ETHICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Ecclesial Existence in a Postmodern Era

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ABSTRACT

This essay endeavors to show that application of a universalist epistemic method in theological ethics results in a construal of God, which is, from a biblical perspective, reductionist, and is a form of ethics in which universality is achieved at the expense of plurality. It argues for the formal possibility of an ecclesial ethics grounded in a tradition-centered rationality. It further argues that such an ethic need not result in a narrow and defensive sectarianism, a rigid and static orthodoxy, or an authoritarian dogmatism. The posture of an ecclesial ethic based on the kind of critical realism advocated here may retain an apologetic and dialogical relation with the broader society, as it seeks to embody the incarnational narrative in its particular context.

KEY WORDS: ecclesiology, epistemology, ethics, William Schweiker, theological realism

ACCORDING TO JOHN WEBSTER, “all ethical reflection has implicit or explicit within it an anthropology and an ontology of history—a construal of the moral agent and of the field in which the moral agent acts” (Webster 1995, 98). In theological ethics generally, and Christian ethics particularly, this construal necessarily involves the concept of God and the divine-human relation. Clearly, this is of fundamental significance since one’s praxis is decisively shaped by the theological or metaphysical system underpinning it—regardless of whether or not that system is coherent or articulated. In a recent essay Paul Griffiths argued that “when appeal to universal epistemic principle is taken to be basic to theology, the effects are always and inevitably destructive,” giving rise to confusion in the resulting theology (Griffiths 1999, 7, 9). Such theology is “eviscerated because the epistemic principle that controls it constrains and reshapes it in rather the way that foot binding used to constrain and reshape the feet of aristocratic women in China” (15). Griffiths argues further that “allowing appeal to universal epistemic principle to control what the Church is permitted to say when she does theology will always result in allowing her to say much less than she wants and ought to say: it will always place her in bondage” (8).
The concern of this paper, then, is to investigate how epistemic method impacts the concept of God in theological and ethical reflection. I hope to accomplish this by examining a recent proposal in theological ethics by William Schweiker, using it to evaluate how the epistemic principle used affects his construal of God and the divine-human relation, and functions to frustrate his efforts to develop a realist, universal ethics. The heart of the issue lies in one's conception of the nature of reality and how one may speak of that reality. I will argue that moral realism must be supported by a form of theological realism if the resulting ethical structure is to be coherent. I will further argue that this approach presupposes a form of ecclesial ethics.

1. Power in the Service of Value

William Schweiker, associate professor of theological ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School, endeavors to construct an ethics of responsibility suitable in the pluralistic context of late-modern Western society, a theory that aims "at securing the value of finite existence through the exercise of power to respect and enhance the integrity of life" (Schweiker 1995, 50; see also Schweiker 1993, 631, 636). He admits that his "deepest concern is to combat the glorification of power as defining the good" because "surely the most pressing challenge we face is the task of charting the connection between power and finite goodness in understanding human existence. Only in this way can we surmount the threat to the integrity of life that defines the postmodern situation" (Schweiker 1998, 156). In addition, Schweiker is concerned with developing a nonnaturalistic ethics of moral realism which asserts the objectivity of morality and moral norms, while refusing to reduce morality to "forms of discourse that describe natural states of affairs, such as physics or biology" (160, 172).

Happily, Schweiker provides a succinct and enlightening account of several basic assumptions he brings to his work (Schweiker 1995, 47-52). He argues first that it is not required that a theological ethics derive all its knowledge regarding human existence solely from Christian thought, but may use whatever credible resources are available. Persons are understood as agents in a network of relationships with others and the world, and whose lives exhibit "a relentless quest for wholeness," which

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1 In another work Schweiker (1998, 209) provides a brief definition and discussion of the terms "value" and "power": "Value is the fittingness of being in relation to being insofar as this relation respects and enhances the integrity of an existent . . . a relation of being to being in terms of what completes or frustrates those involved . . . By power I mean the capacity to respond to, influence and shape reality . . . It is that which enables things—such as persons, moral values, the world—to come to be and to continue to exist in complexes of interaction."
they seek through the exercise of power. Schweiker asserts that this quest finds its true fulfillment in the divine, although he recognizes that others may not hold this conviction. Considering the phenomenon of religion historically and descriptively rather than dogmatically, Schweiker says that “it seems clear that the idea of power or powers is central . . . religious activity is always a response to what is experienced as an active force in the world and in human existence” (48). His fourth assumption regards the linguistic construal of these powers, which in earlier periods of human history were described in mythico-agential terms. Schweiker notes that “modernity has insisted that there is but one kind of agent in reality, the human agent, and the world is the place of this agent. The human is on its own, this life is all there is, and human beings must assume responsibility for their lives and the lives of humankind” (48).2 Schweiker’s final assumption concerns the material focus of ethical reflection, which is not the concept of power, as such, but the delineation of the “ways in which human beings and communities ought to live in relation to the God of Christian faith” (51). For Schweiker, the notion of responsibility is a useful idea, which “requires the transformation of what persons and communities seek in life, in their vision of the good, and the projects to which they are committed. Responsibility is the concept we can and must use to sort out the complex relation of power and value in the domain of individual and social action” (51).

