

A 'Saving Interruption': Moral Knowledge and Participation in Christ

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. [Ps 19:1]

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made...
[Rom. 1:20]

What can we learn about the moral order through the power of natural reason? Is there moral content in nature? These questions have perennially challenged the doctrine of theological ethics. The challenge lies in the inescapable tension between the school of *lex naturae*, and the school of prayer. I might express this same tension in other words, as tension between an ostensibly ontological concept of moral order, and the experiential reality of participation in Christ.

Toward a "more natural" theology

As an entrée to creative wrestling with this tension, I should like to explore briefly Eberhard Jüngel's notion of a "more natural" theology. In his commentary on the *Barmen Declaration* Jüngel recognizes the need for the Church in every age to:

...outline a *more natural* theology than so-called natural theology: a *natural theology* which knows Jesus Christ as the one who has reconciled both human beings and the world (2 Cor 5:19).¹

I should like here to explore briefly the epistemic significance of Jüngel's approach, drawing particular attention to 'participation in Christ' as the epistemic event in which moral knowledge occurs, and then to interpret Jüngel's statement that truth is to be understood christologically as an event of a "*saving interruption*."² Following Jüngel's lead then, the task I am assigning for these next few pages is to look at natural theology through a christological lens, and consider what implications may ensue for the doctrine of moral knowledge.

The first question that comes to mind is: Can there really be a "christological natural theology"?³ Does this not seem a contradiction in terms? Are "christological" and "natural"

¹ Jüngel, *Barmen; Kirche Zwischen Versuchung und Gnade*, E.T. *Christ, Justice and Peace: Toward a Theology of the State in Dialogue with the Barmen Declaration*, trans. by D. Bruce Hamill and Alan J. Torrance (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1992), p. 26.

² Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: the Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*, trans. by John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 138.

³ This may sound like a recipe to embark in a dialectical direction, due to the conflicting epistemological directions implied by "christological" and "natural", but I do not intend to address this issue here; rather, I am here asking after the implications of a positive, integrated understanding of Jüngel's proposal, and I believe this is the approach that best serves his intentions. For good analysis of the dialectical approach to doctrine,

mutually exclusive modifiers for theology? Not necessarily. In view of Christ as the one in whom, through whom, and for whom all natural things are created [Col. 1:15ff], we might find these to be eminently compatible adjectives. Even the great opponent of natural theology, Karl Barth admits that

...we are certainly not always wrong, if we believe we hear a song of praise to God in the existence also of Sirius and the rock crystal, of the violet and the boa-constrictor.⁴

Thus, while Barth may reject the premise of traditional natural theology,⁵ he does not reject the questions it asks regarding what can and cannot be discerned and known through natural capacities of human comprehension.⁶ Indeed, he even goes so far as to consider what a “Christian” natural theology might entail, though he does not develop this concept in depth, preferring instead to apply his energy to polemics against the pseudo-theology that he saw lurking in the motivations of traditional natural theology.⁷

Eberhard Jüngel has blazed a helpful path in this direction of seeking a christological natural theology.⁸ Picking up where Barth seems to have left off, Jüngel presses on in pursuit of “a

see for example, Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, esp. pp. 391ff; and Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (2000).

⁴ Barth, *Knowledge of God*, 41.

⁵ Barth, of course, famously expresses the flaw intrinsic to natural theology which renders it incoherent, for it can proceed only by means of denying the witness of “real” theology: “For, “natural theology” does not exist as an entity capable of becoming a separate subject within what I consider to be real theology—not even for the sake of being rejected. If one occupies oneself with real theology one can pass by so-called natural theology only as one would pass by an abyss into which it is inadvisable to step if one does not want to fall”, *Nein!*, 45.

