

Kevin Diller. *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response*. Strategic Initiatives in Evangelical Theology. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014. 326 pp. \$27.20 (paper).

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It is hard to think of a book that would be more suitable to be reviewed in this journal than Kevin Diller's *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma*. This book is at the core of what the project of analytic theology is all about: combining the best insights of systematic theology and philosophy of religion into a single, rigorous approach. The purpose of the book is ambitious: to show how Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga, the twentieth century's two towering figures of, respectively, Protestant theology and Christian philosophy of religion, jointly provide a satisfying response to what Diller considers to be the main dilemma for theology.

So, what is the dilemma, according to Diller? We should remember that a dilemma is a decision one has to make between two horns each of which are desirable or each of which are undesirable but that are incompatible. What does Diller consider to be the two horns? He points out that there are two conflicting propositions that Christians affirm. On the one hand, Christians have a *high* view of theological knowledge, or at least of human knowledge of God: they think that we can know quite a bit about God. On the other hand, Christians have a rather *low* view of the unaided human capacities to secure such knowledge of God: sin has damaged our cognitive capacities and the fact that we are finite beings means that it is hard, if not impossible to attain knowledge of God all by ourselves.

The problem with the dilemma, thus presented, is that it isn't clear that it's a dilemma at all. After all, it isn't clear that these two propositions conflict with each other, not even *prima facie*. This is because there's no reason to think that human capacities are unaided: if God exists, then God probably aids human capacities. There is, therefore, no reason to think that one can't simply accept both propositions: human knowledge of God is possible, even though such knowledge would be impossible if human capacities were entirely unaided. Thus, it seems to me that phrasing the issue in terms of a dilemma is slightly confusing.

In other places in the book, however, Diller uses the expression 'the epistemic problem' (pp. 29-42) rather than the phrase 'epistemological dilemma'. Here is how he formulates the problem: "The epistemic problem for contemporary Christian theology is that it cannot follow either of the paths we have treated here generally as skepticism and postmodernism. It is forced to sit uncomfortably with a high view of knowledge and a low view of the unaided capacities of the human knower to self-secure such knowledge" (p. 39). On skepticism, it is hard or impossible to get knowledge, whereas on postmodernism knowledge comes easy, since it is indexed to what human beings think about the world. Diller is right that,

thus defined, Christianity isn't compatible with skepticism and postmodernism and that it will, therefore, have to come up with an alternative view on how knowledge of God is possible. It seems to me that this is an important question and that Diller shows convincingly that much of what Barth and Plantinga have to say on this topic can be combined into a single account that is strong both from a theological and a philosophical point of view.

This is an important conclusion for several reasons. First, Barth and Plantinga are often seen as unlikely associates. Nicholas Wolterstorff, himself a well-known defender of Reformed Epistemology, says: "Barth has little direct influence on philosophy. There is, in that, a certain historical justice: Barth made clear that in his theology he had little use for philosophy. He regarded philosophical theology as idolatrous; and as to philosophy of religion, he insisted that Christianity is not a religion."¹ Famous is, of course, Barth's reply to Emil Brunner's defense of natural theology with a resounding "No!".² Second, a combined account can help us to see what the proper place and role of theology in academia are: if God exists, it can provide knowledge of God, even though, to a large extent, it cannot actually *demonstrate* to those who don't share its assumptions that it does indeed provide knowledge. And, third, this account can be used in debates on conflicting religious claims from different religions or from within a single religion: the various ways in which God reveals himself, how sin impairs knowledge of God, and how God's self-revelation in the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit makes knowledge of God possible can play an important role in explaining why it is rational to adopt certain religious standpoints or even help solve certain debates.

The book has two parts. The first part, which consists of chapters 1-6, provides an overview of the epistemic problem, Barth's theology of revelation, and Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology. The second part, which consists of chapters 7-9, provides a defense of how Barth's and Plantinga's views are compatible and jointly provide a satisfactory response to the epistemic problem.

