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## BARTH ON EVIL

Nicholas Wolterstorff

In this paper I offer an interpretation of Karl Barth's discussion of evil in volume III/3 of his *Church Dogmatics*. It is, I contend, an extraordinarily rich, imaginative and provocative discussion, philosophically informed, yet very different from the mainline philosophical treatments of the topic—and from the mainline theological treatments as well. I argue that though Barth's account is certainly subject to critique at various points, especially on ontological matters, nonetheless philosophers are well advised to take seriously what he says. It offers a powerful attack on many standard lines of thought.

§1. Though Karl Barth has much to say about evil, he does not aim to explain evil. Explanation, he says, is impossible; evil is "necessarily incomprehensible and inexplicable to us as human beings" (311). Working as a Christian theologian whose thought is firmly grounded in the scriptures, he develops instead a theological framework for *thinking* and *speaking* about evil. The development, extraordinarily rich, and as difficult and expansive as rich, occurs in the third part of the third volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, this being the volume in which he develops the doctrine of creation.

Having devoted §49 of III/3 to a discussion of providence, under its three aspects of preservation, accompaniment, and rule, he then opens the following section thus:

There is opposition and resistance to God's world-dominion. There is in world-occurrence an element, indeed an entire sinister system of elements, which is not comprehended by God's providence in the sense thus far described, and which is not therefore preserved, accompanied, nor ruled by the almighty action of God like creaturely occurrence....There is amongst the objects of God's providence an alien factor. It cannot escape God's providence but is comprehended by it. The manner, however, in which this is done is highly peculiar in accordance with the particular nature of this factor....The result is that the alien factor can never be considered or mentioned together in the same context as other objects of God's providence. Thus the whole doctrine of God's providence must be investigated afresh.



This opposition and resistance, this stubborn element and alien factor, may be provisionally defined as nothingness [*das Nichtige*] (289).

Evil is nothingness. "Evil" is not *defined* as nothingness by Barth. Rather, evil is *identified* by Barth as nothingness. To the question, "What really is evil?" the answer he gives is, "Nothingness." Nothingness is what our word "evil" designates. Scriptural words for nothingness—thus, for evil—are "chaos" and "the demonic." The fundamental feature of nothingness is that it *menaces*—menaces God and creature alike, especially those creatures which are human. Evil is the actualization of this menace.

...the being of the creature is menaced by nothingness, menaced in such a way that it needs the divine preservation and sustaining and indeed deliverance if it is not to fall victim to it and perish. Obviously it is menaced by something far more serious than mere non-being as opposed to being, although it is of course menaced by non-being too....that is chaos according to the biblical term and concept (75-76).

The word Barth actually uses to designate that which is evil is, of course, not "nothingness," since he was writing in German; it's "*das Nichtige*." The translators recognize that "nothingness" is inadequate as a translation of "*das Nichtige*." Though accurate, its connotations are much too pallid. Since translation is not my concern here, I will, when speaking in my own voice, avoid the issue and regularly use Barth's original, "*das Nichtige*"; when quoting from the English translation of Barth's text I will, however, quote the translation as it stands.

Before we can get in hand the various things Barth says about *das Nichtige*, we need some glimmer of what he has in mind. One point of access to his thought here is his discussion of Heidegger and Sartre; for though Barth regards their comprehension of *das Nichtige* as shallow compared to that available to the Christian, he thinks that they did nonetheless recognize *das Nichtige*. They recognized that *das Nichtige* is "no mere fiction or theme of discussion. It is no mere product of our negations to be dismissed by our affirmations. It is there. It assails us with irresistible power as we exist, and we exist as we are propelled by it into the world like a projectile. We are forced to consider it, for it already confronts us. We experience nothingness....Their [i.e., Heidegger's and Sartre's] thought is determined in and by real encounter with nothingness. They may misinterpret this encounter and therefore nothingness, but not for a moment can they forget it" (345).

What brought *das Nichtige* with inescapable force to the attention of Heidegger and Sartre was the calamitous times through which they lived. Both lived through the "upheaval occasioned by two world wars. They have completely abandoned the optimism and pessimism...of the 18th and 19th centuries....For the moment at least they cannot deny that nothingness—and it may well be the true nothingness—has ineluctably and unforgettably confronted them....Whoever is ignorant of the shock

experienced and attested by Heidegger and Sartre is surely incapable of thinking and speaking as a modern man....For we men of to-day have consciously or unconsciously sustained this shock. In our time man has encountered nothingness in such a way as to be offered an exceptional opportunity in this respect. More than that may and must not be said, for at all times man has his being within this encounter, and no more than an exceptional opportunity of realizing this is offered us even to-day. Even to-day we have no reason to boast that 'we have looked in the face of demons'" (345). We have indeed. But all men and all women at all times and in all places have done so—whether or not they knew that they were doing so.

Heidegger and Sartre were witnesses to the menacing power of *das Nichtige*. To the presence of the demonic among us. To that strange factor in reality which powerfully menaces not only our flourishing but our existence. To that which threatens our existence and our shalom with nihilation. More than merely human sin and its consequences, more than merely that plus the evils which befall us, *das Nichtige* is that power, that dynamic, that menacing and destructive factor (Barth's words) of which these are the concrete manifestations. *Das Nichtige* is the power of darkness that haunts our world. Menace. Cosmic menace.

Barth's entire discussion pivots on his claim that evil is a power. Heidegger and Sartre sensed the presence of such a power. Holy Scripture affirms it—affirms that there is a power of darkness which haunts reality and is ever on the attack against creation in general and human beings in particular, affirms that human beings are helpless against it but that God, embracing the life and flourishing of his human creatures as his own, sacrificed his own Son as victim in the battle, thereby winning the contest. "Holy Scripture regards nothingness as a kingdom, based upon a claim to power and a seizure of power,...always on the march, always invading and attacking. Its decisive insight is that God Himself is the superior and victorious Opponent of nothingness" (523-4). It "is for the Bible no mere figure of speech or poetic fancy or expression of human concern but the simple truth that nothingness has this dynamic, that it is a kingdom on the march and engaged in invasion and assault" (524). To deny such a power, says Barth, is to trivialize what transpired at the cross and in the resurrection.

We must not deceive ourselves and say that it does not really do all these things, or is not real in all these things. One form of the triumph which nothingness can achieve is to represent itself as a mere appearance with no genuine reality. Let us only be proud and enlightened and unafraid and unconcerned in face of it! Let us only persuade ourselves that there is nothing in it, that there is no devil and no kingdom of evil and demons as his plenipotentiaries, as effective powers and forces in the life of nations and societies, in the psychical and physical life of men and their relationships, that we can control our being without having to take into account this alien lordship or considering that where it is not broken all being and enterprise and achievement on earth

is fundamentally corrupt and worthless!... Nothingness rejoices when it notices that it is not noticed, that it is boldly demythologised, that humanity thinks it can tackle its lesser and greater problems with a little morality and medicine and psychology and aesthetics, with progressive politics or occasionally a philosophy of unprecedented novelty—if only its own reality as nothingness remains beautifully undisclosed and intact (526).<sup>1</sup>

§2. Barth faces the topic of *das Nichtige* head-on immediately after he has discussed God's providential preservation, accompaniment, and rule of his creatures. But as he himself observes, reference to *das Nichtige* was already made in his discussion of God's preservation. So let's begin there.

Before God created—if we may speak of “before”—before God created, there was God and God alone. Nothing else, not anything else. The primeval—if we may speak of “primeval”—state of things, other than God, was that they just were *not*. That is, there *were no other* things than God. If things other than God are to exist they must be brought forth from not being. The only one who can do that is God—by creating. Creation is bringing things forth from the abyss of non-being.

