoid this hazard. He thus prescribes a lexical ordering in which awareness and cognizance of the objective reality of the moral order must come first, before the questions of epistemology may be considered. Thus, the method of O'Donovan's realism requires that discussion of the ontological reality of the moral order must precede and take priority over reflection upon the means by which we acquire epistemic access to the moral order:

> Our epistemological pause… quite properly *follows* on what we have learnt about the created order and its fulfillment, for epistemology is a reflexive, not an absolute, intellectual operation.[66]

It would seem that by relegating the questions of epistemology to the status of afterthoughts which must *follow* the ontological doctrine of the moral order, O'Donovan intends to avoid any charge of fideism that might accuse him of having imported tacit dogmatic beliefs into his ethics. But does this stratagem avoid fideism, or does it merely cloak its fideism in the disguise of the objective reality which it ascribes presumptively to the moral order?[67]

O'Donovan defends his position with respect to the objective reality of the moral order by asserting that the reality of the moral order is simply *there*; it is there for all to apprehend, and whatever errors or deficiencies might impede or cloud our knowledge of the moral order

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[65] *R&MO*, 77.

[66] *R&MO*, 76. Italics in the original. Cf. O'Donovan's discussion of Christological doctrine: "We may approach this question in two stages, epistemological and ontological" (149).

[67] By way of example, we can see how ontological priority sets the stage for O'Donovan's discussion of "just war theory", as he sets out the foundational principles of the topic: "First, God's peace is the original *ontological* truth of creation"; O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 2. Whether such statements of ontologically prior principles are reasonable or unreasonable, and whether they are objective or fideistic, depends on the context of faith in which they are presented.

are attributable to our limitations as human observers, and do not in any way detract from the assurance that the order is *there*. Thus, by subordinating the epistemological questions to the ontological, O'Donovan is able to posit the generic, universal reality of moral right and wrong in any and all circumstances, regardless of the conditions pertaining to the individual's epistemic access to moral knowledge.

This is not to suggest that O'Donovan neglects the epistemological questions pertaining to the fallen condition of human reason. To the contrary, he recognizes the need for Christian doctrine to address these questions, and he makes four claims with respect to the nature and limitations of moral knowledge:

1) Moral knowledge pertains to the *totality of things in their relations* to one another;[68]

2) Moral knowledge is existential; i.e., it occurs "*from within*" the moral order as "the subject participates in what he knows";[69]

3) Moral knowledge arises "*from man's position* in the universe", and is therefore "inescapably compromised by the problem of fallenness";[70] and,

4) We remain always "ignorant of the end of history";[71]

In these limitations we can see the inescapable consequences of the fall. Human knowledge is existential; that is to say, formed within and limited by our imperfect vantage as observers and participants in the moral order. There is no Archimedean point from which we might observe the creation in order to discern its structure with perfectly objective clarity.[72] Until the day of the eschaton, it seems our moral knowledge must remain incomplete, provisional and shrouded in mystery.[73] Given the mystery of it all, and heeding the advice of Qoheleth regarding the vanity of seeking to understand human existence, what hope may we

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[68] *R&MO*, 77.

[69] *R&MO*, 79.

[70] *R&MO*, 81-82. Cf. "But given the fact that the world is fallen and is perceived only by fallen minds…"; O'Donovan goes on to point to the necessity of eschatological fulfillment of Christ to bring about full knowledge, 55-56.

[71] *R&MO*, 82.

[72] As O'Donovan notes, "the skeptical Koheleth" of *Ecclesiastes* searched in vain for such a vantage point, and so shall we all aspire in vain to "comprehend it all", *R&MO*, 79f.

[73] "Such knowledge must always have an incomplete character… The whole can be known only as a mystery which envelops us, into which our minds can reach only with an awareness that there are distances and dimensions which elude us." *R&MO*, 79. Cf. 49, and 81: "It is, by its very nature and not by accident, *provisional* knowledge." O'Donovan acknowledges that natural epistemic access is incapable of arriving at anything more than a flawed and "fragmentary knowledge of the way things are", 89.

attach to our striving after moral deliberation and learning? O'Donovan has a ready answer to that question—our hope is secured because the ordered structure of being and good is *there*, as an objective reality, no matter how fragmented and provisional our discernment might be.

Ontological priority thus provides the corrective O'Donovan needs to shore up our confidence that moral knowledge does not become mired in ambiguity as a result of our necessarily existential "position in the universe", which is "inescapably compromised" by our status as imperfect participants.[74] The purpose of this corrective is to sustain the realism by which O'Donovan aims to determine "good or bad, right or wrong, by virtue of a reality 'out there'", and thus to avoid the degeneration of theological ethics into "voluntarism, relativism, emotivism, subjectivism, etc."[75]

This has implications for deliberation and moral learning. Relying upon the assertion that right and wrong exist as part of a reality that is 'out there', we may conclude that there will exist in every circumstance the challenge as well as the possibility to perceive rightly the structure of the moral order which informs moral deliberation and action. As moral persons therefore, we should aspire to learn and apply moral knowledge with better skill. This leads to the paraenetic conclusion: "mental striving is essential if knowledge is to be knowledge."[76] O'Donovan rightly notes that such striving will forever reach for, but never attain, the horizon of completeness; nonetheless, we must continue to strive on toward the goal, for this is the essence of what it means to be human.[77] By putting the epistemological questions in second place, behind the objective reality of the moral order, O'Donovan is thus able to conclude:

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[74] O'Donovan protests against any such ambiguity or "ethical underdetermination" in his critique of Hans Ulrich's theological ethics (*Wie Geschöpfe leben*, 2006), which are based in the "*theologico-ethical* … experience of the theological self, acting consciously as God's creature before God". Ulrich's view suggests that theological ethics must be grounded in "*man's conversion*" as a participant who discovers and experiences the moral order through relationship with God. This union of ontological and epistemic realities is incompatible with O'Donovan's ontological priority, and so he asks and answers rhetorically: "how is the theologian himself to become part of what he describes? Surely we need a discipline that will help us gird up our loins!" O'Donovan, 'The Object of Theological Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics* (2007): 203-14, 205, 211. Given that O'Donovan has stated the core of evangelical ethics in terms remarkably similar to Ulrich— "Morality is man's participation in the created order", and "moral illumination does, in its fundamental form, involve conversion", *R&MO*, 76, 92—we should expect the exhortation to gird up our loins to apply with equal serious to both Ulrich and O'Donovan.

[75] O'Donovan, 'The Object of Theological Ethics', 210.

[76] *R&MO*, 49.

[77] "We remain beings for whom knowledge is the mode of their participation in the universe"; *R&MO*, 87. "Moral 'learning' is all the time 'thinking'. It is the intellectual penetration and exploration of a reality which we can grasp from the beginning in a schematic and abstract way, but which contains depths of meaning and experience into which we must reach", 92.

> Knowledge which admits discontinuity as anything other than a challenge to be overcome has in principle abandoned the task of being knowledge…"[78]

This means that our striving after moral knowledge is not in vain. This is the thrust of O'Donovan's realism—it protects against the cloud of suspicion that accompanies critiques based upon the subjectivity of human experience. For this reason O'Donovan is able to say metaphorically that moral truths stand "as bricks to a building", and therefore "wisdom must involve some comprehension of how the bricks are meant to be put together."[79] Such a concept of ontological priority suggests that humans must possess, in some sense, the capacity to acquire moral knowledge in spite of the epistemological challenges described above with respect to existential knowledge. This construes the moral order as being in some sense accessible to human nature, without being contingent upon any endowment of faith, doctrine or scripture to facilitate epistemic access to its structure.[80] O'Donovan describes this aspect of the moral order as a "natural ethic"[81] and goes on to observe that "Secular man can observe the same indications of order as anyone else." [82] Of course the "secular" observer of moral order will necessarily fail to discern the *true* context of the moral order, and will completely miss its evangelical content; nonetheless, the moral order remains in some sense immediately accessible to the secular observer via human nature. This follows logically from the concept of ontological priority, because O'Donovan's methodical realism affirms objective knowledge of the ordered structures of the creation. The logic behind this argument rests on the premise that the ontological and epistemological issues can be neatly separated and addressed sequentially. On O'Donovan's view, confusion results if the lines between

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[78] *R&MO*, 49f.

[79] *R&MO*, 200.

[80] John McIntyre offers a helpful insight as to why we should not rush to conclude from the idea of ontological priority that humans have a natural capacity to discern moral truth, or any other revealed truth: "[I]f God is to communicate with us, then his communication must eventually be convertible into verbal, conceptual, propositional form. But we are not thereby affirming that the source of the communication is verbal, or even that God's response can be atomized into discrete thoughts. On such matters we have to remain agnostic." This agnosticism rightly serves to undermine the presumption of epistemological arrogance which seems implicit in the idea that the ontological priority of the moral order means that moral truths can be "atomized into discrete thoughts", as O'Donovan suggests metaphorically by his reference to "moral bricks". McIntyre, *Theology after the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture*, ed. Gary D. Badcock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 209.

[81] *R&MO*, 16f. O'Donovan argues that the ontological reality of moral order provides grounds for an "ethic of nature", i.e., an "objective order to which the moral life can respond", 19.

[82] *R&MO*, 35.

ontology and epistemology are blurred.[83] He cites this as a primary failing in the Barth-Brunner debate with respect to natural theology, and suggests that his own form of realism can sort out the confusion.[84]

But how can we best differentiate the ontological and epistemological issues cleanly? How is ontological priority to be maintained in the face of the peril it invites with respect to naturalism? We see now that O'Donovan's claim to pursue *evangelical* realism[85] apparently hinges upon the requirement of ontological priority. At root, O'Donovan's realism may be expressed as the requirement to conjoin and hold in tension two essential, yet opposing, polar commitments: (1) on the one hand, the ontological priority of the moral order ensures access to "moral knowledge as a natural function of man's existence"[86]; and yet on the other hand, (2) "the order of reality is not truly known at all", because "there is no self-contained cosmic intelligibility" of the creation as creation.[87] What kind of knowledge is this then, which arises as a natural function of human existence, and yet remains 'not truly known at all'? How can moral knowledge be both known and yet unknown at the same time? There is necessarily a bit of mystery remaining in this type of realism (as O'Donovan duly noted at the outset in the four parameters named above), yet he is not content to let the matter of evangelical ethics end here, shrouded in a mystery that prevents further articulation; rather, he intends to peer into this mystery at least far enough to outline the path forward to the goal of outlining the structure of an evangelical ethic. We now see that success in this goal requires an *epistemological* realism robust enough to maintain the polarity "between revelation in the particular and created order in the universal"[88] without collapsing. The question remains however: what form must such knowledge take?

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[83] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 64-65, sees correctly that "This clarification of the ontological and epistemological issues in ethics underpins one of the central thrusts of O'Donovan's work; its attempt to restore the concept of 'the natural' and the doctrine of creation within Christian ethics."

[84] O'Donovan diagnoses the Barth-Brunner debate in these terms: "[T]he ontological and epistemological issues were never properly differentiated"; *R&MO*, 86.

[85] *R&MO*, xviii.

[86] *R&MO*, 88. Cf. 20, where O'Donovan also states the nub of the epistemological problem: "This nature involves all men, and indeed, as we shall see later, does not exclude a certain 'natural knowledge' which is also a part of man's created endowment. And yet only in Christ do we apprehend that order in which we stand and that knowledge of it with which we have been endowed."

[87] *R&MO*, 88. In supporting this latter commitment O'Donovan says: "If one term of that relation [i.e. knowledge of the Creator] is obscured, the universe cannot be understood", 88. In this context he sounds sympathetic to Barth's language about "the image of God in man [being] not merely 'defaced' but 'lost'" (89).

[88] *R&MO*, 85.

3   IMPLICATIONS OF O'DONOVAN'S EVANGELICAL REALISM

Sustaining the polarities within evangelical ethics

In this chapter we shall look more closely at the ramifications of O'Donovan's pursuit of "evangelical realism". At its core, this realism seems driven by a desire to follow a mediating path capable of holding polarities in tension—specifically those tensions which invigorate the dichotomy of "creation ethics" vs. "kingdom ethics". We can see this mediation at work in his expression of sympathy for both the "realist versions of Natural Law theory", as well as for the "realist" inclinations which he attributes to T. F. Torrance's "scientific theology".[1] This is indeed a robust realism, as seen in its ability to ratify aspects both of Aquinas' natural law theory, as well as of Torrance's 'scientific theology' which departs decidedly from Thomism.[2] The antithetical poles of discernment represented by Aquinas and Torrance

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[1] *R&MO*, xviii, 77, 85. Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), Chapter 1.

[2] Torrance sums up the problems with natural theology in terms of the "Latin Heresy", to wit: "to seek knowledge of God from what he has created out of nothing, would be to operate only from the infinite distance of the creature to the Creator, where we can think and speak of God only in vague, imprecise and negative

demonstrate O'Donovan's purpose in pursuing a course of evangelical realism—to hold polarities in tension. This is the overarching function of his architectonic. O'Donovan seems ever mindful to preserve and defend the tension in his suggestion of natural epistemic access to the moral order. His architectonic serves therefore to uphold the ontological priority of the moral order, and at the same time, to avoid the peril of naturalism that departs from an evangelical understanding of the role of revelation and faith in the apprehension of truth. O'Donovan sees no insurmountable paradox here, but rather a polarity which is part and parcel of the Gospel—

> This polarity between an exclusive knowledge and an inclusive object of knowledge, between revelation in the particular and created order in the universal, must be carefully defended.[3]

This polarity revolves around the role of revelation in the acquisition of moral knowledge. On O'Donovan's view it would be false to suggest that the horns of this dilemma are mutually exclusive—i.e., we do not have to make "the unacceptably polarized choice between an ethic that is revealed and has no ontological grounding and an ethic that is based on creation and so is naturally known."[4] While O'Donovan wants to affirm that "Revelation in history is certainly the lynchpin of Christian epistemology",[5] this does not apparently make it the lynchpin for a doctrine of the moral order. Revelation is one thing, and the reality of nature is another, or so it would seem:

> It is one thing to say that until the Word became incarnate, man could discern no meaning in nature; quite another to say that until the Word became incarnate nature had not meaning. Revelation is the solution to man's blindness, not to nature's emptiness.[6]

We see this tension also in "the irreducible duality between the freedom of God to act particularly in history and the generic ordering of the world which is reflected in morality."[7] O'Donovan's realism requires this polarity to be sustained, and held in tension. Its collapse

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terms"; T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990) 213. The problem lies not in the logic or metaphysics of natural theology *per se*, but rather in its independence from evangelical witness, which results in "an arbitrary movement of thought", 150.

[3] *R&MO*, 85.
[4] *R&MO*, 19.
[5] O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic', 26.
[6] O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic', 26.
[7] *R&MO*, 45.

cannot be permitted.[8] This capacity to affirm both revelation in the specific *and* the universal structure of the moral order in general is the fundamentally important criterion of O'Donovan's "evangelical realism".[9]

On O'Donovan's view, the collapse of the polar commitments required of evangelical ethics leads invariably into one or another form of idealism.[10] Examples of the dire consequences of this collapse fill the pages of *R&MO*—to cite but a few of these, we find O'Donovan warning against the errors of: modern idealism (238), pantheistic idealism (248), humanism (37), technological humanism (237), monophysite humanism (242), scientism (52), rationalism (133), nominalism (49), historicism (58), Gnostic dualism (63), conservatism (185), consequentialism (187), legalism (261), antinomianism (263), moralism (262), relativism (220), Kierkegaardian voluntarism (16), pantheism as a potential by-product of Kierkegaard's Christian voluntarism (39), Nestorian theism (242), Hegelian idealism (36) and Hauerwas's crucimonism (xv). O'Donovan categorizes these various ~isms chiefly in terms of *rationalism* (inclined to continuity with the natural order, security and reason) and *voluntarism* (inclined to discontinuity, instability and subjectivity). He points out how each of these idealisms tends toward varieties of humanism, and thus they meet at "the antipodes".[11]

This concern over collapsing polarities and their tendency to meet at the antipodes of humanism (as seen in modern cultural "liberalism", for example) continues to motivate O'Donovan's more recent work. To cite but one example: in *Church in Crisis* he elucidates the tension between Protestant and Catholic perspectives as indicative of the type of weakness which befalls moral theology when it allows the poles of evangelicalism to collapse—

> In making this conjunction its object, liberalism assimilated a Protestant construction of Christian existence in missiological terms. In assuming it already present and needing only to be affirmed, it assimilated a Catholic, doxological one. Yet the conception is neither Protestant nor Catholic. Both the eschatological frontier between this world and the next, important to Protestants, and the ontological frontier between the Creator and the creature, important to Catholics, are collapsed.[12]

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[8] There are two fundamental ways for the polarity to collapse: either by condoning one of various forms of idealism, or by reengaging "the debate between the so-called 'ethics of the kingdom' and the 'ethics of creation'; *R&MO*, 15. Cf. xv, where O'Donovan expresses his desire to overcome the unfruitful debate between these two views.

[9] O'Donovan describes his own "evangelical realism" in contradistinction to the "high-church moral programme of Hauerwas", *R&MO,* xviii.

[10] E.g., "misleading Idealist implications", *R&MO*, 106.

[11] *R&MO*, 133. Cf. 181.

[12] O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008) 8.

Wherever O'Donovan looks, he sees an inescapable tension within evangelical theology, and rightly so, for there is indeed a chasm between God's being and our experiential knowledge of him. Kierkegaard characterized this chasm as the "infinite qualitative difference"; O'Donovan states it as "the proper tension between the transcendence and the incarnate nearness of God, [without which] there can simply be no gospel at all.["][13] He looks back on the Tudor Reformers with admiration for their diligence to hold the polarities together in "a very nearly perfect balance".[14] He attributes their fine sense of balance to their courage in facing into the "discomfort between objectivity and subjectivity: the objectivity which must be ascribed to sacramental grace, and the subjectivity implied in the role of faith in appropriating it", without shying away from the task.[15] O'Donovan would seem to be a present-day inheritor of this courageous tradition, for he presses on in search of this finely tuned balance, ever diligent to articulate the twinned tensions of ontological order and the epistemic role of faith.

The peril of naturalism

O'Donovan is quick to recognize the liminal appearance of naturalism which stems from his statement of tension between "revelation in the particular and created order in the universal". He recognizes both the value and the risk inherent in the concept of a 'natural ethic', and expresses both sympathy and trepidation at that prospect:

> [W]e have avoided using the classic term 'Natural Law' in the course of our exposition of created order, and will continue to avoid it, despite points of strong sympathy between our account and the more realist versions of Natural Law theory.[16]

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[13] *39 Articles*, 20. Thus, there is a "tension between subject and predicate that must be preserved in any statement of the gospel", 21.

[14] O'Donovan attributes this balance to the Reformers' desire to hold Old Testament Law in tension with the Gospel. He reads Cranmer's Article 7 in light of a "historical dialectic" which functions as a bi-directional fulcrum through which the "gospel of Christ" mediates both "the contingent social order", as well as "the universal good". This might be reading more into Article than Cranmer intended, but it demonstrates O'Donovan's search for perfect balance through dialectical concept of historical vantage; *39 Articles*, 64. In his comments on Article 9, O'Donovan similarly praises Augustine for offering a balanced approach "to embrace the complementary aspects of human evil… encouraging each aspect to interpret the other", 73.

[15] *39 Articles*, 129.

[16] *R&MO*, 85. In response to some reviewers of *R&MO*, O'Donovan argues that the book was *not* "a cover for a return to a 'natural ethic'"; *DN*, 19.

Sympathy and trepidation—these represent yet one more set of the irreducible polarities symptomatic of O'Donovan's course of realism. His sympathy for Natural Law theory extends only as far as can be traveled without departing from the evangelical affirmation of Christ as the incarnate Word. Yet he avoids the term "Natural Law" in order to avoid the inference that moral goodness is self-evident in the form of axiomatic principles "authenticated by their universal self-evidence alone."[17] The crucial qualification in O'Donovan's statement lies in the word "realist", by which we may understand that he has sympathy for only those interpretations of Natural Law which remain compatible with the evangelical message of Christian faith. This begs the question: what are the appropriate qualifications which must be placed upon Natural Law theory to render it "realist"? It would seem that O'Donovan's criteria here require us to validate the capacity of "secular man" to observe the moral structure of creation as it exists in nature. But how are we to sustain this natural witness to ethics without departing from the evangelical witness of the resurrection of Christ as the foundation of ethics? If "Revelation in history is certainly the lynchpin of Christian epistemology",[18] as O'Donovan advocates, then how is objective reality to be discerned apart from the event of revelation? There is a fundamentally unavoidable tension at work here, one pole of which exerts a gravitational force in the direction of naturalism, based in the presumption that the created order carries within itself authority to authenticate knowledge of universal significance. The battle to sustain the polarity of revelation and a "natural ethic' in tension would be lost if ever "Natural Law" were to be conceived as a self-evident source of truth and moral authority. How does O'Donovan avoid this peril of naturalism? He clearly recognizes the threat naturalism presents for an evangelical ethic, and he insists that knowledge of the created order must be "vindicated by God's revelatory word that the created good and man's knowledge of it is [sic] not to be overthrown in history."[19] He goes on to identify the indelible bond which holds together the polarities of evangelical realism:

> Such knowledge, according to the Christian gospel, is given to us as we participate in the life of Jesus Christ. He is the point from which the whole is to be discerned, 'in whom

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[17] O'Donovan cites John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, as evidence of this interpretation of Aquinas and almost "all subsequent natural law thinking." *R&MO*, 85, 86.
[18] O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic', 26.
[19] *R&MO*, 85.

are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3)… True knowledge of the moral order is knowledge 'in Christ'.[20]

The key phrase here is: *given to us as we participate in the life of Christ*. This reliance upon Christ as the source of moral knowledge defends against the peril of naturalism. But what does "in Christ" mean in this context? O'Donovan warns that it must not subscribe to an ethereal, abstract "universal Logos", for that would grant warrant to a self-authenticating version of Natural Law theory. He speaks rather in terms of participation in the life of "the Logos made flesh in the first century AD, crucified under Pontius Pilate and raised again on the third day".[21] His realism aims therefore to affirm two opposing directions of interpretation in the creedal confession: we are to see Jesus as the historically incarnate truth, as well as to see the extra-historical and universal objective reality of the orders of creation, by virtue of their ontological priority.

The conditions for moral knowledge: love & obedience

As with the bi-directional witness of the resurrection, O'Donovan's concept of participation in Christ here seems to entail a similarly bi-directional view of the doctrine of incarnation. On the one hand, our participation in Christ may be viewed as participation in that which is *natural*—the well-ordered universe created through Christ; and on the other hand, our participation is in that which is *supernatural*—through faith in Christ which occurs only via special revelation. This requires an evangelical ethic to proclaim two polarities with respect to moral knowledge: (1) the universal objective truth within the moral order is accessible to human knowledge, at least in part; and (2) "true knowledge of the moral order is knowledge 'in Christ'", which is "given to us as we participate in the life of Jesus Christ."[22] Thus the project of separating the ontological and epistemological issues would seem to hinge upon how we understand the epistemic contingencies of what it means to *participate in the life of Jesus Christ*. O'Donovan acknowledges that this participation is the key which unlocks the deeper meaning of the moral order by revealing Jesus Christ as the source,

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[20] *R&MO*, 85. As O'Donovan aptly puts it, the error lies in etherealizing the meaning of 'in Christ' in such a way that faith is grounded in "a universal Logos" rather than in the "Logos made flesh in the first century AD".
[21] *R&MO*, 85.
[22] *R&MO*, 85.

content and shape of the eschatological love which forms the heart of ethics. And how does this participation take place? By living in obedience:

> Knowledge of the natural order is moral knowledge, and as such it is co-ordinated with obedience. There can be no true knowledge of that order without loving acceptance of it and conformity to it, for it is known by participation and not by transcendence. [23]

Moral knowledge thus requires "loving acceptance" of the natural order. If we take this requirement in the sense of faithful obedience and conformity to the gospel and the new-old commandment taught by Jesus,[24] faith in him would seem to be a necessary component of moral knowledge. Indeed, the requirement of participation in the life of Christ would seem to call for obedient response, offered freely and in faith, as a necessary condition for loving acceptance of Christ and the moral order that he embodies. O'Donovan would seem to be ratifying this conception of participation in Christ as the foundation for moral knowledge when he says:

> The true moral life of the Christian community is its love, and its love is unintelligible except as a participation in the life of the one who reveals himself to us as Love, except, that is, as the entry of mankind and of the restored creation upon its supernatural end.[25]

To make loving obedience to Christ a pre-requisite of moral knowledge would seem to make faith and participation in Christ necessary conditions for epistemic access to the moral order.[26] This would however be too hasty a reading of O'Donovan, for he stops short of equating ethics with faith or worship or theology, because he discerns within those equations the lamentable confusion of the epistemological and ontological issues. He does not deny the epistemic role of faithfulness; yet he does not construe moral knowledge to be contingent upon evangelical witness.[27] In recognition of the tension in his statement of loving

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[23] *R&MO*, 87.

[24] E.g., Matt. 22:37-40; John 13:34-35; 1 John 2:7, 4:21.

[25] *R&MO*, 246.

[26] If interpreted in this vein, O'Donovan's statement of the epistemic contingencies of moral knowledge sound eminently consistent with Barth's insistence that dogmatics and ethics are inextricably bound together in the event of revelation; *CD* I/2, 790. Webster notes well Barth's consistency in this regard: "Christian dogmatics is inherently ethical dogmatics. … Dogmatics, precisely because its theme is the encounter of God and humanity, is from the beginning moral theology… He does not bifurcate freedom and nature"; John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 8.

[27] While O'Donovan identifies explicitly the criterion of worship for true knowledge—"knowledge is tied up with the faithful performance of man's task in the world, and that his knowing will stand or fall with his worship of God and his obedience to the moral law"; *R&MO*, 81—he does not make knowledge contingent upon

acceptance as the requirement for moral knowledge, he identifies the dialectical tension in the question of how obedience factors into the epistemic requirements for moral knowledge:

> How, then, we must ask, if true knowledge of the whole is co-ordinated with obedience, can there be such a knowledge available to disobedient man?[28]

O'Donovan offers no immediate answer to this question, other than to insist upon the bi-directional vantage of his evangelical realism which upholds the objective reality of the moral order against the risk that it might collapse under the pressure of the experiential and subjective aspects of "loving acceptance" and obedience. Beyond his repeated reliance upon *participation in Christ* as a solution to the dialectical tension between natural and revealed knowledge of the moral order, he pays surprisingly little attention in *R&MO* to its implications for theological anthropology, Christology and pneumatology.[29] O'Donovan does refer to "being-in-Christ" once in the context of explaining "how the freedom realized in our subjectivities by the Spirit is the same freedom as that which Jesus first achieved in his subjectivity—'objectively' from our point of view."[30] Thus we see that participation (or 'being') in Christ binds us ontologically to the moral status of Christ, so that we participate in *his* subjectivity, and *his* moral freedom, without making our own moral knowledge contingent upon the subjective experience of faithful participation in Christ. Again we can see O'Donovan's concern to affirm the objective status of moral knowledge—in this case interpreting participation in Christ as something to be recognized "'objectively' from our point of view." But this introduces another paradoxical question—how can we view our subjective moral freedom in Christ *objectively*, as O'Donovan claims? His answer is that by recognizing Christ's subjectivity as preexistent to our faith, our own subjective experience is subsumed within the eternal and preexistent moral life of Christ who has vindicated human moral freedom once and for all. We inherit the moral freedom of the first Adam, which is

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evangelical faith, for that would undermine the authority of *lex*, *iustitia*, and *ordo* as the fundamentally important strands of moral knowledge. Thus, he concludes that worship is to be added to this triad as "the fourth strand [which] is not a constitutive element of political authority alongside the other three." *WJ*, 142; cf. *DN*, 47.

[28] *R&MO*, 82.

[29] Hans Burger notices correctly that "Although O'Donovan does not explicitly reflect on the concept of 'being in Christ,' it is evident that the concept of 'representation' is very central to his Christology if not *the* central concept. The matter of 'being in Christ' is also present, although he does not often use the words 'being in Christ'."; Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008) 477-8. In O'Donovan's behalf however, I must also acknowledge that he does not position *R&MO* as a work of systematic theology. His titular claim to "an outline for evangelical ethics" is appropriate, and reminds us to pay attention to his epistemological method in our reading, rather than to expect to find dogmatics pertaining to systematic theology.

[30] *R&MO*, 24. Burger makes note of this reference, *Being in Christ* , 478.

fulfilled in the last. Our participation in Christ is therefore participation in an objective reality that has existed for all time, as O'Donovan explains:

> The gift of subjective freedom must already be an aspect of our being-in-Christ, not merely a precondition of or a consequence of it. Before the Spirit gives us this freedom it is Christ's freedom… we must characterize Christian freedom as participation in Christ's authority within the created order.[31]

By conceiving of human moral freedom as a participation in the authority of Christ "within the created order", O'Donovan would guard against the possibility that participation in Christ might be interpreted as an impenetrable mystery which obscured knowledge of the moral order behind a smokescreen of subjectivity, leaving it ultimately undetermined. O'Donovan aims for a realism which will rule out interpretations of faith as an irrational and mysterious 'leap' which renders moot the effort to ascertain objective knowledge through rational thought.[32] If rational moral deliberation were to be impugned by the apparently arbitrary and inaccessible impetus of each observer's private "spontaneity of mood and emotion",[33] the entire project of evangelical ethics would be at risk: rather than standing solidly as an objective reality within the creation, the moral order would then exist only in the realm of esoteric and personal ideas, "opted into by those who so choose, irrelevant to those

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[31] *R&MO*, 24. Burger shows good insight into O'Donovan's doctrine here—"a moment of union is not necessary within O'Donovan's conceptuality. Representation, participation together with the concepts of judgment, authority and faith suffice to explain the salvation of humanity"; Burger, *Being in Christ*, 500, cf. 477-8, 515. For Burger, 'representation' implicates the objective reality of Christ as the representative last Adam who makes atonement for us and binds us into moral reality and all reality; 'union' on the other hand, refers to our mystic, experiential and subjective union with Christ, which of course O'Donovan does not want to implicate as being a precondition for epistemic access to moral reality.

[32] Concern to avoid existentialist interpretations of divine command theory as being too "particular and unpredictable" drives O'Donovan's critique of Barth's ethics; *R&MO*, 87. Nigel Biggar recognizes how a perception of irrationality can arise from Barth's ethics: "the real problem with any concept of divine command such as Barth's is that it transcends rational assessment." Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 24. This perception stems from superficial reading of statements such as this: "They [i.e., orders and realms of ethical knowledge] are not universal ethical truths, but only the general form of the one and supremely particular truth of the ethical event which is inaccessible as such to the casuistical grasp"; *CD* III/4, 29. The charge of irrationality however is spurious, as it misses the full import of Barth's relational epistemology. Biggar goes on to show that just because "God's command cannot be articulated in terms of principles or rules that hold from one situation to another", this does not rule out normative ethics, nor does it result in irrational, arbitrary moral deliberation; Biggar, 'Hearing God's Command and Thinking about What's Right: With and Beyond Barth', in *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988) 103f.

[33] *R&MO*, 119.

who do not choose."[34] O'Donovan's realism must avoid these extremes, of course, in order to maintain its balance.

Avoiding the peril of divine command ethics

O'Donovan's exegesis of ὑπακοή (*hypakoē*) helps us see how he expects his evangelical realism to rule out those aspects of divine command theory which he finds unsavory.[35] While there is a sense in which the concept of 'obedience' does apply appropriately to this biblical word in a practical sense, it is an inexact translation. After all, "obedience", *simpliciter*, might conform to a voluntarist-leaning divine command perspective, which O'Donovan would like to avoid. In order to counter-balance the subjective and emotive aspects of personal imagination and experience which might be incorporated within the concept of obedience to divine command, O'Donovan requires that obedience must be understood in a "cognitive sense".[36] He thus maintains that proper exegesis requires the meaning of ὑπακοή be "split into two distinct elements, 'hearing' and 'doing'", the co-ordination of which requires cognitive attentiveness. By this he means to emphasize the rational engagement of the moral subject with the moral order. Thus, to participate in Christ is to make a rational assent to the available evidence, and participation in Christ is therefore to be defined as a rational, obedient response to his authority.[37] Thus, sin must be defined in terms of the cognitive aspect of participation:

> The disjunction of hearing and doing, or of reason and will, is sin. It is the failure of man to make the response that is appropriate to him as a free rational agent.[38]

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[34] O'Donovan finds this pernicious misconception prevalent: "Western moral thought since the Enlightenment has been predominantly 'voluntarist' in its assumptions", *R&MO*, 16. We may presume that this widely held, yet erroneous, perception of irrelevance motivates O'Donovan's discourse, as he begins the first page of his Preface by sharing the difficulty he has experienced as a professor of moral philosophy encountering "the blank faces of my students", whom we might presume to be under the influence of this misconception, vii.

[35] Cf. O'Donovan's exegesis of Romans 1:5; 6:16; *R&MO* 110.

[36] *R&MO*, 110. He cites James 1:22 for support, since it carries the admonition "do not be deceived". Also in support of this reading, he translates 1 Peter 1:22 as "attentiveness" to the truth, in order to convey the "cognitive content" of obedience.

[37] In this way O'Donovan intends to repair the breach he discerns in Barth's moral theology due to its emphasis on divine command. He offers this critique of Barth, with respect to a perceived lack of moral responsibility to objective reality: "All this left him with a formal account of the theological basis of ethics which, depending exclusively on the divine command – interpreted in the existentialist way as particular and unpredictable –, was far too thin to support the extensive responsibility for moral deliberation which he would claim in practice and sometimes even defend in theory"; *R&MO*, 87.

[38] *R&MO*, 111.

This cognitive aspect of obedience to moral authority has important implications for the doctrine of sin. First, it means that sin is not so much to be understood as a "lack of knowledge", but rather to be more precise, sin is "misknowledge".[39] O'Donovan's point here is not that humans, as fallen creatures, have lost their ability to perceive and know the moral order; but rather, their perception is *false*—it is *mis*-knowledge."[40] This distinction between mis-knowledge and "lack of knowledge" (i.e. ignorance) requires some careful parsing to achieve a fine nuance—the claim that mis-knowledge does not correspond to a loss of the human capacity to perceive the moral order, would seem to imply that even in the fallen condition of sin, ignorance of the truth does not put a person into a state of *un*-knowing with respect to moral truth. Thus, the *capacity* to know the truth seems to remain intact, at least in some sense. We might therefore understand sin as a failure of cognition which results in a type of knowing that misses the mark.[41] The failure inherent in mis-knowledge does mean, however, that *true* understanding of the moral order has been lost, as O'Donovan concludes:

> Knowledge of the moral order is a grasp of the total shape in which, if anything is lacking, everything is lacking.[42]

This would seem to beg the question, if "everything is lacking" in natural access to moral knowledge, on account of the presence of sin, how could this be called *moral* knowledge? Likewise, how could it be called moral *knowledge*? To suggest that "everything is lacking" in this unredeemed status of moral knowledge would seem to imply that faith becomes an essential prerequisite to knowing anything at all about the moral order. In answer to this objection, O'Donovan wants to say that although "true" understanding requires divine revelation, nonetheless, mis-knowledge is still an engagement with the moral order, because "knowledge is, and always has been, man's order of participation in the universe."[43]

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[39] *R&MO*, 88. Speaking through Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard comes to a similar conclusion in defining sin as untruth, Kierkegaard and Howard V. Hong; Edna H. Hong, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985) 15.

[40] To explain what he means by "mis-knowledge", O'Donovan references the Barth-Brunner debate over the idea "that the image of God in man was not merely 'defaced' but 'lost'"; *R&MO*, 89. O'Donovan maintains that the epistemological implications of this debate require greater nuance than Barth and Brunner were able to achieve. For an insightful study of Brunner's distinction of the terms 'defaced' and 'lost', see Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Essays toward a Reading of His Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999) 153.

[41] This interpretation compares well with the literal biblical meaning of sin (ἁμαρτία, חטא) as a "missing of the mark.

[42] *R&MO*, 89.

[43] *R&MO*, 89. "[R]evelation catches man out in the guilty possession of a knowledge which he has always had, but from which he has never won a true understanding. It shows him up… as a man who has 'suppressed the truth' in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18)", *R&MO*, 89. O'Donovan thus implies that the first chapter of Romans

By relying upon this cognitive capability as the essence of what it means to be human O'Donovan intends to avoid the risk of confusing the epistemological premises of faith with the ontological primacy of the moral order. As we have seen, O'Donovan points to participation in Christ as the key to resolving the existential tension which lingers in his articulation of moral knowledge vs. mis-knowledge. This is why the resurrection serves as the necessary foundation for an evangelical ethic—Christ vindicates our fallen moral knowledge, and completes what is lacking therein. In Christ's resurrection we see God vindicating the moral order, and by participation 'in Christ' we may gain the ability to know that order. Without the witness of the resurrection to eschatological transformation, and the bi-directional vision of the resurrection, we would have no valid reason to trust in the doctrine of ontological priority as a justification for a 'natural' ethic.[44]

Implications for theological anthropology

The correlation between cognition, obedience and knowledge at the core of human identity, together with the claim that access to the moral order occurs through participation in Christ, raises some important implications for theological anthropology. O'Donovan recognizes that one radical implication of this doctrine is to define human persons in terms of the capacity for knowledge:

> Knowledge is the characteristically *human* way of participating in the cosmic order. Man takes his place … by knowing the created beings around him in a way that they do not know him… To know is to fill a quite specific place in the order of things, the place allotted to mankind.[45]

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supports his view that *natural* access to knowledge can lead to *moral* knowledge. In contrast to this interpretation, I would suggest that Paul's conclusions with respect to the outcome of natural knowledge of the created order(s) might invite less sanguine readings of the viability of natural knowledge—"since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil…" (Rom. 1:28f).

[44] And not just the resurrection, but the incarnation also must provide the same bi-directional vantage if O'Donovan's realism is to sustain this tension in moral knowledge. In some ways, the incarnation seems even more crucial to O'Donovan's realism, because it is in the incarnation of Christ that human mis-knowledge (i.e., sin) is justified as being an engagement with the ontological reality of the moral order.

[45] *R&MO*, 81. Yet sin (disobedience) disturbs the fulfillment of human identity and destiny, and so O'Donovan offers the necessary qualification: "man's place in the universe… has not been faithfully occupied… Knowledge will therefore be inescapably compromised by the problem of fallenness, the defacement of the image of God, and by the fallen creature's incapacity to set himself right with good will and determination."*R&MO*, 81-82. Cf.

As a corollary to this understanding of "the place allotted to mankind", there are certain implications for the doctrine of revelation. In order to maintain the influence of the moral order as being impervious to any descent into relativism which might stem from existential subjectivity, he is careful to state explicitly that participation in Christ does not make knowledge of the order of the universe a matter solely contingent upon special revelation—

> Thus it [order in the universe] remains accessible to knowledge in part. It requires no revelation to observe the various forms of generic and teleological order which belong to it. An unbeliever or a non-christian culture does not have to fail entirely to respond to this knowledge in action, disposition or institution. So much must be said about moral knowledge as a natural function of man's existence.[46]

Accordingly, human nature is seen to possess some capacity to discern moral order, and likewise, the universe is seen to possess some capacity to reveal moral order. Furthermore, these capacities are to be understood as being realized apart from any specific event of revelation. Given O'Donovan's comments about the state of mis-knowledge that pertains to the fallen condition of humans in the absence of divine revelation, how is the mis-knowledge pertaining to these natural capacities to be reconciled with the true content of the moral order? This question leads to discussion of the Christological implications.

Adopted into equality in Christ?

Confronted with the fragmentary and provisional quality of our moral knowledge, we must rely upon the bridgework which participation in Christ provides if we are to span the distance created by the problem of "misknowledge" that results from sin. In Christ alone we

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p. 55-56. To define the ontological essence of human beings in terms of a cognitive capacity for knowledge brings troubling implications for the humanity of embryos, infants and the mentally impaired, as Barth points out in his rejoinder to Brunner regarding "new-born children and idiots. Are they not children of Adam? Has Christ not died for them?" *Nein!*, 89. Joan Lockwood O'Donovan cites this counterargument by Barth in her analysis of Brunner's doctrinal move to define a 'formal' *imago Dei* in terms of the capacity for knowledge, and comes to the well reasoned conclusion that Barth's statement of the *imago*—as being defined in relational terms of "the Word revealed in Jesus Christ as the epistemological and ontological foundation of human being"—is to be preferred over Brunner's "formal concept of the *humanum* as rational self-determination"; Joan E. O'Donovan, 'Man in the image of God: the Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered', *Scottish Journal of Theology 39* (1986): 433-459, 458.

[46] *R&MO*, 88.

escape these bonds. Christ alone—creator and vindicator of the moral order—incarnates "right" moral action as an ever-present, immediate possibility in all circumstances. O'Donovan thus describes participation in Christ as the ontological reality which binds our fragmented, provisional and partial knowledge with his perfect moral authority—

> [W]e need not be afraid to speak even of an equality of perspective with the Son of God, in that the New Testament refers to our 'adoption as sons', and to Christ as 'the first-born among many brethren' (Rom. 8:23, 29). But at the ontological level we must say something stronger: Jesus is not only a witness to the restored moral order, however indispensable; he is the one in whom that order has come to be. God has willed that the restored creation should take form in, and in relation to, one man. He exists … as the one in whom it is summed up. To participate in the new creation is, not provisionally only but for ever, to participate in Christ – in an equality with him, certainly, since we have been adopted into his relation to the Father, yet never interchangeably.[47]

Were it not for the benefits of participation in Christ, the limitations of humankind's "inescapably compromised" moral vision would perpetually shroud our moral deliberation in the miasma of sin, and our ethical discourse would fail to escape the vicissitudes of voluntarism; but because Christ embodies the completeness and perfection of the moral order, we gain immediate access to that perfection by virtue of our adoption into his kingdom family, which adoption in some sense makes us equal with him. Thus, "to participate in Christ" is to stand as equals with Christ, in some sense, with respect to participation in the moral order. This reality emerges from God's freedom in choosing to adopt us into an equal relationship with Christ. Awareness of this relationship grants us warrant to trust with confidence that by acting in faithful obedience to Christ, we are participating in, and bearing witness to, the moral order summed up in him. This is the bold, even scandalous, claim of evangelical ethics. But how far may we push the idea of *equality* in this statement with respect to the ontological reality of the moral order? Does this equality pertain only to the relationship of faith in which cognitive assent to the authority of Christ obtains? Or does this equality also apply to the human condition of non-believers, based upon O'Donovan's argument that moral knowledge is, to some extent at least, "a natural function of man's existence"?[48] Here we see how the Incarnation of Christ emerges as a foundational principle in O'Donovan's realism. By understanding Christ as the representative who sums up and completes mankind's cognitive, obedient response to the moral order—once-and-for-all, for

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[47] *R&MO*, 150.
[48] *R&MO*, 88.

all humankind—the ontological priority of the moral order may be considered a Christologically necessary doctrine. We can see this Christological emphasis upon representation in O'Donovan's interpretation of the Anglican Reformers—

> The compelling force of the Reformers' answers is that they reintroduce the forgotten middle-term in the relation of God and the soul: the effective agent of God and the representative of man, Jesus Christ, whose work of salvation is complete and decisive, the last word to which nothing can be added… already proposition and answer, thesis and antithesis, all in one.[49]

The once-and-for-all finality of Christ's incarnation thus binds all human flesh to the primal structure of the moral order embedded within the creation. O'Donovan's evangelical realism is grounded in this binding. We can retrace the logic: Christ is preexistent and eternal; Christ incarnate is objectively real; Christ binds humankind to himself; and, "nothing can be added" to this moral significance of Christ as the representative of all humankind. Thus, the objective reality of Christ mediates and secures moral knowledge as "a natural function of man's existence". *QED*, or so it would seem. Upon the rigor of this logic O'Donovan's appeal to the epistemic import of a 'natural ethic' would seem to hinge. I shall end this chapter by identifying some challenging implications of this evangelical realism.

Challenges ensuing from O'Donovan's evangelical realism

While O'Donovan's approach seems to offer a promising apologetic for the *ontology of the moral order*, it engenders some challenges as a statement of the *epistemology of moral knowledge*. The challenges stem generally from the difficulty of sustaining the tension between the presumed objectivity of a 'natural ethic', and the subjective experience of faith in which true evangelical understanding obtains. This engenders challenging Christological and pneumatological questions, with serious implications for theological anthropology. Of course we must recognize that O'Donovan has not set out to develop a systematic theology, but rather, an outline for evangelical ethics; nonetheless, these implications deserve thorough attention if the method of his realism is to be termed "evangelical".

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[49] *39 Articles*, 78. Hans Burger cites this reference in support of his reading of O'Donovan's Christological emphasis upon Representation, *Being in Christ*, 454, n9.

First, there is the *challenge of avoiding subjectivity in statements of moral knowledge.* As O'Donovan has shown, subjective experience is formed and occurs *within* the one objective reality of the universe. Therefore the ontological reality of the ordered structure of the universe, and the moral order within it, cannot in any sense be contingent upon an individual's subjective experience. Given the necessarily existential, flawed and fragmentary nature of our human knowledge however, the agency of the Holy Spirit is necessary to redeem moral knowledge and behaviour—

> Again, when we speak of the Christian moral life as lived *in the Spirit*, we declare that this life is itself part of the divine self-disclosure, and as such points us forward to the goal of that self-disclosure. The Holy Spirit, outside of whose field of operation the Christian moral life is unthinkable, is a signpost to the future, 'the earnest of our inheritance pointing to the redemption of God's possession' (Eph. 1:14).[50]

To say that Christian moral life is unthinkable apart from the activity of the Holy Spirit would seem to suggest that a "natural ethic" alone fails to provide epistemic access to the moral order. Are we to presume therefore that the Holy Spirit is at work in redeeming the fallen understanding which derives through a "natural ethic"? How does this happen outside of faith as a necessary component of epistemic access to the moral order?

Second, there is the *challenge of formulating an evangelical doctrine of sin and moral knowledge* within the parameters laid out by O'Donovan's realism. If sin is defined as "the disjunction of hearing and doing, or of reason and will",[51] this would seem to imply that obedience to the gospel ("loving acceptance", in O'Donovan's phrase) were essential for cognizance of, and response to, the moral order. Yet, O'Donovan's realism demands that the mis-knowledge which results from sin does not equate to a loss of the human capacity to perceive the moral order. This suggests that acts committed in a state of mis-knowledge (in the form of ignorance or the disjunction of reason and will) may somehow—accidentally and unintentionally, perhaps—result in right moral behavior, by the activity of the Holy Spirit. This would seem to pose a contradiction to the role of the Spirit as agent of divine self-disclosure. Furthermore, this raises challenges for how we are to understand participation in

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[50] *R&MO*, 247.
[51] *R&MO*, 111.

