

# WITHOUT EXCUSE



SCRIPTURE, REASON, AND  
PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

— EDITED BY —

DAVID HAINES

Without Excuse:

*Scripture, Reason, and  
Presuppositional Apologetics*

Edited by  
David Haines

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# Preface

**Joseph Minich**

This volume is quite critical of the philosophy of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) and his followers. But many of this volume’s authors offer such criticism in the spirit of theological sons to a father, recognizing that Van Til’s influence has also been for their good. These essays are, therefore, offered to the church in a spirit of gratitude for our fathers in the faith and for their virtues—even if we seek to make the case that the Van Tillian tradition has committed several errors that have had a significant impact on the life of the church. Balancing on these registers is difficult, and because there is to be no party spirit in the kingdom of God, it is fitting at the outset to name some of the ways in which the Van Tillian movement served the church during the complex twentieth century.

Of first importance, Van Til and his disciples were confident in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. For all the ways we have perhaps disagreed about the usefulness and necessity of extra-scriptural revelation, in no way should we neglect the example of their unwavering confidence in Scripture (God’s own speech to us). Indeed, for the Christian, the Bible is of the greatest importance, the very word of God. God’s word is a source of truth and life, that which is worthy of our reliance and which both fittingly commands and has rightfully earned our trust. In this, we should not be one iota less confident than the followers of Van Til.

Second, Van Tillians were conscious of the spiritual and moral battle that often stands behind an intellectual battle. While they perhaps risked projection in certain cases, they were undoubtedly correct about the relationship between a misshapen will and the misshapen perception of reality.

Third, the Van Tillians insist that Christianity has something to say concerning all of life. While we might disagree about what this means precisely, it is nevertheless the case that the redemption of creation through the gospel has in its scope the whole of the world in all of its aspects. In this, they were faithful sons of their father, Abraham Kuyper.

Fourth, the Van Tillians cultivated theological creativity, fresh insight into Scripture, and the possibility of growth in knowledge.

Fifth, the Van Tillians were good at keeping the gospel at the fore. They have made bold evangelists. While we might not always agree with their particular arguments, we can only covet their heart.

Sixth, whether we agree with his philosophy or not, Van Til appreciated the importance of satisfying the Christian mind. Part of what has drawn so many people to Van Tillianism is its desire to give a satisfying account of reality relative to our distinctive Christian understanding. Many Christian churches are alienating to thinking persons, and Van Til sought to address this both pastorally and professionally.

Seventh, a lot of modern work is lending credibility to the Van Tillian insistence that Scripture at least anticipates many philosophical insights.

Eighth, Van Til's movement has functioned (sometimes via later disciples) as a gateway drug to *some* useful philosophical insight, particularly on the nature of knowing.

Ninth, even if the Van Tillian movement tends towards biblicism, its expectation of finding relevant Scriptural insight into many fields has (in more competent hands, at least) yielded much insight and fruit. There are many questions that might not have been asked of Scripture apart from Van Til's influence.

Tenth, and crucially, Van Til cultivated an awesome view of God's grandeur, but also of God's availability to the creature and sinner. In a century when so much of Christianity has been reduced to fluff, and granting that not all who "talk big" about God are being truly pious, it is nevertheless a priceless *legacy* to have fathers who speak reverently of an awesome God, and who lead us to the One who gives Himself to us in His creation and covenant.

To the extent that we differ from our fathers and brothers, we differ as partners, therefore, in the project of God's kingdom. While we seek to go beyond and even depart from them in many respects, we go as building on a foundation and set of evangelical instincts which still inform our own concerns and priorities. It is our hope and prayer that these essays are received in the spirit they are intended—as a good-willed offering to fellow pilgrims on the journey to Christian maturity.

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*I:*  
**THE BIBLE, VERIFICATION, AND  
FIRST PRINCIPLES OF REASON**

**M. Dan Kemp**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Cornelius Van Til once claimed that “We cannot subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns of its proper function from Scripture.”<sup>[1]</sup> John Frame says of Van Til’s thought that “human beings are obligated to presuppose God in all of their thinking.”<sup>[2]</sup> Van Til and Frame claim that God is the ultimate basis of all knowledge. One famous reply to this view claims it is self-undermining insofar as the Bible does not consider itself to be the sole source of knowledge of God or many other things. The Bible, the reply goes, does not ask its immediate recipients to accept without verification the word of a purported prophet as a word from God. Frame replied that the verification promoted in Scripture is itself a word from God and must be accepted as such. Thus, they say, the Bible remains the sole basis for theology, and the integrity of *sola scriptura* is preserved.

In this chapter, I argue that, if the Christian Scriptures constitute or form the basis for all human knowledge, attempts to verify the Christian Scriptures are not epistemologically profitable. This result is particularly acute in readings of Scripture passages that seem to provide methods of verification for a word of God. I argue that the position put forward by Clark, Van Til, and Frame entails a reading of these passages that renders them useless as criteria of verification, even though, on the contrary, the passages present themselves as such. In short, the popular reply to critics of the Clark and Van Til school mentioned above does not succeed.