But we don't yet have *das Nichtige* in view. For *Das Nichtige* is not non-being as such. Non-being is, precisely, not anything; whereas *das Nichtige* is something: there is *das Nichtige*. Yet it's not the case that before God creates there is God *and something else*—namely, *das Nichtige*. Before God creates there is God and not anything else. Neither is it the case that *das Nichtige* is a creature brought forth from non-being by God. *Das Nichtige* is not a creature of God but comes about as the inevitable *accompaniment* of God's bringing forth of creatures.

On God there are no limitations. In particular, on God's existence there are no limitations. God exists eternally, necessarily, and self-sufficiently. By contrast, the existence of the creature is inherently limited.

To no creature does it belong to be endless, omnipresent or enduring. The preservation which God grants to the creature is the preservation of its limited being....It will be understood that it is not for this reason partial, transitory or imperfect. Indeed, for this very reason it is a complete and final and perfect preservation. For what could be more perfect than that God should give to the creature...that which is proper to it, that to each one He should give that which is proper, that is, that which it is able to have of being, and of space and time for that being, according to its existence as posited by the wisdom and power of God, and that which it ought to have of being and space and time according to the righteousness and mercy of God (61-62)?

Why the repeated reference to God's activity of *preserving*? Because among the intrinsic limitations of the creature is its lack of self-sufficiency. God cannot give to the creature self-sufficient existence. Accordingly, the creature forever bears within itself the possibility of

sliding back—better, the *tendency to slide back*—into the abyss of non-being. It's as if non-being is tugging, pulling, at the creature—as if it has an attracting power over it. Only God's preserving activity prevents the creature's tendency toward not being from being realized. Indeed, God's preserving activity just is God's prevention of the realization of that tendency.<sup>2</sup> Non-being is "the abyss in which [the creature] must inevitably sink, the ocean by whose waves it must inevitably be overwhelmed, if He who created it did not also preserve and sustain it" (77). The reason, once again, is that the creature "is not God. It is the reality which is distinct from God, elected, willed and actualised by Him, but differentiated from Him, and therefore not participating in His sovereignty or in the freedom of his election and decision. And as such, if God did not will to save and keep it, it might well, indeed it must, be overwhelmed by chaos and fall into nothingness" (74). To be a creature is to be subject to the menacing tug of nihilation (annihilation) which only God's providential preservation can avert. The "being of the creature is menaced by nothingness, menaced in such a way that it needs the divine preservation and sustaining and indeed deliverance if it is not to fall victim to it and perish" (75-76).

*Das Nichtige* is that menacing power. Given the non-self-sufficiency of creatures, a creature cannot exist without being subject to the menacing tendency to sink out of existence. *Das Nichtige* is that menacing tendency, inherent in being a creature which is not self-sufficient, toward not being: "the tremendous danger, the most serious peril," so completely hostile" to the creature as to be "an absolute denial of the essence and existence of the creature" (76). *Das Nichtige* comprises more than the tendency of every creature to sink into non-existence; shortly we shall see what the more is. But this, at least, it is.

The shadow which flees before God, possesses everywhere in the Bible its own ponderable reality. God knows this nothing as the opponent of the creature, as that which may and can seduce and destroy the creature. God knows that under the dominion of this nothing the creature must perish. It is always present—as it were on the frontier of the cosmos to which He has given being. It continually calls this cosmos in question. It has mounted an offensive against it. If only for a moment God were to turn away His face from the creature, the offensive would break loose with deadly power. In its relation to God chaos is always an absolutely subordinate factor, but it is always absolutely superior in its relation to the creature (76).

Now look at creation from a slightly different angle. "When in creation God pronounced His wise and omnipotent Yes He also pronounced His wise and omnipotent No....He marked off the positive reality of the creature from that which He did not elect and will and therefore did not create. And to that which He denied He allotted the being of non-being, the existence of that which does not exist" (77). "[T]hat which He did not elect and will, the non-existent, comprises the infinite

range of all the possibilities which He passed over and with good reason did not actualise, the abyss in which the one thing which He did create must inevitably sink...if he who created it did not also preserve and sustain it" (77). The thought is that originally there was God and non-being—that is, God and nothing else; now, after creation, there is God, creatures, and *all that God did not create*. Barth calls this last, "that which is not." God's activity of creating perforce brings about this new 'realm' of *that which is not*.

What are we to make of this? Barth's words invite the following interpretation: God's creation has a bright side and a shadow side. The bright side consists of all the things God brought about by saying Yes to them; these are the creatures. The shadow side consists of all the things God brought about by saying No to them; these are the unactualized possibles. It is these unactualized possibles, *that which is not*, which menace the creature and thus constitute *das Nichtige*. Barth says that *that which is not* "is truly actual and relevant and even active after its own particular fashion" (74). He says that "In the power—that is, the negative power—of this divine creating, approving, dividing and calling, there enters in with the creature that which in all these things is marked off from it, and it enters in with menacing power, the power of the denial of that which God has affirmed, as the non-being which does not exist, as that which is not created, as that which is so absolutely opposed and hostile to the creature" (77). He identifies *that which is not* as "that which according to the account in Genesis 1:2 [God] set behind him as chaos" (74). And he describes it as the object of God's "wrath and rejection and judgment" (77). The picture comes to mind of a numberless swarm of possible wrens, robins, sparrows, and such like, to which God in wrath said "No, I refuse to create you," and which now menace creatures by trying to drag them down into the abyss where they too will become mere possibles.

If this is how Barth was thinking, it won't do. That there are unactualized possibles is a position which enjoys philosophical respectability—though I myself regard it as mistaken. But even if one holds that there are mere possibles, I don't see that it's tenable to suppose that creation consists of bringing about existent things, on the one hand, and non-existent possibles, on the other. One can see what was going through Barth's mind: there's an infinitude of possibilities that God rejected at creation; God's options were not limited to what God actually created. But the question to ask is how God's rejection of these possibles could bring them about? Don't they have to be there already if God is to reject them? And aren't the actuals also possibles; viz., *actualized* possibles? If one holds that there are possibles, then much better to think of God as *selecting* some from among the already-extant possibles to actualize, and choosing to let the others remain unactualized. But then, of course, before creation it's not God and non-being, that is, God and nothing else; it's God and an infinite realm of possibles. An unacceptable option. Beyond a doubt Barth wanted to avoid it. He saw no option but to say that *in* creating, God brought about the rejected possibles.

But rather than postulating possibles, some actualized, some not, bet-

ter to recover the Augustinian way of thinking: Before creation there was indeed just God and nothing else. But as part of that reality which is God there are the divine ideas, some of these being ideas of individual things. In creating, God chose to exemplify some of his exemplifiable individual ideas and not others. Barth remarks that "that which is not is that which is actual only in the negativity allotted to it by the divine decision, only in its exclusion from creation, only, if we may put it thus, at the left hand of God" (73-74). What this comes to, on the Augustinian interpretation, is that only after God decided to exemplify certain of his ideas and not others, will the latter have the property of *not* having been chosen by God for exemplification in creation. But then, they *really do* have that property. *That which is not* "has and can have its actuality only under the almighty No of God, but does have and is actuality in that sense" (74).

There's more that needs correcting than the ontology, however; what Barth says *about* the unactualized possibles is even more questionable than his postulation thereof. Surely unactualized possibles, supposing there are such, are totally lacking in activity and power. They menace no one. And why should they be the objects of God's wrath? Presumably God liked them less, individually and in combination, than the possibles God actualized; otherwise God would not have said No to them. But does the No have to be a wrathful No? Why should all those impotent, non-menacing, merely-possible wrens, robins, and sparrows be the object of God's wrath?

