

TRUTH AND LANGUAGE IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. Torrance

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ABSTRACT: Truth and the language we use to speak of the truth can never be separated in Torrance's critical realist epistemology, but this does not mean that they can be identified. This essay explores Torrance's deeply interrelated theories of truth and language and draws out some concrete implications that are helpful for moving forward in the dialogues surrounding theological epistemology and methodology.

Torrance's Critical Realist Epistemology

Before we can say anything of consequence on the topic of truth and language in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance, we must point out that he holds to a critical realist epistemology.¹ We will deal with elements of this epistemology, particularly the elements of truth and language in this paper, but we must begin with some brief discussion of the major themes of his critical realism here.

The key issues are that Torrance believes that there is a reality external to the mind of the subject and that this reality is knowable. This knowability is "*presupposed* by all human beings in everyday intercourse with the world and *confirmed* by successful scientific endeavor."² However, it is also important

1 "I have found myself to accept this epistemology of *critical realism*, but it has challenged me to rethink the whole question of *being*" (Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* [Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh: 1985], 132).

2 Elmer Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding his Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 2001), 60; Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and*

that, though this knowability is presupposed and actually confirmed in human beings, it is not automatic. The suitable structural kinship between the human mind and external reality is not latent in the human mind but can and must be developed through actual contact with reality.³ This applies with equal force to our knowledge of the natural world as it does to our knowledge of God. As Torrance points out from time to time, children learn more about the physical world around them by the time they are five years old than they would ever be able to explain, even if they were to become brilliant physicists.⁴

As part of his realist conviction, Torrance rejects radical epistemological and cosmological dualisms of both ancient and modern origin in favor of a unitary understanding of knowledge.⁵ In particular, Torrance opposes a sharp dualism between the knower and what they seek to know, as is so often held by post-Kantian philosophy. Though there is no necessary or inherent connection between the knower and the reality they seek to know, Torrance insists that such a connection is *possible*. When dualistic ways of thinking are imported into our knowledge, elements that are found together in experience are torn apart. Instead, Torrance insists that, in our most basic experience, form and content are not separable from one another. In fact, Torrance believes that this dividing of “aspects of reality that are naturally integrated” has a “damaging effect in

Scientific Theology, 27.

3 This “actual contact” with reality is implied in the success of our science, but is not reducible to it. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 60; Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 1999), 10; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 27. For a concrete example of how this happens with biblical revelation, see Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 37–38.

4 What Torrance has in mind here is similar to Polanyi’s notion of a “tacit dimension” in all knowledge. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1980), 13; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 48.

5 Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 57. Also see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 60–61, where Torrance understands “a unitary relation between the empirical and theoretical ingredients in the structure of the real world and in our knowledge of it” to be definitive of realism. However, Torrance wants to maintain a “proper dualism” between God and the created world. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1969), 71.

different areas of knowledge.”⁶ Particularly relevant for the purpose of this paper is that Torrance insists there can be a real relation between sign and thing signified.⁷

Torrance does not speak about the nature of truth in some way that is detached from the actual body of Christian revelation, but all his discussions are based firmly on the content of that revelation. What can be confusing for those who are new to Torrance’s work is that he does not emphasize this point very frequently. At the beginning of his monumental work on theological method, *Theological Science*, Torrance points out that his approach is self-consciously *Christian* and implicitly rooted in the depth of Christian theology:

It must be said right away, that what is offered in this discussion presupposes the full content of theological knowledge, and is an attempt to set forth the way of proper theological knowledge in accordance with that content – although, of course, little of that positive content can be expounded here. It is to be granted also that what is offered here is not fully meaningful if considered in abstraction from that material content.⁸

As clear as this statement is, he never asserts this point with such clarity again for the rest of the work. The fully integrated relation between theological method and content in Torrance’s work can be found in the first four chapters in his important work, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity and how it arises.⁹

6 See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1992), 1-5; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 40-44; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 9-10, 97-98; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville: 1980), 146-149. For Torrance’s understanding of Athanasius’ rejection of cosmological and epistemological dualisms, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1995), 212-213.

7 Thomas F. Torrance, “Theological Realism,” in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, eds. B. Hebblethwaite and S. Sutherland (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1982), 172-173.

8 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 10-11. Also see *Ground and Grammar*, 155-156, where Torrance admits that, though he will not seek to explain the doctrine of the Trinity within that chapter, it is nevertheless assumed in his thinking.

9 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1-111.

As a corollary to this, Torrance's theological method is deliberately *a posteriori*, as indeed it cannot help but be if it is based on revelation, that is, content that is given from beyond ourselves.¹⁰

A genuine theology is distrustful of all speculative thinking or of all *a priori* thought. Theological thinking is essentially positive, thinking that keeps its feet on the ground of actuality; *a posteriori*, thinking that follows and is obedient to the given and communicated Word and Act of God as the material for its reflection; and *empirical*, thinking out of real experience of God determined by God.¹¹ "In no authentic knowledge do we begin with epistemology and then on the ground of theory independently argued go on to develop our actual knowledge."¹²

Torrance is adamant that we must not start with questions as to the *possibility* of knowledge but with the conviction that we have *actually* achieved knowledge, and only on such grounds ask how such knowledge has arisen and to what degree that knowledge is truly rooted in the reality in question.¹³

10 See the discussion of God's self-revelation in *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1–24.

11 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 33.

12 Torrance often rails against the allowing of theoretical factors to distort empirical factors in investigation, but he is very much aware that empirical factors do not stand alone. Empirical and theoretical factors are always related in a dialectical way and Torrance often prefers to speak of "empirico-theoretical" investigation because of this. See Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Wipf & Stock, Eugene: 1997), 165.

13 This touches on the role that "ultimate beliefs" play in Torrance's thought. Though anything resembling a full treatment of such beliefs is beyond the scope of this essay, it is sufficient to note that Torrance believes that the conviction that we do in fact know things is an ultimate belief (on which we stake our lives) that can neither be verified nor falsified, but arises under the pressure of reality on persons. See *Theological Science*, 25–54; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 80–81. For Torrance on ultimate beliefs, see primarily his essays "Ultimate Beliefs and the Scientific Revolution," in *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1984), 191–214, and "The Framework of Belief" in *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Handsel Press, Edinburgh: 1980), 1–27.

The Distinction between the Truth of Being and the Truthfulness of Statements

Before we discuss Torrance's understanding of truth in general, we must first understand how he defined "truth" and note some basic distinctions that were crucial to many of his most important discussions on the nature of truth. Perhaps the clearest definition of truth is found in Torrance's essay, "truth and authority in the Church."¹⁴ In this essay, he explains that he is concerned to put forward an understanding of truth by using the language of the church Fathers, early medievals, Augustine, and Anselm.¹⁵ he says,

The truth is that which is what it is and that which discloses what it is as it is. The concept of truth enshrines at once the reality of things and the revelation of things as they are in reality. truth comes to view in its own majesty, freedom and authority, compelling us by the power of what it is to assent to it and acknowledge it for what it is in itself.¹⁶

Within this manner of defining the truth, Torrance believes that we have an interweaving of both hebrew and Greek notions of truth; the former emphasizing truth as consistency and faithfulness, rooted primarily in the faithfulness of God to who God is, the latter which spoke of truth as the reality of things, "their *aletheia* or *physis*."¹⁷ It is important to understand, as we will clarify later, that this is a realist understanding of truth, as opposed to both existentialist philosophy and nominalism. For Torrance, truth has ontology; it is what really *is*.

