

BOOK REVIEW

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Encountering Reality: T. F. Torrance on Truth and Human Understanding

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This is the best book yet on T. F. Torrance and his views about theology and natural science. It not only displays a sure grasp of Torrance's ideas, but also relates them to seminal voices in the philosophy of science and in the field of modern quantum physics. Unlike previous ventures in this area, Stevick does not make the reductionist move of judging Christian dogmatic theology by alien scientific norms in order to bring the two disciplines into relationship. He grapples with major proposals in epistemology on the scientific side such as those of Lakatos, Putnam, Quine, Tarski, Van Fraassen, Feyerabend, and Feynman. At the same time he allows Torrance's theology to hold its own as representing a field of knowledge with its own independent integrity. Torrance's views are explicated, modified, and sometimes corrected with great insight and ingenuity. No future study that wishes to relate the trinitarian faith to modern scientific inquiry can afford to ignore this work.

The book falls into five chapters. With great care Stevick examines the epistemological quandaries of modern science while also relating Torrance's proposals to them. Stevick's deft summaries of the epistemological issues on the scientific side are alone worth the price of the book. At the same time he unpacks any number of ambiguities and obscurities on Torrance's side without dismissing him out of hand. Many promising lines of inquiry for the future are opened up in the process.

In Chapter 1, "What Is (Authentic) Knowledge?", Stevick explores Torrance's critique of dualist, positivist, and reductionist ways of thinking. He defends Torrance against charges that his own positions are somehow dualistic in themselves. The core idea -- that "the nature of the object prescribes the mode of rationality we have to adopt toward it" (3) -- is introduced and then carried forward as Torrance's basic epistemic intuition. The idea that to know something means to know it

"according to its nature" (*kata physin*) is at the heart of Torrance's theological and scientific realism. Stevick draws some surprising implications from it. For example, he argues that "epistemic access" need not be complete nor infallible in order to be reliable (6-7). Nevertheless, he notes that "an analysis of *kataphysic* knowledge is entirely absent from Torrance's own writing" (7). Whereas in the hands of a lesser critic this kind of shortfall might lead to dismissing Torrance out of hand, Stevick goes on to fill in the gaps. Along the way he offers a most illuminating account of why Torrance is neither "realist" nor "antirealist" in epistemology while overlapping and transcending each. Again and again Stevick puts his finger on ambiguities and inadequacies in what Torrance says while also explaining why his lines of thought remain cogent and fruitful when read with critical sympathy.

Chapter 2, "Ultimate Beliefs," defends Torrance against charges of "foundationalism" and "fideism." It turns out, arguably, that no epistemological proposal can proceed without at least some background beliefs that can be neither verified nor falsified. Torrance calls these "ultimate beliefs." They are "by their very nature irrefutable and unprovable." They "have to be assumed in any attempt at rational proof or disproof," and they involve "a relation of thought to being" that cannot be logically demonstrated, but without which no inquiry can move forward (43). The object under consideration always remains significantly beyond our ability to grasp it in thought and word, even though thought and word cannot be dispensed with. Stevick relates this claim to the insights of Kuhn, Duhem, Quine, Lakatos, and others (44). In the end Stevick concludes that Bhaskar [an anti-positivist] and Torrance are approaching "the same or similar concerns from different directions" (60). Plantinga is then used to explain why Torrance is not a "fideist" in any pernicious sense (62), while Thiemann's unfortunate charge that Torrance is a "foundationalist" is overturned by an exercise in careful conceptual analysis (65-71). In conclusion, the provocative Torrencian claim is advanced that "the final court which can decide the truthfulness of a proposition or conviction is not reason but reality" (71).

The question of "Objectivity" is taken up in Ch. 3. "Torrance's concerns push us to conceive of objectivity primarily in terms of the object we seek to know, rather than in terms of the knowing subject" (ix). Objectivity does not mean

neutrality. "It is not possible to describe any phenomenon from a neutral coordinate system.... Every observation is bound up with a particular coordinate system, or point of view, which must be assumed in scientific description" (74). Torrance follows Polanyi in arguing that objectivity means attending to the rationality inherent in reality, and in the object under investigation (80). From this standpoint "objective knowledge can never be treated as final, for there may always be more to learn" (82). At the same time the knowing subject can never be abstracted from "the knowing relation" (82). As Polanyi suggested, it is finally the informed community of inquiry that keeps the knowing relation from collapsing into mere subjectivity (85-87). This position is in line with Kuhn when he argues that "scientific knowledge is not theory-neutral but always relative to a particular paradigm or scientific perspective shared by the community of scientists" (94). But how can a collapse into "corporate subjectivity" be avoided on these terms? In an acute way the question of objectivity thus evolves into the question of truth.

