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Claiming Barth for Ethics: The Last Two Decades

David Clough and Michael Leyden

Until 1990, the general conclusion on Karl Barth's forays into theological ethics seemed to be that of Robert Willis, the author of the only monograph on the topic (*The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 1971). Citing earlier critics such as John Cullberg and Henri Bouillard, Willis judged that Barth's account of divine action in the *Römerbrief* eliminated the world, the possibility of human action and therefore any satisfactory basis for theological ethics (pp. 36–7). While Willis found more space for human action in Barth's later works, he remained convinced that a satisfactory account of human action was impossible in a Barthian framework. Since 1990, however, the publication of a small library of monographs suggests there is much more of interest in Barth's ethics than

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Willis recognized. The first was Paul Matheny's 1990 monograph *Dogmatics and Ethics: The Theological Realism and Ethics of Barth's Church Dogmatics*, though this has received little attention to date. Following Matheny have been: Nigel Biggar's *The Hastening that Waits* (1993); two volumes by John Webster (*Barth's Ethics of*

Reconciliation (1995); *Barth's Moral Theology*, 1998), Archibald Spencer's *Clearing a Space for Human Action: Ethical Ontology in the Theology of Karl Barth* (2003), David Clough's *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth's Ethics* (2005), Paul Nimmo's *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (2007) and several other monographs with strong relevance for ethics: Timothy Gorringer's *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (1999); Joseph Mangina's *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God* (2001); and Frank Jehle's *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968* (2002).¹ In this article we set out an overview of these works and assess what we may learn from the past two decades of scholarship regarding Barth's contribution to theological ethics.

Paul Matheny's *Dogmatics and Ethics: The Theological Realism and Ethics of Barth's Church Dogmatics* (1990) is an account of the unity of ethics and dogmatics as Barth understood it. Matheny argues that, for Barth, the principal theological problem is ethics, such that 'Dogmatics was to be understood as an explication and examination of the proclamation of the Church in reference to the Gospel message in terms of its appropriateness as instruction and regulation in the living of the Christian life' (p. 7). In the introduction, Matheny sets Barth's approach against the theological and ethical background of nineteenth and early twentieth century Protestantism: the explosive claim that Barth makes in this context is that dogmatic theology is not subordinate to ethical concerns, but that the two are 'homogenous tasks'. From here Matheny sketches the shape and content of what he calls Barth's 'Theo-ethical Realism'. The first chapter explores the basic shape and content of Barth's theological method arguing that Barth conceives reality from a Christian perspective as a whole,

¹ Obviously, the construction of any such list invites debate about omissions on the boundary. Among other volumes with relevance for the interpretation of Barth's ethics in this period are McCormack (1995), Johnson (1997), Hart (1999), Hunsinger (2001) and Greggs (2009).

so that created reality exists within the absolute divine reality of God. Revelation is therefore the means by which human beings come to know God, the reality of their existence and 'the good' as an ethical category (p. 19). In the second chapter Matheny brings Barth into dialogue with key figures of the modern period—in particular Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ludwig Feuerbach—and shows how Barth's new approach critically engaged Idealism,

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Absolutism, Nihilism, and Projectionism, as well as revealing the weaknesses of some forms of Existentialism. The third chapter locates the human being within the grand narrative of Barth's theology, examining the character of human freedom and Christology. Matheny notes that Barth's account depicts the human agent in relation to God in such a way that ethical reflection cannot meaningfully and truthfully take place aside from theological reflection. He proposes that Barth treats human being and action as a form of 'Christocentric ontology' where the task of Christian anthropology is to develop 'formal and material anthropological statements from corresponding Christological statements' (pp. 133–4). Also key to this chapter is Barth's emphasis on human relationships and *Mitmenschlichkeit*. Christian ethical reflection locates the individual in relation both to God and to fellow human beings. This raises important questions about theological-ethics in public, and one hears Matheny's implicit answer that for Barth theo-realist ethics is, properly speaking, public ethics by virtue of the divine claim on all human beings. In Chapter 4, Matheny continues the theme of encounter, arguing that ethics, conceived theologically, is a kind of response to God's action in Christ, and is therefore a form of Christian

witness. The final chapter argues that Christian ethics is the performance of theo-realism: emphasising the circular nature of Barth's theology – that God, in his self-giving in Christ, reveals true human action as command, and human beings in their acts of prayerful obedience, bear witness to the reality of God's self-giving.

