

A CAPACITY FOR AMBIGUITY?: THE BARTH - BRUNNER DEBATE REVISITED

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Summary

This essay seeks to reconsider the debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner concerning the relationship between the nature and grace. The first section considers the immediate political and social context for the debate in 1930s Germany, and suggests that only when this Sitz im Leben is taken into account can the urgent tone of Barth's denunciation of Brunner be properly appreciated. Subsequent sections identify the key issues of dispute between the two, especially Brunner's insistent differentiation between a 'formal' and 'material' image of God in humans, and his affirmation of the need for a 'point of contact' for grace in human nature as created and fallen. The essay concludes by exploring an ambiguity in the central term Offenbarungsmächtigkeit, and suggests that there is a way of interpreting this term which satisfies Barth's theological concerns, and which he himself cannot avoid conceding the validity of.

The purpose of this paper is to consider again the very public disagreement between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner which reached its zenith in 1934, although it had murmured on for some considerable time beforehand and was continued with no small amount of enthusiasm long afterwards. The focus of this fierce disagreement was the question concerning the relationship between nature and grace, creation and redemption, state and church. The disagreement was remarkable not due simply to the passion and vigour with which Barth, at least, engaged in it, but because it had erupted between two men who hitherto had been viewed as theologically at one. An angry exchange between Barth and Harnack was perhaps unsurprising. But Barth and Brunner? Were they not from the same stable, and engaged in essentially similar theological projects? So it had seemed to many. And so, viewed from one perspective at least, it would continue to appear, even to Brunner himself as we shall see. But Barth insisted that the relationship between them was rather like that between two adjacent points on the circumference of a circle: looked at from one perspective as close as they could ever be; but from another, as far apart as possible. What I hope to do in this essay is to penetrate to the heart of the debate, to expose and examine the key issues, and

finally to pose some questions concerning the adequacy of Barth's formulation of his case. The texts to which our attention will be directed are Emil Brunner's essay 'Nature and Grace: A Contribution to the Discussion with Karl Barth', and Barth's response 'Nein! Answer to Emil Brunner'. Both pieces originally appeared in 1934 and were subsequently helpfully bound together in an English translation by Peter Fraenkel in 1946 under the now familiar title *Natural Theology*,¹ and it is to this edition that I shall be referring.²

I. *Status confessionis* or storm in a teacup?

What, then, was the issue in 1934? We should note briefly the immediate political/social context of the dialogue, since this weighed heavily upon Barth in formulating his point of view. 1934 was, of course, also the year in which the 'Barmen Declaration' was promulgated, a vehement protest on the part of the 'Confessing Church' against the so-called 'German Christians' and 'National Socialism'. The questions of the relationship between church and state, grace and nature were thrust to the fore in a situation in which apparent compromises were being made between the gospel of Jesus Christ and that of Germany's other more recently adopted messianic movement. Barth, together with others, became increasingly convinced that in the face of all syncretistic blurring of boundaries, the Christian Church and its theologians must return unequivocally to the one absolute authority for faith: the Revelation of God to humans in Jesus Christ and him crucified, a revelation the very substance of which spoke clearly of a judgement upon all purely human philosophies and ideologies, indeed upon human existence as such, considered apart from God's redeeming action in Jesus Christ. Christian theology, Christian ethics, therefore, could in no sense be held to derive their message from two distinct sources: revelation on the one hand, and nature or reason on the other. To suggest this in the Germany of 1934, when the most demonic fruits of human nature and culture were clearly manifest in the political and

¹London, 1946.

²We should note that Brunner eventually furnished a more developed 2nd edition of his essay in 1935 in which he continued the dialogue; but since we are primarily interested in Barth, we will refer to the original Brunner piece to which Barth's response is directed.

social sphere, was to entertain the view that theology must serve two masters: on the one hand the Lord of light, and on the other the Lord of darkness.

