

Cartesianism According to Karl Barth

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One easy way into Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is to trace his references to the philosophy of Descartes. He ascribes the liberal-modernism in Protestant theology, to which he was so deeply opposed, to the grip of Cartesian epistemology on theological methodology since the Enlightenment. Paradoxically, he insists on a radicalization of Cartesian considerations about doubt and certainty when he comes to work out the doctrine of creation.

I – Cartesianism as the ruination of modern theology

Very early in the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* (henceforth *CD*), Barth assails 'Modernistic dogmatics', 'theology since the days of the Enlightenment' (*CD* I/1, page 36, first published in 1932, English translation 1936, revised 1975). He means, of course, Protestant theology: a theology, or a family of theologies one might say, in which 'church and faith are to be understood as links in a greater nexus of being', so that dogmatic theology becomes 'a link in a greater nexus of scientific problems, from the general structural laws of which its own specific conditions of knowledge are to be deduced and its own specific scientific character known'. The mistake with this, according to Barth, is that theology is regarded as having the same epistemological status, requirements, methods and so forth, as any other scientific or scholarly discipline. More specifically, this 'nexus of problems' is 'that of an ontology', a conception of reality, a metaphysics of being, which—'*since Descartes*'—is the ontology 'of a comprehensively explicated self-understanding of human existence which may also at a specific point become the pre-understanding of an existence in the Church or in faith, and therefore the pre-understanding and criterion of theological knowledge'.

So the charge against Protestant theology from the Enlightenment into the 1930s is that the conception of theological knowledge that is always already in place depends entirely upon an understanding of human existence which Barth labels 'Cartesian'.

Barth goes into small print, as he always does to fill in the background. He mentions idealist metaphysics, the philosophy that led Schleiermacher and (the somewhat less famous) M.L. De Wette (*Lehrbuch der christlichen Dogmatik*, 1831) to understand human existence as 'a sum of capacities ... of human self-consciousness', and to find in the middle of that, either as feeling or as direct self-consciousness, 'an original disposition or basis for the piety which will find historical actualisation, and therewith the noetic principle of Christian dogmatics as the self-explanation of this specific historically actual piety'. Putting it simply, Christian theology is forced to fit into a previously and quite independently settled conception of human existence as *self-consciousness*.

This understanding of existence has developed since Kierkegaard, the horrors of the First World War, and Heidegger, so that the self is not so much a capacity but is rather just 'projected into nothingness'. Barth is not surprised that a theologian like his great contemporary Rudolf Bultmann should try to reinterpret the New Testament on the basis of this existentialist philosophy of the self. Bultmann comes straight out of Schleiermacher, Barth thinks. Quoting his brother Heinrich Barth, a philosopher by trade, he insists that any theological project that begins with a definition of human nature is 'at root a piece of Liberalism'.

Bultmann's major theological reconstructions of the New Testament were not to appear until after the Second World War, but his little book on Jesus, which came out in 1926 and in English in 1934, and essays published about the same time, insist on man as a questioning being in search of self-understanding, with the New Testament providing authentic answers. The problem with this whole approach, for Barth, is that you first of all have a general ontology or anthropology and then fit in the concrete historical factor which is Christian revelation. Basically, Christian revelation comes as an answer to questions we already have articulated about ourselves. For Barth, the Gospel has to be allowed to frame the questions, not just to answer prearranged questions. Then, since the Enlightenment, we conceive ourselves in terms of the self-conscious autonomous individual of the Cartesian/Kantian anthropology that Barth found at work in the existentialism of the 1920s and 1930s (and that Iris Murdoch found at work in Oxford moral philosophy in the 1950s—her sketch of this syndrome, in *The Sovereignty of Good*, is still the best and briefest available). For Barth, again, God's self-revelation has to be the startingpoint of theology, not our self-understanding—and certainly not our self-understanding in terms of self-consciousness, autonomy etc.