Matheny's account is heavily descriptive and highly favourable, which may account for the fact that it has received little scholarly attention since its publication. He sees possibility of responsible human agency in the 'coincidence' between God's action in Christ and human response in ethical deliberation. There can be no neutral position from which to do the latter, leading Matheny to follow Barth in ruling out all forms of casuistry and Christian idealism, and there can be no foundation for the doing of Christian ethics other than the foundation laid in Christ.

By contrast, Nigel Biggar sees the potential in Barth for a theological ethics much more akin to casuistry and natural law ethics, examining key texts from both the early Barth and *The Church Dogmatics*. The twenty years between Willis's *The Ethics of Karl Barth* and Nigel Biggar's *The Hastening that Waits* (1993) saw the publication of the Barth *Gesamtausgabe* (1976-78) and the translation of key volumes from this collection into English. Biggar engages extensively with this new material, especially Barth's Münster/Bonn Ethics lectures (1928–31) and the lecture fragments from the final section of the unfinished *Church Dogmatics* IV/4 (1959–60). He finds considerably more of value in Barth's ethics than Willis, particularly with regard to the notion of

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attending to the divine command, a theme that is prominent from the Münster/Bonn lectures onwards. Biggar is much more cautious than Matheny, however, in his acceptance of Barth's account, aiming instead to draw out of Barth a kind of Christian casuistry that will allow him to make Barth's theological ethics more publicly engaging. He assesses the concerns of critics of Barth's ethics carefully, summarizing their worry as:

If the content of God's commands cannot be expressed in terms of moral principles or rules that are always applicable to appropriate cases, if its meaning cannot be specified in terms of kinds of acts, if it has no intelligible constancy, then there can be no way of charting one's way through moral perplexity by distinguishing good and bad acts in terms of their characteristic features (p. 22).²

In response to critics of the subjective and fideistic nature of divine-command theories, Biggar emphasizes the formal structure of Barth's account of divine command in order to suggest that Barth is more systematic in his approach to ethics than Barth himself admits. He notes the enduring significance of a trinitarian shape to God's commanding, in which God as Creator, Redeemer and Reconciler encounters humanity in its threefold determination as creature, reconciled sinner, and heir of redemption. Within this structure Biggar argues that for Barth three authorities aid our hearing of the command: scripture (ch. 3); the Church (ch. 4); and the world (ch. 5). Alongside this emphasis on the continuity in Barth's account of ethical method Biggar argues against Barth that casuistry need not be a false claim to be in possession of the divine command or closed to God's ongoing activity of commanding. In fact, Biggar argues, Barth engages in this kind of casuistry when he comes to deal with particular

² Alongside Willis (1971), Biggar cites Gustafson (1975), Lehmann (1963); and Lovin (1984).

ethical topics. Biggar proposes a dialectical casuistry in which the believer addressed by God hears the command in the broader covenant narrative, witnessed in scripture and interpreted by the Church. Placing encounter with God's command in this context allows for a theologically informed Christian casuistry that is open to public scrutiny rather than remaining problematically a private and individual matter. Biggar concludes that despite the popular reputation of Barth's ethics, he in fact espouses 'what could reasonably be called a version of natural law' in recognizing that there are 'certain "goods" or states of being in which human beings flourish' (pp. 164–5). Biggar's engagement with Barth therefore leads him to seek a path beyond Barth in the direction of

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a more systematic approach to ethics than Barth provides, an approach that embraces natural law and casuistry (p. 167–8). Whether such substantial revision to Barth's ethical project is necessary is a point of dispute between Biggar and other accounts surveyed below: especially those of Clough and Nimmo.