Christ as the key to moral knowledge. Christ's life is moral because of his loving obedience to the Father, not because his mis-knowledge was somehow redeemed by the Holy Spirit.[52]

Third, there is the *challenge of avoiding any implication of the on-going work of the Spirit within the teleological order of creation*. As we have seen, O'Donovan concludes that the moral order of the universe is teleologically complete and eschatologically fulfilled; it is not evolving or contingent in any way upon history to reveal its teleological content. This doctrine of teleological order ensures for the moral order a "completeness which is already present in the universe".[53] This would seem to make moral law akin to scientific law in the sense that each is an objectively knowable reality external to the mind of the observer. Theology might thereby be considered an experimental science on a par with physics.[54] As such, moral theology could be considered a scientific pursuit in which moral reality is "out there" to be prodded and probed to reveal its inherent truths—

> Moral 'learning' is all the time 'thinking'. It is the intellectual penetration and exploration of a reality which we can grasp from the beginning in a schematic and abstract way, but which contains depths of meaning and experience into which we must reach.[55]

If moral learning is all the time "thinking", conceived as an intellectual operation, where does conversion fit into the process of moral learning? And does this relegate the Holy Spirit to a teaching role? Given that moral knowledge comes to fruition only through participation in Christ, this idea of moral learning as an intellectual exercise would seem to conflict with the miraculous event of conversion and the on-going role of the Spirit in discernment of

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[52] In his cogent analysis of sin and morality, Ivor Davidson presents the issue succinctly: "Jesus has no relation with some other person called God the Son: Jesus *is* God the Son"; "the obedience of the incarnate Son is grounded in inner-divine relations of giving and receiving". If we are to participate in the moral life of Christ then, we will be participating not by virtue of an unwitting correspondence to some other person or ontological reality, but rather by cognizant relationship sustained in the inner-divine relations of the Trinity. Davidson, "Pondering the Sinlessness of Jesus Christ: Moral Christologies and the Witness of Scripture" (2008: 391-2).

[53] *R&MO*, 62.

[54] Moltmann engages this idea with good insight, for while he sees value in conceiving of theology as being experimental—"a *theologia experimentalis*, an experimental theology"—this refers to the interactive aspect of exploration as a *participation* in the universe, and not as a doctrinal statement of moral reality as being an ontologically external, self-contained and complete reality to be studied from an objective vantage point. Thus, Moltmann draws a helpful distinction between experimental theology and experimental physics—theologically speaking, "reality is not only hidden, but is itself not yet there… 'the whole' is not an eternal reality… reality is itself at stake in the process of history." Jürgen Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom* (London: SCM, 2003) 7, 14.

[55] *R&MO*, 92. Cf. "Obedience must be thoughtful obedience… Moral instruction is directed to what we 'do,' but nobody 'does' anything without thinking"; O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible,* eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 165-175, 175.

moral truth. These are rightly conceived not as mere intellectual human achievements, but rather as miraculous works of the Spirit—

> Conversion… is an event in which reason and will together are turned from arbitrariness to reality, an event which is 'miraculous' in that there are no sufficient grounds for it, whether rational or voluntative, within the subject himself.[56]

Furthermore, this miraculous event is not a mere one-off moment of illumination, but an on-going process of continual activity by the Spirit, in the relationship which sustains faith as a continuing event of continuing conversion in the life of the believer.[57] Yet in view of moral learning as an intellectual engagement with the ontological reality of the moral order, it would seem that the miraculous event of conversion must be conceived as being wholly inconsequential to the structure of the moral order;[58] otherwise, the order would be in some sense an emergent, dynamic reality incorporating the event of conversion.[59] To sustain the concept of teleological completeness O'Donovan must rule out the concept of "continuous creation" which would give the structure of the creation a dynamic aspect untenable on view of his realism—

> Classical Christian theology took trouble to distinguish between the ideas of 'creation' and 'providence'. … The modern faith in 'continuous creation' is merely the latest form in which forgetfulness of this dialectic between order and contingency betrays itself.[60]

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[56] *R&MO*, 113.

[57] Thus, O'Donovan recites the opposing pole of tension in moral knowledge: "moral learning… must begin… with the initial conversion of the mind in repentance… it must be constantly renewed in repentance as well"; *R&MO*, 93.

[58] Michael S. Northcutt serves as an example of the oversight that can result from an uncritical reading of O'Donovan's doctrinal implications for pneumatology. Northcutt cites *R&MO* (107) approvingly in support of his conclusion regarding moral learning as an intellectual process aided by the Spirit: "The Spirit enables our moral agency by enlightening our minds to the reality of sin, and by removing the veil that sin placed over our minds"; Northcutt, 'Being Silent: Time in the Spirit', in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004): 414-26, 425. He thus accepts O'Donovan's concept regarding the role of the Holy Spirit as enlightening the intellect and rational moral sensibilities, yet without noticing that implicit in this enlightening there also occurs the personal transformation of awakening to life in Christ, and this is also initiated through the agency of the Holy Spirit in the same event which brings enlightened understanding and *metanoia*.

[59] O'Donovan acknowledges the event of conversion as an on-going, continual event—"Faith, therefore, is always open to repentance… It is renewed and sustained, not out of the agent's established character but by continual conversion." *R&MO*, 256. Nonetheless, his realism excludes the dynamism of this continuing event from contributing to the structure of the moral order, for that would impinge upon the doctrine of its objectivity. In a contradictory (or dialectical) statement, O'Donovan also suggests that the order of creation is contingent upon our worshipful participation in it—"Our very joy places us within that order, and by our gladness the ordered creation of God is made complete"; *DN*, 182.

[60] *R&MO*, 61. Elsewhere, O'Donovan alludes to continuing creation as a "depressing conception of Manichaen character"; *DN*, 143. Cf. O'Donovan's critique of the idea of incarnation as an on-going event of mystic union between believers and Christ: "Being party to the positive conjunction of God and world is the distinct form of

Thus, acts of providence are deemed not to be creative, at least not in the sense of creation *ex nihilo*; else, "continuous creation" would in some sense be happening in the out-working of God's providence. There is a dialectic point of view necessary to combine this statement of teleological completeness with the on-going miraculous work of the Spirit.[61] This dialectical view of the moral order as being both complete, and yet contingent upon the work of the Spirit, suggests that certain boundaries must be placed around pneumatological doctrine in order to limit the role of the Holy Spirit to revelation of the objective reality of the moral order and the 'right' moral choices which comprise it.[62] The effect of these limits is to rule out any activity of the Spirit which would imply either: (a) incompleteness in the ontological reality of the moral order, or (b) historical process as an integral component of the moral order. This puts O'Donovan's doctrine of the Holy Spirit under significant stress, for it would seem to limit the role of the Spirit to the illumination of an external objective reality, to the exclusion of inner-divine relationality as a continually new and miraculous event upon which the moral order remained contingent. We might thus rephrase this pneumatological issue as the *challenge of excluding the epistemic role of the Holy Spirit from the ontology of the moral order.*

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theosis offered to believers in liberal theology"; O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 8. Polkinghorne offers a helpful corrective to a strident rejection of on-going creation when he points out that a "notion of continuous creation may be expected to go beyond a deistic upholding of the universe in being"; in other words, the flat-out rejection of on-going creation tends to collapse into deistic natural theology based upon the presumption that God is no longer at work in creation. This leads to a doctrine of "the God of natural theology alone, who is simply the ground of cosmic order"; John Polkinghorne, *The Work of Love: Creation and Kenosis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 96.

[61] This dialectic can be seen in O'Donovan's statement of conversion as both an on-going event and a single event: "In [a] sense it is true to say that conversion happens not once but many times. Yet it is always the one eschatological reality, … the one decisive transformation; so that we may say, and more profoundly, that conversion happens only once, and that each successive turning back claims and reclaims the one decisive encounter"; *R&MO*, 258.

[62] These limits come into conflict with the active role of the Holy Spirit in the miracle of conversion, and the redemption of reason as an element of new creation. Alan Torrance discusses the epistemic significance of transformational work of the Spirit in 'Can the Truth Be Learned? Redressing the "Theologistic Fallacy" in Modern Biblical Scholarship', in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*; Torrance, Alan J., and Markus Bockmuehl, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008): 143-63. Torrance demonstrates the "dynamic presence of God and God's creative reconciling of our minds" as epistemological necessities for theology and ethics, 151.

Conclusion

Given the challenging questions raised by O'Donovan's path of evangelical realism, we might ask at this juncture to what extent he has succeeded in achieving the balance he desires between the various polarities. Similarly we might wonder how well this path of realism succeeds in sorting out the confusion of the epistemological and ontological questions which O'Donovan ascribes to the Barth-Brunner debate. After all, O'Donovan admits that a purely natural route to knowledge will lead to a failure to grasp moral knowledge, a failure which he refers to as a "misknowledge" in which "everything is lacking." This sounds strikingly similar to Barth's conclusion that there is no natural point of contact which provides epistemic access to knowledge of the moral order,[63] yet O'Donovan argues that this conclusion stems from epistemological confusion. By looking more intently into that debate in the next chapter, we shall shed light on these issues.

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[63] Barth argues that the "repair" of the "point of contact" in the human *imago Dei* which leads to epistemic access to knowledge of the true God "consists in a *miracle* performed upon man," a miracle in which "'material" aptitude' for such knowledge is 'the most *impossible* thing in the world', *Nein!*, 94. O'Donovan similarly notes the necessity of miracle to redeem human reason: "Repentance must go hand in hand with faith, which is the proper stance of reason when it attends to an object which it cannot transcend or contain", and "Conversion…is an event in which reason and will together are turned from arbitrariness to reality, an event which is 'miraculous'", *R&MO*, 113.

Point of Contact: Implications of the Barth-Brunner Debate for Moral Knowledge

γινέσθω δὲ ὁ θεὸς ἀληθής, πᾶς δὲ ἄνθρωπος ψεύστης

Romans 3:4

There comes a decisive turning point in *Resurrection and Moral Order* at the end of "Part One: The Objective Reality". Having set forth his view of the created order, its objectivity and fulfillment, O'Donovan turns his attention to the rules of engagement, as it were, which pertain to moral knowledge, in a chapter described as "a pause for reflection".[1] In this chapter he aims to sort out the epistemological questions which arise from the recognition that in the case of evangelical ethics, moral knowledge does not subsist within an objectifiable conceptual structure which can be expressed as a set of principles, but rather *evangelical* moral knowledge "is also, and perhaps more importantly, a function of its object".[2] Indeed. How can we speak meaningfully of moral knowledge as an objective truth accessible to natural reason, when that very truth is known solely in and through Christ? Whatever can it mean to speak of moral knowledge as objective truth, if we hold its meaning

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[1] *R&MO*, 76.
[2] *R&MO*, 76.

to be embodied in Christ, communicated via the *euangelion*, and understood through participation in Christ?

"What kind of knowledge can this be…?" This is the question O'Donovan realizes he must confront before continuing to discuss the subjective aspect of moral knowledge which occurs through participation in Christ. This question leads him directly into a discussion of the epistemological conditions applicable to knowledge of the moral order, and here he makes a most insightful comparison between his own concern for the objective-subjective synthesis of moral knowledge,[3] and the Barth-Brunner debate:

> In the great theological attack upon Natural Law which was spearheaded earlier this century by Karl Barth, we can only regret that the ontological and epistemological issues were never properly differentiated. In his pursuit of an uncompromised theological epistemology Barth allowed himself to repudiate certain aspects of the doctrine of creation (such as "ordinances") which ought never to have fallen under suspicion. Emil Brunner, for all his unclarity over the epistemological issue, deserves credit for having understood this.[4]

What is it about Barth's "attack upon Natural Law", and the resultant repudiation of certain doctrines of "ordinances" that concerns O'Donovan so? In order to answer this question, we shall need to delve into the core issues of the Barth-Brunner debate as they pertain to O'Donovan's concern for the epistemological ground rules of moral deliberation and moral knowledge. We shall discover via this analysis that the crux of the matter is how we are to understand the human capacity to perceive the shape of the moral order as revealed through the creation. The big word coined by Brunner to address this very issue is *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*—literally, "capacity of (or for) revelation", which requires careful exegesis, because it can refer ambiguously to either a *human* attribute (capability or capacity), or to an attribute of the revelatory powers of *nature*.

The irony of this three-way dialog between Brunner, Barth and O'Donovan is that all three are driven in some sense by the same polemical impulse—to oppose the relentless interpretive pressures of 20th-century secularism which steer the modern moral imaginary in the direction of secular humanism. In the case of Brunner and Barth, this concern came to the fore in the context of the ugly and terrifying social and political movements of Nazi Germany in the 1930s.[5] The historical context helps explain the intensity of their debate. As

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[3] For further reference to O'Donovan's concern for the objective-subjective synthesis, see *R&MO*, 102.
[4] *R&MO*, 86-7.
[5] For as much as our present analysis confines our attention to the antagonism of the Barth-Brunner debate, it is well worth remembering that their end-of-life gestures of reconciliation might well serve as the better ethics

O'Donovan points out, the driving force behind the Barth-Brunner debate is not so much the doctrine of natural theology *per se*, but rather the implications that doctrine brings for moral knowledge, and hence, the intensified importance of the church's theological response to the political pressures of the day.[6] In confronting those dire political pressures, Brunner seeks to uphold the rubrics of Christian morality against the tide of secular humanism by emphasizing the responsibility as a determinative characteristic of human nature. His doctrine thus serves to shore up the theological underpinnings of *human dignity* as being realized in responsibility to the moral order. This leads him to develop the problematic assertion of a "formal" image of God contained in human nature, in order to explain moral responsibility as a component of human nature in correspondence with the "ordinances" of creation. Barth rejects the implications of Brunner's doctrine for ethics and theological anthropology, insisting rather upon a *Christo-centric* moment of encounter at the heart of ethics. O'Donovan finds each of their approaches to require further nuance; nonetheless, he holds in common with both of them the desire to repudiate the drift of our secular age into humanism. In O'Donovan's case, the primary concern is to expunge theological ethics of pernicious arbitrariness and voluntarism. He judges Barth's doctrine somewhat problematic on this score, due to its emphasis upon the divine command—

> All this left him [Barth] with a formal account of the theological basis of ethics which, depending exclusively on the divine command—interpreted in the existentialist way as particular and unpredictable--, was far too thin to support the extensive responsibility for moral deliberation which he would claim in practice and sometimes even defend in theory.[7]

The positions of all three converge upon the interpretive issue of what it might mean for there to exist a point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) for moral knowledge. Analysis of this issue will therefore serve as an effective lens onto the implications of O'Donovan's

lesson to be gleaned from their association. For deeper insight into the issues of the debate and its context, see T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); John W. Hart, *Karl Barth v. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); John C. McDowell, 'Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope', *International Journal of Systematic Theology 8* (2006): 25-41.

[6] *R&MO*, 90. Cf., Moltmann notes perceptively that natural theology was not so much the impetus of their debate, as the political repercussions of the actions of the pro-Nazi 'German Christians'. Jürgen Moltmann *Experiences in Theology: Way and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 80f.

[7] *R&MO*, 87.

evangelical realism. We shall begin our analysis by delving into the anthropological and epistemological implications of Brunner's doctrine, and then turn to consider Barth's reply, *Nein!* Finally, we shall apply our findings to a case study which demonstrates O'Donovan's effort to sort out the ontological and epistemological issues. This study is based in his analysis of the relationship between doctrines of *ordo essendi* and *ordo cognoscendi*.

Part I: *Analysis of Brunner's doctrine of* Anknüpfungspunkt

The famous "debate over natural theology" reached a polemical zenith of sorts with the publication of Brunner's *Natur und Gnade* and Barth's reply, *Nein!*[8] In these pamphlets Brunner and Barth confront one another directly on the doctrinal issues of revelation, the orders of creation, the *imago Dei* and moral knowledge. Brunner defends herein his doctrine of the point of contact—his "Lehre vom Anknüpfungspunkt",[9] yet it is his comprehensive monograph on theological anthropology, *Man in Revolt*, in which we find his most sustained presentation of the doctrine of *Anknüpfungspunkt*.[10] In the several Appendices to this *opus*, Brunner sets forth explicitly his doctrines of *Anknüpfung*, the *imago Dei* and natural theology with deliberate academic rigor. Following *Natur und Gnade* by three years, the book comprises Brunner's definitive response to the vociferous rebuttal he received from Barth's angry reply in *Nein!*[11] Brunner puts plainly his desire to settle the debate once and for all by articulating more thoroughly those aspects of his doctrine of theological anthropology which figured so prominently in his debate with Barth—

> With the publication of this book I hope that I have redeemed the promise made in the foreword to the second edition of *Natur und Gnade*, namely, that only a completely theological anthropology, … will be in a position, without causing new misunderstandings, to show clearly my concern, as against Karl Barth, namely, man's responsibility.[12]

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[8] The two signal works from 1934 have been published together in the slim volume, *Natural Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), hereafter "*NT*", which comprises Brunner's *Natur und Gnade* (hereafter, "*NG*") and Barth's reply, *Nein!*

[9] This is the phrase Brunner uses in *NG*, 19 (*NT*, 32).

[10] English translation of *Der Mensch im Widerspurch* (1937). Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939), hereafter *MiR*.

[11] Barth begins *Nein!* bluntly with an "Angry Introduction" (70). Brunner, for his part, denies holding any angry feelings, and says the whole matter was due to a misunderstanding that he could take "fairly lightly"; *NT*, 15.

[12] *MiR*, 11. Cf. p. 527, where Brunner again refers to this book as an attempt to address Barth's *Antwort*.

Interestingly, Brunner identifies "man's responsibility" as the hinge issue in the debate.[13] Brunner's concern here corresponds to O'Donovan's definition of the distinguishing characteristic of "*man's position* in the universe" as being the possession of knowledge, and hence, the capacity to do so.[14] This leads him to accuse Barth of a form of divine command ethics which deprives humans of the responsibility which comes from free moral agency.[15] Why does this issue play such a central role in Brunner's doctrine, but not Barth's? The answer lies in Brunner's concern to affirm human dignity at the core of what it means to be human. He saw this as a flaw in Barth's position—that Barth's doctrine disparages human dignity and freedom inevitably in order to make room for the initiative and freedom of God. "Brunner accuses Barth of overwhelming and annihilating the human", as McDowell observes with wry precision.[16] Accordingly, Brunner frames the central question which will guide his opus on theological anthropology: *Was ist der Mensch?* [17] This simple question serves as the lodestone for Brunner's movement along his course toward a statement of true and genuine humanity.[18] It also serves notice of what will become a point of contention with Barth—the question of whether this is the proper starting point. To begin from the human side of the question is to invite an anthropocentric, as opposed to a Christocentric, doctrine. Thus, Brunner has chosen to begin the development of his doctrine of theological anthropology from a perspective distinctly different from Barth's.[19] From Brunner's point of view, an emphasis on the human side of the question might be seen as a corrective issued out of concern that the polemical thrust of Barth's "theocentricity" places such attention upon

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[13] Cf. *NT*, 25, 31, 56, 59.

[14] *R&MO*, 81.

[15] O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture' in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 165-175, 169.

[16] John C. McDowell, 'Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope', *International Journal of Systematic Theology 8* (2006): 25-41, 27. Barth, in contrast, "makes his theology dance to the rhythms of perichoretic improvisation."

[17] This question repeatedly engages Brunner, in numerous works; e.g. his chapter on "The Mystery of Man" in *Our Faith* likewise begins, "What is man?" Brunner, *Our Faith*, trans. by John W. Rilling (London: SCM Press, 1959) 34.

[18] This is my paraphrase of Brunner's subtitle: Die christliche Lehre vom wahren und vom wirklichen Menschen.

[19] Barth looks back upon the tendency of evangelical theology in his lifetime to lose its direction and become "religionistic, anthropocentric and… humanistic" by dint of its overriding concern to focus on the "external and internal disposition and emotion of man", as opposed to a focus on Jesus Christ as "the Revealer of them both (God and man, that is)"; Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960) 39, 47. Cf. T.F. Torrance's summation of this problem as recognized by Barth: "theology… lost a grip upon its own essence as Christian theology and became basically anthropocentric"; T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990) 30-31.

divine initiative that human freedom is consequently eviscerated, and even perhaps left out of theological anthropology altogether.[20]

The humanum *as that special "something"*

This concern to counterbalance Barth's emphasis upon "theocentricity" and divine command leads Brunner to exposit a concept of human nature, or humanum, which can sustain the weight of moral responsibility without being rendered inconsequential by the overwhelming weight of divine initiative. Again, there is a parallel to be seen in O'Donovan's concern to sustain moral responsibility within the natural order as a priority unquenched by the epistemic thrust of revelation as an event of personal experience wrought in ontic encounter with God.

From the outset Brunner focuses on the question of how to define the *humanum* as that special "something" that separates *homo sapiens* from the higher primates and all other animal life forms—

> All these human beings are bound to one another … by that "something" which makes man *man*, the 'mind' or the 'reason'… in contrast to all that can be conceived from the biological point of view; that is to say, the *humanum*.[21]

We see immediately that Brunner's choice to define this "something" in terms of the capacities of mind and reason hearkens back to the medieval Christian philosophy of Boethius and the idea of a rational soul as a substance which can be defined in terms of its mental capacities.[22] This raises the question of whether Brunner has tacitly imported these ideas as presumptions, or whether he intends to develop them via biblical theology. Be that as

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[20] John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 12. The generic challenge to Barth's ethical stance is seen in the responses of his contemporaries, e.g. W. Link's rejoinder: "How can the affirmation of the moral deed arise from the denial of everything human?" 18. Webster points out rightly that Barth's doctrine does not negate the human ethos, but rather, recognizes its transformation through divine action, 30.

[21] *MiR*, 22.

[22] *MiR*, 41f. The torrid pace of neurobiology (see Chapter 1) has already made some of Brunner's remarks on this topic sound hopelessly dated: "down to the present time no traces of this "something" have ever been discovered in an animal". Cf. Brunner's defense of his doctrine "in spite of all these attacks of modern naturalism" (*MiR*, 41-2). Brunner finds support for this idea in the ancient humanism of Greek philosophy, expressing affinity for the suggestion that the *humanum* corresponds in some sense to "the spark … of Divine Reason", 550f, although he also warns of going too far in that direction of interpretation, 551. Cf. Brunner's comments regarding "that inward and higher "something""; *MiR*, 19; cf. 82.

it may, Brunner's affinity for the idea of a rational soul finds further expression in terms of the correspondence between *humanum* and *divinum*—between that which makes a human being a *human* being, and that which makes God *divine*:

> The distinctive element in man… is the *humanum*, which for Greek thought is also a *divinum*. The *humanum* is based upon a *divinum*. This is the common element in the idea of man both in ancient philosophy and in Christianity.[23]

Accordingly, Brunner's expression of the *humanum* in terms of the capacities or attributes pertaining to that special "something" aligns with the theological notion that God can similarly be described in terms of attributes; hence, the dependence upon the notion of *divinum* as an analog for discussion of the *humanum*. Brunner says this expression of human nature holds true not only for Christian orthodoxy, but also for the whole "variety of views of man";[24] and furthermore, the relationship between God and human corresponds analogically with the idealized divinity of mediaeval metaphysics.[25]

The next distinctive attribute of the *humanum* is this:

> There is one final depth in man … He has *religion*… [J]ust as man is *homo faber*, so also he is *homo religiosus*. He is this even when he renounces all mythology, all ideas of a supernatural being, and becomes an agnostic or an atheist.[26]

Brunner bases his concept of *homo religiosus* upon the existential experience of human consciousness, a condition he ascribes to all human beings, not only to Christians and other people of faith, but to all humankind regardless of belief in any supernatural reality or

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[23] *MiR*, 548. Similarly, in chapter one, Brunner defines the *humanum* as the "common element [of] all human beings, … that *humanum* which distinguishes [them] from all other creatures", *MiR*, 22, cf., 93.

[24] *MiR*, 41f. Such an endorsement of metaphysics and the naturalistic views of humanism, both ancient and modern, indicates a predilection for reconciliation between Christian and natural ethics, a dubious prospect to be addressed in chapter 7.

[25] Brunner discusses the *humanum* and *divinum* in light of philosophy in Appendix V, *MiR*, 547-559. We see this point emphasized also in *D-HE,* 46, where Brunner identifies the divine-human relationship as the fundamental ontological and epistemological reality. "[T]he state of the dependent-independent creature… is the fundamental category of the Bible; and in relation to it is everything said in the Bible is said and must be understood."

[26] *MiR*, 25.

relationship with the living God. Thus, the inclination toward religion is a fundamental and universal aspect of the *humanum*.[27]

Distillation of Brunner's doctrine of the *humanum* thus yields these three characteristics:

1) The *humanum* is based upon the *divinum*, which is discerned as a higher "something";

2) The "mind" and "reason" represent "that "something" which makes man *man*"; and

3) The inescapable inclination and predilection for religion marks the *humanum* (as *homo religiosus*).

This statement of the *humanum* lays the foundation for Brunner's "doctrine of the point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*)"[28] which sparked his debate with Barth. Reason and mind are hereby seen to be innate capacities, present even when in an undeveloped state, by which humans can do those things that display their human-ness. Brunner explicitly defines mind and reason as those capacities which constitute the "distinctively human element [of] humanity."[29] These elements culminate in culture, mathematics, science, art, speech, and religion.[30]

In *Natur und Gnade* also, Brunner mentions the capacity to hear the Word of God as a distinctive element of the *humanum*.[31] Furthermore, and to the ire of Barth, Brunner maintains that this capacity can never be lost. Even in the case of the sinner, the capacity to hear the Word of God remains a fundamental element of the *humanum*; it is always there as an 'actual' reality, and not merely an artifact of faith:

> Thus, the structure of the being of man is always pre-supposed, which indeed, as we now know, is an actual, not a substantial responsible being, being in decision. In the Bible this structure is

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[27] By way of defining what he means by religious inclination in the case of non-believers, Brunner explains: "The dimension of eternity remains, never unoccupied, even if only by the sense of insecurity and the anxiety which accompanies it", *MiR*, 26.

[28] *NG*, 19; *NT*, 32.

[29] *MiR*, 43. "…seiner Geist, seine Vernunft. In dieser Fähigkeit hat er seine Humanität. Diese Humanität aber is erst das eigentlich Menschliche"; *Mensch*, 30.

[30] *MiR*, 42.

[31] Brunner uses the same word here, *Fähigkeit*, to express the idea of capacity in the sense of ability, skill, talent or asset, as he explains the meaning of *humanum* in terms of the capacity to hear the Word of God, *Wortmächtigkeit; NG*, 19.

> never regarded as lost—indeed how could this be so, since even the sinner is still a human being?[32]

Brunner even goes so far as to describe this characteristic of the *humanum* as a "capacity for recognising truth":

> Even fallen man still has—thanks to the "portion" of the *imago* that he has retained—an immortal soul, a conscience, in which the law of God is indelibly and irremovably implanted. But he also has an inclination toward truth and a capacity for recognising truth.[33]

This expansive statement of the human capacity and inclination for truth raises serious questions. How does sin affect this capacity? What is truth in that case?[34] Does this ascription of an indestructible attribute to the ontological reality of the *imago Dei* indicate that Brunner's doctrine of *Anknüpfungspunkt* imports epistemological presumptions into his statement of the truth-discerning capacity of the *humanum*? We can see here some resemblance to O'Donovan's doctrine of ontological priority for the moral order, which in keeping with Brunner's doctrine of *Anknüpfungspunkt*, supports the idea that truth (or the moral order, as the case may be) is "out there" to be ascertained as an act of "thinking".[35]

Of ontological priority and epistemological presumption

So far, our analysis suggests that Brunner's doctrine of the *humanum* comports remarkably well with the classical scholastic definition of the human being as a "rational *substance*", as per Boethius: *persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*.[36] This provides an ontological foundation for his doctrine of *Anknüpfungspunkt*; however, he wishes to forestall some unfortunate consequences of those medieval metaphysics to avoid the

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[32] *MiR*, 539. This is the same point Brunner made in *NG* with respect to *Wortmächtigkeit*: "The Word of God does not have to create man's capacity for words. He has never lost it, it is the presupposition of his ability to hear the Word of God"; *NT*, 32.

[33] *NT*, 42. "…Vermögen, Wahres zu erkennen"; *NG*, 28.

[34] Jesus' silence in the face of Pilate's question [John 18:38] might suggest that the question has been asked on false premises, and thus cannot be answered within the presumption of such a capacity as an independent, human-focused *Anknüpfungspunkt*, or Archimedean point, as the case may be.

[35] "Such is the subjective and pessimistic conception to which the notion of original sin is reduced when it loses its ground in an objective creation-order containing a collective human nature"; *39 Articles*, 71. Cf. O'Donovan's endorsement of "Augustine's belief in a real human nature as such", 68f.

[36] De duobus naturis et una persona Christi, c.3.

"disastrous influence" they have repeatedly inflicted upon Church theology.[37]   The risk here

is clear—to invite the notion that human nature can be conceived as possessing a "Divine

spark" within itself leads quickly to the suggestion of an idealized, pristine state for human

nature which remains impervious to sin. As Brunner notes, in such an idealized construction

of the *humanum*: "the idea of sin cannot develop".[38] It seems therefore that Brunner wishes

to place some constraints of some sort upon the consequences which his metaphysics of the

humanum can bring for dogmatics.

In order to guard against the risk of this sort of idealism, Brunner warns wisely:

> Whatever the claims of philosophy may be, I maintain that faith must never renounce its own
> ontology. … Every idea of being already betrays its background, whether it be that of
> metaphysics or of faith.[39]

Having articulated his ontology of the *humanum*, we now see Brunner switching gears to

ask the epistemological questions concerning the ground rules for theological anthropology

and for dogmatics in general. It is a move reminiscent of O'Donovan's pause for

epistemological reflection, which occurs only after the ontological statement of the moral

order has been made. It is as if Brunner pauses to ask what epistemological presumptions

have been at work in the forgoing statement of the *humanum*; and, his answer is this—every

ontological idea betrays its background. Where you begin is where you end; therefore, faith

must never renounce its own ontology. And what is the "ontology of faith"? Brunner defines

it concisely:

> There is absolutely no definition which is more 'original' than this: Creator and creature. God is
> the Creator not only of all that exists, but also of all the forms of existence…[40]

Thus, we see that the ontology of faith rests explicitly upon the relationship between the

Creator and the creature. This is the one premise upon which all theological statements are to

be based; i.e., the ontology of faith requires all knowledge to be rooted in the knower's

relationship with the Creator, who is known through revelation. Thus, when Brunner defines

the distinctive character of the *humanum* in terms of the capacity of mind and reason to

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[37] *MiR*, 551.

[38] *MiR*, 551.

[39] *MiR*, 542, 543.

[40] *MiR*, 543. I might note the irony that even in the course of setting forth the epistemic function of faith, the hint of neo-Platonic metaphysics lingers in Brunner's language: "forms of existence".

discern truth, and then asserts that this same capacity persists even apart from scriptural or other special knowledge of God, this requires him (tacitly, at least) to presume a doctrine of general revelation within his definition of the *humanum*. Indeed, Brunner cites his doctrine of revelation through nature (general revelation) as one of his two fundamentally radical differences from Barth (the other being his doctrine of the *humanum*):

> I, in opposition to Barth, but in agreement with the Scriptures and the Reformers, maintain that God is still revealing Himself in His work of Creation at the present time…[41]

O'Donovan's charge against Brunner and Barth—that they never sorted out their confusion of epistemological and ontological issues—now comes into clearer focus. In *Nature and Grace*, Brunner expounds upon the doctrine of general revelation as a pillar of his disagreement with Barth. It is here that he uses the term *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* which became such a contentious point in the debate:[42]

> The term "nature" can be applied to such permanent capacity for revelation ("Offenbarungsmächtigkeit") as God has bestowed upon his works, to the traces of his own nature which he has expressed and shown in them.[43]

Furthermore, Brunner's definition of the *humanum,* as possessing the natural human capacities of mind and reason, presumes implicitly that general revelation serves as a source of knowledge not only for the physical reality of nature, but also for the *spiritual* realities of God and morality. This suggests that the sense of moral responsibility is similarly contained within the innate core of the *humanum*; it is part of the original, inescapable and indestructible image of God placed into the very core of human existence ("den Kern seines Menschseins")—

> This 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not' is not something added externally to human existence; it constitutes the heart of man's being. Man's being is inseparable from his sense of obligation.[44]

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[41] *MiR*, 527. Brunner refers to the "Biblical doctrine of general or 'natural' revelation" as an essential tenet of his theological anthropology, *MiR*, 11. Cf. *NG*, 24ff.

[42] Brunner argues with energy: "Further, some twenty times or so Karl Barth quotes from my pamphlet the words *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit des Menschen* which I not only have never employed at all, but which I, as much as he, detest as heretical." *MiR*, 527. While Brunner certainly has coined the word *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* in his pamphlet, he argues that Barth's mistake is to interpret this capacity as an attribute of man as subject, rather than nature as the object, of revelation.

[43] *NG*, 15; *NT*, 27. Brunner makes this statement in the context of arguing that Barth "departs as much from the Bible as [he] does from the Reformation. He acknowledges here only a general *grace*, but not a corresponding general *revelation* ("allgemeine Offenbarung")." *NT*, footnote, p. 60; *NG*, 14.

Likewise, the apperception of God, even on the part of the unfaithful and sinners, is a component of "the original nature… of the *Imago Dei*"; thus, Brunner maintains that "The fact that he knows the law of God springs from his origin, the fact that he has a wrong understanding of it is due to sin."[45] This "fact" proceeds logically from Brunner's linked doctrines of natural revelation and the ontological reality of the capacity for such knowledge within the *humanum*.[46] The result is that Brunner's theological anthropology introduces necessarily some knowledge of God as a possession of the *imago*, and thus, *theologia naturalis* becomes a practical reality, not merely a formal concept:

> [M]an is never without some knowledge of God; whether rightly or not, to some extent he is always aware of Him. Rational ideas about the being of man are always, secretly, theological ideas, however formal they may seem to be[47]

Now we can see that in order to define the *humanum* in terms of the ontological, indestructible and inescapable capacity of mind and reason to know truth, Brunner has imported, implicitly and necessarily, some epistemological content into his definition. This content includes some knowledge of God, truth, morality, obligation and holiness. It follows logically from Brunner's construction of the *humanum* that this knowledge is fruit born of general, "natural" revelation. For Brunner, the fruit of this understanding is evident throughout all humanity, in every culture and religion, thus giving decisive evidence to the practical efficacy of *theologia naturalis*.[48] Furthermore, even when this knowledge is to some extent imperfect or mistaken, it includes nonetheless some substance of natural and spiritual reality, even knowledge of God and morality. Accordingly, we can see that Brunner's doctrine paves the way for a 'natural' ethic; yet he simultaneously insists upon the 'ontology' of faith. How are these statements to be reconciled with each other, as well as with evangelical statements of revelation and atonement?

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[44] *MiR*, 19.

[45] *MiR*, 526.

[46] Brunner argues in *NT* that this capacity of the *humanum*, even in unconscious operation, may include knowledge and respect of the holiness of the "ordinances of creation" (*Ordnungen*); *NT*, 31.

[47] *MiR*, 545. This innate capacity to know God is important for Brunner, because it gives evidence to the "intrinsic value" of man; *MiR*, 96-7. Brunner sees this 'intrinsic value' as a crucial point in his argument with Barth, whom he accuses of turning the *humanum* into a *profanum*; *MiR*, 95, 171; cf. *NT*, 88.

[48] There is an implication of immediacy here, which is echoed in *R&MO*, 35: "Secular man can observe the same indications of order as anyone else."

The epistemological and ontological questions seem to become entangled at this point. Brunner's emphasis on the innate capacity of the *humanum* to discern and possess objective knowledge of moral truth, obligation, and even traces of God's own nature revealed in his works, yet apart from any explicit faith, runs counter to the Reformers' emphasis on *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*.[49] On the other hand, his insistence upon the ontology of faith, which is based in a personal relationship with God as the basis for theological knowledge, would seem to controvert his affirmation of objective moral knowledge as pertaining to *theologia naturalis* and general revelation.[50]

How does Brunner intend to disentangle these knotty issues? His solution is Solomonic—he "cuts the baby in half", as it were; the baby in this case being the *imago Dei*, the God-given, God-inspired imprint of personhood which shapes human nature. Accordingly, the *imago* is conceived as a bifurcated reality—it consists conceptually in two separate portions: one "material" and the other "formal". The "formal" *imago* is that which bears the divine imprint of "rational nature, the immortal soul, the capacity for culture, the conscience, responsibility, the relation with God",[51] This is the 'form' or 'shape' of human nature, which persists independently of the status and content of human knowledge or faith, and which survives the stain of sin. The "material" definition of the *imago*, on the other hand, represents the "anti-personal person" which is completely lost due to sin and the failure to of the person to live in perfect submission and love in communion with God.[52] This would seem to be a neat solution, for it permits Brunner to uphold both the ontological attributes of the *humanum* as well as the epistemological conditions of evangelical faith. This solves all the apparent difficulties he anticipates regarding the doctrines of faith, sin, revelation and *theologia naturalis*. Or does it?

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[49] As tacit, but nonetheless telling, evidence of this challenge, we notice that in Brunner's articulation of the doctrine of sin in *The Divine-Human Encounter* (pp. 97-99), he makes no mention of the ontological capacity of the *humanum* or the *imago*; nor does he mention the bifurcation of the *imago* in this book at all, even though this work contains segments copied verbatim from *Mensch im Wiederspruch* (e.g. *D-HE,* 46) and *Mensch Im Wiederspruch* had been recently completed when he prepared and presented the contents of *D-HE* in lecture form during 1937. We might excuse this omission on the grounds that Brunner was simply addressing different topics in each work, but that is a dubious defence, because his purpose in *D-HE* is to directly address how the human being comes to possess knowledge of God, and he does exposit here a doctrine of the *imago*, as well as the idea of "formal" vs. "material" principles in knowledge, *D-HE*, 30f; yet, he does this without ever mentioning his idea that the concept of the *imago* requires to be bifurcated.

[50] Brunner would seem to be moving in this direction when he says, "Self-revelation and knowing, as we have said from the start, is always the decisive element in the God-man relation", *D-HE*, 44; cf. 31, 47-49, 61. He seems to mean something different from Barth when he speaks of God's "Self-revelation."

[51] In short, Brunner equates this with Calvin's doctrine of the remnant of *imago* which persists in spite of sin, and he interprets this as Calvin's endorsement of the concept of the "formal" *imago*; *NT*, 41.

[52] *NT*, 24; the 'material aspect' of the *imago* can be actualized only through participation in Christ, as per Galatians 2:20 (32-33); cf. 42.

The formal-material imago: Doppelgänger *or* Doppelsinnigkeit*?*

Brunner maintains that his concept of the bifurcation of the *imago* proceeds directly and necessarily from the biblical theology of the Reformation. He states his case in no uncertain terms, arguing that his dialectical theology is precisely that of the Reformers—

> I have never taught that there was any other point of contact than this dialectical one; for the past twelve years (see my article on the Law in *Theologische Blätter*, 1925!) the central point of my theological thought—which has been unchanged—just as it is that of the theology of the Reformers, has been, and is, the dialectic of the Law and the Gospel.[53]

And so, Brunner maintains that his device of separating the *imago* into two dialectically opposed components proceeds in exact correspondence with the dialectic of Law and Gospel; and furthermore, that this is the *only* way of understanding the biblical witness to the *imago* and the *humanum*.[54] By this device he claims to have answered the challenges to his doctrines of revelation and sin by agreeing that the "material" *imago* is indeed completely lost; the sinner is thus incapable of achieving faith and acquiring right understanding apart from the initiative and agency of the Holy Spirit. At the opposite pole of this dialectical axis, however, the "formal" *imago* is never lost; it is an indestructible ontological reality possessing real capacities (e.g. *Wörtmachtigkeit*) and real knowledge. Thus, the "formal" *imago* does double duty: it succumbs to the epistemological consequences of sin, and yet survives those consequences and retains an indestructible capacity for knowledge pertaining, at least to some extent, to both natural and supernatural reality, including the moral sense of responsibility for ethical actions.

To sustain this double functionality of the *imago* requires that other doctrinal concepts, in addition to the *imago*, also be interpreted in dialectical tensions. Brunner's doctrine of general (i.e., "natural") revelation, for example, requires to be understood in this fashion:

> This means that in the phrase "natural revelation" the word "natural" is to be understood in a double sense, one objective-divine and one subjective-human-sinful.[55]

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[53] *MiR*, 514-5.

[54] Cf. *NT*, 40: "This dualism, this inner contradiction in the human essence, is characteristic of man as he is now."

[55] *NT*, 27. "Das heißt also hinsichtlich der „natürlichen Offenbarung": das „Natürlich" ist in einem doppelten, in einem objektiv-göttlichen und in einem subjektiv-menschlich-sündigen Sinne zu verstehen.", *NG*, 14-5.

Whether this double sense of interpretation removes confusion or creates an ambiguity is apparently a matter of opinion, judging by the attention it receives in his debate with Barth. This statement also gives a clue as to the direction our analysis must go—we must ask how Brunner aims to resolve the apparent contradiction implicit in the dualism that emerges in his concept of the *imago*. To answer that question we look to Brunner's statement of Objective-Subjective antithesis as the "epistemological" principle which forms the heart of Reformation theology.[56]

Brunner's epistemological antithesis

Brunner takes up this issue in *The Divine-Human Encounter*, where he exposits the "Objective-Subjective Antithesis" as the central issue in understanding faith. This antithesis is necessary to work out "the Biblical understanding of truth" and "the formal nature of the concept 'understanding of truth'"[57], because the Bible presents us with no ontological or epistemological doctrines *per se*, but rather it sets forth the "two-sided relation between God and man … as happening in a story."[58] Accordingly, Brunner finds the Objective-Subjective Antithesis to be a doctrinal necessity, because "The relation between God and man and between man and God is not of such a kind that doctrine can adequately express it in abstract formulas".[59] By means of antithesis however, the story can be told simultaneously both from the human point of view and from God's.

In essence, Brunner maintains that the difficulties raised by Barth—pertaining to Brunner's ability to sustain his ontological doctrine of the *imago* and *humanum* in coherence with the epistemological conditions of revelation and faith—disappear when viewed from the bi-directional vantage point of the Objective-Subjective Antithesis. In doing so, Brunner aims to deflect Barth's critique by arguing that any doctrinal difficulties pertaining to the bifurcation of the *imago* are merely illusions due to Barth's failure to understand what is going on in the Objective-Subjective Antithesis—this is no more and no less than the requirement of dialectical theology. This antithesis explains how knowledge and truth can

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[56] Cf. *D-HE*, 20: "Its "epistemological" principle was a dialectic; that is, its form of expression was never the use of one concept, but always two logically contradictory ones."

[57] *D-HE*, 31.

[58] *D-HE*, 31.

[59] *D-HE*, 31.

remain human responsibilities (this is the *subjective*, experiential aspect of faith, ensuing from the capacities of the "formal" imago), while at the same time affirming the sole initiative of God in all matters of revelation (this is the *objective* aspect of faith, viewed from God's perspective).

Antithesis proves indispensible in Brunner's doctrine. In *The Divine-Human Encounter* he employs this bi-directional perspective to turn aside from the seemingly never-ending levels of metaphysical abstractions that he found himself needing to pursue in order to sustain his ontological claims regarding *humanum*. We see this antithesis at work, for example, in his distinction between *nous* and *meta-noein* as a means of explaining the ontological reality of *Wortmächtigkeit*:

> Since the Bible clearly presupposes the *nous* of man as the place and organ of faith, and the *meta-noein* is contained in the process of faith itself, it is not permissible to emphasize the creative power of the preached Word of God to such an extent that the relation to the receiving *nous* and to the understanding act of the thought of man is left out of account, in order not to be obliged to admit that there is a point of contact. The point of contact is indeed precisely characterized as a dialectical one by the *meta-noein*.[60]

Brunner makes this distinction in order to uphold the sense in which the *nous* is the human receptacle (or "organ") of revelation or understanding; thus, *nous* is to understanding, as bucket is to water. This interpretation treats the *nous* as an ontological attribute or component of what makes a person human. On this view, *nous* refers to the human capacity to understand, to receive knowledge, and to be consciously aware. Brunner holds this capacity to be a *thing* in itself—a "place" or "organ" within the human being—in distinction from the *act* of faithful thinking, knowing, or understanding, in a transformative, repentant act, which is represented by the verbal noun "*meta-noein*." The *meta-noein* thus serves as the pole standing in dialectical opposition to the *nous*. By means of this distinction, Brunner upholds the reality of an *Anknüpfungspunkt* in spite of the Barthian argument that *metanoia* (repentant belief) is a miraculous event orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, and is not contingent upon any pre-existent ontological human capacity.[61] Here again, we see that the concept of

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[60] *MiR*, 341. Interestingly, Brunner nowhere mentions "*nous*" or "*meta-noein*" in Appendix III.
[61] This became a key point of contention with Barth, whom Brunner saw as emphasizing the "creative power of the preached Word of God to such an extent" that it left no room for an ontological understanding of *Anknüpfungspunkt* within the "formal" *imago*.

Anknüpfungspunkt requires statement in terms of an epistemological antithesis and a dialectical doctrine.[62]

There emerges from Brunner's doctrine a cascade of nested abstractions, like Russian dolls, with each bifurcation and each antithesis begetting another. This is the essence of his dialectal theology.[63] The bifurcation of the *imago* has repercussions, which require him to apply his dialectical method as a corrective even to Luther's theological anthropology—

> Thus, like Luther, I teach that this present *humanitas* is a mere 'relic' of the original *humanitas*… But it is not sufficient to describe this element that remains—as the Reformers do—merely quantitatively as a 'relic'; it ought to be understood dialectically … dialectically related to the Gospel.[64]

Yet the Bible does not describe the divine-human relation in terms of such abstractions, as Brunner notes duly—

> Manifestly we have not spoken here of actual man, … Hence we have executed a thoroughly necessary abstraction.[65]

So in order to speak of "actual man" Brunner finds it necessary to turn away (at least momentarily) from these abstractions in order to consider the personal experience of faith in the relationship between God and human. Such is the freedom of his epistemological antithesis that it permits him to make this move, in order to affirm the experiential and subjective aspect of faith. Here in his discussion of the "happening" of personal relationship

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[62] Brunner claims this vantage is required implicitly by the biblical witness; yet in response to his statement above, "Since the Bible clearly presupposes…", we might ask, *whose* presupposition is this? Is this the presupposition of the Holy Spirit, or that of Brunner?

[63] Brunner's acclaim for Hamann proves ironic on this score. He puts some cryptic words of Hamann on the frontispiece of *Mensch im Wiederspruch*, regarding the mystery of human nature and the need to "press forward into the very heart of God Himself", and then presses on with analytical abstractions, as though taking Hamann as an endorsement for eristic theology. The irony is that Hamann anticipates the impossibly futile levels of abstraction that will inevitably result from Brunner's dialectical ontologies—"Yes, daily at home I have the experience that one must always contradict oneself from two viewpoints, [which] never can agree, and that it is impossible to change these viewpoints into the other without doing the greatest violence to them. Our knowledge is piecemeal — no dogmatist is in a position to feel this great truth, if he is to play his role and play it well; and through a vicious circle of pure reason skepsis itself becomes dogma." Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Arthur Henkel, Volume 5 (Wiesbaden/ Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1975) 432. Gwen Griffith-Dickson supports our reading of Hamann as one who warns against intellectual confidence in the pursuit of rationalistic statements of human nature: "Rather like the late Wittgenstein, his work was deconstructive"; *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved 10 April from: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hamann/.

[64] *MiR*, 514.

[65] *D-HE*, 54. This conclusion sounds like a bit of retraction, coming as it does at the end of more than 20 pages in the chapter which Brunner begins by analyzing the "matter" and "form" of Biblical understanding, 31f.

in *The Divine-Human Encounter* we find no mention of the bifurcated *imago*, in contrast to the explicit and lengthy discussion of the ontological attributes of the *humanum* found in his theological anthropology in *Man in Revolt*. Perhaps this is why Brunner sees no inconsistency in being able to affirm, on the one hand, the indestructible "formal" *imago* as possessing "a conscience in which the law of God is indelibly and irremovably implanted", even in the case of "fallen man",[66] while at the same time concluding that, on the other hand:

> Only the Christian, i.e. the man who stands within the revelation in Christ, has the true natural knowledge of God.[67]

That Brunner finds it necessary to turn away from the abstractions induced by his statement of the *humanum*, in order to discuss the actual "happening" of the divine-human relationship, suggests that an evangelical understanding of this relationship is not readily assimilated with his statements of the "formal" *imago* and *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*. We conclude that Brunner's abstractions do not provide a "point of contact" for evangelical ethics.[68] We shall turn next to consider Barth's side of the debate in order to explore further the mutual implications of theological anthropology and evangelical ethics.