It is easy to see how this specific context served to exaggerate the issues: but the issues were already there to be exaggerated, and had now to be wrestled with. Whether 'nature' be manifest in Nazism, or the altogether less objectionable form of the classical philosophies of ancient Greece, the methodological question remained essentially the same one. In terms of our knowledge of God and his purposes and designs for his world, what part may 'nature' be expected to play? What is the true relationship between 'nature' (the sphere of the human as given apart from any effective redemptive or revelatory activity on the part of God) and 'grace' (the condition and knowledge of those who have been acted upon in such a redemptive/revelatory way)?

This was the key question. It was an age old question for Christian theology, and one to which Barth saw Roman Catholicism and Protestant liberalism alike as having given a similar answer, namely: *Gratia non tollit naturam sed perfecit*: 'Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it'. In particular, this meant affording human reason some positive status as regards the knowledge of God. Barth believed that in every age, and not just in the *status confessionis* of Nazi Germany, such an answer opened the floodgates to relativism, secularism and paganism, viewing the category of the 'natural' as standing in a relationship of fundamental continuity with that of 'grace', as a *preparatio evangelica*, and therefore as having a distinct and necessary role to play in the formulation of theology within the Church.

In the early centuries this meant allowing Neo-Platonism (for example) to provide an interpretive mesh, a philosophical framework, within which sense was made of the message concerning God's Son—a process which led, among other things, to Arianism. In Nazi Germany it effectively meant allowing legitimacy to be afforded to the very same 'natural humanity' as was responsible for the Nazi philosophy and policies as a basis for Christian theology, to be set alongside that of the Word of God, and as a necessary context within which to interpret and make sense of that Word. It was, in short, to engage in a pact with the devil, and to place Christian

theology under the servitude of false gods whose ends did not simply fall short of but were diametrically opposed to those of the one true God who brooks no rivals, and whose Word uttered in the crucified Jesus is one of judgement upon all human pretensions and achievements. Here, then, with this fundamental question of theological method, the very life and integrity of the Christian Church was perceived to be at stake.

It is important, when reading the response of Barth to Brunner in 1934 always to keep this context firmly in mind: otherwise the passion and invective may seem to be getting rather too worked up about an abstract issue of merely academic interest. For Barth it was a matter of fidelity to the church's task of witness to Christ in a situation where his sole Lordship and sovereignty was being called into question, and the truth of the gospel sold down the river for the sake of compromise with an intrinsically evil regime. To give way at *this* point, to concede some other authority for faith than that of God's self-revealing act, to lay claim to some innate receptivity for knowledge of God on the part of humanity—albeit only the slightest concession—was, he believed, to have placed one foot on the slippery slope which led inevitably to a natural religion, a natural law and a Promethean challenge to the sole authority of God's Word. It was, in short, to have abandoned obedience to the form of God's self-revealing in exchange for an epistemic self-justification in theology which, however partial, posed a fundamental challenge to the doctrine of justification by faith. Humans, Barth insists, can no more contribute anything to that knowledge of God which alone saves than they can bring anything to the throne of grace in order to secure the divine favour. On both counts they are effectively bankrupts, and must cast themselves on the mercy and grace of God poured out in his Son.

Let's turn, then, to the Brunner-Barth dialogue itself, as we are given to overhear part (and only part) of it in the book *Natural Theology*. We now know what the issue was: but in fact the main question posed in and by the book itself is not so much this issue as such, but where precisely Barth and Brunner stand in relation to it, and therefore to one another. Do they stand on the same side of the theological fence or not?

II. The case for the defence: Emil Brunner

Brunner's essay consists basically of an attempt to show that in actual fact there is very little substantial difference between their respective points of view. He commends Barth for what he desires and intends, which, Brunner argues, *he* too desires and intends. But Barth, he suggests, has gone too far in drawing some radical conclusions from his position: conclusions which are not necessary in order to achieve what both want to achieve, and conclusions which he (Brunner) refuses to endorse. Nonetheless, he argues, these are relatively minor matters, and he and Barth stand firmly in the same camp. 'We are concerned', says Brunner, 'with the fact that the proclamation of the Church has not two sources and norms, such as, e.g. revelation *and* reason or the Word of God *and* history, and that ecclesiastical or Christian action has not two norms, such as e.g. commandments *and* "Ordinances"' (p. 18). 'In all this', he says, 'there is between me and Barth no difference of opinion, except the one on the side of Barth that there is a difference of opinion' (p. 18)! Barth appears, he suggests, 'like a loyal soldier on sentry duty at night, who shoots every one who does not give him the password as he has been commanded, and who therefore from time to time also annihilates a good friend whose password he does not hear or misunderstands in his eagerness' (p. 16).