John Webster's *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (1995) focuses on the lecture fragments that would have completed the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. For Webster this is a key text showing human action was not peripheral to Barth's theology and illustrating the integration of ethics and dogmatics evident throughout the Barth-corpus. The moral field, for Webster, is delineated in Barth's mind according to the activities of the living God – who, as the Creator and origin of humanity, encounters and commands human beings in Jesus Christ. Appropriate responses are given in Barth's account of Baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit, and

the work of the Holy Spirit in the moral life of a human agent is not underestimated. Webster makes the point that here more than anywhere else in the *Church Dogmatics* the work of the Holy Spirit, and the significance of this for the moral life, is emphasised by Barth. He notes that the answer to the question, ‘what should I do?’ is rooted, for Barth, in a prior question to do with moral reality which is intrinsically linked to the person of Jesus Christ: in Him human beings meet God and receive the proper understanding and orientation of their own actions, enabling appropriate actions by the work and power of the Holy Spirit. Ontology is therefore a Christological category (pp. 214–5). The Holy Spirit enables the human agent to realize this ontological determination in the invocation of God (prayer), and to act accordingly within that sphere of relationship. As with Biggar, there is a clear Trinitarian structure – but one that is more personal and relational rather than formal. Webster uses ‘space’ and ‘room’ as metaphor for moral ontology, exploring the notion that human agents *inhabit* ‘moral space’ – they are insiders – and as such are surrounded by morally textured reality to which they are required to correspond. Barth’s is ‘an account of what the good *is*, rather than [what it] is *chosen* or *desired* to be’ (p. 216). The corollary of this point relates to a Barthian account of natural theology: in parallel with Biggar’s claim that Barth is engaged in a kind of natural law, Webster finds space in Barth for a relationship between nature and the good which does not preclude the gracious revelation of the divine in order to receive a proper orientation to each. Webster sees in Barth a kind of ethical realism, where revelation makes one aware not only of God but also of oneself and the creaturely reality in which one exists.

Webster’s second volume, *Barth’s Moral Theology* (1998), explores Barth’s moral ontology in a set of studies of a wider selection of texts – beginning with

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the very early lectures and papers delivered during Barth's pastorate and tracing its development through the Münster ethics lectures and the *Church Dogmatics*. Webster argues that Barth was always a moral theologian, even in the early texts where critics such as Willis complained there was no room for ethical action (p. 19). In a chapter exploring human agency in Barth as it compares to Martin Luther, Webster draws on Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989) to make clear that moral action takes place within an order of being (p. 152) and proposes this as central to the fabric of both Barth and Luther on human agency. The contrast between the two rests on the way in which divine actions forms the grounds for moral ontology: for Luther faith is the focal point, and for Barth it is the invocation of God in prayer. Having realized that one inhabits moral space, prayer allows the Church to discern the particular response required in a particular context. Ethics is therefore as much a spiritual exercise for Barth as it is one of human action. Webster therefore gives us a structure for human agency that is both vertical and horizontal: upwards to God and outwards to humanity. The point of Webster's work is to show that, after the seemingly negative approach to human agency of the early Barth, there is a positive purpose in mind, viz. the creation of properly orientated morally responsible human agents. This is about much more than the public viability of theological ethics, since the implicit claim pertains not only to the church, but the unchurched also.

Timothy Gorringer's *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (1999) is an impressive attempt to approach Barth's thought with rigorous attention to its political, economic, social and artistic context. In contrast to most of the other volumes here reviewed,

Gorringer attends to key moments in Barth's life, relating them both to his professional career and his engagement in public affairs. In the opening chapter, Gorringer outlines his approach to a contextual reading of Barth that draws upon the work of FW Marquardt, who argued in 1972 that Barth was a life-long socialist and as such 'socialist praxis was the interpretative key to Barth's theological output' (Gorringer, 1999, p. 5). Gorringer argues that Barth's previous interpreters have read his work only in relation to the intellectual context of early twentieth century European theology and in particular post-Enlightenment liberal Protestantism.³ To remedy this, Gorringer divides the eighty plus years of Barth's life into five distinct historical periods, and proposes that his account of Barth's theology will engage with each of them. They are: the collapse of the *Belle époque* (-1918); the Weimer Republic