If Scripture forms the basis of all knowledge, then all arguments for the trustworthiness of Scripture are circular. Philosophical positions which view circular reasoning as licit have long been criticized. The absurdity of

circular demonstration follows from the idea that premises should be better known than conclusions. If B is the premise for conclusion C, then B is better known than C. But if circular demonstration is possible, then C may be a premise for some conclusion A, which is a premise for the conclusion B, from which it follows that C is better known than B. It follows that B is better known than C and C is better known than B; or, in other words, that B is better known and not better known than C, which is absurd.<sup>[3]</sup> But why should we think that premises ought to be more plausible than their conclusions? In this section, I will show why it is important that premises be more certain than their conclusions. In other words, I will show why it is that premises of successful arguments make their conclusions more plausible than when conceived without them. If my argument succeeds, then the traditional argument against circular demonstration goes through.

I start with a preliminary description of the view that Scripture is the source of all reason, and I briefly discuss what motivates this view. Then I look at two biblical examples of divine revelation being tested by those who receive it: Moses' miracles in Exodus 4 and the standard for prophets in Deuteronomy 18. I then analyze the difference between fallacious and non-fallacious question-begging arguments. The difference will explain why the reply to the main argument is implausible. Briefly, non-fallacious question-begging arguments have no pretense about their circularity. They are not fallacious because they are not trying to convince the interlocutor of anything. On the other hand, fallacious question-begging arguments include multiple irrelevant premises since the conclusion has already been accepted. I then argue that the reply to the main argument makes the fallacious sort of question-begging argument, by including things in the argument that end up failing to contribute any credence at all to the conclusion. Finally, I consider and respond to possible objections.

I should address one potential concern before getting into the main of my argument. Readers might wonder why it is worth reading a philosopher about this question. Isn't it arrogant for a student of philosophy, who lacks training in the formal skills of exegesis and the relevant scholarly body of literature, to comment on this dispute? Shouldn't it be left to theologians and biblical scholars? Under some circumstances, this charge might land. I do not think it does for this debate, however, since no complicated exegesis

is required for my argument. This chapter concerns the use of evidence, its relation to circular arguments, and these two things applied to particular passages in Scripture.

## **PRELIMINARY TERMINOLOGY AND MOTIVATION**

In this section, I will define and motivate the view that the Bible is the source and standard of all knowledge. To Cornelius Van Til, “The Reformed apologist assumes that nothing can be known by man about himself or the universe unless God exists and Christianity is true.”<sup>[4]</sup> Presumably, Van Til does not intend to assert merely that if God did not exist, there could be no knowledge because there would be nothing at all to know. This would not provide the Reformed apologist with an apologetic, since it would not explain, but only assert, that the universe depends on God. Just as the fact that humans could not know anything if neurons or atoms did not operate as they do does not imply that there was no knowledge until the 1890’s, neither does the fact that our knowledge depends on God’s existence imply that it depends on *knowledge of* God’s existence. Rather, Van Til is directly asserting an epistemological dependence relation: that any knowledge at all depends on knowledge of God and Christianity. In other words, no knowledge can be had without first having knowledge of God, who can only be known by revelation. Thus, the revelation of God, the Christian Bible, is the first principle for “Christian”—that is, true and genuine—knowledge.

### **First Principles**

Advocates for this view motivate it by noting the need for a first principle of reason. A principle is an explanation of a thing. We can introduce this idea by identifying it as the answer sought for when we ask various “why” questions. Why does the earth revolve around the sun? Why is the plant in my window tilting toward the sunlight the way it is? and so on. Legitimate answers to these questions explain the phenomenon we are considering. But say you want to know the explanation of *that* explaining principle. You keep asking “why” until you reach the end of the explanatory line by reaching a principle that explains and neither has nor requires an explanation.

The explanations of our knowledge of these principles, however, are not identical to the explanations of the principles themselves. Humans are not privileged to have knowledge of the world, to paraphrase Aristotle's famous quip, from the perspective of nature, absent great study or revelation. Hence, we also ask a different sort of "why" question. Why did the jury convict the criminal? "Because he was guilty" will not suffice as an answer. "Because the jury *found* him guilty," is the right sort of answer, but one which requires further explanation. "Because the evidence was overwhelming." "Because several reliable witnesses testified to seeing him commit the crime." "Because we found a note written by the defendant saying he planned to commit the crime." These answers follow what has sometimes been called an explanatory order of discovery, as opposed to the explanatory order of causes mentioned above. If you ask someone to explain how he knows that water turns to gas when heated to 212 degrees Fahrenheit, you do not expect him to start telling you about how at a certain match of temperature and atmospheric pressure, the vapor pressure of the water equals the pressure on the water by the atmosphere, and so on. In fact, this would not answer your question at all. In other words, you do not expect him to tell you *why* water turns to gas when sufficiently heated. One can know *that* water behaves this way without knowing *why*, from which it follows that the means by which one comes to know *that* is not solely the explanation *why it is that*.<sup>[5]</sup>