Because of the tendency to either collapse the truth of signification and the truth of being together or to separate them entirely, Torrance often makes a point of providing an analysis (based on Anselm's *De Veritate*) of the many ways we can speak of something as "true."¹⁸ For the sake of completeness,

14 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 303–332.

15 Ibid., 310.

16 Ibid., 303. Also cp. *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 140–147; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 126–127; *Theological Science*, 141–143.

17 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 310–311. Also cp. *Theological Science*, 141. For a summary of truth in the whole of the biblical tradition, see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 123–124.

18 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 127–135; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 141–147.

we will summarize the entire argument, and then indicate the key points for understanding Torrance's thought.

One crucial aspect which, unfortunately, cannot be fully discussed here is Torrance's conviction that all knowledge is fundamentally *personal* in nature.¹⁹ This extends to our knowledge of truth and our theory of language. In all of this discussion, it is important to remember that we are not dealing with knowledge or understanding that is somehow detached from ourselves as persons, but that there is a personal, tacit dimension that shapes what we know and perceives connections that cannot be reduced to entirely explicit articulation.

This personal character that is required in theological inquiry is not, however, a lapse back into subjectivism but

a responsible participation of the person as an active rational agent in the acts of understanding, but a participation that is controlled from beyond the knowing person by objective reality and universal standards which transcend his subjectivity.²⁰

Torrance is adamant that only a *person* is able to make judgments, understand or intend meaning, discern patterns, and be committed to reality and truth.²¹

To return to our summary, the first point to note in Torrance's analysis of the *De Veritate* is that we must distinguish between two "truths of statement."²² The first of these refers to whether or not a statement makes verbal sense. If it does, we can say that the statement is "true" inasmuch as it does what it is meant to do, that is, in this case, function as a statement. We could call this the "syntactical truth" of a statement. Both Torrance and Anselm grant that we do

19 Torrance is most frequently engaged in dialogue on this point with Michael Polanyi. Crucial discussions on this topic can be found in the essays, "The Place of Michael Polanyi in the Modern Philosophy of science," *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge*, 107–173, and "The Social Coefficient of Knowledge" in *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 98–130. Also see *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 61–72.

20 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 45. For Torrance on the personal and participatory nature of all knowledge (including theological knowledge), see "The Social Coefficient of Knowledge," in *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 98–130.

21 For a particularly outstanding and concise explanation of this issue, from which this brief treatment is primarily drawn, see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 45–46.

22 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 128; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 144; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 320–322.

not usually mean this when we say that a statement is true, but it is important to note because, if a statement is not true in this way, it cannot be true in any of the other ways.

The second truth of statement deals with whether or not a statement directs attention away from itself to a state of affairs beyond itself. We could call this the "semantic truth" of a statement. Again, if a statement is to have semantic truth, it must also have syntactic truth, but it is entirely possible for a statement to have syntactic truth and yet not have semantic truth, as happens, for example, when a statement does not direct us to a true state of affairs. If a statement has both syntactic truth and semantic truth, it has what Torrance and Anselm call "truth of signification."²³

The truth of signification, by definition, cannot stand alone, but implies the connection between the statement and the thing signified. The truth of signification is dependent on the truth of being which, to put it as simply as possible, is "what really exists." For example, if I were to say, "The sheet of paper on which this document is printed is white," the truth or falsity of the statement would not be rooted in the statement itself, but in the reality to which it refers.²⁴ If it happened that this document were to be printed on paper of some other color, it would make the statement false, for it would no longer refer to something that is true independently of the statement.

The truth of signification is of extreme importance, because it is Torrance's answer to those who would demand a logical connection between statements and the reality signified. He often draws on the language of Wittgenstein that one cannot picture in a picture how a picture pictures what is pictured, and then he says that neither can we state in statements how statements are related to

23 *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 127–128; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 144–145; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304–305, 320–322. The syntactic truth and semantic truth of statements bear strong resemblances to coherence and correspondence theories of truth, respectively.

24 This is similar to Tarski's theory of truth. There are many places in the Torrance corpus where it seems that he endorses a purely correspondence theory of truth. In point of fact, it would seem that Torrance would consider the two options of a coherence or correspondence theory of truth as yet one more form of dualism to be rejected.

reality without reducing that relation into statements.²⁵ The relation between statements and reality is a *semantic* relation, and it is participatory, for it involves persons in knowing relations.

It is important to understand that Torrance maintains that the truth of being²⁶ carries its own authority, as stated in the quotation above.²⁷ This is a further reason why the truth of signification is so crucial. The sheer reality of the truth of being places us under a debt, or, as Torrance has said, "We owe it to the truth to be truly related to it."²⁸ Nothing can be brought forward to justify the truth of being other than its being what it is and not something else. The only way we can judge the truth or falsity of a statement is by actually participating in the reality of the existent in question.²⁹ There is no short-cut by which we can judge statements to be true or false by bypassing this participatory element.³⁰ The upshot of all this for understanding Torrance's thinking on this point is that, though the truths of statement are really related to the truth of being (and the supreme truth of God), this relation is not one-to-one. truth of being cannot be collapsed into truths of statement. This carries with it a rejection of a strict correspondence theory of truth.

It would be convenient to say that, for Torrance, the truth of being is self-evident, though that would be misleading. This is because Torrance (and Anselm)

25 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 318. For other places where Torrance appropriates this Wittgensteinian language, and his modification of it, see *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 54; *God and Rationality*, 35–37, 109–110; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 318–320; *Theological Science*, 183–186; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 73.

26 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 128–129; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304–305, 320–322; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 6–7, 141–143, 145.

27 "Truth comes to view in its own majesty, freedom and authority, compelling us by the power of what it is to assent to it and acknowledge it for what it is in itself." See footnote 16 above.

28 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 317.

29 The element of personal participation in knowledge for Torrance is quite similar to that of Polanyi. The issue of verification will be discussed below.

30 This is due to the personal character of all knowledge. See footnotes 19 and 20 and related discussion above.

are deeply convinced that no created reality is truly self-evident, but everything that exists depends on God, who created the universe of space and time out of nothing. hence, the truth of created being is always dependent on a deeper truth, the Supreme truth of God.³¹ For Torrance, these distinct facets of truth form a hierarchy in which the truth of statement is dependent on the truth of signification, which is dependent on the truth of being, which is dependent on the Supreme truth of God, which is not dependent on anything beyond itself.³²

This analysis yields an understanding of truth that is a little more detailed than what we usually operate with in our daily lives. In practice, we tend to deal only with a twofold understanding of truth, distinguishing between the truth of being and the truth of signification.³³ This seems to be the real point of Torrance's analysis, to distinguish between truth and truthfulness and yet have them correlated in a real way.³⁴ To totally separate them (as postmodern thinkers often do) is to deny that our statements have any connection with objective reality; to identify them is to say that it is not possible to distinguish between the statement of the truth and the truth itself. This happens in nominalism or hyper-realism where the truth of statement and the truth of being are identical, such as the official statements of the magisterium in the Roman Catholic Church, in fundamentalism, and in certain forms of linguistic philosophy.³⁵ The danger of this error was understood by Plato, who, in his *Cratylus*, pointed out that "the more our terms become exact images or replicas of the reality of things, the more inevitable it is that they should be mistaken for that reality and become substitutes for it."³⁶

This twofold understanding of truth, where we distinguish between the truth and the truthfulness of our statements, will form the structure of the rest of this

31 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 129–130; *Transformation and Convergence*, 303–305, 312–316, 320–322.

32 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 317.

33 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 131.

34 Ibid., 145–149; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 2; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 317–318.

35 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 307.