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(1919-33); the growth of German Fascism (1933-45); the Cold War in Europe (1946-62); and the period of its Thaw (1962-8). Each chapter assesses key texts and relates the important theological developments to the social-historic context; a very valuable table at in the Appendix shows in parallel events in Barth's life, his publications, significant publications of others, and key events in history and culture (pp. 292–301). A strong emphasis throughout is the revolutionary character of the reality of God, which remains free in relation to political ideologies and frees human beings for responsible action, which is the calling of the church. Gorringer links this emphasis on human freedom with the themes of South American liberation theology, arguing that Barth recognized the importance of theology being attentive to its context (p. 287).

³ Gorringer cites as examples Torrance (1990), McCormack (1995) and Macken (1990).

Gorringer sees in Barth the call for a theology of freedom in each and every context centred on the person of Jesus Christ and notes that this chimes well with the concerns of Liberation theology over the past forty years. Barth does not give us prescriptive Christian ethics, but a mandate for contextual ethical reasoning in order to bring about human freedom. This, for Gorringer, is the key reason Barth's theological ethics remain relevant. Bringing Barth into dialogue with Liberation theology has the effect of loosening Barth from the critique that there is no feasible public application of a Barthian theological ethics, and also overcomes the concern that Christocentric theology has little regard for human flourishing.

In a similar way, Joseph Mangina's book, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God* (2001), takes a more thematic approach to Barth's theological ethics and engages seriously with Barth's long held socialist politics. Like Matheny, Mangina begins his study by contextualising Barth's work against the backdrop of 'Cartesian' approaches to ethics which were characteristic of Protestantism at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, Mangina highlights key figures from the liberal tradition, such as Adolf Harnack and Wilhelm Hermann, against whom Barth was thinking, as examples of post-Kantian, post-metaphysical ethical theology (p. 15). Mangina judges that Barth answered the extreme immanence of liberal theology's God 'with an exaggerated view of divine transcendence' driving apart the co-inherence of history and faith (p. 25), but he believes that Barth succeeds in developing a theologically grounded account of human self determination (p. 37). The second chapter develops this point by examining human participation in the trinitarian life of God through Jesus Christ, comparing Barth's doctrine of reconciliation with the Neo-Protestant tradition. Mangina traces this tradition from the

period of the early Church, through the Reformation into modern theology, a migration in the understanding of the *pro me* of the Christ

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event. He argues that Barth rejects the anthropocentrism of the Ritschlian school: instead, he offers a reading of the *pro me* in relation to the *pro nobis* of the Cross. In Chapter 3 Mangina engages with Barth's Christocentric doctrine of sin in order to 'apply' the self-knowledge which he has established in Chapters 1 and 2. Mangina shows Barth undermining modern accounts of human sin which, since Kierkegaard, have made human sinfulness foundational, or anthropologically basic. Instead, humans are called to see themselves in the mirror of Jesus Christ. Mangina provides three examples of Barth's biblical referencing for his Christologically-particularist-framework: Jeremiah, Abigail, and Job. In the final two chapters, Mangina moves on to examine the affective elements of Barth's thought, and what he calls 'passion' in the Christian life. Chapter 4 considers emotions in the context of the life lived in the world and before God, focussing particularly on gratitude and joy as pervading affections in Barth's work (pp. 132–9). Chapter 5 continues this theme by accounting for growth in the Christian life – accounting for the temporal existence of human beings. Mangina points to Barth's emphasis on 'passion' for the Christian life as a form of growth and development, and essentially of Christian witness.