Is it possible to spy what Barth might have been trying to get at? In particular, is it possible to spy something that he might have been trying to get at which is consistent with what we earlier interpreted him as saying? Or do we have to say, with regret, that this part of his thought is all confusion? Well, consider what he says at the very beginning of his discussion of *that which is not*:

God created [the creature] "out of nothing," that is, by distinguishing that which He willed from that which He did not will, and by giving it existence on the basis of that distinction. To that divine distinction it owes the fact that it is. And to the same distinction it owes the fact that it can continue to be. By preserving the distinction God preserves the creature (73).

I suggest that what Barth wants to call to our attention is an additional aspect of the menacing tendency which confronts the creature. So far we have described that menace as the tendency toward not existing. But once we see that creation consists of God distinguishing among possibilities in deciding to exemplify some of his exemplifiable archetypes and not others, then we see that the menacing tendency which confronts the creature is also the tendency toward the overthrowing of the distinction God made in creating—that between those of his ideas which he exemplified and those which he did not. Earlier in our discussion, God's providential preservation was described as the preservation of the creature in existence, against the ever-present threat thereto; now we see that

it can also be described as the preservation of the distinction among possibilities, made in creation, against the ever-present threat to that.<sup>3</sup>

Before we move on, we must look at creation from yet another angle. The creature is created and preserved in order that it may live in fellowship with God, "in order that the glory of the beloved Son of God may be manifest in it" (79), in order that it may "participate in [the]work of salvation" (79). For this fellowship, for this manifestation, for this participation, it must exist. "It must have permanence and continuity. It must be preserved by God" (79). Thus the tendency of the creature toward not existing, which haunts the created order, menaces not only the creature, and not only that plus the differentiation God drew in creating, but also God's gracious intentions.

[The menace] does not consist in the first instance in the powerlessness of the creature in face of the non-existent. It cannot then be described or understood in the first instance only as a weakness, privation, or imperfection of the creature. It has its root in the foreordination of the creature to participation in the divine covenant of grace. Because it has to be present in the divine work of deliverance and liberation, it can therefore be present—present as a creature—in all the immeasurable perils in which it cannot preserve or sustain itself (80).

§3. We do not yet have evil in view. We have discerned *das Nichtige*. It's that menacing tendency which faces the creature, by virtue of the creature's ontological non-self-sufficiency, to sink out of existence, and it's that menacing tendency which faces God, also by virtue of the creature's non-self-sufficiency, toward the overthrowing of the demarcations made by God at creation for the sake of fellowship with the creature. God's providential preservation staves off that menace, however. "Nothingness [has thus far] met us as this total peril which is not actual in this form but is warded off by God's preservation." So far then, no evil. Menace. But the menace is warded off. We have not yet seen *das Nichtige* in its persona of evil.

*Das Nichtige* not only *menaces* the creature; it actually *makes an incursion* into the life of the creature. Evil is the incursion of *das Nichtige* into creation. The pages we have been looking at occur early in §49 of *Church Dogmatics* III/3, the topic of the section being "God the Father as Lord of His Creature." The topic of section §50 is "God and Nothingness" ("*Gott und das Nichtige*"). Here Barth discusses *das Nichtige* in the persona of evil. Conversely: here he develops his account of evil as *das Nichtige*.

He sets himself some crucial theological parameters. When we confront evil, we confront the fact that "between the Creator and the creature...there is that at work which can be explained neither from the side of the Creator nor from that of the creature, neither as the action of the Creator nor as the life-act of the creature, and yet which cannot be overlooked or disowned but must be reckoned with in all its peculiarity. The simple recognition that God is Lord over all must obviously be applied to this third factor as well. Where would be the real situation of the real man

or the real way of real trust of the real Christian,...if the knowledge that He is Lord over all were not applied especially to this element" (292)?

Given this requirement, the challenge, for our explanation of God's lordship over evil, will be to avoid two opposite errors. "We stray on the one side if we argue that this element of *das Nichtige* derives from the positive will and work of God as if it too were a creature, and that the Creator Himself and His lordship are responsible for its nothingness, the creature being exonerated from all responsibility for its existence, presence and activity. But we go astray on the other side if we maintain that it derives solely from the activity of the creature, in relation to which the lordship of God can only be a passive permission and observation, an ineffectual foreknowledge and a subsequent attitude. How can justice be done both to the holiness and to the omnipotence of God when we are faced by the problem of nothingness" (292)?

Barth begins his treatment by polemicizing against confusions of two sorts.<sup>4</sup> The first, is that which identifies one and another form of negation inherent in creatures and their interrelationships, or inherent in God's relationships with creatures, with *das Nichtige* as such—or with *das Nichtige* qua evil. The fact that the creature is this and *not* that, and that God is this and *not* that, is not evil; neither is it *das Nichtige* in its persona of ontological menace. "...nothingness is not simply to be equated with what is *not*, i.e., not God and not the creature." For one thing, "God is God and not the creature, but this does not mean that there is nothingness in God. On the contrary, this 'not' belongs to His perfection." And as to the creature, "the creature is creature and not God, yet this does not mean that as such it is null or nothingness. If in the relationship between God and creature a 'not' is involved, the 'not' belongs to the perfection of the relationship, and even the second 'not' which characterises the creature belongs to its perfection. Hence it would be blasphemy against God and His work if nothingness were to be sought in this 'not,' in the non-divinity of the creature." Then too, "the diversities and frontiers of the creaturely world contain many 'nots.' No single creature is all-inclusive. None is or resembles another. To each belongs its own place and time, and in these its own manner, nature and existence" (349-350).

It's true that it is by virtue of the fact that it's not God, on the one hand, and not identical with any of the non-existent possibles (to use the language of Barth's ontology), on the other hand, that the creature is menaced by its tendency toward not existing. But these negations *by virtue of which* it is menaced are not, as such, the Menace; and certainly these negations are not themselves evil. The presence of these negations does not represent the *incursion* of *das Nichtige* into creation. "When the creature crosses the frontier [of God's positive will and election] from the one side, and it is invaded from the other, nothingness achieves actuality in the creaturely world. But in itself and as such this frontier is not nothingness" (350). One might rightly describe the negations belonging to the creature—"its distinction from God and its individual distinctiveness"—as belonging to the "shadow side" of creation. On this shadow side, the creature, says Barth, is "contiguous" to *das Nichtige*. Better, I

think, to say that it is contiguous to *that which is not*, and (ontologically) susceptible to the incursion of *das Nichtige*. But contiguity to *that which is not*, and susceptibility to the incursion of *das Nichtige*, is not yet the incursion of *das Nichtige*.<sup>5</sup>

All conceptions and doctrines which view nothingness as an essential and necessary determination of being and existence and therefore of the creature, or as an essential determination of the original and creative being of God Himself, are untenable from the Christian standpoint. They are untenable on two grounds, first, because they misrepresent the creature and even the Creator Himself, and second, because they confound the legitimate 'not' with nothingness, and are thus guilty of a drastic minimisation of the latter (350).

Let us move on to the other, even more important, misconception against which Barth polemicizes. It is a near relative of the first. Pointing to "a negative aspect of creation and creaturely occurrence," the second misconception identifies this negative aspect with evil—that is, with *das Nichtige* qua evil. The similarity to the previous misconception is obvious. What makes it different is that this "negative aspect" is distinct from the negations of the prior misconception.

In creation there is, says Barth,

not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not only beauty but also ashes; not only beginning but also end; not only value but also worthlessness....[I]n creaturely existence...there are hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death (296-7).

It is "irrefutable," however, "that creation and creature are good even in the fact that all that is exists in this contrast and antithesis. In all this, far from being null, it praises its Creator and Lord even on its shadowy side, even in the negative aspect in which it is so near to nothingness (296-7).