36 Ibid., 320.

essay. The two main topics of discussion are truth and language, which can be understood as analogous to the truth of being and the truth of statement (the truth of signification), respectively. When Torrance speaks of truth, he almost always is speaking of the truth of being and the implications it has for our knowledge. Also, Torrance never treats language as if it were important in itself independent of the truth of being. Indeed, to affirm an independent relevance of language, independent of the truth of being, would be to lapse into nominalism or postmodern relativism. For Torrance, language is important because it directs us away from itself to the truth of being.

Truth of Signification/truthfulness of Statements

Torrance emphasizes, in a myriad of different contexts, that our words and statements do not have significance or truth in themselves, but only as they refer away from themselves towards the truth of being.³⁷ We will deal more fully with this truth of being below, but it is important to understand this referential function of language. The real conviction that drives Torrance to insist on a distinction between the truth of being and the truthfulness of statements is Christological. It is Torrance's conviction that when we speak of truth in its fullest sense (or truth with a capital "T"), we are speaking of Christ, the incarnation of God in human flesh in our contingent and creaturely world of time and space.³⁸

If we think of Jesus Christ in this way as the truth in his own Person, our statements about him, biblical and theological statements, cannot be true in the same sense as Jesus Christ is true, for they do not have their truth in themselves but in their reference to him away from themselves, and they are true insofar as that reference is truthful and appropriate.³⁹

37 Some of the most important discussion can be found in *Ground and Grammar*, 32–37; *God and Rationality*, 34–38, 175–176; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 58–61, 65–71, 94–97; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 153–154; *Transformation and Convergence*, 306–310; *Divine Meaning*, 245–274; "Theological Realism," 169–173.

38 There is a fuller discussion of this topic below under the heading "The Role of Jesus Christ in Relation to Truth and Language."

39 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 124.

For Torrance, it is impossible to state in a statement how our statements are related to reality without reducing that relation to mere statements.⁴⁰ In other words, there can be no legitimate attempt to render the relation of our words and statements to the realities they intend entirely explicit. The attempt to do so leads not to genuine knowledge but to skepticism, as is so evident in the collapse of foundationalism. To show that there can never be a direct logical bridge between our statements and the realities signified by them, Torrance draws on the observation that every definition of a word requires the use of other words that, for the purpose of the definition, must remain undefined.⁴¹

So, if Torrance insists on a real relation between statements and reality, but also that this relation cannot be brought to explicit verbal articulation, what kind of relation is it? For Torrance, statements are intended to fulfill a *semantic* function, where the truth of the statement is not in the statement itself but in the reality to which it refers. This relation is not logical, as we have seen, because we cannot bridge the gap between statement and the reality signified through logico-deductive activity; however, in spite of that, the reality intended shows through.⁴² This is how we operate with language in our daily lives, not even giving it much thought, only turning "a critical eye

40 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 36; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 318; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 73; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 143. As stated above, Torrance rejects any one-to-one correlation between statements and what is stated and thus rejects a strict correspondence theory of truth.

41 Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 65. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 73. Torrance quotes with approval the following statement by G. E. Moore: "It is quite impossible for anyone to prove, in one strict sense of the term, that he does not know any external facts. I can only prove that I do, by assuming that in some particular instance, I actually do know one. That is to say, the so-called proof must assume the very thing it pretends to prove. The only proof that we do know external facts lies in the simple fact that we know them" (*Theological Science*, 165). The refutation of skepticism, for Torrance, can never be through force of argument, but by sheer appeal to ultimate beliefs.

42 This "showing through" is not something that can be rendered entirely explicit, but is a function of the personal nature of knowledge. The conviction that reality shows through in spite of the absence of a one-to-one correlation of reality and our statements about reality is another example of what Torrance would call an "ultimate belief," neither verifiable nor falsifiable, but one upon which we stake our lives.

upon [the distinction between sign and thing signified] when something arises to obscure signification, such as a break in the semantic relation."⁴³

Our statements signify more than they can bring to explicit expression. The implications for terms such as "*homoousion*" or "hypostatic union" cannot be fully articulated in words alone. These can be seen as paradigmatic cases of what happens in *all* our use of language, where our statements signify much more than they can adequately express. This tacit dimension (developed in Torrance's thought in dialogue with Michael Polanyi) is consequential because it expresses Torrance's resistance toward any attempt to reduce reality to statements about reality.⁴⁴

In our ordinary experience, we do not question how words such as *house*, *large*, *red*, or any others, are related to the realities they intend; we jump immediately from the words to what they signify without a thought, and yet without thinking for a moment that the denotative statement, "The large red house on the corner" is the same thing as that large red house on the corner. Our statements fulfill their semantic function quietly and painlessly; so much so that we may take it for granted or forget that it is taking place, but it is still very important.

An additional significant point about the semantic function of language is that when statements direct attention away from themselves to a particular reality, they point us to something that exists *independently* of the statement.⁴⁵ This is why Torrance always insists that, though we operate with a twofold notion of truth, the truth of being always has ontic priority over the truthfulness of our statements of it.⁴⁶

The extreme importance of this semantic relation of statements to reality is thrown into relief when we consider what Torrance believes to be twin errors of not taking seriously the relation of the truth of signification to the truth of

43 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 58; "Theological Realism," 169.

44 For some key discussions on the inadequacy of a merely explicit understanding of our experience of reality, see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 53–58, 64; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 132–133; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 37–38. When Torrance speaks of the tacit dimension, he is speaking of the personal and participatory nature of knowledge. See footnote 20 and related discussion above.

45 Torrance also likes to emphasize that truth or reality is discovered and not invented. *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 114; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 27.

46 See discussion below under the heading "The Ontic Priority of Being Over Language."

being.⁴⁷ The first of these errors is the tendency to utterly separate the truth of signification from the truth of being. If this is the case, words are detached from their ground in reality and may (not to say, *must*) be interpreted independently of such a reality. This has manifested itself in the moralism of medieval times and in the existentialist philosophy of modern times "in which the statements concerned are understood to express your attitude to existence."⁴⁸ The other error is to fall into an extreme form of nominalism that manifested itself in medieval times in the philosophy of the terminists and in modern times in linguistic philosophy.

The root behind both of these errors, in Torrance's mind, is the radical dualism between noumenal "things in themselves" and phenomenal "things as they appear to us."⁴⁹ As was noted above, radical dualisms tear apart our thinking in many ways, but in the scope of this essay, the only one that will concern us is this epistemological dualism that does not allow a real connection between our statements and reality.

The Significance of Existence-Statements and Coherence-Statements for Truth and Language

In his monumental work on theological method, *Theological Science*, Torrance discusses what he calls coherence-statements and existence-statements, drawing, respectively, on Hume's distinction between statements about "*relations*

47 For these two errors, see *Transformation and Convergence*, 307; *Ground and Grammar*, 32–37.

48 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 34.