Frank Jehle's *Ever Against the Stream: the Politics of Karl Barth 1906-1968* (2002)⁴ is a political biography of Barth, tracing the development of Barth's political engagement throughout his career. Notable in this book is the wide range of German

⁴ First published in German as Jehle (1999).

sources Jehle draws on: conversations, letters, and other documents rarely referenced in English that provide interesting insights into Barth's social and political engagements. Jehle successfully brings together Barth the academic and Barth the human being: 'Barth was not an introverted scholar who withdrew into the proverbial ivory tower in order to devote himself to playing with glass beads. The most important reading material for him, after the Bible, was the newspaper.' (p. 100) After an introduction, Jehle introduces Swiss politics and Barth's participation in the life of the Swiss Zofinger Union of Bern during his student days. Jehle recalls the nicknames Barth earned in his first pastorate Safenwil-Aargau — 'Red Pastor' and 'Comrade Pastor' (p. 27) — as Barth applied his political mind to the work of the local Socialist Party. He points to the lecture 'Jesus Christ and the Social movement' (1911) as definitive for this period in Barth's political development, drawing Barth's theological reflections and political interests together (pp. 31 ff.). Chapter 5 is the only one dealing specifically with academic output in relation

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to politics – exegeting his two *Romans* commentaries (1919; 1922). Here Jehle points to the specifically political nature of Paul's epistle, and shows how Barth spoke about his own political position in relation to what he found in Paul (pp. 38–43). At the end of the war Jehle notes a letter Barth wrote, acknowledging his own responsibility as a citizen for the way in which the Swiss Federal Government had presented the face of the Cantons to the world (p. 79). His active citizenship would cause Barth to seek out a new friendship with Germany after the war (Chapter 9) built around theological principles, worked out in lectures and post-war constructive theological exchanges.

The final two chapters examine Barth's controversial relationship with Communism, before offering a critical summary of Barthian theological ethics. Barth found himself swimming against the stream with regard to Communism: by not joining the outcry against it he was intending to remind people of the primary call of the Church to follow God, but at the same time holding strictly anti-communist views he was critical of other church leaders who saw in communist ideals a kind of salvation. Either way, there could be no 'uncritical participation' for the 'responsible church' (p. 99). Jehle's conclusion in the final chapter is that a silent community is not a Christian church: the Christian community is responsible and participatory (p. 108). As with Gorringer, Barth's life and works function in an exemplary manner for Jehle. What we see modelled in practice is understood to relate to Barth's theological convictions, and then commended to the modern Church as a way of engagement in the world. There is a call for commitment to one's Christian identity whilst also a recognition of the need to participate in the world. Ethics requires the union of identity and action so that how one behaves confirms the truth of one's identity.

Archibald Spencer's *Clearing a Space for Human Action* (2003) sets out to test some of the tentative conclusions in Webster's work. In particular, he examines the notion that there is in the early Barth a positive evaluation of the human subject that forms the groundwork for the later description of the human agent in the *Church Dogmatics* (p. 2). Spencer engages in depth with a substantial number of texts in the Barth corpus, aiming to show that after the turn from Liberalism in the mid-1910s, Barth was consumed by the need to clear the ground of modernist presentations of the human agent, and replace these with a theological account centred on the person of Jesus Christ. For Spencer, Barth's insistence of the relationality of dogmatics and ethics leads to a moral ontology, but one in which the difference and reality of God

and human beings as acting persons is preserved. The human being acts genuinely, but in a derived sense – this is what is meant by the primacy of God in relation

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to humanity. Barth accounts for true humanity theologically, offering a Christological anthropology – and therefore grounding ethical ontology Christologically. His study accounts for the Christological turn early in Barth's development and traces its effects into the *Church Dogmatics*. Spencer's approach assumes Bruce McCormack's account of the development of Barth's theology (1995), and seeks to complement it with a consistent examination of moral ontology in the whole of the Barth corpus. Having examined the reception history of Barth's ethical theology (ch. 1) Spencer engages in a Barthian ground-clearing, drawing on texts from 1914-1931 that indicate Barth's opposition to contemporary anthropologies, and which begin to point towards a theological anthropology (chs 2–4). It is this act of ground-clearing that accounts for the perceived negativity in Barth's account of human agency: only when the ground is clear does Barth posit a theological anthropology. Spencer then examines Barth's more constructive ethical ontology in the *Church Dogmatics* (ch. 5). Spencer notes Barth's claim that it is only as human conscience is enlivened by the Holy Spirit that a co-knowledge of the will of God is possible (p. 237). This emphasis on the Spirit results in a more dynamic account of the divine-human interaction than is present in other interpretations, but is in potential tension with accounts such as Biggar's that press for accountability beyond the individual.