Little needs to be said about chapter 1: it provides a clear exposition of the epistemic problem. The second chapter explores Barth's theology of revelation. This theology is centered on the idea that God's actions in Christ by the Holy Spirit are simultaneously revealing and saving. Diller distinguishes four core ideas about knowledge of God that Barth spells out and defends. For each of these points, he shows convincingly how Barth embraces them. Anyone who is familiar with Plantinga's work will immediately start to wonder to what extent these points are indeed compatible with Plantinga's philosophy of religion. The first idea is this:

- (i) Principles of theological knowing are known in reflection on the gift of the knowledge of God. So, proper thinking about knowledge of God starts from the fact that God *has revealed* himself.

Now, it seems that this principle can be interpreted epistemically or metaphysically. It's doubtful whether Plantinga would fully agree with this principle if it's understood as an *epistemological* claim. Since Plantinga, in the

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition," in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 166.

² Karl Barth, *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner* (München: Kaiser, 1934).

course of his life, has come to be fairly positive about the possibilities of acquiring knowledge about God on the basis of theistic arguments: it seems that someone who doesn't yet know anything about God can come to know certain things about God on the basis of natural theology, such as that he exists or that he created the world. If understood *metaphysically*, the principle seems (close to) a truism: how could one ever come to know God if God hadn't revealed himself in some way or other?

The second principle that Barth advocates runs as follows:

- (ii) Knowing God is personal, cognitive, and participative. God reveals himself in Christ.

Plantinga, of course, agrees that there is such a thing as personal knowledge of God that is at least partly cognitive and partly affective, and that issues from a personal relationship with God. However, Plantinga also argues that it seems possible to acquire some basic, rudimentary knowledge of God on the basis of theistic arguments. Such knowledge is not necessarily personal or participative. Below, I return to whether Plantinga and Barth truly conflict on this point. Here, I would like to stress an important *agreement* between Plantinga and Barth, namely that for both, knowledge of God crucially depends on the fact that God has revealed himself in one way or another and that the relevant cognitive processes are, therefore, for all we know, reliable, and that one need not be able to access those reliable belief forming mechanisms in order to have knowledge of God. Both accounts of the knowledge of God are, therefore, radically externalist.

Barth's third principle is this:

- (iii) Knowing God is divinely initiated, self-attesting grace.

Plantinga would fully agree: knowing God in the sense of having knowledge by acquaintance of God is the result of divine grace, since human beings' cognitive capacities have been seriously impaired by sin and couldn't attain knowledge by acquaintance of God if it weren't for the fact that God reveals himself to people in the Scriptures, in religious experiences, in prayer, in the liturgy, and so on.

Finally, according to Barth:

- (iv) Knowing God is personal transformation and reconciliation.

We could call this the *soteriological dimension* of Barth's account of the knowledge of God. The idea is that knowledge of God partly consists of or implies a reconstitution of our minds, submission of our will, and a transformation of our being. Now, Plantinga would, of course, agree that there is such a thing as the cognitive consequences of *grace* and that sanctification by the Holy Spirit leads to more knowledge of God. An important distinction that Plantinga makes and that Diller fails to pay attention to, though, is that between the *sensus divinitatis* and the *internal instigation of the Holy Spirit*. The first is a doxastic mechanism that every human being has to some extent or other and that produces the basic belief that there is a God (a supernatural being who created the universe), whereas the second mechanism or process is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit that leads to all sorts of more specific beliefs about God, such that God revealed himself in

Jesus Christ, that one's sins are forgiven, and belief in the 'great things of the gospel' as Jonathan Edwards called them.³ Thus, knowing certain things about God does not require personal transformation and reconciliation, but the more full-fledged knowledge of God that results from a personal relationship with God in Christ does require such a thing.

One of the most important things of this chapter and, in fact, of this part of the book is that Diller convincingly shows that, in opposition to what is widely thought among philosophers, Barth was *not* hostile to philosophy or epistemology in particular. Barth doesn't reject philosophy per se, but the way it typically operated at his time. Theology, Barth even says, is done and has to be done within the realm of philosophy. But the important point is that theology acknowledges the primacy of God's self-revelation, whereas philosophy, as it stood at Barth's time, rejected the primacy of God's self-revelation and emphasized the primacy of God's self-revelation in nature and, specifically, in German culture. *That* is something Barth emphatically rejects, but, Diller rightly points out, there is no reason to think that he rejects philosophy per se.