The answers we want to this latter sort of "why" question provide a basis for believing a proposition. The basis, moreover, is a normative principle governing our beliefs rather than, say, physical laws or biology. The latter are certainly requirements for human reason as we currently experience it without themselves being rational bases. For example, the soundwaves and neurons that allow me to understand what my teacher says are a cause of my knowledge. They are not, however, the normative feature we appeal to when we think of knowledge having a ground or basis. Like principles of being or causes, principles of discovery eventually bottom out. When that happens, we have reached what we can call first principles of discovery. These principles are self-evident in that they possess everything they need to be known to a rational being. But self-evidence is not sufficient to make something a first principle, since it is possible for something to be



demonstrable and self-evident. A first principle is a principle that cannot be explained by other principles. Thus, a first principle of discovery cannot be inferred by other principles. If it is to provide a basis for demonstrative knowledge, it must be indemonstrable and self-evident.<sup>[6]</sup>

A first principle of reason, then, must be an ultimate and normative basis of reason, as opposed to the metaphysical or material basis that might obtain. To give an example of how a series of “why” questions might terminate in a first principle of reason, imagine that you ask me why it is that I believe that I was born in Nuremburg. I reply that my parents told me I was. If you ask me why I believe my parents, I will tell you that they have been generally reliable in the past. Now here you can ask me at least two questions: (a) how I know that my parents have been reliable, and (b) why reliable witnesses ought to be believed. There appears to be no answer to (b), which asks for a reason to believe a self-evidently true proposition. Under normal conditions, and absent defeaters, reliable witnesses ought to be believed. My answer to (a) might be that my senses and memory tell me that many things my parents told me were in fact true. You might then ask me why I ought to trust my senses and why I ought to trust my memory. To that, again, I need not give an answer. I do not draw an inference from some more basic principle to my trust in my senses and memory. I just find myself doing so, and it seems right to do so.

It is conceivable that there could be more than one first principle of reason. The example above illustrates, for instance, how sensory experience and authority could be distinct epistemological bases. These various first principles would each be “ultimate” in the sense that they cannot be reasonably questioned as reliable guides and they provide a basis for other non-basic beliefs.<sup>[7]</sup>

If there are multiple first principles, then “the ultimate standard” does not necessarily mean “the foundation or basis.” For instance, a principle can be ultimate in the sense of overriding other principles. Imagine someone who is hard of hearing. He can still get along fairly well in conversation because his hearing still gives him some knowledge. The fallibility of this knowledge is, however, increased due to the defects in his hearing. This greater fallibility often leads him to make mistakes that have to be corrected. One way to correct his mistakes would be to clarify a statement

by writing it down. So, he thinks he heard someone say at a gathering that they are “getting an evening gown,” but his friend quickly writes a note to him that says he is “moving out of town.” Of course, he is able to read because his eyes are able to accurately perceive the letters on the page. Thus, the perception of his eyes overrides the perception of his ears, in this case. Notice, however, that this does not mean that his ability to hear is not its own distinct source of knowledge. He usually does hear things correctly and does not need correction.

Some say that the Word of God is “ultimate” in that it is overriding, like my sight in the example above. The Word of God, however, is *absolutely* overriding in that no other source of knowledge could defeat it. This view is compatible with recognizing multiple basic principles of knowledge, principles that cannot be challenged and immediately provide the subject with knowledge of some matter. For instance, one can know something by his senses, which have no further basis, and then later be told the same thing by someone he trusts. The same thing known is given by two distinct and independent principles of knowledge, sense experience and trustworthy authority. Neither is based on the other, and each is able to give knowledge of something without the other, like the way we might hear a dog barking and then see the dog that is barking. God provides us, on this view, with the ability to know various things and supplements or overrides those abilities with special revelation. So, if there is more than one first principle, then “ultimate” is not the same as “basis,” since a principle A can override a principle B under certain conditions without being the basis of beliefs that could only be known by principle B. For instance, my trust in testimony might under certain circumstances override my confidence in my vision without contravening the fact that I only know some things by seeing them.

If there is only one first principle of reason, then a principle being “ultimate” will mean that it provides the *basis* of all other knowledge. To use a metaphor, if a house gets some of its water from a city lake and some from a well, it has multiple water sources. If it only gets water from a well, however, all its water comes from a single source. Similarly, if knowledge has multiple sources, then knowledge might be obtained by one source (e.g. senses) without making use of another (e.g. testimony).

There are two queries: whether reason must have a single first principle of knowledge and whether God's revelation is a source of knowledge. One view says yes to both. Non-Christians (and perhaps non-traditional Christians) may answer no to both or no to the second. Traditionally Reformed Christians may answer yes to the second, and no to the first. The debate among orthodox Christians, then, is between those who affirm and those who deny that there is a single principle of reason, since all orthodox Christians agree that the Scriptures are a source of knowledge.

### **Justification and Circularity**

How do we know if a purported first principle is correct? Consider again the exchange about my birth city. If the Christian Scriptures are the first principle of reason, then it will not do for me to end the conversation by asserting that reliable witnesses, sensory experience, and memory ought to be believed. Even these principles require rational justification. Gordon Clark says,

Every philosophy must have a first principle; a first principle laid down dogmatically...Since therefore every philosophy must have its first indemonstrable axiom, the secularist cannot deny the right of Christianity to choose its own axiom. Accordingly, let the Christian axiom be the truth of the Scriptures. This is the Reformation principle *sola scriptura*.<sup>[8]</sup>

According to this view, God's revelation is the only ultimate principle. This claim has vexed many who hear it. If God's revelation is the ultimate basis of all reason and knowledge, arguing with self-proclaimed non-believers becomes very complicated. On the one hand, the aim is to rationally motivate belief in the truth of the Christian Scriptures. On the other hand, on this view, reason presupposes the truth of the Christian Scriptures.