In the preface to *CD I/1* Barth explains that by abandoning his 'Christian dogmatics' after only one volume and starting again with his

'Church dogmatics' he is signalling his belief that dogmatics is not a 'free science'. Rather, it is 'bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful' (xiii). The first consequence of that move is that he has 'excluded to the very best of my ability anything that might appear to find for theology a foundation, support, or justification in philosophical existentialism'. Readers, critics, enthusiasts, might have had reason for taking the first volume of the earlier project as confronting us with the choice between God's Word or human existence as the startingpoint. Leaving any room for doubt about this, even a smidgeon of ambiguity, Barth now sees, only continues the line in Protestant theology that leads from Schleiermacher by way of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89) to Wilhelm Hermann (1846–1922), who taught both Barth and Bultmann—'in any conceivable continuation along this line I can see only the plain destruction of Protestant theology and the Protestant Church'.

Strong words—but this is 1932. Hitler got six million votes in the general election of 1930 but it was January 1933 before the Nazis were taken into government by a rightwing coalition which no doubt expected to exploit and tame them but who were wiped out by 1934. In the second volume of *CD*, which did not appear until 1939 (and in English only in 1957), Hitler is mentioned twice.

Barth attacks 'the demand to recognize in the political events of the year 1933 and especially in the form of the God-sent Adolf Hitler, a source of specific new revelation of God'. He denounces the Christians in Germany who had colluded with 'the transformation of the Christian Church into the temple of the German nature—and history—myth'. Again in small print, Barth analyses the crisis in German Protestantism in the 1930s—'the myth of the new totalitarian state' being what he calls 'a new form of natural theology' (*CD I/2* page 173).

Secondly, Barth denounces the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler as radical idolatry, appealing to Thomas Aquinas's principle, *Deus non est in aliquo genere*—'a statement of incalculable importance for the logic of theology'—as part of his case in favour of the sovereignty of God alone—'There is no room now for what the recent past called toleration. Beside God there are only His creatures or false gods, and beside faith in Him there are religions only as religions of superstition, error and finally irreligion' (*CD I/2* page 444).

Liberal Protestantism with its bondage to existentialist anthropocentrism is as incapable as Roman Catholicism with its 'exploitation of the *analogia entis*' to resist the mystique of the new paganism, so Barth thinks—'I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible ever to become a Roman Catholic, all other reasons for not doing so being to

my mind short-sighted and trivial' (*CD I/1* page xiii). However all that may be, Barth insists on 'a Protestant theology which draws from its own source, which stands on its own feet, and which is finally liberated from this secular misery'.

The irony here is, of course, that it was his study of Anselm (1931), in his discovery of 'fides quaerens intellectum', that Barth saw that theology does not have to justify itself by some non-theological set of criteria; it has its own rationality and internal coherence in the form of witness to the event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Barth's refusal to admit any foundation, prolegomenon, conceptuality or framework prior to or in preference to the gospel, is the hallmark of his whole enterprise and it comes decisively from his reading of Anselm and other pre-modern theologians.

The Modernist view from which Barth insists that Protestant theology must demarcate itself goes back to the Renaissance and especially to Descartes, with his proof of God from human self-certainty (page 195). Barth quotes recent authors such as G. Wobbermin (1921) and Heinrich Scholz (1922), who are open or incautious enough to appeal to Descartes—'The I-experience establishes for man the surest certainty for reality that he can conceive of or that is possible for him at all. It is the presupposition ... of all validation of reality with reference to the external world'.

Is this Cartesianism as impregnable as it purports to be, Barth asks, even *philosophically*? Unfortunately he does not stop to consider this question. We must be careful not to get so impatient with Descartes, on the other hand, that we 'throw ourselves into the arms of e.g. Aristotle or Thomas' [!]'—'Suspicious of the other side too, we shall simply make the point that at any rate in theology one cannot think along Cartesian lines' (*CD I/1* page 195).

But can Barth be allowed to get away here with insisting that, since it is 'not our present concern', there is no need to reflect on the choice that he recognises between Descartes and Aquinas? Will it do to call a plague on both camps and pretend that he can get on with doing theology independently of either? He attacks Karl Holl (1907), who asserted that 'nothing is to be recognized as religiously valid but what can be found in the reality present to us and produced again out of our direct experience'. As he says, this is once again 'the principle of Cartesian thinking' (page 195). Yet again he insists it is not his business to discuss whether there is a better philosophy than the Cartesian way, he just insists that in theology we cannot start from the 'I-experience' as the basic certainty. 'Theologians with Cartesian inclinations cannot be directly and strictly reduced *ad absurdum* and overturned'—'The power with which their mouth must be stopped is not under our control' (page 197)!

