

Faith, Unbelief and Evil. A Fragment of a Dialogue¹

by
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“The man who is isolated over against God is as such rejected by God. But to be this man can only be the choice of the Godless man himself. The witness of the Community of God to every individual man points in this direction: that this choice of the Godless is null and void, that he belongs to Jesus Christ from eternity and thus is not rejected, but rather chosen by God in Jesus Christ, that the reprobation which he deserves on the basis of his wrong choice is borne and removed by Jesus Christ; that on the basis of the true, the Divine choice he is chosen for eternal life with God. The promise of his election will determine him as a member of the Church to become himself a carrier of its witness to the whole world. And the revelation of his rejection can determine him only to believe in Jesus Christ as Him by whom it is borne and removed.”

(Fourth of Karl Barth’s “main theses” on God’s Election of Grace in his *Dogmatic II/2*)²1

I. Our Knowledge and our Ignorance of God.

Historian: I hear your friend Karl Barth has recently finished another volume of his “Dogmatic”. What’s it all about?

Theologian: The first part of it is about Predestination and the rest about Ethics. But it’s not really another volume—only another half-volume. It completes the volume on “The Doctrine of God.”

Historian: It’s certainly in the old Reformed tradition to complete the doctrine of God with an account of Predestination. In the Westminster Confession, the second chapter is “Of God” and the third “Of God’s Eternal Decree”, and that reflects most Reformed dogmatic systems of the period. But what was in Barth’s first half.

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Theologian: That also had two parts, the first on “The Knowledge of God” and the second on “The Being of God”.

Historian: That’s in the old Reformed tradition too. I’ve just been dipping into an outline of theology by William Ames⁴, and early seventeenth century English Presbyterian not a member of the Presbyterian Church, of course; there wasn’t one in England in those days; but a member of the Presbyterian “party” in the Church of England. And

¹ Edited by David Jakobsen. The original is undated and kept in the Prior collection at Bodleian Library, Oxford. An earlier version of this text has been published in *Synthese* (2012) 188:381–397.

² Karl Barth: *Die Lehre von Gott. Teilband 2* of the series: *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Published by Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag in 1942, and was translated to English in 1957.

³ By this, a number in curly braces, we mark the page numbers from the typewritten original.

⁴ Prior starts his considerations on Barth’s reformed theology with Dr. William Ames (1576–1633). Though William Ames never got to see The New World, he became more known and quoted there than Luther and Calvin. Cf. Ames, W. (1997). *The Marrow of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

in his “Medulla Theologiae” the chapters on the doctrine of God begins with some sections on our knowledge of Him, and then go on to His being. His treatment of our knowledge of God, though, begins with an account of our ignorance of Him—His incomprehensibility, and how we cannot know him apart from his revealing Himself to us; though he goes on to say that he has revealed enough of Himself to enable us to live rightly. He quotes in this connection a text that the old Reformed divines were always very fond of. Deut XXIX, 29: “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but these things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law”.⁵ And the basic pattern that Ames drew from this text was also common to Reformed divines, and long continued to be so. In the early eighteenth century, for example, William Wisheart⁶, Principal of Edinburgh University, gave a series of “Discourses of God”, in which God’s attributes were discussed one by one, but the attribute that Wisheart handled before venturing upon any others was His incomprehensibility. I shouldn’t imagine Barth would leave that one out either, from all I have heard about him.

Theologian: No, he certainly doesn’t. But it doesn’t come at the beginning of his account of our knowledge of God but at the end of it. And there are reasons for that. In the first place, of course, it expresses Barth’s belief that God is not only incomprehensible before He has made Himself known to us, but even afterwards too. And more than that, it is not till he has made Himself known to us that we really know how incomprehensible He is. You know how Barth detests all kinds of “apologetics” designed to “prepare” people for Christianity. Well, it’s not only what we might call “positive” apologetics that he opposes—things like the tradition proofs of the existence of God. He is equally opposed to attempts to prove, from outside of Christianity and with a view to turning men towards it, how ignorant of God we are, and how much they need the Gospel. Men cannot know how much they need the Gospel until they have heard it, or how ignorant they are of God until they know Him.

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Historian: That’s going a bit further than most earlier writers, but the basic idea’s not far removed from some of them. For example Thomas Crawford, a dry but discriminating sort of Scottish Calvinist of last century, says in his Baird Lectures on “The Mysteries of Christianity”, “There can be no true revelation made of the divine nature which shall not give us a fuller and more vivid impression of its *incomprehensibleness* as of its other attributes. In this respect there needs must be a hiding of God in the very process of revealing Him”⁷. And old Wisheart too, whom I mentioned before, is really closer to Barth than to Ames in his arrangement, now I come to think of it. His discourse on God’s incomprehensibility is the first of his discourses on God’s being, but comes after a prefatory discourse on “The Knowledge of God”—it forms a sort of bridge between the subjects of the knowledge of God,

⁵ Most likely quoted from King James Version.