⁶ “But the problem [of natural theology] itself we cannot reject. If God is knowable, then it is necessary also to ask how far He is knowable to man”, *CD II/1*, 129. Cf. Barth’s remarks on the *Barmen Declaration*, which is rightly seen as a rebuke of natural theology; even so, Barth explains that this rebuke “does not deny the possibility of a natural theology as such. On the contrary, it presupposes that there are such things”, and he goes on to explain the thrust of the rebuke in terms of church dogmatics: “But it does deny and designate as false doctrine the assertion that all these things can be the source of Church proclamation, a second source alongside and apart from the one Word of God. It excludes natural theology from Church proclamation.” *CD II/1*, 178

⁷ *CD II/1*, 94. Barth goes on to diagnose the concept of a “Christian” natural theology as problematic due to the dilemma of desiring to “really represent and affirm the standpoint of faith” and at the same time to arrive at knowability of God through the “unbelief” which he attributes to traditional statements of natural theology.

⁸ Notable among other explorers of this direction include Stanley Hauerwas, who suggests a similar view of christological natural theology when he argues “that the great natural theologian of the Gifford Lectures is Karl Barth, for Barth, in contrast to James and Niebuhr, provides a robust theological description of existence”, *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (London: SCM, 2002) 39. Barth addresses the concept: “As a “Christian” natural theology, it must really represent and affirm the standpoint of faith. Its true objective to which it really wants to lead unbelief is the knowability of the real God through Himself in His revelation.” *CD II/1*, 94. Ray Anderson proposes a similar concept: “It would indeed be a new direction in natural theology of the transforming grace of the death and resurrection of Christ to be displayed in the public arena through serious moral commitment to the humanizing of human persons. It would indeed be an appropriate testimony to the theological legacy of Karl Barth for evangelical theology to move in this new direction”, in “Barth and a New Direction for Natural Theology”, in *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth May 10, 1886*, ed. by John Thompson (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 241-266, p. 263. Such a new construction of natural theology would also seem to be precisely what is required to sustain Oliver O’Donovan’s suggestion that the moral order requires to be understood in terms of the relational “experience of being claimed”, O’Donovan, “What Can Ethics Know

new approach to solving the old problem of natural theology.”⁹ Jüngel rightly frames the problem in christological terms, asking how the doctrine *extra Christum nulla salus* (outside Christ there is no salvation)¹⁰ can be reconciled with natural theology. In other words, how can it be that “this exclusive truth claim becomes an inclusive granting of a truth that concerns every human being as such”?¹¹

Jüngel sets the cornerstone for construction of his christocentric natural theology upon Luther’s statement that “justification by faith is the theological definition of the human person”.¹² This thesis places faith at the core of the *ontological* statement of the *humanum* (i.e., of what it means to be human). Furthermore, because this describes “the *whole* of the person and therefore *all* persons”, this definition serves also as a suitable platform upon which to construct a natural theology.¹³ The neat trick to be pulled off here by Jüngel (if he can do it) is to express natural theology in terms of faith. He has merged the epistemological aspect of faith into the ontological description of the person (and the *humanum*). Is this merely a sleight-of-hand, a playing with words? Or has Jüngel indeed offered a coherent dogmatic approach to convey the meaning of natural knowledge in terms of the christological event of faith? He acknowledges this potential objection by going immediately to the heart of the matter as he asks: what is the meaning of the word “God”? The question needs to be answered within the context of natural theology if Jüngel’s proposal is to succeed, yet the God known through Christ is known only through the event of faith, actualized through God’s self-revelation. How then can this word be used meaningfully at all outside the context of faith? How can the word ‘God’ (and hence, faith in God) apply to natural theology with universal validity? This is a hermeneutical problem. The word ‘God’ takes on *performative* significance in terms of the relationship of faith in which God becomes known. Use of the word ‘God’ becomes a speech-act; it conveys the context and event of faith in which it is spoken. This is the direct result of the intention to define ‘God’ in concrete, trinitarian, and hence christological, terms as:

about God?” in *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics*, ed. by Alan J. Torrance and Michael Banner (T&T Clark, 2006), 40.

⁹ E. Jüngel, “*Extra Christum Nulla Salus—A Principle of Natural Theology?*” (1989) p. 174. Jüngel takes his cue from “the problem which [Karl] Rahner indicates by speaking of anonymous Christians”, 173-4. We need not analyze Jüngel’s interpretation of Rahner’s statements here; the essential point for our study is that Jüngel’s response to Rahner addresses precisely the same issue of the epistemic role of faith which concerns our thesis.