According to many who have espoused this view, the necessity of always and everywhere presupposing a proposition does not preclude the possibility of providing evidence for that proposition.<sup>[9]</sup> Advocates of this view often emphatically tell us that evidence can be best, and indeed only, given for the existence of God when those evidences are put forth and interpreted according to "theistic standards," which presuppose the

existence of God. For instance, consider the cosmological argument for the existence of God. The position we are considering claims that this argument only works if we assume a theistic universe. Consider what John Frame has to say about this particular argument.

[T]he *kalam* cosmological argument is a good argument. But it is good only on the Christian presupposition that the world is a causal order and therefore a rational order. Deny God, and you deny the need for a rational structure or for a causal order reaching back to a first cause.<sup>[10]</sup>

Now, as Frame would have it, the cosmological argument for the existence of God obviously begs the question. The proposition “God exists” is present in the premises. This circularity is admitted and embraced by advocates of the view in question.<sup>[11]</sup> According to them, no other option is available to the faithful Christian. Frame writes,

Does this circularity entail the death of all reasoning...? No: (1) All reasoning, Christian, non-Christian, presuppositional, “classical,” is in this sense circular. There is no alternative. This is not a challenge to the validity of reason; it is simply the way in which reason works. (2) There are distinctions to be made between “narrow circles” (e.g., “The Bible is God’s word because it says it is God’s word.”) and “broad circles” (e.g., “Evidence interpreted according to the Christian criteria demonstrates the divine authority of Scripture. Here it is:...”). Not every circular argument is equally desirable. Some circular arguments, indeed, should rightly be dismissed as fallacious. (3) Reasoning on Christian criteria is persuasive because (a) it is God’s approved way to reason, (b) it leads to true conclusions, (c) and everyone, at some level, *already knows* that such reasoning leads to truth (Romans 1, again).<sup>[12]</sup>

If the Bible is the first principle of all knowledge, then no argument can be given for the Bible as revelation of God except arguments that have a proposition like “The Bible is the revelation of God” in their premises. Circularity is not a problem, it is argued, because no view in competition with Christianity is in a better position. As Greg Bahnsen puts it,

Christianity and its rival philosophies of life represent mutually exclusive principles of interpretation, criteria of truth, conceptions of

objectivity, values and ideals, etc. Ultimately, then, the details of one's theory of knowledge are "justified" in terms of their coherence within the distinctive and broad theory of which they are a part; they will be warranted in light of the fundamental metaphysical and ethical assumptions that are themselves warranted by those same epistemological assumptions. The arguments on both sides are "circular" in the sense that each worldview attempts to regiment its presuppositions as a consistent and coordinated perspective on experience.<sup>[13]</sup>

Similarly, John Frame says,

[N]o system can avoid circularity, because all systems...are based on presuppositions that control their epistemologies, argumentation, and use of evidence. Thus a rationalist can prove the primacy of reason only by using a rational argument. An empiricist can prove the primacy of sense-experience only by some kind of appeal to sense-experience. A Muslim can prove the primacy of the Koran only by appealing to the Koran. But if all systems are circular in that way, then such circularity can hardly be urged against Christianity. The critic will inevitably be just as "guilty" of circularity as the Christian is.<sup>[14]</sup>

Recall the rather traditional picture of first principles I mentioned above. The thought pushed by Bahnsen and Frame in these passages departs with this school by insisting that first principles can be "proved" (i.e. demonstrated), albeit by circular means. On the classical picture, again, first principles cannot be demonstrated to be true in any sense.

It is not clear what must be assumed according to Van Til or Frame. The Triune God, the Christian Scriptures, or "Christianity" as a whole are each presented as the basis of reason. Of course, any one of these positions is going to argue that these principles are each mutually implicating. Yet I suspect that there is some disagreement among those who share the view that something distinctive of the Judeo-Christian outlook is the basis of all reason. Nevertheless, we can make progress in this debate without distinguishing between these positions. First, the position seems to be that God and the Bible are both somehow first principles of natural reason. In an earlier work on the topic, Van Til states,

It thus appears that we must take the Bible, its conception of sin, its conception of Christ, and its conception of God and all that is involved in these concepts together, or take none of them. So also it makes very little difference whether we begin with the notion of an absolute God or with the notion of an absolute Bible. The one is derived from the other. They are together involved in the Christian view of life. Hence we defend all or we defend none. Only one absolute is possible, and only one absolute can speak to us. Hence it must always be the same voice of the same absolute, even though he seems to speak to us at different places. The Bible must be true because it alone speaks of an absolute God. And equally true is it that we must believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one.<sup>[15]</sup>

Scott Oliphint says something similar about the relationship between the Bible and God himself in the presumption of reason.