⁶ William Wisheart (1691/2–1753), was one of David Hume’s chief religious critics, accusing him of “sapping the foundations of morality” in A Letter From A Gentleman (1745. Cf. Fieser, J. (1997). *Moral skepticism*. In D. Garret et al. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Empiricism*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.

⁷ Cf. Crawford, T. J. (2008). *The Mysteries of Christianity* (1874). Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing.

and His being. In that prevatory discourse Wisheart enlarges upon how serious a duty it is for us to acquire a knowledge of God, before telling us how hard it is.

Theologian: Barth also insists, in the opening “positive” part of his chapter on the knowledge of God, that God wills to be known.

Historian: I must confess I’m a bit surprised to find Barth anticipated by Wisheart and Crawford. They both had the reputation in their different periods, of being rather “moderate” Calvinists—a bit “rationalistic” quite genuinely loyal to Reformed standards, but suspicious of “fanaticism”.

Theologian: Barth’s no fanatic either, and is perhaps even a bit rationalistic. Doesn’t any theologian who takes his job seriously pretty well have to be?— I mean, thought is the main tool of his trade and he can hardly afford to despise it.

Humanist: I wonder! I don’t want to appear cynical, but perhaps there is another reason than the ones you have mentioned for Barth’s handling the positive affirmations of Christianity first, and binging out their “incomprehensible” character afterwards. It seems to me frankly, that the central affirmations of Christianity are self-contradictory and absurd, and Barth even seems at times to say as much himself. But if one begins by facing frankly up to that even under the guise of talking about God’s incomprehensibility and the corruption of our reason, why-, there can be no going further.

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One cannot even discuss Christianity then, for if it is self-contradictory, then its statements just cancel one another out and there’s nothing to discuss. And please note that this isn’t an attack on Christianity by me—if Christianity is really self-contradictory, then it attacks itself, negates itself, “takes back of its own accord its basic affirmations (for that’s what self-contradiction means), and there’s really nothing left for me to do, except change the subject. But by the time Barth reaches the points where he admits the self-contradictory character of Christianity, he has already got on “thinking Christianly” about all sorts of things that seems to have plenty of positive meaning and content, and their secret emptiness is something he can just put into the margin—didn’t he say, in the days before he set up as a “rationalist” and when his thought was all “paradox”, that all he was writing then was a “marginal note” to other theology?—and now it remains as a marginal note to his own theology; and having duly noted it we just pass on to the further theology that follows, hardly seeing what we are doing. I don’t accuse him, of course, of deliberately playing this trick upon his readers, for he is himself taken in by it, and “goes forward” in good faith. But that’s how he manages it, all the same.

II. The Paradox of Evil.

Historian: I can’t pretend to be able to answer that one; though it’s surely not so very unscientific to put problems we meet with on one side in the hope that further exploration of the subject will throw back light upon them which we cannot yet obtain. Anyway, I can’t help behaving exactly in accordance with your description, and want to “go forward” and find out some more about this volume of Barth’s. We’ve heard some of the things in his chapter on “The Knowledge of God”, what does he say about the “The Being of God”?

- Theologian: He says that God’s being is “love in freedom”, and deals with His attributes under the two heads of His “Freedom”, or His self-sufficiency and sovereignty, and His love.
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- Historian: That’s a bit different from the more systematic of the older Reformed divines. Ames, and with him most of the protestant schoolmen of the 17th century, divide God’s attributes in to those of His “sufficiency” and those of His “efficiency”. He is all-sufficient in Himself and for Himself and for all beings, and He is all-efficient, able to give effect to all that He wills. And from His “efficiency” these divines make a natural transition to the eternal “decree” by which He makes His will effective. But John Witherspoon⁸, who led the “Evangelical” party in the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century, and later went over to America and was one of the framers and signatories of the Declaration of Independence, classifies God’s attributes or perfections as “natural” and “moral”, omnipotence, for example, being a natural perfection and mercy and justice moral ones. That comes nearer to Barth’s “freedom” and “love”, doesn’t it? And in our own day too Principal Dickie⁹, in “The Organism of Christian Truth”¹⁰, has taken over from the Ritschlian Haering the division of God’s attributes into those of “absolute personality” and those of “holy love”. But even back in Calvin the same division can be seen. In his Geneva Catechism of 1642, the one the Church of Scotland used when it was first reformed, he says that in order to put our whole confidence in God as we ought, we must know “that He is both Almighty and perfectly good”. Perhaps his immediate successors were a little apt to pipe down on the “perfectly good” part of it. At all events their faith in God’s goodness or love wasn’t deep enough to control the very structure of their thought about His attributes.
- Humanist: Maybe they had their reasons. To take God’s almightiness and His perfect goodness equally seriously would have landed your seventeenth century divines in dilemmas from which they could not have extricated themselves; and that is where it lands Barth, as he confesses freely enough in his “Credo”. I have in mind, of course, the dilemmas arising from the reality of evil. Barth says quite frankly that anything which purports to be a solution of this problem denies either God’s omnipotence or His goodness or the reality of evil—either He wouldn’t prevent it (and then he is not perfectly good), or it isn’t really there. And yet he insists on affirming together all of these things which really cannot be held together.
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- Historian: This frankness about the cleft stick we are in is not new. Last century Crawford, whom I mentioned before, stated the impasse into which the existence of sin leads us, in exactly the same terms as Barth. He believed, however, that the three factors in the enigma—God’s omnipotence, His goodness, and the reality of evil—were all known to us independently of revelation, and the existence of such problems even