The logic of Schweiker’s account begins with human experience of reality. Human experience of the world and others gives rise to an intuitive, albeit inchoate, sense of what ought or ought not to be or to occur. This inherent sense of value “is an experience of the moral sense of creation, an awareness of the moral law; it is the witness of conscience,” and as such, is the locus of the resonance of the divine within the self, and testifies that power is subservient to value (Schweiker 1998, 188–189).3 Thus, the connection (and conflict) between power and value is woven into and disclosed in the very fabric of existence. For Schweiker, this connection drives human love, creativity, and conflict, and provides the rationale for religion (185). This experience of the priority of value over power does not, however, mean that humanity can simply, as it were, by reason alone, “emerge from its self-imposed immaturity” (Kant 1983, 41). The initial sense of inherent moral order is only fleeting, an “axiological surprise” (Schweiker 1998, 9), thus revealing that human moral sensibility requires development through acts of interpretation, to the end that persons are morally formed in accordance with ultimate reality (Schweiker 1993, 615). Schweiker contends, therefore, that

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2 Schweiker explicitly accepts the basic premise of this view in Schweiker (1998, 43).
3 See also Schweiker’s assertion on page 11: “To grasp the connection of power/value in your consciousness of being an agent is nothing less than an inarticulate sense of the divine.”
moral progress or perfection can begin only with a transformation at the heart of human existence, with our longing for some contact with a value-creating power in our attempt to render our lives and our world meaningful and intelligible. . . . Without this transformation, value is collapsed back into power, the world into ego. . . . Given this, one needs in ethics an idea or symbol that designates the transformation of power with respect to the value of existence [Schweiker 1998, 187].

Schweiker, therefore, argues that the question of God is the question of the first principle of morality (173, 178). His argument progresses by way of dialogue with the Platonic ethics of Iris Murdoch. Schweiker begins by noting three points of common ground between Platonism and Christianity. First, they both insist on one supreme reality—Good or God—and are thus monistic or monotheistic forms of thought. Both traditions are realistic in the sense that ultimate reality actually exists though it is not reducible to the human and linguistic constructions used to describe it. Finally, in light of these two features, both traditions are also “forms of ethical universalism,” that is, they both seek to “specify the norms and goods that ought to characterize all human life” (171–172). The major dispute between the two traditions concerns how the real is to be symbolized and thus how the first principle of ethics is to be formulated. Murdoch develops an account in which “ethics is a theology without God because Good is what the old God symbolized” (181). Schweiker’s primary criticism of Murdoch, however, is that although she has managed to establish “the reality of Good,” she is unable to similarly establish the goodness of reality, and especially that of persons, without resort to “a residue of the Christian insistence on the created worth of individuals” (184). He concludes then, that a “realist ethics that holds to the dignity of the individual on grounds other than an act of power within the self—be that act will or consciousness—is possible only by appeal to some idea of creation and thus also a creator” (184).

This, however, raises a problem for Schweiker: is it possible to insist on a doctrine of creation without compromising commitments to universality? Schweiker suggests the task of a theological ethics is to “critically and constructively [use] the symbolic and conceptual resources of the Christian tradition in order to articulate and interpret the intrinsic moral structure of experienced reality” (174). It does this, not only for so-called “Christian morality,” but also to indicate that the “reality symbolized by the word “God,” the divine reality that is objective to the self, in fact [resonates] within the self, to the depths of self-being” (186–187). Fleeting experience of objective and transcendent value, which in Schweiker’s metaphysic must be understood as experience of the divine reality, is the catalyst or matrix of human religion and the search for God as the basis and guarantor of this value.

4 See also, Schweiker (1995, 5).
Schweiker insists that the divine reality and universal experience of it are real, despite the contingency and particularity of human and religious description of it. He likewise insists that his account is not the “God of the philosophers.” Nevertheless, he immediately qualifies this assertion with a second to the effect that neither is it an anthropomorphic conception of deity. The point in saying that God is personal and an agent is to make a claim about the irreducibility of creativity in our conception of life; it is not to designate a literal person. The God of Christian faith is believed to be the unconditional value-creating power. Yet, because faith in God is articulated through a complex set of concepts and symbols—such as creation, the human as the imago Dei, the priority of justice and mercy in the moral life, and, centrally, Christ—power *qua* power does not and cannot define the Good.\(^5\)

It is precisely here, however, that Schweiker’s argument collapses, and this in spite of his claim to realism. For Schweiker, the word “God” refers not to an agent but is, rather, a symbolic means of referring to an undifferentiated extra-linguistic reality, and serves the “hermeneutical” function of supporting a theological construal of the world. In effect, his call for “hermeneutical realism” in ethics (184), functions to bracket the question of the truthfulness or otherwise of theological discourse. The problem is that if, in fact, God in God-self is actually ultimate and *impersonal* power, then Christian (and philosophical) attempts to offer a transvaluation of power in their description of God *precisely as person*, however useful and beneficial for axiological and ideological purposes, actually serve to misrepresent and hide the frightful reality that “power *qua* power” is exactly what lies at the core of reality.