David Clough's *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth's Ethics* (2005) is rooted in a comparison of the ethics of the second edition of Barth's *Romans* commentary

with the ethics of the *Church Dogmatics*.⁵ Like Gorringer, Clough is keen to see Barth in the light of his historical-social and intellectual contexts (ch.1). Clough highlights the themes of *crisis* and *dialectic* in Barth's early theology and argues that the concepts remain significant for the interpretation of Barth's ethical thought in the *Church Dogmatics*. He joins Bruce McCormack, therefore, in suggesting that the theological shift represented by Barth's 1931 work on Anselm should not be exaggerated, as Barth himself and influential interpreters such as Hans Urs von Balthasar did (pp. 57–9; McCormack (1995)). Part I explores the nature of the crisis in relation to *Romans II*, exploring the place of ethics and Barth's discussion of two ethical themes in *Romans II*: love and community; and war, peace and revolution. Clough argues that both those who criticize and those who celebrate Barth's ethics in this period as being contentless only notice Barth's account of God's 'No' to human sin and

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miss the 'Yes' of God within Barth's dialectic that continues to affirm the possibility of responsible human ethical action. In Part II, he compares these elements of *Romans II* with Barth's treatment of the same topics in the *Church Dogmatics* (chs. 6 & 7), arguing that the *Romans II* dialectic is still present in the *Dogmatics* in its repeated emphasis on the sovereignty of God's commanding alongside the human ethical responsibility to seek out the territory in which the command may be encountered. As noted above, Clough criticizes Biggar's interpretation of Barth's ethics as a form of natural law as an inappropriate domestication of his thought (p. 116) and argues that,

⁵ The co-authors acknowledge the awkwardness of discussing the work of one of us in the third person, but saw no better alternative.

in maintaining the dialectical tension between our need to act responsibly and our need to be open to God's commanding, Barth is a significant resource for constructive accounts of Christian ethics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The alternatives, he suggests, are on one side the absolutist idolatry of claiming to possess the mind of God and on the other, the relativist apostasy of giving up on the attempt to hear God's command at all (p. 124). Clough situates Barth as the middle ground between these extremes, requiring a constant striving and straining to hear the command of God, in full recognition of the fact that we cannot own it. Using a term Barth borrowed from Luther, Clough calls this a *theologia viatorum*, a theology for wayfarers, characterized by faithfulness, humility, and action.

Paul Nimmo's account of Barth ethics, *Being in Action* (2007), builds on the work of Eberhard Jüngel (2001) and John Webster (see above) in examining the importance of Barth's actualistic ontology for the relationship between theology and ethics in the *Church Dogmatics*. God's being is known in the act of revelation: this is the actualism of Barth's actualistic ontology. More than that, the actualistic aspect of God is *constitutive* of the divine Being, over and against a *substantialist* account in which the Being of God would be complete aside from and prior to divine decisions, actions, and relations. God's being and identity is revealed in God's work – there is no other way in which God is known. This emphasis on actualism leads Nimmo to share Clough's judgement that Biggar's interpretation is too comfortable with natural law and casuistry to do justice to the dynamic character of Barth's ethics. The volume is divided into three sections, each addressing key aspects of the ethical enterprise: the noetic aspect — how do ethical agents know what to do? — the ontic aspect — what does it mean when they do it? — and the telic aspect — to what end do they do it? Under the heading of *noesis* Nimmo covers the divine command, and the discipline

and practice of theological ethics (chs. 2-4). Barth's account of the divine command is much more than an external order. It is characterized as a personal event in which the individual is 'arrested' internally