Part II: *Barth's Reply: Nein!* — Offenbarungsmächtigkeit *and theanthropic ethics*

The concreteness of moral reality

From the opening pages of his 1928 Münster lectures, Barth sets a course for theological ethics that will shape his life's work:[69] he refuses to allow theology and dogmatics to be

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[66] *NT*, 42.

[67] *NT*, 27.

[68] In this regard, Brunner's 1929 essay sounds either prescient or cryptic—"For the question at stake, from the moral side, is nothing more or less than this, whether that apparent roundabout way by faith may not prove to be the only way to moral reality"; Brunner, 'Faith in Justification and the Problem of Ethics', in *God and Man: Four Essays on the Nature of Personality,* trans. David Cairns (London: SCM, 1936) 72. If Brunner had pursued the doctrinal implications of the "roundabout way of faith" for evangelical ethics, perhaps Barth would not have felt the need to shout "Nein!"

[69] Webster demonstrates the "definite continuity" and remarkable "degree to which Barth's thinking is coherent from beginning to end", *Barth's Moral Theology*, 2-3. Cf. O'Donovan's judgment that the 1931 *Ethics* represent

conceived in terms of mere abstractions. The crisis of encounter with God,[70] realized in the ontic event of the self-revealing Logos, Jesus, the "one man among all others",[71] rules out the possibility of founding dogmatics upon abstractions.[72] Similarly, theological ethics and dogmatics are of a piece, inseparable into distinct disciplines, for such a separation would require dogmatics to be formulated on some basis other than the concrete reality of the Christ.[73] This focus upon the concrete reality of Jesus provides Barth a starting point for his development of ethics which differs radically from Brunner's—

> The ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus. So long as we select any other starting point for our study, we shall reach only the phenomena of the human. We are condemned to abstractions so long as our attention is riveted as it were on other men, or rather on man in general, as if we could learn about real man from a study of man in general, and in abstraction from the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus. In this case we miss the one Archimedean point given us beyond humanity, and therefore the one possibility of discovering the ontological determination of man.[74]

Whereas Brunner begins with the question "Was ist der Mensch?" and is driven immediately into a cascade of abstractions in his effort to articulate an ontological doctrine of the universal *humanum*, Barth will not deviate from the concrete reality of the one man Jesus, as providing the only viable starting point for theological anthropology and ethics. Thus, he dismisses abstractions summarily as being incapable of expressing the content of theological ethics. Christ and his command are encountered as concrete realities, in the event of revelation. This is "the dominant principle of theological ethics"—"God *acts*."[75]

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a "constant element in Barth's thinking on the subject", and thus, we should be advised to "reject the temptation presented by his wartime writings to regard them as a later development", O'Donovan, 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', *Journal of Religious Ethics 19* no 2 (1991): 1-30, 3.

[70] "The point of all ethical reflection is that at every moment of life…we have to respond by our action… At every moment our action means crisis, not a crisis we bring on but a crisis in which we *stand*. … We are put on the scales"; *Ethics*, 89.

[71] *CD* III/2, 132.

[72] "[T]he dominant principle of theological ethics, the sanctifying Word of God, is to be understood as an *event*… God's Word is not a general truth which can be generally perceived from the safe harbor of theoretical contemplation"; *Ethics*, 50. Cf. "Grace… rules out any attempt to snatch at Gods' being beyond his act"; *Ethics*, 31.

[73] "Theological ethics is itself dogmatics, not an independent discipline alongside it", *Ethics*, 18. "Theological ethics confesses God's revelation in Christ through the Holy Spirit"; *Ethics*, 35.

[74] *CD* III/2, 132. Cf. "the ethical event as an encounter of the concrete God with concrete man"; *CD* III.4, 26.

[75] *Ethics*, 50: "The Word of God is the Word of God only in act. The Word of God is *decision*."

The "great epistemological caveat"

As if to foreclose the option that theology and ethics might ever be pursued from some starting point other than the concrete "reality of the divine Word", or that dogmatics might ever stray from its true Christo-centric foundation by conceiving of ethics and theology as distinct disciplines, Barth sums up the opening chapter of his 1928 *Ethics* by framing the "great epistemological caveat" (hereafter, "GEC").[76] This caveat is neither a principle *per se*, nor a systematic method; it is rather a mere proverbial catch-phrase by which Barth can reference his introductory remarks as providing the context in which theological ethics can be developed in accord with the concrete reality of the command of God as being "the reality which *itself* bears witness to itself where it is known."[77] Indeed, the phrase "great epistemological caveat" receives mention only here in this first chapter of *Ethics*. If anything, Barth's reluctance to use the phrase elsewhere gives tacit witness that it does not provide a prescriptive epistemological method for what follows. Nor does Barth herewith intend to set down any epistemological principle as a starting point. The GEC can be understood only within the spiritual context of which it speaks, and thus can be observed only in the form of a *Nachdenken*. To treat it as though it could be expressed as foundational principle or method would, ironically, strip it of its intended meaning, for it is not intended to provide a constructive methodology, but rather to serve merely as a warning *against* the construction of methodologies as though any epistemological principle could prepare us to hear and receive the self-authenticating divine command. My intention is to use the term "GEC" here only in the same sense that Barth uses it in the initial chapter of *Ethics*—as a handy phrase which reminds us that the tenets and affirmations of Christian faith provide the context for theological ethics. The caveat functions for Barth like an affirmation of the spiritual foundation of ethics—"the way of thought that we are pursuing is not a secure one except in the reality of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."[78] In other words, every step in the direction of ethics requires theological reflection in the faithful practice of dogmatics. Thus we may characterize Barth's caveat as an injunction against approaching dogmatics or theological

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[76] *Ethics*, 98. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 45f, notices the importance of this caveat as a foundational aspect of Barth's ethics, and rightly discerns that Barth consistently employs this caveat in "opposing the tendency of modern theological ethics to adopt an 'apologetic attitude' to philosophical ethics".
[77] *Ethics*, 99.
[78] *Ethics*, 98.

ethics by any route other than *fides quaerens intellectum*.[79]   This is because *faith comprises acquaintance with the concrete person of Jesus Christ, in whom, to whom, and from whom, dogmatics and theological ethics subsist.*

In search of an Archimedean point

Witness to Jesus Christ is of course the core evangelical affirmation. This serves as the overarching reality for dogmatics, theology and life. There exists no other point from which to embark. Hence, Barth's prolegomena in *Ethics* serves to remind that the moment we allow either theological ethics or theological anthropology to drift into abstractions, and away from the concrete reality of the divine-human encounter, we have strayed from theology and are steering instead along some other path to knowledge, such as philosophy, psychology or metaphysics[80] —

> From this knowledge of the man Jesus we have derived the criteria which indicate the limits within which the attempt to attain knowledge of human existence must always move. We have thus been warned against confusing the reality of man with mere phenomena of man.[81]

This insistence that the task of theology must always begin from the same starting point—from the concrete reality of God revealed in the man Jesus—provides a crucial insight into the shape of Barth's epistemology.[82]   We find a telling excursus on this insight in the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*, where Barth explains why he revised the opening chapters in order to address precisely those same issues which are affirmed by his reference to the

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[79] Barth reflects on the seminal importance of *Fides* as "the real work that documents my conversion…from the residue of a philosophical or anthropological… grounding of Christian doctrine"; Barth, 'Parergon', *Evangelische Theologie* (1948) 272. Hans U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 93 marks the significance of Barth's 1931 commentary on *Fides* as his "second conversion", which enabled him to escape the shackles of philosophy and "arrive at a genuine, self-authenticating theology". Similarly, Moltmann describes Barth's thought as *theologia viatorum*; Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Way and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 50.

[80] Barth does not deny the usefulness of "naturalistic, idealistic, existential, historical, psychological and similar thoughts and expressions"; "Yet we shall not derive the reality to which we refer from one of these working hypotheses, but from the point where it is really present, where it is event and revelation." *CD* III/4, 44.

[81] *CD* III/2, 133.

[82] T.F. Torrance credits Barth with confronting "the reduction of theology to anthropology that had been going on since the end of the eighteenth century." Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990) 136.

GEC in *Ethics*. In the extended and revised Section 5.1 Barth answers Gogarten's critique by offering a definitive statement of the epistemological foundations for dogmatics.[83]

Barth frames *Church Dogmatics* I/1 §5.1 as a detailed response to Gogarten's accusation that he had failed to establish a "true anthropology" as the "central task [and] criterion of all further theological propositions."[84] Two salient points of contention emerge from Barth's answer to this charge: first, the possibility of an Archimedean point for theological anthropology; and second, the concept of a "point of contact" (*Anknüpfungspunkt*). For Barth there is but "one Archimedean point given us beyond humanity, and therefore the one possibility of discovering the ontological determination of man"; his name is Jesus.[85] The pressure to find an *Anknüpfungspunkt* is perennial, and Barth recognizes this pressure in Gogarten's desire to address the challenge of existentialism which arose in their day.[86] Barth neither shies away from nor dismisses this challenge. He addresses it directly; however, his main concern is that this existential challenge must not be allowed to subvert the foundation of faith which warrants knowledge of God.

The mechanism at work in Gogarten's error is the implicit claim to conceive of theological anthropology in terms that will enable an ontological point of contact for knowledge of God. Thus, Barth's response to Gogarten here resounds in accord with his reply to Brunner, *Nein!*[87] This repudiation fits the consistent pattern of his thought throughout *Church Dogmatics*. The urgency of Barth's polemical appeal is directly proportional to the degree of risk he perceives in theological proposals spawned by a desire to be culturally relevant by adopting philosophical and non-theological epistemological methods.[88]

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[83] The revised *CD* I/1 appeared in 1932, thus preceding *Nein!* by two years. T.F. Torrance marks Barth's break with Gogarten as the turning point from which Barth adopted a more focused polemical stance against the incursion of natural theology, as he came to see Gogarten's position as a betrayal of the Gospel, which "involved a reversal of the action of God in the death of Jesus Christ", Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 112. Gary Dorrien also cites Barth's argument with Gogarten as the point from which Barth made a clean break with the "increasingly massive dogma of orders"; Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) 115.

[84] F. Gogarten, 'Karl Barths Dogmatik', *Theol. Rundschau* (1929), quoted in *CD* I/1, 125-132.

[85] *CD* III/2, 132.

[86] Barth validates the need to address the challenge, yet cautions: "Theology has all too often tried to seek out and conquer the consciousness of an age on its own ground"; *CD* I/1, 127.

[87] As does Gogarten, Brunner recognizes the cultural pressure toward apologetics as a motivation to construct a *theologia naturalis* , an "intellectual work in the realm of concepts"; *NT* , 58.

[88] While Barth's main thrust here is directed against Gogarten, he also cites Schleiermacher as an example of the same misguided effort to address the "consciousness of an age"; *CD* I/1, 127. Daniel Price identifies the anthropological flaw in Schleiermacher's description—"a natural capacity to develop God-consciousness". Daniel Price focuses more upon the psychological meaning of this capacity, but his insight provides a good example of how natural capacities presume the ontological reality of a point of contact for theological

The problem in Barth's view stems from Gogarten's argument in favor of "the primacy of anthropology" as providing a foothold upon which to claim epistemic access to knowledge of God.[89] The presumption of an ontological foundation for theological anthropology, implicit in Brunner and Gogarten, presumes to embark from an anthropological rather than a Christological starting point. Gogarten runs counter to Barth in saying, "There is no understanding of man without understanding of God, but … again I cannot understand this God without already understanding man".[90] Is Gogarten suggesting that knowledge of "man" *precedes* knowledge of God, and can thus provide an Archimedean point for knowledge of God?[91]

We can trace these same general lines of thought throughout *Nein!* In each case, Barth exposes the implicit link which connects the proposition of an abstract, ontological *Anknüpfungspunkt* with the natural human capacity to discern knowledge of God.[92] Doctrinal statements of such a capacity as an ontological attribute of the *humanum* will result inevitably from any foundation for theological anthropology which misses the intent of Barth's caveat.

Uncovering the dilemma of Offenbarungsmächtigkeit

As we have seen in Barth's response to Gogarten, the hinge issue in their debate is the proposition that there exists an Archimedean point for theological anthropology apart from the concrete reality of Jesus. Barth does not reject out of hand Brunner's suggestion that the shape of the "formal" *imago* might be a valid question for theological anthropology; after all, there might be an appropriate Christological sense in which to define it. The problem with Brunner's concept stems rather from the epistemological capacities he attributes to this "formal" *imago*. In his point-by-point analysis of "Brunner's Natural Theology" Barth seizes

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knowledge. Price, 'Karl Barth's Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought: The Dynamic Concept of the Person in Trinitarian Theology and Object Relations Psychology' (PhD Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1990) 76.

[89] *CD* I/1, 129. O'Donovan finds Barth's emphasis on the eschatological significance of the resurrection to overshadow the importance of advent and incarnation; *R&MO* (xvii). The Advent moment holds for O'Donovan Donovan a vindication of an ontological basis for theological anthropology.

[90] *CD* I/1, 129.

[91] This is also the same question Barth addresses repeatedly to Brunner in his critical comments regarding *MiR* in *CD* III/2. Barth concludes that Gogarten has deviated inconsistently from his own Christological claim; *CD* I/1, 128.

[92] Gunton explores the interrelation between human capacity and the event of revelation with helpful attention to the inseparability of the ontic from the noetic: "First, it is the case that nature does not reveal its secrets apart from structures of human rationality"; Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 34.

upon the concept of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* ("capacity for revelation") as the "quintessence" and fatal flaw in Brunner's doctrine.[93]

Barth begins his analysis of Brunner's doctrine by expressing his willingness to accept Brunner's claim that "In this formal sense the original image of God in man is not destroyed."[94] Thus far, and no further, Barth is willing to go along with the Brunner's concept of the "formal" *imago*. This concept *per se* does not in and of itself constitute the grave danger against which Barth warns; it *does* however open the door through which theological danger beckons like a siren. The problem emerges when Brunner attributes epistemic capacities to the "formal" *imago*. On Barth's view, the decisive question is "What is the relevance of the 'capacity for revelation?'"[95] Using the analogy of a drowning man, Barth asks, what difference does it makes whether this man could swim a few strokes? Are we to understand that humans possess, as a general capacity of the *humanum*, the ability to help save themselves by swimming a few strokes towards salvation? "Surely not", Barth says, quoting Brunner's statement that "man of himself can do nothing for his salvation."[96] The debate thus hinges on the *epistemic* function of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*—

> Has not Brunner added to man's "capacity for revelation" (*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*), to what we have been assured is purely "formal," something very material: man's practically proved ability to know God, imperfectly it may be, but nevertheless really and therefore surely not without relevance to salvation? Perhaps he can swim a little, after all? If he has really done this, we are happy to know now more clearly what he means by "*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*".[97]

What does Brunner mean by *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*? That is the question.[98] If *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* is conceived to be an epistemological attribute of the *humanum*, which provides a point of contact for knowledge of God, then Barth and Brunner would seem to have an irreconcilable difference, summed up in a single word: *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*.[99]

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[93] *Nein!* 78. Barth's emphasis of this point annoys Brunner greatly: "Further, some twenty times or so Karl Barth quotes from my pamphlet the words *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit des Menschen* which I not only have never employed at all, but which I, as much as he, detest as heretical", *MiR*, 527. Brunner's point here is that he did not append the words "*des Menschen*" to *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, which he *does* use in the pamphlet mentioned. The appended words might render the noun *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* as an active capacity of the *humanum*, a nuance which Brunner wishes to avoid.

[94] *Nein!* 79.

[95] *Nein!* 79.

[96] *Nein!* 79.

[97] *Nein!* 82.

[98] Indeed, Barth repeats the question again throughout his *Antwort*; *Nein!* 80, cf. 82.

[99] Brunner's invention of this word was destined to raise Barth's suspicions given that he defines the Trinitarian God in terms of revelation (*Offenbarung*): "… dann müssen wir vor allem verstehen, daß dieses ihr Subjekt,

But is the difference truly irreconcilable? To some extent Barth and Brunner can be seen to be talking past one another, indicating that some bit of confusion lingers in their debate. Barth laments the loss of consanguinity with Brunner,[100] while Brunner defends himself as having been misunderstood by Barth.[101] O'Donovan notices the persistence of this confusion with regret, implying that Barth and Brunner might have been able to reconcile their differences if only they had properly differentiated the ontological and epistemological issues.[102] While O'Donovan stops short of specifying clearly the locus of confusion, our analysis points to the misunderstanding over *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* as the central issue.

Identifying the locus of confusion

We begin our attempt to sort out the confusion by noticing some validity in Brunner's claim to have been misunderstood. As we have seen, he believes his dialectical approach of splitting the *imago* succeeds in holding the ontological and epistemological priorities together in tension. Furthermore, he believes that his conception of the "formal" *imago* can sustain the full weight of the Reformers' emphasis on *sola gratia*, and therefore that Barth is simply mistaken when he interprets Brunner's description of *Anknüpfungspunkt* as somehow denying God the sole initiative in all matters of faith and salvation. Thus Brunner defends his dialectical formulation of the epistemological capacities of the *humanum* against Barth's attack.[103] This is not unlike O'Donovan's defence of his own statements of objectivity for the moral order by holding them in tension with evangelical statements of participation in Christ. In Brunner's case there is a bifurcation of the *imago*, and in O'Donovan's case there is a "polarity between revelation in the particular and created order in the universal".[104] By articulating an epistemological antithesis at the heart of the *humanum*, Brunner believes he is immune to Barth's critique. On the one hand, the *imago* is totally lost (materially) and therefore incapable of swimming any strokes at all in the act of faith, and yet on the other hand, the *imago* remains intact (formally), and thus provides a natural point of contact suited

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Gott, der Offenbarer, identisch ist mit seinem Tun in der Offenbarung, identisch auch mit dessen Wirkung";
(*K.D.* I/I, 312; *CD* I/1, 296). Cf. Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 89.
[100] *Nein!* 71.
[101] *NT* 15, 16.
[102] *R&MO*, 86.
[103] *NT*, 32.
[104] *R&MO*, 85.

to the epistemic event of faith. Barth however, sees this as an untenable abstraction. Here is the source of confusion over the epistemological and ontological "ground rules", as it were. For Brunner, the abstraction is essential to maintain biblical witness to the dignity of the *humanum* as a bearer of the divine *imago*. For Barth however, the epistemic ground rules specify that faith and knowledge of God occur only within the concrete reality of the divine-human encounter, and therefore Brunner's abstraction cannot be endorsed.

In this repartee, we see Barth applying, repeatedly and systematically, the test of *fides quaerens intellectum* to Brunner's doctrines of *theologia naturalis* and the *humanum*. For the sake of our analysis, it will prove helpful to articulate the following three affirmations as representing the main thrust of Barth's epistemological direction. A doctrine of evangelical ethics requires expression in terms which are:

> (a) concrete, not merely abstract;
> (b) positive, not merely dialetic; and
> (c) derived through a union of noetic and ontic knowledge

Concrete, not merely abstract

We see this principle of concreteness at work in Barth's disagreements with both Gogarten and Brunner regarding the possibility that an Archimedean point, or any other *Anknüpfungspunkt*, can be expressed in abstraction, rather than in the concrete reality of the divine-human encounter as understood through the self-revelation of the God who meets us and knows us in and through Jesus Christ.[105]

Positive, not merely dialectic

This distinction might not be as readily apparent, for Barth and Brunner each claim to be offering positive theological statements. Brunner claims even to be making a more positive

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[105] As a handy summation of this point, we notice that Barth incorporates this epistemological caveat as a foundational principle of his theological anthropology: "We were warned at the outset not to seek real man elsewhere"; *CD* III/2, 121. Following Webster's insight, we might likewise characterize the "formal" *imago* as a case of nominalism, to the extent that it lacks identity in the concrete Christian narrative; John Webster, 'Eschatology, Anthropology and Postmodernity', *International Journal of Systematic Theology 2* no 1 (2000): 13-28, 26-27.

statement than Barth with respect to both *theologia naturalis* and theological anthropology.[106] At first glance, it might seem he has a point here; after all, Barth is the one shouting, "Nein!" Yet upon closer examination, we see that Barth's approach places a premium on the positive evangelical affirmations which are undone ultimately by Brunner's dialectical bifurcation of the *imago*. Barth addresses God's revelatory presence in positive terms as a self-authenticating speech-act.[107] He insists upon this function of theology in spite of the unavoidable mystery inherent in the confrontation.[108] Accordingly, Barth finds great irony in Brunner's claim to have departed from his negative definition of *Anknüpfungspunkt* in 1932, in order to argue in 1934 for a positive statement of *theologia naturalis*:

> One can understand that he [Brunner] could not stop at a merely negative definition of the "point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*)." … The "point of contact" had now to be defined positively in the same way in which it was then defined negatively. Hence full scope is given to the *theologia naturalis vulgaris* and we begin to move again round the circle in which theology evidently has moved for two hundred years.[109]

What is going on here? Is Barth merely demonstrating his prowess as a master of rhetoric?[110] Rather than complain against Brunner's movement, why does not Barth welcome Brunner's alleged turn to the *via positiva*? To sum up Barth's accusation curtly, he charges Brunner with having disguised a negative definition of the *imago* as a positive one.[111] Brunner, for his part, claims to have defined the *imago* dialectically, rather than negatively, as we have seen in his extensive treatment of the issue in *Man in Revolt*. Here is the reason Barth's positive emphasis is to be contrasted with Brunner's *dialectical* epistemological

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[106] "It is the task of our theological generation to find the way back to a true *theologia naturalis*. And I am convinced that it is to be found far away from Barth's negation and quite near Calvin's doctrine"; *NT*, 59f.

[107] Bonhoeffer, for one, found this early on to be Barth's distinctive theological signature: "Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion… but he put in its place a positivist doctrine of revelation which says, in effect, like it or lump it." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971) 286. Robin Lovin notes that Barth's single-mindedness on this point is a motivating factor in Brunner's desire to confront Barth; Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*: *The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 45ff.

[108] This positive approach serves as a foundational issue for Barth, in *CD* I/1, 162ff, as well as in the 1928 precursor, *Prolegomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik* , 91.

[109] *Nein!* 121.

[110] Some have so charged Barth, unjustly in my view; e.g., John C. McDowell, 'Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope', *International Journal of Systematic Theology 8* (2006): 25-41, 29.

[111] Barth diagnoses this negative aspect of Brunner's dialectic approach in *CD* III/2, 130, where he argues that the "formal" *imago* cannot signify a positive content of being in the *humanum*, but merely a "form, … possibility, potentiality, disposition and capacity" in a *passive* sense, because the real attributes of the *humanum* can be "actualised [only] in that act of God's gracious dealings".

movement, rather than with his negative statement of *Anknüpfungspunkt*. [112] Brunner's dialectical bifurcation of the *imago* defines the *humanum* in both positive and negative statements—the *imago* is destroyed, and yet it survives intact. That is the heart of Brunner's dialectical approach; however, Barth exposes its superficial and mutually exclusive aspects. On the one hand, Brunner argues that the "formal" *humanum* must be considered incapable of knowledge of God:

> "The Gospel cannot be preached unless this continuity is completely disrupted. The content of the Gospel is of such a kind that by it this previous understanding (*i.e.* of God through reason) is not merely correct but decidedly negatived. The natural knowledge of God is neither a true knowledge of *God* nor a true *knowledge* of God."[113]

"Continuity" refers here to "a directly observable continuity between nature and grace, reason and revelation";[114] this is "completely disrupted", and thus defined in negative terms. Yet on the other hand, Barth finds Brunner to be arguing for the exact opposite:

> Moreover, "the necessary, indispensable point of contact," which before was defined as the "*formal imago Dei*," has now, as it were, openly become "what the natural man knows of God, of the law, and of his own dependence upon God." … Evidently the "formal *imago Dei*" meant that man can "somehow" and "to some extent" know and do the will of God without revelation.[115]

The problem lies not in the "decidedly negatived" aspect of Brunner's doctrine, but rather in its dialectical movement which produces contradictory statements. The insidious flaw here is exposed by Barth's comparison of "Brunner then and now", where he asks with rhetorical flourish:

> Is there any form of pride worse than that of a certain type of Kierkegaardianism? Has there ever been a more explicit Prometheanism than that of the philosophy of an existence despairing of

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[112] Linda Woodhead illustrates the reason Brunner's dialectic fails to sustain a positive statement of the *humanum*: "human nature… shares in the *mystery* of God—and can never be pinned down", and "the impossibility of understanding or speaking of the divine nature also applies to human nature"; Woodhead, 'Apophatic Anthropology', in *God and Human Dignity*, R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 233-46, 233f. Woodhead recognizes the *via negativa* as a route to understanding the "capacity" of the human being, but in contradistinction to Brunner, her definition of this capacity renders incoherent any ontology of material content for the *Anknüpfungspunkt*, which Brunner affirms. Unlike Brunner, Woodhead avoids carefully any suggestion that the divine "something" is a possession or attribute of the "formal" *imago*.

[113] Barth quotes Brunner from "Die Frage nach dem '*Anknüpfungspunkt*' als Problem der Theologie", *Zwischen den Zeiten* (1932); *Nein!*, 113.

[114] *Nein!* 113.

[115] *Nein!* 89, 90.

itself? How can that "negative point" be the "point of contact" for divine revelation, since its demonstration leads necessarily to a triumph of reason at its most natural and unregenerate?[116]

What Barth argues here is that Brunner's dialectical bifurcation of the *imago* posits an unregenerate, un-knowing, natural capacity of the *humanum* as an entrée to knowledge of God. Thus Barth suggests that Brunner's dialectical attempt at resolving the continuity and discontinuity within the epistemological dilemma of human existence reduces the "point of contact" to a point of *despair*. This proves an inescapably incoherent foundation for Brunner's doctrine, because a point of despair does not offer a positive basis upon which to pursue dogmatics.[117] This problem arises precisely as a result of Brunner's move to elide an affirmation of *fides quaerens intellectum* in his statement of formal capacities of the *humanum*. Brunner's "formal" *imago* doctrine seems to skirt that affirmation, and to follow instead a route which leads inevitably into an *Anknüpfungspunkt* conceived negatively, rather than to affirm positively the confessions of evangelical faith.[118]

Noetic and ontic knowledge: parity in union, not priority in distinction

The noetic reality of cognition (and re-cognition) and the ontic reality of faith require to be considered in unity and parity, such that neither may presume priority over the other. This becomes particularly important for Barth in the service of theological anthropology:

> We pass beyond the limits of autonomous human self-understanding, therefore, to a genuinely different level of thought, only when we realise that the conjunction "God and man" or "God with man" or "man with God" means noetically and ontically that God *acts* towards man…[119]

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[116] *Nein!* 120.

[117] Barth expounds upon this conclusion in *CD* III/2, 122: "in face of the existentialist interpretation of man… everything that can be said and thought about man points beyond or behind himself". The fruit of such knowledge can point only *away from* the self's own reality, toward something inaccessible and hidden, toward something beyond or behind oneself. Barth has praise also for Brunner, nonetheless, regarding his statements of man as existing within the Word of God (428-9), but he faults Brunner for not following through to discover the weakness implicit in the dialectical split of the *imago*; *CD* III/2, 129.

[118] Linda Woodhead recognizes the negative aspect of the "point of contact" so conceived, and concludes that if there is any capacity to be attributed to the *humanum* on the basis of the apophatic approach, it will necessarily be defined in passive, rather than active terms. Although she does not address the Barth-Brunner debate specifically, her analysis supports Barth's contention that Brunner's "formal" *imago* makes sense only passively, as in the capacity *to be saved by* God. Woodhead, 'Apophatic Anthropology', in *God and Human Dignity*, R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 233-46, 236f.

[119] *CD* III/2, 124. Cf. "Here, too, it is the case that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is the **noetic** basis as and because it is also the **ontic** basis of man's creaturely being. But here it is both **in almost indissoluble unity**, and therefore to avoid repetition we may consider it at once in this double quality"; *CD* III/4, 41.

In contrast, Brunner has broken the bond between the noetic and ontic aspects of the divine-human relationship in a single stroke, by his bifurcation of the *imago*. Barth protests that in "the question of the 'point of contact'… Brunner has been unable to adhere to *sola fide—sola gratia*."[120] Furthermore, in his extended treatment of Brunner's doctrine of the *humanum*, Barth concludes that the failure to define the *humanum* in terms of the "concrete and realised relation to divine revelation" can result only in a "purely formal" statement of human capacity in which:

> [W]hat he [Brunner] says about the identity of this Word of God with historical revelation and with Jesus Christ as attested by Holy Scripture obviously refers only to the noetic and not the ontic basis of the being of man.[121]

In essence, Brunner's bifurcation of the *imago* suggests that the noetic and ontic aspects of knowledge can be considered independently. Barth objects to this on the grounds that the noetic "formal" aspect cannot be divorced from the ontic reality of faith which serves as the basis for knowledge of God, at least not in the case of revealed truth.

Fides contra ontologiam

To ignore any of the three affirmations named above, by defining the *humanum* in terms that are either abstract, dialectical and/or grounded in priority of the noetic over the ontic, will result inevitably in a formulation of the *humanum* which imports material theological content of ethical and dogmatic significance into the concepts of human capacity and *Anknüpfungspunkt*. Barth detects precisely this problem with Brunner's statement of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, because it adds "to man's 'capacity for revelation'… something

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[120] *Nein!* 90.

[121] *CD* III/2, 131. Brunner defends himself against this complaint in *NT,* 32, where he argues that "the Word of God itself creates man's ability to believe the Word of God, i.e. the ability to hear it in *such a way* as is only possible in faith. It is evident that the doctrine of *sola gratia* is not in the least endangered by such a doctrine of the point of contact." But we detect here confusion on Brunner's part over the issue of the noetic-ontic divide, for he has not addressed Barth's point that to conceive of the Word of God as providing natural access to knowledge of God, in the absence of any ontic reality through God's self-revelation as the Trinitarian God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to relegate the Word of God to the status of the universal Logos, which "has no intrinsic connexion with the history summed up in and denoted by this name", that is, Jesus Christ *NT*, 131.

very material: man's practically proved ability to know God, imperfectly it may be, but nevertheless really and therefore surely not without relevance to salvation".[122]

For this reason, Barth argues that the only way to make sense of Brunner's bifurcated *imago* is to agree that, "a man is a man, and not a cat". Otherwise it seems to be an inescapable conclusion that Brunner has imported material content into his concept of the "formal" *imago*.[123] Speaking metaphorically, the shape of the bucket is determined by its contents. Barth expounds upon this problem in *Church Dogmatics* where he fleshes out his theanthropic approach to theological anthropology. Here he explains why theological attempts to bypass confessional affirmations with respect to the *humanum* will inevitably result in "naturalistic and idealistic interpretations" which are essentially restatements of "the naively classical definition of man as an *animal ratione praeditum*".[124] On Barth's view therefore, the problem with such formulations of the *humanum* is that they claim to arrive at theologically significant knowledge through autonomous self-understanding, in denial of the epistemic conditions present in the event of faith.[125] Accordingly, Barth grasps the nettle when he says, "It is at this point that offence is usually taken."[126]

The ethical import of Offenbarungsmächtigkeit

Given their fundamental disagreement over the proper epistemological approach to theological anthropology, Barth's and Brunner's differences might seem to be irreconcilable. Still, our analysis has clarified at least one point upon which we can imagine Barth and

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[122] *Nein!* 82.

[123] "What he [Brunner] calls the purely formal side of humanity is evidently full of material"; *Nein!* 121. Joan O'Donovan affirms Barth's critique of Brunner's dialectical *imago*: "Brunner, as Barth is quick to notice, is unable to sustain his formal definition of person, being compelled by his dialectic of nature and grace to elaborate the formal *imago* in terms of material capacities of knowing God's nature and will", Joan O'Donovan, 'Man in the Image of God: The Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered', *Scottish Journal of Theology 39* (1986): 433-459, 451, and goes on to demonstrate the problematic ethical implications of Brunner's dialectic, specifically with respect to the humanity of "new-born children and idiots", again following Barth (*Nein!* 89). She argues insightfully that Brunner's theological anthropology leads into a morality defined in terms of the self, "a legal morality" motivated by self-respect, rather than by love of God: "Brunner is, of course, describing the moral *hubris* of sinful mankind and not the moral *telos* of created mankind" (458).

[124] I.e., an "animal endowed with reason", *CD* III/2, 122. Bruce McCormack notes that Barth's theanthropic approach rules out any "independent anthropology (independent, that is, of reflection upon the true, restored humanity disclosed in Christ)"; McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 454; cf. Paul Nimmo *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007) 33.

[125] *CD* III/2, 124. Cf. "This point of contact is, therefore, not real outside faith but only in faith." *CD* I/1, 273.

[126] *CD* III/2, 124.

Brunner would agree—their disagreement can be seen to revolve around the epistemological significance of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* as an attribute or component of an ontological statement of the *humanum*. Addressing Brunner rhetorically, Barth asks, "And *where* is all this going to lead us?"[127] The point is not to perpetuate an intractable disagreement over epistemology, but rather to consider the implications of each proposal for *ethics*. Barth follows his rhetorical question by pointing immediately to the implication Brunner's doctrine holds for the discovery of moral principles based in culture and reason, on the basis of trust in the natural endowment of the *humanum*. And on the last page of *Nein!*, Barth returns to the subject of ethics, to explain the ultimate importance this debate holds, not merely for dogmatics and academics, but for the world in general:

> Ethics will be quite a good and useful thing if it always remembers the commandments of God. In contrast to Brunner's ethics it should not be based on a dogmatic presupposition of those mythical "ordinances." Therefore it should refrain from trying to turn the commandments of God into the commandments of men.[128]

Ethics is indeed the proving ground for the doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*. Theological anthropology and ethics are not lightly to be split asunder without doing impinging upon the affirmations of evangelical faith.

Part III: *A lens onto O'Donovan's effort to sort out the confusion*

We began this chapter with the goal of probing the tension inherent in O'Donovan's statement of moral knowledge; this tension arises due to the suggestion that moral knowledge can be construed as embodying objectifiable moral principles within a conceptual structure, and simultaneously, "also, and perhaps more importantly, a function of its object".[129] Delving into his treatment of the Barth-Brunner debate, we have seen how this casts a lens onto O'Donovan's epistemological realism, and why he insists that a chapter on epistemology must follow a chapter on ontology. While arguing for the objective reality of the moral order as an ontological fact independent of, and prior to, the conditions which grant epistemic

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[127] *Nein!* 85.
[128] *Nein!* 128.
[129] *R&MO*, 76.

access to moral reality, O'Donovan's assertions bring implications that run parallel to Brunner's dialectical statements of the *imago*. The crux of the matter revolves around the issue of immanent, natural access to moral knowledge, as we have seen in O'Donovan's support for the concept of a "natural ethic" which affirms the objective reality of an objective "order of things" within which Christian ethics has "an objective reference".[130] O'Donovan cites the Barth-Brunner debate concerning *theologia naturalis* as an example of the confusion over this concept which he intends to dispel.[131] Our analysis shows that O'Donovan's concern to maintain a polarity in the dogmatics of revelation parallels Brunner's concern to establish a point of contact for the divine-human encounter. This becomes clearer in light of the doctrinal implications of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, which brings into play the concept of an *Anknüpfungspunkt* ("point of contact") for moral knowledge. As the concluding exercise of this chapter, we shall apply this analysis to a case study which will demonstrate how these issues play out in O'Donovan's thought.

Case Study: O'Donovan, Barth and Ramsey on the concept of a "purchasing point for grace in nature"

O'Donovan's analysis of political ethics in the case of 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"' serves as a tailor-made case study of the epistemological issues addressed by Barth's *Ethics*.[132] He begins by noting that Barth rejects any "natural substratum" for politics, as well as "any purchasing point for grace in nature" (10-11). He then notices how Barth enforces this injunction by insisting that "the *ordo essendi* must follow the *ordo cognoscendi* exactly" (11). In other words, the ontological issues must *follow*, and not have priority over, the epistemic conditions of moral knowledge. This departs clearly from O'Donovan's emphasis upon the ontological priority of the moral order. Barth's affirmation of the concrete reality of faith precludes the possibility of relying upon any Archimedean point for

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[130] *R&MO*, 17.
[131] *R&MO*, 86-91.
[132] O'Donovan, "Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"", *The Journal of Religious Ethics 19*, no. 2 (1991): 1-30. Page numbers above in parentheses above refer to this article.

knowledge other than the event of the self-revealing Christ. Barth's epistemological direction in this regard runs opposite to O'Donovan's emphasis upon ontological priority.[133]

While O'Donovan is able to affirm the Christo-centric epistemologies of both Ramsey and Barth, he goes on to distinguish them on the basis of their ontological statements of moral order. He suggests that Ramsey and Barth did not part company over the issue of *ordo cognoscendi*; but rather, they differed in their *ontological* statements regarding the "*esse* of politics".[134] The *esse*—the statement of ontological reality which emerges from dogmatics— does of course become the nub of the problem, if it is taken as a validation for any false Archimedean point, such as the doctrine of *Anknüpfungspunkt* which emanates from Brunner's *theologia naturalis*. This risk in political ethics stems from the potency of the concept of *lex naturae*, and its kinship with *theologia naturalis*. O'Donovan holds Ramsey harmless from that danger, arguing that in Ramsey's case:

> The *esse* is not brought in as an independent datum; rather, it is the hypothesis demanded by the shadow that the cross throws, together with its light, across the *bene esse*. (11)

By ruling out the possibility that the *esse* of the moral order can be construed as an "independent datum", O'Donovan would seem to agreeing with Barth that Christ alone provides an Archimedean point. O'Donovan makes this assertion with reference to Barth's "rejection of any purchasing-point for grace in nature", clearly linking this injunction against "an independent datum", with Barth's rejection of *theologia naturalis* (10f). Ramsey, Barth and O'Donovan would all seem to agree that the *esse* of politics does not arise as an independent datum, nor does this *esse* imply the existence of an *Anknüpfungspunkt* in nature. But what of the *bene esse*? Does the *bene esse* also conform to these same caveats? O'Donovan follows Ramsey in defining the *bene esse* as the right and good essence of political ethics: the goal, purpose and *telos*, which is to be understood in terms of "in-principled love", and therefore "the *bene esse* of politics… is a work of Christian love" (9).

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[133] O'Donovan's formulation of the principle: "the *ordo essendi* must follow the *ordo cognoscendi* exactly" seems at first glance to be consistent with Barth's exposition regarding the epistemic importance of the God-man Jesus: "But only this divine act of majesty can be the *ratio cognoscendi*, the ground of knowledge, of this man", *CD* IV/2, 38. Here we see Barth yet again insisting upon rigor in adherence to *fides quaerens intellectum*. O'Donovan's phrasing conveys Barth's intent to uphold the primacy of faith in the matter of locating epistemic access to ethical and theological knowledge. Whether the GEC can be as tidily summed up in a principle, as O'Donovan would have it, remains to be seen.

[134] O'Donovan identifies this *esse* as the crucial issue, yet he notes that "Ramsey has almost nothing to tell us about the *esse* of politics" (10). In spite of this absence in Ramsey's language, O'Donovan proceeds to interpret the Barth-Ramsey comparison in precisely these terms. This indicates the value of our case study as a window onto O'Donovan's epistemology, and not merely as a window onto Ramsey's.

Thus, O'Donovan endorses Ramsey's Christological explanation of *bene esse*. But beyond this point, Ramsey and Barth diverge (at least in O'Donovan's view).

The problem pertains to the concept of "the *humanum* of Christ, of the one Christ who represents both passing and coming humanity in himself". Arguing that Barth has been inconsistent in his application of the reality of the *humanum* as embodied in Christ (22), O'Donovan points to Barth's refusal to grant ontological reality to the concept of *homo politicus* (16). Ramsey, on the other hand, finds warrant to conceive of humankind in terms of *homo politicus*, because the doctrine of Incarnation "requires … a political analogue to the *homo assumptus*" (16). O'Donovan asks: why does Barth deny this concept? He expounds upon this question in a footnote, arguing that Barth makes inconsistent statements with respect to the concept of the *humanum*—

> Barth intended to… concede a place in Christology to the *humanum*, not "a man," but "human being," which is the object of assumption in the Incarnation (1955:45-50); and for that reason we must look for a reason outside the realm of Christology to explain why there was no analogue to the *humanum assumptum* in his political theory. (27)[135]

In drawing attention to this sentence in which Barth acknowledges that Jesus Christ embodies the *humanum* which pertains to all humanity, O'Donovan has chosen not to elaborate upon the context in which Barth makes this statement. In the same paragraph quoted by O'Donovan, Barth confesses yet again that faith subsists in concrete encounter with Christ:

> It is not the idea of the *humanum*, in which *per definitionem* this could exist in real men either never and nowhere or only always and everywhere. It is the concrete possibility of the existence of one man in a specific form…[136]

Thus Barth guards explicitly against any abstract definition of the *humanum* as a universal concept (as O'Donovan seems wont to do) and he likewise affirms Jesus as the "one man" in whom the concrete possibility of the *humanum* must be discovered.[137] Furthermore, Barth also begins this same paragraph by affirming the noetic and ontic unity of

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[135] O'Donovan is here citing *CD* IV/2. O'Donovan similarly critiques Barth's "formal treatment of the state" by referring to "vacillation… within Barth's thought" which may be seen in "the dialectic between the normal, central functions of the state and its marginal, occasional function"; 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', 3.

[136] *CD* IV/2, 48.

[137] Again, in this same passage, Barth upholds the concreteness of theological anthropology: "Incarnation is the actuality of this work of God. A recognition of the ultimate character of this actuality depends upon our avoidance of all abstractions", *CD* IV/2, 46.

knowledge of Jesus Christ, in order to guard against any merely noetic or dialectical concepts of the *humanum*:

> We might also use the term human nature, like the older dogmatics, so long as we are careful—when we apply the term to the humanity of Jesus Christ—to keep the expression free from any idea of a generally known *humanum*…[138]

In the same manner, Barth reminds us yet again that the specific and concrete being and essence of Christ resists definition in terms of a universal, objectifiable and abstract concept—

> But its object, that which God assumed into unity with Himself and His being and essence and kind and nature, is not "a man," i.e., one of many who existed and was actual with all his fellow-men in a human being and essence and nature and kind as opposed to other creatures, but who was and is also this one man as opposed to all other men.[139]

Thus we see Barth holding to a rigorously Christo-centric anthropology which embeds the dogmatic and ethical content of the *humanum* as within a framework of positive confessional affirmations grounded in the concrete reality of Jesus Christ. Barth also goes on to explain in this same paragraph why the concept of "a man" in general, pertaining to the universal *humanum* as the basis of an autonomous human being, must recede into the background, in order to focus on the concrete reality of the one man, Jesus of Nazareth.[140] Thus, Barth has carefully sandwiched his comments on the concept of the *humanum* within confessional affirmations. O'Donovan mentions none of this context, and would thus seem to garner scant evidence for his claim that Barth's political theory is inconsistent with respect to his doctrine of the *humanum.* Thus, we might question O'Donovan's suggestion that Barth denies the possibility of *homo politicus* on account of an insufficiently fleshed out idea of *humanum assumptum* in his doctrine of Incarnation.[141] We might conclude rather, in

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[138] *CD* IV/2, 47. O'Donovan relates Barth's refusal of the "dialectic of *esse* and *bene esse*… in politics" to the source of his divergence from Ramsey, who apparently does rely on such a dialectic notion of politics. 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', 10.

[139] *CD* IV/2, 48.

[140] *CD* IV/2, 47.

[141] O'Donovan objects to Barth's doctrine of Incarnation, because it does not sustain the ontological definition of *homo politicus* for which O'Donovan would advocate. Barth's emphasis upon the epistemic role of faith, and the corresponding union of noetic and ontic orientations in dogmatic knowledge, thus impedes O'Donovan's search for epistemological realism. He locates the root of the problem in "Barth's account of the Christ-event [which] has left no room for Advent", 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', 12, and suggests Ramsey's doctrine as a more realistic one, because it offers "a political analogue to the *homo assumptus*… [which] Barth

opposition to O'Donovan, that Barth's emphasis upon a Christo-centric anthropology moves him to "keep in the background" any general, abstract statements of *humanum*, or *humanum assumptum*, or *homo politicus*, in order to emphasize the concrete reality of Jesus Christ which necessarily accompanies and governs the dogmatic treatment of such concepts. This is not to say that Barth rules out the concept of the *humanum* and its correlates as noetic impossibilities, but rather he precludes such abstractions as these from directing the course of the hermeneutics of doctrine. Here then, is the answer to O'Donovan's question as to "why there was no analogue to the *humanum assumptum* in [Barth's] political theory." The answer is clear: because the concept of *humanum assumptum*, as O'Donovan defines it— dialectically, abstractly, and independent of ontic immediacy—simply does not exist within Barth's doctrine of the Incarnation.[142]

On O'Donovan's view, Barth's conclusion regarding the *homo politicus* is too severe; it reaches a dead end in pursuit of a realistic political ethics. While he would seem to agree with Barth that *fides quaerens intellectum* is a crucial epistemological criterion, it is not the only criterion. Thus, O'Donovan concludes from his comparison of Ramsey and Barth that a limit needs to be placed upon Barth's theanthropic approach, at least in matters related to the ontological priority of the *bene esse* of the *humanum*. That limit is reached where O'Donovan finds Barth's conclusions with respect to the *humanum* to be unrealistic and/or irrelevant.

O'Donovan expresses his concern for relevance in his interpretation of Ramsey's political ethics, which he affirms as:

> … a doctrine more properly called "realist," i.e., an essentialist understanding of what political agents are and what politics is good for. Only such moral counsel as derives from the being of political agency can be relevant to the decisions which statesman and citizens must make. (15)

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was not ready to grant", 16; cf. 26. Cf. *R&MO,* xviii: "Barth's scheme betrays him into silence"; also *R&MO*, 143-6.

[142] Ivor Davidson's analysis of the doctrine of dyotheletism (i.e., 'two wills' of Christ) offers good insight into the risks of applying the concept of *assumptio carnis* ('assumption of human flesh') in a dialectical, abstract manner; Davidson, ' 'Not My Will but Yours be Done': The Ontological Dynamics of Incarnational Intention', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 no 2 (2005): 178-204. Davidson warns against applying the doctrine "in some static or abstract sense", 183. Such hermeneutical inclinations lead toward a bifurcation of the *imago*. Davidson identifies this inclination in the habit of such abstractions to articulate a 'God-consciousness' within human nature—"a potentiality already inherent in humanity, arousing a natural spiritual capacity to new heights of experience", 203. As far as Barth is concerned, the development of such abstractions is not doing "real theology—not even for the sake of being rejected" *Nein!* 75; indeed, it is not doing theology at all, as McDowell recognizes: "The problem is that, as far as Barth, in a moment of intensive acuity, is concerned, Brunner is *doing theology* in a way that is, in fact, doing no theology at all.", John C. McDowell, 'Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the Subjectivity of the Object of Christian Hope', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 25-41, 34.

O'Donovan endorses Ramsey's emphasis on developing a "realist" doctrine that will prove useful and relevant in "real life". To drive this point home, O'Donovan closes his comparison of Ramsey and Barth by explaining what makes a political theory relevant:

> For Ramsey… the form of the *act* was decisive for everything else in political theory. It bound together international and domestic, public and private, in one moral field; it laid the foundation for civil society and the authority of government; it drew justification from the theologico-moral principle… (23)

This premium on principled action presses theological ethics to provide rules and principles which can be applied with confidence in pursuing appropriate teleological goals.[143] O'Donovan emphasizes this point again in the last sentence of his article, saying that political action belongs "at the core of political theory" (23). Here again, we see that Barth's Christo-centric anthropology presents an impediment to O'Donovan's aim to be realistic, because it blocks the path by which ethics might be construed as a set of objective principles. No matter how carefully nuanced those ethical principles might be, even in light of the limitations due to human moral knowledge being existential, flawed, provisional and incomplete, the very premise that ethics might be discussed in terms of principles at all runs counter to the evangelical affirmations of faith.[144] O'Donovan's concluding endorsement of Ramsey's appeal to justify political ethics on the basis of "the theologico-moral principle" shows up the problem. The gospel is not based in a moral principle.