If this reading of Schweiker is correct, his proposal cannot be sustained within the terms of its own discourse, and it is seen to have fallen into the kind of confusion we are warned of by Paul Griffiths. Schweiker contends that human experience is indicative of ontic reality, but this can only be recognized when such experiences are interpreted within a framework of convictions in which power is subservient to value. Schweiker finds such a framework in the Christian explication of who God is. In the Christian tradition:

> God is the creator of the moral order of reality insofar as the mystery that is ultimate power names itself with respect to the goodness of creation, the demands of covenant fidelity and justice, and the redemptive power of

\(^5\) See also pages 37–38: “My argument centers, then, on the moral and hermeneutical import of claims about divine agency... I am not trying to denote a literal, individual acting being, as in traditional theism, with purposes, intentions, and acts of will, who is (or is not) causally responsible for bringing about events in the world... I am concerned with the practical status of theological discourse with respect to the moral life rather than offering a theoretical argument about God in God’s self.”
love. Outside of this name and the history of interpretation it entails, the meaning of the ultimate reality is the abyss of power. . . . any construal of the divine which fails to deepen and even instigate the insight into the worth of existence definitive of moral understanding so as to empower the moral life cannot claim ethical or theological validity [Schweiker 1993, 633–635; emphasis added].

The dilemma, however, is that he requires the Christian interpretation as a normative criterion for understanding what is ontically real, while simultaneously disallowing the interpretation to have genuine ontological reference. Schweiker’s justification of this God as “value-creating power” is made “with respect to a history of God’s actions” with particular reference to his revelation within covenantal contexts (Schweiker 1998, 187). Yet, the religious quest instigated by this experience cannot speak in realist terms: notions of divine agency, personality, and even the “complex set of concepts and symbols” by which the divine power is characterized are viewed by Schweiker as human religious constructs. If this is the case, how then can they indicate that which is ontically real? It seems that the attribution to the divine of “value-creating power” is an arbitrary designation, a human linguistic construction that indeed functions to permit the continued hegemony of a culturally Christian worldview.

Further, once we excise the personal and agential aspects of the Christian understanding of God, it is questionable whether the ontology still functions to secure the value of existence. If the divine is no more than ultimate and impersonal power, is the teleological nature of the Christian doctrine of creation also forfeit, with a corollary loss of its inherent value? Schweiker insists on the one hand, that the language of personal agency underwrites “the irreducibility of creativity in our conception of life,” while rejecting on the other any concept, which views God as providing “causal explanations of the physical world” or designates “a literal person.” Indeed, he asserts that “we must” grant “the

6 Note Schweiker’s revealing assertions: “Agential accounts of the divine are important in this respect not because they literally designate a supreme agent, but because to speak of ultimate power in terms of agency is to assert a value beyond power. The most radical claim of Christian faith, I hold, is that ultimate power, the divine reality which creates, sustains, judges, and redeems all of existence, is known and understood as binding its identity to the respect and enhancement of finite reality. Christian claims about ‘God’ are interpretations of power which render all exercises of power subject to moral evaluation. One can thus speak about a ‘personal’ God in order to specify the belief that power alone is not the ultimate value, but not to give causal explanations of the physical world. Once this point is fully understood, then the ethicist can specify the moral meaning of theistic discourse without reverting to mythico-agential accounts of reality . . . . The symbol ‘God’ gives rise to moral thought about the transvaluation of power. It is this insight, I contend, that was not thoroughly grasped in previous theories of responsibility in Christian ethics that centered on the event of encounter” (1995, 49–50).
contemporary criticisms of agential accounts of the world” (43), a worldview incompatible with that he seeks to construe.

In sum Schweiker contends that the ultimate power be construed in terms of personal agency. By so doing, he is able, first, to secure the objective value of finite existence by appealing to a doctrine of creation, and second, to assert the ontic priority of value over power. The adequacy of the ethics is grounded in the universal experience of humanity, which testifies to this ontic reality, while the particularism inherent in the Christian tradition’s construal of God is overcome by selective use of biblical and traditional materials, and by insisting that the construal itself is not realist. As a work of moral philosophy Schweiker’s account provides an important critique of the use and misuse of power in technological society, and as such is a valuable resource for dialogue and apologetic engagement with the broader culture. Nevertheless, the irony of Schweiker’s position is that his truncated version of the Christian doctrine of God is established as a normative criterion by which other construals of moral ontology are judged, and which thus functions, contrary to his intention, as a form of metanarrative. Schweiker’s goal to construct a normative ethics for a pluralist context falters on epistemological grounds.

2. Realist Christian Theology

This discussion raises a number of significant questions. The first concerns the extent to which the images of Christian theology can be applied in theological ethical reflection without loss of their distinctive and peculiar emphases. At what point does a Christian theological ethics transmute into, more properly, a philosophical ethics? This question is not simply an intellectual curio, but has fundamental significance for the faith and life of the people of God as they pursue their distinctive way of being in the world. It is evident that for Schweiker the theology is for the sake of the ethics, in this case a rational and normative ethics. In his construction the epistemological role of human experience is conspicuous, while portrayals of God are—certainly from a more traditional perspective—reductionist. Schweiker portrays God in monistic rather than trinitarian terms; his Christology is narrow and functional, and he records only scarce references to the Holy Spirit.