¹⁰ Cf. Acts 4:12; John 14:6.

¹¹ Jüngel, *Extra Christum.*, 175-6. The easy answer of course is to insist that there are two distinctly types of knowledge—salvific vs. non-salvific—and that the Gospel belongs to the former, while ethics and natural knowledge of the moral order belong to the latter category. This is, of course, a non-solution, in light of the inseparability of ethics and dogmatics, which is a point we need not rehearse here. Suffice it to say, every scheme to bifurcate knowledge into mutually exclusive categories of ‘natural’ vs. ‘revealed’ has been tried and found wanting. Barth for one has expressed the point in terms of the “great epistemological caveat”, which he prescribed in his Münster *Ethics* lectures (1928-1929), p. 98: “[T]he way of thought that we are pursuing is not a secure one except in the reality of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.” Barth’s ‘caveat’ insists that knowledge be considered within this hermeneutical context of this reality. John Webster notices the importance of this caveat as a foundational principle for Barth’s ethics, and rightly discerns that Barth consistently employs this caveat in “opposing the tendency of modern theological ethics to adopt an ‘apologetic attitude’ to philosophical ethics”, Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 46.

¹² M. Luther, *The Disputation Concerning Man*, thesis 32, LW 34, p. 139, quoted by Jüngel, *Extra Christum*, 180.

¹³ Jüngel, *Extra Christum*, 180.

...the *deus iustificans* (God who justifies), and thereby as the one who communicates himself, whose self-communication takes place *sola gratia* (by grace alone) and therefore in freedom... [T]he word 'God' is a 'word of offer'.¹⁴

Here the paradox of faith asserts itself, stubbornly refusing to be either explained or replaced by any explanations (which ultimately rely upon further paradox). In the attempt to construct a new christological version of natural theology, Jüngel is attempting to transform the conceptual "god" of natural theology into the concrete, active, living God of the Bible; for, if Jüngel's definition is to bear weight in natural terms (*extra Christum*), the word 'God' must be seen to function as a relational event in which an offer is made *sola gratia* (by grace alone). The paradox of faith remains undiminished, because on Jüngel's view, the natural meaning of "God" is required to serve a purpose (make an offer) which would be refuted by the very premise that knowledge of this God could be obtained apart from the offer; that is to say, apart from faith as the epistemic event which brings access to the reality and fulfillment of the offer. This clearly refutes the traditional meaning of natural theology, as Jüngel admits. Jüngel therefore takes care to draw the distinction between *traditional* natural theology and *christological* natural theology. The biblical and christological meaning of God fails utterly to be derived from traditional natural theology. Thus, it is far from clear that Jüngel has taken a step in the direction of offering a new construction which can coherently address the issues by which traditional natural theology seeks to be judged.¹⁵

Regardless of the degree to which Jüngel's approach might be deemed a success or failure by proponents of traditional natural theology, I would like to draw at least one significant conclusion from his proposal—the attempt to construct natural theology upon christological terms may be construed as a *hermeneutical* exercise. The reason for this is that the epistemic role of faith, as an event, resists reduction into *merely* ontological language. Perhaps the concept of orders of creation (*Ordnungen*) might be reduced into metaphysical and ontological categories, but the faith event in which the self-revealing God makes himself known is not reducible into ontological categories as per the *Ordnungen*. Thus, the traditional conception of natural theology collapses under the weight of the burden of explaining the epistemic events of faith and revelation. The language of traditional natural theology has no category from which the meanings of faith and 'God' can be derived. Jüngel concludes concisely:

The being of God is the hermeneutical problem of theology. Or, more precisely: the fact that the being of God *proceeds* is precisely the hermeneutical problem.¹⁶

The hermeneutical problem consists in the paradoxical impossibility of deriving the meaning of 'God' apart from God's self-communication. The verb "*proceeds*" conveys this self-referential activity of God, in which God is known through the event (the proceeding) in

¹⁴ Jüngel, *Extra Christum*, 181.