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at a particular point in time, and claimed by God in that moment. Under the *ontic* aspect of Barth's ethics, Nimmo deals with the reality of the human ethical agent (ch. 5), examining the correspondence of divine and human action (ch. 6) within the ontological framework (where both are understood as beings-in-action, but where the divine Being holds primacy). The Way of (good) ethical action (ch. 7) therefore must ensure the positive relation of the creature to the Creator. Under the *telic* aspect of Barth's ethics Nimmo treats the participation of the Christian in the life and mission of God in the world, the witness of the church to God, and the ultimate glorification as heirs of God's kingdom (ch. 8). In his concluding chapter, Nimmo explores the relevance of Barthian ethics for contemporary moral discussions. As we noted in relation to Webster, the orientating aspects are key for Nimmo – these are vertical and horizontal: giving an awareness of God, and the intrinsic divine-human relationship in which all people stand; and an awareness of the Church's humanity as 'co-humanity' in and with the humanity of the world (p. 188–9).

Following the survey of these ten volumes, we suggest the following as points of note from this recent scholarship on Barth's ethics. First, the very existence of these books indicates that, in contrast to the view prevalent before 1990, Barth's ethical thought is now judged by many theological ethicists to be worthy of serious attention, either for the practical model he offers describing the way of Christian

ethics in the world, or for helping to locate human agency in the matrix of wider dogmatic concerns. All the authors surveyed consider that Barth is able to give a satisfactory account of human agency within the framework of divine command; all agree that critics are wrong to consider Barth as merely espousing a form of divine intuitionism; all judge that there is value in the particular way Barth framed the place of ethics in the Christian life. There is obvious self-selectivity in this chorus of opinion and we cannot therefore interpret it as expressing universal scholarly approval of Barth's ethical method, but it is clear that Barth's approach to ethics is now considered a live option for theological ethics in a way it was not previously. It is tempting to seek an explanation for this change of view in a changed understanding among theologians of the relationship between theology and philosophy: we might speculate that this renewed appreciation of Barth's ethics was only possible in a context in which theology saw itself as more self-assured and under less pressure to make its ethical deliberations fit a secular paradigm.

An issue for several of these volumes is the relationship of Barth's ethical project to nature and natural law. Biggar's claim that Barth espouses a version

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of natural law seems to find support in Webster's conclusions concerning Barth's relationship to natural theology, but Biggar's interpretation is criticized by Clough and Nimmo. In order to recognize what is at issue here, it is helpful to note Webster's distinction between natural law interpreted as, first, the ontological claim that the good and the real are inseparable and, second, the epistemological claim that we can

know the good by reflection on the natural order.⁶ Webster notes that Barth agrees with the ontological claim but disagrees with the epistemological claim. There is no dispute concerning this two-fold position: if Barth were not committed to the ontological claim, he would be proposing an ethic of divine command as a private and esoteric message to believers unconnected with the reality of existence in the world; if Barth were committed to the epistemological claim, he would be contradicting his express position in volume II/2 of the *Church Dogmatics* that grounds theological ethics in the election of God and sets it in opposition to the ‘general conception’ of ethics.⁷ Biggar claims Barth’s ethics as a version of natural law on the basis that Barth considers there are states of being in which human beings flourish.⁸ This is a position related to the ontological claim that the good and the real are inseparable, but is a way of putting things foreign to Barth, which is what gives rise to the objections raised to Biggar’s reading. Barth does not characterize the command of God as providing information about the goods necessary to human flourishing: rather, he characterizes the task of ethics as seeking to set out where the church is likely to encounter the command of God, which can never be fully specified in advance.⁹ The ontological claim that the good and the real belong together is one that Barth shares with natural law, therefore, but the similarities between his position and accounts of natural law that rest on recognition of basic human goods should not be exaggerated.¹⁰

A related theme that is a matter of dispute between these works is how much of Barth’s project needs to be rethought in order for it to be reclaimed. Amongst these works, Matheny’s account commends Barth’s approach as it stands, whilst Biggar is

⁶ Webster (2000), p. 156.