There is a long tradition of philosophical writing about "the problem of evil" in which a good many, if not most, of Barth's examples of the negative aspect of creation are cited as *evils*: pain, suffering, loss, failure, infirmity. Barth dismisses this whole tradition as "an insult to Creator and creature" (301). Over and over in his discussion of creation and providence he makes the point that we are creatures of a definite sort with definite limitations;<sup>6</sup> and that, in being creatures of our sort placed in a world of our sort, and as a consequence regularly undergoing negatively 'valorized' experiences, we are to see God's gracious hand.

It's part of our design plan, part of being a properly-functioning human being, that we should dislike pain, suffering, loss, failure, infirmity—that we should experience them negatively. And it's a well-nigh inevitable consequence of creatures with our design plan living in a world of this present sort that we would *in fact* experience pain, suffering, loss, failure, infirmity. It's well-nigh inevitable that experiences

which are in fact negatively valorized would come our way. About all this, there is, as such, nothing bad. These negative experiences are not, as such, evils. To creatures of our sort, living in a world of this present sort, experiencing these sorts of things, and experiencing them negatively, God said Yes.

Often it's possible to see a rationale to some negative aspect of our constitution or existence. In general, minus these negative aspects, human life would be precarious and flaccid. Precarious, if, upon breaking bones, we felt no pain, or didn't mind if we did; flaccid, if, upon failing in some endeavor, we felt no disappointment, or didn't mind if we did. It's true that in the negative aspect of our existence we are peculiarly open to the incursions of *das Nichtige*. "Viewed from its negative aspect, creation is as it were on the frontier of nothingness and orientated towards it" (295-6). But the fact that this negative aspect of our existence places us on the frontier of *das Nichtige*, and makes us peculiarly open to its incursions, by no means implies that this negative aspect is to be identified with the actual incursions of *das Nichtige*.

To confuse the negative aspect of human existence with evil is, for one thing, an insult to Creator and creature. "Since God's Word became flesh, He Himself has acknowledged that the distinct reality of the world created by Him is in both its forms, with its Yes and its No, that of the world which He willed....In the knowledge of Jesus Christ we must abandon the obvious prejudice against the negative aspect of creation and confess that God has planned and made all things well, even on the negative side. In the knowledge of Jesus Christ it is inadmissible to seek nothingness here" (301).

"But in this confusion an error is also made in relation to nothingness itself. Being sought where he is not to be found, the enemy goes unrecognised....Being understood as a side or aspect or distinctive form of creation, nothingness is brought into a positive relationship with God's will and work. Its nature and existence are attributed to God, to His will and responsibility, and the menacing and corruption of creation by *das Nichtige* are understood as His intention and act and therefore as a necessary and tolerable part of creaturely existence. We cannot really fear and loathe nothingness. We cannot consider and treat it as a real enemy" (301).

§4. There is something right in the two misconceptions we have discussed. What is right is the underlying intuition that evil has to do with *the negative*—with negativity, with nullity, with not-ness, if we may speak thus. The intuition was of course present already in the patristics, and earlier yet, in the classical Greeks, finding expression in their suggestion that evil is a *lack* of being, of a certain sort. The error in the misconceptions we have discussed lies in the particular identification made. The challenge is to find that precise negativity, that precise nullity, that precise not-ness, which constitutes evil.

Barth's proposal is that evil is that negating, nullifying dynamic or power "which opposes and resists God, which is itself subjected to and overcome by His opposition and resistance, and which in this twofold determination as the reality that negates and is negated by Him, is total-

ly distinct from Him. The true nothingness is that which brought Jesus Christ to the cross, and that which He defeated there" (305). The fundamental point Barth wishes to make here is that the negativity which constitutes evil in all its forms can be identified only if God is brought into the picture. Unless we bring God in, we'll miss its nature. There is at work in reality a power, a dynamic, toward the negating of God's purposes and desires, which in turn God negates. Evil is that. Evil is not just a *factor*—the factor, say, of things going amiss with respect to God's purposes and desires. Evil is the *dynamic* toward the *frustrating* of those purposes and desires. The *dynamic* toward the *negating* of those purposes and desires. A power of negating God's will which in turn God negates. So as to distinguish it from all those forms of negativity of which we have already taken note—from non-being, from that which is not, from negations, from the negative aspects of creaturely life—Barth chooses to call it *nothingness*, *das Nichtige*. The choice is not arbitrary; he thinks that this is what Heidegger and Sartre had their eye on when they spoke of nothingness.

An obvious question is whether it's right to identify this dynamic toward the active negating of God's purposes and desires, with that ontological menace of which we spoke earlier, and which Barth also called *das Nichtige*. Isn't Barth using "*das Nichtige*" equivocally?

There is indeed a difference which must not be overlooked. The menacing tendency of creation to sink back into non-existence is averted by God. Were God not to avert that menace, the evil of all evils would take place, viz., the disappearance of creation, thus negating God's purposes and desires in the most fundamental way possible. In fact, however, ontological menace does not become ontological catastrophe. God's negating of the negating power which is ontological menace takes the form of preventing that power from being actualized. The creation still exists. God providentially preserves it. By contrast, the menace which is *das Nichtige* in its other form is not averted. Evil occurs. In this case, God's negating of the negating power takes the form of opposing its incursions.

Yet, there remains something of importance common to ontological menace, on the one hand, and to that negating of God's purposes and desires which is evil, on the other hand: both are dynamics, powers, present in the created order, which menace God's will. It is that shared character of *menacing dynamic* that requires us to see these two phenomena together, and entitles us to call them both *das Nichtige*. In one of *das Nichtige's* two major forms, the menacing dynamic is averted before being actualized; in the other, the menacing dynamic is actualized before being defeated.

What sort of reality are we to ascribe to *das Nichtige*, Barth asks. We can't say that it's "nothing, i.e., that it does not exist. God takes it into account. He is concerned with it. He strives against it, resists and overcomes it.... If we accept this, we cannot argue that...nothingness is nothing, i.e., it does not exist. That which confronts God in this way, and is seriously treated by Him, is surely not nothing or non-existent.... All conceptions or doctrine which would deny or diminish or minimise this...are untenable from the Christian standpoint. Nothingness is not

nothing" (349). And obviously it's not God. Is it then a creature? Perhaps an angel which has freely chosen to oppose God, as much of the Christian tradition would have said?

Barth's rejection of this suggestion is brief—brief for him, that is (522-531)! Several points of response come to mind. For one thing, it makes no sense to identify *das Nichtige*, in its persona of ontological menace, with some fallen creature; the menacing tendency to sink back into not existing is of the wrong ontological category to be identified with a creature. And if it were a creature, why wouldn't God just let it do what it tends to do; viz., sink back into non-existence? Furthermore, as we shall see in a bit more detail shortly, Barth's understanding of freely chosen evil action—sin—is that though it is the agent's own act, for which the agent is responsible, nonetheless it is also "surrender to the alien power of an adversary" (310). If then we identify that alien power with some spiritual creature, we shall have to say that the sinful choices of that adversarial creature are themselves not made under the influence of any alien power whatsoever. These, I say, are points of response that come to mind. Barth's actual response is different from any of them. In the biblical view, "God sees and therefore treats all things, including nothingness, with justice, i.e., according to their true being" (524). God's attitude toward *das Nichtige* is total condemnation; for *das Nichtige* "is falsehood in its very being" (525). Justice for *das Nichtige* consists of total annihilation. That cannot be said of any creature—not even of a rebellious angel.