Further, although Schweiker utilizes the imagery of traditional Christian theology he evacuates it of any ontic reference, preferring to speak of “God” as simply “the divine,” “power and powers,” etc. In his discussion of the concept of God and the question of its truth, Wolfhart Pannenberg (1988, 63–118) demonstrates the manner in which philosophy has argued for the necessity of the concept of God, both to secure the ultimate unity of existence, and to provide a proper self-understanding
for humanity (70, 93). He asserts that in the end Christian theology, while recognizing the critical function of philosophical theologies, cannot accept their claim to establish a genuine knowledge of God, for “God can be known only through God himself...knowledge of God is possible only by revelation” (94). He further contends that the word “God” as used in philosophical attempts to describe the Other encountered in human religious experiences, functions more as a category designation than as a proper name (67–68). While this provides an important apologetical opportunity for Christian theology, it is necessary to insist that the distinction between philosophical and theological discourse be affirmed. In light of this distinction it is arguable that Schweiker’s proposal is more properly defined as philosophical than theological.

More important than this, however, is the question regarding the nature of reality and the truthfulness of theological assertions. In recent years both theologians and philosophers have engaged in extensive debate around this issue in the struggle to find appropriate methodology for their respective disciplines. According to John Hick it constitutes the “most fundamental of all issues in the philosophy of religion today” (Hick 1993, 3). In general terms, realism is the conviction that the perceived world exists independently of our perception of it, and that human rationality, as a result of a certain correspondence between itself and the inherent rationality of all existence, has access to the wider rationality within which it is set. Further, realists also maintain that human language functions to depict reality more or less as it actually is. For most of its history the Christian tradition has had a realist orientation, viewing the Scriptures as a kind of window through which ultimate reality and truth might be genuinely perceived if not always clearly seen. This view has come under increasing pressure since the arrival of the modern era with its philosophical idealism and historical consciousness and criticism—a pressure that has only increased in the twentieth century with the growing awareness of the contingent nature of all perception and of the language that seeks to describe reality. Sue Patterson has succinctly captured the primary issue: “...reality eludes us. For who but God is able to comprehend the whole?” (Patterson 1999, 32). Thus, some contemporary theologians follow Feuerbach’s path and embrace a nonrealist position that avers that religious language has no transcendental reference, but is expressive, instead, of human emotions, aspirations, moral, and spiritual ideals. Such theology in fact all too easily reduces to an anthropology in which “religious language is in no sense more than a life-enhancing means of discussing the human condition” (Soskice 1987, 109), resulting in an atheistic form of theology and ultimately a wholly different vision of Christianity. John Hick argues that the “radical reinterpretation” of those holding a nonrealist position is unwarranted since “only if there are good reasons to reject religious
realism is there any need to develop a non-realist alternative” (Hick 1993, 9–10)."

It is plain that Schweiker’s hermeneutical realism is an attempt to find a mediating position between a naive realism and nonrealism. Thus while he affirms metaphysical and moral realism, he also insists that human description of the ultimate functions only as a means for human interpretation of reality, and does not refer in any realist sense to God an sich. The question remains, then, whether Christian theology and ethics are thus limited to the choice between an unsatisfactory naive realism, an equally unsatisfactory nonrealism, or qualified forms of realism that avoid the truthfulness or otherwise of its claims. The problem is that Christianity requires a certain realism if its internal logical structure is to be coherent, yet this very realism has been rendered uncertain, if not impossible by the advances of historical criticism and linguistic philosophy in the twentieth century.

Several theologians have attempted to circumvent the implications of the linguistic turn for theology. Janet M. Soskice, for example, accepts that the challenge for theological realism is to delineate “how religious language can claim to be about God at all, given that naïve realism in these matters is unthinkable” (Soskice 1987, 109). She accepts that human speech about God is ineradicably metaphorical but insists that this does not mean it is “merely metaphorical where this is understood as unfactual, untrue, and unnecessary” because “truth and falsity are assessed at the level of intended meaning, not at that of so-called literal word meaning. Metaphor is a kind of language use and not a kind of truth” (107). Theological realists, in common with scientific realists, do not regard their explanatory models and the metaphors arising in them as “convenient fictions for the ordering of observables but as terms which somehow provide access to states and relations which exist independent of our theorizing about them” (110). Nonetheless, in both communities of discourse the metaphorical descriptions of reality are acknowledged as tentative, qualified, and subject to further revision.

7 It is not my intention in this paper to argue for a theistic worldview. Those wishing to pursue the question further will find succinct treatments of the issue in Pannenberg (1988), and in Markham (1994), especially pages 129–55. Markham rejects “solipsism and extreme forms of idealism” (141) as epistemologically incoherent, and further contends that the intelligibility of the world can only be asserted on theistic grounds: “We are only left with two options. First, a worldview which is both realist and theist . . . this is coherent and reasonable. Second, a worldview which is explicitly antirealist. Once you give up on truth and simply articulate your narrative, then you have also given up on intelligible explanations for the world, and therefore God . . . to those who continue to explain the world, but do not believe in God, I can only suggest that they are operating with an unjustifiable rationality—quite literally, an irrational rationality” (152–153).
Soskice then addresses the problem of how provisional theories can in fact be genuinely reality-depicting prior to and without definitive knowledge. Drawing on recent studies of reference, Soskice argues that “the relevant linguistic competence does not involve unequivocal knowledge but rather depends on the fact that the speaker is a member of a linguistic community who have passed the name (i.e. Columbus) from link to link, going back to the man, Columbus, himself” (111). By situating reference within the linguistic community, Soskice shifts the vehicle of reference from the words themselves to the speaker, and secondly asserts that realism is dependent upon the tradition of the linguistic community and upon authoritative others whose judgment we trust in the grounding of our own reference. It is in virtue of our connectedness through various structures of community, language, and communication that we are able to utilize the insights and experiences of authoritative others in every sphere of human existence, whether we are speaking of childcare, historical figures, quantum physics, or matters of theology and religious experience. Soskice thus concludes:

It is the claim of the theological realist that the models and the metaphorical terminology, while clearly arising in particular cultures and contexts and modified over time, may nonetheless be reality-depicting ... The models used will inevitably be linked to particular historical and social contexts. On my argument this isn’t a vice but the very foundation of a realist case: having a shared descriptive vocabulary and a tradition is one’s only chance of being able to say anything at all, in theology, science, ethics, or any other field of interest and endeavor. A shared and matured descriptive vocabulary gives the possibility of sustained reflection which goes beyond the necessarily limited experiences of each individual [117–118].

Soskice therefore offers a form of “critical realism” that may be viewed as a pragmatic resolution to the problem facing theological realism. She presents a reliabilist account in which reliability rather than certifiability is the criterion of genuine knowledge, though with the caveat that such knowledge remains contingent and subject to ongoing verification and revision. Nonetheless, in this account, the distinction between the thing-in-itself and human description of it remains, and it proves impossible to get behind the language of description. We perceive, as it were, the reflection of reality in the mirror of description. However, we cannot climb into the mirror and gaze back through it from the other side directly at the reality which projects the image. Since this is the case, how is it possible to ascertain whether or not our mirror distorts the reality? Simply, we cannot know.

It is at this point that Patterson makes the observation that this way of approaching the discussion derives from the infrastructure of modernity. By accepting a dualism between the thing in itself and human
description of it, realism is hamstrung because if realism is reduced to a partial correspondence between reality and description of it, how do we know which parts of our descriptions correspond (Patterson 1999, 22)? Thus, while wishing to retain a modest form of the pragmatic approach, Patterson seeks to undergird it with what might be termed an ontological approach to the problem. She develops her approach via a critical appropriation of certain features of T. F. Torrance's contributions to this discussion.

Torrance follows the general tenor of realism by claiming the inherent rationality of the universe and a certain correspondence between this inherent rationality and human rationality. In doing so he is able to deny that knowledge is simply a function of the knowing subject, but rather suggests that the human subject inhabits the perceived reality and as such is absorbed into and participates in that reality and its inherent rationality. Because this is so, the mode of human participation in reality is that of discovery rather than creation, as the inherent rationality of reality imposes itself on human cognitive faculties. For Torrance, humanity is deeply attuned to the rationality of reality though only in the mode of reception. As humanity is "open and responsible" to the givenness of reality that confronts them, they become "the appointed instrument under God through which the intelligible universe reveals itself and unfolds out of its chrysalis, so to speak, in rational, orderly and beautiful patterns of being ... it is [their] function to bring nature to word, to articulate its dumb rationality in all its latent wonder and beauty" (Torrance 1982, 68-9; quoted in Patterson 1999, 25). Finally, although Torrance speaks of the rationality of reality as an inherent rationality, it is not a rationality that is grounded in itself, for the simple fact that a contingent being cannot provide an explanation of itself. That the universe is inherently rational means that it is capable of rational explanation—but only from beyond itself. It is found to have "meaning through an immanent intelligibility that ranges far beyond the universe to an ultimate ground in the transcendent and uncreated rationality of God" (Torrance 1982, 44; quoted in Patterson 1999, 26).

Although Patterson finds much value in Torrance's formulation, she is unwilling to follow him by restricting human participation in reality to the mode of discovery and reception only, that is, to the role of being cosmic knower, interpreter, and communicative vehicle. Like Torrance, she presupposes the inherent rationality and intelligibility of the universe and human rationality as a part of that wider reality. Nonetheless, "if knowing (and therefore conceiving) is a part of being, then knowledge not only discovers but also in part constitutes reality. This seems inescapable logic" (Patterson 1999, 28). In this respect Patterson's partial form of critical realism resembles that of Soskice. However, in order to avoid the verification problem identified in Soskice's work, Patterson
develops an incarnational account of rationality in which Jesus Christ as the divine Logos not only subsumes the deep inner coherence of divine rationality within his own being, but also incorporates within himself human contingent rationality as well. She asserts that it is only by resort to a revelatory or incarnational solution that critical realism can avoid a loss of coherence. Patterson refers to her proposal as “theistic realism” and claims that it is “still concerned with truth while grasping the nettle of reality’s ‘language-riddenness,’” avoiding both a lapse into postmodern nihilism and a refusal to confront the issue of language. In her model “the world under human description seeks verification and redemption in terms of the world under God’s description, that is, in the person of Jesus Christ who is the incarnate meeting place of divine and creaturely reality” (32).