[T]his is all just another way of saying that the only way in which we can know God—or anything else, initially—is if God graciously chooses to reveal himself to us. That revelation comes in and through creation (thus knowledge of creation presupposes knowledge of God), and through his spoken (written) Word. As creatures, therefore, there is an inextricable link—an inextricable *principial* link—between God and his revelation. From the perspective of the creature, we cannot have one without the other. And that is just to say that the *principia* [first principles] of theology entail each other. We know God properly by his revelation, and we know his revelation by knowing him properly.<sup>[16]</sup>

Van Til and Oliphint appear to say that God and his revelation are somehow both supposed to be the *single* basis of all knowledge.

My argument in this chapter applies to any of these positions. Even if it is thought that the Triune God and not the Christian Scriptures is the first principle of reason, the Christian Scriptures are presented as a more fundamental principle of knowledge than other epistemological standards such as natural reason, conscience, authority, and so on.

## **VERIFICATION OF REVELATION IN THE BIBLE**

Several biblical passages suggest that the Bible does not understand itself to

be the only source of all knowledge or the basic principle of all reason. Although there are many relevant passages that involve verification of the word of God, we will only look at two in this section. First, we will look at Moses' authentication as a prophet from God to the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt. Then we will look at the prescriptions in Deuteronomy concerning authentication of claims to prophecy. In the next section, I will consider why some think that these passages provide evidence against the claim that the Bible is the basic principle of all reason.

### **The Authentication of Moses in Exodus 4**

In the early chapters of Exodus, God commands Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses is told by God to tell Pharaoh and Israel that he speaks for God. This is surely an incredible claim without a great deal of evidence. In order to follow Moses, the people would need some reason to think he is a proper authority, and Pharaoh would need good reason to think Moses speaks with an authority higher than himself. Anticipating this problem, Moses asks God how he can reasonably expect the people to believe him. The exchange is worth quoting in full.

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" <sup>2</sup> The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. <sup>4</sup> But the Lord said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— <sup>5</sup> "that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you." <sup>6</sup> Again, the Lord said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. <sup>7</sup> Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. <sup>8</sup> "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they

may believe the latter sign. <sup>9</sup> If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.” (Ex. 4:1–9 ESV)

God tells Moses to perform various works, each more dramatic than the last, in order that the Israelites “may believe that the Lord...has appeared to [him].” He is later told to perform the miracles for Pharaoh, but also that Pharaoh’s heart will be hardened (Ex. 4:21). Pharaoh’s hard heart is both revealed by and the cause of his refusal to acknowledge Moses’ authority. This would not be intelligible unless it were assumed that a reasonable and non-obstinate witness to the miracles would confess belief after beholding them. In other words, Moses’ authority as a speaker of God’s word is verified by miraculous events, and Pharaoh’s hard heart is revealed by his obstinacy in light of beholding those events. Essentially, it will be reasonable to believe that Moses speaks for God because Moses will perform actions that only one with the power of God can do.

### **Claims to Prophecy in Deuteronomy 18**

Moses delivered the law to the people of Israel in the form of the book of Deuteronomy just prior to their entrance into the promised land. The law was given to the people at least in part because Moses was not to enter the land, and so they needed a codification of the law in order to remain faithful to God. Naturally, Deuteronomy anticipates that some would claim to receive a prophecy from God, and that such claims will need to be tested. Again, the text is worth quoting in full.

<sup>1</sup>“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— <sup>16</sup> just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ <sup>17</sup> And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. <sup>18</sup> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. <sup>19</sup> And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. <sup>20</sup> But the prophet who



presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’<sup>21</sup> And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’—<sup>22</sup> when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. (Dt. 18:15–22 ESV)

God mentions that he intends to communicate with Israel through a prophet in the future. Also, however, there will be pretenders who claim to speak in the name of God. The stakes here are high. If God speaks to a prophet who is then ignored by the people, they will be held responsible (v. 19). Alternatively, listening to a false prophet is bound to lead the people away from the will of God. Hearing a Word from God, but ignoring it, and hearing a word of man *as* a word from God are both dangerous. As the passage suggests, in this context, it would not always be clear which message comes from God and which does not. So God gives the people a test to sort out the genuine from the counterfeit prophets.

These passages illustrate the natural expectation that someone claiming to speak for God, and therefore a Word of God, requires a significant amount of evidence. God does not deliver the Word and then remain silent, expecting the recipients to take it in a sheer leap of blind faith. God gives them reason to believe that the Word is trustworthy. Moreover, the verifications displayed in these two passages are not rare instances in the Bible. The principle is found at various points in Scripture. The authentication of Jesus as the Messiah and of Paul as an apostle, for instance, reveal the same assumption. Scripture, it seems, can be authenticated. The question at hand is whether this authentication itself presumes what it concludes. In other words, the question at hand is whether the Bible presupposes a single basic principle of knowledge (i.e. God’s special revelation) or many (e.g. the Bible and natural reason). It is to that question that I now turn.

## **INTERPRETING VERIFICATION OF REVELATION IN THE BIBLE**

In this section, I will briefly review the main arguments for and against the position that Scripture, *per* Exodus 4 and Deuteronomy 18, does not see itself as the sole basis of all knowledge.

