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Truth as Encounter

Emil Brunner, the Relationship Theologian

ALMOST ALL THE SCHOLARS agree that *Truth as Encounter*¹ is the centerpiece of Emil Brunner's theology. Indeed, it could be described as the hinge that connects his earlier thought with his later. Alister McGrath calls this relational conception "a Leitmotif of Brunner's later thought, tending to be amplified rather than modified."² That said, whilst the relationship-focus was already present before his Uppsala-Lectures, it was only after *Wahrheit als Begegnung* that he chose the language of personal

1. In 1938, *Wahrheit als Begegnung* was released as a printed version of the Olaus Petri Lectures delivered 1937 in Uppsala, Sweden. In 1943, the English translation was published under the title *The Divine-Human Encounter*. Although this title rendered the relational dimension of Brunner's content well, Brunner himself repeatedly mentioned that he was unhappy with it because the central aspect of truth was lacking (see, e.g., Brunner, "Intellectual Autobiography," 12). In 1963, a second, enlarged edition of *Wahrheit als Begegnung* was released because Brunner wanted to clarify that he had only tackled the theological questions in the first edition and not some philosophical or epistemological viewpoints in general. The first part of this second edition was titled *The Christian understanding of truth in relation to the philosophico-scientific understanding*, adding another fifty pages to the original text. One year later, 1964, the English translation of this second edition came with a new title: *Truth as Encounter*. It can be assumed that this was due to Brunner's intervention, and he then jokingly granted his absolution to the publisher for his earlier shortcomings (Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 1).

For the sake of simplicity this book will only refer to this second edition *Truth as Encounter* save instances where a specific reference to the first edition is meant and necessary.

2. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 171.

encounter.³ Thus, McGrath notes that Brunner's "main phase of . . . theological development was essentially complete with [its] publication."⁴ However, McGrath is not alone in this assessment. Frank Jehle concludes that with Brunner's Uppsala-Lectures his theological process came to a certain goal. From then on (1938–66) some prefer to call it Brunner's phase of personalism when he came to a settlement with himself and was able to define his own position apart from Karl Barth's. What followed was an unfolding of this theme.⁵ Jehle also notes that this development was nothing new, but rather a topical continuum in Brunner's thought.⁶ He quotes Arthur Rich who praises Brunner's *Truth as Encounter* as his "most weighty piece of writing" and considers its importance not yet appreciated enough by far.⁷ Rich also points to the genius of the "simplicity" of Brunner's work:

Only those who have worked through, grasped, and understood a thing in its essence will be touched by the truth and be able to bring it to simple, comprehensible, and understandable words. It is about simpleness [*Einfachheit*] that has nothing to do with simplicity [*Simplizität*], but is a sign of maturity, truth, and validity. Emil Brunner is and will undoubtedly remain a role model in this respect, which one can only emulate.⁸

It is of interest to note various commentators' opinions regarding Brunner's work. For instance, Brunner's eldest son perceives in his father's theological personalism the center around which everything in his ethics revolves.⁹ Matthias Zeindler calls Brunner's "thinking in terms of relationship" (*Beziehungsdenken*), as outlined in *Truth as Encounter*, the "key to Emil Brunner's complete works."¹⁰ David Cairns sees it as "perhaps the most brilliant of Brunner's books, . . . the most original thing that he has written."¹¹ Paul Tillich, on the other hand, counts Brunner's *The Divine-Human Encounter* as his "possibly most suggestive book,"

3. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 126.

4. McGrath, *Emil Brunner*, 181.

5. Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 353.

6. Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 348–49.

7. Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 580 (TM).

8. Rich, "Denken," 81–82 (TM). Cited also in Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, 580.

9. Brunner, *Mein Vater*, 208.

10. Zeindler, "Emil Brunner," 94–95 (TM).

11. Cairns, "Theology of Emil Brunner," 303.

calling his epistemology, explicated in that work, “both Biblical and existentialist and, most important [*sic*], adequate to the subject matter with which theology has to deal.” For Tillich, Brunner’s “concept of encounter” is “highly useful in a situation where the word ‘experience’ has lost any definite meaning.”¹² John Hesselink quotes Heinz Zahrnt for whom Brunner’s relationship-concept of personal correspondence “is a most pregnant representation of his fundamental theological concern.”¹³ Gerhard Gloege, in turn, considers this personalism as the main feature of Brunner’s theology.¹⁴ Bernard Meland even postulates that Brunner’s relationship-focus is the determining factor to “understand Brunner’s total theological endeavor” and that “any attempt to refute Brunner’s theology must come to terms with the issues which this intention raises.”¹⁵ Thus, we have seen so far that there is not much discussion concerning whether or not Brunner’s relationship motif proposed in *Truth as Encounter* is the centerpiece of his theology and consequently earns him the title of a relational or relationship theologian.¹⁶