Thus Patterson’s theistic realism is a proposal that human description offers a partial correspondence to reality, but because it is inevitably colored by contingency it remains open to further qualification and revision. The criterion against which description is measured is the rationality of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed in the Scriptures. She argues that “we cannot avoid correspondence in the realism required by Christianity, but it is not the correspondence we thought it was . . . The name and the means of the correspondence is incarnation, where this is taken to embrace the whole of human history and rationality, including its eschatological judgment and fulfillment. Its method of verification is revelation” (27).

To summarize the argument thus far: Schweiker’s attempt to construct a normative theological ethics was compromised by an epistemic method that did not allow him to speak in realist terms. Both the universal epistemic method as well as the relativist form of realism he adopted, appear incompatible with the truth claims advanced in Christian theology and Christianity generally. In addition to an acceptance of a theistic conception of reality—which Schweiker acknowledges—it is also necessary to adopt a form of theological realism as a support for the metaphysical realism posited in the first presupposition. Patterson’s synthesis of the pragmatic realism of Soskice and the ontological realism of Torrance provides such a form of theological realism. The issue now arises, however, as to whether the particularity inherent in her formulation is warranted. On what grounds may one privilege Jesus Christ as the locus of meeting between divine and creaturely rationality?

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8 The ascription “theistic realism” as an alternative to “critical realism” appears on page 97.
3. The Turn to Ecclesiology

The fundamental presupposition of my argument is that there has been given in Jesus of Nazareth a climactic—and not just paradigmatic—revelation of God because of the implications of his resurrection. This essay began with John Webster’s assertion that every ethics contains “a construal of the moral agent and of the field in which the moral agent acts” (Webster 1995, 98). Webster continued his argument by asserting that “what is most striking about Barth’s account (as well as what separates it from nearly all contemporary accounts) is its undeflected attention to one set of historical incidents as ontologically, noetically, and morally fundamental” (98).

Nonetheless, it is precisely the realist fixation with “one set of historical incidents” that attracts objections from both modern and postmodern critics. In the eighteenth century Gotthold Lessing memorably spoke of “the ugly great ditch” that lay between faith and history. A critical approach to Scripture, even in Lessing’s time, raised the question of the reliability and verifiability of the events narrated therein. Further, even if the historical record were accepted, it remained impossible to move from “the accidental truths of history” to the “necessary truths of reason,” for why should particular historical events, even if they could be reckoned accurate, be accorded universal epistemic privilege (quoted in McGrath 1997, 363)?

Thus, modern critical theology eschewed a naïve reliance on the “historical” narratives of the Bible, preferring instead to ground theology in a universal, tradition-transcendent rationality that was supposedly available at all times and in all places to all people. In the contemporary era, of course, notions of a singular universal rationality are discredited. We live in a pluralist environment, a storied world. No single worldview can claim preeminence over all others for rationality is traditioned. Postmodern theory rejects claims of universals and absolutes, and rejects the necessity, desirability, and even the possibility of objective truth, which is replaced by “hermeneutic truth” (Gellner 1992, 35). In light, therefore, of both the historical difficulties associated with the resurrection, and the traditioned nature of rationality, how can the Christian tradition claim with any warrant, an authoritative and normative revelation?

It is evident that cogent arguments must be made for the possibility of historical religious knowledge, and specifically, for the historicity of the resurrection. It is well known, of course, that the historicity of the resurrection, and especially, the physical resurrection of Jesus, cannot be demonstrated or proven. It is likewise known that many scholars reject a literal resurrection on the grounds of its improbability or impossibility,
and prefer to regard the biblical accounts as metaphors of the impact that the historical Jesus had on those who followed him in life. It is further known that the New Testament documents that portray the resurrection present very real historical difficulties, difficulties some scholars claim to be insuperable. Obviously I will not be able in this essay to address the vast and complex issues raised around this subject. My task here is to argue the more modest proposal that such belief is not in itself irrational or unreasonable.

In his essay, “Empiricism, Rationalism and the Possibility of Historical Religious Knowledge,” C. Stephen Evans (1993) argues that there is no good reason to think that such knowledge is impossible. He distinguishes between the empiricist and rationalist difficulties raised by Lessing’s “ugly ditch” and argues that although Lessing raised criticisms of an empiricist nature, they in fact functioned to cloak a covert rationalism. The difficulty raised by empiricism is that we have insufficient evidence for the religious claims made on the basis of biblical history, since knowledge derived from history can only ever be uncertain. The presupposition lying behind the difficulty is the notion that religious knowledge must have a degree of certainty which historical knowledge cannot attain. Lessing’s true position is revealed, however, in his further objection that accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason. Evans notes, therefore, that even had Lessing been an eyewitness to the biblical events he would have necessarily rejected them as an authoritative basis for religious knowledge because “empirical propositions, however well attested, simply don’t have the right kind of character to count as religious knowledge” (Evans 1993, 145). The rationalist’s presupposition is that since “religion concerns ultimate truth ... it cannot be concerned with anything so risky as beliefs with empirical content. It must be concerned with that which is truly certain: necessary truths, or self-evident truths, or universally accessible timeless truths” (150). But, as Evans points out, these assertions regarding religious knowledge are themselves, far from self-evident and need not be accepted as *a priori* judgments in Christian theology.