### **The Argument**

Exodus 4 and Deuteronomy 18 are *prima facie* evidence against the claim that the Scripture is the sole basis of all knowledge. In response to John Frame's claim that the Bible must be presumed by all reason, Gary Habermas says,

Over and over again, with the help of several checks and balances, we are told to test God's revelation to us. To be reminded of just a few of these, potential prophets are to be tested according to their own predictions (Deut. 18:21–22).<sup>[17]</sup>

Scripture is the inspired Word of God. And yet it tells us to test it. Moses' authority was tested by miracles before Pharaoh and the enslaved Israelites. The legitimacy of genuine prophecies after Moses were tested by whether the events prophesied came to pass. Neither test is constitutive of the Word or prophecies themselves. Moses' statement "Let my people go" is not the same as turning the Nile to blood; a genuine prophet's prophecy is not the same as its coming to pass. Thus, the prophetic claim of Moses and those of later genuine prophets are (1) inspired revelations from God and thus carry all the infallibility and authority therein and (2) appeal to something other than themselves (the warrant generated by miracles or predicted events coming to pass) in order to be known as Scripture. It follows, the argument concludes, that authoritative and infallible revelation from God is not just by itself the basis for all knowledge.

### **The Reply to the Argument**

Some have argued against the thought that verification of Scripture requires an authority external to Scripture. These objections converge on the point that allegedly external standards given by Scripture are in fact given by Scripture, leaving intact the claim that Scripture is not

authenticated by any principle outside of itself. Frame captures this point in his reply to Habermas,

This procedure [of verifying alleged revelations from God, as is outlined in, e.g., Ex. 4 and Dt. 18] is what I would call a “broadly circular argument,” an argument in which Scripture is verified by Scripture’s own standards. How is it, then, that once we grant the legitimacy of such tests, “Frame’s entire approach would have to be seriously amended” (p. 245)? I have never opposed the process of verifying Scripture by scriptural standards. Indeed, that is the heart and soul of my apologetic method.<sup>[18]</sup>

Frame employs the distinction between “narrow” and “broad” circular arguments to explain the arguments in passages like Ex. 4 and Dt. 18.<sup>[19]</sup> Narrow circularity argues thus: P, therefore P. Broad circularity argues something like thus: P, therefore Q, therefore R, therefore P. Broadly circular arguments for the existence of God employ evidences from archaeology and history, as well as commonsense, metaphysics, causation, consciousness, and morality. The rational inference from the occurrence of Moses’ miracles and a prophet’s prophecy coming to pass to the belief that they possessed a Word from God were broadly circular. Scripture is verified by a test prescribed by Scripture. As such, Frame’s response applies to the biblical passages an often-repeated principle held by advocates of the view in question: circularity is unavoidable in an argument for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity.

Recall that the initial argument against Frame’s view is that revelations were (1) fully authoritative and infallible revelations of God and (2) shown to be revelations by something other than themselves. Frame objects to the second premise. Of course, those passages appealed to “something else” in that they were not simply restated until accepted. That “something else” that they appealed to, however, was itself Scripture. So the Bible does not appeal to something other than itself in order to authenticate itself, and Ex. 4 and Dt. 18 have not been shown to suggest otherwise.

In summary, some argue that Scripture does not see itself as the sole source of knowledge since it assume that God’s word can be verified, as is displayed in Ex. 4 and Dt. 18. Others reply that this only shows that Scripture is verified by Scripture since these tests are themselves biblical

standards. Indeed, this view must understand verification in these passages as “broadly circular” since it is clearly not narrowly circular. This reply does not succeed, however, since the account of biblical verification it implies is superfluous. Before I can show this, however, I need to make an extended point about circular or question-begging arguments.

## **QUESTION-BEGGING ARGUMENTS**

An argument begs the question when it assumes what it claims to prove. For instance, if I tell you that my friend is trustworthy because he tells me that he is, I have clearly made a mistake by begging the question. At the end of the day, I have argued that I should believe what my friend tells me because I should believe what my friend tells me. Some call this feature of the argument “circularity,” though I will use the terms interchangeably.

### **Valid Question-Begging Argument Type 1: Decomposition**

An argument is valid when the conclusion follows from the premises. To take a typical example: All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal. Clearly the conclusion follows from the premises such that the premises cannot be true and the conclusion false. An argument does not have to have true premises in order to be valid. Think of the following, obviously absurd, argument. If I am wearing a pink sweater vest, then I can jump over the tallest building on earth. I am wearing a pink sweater vest. Therefore, I can jump over the tallest building on earth. Every proposition in this argument is false, but the argument is valid. That is, the conclusion follows from the premises such that if the premises were true, the conclusion would be true also. When the conclusion follows from the premises, the argument is valid. When the argument is valid, and all its propositions are true, the argument is sound.

Here is another valid argument: “P. Therefore, P.” It in fact follows in all possible worlds that if P is true, then P is true. Or take the following argument:

- (1) P & Q.
- (2) Therefore P.

Each of these arguments assumes what it sets out to prove. Yet they are valid in that their conclusions follow from their premises. But these arguments clearly beg the question. Therefore, an argument's being question-begging does not make it invalid.

