Compromised Correlations
Paul Tillich’s Concept of Correlation Revisited

Today, the method of correlation which Paul Tillich famously formulates in his Systematic Theology (1951-1963) has come under pressure. According to the critics, it cannot be assumed that there is a clear-cut revelation and a clear-cut situation which could be correlated like a key and a keyhole. Tillich’s concept of correlation, therefore, seems to be outdated, entangled as it is with the conditions of a modern ‘solid’ as opposed to a postmodern ‘liquid’ society.

In response to these critiques, we will return to Tillich’s method of correlation, arguing that Tillich’s ‘correlation’ is actually not correlational enough. Concentrating on the concept of experience – strictly speaking, religious experience – which Tillich develops in The Courage to Be (1952), we analyse how Tillich diminishes the subject’s capacity to experience the transcendent. To be sure, his anthropology aims to allow for the encounter of the immanent and the transcendent within the context of human experience; however, through the introduction of a ‘Protestant Principle’, every encounter comes under the suspicion of idolatry. Here, Tillich seeks to safeguard the transcendent from the immanent. Yet his move casts doubt on the very concept of correlation. For how is a correlation possible, if the transcendent always already lies behind or beyond the immanent?

In critical conversation with Tillich, we advocate what could be called an incarnational concept of experience, in which the encounter of the immanent and the transcendent implies that the transcendent is compromised by the immanent and the immanent is compromised by the transcendent. Utilising such a concept of experience, we aim to explain that the method of correlation cannot separate a clear-cut transcendent key from a clear-cut immanent keyhole (in order to correlate what it has separated). However, what can be correlated are the ambiguous accounts of the compromise between the transcendent and the immanent: experiences in the present are articulated through experiences in the past and experiences in the past are interpreted through experiences in the present. Emphasising the ambiguity of the encounter between the transcendent and the immanent, we eventually explore how the compromised correlations which result from the incarnational concept of experience allow for a retrieval of the method of correlation. Hence, we aim to demonstrate how Tillich’s method of correlation – in a revisited form – remains relevant for theology today.

Biographical Note:

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