Worse still, according to Barth, is ‘an indirect Cartesianism’ (page 213), which is no mere academic matter. ‘Behind Professors Wobbermin and Schaeder and their view of the independent being and possession of religious man with its independent interest there stands the *Ecclesiam habemus* of General Superintendents Dibelius and Schian, the “common sense” of practically the whole of our positive and liberal ministry, and the prevailing tendency in the pietistic-community movement, which at this point is intimately bound up with the prevailing tendency in the Church at large’. Obscure as the references are for us, without extensive footnotes, Barth’s attack on the Reformed Church of the early 1930s is plain enough. Of course we are to become responsible witnesses to the truth of God’s Word and in that sense it becomes our own, Barth goes on to insist; but the point is whether the possibility of knowledge of God’s Word is given to the religious man in such a way that we are to look for it in our own personal experience of faith, in our ‘word-bound ego’, among the contents of our consciousness: ‘We have to put to Christian Cartesianism the question whether we can be responsible for the thesis of the immanence of the possibility of experience of God’s Word in the consciousness’ (p223)—‘real acknowledgment of the Word of God does not rest at all on a possibility imparted to man and thus integral to him or immanent in him, but ... rests in God’s Word itself, which man and his possibilities can in no sense precede but only follow’.

In *CD I/1* (1932), then, in Barth’s lengthy discussion of the nature of theology, its relationship to Scripture, the Word of God and so forth, the great enemy is what he labels Modernism, Liberalism—direct and indirect Christian *Cartesianism*. For Barth, as the rest of this volume insists, Christian theology has to start with God as self-revealed in the dispensation of grace and that means God as Trinity.

II – Neither Cartesian doubt nor Cartesian certainty radical enough

In *CD III/1* (1945, English translation 1958), in his treatment of the doctrine of creation, Barth has a lengthy discussion of the ‘radical question of the reality of that which is’, as this question ‘stands at the very beginning of modern philosophy’ (page 350). He starts, then, with Descartes (pp350-63), and he concludes that, although neither the question as raised by Descartes nor the answer given by him can be regarded as ‘serious’, nevertheless his philosophy is ‘a good example of the fact that we cannot with impunity seek the reality of the created world anywhere but at the point where it is undoubtedly given, namely, in the revelation of God the Creator’ (363). Descartes’ philosophy,

precisely because and to the extent that it gives such an important role to faith in God, is 'exemplarisch für die Tatsache, dass man die Realität der Geschöpfungswelt nicht ungestraft anderswo sucht als da, wo sie unzweifelhaft ausgesprochen ist: in der Offenbarung Gottes des Schöpfers' (German 415). In other words: if you look for the reality, the realness, of the creaturely world anywhere else than where it is declared indubitably—in God the creator's revelation—then you will not go *ungestraft*, unpunished.

The 'benefit of creation', *die Wohltat der Schöpfung*, is that created reality 'really is, that it is not not, or not merely an appearance, or the subject of an illusion or a dream' (CD III/1 page 344).

'Our consciousness of ourselves and the world, i.e. our awareness and conception of our ego, and of people and things existing outside ourselves, might well be a matter of mere supposition, of pure appearance, a form of nothingness, and our step from consciousness to being a hollow fiction' (page 345)—'Unsere als Ichbewusstsein und Weltbewusstsein, d.h. also Wahrnehmung und Begriff unserer selbst und der Menschen und Dinge ausser uns sich vollziehende Existenzerkenntnis könnte auch bloss vermeintlich, sie könnte auch Schein, und zwar reiner Schein, eine Gestalt des Nichts sein, unser Schritt vom Bewusstsein zum Sein eine leere Fiktion' (German page 395).

Our knowledge of existence as it actually occurs, as I-consciousness and world-consciousness, i.e. as perception and concept of ourselves and of people and things outside us, might well be purely supposititious [spurious we might as well say]—it could be illusion, pure illusion, a formation of nothing, and our step from consciousness to being could be an empty fiction [and there Barth is assuming that we do have to step from inside our minds towards the reality outside them].