49 Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 58. Though Torrance never makes this explicit, it seems that his analysis of ultimate beliefs (or would-be ultimate beliefs) is quite similar to the concept of a transcendental argument as found in the thought of Roy Bhaskar, namely, that while our convictions may be mistaken, if we assume that a conviction is sound, it has certain concrete implications. The connection (that is non-dualism) between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds is the basis on which we can see whether our beliefs are properly "ultimate" or whether they are "penultimate." See Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Verso, New York, NY: 2008), 20.

of ideas and those about *matters of fact*.”⁵⁰ Never again would Torrance go to such great lengths to expound the differences between these two kinds of statements, but the main ideas expressed in them manifested themselves quite frequently in the works published shortly afterwards. Even though the distinction is explicitly mentioned less and less often in his later works, and the distinction is cited as being drawn from earlier and earlier thinkers, first Calvin and Bacon,⁵¹ and then all the way back to Clement of Alexandria,⁵² the key ideas still lurk in the background and are brought up for brief acknowledgement.⁵³

The distinction is based on the fact that there are some statements, called by Torrance coherence-statements, which can be deduced and verified simply with the use of deductive reason. Such statements are not necessarily dependent on anything that actually exists anywhere in the universe. Other statements, however, are deeply connected to the actual world of space and time. Whereas the former can be deduced by pure logic, these statements can only arise within our experience. Both kinds of statements operate with a semantic function. Existence-statements have their meaning primarily in their referring away from themselves to a reality that exists independently of themselves; coherence-statements have their meaning primarily in their referring away from themselves to other statements.

It is important to notice that, though existence-statements and coherence-statements do indeed have implications for Torrance’s understanding of truth, in themselves they have more to do with his theory of language. Neither existence-statements nor coherence-statements have meaning in themselves; they function as they refer away from themselves to something else. This means that, though existence-statements refer to things that exist independently of them in the world and coherence-statements refer to other statements within a complex of statements, both function in a primarily semantic way.

50 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 164. The lengthy discussions can be found on 164–172 and 226–263. Also see *God and Rationality*, 44–45.

51 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34–35.

52 Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 180.

53 See Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34–35; *The Christian Frame of Mind* (Helmets and Howard, Colorado Springs: 1989), 73–75; *Divine Meaning*, 180.

There are a few important considerations for Torrance's theology related to this distinction. For Torrance, existence-statements are of primary importance.⁵⁴ It is only where our statements have actual empirical correlates that they can be said to have real meaning, or at least, meaning that bears on external reality and not simply the connections between ideas. This relation between ideas, however, is not to be neglected because it is only through the complex of coherence-statements that we can see whether all our statements are indeed truthfully related to the reality in question — for example, out of our basic encounter with God — for if they are not, there would be contradictions among them.⁵⁵ Torrance, adapting a statement by Kant, stated that "coherence-statements without existence-statements are empty, existence-statements without coherence-statements are blind."⁵⁶

This means that our complex of coherence-statements, if they are to have a connection to the real world and not merely describe an independent "conceptual space," cannot stand alone with some kind of arbitrarily imposed criterion that they are more rigorous because they derive, not from experience, but from the pure activity of the deductive reason. They must be correlated, at least at decisive points, with reality in order to avoid taking on an independent character, detached from empirical reality and, hence, useless for daily life.⁵⁷

Perhaps the most important insight to grasp from this distinction between existence-statements and coherence-statements is the difference in the nature of the knowledge we gain through them. Existence-statements are able to tell us what we do not know, and indeed, could not have told ourselves, because

54 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 165.

55 Ibid., 164.

56 Ibid., 169.

57 The notion of "empirical correlates" and their importance for Torrance's thought, not least for their implications for Torrance's position within the debate between correspondence and coherence theories of truth is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it must be noted that Torrance is not interested in any theory, regardless of how coherent, that is entirely detached from our spatio-temporal existence. For example, if it is to have meaning for us, the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ must be correlated with our empirical world in the empty tomb. See *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 34–39.

they draw on a vast reality that far exceeds what they can explicitly articulate.⁵⁸ Coherence-statements, on the other hand, cannot tell us anything new in the strict sense, but only help us to make sense out of what we already know.

This issue is brought to light most clearly in Torrance's discussion of the change in the type of questions that were being asked in theological and natural science due to the Reformation, especially in the work of John Calvin.⁵⁹ The form of questioning called *Quaestio* was common in the middle ages and was "the kind of question you ask in solving a problem in knowledge you already have, in order to move from confusion to clarity."⁶⁰ The form of questioning that rose to prominence through the work of Calvin and Bacon was known as *interrogatio*, in which "you interrogate something in order to let it disclose itself to you and so reveal to you what you do not and cannot know otherwise. It is the kind of question you ask in order to learn something *new*, which you cannot know by inferring it from what you already know."⁶¹ This new form of questioning had its origin in the courtroom and bore a strong resemblance of the practice of interrogating witnesses to get at what is the case.

The issue of verification arises sharply when we consider the difference between existence-statements and coherence-statements.⁶² Torrance affirms strongly that we cannot verify the truthfulness of a statement by some way that bypasses how actual knowledge arises.⁶³ This means that, while the truthfulness of coherence-statements can be verified by anyone who begins with the same set of basic concepts or axioms through the rigorous application of their reason, it would be utterly irrational to apply the same process to the verification of existence-statements. The only way to verify the truth of an existence-statement

58 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 166.

59 For what follows, see *God and Rationality*, 33–35, and *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 12–14.

60 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34.

61 *Ibid.*, 34.

62 *Theological Science*, 177.

63 *Ibid.*, 145–146, 165–166, 193–194; *God and Rationality*, 196, 201–202; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 135–137.

is to intuit⁶⁴ the reality in question afresh, as that is how the statement in question arose in the first place. "This means that we can only 'convince' others of the truth of our existence-statements if we can get them to see or hear the reality they refer to as we see or hear it. It can never be forced upon them. They must be brought to share our *intuition* of the object given."⁶⁵ That is to say, indubitable demonstration is never possible, but a shared intuition can help keep our statements grounded in reality and allow our statements to be challenged by the statements of others who also share in apprehending the same objects.

In summary, for Torrance, both existence-statements and coherence-statements work together to enrich our knowledge. Engaging deeply with coherence-statements can help to further our thought more quickly and fully than with only the use of existence-statements, but it is important that they are correlated with empirical reality at crucial points.

At this point, let us turn to the other understanding of truth, the truth of being. After some of Torrance's basic positions have been discussed, we can consider some of the major implications of the relation between the truthfulness of statements and the truth of being.

The Truth of Being

Torrance places a major stress on the truth of being; for him, as the name implies, it is a matter of metaphysical significance. We are concerned, not with inventions or projections of our minds, but with a reality that exists independently of us and stands over against us as an object. To use Kantian language, we are not to be content merely with things as they appear to us but must push on to things as they are in themselves.

Once a position like this is affirmed in the philosophical dialogue in the post-Kantian world, the question is bound to be raised, "Is it even possible to know whether an independent reality really exists?" Torrance, however, adamantly

64 Torrance defines this term in the following way: "We shall use the term 'intuition' to speak of our apprehension of a reality in its objectivity and unity, as a whole" (*Theological Science*, 165, footnote 3). It should be noted that this is markedly different than how others use this term.

65 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 165.

refuses to answer this question because it is posed in abstraction from our actual experience and can have no real meaning. he grants that such questions can be asked, but they can *only* be asked *a posteriori*, after we have arrived at actual knowledge, by which we must test what we think we know.⁶⁶ Citing with approval an essay by G. E. Moore on the philosophy of David Hume, Torrance says, "The only proof that we do know external facts lies in the simple fact that we know them."⁶⁷ If such questions are intended to be skeptical and to demolish theology and theological statements, in point of fact they undermine empirical science and all knowledge and language.⁶⁸

We must begin with our actual knowledge of reality and only engage in our critical testing *a posteriori*. It is important to note that, although the title of this section is "The Truth of Being," Torrance's discussions are frequently within the context of the supreme truth of God as the paradigmatic case of truth. It is methodologically dubious to begin with how we come to know created truths and then try to apply that understanding to how we come to know God. Rather, since God is the supreme truth, we begin there and then find that it is indeed consistent with how we know created truths. However, we must never forget that, for Torrance, the supreme truth of God always has ontic and epistemological priority.⁶⁹

When dealing with our experience of external reality, Torrance does not break down to explicit articulation *how* we come to know things, yet affirms that we do indeed come to know them.⁷⁰ Indeed, as was discussed earlier in the section on language, to do so would be to violate some of his deepest methodological

66 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 43–44. Also, see discussion above of Torrance's *a posteriori* theological method.

