CHAPTER TWO

INTRODUCING THE DIALOGUE PARTNERS:
TORRANCE AND FEYERABEND

Thomas Forsyth Torrance

One of Feyerabend’s most forceful challenges to natural science’s own narrative, is that personal factors are just as decisive as impersonal ones in the development of a body of theory. Therefore in our account of the development of their intellectual ideas, we also admix pertinent personal details. Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1913–2007), although born in China where his parents were missionaries (that personal fact was to have important implications for his epistemology1), was by upbringing a Scottish Calvinist. After gaining undergraduate degrees in both classics and philosophy, and divinity, from Edinburgh University, he went to study at Basel under Karl Barth.2 Although world events meant that Torrance was only to be in Basel for a year (1937–38), it was from that institution that he gained his doctorate in 1946 on the ‘Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers.’3 More important was the influence that Barth was to have on him personally and intellectually, particularly through the translation (with G. W. Bromiley) of the Church Dogmatics. From 1950 until his retirement in 1979 he was a Professor at New College Edinburgh.4 The focus of this book will be his work on the relationship between theology and the natural sciences. It is here that Torrance is at his most distant from Barth – perhaps more distant than Torrance acknowledged or realised.5 His work in this field was extensive and he was awarded the Templeton Prize for it in 1978. He died on 2nd December 2007, after an astonishingly long

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2 McGrath, 1999, p. 42.
3 Torrance, 1948.
4 Pre-empting our conclusion that Torrance does not take sufficient note of political factors in theological controversies it is worth noting in passing that initially he was appointed to the Chair of Church History for political reasons, transferring after two years to twenty seven years in the Chair of Dogmatic Theology (McGrath, 1999, p. 87).
5 McGrath, 1999, p. 196.
and productive retirement, just as I was completing the thesis on which this book is based.

Just before his return to Scotland at the outbreak of the Second World War, Torrance was offered a post at Princeton University in the Theology Faculty by Theodore Green. The circumstances of the offer are illumining. The university had specified the requirement that theology should be taught, not on a confessional or church basis, but ‘in a dispassionate way.’ Torrance was precisely the former: a confessional church theologian after the manner of Barth, and in his interview headed by Green, all knew where he stood. He responded to the panel that he would teach ‘theology as a science,’ adding ‘we think not as we choose to think, but as we are compelled to think in accordance with the nature of the object, and thus in manners which are governed by the objective ground on which the science rests.’ He concluded by pointing out that with regard to the University’s demand that there should be no proselytising, he could not offer an assurance that no one would be converted by his lecturing on this basis. He was sure he had blown the interview, but the next day was offered the post, though circumstances prevented him from taking it up.

The implications of the issues raised in that interview would gestate with Torrance for twenty years, until his Hewett lectures of 1959: *The nature of theology and the scientific method*. Refined and expanded over a further decade, these were then published in his landmark book *Theological Science* (1969). The term itself derives, according to Torrance, from a series of lectures by Robert Flint of Edinburgh (a founder of the Royal Society), and is also used by Thomas Erskine. Two years later there followed a sequel *God and Rationality* (1971), also *Space, Time and Incarnation* (1969a), *Space, Time and Resurrection* (1976), *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (1980), *Divine and Contingent Order* (1981), as well as many works in related fields, contributions to other volumes, and the publication of numerous articles. This is the background and material composition of the Torrance’s search for a truly ‘scientific theology’ based around the notion of objectivity which is expounded in chapter four. It is my contention that in the notion of objectivity as *faithfulness to the nature of the object*,

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8 Torrance, 1996a, p. 237 & p. 263, as far as I can see not noted by commentators.