We have no direct and unmediated awareness of our own or any other reality—'Es ist nicht wahr, dass wir unmittelbar um unsere eigene oder um irgend eine Wirklichkeit wissen'. 'It is only true that we immediately suppose that we have such an awareness'—'Wahr ist nur dies, dass wir unmittelbar *meinen* [Barth's emphasis, not carried over into the translation, 345], *darum zu wissen*'. We only *think* we have direct knowledge of things. 'It is only true that we instinctively suppose that we and other beings exist, and that our consciousness implies actual existence, that of ourselves and of others'—'Wahr ist nur unsere unmittelbare *Vermutung* [again his emphasis, again untranslated], dass wir und andere Wesen existieren, dass unser Bewusstsein ein Sein—unser eigenes und fremdes Sein—in sich schliesse'. All that is true is that we *suppose* we are aware of the world around us.

Why 'immediately' in one sentence becomes 'instinctively' in the

next is difficult to explain, unless the translator is unwittingly resiling from the mentalism of the whole conception. But Barth's language is surely very clear. It is nothing to do with instinctive reaction. It is plainly all a matter of *meinen* and *Vermutung*. 'it is all a matter of *hypothesis*.

'How can we be sure that supposed reality is real?', Barth asks—'Woher sollten wir wissen, dass das vermeintlich Wirkliche wirklich ist?'—'When, where and how do we take the step by which our consciousness is in fact able to control our own being or that of others?'—More literally, when, where and how do we see ourselves taking the step, in which our consciousness proves itself actually as master of our own or any other being?

'The supposition pointing in this direction is irrefutable; but it is also unprovable' *unbeweisbar* (page 345). Barth's language becomes more and more bizarre: 'we can only point out that as a rule we *behave* 'as if' [again Barth's italics and scare quotes fail to appear in the English] it were valid [the supposition that we and others really exist]'—'We assume being and not appearance'—'Wir vermuten das Sein und nicht den Schein'—'We live in and by the healthy opinion, in und von der guten Meinung, that we are, that something is'—'But in itself this is not better founded than the morbid idea, die böse Meinung, that we are not, and that nothing is'—'We can persuade ourselves that we are certain on this point but it is only a matter of persuasion'—*einreden*—we talk ourselves into it, if you like.

'Always beneath our feet there yawns the gulf of the possibility that our healthy opinion might be deceiving us, that it might actually turn out that nothing is real, that supposed reality is nothingness'—we live 'as if'—'the nihilism which is implicit and often enough explicit in the human mode of life, which can never be quite suppressed and which it is better not to deny, calls in question the validity (*Kraft*: force) of this supposition'—'this irrefutable but also unprovable supposition'—*that we are real*. Again: 'we live without knowing that we are or that anything is'—'We may well attempt to persuade ourselves that the world is real'—'But such an attempt cannot deliver us from the vicious circle of consciousness and being which might equally well be the circle of pure appearance' —'der Kreislauf von Bewusstsein und Sein' (German page 396—there is nothing about the circle's being 'vicious' in the original).

'To affirm that we are, that something is, with any sense of security, we have not merely to say this, but to be authorised and inescapably compelled to say it'—that we exist—that *anything* exists—we had not only to say to ourselves, we had to be 'ermächtigt, autorisiert und unausweichlich genötigt sein'—it has to be 'begründet und garantiert'—

'we say it because it has first been said to us' .

We can say we exist because God has told us so—'A higher Judge must have intervened between our consciousness and our supposed intrinsic [internal] and extrinsic [external] being, and decided that our consciousness does not deceive us, and that our being is no imaginary being'—that our being is not merely illusory!—We need God to step in between our minds and the external world, indeed between our minds and themselves, to fill the gap, to guarantee that what seems to be really is. 'if we are informed , *Bescheid gegeben*, by this real Creator that we are His creatures, we do not merely suppose, *vermuten*, but *know* , *wissen* [Barth's underlining again not translated] on the basis of this information that we really are'—so it is only because God has informed us that we are real that 'our I-consciousness and world-consciousness is then removed from the sphere of appearance'—now , indeed—'we are forbidden, *geboten*, to doubt existence and ourselves'. But it takes God's revealing to us that we are creatures to stop us from thinking we are unreal—God *forbids* us to regard ourselves as unreal—'It is incumbent on us to be conscious of being and to recognize the reality of our existence'—'We have no other choice but the decisive recognition, without any shadow of ambiguity, of the reality of the created world and ourselves' (347)—'We have to be told by our Creator that we and all that exists outside us are His creatures'.