How to relate the question of truth to the idea of knowing something "according to its nature" (*kata physin*) is discussed in Ch. 4. "Torrance stresses that the truth of our statements must always be secondary to the reality to which they refer" (ix). This is perhaps the key chapter of the book. Torrance is said to reject both a "strong correspondence theory" and a "strong coherence theory" (106). The former emphasizes the objective pole of the knowing relation at the expense of its subjective pole, while the latter does exactly the reverse, emphasizing the subjective pole at the expense of the objective pole. A real relation exists between our statements and reality. Our statements are true or false based on what is the case independently of them. Intelligibility, moreover, is always relative to the framework or paradigm that is being used in order to know something (108-109). One and the same statement can have a very different meaning depending on the paradigm that is being used. A strong correspondence theory is therefore ruled out (112).

How science deals with this situation is discussed with reference to both Popper and Lakatos, neither of whom is regarded as being fully satisfying (112-17). Pure coherence alternatives, such as the Duhem-Quine thesis, are also found wanting (120-21). Stevick has to undertake some major critical reconstructions in

order to get Torrance into a position to respond to such dilemmas (121-24). These critical revisions are at once ingenious and sympathetic, precisely at points where previous analysts of Torrance might be tempted to throw up their hands. Torrance -- the spirit if not the letter of Torrance -- is then ably contrasted with Aquinas (126). Stevick interprets Torrance to claim that "being is more basic than our statements about being" (126-27). This leads to more or less Polanyian idea of a "stratified relationship" between "created realities and our statements about them" (127). Although Torrance may not be entirely consistent at this point, Stevick reads him charitably and fruitfully. Because Torrance is concerned with "the truth of being" (129), he can be read as holding that "reference may be partial and broken, and yet still be genuine" (128). "This focuses the notion of truth primarily on being and only secondarily on statements" (131) -- a fairly astonishing claim indeed.

Stevick then turns to Tarski to move the discussion forward (131-32), while Polanyi is also drawn upon. Tarski has realized "that the goals of a correspondence theory of truth only make sense if we have a way to speak and think on more than one level simultaneously" (132). Stevick then creatively and "rationally reconstructs" what Torrance seems to intend so that Torrance ends up with a "correlation theory of truth" (133) that at once overlaps with and yet also transcends both correspondence and coherentist theories. It is not a matter of individual statements taken in themselves but of "entire systems" of statements "cohering together *in the object they are attempting to represent*" (136, italics original). After navigating among ambiguities and unaddressed matters in Torrance, the result according to the creative reconstruction assembled by Stevick is "a dynamic and flexible notion of the truthfulness" of theories that "enables Torrance to avoid the problem of reference with his empirical correlates and account for how theories which have proven inadequate to reality are not to be treated as 'false' merely because of that" (142). I think this is a remarkably provocative interpretation. It invites careful examination in any future discussion.

"It is not clear that Torrance fully understood the significance of his own position" (144). Indeed it seems fair to say that Torrance did not have nearly the philosophical sophistication and erudition that Stevick brings to the subject of

modern epistemology in science and theology. Nevertheless, Stevick makes Torrance interesting and relevant in ways that lesser interpreters could never manage to do. "Once it is granted," writes the author, "that there is a stratification of truth and that theories are not to be judged true or false based on whether they provide a literally true account of reality, but by whether they are rooted in reality that can reveal itself in new and surprising ways, a host of questions can be raised" (144). These questions would apply with equal relevance in the field of modern science as well as in that of dogmatic Christian theology. A fascinating discussion ensues about how Torrance so interpreted may then be related to Bhaskar, Van Fraassen, and Wittgenstein (145-57).

Chapter 5 takes up "the role of theory" in relation to the idea of "knowledge in accord with its object" (*kata physin*). Torrance's idea of "disclosure models" is related to his "scientific realism." Stevick makes a case that Torrance's "correlation theory" is superior to "realist" and "antirealist" theories because it can avoid the traditional problems that they have generated. "While Torrance's realism makes it clear that our theories change due to the fact that reality far exceeds the ability of our theories to describe or explain them, antirealism has difficulties explaining why our theories ought to change over time. To do so, it would seem that there would need to be some theory-independent reality that can challenge our theoretical constructions. However, if it is affirmed that such a reality exists and that we have access to it, it would seem to imply something not altogether unlike Torrance's realism" (194-95). Stevick concludes that Torrance leaves us with a "robust and consistent" interpretation of how our theories may be related truly to reality.

In this entirely admirable and stimulating book, Stevick has provided us with a model of careful interdisciplinary work -- one fully informed about epistemological quandaries as they arise in current scientific discussion. Stevick shows how the historic Nicene faith as understood so incomparably by Torrance may well yet have a signal contribution to make to our better understanding of theology, science, and their mutual conceptual interrelations.

George Hunsinger