Brunner himself makes it very clear that a close relationship between humans and God is the basic leitmotif of life, his theology, and theology in general. In his popular booklet *Our Faith* he writes about the meaning of human life: “God created us for fellowship with Himself. Fellowship with God is, so to speak, the substance of human life.”¹⁷ Later he widens the scope and adds a definition of eternal life: “It is life *with* God, *in* God, *from* God; life in perfect fellowship.”¹⁸ In essence, this simple and practical focus—fellowship with God—is the goal of Brunner’s academic, professional, and personal lifework.¹⁹ Whereas this layperson’s expression of God-human interaction could and should be enough, Brunner

12. Tillich, “Brunner’s Epistemology,” 99. After his praise Tillich then critically questions whether “person-to-person encounter is the only valid analogy” of God-human interaction and whether it is possible to “establish the divinity of the divine in merely personalistic terms.”

13. Hesselink, “Reappraisal,” 41.

14. Gloege, “Gläubiges Denken,” 59.

15. Meland, “Thought of Emil Brunner,” 165. See also Hauge, “Truth as Encounter,” 133. A similar statement has been made about Barth’s theology in Deddo, *Theology of Relations*, 153.

16. See, e.g., Thompson, “Emil Brunner,” 65–77.

17. Brunner, *Our Faith*, 108.

18. Brunner, *Our Faith*, 151.

19. See Maurer, “Keine neue Orthodoxie,” 98.

explains, it is not so simple since for centuries much speculation and abstract thought has found its way into the church. Indeed, it is through the lens of such misunderstandings that the original biblical message and its corresponding terminology are now interpreted. Some of these misconceptions have poisoned the whole of Christian teaching and are therefore especially dangerous. Consequently, new terms and a new conception are needed to correct those detours and lead back to the simplicity of the message, promise, and practice of fellowship between God and humans. To precisely this task, which Brunner deems sadly necessary, he has devoted his theological enterprise with its central conception explicated in *Truth as Encounter*.²⁰ This is not an easy task:

To track down such a presupposition—foreign, even contrary, to the Bible itself—is therefore as difficult as it is necessary: difficult because it cannot be discovered in a single article of doctrine but extends through the whole of it; necessary because it has alienated from its peculiar meaning the entirety of Christian doctrine. The “sickness,” figuratively speaking, lies not in a localized abscess or in a deformed organ but, rather, in the corruption of the blood, which thus secretly spreads the corruption into all organs.²¹

This metaphor of body and blood illustrates well how Brunner has taken on this task. In *Truth as Encounter*, as a true Doctor of Theology, he makes the diagnosis and proposes the cure for the corrupt blood: relationship as theological leitmotif. In the rest of his works, he then explicates how this blood affects the whole of the theological “body.”

In summary, Brunner’s concern is essentially twofold, like two sides of the same coin: First, he is concerned with the existential, the actual relationship between God and humans, which is the core, the epicenter around which everything else revolves. Second, he consequently proposes this relationship as epistemological “glasses” leading to his theological leitmotif. This Part, therefore, will first address Brunner’s understanding of and development towards relationship as existential core and, secondly, its epistemological consequences for theology. Chapter 3, based on this depiction of Brunner’s thought, makes a case for building this book on Brunner; first, by dealing with the question as to why Brunner is

20. Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung*, 69–70; ETR 67–68.

21. Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 68; GR 69. Interestingly, a very similar metaphor is used by Brooks, *Social Animal*, 235, to depict the difference between *change* and *reform*.

almost forgotten today and by exploring the possibility that misreadings or ignorance of his theology may have contributed to the demise of his theological influence; secondly, by evaluating other relational theologies and comparing them with Brunner's approach.

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