67 Ibid., 165.

68 Ibid., 183–184.

69 Some have considered Torrance to be a foundationalist, though in a different way than classically formulated, using either the reality of God or the whole complex of personal and communal apprehension as the "brute fact" upon which to base our knowledge. An answer to this critique can be found in Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 343, note 97; and 358, note 136.

70 See footnote 2 and the related discussion above of Torrance's conviction that there is a knowable reality external to the mind.

convictions. However, an example of the power with which he speaks of this kind of experience may be appropriate. In a personal moment in the preface to *Theological Science*, he asserted,

I find the presence and being of God bearing upon my experience and thought so powerfully that I cannot but be convinced of his overwhelming reality and rationality. To doubt the existence of God would be an act of sheer irrationality, for it would mean that my reason had become unhinged from its bond with real being.⁷¹

A detailed account of Torrance's epistemology is beyond the scope of this essay; it is sufficient for our purposes to build on the conviction that we *do* come to know reality.

The Implications of the Stratified Nature of Reality for Truth and Language

One of the problems that Torrance sees cropping up frequently in the history of thought is the tendency to flatten out reality onto a single logical level instead of recognizing that reality is stratified in a multi-leveled structure. To collapse everything to a single level is not only irrational (that is, behaving toward reality in a way that is not consistent with what it actually is), but it owes more to unscientific *a priori* assumptions than actual investigation of reality.

To a certain extent, Torrance can understand why this has been such a major trend in theological thinking. In the time of Thomas Aquinas, to think more rigorously was to think more like in Euclidean geometry, which does not operate with different logical levels.⁷² However, this way of thinking has been overcome by the integration of geometry into physics as well, and is very much evident in the extremely important and influential work of Kurt Gödel.⁷³

71 Torrance, *Theological Science*, ix.

72 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 321; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 41–42.

73 Gödel's thought is referenced (explicitly or implicitly) quite frequently in Torrance's work. See *Theological Science*, 256–257; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 86–90; *God and Rationality*, 99–100; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 73–74, 116–117; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 86–87.

The work of Einstein has helped to move natural science in a direction where the stratified levels of reality are taken more seriously. Torrance often cites the essay by Einstein, "Physics and reality," as a helpful resource.⁷⁴ The language used is often borrowed from Einstein, as well as the basic structure of the three levels, but Torrance's appropriation is not uncritical; there are many distinctively Christian elements that are of decisive importance in his thought. We will now turn to the understanding of the stratified nature of reality as it is found in his works.⁷⁵

The first level is the level of our ordinary, day-to-day experience. It is at this level that our concepts and statements are tied very closely to empirical reality.⁷⁶ Within the context of Christian faith, considering how the doctrine of the Trinity arises, Torrance refers to it as the evangelical and doxological level, where we are joined with the community of the faithful in hearing the gospel and responding with praise and thanksgiving to God. He will also point out that, in the context of the church, this is the level of "incipient theology," where empirical and theoretical elements are inseparably intertwined.⁷⁷ Perhaps no more than at this level is it clear that Torrance rejects the notion that events come first and interpretation comes later; rather events are already laden with meaning and cannot be understood apart from their intrinsic intelligibility.

It is at this level where our deepest convictions not only about the natural world but also about God arise. Scholarly theologians have no more access, for all their reading and reflection, to the reality of God than people who have lived long in the scriptures and participated fully in the worshiping life of the church all their lives. Theologians might have more conceptual clarity at higher levels, but it is at this first level that our deepest understandings of divine and created nature arise. For Torrance, the development of our most basic grasp of the knowledge

⁷⁴ Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 156; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 132.

⁷⁵ Brief discussions on the stratified nature of reality as a whole can be found in *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 82–88; *Transformation and Convergence*, 305, 322–328. It is also hinted at in Torrance's earlier book, *Theological Science*, 258–261.

⁷⁶ For this first level, see *Ground and Grammar*, 156–157; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 88–91.

⁷⁷ Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 23–25; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 39–42; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 43–50.

of God is largely tacit, holistic, and rooted in this evangelical and doxological participation in the church. In Christian theology, such participation is analogous to Einstein's "everyday thinking," of which physics is but a refinement.⁷⁸

The second level is where we take the content from the basic level and try to organize it and make sense out of it, bringing it to some degree of clarity.⁷⁹ Within the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, this takes the form of the probing into the evangelical and doxological experience of God and beginning to see that there is a three-fold nature to how God interacts with us. We see that God is portrayed in the New Testament and worshipped in the church as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yielding what has come to be known as the economic Trinity.

The third level of reality is where we take the content from the second level and once again attempt to probe into its inner intelligibility, coining new terms, and shedding ourselves of unnecessary concepts in order to achieve the highest level of logical and conceptual simplicity possible.⁸⁰ In trinitarian theology, this takes the form of the insight that what God is towards us in Christ and as the economic Trinity he is antecedently and eternally in himself as God. That is, God does not just reveal himself to us as triune but truly *is* triune in his being.

It seems that, for Torrance, the first and third levels are the most important and that the second level exists as something of a bridge between the two.⁸¹ The reason for this is because Torrance adamantly resists a conventionalist use of language, where our terms and concepts are meant merely to help us organize our thoughts and are not necessarily based in reality. At the most basic level,

78 Albert Einstein, "Physics and Reality," in *Ideas and Opinions* (Wings Books, New York/Avenel, NJ: 1954), 290.

79 For this second level, see *Ground and Grammar*, 157; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 91–98.

80 For this third level, see *Ground and Grammar*, 157–158; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 98–107.

81 This marginalization of the second level seems strongly implied when understood in light of Torrance's larger theological concerns. However, an ambiguity persists: does Torrance believe that the second level has a lasting significance in scientific inquiry or is it merely a transitional level, not altogether unlike the role of theory in positivism (a view Torrance so passionately rejects)?

we are concerned with direct personal participation;⁸² at the third (which is, for practical purposes, the highest level, though, in theory, the levels could extend upwards *ad infinitum*), we are dealing with the highest level to which we have yet been capable of, where our terms are profoundly shaped and rooted, not in the organizing of our thoughts, but by the penetration into the depths of reality as it is in itself, independent of our knowledge of it.

This marginalization of the second level is evident in Torrance's insistence that there are some concepts and terms that are developed in the organizing of our thoughts that, upon deeper investigation, are shown to be inadequate or even simply unnecessary.⁸³ For example, the doctrine of transubstantiation ultimately was trying to get at the idea that Christ is really present in the Eucharist. However, in a framework of thought dominated by Aristotelian philosophy, this basic conviction could not take a form other than transubstantiation. When we reached greater conceptual clarity and began to understand the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist in a deeper way, we come to understand that transubstantiation, as necessary as it was in historical theological development, needs to be kicked away, as a scaffold is once the building is erected. Further understanding has shown that it is a misunderstanding of what transubstantiation was intended to communicate if we insist on perpetuating the doctrine "as if that form of the conception had a point-to-point correspondence with the real presence."⁸⁴

The concern with moving up through these levels is that, as one ascends them, they are progressively further and further away from the world of experience and there is a tremendous temptation to think words or concepts instead of thinking *realities* through our words and concepts.⁸⁵ This concern leads us to

82 This is because all of our knowledge is personal and participatory. See footnotes 19 and 20, and related discussion above.