We find here in O'Donovan's treatment of Ramsey and Barth several of the same themes which undergird *R&MO*—to wit, his appeal to ontological priority for the moral order, his claim to find warrant for this reality in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the dialectical conception of moral knowledge. In *R&MO* as well as in this case study, O'Donovan

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[143] Aquinas provides the classic statements of this premium on action, and its implications for practical reason, conscience and natural theology. Clifford G. Kossel identifies "the question of action" as "the first precept of the natural law" for Aquinas, calling it: "the *natural necessity* that binds practical reason and will"; Kossel, "Natural Law and Human Law (Ia IIae, qq. 90-97)", *The Ethics of Aquinas*, edited by Stephen J. Pope (Wash. D.C.: Georgetown, 2002), 169-193, 175.

[144] While not addressing the "great epistemological caveat" *per se*, Paul T. Nimmo demonstrates convincingly that for Barth "the discipline of theological ethics" does not yield to "specification in the form of 'moral principles' or 'ethical system'", Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007) 60-61. Nimmo follows Trevor Hart here in recognizing that "the command renews and is part of an ongoing relationship between two subjects, a 'history' as Barth calls it", Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Essays toward a Reading of His Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999) 86. Thus principles attempt to resolve the ethical crisis on false premises. It is for this reason that Barth categorizes moral principles as "instruments of the misinterpretation and misapplication of the command, provoking the very desires which are excluded by the command, the very attempt at human self-justification and sanctification which is forbidden by God and absolutely fatal", *CD* II/2, 727.

advocates for an epistemological realism which is found to be inconsistent with Barth's confessional priorities.

Conclusion

We have identified two important issues which bear further examination:

First, our case study identifies the source of the conflict between O'Donovan's pursuit of epistemological realism and the confessional priorities of evangelical faith—the ensuing epistemological conflict emanates from differences in the underlying interpretations of *humanum*; and inversely, differing interpretations of the *humanum* are seen to lead directly to epistemological conflicts in dogmatics and ethics. O'Donovan points to the doctrine of the Incarnation—specifically the concept of *homo assumptus* –as a pivotal issue in precisely this context.[145]

Second, the presumption of discrete moral principles places theological ethics upon a non-evangelical path. The moral content of the gospel cannot be reduced to a set of discrete principles. O'Donovan's comparison of Ramsey and Barth demonstrates clearly the friction which Barth's approach creates for any movement in the direction of ethical principles. Even Ramsey's explicitly Christological formulation of political theology and the *ordo essendi*[146] fails ultimately to avoid the conflict between the epistemic aspect of evangelical faith and the presumption of objective principles within the moral order. O'Donovan has characterized this conflict as an artifact of Barth's inconsistency in *special* ethics (of political power, for example); however, O'Donovan's appeal for consistency may be more dependent upon his own program to justify a 'realist' political theology, than upon any logical errors in Barth's epistemological orientation. As we have seen, O'Donovan ultimately judges the success of political theology on the basis of its usefulness in determining political action in real life, an

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[145] E.L. Mascall comes to the same conclusion with respect to the crucial role of the doctrine of 'the assumption of manhood into God' as he explains the implications this doctrine holds for natural theology. Like O'Donovan, Mascall takes exception to Barth's epistemological rigor with respect to Christo-centric anthropology. Mascall's perceptive analysis of the epistemological difficulties leads him to focus ultimately on the doctrine of the Incarnation as the crux of the matter; Mascall, *The Openness of Being: Natural Theology Today* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971) 155.

[146] As O'Donovan notes, Ramsey construes the essence of political theology in terms of "in-principled love… subject to the contradiction of the cross", and asserts that "The task of politics is to be a sign of the reign of Christ…", 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', 11.

admirably pragmatic and undoubtedly pastoral concern. Barth, on the other hand, eschews this sort of pragmatism as a goal of dogmatics and ethics, and holds rather to rigorous application of the confessional sensibilities of *fides quaerens intellectum* as the decisive factor.

This conflict over the concept of a "purchasing point for grace in nature" reveals the issue of the direction of the pressure of interpretation.[147] O'Donovan would describe Barth's direction of interpretation as moving from *ordo cognoscendi* (i.e., faith) to *ordo essendi*; and he argues, by way of Ramsey, that this lexical ordering becomes untenable as a course to accomplish a realist political theology. In rejecting this ordering O'Donovan presses, tacitly at least, in the opposite direction of interpretation, which is to begin with the recognition of the importance of a 'realist' concern for political relevance, and move from there toward dogmatics of the *ordo essendi*.[148] In framing his argument however, he has presented both Barth's and Ramsey's ethics in a somewhat reductionist manner, evaluating their ethics as though they could be articulated in terms of principles. As we have seen, evangelical affirmations of moral knowledge cannot be presumed to find support in objective principles without doing those affirmations irreparable harm. Nor can the *ordo cognoscendi* and *ordo essendi* be established in lexical order, as though any epistemological method could prescribe their relative priorities; rather, they operate in tandem, just as do the noetic and ontic aspects of knowledge. Thus, we may conclude that neither the epistemological difficulties nor the source of confusion named by O'Donovan may be laid at Barth's doorstep. The difficulty lies rather in the ontological doctrine of the *humanum* which emerges from the presumption of any point of contact (whether called *Anknüpfungspunkt* or "purchasing point for grace in nature") which fails to adhere to the confessional affirmations of evangelical faith.

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[147] Alan Torrance identifies this issue as a useful rubric in studying Barth's theological language. Torrance credits Daniel Hardy with identifying in Barth's language a 'pressure of interpretation [which] demands the differentiation of God from the sum of the domains of the world"; Torrance, *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 201f; D. W. Hardy, 'Christ and Creation' in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381*, ed. T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981): 88-110, 105. Support for this idea is found also in Colin Gunton's rubric of 'concentric circles' of interpretation, which are centered upon the singularity of the "personal act of divine self-revelation which is Jesus Christ"; Cf. Alan Torrance, '"Auditus Fidei: Where and How Does God Speak?" ' In *Reasons and the Reasons of Faith*, eds. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: T&T Clark, 2005) 27-52, 39.

[148] O'Donovan states his realist goal: "Our goal is to make right appear in our midst (*iustitia*); and to make it appear conformably to the safety of that organism of human relations which we inherit (*lex*); and to refound that organism securely upon that appearance of right by means of an appropriate disposition of power (*ordo*)"; 'Karl Barth and Ramsey's "Uses of Power"', 11; i.e., he seeks to disclose the right (*iustitia*) within the moral order (*lex* and *ordo*). *R&MO* expresses essentially the same goal: to defend the "moral principle which requires deference to political authority" consisting in "the threefold cord" of "the natural authorities of might and tradition with that other 'relatively natural' authority, the authority of injured right", 128f.

The Kierkegaardian Knot: Binding the Concept of Moral order with the Epistemic Event of Faith

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen,
not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

C.S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?"

Whence the conflict between O'Donovan's realism and the "great epistemological caveat"?

Here is the conundrum to be solved: Given that O'Donovan pursues an explicitly evangelical ethics, how can it be that the affirmations of the GEC present an obstacle to his path? After all, O'Donovan places "the gospel at the heart of evangelical ethics", and he emphasizes the concrete reality of Jesus Christ at the center of evangelical faith.[1] Do these affirmations not align perfectly with the GEC? Whence then does the conflict arise? The preceding case study offers a clue as to its source—O'Donovan, Brunner and Barth each begin from different starting points; their goals diverge based upon their differing perceptions of the problems to be addressed. O'Donovan identifies voluntarism as the fundamental problem for Christian ethics, and he names Kierkegaard as its progenitor:

> Kierkegaard, perhaps, provides the pattern for modern Christian voluntarism, in which neither faith nor morality can rest upon the foundation of reason but must simply be chosen… In this modern 'faith-ethic' Christian moral obligation becomes a function of the believer's decision, something that he has opted into. It is esoteric, meaningful only

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[1] *R&MO*, 25, 264, 242. Reflecting back on *R&MO*, O'Donovan cites these affirmations as the core of his evangelical ethics in 'John Finnis on Moral Absolutes', *Studies in Christian Ethics 6* (1993): 50-66, 64.

> to those who, by a process in which moral awareness has apparently played no part…, have placed themselves within the closed circle.[2]

Kierkegaard's expression of faith in the language of existentialism has precipitated a distressing slide into voluntarism, which renders Christian ethics irrelevant in mainstream discussions of moral philosophy. O'Donovan laments the loss of credibility that this slide into voluntarism creates for teachers of moral philosophy and Christian ethics,[3] yet the even more distressing problem is the debilitating effect this slide has upon Christian dogmatics. The most virulent and hazardous strains of voluntarism have cut morality loose from the bounds of reason, and placed moral authority upon the unreliable and shifting ground of emotions and feelings which remain ultimately inarticulate.[4] What other direction could ethics go, once Kierkegaard demonstrated that "truth is subjectivity"?[5] On O'Donovan's view this Kierkegaardian shift in theology and ethics has created a new burden for morality in the modern era—arbitrariness;[6] that is to say, the view that morality is determined by the arbitrary choice of individual moral agents operating under "the voluntarist supposition that my good is something which I create or evoke for myself."[7] Thus we see that the desire to mitigate, even to reverse, this slide into voluntarism motivates O'Donovan's "outline for evangelical ethics".

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[2] *R&MO*, 16. Cf.: "Western moral thought since the Enlightenment has been predominantly 'voluntarist' in its assumptions", 16. O'Donovan is ready to praise Kierkegaard for transforming "all ethical concepts", 263; nonetheless, O'Donovan laments the distressing slide into voluntarism. Richard Swinburne, for one, would seem to agree with O'Donovan's assessment of Kierkegaard: "I find most modern writing on this subject almost unbelievably unclear… clearly much of the responsibility for the traces of this view in modern theological writing derives from Kierkegaard." Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981) 115-116.

[3] *R&MO*, vii.

[4] *R&MO*, 119. O'Donovan likewise laments that "The voluntarist tradition of thought, by exalting the command of God above all reason, deprived it of speech and thereby relegated it to the sphere of private and interior compulsions…", 141. And the result of this slide in modern moral philosophy was that "the voluntarist journey ended with a vacuum of authority", 134.

[5] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992). Hereafter, *CUP*.

[6] *R&MO*, 151. This arbitrariness necessarily entails relativism, because there is "no rational resolution available to our deliberations… nothing more than a bare choice, a raw exercise of the will", and thus we are "caught in the relativist *impasse*", 220.

[7] *R&MO*, 250. Superficially at least, this sounds very much in line with Kierkegaard's proposal: "But freedom, that is the wonderful lamp. When a person rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into existence for him", *CUP*, 138.

Voluntarism & the ascent of the modern "self"

Of course this descent of ethics into the inarticulate abyss of voluntarism is not entirely Kierkegaard's fault. The same story can be told via the broad narrative of modern Western thought, as the rise of the concept of the individual self to preeminence throughout culture and philosophy. The modern affirmation of the self has become a foundational concept in the practice of both theology and philosophy, as moral philosophy and theological ethics have moved in the direction of voluntarism. Charles Taylor describes this movement with admirable precision as he traces the demise of the "ontic logos" as a defining concept for theology, philosophy and morality.[8] Taylor offers a sweeping explanation of the shift in intellectual currency which brokered the ascent of the subjective self, and the corresponding decline in importance of the objective cosmic order as a foundational ontological concept. No longer could the cosmic order be conceived so readily as the veritable embodiment of Ideas, once the modern self rose to exert its newfound power of epistemological priority over everything, and to posit the individual as the creator of meaning and value through imagination, intellect and will. Hence, the existential self of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* serves, emblematically at least, to usher in the virulent strain of voluntarism which derails theological ethics and moral philosophy.[9]

Echoing O'Donovan's theme, Taylor documents the shift in moral philosophy which occurs when the glory of God's goodness, as embodied in the created cosmos, loses priority as an objective, ontological reality. Taylor also diagnoses perceptively that this loss of ontological emphasis proceeds not merely out of shifting metaphysics, but also from the simultaneous loss of an *ontic* relationship with supernatural truth, whether that truth be witnessed in the ontic reality of the platonic Ideas *per se*, or in the supernatural reality of religious faith. Hence, Taylor's apt phrase "ontic logos" designates the focal point of meaning which is lost as the modern self rises to epistemological preeminence: "All this changes when we disengage from the world, and when therefore theories of ontic logos cease

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[8] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[9] Taylor sums up the transfiguration of reality wrought by the voluntarist notion of self: "In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard lays out the idea of an aesthetic transfiguration of life, only to trump it with a higher form, the ethical. …[T]he ethical man truly chooses himself. He chooses himself infinitely… [A]ll finite things get their value and significance from this choice", *Sources of the Self*, 449-50.

to be meaningful for us". [10] The significance of this movement by which the self disengages from the world, is that it shifts the location of value, in the sense of moral goodness, from the external and objective reality of the moral space we inhabit, to the internal and subjective reality of "*minds*, ours or God's". [11] Meaning and value then become determined by "a transfiguration of our own vision, rather than simply through a recognition of some objective order of goodness". [12] The obvious cost to moral philosophy here is that the objective order of goodness may no longer be presumed to exist. Or even if it does exist, we cannot presume to be able to recognize it or communicate it, for the locus of value has been shifted to the interior noetic and emotional life of the independent self. [13] This is precisely the problem which O'Donovan aims to confront in *R&MO*—"Clearly there is something suspicious in the paradoxical dissociation of morality from reality", a movement which he considers "voluntarist in inspiration". [14]

O'Donovan and Taylor each trace the decline of objective moral reality in an arc that sweeps from Descartes to its nadir in the present-day "vacuum of authority" [15]—a trajectory which gathers momentum as it receives a gravitational tug toward voluntarism from Kierkegaard's portrayal of the willful self in *Either/Or*. They each point to the debilitating effect which the modern turn to subjectivism has had upon the "public cosmic order of meanings", [16] in Taylor's phrase, which results in the "relativist *impasse*", [17] in O'Donovan's phrase. Though they offer similar appraisals of Kierkegaard's existentialism as an impetus for voluntarist tendencies in modern thought, the differences in Taylor's and O'Donovan's nuances are most interesting. For O'Donovan, Kierkegaard is conceivably the dominant progenitor of modern Christian voluntarism. Taylor, on the other hand, sees Kierkegaard as merely one illustrative example of the significance of the rise of the volitional self in the

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[10] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 187, cf. 287. Taylor dates the demise of the "ontic logos" from Descartes' rejection of teleological order, 144, which echoes another of O'Donovan's themes. Though Taylor steers clear of the theological significance of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, his analysis nonetheless points perceptively to the mutual implications of ethics and anthropology (which he expresses here in terms of "identity"), as he concludes that "being a self is inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues, to do with identity and how one ought to be", 112; cf. 521.

[11] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 187.

[12] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 448. Taylor goes on to relate this transfiguration of vision to Kierkegaard's expression of the ethical realm (in *Either/Or*) as that which we attain "by choosing ourselves in the light of infinity", 449, and "In choosing myself, I become what I really am, a self with an infinite dimension", 450.

[13] See, e.g., A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985); A. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Writings of Anthony Thiselton* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

[14] *R&MO*, 249.

[15] *R&MO*, 134.

[16] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 511. "We now live in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meanings is an impossibility", 512.

[17] *R&MO*, 220.

grand sweep of modern thought.[18] This difference in perspective may be explained in part by Taylor's intention to refrain from theology; however, his intentionally secular presentation makes his emphasis upon the loss of "*ontic* logos" all the more interesting.[19] Why does Taylor choose to emphasize the ontic and supernatural aspect of moral reality, while O'Donovan chooses to focus on the ontological? This subtle difference indicates different directions in their approaches to confront the challenges of modern subjectivism. O'Donovan diagnoses the toxicity of Christian voluntarism within theological ethics, and prescribes a remedy in the form of dogmatic attention to the *a priori* ontological reality of the moral order as a seawall against which the tide of voluntarism must be dashed. In this regard, we are not surprised that he finds "a point of agreement with the classical ethics of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics… ethics as a close correlate of metaphysics",[20] as well as his acknowledgement of "points of strong sympathy between our account and the more realist versions of Natural Law theory."[21] O'Donovan founds this affinity with the classical statements of ethics upon his affirmation that:

> The order of things that God has made is *there*. It is objective, and mankind has a place within it. Christian ethics, therefore, has an objective reference …in accordance with this order.[22]

So, the moral order is *there*, but *where*? Is it in the divine will? Is it in some metaphorical understanding of the "good" or *telos*? Is it immanent, and locatable by virtue of some point of contact? Or does it lie rather in the event of God's self-revelation of his redemptive purposes for humanity? These questions drive O'Donovan's concern to establish an objective referent for the moral order, over and against the challenges of subjectivism, voluntarism and the like.

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[18] Taylor groups Kierkegaard together with Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche as "nineteenth-century writers who illustrate this issue of self-affirmation", *Sources of the Self,* 449.

[19] By no means do we wish to suggest that Taylor intends to connote a biblical or Christological significance to the meaning of "ontic logos". He is careful to apply the concept in the secular realm, applicable to Plato's realm of Ideas, for example, and makes no special distinction between secular and religious concepts of supernatural reality. He uses the phrase not to impute religious significance to moral reality, but rather to recognize the inseparability of "Forms [and] intelligence (*nous*)" in the acquisition of knowledge; thus, "correct human knowledge and valuation comes from our connecting ourselves rightly to the significance things already have ontically… true knowledge and valuation only arise when this connection comes about"; *Sources of the Self,* 186.

[20] *R&MO*, 17.

[21] *R&MO*, 85.

[22] *R&MO*, 17.

Ontic encounter vs. ontological priority

Taylor approaches the bane of subjectivism from another direction. Rather than begin with a foundational statement of the objective reality of the moral order, he begins by addressing the dilemma of the modern concept of the self. The various modern attempts to resolve this dilemma suffer generally from a common failure to achieve a "personal resonance" of an "epiphanic quality".[23] Taylor concludes that the significance of moral knowledge lies in the ontic encounter with moral reality, rather than within the ontological reality *per se*, as though morality could be communicated merely in abstract terms spoken in isolation of the context of personal, ontic encounter with moral reality. While he stops well short of pursuing the theological implications of this criterion of "personal resonance", his insight suggests a promising line of inquiry for our study of O'Donovan's attempt to ground evangelical ethics upon the ontological priority of the moral order.[24] Taylor's insight prompts us to ask: How well does O'Donovan's statement of ethics capture the significance of personal resonance and ontic encounter?

We might be initially tempted to argue that the difference in nuance between Taylor's emphasis on the ontic logos, and O'Donovan's on the ontological reality of the moral order, is a distinction without difference, given that ontic descriptions are readily to be found within O'Donovan's discourse, and conversely, ontological concepts frequent Taylor's evaluation of modern approaches to moral reality. Furthermore, O'Donovan devotes an entire chapter of *R&MO* to a highly articulate and focused explication of the essential and inescapable *existential* characteristic of knowledge of the moral order—its interiority, incompleteness and mystery.[25] We might suppose therefore that he shares Taylor's emphasis upon ontic encounter. Furthermore, O'Donovan notes that reason is fallen, and we rely therefore upon God's gracious intervention via revelation and reconciliation in Christ.[26] The shadow of the

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[23] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 512. Taylor sums up modern moral philosophy as a set of "strange cramped theories … which have the paradoxical effect of making us inarticulate on some of the most important issues of morality", 89, cf. 107.

[24] Taylor is careful to avoid delving into theological discourse here, and we should be equally careful not to interpret his analysis as a theological statement; however, he explicitly acknowledges his personal favor for Christian spirituality and a "theistic perspective" as superior to secular moral views, and he closes this book with an affirmation of Judeo-Christian theism as the most hopeful and workable solution to "the moral predicament of our time", *Sources of the Self,* 517, 518, 521.

[25] *R&MO*, 76-97.

[26] "Man has refused the role assigned him by his Creator. Knowledge will therefore be inescapably compromised by the problem of fallenness, the defacement of the image of God, and by the fallen creature's incapacity to set himself right with good will and determination", *R&MO*, 81-2.

cross is thus the only real vantage from which to apprehend knowledge of the order of reality, and this requires the revelatory power of God—

> Such knowledge … must be apprehensive knowledge of the whole of things … vindicated by God's revelatory word … given to us as we participate in the life of Jesus Christ. … True knowledge of the moral order is knowledge 'in Christ'.[27]

O'Donovan emphasizes *participation in Christ* as the only path leading to true moral knowledge. Based upon this Christological statement of moral knowledge, O'Donovan would seem to be endorsing here also the central affirmations of the GEC—the concrete reality of Christ, the positive identification of Christ as the only real Archimedean point, as well as the union of noetic and ontic orientations.[28] The union of the noetic and ontic aspects of knowledge resound here in O'Donovan's affirmation of participation in Christ. How else are we to interpret the significance of the concrete reality of Christ's love as that which has the sole capacity to make the "true moral life" intelligible?—

> The true moral life of the Christian community is its love, and its love is unintelligible except as a participation in the life of the one who reveals himself to us as Love, except, that is, as the entry of mankind and of the restored creation upon its supernatural end.[29]

O'Donovan seems to endorse both the ontological and the ontic at the same time; it's as if he holds trump cards in two suits at once. This is reminiscent of Brunner's dialectical approach, which explains why O'Donovan seizes upon the Barth-Brunner debate as the archetypal example of where the problem lies—

> In the great theological attack upon Natural Law which was spearheaded earlier this century by Karl Barth, we can only regret that the ontological and epistemological issues were never properly differentiated.[30]

Although O'Donovan expresses antipathy here for Barth's doctrine, we have seen already that he also ratifies the existential essence of moral knowledge. Thus, it seems to be not

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[27] *R&MO*, 85.

[28] O'Donovan clearly conveys a concrete, positive Christology in his affirmation that "Christianity must take … the path of an integrally evangelical ethics which rejoices the heart and gives light to the eyes because it springs from God's gift to mankind in Jesus Christ" *R&MO*, 12. And he is adamant that this Jesus is "the historically concrete figure of Jesus of Nazareth", 242.

[29] *R&MO*, 246. Cf: "Love is the overall shape of Christian ethics", 25; and, "Morality is man's participation in the created order", 76.

[30] *R&MO*, 86-7.

existentialism *per se* to which O'Donovan objects, but rather Barth's insistence upon "the divine command—interpreted in the existentialist way as particular and unpredictable".[31] This critique of Barth's "uncompromised theological epistemology" resonates well with O'Donovan's objection to the voluntarist sentiments of Kierkegaard's ethics.

Who can understand Abraham?

The inscrutable figure of Abraham provides the litmus test for divine command ethics. The moral dilemma contained in God's unconscionable command to sacrifice Isaac cannot be simply explained away by postulating a historical shift in cultural norms.[32] Nor can the problem be dismissed as a case of discerning one's vocation, for such a claim would presume to reduce morality to the arbitrary conditions of private voluntaristic perceptions. No, there is a horrible conflict here in God's command to sacrifice Isaac which will not be disposed so handily. The story of Abraham thus provides the entry point through which O'Donovan might expose and expunge the dark side of voluntarism which he ascribes to Kierkegaard's moral sensibilities:

> In speaking of a 'tension' between the vocational and the generic demand, we need not assent to the view apparently held by Kierkegaard (in *Fear and Trembling*) that there is no resolution possible within the sphere of moral thought—that what is demanded at the vocational level is 'a religious suspension of the ethical'.[33]

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[31] *R&MO*, 86-7.

[32] *R&MO*, 43. O'Donovan joins with John Finnis in affirming the classical statement of Thomas Aquinas that "the primary principles are authenticated by their universal self-evidence alone". This is one pole of the irreducible polarity which O'Donovan aims to uphold, *R&MO*, 86.

[33] *R&MO*, 44. A few comments are necessary to frame the context for O'Donovan's handling of Kierkegaard. First, we note that the actual phrase employed by Kierkegaard is not "religious" but rather "*teleological* suspension of the ethical" (emphasis added). Elsewhere (e.g., 142) O'Donovan cites the phrase accurately. Second, we are well advised to pay attention to Kierkegaard's advice to keep in mind his intention to present the "life-views" of his pseudonymous authors, and we should therefore not be fooled into placing these words in the mouth of Kierkegaard himself: "Therefore, if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine", *CUP,* 627. Finally, having acknowledged the necessarily fictional quality of Kierkegaard's essay in *Fear & Trembling*, we may proceed to analyze O'Donovan's response to the "life-view" presented therein, without undue concern as to the degree to which the views of de silentio might or might not reveal the views of Kierkegaard himself, because our immediate concern is to examine how O'Donovan engages with the concept of "teleological suspension of the ethical", rather than to assess Kierkegaard's reasons for employing pseudonyms. Our practice shall be (pace Kierkegaard) to cite de silentio when it suits our context.

To impute that "there is no resolution possible within the sphere of moral thought" is of course anathema to O'Donovan's concept of ontological priority. The problem is not so much the limitation this places upon thinking—after all, human reason has been "compromised by the problem of fallenness"[34]—but rather, the problem lies in the suggestion that the realm of the moral order contains irresolvable conflicts. This prospect is untenable, for God cannot be divided against himself. O'Donovan reminds us, following Aquinas, that this is the one limitation upon God's categorical freedom which cannot be countenanced.[35] Thus, the suggestion of a "religious [sic] suspension of the ethical" is tantamount to a claim that ethics exists only within the private, subjective realm of the individual's ability to hear accurately a divine summons, as Abraham presumably did. Kierkegaard's suggestion thus presumes to abnegate the prospect of locating moral authority within the orders of God's creation (*ordo creationis*). Against such a dire and incoherent consequence of divine command theory, O'Donovan protests—

> God's authority … is not opposed to the created order as such. It does not override our obligation to the truth in a 'teleological suspension of the ethical' such as Kierkegaard described.[36]

O'Donovan thus interprets the concept of "teleological suspension" as an outright *denial* of the moral order. Such a suspension would deny the very possibility of a real, objective, and teleological order within the universe, and relegate ethics entirely to the private and subjective realm of personal discernment of divine commands. This is the "frightful conception" which emerges from Kierkegaard's handling of the story of Abraham. While O'Donovan gives Kierkegaard due credit for recognizing the horror of such a conflict,[37] he is not dissuaded from the view that there are irresolvable problems with the voluntarist style of ethics cultivated by Kierkegaard, and that the root of these problems stems from the antinomian conflict which would ensue if God had created the universe either without recognizable ethical order, or with an ethical order in conflict with God's authority. Such

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[34] *R&MO*, 82.

[35] With reference to St. Thomas: "God is limited by the logic of non-contradiction, but by nothing else", *R&MO*, 41. Gilles Emery supports this interpretation of St. Thomas specifically with respect to the order of creation (*ordo creationis*), and explains how Thomas conceptualizes creation as proceeding as a communication of God's being, as "a reality from its principle (*eductio principaiati a suo principio*)". Emery, 'Trinity and Creation', in *Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow, eds. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) 58-76, 60.

[36] *R&MO*, 142.

[37] O'Donovan quotes Kierkegaard's *Either-Or II*, *R&MO*, 226. Cf., 263.

would be a "frightful conception… that the universe might be at war with itself", and a "terrifying collision between love for God and love for the persons." [38] O'Donovan asserts adamantly that "this collision does not and cannot occur."[39]

The Thomistic doctrine of God as the *summum bonum*, in whom there can be no self-contradictory denial of his own goodness, renders the possibility of collisions within the ontological reality of the moral order incoherent.[40] They cannot happen. On O'Donovan's view then, Kierkegaard (or Johannes de silentio, as the case may be) is clearly mistaken in presuming that a proper religious and ethical response to the reality of the divine address might require a "teleological suspension of the ethical". In a nutshell, this leads directly into the abyss of voluntarism which O'Donovan seeks to expose as incoherent and incompatible with an evangelical ethic:

> The demand that morality must change with God's acts in history therefore puts the axe to the root of the doctrine that morality is generic.[41]

How then does O'Donovan propose to resolve the moral tension in God's call to Abraham? He suggests that Kierkegaard has failed to perceive it as a conflict between *kinds* of ethical obligations (vocational vs. teleological order), in which the vocational kind trumps the teleological. Although the tension of vocation is indeed a real felt experience of the particular individual, it is not due to any inherent conflict within the moral order *per se*; but rather, there is a generic principle which *subsumes* the vocational demand:

> Because the vocational demand, which is not generic, is sanctioned by the generic principle that one should heed one's vocation, the conflict is resolved like any other conflict between *prima facie* moral claims.[42]

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[38] *R&MO*, 226.

[39] *R&MO*, 227.

[40] "'Teleological' ethics… derives from the ontological conception of God as the *summum bonum*, in which it was the task of moral reasoning to recognize and responds to the ordered structures of being and good"; *R&MO*, 138.

[41] *R&MO*, 41.

[42] *R&MO*, 44. "Subsumption, then, is a matter of truthful recognition", 197, cf. 189. This principle of subsumption would seem to be consistent with moral absolutes, in the sense that conflicts are presumed to be resolvable in light of 'higher' universally applicable principle which can subsume the lower ones. O'Donovan disavows this possibility however, in his critique of John Finnis, which leaves some quandary as to when "subsumption" is a workable hypothesis and when it is not; O'Donovan, 'John Finnis on Moral Absolutes' *Studies in Christian Ethics 6* (1993): 50-66. In a more recent essay, O'Donovan expresses an opposing view that would seem to corroborate Finnis's view of 'universal reference' in ethics: "no claim acquires a moral binding force unless it is seen to be accounted for in categories that are universal, transcending particular differences of time and circumstance…" Given these varying views of 'universality' we might wonder whether a paradox lies beneath the very concept, and all the more so, as O'Donovan concludes: "through the concrete moral demands

Thus Abraham's moral dilemma, and other moral tensions following the pattern of Abraham's, do not provide evidence of conflicts within the moral order; rather, they give the *appearance* of conflict to the individuals involved simply because those individuals lack a fuller awareness of the totality of the moral principles in play.[43]

Though O'Donovan exercises due diligence to guard against the tendency of voluntarism to stray into the irrational abnegation of teleology, he does not mean to disparage completely the significance of the voluntarist emphasis for God's freedom.[44]   The freedom of God to act without prior constraint remains essential.[45] Thus, the classical lines of debate between deontic and teleological ethical theories, the two "moral languages", need to be held together in tension.[46] In doing so, he emphasizes the rationalism of the teleological school, as opposed to the voluntarism of the deontic. On this view, there exists a "necessary dialectic" between the teleological language which derives from the "task of moral reasoning", and the deontic which derives from the affective, voluntary inclinations due to perceptions of "command and obedience".[47]

By means of this dialectical statement, O'Donovan claims to dispose of any counter-arguments from the direction of divine-command thinking which might object to his "linking of moral obligation to the natural generic-teleological order."[48] He defends his position on the basis that, "the relation of the creation to the Creator is teleological, but not in any way generic".[49] In essence, this contention amounts to a dialectical affirmation of the irreducible duality of the deontic and teleological moral languages. This way O'Donovan can affirm both

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that we encounter we hear the distant call of an intelligible world-order", O'Donovan, 'What Can Ethics Know about God?', in Torrance, Alan J., and Michael Banner, eds., *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2006) 33-46, 37-38.

[43] O'Donovan uses the story of Jesus' boyhood sojourn in the temple [Luke 2:41-52] to illustrate—although Jesus "first appears in paradoxical tension with his duty to his family", this is merely a perception of paradox, because once we admit that there is a "generic duty" to "follow our vocations", the conflict is resolved; *R&MO*, 43f.

[44] *R&MO*, 136.

[45] O'Donovan describes the exercise of *arbitrium* as fundamental to our understanding of providence and the doctrine of God, *R&MO*, 42.

[46] *R&MO*, 137.

[47] *R&MO*, 137-9. Cf. 132: "God's command *cuts across* our rational perceptions and relativizes them."

[48] *R&MO*, 38. O'Donovan refrains from making a broader survey of divine command theories, which would have distracted from the main thrust of this book; however, it is instructive to note that divine command theories are not constrained categorically by the dialectic as O'Donovan states it. More nuanced approaches have been taken by Swinburne, Robert Adams and Philip Quinn for example. See William J. Wainwright, *Religion and Morality* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), for a survey.

[49] *R&MO*, 40.

the absolute and incontrovertible reality of teleology underlying the "natural generic-teleological order", and also the absolute and unassailable freedom of the Creator:

> The tension between the two moral languages reflects a necessary dialectic in the perceptions of moral agents for whom moral insight is still a task and not yet an achieved fact.[50]

There lies within this dialectical approach to ethics, an echo of Brunner's dialectical statement of the *humanum*, in which the human person retains some capacity (by virtue of the indestructible "formal" *imago*) to perceive moral reality, even though the practical understanding of that reality is necessarily flawed (on account of the loss of the "material" *imago*). This would explain O'Donovan's "strong sympathy" for "the more realist versions of Natural Law theory", as well as his affirmation of Brunner's statement of the doctrine of creation with respect to the "ordinances".[51] This dialectical tendency appears also in O'Donovan's doctrine of revelation. It follows that a dialectical approach to the human capacity to discern moral order would likewise suggest a dialectic between the function of natural reason with respect to the general revelation of the natural order, and the particular event of special revelation:

> The value of the voluntarist emphasis lay in its perception that the dialectic between reason and revelation rests not on an accidental deficiency of human reason but on the aboriginal metaphysical fact that human reason is not transcendent.[52]

We may now summarize O'Donovan's answer to the question of Abraham's moral dilemma: First, the existential tension is real. Second, the apparent conflict within the moral order, as witnessed in the tension between the divine command and the teleological moral reality, is an artifact of imperfect human reason. It only *appears* to be a moral conflict, within the necessarily existential limitations of human knowledge. In actuality, the conflict is removed due to the particularity of vocation being subsumed within a greater generic moral principal.[53] Third, even though it gives no evidence to any underlying conflict in the "generic-teleological order", existential tension is a necessary condition of the imperfect

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[50] *R&MO*, 139; cf. 132; also his defense of "the natural ethic" 16-21, and his discussion of Natural Law, 85-91.
[51] *R&MO*, 85, 87.
[52] *R&MO*, 136.
[53] Wainwright judges perceptively, with reference to the similar explanations of Gellman, Outka and C.S. Evans, the unfortunate result that: "each of these accounts unduly sanitizes Johannes's messaged"; Wainwright, *Religion and Morality* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005) 195.

capacities of perception and reason which comprise the "aboriginal metaphysical fact that human reason is not transcendent."[54] Fourth, there is an irreducible polarity between the "rationalist" and "voluntarist" moral languages, which requires to be conceived within a dialectical doctrine of human perception—a dialectic which bears resemblance to Brunner's bifurcation of the *imago*, though without embracing it explicitly. Fifth, this dialectical approach safeguards both the absolute freedom of God, and the absolute reality of the moral order within creation. O'Donovan thus proposes to have resolved the paradox inherent in the Kierkegaardian notion of "teleological suspension of the ethical".

Faith as paradox

O'Donovan's engagement with Kierkegaard sheds light on the question with which we opened this chapter: How is it that O'Donovan's evangelical ethics can simultaneously endorse a concrete Christocentric view of ethics, and yet encounter conflict with the affirmations of the GEC? By this close reading of O'Donovan's response to Kierkegaard, we have seen that O'Donovan aims his polemics at eliminating the threat of antinomianism which derives its energy from the voluntaristic tendencies he ascribes to Kierkegaard. The antinomian tendencies of Christian voluntarism are so perennially pernicious that O'Donovan sees them (anachronistically) even in Luther's dictum, *Pecca fortiter!*[55] By means of his dialectical approach, O'Donovan claims to hold this antinomian tendency in tension with moralism, its polar opposite, in order to achieve an "integrally evangelical ethics".[56] The ultimate problem here is the voluntaristic tendency for theological ethics to degenerate into a "Christian morality without rules", a "'normless' ethics" which refuses to admit the teleological reality of the moral order.[57]

O'Donovan grasps for the nettle when he objects to Kierkegaard's call for "teleological suspension", which seems on the surface to be a hardened voluntaristic denial of teleological reality. The problem hinges on the proposition that moral knowledge and deliberation may be conceived as emanating from the interiority of human experience, unconstrained by the

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[54] *R&MO*, 136; cf. 38.
[55] *R&MO*, 262f.
[56] *R&MO*, 11, 12, Cf. 262-263.
[57] *R&MO*, 25.

objective teleological reality of the moral order.[58] Abraham's moral dilemma provides the archetypal illustration:

> What makes it distinctive, however, is that the conflict cannot be fully understood by anyone except the agent, since the character of one of the claims is susceptible only of private discernment.[59]

Indeed, Abraham's trial remains a hidden, private affair of which neither he, nor de silentio, no Kierkegaard, nor the reader, can speak:

> Abraham cannot speak. What would explain everything, that it is a trial—though note, one in which the ethical is the temptation—is something he cannot say (i.e. in a way that can be understood.[60]

Does this raise the spectre of an incommunicable, inarticulate darkness as the final arbitrator of all ethical questions? Such is the impossibly hopeless verdict O'Donovan wishes to refute:

> [T]he authority of God is not incommunicable, interior and removed from public view… The voluntarist tradition of thought, by exalting the command of God above all reason, deprived it of speech and thereby relegated it to the sphere of private and interior compulsions, making it a matter of personal vocation rather than shared moral obligation.[61]

The very idea that God might be unable to communicate his authoritative word, or that humans might not be able to receive, interpret, or communicate revealed truths, is absurd. Such inarticulateness renders absurd not just ethics, but faith as well. Thus, de silentio concludes: "Faith is… the paradox of existence", and "Faith is exactly this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal."[62] And here is the nettle which eludes our grasp—the paradox of faith which cannot be explained away, at least, not in the universal language of ethics. Here is the nettle which stings and spurns the attempt to explain the faith

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[58] O'Donovan states the problem: "Abstraction from teleology makes it impossible, in the first place, to know the universe whole" *R&MO*, 49. He detects this abstraction within "the voluntarist tradition", and asks: "once the divine command is abstracted from the ordered universe what content is left to the idea of authority itself?" 134.

[59] *R&MO*, 44.

[60] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Sylvia Walsh; C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 101. Hereafter, *F&T*.

[61] *R&MO*, 141.

[62] *F&T*, 40, 47 and *passim*.

of Abraham in terms of universal principles.[63] *Fear and Trembling* is not a book about ethics, after all. It is a book about faith, for which Abraham proves to be, literally, the seminal example.[64] Thus, to interpret the phrase "teleological suspension" as an *ethical theory* is to take it out of context. It will not make sense as a statement of Christian ethics (as O'Donovan has demonstrated thoroughly) for the simple reason that it was never intended to provide one.[65] It is rather the self-styled "dialectical lyric" of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author to marvel at the absurdity of faith, the paradox that faith can even exist. Thus, de silentio puts it forthrightly:

> Abraham represents faith and that it is properly expressed in him, whose life is not only the most paradoxical that can be thought but so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all. Abraham acts by virtue of the absurd… This paradox cannot be mediated…[66]

If we are correct in this assessment of *F&T*, and in concluding that the "teleological suspension of the ethical" is a commentary upon faith, rather than a prescription for Christian ethics, then we may conclude similarly that O'Donovan's objection to this Kierkegaardian concept would be better aimed not against any allegedly Kierkegaardian doctrine of Christian ethics, but rather against the paradoxical epistemological issues of faith which Kierkegaard explores through the example of Abraham.[67] O'Donovan's response, therefore, is properly taken as a critique of the idea (which is "Kierkegaardian" in O'Donovan's interpretation) that

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[63] Craig Barnes shows that this text cannot be preached by explaining away the paradox, or by helping Abraham to "help God be rational"; Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 118.

[64] Evans concludes correctly: "Fear and Trembling is not a book about ethics; it is a book about faith", *F&T*, xi; cf. xxii. The ethical is treated because it is something that can easily be confused with faith"; Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*: *Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 62. Thiselton, likewise, recognizes Kierkegaard's intent in *F&T* as showing via Abraham that "the sharp edge of choice-in-the-face-of-paradox" cannot be blunted by attempts to understand it; *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Writings of Anthony Thiselton* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate 2006) 356, 357. Others come to the same conclusion, e.g., Philip L. Quinn, 'Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics' in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Gordon Daniel Marino and Alastair Hannay, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Jonathan Malesic, 'A Secret both Sinister and Salvific: Secrecy and Normativity in Light of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 74 no 2* (2001): 446-68.

[65] "The ethics whose teleological suspension is at issue in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is the secular ethics of his own time", and thus is not intended as a comment upon Christian ethics; Quinn, 'Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics', 349. *Works of Love* is Kierkegaard's most thorough treatment of Christian ethics. This assessment is confirmed by C.S. Evans in *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*.

[66] *F&T*, 49.

[67] Murray Rae demonstrates persuasively that for Kierkegaard the "ethical concerns are inseparably bound up with epistemological ones. The fundamental reason for this is that in knowing the Truth we are not concerned with knowing propositions but with participating in the new life Christ offers"; Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 146; thus: "in respect of Christian faith ethics (the business of acting decisively) and epistemology cannot be separated", 159.

faith presents an epistemic obstacle to moral deliberation and the articulation of evangelical ethics. How can we really trust God and believe in the teleological goodness of God's creation if ethical conflicts may exist as realities beyond the power of rational thought? And so O'Donovan concludes:

> The risk of Abraham cannot be avoided. But once its dangerous tendencies have been thus corrected, rationalism too can instruct us. If obedience is to be 'trusting', it must be hopeful. The disciple who obeys the divine word in defiance of his own limited perceptions of right is genuinely trustful only if he believes that the paradox is not an ultimate contradiction in reality. He must hope to see the moment of critical confrontation finally resolved by the elevation of his reason to grasp God's action as a coherent whole.[68]

The fly in the ointment here is the possibility of "an ultimate contradiction in reality". But what does "in reality" mean here? The forgoing analysis indicates clearly that for O'Donovan it refers to the assured, objective reality of a teleological moral order within the creation. This reality is simply *there*. It requires no revelation and no evangelical faith to see it. Given the incorruptible wholeness of God, conflict cannot exist within this reality. Such a conflict would present an unassailable paradox capable of resisting the force of reason. Such would be a stumbling block to faith. This is untenable within O'Donovan's outline for evangelical ethics.[69]

There would seem to be ample justification to raise skeptical questions about O'Donovan's interpretation of Kierkegaard.[70] While it seems patently evident that Kierkegaard intends to present faith as a paradox which eludes the explanatory powers of reason,[71] it seems equally clear, in light of his attention to the efficacy of reason in his corpus, that he also affirms reason as a valuable component of faith and discipleship.[72] But while

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[68] *R&MO*, 136.

[69] The "stumbling block" here derives, to some extent, from O'Donovan's interpretation of what de silento means by "teleological suspension". Based on his fine reading of *CUP*, C. Stephen Evans argues persuasively that Kierkegaard "never doubts that [the] ideal of objective knowledge is valid … or that there is a reality independent of us that we are attempting to know." Evans, 'Realism and Antirealism in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 154-176, 170. "The crucial question for Kierkegaard then is not whether a person's beliefs are objectively right but whether the person has the right kind of relationships to what is believed",173.

[70] "Kierkegaard proposes that the moral law can be known by general revelation as well as special revelation", Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 163.

[71] E.g., *CUP*, 208ff, 213, 218; *F&T* 31.

[72] For Kierkegaard, faith is "neither the abandonment of reason (*contra rationem*), nor an addition to reason (*supra rationem*), but rather reason's redemption"; Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation*, 116.

O'Donovan's interpretation of Kierkegaard may not provide a nuanced assessment of Kierkegaard's ethics, it does lend a clear view of the intersection at which these epistemological paths collide. We are now at the scene of the accident, as it were.[73]

Suspicion of teleological ethics

In his closing chapter of *R&MO*, O'Donovan sums up his reason to be suspicious of paradoxical notions—

> Clearly there is something suspicious in the paradoxical dissociation of morality from reality which this argument urges upon us…. In this dissociation we may discover the clue to its real character, and recognize in it a reflection of that suspicion of teleological ethics which we have already discerned to be voluntarist in inspiration.[74]

We can capture the gist of the problem in these snippets:

de silentio (Kierkegaard):   "teleological suspension of the ethical"
O'Donovan: "suspicion of teleological ethics"

Does this juxtaposition invite a dialectical resolution? Kierkegaard denies that route, via the sharp irony of de silentio's voice. There is no higher principle, no set of principles, no greater *telos*, and no "higher universal" of any kind, which could remove the paradox of faith. This is the difference between faith (the existential paradox) and ethics (teleological principles, in this case). Thus, to accept the mission to resolve the paradox in ethical terms would be to follow the path of the "tragic hero":

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[73] This collision becomes particularly acute in O'Donovan's assessment of the paradox of self-love; cf. *R&MO*, 249. Analysis of precisely this paradox generates the main thrust of O'Donovan's monograph, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (Yale University Press, 1980). From the first page, he focuses upon "the sheaves of paradox" born by the notion of self-love, and he proceeds to explain how the tension between Augustine's belief in "immanent teleology [at] the root of his eudaemonist ethics" coheres with his "epistemological program, *credo ut intelligam*", in spite of the fact that "There is no 'theory of self-love' articulated in his pages", op. cit., 1, 157. O'Donovan also cites Kierkegaard in this context as an illustrative example of the sort of enigmatic and impressionistic interpretations which contribute to the paradox, rather than resolve it, 1, 112.

[74] *R&MO*, 249.

> He lets an expression of the ethical have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical; he reduces the ethical relation between father and son or daughter and father to a sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of the ethical life. Here, then, there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical itself.[75]

In other words, the tragic hero denies the paradoxical question (of "teleological suspension") and reduces ethics to dialectical principles. For Kierkegaard however, *the concept of moral order and the existential aspects of faith must remain bound together in a paradoxical union.* These must not be set asunder if Kierkegaard's portrayal of Abraham's ethical dilemma is to cohere with its goal, namely faith itself.

On O'Donovan's view however, Kierkegaard has sidestepped the crucial issues within a practical doctrine of Christian ethics, and the result has been to encourage "confusion of the ontological and the epistemological in much modern theology".[76] O'Donovan can affirm on one hand, "love as the overall shape of Christian ethics",[77] and participation in Christ as the fundamental condition of moral knowledge;[78] yet on the other hand, he will not permit the paradox of faith to supervene or preclude the immanent teleology of the moral order, and so he disposes of this obstacle by cutting the Kierkegaardian Knot.

Where and how does O'Donovan cut the "Kierkegaardian Knot" (K²)?

Simply put, the K^2 is an *affirmation of the epistemic function of faith as an event bound inextricably with the concept of the moral order.*[79] This bond is cut by O'Donovan's ascription of ontological priority to the moral order. He does so to overcome the idea (which

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[75] *F&T*, 51f. Here we see Kierkegaard invoking the label "dialectical" as a category for attempts to reduce a paradox to systematic principles. By the subtitle to *Fear & Trembling, A Dialectical Lyric,* we infer that the tome may be read as a *critique* of dialectical theological ethics which would purport to explain away the paradox of faith. De silentio boasts ironically of "the power of the dialectic" and then proceeds to show how nonsensical dialectical reasoning becomes if employed to dispose of paradox. In the process he pays sarcastic homage to Lessing as "one of Germany's most erudite minds", *F&T*, 77.

[76] *R&MO*, 19. O'Donovan acknowledges that "Kierkegaard also *distinguished* very sharply between faith and morality", but judges this distinction to have been ultimately ineffectual in correcting the misguided direction of "contemporary Christians who have followed him in assigning to both a voluntarist foundation", 16.