⁸ John Witherspoon (1722–1794) was President of Princeton College from 1768 to his death.

⁹ Professor John Dickie, Presbyterian theologian and Principal of Knox Theological Hall in Dunedin from 1909 until his death in 1942.

¹⁰ With the subtitle *A Modern Positive Dogmatic*, was published in 1931 by James Clarke. See Dickie, J. (1931). *The organism of Christian truth: A modern positive dogmatic*. London: James Clarke.

apart from revelation was for him a good answer to those who rejected revealed doctrines such as those of the Trinity and the Atonement on the grounds of their perplexing character. And isn't it true that the problem of evil wasn't invented by Barth or Knox or even the Bible? What, Humanist, do you make of it yourself?

III. Atheism and Evil.

Humanist: I'm sorry to disappoint you, but for me the problem doesn't really exist, because I simply deny all three of the factors involved. I would very carefully qualify my denial of the reality of evil; but in any case that factor creates no logical problem when the other two are left out. Terms like "good" and "evil", to my mind, do not really describe properties of anything but merely express our wishes. I do, indeed, think that we should confine them to the expression of our disinterested wishes—wishes that we want all others to wish too; and wishes about the behaviour of others that include in themselves a preparedness to meet similar wishes about our own behaviour. Bertrand Russell defines "ethical" desires as desires about the desires of mankind. But in any case "That is evil" simply means "Don't do that!" or "Take it away!" or something of that sort—not a description at all, but a demand or decision. Of course our wishes can themselves be described, and that description is part of the description of the universe, and it is also part of the true description of the universe to say that our wishes are not always realized and that there is a clash of wills and forces in the world. From the fact that we want a thing to be so we certainly cannot argue that it is so, no matter how disinterested this wish may be. But what intellectual problem is there in that?—that's just part of how things are. Of course we wish they were different, and try to make them different; but that too is just part of how things are.

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Historian: This solution of the problem of evil, or rather dismissal of it as no problem, has some rather astonishing resemblances to the outlook of the Protestant schoolmen, and especially of William Twisse, the chairman of the Westminster Assembly, and his ardent Scottish disciple Samuel Rutherford¹¹, who wrote very copiously on these matters. Rutherford held that the term "goodness" simply had no meaning except what God chose to will and to decree, and he could choose to will and to decree practically anything (the exceptions were of a logical rather than an ethical nature—e.g. He could not choose not to be God). On this view, of course, to say that "God is good" simply tells us nothing at all about Him—it tells us that "He wills what He wills", which is as much as to say, "It is raining, when it is raining". The demand for faith in God's goodness is seldom made as easy as that! Rutherford couldn't claim the support of Calvin and Knox at this point. Knox associated himself heartily with Calvin's statement that "the imagination of the absolute power of God, which the Schoolmen"—i.e. the later medieval Schoolmen—"have invented, is an execrable blasphemy; for it is as much as to say that God were a tyrant that appointed things to be done, not according to equity, but according to his inordinate appetite". The Reformers compared the holders of such views to "the heathen who did affirm that

¹¹ William Twisse (1575–1646) and Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) were Reformed Theologians, holding to a Supralapsarian view on election.