This metaphor is a telling one, for in it we find the basic thrust of Brunner's complaint. 'Barth', he says in effect, 'has either misheard or else misunderstood me—I *gave* the proper password, but find myself having been dispatched by the theological bullet all the same!' What, then, is the password? At this point let me suggest a formulation of it which I think encapsulates the central issue. *Nature is not, in its historical state, predisposed towards grace, but resists it. The old creation is not capable of the new creation, i.e. there is nothing in the old Adam, the flesh, which could simply be developed or extrapolated to posit the new Adam. Redemption, therefore, is not a matter of evolution, or of development, or perfection: but of revolution, crisis and crucifixion.* Put in *this* way, I suggest that both Barth *and* Brunner would be in agreement—although it is difficult to be certain. But in actuality the formulations and expressions which each employed were in turn rejected by the other as utterly unacceptable. Interestingly, each denied meaning what the

other insisted they *must* mean! Let's look, then, more closely at these alternative expressions and claims.

Brunner lists a number of radical conclusions which he identifies in Barth which include the following:

1. In the fall the image of God in humans was obliterated without remnant.
2. Scripture is the sole source and norm of our knowledge of God, and we must thus reject any attempt to identify a 'natural' or 'general' revelation of God in nature, the conscience, or history.
3. There are no grounds for speaking of a 'point of contact' for the saving action of God in human nature, since this would undermine *sola gratia*.
4. The new creation is not a perfection of the old, but comes into being exclusively through the destruction of the old, and its replacement by something utterly new.

Brunner's response to these points centres around an emphatic denial of the third. We must, he argues, be able to speak meaningfully of a 'point of contact' for grace in nature, else we are left with a revelation and a redemption which are left floating in mid-air never actually *making* contact, and never, therefore, actually revealing anything or redeeming anybody. God's grace must *make contact* with something, and therefore there must be something with which contact can in fact *be made*, in sinful human nature. Here we reach the core of the debate, and the source of much ambiguity and (possible) confusion.

First Brunner turns to Barth's (alleged) attitude to the *imago Dei*, and seeks to introduce a useful distinction. 'I agree', he writes, 'that the original image of God in man has been destroyed, that the *justitia originalis* has been lost and with it the possibility of doing or even of willing to do that which is good in the sight of God' (p. 22). But, he suggests, ought we not to differentiate between a 'formal' image of God, and a 'material' image of God? The 'formal' image is the *humanum*, that which distinguishes humankind from the beasts and the inanimate creation. This special status of the human creature is 'not only not abolished by sin; rather it is the presupposition of the ability to sin and continues within the state of sin' (p. 23). It is the status of human beings as subjects, capable of language, and therefore capable of being addressed by God. As we shall see, a good deal rests upon one's translation of this word

Wortmächtigkeit. It is the responsibility of humanity, and that which defines their sin as such. No animal can be guilty of sin—only human beings. And this is a reflection of the retention of the formal image. But *materially* speaking, the image is utterly lost. That is to say, 'man is a sinner through and through and there is nothing in him which is not defiled by sin'. He is in no way predisposed towards grace, but hostile to it. Grace comes in the form of judgement and forgiveness: it is no mere 'grouting of the gaps in nature' as P.T. Forsyth puts it, nor a fostering of some latent principle of response to the divine. It is achieved in a cross.

Humans, then, remain persons responsible before God, albeit sinful persons who have flouted and continually flout that responsibility, thereby incurring judgement.