[77] *R&MO*, 25.

[78] *R&MO*, 11, 85, 150 and *passim*.

[79] The reality of faith does not fit into neatly contrived definitions, and I do not mean to suggest that I am attempting that errand, for I fear that would place me in the camp of less-than-successful tragic heroes. Nonetheless, my hope is that this phrase provides a useful short-hand rubric for the discussion to follow.

he attributes to Kierkegaard) of faith-as-paradox as an epistemological strategy which grants priority to subjective (and ultimately, voluntaristic) personal experience. Thus, O'Donovan would prefer to safeguard the reality of "immanent teleology"[80] within the moral order, and he endeavors to hold together the irreducible duality in which moral knowledge is both existential and immanent.[81] This strategy bears resemblance to Brunner's Objective-Subjective antithesis and dialectical statement of the *humanum*. Although O'Donovan expresses sympathy for Brunner's theology in this regard, he stops short of identifying with Brunner's stringent dialectical theology.[82] And so, O'Donovan takes a different approach to uphold the polarity: rather than begin from a dialectical statement of the *humanum* and its challenging implications for moral knowledge, O'Donovan approaches from the direction of ontological priority, and relegates the epistemological questions to secondary status in order to stave off the troubling modern objection to fideism.[83]   In this way, he aims to overcome the detritus of the Barth-Brunner debate in which he concludes "the confusion of the ontological and the epistemological issues were never properly differentiated".[84]

There is irony in the direction of interpretation indicated here, for it could be seen to emanate from the implicit imposition of an *a priori* either-or choice regarding the premise of objectivity in the moral order:

> The order of things that God has made is *there*. It is objective, and mankind has a place within it. Christian ethics, therefore, has an objective reference because it is concerned with man's life in accordance with this order.[85]

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[80] O'Donovan finds support for this epistemological stance in his extended treatment of Augustine's ethics, wherein he finds "that Augustine does believe in immanent teleology and that that is the metaphysical root of his eudaemonist ethics", *The Problem of Self-Love*, 157.

[81] Thus would O'Donovan avoid the "constant tendency in Christian theology for this polarity to collapse"; *R&MO*, 87, 85.

[82] O'Donovan recognizes, along with Barth, that Brunner displays a degree of "unclarity over the epistemological issue"; *R&MO*, 87. Elsewhere, he mentions his desire to avoid "antithetical development" of ethical norms, preferring the term, "complementary"; O'Donovan, 'John Finnis on Moral Absolutes', *Studies in Christian Ethics 6* (1993):50-66, 63.

[83] O'Donovan argues persuasively that there is "no *neutral* account of what moral thought is, from which such sceptical questions can successfully be raised and answered in a spirit of pure enquiry, without either faith or unbelief", *R&MO*, 77. As Bruce Marshall puts it succinctly, "Surely no one wants to be a fideist"; this sentiment pressures theologians into "giving reasons for beliefs without creating epistemic subordination and dependence", which leads theology into apologetics; Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 141-7.

[84] *R&MO*, 86. Cf. O'Donovan's concern that this confusion not "be allowed to shelter a destructive and semi-Christian ontology"; 'The Natural Ethic', 26.

[85] *R&MO*, 17.

Elsewhere, O'Donovan phrases the *a priori* either-or choice in these terms: "Is cosmic order really present in the world, or is it imposed upon reality by the human mind?"[86] If this objectivity is to be taken as *a priori*, then it follows naturally that:

> Any attempt to think about morality must make a decision early in its course, overt or covert, about these forms of order which we seem to discern in the world. Either they are there, or they are not. This decision, which will shape the character of the whole moral philosophical enterprise, forces itself as much upon secular as upon Christian thought.[87]

In order to ensure conformity with the "objective reference" provided by the content of the moral order, the *decision* must be made first, with respect to discernment of the certain and objective existence of the moral order; only afterwards may the epistemological questions be raised.[88] Might this epistemological sequence suggest that in his advocacy of ontological priority O'Donovan has endorsed the same sort of voluntarist movement which he finds problematic in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*?[89]

What is the significance of this epistemological either-or decision? In effect, it serves to constrain the implications of the GEC, placing a caveat upon the caveat, as it were, and taking some of the "great"-ness out of the GEC. Similarly, this either-or decision effectively makes ethical doctrine contingent upon the decision to believe in an absolute ontological reality, without regard for the epistemic conditions of faith pertaining to such belief. By isolating the epistemic conditions pertaining to the choice of such a belief, this *a priori* choice renders asunder that which the K^2 would find to be bound together (paradoxically) in faithful union. Has O'Donovan postulated herein a voluntaristic either-or as a precursor to the

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[86] *R&MO*, 67.

[87] *R&MO*, 35.

[88] *R&MO*, 76. Cf. O'Donovan's statement in the preface to the second edition of *R&MO* where he defends his conclusion that epistemology of the moral community needs to be placed within "a subjective chapter of ethics which must *follow* (and *must* follow) from the objective chapter", xix (italics in the original).

[89] We do well to keep in mind the proviso that the fictional *Either/Or* may not be fairly characterized as Kierkegaard's statement of Christian ethics, though it does illustrate a voluntarist approach to faith and knowledge. *Either/Or* is better seen as Kierkegaard's illustration of the aesthetic and ethical "stages" which are surpassed in Kierkegaard's conjecture by the "religious sphere of faith", as he demonstrates in *Stages on Life's Way*, Malesic, 'A Secret both Sinister and Salvific', 454. Charles Taylor reminds us rightly, with respect to the ethical position of B in *Either/Or*: "Kierkegaard in his later writings evolved beyond this definition of the ethical, which came to be seen as a stage which was in turn trumped by the religious", *Sources of the Self*, 450. Taylor does not pursue the implications of this observation further, nor does he discuss the meaning of faith within Kierkegaard's ethics, but his observation highlights the importance of rendering Kierkegaardian ideas of "choice" and "self" in a full context of Kierkegaard's concept of ethics. C. Stephen Evans elaborates this point in *Kierkegaard's Ethics of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

formulation of a Christian ethics, in order to eliminate the threat of Kierkegaardian voluntarism from the outset? If so, it might seem that the only tool capable of cutting the K^2 would be, in and of itself, another paradox. This would be an ironic conclusion—a paradox to cut the paradox. Clearly, that irony will not satisfy the direction of O'Donovan's ethics.

It is patently obvious that O'Donovan does not mean to propose another paradox as the solution to Kierkegaardian voluntarism. But given the premise of an initial either-or choice in O'Donovan epistemological approach, how is such a paradox to be avoided? Here O'Donovan takes a cautious step in Barth's direction, in his desire to sustain a balance along the axis of tension that runs between the opposing realist and voluntarist poles of evangelical faith.[90] He gives Barth credit for recognizing difficulties with Brunner's argument and concludes that, in spite of Barth's failure to properly differentiate the ontological and epistemological issues, "the *epistemological* positions of this greatest of twentieth-century theologians remain fundamentally important for Christian ethics."[91] Barth would thus be judged to be going in the right direction in his Christo-centric approach;[92] but only to the extent that it does not undermine the realist view of ontological priority. Thus, O'Donovan's critique of Barth is not so much a disagreement with Barth's direction, but rather, a judgment that Barth has perhaps gone too far in this direction; that is to say, O'Donovan judges Barth to have made unfortunately unbalanced doctrinal statements in his quest for absolute epistemological rigor.[93]

In conclusion, we hear O'Donovan affirming aspects of both Brunner's and Barth's opposite positions with respect to moral reality: he can affirm the epistemological aspect of faith, as advocated by Barth, as well as the ontological priority of the moral order, for which he deems Brunner to be a better advocate.[94] Ultimately, O'Donovan concludes that the bidirectional perspective of the resurrection is the key to a statement of evangelical ethics which can uphold the tension in these positions, while resisting a collapse into either a rigorous dialectical doctrine of ontological reality, or a paradox of faith such as the K^2

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[90] *R&MO*, 85. Indeed, O'Donovan can even affirm "the dynamic of the Gospel" as demonstrating "that paradoxically twofold need which refuses, existentially or ontologically, to be reduced to simplicity one way or the other"; *DN*, 38.

[91] *R&MO*, 87.

[92] *R&MO*, 90. Cf. *WJ,* 86, where he expresses appreciation for Barth's essay, "Gospel and Law", and as we have seen above, O'Donovan affirms the christo-centric direction of both Barth and Ramsey.

[93] *R&MO*, 86-87.

[94] O'Donovan agrees that there is a "sense, then, in which it is true to say that the image of God in man was not merely 'defaced' but 'lost'"; *R&MO*, 89.

espouses. This makes moral knowledge contingent upon participation in Christ[95] and the agency of the Holy Spirit—

> Again, when we speak of the Christian moral life as lived *in the Spirit*, we declare that this life is itself part of the divine self-disclosure, and as such points us forward to the goal of that self-disclosure. …The Holy Spirit, outside of whose field of operation the Christian moral life is unthinkable, is a signpost to the future…[96]

But this begs the question yet again: has O'Donovan resolved the paradox of faith, or merely restated it? How can the "divine self-disclosure"—which Barth would seem to affirm as the realm in which moral life is lived and discerned—be the context of moral life, if it is also true that teleological content of the moral order is immanent and requires no revelation?[97] O'Donovan's answer rests upon the crucial role of the bi-directional perspective of the resurrection.[98] Does this work?

And where is all this going to lead?[99]

At this point, it might seem we have reached an epistemological impasse, for we are now talking about whether and how to resolve the paradox of evangelical faith, and that would seem to be, in and of itself, a paradoxical task.[100] So let us aver the paradoxical nature of faith, and rephrase the question: How does O'Donovan's epistemological realism, with respect to the bi-directional view of the resurrection, cope with the seemingly dialectical aspects of moral knowledge? We shall proceed to answer this question in terms of another

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[95] *R&MO*, 79, 81, 85 87.

[96] *R&MO*, 247.

[97] "God is who He is in the act of His revelation"; *CD* II/1, 257. Cf. Schwöbel, 'Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 17-36, 32.

[98] *R&MO*, 249.

[99] This is the question which Barth poses in *Nein!* (85) as the test of Brunner's doctrine. Similarly, we propose to test O'Donovan's epistemological realism by examination of its implications.

[100] We are reminded here of Barth's reply to Bultmann when asked what he held against Bultmann's theological philosophy, to which Barth said he could only reply "not with an argument, but with a recitation of the creed"; Gary Dorrien cites this from Barth's letter to Bultmann, 20 June 1931, in *Karl Barth/Rudolf Bultmann Letters*, 64-65; Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) 98.

case study which "puts the ball in play" or the "bird in flight", to borrow Barth's allusion, for the dynamic epistemic criterion of faith seems to require observation while in motion.[101]

Case Study: Ordnungen[102]

Our test case concerns the doctrine of *Ordnungen* ("orders of creation"), which implicates the noetic and ontic aspects of knowledge. The most focused treatment of the differences between Barth and Brunner over the doctrine of *Ordnungen* occurs in Brunner's *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen*, and Barth's rejoinder in *Church Dogmatics* III/4; accordingly, we shall direct our attention to those two documents.[103]

Brunner begins with an affirmation which, superficially at least, would seem to be consistent with Barth's view of ethics and dogmatics—

> As the indicative and the imperative suddenly alternate, as speech about the redeeming love of God flows directly into the claim for human love, so the whole New Testament is an indissoluble blend of "ethics" and "dogmatics".[104]

It becomes immediately apparent that Brunner's "indissoluble blend" bears merely superficial agreement with Barth's concept of the sameness of dogmatics and ethics, because Brunner proceeds quickly to split them into two separate movements, claiming the necessity of "an external technical separation".[105] Barth disagrees: "The attempt methodically to separate dogmatics and ethics is dubious even from the point of view of ethics". [106]

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[101] "For our position is really an instant in a *movement*, and any view of it is comparable to the momentary view of a bird in flight"; Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928) 282f, quoted in Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology,* 24.

[102] This is the word Brunner uses in his title, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen: Entwurf einer protestantisch-theologischen Ethik* (1932), E.T., *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, trans. by Olive Wyon London: The Lutterworth Press, 1937). Hereafter, *DI*.

[103] It is interesting to notice Brunner's decision not to translate the title of *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* literally, but rather to mention only the divine command, and omit reverence to *die Ordnungen*. My conjecture is that Barth's *Nein!* which appeared in the intervening years between the German original and the English translation might have influenced him. Also of interest is the striking resemblance between Brunner's subtitle, *an Outline of a Protestant Theological Ethic*, and O'Donovan's, *An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*. The two books certainly cover very similar territory, and begin from similar concerns for relativism and Kierkegaardian consciousness; e.g., *DI*, 17, 21.

[104] *DI*, 84.

[105] *DI*, 86.

[106] *CD* I/2, 790. Webster notes correctly that for Barth "Christian dogmatics is inherently ethical dogmatics", *Barth's Moral Theology*, 8.

Why does Brunner insist upon this "technical separation"?—because he has proposed that the other task of theology is to engage in discussion with the secular culture which demands proficiency in apologetics.[107] Barth rejects this other task of theology as being impossible, for it would require theology to be something other than that which it can only be—namely, a witness in actuality of the self-revealing God.[108]

O'Donovan for his part, echoes Brunner's statements, emphasizing God's redeeming love as the foundation of Christian ethics, in which the indicative of teleology and the imperative of divine command originate and remain forever linked to God's divine self-disclosure. And, like Brunner, O'Donovan recognizes that this foundation creates a bond between theology and ethics, so that "Christian thought about ethics must prove itself as 'moral theology'".[109] Yet, also like Brunner, he deems it necessary to separate ethics from dogmatics—

> Ethical questions are not the same as doctrinal questions; the old slogan that 'ethics is dogmatics' was intolerably high-handed.[110]

With this pithy conclusion, O'Donovan does not mean to suggest that the bond between ethics and dogmatics may be severed; his position is carefully nuanced in defense of that "indissoluble bond" between them. Christian ethics would be incoherent apart from the faithful witness of dogma. Yet, dogma and ethics do different things. "Dogma is *doxa*, an act of praise", while the task of ethics "is to inform, out of praise and for the sake of praise, the deliberative reasoning which determines practical human undertakings."[111] Thus, "the communication between the two is reciprocal."[112] And they are the responsibilities of different disciplines—the "moralist" and the "dogmatician".[113] This division of "intellectual roles", however, must also be carefully nuanced in order to preclude the false interpretation

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[107] In this sense of the word "apologetics", Barth finds nothing to do with theology *CD* II/2 (518, 520). Barth said as much also in his earlier *Ethics*, p. 21, where he rejected apologetics as being "the attempt to establish and justify theological thinking in the context of philosophical, or, more generally and precisely, nontheological thinking."

[108] Brunner: "It is the task of our theological generation to find the way back to a true *theologia naturalis*", *NT*, 59. Barth refers to Brunner's "other" task for theology and explicitly rejects it, *Nein!,* 70, 76. Cf. Barth's rejection of natural theology as "another" task of theology in *CD* II/1, 128f.

[109] O'Donovan, 'What Can Ethics Know about God?', 33.

[110] Ibid., 33.

[111] Ibid., 34.

[112] Ibid., 34.

[113] Ibid., 34.

that they could ever exist as concrete realities.[114] These roles are abstractions, O'Donovan maintains, yet they are obviously important abstractions, apparently made so by the need to conceive of the intellectual task of ethics without continually confining it within the existential act of *doxa*. On O'Donovan's view then, neither of these tasks may be confined within the jurisdiction of the other; rather, they must mutually inform one another.[115] This proviso of mutuality protects against the risk of voluntarism, and gives the moral theologian a platform for dialogue with the "thought-world of ethics and politics".[116] Here we can see how the nuanced distinction between ethics and dogma, for both Brunner and O'Donovan, posits a point-of-contact between thought-worlds in furtherance of the goal of apologetics.[117]

In contrast to this sanguine view of dialogue between ethics and dogmatics, Barth argues against the possibility of accord between theology and such a disjointed conception of ethics, as though morality could be pursued in generalizations outside the covenantal grace of God. Indeed, such a presumption would replay the first sin of speculation in denial of God's good creation, as conceived by the serpent in the garden (Gen. 3)[118].

Barth denies the premise of a "general conception of ethics", yet he affirms the existence of order within the creation, and the possibility of existential discernment of order even when the observer lacks knowledge of God. The question for Barth is not whether a realist view of the moral order is defensible, but rather: on what grounds is it defensible? This is the context in which Barth articulates his doctrine of the "little lights", which stands in contradistinction to Brunner's *Ordnungen*, not because Barth denies the *Ordnungen* per se, but rather, because

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[114] Ibid., 34. O'Donovan nuances this abstraction further, noting that the "conversation between specialists could have little interest unless we each had a theological stake in the other's special interest", and he acknowledges "the evil that has befallen the world" when such "heuristic distinctions" are taken "in a humourlessly literal way as ultimate frontiers", Ibid., 35.

[115] And even so, O'Donovan suggests that mutual dialogue between the dogmatician and the moralist remains insufficient "to pursue the goal of theology to the end", for which they might need to recruit metaphysics as a third participant, Ibid., 45.

[116] Ibid., 44. O'Donovan values this dialog by which political theology breaks out of the "cordon sanitaire" established by religious fideism. Thus, he concludes: "Theology must be political if it is to be evangelical", *DN*, 2-3. O'Donovan continues in the direction set in *R&MO* regarding the objective and immanent reality of the moral order, with respect to politics, as he supports a realist assertion that political authority within a society is acknowledged as being simply *there*, to be apprehended as in the Thomist tradition of 'Natural Law', *DN*, 47. O'Donovan nuances this "theorem" by following it immediately with the context of the Psalmist who recognizes in this reality the provision of "Yhwh's rule" which engenders praise.

[117] Rufus Black finds similarly that O'Donovan's concept of practical reason argues in favor of "the epistemological superstructure for a bridge between Christian and other forms of ethics". Black finds O'Donovan to be in concert with Grisez and Finnis on this score, even though "O'Donovan is much more skeptical than Grisez about the extent to which fallen humanity can accurately perceive this natural order"; *The Revival of Natural Law*, Nigel Biggar and Rufus Black, eds. (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000) 159.

[118] "Strange as it may seem, that general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin*"; CD* II/2, 518.

of the impossibility of knowing either the meaning of the *Ordnungen* or the source of the one true light who kindles and orders the lesser lights, if the self-creating circle of theological knowledge is broken—"To be aware of this order we do not leave the closed circle of theological knowledge."[119] The lesser lights of creation *do* shine by, through and with the light of Christ, in witness to their creation, but they *do not* lay open to understanding by the prospect of any autonomous human capacity—that unfortunate prospect can lead only into further mystery and existential angst apart from the self-revelation of their Creator.

The "closed circle of theological knowledge" is of course that same epistemological condition which O'Donovan resists as being "voluntarist in its assumptions" and "mainly irrationalist" in content, and so must be avoided in favor of a more realist account of knowledge of the moral order.[120] There is irony here, for Barth and O'Donovan share a common intention—to avoid arbitrariness—though they proceed in divergent directions.[121] O'Donovan aims to expose the specious epistemological presumptions of voluntarism, by affirming the objective reality of the moral order. Barth aims to expose the erroneous presumption that ethics and dogmatics may be conceived in distinction from one another. On Barth's view, the error lies in the premise of an autonomous self-understanding as a means of escaping the "circle of theological knowledge". This circle must remain intact as the sole means of epistemic access to moral knowledge, because it subsists in the epistemic event of revelation. Any attempt to arrive at moral knowledge apart from the unified ontic and noetic criteria of this circle will be cast upon the whims of "arbitrary human assertion",[122] which claims its authority by default if the epistemic event does not proceed "according to the Word of God!"[123]

Accordingly, to proceed in ethics via any route other than the self-revealing Word is necessarily arbitrariness based in human self-understanding:

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[119] *CD* III/4, 44. Cf. *CD* IV/3.1, 153.

[120] *R&MO*, 16.

[121] This irony rises to the surface in O'Donovan's sermon, "Knowing the Truth", where he exegetes John 7:16. Here he acknowledges that "truth is a relation between ourselves and what is not ourselves, and that relation cannot arise within the circle of our own critical exertions… If one does not receive one's knowledge as a gift, one constructs it as a private invention"; O'Donovan, *The Word in Small Boats: Sermons from Oxford*, ed. Andy Draycott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 110-11. By this statement we might infer that the only viable alternative to arbitrariness is to receive knowledge as a gift—a conclusion that would seem to correspond, ironically, with Barth's insistence upon the "closed circle of theological knowledge" wherein knowledge is received as a gift in the event of revelation.

[122] *CD* III/4, 31.

[123] *CD* III/4, 27.

> This being the case, it would be an act of arbitrariness which could only result in misconceptions to understand the truth of the idea of creation as the only key to this reality and indirectly as the key to the understanding of the ethical event, even if it were as easy to grasp this key as representatives of the theology of orders assume.[124]

We have seen that O'Donovan objects to this conclusion on the grounds that the objective reality of the moral order is simply *there*—it is assured, for the resurrection bears witness to its vindication, and the incarnation to its presence. We participate in this moral reality in Christ. O'Donovan has argued persuasively that this perception of reality is not an arbitrary creation of the volitional self. And Barth also affirms the existence of order in the creation. Is this another impasse in the paradox of faith, as seen by two evangelical theologians who differ merely in emphases? Perhaps not. Our thesis is that something else is going on here: O'Donovan is stepping conveniently in and out of the "circle of theological knowledge", as Barth has defined it.

Conclusion

We have seen that O'Donovan aims to avoid the unfortunate implications of Brunner's dialectical theology, yet without sacrificing the moral content he ascribes to the *Ordnungen*. Now we can see how this is accomplished. Rather than postulate an explicitly dialectical ontology of the *humanum*, which carries unfortunate implications for the epistemic function of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*,   O'Donovan relies, implicitly, upon a *dialectical epistemology* from which to view the moral order from either of two directions—looking "backwards" from the resurrection in order to affirm the "givenness" and objectivity of the moral order established concretely in the cosmos, and simultaneously "forwards" from the resurrection, cognizant of the reality that revelation, via the agency of the Holy Spirit, is the necessary condition for full and true moral knowledge. This is a robust epistemological strategy, from which an apologetic direction may be chosen depending upon the intellectual challenge to hand (which is why its articulation is as difficult as capturing a bird in flight). When faced with the questions of moral philosophy, this epistemological realism can articulate the ethical significance of the *Ordnungen* as well as the ontological reality of the human being as *esse etiam in intellectu*. When faced with the questions of theological dogmatics, this

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[124] *CD* III/4, 28.

epistemological realism can function in full cognizance of revelation and *metanoia* as the events in which moral knowledge obtains, and even go so far as to affirm, with evangelical robustness, the paradoxical and existential aspects of faith and life in Christ.

When O'Donovan's epistemological realism moves in the "forwards" direction, carried by the epistemic force of faith, revelation and *metanoia*, it moves in concert with both Barth's concept of the "closed circle of theological knowledge", and the K^2. When it moves in the "backwards" direction, it meets resistance in the form of the GEC. Finally, to the extent that this bi-directional epistemological realism articulates a *dialectical epistemology*, it cuts the K^2. To adopt an epistemological "standpoint" based in any way upon a parsing, distinction or division of the movement contained within the event of divine self-revelation, is to presume the existence of some other realm in which the epistemic conditions of moral knowledge may be sought. It is for this reason that the GEC functions within a single circle of knowledge. Thus Barth warns against the attempt to divide the movement of faith into distinguishable epistemological directions—

> Thus the nature of Christian moral knowledge is to be sought and found neither in isolated preference for one or the other standpoint [creation, reconciliation, redemption, to nature, grace or glory], … but in the *treading* of this way in accordance with the divine act of revelation, in the *traversing* the three standpoints in the basically single circle of the *movement* of knowledge described.[125]

In different aspects, and to varying degrees, O'Donovan's epistemological realism encounters conflict with the evangelical affirmations of the GEC (Barth), and the existential paradox of faith (Kierkegaard). Nonetheless, O'Donovan's approach brings valuable insight into the limitations of Brunner's dialectical ontology of the *humanum*, Barth's "uncompromised theological epistemology", and the voluntaristic tendencies of Kierkegaardian existentialism. Might there be a way to incorporate these important contributions of O'Donovan into an evangelical ethics which avoided the complications we have described by the phrase "dialectical epistemology"? We shall turn our attention next to that prospect.

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[125] Barth, *Ethics*, 54.

6 THE TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONS AND THE CONCEPT OF MORAL ORDER

καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ᾽ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν

Colossians 3:9

We have seen how the paradoxical implications of faith and *metanoia* for moral knowledge can present a challenge to O'Donovan's outline for evangelical ethics; yet, only by incorporating the personal, experiential reality of faith into moral reality can we hope to express an evangelical statement of ethics which coheres with the Gospel.[1] In this chapter I shall advance the thesis that the way forward, to mitigate and even resolve some of the difficulties encountered in the implications of O'Donovan's epistemological realism, is to recognize the transformational role of faith in providing epistemic access to moral knowledge. We aim to articulate an evangelical ethics which can provide a coherent ontological concept of the moral order, while at the same time affirming the actualization of faith as the essential event of epistemic access to moral knowledge.

This is *not* to suggest that the solution to meeting this challenge is a matter of "getting the mixture right" between subjective faith and objective reality. The question is not a matter of placing more emphasis upon the existential aspect of faith, as compared to the objective

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[1] Of course, I do not mean to suggest that O'Donovan ignores the role of faith in the actualization of moral knowledge; to the contrary, he insists upon the existential reality of "participation in Christ" as the essential criterion for true moral knowledge (see Chapter 3).

reality of the moral order. These are not offsetting arms of a scale which balance each other, as though they were fungible commodities which could be mixed together in the proper proportions so as to even the scales. No, that way of thinking simply perpetuates the conflicts inherent in a dialectical epistemology, and relativizes the role of faith in moral discernment, which leads to misconstrued and unanswerable questions, such as: How much moral truth can be perceived without evangelical faith? And, how much faith is enough to enable true moral knowledge?[2]

These are the types of questions that emerge from Brunner's bifurcation of the *imago*. Even though he delimits carefully the scope of natural reason by specifying that full knowledge of God is accessible only to those "whose eyes have been opened by Christ",[3] his doctrine of the "formal" *imago* still endorses the capacity of natural reason to ascertain divine truth "to some extent". Barth of course rejects the suggestion that the formal *imago* is capable of recognizing "the will of God imprinted upon all existence from creation" and finding moral truths embedded in the *lex naturae* and the "ordinances of creation and nature.[4] We have seen that the dialectical epistemology which emerges from O'Donovan's outline faces similar challenges, when it severs the bond between the epistemic role of faith and the actualization of moral knowledge.

The hermeneutical task

The doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* emerges as critical factor in theological ethics precisely for this reason—it addresses the very core of what it means to speak of moral knowledge. Our thesis regarding *the transformational role of faith in providing epistemic access to moral* knowledge must therefore be examined in light of its doctrinal implications for *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*. We shall be especially concerned with the development of the hermeneutic of this doctrine, because as we have seen, attention to epistemological presumptions is crucial.[5] O'Donovan draws attention to this hermeneutical issue when he

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[2] Cf. Matt. 17:20: "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed…" The size or relative proportion of faith is not the issue, but rather, the merest existence of faith is enough for God to use for miraculous effect.

[3] *Nein!,* 111.

[4] *Nein!,* 111.

[5] Thiselton provides an instructive example here, in his concern for the development of "a hermeneutic of specific doctrines", as opposed to articulation of a systematic theology; Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 177. I share this same goal: to pursue a hermeneutic of the doctrine

describes the paradox implicit in moral knowledge due to "the self-involvement of the subject from within" which can prevent moral discernment from ever breaking free of "the circle of self-reference into a clear conception of the objective reality of good".[6] The paradox of faith is thus embedded within moral knowledge—such knowledge involves the relational and transformational aspects of faith as the relationship in which divine revelation occurs. The relational aspect of knowledge and faith runs throughout scripture, yet it has received renewed theological attention in the modern era.[7] Much of the polemical energy of the Barth-Brunner debate, for example, can be seen to derive from Barth's doctrine of "Man's readiness to know God" as being completely dependent upon the relationship of the creature to the Creator.[8]

Relationality: from ontological priority to the ontology of faith

O'Donovan's attention to the relational aspect of moral knowledge has grown more prominent in recent works, perhaps indicating new concern for the relational aspect of knowledge, faith and revelation. Reflecting back upon *R&MO*, he defends himself against critics who read the book as "merely a cover for a return to a 'natural ethic'". In his own defense, he says that these critics were mistaken—they missed "the central problematic of the book, how an *ethics* could be *evangelical*, which is to say proclamatory of the divine action. By rooting ethics in the resurrection I argued that it could only be grasped within the history of divine action."[9] Thus, he reiterates that his ethical theory is grounded in the revealed truth of the Gospel as received through faith.

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of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, as opposed to a systematic theology of faith and all that would be entailed therein. As we have seen, O'Donovan's dialectical epistemology is well capable of making theological statements of faith, Christology and pneumatology. The issue at hand is not to whether and how well his evangelical ethics functions as a systematic theology; but rather to identify the hermeneutical significance of the doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* for evangelical ethics.

[6] *R&MO*, 250. Cf. *WJ*, 19-22.

[7] Thiselton rightly notes that relationality "stems from the very heart of biblical traditions", and has been expressed axiomatically by Calvin, Schleiermacher, Barth, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Balthasar, Rahner, and many others; *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine,* 179f. For a helpful survey of the treatment of relationality in theological anthropology, see Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). His relational understanding of the *imago Dei* supports the view that theological ethics requires to be discussed in terms of participation in Christ, in order to understand ethical praxis as a matter of new creation in the act of "putting on Christ", 262-3. Cf. Rom. 13:14; Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24; 2 Cor. 5:17.

[8] *CD* II/1, 128. Cf., "In its own way all natural theology circles about the problem of the readiness of man to know God"; Ibid.

[9] *DN,* 19.

O'Donovan develops the foundational importance of divine action further in *The Desire of the Nations*, where he emphasizes divine rule and the divine initiative in which faith is actualized. He goes on to emphasize, with respect to revelation: "the history of divine rule is presented to us as a *revealed* history".[10] The relational aspect of faith appears even more directly in O'Donovan's exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount, where he finds prayer to occupy the center of the sermon, and to serve as a lynch-pin to "enshrine the moral attitudes of the community."[11]   The relational importance of the worshiping community emerges as an important exegetical theme throughout *Desire*.[12] Commenting on "the connexion between Easter gladness and the moral life" as seen in 1 Peter, he concludes:

> Church morality is an evangelical morality. It springs from the vindication of God's rule … in Christ's resurrection… This is a morality of new creation in Christ, the life of a new community constituted by God's acceptance of Christ, promising a world made new in Christ and fit for human beings to live and act in.[13]

O'Donovan continues to develop the importance of faith for ethical deliberation in *The Ways of Judgment*, which he closes with an extended reflection upon the evangelical understanding of conscience as being shaped by "hopeful attention to the inner dialogue with God", and faith as a personal event "governed by the inner control of the Holy Spirit".[14]

While O'Donovan has continued to hold fast to his doctrine of objectivity for knowledge of the moral order,[15] he has begun to explore in more depth how the objectivity of moral knowledge is to be understood with respect to the ontological reality of faith as a relationship in which one is 'claimed'—

> To understand the moral order as objective is to treat as objective also the experience of being claimed, of being obliged or beholden to structures of relations which are given with one's being in the world. It is to know that such a claim is not the projection of one's own or anyone else's purely subjective will. It is to discover the character of the

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[10] *DN*, 21.

[11] *DN*, 107.

[12] Commenting on *R&MO*, O'Donovan acknowledges a new emphasis upon worship and faith as essential for political theology and ethics: "In *The Desire of the Nations* I added a fourth strand to the analysis of YHWH's kingship, *worship*, to which the equivalent in the Gospel account of Jesus' ministry proved to be *faith*"; *WJ*, 142.

[13] *DN*, 182-3.

[14] *WJ*, 309, 315. O'Donovan acknowledges here his desire to augment his earlier discussion of conscience given in *R&MO*, with greater sympathy to "the task of reflective self-examination" (footnote, p. 308), which supports our discernment of his movement to give greater consideration to personal experience.

[15] O'Donovan, 'What Can Ethics Know about God?' 39.

> moral order as authority, and so to establish that authority is the objective correlate of freedom.[16]

Thus we perceive a consistent movement in O'Donovan's work toward appreciation for the relational aspect of faith. This direction is evident from the beginning in *R&MO*; still, he seems to develop it further in response to various critiques of his "realist" approach to evangelical ethics.

It is also evident that the confusion surrounding the epistemological and ontological issues at the heart of the debate over natural theology continues to draw his attention. The conflict between the immanence of *lex naturae* and the transcendence of participation in Christ has not been resolved, as we have discovered through our analysis of the doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*. It will prove fruitful therefore to explore further the doctrine of moral knowledge as "participation in Christ" and the concept of moral knowledge which derives from natural theology.

Toward a "more natural" theology

Eberhard Jüngel has taken helpful steps in this direction, with his pursuit of "a new approach to solving the old problem of natural theology."[17] Jüngel frames the problem in Christological terms, asking how the doctrine *extra Christum nulla salus* (outside Christ there is no salvation)[18] can be reconciled with natural theology. In other words, how can it be that "this exclusive truth claim becomes an inclusive granting of a truth that concerns every human being as such"?[19] The easy answer is to insist that there are two distinct types of knowledge—salvific vs. non-salvific—and that the Gospel belongs to the former, whereas ethics and natural knowledge of the moral order belong to the latter. This is, of course, a *non*-solution, and we need not rehearse here the ground previously surveyed regarding the inseparability of ethics and dogmatics, which we have seen to be necessarily bound together

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[16] Ibid., 40.

[17] E. Jüngel, '*Extra Christum Nulla Salus*—a Principle of Natural Theology? Protestant Reflections on the 'Anonymity' of the Christian' in *Theological Essays* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989) 173-188, 174. Jüngel takes his cue from "the problem which [Karl] Rahner indicates by speaking of anonymous Christians", 173-4. We need not analyze Jüngel's interpretation of Rahner's statements here; the essential point for our study is that Jüngel's response to Rahner addresses precisely the same issue of the epistemic role of faith which concerns our thesis.

[18] Cf. Acts 4:12; John 14:6.

[19] Jüngel, '*Extra Christum...*', 175-6.

by the evangelical affirmation of ethics as subsisting within the self-authenticating divine command. Suffice it to say, every scheme to bifurcate knowledge into categories of "natural" vs. "revealed" has been tried—it can be bifurcated either by a dialectical doctrine of the *imago* (Brunner), or by a dialectical epistemology (O'Donovan). In either case there are serious implications for *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*.

Jüngel's proposal is tantalizing, because if he is right in suggesting that there can be a Christological basis for an "entirely new construction of natural theology", then this new construction will also demonstrate *the transformational role of faith in providing epistemic access to moral knowledge.* How so? Because a truly Christological natural theology will necessarily sustain the integrity of the bond between ethics and dogmatics, in which God-talk is an act of *fides quaerens intellectum* which proceeds through the epistemic event of faith. Such a new construction of natural theology would also seem to be precisely what is required to sustain O'Donovan's suggestion that the moral order requires to be understood in terms of the relational "experience of being claimed."[20]

Jüngel sets the cornerstone for construction of his christocentric natural theology upon Luther's statement that "justification by faith is the theological definition of the human person".[21] This thesis places faith at the core of the *ontological* statement of the *humanum*. Furthermore, because it describes "the *whole* of the person and therefore *all* persons", this definition serves also as a suitable platform upon which to construct a natural theology.[22] The neat trick to be pulled off here by Jüngel (if he can do it) is to express natural theology in terms of faith. He has merged the epistemological aspect of faith into the ontological description of the person (and the *humanum*). Is this merely a sleight-of-hand, a playing with words? Or has Jüngel indeed offered a coherent dogmatic approach to convey the meaning of natural knowledge in terms of the Christological event of faith? He acknowledges this

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[20] Similarly, Hauerwas argues "that the great natural theologian of the Gifford Lectures is Karl Barth, for Barth, in contrast to James and Niebuhr, provides a robust theological description of existence"; Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002) 39. Barth says, "a 'Christian' natural theology, [must] really represent and affirm the standpoint of faith. Its true objective to which it really wants to lead unbelief is the knowability of the real God through Himself in His revelation"; *CD* II/1, 94. Ray Anderson (1986: 263) proposes a similar concept: "It would indeed be a new direction in natural theology of the transforming grace of the death and resurrection of Christ to be displayed in the public arena through serious moral commitment to the humanizing of human persons. It would indeed be an appropriate testimony to the theological legacy of Karl Barth for evangelical theology to move in this new direction."; Anderson, 'Barth and a New Direction for Natural Theology', in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886,* ed. John Thompson (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1986): 241-66, 263.

[21] M. Luther, *The Disputation Concerning Man*, thesis 32, *LW* 34, p. 139, quoted by Jüngel, *'Extra Christum...'*, 180.

[22] Jüngel, *'Extra Christum...'*, 180.

potential objection by going immediately to the heart of the matter as he asks: what is the meaning of the word "God"? The question needs to be answered within the context of natural theology if Jüngel's proposal is to succeed, yet the God known through Christ is known only through the event of faith, actualized through God's self-revelation. How then can this word be used meaningfully at all outside the context of faith, and with universal validity? This is a hermeneutical problem. The word 'God' takes on *performative* significance in terms of the relationship of faith in which God becomes known. This is the direct result of the intention to define 'God' in concrete, trinitarian, and hence Christological, terms as:

> …the *deus iustificans* (God who justifies), and thereby as the one who communicates himself, whose self-communication takes place *sola gratia* (by grace alone) and therefore in freedom… [T]he word 'God' is a 'word of offer'.[23]

If Jüngel's definition is to bear weight in natural terms (*extra Christum*), the word 'God' must be seen to function as a relational event in which an offer is made *sola gratia* (by grace alone). This clearly refutes the traditional meaning of natural theology, as Jüngel admits. The biblical and Christological meaning of God fails utterly to be derived from traditional natural theology. Thus, it is far from clear that Jüngel has successfully arrived at a Christological natural theology.[24]

Regardless of the degree to which Jüngel's approach might be deemed successful by proponents of traditional natural theology, we can draw at least one significant conclusion from his proposal—the attempt to construct natural theology upon Christological terms may be construed as a hermeneutical exercise. The reason for this is that the epistemic role of faith, as an event, resists reduction into merely ontological language. The orders of creation (*Ordnungen*) might be reducible to ontological categories and concepts, but the faith event in which the self-revealing God makes himself known is not reducible into these same ontological categories. Thus, natural theology collapses under the weight of the burden of explaining the epistemic events of faith and revelation. Its language contains no categories from which the meanings of faith and 'God' can be derived:

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[23] Jüngel, '*Extra Christum…*', 181.

[24] Jüngel recognizes that this claim fails to win "universal validity" apart from the claim that "God is a hypothesis which must verify itself." '*Extra Christum…*', 180. This criterion may also be expressed as, "the desire to prove that all persons always exist in relation to God independent of the saving revelation, 181.

> The being of God is the hermeneutical problem of theology. Or, more precisely: the fact that the being of God *proceeds* is precisely the hermeneutical problem.[25]

The hermeneutical problem consists in the paradoxical impossibility of deriving the meaning of 'God' apart from God's self-communication. The verb "proceeds" conveys this self-referential activity of God, in which God is known through the event (the proceeding) in which he continually becomes who He is.[26] This is the context in which Jüngel titles his interpretation of Barth's Trinitarian theology as *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*. Of course Jüngel follows Barth here, even to the extent that he describes this book as "an interpretive paraphrase of some trains of thought of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*."[27] Nonetheless, he goes significantly beyond the boundaries of paraphrase and offers fruitful insights for dogmatics, two of which I shall highlight as being most significant:

a) A Christological starting point leads to a *more natural* theology; and
b) Knowing and being cohere in that which is self-evident.

First, Jüngel's Christological foray into natural theology yields a more significant statement of humanity than is possible within traditional natural theology. This is why Jüngel refers to it as a *more natural* theology. He derives this claim directly from the confession of Jesus as being in the beginning with God.[28] Thus the unity of the human Jesus, as "the Son of God … *in concreto* and not *in abstracto*",[29] immediately places the meaning of *humanum* within the context of the Trinitarian God. In his concrete human-ness, Jesus bears all the ontological possibilities of the *humanum*, incarnate in unity with the *imago Dei*. Jüngel takes this theanthropic conception of human being as "the christological counterpart to the *theologia naturalis* which [Barth] rejected."[30] This unique valuation of humanity in the form of God's self-revelation lends a significance to human dignity far surpassing any conceivable dignity obtainable through traditional natural theology:

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[25] Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: the Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) 10; hereafter, *God's Being*.

[26] The divine name, YHWH, can thus be interpreted as an outright rejection of categories pertaining to *theologia naturalis*, *lex naturae*, and religion in general. I might therefore reiterate Jüngel's synopsis in the aphorism: YHWH is the hermeneutical problem of theology.

[27] Jüngel, *God's Being*, xxvi.

[28] John 1.

[29] *CD* II/2, 98.

[30] *God's Being*, 97.

> In this, Barth has in some measure christologically surpassed the conception of all natural theology. One can hardly any longer make the charge Barth's rejection of any natural theology withheld from humanity the significance which is its due.[31]

This insight invalidates those critiques of Barth based upon the charge that he diminishes somehow the theological significance of human dignity by accentuating divine action and Christo-centric anthropology. This was of course Brunner's concern—to defend the theological significance of human dignity. He accused Barth of treating human nature as mere raw material, *truncus et lapis*, [32] and of making humans "wholly passive" in the event of faith.[33]

O'Donovan and Brunner make similar moves here: each affirms the capability of humans to see (at least to some extent) moral truth within the orders of creation. Brunner is concerned to affirm human dignity and to shore up the case for duty and responsibility as being the heart of morality. This leads him to emphasize the capacity of the "formal" *imago* to acquire moral knowledge. O'Donovan, on the other hand, is concerned to refute voluntarism as a norm for ethics, and so he argues for the ontological priority of the moral order. Both approaches lead to a similar conclusion in claiming that the moral content of the *Ordnungen* remains accessible to human capacities, without the need to invoke any contingency upon 'special' revelation.[34] Both Brunner's and O'Donovan's arguments thus lead to doctrines wherein *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* may be expressed as a reality which can be actualized apart from faith.[35]

The conclusion to be drawn from Jüngel's exposition is that such a critique of Barth misses utterly the significance of defining human dignity solely in terms of the transcendent dignity of the God-man Jesus as a self-revealing event of God. Thus, Jüngel can claim rightly that Barth's Christological anthropology has "surpassed the conception of all natural theology." This is why Jüngel, with intentional irony, makes the claim that the only solution to the limitations of natural theology is to posit a *more natural* theology which can transcend

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[31] *God's Being*, 97.

[32] *MiR*, 538.

[33] *MiR*, 537. Brunner accuses Barth of espousing a "false anthropology"; *MiR*, 539. We may hear a sympathetic echo of this concern for human dignity in O'Donovan's claim that the moral order "remains accessible to knowledge in part. It requires no revelation to observe the various forms of generic and teleological order which belong to it." *R&MO*, 88. Cf. Brunner's desire to set forth a "Genuine Christian Humanism"; *MiR*, 344. Cf. *DI*, 68; and *MiR*, 558f regarding the reduction of the *humanum* to a *profanum.*

[34] *R&MO*, 86-7.

[35] We need not here digress to consider the deeper question of whether this capacity of the *humanum* is an active or passive attribute (see Chapter 4). The similarity noted here between Brunner's and O'Donovan's doctrines of moral knowledge holds in either case.

them by virtue of the truth of human nature, as witnessed in the Trinitarian God and the humanness and election of the Son.[36]

Natural theology cannot pull itself up by its bootstraps to such heights as this in the affirmation of the divine affirmation of human dignity. Being incapable of recognizing the significance of "participation in Christ", natural theology fails ultimately to bring the events of being and knowing into a coherent identity, and thus fails to answer with epistemic clarity the questions it asks. If there is a solution to be found in the direction of natural theology, it must subsist in a *more natural* theology which comes at the problem from the one Word of God. Only from this direction can we

> …outline a *more natural* theology than so-called natural theology: a *natural theology* which knows Jesus Christ as the one who has reconciled both human beings and the world (2 Cor 5:19).[37]

The second insight I wish to explore here is that Jüngel frames the fundamental problem of natural theology differently than does Barth. Barth defines natural theology as a treatment of "the readiness of man to know God"; [38] i.e., the capacity of the *humanum* to apprehend the revelatory content of God's work. Jüngel's and Barth's views complement one another. Jüngel's approach, however, offers a valuable clue as to how we might sort out the ontological and epistemological issues in natural theology, and hence, in moral knowledge also. Jüngel views the fundamental problem of natural theology as a theological claim regarding the "self-evidentness of God"—

> The desire to prove that all persons always exist in relation to God independent of the saving revelation which occurs in Jesus Christ shows that natural theology has been

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[36] It seems difficult to reconcile Brunner's charge against Barth in light of the sweeping affirmations of human dignity which Barth applied to all humankind in *The Humanity of God*, 50.

[37] Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace: Toward a Theology of the State in Dialogue with the Barmen Declaration,* trans. A. J. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992) 26 [E.T. of *Barmen; Kirche Zwishen Versuchung und Gnade*]. We have focused here on the import of Jüngel's "more natural" theology for the unity of ontological reality and epistemic access. He highlights another significant outcome worth mentioning, and that is the ability of his more natural theology to go "Deeper, therefore, into compassionate solidarity with those who cry *de profundis* for God…"; Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, 28. A.J. Torrance interprets this solidarity as an inherent capacity to recognise "Jesus Christ as the one who has reconciled both human beings and also the world", and thus to give meaning to human suffering in a healing way which traditional natural theology cannot; *Christ, Justice and Peace*, xv-xvi.

[38] *CD* II/1, 128. Similarly, in *Nein!,* Barth defines natural theology in terms of a system of interpretation, which depends upon the human capacity to discern divine revelation: "By 'natural theology' I mean every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, i.e. to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture", *Nein!,* 74-5.

guided by the concern to make clear that God is *self-evident*. The self-evidentness of God is the real claim of natural theology.[39]

Jüngel recognizes correctly the motive underlying natural theology: to yield theological knowledge without admitting, or submitting, to the epistemic contingencies of special revelation. Thus, natural theology claims "to *demonstrate* that which ought to be *self-evident*."[40] The "self-evidentness" of the truth claims in natural theology can be described in terms of either human capacity or God's self-evident being, but in either case, the logic underlying the claim is problematic. How can that which is self-evident be demonstrated or proven? Demonstration proceeds *from* that which is self-evident, *toward* that which is not. The claim that knowledge of God is naturally self-evident therefore reduces to the claim that God creates, and subsists within, the epistemic event which makes such knowledge evident and knowable. Once again, we see that the act of being and the event of knowing must cohere—the ontological reality and the epistemological actualization of knowledge are inseparable; they are bound in the Kierkegaardian Knot[41], and are mutually 'indwelling', to borrow Polanyi's phrase.[42]

This diagnosis leads to the conclusion that attempts to construct a natural theology in *merely ontological* terms will fail. Such attempts fail the test of coherence, because the epistemic conditions of knowledge and the relational events which actualize "self-evidentness" are not subsumed by ontological categories.[43] For a 'something' (or a self) to make itself self-evident, the epistemic conditions of its evidence will be inseparable from its essence. In other words, being and knowing are joined within its identity—*ratio essendi* and *ratio cognoscendi* cohere.[44] This is precisely the coherence expressed in our thesis: *the ontological reality of the moral order requires to be understood in terms of the epistemic reality of participation in Christ.* Jüngel's approach to a *Christological* natural theology

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[39] Jüngel, '*Extra Christum...*', 181.