One might still wonder what Barth would have thought about, say, Reformed Epistemology. After all, Reformed Epistemology doesn't assume that God *has in fact* revealed himself, but merely claims that there is no reason to think that beliefs about God aren't properly basic and that, if God exists, belief that God exists probably has sufficient warrant to count as knowledge.⁴ At the same time, Plantinga also admits that if God does *not* exist, then probably belief in God does *not* have warrant, which squares well with Barth's idea of the primacy of God's revelation. Barth, then, might have been fairly positive about the main tenets of Reformed Epistemology.

In chapter 3, Diller nicely shows how Barth rejects three important assumptions of much post-Enlightenment theology:

- (a) The claim that theological knowledge is possible is legitimate only if an explanation is given of *how* such theological knowledge is possible.
- (b) An account of how theological knowledge is possible must stem from a general epistemology that explains all knowledge. (According to Barth, there is a *sui generis* concept of theological knowledge.)
- (c) Theological knowledge must be anchored in grounds that are readily accessible.

It seems to me Plantinga would agree on rejecting all these assumptions, even though it seems he would claim that the concept of theological knowledge or knowledge of God is *sui generis* only in the sense that, to a large extent, it has a unique source and issues from unique doxastic mechanisms, such as the *sensus divinitatis*. It is *not sui generis* in the sense that the word 'knowledge' means something different when it comes to religious knowledge or in the sense that knowledge should be analyzed differently – has different necessary and sufficient

³ E.g. Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, The Works of President Edwards, Vol 4 (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1808), 230.

⁴ See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

conditions – in the case of religious knowledge in comparison with other kinds of knowledge.

After discussing Barth in detail, Diller provides a clear exposition of Plantinga's theory of warrant in chapter 4 and a lucid account of Plantinga's Aquinas/Calvin model in chapter 5. After a brief interlude in chapter 6, he turns to developing a synthesis between Barth's and Plantinga's work in the second part of the book. Chapters 7-9 deal respectively with natural theology, the nature of the knowledge of God, and the role of Scripture in acquiring knowledge of God. In my view, chapter 9, on the role of Scripture, could have been left out of the book, because Barth and Plantinga agree on the crucial role of Scripture in coming to know God, especially when it comes to how God has revealed himself in Christ, even though it seems Plantinga would emphasize more than Barth that God reveals himself in Christ even apart from the Scriptures, such as in the Eucharist and in personal religious experiences. There is not much even of a merely *apparent* conflict on this point. We already discussed Barth's and Plantinga's views on the nature of knowledge of God above. I, therefore, confine myself to chapter 7 here.

One of the helpful things Diller does in this chapter is explain how Barth's take on natural theology should be understood in light of the cultural-historical circumstances of his time. Among other things, he says: "Barth's acerbic reply to Brunner should be viewed in light of the capitulation of German Christians to Nazi national theology and the alarming events beginning in 1933, which involved an appeal to German culture as a source of natural revelation" (p. 181). This is often overlooked by analytic philosophers in our time.

Still, it is hard to deny that Barth seems to suggest that natural theology ought to be abandoned altogether. This is a significantly stronger claim than Plantinga's assertion that natural theology isn't necessary to be rational, epistemically justified, or warranted in believing that God exists.⁵ Plantinga has become increasingly positive about the value of arguments for God's existence.⁶ In fact, his paper "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," is one of the most cited papers on this point.⁷ This is something Diller fails to acknowledge or even misunderstands. According to Diller, "Plantinga clearly sees himself in line with a tradition of Reformed thought on this point. He does not stop here, however, nor does the tradition with which he finds himself aligned. Not only is natural theology unnecessary for belief in God; but there is also something fundamentally improper about it" (p. 197). This seems mistaken to me: Plantinga would only say that

⁵ The Reformed objection to natural theology is merely that the arguments from natural theology aren't necessary for rationality or warrant for one's theistic belief. See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 63-73.

⁶ For a sketch (and interpretation) of his developments on this point, see Graham Oppy, "Natural Theology," in Deane-Peter Baker (ed.), *Alvin Plantinga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 15-47. As Keith Mascord points out, "for those who are inclined to criticize Plantinga's work for providing little by way of help to the positive apologist, it should at least be acknowledged that Plantinga himself is in favour of positive apologetics. Although his attempts to justify basic theistic belief do not (by themselves) contribute much, if anything, to the task of persuading a non-believer to believe, Plantinga commends the work of the positive apologist, and, furthermore, highlights the many good theistic arguments that such a person might employ." See Mascord's *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2006), 119.