83 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 324–328; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 151–157.

84 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 326–327.

85 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 44, 194, 203; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 63. For a discussion of the deeply related idea of the "scope" of the scriptures in Athanasius' theology, see *Divine Meaning*, 235–244. It is in making points like this that it becomes clear that when Torrance speaks of "truth" he is referring (using Anselmian language) to the truth of *being* rather than the truth of statement. This difference of

the important point that, when we are dealing with these different levels in the stratified nature of reality, we are dealing with levels that are correlated with one another. This correlation is not a one-to-one relation between them; after all, if the levels were coordinated in this way, we would not be dealing with several levels, but just different understandings of a single level. The levels are coordinated with each other and with reality at certain critical points, without which, they would become detached into nothing more than abstract thought.⁸⁶ To a certain degree, the three levels give expression to differences in degree rather than in kind; however, they must not ever be flattened down into a single ontological or epistemological level, for that is something that Torrance absolutely rejects.

An example of a refined theological concept that is involved in trans-level coordination with reality can be seen in the doctrine of the hypostatic union.⁸⁷ The hypostatic union expresses the conviction that while Jesus is true God of true God, he is also true man of true man and that these cannot be separated from one another, nor collapsed together. There is basic evangelical and doxological evidence for this in statements like "I and the Father are one," and "He who has seen me has seen the Father," and "No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him," as well as others. This basic experience is organized at the second level into the conviction that, in Christ, we see God, that there is a connection between revelation of Christ and revelation of God. Finally, we push to the deeper conviction that this connection is not merely a convenient way of thinking, but is grounded in reality, that in Christ, God and man actually *are* united.

Once the doctrine of the hypostatic union is achieved, however, it tremendously simplifies our thought and provides clarity above and beyond what we could have anticipated and thereby shows that it truly is rooted in the truth of being. We begin to realize that isolating things such as the pain and suffering of Christ

emphasis is not made sufficiently explicit on a consistent basis, but it is a difference that sets Torrance apart from the mainstream of the realism/anti-realism debate.

86 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 140, 148; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 34–39; *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 35–37.

87 For a more detailed discussion involving both the hypostatic union and the *homoousion*, see *Ground and Grammar*, 159–174.

from the being of God is a violation of the hypostatic union. The coordination of basic experience with these higher levels allows conclusions to be made which are crucial to the consistency for a lower level, but cannot be decided on that level. To put this in another way, as we probe into the higher epistemological levels, we are simultaneously probing more deeply into reality itself. As such, there are moments when we experience a “paradigm shift” or a “gestalt switch” at the higher levels that then reshapes how we perceive all of reality, not least at the lower levels. However, even our concepts at the highest levels are still fundamentally statements that are relativized by the realities to which they refer, and therefore they must never be confused with the truth of being or the supreme truth of God.⁸⁸

Even though, epistemologically speaking, we are moving away from the level of our basic experience as we ascend from lower to higher levels of reality, the higher levels have penetrated more fully into the inherent intelligibility and rationality of reality.⁸⁹ In spite of the fact that the higher levels are more detached from direct personal participation, they exercise a controlling function over the lower levels. This control coordinates a hierarchical structure of truths where each level is open to the levels above it and has its meaning with reference to those higher levels, but the latter are not reducible downward.⁹⁰

It is crucial to remember that the purpose of striving after this clarification and simplification of our concepts and thinking is so that we may be radically committed to the inherent intelligibility of reality. We must not confuse or conflate our statements of the truth with the truth itself.⁹¹ Rather, the real goal is to develop terms that are not merely constructions but serve to signify realities beyond themselves and are rooted in them.

88 This touches on Torrance’s notion of “disclosure models,” a brief treatment of which is below under the heading “The Ontic Priority of Being Over Language.”

89 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 160.

90 *Ibid.*, 140; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 20.

91 As we mentioned above concerning the truth of signification and the semantic function of language (see, respectively, footnotes 24 and 43 and relevant discussions in the essay).

Further Elements of Torrance's Theory of Truth and Language

As interesting and compelling as Torrance's understanding of the truthfulness of statements and the truth of being may be, equally interesting are the relations between his theory of truth and theory of language. A few of the most important of these elements will be addressed here.

The inadequacy of our language

By affirming that the function of our words and statements is to direct attention away from themselves and toward a particular reality, Torrance is affirming that there is a measure of inadequacy in our language, where our statements do not really capture the reality to which they refer us. Torrance refers to this fact quite often so that it is difficult to read any essay on either truth or language that does not include a comment to the effect that the inadequacy of our statements is part of their truthfulness. Any statement that claimed to fully exhaust the reality it intended would be grossly inaccurate.⁹²

This issue is not new, as Torrance points out by discussing it as it is dealt with in Plato's *Cratylus*. The question, "Do the terms we use have their significance in virtue of some natural relation between them as verbal signs and the realities they signify, or simply in virtue of an extrinsic conventional relation?"⁹³ The conclusion is that "If words or signs are to do their job properly, they must have some measure of detachment or incompleteness or even discrepancy to allow them to point away from themselves to the realities intended, in the light of which their truth or falsity will be judged."⁹⁴ This is true for all statements, regardless of how mundane their reference; how much more so is it true for theological statements that direct us to the inexhaustible depths of God?⁹⁵

92 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 169, 187–188, 198; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 162. To see where Torrance finds this idea in the thought of Athanasius (i.e., "Thus far human knowledge goes, for at this point the Cherubim cover themselves with their wings."), see *Divine Meaning*, 246.

93 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 65; "Theological Realism," 170–171.

94 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 65.

95 Drawing on Polanyian language, the inadequacy of our language, that is to say, the fact that, even at their best, our statements fall short of the reality they intend,

Torrance makes an important distinction, which he takes up from patristic thinkers, between *apprehending* and *comprehending* God. Both, he affirms, are conceptual ways of knowing God, as opposed to the popular claim that we can have only a “non-conceptual knowledge of God.”⁹⁶ “Apprehension is a grasping of God which does not exhaust his transcendent reality and mystery; but it is no less conceptual for that reason, since it is the form of conception rationally appropriate to his divine nature and majesty.”⁹⁷ Comprehending God would be to say that we can bring the totality of God under the command of our knowing, which would be to bring the infinity of God under our finitude. Torrance does not believe that we need to choose between a conceptual or a non-conceptual knowledge of God, “nor even between apophatic and cataphatic knowledge, but between *cataleptic* apprehending and cataphatic comprehending.”⁹⁸ That is to say, rather than emphasize the contrast between “positive statements with definite conceptual content” and “negative statements with indefinite conceptual content,” we ought to highlight the contrast between a focus on our statements as such (which will tend to connote their adequacy) and the reality to which our statements direct us.⁹⁹

The ontic priority of being over language

Although Torrance’s emphasis on the ontological priority of the truth of being over all our expressions of it has been alluded to a few times already in this work, it nevertheless bears a more substantial treatment. In the light of the relationship between language and reality, we can see that for Torrance words are neither identical to the realities they intend nor are they utterly detached from them and only filled with content from the subjective states of the interpreter. For

has implications for what Polanyi would call “focal knowledge,” as it means that we can never make what we know entirely explicit. However, it does not limit our “subsidiary knowledge,” as we always know more than we can tell. Many have remarked upon the poverty of their minds and tongues to give expression to what they truly apprehend. For example, see Gregory Nazienzen, *Oration*, 40.41.