It may come as a surprise to many that begging-the-question is a valid argument form. One need only crack open any elementary logic textbook to see "begging-the-question" categorized as an informal fallacy and thus fatal to an argument's validity. However, there are reasons why an inference like this can be important and useful. Say that you are a logician or software developer and you need  $P$  *without*  $Q$ , but you only have " $P \ \& \ Q$ " for some reason. It is important that we should have rules allowing us to validly deduce a conclusion from a premise that already contains that conclusion. If we were forbidden from arguing in this way according to the laws of informal logic, we would arbitrarily cut ourselves off from a perfectly fine inferential rule. It would be like trying to type without ever being allowed to use the "h" key. Of course, you may be able to get around the rule in most cases. (I just did two sentences ago.) But you might not, and in any case, why should you?

### **Valid Question-Begging Argument Type 2: Independently Relevant Premises**

Imagine that you are planning to meet someone for lunch whom you have never met in person. You arrive at the agreed upon location at the agreed upon time but do not yet see your acquaintance. You then see someone who looks like the person you are supposed to meet walking toward you. You're pretty sure, but you aren't entirely sure. Then you notice that the person has a distinctly "academic" look, and you know the person you are meeting is a professor. The person is middle-aged, and you know that the person you are supposed to meet is middle-aged. In a split second, you formulate the thoughts in your mind. "That's the person. It looks like the picture I saw. It matches the profile I know of this person. The person is also looking at me and walking toward me. Therefore, because of all these things, it is the person." Now, in this case, you have made an argument that could be formalized in the following way.

(1)  $P$  ("That is the person I am meeting.")

- (2) Q (“That looks like the person I am meeting.”)
- (3) R (“That person is looking at me and walking toward me.”)
- (4) S (“That person is middle-aged.”)
- (5) Therefore, P. (“That is the person I am meeting.”)

Here, you have not inappropriately begged the question. Clearly the argument here is valid and sound. The reason is that the premises are *independently relevant* to the conclusion. In this case premise (1) really does add evidence for the conclusion as opposed to an argument that just contains (2)-(4), and (2)-(4) adds evidence for the conclusion more than just premise (1). In other words, this argument is not absurd because (1)-(4) pull real weight in establishing the truth of (5).

### **Fallacious Question-Begging Arguments**

It is perhaps misleading to say that begging-the-question is a valid form of argumentation. Yet as I have shown, it clearly follows, and not always trivially so, that if P is true then P is true. Hence, some instances of begging the question are perfectly fine arguments. On the other hand, some kinds of begging-the-question clearly make bad arguments. So when does this kind of argument become fallacious? We might learn from the following example.

- (6) P
- (7) If P, then Q.
- (8) If Q, then R.
- (9) If R, then P.
- (10) Therefore, P.

This argument is technically valid, since each conclusion follows from the premises. Moreover, let’s say that all its premises are true. The argument is therefore sound. It is clearly a bad argument, however. Why? It is not because it begs the question any more or less than the valid arguments noted before. It seems, rather, that premises (7)-(9) perform no role in establishing (10). And if they perform no role in establishing (10), there is no point of their presence in the argument. If someone doesn’t accept (10), then he doesn’t accept (6), and the rest of the argument isn’t going to help him accept the conclusion. Premises (7)-(9) become suspiciously

disingenuous. They are a lot of work with no payoff, since they add no credibility to (10) that isn't already present in (6).

The first kind question-begging argument is useful for isolating a proposition from a conjunction of propositions. The second kind question-begging argument is useful for adding credibility to the conclusion because the other premises independently provide evidence for the conclusion. Question-begging arguments like (6)-(10) do not add credibility to their conclusions, nor do they perform the simple role such as conjunction decomposition. They are thus not useful for showing why the conclusion ought to be believed or how it can be known. Indeed, they couldn't be. In order for A to provide a reason to believe B, A must be better known than B. But if A is better known than B, A and B cannot be the same proposition. [20] However, arguments like (6)-(10) are susceptible of appearing to have premises better known than their conclusions. Why think this? To see the point, imagine how bizarre it would be if someone were convinced by this,

P. (premise)

Therefore, P. (conclusion)

but not this,

P. (assertion)

This strikes us as bizarre because there is no rational difference between asserting "P" and deriving P from the truth of P. Thus, in the case that someone is convinced by a question-begging argument for P but not by the mere assertion of "P," he or she has been persuaded by some *non-rational* aspect of the first argument's presentation. The argument "P. Therefore, P." doesn't make P more reasonable. Similarly, the argument (6)-(10) above asks us to do the heavy lifting of considering (7)-(9) when (7)-(9) do not provide evidence for (10) without (6). Instead, the interlocutor is led to believe that (6)-(9) makes (10) more plausible in a way that is inaccessible from directly asserting (10) from (6) or "P" from "P." It would be better to simply assert (6) or "P" and be done with it. If that doesn't rationally persuade them, then inferring "P" from "P" can't persuade them (barring insanity). And thus, any persuasion reached by adding steps is sheer deception. If asserting "P" does persuade them, then circular arguments cannot persuade them more. Circular arguments play no rational role to show that a conclusion is true unless, as I showed earlier, other

premises *independently* provide evidence for the conclusion. Barring that condition, circularity is an exercise in superfluity.