Next Brunner turns to the theme of a so-called 'general revelation'. Here he employs another distinction, although it is implicit rather than drawn out and developed. On the one hand, he insists, we can hardly attend carefully to the Bible and fail to recognise the fact that God's world is of such a sort that it 'speaks' of his workmanship. 'Wherever God does anything', Brunner writes, 'he leaves the imprint of his nature upon what he does. Therefore the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation, a self-communication of God' (p. 25). This fact does not alter due to the presence of human sin. The heavens do not cease to declare the glory of God after the Fall. In this sense, therefore, we can and must speak of a revelation of God in the natural world. But, on the other hand, Brunner affirms, what we must insist with equal vigour is that sin blinds human beings, and renders them incapable of recognising or responding appropriately to this self-giving, unable to see what is there.

Similarly with conscience; the consciousness of responsibility, of an 'ought' or categorical imperative which stands over us, no matter how imperfectly we perceive it, or how much we rebel against it, is present even in sinful humanity. Indeed again, Brunner insists, it is that which determines our humanity *as* sinful. And this is, he argues, a knowledge of God through a level of knowledge of God's law; although *again* we may reasonably say that it is not recognised as such, and that it serves no purpose whatever in terms of enabling us better to open ourselves to God or to receive

further knowledge of him. Indeed the opposite may well be true; we may dig ourselves deeper into the trenches of our rebellion whenever such 'knowledge' manifests itself in a sense of guilt or obligation.

Thus, Brunner concludes, the real question (asked and answered on a biblical basis) is not are there two kinds or levels of revelation (although we might note he never suggests anything other than one ultimate *source*), but rather how the two that *do* exist (in creation and in Jesus Christ) are related: '...taking our stand upon the revelation in Jesus Christ', he writes, 'we shall not be able to avoid speaking of a double-revelation: of one in creation which only he can recognise in all its magnitude, whose eyes have been opened by Christ; and of a second in Jesus Christ in whose bright light he can clearly perceive the former. This latter revelation far surpasses that which the former was able to show him' (p. 26-7). As we shall see, this way of stating the matter was wholly unacceptable to the Barth of 1934, although it is interesting to note the fact that there is at least a formal (and possibly a material) link with something which the Barth of *Church Dogmatics* IV.3 was eventually prepared to countenance.³

Brunner suggests (helpfully, I think) that one should differentiate between an objective-divine and a subjective-human-sinful sense of the phrase 'natural revelation' (which he prefers to 'general' revelation). On the one hand it refers to that objective 'capacity for revelation' (*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*) with which God has invested his universe, or to the formal image of God which remains in humans. On the other, 'nature' can refer to 'what sinful man makes of this in his ignorant knowledge' or 'what man himself makes of himself through sin' (p. 27). We might put this slightly differently and speak of a necessary distinction between the ontic and the noetic: between what is there to be seen, and our ability to see it. Again, there are two

³See §69.2, 'The Light of Life', where Barth develops the view that those aspects of the cosmos which he refers to as the 'little lights' of creation, while they certainly do not reveal God to the unregenerate mind are, nonetheless, given to do so as and when they are viewed by the eyes of faith. The creation, he affirms in this context, is thus invested with 'a power of speech' which persists regardless of whether humans hear what it has to say or not. What is heard by those with ears to hear is altogether more full than that which is grasped by common sense alone; but there is a positive relation between the two!

distinct senses of *Wortmächtigkeit* or *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* operative here. On the one hand the world itself possesses a God-given capacity for speech, or capacity for revelation: i.e. the ability to reveal God. On the other, the question arises of the capacity of human beings to see or to receive this 'speech' or 'revelation'. Both are rendered by the same ambiguous phrase 'capacity for revelation' or 'capacity for speech/language'. (Brunner employs both.) Brunner concludes: 'Only the Christian, i.e. the man who stands within the revelation in Christ, *has* the true *natural* knowledge of God' (p. 27). Those, I venture to suggest by way of anticipation, are words which Barth himself might have uttered.