96 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 22–23.

97 Ibid., 22.

98 Ibid., 22.

99 Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind*, 107–108.

Torrance, biblical and theological statements form a kind of lens *through* which we may “look” to know the divine realities they direct us toward.¹⁰⁰

Torrance, in his works on the theology of the early church, often quoted a pithy statement of Athanasius regarding how our terms must be forced to conform to the nature of God and not vice versa. “Terms do not detract from his nature; rather does his nature draw terms to itself and transform them. For terms are not prior to beings, but beings are first and terms come second.”¹⁰¹ It is clear from his publications that Torrance agrees with this idea, for language is always subordinated to reality.

Drawing on Einsteinian language, Torrance believes that God and the created world do not wear their heart on their sleeves and that they are deep but not devious.¹⁰² We really can penetrate into their inherent intelligibility, but that such an understanding is far from automatic and requires much disciplined and rigorous investigation.¹⁰³ Our investigative labors produce models of the reality we are investigating that are intended to be rooted in that reality but are judged to be truthful or false in light of it. As we ask questions of reality to understand it, our very questions are questioned by the authority of its being so that we are taught to ask new and better questions, which are also refined in light of what actually *is*.

This idea, that we produce *disclosure models*, that is, models through which we look so that reality can disclose itself to us, is already latent in Torrance’s

100 This has been discussed above in the concern that we do not think concepts, but think realities *through* our concepts. See footnote 87 and its related discussion above.

101 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1988), 129. This is cited several times in this book. Also see in particular Torrance’s analysis of how Athanasius applied terms such as *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *physis* in *Divine Meaning*, 206–212.

102 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 119–135; *Transformation and Convergence*, 253–259; “Theological Realism,” 189.

103 This is strongly related to the “knowability” of reality as discussed in the opening section of this essay “Torrance’s Critical Realist Epistemology.” Though we make contact with reality, we must develop a structural kinship between our minds and what we seek to know.

understanding of the stratified nature of reality.¹⁰⁴ We take the empirical and theoretical elements already present in our daily experience and organize them into a helpful model through which we go back to reality and check our model's validity. There are times when our models are shown to be not actually rooted in reality and must be discarded or radically revised. However, there are other times when our models reveal far more to us about the reality in question than they continually surprise us in their fruitfulness. By doing so, they reveal that they are truly rooted in reality;¹⁰⁵ in fact, they may be more deeply rooted than even their original formulators could have imagined.¹⁰⁶

The ascending the different levels of reality involves a developing and refining of disclosure models, the goal of which is to find high-level models that both simplify and clarify our understanding of reality.¹⁰⁷ Such an example in physics would be relativity theory; in theological science, two would be the *homoousion* and the hypostatic union.

Authority

Another crucial implication of the relation between the truth of being and the truthfulness of statements is how Torrance understands authority. He discusses the issue of authority in two different essays where he distinguishes between something being *authoritative* and *authoritarian*.¹⁰⁸ Torrance does not deny that legitimate authorities arise in the history of theological investigation, but that their authority does not rest in themselves but in God, from whom all authority comes.

104 See discussion above in section "The Implications of the Stratified Nature of Reality for Truth and Language."

105 This draws on a Polanyian understanding of "reality."

106 Only if the model is inadequate to the reality, that is, if it does not attempt to reduce the relation between the model and reality to a one-to-one relation, can it be revised in light of it. For an example of how, for Torrance, this kind of revision can take place, see *Theological Science*, 171.

107 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 201–202; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 162, 181; *Ground and Grammar*, 124–127.

108 These discussions can be found in *Transformation and Convergence*, 328–330, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 154–156. Although the essays in which these discussions are found are different, the discussions on authority in them are nearly identical.

It seems best to speak of the distinction between the authoritative and authoritarian by pointing out the parallels in Torrance's thought between these concepts and the truthfulness of statements in general. For Torrance, a statement is truthful when it successfully directs attention away from itself toward the reality it intends, and it is false when it fails to do this or indicates something that is not the case. Similarly, as God is the source of all genuine authority, when authorities behave and speak in such a way as "not to obscure [God's supreme authority] but let it appear in all God's ultimate Prerogative and Majesty and to be acknowledged as such,"¹⁰⁹ they are truly authoritative. "However, when these secondary authorities arrogate to themselves the authority delegated to them, thus constituting themselves authorities in their own right, then they become perverted, the 'authorities of darkness.'"¹¹⁰ Because of this, we can say that "faith and certainty do not rest on biblical authority as such" but on the realities to which the Bible bears witness.¹¹¹

An example of authoritativeness versus authoritarianism comes from the Gospel accounts. The Jewish leaders behaved as if their words were authoritative in themselves, thus obfuscating the true authority of God, and were thus authoritarian. On the other hand, Jesus' teaching was marked by a true authoritativeness where the authority of God showed through and bore witness to itself.

Communal Shaping of Language¹¹²

In his various discussions on language (especially theological language), Torrance will often remind us that the words we use to speak of a given reality must be fundamentally shaped by the nature of that reality. Otherwise, our

109 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 154; *Transformation and Convergence*, 328.

110 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 154. *Transformation and Convergence*, 328.

111 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 135.

112 This section has some points of contact with the personal nature of all knowledge. See footnotes 19 and 20 and their related discussion in the main body. In particular, both discussions are to make it clear that our knowledge is never isolated from the whole complex of our person and interpersonal relationships.

understanding is shaped by our previous understanding of our words instead of reality being understood out of itself. This is the reason why he insists on using terms differentially, that is, the same word may have different meanings depending on whether it refers to created or uncreated realities.¹¹³

However, it is equally important that our words retain some degree of continuity with ordinary usage, or else they will become detached from our experience and become essentially meaningless. The difficulty is that words acquire their meaning within communities, and the language and subconscious of communities are not always adequately shaped by reality. Indeed, part of the reason behind Torrance's tireless crusade against dualism is the fact that such habits of thought have been built into culture and reinforced through language.¹¹⁴

The acquisition of new knowledge is complicated by the nature of language as communally generated. This is because our new knowledge arises out of contact with reality that cannot be fully communicated within the compass of the language we have already developed, or else it would not be truly new knowledge. However, in order for that new knowledge to be communicated, it must be done in the language of a particular culture. In this process, we coin new terms, and previous terms are stretched beyond their normal usage, but a fundamental continuity is preserved.¹¹⁵

However, because the language used today is the product of what was developed in the past, our language has a built-in obsolescence that resists the development of new ideas.¹¹⁶ Our language must be forced to be modified as new knowledge is gained. Torrance believes this is possible (because it does indeed happen), but that it is not inevitable, and we must be deliberate at freeing ourselves and our culture from the restrictive linguistic trends of the past.

The paradigmatic example of a people whose language and culture have been shaped under the influence of God's interaction with them is ancient Israel.

113 This relates to the ontic priority of being over language as discussed above. Also see *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 17–21. See also the text related to footnote 102 above for a quotation from Athanasius expressing a similar conviction.

114 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 28–32.

115 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 180–182.

116 Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 19–20; *God and Rationality*, 117–118, 203; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 151, 160–163, 181.

Torrance believes that this sustained influence of Israelite life, culture, worship, and language is crucial to understanding God's self-revelation in Christ, not least the atonement. By understanding biblical and theological statements, not by imposing a Gentile frame of knowledge upon them, but by allowing their significance within the life and history of Israel, we gain fuller understanding of what God has done, both throughout history and in Christ.¹¹⁷

The role of Jesus Christ in relation to truth and language for God

This discussion of the role of Jesus Christ in Torrance's understanding of truth and language is at the end of this essay. This is not because it is intended to be marginalized. Rather it can be seen as the climax and paradigmatic case that envelopes all the topics discussed so far.