⁷ See Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," in Deane-Peter Baker (ed.), *Alvin Plantinga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 203-227.

natural theology is improper if it is also claimed that it is necessary for belief in God to be rational, justified, or warranted.

Diller rightly points out that Barth leaves room for an abstract, impersonal, propositional knowledge of God on the basis of natural theology. Barth, however, thinks that such knowledge is of little value:

But positively the knowing of faith cannot be an abstract knowledge because it is only one element in the active recognition of faith. It is an indispensable element. It is an integral element. It decides its meaning and direction. It shows us what must be the object and origin of the recognition of faith. But it is only one element. Taken alone, as an abstract knowledge of God and the world and even of Jesus Christ, it can only be described as unimportant and even, as Jas. 2:19 tells us, negative, a possibility or impossibility of demonic being.⁸

Given his cultural-historical circumstances, this is perfectly understandable, for, in a way, the *Deutsche Christen* did have knowledge of God's existence on the basis of God's revelation in nature, but it made no difference to the way they lived their lives. Things have significantly changed since then, though. Much of the United States and most certainly Western-Europe no longer has a Christian culture and there are widespread misunderstandings about who God is, the relation between faith and science, and what is needed to rationally believe in God. In such a context, theistic arguments can play an important role.

Also, Diller fails to acknowledge that for Plantinga these theistic arguments play a *positive* role in the sense that they can contribute to coming to believe or maintain belief in God. Says Diller: "Plantinga's suggestion is that apologetics that makes recourse to the positive arguments of natural theology need not be conducted in such a way as to imply that its arguments ought to be taken as the *basis* for belief. If Plantinga is right, and I think he is, this suggestion appears to neutralize Barth's main concern" (p. 206). Diller is right, of course, that, according to Plantinga, the arguments of natural theology should not be *the only* basis of one's belief in God, for that basis would be fairly unstable. Beliefs can have multiple grounds, though, and it seems that Plantinga's position is that these theistic arguments can be among the grounds for one's belief in God.

In conclusion, Diller makes a convincing case that Barth's theology of revelation and Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology are largely compatible and complementary, even though he fails to acknowledge a few incompatibilities (or at least tensions) on minor points. Of course, Plantinga uses philosophical arguments to defend the rationality and warrant of theistic and Christian belief, whereas Barth draws largely from theological resources, but that as such is no contradiction. Diller's book provides an excellent introduction for those philosophers who don't have time or energy to read through the entire 14 volume *Church Dogmatics* of Barth and for those theologians who are struggling to get a firm grip on Plantinga's philosophical models of rationality and warrant. He, therefore, shows the consonance between two different approaches to the

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1974), 765.

epistemic problem and encourages the conversation between two disciplines that tend to operate independently.

There are also a few questions regarding the relation between Barth's theology and Plantinga's philosophy that Diller does *not* address. Among them are questions regarding *defeaters*. Barth at certain points in his work seems to suggest that if God reveals himself to a person, then that revelation is so strong that there cannot be any facts from, say, science, that defeat the rationality of one's belief in God. Is this interpretation correct? And how does it relate to Plantinga's emphasis on the importance of defeaters? After all, on Plantinga's view, there can be defeaters that are themselves not defeated and that, therefore, defeat the warrant for one's Christian belief.⁹ But Plantinga also stresses that there is such a thing as *intrinsic* warrant: the warrant for one's belief in God can be so strong that even strong defeaters don't defeat it. So, are Barth and Plantinga in agreement on this or not? Thus, there are important questions regarding the relation between Barth's and Plantinga's views that remain unanswered. Diller has provided us with an important framework and background for addressing such questions, though, and he has presented a plausible book-length argument for theologians and philosophers to reconsider what is often thought to be an important incompatibility, but which might overall well be a strong response to the epistemic problem that is convincing from a both a theological and philosophical point of view.

⁹ See, for instance, Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 183-186; Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 89-125.