Fair enough, one might say. Of course there is a sense in which it takes divine revelation for us to understand what it is to be created—the doctrine of creation is a matter of Christian faith. But Barth is saying something much more dramatic. It takes divine revelation for us to know that we exist at all—'Then in assured recognition, in *gesicherter Erkenntnis*, we can and must and may and will also say that we are, that something is' . 'This has to be said to us'. Actually the German reads, 'that had to be *said* to us'—'Das müsste uns *gesagt* sein'—again Barth's emphasis is absent in the English text. Once again, perhaps the translator could not quite believe how exorbitant Barth's claim is. We had to be *told* that we are real and not an illusion. For Barth, that we have this knowledge of the existence of the world outside our minds follows from the doctrine of creation. Left to ourselves, without divine revelation, we might reasonably have believed that we have no real existence—that there is no external reality.

Barth goes on to write of our having to 'cross the bridge from mere consciousness ... to the recognition of existence'—displaying the hold on his mind of the Cartesian picture of the human mind as trapped on one side of a chasm, with getting to know anything as a perilous leap across. He attacks the Cartesian argument from the perfection of the being of God to His existence—it is too much 'involved in the vicious

circle of consciousness and being'—'This perfect being ... may be the subject of the hypothesis that it is, but it is also subject to the suspicion that it may not be' (page 348)—'We do not at all escape the sphere of the ambiguity of our intrinsic and extrinsic being if we attempt to broaden it by pointing to the validity of our immediate apprehension of God'. We learn from God's self-revelation of His existence and since He knows the existence of the world, that includes knowledge of the reality of the world, of ourselves and of other people—'awareness of creaturely existence rests wholly and exclusively upon God's self-communication in revelation'—'It is wholly and exclusively an echo and response of the creature to what is said to him by his Creator'—'It is neither a spontaneous nor a receptive accomplishment of the creature, for it does not rest upon any of his inherent faculties, nor is any of these faculties capable of this recognition'—'It merely takes place'—'It is a sheer fact' that we whose minds are powerless to recognize our own existence, or the existence of the world outside our minds, may be brought to this recognition 'under the law of faith and obedience'—'It is recognition in the form of acknowledgment'—which distinguishes it, Barth concludes, from all recognition, Erkenntnis, 'based upon the consciousness of the ego, the world and God'. Obedience to the authority of revelation, rather than reliance on the certainty of self-consciousness—and certainly not *adaequatio intellectus ad rem!*

But do we have to choose between knowledge of our existence, of the existence of other minds and of the outside world founded on 'unser Ich- und Welt- und Gottesbewusstsein' on the one hand, a bogus knowledge as Barth insists, and knowledge of our existence, of others and of the world as an implication of our faith in God revealed as our Creator? Does there have to be this stark choice between Cartesian philosophy of consciousness, everything starting from the first person point of view, and fullblooded thoroughgoing Christian revelation—between a philosophy of consciousness always vulnerable to scepticism, solipsism and so forth, trembling on the abyss of nothingness, and the submission of faith to the authority of the revealed Word of God guaranteeing that we are real, the world is really as it appears, and so on?

Now, with divine revelation, Barth concludes, there is no room for doubt—'it does not depend upon any choice of the creature'—we no longer have to live 'on the ground of a mere hypothesis'—'No, the only normal thing here is full, unlimited ad unreserved certainty'—'The only normal thing here is the grateful rejoicing of the creature at the existence of his Creator, and also at his own existence and that of his fellow-creatures'—but we 'cannot say this to ourselves except as it is declared to us'—'we have no capacity in ourselves to achieve this certainty' [that

we and the world are real]—‘The knowledge of the reality of the created world, and therefore of the legitimation of our consciousness of the ego and the world, depends essentially on the knowledge of God’.