It is evident that Evans is proposing a reliabilist epistemology as sufficient ground for beliefs based on historical evidence. Certain knowledge is not required to secure epistemic warrant: “What gives a belief its positive epistemic status is not my ability to justify it, or know that it is justified. It is rather the fact that the belief is objectively rooted in something that makes it likely to be true” (Evans 1996, 217). Further, the claim that religious knowledge must be certain knowledge denies the very character of Christian faith as a venture of risk, predicated on

10 In this work, Evans offers a lengthy apologetic for the historical reliability of the Gospel narratives providing arguments to establish the likelihood of their truthfulness.
knowledge that is by nature uncertain. To insist that Christian faith be predicated on knowledge that is certain and can be verified beyond question is to undermine the concept of faith and make it subject to the strictures of reason.

To argue thus is not, however, to assert that the New Testament documents are basically unreliable, but to acknowledge the impossibility of certifiable knowledge. In the prolegomena to his multivolume New Testament theology, N. T. Wright proposes a critical realist approach to both the New Testament documents and the underlying history that they purportedly tell. He rejects the position of naïve realism that a reader has direct access to the object or event narrated by an author and mediated via a text. He likewise rejects unqualified acceptance of “phenomenalist” positions (by which the reader has access only to the author, or to the community represented by the author of the text) as well as “reader-response” theories (in which the locus of meaning is grounded only in the interaction of reader and text, and even the author is out of the loop, so to speak). His version of critical realism wants to affirm both the objective reality and existence of the objects of knowledge and the subjectivity involved in the knower’s apprehension of these objects. Wright argues that neither the perspective nor the historical context of the author renders the Gospel reports less historical. Nor does the fact that the Gospel reports are interpretations “mean they are not interpretations of events” (Wright 1992, 95; Wright’s emphasis). Indeed, he argues, “if we reject this or that event, we must do so on quite other grounds from those regularly advanced or hinted at, namely that the evangelists are not ‘neutral,’ that their work reveals their own theology rather than anything about Jesus” (91, Wright’s emphasis). For Wright, the Gospel reports, even those fashioned in metaphorical or mythical language, provide knowledge of both the author and the underlying history. Quite provocatively Wright suggests that “many critical methods were devised not in order to do history but in order not to do history: in order, rather, to maintain a careful and perhaps pious silence when unsure where the history might lead” (93).

The argument for the historicity of the narratives is not sufficient, however, as a ground for the epistemic warrant of Christian belief. It is at this point that Evans takes a surprising turn and makes the assertion that much knowledge, including religious knowledge, presupposes a certain “predisposition” or preparedness of the knower in order to be able to recognize religious knowledge (Evans 1993, 151–154). He argues that in many fields of human endeavor, not least in the natural sciences, it is only by participation in a community of knowledge that one is enabled to participate in the reality of the knowledge known by that community.

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11 See particularly chapters 2–5.
the particular community one is trained to observe that which is not necessarily apparent to the so-called uninitiated. For Evans, this includes the possibility of learning to recognize revelation when it occurs.

Evans's argument for the genuine though relative historicity of the Gospel accounts, and the epistemic value of participation in the community turns out to be a pragmatic version of critical realism with certain affinities to the work of Janet M. Soskice. Soskice's reliabilism, coupled with her emphasis on participation in a linguistic community, insists that reliable, reality-depicting knowledge can be transmitted generationally. The protest that such knowledge is necessarily relative because it is culturally and historically contingent, and may even be incorrect knowledge is not viewed by Soskice as an insurmountable problem but as an inevitable consequence of human existence, and thus as the very foundation of the critical realist enterprise. The critical realist knows that her formulations are contingent, and thus in principle open to the possibility of revision, correction, and development, but asserts that they are reality-depicting nonetheless. To capitulate to the relativist impulse is to necessarily embrace the irrationality of a moral and cognitive nihilism, to smuggle in an alternate (and often unacknowledged) authority as the ground for one's assertions, or otherwise, because one is overwhelmed by the ultimate impossibility of grasping and communicating anything of meaning, to be reduced to silence.12

In his argument for epistemological virtue in theology, Paul Griffiths also contends that it is only through participation in a community in which we recognize and accept the authoritative testimony of others that we are able to grow in knowledge:

We inevitably and properly form and maintain many of our beliefs by (explicitly or implicitly) relying upon authoritative testimony. Sometimes we do this in knowing reliance upon arguments that would demonstrate the putative authority to be an actual one. . . . But more often we employ epistemic principles of this sort without knowing or being able to say in virtue of what the testimony to which we attribute authority is authoritative . . . This is an ordinary, indeed an unavoidable, aspect of human cognitive functioning: most often, coming to know more than we now know in any area of human inquiry has among its necessary conditions believing that certain things are the case upon the ground of authoritative testimony whose authority we cannot show to be such without already assuming it [Griffiths 1999, 5–6].