[40] Jüngel, '*Extra Christum...*', 182.

[41] See chapter 5.

[42] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

[43] John Milbank sees this as the crux of the matter—"the domain of metaphysics is not simply subordinated to, but completely *evacuated* by theology"; Milbank, 'Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics', *New Blackfriars 76*, issue 895 (2007): 325-343, 328. Milbank offers good insight upon the implications for ethics, for example, the impossibility of rendering the relational component of ethics in metaphysical terms; *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 39.

[44] Jüngel, '*Extra Christum...*', 182.

arrives at this conclusion—ontological being and epistemic process are inseparable.[45] Traditional natural theology fails this Christological test by presuming that meaning may be discerned through the *ratio essendi* without regard for the epistemic process at work through the *ratio cognoscendi*. This Christological conclusion is not meant as an *a priori* rejection of traditional natural theology, as though no meaning could be derived from the *Ordnungen*. Indeed, natural theology can and does arrive at meaningful interpretations of the *Ordnungen*, yet within the self-imposed constraints of its own epistemological presumptions. Even the arch adversary of natural theology Karl Barth acknowledged the appeal of natural theology, and refused to reject the problem which it presents for human existence—the questions it asks and the answers it seeks are realities not to be disparaged.[46] Intellectual integrity demands an answer to the observation that right and wrong seem evident to people of all faiths, including those with faith in no faith, and those with faith in faith in no faith, and so on. Natural theology obviously gives answers to the question of how moral reality may be known.[47] Yet does it arrive at the *right* answers? What makes moral knowledge *moral*? What makes it *knowledge*?

Participation in Christ

The co-inherence of *ratio essendi* and *ratio cognoscendi* means that the capacity of the *Ordnungen* to reveal moral knowledge, as well as the capacity of persons to receive the revealed content of moral knowledge, both require to be defined in terms of the self-revelatory act and being of God.[48] A "more natural" theology then, on Jüngel's view, will understand *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* in terms of "participation in Christ", which of course is the same epistemic condition which O'Donovan affirms as the uniquely valid route to moral truth, the path of obedience:

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[45] Murray Rae makes this case elegantly through his commentary on Kierkegaard's application of the Meno Paradox; Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

[46] "But the problem [of natural theology] itself we cannot reject. If God is knowable, then it is necessary also to ask how far He is knowable to man", *CD* II/1, 129. Cf. Barth's remarks on the *Barmen Declaration*; *CD* II/1, 178.

[47] Barth similarly acknowledges the capacity of natural theology to give answers, yet in the light of biblical theology, these are seen to be wrong answers. *CD* II/1, 129.

[48] Colin Gunton provides extended comments on this theme in *Act & Being* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

> Knowledge of the natural order is moral knowledge, and as such it is co-ordinated with obedience. There can be no true knowledge of that order without loving acceptance of it and conformity to it, for it is known by participation and not by transcendence.[49]

Here is the test of coherence for natural knowledge—to what or to whom does the moral person respond in obedience? If not to the triune living God, then to what moral authority does it bear witness? Furthermore, what ontological reality can be ascribed to any other authority? Barth, of course, famously expresses this dilemma by referring to natural theology as being no theology at all, for it can proceed only by means of denying the witness of "real" theology—

> For, "natural theology" does not exist as an entity capable of becoming a separate subject within what I consider to be real theology—not even for the sake of being rejected. If one occupies oneself with real theology one can pass by so-called natural theology only as one would pass by an abyss into which it is inadvisable to step if one does not want to fall.[50]

Barth concludes that "nothing could be simpler or more obvious" than to see that ""natural" theology [is] quite impossible within the Church, and indeed, in such a way that it cannot even be discussed in principle."[51] Why impossible? Because "it is possible only on the basis of a mortal attack on the Christian doctrine of God".[52]   In the direction of natural theology therefore, is to be found no knowledge of God, but only a disobedient step in the opposite direction.[53] Thus, the test of coherence in moral knowledge turns out to be a Christological test. O'Donovan acknowledges the falsehood which pertains to knowledge obtained *apart from* participation in Christ:

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[49] *R&MO*, 87. O'Donovan would seem to be sympathetic to Kierkegaard here in this coordination of knowledge and obedience. Kierkegaard explored this line of thought "relentlessly", as Rae observes: "Without obedience, Kierkegaard further contends, faith does not exist, and without faith there is no knowledge of God"; Rae, '"Incline Your Ear so that You May Live": Principles of Biblical Epistemology', in *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God*, eds. Mary Healy and Robin Parry (Milton Keynes, U.K.; Paternoster, 2007) 161-180, 173. We can read Paul's language about "putting on Christ" in this sense, as expressions of the epistemic event of revelation in which knowledge occurs in faith. Galatians 2:20 sums up this understanding of living by faith.

[50] *Nein!,* 75.

[51] *CD* II/1, 85.

[52] *CD* II/1, 85.

[53] *CD* II/1, 86.

> This is the sense, then, in which it is true to say that the image of God in man was not merely 'defaced' but 'lost'.[54]

Nonetheless, O'Donovan proceeds, by the means of a dialectical epistemology, to entertain the possibility that moral knowledge remains somehow accessible, even in the disobedience of unfaith, at least partially and to some extent, because "It requires no revelation to observe the various forms of generic and teleological order which belong to it."[55] This is the point at which his epistemological realism departs from an evangelical understanding of God's self-revelation and the inescapable paradox of faith seen in the K^2. Is there a way to reconcile his concern for realism with the evangelical epistemic reality of faith? Is there a way to affirm both (1) faith and obedience as the epistemic reality in which moral knowledge obtains, and (2) the ontological priority which O'Donovan places upon the moral order?

In this regard we can discern a connection between O'Donovan and Jüngel in at least this one salient matter—O'Donovan's pursuit of "evangelical realism" might also be viewed as an attempt to articulate a "more natural" theology. After all, he is concerned to affirm both a "more realist" approach to *lex naturae*—which represents the moral content of knowledge obtainable through natural theology—as well as to affirm the Christological significance of participation in Christ as the uniquely effective epistemic condition of true moral knowledge. Is this not another way of framing precisely the same challenge which Jüngel addresses in his effort to present, on a Christological basis, "an entirely new construction of natural theology"?[56] Let us then apply Jüngel's insights to O'Donovan's epistemological and evangelical realism by asking: How might O'Donovan's realism be qualified by an understanding of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* in terms of "participation in Christ"?

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[54] *R&MO*, 89. O'Donovan prefaces this acknowledgement by referring to the idea of defacement of the image of God as "a theme which previous generations" applied to the "epistemological implication of the fallenness of man". By this context, we can see the connection between disobedience and misknowledge, as well as infer O'Donovan's desire to advance dogmatics beyond the dilemma this poses for theological ethics. *R&MO*, 87; cf. 82.

[55] *R&MO*, 88. Thus, the change brought about by the revelation of Christ, in a moment of conversion, "does not deny our fragmentary knowledge of the way things are, as though that knowledge were not there, or were of no significance … Rather, revelation catches man out in the guilty possession of a knowledge which he has always had, but from which he has never won a true understanding", *R&MO*, 89.

[56] Jüngel defines this task in terms of holding together both the evangelical affirmation of *extra Christum nulla salus*, as well as the possibility of natural knowledge of God, as asserted by Vatican I. These two conditions parallel O'Donovan's concerns, with respect to moral knowledge, to affirm participation in Christ, as well as the objective reality of the moral order, and natural knowledge thereof; *'Extra Christum…'*, 176.

Offenbarungsmächtigkeit *in Christ*

So the presumption of an objective reference for Christian ethics based in the concept of moral order (see Chapter 1 of *R&MO*, for example)[57] apparently embarks upon a metaphysical course which will eventually stumble over the epistemic event of faith. But what if the epistemic event of faith is *included within* this objective reality, this order of things? What if participation in Christ proves the foundational concept of *Ordnungen*? What if the self-understanding readiness of the self-revealing God to give and to receive revelation is not only included within this objective reality, but *is* the very ontological reality which takes priority over all ontological realities? Here might be the means to resolve the difficulties encountered in O'Donovan's articulation of ontological priority—to affirm the priority of participation in Christ as the event in which moral knowledge occurs. Indeed, we are claiming that evangelical ethics proceeds from, and coheres in, nothing less than the miracle of faith. This amounts to a claim that the ontological reality of the created order, together with knowledge of the moral content of that order, is a miraculous event. As Barth recognized early on, comprehension of moral knowledge, theologically speaking, is a miracle. In order for our "moral view of the universe" to correspond to divine truth, rather than to the many and varied *logoi* of human vanity, our comprehension of the cosmos must subsist in the event of hearing God.[58] For a person to rightly hear this Word,

> …a sheer miracle must happen to him, a second miracle in addition to the miracle of his own existence, if his life shall be a true Christian life, which is a life within the hearing of God's Word. This miracle is the office of the Holy Spirit… In the Holy Spirit he hears God's Word, far above any ethical reflection…[59]

Here is the distinction demanded by Jüngel's *more natural* theology. Apart from the miracle of faith in which God provides the epistemic event of comprehension, there may indeed be knowledge of moral order, but it will derive its moral authority from some source other than God. It will bear witness therefore, not to the *Logos* of God, but to the *logoi* of

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[57] *R&MO*, 17.

[58] Similarly, Webster characterizes conscience as an "encounter with the *viva vox Dei*" experienced by "the community of faith"; Webster, 'God and Conscience', *Calvin Theological Journal 33* no 1 (1998): 104-24, 123.

[59] Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 11.

human conception.[60] This witness to other sources of authority, distinct from the miraculously delivered and received Word of God, is precisely the danger which motivates the affirmations of the *Barmen Declaration*, and which provides Jüngel's impetus to seek a *more natural* theology.

Thus, to affirm the priority of participation in Christ, and thereby avoid the dangers of natural theology, is to give overarching priority to faith as the epistemic event in which knowledge of the moral order occurs. Here the conflict with the ontological priority of O'Donovan's realism becomes clear. If *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* is to be understood in terms of participation in Christ, it seems the epistemological issues cannot be so neatly put off until after the ethical content of the *Ordnungen* has been perceived.[61] The only way to affirm both priorities at the same time is to recognize them as inseparable expressions of a singular reality—in other words, to recognize the epistemic event of faith as the ontological reality in which moral knowledge occurs. We find this unity proclaimed in the trinitarian doctrine of the Word as existing in the beginning with God.[62] Jüngel asks the pointed question:

> If in Jesus Christ election is really to be understood as history between God and humanity then must we not speak of *faith*, too, along with the being of the man Jesus, as in the beginning with God?[63]

Here is the epistemic reality which rules over all human conceptions—His name is Jesus. This is the epistemic reality to which evangelical ethics will bear witness if it is to be *evangelical*.[64] Apart from this reality, ethics may indeed bear witness to a "moral order", but in doing so it will be bearing witness to some *logoi* of human conception, rather than to the one who is "the original pattern of the believer."[65] Trinitarian dogmatics then, provide the venue in which to address the conflicting epistemological and ontological priorities which we have surfaced in our analysis of evangelical ethics, if there is to be any hope of resolving them. The direction forward is to understand participation in Christ as the event in which *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* is actualized. The perichoretic innertrinitarian being of God thus

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[60] A.J. Torrance relates *Barmen* to "Bonhoeffer's lectures on Christology where he emphasises that we must never interpret the Logos or the Word as the divine endorsement of any prior, human programs (*logoi*); Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, xii-xiii.

[61] *R&MO*, 76.

[62] John 1.

[63] *God's Being*, 97.

[64] In this sense, the denial of the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Gospel is the one unforgiveable sin, as per Mark 3:29; Matt. 1:31.

[65] *CD* II/2, 198.

proves to be the foundational subject of evangelical ethics; both the ontological and epistemological issues are grounded therein.[66]

In this sense, we may say faith is sacramental—it occurs in and through the real presence Christ.[67] This aspect of evangelical ethics follows directly from understanding revelation as the divine self-witness of God, as Barth puts it:

> We can say quite simply that revelation means sacrament, i.e., the self-witness of God, the representation of His truth, and therefore of the truth in which He knows Himself, in the form of creaturely objectivity and therefore in a form which is adapted to our creaturely knowledge.[68]

Jüngel links this insight to the epistemic implications of God's lordship:

> We have seen that, for Barth, the category of the lordship of God expresses the *capacity* for revelation, the *possibility* of revelation which is grounded in the being of God.[69]

Offenbarungsmächtigkeit belongs to God; the *humanum* may participate, but not claim possession. The innertrinitarian life of God thus represents both the epistemic *possibility* as well as the ontological *fulfillment* of knowledge of God.[70] Christ is both the origin [John 1; Col. 1:15ff] and the perfection of faith [Heb. 12:2].

This understanding of participation in Christ raises the issue of subordinationism as a potential stumbling block to the doctrine of God; for the question is how Christ can be obedient to God if he *is* God. As we have already noted, obedience is fundamental to faithful knowledge of God as the self-revealing One. Barth recognizes the offence in the notion of

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[66] Tim Dearborn follows J.B. Torrance in demonstrating the role that *perichoresis* (περιχωρησις) plays in understanding "the distinctive pattern of grace". Dearborn, 'God, Grace and Salvation', in *Christ in Our Place; the Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World: Essays Presented to James Torrance*, eds. Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989) 265-293, 285.

[67] We might similarly describe faith as being an anhypostatic-enhypostatic reality, in agreement with McCormack's observations that this "the anhypostatic-enhypostatic model" is "*built into the very structure of* [Barth's] *Christology*", and that this structure permits Christology to avoid the problems inherent in the time-eternity dialectic; McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 327f. I would not however follow McCormack's description of Barth's Christology as "dialectic", as should be apparent from my analysis of the problems encountered in dialectical epistemology.

[68] *CD* II/1, 52; cf. 47 regarding "the truth of his self-demonstration [which] judges other supposed truths".

[69] *God's Being*, 62-3.

[70] Jüngel finds this to serve as "an ontological axiom" in Barth's thought, "which is itself grounded in revelation: 'Where the actuality exists there is also the corresponding possibility.'[*CD* II/1, 5]", *God's Being*, 63. Similarly, Richard B. Hays argues that πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is better rendered "faith *of* Jesus Christ" than "faith *in* Jesus Christ", in order to convey the "deep connection in Paul's thought between Christology and ethics"; Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 31-32. This exegetical insight helps interpret the transformational significance of Gal. 2:20 as it relates to Christian ethics.

subordination,[71] yet the offence pertains to human categories of superiority and obedience (hence, subject to the risks of *analogia entis*) and not to the essential and self-demonstrating unity of the innertrinitarian life of God. Within the mysteriously perichoretic life of God in which the economic and immanent trinities are one trinity, intrinsic, and ineluctable, the obedience of faith is grounded and provides the only context in which to ground the doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* as participation in Christ:

> Is it a fact that in relation to Jesus Christ we can speak of an obedience of the one true God Himself in His proper being? … it is plain that we not only can do so but have to do so, that we cannot avoid doing so either on the one side or on the other. … We have to reckon with such an event even in the being and life of God Himself. … His divine unity consists in the fact that in Himself He is both One who is obeyed and Another who obeys[72]

Evangelical ethics thus requires expression in terms of the faith event grounded in the innertrinitarian life of God:

> God's innertrinitarian being-as-object is fulfilled in the act in which God knows *himself*. In revelation God gives the human person a share in this event of the knowledge of God and of his truth.[73]

By articulating *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* on the grounds of faith, the errors of *analogia entis* may also be avoided. The alternative, *analogia fidei*, replaces ontological priority with the inseparable synthesis of faith as the embodied reality—the actualized event—in which knowledge of God and the moral order occur. This shift in focus brings with it a new challenge, however, in that the paradox of faith remains inscrutable to explanation by any other analogy.[74] Thus, conflict arises from attempts to *explain* the paradox of faith, as we

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[71] "We have not only not to deny but actually to affirm and understand as essential to the being of God the offensive fact that there is in God Himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination. And our present concern is with what is apparently the most offensive fact of all, that there is a below, a *posterius*, a subordination, that it belongs to the inner life of God that there should take place within it obedience." *CD* IV/1, 200-1.

[72] *CD* IV/1, 200-1.

[73] *God's Being*, 64.

[74] Von Balthasar rightly notes the premium this places upon *action*, with the concomitant challenge for dogmatics that God's being-as-action is "inaccessible to all theory", *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 108; cf., 163. Similarly, Hauerwas explains: "Barth's appeal to the *analogia fidei* … is his way of exploring the inseparable connection between God's being as act and our ability to speak of God"; S. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002) 186. McCormack judges correctly the implications of *analogia fidei* in terms of (1) its focus on the concrete event of revelation; (2) the impossibility of human capacity or pre-understanding; (3) its continuous operation as a sovereign act of revelation; and (4) the challenge this presents

have seen above. Similarly, the motivation to eliminate the arbitrariness which stems from unbridled voluntarism also encounters this same conflict, if the solution is presumed to lie in the explication of a paradox.

The Great Epistemological Presumption

The concept of *analogia fidei* thus emerges as the great epistemological presumption of our thesis. It presumes that only a Christological view of the personal capacity for moral knowledge will suffice. Furthermore, it presumes that the innertrinitarian life of God is the premise for dogmatics and ethics. As Jüngel discovered in his search for a *Christological* natural theology: "We are, indeed, working with a presupposition here."[75] Precisely. This is the presupposition which makes evangelical ethics *evangelical*. While this presupposition entails the miracle of faith, it does not imply that theological knowledge is either impossible or inaccessible. It does not even deny the possibility of a point of contact; to the contrary, as we have seen, the point of contact is given in the faith of Christ, and we can therefore arrive at a coherent statement of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* based in the miracle of faith. Barth states as much in his definition of "the real point of contact"—

> The image of God in man of which we must speak here and which forms the real point of contact for God's Word is the *rectitudo* which through Christ is raised up from real death and thus restored or created anew, and which is real as man's possibility for the Word of God. The reconciliation of man with God in Christ also includes, or already begins with, the restitution of the lost point of contact. Hence this point of contact is not real outside faith; it is real only in faith. [76]

The real point of contact occurs not as a characteristic of the "formal" *imago*, but rather as the epistemic event of God's self-revelation in which human understanding is transformed by the miracle of faith. It is a self-actualizing possibility:

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for the capacity of human language to communicate ("bear witness"). I take exception, however, to McCormack's conclusion that "The *analogia fidei* is itself an *inherently dialectical concept*", on the grounds that this interpretation may invite the same conflicts we have already encountered with dialectical epistemology. McCormack does not, however, intend to impute such a form of dialectical epistemology to Barth's theology— hence, his phrase "critical realism" is an attempt to avoid confusion over his use of the word "dialectical"; *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 16-7.

[75] Jungel, '*Extra Christum…*', 180.
[76] *CD* I/1, 239.

> We can establish it only as we stand fast in faith and its knowledge, i.e., as we turn away from ourselves and turn our eyes or rather our ears to the Word of God. As we hear it, we have the possibility of hearing it.[77]

"Turn" and "hear" are the effective verbs in this understanding.[78] These are personal actions which involve the person-as-knower in the event of moral knowledge. This follows sensibly from the ineluctable mutuality of *ratio cognoscendi* and *ratio essendi*. Knowing and Being are combined in the reality of God as self-demonstrating event, knowledge of which is grounded in personal participation in the concurrent movement of faith, guided by the Holy Spirit. Knowing-as-Being leads therefore to Knowing-as-Acting through a person's participation in the process of knowledge. This is the epistemological corollary to the ontological actualization of being-as-knowing.[79] In this sense of understanding what it means to be a person-as-becoming, we see that the meaning of the self is grounded in the self-determining event of God as eternally "Becoming-Who-I-Am".[80] Knowledge is thus not an objectifiable reality *per se*, for it has no existence outside the person-as-becoming, but is rather a consequence and aspect of a person's relationship with the source of knowledge. What does this mean for our understanding of the person as a knower of *moral* knowledge?

Metanoia *& moral knowledge*

Turn and *hear*. These are the essential verbs for knowledge of God, and hence for theological knowledge of the moral order. In the New Testament *metanoia* (μετάνοια) is of course the word which conveys this sense of turning, or repenting, in the context of faith, truth and discipleship. *Metanoia* is the event, action and process in which a person's understanding and knowledge are transformed.[81] This event is the existential human reality

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[77] *CD* I/1, 236.

[78] This language echoes the parabolic teaching of Jesus and the prophets [Matt. 13:10-17, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10, John 12:40; cf. Isa. 6:9-10]. The function of the parables is to bring about a transformation in understanding—to *turn* and to *hear*.

[79] Michael Polanyi develops this concept in *Personal Knowledge*; he puts it aptly: "Knowledge is an *activity* which would be better described as a *process* of knowing" (The emphasis is mine.) *Knowing and Being: Essays,* ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press 1969) 132.

[80] Hence, Jüngel's title, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*.

[81] Murray Rae says it well: "The result is that the knower is not left as she was but is transformed through the knowing process. The knower is made a new person under the impact of the new relation…"; Rae, '"Incline Your Ear so that You May Live": Principles of Biblical Epistemology', in *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God*, eds. Mary Healy and Robin Parry (Milton Keynes, U.K.; Paternoster, 2007) 161-180, 161.

which corresponds to the epistemic miracle of faith in which the human person participates in the self-revelation of God. *Metanoia* thus refers to the transformation of the human person in the actualization of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* as an epistemic event. *Metanoia* is the human side of what it means to "participate in Christ"—a continual event in the life of faith. This is a continual relationship, and not a once-and-for-all moment which a person can set aside and "get on with life".

Because the Christological source of this relationship does not change from one moment to the next, so also it would be a mistake to presume that *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* becomes something other than the miraculous event in which God's Being-in-Becoming is continually and always the life-giving reality of revelation. To shift the hermeneutic focus to a singular "moment of conversion", would be to reject the very premise of the *analogia fidei*, and to reintroduce the problems inherent in the concept of the bifurcated *imago*.

The transformation (*metanoia*) of the person-as-moral-knower is thus a concomitant reality of moral knowledge. This is why we have paid so much attention to the meaning of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* for theological anthropology. If we get this concept wrong, we run the risk of embarking upon some other route to evangelical ethics which presumes to bypass the miracle of faith. The possibility of a point-of-contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) *simpliciter*, is not the problem. Even the "formal" *imago, simpliciter*, is not the problem. Even Barth is willing to admit that "a man is a man and not a cat."[82] The problem arises when these concepts are given force to present other possibilities for real knowledge of God by discerning the *meaning* of the orders of creation, through other epistemological routes apart from the event of participation in Christ, i.e., apart from the relational event of faith. The real problem is when *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* is construed as a human capacity, because that idea imports moral significance into the natural *humanum*. Up to this point, Brunner's dialectical theology is unproblematic.[83] Past this point lies the abyss of which Barth warned. This is why *evangelical* ethics, when speaking of human understanding of moral knowledge, will ground that understanding in terms of participation in the self-revealing, innertrinitarian life of God. [84]

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[82] *Nein!*, 88.

[83] Joan O'Donovan sees the flaw in Brunner's importation of "revelational content" into his dialectical doctrine of the "formal" *imago*, concluding that this "functional deflation of the "formal factor" signals the collapse of the nature/grace dialectic in its epistemological and ontological aspects." Joan O'Donovan, 'Man in the image of God: the Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered', *Scottish Journal of Theology 39* (1986): 433-459, 441.

[84] *Ethics*, 461. Bruce McIntyre offers helpful insight, in understanding the criterion to define "the *imago Dei*, the *humanum*, not in substantialist terms at all, but relationally… One could call it the "addressability" of

Transformation vs. Conversion

O'Donovan acknowledges the importance of repentance and conversion as essential events in the process of moral learning—"one can only *repent* false perceptions of the moral order and turn to truer ones."[85] Thus, his epistemological realism easily accommodates the view that "moral illumination" comes through a transformational experience of conversion.[86] Furthermore, he recognizes faith as an on-going reality.[87] Even though "moral learning [must begin] with the initial conversion of the mind in repentance… it must be constantly renewed in repentance as well."[88] This need for renewal leads him to describe the whole process of moral learning as one of "continual conversion"—

> Faith, therefore, is always open to repentance, able to relax the compulsive grip of self-justification upon the past. Love which is qualified by faith is free from 'self-love' … It is renewed and sustained, not out of the agent's established character but by continual conversion.[89]

This sounds congruent with the conclusions we have reached with respect to the significance of *metanoia* as a continual reality of the relationship of faith; yet upon closer reading we see that the role signified here by the event of "conversion" does not express the same thing as *metanoia*. The difference between conversion (as stated in *R&MO*) and *metanoia* becomes clear in his explanation of conversion as a "moment", as opposed to an on-going relationship. The former is a singular event, and the latter is an on-going relationship. Each has epistemic significance, but with vastly different implications for *Offenbarungs-mächtigkeit* and the objective reality of the moral order. O'Donovan takes up this issue in the closing pages of *R&MO*, in a section titled most aptly, "Conversion and the meaning of life", where he comments here on the example given by the contrast between the wicked and the righteous in Ezekiel 18:21ff—

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humankind by God"; McIntyre, *Theology After the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture*, ed. Gary D. Badcock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 77f.

[85] *R&MO*, 92.

[86] Ibid.

[87] O'Donovan reiterates the role of faith in his later works, e.g. in commentary on Col 1:28 and Eph. 4:24, regarding the "subjective experiences that draw the one affected into a new objective reality"; *WJ*, 314f.

[88] *R&MO*, 93.

[89] *R&MO*, 256.

> The turn that each has taken… has marked his life and imposed a shape upon it which is decisive for the whole. There has been a formative moment, a moment of conversion from which the rest of the man's career has taken its meaning for good or ill.[90]

This stands in contrast to his preceding description of "continual conversion", due do the dialectical opposition of the "continual" and "momentary" aspects. Analogically speaking, the moment of conversion is the moment of resurrection into new life. This is certainly a biblical concept, which can be inferred from Paul's metaphorical descriptions of "putting on Christ" or "the new man". In this context, the "moment of conversion" might be seen to serve as a dividing line which partitions moral knowledge into two camps—one occurring before, and the other after, the moral agent's "conversion". This provides an analog to the bi-directional perspective of the resurrection, from which we can look backwards to see continuity with the created order, and simultaneously look forward toward the eschaton to see its vindication and redemption. On this view, O'Donovan explains, the conversion moment "happens not once but many times", yet in the end, "it is always the one eschatological reality" which subsumes everything within "*the one decisive transformation*; *so that we may say, and more profoundly, that conversion happens only once*".[91] Thus, the significance of "continual conversion" differs decidedly from our concept of *metanoia*.

The problem is that this invites the possibility of an *analogia entis*, for the reason that it objectifies the relationship of faith. Once the relationship of faith is captured, so to speak, in a life-changing moment of conversion, it can be applied as a transformational function to affect a person's entire understanding of reality. If faith is objectifiable in this manner, it invites the possibility that the transformed *humanum* may now possess capacities that did not exist prior to the conversion moment. This is not to suggest that a unique conversion moment may be identified as a turning point and repentant act of discovering faith. Our concern is rather with the implications of conversion for the hermeneutic of doctrine. The risk here is to infer that the new perspective gained through a momentary instance of conversion bestows upon the person a new capacity to discern revealed knowledge. Such a concept would lead back to the same difficulties we have seen in definitions of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* which are not

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[90] *R&MO*, 257. O'Donovan goes on to reiterate this meaning of conversion as a "moment of recognition" in his exegesis of Jesus' dialog with the thief on the cross, and the parable in Luke 7:42.

[91] *R&MO*, 258 (emphasis added).

grounded in participation in Christ.[92] The "moment of conversion" does not put an end to the on-going relationship in which the miracle of epistemic access subsists.

That this section near the conclusion of *R&MO* is titled, "Conversion and the *meaning of life*", draws attention to the hermeneutical significance of conversion with respect to knowledge acquired in the event of God's revelation. If, as Jüngel says, "The being of God is the hermeneutical problem of theology", then it follows that the knowledge of any and all forms of God's self-revelation, including the witness to God which comes through the orders of creation, will entail the dynamism of transformation, regardless of whether transformation is construed as a moment of conversion or an on-going process of *metanoia*. There are significant differences, however, between the hermeneutical implications of these two different understandings of transformation, and I shall conclude this chapter by examining this issue.

The Cosmology of Faith

The hermeneutical significance of conversion is simply this: the *meaning* of moral knowledge is interpreted within the 'cosmology' of one's beliefs. Cosmology here refers to the totality of one's context of meaning, incorporating world-view and faith. In other words, 'cosmology' is the universe comprised of personal awareness and comprehension.[93] As Wittgenstein put it, language works within a home setting or a "language game" that provides meaning. If it is to function properly, and communicate meaning, language will not "go on holiday" from that setting, but rather will remain within the home or 'cosmology' within which it derives its meaning.[94]

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[92] A.J. Torrance notes that the objectification of knowledge corresponds to a "supposition of criterial immanence [which] inevitably leads to the material identification of God's self-communication with the universalization and absolutization of our own interpretative criteria and self-understandings", citing Strauss as an example. Torrance, "'*Auditus Fidei*': Where and How Does God Speak?' in *Reasons and the Reasons of Faith*, eds. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: T&T Clark, 2005) 27-52, 32.

[93] I follow A. J. Torrance in this use of the concept 'cosmology': "that to which we require to pay attention in these debates concerns not the terms we use but the nature of the cosmology or ontology underlying the theory of analogy operative in any particular theology; Torrance, *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 129; cf. 143. Since language derives meaning by analogy, a hermeneutical 'cosmology' will be defined by the analogies employed. Thiselton expresses the same idea with the phrase, 'horizon of understanding'; T*he Hermeneutics of Doctrine,* 177). See also Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007) 60, on the "idea of the totality of existence [which] contains the sense of ordered whole… a humanly meaningful one."

[94] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sect. 38. Cf. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine,* 177.

The hermeneutical issue with respect to moral knowledge is this: Conversion and *metanoia*, representing substantive changes in one's cosmology, present a *prima facie* challenge to any claim for ontological priority of the object to be known (the moral order, for example). If knowledge is inextricably tied to a dynamic process in which the knower is being transformed, how then is the ontological priority of the moral order to be understood? To which cosmology would such knowledge pertain? Would it be proper to describe such knowledge as occurring *pre*-conversion, or *post*-conversion? If this knowledge pertained to a *pre*-conversion cosmology—that is to say, within the understanding of the person in an 'unconverted' state—then its "home" setting would lack the content and context of faith. On the other hand, to claim that such knowledge occurs only within a *post*-conversion cosmology—that is to say, within the context of faith—would seem to refute the claim that the ontological reality takes priority over the epistemological conditions in which the knowledge occurs. This poses a problem for the dogmatic assertion of ontological priority. The concept of a static cosmology, which does not accommodate the transformational aspect of *metanoia*, is unable to account for the epistemic access which faith provides to moral understanding. A coherent cosmology will thus be one which integrates the epistemic aspects of faith with the ontological reality of the moral order. There is a circle of "reflexive contextualization"[95] at work here, in the dynamism of faith, which refuses to be broken. The person-as-moral-knower cannot extract herself from the hermeneutical contingencies of faith which make her cosmology a dynamic one. A cosmology which admits to the consequences of *metanoia* will be a cosmology which remains ever contingent upon the dynamism of a relationship which retains the freedom to be prior to any other priority, ontological or otherwise. This dynamic aspect of a properly evangelical cosmology follows directly from the understanding of God as self-revealing.[96] And because this understanding itself is arrived at through the transformative relationship of faith, there is an inescapable hermeneutical circularity to the resultant cosmology, which runs counter to the prevailing inclinations of metaphysics.[97]

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[95] To use O'Donovan's phrase, *WJ*, 19.

[96] A.J. Torrance (1996: 90) expresses this dynamism in terms of a "*radical* and *irreducible intrinsicity*" grounded in Barth's interpretation of God as "the Revealer [who] is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect"; *Persons in Communion*, 90 (cf. *CD* I/1, 296; cf. 298). This radical intrinsicity describes well the hermeneutical circularity which I have attributed to the K^2. Torrance describes the circularity implied by Barth's doctrine of revelation, *Persons in Communion,* 92.

[97] Murray Rae analyzes the epistemic significance of faith with valuable insight into Kierkegaard's thought: "in Kierkegaard's view faith and knowledge are not two separate tasks, indeed they are not tasks at all, but are received as a single gift of grace in that "Moment" of encounter which is both ontologically and

O'Donovan identifies the dilemma of hermeneutical circularity in *R&MO*,[98] and pursues it further in *The Ways of Judgment*: "The undisclosed aspect of the new creation means that our judgments cannot achieve a completely self-contextualizing truth."[99] This is true indeed; for human judgment *per se* does not contain within itself an Archimedean point capable of proscribing a hermeneutical horizon capable of anticipating the transformative aspect of new creation; i.e., human judgment does not contain the impetus of its own *metanoia*. For this reason, the search for a completely self-contextualizing truth fails the test of coherence in evangelical dogmatics. The possibility and actuality of new creation means that the hermeneutics of moral knowledge remain contingent upon the dynamism of faith as a relationship: a person participates in moral reality, and derives meaning from that relationship, rather than from the application of some innate human capacity to comprehend a pre-existent and objective moral order within the universe. The boundaries of one's hermeneutical horizon remain contingent upon the miraculous activity of the Holy Spirit.[100] O'Donovan expresses this boundary condition as a limitation in the capacity to apprehend truth (and hence, to make judgments on the basis of moral discernment):

> Our judgment is never more truthful in its correspondence to God's judgment than when it acknowledges its own severely limited capacity for truth.[101]

Thus, that what appears to be a *limitation upon* truth from one point of view is seen from a diametrically opposed point of view to be a *freedom for* truth, viewed from within a

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epistemologically transformative"; Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed,* 2. This leads to what Rae calls, "a relational epistemology", based on Kierkegaard's understanding of the "individual" ("*Den Enkelte*"), 144-5. Vernard Eller defines this epistemology in terms of the helpful synonym: "life in communion with God." Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship* (Princeton.: Princeton University Press, 1968) 107.

[98] Commenting on the shift in cosmology brought about by conversion, O'Donovan says that, absent the context of faith, "the order of reality is not truly known at all", *R&MO*, 88. Cf. "The fact that moral illumination does, in its fundamental form, involve conversion… should alert us to the inadequacy of the accumulative model to express our experience of moral learning", 92. Hence, conversion transforms one's 'cosmology', and requires moral meaning to be construed within a cosmology which is dynamically renewed during the event of learning.

[99] *WJ*, 87. Cf. *R&MO*, 250 re "the self-involvement of the subject from within" which can prevent moral discernment from ever breaking free of "the circle of self-reference".

[100] And thus, knowledge of truth pertaining to the presence and activity of the living God remains contingent upon the miraculous power of God. The apprehension of truth is an event which "does not happen in the actualising of our capacity, but in the miracle of His good-pleasure", *CD* II/1, 182.

[101] *WJ*, 22.

cosmology grounded in the dynamism of faith. After all, the alternative amounts to misunderstanding, mis-knowledge, and un-truth.[102]

There is a perennial pressure to defend both these opposing cosmologies in order to meet the need for apologetics within the context of the many and varied cosmologies of modern society.[103] As we have seen, O'Donovan employs a dialectical epistemology as a means to sustain both of these cosmological perspectives, and thus to meet the demand of apologetics to provide a point of contact for engagement with a variety of hermeneutical horizons of understanding. He is careful however, to avoid the accusation which Barth leveled at Brunner regarding "another task of theology";[104] rather, O'Donovan defines apologetics as a task not in addition to, but rather *within* theology:

> Now apologetics is not a distinct genre of religious thinking. There are no apologetic reasons and arguments that do not belong in the ordered exposition of Christian belief traditionally known as "doctrine." The only satisfactory reason *to* believe is the reason *of* belief.[105]

Thus, "apologetics is… a distinct genre of *exposition*."[106] From this it follows that the impulse toward apologetic engagement with varying, non-theological cosmologies will be constrained to unfold *within* the theological cosmology of faith. Here the nub of the problem becomes clear—can the dialectically opposed directions of these two cosmological poles be integrated within the cosmology of faith (and hence, within the hermeneutical circularity entailed by *metanoia*)? Or do these dialectically opposed perspectives need to be exposited as two (or even more) separate and mutually exclusive cosmologies? There is a fine line to be drawn here. Any exposition which proceeds via competing cosmologies will necessarily encounter friction with evangelical affirmations, cut the K^2, and ultimately suffer the accusation of incoherence as a statement of evangelical dogmatics and ethics.[107]

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[102] O'Donovan states this dialectical reality: "Knowledge of the moral order is a grasp of the total shape in which, if anything is lacking, everything is lacking." *R&MO*, 89. Thus, lack of faith means "that the order of reality is not truly known at all", 88.

[103] Thiselton notes well the need to identify the hermeneutical horizon of doctrinal statements, due to the variety of alternative horizons which will lead to different understandings: "in exploring Christian doctrine we are obligated to engage with a multiplicity of varied horizons in the public world"; *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine,* 178.

[104] Cf. *CD* II/1, 128 re Barth's rejection of "'another' task of theology besides that of explaining the revelation of God."

[105] *WJ*, xiii.

[106] *WJ*, xiii.

[107] Barth anticipates the shortcomings of apologetics: "[T]heological ethics must not and will not disarm its distinctive Whence? and Whither? in order to assure itself a place in the sun of general ethical discussion… The

We have seen several instances in which O'Donovan's dialectical approach appears to *shift back-and-forth between cosmologies* (or hermeneutical horizons).[108] Evidence of this shift can be found in the statements which explain knowledge of the moral order as requiring no revelation. While O'Donovan states that fulfillment of this possibility requires participation in Christ, there is apparently a shift at work in the movement from the "pre-conversion" cosmology of the "natural" person, *sans metanoia*, to the post-conversion cosmology of Christian belief. Is this shift illusory merely, or does it indicate a profound discontinuity between evangelical and non-evangelical cosmologies? There is a certain lack of clarity around this issue in some of the doctrines articulated within O'Donovan's outline for evangelical ethics. As we have seen, the assertion of ontological priority suggests at least the possibility, if not the endorsement of, a cosmology incompatible with the dynamics of faith. The risk is to cross between incompatible cosmologies in the process of pursuing a dialectical epistemology. If we posit a cosmology based upon the *pre*-supposition of ontological priority for the moral order, then we are entertaining a cosmology in which the *meaning* of the moral order is not contingent upon the epistemic reality of faith. A cosmology based upon the dynamic event of faith, on the other hand, is well capable of sustaining the reality of moral order within the creation.[109] This cosmology discerns *meaning* in the moral order through "the form of faithful *Nachdenken*", which sustains the hermeneutical circle of faith.[110]

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apologetic orientation of theological ethics is false. The apologetic attitude must be completely abandoned." *CD* II/2, p. 524.

[108] O'Donovan is not alone in skirting this fine line. Moltmann also makes a very similar move, as he suggests that a "Christian theology of nature" can "lead to just such a natural theology as a cosmological and biological interpretative suggestion. It cannot remain within the closed Christian circle"; Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Way and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 69ff. The problem derives from the suggestion that the hermeneutical horizon of Christian faith may be transgressed or linked up with alternative cosmologies.

[109] From this perspective, O'Donovan sees that "The gospel is not indifferent to its own communication; it has its dynamic of self-communication within itself"; *39 Articles*, 114.

[110] A.J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 88. Torrance elaborates the function of *Nachdenken*: "This involves the *metanoia* of our *noiein* in such a way that the pressure of interpretation, reinterpretation and reordering involves a directionality which is *from* Gods' Word… *to* humanity and not the other way round", 100-101. "In offering a "church dogmatics," he seeks to establish the nature of theological knowledge by way of a *Nachdenken* or a "backward look"—outlining the methodological, criterial, and epistemological conditions of God's self-communication to human creatures, where these are conceived as postsuppositions" carried and established in, through, and with the event of the divine address itself", A.J. Torrance, "*Auditus Fidei*", 40

Dynamics of Trinitarian Theology

We turn our attention now to the doctrinal implications of our thesis. As we have seen from our analysis of O'Donovan's evangelical realism, doctrinal challenges arise from a dialectical movement between cosmologies. These challenges pertain to a certain lack of rigor with respect to the contingencies of *fides quaerens intellectum*. What is the doctrinal substance of our conclusion that an evangelical doctrine of ethics and moral discernment operates within a cosmology based upon the dynamic event of faith as sustained in relationship with the Triune God?

This seems not to be a question of great concern in O'Donovan's ethics;[111] but rather, he seems to avoid the issue out of concern to prevent the dynamics of the faith experience from being interpreted in the form of an over-enthusiastic pneumatology. This concern inspires his energetic defence of the concept of moral order as a bulwark against voluntarism and arbitrary spiritual experience. His pursuit of realism by means of self-described *practical* theology seems intent on avoiding and denying any doctrinal excesses leaning in the direction of unpredictable and unreasonable charismatic experience in moral discernment.[112] This impulse seems aimed at the target of what might be caricatured in terms of a Spirit-olatry. We have seen already how O'Donovan's polemical stance against voluntarism works to mitigate against subjective experience as a basis for moral authority. Be that as it may, our present concern is to identify the doctrinal implications of his ethics and epistemology. To apply the label "practical" or "pastoral" to theology in no way excuses the theologian from being held accountable to the doctrinal implications of Trinitarian theology. Theology is not beholden to labels such as "practical", "pastoral" or "systematic", but rather to the reality of the Triune God who holds theologians accountable to present a faithful witness through the integrity of their *theologein*, and all the more so when we focus on the explicitly *evangelical* aspect of doctrine.

I shall offer a six-fold answer to the question of doctrinal substance which derives from an evangelical doctrine of moral discernment based upon the dynamic event of faith.

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[111] McIlroy also assesses the need for a "more complete trinitarian analysis" in O'Donovan's thought; David H. McIlroy, *A Trinitarian Theology of Law: In Conversation with Jürgen Moltmann, Oliver O'Donovan and Thomas Aquinas* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009) 108f.

[112] "I am a *practical* theologian, a *moral* theologian, a *political* theologian, or whatever other title anyone thinks suitable to describe an enterprise with a deliberative rather than a theoretical goal. I would even like to say, I am a *pastoral* theologian." O'Donovan, 'Deliberation, History and Reading: a Response to Schweiker and Wolterstorff', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001): 127-144, 127-8.

First of all, the cosmology of faith calls for a holistic theological anthropology which grounds the understanding of the *imago Dei* in the relationship between God and human, Creator and creature. The bifurcation of the *imago*, as seen in Brunner's dialectical construction of "material" vs. "formal" moments, engenders conflict with evangelical affirmations, as we have seen. Furthermore, this same conflict arises in the case of a dialectical approach to epistemological realism.

Gunton is right to warn of the challenge to Trinitarian theology which emerges from dualistic cosmologies because they entail dualistic anthropologies: "Overall, the message is clear: with a dualistic cosmology, a dualistic anthropology is likely to be correlative."[113] This corresponds precisely to the problems we have discovered in the dualistic ontology implicit within Brunner's bifurcation of the *imago*. Although O'Donovan sidesteps neatly the inherent dualism of Brunner's ontology, in the process he opens the door to a bifurcation of cosmology.[114] That is to say, there arises a bifurcation in the hermeneutical direction at work in O'Donovan's pursuit of evangelical realism. The bifurcations of cosmology and anthropology are mutually indicative; their similarity can be seen in the dogmatics of Brunner and O'Donovan. Even though O'Donovan avoids the ontological problems of Brunner's *theologia naturalis* to which Barth objects, there remains a troubling bifurcation of moral reality which impinges the dynamics of faith in unfortunate ways.

Second, we need to remember that the immanent and economic Trinity cannot be separated. The dialectical aspect of these concepts, useful as they are when their complementarity is understood in terms of mutual qualification,[115] devolves into a problematic discussion of the metaphysical attributes of God if ever they are taken to be ontological descriptions of God. Gunton is helpful when he points out the need to

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[113] Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1997) 104. Hereafter, *Promise*.

[114] Colwell diagnoses the problem with O'Donovan's affirmation of continuity in the objective moral goodness of the created order, which is both complete, and yet fallen, and therefore represents also a discontinuity: "It is difficult to see how Professor O'Donovan's affirmation of continuity can be maintained without more explicit reference to this underlying continuity of all reality and of all knowledge of reality. The alternative to such a foundation for ethical continuity is epistemological dualism…"; John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: the Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) 243. What Colwell calls "epistemological dualism" corresponds to the bifurcation of cosmology.

[115] Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992) 61; cf. 46.

"understand the relation of economic and ontological Trinity more systematically than seems to be the case in much recent theology."[116]

This relates directly to O'Donovan's emphasis upon the priority of ontological description of the moral order, because this conceives of the moral order as a static, immanent reality to be expressed in ontological terms without recognition of the activity of the Triune God in the events of faith and revelation.[117] To separate the ontology of the moral order from the dynamic movement of the Spirit which brings epistemic access is to invite an implicit consideration of the immanence of the Creator God apart from the necessary recognition of the activity of God in the dynamic of faith. There emerges in O'Donovan's doctrine an emphasis upon the immanent Trinity at the expense of the economic, because the ontological priority of the objective moral order correlates to an objective capacity of the *humanum* to discern that moral order. This sounds an echo of Augustine's implicit presumption of the capacity of reason as an indication that "knowledge of God is to be found primarily in the mind", as Gunton notes.[118] This draws "attention away from the concrete historical events in which God is present to the world in the economy of creation and salvation".[119] The objective reality of the moral order cannot be split apart from the dynamic economy of the Trinitarian God who reveals himself to be its sole authority, through the dynamics of faith. Thus, there is a need to cast moral reality in "dynamic as well as ontological terms", just as there is a need to hold the aspects of the immanent and economic Trinity in a mutually contingent unity.[120] Evangelical ethics must speak of the one Trinity, not multiple trinities.[121]

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[116] Gunton, *Promise* 178. Gunton diagnoses the difficulties which pertain to theology pursued as though it were a "quest for ontology …an understanding of the *kind of being* that God is" (emphasis added); *Promise*, xi. He traces the roots of this issue in *Act & Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Similarly, T.F. Torrance exposes the dangers of the quest for the ontological attributes of God in Chapter 8, "Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy", in *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (London: T&T Clark, 1990).

[117] McIlroy diagnoses the problem accurately when he identifies the need for a "more complete trinitarian analysis" in O'Donovan's thought; *Trinitarian Theology*, 108f.

[118] Gunton, *Promise*, 48.

[119] Gunton, *Promise*, 48.

[120] T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (London: T&T Clark, 1990) 172.

[121] Gunton shows how this problem stems from an uncritical acceptance of Augustine's Neo-Platonism, which "introduces a tendency to draw apart the being of God—what he is eternally—and his act—what he does in time"; *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1997) 4. Cf. McIlroy, *Trinitarian Theology*, 10.

The third doctrinal implication of evangelical ethics, closely related to the second, is this: *the universal subsists in the particular.* In support of his claim that the moral order is an objective reality, prior to the conditions of epistemic access, O'Donovan endorses the idea that the created order comprises universal moral truth. Yet, in cognizance of the evangelical witness to the specific moral authority of the historical Christ, O'Donovan must propose an answer the big question, as to how the universal comes to be recognized in the concrete, specific historic reality of Jesus of Nazareth. How indeed, he asks, is it "that universal justice has become concrete"?[122] In seeking an answer to this question in terms of political theology, he proposes that the criteria of justice should uphold the concept of "*universal* flourishing".[123] Indeed, this strikes a sensible chord for the evaluation of public policy, and resonates with our contemporary culture's esteem for human flourishing. We are not concerned here to argue against the merit of this concept for public policy, but rather to inquire after the *theological* basis for such a criterion. The point is that the *universal subsists within the particular*. That is to say, the particular, singular, historic event of Christ is the foundation of theological understanding of humanity, morality, ethics, justice, political theology and every search for universal truth. Justice occurs not in the universal, but rather in the specific. Justice does not happen in the domain of abstract noetic notions, but rather in the real lives of persons who long for justice—specific persons created and loved and known by the Father, Son and Spirit who make atonement for sin a reality. Justice occurs in the flesh, *ensarkos*. Justice, when it occurs, is recognized in an ontic-noetic event. Jesus is the singular exception who bears the weight of the universal upon his individual human-divine shoulders. For this reason we recognize that evangelical ethics operate from within the dynamic epistemology of faith. This recognition provides a corrective to the tendency of O'Donovan's dialectical realism to seek validation of concepts of truth and justice as though they could be located in the abstract universal.