We turn, briefly, then, to the infamous phrase 'point of contact' (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) a phrase which Brunner whispered in the shadows only to find himself on the receiving end of a salvo from Barth's barrel: it was not the password! His response is abrupt. 'No-one', he writes, 'who agrees that only human subjects but not sticks or stones can receive the Word of God and the Holy Spirit can deny that there is such a thing as a point of contact for the divine grace of redemption' (p. 31). There is, in other words, *something* about humans which makes them suitable recipients of God's gracious initiative, as opposed to other creatures. Brunner goes further, identifying this 'something' with the formal image of which he has already spoken. It is in the capacity for language (i.e. the ability to be addressed) and the formal responsibility before God which this entails that the point of contact is to be located. Only because humans can hear and understand the divine address is God able to speak to them. 'This receptivity', Brunner stresses, 'says nothing as to [their] acceptance or rejection of the Word of God. It is the purely formal possibility of [their] being addressed' (p. 31).

Such 'receptivity' is not, then, a predisposition for or an innate questing after the divine address: but simply the ability to hear it when it arises, however alien its substance may be, and even as it is a word of judgement which breeds resentment and rejection. Another way of putting this is to employ the now familiar distinction: '...materially', Brunner concedes, 'there is no point of contact, whereas formally it is a necessary presupposition. The Word of God does not have to create man's capacity for words. He has never lost it, it is the

presupposition of his ability to hear the Word of God' (p. 32). Brunner seems to trespass beyond this careful distinction, however, when he urges that in fact this capacity, this point of contact, the sphere of the possibility of being addressed, embraces 'everything connected with the "natural" knowledge of God' and insists that 'The Word of God could not reach a man who had lost his consciousness of God entirely' (p. 32), a claim which does not seem to me to follow, and with which Barth is in fundamental disagreement. (One might very well suppose a merely formal 'capacity for words' which was yet in no sense *conscious*. What must *remain*, logically, would seem to be the capacity for such consciousness to be engendered or created anew.)

Finally, Brunner argues that the category of renewal or restoration (*reparatio*) is a wholly legitimate one, whereas the idea of the total replacement of something old by something essentially *novel* in redemption is unbiblical, and denies continuity of personhood. A person is not replaced; she is redeemed and healed and restored; something for which, as a sinner, she has no 'natural' potential or predisposition, but for which she has a *capacity*.

We turn, then, at last, to Barth's emphatic response to all this, the content of which is neatly encapsulated in its one word title '*Nein!*'

III. The case for the prosecution: Karl Barth

The heart of Barth's rejoinder lies in the major question-mark which he places alongside Brunner's use of the distinction between a formal and material image, or a formal and material capacity for revelation, or point of contact. In short, Barth suspects from first to last that in, with and under the formal Brunner slips in a degree of material, however slight. And to do this is to affirm the possibility, no, the actuality, of a knowledge of 'the one true God, the triune creator of heaven and earth, who justifies us through Christ and sanctifies us through the Holy Spirit' (p. 81) obtained prior to and independently of the activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and which serves, as it were, as a theological foundation for receiving, making sense of and expounding this 'other' and fuller knowledge. For all the reasons indicated earlier, Barth will have nothing to do with

any of this, and Brunner denies that this is his intended meaning. But we should not, perhaps, rush ahead too quickly.

Barth defines 'natural theology' as follows: 'every... 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' (p. 74-5). In Brunner's claim that there is in humans a 'capacity' for revelation, or a natural 'point of contact', Barth discerns something which, he believes, falls into this category and must therefore be condemned 'as something which endangers the ultimate truth that must be guarded and defended in the Evangelical Church' (p. 69). He turns at once to the all-important distinction upon which Brunner's exposition hinges.