It is clear that Griffiths posits epistemological authority for theology in an authoritative tradition. It is equally clear that he does not view this

12 While certainly no friend of the position I am arguing, Gellner's somewhat caustic remarks indicate something of the logical irony of the postmodern position (see Gellner 1992, 35–37, 70–71).
tradition as static or inert but dynamic and capable of growth and development. Two implications of Griffith’s assertions are relevant to the argument of this paper. First, an epistemology in service of the Church and theology will not seek “to establish the belief-worthiness of what it recommends independently of assuming its truth” (16). To do so is to attempt to secure a neutral vantage by which to bring Christian theological claims into judgment, and in so doing to assert and impose another authority onto theology in place of an authoritative tradition. Rather, it is necessary to participate in, and even submit to the tradition in order to learn the grammar of Christian theology so that the epistemic methods used do not constrain or restrict its speech. Second, an epistemology in the service of Church and theology “will not require for the demonstration of what it claims arguments that either do or should convince those who do not already take what it claims to be true” (16–17). Such an assertion leads to the crucial though controversial avowal that a Christian theological ethics is precisely that: Christian, developed in the conviction that the events that transpired around the person of Jesus of Nazareth represent a divine disclosure of ontic reality, a disclosure given in particular historical context but which are nonetheless freighted with the weight of universal normativity.

Here again, Patterson’s work provides helpful direction as she develops the implications of the historicity of the resurrection and the incarnational narrative of Jesus Christ as testified in the Scriptures. Patterson, as we have seen, argues that the coherence of realism relies on incarnation. She argues further that the Church, as the locus of Christ’s being and agency in the world, “participates in and represents (or bears) this incarnational reality and thus participates in the divine being” (Patterson 1999, 138). This participation means that the nature and function of the Church are inherently ethical because “it possesses and enacts in its Christology, and offers in its witness, a prophetic vision of the Good” (139–140). Indeed, Patterson asserts, “the Church, if it is to be true to its Gospel, is to see itself as the primary, in fact the only, authentic form of human life. . . . Christianity must absorb the world because the Church is the form of life which, of all forms of life, constitutes, in its participation in God’s incarnation, the divine form of life that judges and perfects all life” (146–147).

It is evident, of course, that this argument raises the issue of particularism and the specter of sectarianism. Patterson acknowledges that such realist conceptions of the Church have been labeled exclusivist and imperialist, and that these accusations are justified unless the theistic realism invoked is a critical form that recognizes that the traditioned nature of Christian truth-claims are, in principle, provisional and revisable (137–138). The tradition of the Church and its grasp of the truth are not to be understood as complete and whole. The Spirit leads into new
truth precisely through the interaction of the Church with the broader context within which it is set. Theology and pastoral ministry may annex "alien' theories and models to aid its endeavors of self-description, nurture, and mission" (148), and in so doing may itself be converted, even reinvented. It does so, however, from within the bounds of its own incarnational grammar "which absorbs, judges, and redeems the present world in all its complexity, and embraces a future which includes the possibility of the Church's becoming and its eschatological fulfillment" (148).

An ethics, therefore, which is grounded in tradition need not result in a narrow and defensive sectarianism, a rigid and static orthodoxy, or an authoritarian dogmatism. The posture of an ecclesial ethics based on the kind of critical realism here advocated may retain an apologetic and dialogical relation with the broader society, as it seeks to embody the incarnational narrative in its particular context. An ethics grounded in revelation, further, is not necessarily inimical to plurality. A key criticism of Schweiker against the ethics of Karl Barth, for example, and indeed against all forms of responsibility ethics based on an encounter model, is that they are "practically inadequate" in their lack of attention to the pluralistic nature of contemporary existence (Schweiker 1995, 24; Schweiker 2002, 44). I have already noted the irony of Schweiker's position in this regard. By contrast, Barth eschews normative ethics—even for Christians—and insists on the community gathered and waiting in anticipation of the command of God. Although such an ethics appears sectarian, is it thereby inadequate? It might be argued that, far from being inadequate, such a construal is well suited to the current postmodern context. Indeed, it is possible that such an ethics may very well nurture a vision of the Church as a prophetic counterculture enlivened by the Spirit in a dispirited world.

If, in fact, the Christian tradition not only witnesses to ontic reality but does so in realist terms, that is, if the reality of revelation is granted, the very existence of the Church, to the degree that it conforms to that reality, becomes a witness within a pluralist culture, to the truth that lies at the core of all reality, a witness which simultaneously confronts the deficiencies of alternate ontologies and invites consideration of the ontology held forth in the Church. In this understanding the Church itself, to adopt Stanley Hauerwas's distinctive phraseology, does not have a social ethic, but is a social ethic (Hauerwas 1985, 181–182; see also Hauerwas 1981, 1, 109). Further, this formulation does not require churches to conform to a normative ethical form, but rather requires individual churches to fashion themselves in accordance with and in response to the particular cultural forms, ideologies, and idolatries of the society in which they are situated. The relation of the Church to the wider community is apologetic and dialogic as it both proclaims and demonstrates, in word and deed,
worship and ministry, the truth of the Gospel in its own particular context. The nature and model of the Church’s existence is incarnational, proclaiming, and performing the story of “a personal God who is both so radically at one with human suffering as to encompass it and so transcendent of it as to remove it” (Patterson 1999, 156). Kevin Vanhoozer has suggested that

The church’s aim should be to render a faithful interpretation of Scripture. . . the reading that gives rise to a way of living that most approximates the life of Jesus himself, the harbinger of the kingdom of God. . . . The community of believers represents a prophetic counter-culture that challenges the gods and myths of the day with regard to which world and life view best fulfils humanity. . . . Again, this is not only a matter of correct doctrine but also a matter of faithful biblical performance. The church must be the cultural incarnation of the story of God in Christ [Vanhoozer 1993, 27–28].

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