Barth does not deny the existence of demons and demonic powers. What he argues instead is that those are to be identified with *das Nichtige* in its persona as evil. The language of "demons" and "demonic powers" is another way of speaking of *das Nichtige*.

Everything which has to be said about [nothingness] is also to be said of demons as the opponents of God's heavenly ambassadors [i.e., the angels]. They are. As we cannot deny the peculiar existence of nothingness, we cannot deny their existence. They are null and void, but they are not nothing.... Their being is neither that of God nor that of the creature, neither that of heavenly creatures nor that of earthly, for they are neither the one nor the other. They are not divine but non-divine and anti-divine. On the other hand, God has not created them, and therefore they are not creaturely.... This is all to be said of demons as of nothingness. They are not different from the latter. They do not stand apart. They derive from it. They themselves are always nothingness. They are nothingness in its dynamic, to the extent that it has form and power and movement and activity. This is how Holy Scripture understands this alien element" (523).

Demons are "the exponents" of *das Nichtige*, "the powers of falsehood in a thousand different forms" (527).

So what then is the ontological location of *das Nichtige*? What is its ontological category? If, on the one hand, it's not simply nothing; but if, on the other hand, it's neither God nor any of the powers and activities

of God, nor any creature nor any of the powers and activities of any creature, what is it? It's a power; Yes. But it's not a power of either God or creature. There seems to be nothing of which it is a power—a free-floating power. We must conclude, says Barth, that it exists "in a third way of its own" (349). Which is, of course, not to say anything more than that it is neither God nor creature. *In addition to God and creatures, to their powers and activities, there is das Nichtige.*<sup>7</sup>

Though we do not know how to locate *das Nichtige* ontologically, we do know its nature, its identity, says Barth. The identity of *das Nichtige* is determined by its relation to God's purposes and desires. Specifically, the identity of *das Nichtige* consists in its being that power and dynamic which negates God's will and which, in turn, God negates. God's will is thus, in an odd way, the condition of there being *das Nichtige* and the basis of its identity. Only because God said Yes to certain possibilities, and therein No to others, can there be any such thing as opposition to God's will. God "says Yes, and therefore says No to that to which He has not said Yes. He works according to his purpose, and in so doing rejects and dismisses all that gainsays it.... It is only on this basis that nothingness 'is,' but on this basis it really 'is.' As God is Lord on the left hand as well, He is the basis and Lord of nothing too" (351).

So far, so good. But Barth succumbs to the temptation to say that God's negative will is not only the *necessary* condition of anything having the *identity* of being the dynamic of negating God's will which God in turn negates, but that it is the *sufficient* condition for the *existence* of that dynamic. The passage quoted just above continues, "That which God renounces and abandons in virtue of His decision is not merely nothing. It is nothingness, and has as such its own being.... Nothingness is that which God does not will. It lives only by the fact that it is that which God does not will. But it does live by this fact. For not only what God wills, but what He does not will, is potent, and must have a real correspondence. What really corresponds to that which God does not will is nothingness" (352). The passage is less than decisively clear on the issue at hand. Barth's thinking *appears* to be that if God said No, then *there's something* to which God said No. But since that was not some previously existing creature, nor some entity whose existence was entirely independent of God, it must be the case that that to which God said No exists on account of God saying No to it. That, I say, *appears* to be Barth's reasoning in the passage; but it's not entirely clear. I take the following passage to confirm that that was in fact how he was thinking: The demons [i.e., *das Nichtige*] "are only as God affirms Himself and the creature and thus pronounces a necessary No. They *exist in virtue of the fact* [my emphasis] that His turning to involves a turning from, His election a rejection.... They are as they are judged, repudiated and excluded by God" (523).

It turns out, then, that Barth's thinking here is wholly parallel to his thinking about *das Nichtige* in its persona of ontological menace. In creation, God's Yes implies a No. And his Yes, amounts to his saying Yes *to something*; those are the creatures. Likewise, his saying No, amounts to his saying No *to something*; those are the uncreated possibles. God's say-

ing Yes to the creatures is what brings them into existence; and God's saying No to the unactualized possibles is what brings them into existence. So too, within creation, God's saying No to all that threatens the well-being of the creature brings about the power of threatening the creature. For if God says No to threats to the creature, then *there is something* to which God says No. And God's saying No to those threats is what brings them into existence. The reasoning is as flawed in this latter case as we saw it to be in the other.

It turns out, then, that in spite of his claim that evil is "incomprehensible and inexplicable," there is much about evil that Barth professes to comprehend and explain—more than he should. We know the nature, the essence, of evil. Likewise, we know why there is something which has this essence. And in a certain way we even know, as we shall see shortly, why the menace to the creature is not averted in the case of evil, whereas, by contrast, it is averted in the case of ontological menace. What we do not know is the ontology of evil—other than that it is a power; we don't understand what sort of being it is that is neither Creator nor creature, yet brought about by the Creator.

Though it's been implicit in what's been said, there's one point worth highlighting before we leave this part of our topic. That which constitutes the essence of *das Nichtige* is the very same thing that gives to it its character of evil. For what is fundamentally definitive of evil, from the Christian standpoint, is resistance to grace; and such resistance, as we have seen, is the essence of *das Nichtige*.

What God positively wills and performs in the *opus proprium* of His election, of His creation, of His preservation and overruling rule of the creature...is His grace....What God does not will and therefore negates and rejects, what can thus be only the object of His *opus alienum*, of his jealousy, wrath and judgment, is a being that refuses and resists and therefore lacks His grace. This being which is alien and adverse to grace and therefore without it, is that of *das Nichtige*....and this is evil in the Christian sense, namely, what is alien and adverse to grace, and therefore without it. For it is God's honour and right to be gracious, and this is what *das Nichtige* contests. It is also the salvation and right of the creature to receive and live by the grace of God, and this is what it disturbs and obstructs (353).

§5. One of the forms assumed by *das Nichtige's* incursions into the created order is sin. The point of saying this is that though sin is "man's own act, achievement, and guilt" (310), it's more than that. It's something "under which we suffer" in a way which is "sometimes palpable but sometimes we can only sense and sometimes is closely hidden. In Holy Scripture, while man's full responsibility for its commission is maintained, even sin itself is described as his surrender to the alien power of an adversary....He is led astray and harms himself, or rather lets himself be harmed. He is not merely a thief but one who has himself fallen among thieves" (310).<sup>8</sup> From this we can infer that Barth would dismiss

as woefully inadequate any attempt to account for evil by locating it in free will wrongly used, coupled with the overriding value God attaches, in creation and providence, to free will however used, rightly or wrongly. The sinful exercise of free will is to be understood as not only an action of the agent, but as also, submission to the power of *das Nichtige*.