God jested or sported in the affairs of men”. Further, along with others who didn’t accept this first part of his viewpoint, Rutherford distinguished two sense in which we could use the phrase “the will of God”. We might use it to mean His “will of decree”, i.e. what He has decided to do or to bring to pass and that covers everything that actually happens. Or we might mean by it His “will of command”, i.e. what He orders us to do, by His revealed Word, And between these two there is no logical connection. If we disobey God’s “will of command”, we cannot justify ourselves by saying that we are simply doing what He has decreed we shall do—our wrong consists in disobeying His orders, no matter what His secret plans and purposes about us may be. Nor can we argue that anything must take place because God has commanded it and in that sense expressed His “desire” for it—what actually happens depends on God’s other “will”. Consistently with this, Rutherford held that nothing that exists or happens is evil in itself—all is the creation of God, and would simply drop into nothingness if He did not actually keep it in being at every moment; and so all is “good” too, even sinful actions as far as their “being” is concerned. But the {8} “malignity” or “obliquity” of the actions is not from God, and lies in their conflict with His will of command. Rutherford seemed here to oscillate between the view that the distinction Between good and evil has nothing to do with “being” at all, and belongs to another universe of discourse, so to speak, and the view of Augustine that evil is a kind of lack of being a “privation” of good for which God cannot be held responsible.

Humanist: No matter how one look at it, this theory certainly puts a very horrible monster on the throne of the universe—and not only the part of the theory that departs from Calvin and Knox either. What seems to me especially monstrous even in the rest of it is its implicit denial of the “disinterestedness” of goodness, when it says that there is no common measure between what God orders others to do and what He does Himself. Whether or not “goodness” has any meaning independently of people’s wishes—God’s or anyone else’s—one does judge a person’s goodness by what he does himself and not by what he orders others to do.

Theologian: A very sound point, though I doubt whether you are in a position to make it. The late nineteenth century Russian Christian writer Soloviev made it against the Tolstoyans in his “Three Conversations on War and Christianity”. The Tolstoyans made Christianity entirely a matter of uncompromising obedience to their divine Master, but had no doctrine of the atonement or of the deliverance of man from death. Martyrdom, said Soloviev to them, is a good act, but was Ivan the terrible god when he ordered men to submit to martyrdom at his hands? And “so long as you do not show me the good quality of your master in his deeds, but only in his verbal instructions to his workmen, I remain of the opinion that this far-away master of yours, demanding good of others, but doing nothing good himself, imposing obligations, but showing no love, never appearing for you to see, but living somewhere away incognito that he is none other than the God of this world.”

Humanist: I suppose you say I’m not in a position to make this criticism because I have no “basis” of ethical judgment. But neither, if it comes to that, have you—the very idea of a “basis” of ethics is meaningless. That’s just part of what I said before—it is impossible to make any logical inference from a description of how things are, to a moral judgment or decision (for example the decision to abide, oneself, by the basic {9} demands one makes on others). I don’t know what particular inference of this kind you would claim to make, but you might, for instance, say “God demands

this”—simple statement of fact—“and therefore we ought to do it”. But that only follows if we “ought” to do what God demands, and this decision or judgment can have no “basis” at all—that’s how one might decide to live, and that’s all there is to it. Or one might say, “God has been good to us, and therefore we should in mere gratitude be good to one another”—isn’t that the basic argument of the First Epistle of John?—but that again presupposes that we “ought” to be grateful, and there’s no “basis” for that either. Christians and humanists alike are driven back, sooner or later, to sheer decision, decision without any “basis”.

Theologian: And isn’t that just where your own view is so very like Rutherford’s? God’s “will of decree” fixes the description of the world, and His “will of command” calls for our decision, and there is no connection at all between them. But anyway I’m glad you’ve answered Historian’s remark that the problem of evil didn’t begin with Christianity, and shown that if Christianity is dropped the problem may be avoided. That’s a small point on which Barth doesn’t agree with Crawford. It is God’s revelation of His goodness and His power, and of the seriousness of sin, that creates this problem. In the Bible we can even trace its deepening as this revelation becomes clearer—beginning with the strangeness of God’s dealing with His people and leading up to the strangeness of His dealings with His Son. This is part of the way our perceptions of God’s incomprehensibility grows with our knowledge of Him. And the significance of the parallels between Rutherford’s theory and yours is just this, that the more satisfactorily a “Christian” theory appears to have “solved” the problem of evil, the closer that theory is to atheism. That doesn’t mean that we should simply be silent about either the reality of evil or the freedom and love of God; for that silence would itself be a solution of the problem, or at least a way of disposing of it—indeed, isn’t it precisely the way of disposing of it that you, Humanist, have put before us? To claim no solution, not even this one of silence—that is the only Christian position. For the Christian, the “mysterium iniquitatis” must remain a mystery, the problem must remain a problem.

Humanist: Just what sort of mental process is this, which deals with a problem, but so deals with it that it is never either solved or displayed as illusory?
{ 10 } What is this but a systematic self-stultification?