There is, of course, Barth admits, a formal 'image of God' remaining in humanity which is not destroyed by sin, if what we intend by affirming such is simply that 'Even as a sinner man is man and not a tortoise' (p. 79). But what, he asks, has *this* to do with any supposed *capacity* in man for revelation or any natural receptivity for the divine word, as long as it remains purely *formal*, and does not trespass into the sphere of the material? He employs the following metaphor to make his point: 'If a man had just been saved from drowning by a competent swimmer, would it not be very unsuitable if he proclaimed the fact that he was a man and not a lump of lead as his "capacity for being saved"? Unless he could claim to have helped the man who saved him by a few strokes or the like!' (p. 79).

The point Barth is making is that the ability to swim a few strokes (however few) constitutes a *material capacity* to participate in the rescue. If, as Brunner alleges, humans are utterly unable to contribute in this manner, then what possible sense is there in referring to a 'capacity' for revelation at all? Barth's use of this metaphor is revealing, and highlights a problem of meaning and interpretation which lies at the very heart of the debate and to which we must return in due course.

Barth turns next to Brunner's insistence that the world, as created by God, is 'somehow recognizable' to humans as God's world. At one moment, Barth notes, Brunner wants to suggest that such recognition is rendered impossible on the

human side by sin. Yet in the next breath he speaks as if the 'blindness' is not total; as if, albeit blurred and hazy, some partial recognition, and thereby some partial 'knowledge of God', remains in spite of sin. In this case, Barth notes quite correctly, the distinction between formal and material disintegrates, and we are back with an alleged knowledge of God to be had apart from God's self-revealing activity in His Son, and with an account of the 'idolatry' which is the practical effect of such 'partial' knowledge, as 'but a somewhat imperfect preparatory stage of the service of the true God' (p. 82), rather than that which must be banished from within the borders of Israel.

What, then, of the infamous phrase, 'point of contact'? Is there some formal anterior basis in human nature which provides a necessary precondition for the coming to humans of God's gracious Word? Again, says Barth, 'If we are prepared to call the fact that man is man and not a cat the 'point of contact', 'the objective possibility of divine revelation', then all objection to these concepts is nonsensical. For this truth is incontrovertible' (p. 88). But—there can and must be no suggestion of any remainder of some original righteousness, or openness to God, or readiness to hear what he has to say. The Word of God does *not* rely in *any* way upon *such* a capacity. To suggest such would be to posit a meeting of God by humans if not halfway, then some distance at least across the gap which separates them. Rather, the biblical view, worked out in the doctrines of *sola gratia* and justification by faith, is that God bridges the whole gap Himself, and far from finding humans to be ready recipients of His gracious offer of forgiveness (via some Roman *potentia oboedientialis*), meets only with opposition and recalcitrance. When the Word becomes incarnate, the human response is to crucify Him in an act of supreme defiance which epitomises the general truth about man's so-called 'capacity for God'. It is precisely because God can *rely* upon this response that He is able to turn the tables on man and transform his typical act of rebellion and hate into the very fulcrum of his own redemption.

Thus, according to Barth, what is required is no mere rejigging or repolishing or repairing of human nature: but rather the crucifixion of the flesh, and the raising up of a new

creature. Regeneration is expressed not in the figure of repair or restoration, but of new birth, a completely new start.

Here Barth draws on what for him is the chief significance of the doctrine of the virgin conception of Christ's human life: the words of Mary 'How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?' is the question of all humanity in the face of that work of redemption and regeneration wrought in them by Christ. The virgin conception at the beginning of God's entry into human flesh, just as surely as the resurrection at the end of it, speaks decisively of God's capacity to achieve his purposes in that which, by nature, has no capacity to realise the same ends. Mary, being a virgin (i.e. precisely *as a virgin*, rather than considered as a woman more generally), is utterly unable to conceive a child apart from the creative act of God in her womb. The crushed and lifeless body of the man Jesus has no capacity to live again, apart from the activity of the Spirit of God poured out in power. Human beings, sinful and fallen, have no 'capacity' in and of themselves, for God, no natural predisposition to hear and receive his Word. Again, the Spirit of God must come and create (*ex nihilo* in this respect) precisely such a capacity. Faith is a gift of the very God towards whom it is directed. In this respect, the attempt to secure some 'point of contact' in humanity for God is parallel to the doctrine of the immaculate conception: it assumes that wherever God and humanity come into close contact there must be some prepared ground, some fertile soil, some openness to and aptitude for God's purposes: as if Mary's obedient response were the result of some inherent immunity to the sin which blights the rest of us, rather than a result of the working of God's Spirit.