Barth insists, emphatically, that sin is not the only concrete form of *das Nichtige* in its persona of evil. *Das Nichtige* also manifests itself in all that exhibits and tends toward what he regularly calls "evil and death," meaning by "evil" not "the ills which are inseparably bound up with creaturely existence in virtue of the negative aspect of creation," but "evil as something wholly anomalous which threatens and imperils this existence"; and meaning by "death" not "dying as the natural termination of life," but death as the total opposite of human flourishing, namely, "the ultimate irruption and triumph of that alien power which annihilates creaturely existence and thus discredits and disclaims the Creator" (310).<sup>9</sup> *Das Nichtige* aims at "the comprehensive negation of the creature and its nature" (310). And it is "absolutely essential" that it be seen in its form of 'evil and death,' as well as in its form of sin, "if we are to understand what is at issue and to what we refer....In the incarnation God exposed Himself to nothingness...in order to repel and defeat it. He did so in order to destroy the destroyer. The Gospel records of the miracles and acts of Jesus are not just formal proofs of His Messiahship,...but as such, they are objective manifestations of His character as the Conqueror not only of sin but also of evil and death, as the Destroyer of the destroyer, as the Saviour in the most inclusive sense" (311).<sup>10</sup>

§6. I think there can be no doubt that in his account of evil—at least in that part of it which we have seen thus far—Barth satisfies the requirement he set for himself of honoring the holiness of God. To *das Nichtige* in general, and to *das Nichtige* in its persona of evil, in particular—that is, to *das Nichtige* as manifested in sins, evils, and eternal death—God unrelentingly and unwaveringly says No. The essence of evil is that it is that to which God says No; and there really are things to which God says No, namely, sins, evils and eternal death. Barth wants nothing to do with any of that multitude of theories which say that those phenomena which he, Barth, identifies as sins and evils, are not really evil but merely "negative aspects" of human existence—like the dissonances in a Bach fugue which, if heard all by themselves, are repulsive, but which, when heard within the context of the whole, are seen to contribute indispensably to the goodness of the whole. It's not the case that reality is good through and through. There is evil in it: that which is in opposition to God and to which God is therefore in opposition. God does not survey the whole with blissful satisfaction, finding nothing to which he wishes to say No. God is angry, wrathful. Barth's metaphors for God are the metaphors of one engaged in combat, not the metaphors of one engaged in blissful contemplation. Battlefield, not art museum. Rather than being "a majestic, passive and beatific God on high," God is "the Adversary of this adversary" (357).

But what about the other requirement, of honoring the omnipotence of God? If things aren't going as God wants, if reality is laced through with

that to which God says No, isn't God radically lacking in power? Not at all, says Barth. The issue is not whether God is omnipotent, but of the form which omnipotence takes. God's omnipotence is not that of one who finds nothing to which to say No, no menace and no incursion; it's that of one who wins the battle against that to which he says No. *Das Nichtige* "has no perpetuity. God not only has perpetuity, but is Himself the basis, essence and sum of all being. And for all its finiteness and mutability even His creature has perpetuity—the perpetuity which he wills to grant it in fellowship with Himself, and which cannot be lacking in this fellowship but is given it to all eternity. Nothingness, however, is not created by God, nor is there any covenant with it. Hence it has no perpetuity" (360). It is "broken, judged, refuted and destroyed at the central point, in the mighty act of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ" (367).

In this is to be seen the "incredible and real mystery of the free grace of God," "that He makes His own the cause of the creature" (356). There was no necessity in this, Barth insists. God might have been content with the fact that in creating and preserving he overcomes the ontological menace of *das Nichtige*, "separated, negated, rejected and abandoned" it (356). He might have declared that such inroads as *das Nichtige* makes *within* creation are the business of the creature. His own battle, against the tendency of creation to slide back into non-existence, is won; let the creature now take over. He might have remained "aloof and detached," "a majestic, passive and beatific God on high" (357). In fact he did not. He did not because,

having created the creature, He has pledged His faithfulness to it.... That is to say, He whom nothingness has no power to offend is prepared on behalf of His creature to be primarily and properly offended and humiliated, attacked and injured by nothingness.... Though Adam is fallen and disgraced, he is not too low for God to make Himself his Brother, and to be for him a God who must strangely contend for his status, honour and right. For the sake of this Adam God becomes poor.... He lets a catastrophe which might be quite remote from Him approach Him and affect His very heart.... He does this of His free grace. For He is under no compulsion. He might act as the erroneous view postulates.... [B]ut He descends to the depths, and concerns Himself with nothingness, because in his goodness he does not will to cease to be concerned for his creature.... He would rather be unblest with His creature than be the blessed God of an unblest creature.... He actually becomes a creature, and thus makes the cause of the creature His own in the most concrete reality and not just in appearance, really taking its place (356-358).

Barth adds that "there are few heresies so pernicious as that of a God who faces nothingness more or less unaffected and unconcerned, and the parallel doctrine of man as one who must engage in independent conflict against it" (360).

Barth concedes that the defeat of *das Nichtige* achieved in "the mighty act of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ...is not yet visible or recognisable" (367). The "final revelation of its destruction has not yet taken place and all creation must still await and expect it" (367). In faith we know, says Barth, that it "is now objectively defeated as such in Jesus Christ." "It cannot be doubted" (367). But it's not evident. The "blindness of our eyes and the cover which is still over us [obscures] the prospect of the kingdom of God already established as the only kingdom undisputed by evil" (8).

The words suggest that now, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, it only *appears* that there's evil; there isn't really. But that can't be Barth's meaning; for there's nothing more fundamental to his account of evil than his insistence that there really is evil in the world. What he has to mean is the following: once upon a time there was reason to think that the dominion of the powers of darkness was perhaps equal, or even superior, to that of God. However, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has defeated the powers; accordingly, therein it is manifest that their dominion is not, and was not, equal to God's. All along it was only a "semblance of validity" (367), that is, a semblance of dominion equal or superior to God's. Nonetheless, though the powers of darkness were defeated in Jesus Christ, and their dominion therein displayed as inferior, the incursion of those powers is not yet over. So much is this the case, that to our ordinary secular eyes there's about as much reason as ever to wonder whether perhaps the powers of darkness are not equal or even superior to those of God. It's not evident that *das Nichtige* lost the battle. That, so I suggest, is what Barth has in mind.

There's an obvious question: Why, if *das Nichtige* lost the battle, do its incursions continue? If *das Nichtige* has been defeated, then it "can have even its semblance of validity only under the decree of God. What it now is and does, it can be and do only in the hand of God" (367). So why do its incursions continue?

Barth's answer is that "there is a legitimate place here for a favourite concept of the older dogmatics—that of permission. God still permits His kingdom not to be seen by us, and to that extent He still permits us to be a prey to nothingness" (367). And indeed, what else *could* Barth say at this point? But is permission of evil compatible with the holiness of God? Hasn't Barth, at the end of the day, failed to satisfy one of the conditions he set for himself, that in his account of evil he fully honor the holiness of God? Can a holy God *permit* evil?

The answer is surely that introducing permission of this sort at this point does not, so far forth, compromise the holiness of God. Sins and evils remain evil; they are not reconceived as "negative aspects." The reason is that, in general, one may permit something to happen that one could prevent while nonetheless disapproving of it, desiring that it not happen. One's reason for permitting it might be of many different sorts; but if it's to be a morally acceptable reason, it will have to be of the form that one (non-culpably) believed that preventing the evil would not secure a greater good, overall, than permitting it. Which implies that one's permission occurs within the context of being in control of the situ-

ation. Clearly it's along these lines that Barth is thinking. God "thinks it good that we should exist 'as if' He had not yet mastered [*das Nichtige*]" (367). The truth is that the incursions of *das Nichtige* are now, strangely, "an instrument of [God's] will and action" (367).<sup>11</sup> Even though *das Nichtige* "does not will to do so it is forced to serve [God], to serve His Word and work, the honour of His Son, the proclamation of the Gospel, the faith of the community, and therefore the way which He Himself wills to go within and with His creation until its day is done. The defeated, captured and mastered enemy of God has as such become His servant. Good care is taken that he should always show himself a strange servant.... Yet it is even more important to reflect that good care is taken by this One that even nothingness should be one of the things of which it is said that they must work together for good to them that love Him" (367-8). Barth makes no attempt to describe the general pattern of sins and evils working together for good; perhaps he thinks there is no general pattern.