Theologian: Yes, it might even be just that. And then again it mightn’t—it might be the grace of faith, keeping our eyes open and our hearts sensitive to the three realities involved, no matter how insoluble may be the problem to which their co-existence gives rise. Barth has not forgotten that other possibility you mention, you know—there is a great deal in “Credo” about faith and its “counterfeit”, the designing self-stultification which in the end only God can distinguish from the real thing. But he offers us means of protecting ourselves against this counterfeit—we can enter into and continue in the Church’s fellowship, and not attempt to believe alone, and we can pray and pray again for His grace.

Humanist: And this is self-stultification too.

Theologian: It might be—and it mightn’t. Do you want me to say it all over again?

IV. The Two Edged Sword.

Historian: This conversation is taking a rather queer turn. I have a mental picture of a ship ploughing through the sea—the sea in front of it is all one piece till the prow strikes

it and turns one wave to one side and one to the other, and after that they never meet. And so it moves forward, making this division again and again as it goes. This argument is like that—it seems to lead to no conclusion, but simply brings one to one point or another where one must go this way and another must go that.

Theologian: Yes, and perhaps this argument which convinces no one but only again and again divides those who participate in it, is also, more secretly, predestination in action. But we seemed to have reached a point a minute ago where things were even worse than that, and there seemed nothing to do but repeat oneself. It's not really as bad as that—there is something more to come. When this struggle between divine revelation and human reason which is theology reaches this stalemate—when there seems no more to say but what has been said before and seen to be futile—the movement does go on, and these “positive affirmations” that have led us into absurdity { 11 } are heard again in a new way, in the form of commands. We have seen that God is perfect love acting in perfect freedom, and yet in our situation, the situation of evil men in an evil world, this just doesn't make sense, and so in a way increases rather than lightens our darkness. And then precisely in that darkness we hear the command, “Now act—love, and love freely, and enter in action into the incomprehensible struggle of Him Who is ‘love in freedom’ against the evil in yourself and in the world”. And so the outline is given to us of a pattern of life, and it comes to us as a good pattern too, all of it, the hearing of the Word, in all its “absurdity”, as well as doing of it; things like the baptism of children as well as practical self-giving in all things and steadfastness and sanity in relationships like marriage and citizenship. It is really inevitable that Barth's chapter on Predestination should be followed, as it is, by one on Ethics. What he does is not quite the same as deducing a demand from a description, as Humanist says we must not do; if only because the “descriptions” are ones which Humanist would hardly recognize as such, because of the element of self-contradiction in them. I believe it is an axiom of modern logic that from a false proposition one can deduce any proposition; and perhaps from an absurd proposition one can deduce even a demand. I don't press that suggestion very seriously, but just put it forward as a lightly made indication that Humanist's canons of argument hardly apply to what is going on here.

Humanist: I'm glad for your own sake that you don't press it very seriously. For a proposition that is really absurd simply says a thing and then takes it back again, and in the net result says nothing, false or true, and one can no more “believe” such a proposition than one can believe what one knows to be false, let alone “deduce” anything from it. And yet, if you disclaim the attempt to infer a moral judgment from a description properly so called, what can I see in your theology except this: first, a series of apparent descriptions (“God is love and freedom”, and the like) which one finally sees to be absurd, and then, coming after them for I know not what reasons, a series of moral demands? And what can I do except reject the absurdities—though I could also, of course, repeat them after you and claim that they mean as much to me as they do to you, since in any case they really mean nothing—and then listen to your demands independently taking them seriously just for what they are? And as a matter of fact I do find the essential moral demands { 12 } that come from Christianity very compelling. There is no “basis” for my decision that I should try to love my neighbour as the story of the Good Samaritan demands of us, and no “basis” for my detestation of moral pretentiousness, in myself and in others, like that of the Pharisees; but there it is, and to look for a “basis” for these things is really to chase a

will-o'-the-wisp – mightn't one even call it a kind of lack of faith, an unwillingness just to make these decisions as to how one shall live, and then just live by them?

Theologian: I haven't really any answer to that, and in a way don't want to try and answer it either, and don't think I should. There is "lack of faith" in all of us, and in our very theology too—even the affirmation that "God is love in freedom" may be used to build up a counterfeit faith rather the real one, and for this abuse God may well take away our faith altogether, in the sense of faith in Him. That may at any time actually happen to me; it may have happened to you though it's really none of my business to indulge in such speculations. And perhaps, in that darkness which we have brought upon ourselves He may give us a faith which is really in Him though we do not know it—a kind of integrity which was absent from our too careless "believing". I have often thought that much of the world's unbelief is like the prodigal son's resolve to renounce his relationship to his father because he had proved himself unworthy of it—there was a lot more real "sonship" in that than in his earlier frivolous taking of the relationship, his father simply made the denial impossible. Well, what may be hidden in your "Humanism" I do not know—I am not the Father!—but I feel that the Church's attitude to such as you, in your last utterance, must be governed by Christ's words, "He that is not against us is for us".

