

Introduction

Bruce McCormack has called T. F. Torrance “the most significant theologian of the late-twentieth century.”¹ This claim seems to be supported by the fact that the literature exploring and evaluating Torrance’s thought is already rather large and growing steadily.² This bears witness to his tremendous influence in theological areas such as Christology, Trinitarian theology, atonement, and other classical loci in the study of Christian faith. What is comparatively underrepresented is Torrance’s considerable work in epistemology. This is not to say that Torrance’s commentators have utterly neglected his epistemology—indeed, most of the major works on Torrance include at least some discussion of it. What is remarkable, however, is that it has not yet received a detailed analysis, nor has it been brought into dialogue with the significant works in secular philosophy of science that were available during his academic career.³ Given that

1. Endorsement for Alister McGrath, *T. F. Torrance, an Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).
2. The interested reader can pick up the following monographs: an intellectual biography covering Torrance’s life (McGrath, *T. F. Torrance, an Intellectual Biography*); an overview of the major themes in Torrance’s work (Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001]); an engagement with Torrance’s doctrine of the Trinity (Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009]); an analysis of the function of doctrine in Torrance’s thought (Elmer M. Colyer, *The Nature of Doctrine in the T. F. Torrance’s Theology* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001]); an extended dialogue between Torrance and philosopher Paul Feyerabend (*Is Theology a Science?: The Nature of the Scientific Enterprise in the Scientific Theology of Thomas Forsyth Torrance and the Anarchic Epistemology of Paul Feyerabend*. Studies in Systematic Theology, Vol. 7, eds. S. V. D. Bevens and Miikka Ruokanen [Leiden: Brill, 2011]); a treatment of Torrance’s engagement with the natural sciences (Tapio Luoma, *Incarnation and Physics: Natural Science in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]); and several others, more coming into print every year.

over forty-five years have passed since the publication of *Theological Science*,⁴ and the considerable amount of work Torrance published after it, it seems surprising that this lacuna has not yet been filled when one might have expected a host of works providing commentary on this important topic.

The aim of this work is to unpack and critically explore what has been called the “fundamental axiom of Torrance’s theology,”⁵ the conviction that we know something authentically only when we know it according to its own nature, what Torrance describes as knowledge that is “*kata physin*.” This claim seems uncontroversial, and yet, we see in Torrance’s theology that it has far-reaching implications.

Chapter one introduces the concept of “*kata physin*” as well as how it functions in Torrance’s thought. It will be argued that Torrance’s resistance to dualist, positivist, and reductionist ways of thinking flows from his conviction that such thinking is not implied by the objects of our knowledge, but that they are generated by other concerns, and then, *imposed* upon such objects. Unpacking this conviction will allow for an evaluation of whether Torrance, for all his dislike of dualism, might be harboring some dualistic tendencies of his own.

The conviction that one knows something truly only when one knows it in accordance with its nature is not value-neutral, but relies upon certain key suppositions—namely, that there exists something to know and that one has some kind of epistemic access to it. This raises the question as to whether background beliefs of this kind—especially those that can be neither verified nor falsified—have a legitimate place within epistemology, and if so, how they function. It is this question over what Torrance calls “ultimate beliefs” that lies at the core of actual and potential criticisms that he is a foundationalist or a fideist. These are the concerns explored in chapter two.

If it is the case that ultimate beliefs are, as Torrance claims,

3. By “secular philosophy of science” is merely meant the work of philosophers of science who are doing their work without any explicit theological concerns. This would exclude the work of those working explicitly in the theology–science dialogue.

4. *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

5. Colyer, *Nature of Doctrine*, 15.

unavoidable, it has implications for our understanding of objectivity. If it is the case that we are never able to speak unambiguously of “the facts,” then this raises the question as to whether there is any other conclusion than that we are stuck with radical subjectivism in all our interactions within the world of space-time in which we live. Chapter three examines the problems faced by a traditional concept of objectivity when it is granted that we may never ignore the knowing subject, that the subject-object relationship can never be utterly transcended. Torrance’s concerns push us to conceive of objectivity primarily in terms of the object we seek to know, rather than in terms of the knowing subject. That is to say, rather than asking how it is that we may be objective, we must learn to ask and answer the question, “How can we let *what we seek to know* be objective to us?”

Torrance’s insistence that we allow the objects of our knowledge to have utter primacy over our statements about them leads to an alternative theory of truth. Chapter four engages with the question as to how our statements, theories, and doctrines relate to the reality they intend. We shall see that both a correspondence theory of truth, which roots truth in our *individual* statements, and a coherence theory of truth, which roots truth in our *systems* of statements, rely upon the subject-object dualism that Torrance rejects. In their place, Torrance stresses that the truth of our *statements* must always be secondary to the *reality* to which they refer (what Torrance calls the “truth of being”). Torrance’s ontological notion of truth will be shown to be different in some crucial ways from that developed by other theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas.

In our scientific age, the most relevant of these implications is how Torrance’s notion of truth shapes his understanding of the function of scientific theories, discussed in chapter five. For Torrance, theories function as “disclosure models” that self-consciously subordinate themselves to that to which they bear witness. Historic issues within the philosophy of science such as verifiability, falsifiability, paradigm shifts, meaning variance, the underdetermination of theory by evidence, and approximate truth are transformed and given an

interpretation that might provide one possible way toward their resolution.

If Torrance's epistemology is as relevant as we seek to argue, he is truly a theologian for our times. In his writings, we find one way of theology and science interacting with one another, challenging one another, and bringing into constructive relationship what society since the Enlightenment has widely assumed must remain separate. Although we shall move beyond Torrance's position in certain ways and correct it in others, he seems to provide a model of one way for theologians to critically engage the world of natural science. If Torrance can be shown to have achieved even modest success in this endeavor, this is highly significant, not least—but not only—for those who wish to live as committed Christians *within* this scientific culture and not merely *against* it.