¹⁵ Jüngel rightly states the criterion upon which natural theology is to be judged, in terms of its ability to offer a universally applicable definition of humanity. While his christological construction may claim to offer such a definition, he recognizes that this claim fails to win "universal validity" apart from the claim that "God is a hypothesis which must verify itself." *Extra Christum*, 180. This criterion may also be expressed as, "the desire to prove that all persons always exist in relation to God independent of the saving revelation, 181. Jüngel here confronts the contradiction between "belief" and "unbelief" which Barth cites as the reason to declare natural theology (at least in the traditional sense) as no theology at all.

¹⁶ Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming*, 10.

which he continually becomes who he is.¹⁷ This is the context in which Jüngel titles his interpretation of Barth's Trinitarian theology, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden (God's Being Is in Becoming)*.

Jüngel recognizes the conflict this hermeneutical problem of God's Being-in-Becoming poses for natural theology. He identifies the motive underlying natural theology: to yield theological knowledge without admitting (or submitting) to the epistemic contingencies of special revelation. Thus, "The self-evidentness of God is the real claim of natural theology"¹⁸, and "natural theology claims "to *demonstrate* that which ought to be *self-evident*."¹⁹ The "self-evidentness" of the truth claims purported by traditional natural theology can be described either in terms of human capacity,²⁰ or in terms of God's 'self-evidentness', but in either case, the logic underlying the claim is problematic. If something is self-evident, how can it be demonstrated? If it is self-evident, it defies proof. Demonstration proceeds *from* that which is self-evident, *toward* that which is not. The claim that natural knowledge of God is self-evident therefore reduces to a claim that God creates and subsists within the epistemic event which renders that knowledge evident and knowable. Once again, we see that the act of being, and the event of knowing, must cohere. In other words, the ontological reality and the epistemological actualization of knowledge are inseparable.²¹

The logic at work here in Jüngel's diagnosis leads to the conclusion that attempts to construct a natural theology in *merely ontological* terms will fail. Such attempts fail the test of coherence, because the epistemic conditions of knowledge and the relational events which actualize "self-evidentness" are not subsumed by ontological categories.²² For a 'something' or a 'self' to make itself evident, the epistemic conditions of its evidence will be inseparable from its essence. In other words, both being and knowing will be contained within its identity; *ratio essendi* and *ratio cognoscendi* will co-inhere.²³

The co-inherence of being and knowing follows from Jüngel's understanding of the self-evidentness of God; and hence, knowledge of God subsists in the event of God's being-as-

¹⁷ The divine name, YHWH, can thus be interpreted as an outright rejection of categories pertaining to *theologia naturalis*, *lex naturae*, and religion in general. I might therefore reiterate Jüngel's synopsis in the aphorism: YHWH is the hermeneutical problem of theology.

¹⁸ Jüngel, *Extra Christum*, 181.

¹⁹ Jüngel, *Extra Christum*, 182.

²⁰ Barth defines natural theology in terms of "the readiness of man to know God", *CD II/1*, 128. Similarly, in *Nein!*, Barth defines natural theology in terms of a system of interpretation, which depends upon the human capacity to discern divine revelation: "By 'natural theology' I mean every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, i.e. to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture", *Nein!*, 74-5.

²¹ They must be mutually 'indwelling', to borrow Polanyi's phrase. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958).

²² "This means that the domain of metaphysics is not simply subordinated to, but completely *evacuated* by theology, for metaphysics refers its subject matter—'Being'—wholesale to a first principle, God, which is the subject of another, higher science, namely God's own, only accessible to us via revelation... And here we have reached the absolute crux of this matter, and the turning point in the destiny of the West." John Milbank, "Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics", *New Blackfriars* (1995), pp. 36-50, 44. Milbank offers good insight on this point, especially with respect to implications for ethics; for example, this comment on the impossibility of rendering the relational component of ethics in metaphysical terms: "[A] priority of ethical intersubjectivity conceived as a crossing of invisible gazes, cannot really be made phenomenological evident, and still less manifest is the identity of the call as that of a caller", p. 39. Cf. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (1997), 36-52

²³ Jüngel, *Extra Christum*, 182.