Humanist: Well of course I haven't any answer to that either. But there's something that has just occurred to me in connection with what you were talking about earlier the apparent resemblances between Rutherford's "solution" of the problem of evil and my own. I don't suppose, Historian, that this Covenanter of yours would have had much time for Spinoza?

Historian: I should say not! Rutherford was intolerant even for his time.
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Humanist: Yet this view that "goodness" is just whatever God likes to make it, was Spinoza's view too. I suppose you're right, Theologian, in doubting whether I'm in a position to make absolute moral judgments on Rutherford's God. For this God Who is pure Power without any real goodness—what can such a being of pure Power be but an enormous Thing?—a great dead machine, for all Its perfect "freedom" from all constraint or even consistency. It's just an extra Thing that Rutherford adds to the total furniture of the universe; and if It existed we might feat It but could hardly pass moral judgment on It—It stands outside the agreement to treat one another as persons in which the moral life is carried on, just as much as block of stone stands outside it. At all events, It wouldn't be intrinsically good or evil any more than any other thing. What is horrible is only Rutherford's belief that It has some intrinsic claim to reverence. Now Spinoza in his pantheism comes nearer than Rutherford to the realization that this being of pure Power is only a Thing; yet he too teaches that It has some intrinsic claim to man's "love", even though It is quite incapable of "loving" man or anything else. It is on Spinoza's view, man's highest duty to love "God, or nature", although "Between God and man there is just as little in common as there is between the Constellation of the Dog, and a Dog, the barking animal", and "God is not capable of loving man".

Theologian: Werezchkovski¹², in his novel "Peter and Alexis", powerfully describes the reaction to these words from Spinoza of a well born boy Tikhon who went on a pilgrimage

¹² Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865–1941). See Merezhkovsky, D. (1905). *Peter and Alexis*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

searching for “the True Church” in the Russia of Peter the Great. He got mixed up with some weird and horrible religious fanatics who burnt themselves to death, and others who practiced the ritual murder of babies—and then he was brought back and left in the library of the official church, where he read all the new philosophers; and when he read this passage in Spinoza, “it seemed that there, in this dead sky, was a dead God who was not capable of love. It would be better even to know that there was no God at all. ‘But—perhaps there even is not?’ he reflected, and experienced that same horror as when Ivannushka the babe had been crying, while Averiyanka had lifted up a knife above him and smiled.”

Humanist: Feelings as strong as that on the point seem to me a bit crazed. And don’t they indicate also a lack of faith on Werezhkovsky’s part—I mean a lack of faith {14} even in your sense? Spinoza horrifies him so immoderately because at bottom he is certain he cannot escape from his conclusions. But what I wanted to say was, don’t get me mixed up with Spinoza. Rutherford’s transcendent God and Spinoza’s “God-Universe” seem strangely alike at times; but the real Humanist will have no truck with either, and will not be very much interested in “the Universe”. I don’t really know that there *is* such a thing as “the Universe”—there are only a whole lot of different things making up all that is, and you can call all that “the Universe” if you like, but the word doesn’t mean anything in particular; and in any case “the Universe” has no religious significance; there’s no “sacredness” about it and no reason to feel either religious reverence or religious horror towards it. Let us just get on with the things we feel we ought to do and bring about, including, of course, finding out what “the Universe” is like, i.e. what sort of things surround us, and let that be religions enough for us. And so long as one definitely parts company with Spinoza, and keeps clear of complexes about “the Universe”, then one can escape being “covered” by Theologians’s strictures on people like Rutherford. In this way, Theologian, I think I remain safely on the other side of that ship that Historian spoke of and out of your reach.

Theologian: Yes, you’re on the other side of the ship just now. Thomas Masaryk said in a lecture on David Hume that the real atheist is not a violent and defiant man, even intellectually, but calm and rather unassailable — if he is a philosopher, one like Hume rather than one like Nietzsche. And I suppose you answer to that description too. But it was as a religious man that Masaryk made the reflection; and this “ship” of ours is a queer one, and pursues a queer course. I suppose what Historian’s image really represents is God’s Word making its way through the world, and dividing men on this side of it and on that as it goes forward; but it’s piloted by a master strategist, if I may change the figure a bit, and if He is at present on a “strategic retreat” from where you are, it may be only in order to pick you up all the more surely later on. {15}