Descartes was right (page 362)—it is ‘as and because we believe in God’ that ‘we believe ... that we are ... and that the world which surrounds us also is’. It is because we believe in God that we believe in the existence of the world and of ourselves. Of course, Barth concedes, we can ‘calculate, construct, experiment, experience, compare, summarise and utilize’ without ‘fundamental certitude’—‘ohne diese Gewissheit’ [the ‘fundamental’ is introduced by the translator]—but we cannot ‘truly *live*’—Barth’s emphasis, again dropped in the translation—‘without inner assurance and confidence’—a phrase entirely invented by the translator so far as I can see (page 362 cf German 414)—‘We can live truly only when we are certain about the presupposition, *Voraussetzung*, which we all constantly use, that our own individual existence and that of the surrounding world is real’.

So Descartes was right—we can have no certainty about the existence of the external world, other minds and indeed of our own minds unless we are first certain about the existence of God. The only thing is that Descartes did not go nearly far enough. We can be certain of the presupposition that we are real only because God has been revealed to us as our Creator. Neither Cartesian doubt nor Cartesian certainty goes anything like deep enough, Barth thinks.

But Barth’s solution—that we can be certain of the reality of the external world, and indeed of our own reality, only because God has removed our doubts by revelation—God ‘by whose self-disclosure [creaturely existence] is revealed and secured to the creature’ (page 363)—‘durch dessen Selbstkundgebung sie dem Geschöpf offenbar und gewiss wird’—by whose self-disclosure existence becomes manifest and certain to us creatures—will seem no solution at all to those of us who have learned, whether from Heidegger or the later Wittgenstein, that *there never was any need for all this talk about hypothesis, supposition and so forth in the first place*.

Barth is not saying that we need revelation to know that we are creatures—that would, or anyway might be, fine; no, he is saying that we need *revelation* to know *that we exist*. He thinks that, with his appeal to *God’s* having *authorized* the *presupposition* that the external world and other minds exist, he has provided a much deeper solution to the problem than Descartes could ever offer. God, by revealing to us that we are created, now *forbids* us to doubt our existence.

But the question surely is whether by accepting the problem of the existence of the external world *in these terms*—presupposition, hypothesis, consciousness, the first person viewpoint, certainty and all

the rest—without the slightest protest—Barth has not conceded everything to Descartes already. If he had really understood Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, available since 1927, and alluded to in *CD I/1*, Barth would have had to be suspicious of the entire Cartesian project. Far from seeking to radicalize Cartesianism he should have abandoned it. In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger's story is precisely that we are *not* individually conceived isolated self-consciousnesses with huge problems about bridging the gap between ourselves and one another, and all that—but on the contrary that we are always already *in the world*, in his terminology. The scandal of epistemology, Heidegger days, is not, as Kant thought, that philosophers have never been able to produce an argument to justify our belief in the reality of the external world relationship—the scandal is that philosophers ever accepted that there is such a gap to be bridged.

For Barth, however, writing as a theologian committed to the thesis that nothing fails to be illuminated by Christian revelation, the story is that the connection between me and the external world is totally insecure—I need God to assure me that I exist, and God of course does precisely that, in revealing himself to me as my creator. Of course if I am *created* then I *exist*. But as for 'cogito ergo sum'—'I think therefore I am'—what is wrong with this is not that it starts from first-person self-consciousness, the problem you might have expected the Barth who attacks Cartesianism to focus on; no, for Barth Descartes doesn't go nearly far enough. No amount of consciousness on my part will demonstrate that I exist. There is no knowledge of anything in the world, about myself or anyone else, that shows that I exist. I know that I exist simply because I hear God telling me so. Indeed, I know of anything that it is *real* simply because *God tells me so*.

So starting from the Cartesian conception of the self-certain individual leads to the liberal-individualism of a modern theology that denies the absolute sovereignty of the self-revealed God and inevitably becomes powerless to resist the idolatries of fascism. Cartesian scepticism about the reality of the world outside the individual's consciousness is, on the other hand, not nearly radical enough: only God's revelation that we are creatures enables us to be sure that our knowledge of ourselves, and of everything else, is not an illusion. It is hard to think of a theology more different from that of St Thomas Aquinas.