Even as subject in this strange way to God's providence, however, *das Nichtige* "has no perpetuity.... As God fulfils his true and positive work, His negative work becomes pointless and redundant and can be terminated and ended." Barth adds that "it is of major importance at this point that we should not become involved in the logical dialectic that if God loves, elects and affirms eternally He must also hate and therefore reject and negate eternally. There is nothing to make God's activity on the left hand as necessary and perpetual as His activity on the right.... This negative activity of God has as such, in accordance with its meaning and nature, a definite frontier, and this is to be found at the point where it attains its goal and accomplishes its purpose. With the attainment of the goal the *opus alienum* of God also reaches its end" (360-361).

What does Barth mean? Does he mean that when the battle is over, *das Nichtige* itself will have disappeared, so that there is no longer any menace to the creature, neither ontological nor existential? Or does he mean that though the menace of both sorts will remain, the menace will be no more than menace? No longer will there be an incursion of *das Nichtige* into the life of the creature. No longer will there be evil—sins, evils, and death? Does he mean that just as ontological menace has always been stymied, existential menace will be stymied as well?

Barth's language certainly suggests the former interpretation. He doesn't say that evil has no perpetuity; he says that *das Nichtige* has no perpetuity. But if that's what he wants to say, doesn't his earlier line of reasoning, which I criticized, now come back to haunt him—I mean, his reasoning that God's Yes inevitably involves a No as well, and that, if God says No, then thereby and thereupon there is that to which God said No, this being the power of *das Nichtige*. For presumably God's *opus proprium*, God's Yes-saying, continues; hence, by the above reasoning, *das Nichtige* also continues. Or does God's *opus proprium* not continue? Does God's work cease? Does God rest?

The clue to how Barth was thinking is to be found in a few paragraphs which occur in the passage on The Divine Preserving, in section §49, where Barth discusses the *eternal* preservation of the creature.

Temporal creation is destined to be incorporated into the eternal life of God; when thus incorporated, all menace will have disappeared. The Yes which is God's creation and preservation will have ceased; likewise the Yes which is God's providential affirmation of the temporal well-being of the creature will have ceased. God will be at rest; and the creature at rest within God.

The time will come, says Barth, "when the created world as a whole will only have been. In the final act of salvation history, i.e., in the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Foundation and Deliverer and head of the whole of creation, the history of creation will also reach its goal and end. It need not progress any further, it will have fulfilled its purpose.... It will not need any continuance of temporal existence" (87-88). This does not mean the end of God's preservation, however. God's preservation will continue—only now as *eternal* preservation, not temporal. "Eternal preservation does not mean a continuation of the [temporal] existence of the creature. To what end and for what purpose could it continue to be when already it has had and fulfilled its course..." (88)?

"The eternal preservation of the creature of God means negatively that its destruction is excluded" (89). Were its destruction to be permitted, that "would mean that the non-existent had triumphed over the creature of God, that by giving such power to the non-existent God had finally revoked His own work, and that He had finally retracted that Yes and given Himself to isolation" (89). However, "by means of that which He did on behalf of the creature when He Himself became creature, He has in fact broken the power of the non-existent against the creature when He Himself became creature, destroying it and removing the threat of it" (89).

"The eternal preservation of the creature means positively...that it can continue eternally before Him. God is the One who was, and is, and is to come. With Him the past is future, and both past and future are present.... And one day—to speak in temporal terms—when the totality of everything that was and is and will be will only have been, then in the totality of its temporal duration it will still be open and present to Him, and therefore preserved: eternally preserved.... Everything will be present to Him exactly as it was or is or will be, in all its reality, in the whole temporal course of its activity, in its strength or weakness, in its majesty or meanness. He will not allow anything to perish, but will hold it in the hollow of His hand as He has always done, and does and will. He will allow it to partake of His own eternal life. And in this way the creature will continue to be, in its limitation, even in its limited temporal duration.... In all the unrest of its being in time it will be enfolded by the rest of God, and in Him it will itself be at rest, just as even now in all its unrest it is hidden and can be at rest in the rest of God. This is the eternal preservation of God" (89-90).

§7. Karl Barth's discussion of evil is extraordinarily rich, insightful, imaginative, and provocative—filled with observations and emphases that the Christian philosopher ought to take seriously. I think, to cite just a few examples, of his observations concerning what I have called "ontological menace," of his insistence that the "negative aspects" of our

existence are not to be regarded as evil, of his insistence that sin, while certainly the act of the person who sins, is also submission to an alien power, of his insistence that the nature of evil is determined by its negative relation to God's desires and purposes, of his insistence that God does not survey creation with unalloyed bliss but is engaged in combat as one who is wounded and wrathful, of his insistence that God's omnipotence is to be located in God's winning the battle against menace and evil rather than in everything happening as God wishes, and, most fundamentally, of his insistence that evil is a power—a nullifying, negating, nihilating power. These particular points all seem to me true as well as important.

Along the way in my presentation of Barth's thought I have made some critical comments; just now I have expressed agreement on several fundamental points. This is the merest beginning of the critical engagement which Barth's thought merits. On this occasion it is impossible to do more, however. In closing, let me merely call attention to the fundamental structure of Barth's account of evil, and contrast his account with some of the major options present in the philosophical tradition.

I judge that the most fundamental points at which Barth's account differs from most of the philosophical accounts of evil is in the insistence that evil is a power, in the insistence that the negative aspects of our constitution and situation are not evil, in the insistence that evil can accordingly not be identified by reference to such negative aspects, and in the insistence that God is wounded and angered by much of what transpires in creation. On that last point, Barth differs not only from most of the philosophical tradition, but from much if not most of the theological tradition as well; perhaps that is also true for the second and third points. Barth himself discusses (316-334), in some detail, his disagreements on these points with the "great" and "mighty" Leibniz, and in great detail his disagreements with Schleiermacher (while also vigorously defending Schleiermacher against a number of misguided objections).

The traditional account to which Barth's account comes closest is the free-will account—that is, the account which says that evil is due to the free agency of human and angelic/demonic persons. Barth, of course, rejects this account. He holds that human sin must be understood, in part, as submission to an alien, God-defying, power; and he holds that that power cannot be identified with any creature whatsoever. Nonetheless, both accounts hold that God is genuinely displeased by what transpires in the world; there's genuine evil. Furthermore, it's open to those who embrace the free-will account to join with Barth in saying that God is *wounded* and *angered* by what transpires in creation. The free-will account joins Barth's in resisting the temptation to eliminate genuine evil by treating sins and evils as negative aspects of our nature and situation, all of these sins and evils together making an indispensable contribution to the greater good, thus grounding God's unalloyed bliss.

Barth's strategy for resisting the lure of the negative-aspects account can be seen as consisting of three moves. The first of these is his claim that creation without ontological menace is impossible, coupled with his claim that God's desire for fellowship with the creature and for the crea-

ture's flourishing unavoidably brings about existential menace; only the eventual incorporation of creation into the eternal life of God can remove these menaces. Second, Barth assumes, without ever, so far as I have noticed, making a point of the matter, that the existential menace is of such a character that God's only option for dealing with it was to overcome it after it was actualized, rather than to stymie it, as with the existential menace. And third, God for God's own good reasons now permits the existential menace to continue its incursions, these good reasons consisting, at least in part, of the fact that evil itself is now forced to contribute to the good of the creature.

In the free-will account there is nothing like the first two of these moves. At the point of the third move, however, there is close resemblance. The free-will account is fundamentally a trade-off account. God decided to trade off the situation of no evil coupled with no free agents, for the greater overall good of free agency, human and cosmic, coupled with the evil of their sins and ensuing evils. If, for each situation in which a given agent might find itself, there is a fact of the matter as to what that agent would freely choose in that situation, and if God foreknew all these facts, then God knew in advance the details of the trade-off he was making at creation. If there are no such facts, or if there are but God did not know them at creation, then at creation God would have held in reserve the option of calling the whole thing off should the point be reached where the trade-off was no longer acceptable.