Of course O'Donovan can defend his endorsement of concepts such as "*universal* flourishing" as being evangelical on the basis of his witness to the concrete historical Jesus; however, this defense falls short of rigorous evangelical dogmatics if it opens the door to a dialectical endorsement of both evangelical and non-evangelical streams of hermeneutical thought in the development of dogmatics. We can see just such an incipient movement in the

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[122] O'Donovan, 'Deliberation, History and Reading: a Response to Schweiker and Wolterstorff', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001): 127-144, 131.
[123] O'Donovan, 'Deliberation…', 132.

direction of universal concepts in O'Donovan's exposition of justice in terms of universal law:

> The law of creation is the reality that determines our ways. Justice, or right, is essentially responsiveness to the universal law, the successful determination of our ways under the authority of the law. … Justice is the correspondence of our self-determination to our determination by the law it is, in fact, obedience to the law. This is 'general justice' as Plato and Aristotle conceived it. Its ways are the ways of life. And at the level of general justice there are no 'principles of justice' other than the law of life itself, the order of things as they are.[124]

This endorsement of 'general justice' as Plato and Aristotle conceived it would seem to come at the expense of the singular exception of Christ, his atoning death and resurrection as the basis for understanding justice.

In an earlier essay O'Donovan attempts to explain the connection between the conceptual universal and the concrete specific—

> I have made a suggestion *how* we move from the one pole to the other. I have proposed that 'concepts' authorised from the narrative of Israel and Christ govern our deliberations about political ethics. This proposal has created a flutter of alarm.[125]

Perhaps our current analysis is but one more example of the alarm O'Donovan would denigrate. Yet, the basis for alarm is not the use of concepts such as "peace", but rather the tendency to move quickly past the concrete, specific source of authority in Christ, in the effort to endorse the moral authority of the orders of creation. That source of alarm seems to be ignored in O'Donovan's apology:

> But do I scandalise the faithful by calling peace a 'concept'—as though I were to refer to the Body and Blood of our Lord as 'bread and wine'?... it certainly looks like a concept, too, when you see the function it performs in justificatory arguments, and I don't see what is lost by calling it a concept, in that context and without prejudice…[126]

Furthermore, it is worth noting that 'bread and wine', like 'blood' and 'Lamb', are not concepts, but rather analogies. It is not the *analogia fidei* which stirs the "flutter of alarm", but rather the alarming misrepresentation of concepts as authoritative or sacramental truth.

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[124] *Royal Priesthood*, 310.
[125] O'Donovan, 'Response to Respondents: Behold the Lamb!', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11 (1998) 91-110, 93. Hereafter, '…Behold the Lamb!'
[126] O'Donovan, '…Behold the Lamb!' 94.

On this score, Barth's doctrine of the *Ordnungen* and their claim to universal truth upholds the evangelical understanding of moral authority more robustly:

> They are not universal ethical truths, but only the general form of the one and supremely particular truth of the ethical event which is inaccessible as such to the casuistical grasp.[127]

Precisely because the universal subsists within the particular, Barth rejects the abstraction of Brunner's concept of 'orders of creation' as a plurality of truths (which might correspond to O'Donovan's concept of "moral bricks"), while remaining amenable to a singular statement of an 'order of creation'.[128] That singular order finds its authority in Christ as it bears witness to him as its source and ground of being.[129]

This leads us to the fourth doctrinal implication, which is to see how the concept of moral order requires narrative, and not merely ontological description. For as much as we might appreciate the apologetic capacity of O'Donovan's realism to engage in metaphysical dialog concerning moral ontologies, we cannot ultimately escape the narrative basis of moral authority, as Colwell rightly points out: "The Gospel is a living narrative; it is only truly heard by being indwelt through the indwelling presence of the Spirit."[130] The gospel narrative consists in the proclamation of Christ in history, which pertains to both the historical Jesus as well as his relationship with his followers. This is the narrative which takes the form of Paul's testimony, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" [Gal. 2:20]. Of course O'Donovan insists that Christian ethics cannot set itself "loose from the historically concrete figure of Jesus of Nazareth", and thus, evangelical ethics are tied inextricably to the historical person of Christ, and faith has roots in narrative. Nonetheless, O'Donovan's inclination to defend ontological priority leads him to reply by way of explanation, "I will only insist that thought cannot live *sola narratione*."[131] He thus

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[127] Barth, *CD* III/4, 29.

[128] Paul Nimmo, 'The Orders of Creation in the Theological Ethics of Karl Barth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60.1 (2007) 24-35, 29.

[129] Cf. John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16.

[130] John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: the Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) 252.

[131] O'Donovan, '…Behold the Lamb!' 94.

argues that "What is needed is an *account of the logic*" underlying the concept of moral order.[132] In defense of this logic he cites the educative value of

> …analogies between the shape of the Christ-event and the shape of the church, and even the shape of liberal political order and its corruption. They describe an unfolding logic in the liberal order which imitates the logic of the narrative of Christ…[133]

This logic is not problematic so long as it explicitly recognizes the narrative of epistemic access to moral knowledge and the process of discernment which accrues through the agency of the Holy Spirit. When it departs from the narrative of the Gospel, however, and ventures to find a basis for morality in "natural" orders such as the logic of political order, for example, it strays from the Trinitarian basis for understanding moral authority. The movements of dialectical epistemology cannot redeem the implications of such a non-evangelical cosmology, as we have seen.

This highlights the crucial importance of the Holy Spirit for the doctrine of moral order, for the Spirit is the agent who initiates and sustains faith. This leads to the remaining set of implications each which identifies a pneumatological implication for ethics. While numerous references to the work of the Spirit can be found in *R&MO* and many other works of Prof. O'Donovan, there remains also a curious silence of pneumatology in much of his realism.[134] We might presume the Holy Spirit is not absent from those works, but rather tacit. However that may be, the point here is to identify the doctrinal implications of this silence. In this regard, there remain two significant implications to be considered.

The fifth implication of our analysis concerns the role of the Holy Spirit in history. The tension between "already" and "not yet" is a well-known aspect of life in Christ. Where this tension draws the most extensive consideration form O'Donovan is in the matter of the completeness of the moral order within the creation. This raises the issue as to just how complete the creation may be considered to be, in light of its longing to be released from the bondage of corruption and its groaning, with pangs of labor, toward redemption [Rom. 8:18-

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[132] O'Donovan, '…Behold the Lamb!' 94.

[133] '…Behold the Lamb!' 98-9.

[134] As Colwell notes, with respect to *The Desire of the Nations*: "Professor O'Donovan's own work appears to be less than fully formulated: throughout the book there is minimal reference to the Spirit and, in particular, to the dynamic by which this kingdom authority of the risen Christ might e known 'generally' among the 'nations'." John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: the Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) 243. In a similar vein, McIlroy notes "One of the striking features of the selections in that volume [O'Donovan's *From Irenaeus to Grotius*] is the relative absence of reflection on the Trinity." McIlroy, *Trinitarian Theology*, 17.

25]. This is yet another paradox of life in Christ. Difficulties arise for pneumatology and eschatology if we presume to overstate the case for the completeness of the creation. Is the Holy Spirit rendered superfluous to ethics if we presume the moral order to be an ontologically complete and timeless whole? Is the Spirit of Truth [John 16:13] to be constrained by a pre-existent construction of morality? Likewise, how are we to interpret the freedom of the living Christ and the Spirit [cf. John 8:32-36] if the morality is self-contained in the timeless reality of the cosmos? Would that not render the agency of the Holy Spirit an after-thought, as though he were a mid-wife to the moral education of the children of God, as opposed to the creative force of God in redemption and atonement? Gunton is right in this assessment: "attention to the pneumatological dimensions enables the development of a more truly trinitarian construction of the matter… [which] places the atonement in the broader context of God's plan for the whole created order."[135] For this reason, O'Donovan's emphasis upon the completeness of moral order is problematic:

> That which most distinguishes the concept of creation is that it is complete. Creation is the given totality of order which forms the presupposition of historical existence. … Because created order is given, because it is secure, we dare to be certain that god will vindicate it in history.[136]

This tends toward a weak, if not eviscerated, interpretation of the agency of the Holy Spirit.[137] We see this in O'Donovan's definition of redemption as the "recovery of something given and lost",[138] although he quickly adds the caveat: "we must go beyond thinking of redemption as a *mere* restoration".[139] Here again we can see a dialectical movement— redemption is a recovery of a pre-existent created order; yet it is also a transformation of that same created order.

This points to the need for Trinitarian theology to face the reality that the creation is not static, but rather unfolding in time, and to correspondingly understand the work of the Spirit as an agent of that movement. Gunton perceives the challenge inherent in O'Donovan's

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[135] Gunton, *Promise,* 179.

[136] *R&MO*, 60f.

[137] McIlroy surmises correctly how this results from "the domination of O'Donovan's view of the objectivity of the created order", which leads him to "attribute too much self-evidence to creation and not enough activity to the Holy Spirit"; *Trinitarian Theology*, 112-3. He tends to overstate his case however when he concludes that O'Donovan "has not articulated the Spirit's involvement in the exercise of political authority", 117, the reason being that McIlroy has failed to appreciate O'Donovan's efforts to balance statements of ontological priority by means of dialectical epistemology.

[138] *R&MO*, 54.

[139] *R&MO*, 55.

statement, and offers a corrective when he calls for Trinitarian theology "to speak of the relative perfection of creation in the beginning to make the point that creation is not a timeless whole, as it was made in Augustine, but has a temporality and a directedness to an end which is greater than its beginnings, and that they belong to its nature as creation."[140] Based on this assessment, we can discern an echo of Augustinian Neo-Platonism in the attributes of timelessness and transcendent wholeness for the moral order, as though it were an ideal to be accessed by the mind and restored in the eschaton.[141] The corrective to this static and weakened doctrine of the Holy Spirit is to "recover the notion of creation as project", as Gunton surmises.[142] This does not endorse the ideas of God which result from "process theology", but rather affirms the evangelical witness to the Holy Spirit in the dynamics by which faith and moral order *occur* in concert within the agency of the living, loving Triune God. Are we to proclaim that this providential work of God is not exercised in complete freedom, because it must remain beholden to the established completeness and timelessness of the moral order as conceived at the original moment of creation? Surely not.

Thus we conclude that a Trinitarian understanding of moral reality leaves space for the human-divine relationship in which the dynamics of faith occur. This dynamic aspect of moral knowledge, as pertaining to real events in time and space, undermines O'Donovan's statement of teleological completeness in the creation,[143] and thus he rejects it as being a form of 'historicism', which in his view "denies that such a universal order exists."[144] The difficulty arises from O'Donovan's perception that the hermeneutics of doctrine require an either-or choice to be made in answer to the epistemological question: "Is cosmic order really present in the world, or is it imposed upon reality by the human mind?"[145] The question however is seen to be spurious in light of a Trinitarian theology which incorporates the dynamics of faith.[146] The risk in O'Donovan's approach to avoid 'historicism', as he calls it,

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[140] Gunton, *Promise,* 180-1.

[141] Cf. McIlroy, *Trinitarian Theology*, 111.

[142] Gunton, *Promise*, 181.

[143] "Creation is not a process which might be accessible through the backward extrapolation of other processes. Creation as a completed design is presupposed by any movement in time. Its teleological order … is not a product of the historical process"; *R&MO*, 63.

[144] *R&MO*, 67.

[145] *R&MO*, 67.

[146] In his disagreement with Wolterstorff O'Donovan posits a similar either-or between "moralistic" (Wolterstorff's) and "non-moralistic" (O'Donovan's) accounts of *Heilsgeschichte*. This misses the point that creation and providence are mutually interdependent notions. They do not represent an either-or duality of moral order as being either transcendently complete, on the one hand, or arbitrarily shaped by the whims of human history on the other. O'Donovan, 'Deliberation, History and Reading: a Response to Schweiker and Wolterstorff', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001) 127-144, 139.

is to posit a concept of moral order as though it could be ontologically independent and untouched by the ever-present hand of the living God who is shaping history and fulfilling the order of creation.[147] For this reason, we see that O'Donovan's either-or view of historicism tends to speak against the mutuality of providence and creation, the co-existence of the creature and the Creator, as Barth would have it.[148]

The sixth and final implication inspires the title of this dissertation—*the transformation of persons*. Simply put, our thesis is that the concept of moral order, evangelically speaking, is inextricably bound up with the transformation of persons. This is the dynamic of faith. It is the doctrinal recognition of *metanoia* as concomitant with moral discernment. By faith we are transformed.[149] By faith we receive epistemic access to the concept of moral order. This is the heart of an evangelical understanding of ethics.

Having set forth these implications for doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity, we may ask how they might be critiqued. I shall therefore evaluate the following potential counter-arguments as a test of the robustness of the analysis presented here.

Kingdom and Creation

A potential counter-argument might stem from the very pragmatic concern with which O'Donovan opens his outline for evangelical ethics—to avoid the twin temptations of antinomianism and moralism.[150] I can imagine a potential counter-argument might derive from the concern that we have landed too near the dangerous pole of 'kingdom ethics', and thereby given too little shrift to the ontological reality of 'creation ethics'.[151] By now it should be clear that such a counter-argument lacks warrant for evangelical ethics, if it

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[147] Cf. Calvin: "We mean by providence not an indolent God looking down from heaven on what is happening in the world, but God ruling the world He established, so that He is not to be understood as a craftsman who completed His work at some particular moment but rather as the world's perpetual governor. In this way, the providence that we attribute to God pertains to the hands no less than to the eyes"; quoted in *CD* III/3, 10.

[148] *CD* III/3, 12.

[149] Habgood sums up our reason for choosing to demonstrate this truth means of the K^2: "Kierkegaard in his famous exposition of the story makes the point that faith is the highest virtue, because it is only by faith that we can be transformed… only by giving ourselves unreservedly to God—not because it makes moral sense to do so"; John Stapylton Habgood, *Varieties of Unbelief* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000) 54.

[150] *R&MO*, 12.

[151] Regarding the false dichotomy "between the so-called 'ethics of the kingdom' and the 'ethics of creation'", see *R&MO*, xv, 15.

proceeds via a dialectical epistemology to hold 'creation' and 'kingdom' in tension.[152] Furthermore, our thesis does not denigrate the ontological reality of creation ethics, but rather understands the moral significance of that reality within the cosmology of faith. Thus, if there is to be a complaint against our thesis on the basis of an underdeveloped creation ethic, that complaint will be undone by its own doctrinal implications with respect to the capacity of human beings to discern the evangelical content of the moral order. That capacity for evangelistic insight is lacking within the *humanum* apart from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This follows from our analysis of the hermeneutics of the doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*. The counter-argument is thus unfounded.

Moral bricks vs. living stones

Another potential counter-argument might suggest that our thesis leaves the content of the moral order unnecessarily vague and underdetermined, on account of our critique of the premise of ontological priority. That argument might go something like this: If we begin from the presumption that the moral order *exists*, does that not mean that its ontology precedes *knowledge* of it, even if that knowledge induces personal transformation? The thrust of this counter-argument can be expressed in terms of O'Donovan's concept of "moral bricks":

> The items in a code stand to the moral law as bricks to a building. Wisdom must involve some comprehension of how the bricks are meant to be put together.[153]

The image of 'bricks' conveys graphically the hard common-sense reality of ontological priority which suits O'Donovan's doctrine.[154] This is a clearly different sense of moral content from that developed in our thesis. A strictly rigorous idea of ontological priority might lead to the following assertions with respect to "the moral law": (a) moral bricks could be viewed as static, free-standing ontological realities, independent of obedience and faith;

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[152] Similarly, we can see this dialectical presumption at work in echoes of Brunner's doctrine of the capacity of the "formal" *imago* to discern moral reality.

[153] *R&MO*, 200. There is an apologetic value to the concept of moral "bricks" in that it seems more compatible with the "Modern Moral Order" than do the precepts of faith, divine command, and religious truth in general. Taylor, *Secular Age*, shows how the "social imaginary" has moved in this direction.

[154] These bricks would seem to correspond to the "the truths of Christian faith", the "truths that govern action", as the subject matter of ethics; O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 3.

(b) the content of these 'bricks' could, to some degree, be presumed to be available immediately to human perception; and finally, (c) these bricks might well be described as metaphysical truths, existing apart from and independent of personal participation in Christ. None of these assertions can be sustained within evangelical ethics, as we have seen by the foregoing analysis. Moral reality is not well described as a metaphorical set of bricks, which conveys a sense of inert material objects; but rather, the transformational event of faith which occurs in 'living stones' [1 Peter 2:4-5] provides the setting for development of a doctrine of evangelical ethics. Moral knowledge cannot be conveyed apart from, or outside of, the relational context of the innertrinitarian life of God. Theologically speaking therefore, moral bricks are not free-standing entities to be grasped by the natural capacities of the *humanum*. Our analysis rules out that implication of ontological priority, and in the following statement O'Donovan would seem to agree:

> We read the Bible seriously only when we use it to guide our thought towards a comprehensive moral viewpoint… We must look within it not only for moral bricks, but for indications of the order in which the bricks hold together… But in truth there is no alternative policy if we intend that our moral thinking should be shaped in any significant way by the Scriptures.[155]

The point is that the moral code is not contained within the bricks themselves. The moral code is rather discernable only within the *cosmology* which gives *meaning*.[156] O'Donovan's caveat brings into play, implicitly, the other arm of his dialectical realism—*faith*. This becomes quickly apparent in the attempt to exegete a "moral brick". For example, is "do justice" [Micah 6:8] a moral brick? How about "love mercy"? How are these commands to carry any weight unless we know what "justice" and "mercy" mean? And how are we to know justice and mercy apart from the scriptural witness to them? And how are we to hear that witness, let alone understand it, except for the feet of the messenger [Rom. 10:15]? And so on. It seems pointless to seek moral significance in the free-standing bricks themselves.[157] The meaning is to be found only in the life of faith—i.e., "*in relation to* all other aspects of human response to God's grace."[158] Thus, in terms of developing a hermeneutic of doctrine,

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[155] *R&MO*, 200.

[156] *R&MO*, 203.

[157] An interesting exercise in exegesis of scriptural references to stones, for which we lack space here to pursue, would be to consider Jesus' statement in Luke 19:40, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out", as a witness to faith and life as being the essential cosmological conditions for the proclamation of truth, even truth written in stone.

[158] *R&MO*, 203.

we conclude that the idea of ontological priority possesses no warrant to drive out or supersede the relationship of faith in which moral meaning is apprehended.

Apologetics

Another line of counter-argument might originate from the pressing need for ethics to be not merely evangelical, but practical and relevant also. This pressure becomes all the more acute in the prevailing mindset of our secular age which seems less interested in theological discourse than in the pragmatic pursuits of humanism. We have seen how this pressure presents a risk to theological interpretation. By choosing to focus on teaching "Christian moral concepts", O'Donovan aims to allay this risk.[159] In *Ways of Judgment,* he states more explicitly his commitment to the cosmological perspective of *fides quarens intellectum*:

> I make no claims for my train of thought other than the claim proper to every work of theology: here faith seeks understanding.[160]

While this stance is evident within *R&MO*, it becomes more explicitly clear in *Ways of Judgment*, where he describes apologetics as being "not a distinct genre of religious thinking", but rather "a distinct genre of *exposition*."[161] In other words, he is careful here to express the task of apologetics as being subsumed within the task of theology as a whole—as being the "ordered exposition of Christian belief traditionally known as 'doctrine'." Apologetics is thus *not* to be considered another task *in addition to* dogmatics, but rather, a form or type of dogmatics *per se*. This would seem to address adequately Barth's concern to avoid the type of apologetics which, motivated by a desire to engage with the secular, departs from the path of *fides quarens intellectum* and thereby leads into the "temptation to enter into

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[159] O'Donovan acknowledges candidly the humbling experience of "deep frustration" encountered in classrooms where Christian moral concepts suffer the withering critique of "anti-foundationalism", and the traditional "apologetic strategy" fails to impress due to its irrelevance with respect to the moral issues of the day. This experience provides some impetus toward apologetic effectiveness in *R&MO*, vii-viii. While our analysis has identified some points at which this didactic goal may have been breached due to the inconsistencies of a (tacitly, at least) dialectical epistemology, I do not mean to suggest that O'Donovan is motivated by the goal of developing an apologetic strategy to address the secular concerns of moral philosophy. He obviously intends to avoid any such strategy, as that would merely propagate the errors inherent in approaches which earn his disdain.

[160] *WJ*, x-xi.

[161] *WJ*, xiii.

debate with [philosophical ethics] in the form of apologetics", and results in "un-theological thinking".[162] Indeed, O'Donovan's definition of apologetics seems consistent with Barth's view that the only good apologetic is the one which is unapologetically *theological*, holding firmly to the Word of God—

> The words of Psalm 127:1–2 are quite decisive here: "Except the Lord build the house, their labour is but lost that build it…" Good apologetics is distinguished from bad by its responsibility to these words.[163]

By holding apologetics subject to the discipline of theological doctrine, O'Donovan intends to engage in *good* apologetics, in agreement with Barth—that is to say, apologetics conducted within the explicit context of faith seeking understanding. Apologetics is thus no more and no less than a form (*genre*) of faithful *theologein*. Therefore, if there is to be any counter-argument to our thesis on the basis of apologetic strategy, it will be seen to arise from a motivation that differs markedly from the didactic priorities of Professor O'Donovan.

Ghosts of Voluntarism

Finally, we shall consider whether a counter-argument could arise out of concern to expunge voluntarism from the habits of theological ethics.[164] As we saw in O'Donovan's rebuttal of Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension", his concern is that personal faith not be used as a "trump card" to obfuscate or overrule the objectivity of the moral order. We can see this concern in O'Donovan's reference to the "mediaeval ghosts" of voluntarism which he finds to have survived the Tudor Reformation and taken up residence in much modern theology:

> He [Cranmer] appears to say simply that God looks on good deeds as sinful if they are not performed by believers—a curious attribution of arbitrary willfulness to the divine, itself reminiscent of late-mediaeval voluntarism. Thus Cranmer failed quite to lay the mediaeval ghosts to rest, and they have continued to live their shadow-life, both among

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[162] *Ethics*, 21.

[163] *CD* II/1, 9. For Barth, any other approach to apologetics, other than that which operates explicitly with the horizon of faith, commits inevitably the *sacrificium intellectus* by attempting to reason from the "dialectic of unbelief", which equates of course with nonsense. *CD* II/1, 8, 94; cf. *CD* IV/.1, 75.

[164] Hans Burger notes insightfully that in *R&MO* O'Donovan "uses the concept of moral order to correct the modern voluntarist climate"; *Being in Christ,* 454.

Protestants at large and among the Anglicans who looked specifically to him for guidance.[165]

What is the curious life-force which sustains the ghosts of voluntarism? Arbitrariness, says O'Donovan.[166] A bitingly rhetorical question lies implicit in O'Donovan's critique: If God calls a believer's "good deed" righteous, yet judges the same "good deed" sinful when done by a non-believer, does that not force us to assign the attribute of *arbitrariness* to God? By implication, the argument is that we must avoid conceiving of morality as though it were contingent upon personal faith; otherwise we shall have unwittingly assigned the attribute of "arbitrary willfulness to the divine". The problem with this type of reasoning is that it reduces dogmatics to a treatment of the ontological attributes of God—a proposition that leads into serious conflicts with the evangelical affirmations of faith, as we have seen above.

The notion that good deeds are good, regardless of who performs them, or what they believe, appeals to the sentiments of our secular age.[167] After all, the whole world seems to think in terms of ethics.[168] There are indeed ethical principles to be found in every cosmology, and there are people in every cosmology who believe in those principles and strive to live by them.[169] We may rightly call them, "a law unto themselves" [Rom. 2:14]. But the question at hand is this: from whence comes their morality, their "law", their authority for ethical judgment? Is it "natural"? From whence do they derive their authority for ascribing *goodness* to their behavior? For if their self-imputation of goodness comes from

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[165] *39 Articles*, 82.

[166] It is fair to ask whether this is a case of seeing ghosts that are not really there. To affirm the connection between morality and faith (as per the K²) is not to endorse abject voluntarism. Cranmer, for one, might have been quick to see this point. O'Donovan treats Cranmer with deference here, reminding that the *39 Articles* were written in the context of a medieval understanding of voluntarism. My point here is not to evaluate the *39 Articles*, or Cranmer's sense of voluntarism, but rather to notice O'Donovan's interpretation of them.

[167] See Chapter 1 for discussion of the Modern Moral Order (MMO) on view here. Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*. We might well address this conjecture that good deeds are good no matter what you believe, by referring to Jesus' reply, "Why do you call me good?" [Luke 18:19]. The point is that goodness is not discernable apart from personal knowledge of the authority of the One who makes it good. That is, of course, a matter of faith seeking understanding, and not a matter of metaphysical definitions of 'good', as Jesus' question drives home the point.

[168] James Q. Wilson exemplifies the argument that there exists a common moral sense within human nature, which has emerged through evolutionary, developmental and cultural origins; Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993) 26. This concept finds support in the speculative suggestion that there exists a "god-gene" which leads some people to choose faith. On that view, the choice would not be voluntaristic, but rather *deterministic*. Such determinism would be no more palatable within O'Donovan's doctrine than voluntarism.

[169] Acts 17 has sometimes been claimed in support of the idea that competing frames of reference can be reconciled apologetically. This interpretation is highly problematic. To see the *prima facie* evidence of the problem with the view that Paul is somehow validating a pagan cosmology by quoting one of its poets [17:28], we need look no further than the content of his proclamation [17:24-31]— the Gospel of Jesus and the resurrection, and the call to *repent* [v. 30]. There is no moral validation of any aspect of pagan religion, philosophy or ethics to be found anywhere in the Areopagus proclamation; nor is there any validation of pagan cosmology as a source of truth. It is rather named by Paul as a source of human ignorance [v. 30].

a source other than the divine Father God, will they not stand in need of correction through the rhetorical question posed by the Son, "Who is good other than God?" [Mark 10:17-22].

Evangelical ethics is not founded upon the premise that the ethics of non-believers are "bad". The evangelical foundation of ethics resides rather in the affirmation of the transforming relationship in which the true source of good becomes known.[170] Does the personal experience of transformation somehow overrule the premise of ontological priority and lead to antinomianism? That would seem to be the overarching concern which drives O'Donovan's effort to expunge the ghosts of voluntarism, and we can address the claims implicit therein by considering his disagreement with Barth over the issue.

Human freedom in light of the burning bush

O'Donovan expounds the connection between voluntarism and antinomianism in a recent essay where he takes up his "disagreement with Karl Barth" over divine command theory.[171] This disagreement suggests one final direction from which a counter-argument to my thesis might emerge. Basically, O'Donovan objects to Barth's "lack of any universal rules", an alleged consequence of Barth's desire to step back from Kantian universalism.[172] Barth refutes the idea of universal rules, saying they are "not to be found" in the Bible:

> For, as the Lord of this history, God seems hardly to be interested at all in general and universally valid rules, but properly only in certain particular actions and achievements and attitudes, and this in the extremely simple and direct way of desiring from man (as a father from his child, or a master from his servant) that this or that must or must not happen. Nothing can be made of these commands if we try to generalise and transform them into universally valid principles [173]

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[170] There is no cause for surprise in noticing that secular and Christian judgments of moral behavior often align well. Paul makes much the same observation in his admonition to refrain from judging other people's behavior [Rom. 2:1f]; yet the point is that faith, not 'ethics', is the source of righteousness—"the one who is righteous will live by faith" [Rom. 1:17; cf. Habakkuk 2:4]. Rather than showing the uncircumcised to be exemplars of ethics, Paul shows that those who possess the law (Torah) are on a par with the uncircumcised, for all of them alike are under the power of sin—"there is no one who is righteous" [3:9-20]. This explains the imperative, "do not judge", which occupies the entirety of Romans 2.

[171] Oliver O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 165-175, 169.

[172] O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', 169.

[173] *CD* II/2, 672.

The concern is that if we cannot explicitly endorse the concept of universally valid rules, then the ontological priority of the moral order is called into question, leaving us with only the vagaries of a sheer and individualistic human will as recourse to moral deliberation. In this vein, O'Donovan accuses Barth of espousing a form of theological ethics based not upon any divinely instilled order, but rather upon an existential "burning bush" mode of perception, with the result that

> …the divine command in the Bible is, like the burning bush, a wonder that at certain unrepeatable points in history has unexpectedly invaded and taken control of the life of some agent, leaving only the choice to obey or to rebel.[174]

O'Donovan amplifies this idea of "invasion" of the moral agent's mind by means of the example of a soldier trained into "implicit obedience", in which there is no rationality, no reason, no deliberation, but only an unthinking response to command.[175] This seems to me not to capture the deeper significance which Barth attaches to hearing and obeying in the context of a biblical witness which attests to the moral agent's relationship with "God as the Father, or Lord" who orders or forbids "in the process of the revelation and embodiment of His grace, *hic et nunc.*"[176] It is the concreteness of God's being and the concreteness of relationship, which Barth here affirms as the context of *fides quaerens intellectum* within which we may read the Bible as being "replete with ethics".[177] Barth is not espousing here a voluntarism which strips ethics of meaning, but rather he is affirming the concrete reality of the living God as being: (1) beyond the capability of any universally valid rules to contain; (2) more real than the precepts of any abstract moral code; and (3) prior to and above any human judgment or conception of any such moral code. To suggest that Barth's ethics prescribes an "invasion" of the moral agent by a power that shuts down the individual person's will and rationality, obviating moral thinking in the process, and denying human freedom of participation in the moral reality, is to side-step the evangelical affirmations of Barth's doctrine by ascribing voluntaristic tendencies to them. Voluntarism is indeed a ghost, as O'Donovan has called it; it has no life of its own, and survives only as a shadow of the real life of the moral order. That real life from which light radiates, and from which the shadows run, is the personal relationship which is inextricable from the moral order. The

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[174] O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', 169.

[175] Cf. O'Donovan's concern to not interpret "[m]oments of fear and trembling" in opposition to "reflective and considered thinking, the 'rational worship' … [of] Rom. 12:1-2"; 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', 175.

[176] *CD* II/2, 673.

[177] *CD* II/2, 672.

ontic reality of personal relationship will not be expunged without doing grievous damage to the affirmations of evangelical ethics regarding theological anthropology and the cosmology of faith.

Prayer at the Heart of Evangelical Ethics

Accordingly, O'Donovan looks to the Lord's Prayer [Matt. 6:9-15] as the centre, both structurally and thematically, of the moral teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.[178]   The Prayer serves to transform the ethical teaching of the Sermon, to render it in the context of the transforming work of the Father in the lives of the faithful, rather than in a context of moralistic prescription. The Prayer thus occupies the place of prime importance in the center of the chiastic structure of the Sermon, in order to transform what might otherwise be received as a set of ethical principles or a rules-based prescription for moral behaviour, into a witness to the faith relationship which provides access to moral truth.[179]   It sets morality in the context of the moral agent's relationship with the living God, which relationship alone creates the possibility for ethics to become more than a heap of empty phrases [Matt. 6:7]. O'Donovan highlights this transformative impact of the Prayer by viewing it exegetically as the centre of a dialectical contrast between the desire for the treasures of earth vs. those of heaven:

> … the lynch-pin which holds the prayer in place at the centre of the Sermon is the little group of sayings which contrast two possible orientations of the heart: seeking treasure on earth and seeking treasure in heaven… the decision between two competing frames of reference for our action.[180]

On O'Donovan's view this prayer "unites the religious with the moral" by providing a sense-giving structure which places parameters around desire in order to direct it toward the proper

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[178] Cf. O'Donovan, 'The Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics', *Society for Study of Christian Ethics Conference* (Jesus College, Cambridge: 2008), which captures the content of his keynote address at the Society for Study of Christian Ethics conference, *"The Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics",* held at Jesus College, Cambridge (September 2008). Barth also emphasized the centrality of the Lord's Prayer and the "invoking" of God as "the basis of all Christian ethos", with reference to 1 Peter 3:19-20; *CD* IV/4, 211.

[179] O'Donovan alludes to the transformative power of relationship, achieved through prayer, as a core reality of the universe: "The Lord's Prayer… inducts the worshipper into the elementary relations of the universe…These relations link God the Father… with ourselves"; 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon on the Mount', *Studies in Christian Ethics 22.1* (2009): 21-33: 30. Hereafter, 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…'.

[180] *DN*, 107.

object of desire; this structure frames the worshiper's petition within the structure and order of "the elementary relations of the universe".[181] Furthermore, the Prayer has the ability to "control our imaginative enthusiasms… and focus our desires", thus constraining and organizing what would otherwise be misguided natural passions and idolatrous desires.[182] In this sense, O'Donovan finds prayer to be the reconciling link between a natural ethic and a Christian ethic—an idea of utmost interest given our analysis of the idea of a point of contact for ethics. How could it be possible for the Lord's Prayer (or any prayer, for that matter) to merge *competing* "frames of reference", if one frame of reference contains evangelical faith and the other does not?

We might rephrase the concern by asking: of what significance is a prayer uttered from within a cosmology which lacks evangelical faith? There would seem to be reason for some concern in this regard, given O'Donovan's expression of "pagan" prayer as a possibility to be held in relationship with Christian prayer:

> The pagans pray, even those who doubt the reality of what they pray to… But Christians are taught to call God 'Our Father in heaven', for this brings to clarity the truth of the dimly discerned relation between human agency and the government of the objective world…[183]

Though it is clear from O'Donovan's statement that pagan prayer and Christian prayer operate from opposing cosmologies, with the latter being the one in which truth comes into clarity, there lingers within his statement the suggestion that pagan prayer and Christian prayer are parallel paths, each aligned with the same objective reality of moral order, determined by the will of God the Father who is "the source of ordered and intelligible governance of the universe."[184] We are assured that God can hear even inarticulate prayers,

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[181] He interprets all the dichotomies of the Beatitudes as representative instances of "the contrast between the ages", between the *now* and the *then*, [which] lies at the heart of all other contrasts. Given this pivotal position, sitting at the fulcrum as it were, between off-setting "frames of reference", O'Donovan interprets the Prayer as an endeavor which sorts out and reconciles the panoply of contrasts exhibited in the *now* vis-à-vis *then* duality of the moral order; 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…', 22- 30.

[182] O'Donovan, 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…', 30.

[183] O'Donovan, 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…', 30-31. O'Donovan goes so far as to suggest that "Barth's reference to invocation as 'the basic act of the Christian ethos'" supports the notion of Christian prayer "[not] as a *sublimation* of natural ethics, a replacement of the moral enterprise by one on a higher and more Christian plain, but as its *fulfilment*", 30.

[184] O'Donovan, 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…', 30. David Crump offers a helpful analysis of pagan prayers which confirms the plausibility that they may align with Christian prayers in terms of a structure fitting with Paul's exhortation of Phil. 4:6. He attributes this alignment in structure to "the unquenchable human impulse to implore divine intervention…", Crump, 'Are Practical Prayers Pagan Prayers?' *Expository Times 5* (2009): 231-235, 232. Structural alignment does not however carry over into either cosmological alignment or

and the Holy Spirit can intercede with sighs too deep for words [Rom. 8:26]; but what moral significance can be gleaned from a prayer which has faith not in Christ, but in some other reality?[185]   What does it mean to call this a *prayer*?[186]   To suggest that the naturally existential and intellectual longing of the human heart for truth is to be held together in dialectical tension with the evangelical understanding of prayer as embodying a relationship with God the Father, would seem to invite those same difficulties we have already identified in the implications of a dialectical epistemology. For this reason, we would endorse O'Donovan's conclusion that the Lord's Prayer "constitutes the very heart of moral teaching"[187] but not the suggestion that pagan prayer might be considered as a viable and parallel path toward ethical understanding.

This primacy of prayer leads to a serious admonition for the teacher of ethics, as O'Donovan recognizes rightly:

> The teacher who will teach us to act and to live our lives before and for God, will teach us, as the 'basic act' of our living, how to pray.[188]

The teacher of ethics is therefore admonished to pay as much attention to the ethos of faith and the object of prayer as to the content of moral principles. This is a ringing endorsement of the cosmology of faith. O'Donovan closes his commentary on the Lord's Prayer with this affirmation of faith at the heart of ethics; however, there remains in his closing statement on the subject a noticeable silence with respect to the Gospel. The innertrinitarian life of God at work in the act of prayer and the awareness of the moral agent remain tacit in O'Donovan's statement, as do the transforming agency of the Holy Spirit and the actualization of *metanoia* realized in those events. Perhaps there is no need for O'Donovan to emphasize here yet again, as he has done so well elsewhere,[189] the importance of the Gospel and the prime place of the

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content alignment, as Crump points out. By my question here regarding the comparison and potential alignment of pagan vs. Christian prayers I do not mean to suggest that pagan prayers are ungodly; rather, the question remains whether and upon what basis such prayers—being directed as they are to idolatrous gods—might be considered to be aligned with Christian prayer.

[185] Paul makes no allowance here for a "pagan" form of prayer. There is a difference between a prayer rendered inarticulate due to a depth beyond the reach of words, and a prayer rendered incoherent due to a lack of faith.

[186] Barth's comments on the 'little lights' is helpful here. These "prayers" may indeed express the existential desire of the human heart to seek God's truth, even without knowing God; nonetheless, these lights do not, in and of themselves, express or teach the truth of the moral order or bear witness to the triune God.

[187] O'Donovan, 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…',33.

[188] O'Donovan, 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…',33.

[189] As O'Donovan has taught elsewhere with respect to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' question, "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" [Luke 12:57; cf. Matt. 5:25] might better be translated, "judge *of* yourselves", *WJ*, 293. Apart from prayer our judgments will be distorted and even incapacitated by the "log in

Resurrection at the heart of evangelical ethics. The more substantive concern lies not with the perception of the degree to which O'Donovan either does or does not adequately emphasize evangelical affirmations in his commentary on the Lord's Prayer, but rather with the suggestion that competing frames of reference—pagan and Christian—can be considered as viable modalities of moral discourse capable of reconciliation with one another.[190] What would such a reconciliation of cosmologies look like? Upon what epistemological premise could it proceed? The idea that these competing cosmologies might be reconciled raises the question of what it means to say that prayer, as the invocation of God, "constitutes the very heart of moral teaching".[191] To suggest that moral learning could proceed apart from and outside the event of transformation within the faith of the moral agent would be to hold to a doctrine of morality that engendered friction with the affirmations of evangelical ethics. This point is perhaps best seen through the exercise of a case study; so I offer the following illustration.

Case Study: Reconciliation of a "Natural" Ethic

The dire implications of an attempt to validate a natural ethic, as being a parallel approach to moral knowledge aligned with Christian ethics and doctrine, come to the fore in Patricia Williams' attempt to reconcile Christianity with "evolutionary ethics".[192] While Williams does not explicitly define evolutionary ethics in either phenomenological or ontological terms, it is clear from her explanation that she uses the idea in a manner typical of

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our own eye" [Matt. 7:3]. Thus the authority and rightness of Christian ethical judgments will rely upon the work of the Holy Spirit in our self-examination. As O'Donovan says rightly, this prayerful approach to morality is conditioned upon "hopeful attention to the inner dialogue with God" which takes place in response to "the evangelical summons to be judge of ourselves", *WJ*, 309, 312.

[190] We may include contemporary versions of "modern paganism", rooted in secular humanism, along with the classical, historical varieties of paganism without departing from our line of inquiry here. For inasmuch as our culture has moved beyond the old paganism of pre-Christian roots, never to return, our present age of post-Christendom persists in embracing anti-Christian values of "paganism" or "polythesism" as Taylor attests; *A Secular Age*, 770-1. David Bentley Hart agrees, concluding that although "We are not pagans" as of old, "we live after the age of Christendom, and cultures do not easily turn back to beliefs of which they have tired or with which they have become disenchanted"; Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 240. And thus the gods of antiquity have been merely replaced in some sense by new gods conforming to "the moral metaphysics of modernity", 228.

[191] After all, as O'Donovan concludes regarding moral behavior: "acting and living cannot be self-aware and self-possessed without prayer; and therefore they cannot ultimately be acting and living to good effect"; 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon…', 33.

[192] Patricia A. Williams, 'Christianity and Evolutionary Ethics: Sketch Toward Reconciliation', *Zygon 31*, no. 2 (1996) 253-268. Hereafter, "Williams".

various attempts to explain ethics as an emergent characteristic of human behavior which arose naturally through the process of evolution, as the human creature developed a sufficiently complex social mind as to become aware of possessing moral consciousness. For Williams, this is common sense: human beings have evolved dispositions including a bias for rules, along with an acquired habit of judging in terms of right and wrong.[193] Based on this view of morality, she arrives at the conclusion that "most of the ancient doctrines [of the Church] are either factually or morally unacceptable to those who live on the threshold of the twenty-first century."[194] This is a common refrain among advocates of evolutionary ethics,[195] and understandably so, for in order to rationalize the claim that ethics is grounded in, and determined by, "natural" evolutionary process (i.e., interpreted as being determined by non-teleological process), it becomes essential to deny the Gospel as the source and ground of ethics; otherwise, the so-called "natural" processes would be found to lack authority as a hermeneutical path to meaning.

The doctrines of Atonement and sin are called immediately into question in any attempt to reconcile Christian and evolutionary ethics; for if nature is the determinant of our morality, then how are we to understand the human need for a Savior to save us from our sin?[196] We are not surprised therefore to hear Williams argue that that "the logic of the Christology of Chalcedon requires an incarnation but not an Atonement."[197] In the same manner she rejects doctrines of original sin which would suggest humans might be "naturally indisposed to obey God".[198] In lieu of these doctrines she suggests that there is only one interpretation of Atonement that conforms to "modern scientific thinking, namely, the educative interpretation."[199] Though she does not develop a clear statement of this educative doctrine of the Atonement, she makes it clear in her conclusion that we are not saved through the passion and resurrection of Christ—these being unnecessary and troubling artifacts of outdated mythically inspired doctrines[200]—but rather, we are saved by *education*, with Christ

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[193] Williams, 257.

[194] Williams, 263-4.

[195] E.g., Melvin Konner, Francis Ayala, Frans Van de Waal, Richard Dawkins, Michael Gazzinga.

[196] Sir Alfred Ayer anticipates proponents of evolutionary ethics when he justifies his contempt for Christianity on the basis of "the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, which are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous." *Guardian Weekly*, August 30, 1979, quoted by John Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1999) 84.

[197] Williams, 263.

[198] Williams, 258.

[199] Williams, 264.

[200] Williams, 256, quotes Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (1958)— "The course of history has refuted mythology"—in support of her argument that older Christian doctrines need to be reoriented to a modern scientific worldview.

being the principal teacher who sets an "example of how human beings should live with one another by serving the stranger and the outcast even unto death."[201]

So much for the doctrine of Atonement. What of the doctrine of sin? Concomitant to the view that salvation comes not through the presence of Christ the Savior, but rather through the perfection of human nature, Williams describes original sin as an outdated and spurious doctrine.[202] She suggests sin would be better understood as "an acquired taste", rather like the taste for bitter, and that "like acquired tastes, it might be passed from generation to generation through familial, clan, or national culture."[203] By recasting the doctrines of sin and Atonement in this fashion, Williams can proceed with her case for reconciliation by arguing that any moral lapses in human behavior are not due to any original sin, nor indicative of a need for a Savior, but rather they illustrate the wide range of moral and immoral behavior exhibited in human beings which are "not part of God's teleological plan but an unforeseen result of evolution".[204]

What are the implications of this reconciliation for theological anthropology? We can hear a distinct echo of Emil Brunner's doctrine of the "formal" *imago* and the cognitive capacities implicated therein—

> [I]n high human moments, in the human ability to think abstractly and logically about moral questions and to apply that thought to human lives, people see that the strong interpretation of the Love Command is a logical extension of natural morality.[205]

My final observation on Williams' approach to reconciliation is this: she avoids discussion of relationship with Christ, choosing rather to focus on the attributes of God, in parallel with the attributes of the *humanum*, which she takes of course to be outcomes of the

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[201] Williams, 266. In support of her educative doctrine of Atonement she names Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa in the same sentence as illustrative moral leaders (260).

[202] Gregory Peterson makes essentially the same claim in his pursuit of an evolutionary ethic: "the origins of sinfulness... are rooted not in the act of an original, historical couple, but in the complicated evolutionary process itself", and admits this "may seem to be at odds with a genuinely theological account of human nature"; Peterson, 'Falling Up: Evolution and Original Sin', in *Evolution and Ethics*, Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004): 268-286, 283.

[203] Williams, 260.

[204] Williams, 264-5.

[205] Williams, 261. Although Williams reaches conclusions similar to Brunner's, she does not develop any dogmatics to support them. Apparently, she considers it sufficient to claim that the materialistic presumptions of her cosmology are obvious. We may also detect in Williams' epistemological arrogance a fainter echo of O'Donovan's concern that ethics not be construed as operating in the "burning bush" modality; O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible*, Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 165-175, 169. Williams echoes this aversion to domination by the Holy Spirit when she cautions that theologians should be careful to avoid characterization of moral agents as "God's robots acting out of character and against human inclination"; Williams, 261.

evolutionary process.[206] I would suggest that this preoccupation with the attributes of God is an unavoidable corollary to the denial of the real saving presence of Christ in the transformation of persons as being of the essence in Christian ethics.[207]

Reconciliation in Christ

What lessons may we draw from this case study? My purpose here is not to make eristic sport of Williams' doctrine, but rather to demonstrate what happens when the implications of a dialectical epistemology are fully played out with respect to evangelical ethics. Williams' approach to reconciling the competing frames of reference in this case—the one based in the strictly non-teleological materialism of evolutionary theory, and the other in theological knowledge of revealed truth—functions essentially as a dialectical epistemology based upon the presumption that each avenue of ethics derives its moral authority from the same ontology of the moral order. As we have seen, this presumption leads, via the relentless logic of metaphysics, to non-evangelical doctrines.

We might excuse Williams for not having recognized the ramifications of her epistemological approach to reconcile naturalistic and Christian ethics. After all, she seems to ignore the issue of epistemic access altogether. Yet the same difficulties can also arise even in carefully studied approaches to evangelical ethics, such as that of Luke Bretherton, who offers "extensive exegesis of O'Donovan's theologically grounded conception of ethics."[208] Like Williams, Bretherton seeks a path toward reconciliation ("commensurability" is his term) "between Christian and non-Christian approaches to moral problems",[209] and he claims to have found one in O'Donovan's "eschatological teleology." We find Bretherton to be making systematically inconsistent statements, however. He argues that on the one hand,

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[206] Williams finds it necessary to admit to "the logical requirement to weaken one of God's traditional attributes", and she chooses omniscience as the culprit, because on her view morality is non-teleological, and sin is "an unforeseen product of evolution"; Williams, 258.

[207] For this reason, Barth concludes simply that there are irreconcilable differences which do not permit evangelical ethics to begin from the materialistic presumptions of a *theologia naturalis*: "The distinction between this order" [i.e., order defined by relationship with God the Creator and Redeemer who commands] "and what is customarily called 'order of creation' elsewhere is clear and irreconcilable. To be aware of this order we do not leave the closed circle of theological knowledge." *CD* III/4, 45

[208] Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006) 64.