Brunner, Barth insists, in what he has to say about the matter, and notwithstanding his protestation to the contrary, indicates clearly that it is thus in his view also. There is at the very least a sense in man of his own sinfulness, a sense of need, a God-shaped-gap in his life which provides the necessary keying point for God's word of forgiveness. But, while this is indeed quite different in scope to the 'natural theology' of those who wish to arrive at some decisive content for the category 'Knowledge of God' apart from God's own way of self-revelation, it is essentially similar in kind. It must posit something which even sinful humans can, and indeed *must*, bring with them as their portion or fragment of the map which,

when placed together with God's, will reveal the location of the buried treasure!

It is a long way, Barth admits, but a clear and logical way, he insists, from this to the *theologica naturalis* of the Enlightenment, or the fatal joint endeavour between Christianity and that 'natural' knowledge of God and his will which manifests itself in Fascism, apartheid and the like: and for this reason he absolutely refuses to join Brunner in placing his foot on that particular slippery slope. Regretfully, but very definitely and with no small amount of fuss, he parts company with him.

IV. Some questions concerning capacity

I want now, having considered the nature and substance of the debate between these two theologians, to pose some questions. My concern in doing so is not so much to determine whether Barth is correct in his interpretation of Brunner as to tease out a possible point of view (possibly Brunner's own) which Barth's criticism manifestly falls short of, and which he himself, I would contend, cannot ultimately avoid conceding. We must return again briefly to the two notions of a 'capacity for revelation' and a 'point of contact', which amount, both in Brunner's exposition and Barth's critique, to much the same thing.

In his introduction to the 1946 English translation, *Natural Theology*, John Baillie observes that Barth seems to have confused two distinct words in Brunner's essay. Barth's polemic is uniformly directed against the assertion of a 'capacity for revelation' (*Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*) in humans, whereas Brunner speaks rather of a 'capacity for words' or 'capacity for speech/language' (*Wortmächtigkeit*). I'm not altogether sure just how significant this point can be considered to be by way of the case for Brunner's defence. To begin with, one would assume that Barth, with German as his first language, was sensitive to the associations of meaning attaching to these two different words. Secondly, Brunner actually uses *both* words on occasion. And thirdly, what he *does* with the words he uses, rather than the words themselves, is surely the more significant consideration? In fact, what Brunner asserts by insisting that humans are *Wortmächtigkeit* is directly tied to the idea that, in revealing Himself God *speaks*, and that

in order to hear or receive this *speech* we must be able to understand it. Were we mute creatures, in other words, and were God limited to this mode of revealing Himself, we should lack the 'capacity for revelation' which Brunner certainly asserts that we in fact *have*. To my mind, a more significant ambiguity lurks in that which both words have in common—namely the suffix *Mächtigkeit*, translated as 'capacity'. Here, if anywhere, is that upon which the whole debate hinges. What sort of 'capacity' do we actually mean? I want to close by indicating a specific way in which this term *may* be interpreted (and which may be Brunner's intended meaning) which Barth himself could not and does not contend with, but which is theologically significant.