V. God’s Strategic Retreat.

Historian: I’m not quite comfortable, you know, about this equation of Rutherford’s picture of God with Spinoza’s—perhaps because I myself am responsible for starting that train of thought. Of course, Calvinism does seem to come close to pantheism at times—both in their different ways affirm that “God is all-in-all”, and it would be surprising if Calvinists didn’t at times slide into a practical pantheism. Perhaps the two creeds

come closest in the eighteenth century American divine Jonathan Edwards¹³, who was the successor of the old Puritans but in a way also the forerunner of mystical Unitarians like Emerson. He conducted a brilliant campaign against the freedom of the will, which was philosophical rather than theological in character (holding that freewill was a meaningless idea, since every event must have a cause and our acts of choice must be caused by “motives”); was a moving revivalistic hell-fire preacher; and at the same time was something of a mystic, and in his intimate devotional writings speaks of such things as being absorbed and “lost” in the Divine Being. But Rutherford—well, however close he may have come to Spinoza here and there, one thing I just can’t imagine him saying is that while man is capable of loving God, God is not capable of loving man. That God is active, so active that man’s action is but passivity in relation to His, was what he consistently and even violently affirmed.

Theologian:

So, of course, did Edwards; and so, certainly, did all the Reformed divines of Rutherford’s day. But Edwards only makes especially obvious what was true of earlier Calvinism too, and is true of all theology to a greater or lesser degree—Christian and non-Christian or even anti-Christian strands of thinking are always mixed up together in it. A great deal of early Reformed teaching about the attributes of God was even explicitly thought of as falling under “natural” rather than “revealed” theology, and these men ought to have realized that “natural theology” is always something that the Christian Faith must fight against, instead of attempting to build upon it. And it’s not only in connection with God’s Power that this “theology of the natural man” finds expression in our old Reformed writers, but also in connection with His Unchangeableness. Barth, in the volume of his Dogmatic that we’ve been talking about, and the part about God’s attributes, considers these two “attributes of God’s freedom” together, and foreshadows much of what he says later on about Predestination. He urges us to think of God’s “unchangeableness” as His constancy, His {16} answering faithfulness, rather than “immutability” in the sense of the older divines. Their idea of immutability, he says, owed too much to Aristotle and his description of God as the “Unmoved Mover” of all else, and too little to the Bible, and was inconsistent with faith in a living God—God is not so unchangeable that He is dead, for if God is dead, then Death is God—a blind and meaningless Necessity reigns over the Universe. And in the new half-volume he says similarly that “God is not the prisoner of His own predestination”. Isn’t this line of criticism as much as to say that the older divines in their treatment of God’s “immutability” tended to leave us with a Spinozist deity?

Historian:

I suppose so. And I have just thought of another point at which Rutherford did come close to Spinoza’s appeal to us to love God even though it was an absurdity to speak of Him loving us. Rutherford never actually said that about God, but he did say in effect that we should love Him even if He were like that, and that we should love Him even if He were like that, and worse. He was one of those who held that we should be willing and glad to be damned for God’s mere glory. Edwards later held the same, but in him, more clearly than in Rutherford, this was a sort of mystical self-

¹³ Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), “widely acknowledged to be America’s most important and original philosophical theologian”. Cf. Wainwright, W. (2009). Jonathan Edwards. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2009 edition. - The influence of Jonathan Edwards philosophy on Prior is evident in *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford 1967), where Prior discusses Jonathan Edwards arguments against the free will based on God’s foreknowledge.

annihilation in God's Being. I must say there's something about this doctrine that appeals to me—perhaps its thoroughgoingness—though I suppose it's more Mohammedan than Christian, and pathological anyway.

Humanist: Oh, it's not only Mohammedan, I've come across it in some of those German theologians who supported the Nazification of their Church. You'll find a number of their utterances collected by Aurel Kolnai¹⁴ in his "War against the West". One of these gangster theologians, Stapel¹⁵, dismisses Christian objections to what the Nazis do and order one to do, as "moral hairsplitting", humanistic rather than Christian, and says "If God orders His man to go to hell then his sworn adherent will accordingly go to hell".

Theologian: I suppose the man who professes himself willing to be damned for God's greater glory is either willing to be damned unjustly, in which case he worships and immoral God, or justly, which would mean that he enters willingly, like Stapel, into a destiny to sin. He might, of course, simply mean that he gladly accepts all the consequences (including eternal damnation) of the sin he is already guilty of; but does anyone really feel like that about eternal damnation?—mustn't a man be a hypocrite who claims to feel like that? But there's something more serious {17} to be said against this willingness to be damned for God's glory. Even to contemplate such a thing is an implicit pushing aside of the salvation offered to us in Christ, who has taken our damnation upon Himself, and glorified His father even from hell. "Rabbi" Duncan¹⁶, 19th century Scottish missionary to the Jews and then Old Testament Professor, once burst into tears before his students at the thought that Christ's dereliction on the cross, when He cried, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?", "was damnation—and He took it lovingly". I have a feeling that this—"taking damnation lovingly"—was one thing that Rutherford's God, for all His omnipotence unlimited by goodness, could not do. But it's one thing that the God of the Bible has done; and in this act lies the one thing that Rutherford's theology, like Humanist's philosophy, does not give us—a foundation for ethics. We are not called upon to do the really crucial acting here—we are not called upon to "take damnation lovingly", and we couldn't do it if we were; but we are called upon to live as those for whom God Himself has done this. And that is the whole of the negative side of predestination—the whole meaning of "predestination to damnation". And the positive side too. It is the gospel.