[209] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness,* 88.

"Jesus Christ is ultimately authoritative for morality because he constitutes the ontological ground of morality", and therefore, "anything that does not conform to Christ must be judged as not moral"[210]; and yet, on the other hand, "O'Donovan understands nature to have an unmediated authority", and therefore, "Morality of itself is grounded in the creation or natural order."[211] Can these conflicting statements be held together in a coherent doctrine of moral knowledge? Bretherton claims to have found a way to do so within a "distinctively Christian cosmology",[212] but he has not noticed that his dialectically opposed statements pertain to competing frames of reference.

Does this mean that natural theology must be rejected out of hand as either incoherent or inane? No, to the contrary, its prevalence and cultural vitality make it a driving force to be reckoned with. It is incumbent upon the Church to provide theological answers to the questions raised by evolutionary ethics and all forms of natural ethics.[213] The question is not *whether* to seek a reconciliation of natural and Christian ethics; but rather, the more insightful question is: *upon what grounds* shall such reconciliation be sought?

Reconciliation takes place in witness to the crucified and resurrected Christ [2 Cor. 5:14-21]. Whether we are seeking to reconcile cosmologies or the persons who inhabit them, the witness of evangelical faith proves essential if ethics are to be expressed and enacted with coherence to the Gospel of Christ. Thus, Ray Anderson is correct when he points the way forward toward reconciliation:

> A natural theology which does not have at the center a cross sunk deep into human flesh
> will not find transforming love at the center of human moral action.[214]

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[210] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness,* 73.
[211] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness,* 70.
[212] Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness,* 88.
[213] "In our modern era, the lack of a natural theology which speaks for and from the perspective of the concrete and actual humanity of every human person, has left the evangelical church ethically hesitant, if not ethically impotent"; Ray S. Anderson, 'Barth and a New Direction for Natural Theology', in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886*, ed. John Thompson (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1986) 241-266, 257.
[214] Anderson, 'Barth and a New Direction for Natural Theology', 262. O'Donovan makes a similar affirmation: "In light of the resurrection the cross is seen to be a judgment which is, at the same time and completely, an act of reconciliation"; *DN*, 256f. Moltmann likewise arrives at the cross in his desire to reconcile natural theology with the cosmology of faith: "If natural theology is not to lead the sinner astray through pious illusions about himself and his God-like capacity for knowledge, then the *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross, must first put the person who has gone wrong right, and must justify the sinner—make the sinner just." Moltmann's proposal that natural theology be considered "*After* the analogy of faith" sounds remarkably similar to Barth's *Nachdenken*; Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Way and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 78, 79.

The meaning of the cross, revealed in the event of faith, transforms our understanding of moral authority; moral metaphysics are transformed by the transcendent reality of the Triune God of Grace.[215] This transformation does not validate the authority of "evolutionary" ethics, or any other materialistic "natural" ethics;[216] but rather, this transformation provides the meaning and coherence lacking in those explanations of the moral order. At the same time, this transformation provides a rationale to explain why human beings for the most part have a sense of right and wrong that aligns well with the moral content of biblical faith.

For the doctrinal and hermeneutical priorities of the Gospel to be maintained, in pursuit of an evangelical expression of ethics, there can be no "reconciliation" of cosmologies in which the evangelical confession of Jesus as the one who says "I am the Truth" co-exists on an equal footing with an autonomous source of meaning derived from some other non-evangelical idea.[217] So long as we conceive of natural theology as being devoid of this witness, if not in outright denial of it, there can be no possibility for reconciliation with evangelical ethics.[218]

In conclusion, we see that the *meaning* of moral order obtains through participation in the event of the self-revealing God as being-in-becoming. The doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* presented here corresponds to the dynamic cosmology of faith. To suggest that moral meaning and the ethical content of knowledge could be ascertained from outside the relation of faith is to presume some other basis of reality, some other cosmology devoid of the witness to the moral significance of the triune God of grace. The risk is to presume that the *meaning* of life can be had apart from living in faithful relationship with

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[215] J.B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

[216] As examples of ethicists claiming to find moral authority in denial of the cosmology of faith, we can repeat the list compiled by David Bentley Hart: Joseph Fletcher (who advocates forced abortions); Linus Pauling (who proposed "genetically engineering a subhuman caste of slave workers"); Peter Singer (who advocates "prudential infanticide"); James Rachels (who advocates for more expansive and flexible euthanasia policies"); and Lee Silver (who exemplifies the label "transhumanist" for his prognosis that "humanity will take responsibility for its own evolution, by throwing off antique moral constraints and allowing ourselves to use genetic engineering in order to transform future generations of our offspring into gods". Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 234-8.

[217] This speaks to Barth's reason for locating "the basis of all Christian *ethos*" in the evangelical witness of 1 Peter 3:18-20; *CD* IV.4 (211). Cf. Hans Frei, et. al., *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 154f: "No natural theology, no anthropology, no characterization of the human condition, no ideology or world view can set the conditions for theology or knowledge of God. Autonomous anthropology and Christian theology cannot be understood as mutually implicated."

[218] Alister McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), tries the path of *fides quaerens intellectum*, as he pursues a doctrine of "Trinitarian natural theology". Other attempts to redeem natural theology from Barth's critique include Del Ratzsch and Alan G. Padgett, both in *Faith and Philosophy* (2004). These efforts proceed by qualifying the term "natural theology" so that it stands for something other the traditional sort of natural theology which drew Barth's polemical fire.

God. Like the self-revealing event of the Gospel itself, evangelical ethics interrupts any and all hermeneutic methodologies. Like the Gospel, evangelical ethics breaks through into our experience of Jesus Christ as "an *intrusion upon* or interruption of the coherence of the world."[219] This understanding of Jesus is the cosmological constant of the New Testament. The transformational aspect of faith which accompanies this intrusion shows up also in O'Donovan's observations when he gives countenance to the subjective experience of faith, and operates from within the cosmology of faith:

> These are subjective experiences that form the goal of the apostolic ministry, but subjective experiences that draw the one affected into a new objective reality: "to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, to put on the new man which has been created in God's fashion in righteousness and holiness of truth" (Eph. 4:24).[220]

The issue at stake in his epistemology is whether this personal transformation can be held to be a *foundational* component of the concept of moral order. Our thesis maintains that the "new objective reality" on display in the Pauline language about "renewal", putting on the "new person" and living "in Christ" cannot be divorced from the dynamic of faith. The transformation of persons thus requires to be included in any hermeneutical development of an evangelical concept of moral order. Trinitarian theological ethics is dynamic because truth is a person. The dynamism is revealed in the self-revelation of God, which becomes meaningful within the faith experience of persons being transformed; that is to say, persons in communion whose being is in becoming.

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[219] Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, trans. and ed. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 89-90. Webster offers insightful analysis of Jüngel's statement of Christ as "interruption" in 'Jesus in the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel', *Calvin Theological Journal 32* no 1 (1997): 43-71.
[220] *WJ*, 315.

7 CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR MORAL KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL ACTION

> The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection.
> The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge.
>
> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*[1]

The transformation of persons forms the heart of evangelical ethics. This thesis has been borne out by our analysis, and we have concluded that whatever we know of the moral order, if it is to be an expression of evangelical ethics, it will accrue as transforming knowledge accompanied by the metanoia event which pertains to faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Now we ask: what difference does this make?* In this regard I should aspire to meet the challenge issued by John Stott at the conclusion of a conference on evangelical ethics: that our theology should provide more answers, actions and passion in ethics.[2] *In order to develop further the practical implications of my thesis therefore,* I offer some closing thoughts on the practice of moral deliberation as it pertains to worship, teaching and preaching. I then turn to consider in depth one practical example of moral discernment as it relates to our thesis—the bio-ethical

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[1] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM, 1955) 21.
[2] John R. W. Stott, 'Epilogue: Tasks Which Await Us', *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, ed. by David. F. Wright (Exeter [Devon]: Paternoster Press, 1978) 179-83, 179.

issues of reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) and artificial insemination by donor (AID). This topic has been well studied by O'Donovan, notably in his monograph *Begotten or Made?*,[3] and thus provides a suitable case study in which to apply the doctrinal implications of our thesis, and to evaluate their significance in a most practical and contemporary example.

Lex orandi lex credendi*: Evangelical ethics as doxology*

What makes evangelical ethics *evangelical* is its proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[4] Moral deliberation and action are thus acts of worship taking place in relationship with the Triune God of Grace.[5] Colwell identifies relationship and worship at the heart of evangelical ethics:

> Biblical morality is not so much about obedience to an external law, as living in the light of a relationship already established by God's grace. It is an aspect of belonging and a fruit of worship. [6]

There is a profound difference between this Trinitarian worship which proclaims Christ, and other sorts of non-evangelical "worship" which can be inspired by awe at the grandeur of nature or other sources of ecstatic experience. God's creation does indeed inspire worship of the Creator, as attested by the Psalms and God's rebuke of Job in [Job 38-41]. As O'Donovan says, reflecting on God's speech to Job, "nature excites a palpable sense of our human contingency and teaches us to worship".[7] We must be careful however, to distinguish between these forms of worship as equally valid sources of moral discernment, lest we slip into a worship of the creation, rather than the Creator. Such is the risk inherent in any movement between cosmologies. Evangelical ethics is thus bound inseparably with worship of the Triune God. We may identify several implications of this conclusion:

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[3] O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[4] John Webster establishes the crucial "doxological dimensions" of the "moral field", and establishes helpful boundaries around the notion of "sacramental ethics"; Webster, 'God and Conscience', *Calvin Theological Journal 33* no 1 (1998): 104-2, 114.

[5] Biggar's reading of Barth's dogmatics on this score is accurate: "it brings worship and prayer right into the very heart of Christian ethics." (*CD* III/3:89); *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988) 105.

[6] John Stapylton Habgood, *Varieties of Unbelief* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000) 55-6.

[7] O'Donovan, 'Where were you…?', in *The Care of Creation: Focusing on Concern and Action*, ed. R.J. Berry (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2000): 90-93, 90.

First, we see that evangelical preaching and teaching share a common struggle—wrestling with the text. In the pursuit of evangelical ethics, the theologian and teacher will each proceed in prayerful engagement with Scripture.[8]

Second, we realize that the teacher of evangelical ethics will attend to, and trust in, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to be at work in the students.[9] There is even a kind of playfulness here, as Moltmann recognizes—

> The word 'play' does not mean something superficial or casual. It is the profound, unreasoning pleasure in God's presence, which goes far beyond all the purpose-and profit rationality of instrumentalized human reason.[10]

Third, transformation (*metanoia*) of persons entails new creation. Evangelical ethics is rather more than a subject to be taught. It is an endeavor which proceeds by the power of the Holy Spirit. As one participates in the event of revelation which brings transformational understanding, *metanoia* occurs. This is a new creation *ex nihilo*, and not merely a new understanding generated within the natural capacity of *humanum*.

Fourth, doxology happens in *freedom*.[11] An evangelical understanding of freedom is therefore essential within a doctrine of evangelical ethics. An un-evangelical emphasis upon duty and human responsibility to discern right and wrong, relying upon an un-evangelical doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, moves in the opposite direction from the freedom realized in participation in Christ [cf. Gal. 2:20].[12]

Fifth, we may look for the transformation of persons, both incipient and actualized, as a guide to morality. This transformation may become a visible actuality in the concrete present, or it may remain mysteriously hidden until the hoped-for redemption of the eschaton. This

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[8] M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), makes this point eloquently.

[9] Zizioulas describes what happens when ethics is cut off from the life of the gospel—it turns into a dead "untouchable" dogma, buried in a dead orthodoxy, rather than what it truly is in reality: a living doxology, realized in the person of Christ and inseparable from his body. Thus, dogma is a living act of worship, and not a dead "relic" from the past; *Being in Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004) 191.

[10] Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Way and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 25.

[11] "The event of man's freedom is the event of his thankfulness for the gift, of his sense of responsibility as a receiver; of his loving care for what is given him…. This event alone is the event of freedom." Barth, *Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960) 76.

[12] In chapter 4 we saw how the theme of responsibility emerged in Brunner's bifurcated doctrine of the *imago*. As an additional example of the sense of moral duty that departs from the evangelical doctrine of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* as I have developed it, I cite Swinburne: "Although all action in accord with conscience is good, it is better…if it is done contrary to desire." Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 31. This is notably different from the sense of freedom found in Barth's ethics: "The gift of freedom makes man free to be not more and not less than human"; *Humanity of God*, 80.

transformation takes place in prayer and worship, as the moral agent experiences communion with Christ. The reality of transformation (*metanoia*) suggests that moral deliberation seeks to discover possibilities that might bear witness to the transforming power of the Gospel, and thus to create opportunities for self and others to experience that transformation.[13] This suggests a prescriptive appeal to seek moral actions that trust in the redeeming power of atonement, and to evaluate moral choices on the basis of their opportunity to bear witness to new creation in persons.

Implications for moral knowledge

Our view of personal transformation as being essential to both the acquisition of moral knowledge as well as the shape of the moral order raises serious implications for teaching, preaching and education. It means that the didactic content of ethics, in a theological sense at least, cannot be separated from the event in which learning takes place in the psyche of the learner.[14] The meaning of moral choices and behaviour is acquired in moments, and through events, which are theologically, ontologically and epistemologically inseparable from the ontic encounter in which they derive evangelical significance.

Thus if we aim to guide students into awareness and understanding of evangelical ethics, we shall be well advised to treat the Bible as something much more meaningful and powerful (transformative, even) than a field to be mined for "moral bricks". This approach to the subject matter of ethics is peculiar to our evangelical cosmology. Moral philosophy and metaphysics can proceed apace without such concern for revelation and personal transformation. This is not to disparage secular classrooms as places where virtue is sorely lacking. On the contrary, there is remarkable alignment of moral statements to be found between places where faith is absent, marginal or tacit, and those where it is robustly evangelical and voiced. O'Donovan has demonstrated convincingly how this alignment of moral teaching ensues form the ontological reality of the moral order. Still, the implication of

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[13] Alan Torrance shows that "epistemic at-one-ment and the *metanoia* intrinsic to the reconciling event of revelation" are intrinsic to God's creation *ex nihilo*; Torrance, *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 64. Thus, theological expression of ethics will pertain to persons-in-communion and *metanoia.*

[14] Here we hearken once again to the imagination of Kierkegaard's Climacus (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) who boldly replays the opening gambit of Socrates' *Meno Paradox* beginning with the simple question, "Can the truth be learned?" and comes to the conclusion that the learner could only learn by way of transformation at the hands of the 'Teacher', this being of course a euphemism for God.

our thesis should remain clear, that this alignment does not, in and of itself, grant *authority* to moral truth, nor do the principles themselves *contain* moral truth.

The teacher of evangelical ethics accepts a task both more daunting and more care-free than the teacher of moral philosophy—more daunting, because in teaching evangelical ethics, one must be concerned not only with the content of the subject matter, together with the ethos, pathos and logos of the appeal, but must also bear the additional burden of intentional seeking after faith. To focus merely on the content of moral principles is to miss the essential place of transformation in the life of a person who gains or discovers a conviction which imbues the moment of learning with an understanding of moral reality.[15] At the same time, the task of teaching evangelical ethics is the more care-free, because we recognize Jesus as the Teacher who makes our burden light and easy by taking upon himself the responsibility of being both Teacher and Logos.[16]

Begotten or Made?: *Implications for Moral Action*

Begotten or Made? represents O'Donovan's prompt response to the *Warnock Report* of 1984,[17] which has gone on to became one of the most authoritative and widely referenced policy statements of the past 25 years with respect to emerging technologies pertaining to human reproduction.[18] As a member of the Working Party of the Board of Social Responsibility for the Anglican Church, O'Donovan had concerns over the tendency of new reproductive technologies to skew moral discourse in the direction of treating fertilization,

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[15] James Loder offers an incisive analysis of knowing as a transformational event: "all transformational knowing participates in the knowledge of Christ as its norm and paradigm"; *The Transforming Moment,* 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989) 33. He develops a Christological understanding of knowledge as being inseparable from the order of creation itself: "As 'the Logos' (John 1:1), he is the ultimate ground for all order and so also the order of transformation" (64). Parker Palmer illustrates the paradoxical freedom experienced by a teacher who is cognizant of the contingency and real presence of transformation in the moment of learning; Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988). Ford and Hardy also appreciate this paradoxical freedom, and counsel wisely that to focus on moral principles as the heart of Christianity is "perhaps the most devastating perversion of all"; David Ford and Daniel Hardy, *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God* (London: Darton Longman, 2005) 180.

[16] Matt. 11:25-30; John 1:1; 14:6.

[17] This being the report to the UK government commissioned under the chairmanship of Dame Mary Warnock in 1982, M. Warnock (chair), *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilization and Embryology* (London: HMSO, 1984). Cf. *Begotten or Made*, v.

[18] The impact of both the *Warnock Report* and *Begotten or Made?* continues to be noticed in recent monographs such as: Agneta Sutton, *Christian Bioethics: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2008); and Celia Dean-Drummond, *Genetics and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

pregnancy, and reproduction as manufacturing techniques in which the child to be born would correspondingly come to be thought of as a "product" of human making, rather than a gift of divine providence.[19] This tendency of our contemporary western society to view ethical decisions from a technological point of view leads to a "blindness in the realm of thought [which] is the heart of what it is to be a technological culture."[20] Once we fall into the habit of evaluating every activity in terms of technology, ethics becomes a commentary on how best to use our manufacturing capability to achieve the greatest good. O'Donovan's fear is that this moral blindness brought on by the pervasive demands of technology for our attention "imperils what it is to be human, for it deprives human existence itself of certain spontaneities of being and doing".[21] This is a dire situation indeed, for if this blindness were to foreclose the opportunity to see the theological significance of choices to employ reproductive technologies, "the last shreds of a connection between procreation and being will be torn asunder".[22] Ever vigilant, therefore, to prevent evangelical ethics from being sidelined into an ineffectual, esoteric and closed circle which has no impact upon the broader cultural discourse,[23] O'Donovan states his goal for *Begotten or Made?*—

> A Christianity which will bear witness to God's Word in Jesus will be a speaking, thinking, arguing, debating Christianity, which will not be afraid to engage in intellectual and philosophical contest with the prevailing dogmas of its day.[24]

Following this call to engage the prevailing dogmas of our day, beholden as our culture is to technological prowess, O'Donovan sets out to analyze the bio-ethical concerns associated with *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), artificial insemination by donor (AID), surrogate motherhood (aka "womb leasing"), insemination by husband, embryo experimentation and related technologies.[25] He does not dwell on the biological science related to these

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[19] *Begotten or Made?,* 1, 73f. O'Donovan reacts against the suggestion of the Warnock Report that "the child born as a result of *in vitro* fertilization" would "tend to be assigned 'to the same status as other objects of acquisition'…"; p. 74. Sutton says that this concern placed O'Donovan in the conservative minority of the Working Party of the Board of Social Responsibility; A. Sutton, *Christian Bioethics*, 75.

[20] *Begotten or Made?,* 3.

[21] *Begotten or Made?,* 3.

[22] *Begotten or Made?,* 47.

[23] Thus the problem O'Donovan wishes to avoid is that "all Christian moral duties become analogous to such ecclesiastical house-rules as respect for the clergy … duties which presuppose membership of the church community and lay no claim on those outside it"; *R&MO*, 16.

[24] *Begotten or Made?,* 13.

[25] O'Donovan addresses all these technologies in *Begotten or Made?*

procedures, but rather moves quickly into consideration of the moral significance of marriage, sex, parenthood and relationship as the definitive factors for moral discernment.[26]

Given the weight of ontological priority in O'Donovan's concept of the moral order, it might seem surprising that he does not delve further into the biological science of these issues. After all, he expresses sympathy for "the natural ethic", which has led him to chastise Christian ethicists for a form of "theological weakness which has led to … a failure to reckon with creation, and so with the reality of a divinely-given order of things in which human nature itself is located."[27] If human nature could be discerned through the scientific study of the biological human organism, then it would seem prudent to extend that study to the earliest beginnings of human life, even *in utero*. But this quest to discern human nature and hence, the foundations for morality, in the material, bio-physical realm of creation using the tools observational tools and methods of the physical sciences, does not yield ethics in form recognizable as evangelical. True, the physical realm exists in congruence with the moral order of God's creation and the outworking of God's providence, and scientific study of the created order yields much data of immeasurable value when it comes to interpreting the theological significance of the moral order. Yet for as much as the physical, biological and behavioral sciences have a great wealth of knowledge to offer with respect to human nature and human flourishing, they fail utterly to impart theological significance to morality. They stand accessible to evangelical ethics, but evangelical ethics is not disposable to them.

The force of this asymmetry in the relationship between the bio-physical realm of the so-called "natural ethic" and the faith-embodying realm of evangelical ethics becomes quickly apparent in O'Donovan's treatment of the bio-ethical issues. He recognizes immediately that it will not do define the ontological status of the embryo, gamete or zygote in terms of bio-physical attributes. The crucial question is "who is a person?" and this question defies resolution in the phenomenological realm of scientific observation.[28] To answer this question

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[26] The biological evidence for the hominization in terms of discernment of the personhood of the early human embryo is profitably surveyed in Benny Phang Khong Wing, *The Contributions of Oliver O'Donovan and William Werpehowski to the Current Debate Over the Personhood of the Early Human Embryo*, Licentiate thesis, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 2005. Cf. Germain Grisez, When Do People Begin?', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 63 (1990): 27-47.

[27] *R&MO*, 16; cf. 19.

[28] Habgood is right to see this as the crucial distinction between Christian and non-Christian approaches to the questions at hand: "Christian attitudes towards such medical issues as abortion, euthanasia and genetic engineering, for instance, are often distinctive, not as is sometimes claimed because Christians value human life whereas others do not, but because Christian beliefs about what a person is, and when human life begins and ends, may differ from the beliefs of non-Christians"; John Stapylton Habgood, *Varieties of Unbelief* (London:

in the context of mere biology *simpliciter*, would be to run afoul of that danger to be found in a "philosophy bred by a scientism liberated from the discipline of Christian metaphysics".[29] The discipline of Christian obedience to the new-old love command taught by Christ moves the discussion of morality to its proper realm—the dynamics of Trinitarian faith. Thus, O'Donovan begins his essay on the sanctity of human life and the nature of the love command by recognizing the impossibility of answering "who is a person?" apart from faith:

> In the first place, then, there are no 'criteria of personhood' by which a person could be recognized independently of, or prior to, *personal engagement*... And the point I wish to make is that no conceivable set of purely observational criteria can answer that question positively or negatively for us.[30]

It is one thing to say there are no biological or physical or phenomenological "criteria of personhood", but this does not answer the question; rather, it rules out certain epistemological presumptions which would fail to reach an answer. And so, O'Donovan identifies the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' [Luke 10:29-37] as the paradigmatic approach to the question of personhood. To ask "who is a person?" is equivalent to asking "who is my neighbor?" [Luke 10:29].[31] And since there are no phenomenological criteria with which to answer this question, we are left standing in the only place where an answer may be sought: face-to-face in an ontic encounter. The priest and the Levite, who passed by the injured man on the road, might represent those conceptual "criteria of personhood" which fail to recognize the other as a person or neighbor. But the man on the side of the road does not fit their conceptual categories, as the parable demonstrates. He is not an abstraction; he is not defined by a metaphysical concept of what makes a person or neighbor. We discover in the parable the ontic reality which forces an answer upon us from outside our conceptual apparatus. Thus, O'Donovan says rightly: "All we can do is *act personally*, as person or as friend."[32] Lest we stray into the ontological abstractions of a bifurcation of the *imago Dei*, or inadvertently fall into the error of *analogia entis*, we have only one place to stand as we answer the question, and that is in the presence of the other, who is defined not in terms of our concepts, nor by

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Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000) 57. Cf. Habgood, *Being a Person: Where Faith and Science Meet* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998).

[29] *R&MO*, 52.

[30] O'Donovan, Oliver, 'Again: Who is a Person?' in *Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life*, ed. J.H. Channer, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985): 125-37, 127-8.

[31] O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a Person?', 125f. Cf. *Begotten or Made?*, 60.

[32] O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a Person?', 130.

means of projecting our notions of self-hood, but rather in the mystery of personal engagement. And so in the final analysis, the mystery of this encounter is inescapable as we seek to discern what makes a person a person, and O'Donovan closes his essay on this note:

> It is true, as we have emphasized, that the human person resists exhaustive analysis, that it has its root in the mystery of divine vocation whereby God confers our individual existence upon us as he calls us by our names.[33]

This insistence upon ontic encounter between persons, together with the mystery of divine vocation wherein we recognize our existence as a person defined as one whom is known and loved by God, are the epistemological good news of the Gospel, and the essential foundation for an evangelical answer to the question, "who is a person?" Thus, Jesus' parable teaches us to recognize one another not in terms of biological or ontological criteria, attributes or substances, but rather in compassion: "when he saw him, he had compassion."[34]

We may contrast O'Donovan's treatment of the mystery of personhood with others' who seek to align their answers more rigorously with the epistemological presumptions of a "natural ethic". Germain Grisez, for one, argues for a dogmatic link between biological criteria and the metaphysics of person attributable to Boethius:

> I think that all whole, bodily, substantial individuals of any species having a rational nature are persons, and that most human individuals begin at fertilization. On this notion, most human people begin when a human sperm and ovum fuse.[35]

In so doing, he refutes the conclusion of Mary Warnock that "one can handle the relevant moral issues without settling the question of personhood".[36] Along the same lines, we would expect Grisez to take exception to O'Donovan's conclusion that there is "no conceivable set of purely observational criteria can answer that question".[37] Grisez's analytical method illustrates how the epistemological presumptions of a "natural ethic" move the ethical issue of personhood quickly into debate over which bio-physical criteria are determinative. He thus takes exception to the argument that the onset of personhood is best determined by the

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[33] O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a Person?', 137.
[34] O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a Person?', 137.
[35] Germain Grisez, 'When Do People Begin?', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 63 (1990): 27-47, 28.
[36] Grisez, 'When Do People Begin?', 29.
[37] O'Donovan, 'Again: Who is a Person?', 127-8.

biological phenomenon of the appearance of the "primitive streak" at about day fourteen of the embryo's life.[38]

Christian ethicists Agneta Sutton and Celia Deane-Drummond also seek to establish the biological onset of personhood, and their efforts illustrate the nature of the debate which evolves from the attempt to define personhood in bio-ontological terms. Sutton evaluates the arguments based upon the pluri-potentiality of early embryonic cells, twinning and the formation of the primitive streak.[39] She finds the twinning argument the most substantial. In none of these arguments does she cite the relationship of persons with God as an ontological determinant of personhood, although she identifies the familial relationships between persons as the being essential in the definition of human personhood. Nonetheless, her definition is constrained by biological physicalism, and fails to take into consideration the relational aspect of the Trinitarian God.

Deane-Drummond draws upon Aquinas, and bases ethics upon "principles [which] are set in the first place by *synderēsis*, which in turn arises from natural law, the most general and naturally understood principles of ethical conduct."[40] She endorses a "natural ethic" and gives O'Donovan credit for setting out to establish Christian ethics in concert with a "natural ethic". In this regard she affirms O'Donovan's ethics as being superior to the "Barthian view of ethics" which she attributes to Michael Banner:

> In this respect Oliver O'Donovan's position is far more successful, since it tends toward a strong affirmation of the natural order while insisting on the distinctive contribution of theology.[41]

The interesting conclusion to be drawn from such bio-ontological approaches to the debate over the onset of personhood is that they each seek to affirm a "natural ethic", and they find O'Donovan helpful in this regard.[42] Despite the support for their views which Sutton and

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[38] Grisez, 'When Do People Begin?', 35-40. The ethical significance of the "primitive streak" is maintained by Norman M. Ford, *When Did I Begin?: Conception of the Human Individual in History, Philosophy and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[39] Agneta Sutton, *Christian Bioethics: a Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2008) 19-22.

[40] Celia Deane-Drummond, *Genetics and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 16.

[41] Celia Deane-Drummond, *Genetics and Christian Ethics*, 36. Cf., Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Deane-Drummond goes on to interpret O'Donovan's ethics as being an example of how, in contradistinction to Barth, "there is no reason why dogmatic ethics has to be deontological"; *Genetics and Christian Ethics*, 37.

[42] Deane-Drummond offers the clearest commentary on O'Donovan pertaining to this point: "…he argues that we are in an unfortunate position between having to choose an ethic that is revealed and has no ontological grounding, and one that is based on creation and naturally known. He argues, instead, for an intermediate

Deane-Drummond claim to find in O'Donovan's ethics, he seems to rise above the fray of their debate when it comes to the matter of the biological foundations of human personhood which can be discerned through scientific study of the early embryo. He does not become embroiled in the technicalities of biological observation of embryonic cells, but rather bases his rationale of personhood, as well as the ethical significance thereof, upon the ontic, relational and ultimately mysterious divine vocation which defines what it means to be a called a person. Hence, his argument throughout *Begotten or Made?* never strays far from the conclusion that "the Christian thinkers of the patristic age learned that no qualitative term would ever do to express Christ's individual identity, and so (by implication) that no simply qualitative term would ever do to express identity as such."[43] By this insight, he seems to avoid the unrelenting tendency of such debates to descend into a never-ceasing discussion of the biological and phenomenological boundary conditions which obtain at the boundaries of life. As with other boundary issues, we discover that these boundaries are like the mathematics of fractals and the geography of coastlines—no matter how fine the observation becomes, the boundary itself continues to require discernment from a transcendent, or higher, perspective.[44]   The person is not determined by the protoplasm, or the border contained in the grain of sand. Personhood is not to be discerned by testing for it on the basis of biological or ontological attributes, capacities of the *humanum*, behavioral phenomenology or "the most sophisticated biological test",[45] but rather:

> We discern persons only by love, by discovering through interaction and commitment that this human being is irreplaceable... If we assert that it is true of all human beings, we do so by a kind of faith (not unrelated to Christian faith) that the significance we have discerned in those we have loved is a significance which God attributes to all members of Adam's race.[46]

Here O'Donovan is clearly developing his ethics within a cosmology of faith. This seeking after an understanding of what it means to be a human person is clearly an act of *fides quaerens intellectum*. There is no dialectical shift of cosmological stance here. There is

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position, one that begins from revelation, while not excluding "natural knowledge". Such view might suggest some lines of continuity between those Roman Catholics following natural-law ethical traditions, and Barthian ethics"; Deane-Drummond, *Genetics and Christian Ethics*, 35-6.

[43] *Begotten or Made?*, 53-4.

[44] As O'Donovan concludes rightly with respect to the biological boundaries of personhood in the early embryo, it is not possible to avoid the "*ambiguity* of the status of the embryo research subject"; *Begotten or Made?*, 65.

[45] *Begotten or Made?*, 59.

[46] *Begotten or Made?*, 59.

no bifurcation of the *imago Dei*. There is no hint of the controversy to which those movements lead regarding the dogmatics of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*. For when it comes to the practical application of evangelical ethics in this case, driven by the need to avoid the unfortunate conclusions which spring from a "natural ethic", we see that O'Donovan holds fast to the cosmology of evangelical faith.[47] I take this as confirmation of my thesis regarding the dynamics of faith as the providing essential epistemic access to moral knowledge. Correspondingly, we see that O'Donovan frames the ethical issues of personhood, marriage and parenthood in terms of relationships, and the significance of these relationships is found not in the biological, phenomenological realm of natural law, but rather in the realm of faith in the Trinitarian God whom we know through Christ.[48] These are transformational relationships, outside of which the concept of moral order fails to convey evangelical truth.[49]

Support for my conclusion regarding O'Donovan's display of faith in *Begotten or Made?* comes from Benny Wing, who sums up O'Donovan's position on the status of the early human embryo as a "relational paradigm".[50] While demonstrating O'Donovan's paradigm, based in biblical faith, to be superior to the biologically-based paradigms of Ford and others, Wing has but one critique of *Begotten or Made?*—namely, that O'Donovan should pay more attention to the "need to develop a method within [his] paradigm to address the public square with [his] Christian values."[51] Wing seems not to notice the irony in this conclusion— evangelical ethics proves superior to the naturalistic ethics of the public square *precisely because it holds true to the cosmology of faith*, without presuming to accept the task that it

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[47] This is not to say that O'Donovan abdicates his defense of the value to be derived from the "natural ethic", or that his affinity for it in *R&MO* lacks continuity with the practical matters of *Begotten or Made?* To the contrary, we can see his affinity for the idea of natural access to the moral order in the present work as well; to wit, his admonition to Christians to confess "faith in the natural order as the good creation of God"; *Begotten or Made?* 12; and similarly: "In the natural order we were given to know what a parent was" (p. 48). The point is that when it comes to the practical ethical questions pertaining to IVF and AID, the cosmology of faith shines through as the essential cosmology.

[48] John Jefferson Davis affirms the personal dimension, and the impossibility of severing it from the biological dimension, in consideration of reproductive technologies; Davis, *Evangelical Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1985) 72f. Cf. O'Donovan's evangelical insights on the subject of human dignity as being defined in terms of the event in which "God speaks in the second person… We are no longer merely *instances* of *homo sapiens*: we are—as we say, for want of a better term—*persons*"; O'Donovan, *The Word in Small Boats: Sermons from Oxford*, ed. Andy Draycott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 137.

[49] Support for this conclusion comes also from Edwin C. Hui, *At the Beginning of Life: Dilemmas in Theological Bioethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002). Hui develops an "ethic of personhood" and applies it profitably to the ethics of reproductive technologies, coming to conclusions which are very sympathetic to O'Donovan's.

[50] Benny Phang Khong Wing, *The Contributions of Oliver O'Donovan and William Werpehowski to the Current Debate Over the Personhood of the Early Human Embryo*, Licentiate thesis, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 2005: 65.

[51] Benny Wing, *The Contributions of Oliver O'Donovan*, 91.

should somehow validate the cosmology of the public square. Wing's observation, based on a close and insightful reading of *Begotten or Made?* confirms my conclusion that the cosmology of faith proves to be the dominant voice in O'Donovan treatment of the bio-ethical issues.

When we examine the train of thought on display in O'Donovan's grappling with the fractious issues surrounding reproductive technology, therefore, we see that the cosmology of evangelical faith proves decisive, and he must move beyond any dialectical epistemology, and rely upon the relationships discerned through a living faith, in order to rise above debate over bio-ontological boundary issues. We discover through the deliberations of evangelical ethics that *the moral order is not discernable apart from the transformation of persons*. I endorse both the evangelical faith on display here, as well as O'Donovan's conclusions for practical ethics, as he warns against the experimental use of human embryos, and the unfortunate implications it holds for the science of reproductive technologies—

> If we should wish to charge our own generation with crimes against humanity because of the practice of this experimental research, I would suggest that the crime should not be the old-fashioned crime of killing babies, but the new and subtle crime of making babies to be ambiguously human, of presenting to us members of our own species who are doubtfully proper objects of compassion and love. The practice of producing embryos by IVF with the intention of exploiting their special status for use in research is td clearest possible demonstration of the principle that when we start making human beings we necessarily stop loving them; that that which is made rather than begotten becomes something that we have at our disposal, not someone with whom we can engage in brotherly fellowship.[52]

This admonition is based in the evangelical affirmation that our humanity is defined in terms of our relationship the Triune God. To be aware of this relationship is to live in obedience to God who "calls us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ… to become precisely what he made us to be."[53] It is in our awareness of this call, and our concomitant call to brotherly love, that we discern the evangelical basis of our humanity. Our humanity and loving fellowship are based in the mediation of Christ.

These practical conclusions regarding *Begotten or Made?* bear out the doctrinal implications surveyed in the previous chapter regarding a holistic theological anthropology which understands the *imago Dei* in terms of the relationship between God and human person. Of particular importance is the implication that the universal subsists in the particular,

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[52] *Begotten or Made?* 65.
[53] *Begotten or Made?* 66.

when it comes to human dignity. General, abstract concepts fail to establish the moral reality of living in relationship to the God who speaks to human persons. This is why it is not helpful to proceed from general categorical statements of humanity, such as O'Donovan's statement that we relate "to one another as members of common kind, as man alongside man"[54], in "recognition of the supreme good"[55] doesn't work unless that love is mediated by Christ's love for us.

The moral significance of the person transcends general categories of the bio-ontological debate, and resides rather in the particular relationship of a person who is created and loved by God. If we fail to locate human significance in the individual event of human relationship, we commit a category mistake by constraining the meaning of personhood to be defined in conceptual categories, rather than to recognize the person of Christ as the basis for understanding our humanity and our relationships. Thus, in order to avoid that mistake O'Donovan notes the particular, individual aspect of what it means to be a human being:

> He is not merely a chip off the block of total humanity, but someone who is human. This perception has its roots in the biblical understanding of individual vocation. Prior to those events, which bring our humanity to being, we are called by God; 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you' (Jer. 1:5)[56]

In order to arrive at a moral understanding of the person, of the human, or indeed any concept of the *humanum* in general, the person must be known as an individual: a specific, unique person with a history. Here is the implication for evangelical ethics, as spelled out in the previous chapter, that the universal is true only in the particular. O'Donovan is right to name this particularity as of the essence in the ethical considerations of the embryo, pregnancy and begetting. Evangelical ethics is not beholden to be constrained by the general concepts of those biological functions. To stay in the realm of the conceptual is to cede the moral field to the physical and materialistic realm of experimental science. Theological ethics will not be determined within the non-evangelical constraints of the biological realm. Those constraints devolve into ever tighter circles of trying to locate where the boundary lines are to be drawn

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[54] *R&MO*, 228.

[55] *R&MO*, 229. Cf. O'Donovan goes on to elaborate, "We are to love the neighbor 'as our-self' by losing all sense of the distinction between him our our-self, expanding our self-consciousness to include him in radical empathy…;' it is about the full realization of individuality in a commonness of sharing and reciprocation." Similarly, to propose a loss of distinction between our-self *vis a vis* the other-self commits the same category mistake if not mediated by the reality of Christ. Paul Ramsey proves the point when he explains that the basis for being equal to the other is that we, both self and other, are God's creatures; Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1950) 94. Cf. Benny Wing, *The Contributions of Oliver O'Donovan* , 73.

[56] *R&MO*, 238.

around meaning of life, and questions such as, "Who is a person?" Again, we see that when it comes to the practical matters of an evangelical ethics of personhood, "Humanity meets us already itemized and individuated; the sacred claim rests in the individual and not in any other arbitrary division of humanity…"[57] Thus O'Donovan points out the specificity required to answer the question of personhood—

> We met him—I say 'the person', but it is very important not to think that 'the person' is another kind of constituent,… a category mistake to try to demonstrate the presence or absence of a person by proving that this or that biological or neurological function is present or absent. It is a category mistake to say that a new conceptus cannot be a person until there is brain activity; it is a category mistake to say that it must be a person because there is an individual genetic structure. For, whatever criteria we take, we end up by reducing the notion of personhood to that one constituent of human functioning.[58]

Correspondingly, when arguing for the humanity of the embryo on the basis of love of neighbor, it becomes quickly apparent that the ethical questions are inextricably bound to a Christological understanding of theological anthropology. Christ is the basis for the love of others; this neighbor-love is the basis for interpretation of the status of the relationships which pertain to the status of the human embryo. This love is the foundation of the "true moral life of the Christian community… and its love is unintelligible except as a participation in the life of the one who reveals himself to us as Love."[59]

Conclusion

We have pressed the point of asking what it means for ethics to be *evangelical*, and how an evangelical ethics might properly speak of moral order when faced with the hermeneutical pressures of present-day secular western culture. In so doing, we have found Prof. Oliver O'Donovan to be a strong proponent for an approach to evangelical ethics which can hold its own in the milieu of the modern moral imaginary. He works to establish evangelical ethics on a footing that remains intrinsically and unabashedly evangelical while simultaneously engaging in fruitful dialog with the ethics of our secular age. His desire is to present "a

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[57] O'Donovan, *The Christian and the Unborn Child* (Bramcote, UK: Grove Books, 1973) 10.
[58] O'Donovan, 'Who is a Person?' 128.
[59] *R&MO*, 246.

speaking, thinking, arguing, debating Christianity, which will not be afraid to engage in intellectual and philosophical contest with the prevailing dogmas of its day." [60] He aims to chart a course of well-balanced reason amidst the competing tensions within theological ethics. We have discovered that O'Donovan's desire to affirm the rational aspects of theological deliberation, as opposed to the subjective aspects of faith, leads to him to give priority to objective statements of ethics as though they could be separated from the subjective experience of faith. Hence, in the course of *R&MO*, we learn that "a subjective chapter of ethics which must *follow* (and *must* follow) from the objective chapter."[61] Based upon this premise, O'Donovan gives priority to the deliberative powers of reason in the pursuit of moral knowledge. His goal is to resolve the conflicts and paradoxes of theological (and evangelical) ethics which he attributes to an unfortunate confusion over the relative placements of subjective faith experience and objective moral deliberation. By defining the problem of moral theology in these terms, he has set himself the goal of resolving the conflict and dispelling the confusion—

> ...and that I attempt to do in conceiving of theology as deliberative reasoning, encountering experience where philosophy has always encountered it, not as 'source' but as *questio,* as a puzzle that insists on being addressed. [62]

His outline for evangelical ethics shows how he intends to solve the puzzle, as it were. We have probed this puzzle-solving endeavor, paying particular attention to the doctrinal implications of the outline for evangelical ethics as presented in *R&MO*. Our study discovered a tendency within Prof. O'Donovan's epistemological realism to employ a dialectical opposition of cosmologies—sometimes building upon the witness of evangelical faith, and sometimes upon the authority of an objectifiable natural ethic—as a means of avoiding the paradox of evangelical faith, and thereby solving the puzzle as he has stated it.

The impetus for this dialectical epistemology stems from Prof. O'Donovan's desire to avoid the detrimental repercussions of voluntarism which he detects in contemporary theology, and which he traces to Kierkegaardian existentialism. He attributes the problem, and hence, the puzzle, to the "polarity between revelation in the particular and created order in the universal".[63] His goal therefore, is to prevent the polarity from collapsing, for that leads

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[60] *Begotten or Made?,* 13.
[61] *R&MO*, xix.
[62] O'Donovan, 'Deliberation, History and Reading', 130.
[63] *R&MO*, 85; cf. 87.

only into the paradoxical aspects of faith. Seeking to maintain "the proper tension between the transcendence and the incarnate nearness of God",[64] he looks back on the Tudor Reformers with admiration for their diligence to hold the polarity together in "a very nearly perfect balance."[65] This perfect balance he seeks to recover through a commitment to evangelical and epistemological realism, and as we have discovered, that leads to an endorsement of ontological priority for the creation of the moral order.

While arguing for the objective reality of the moral order as an ontological fact independent of, and prior to, the conditions which grant epistemic access to moral reality, O'Donovan develops dogmatic statements of theological anthropology which lead to conflict with the affirmations of evangelical witness. The crux of the matter revolves around the issue of immanent, natural access to moral knowledge, as we have seen in his support for the concept of a "natural ethic" which affirms the objective reality of an objective "order of things" within which Christian ethics has "an objective reference".[66] This emphasis upon the objectivity of the moral order leads to the problematic assertion that the moral content of creation, as an objective reality "remains accessible to knowledge in part. It requires no revelation to observe the various forms of generic and teleological order which belong to it." Upon reaching this conclusion, O'Donovan turns immediately to the Barth-Brunner debate over *theologia naturalis*, where he discerns correctly that the epistemological and ontological issues pertaining to revelation of the moral order occupy center stage.[67]

With sympathy for Brunner and admiration for Barth, O'Donovan suggests that neither of them was able to see how confused they each were over their need to separate the epistemological and ontological issues. O'Donovan's approach requires these issues to be separated one from another, and considered as though they were distinct disciplines which could be employed independently and in a sequentially in the pursuit of theological ethics.

Following O'Donovan's reference to the Barth-Brunner debate as a seminal example of this sort of confusion in modern theology, we probed that famous debate in order to discover how it impinges upon O'Donovan's evangelical ethics. Our analysis discovered how Brunner's dialectical approach to establish a point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) for the divine-human encounter corresponds with O'Donovan's desire to sort out the confusion between the ontological and the epistemological issues pertaining to moral knowledge. In

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[64] *39 Articles*, 20.
[65] *39 Articles*, 64.
[66] *R&MO*, 17.
[67] *R&MO*, 86-91.

Brunner's case, this leads to a dialectical bifurcation of the *imago*; whereas in O'Donovan's case, it leads to a dialectical approach to evangelical realism, and endorsement of both an objectifiable "natural ethic" as well as a subjective faith as paths to moral knowledge. The challenges inherent in this dialectical approach become clear in light of the doctrinal implications of *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, which corresponds to the human aspect of the elusive "point of contact" in which the event of revelation, the dynamics of faith, and participation in the innertrinitarian life of God, all converge.

Thus we found that the Barth-Brunner disagreement over *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* provides a lens onto O'Donovan's approach to solve the puzzle of theological ethics by sorting out the confusion over the ontological and epistemological issues. Next, our analysis of the "Kierkegaardian Knot" cast a spotlight upon O'Donovan's approach to address the paradox of faith. His polemical effort to avoid arbitrariness and voluntarism leads him adopt an epistemological standpoint unconstrained by certain paradoxical aspects of faith. In presuming to have access to such a standpoint, he cuts the Kierkegaardian Knot which binds the concept of moral order together with the event of faith, and this leads him, whether implicitly or explicitly, to develop a dialectical epistemology.

Based upon this analysis, we explored the hermeneutical significance of participation in Christ and *metanoia* as aspects of the cosmology of faith. This analysis exposes the challenges to evangelical ethics which arise from a dialectical movement between cosmologies. We conclude that O'Donovan's evangelical realism has difficulty sustaining evangelical doctrines of Holy Spirit and the Trinity.

As a concluding application and test of our thesis, we delved into O'Donovan's intensive treatment of the practical ethical concerns related to new reproductive technologies such as IVF and AID. Here we found his conclusions to be both worthy in light of evangelical ethics, and consistent with our thesis that moral discernment occurs in faith and thus in relationship with the triune God. Our analysis demonstrated, however, that the moral deliberations involved and the conclusions he reaches are derived not from dialectically opposed cosmologies, but rather from within the cosmology of faith.

In conclusion, we can affirm that evangelical ethics is inextricably bound up with faith; it proceeds in the direction of *fides quaerens intellectum* which happens within the cosmology of faith, and not along other directions, however parallel they might seem to run, however pleasing they might be to behold in light of moral metaphysics and the modern moral imaginary.

By faith we are transformed. By faith we gain epistemic access to the moral order. Ethics, evangelically speaking, is a movement of doxology, filled with life, and taking place within the cosmology of faith. There is no other entrance to evangelical ethics; there is no "backdoor" onto ethics opened by a dialectical epistemology. We must enter through the "narrow gate" [John 10:1-6] of relationship with Christ. Whether we look back from the resurrection to see the goodness of God's created order, or forward to see his act of eschatological transformation, and hence vindication, we are looking from *within* the vantage of evangelical faith, not stepping outside of that faith in the presumption of standing on some Archimedean point. God alone is "self-contained, self-containing reality".[68] There is no other reality upon which to build either ethics or theology. To presume otherwise is an illusion—an illusion destroyed by encounter with the self-revealing God.[69] This may seem disconcerting if we desire to find our footing in the realm of objective concepts, or to present our deliberations in the clothing of objective reasoning, yet it is of the essence in faith and evangelical ethics. Is there a moral reality to be found *there*, in the event of the self-revealing God, and in the transformational agency of the Holy Spirit? Yes, there is. The moral order is *there*—in that place, the place of God's self-revelation. It will be found in and through the encounter with the living God, which takes place as we participate in the innertrinitarian life of God, in Jesus Christ, and by the movement of the Holy Spirit.

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[68] *CD* II/1 (271).
[69] *CD* II/1 (271).

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