Theological statements have the particularly difficult function of referring away from themselves to a reality that is infinite and so completely outstrips their ability to adequately communicate what they intend.¹¹⁸ They are creaturely and contingent words that are attempting to express something that is utterly *uncontingent*.¹¹⁹ There is a yawning chasm between created reality and uncreated reality. How can our words cross that gap? This is a legitimate concern and one that Torrance admits readily. However, he is clear to point out that, if this is meant to be a skeptical observation, it does not just tear down theological science, but all forms of natural science as well, for even when we are speaking of a created and contingent reality, our words prove to be inadequate.¹²⁰

117 Several of the most important discussions of God's shaping of the Israelite culture can be found in *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 86–88; *The Mediation of Christ*, 7–23, 26–39; Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, MI: IVP Academic, 2008), 37–56, 69–75, 130–131; Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, MI: IVP Academic, 2009), 7–60.

118 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 149–150, 183.

119 This is tied up with the semantic function of language, but is amplified because now we are dealing with statements that refer, not to a created and contingent reality but the uncreated and uncontingent God.

120 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 184. See section above under the heading "The Inadequacy of our Language."

Torrance is unconcerned with this inadequacy of our language. After all, as has been shown above,¹²¹ the inadequacy of our language and statements and their indicating more than they can explicitly articulate are part of their truthfulness, being related to the truth of being by a semantic, not a logical, relation.¹²² However, in order to provide further elucidation, Torrance points to Jesus Christ as the truth in its fullest sense.¹²³ As the one person who is at the same time fully God and fully human, Jesus is both the truth of God and the truth of human being.¹²⁴ Our statements about God do not need to cross the gap between created reality and uncreated reality because they may terminate on the incarnate person of Christ, who bridges that gap in his own person.¹²⁵

The incarnation involves a hypostatic union not only between the Word of God and the word of man, the Rationality of God and the rationality of man, but between the uncreated truth of God and the created truth of this world which God has made and to which we belong . . . Thus when our contingent statements refer away from themselves to the truth of God as it is in Jesus Christ, they do not have to bridge the infinite difference between the creature and the Creator in order to terminate on that truth, for they may refer to it in its incarnate reality, and insofar as they are true they may actually terminate on that incarnate reality and thus upon the truth of God Almighty himself.¹²⁶

A crucial concept that must be taken into consideration when attempting to understand Torrance's understanding of the truth of God as it is in Jesus is that, in God, we do not have to do with one whose word and action are

121 See above, "The Inadequacy of our Language."

122 See above section under the heading "The Distinction between the Truth of Being and the Truthfulness of Statements."

123 Often this is done within the context of an extended theological exposition of Christ's words in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life." See *Theological Science*, 146–160, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 137–145.

124 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 85–86, 88–89; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 183–186; *Theological Science*, 143–144, 185–187 (This passage is related to thinking *a posteriori*, see discussion above, page 3); *Divine Meaning*, 108–109, 186–187, 251–254; *The Mediation of Christ*, 50–62.

125 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 124–126.

126 *Ibid.*, 125.

separable from his being.¹²⁷ With us, our words and our actions are different than who we are (though Torrance will grant that they are related). With God, this is not so. God's word and activity inhere in God's being.¹²⁸ God does not just communicate something *about* himself to us, but communicates *himself*.¹²⁹ The relation between God's revelation of truths and God's revelation of himself can be summed up nicely in Torrance's own words: "[Jesus Christ] is the truth communicating himself in and through truths, who does not communicate himself apart from truths, and who does not communicate truths apart from himself."¹³⁰

It must not be forgotten that, for Torrance, every aspect of the life of Christ was a vicarious healing on our behalf and in our place.¹³¹ The fact that Jesus took on a human mind and appropriated human language shows us that even our minds and language need to be healed and reconciled to God. However, it must always be remembered that it is Jesus within the context of Israel, as one who participated in the forms of life and speech of the ancient Jews, joining in the community that shaped the language and came to know God. At the end of the day, we are not seeking for some kind of philosophy of language or truth that somehow bypasses the reconciling of our language and understanding that is worked out in Christ. Rather, it is one more way that we seek to be united to Christ. Like every other aspect of Torrance's theology, truth and language are fully Christocentric.

In bringing this discussion of truth and language in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance to a close, it seems appropriate to show how, in Christ, all the strands of thought discussed here are drawn together. For Torrance, although

127 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 62–67; *God and Rationality*, 141–142; *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 124–129; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 316–317; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 40–42.

128 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 151–153; *Divine Meaning*, 190.

129 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 179–180; *Theological Science*, 147.

130 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 125–126. This is not a form of Augustinian illuminationism. Not only is Augustine more Platonic than Torrance, but Torrance is also emphasizing that we do not come to know divine truths in any way that bypasses the actual life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

131 The very best place to find more about Torrance's understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ is *The Mediation of Christ*.

he never engages in a full exposition of Christology in any of his works on theological method, Christ is truly the first and the last, Alpha and Omega. All of his reflection, but particularly about truth and the function of language, begins with Christ and has its most sublime expression in Christ. The fact that God has condescended to meet with us as one of us and one with us is the absolutely central conviction in Torrance's thought.

In Christ, we see the whole hierarchical structure of the stratified nature of truth. he speaks human words that direct us to himself as the truth of being and, through himself, are made to terminate finally on the reality of God, with whom he is of one being.¹³² In addition, by encountering us with the fullness of his person, Christ confronts us with knowledge that is absolutely new and cannot be explained in terms of knowledge we had already gathered from elsewhere.

We can see each of the three levels of reality that Torrance emphasizes in Christ as well. In our ordinary experience with Christ, we intuitively come to understand that we are dealing with divine communication. By ordering our experience of Christ through the biblical witness, we realize that, in Christ, we have to do with an utterly unique revelation of God through this human being. As we penetrate further into our evangelical and doxological experience in the worshipping life of the church, we come to explicit awareness that, in Christ, we do not only have to do with a revelation *from* God. Rather, we have to do with the fullness of God in human flesh so that what God is in his interaction with us he is antecedently and eternally in himself.

Nowhere do we see the inadequacy of our human words more strongly than in the ministry of Jesus. Never before had such astonishing things been said about God, and yet Jesus, the fullness of God in human flesh, does not hesitate to take them on his lips. This also shows us the power of the semantic relation of words to reality. Never before did words have to indicate a reality as infinitely beyond their capacity than in Christ, and yet the meaning of his words shows through, challenging and transforming human words, thoughts, and lives.

132 See discussion, "The Role of Jesus Christ in Relation to Truth and Language for God" above. Torrance rejects the sharp division between a "Christology from below" and a "Christology from above," insisting that we think out Christ "in his wholeness and integrity as one Person who is both God and man" (*The Mediation of Christ*, 53).

In Christ, words were spoken and actions were performed with true authority, in sharp contrast to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. By taking up the language and history of the nation of Israel, Jesus radically reshaped human understanding. his interpretation was shaped by the being and will of God and not corrupted by human traditions. Now that Christ has come among us, we are not able to go behind his back, to somehow return to a pre-Christian attitude. The new wine has completely destroyed the old wineskins.¹³³ In Christ we are brought face-to-face with the reality of God, the knowledge of whom forces us to break out of the shackles of unredeemed ways of thinking and speaking.

133 Matthew 9:17.