self-revealing. Knowledge occurs in human participation with the event of revelation, and thus faith provides epistemic access to understanding, through “participation in Christ.” In light of this hermeneutic reality, we can now interpret Jüngel’s statement regarding “saving interruption”—

... his [Jesus Christ’s] coming remains an ‘interruption of the secularism of life in the world’, which brings the world to its truth for the first time. In this case, prior to being conceived as the correspondence of mind and reality, truth would be understood christologically as the event of a *saving interruption* of the actual connectedness of life, in virtue of which we are first able to grasp that the world *holds together* at the deepest level, though not through itself. In this, I see one of the most important contributions of Christian theology to the question of ontology: God is at one and the same time the interruption of the coherence of being and its intensification; and, therefore, the correspondence between person (mind) and reality, which occurs in all true knowledge, means, in the case of knowledge of God, a gain to being which at the level of practice makes *more possible* in the actuality of the world than that actuality is capable of granting to itself. If God’s being is in becoming, then for us, too, more is possible.²⁴

Jüngel thus concludes: truth is to be understood christologically as the event of a *saving interruption*. This follows from his consideration of a christological natural theology, where we find truth to be performative, in correspondence with the self-evidentness of God. Therefore *moral* knowledge, if it is to derive meaning from God’s self-revelation, is also seen to be performative knowledge. Moral knowledge is *saving* knowledge. It interrupts. Something *happens*. It is not merely an interruption of our attempt to explain morality in ontological categories; but rather, it is a *participation in the event which brings understanding* to morality.²⁵ It is thus a “saving interruption”, not only in the sense that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” [Rom. 10:13]; but also in the sense that it saves our understanding by interrupting the premises by which we might otherwise explain things.

Thus, an evangelical doctrine of moral knowledge will refrain from the objectification of ethical knowledge. As Jüngel rightly says, “The significance of the *Barmen Declaration* for our time ought, in a particular way, to consist in the fact that it can preserve the church from replacing the apostolic preaching of Gospel with an *epistle of morality*.”²⁶ An epistle of morality would be an epistle of imperatives, severed from its source and authority. Moral imperatives, theologically speaking, are inseparable from the living, relational center of the innertrinitarian life of God, and human participation in it that life. Theological ethics and

²⁴ Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming*, 138-9. The second sentence reads in the original: “Wahrheit wäre dann freilich, bevor sie erkenntnistheoretisch als Übereinstimmung von intellectus und res in Betracht kommt, christologisch als Ereignis einer *heilsamen Unterbrechung* des faktischen Lebenszusammenhanges zu verstehen, kraft derer dann erst denkbar wird, daß die Welt—eben nicht durch sich selbst—im Innersten *zusammenhält*.” Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden : verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth: eine Paraphrase* (Mohr Siebeck, 1986), pp. 137f. Jüngel makes this observation with respect to Barth’s discussion of “parables of the kingdom” which may indeed bring knowledge in the event of a “wunderbarer Unterbrechung der Profanität des Weltlebens”, *K.D. IV/3*, 130f. (*CD IV/3.1*, 116).

²⁵ Borrowing the terminology of Thiselton, I might phrase it this way—It is not merely an interruption of our *Eklärung* of an ontological reality (e.g. in a doctrine of the *Ordnungen*, pace Brunner); rather, it is a *participation* in the moral order of our *Verstehen*. Cf. Thiselton shows the task of hermeneutics to consist of *Eklärung* and *Verstehen* of doctrine. *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 145ff.

²⁶ Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, 33.

moral knowledge therefore remain inexpressible in terms of an objectifiable ontology which takes priority over the event of God's being-in-becoming. Yes, the indicative implies the imperative, but that is not to suggest that the imperative may stand in for, or replace the indicative. That would not be the Gospel, but rather another law entirely. Thus, I conclude that a christological natural theology will not produce merely an "epistle of morality"; but rather, it shall become a Gospel of possibility and the hermeneutic of "the life of the world".²⁷

²⁷ *Weltleben* is Barth's apt term for the focus of natural theology: "...in the strange interruption of the secularism of life in the world (*Weltleben*)"; *K.D.* IV/3, 130f; *CD* IV/3.1, 116.