Barth's third move, like the free-will account as a whole, consists of viewing God as making a trade-off. Having defeated *das Nichtige* at the cross, God could have called to a halt its ingressions. But God did not, for reasons which in their totality are known to God alone; God permits *das Nichtige* to continue to work evil. The details of the trade-off are significantly different from that of the free-will account. In the Barthian account it is *das Nichtige* which God permits to continue to work evil—*das Nichtige* being the uncreated power which, against but mysteriously on account of God's will, ineluctably accompanies creation and providence; in the free-will account, it is creatures possessing the power of free agency who are permitted to continue to work evil. Furthermore, on the Barthian account, the goods which ensue from permitting the power of evil to continue to work its evil ways are presumably diverse—as already noted, Barth makes no attempt to generalize; on the free-will account, the good in view is just one, viz., the great good of free agency. So the differences are significant. Nonetheless, the final move in Barth's three-part strategy is also a trade-off move: God trades the good of stopping *das Nichtige* in its tracks for the greater overall good which ensues from permitting it to continue its incursions for a while. It's hard to see how an account which both honors God's omnipotence and, by acknowledging that there genuinely is evil in the world, not just "negative aspects," honors God's holiness, could be anything other than, in part at least, a trade-off account.

"The light shines in the darkness; and the darkness has not overcome it" —  
John 1:5

## NOTES

1. Cf 527-8: "We cannot deny the power and powers of falsehood in a thousand different forms. We cannot deny that in their infamous way they are real and brisk and vital, often serious and solemn, but always sly and strong, and always present in different combinations of these qualities, forming a dreadful fifth or sixth dimension of existence. Where? But surely the real question is: Where not? They are there in the depths of the soul which we regard as most properly our own. They are there in the relationships between man and man, and especially between man and woman. They are there in the developments of individuals and their mutual relationships. They are there in the concern and struggle for daily bread, and especially for that which each thinks is also necessary in his case. They are there in that in which man seeks his satisfaction or which he would rather avoid as undesirable, in his care and carelessness, in the flaming up and extinguishing of his passions, in his sloth and zeal, in his inexplicable stupidity and astonishing cleverness, in his systematisation and anarchism, in his progress, equilibrium and retrogression, in the great common ventures of what is called culture, science, art, technics and politics, in the conflict and concord of classes, peoples, and nations, in the savage dissensions but also the beautiful agreement and tolerances in the life of the Church, and not least in the *rabies* and even more so the *inertia theologorum*.... We cannot deny but must soberly recognise that in all these things the demons are constantly present and active like the tentacles of an octopus.... They are powers indeed, and yet they are only the powers of falsehood."

2. "The creative work of God has this in common with His work of grace—that...these things take place within the created order with the very same immediacy as the act of creation itself....But when it is a matter of the preservation of creation as such, when it is a matter of that which succeeds creation but precedes redemption, there is need of a free but obviously not of a direct or immediate activity on the part of God" (64).

3. I judge this interpretation of what Barth was "really" getting at to be confirmed by the following passage, in which Barth, more than 200 pages later than the passages we have been scrutinizing, summarizes his earlier discussion: "...we were trying to understand the divine preservation of the creature. We saw this to be God's preservation of His creature from being overthrown by the greater force of nothingness. We then considered how God confirms and upholds the separation between His creature and nothingness as effected in creation, halting the threatened and commencing enslavement of the creature." Barth immediately goes on to add the third point which I (am about to) make in the text above: "We saw that he does this because His will for His creature is liberation for a life in fellowship with Himself, because He wills to be known and praised by the creature as its Liberator and because He thus wills its continuation and not its destruction" (290).

4. I allow myself a bit of poetic (philosophical?) license here. After a statement of the problem, Barth does begin his discussion of *das Nichtige* with a section entitled "The Misconception of Nothingness." But what he discusses in that section is only the misconception which is the second of the two sorts in my arrangement. He discusses the misconception which is the first, in my arrangement, when he gets around later to what he calls "a comprehensive statement" (349).

5. Even prior to creation, there will be an infinitude of things that God is not. On the trinitarian understanding of God, there will even be negations *within* God. These are additional reasons, not mentioned by Barth, for not

identifying negations with *das Nichtige* qua evil—nor even with *das Nichtige* as such. In those negations, there is no menace.

6. “That the creature may continue to be in virtue of the divine preservation does not mean that either as an individual or in its totality it is a creature without any limits. It may continue to be as a creature within its limits. It may have its place in space, and its span in time. It may begin at one point and end at another. It may come, and stay, and go. It may comprehend the earth but not heaven. It may be free here, but bound there; open at this point, but closed at that. It may understand one thing, but not another; be capable of one thing, but not another; accomplish one thing but not another. That it may be in this way, within its limits, is not at all an imperfection, an evil necessity, an obscure fate. Were we in a position to compare and comprehend all the possibilities of all creatures, and the possibilities of the individual with those of the totality, we should be astonished at the magnificent breadth of these limits. And certainly it is not a curse but a blessing that there are these limits to humanity and creation, and that in some cases they are notoriously narrow limits, of which the brevity of human life is only a single if rather drastic example. The creature must not exist like the unhappy centre of a circle which has no periphery. It must exist in a genuine circle, its individual environment....It has freedom to experience and accomplish that which is proper to it, to do that which it can do, and to be satisfied. It is in this freedom that it is preserved by God” (85).

7. In pp. 524-7, Barth strongly suggests that our wish, as theoreticians, to locate *das Nichtige* ontologically, thus to assign to it its proper place in an ontological system, represents a victory for *das Nichtige*. Instead of opposing it with tooth and fang as that which does not fit into God’s creation, as what which menaces creation, we try to show how it *does* fit in. “Let us only integrate the devil and the kingdom of demons and evil into the same system in which elsewhere and according to their different character we also treat of God and Christ and true man and the angels! Let us only do this kingdom the honour of taking it seriously in this sense!... Nothing could suit it better than to find a sure place in the philosophical outlook of man or the world of human thought, securing recognition as a serious co-worker and opponent of God and man” (526). I find this unconvincing!

8. Cf. 307-308: “The reality of nothingness is not seen sharply enough, even in its concrete form as sin, if sin is understood only generally as aberration from God and disobedience to His will. This is true enough, but we cannot stop at this generalisation. Otherwise we might escape and extricate ourselves with the assertion that we are men, creatures, and not God, and that therefore our aberration from God, and to that extent our disobedience, and therefore sin and nothingness, are basically no more than our essential and natural imperfection in contrast with His perfection....In sin as the concrete form of nothingness we should then be dealing again with merely the negative aspect of creation.” Sin is not only the creature’s *act* of disobedience, but the creature’s *submission* to *das Nichtige*—hence, the concrete form of *das Nichtige*’s opposition to God.

9. Cf. p. 74: “not death as a natural limitation but eternal death, the enemy and annihilator of life.” And p. 312: “The New Testament says that [Christ] suffered death for the forgiveness of the sins of many, but it also says, and the two statements must not be dissociated, that He did so in order to take away the power of death, real death, death as the condemnation and destruction of the creature, death as the offender against God and the last enemy.”

10. Barth adds that “It is a serious matter that all the Western as opposed

to Eastern Church has invariably succeeded in minimising and devaluating, and still does so today, this New Testament emphasis. And Protestantism especially has always been far too moralistic and spiritualistic..." (311).

11. This is the strangeness which Barth had in mind when, in a passage quoted earlier, from the beginning of the section on God and Nothingness, he said that "there is amongst the objects of God's providence an alien factor. It cannot escape God's providence but is comprehended by it. The manner, however, in which this is done is highly peculiar in accordance with the particular nature of this factor" (289).