⁷ Barth (1957), p. 516.

⁸ Biggar (1993), pp. 164–5.

⁹ Barth (1961), pp. 10–12.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the relationship of natural theology to Barth’s project, see Hauerwas (2001), ch. 7.

the most sympathetic to Barth's critics, proposing that Barth's objections to natural law and casuistry be set aside and that Barth's approach should be modified to become more systematic and embrace these

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forms of reasoning.¹¹ As has been noted, Clough and Nimmo contend that Biggar's revision of Barth's project is neither necessary or desirable, though Clough is critical of Barth in the more particular sphere of his discussion of war in the *Church Dogmatics* and, very briefly, in relation to his discussion of male-female and same-sex relationships.¹² Apart from these examples, Barth's approach is defended against criticisms in these works, rather than revised in response to them. It is clear that one reason for different critical attitudes to Barth's ethics is what one expects an account of theological ethics to achieve and enable. Those who primarily seek ethical guidance for the church or individual Christian are likely to respond positively to an account of ethics rooted divine commands; those who are primarily interested in Christian ethics as it contributes to public policy debates are more likely to be sceptical. The lack of specific moral injunctions resulting from Barth's approach divides opinion in a similar way. Barth's own example suggests that detailed engagement with questions of public policy is by no means incompatible with his approach, and Michael Banner's self-confessedly Barthian *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (1999) and chairing of a governmental committee on farm animal welfare¹³ provide more recent supporting evidence. It must be conceded,

¹¹ Biggar (1993), p. 41.

¹² Clough (2005), 73–4, 96–7.

¹³ Ministry of Agriculture (1995).

however, that individual congregations and Christians seeking ethical direction get little concrete advice: they are called by Barth, as Clough and Webster suggest in different ways, to strain to listen for the command of God and to allow the Holy Spirit to work. It is clear that this is still a key point of dispute between those who see Barth's approach to ethics as attractive and viable and those who do not.

One further trajectory that is clear in these works is the widespread recognition that Barth scholarship should take the context of Barth's works seriously. Gorringer's work is clearest in its emphasis of this as a methodological priority, but it is also a priority in Mangina and Jehle and evident to some extent in Matheny and Clough. For a theologian so frequently and vigorously in dialogue with the events and people of his day, this attention to context is clearly a promising avenue for gaining a deeper appreciation of the nuances of Barth's ethical thinking. Taking note of Barth's engagement with public issues is also important for appreciating his self-understanding of the task of the theological ethicist.

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Notably absent from these works is significant interest in what David Haddorff has called the 'postmodern turn' in Barth studies: the works that Haddorff lists — Webb (1991), Lowe (1993), Ward (1995), Andrews (1996) and Johnson (1997) — are discussed comparatively little.¹⁴ In part this may be accounted for by the comparatively little interest these works show in Barth's ethical thought, with the exception of Johnson's *The Mystery of God*. It may also be that those giving attention to Barth's theological ethics are unlikely to consider a postmodern account of ethics a

¹⁴ Haddorff (2004), 269.

promising basis for ethics, in which case Clough's rejection of Johnson's celebration of Barth's 'purely formal regard' for the other is representative.¹⁵

In closing it is worth noting a wider influence of Barth's approach to ethics in works that take up his method as a tool rather than as a subject of enquiry in its own right. Banner's *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, noted above, is perhaps the best known confessedly Barthian ethical project; Neil Messer's *Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics* (2007) is another example. The influence Barth's ethical thought will exert in the next two decades is likely to depend as much on how many theological ethicists follow the example of these authors in making use of Barth's approach as on how many monographs on Barth's ethical thought are added to the small pile reviewed here.

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¹⁵ Johnson (1997), 161, quoted in Clough (2005), 130.

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