A 'capacity', we may observe, may either be passive or active, and it may help to clarify matters if we choose the word 'aptitude' instead to indicate the *active* sense. Thus Mary, as a virgin, had no aptitude for childbearing. Her womb did not, that is to say, apart from the conditions furnished by extrinsic factors—either coming together with a man, or else the direct creative action of the Holy Spirit—have the active capacity to produce a fertile ovum. But passively, insofar as she was a woman, and not a slab of granite, she might be said to have had a 'capacity' for what happened to her to happen. Notwithstanding the fact that 'God can raise up children for Abraham out of these stones', the fact is that, in becoming human, and seeking a suitable matrix for his origin as a human person, he chose a *woman*, and not a convenient slab of granite. That Mary was a *woman*, therefore, and not a rock, must be deemed significant in this choice. That what happens happens is, to be sure, an act of pure grace: Mary does not 'deserve' it (whatever that means), and is not able to meet God halfway, or to contribute anything but an empty womb with no intrinsic fertility. As one who 'knows not yet a man' she is, for all practical purposes, barren. And yet there is clearly a sense in which we must say that although as long as she remains a virgin she has, in this sense, no intrinsic aptitude for childbearing, she nonetheless does have the natural capacity for what happens to her to happen. Or, that she must at least have the capacity to receive the capacity for childbirth which God's Spirit generates in her womb.

Let us take the other example. Jesus' body in the tomb has, naturally, no capacity or aptitude for life, apart from the power of God's Spirit at work in resurrection. Yet Jesus' body has what may be termed a natural capacity to *become* a resurrected human body which the stone rolled over the entrance to the tomb does *not* have. He has, that is to say, a capacity to *receive* the capacity for resurrection. Or—he, being a dead human person, is able to be taken by God and raised up into a newly alive human person.

Similarly, we might say, sinful humans have no *capacity* for revelation: if by that we intend an *aptitude*, or a predisposition in favour of that revelation. Yet God actually *reveals* himself to human beings and not to cats or tortoises (so far as we know!) When, therefore, Barth writes 'there can be no question of a capacity for repair on the part of man' (p. 94), we must ask him in what sense this can be true. In what sense does/can anything which *has been* repaired not in fact have had a capacity to *be* repaired? Barth rejoinders that any capacity which it has is one which God Himself has created in it. But, while this may well be true, the fact remains that Barth must therefore speak at the very *least* of a capacity to receive the capacity to receive revelation in humans. This may shift the 'point of contact' decisively back one logical step, and force us to interpret the word 'capacity' in a passive rather than in any active sense: a matter of considerable theological significance:—but there nonetheless remains a 'point of contact' in this qualified sense at least, and Brunner is quite correct to protest the irrationality of its rejection. Thus, the fact that 'man is man and not a tortoise' may be all that is intended by the phrase 'capacity for revelation', or, dare we use it, 'capacity for salvation'. But that does not render it empty of significance.

Mary is a young woman, a virgin, and not a rock: thus she has the capacity to receive the aptitude for motherhood which God's Spirit creates in her empty and sinful womb. Jesus in the tomb on Easter Saturday is a dead man, and not a rose-bush; thus he has a capacity to be raised up regeneratively by God's Spirit into the firstfruits of a new humanity which a rose-bush must be said to lack if not absolutely (since it might by supposed that God *could* do even this!) then relatively and by comparison. Fallen Adam, dead in his sins, has a capacity for revelation and redemption *not* in the material sense that he has

anything other than his sinful and fallen life to bring to God, or indeed his rebellion and repeated attempts to put God to death: not, therefore, the capacity which the acorn has to become an oak (what we may call an 'aptitude' for development in this direction, or what Brunner calls a *material* capacity), but the capacity which a gnarled and twisted piece of timber has to become—only through the creative fashioning skills of the woodworker or artist—something beautiful and pleasing to the eye.

My concluding contention would be that Barth, notwithstanding his strong denials, cannot, as long as he adheres to a doctrine of incarnation, or to the belief that God has revealed himself to humans, avoid positing a point of contact in this second, carefully qualified, sense. The Holy Spirit may well be the 'subjective possibility' or condition of revelation; but he comes as such to men and women who, while hopeless sinners, nonetheless are capable of being acted upon by him in this redemptive and creative manner. Thus it does seem to me that, whatever Brunner himself may or may not have made of it, the distinction between a formal and a material image of God in fallen humanity is one which not only provides a very useful framework for discussion, but is something which Barth himself cannot ultimately avoid. If *this* was the password which Brunner whispered in the darkness to Barth, then we can only conclude that he met with a most undeserved and unfortunate fate!