Historian: I don't know what "Rabbi" Duncan would have thought to hear himself used against Rutherford. He admired Rutherford to the point of idolatry; and Edwards too, though more critically. And he quite definitely shared the view of both that we should be prepared to be damned for God's glory. I'm inclined to think, though, that Duncan, as a missionary to the Jews, may have had the idea imprinted especially deeply on his mind by Paul's strange cry in Romans IX. 3, "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites". And indeed Rutherford too longed for the conversion of Israel. And isn't this rather a good form of the willingness to be damned for God's glory? For here God's glory is thought of in a dynamic rather than a static way—as you

¹⁴ Aurel Thomas Kolnai (1900–1973), Published his critique of National Socialism in *The War Against the West* (1938). Cf. Kolnai, A. T. (1938). *The war against the west*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.

¹⁵ Wilhelm Stapel (1882–1954). German theologian and author.

¹⁶ John (Rabbi) Duncan (1796–1870).

have said, Theologian, God's method of warfare against evil involves "strategic retreats" from some fields to points from which they can be better attacked later on; and so, according to Paul, God has turned away from the mass of Israel in the present "dispensation" in order to turn back to them with all the more power and grace later, having "concluded them all in unbelief, that He may have mercy upon all" (Rom. XI, 32); and may not a man be willing to be damned as part of such {18} a "strategic retreat" for the sake of wider dispensation of God's mercy to others? In this there is not a bare and fanatical submission but a love of the souls of others, and entering into God's own love of them. And is it not true that not one of us can be saved alone? Should we even want to be saved alone? Is it really salvation if we come to God alone? Are we not tied to our "kinsmen according to the flesh?" spiritually too, and can a Christian bear to come into the Kingdom without them?

Humanist: Be careful, be careful! I don't quite know what you mean by "salvation", but I'm not sure that I like the way your conversation is drifting. It reminds me too much of Stapel again—his doctrine too is that God does not and cannot deal with men as individuals simply because they aren't individuals; we must approach God nationally, racially, tribally; any attempt at independent moral decision is wrong. And to me this submerging of the responsible individual in the family, the race, the nation is an evil and retrograde thing, and something from which Christianity at its best may liberate a man—it is just for that I do admire so much in your faith, albeit from outside. And another point, though it may seem a bit ungracious of me to raise it—I doubt whether it shows real respect for another person to insist on taking his place among the damned—it's putting unfair pressure on him to be saved, so to speak. And of course that must be said about Christ's doing it for him too.

Theologian: At least equally objectionable is the suggestion of putting pressure on God, when anyone but God Himself in Christ makes such an offer. That cry of Paul's echoes one of Moses, in Exodus XXXII, 31–2, "Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold, Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin-; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written". And in His answer God quite firmly puts this request (or threat) aside—"And the Lord said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, *him* will I blot out of my book." We must learn to trust God to take care of others as we trust Him to take care of us, and cannot force ourselves into the place of the atoning Christ. That looks like love, but is really mistrust and pride. And yet—and yet what? Somehow I cannot stop here, and take comfort in the fact that Moses and Paul could not either. "Whoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book"—it's a cryptic saying, and not such a direct answer to Moses as it looks. {19} For Moses sinned against God, yes, even with Israel and in the sin of Israel; and so do we all. It is true that we cannot be saved alone. And if we cannot "take damnation lovingly", cannot do what Christ alone could do, we may yet, just because of what He has done, strain a little in that direction. At all events, we should not treat our personal faith as a delicate little flower which we must be forever tending and shielding against all contact with the unbelief in the world—we are called to love that world, to go out into it and risk our faith there, and sometimes it will be badly battered, and battered by those to whom we are tied by love; and then perhaps there may arise in us, not the same things as Christ's "taking damnation lovingly", but a kind of parable of it. There is just such a

moment in “The Brothers Karamazov”¹⁷, where Alyosha, after being tormented by his unbelieving brother’s long account of the cruelties in the world, and finally asked if he would have made the world if it had to contain such things, quietly answers “No”. Faith may even be awakened in men by their seeing how near they have brought us to the loss of it—as we all brought God near to loss of faith in Himself—or it may not; but to this degree at all events, “as was the master, so must the servant be”.

¹⁷ Fyodor Dostoevsky—*The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Cf. Dostoevsky, F. (2002). *The brothers Karamazon*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.