Asserting “P” may be useful for one to know it, such as with the case of self-evident truths. It may be the sort of thing one believes merely upon understanding, such as the statement that “parts can never be greater than the whole” or that “those who expend great effort upon another are owed gratitude by the recipients of that beneficence.” But the *inference* from P to P, either immediately or with several steps in between, does not perform any role in showing that P is true. If it happens to be persuasive to someone, this can only be due to features of the argument that have nothing to do with why the conclusion follows from the premises. Thus, circular arguments, insofar as they are persuasive, are deceptive.

Again, question-begging arguments can be valid and sound, so it is not correct to say they are invalid according to the sense of validity most logic textbooks employ. They do not violate logical norms in that strict sense. And yet, most of the time, they are argumentative mistakes. There is a certain amount of deception involved in question-begging arguments that are psychologically persuasive, as we saw before with the person who was persuaded by “P. Therefore, P.” but not by “P.” Similarly, if someone is persuaded by “P; Q; R; S; therefore, P.” but not by simply “P,” then something has gone wrong. The error is not in strict validity, since P follows from P. The problem is that the dialectic between the person giving the argument for P and the person who does not accept P has been halted erstwhile the appearance of progress remains.

To summarize, bad question-begging arguments violate dialectical rational norms by giving the appearance of increasing the credibility of a proposition without actually doing so. So if an argument’s premises are dependently relevant to the conclusion, and the argument contains premises that do not work to prove that the conclusion is true, then the argument is to no gain. Broadly circular arguments violate dialectical norms of reason by asking the interlocutor to expend effort to no gain.

## **BIBLICAL VERIFICATION AND QUESTION-BEGGING ARGUMENTS: A REPLY TO FRAME**



Now that we understand what question-begging arguments are and when they make an argument bad, we can see why Frame's objection against Habermas's understanding of biblical verification fails. Frame's reply to Habermas makes biblical verification superfluous such that it is unlikely to be a correct reading of passages like Ex. 4 and Dt. 18.

Even if Frame's reply succeeded against Habermas's appeal to Deuteronomy 18, it does not succeed in its current form against the appeal to Exodus 4. When Moses later performs the miracles (Ex. 7:10; 20) those who witness them do not have a scriptural standard by which to know that the test legitimately shows that Moses speaks for God. The Bible does not provide a "scriptural standard" for those whom the signs are meant to persuade because it does not address them at all. The Israelites are given only the Word and the signs. They are not told, however, that the signs are a standard revealed by God.

This brings us to a fatal problem with Frame's reply to Habermas. According to that reply, those who hold that Scripture is the sole source of all knowledge must understand verification in passages like Ex. 4 and Dt. 18 as broadly circular arguments. In other words, the argument does not immediately infer "P" from "P" or "This word is a Word of God" from "This word is a Word of God." They involve a series of inferences between the conclusion and the identical proposition that shows up as a premise. But, as we saw, broadly circular arguments are worse than narrowly circular arguments in that they are more deceptive and fruitless in the way they violate dialectical norms of reason. If God's Word is the sole source of all knowledge, it is to no gain that it *provides* criteria by which God's Word can be known. That is because the inferential steps in between do no work to show that the conclusion is true apart from what the conclusion can do by itself. It is superfluous to give a test to verify an item of knowledge that itself constitutes the basis of all other knowledge. But giving a test or an argument provides the sense that there is a point to it, that some knowledge will be gained by following it.

It follows that Frame's view has the unwelcome consequence of making biblical verification pointless—a whole lot of work with no real payoff. Such verifications add no credibility to the conclusion that was not already present before. It would be pointless to do what Scripture tells us to do in these cases if belief in its truth could not be suspended. If the Word of

God were the sole basis of reason, it would be manifestly absurd for it to provide a means by which to authenticate itself. It would be like a piece of writing telling you that it (that very piece of writing) is a piece of writing if it contains the letters “p” and “q.” It is obvious that *it is already* a piece of writing and one could not recognize “p” or “q” unless one already *fully granted* the document in question to be a piece of writing.

Recall how I initially presented fallacious question-begging arguments. My presentation there corresponds to John Frame’s distinction between “narrowly” and “broadly” circular arguments. Narrowly circular arguments can be valid, as I have shown. Broadly circular arguments are absurd, however, because they involve effort with no payoff. So rather than improving the situation by “broadening the circle,” as it were, this makes the arguments worse. They are no less question-begging than narrow circular arguments, so any appearance they have of credibility is specious. They are, in short, worse arguments because they violate rational norms by doing a better job than narrow circular arguments of *appearing* to establish a conclusion without doing so. It turns out, then, that it is a problem for Frame’s understanding of verification in Ex. 4 and Dt. 18 that sees it as broadly circular.

## **RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS**

### **No Religiously Neutral Arguments**

One objection to my thesis insists that no argument for the existence of God is possible unless it presumes the conclusion. It has been proved, the argument insists, that such “neutrality” is impossible and that every realm of knowledge makes clear and determinate presumptions about God. In other words, circularity is permissible because it is unavoidable. This argument will not do. First, even if it were true that all knowledge presumes religious knowledge, it wouldn’t follow that *circular reasoning* is a licit way to argue. It would just show that all knowledge assumes God, which is compatible with the claim that religious knowledge is indemonstrable.

More importantly, this argument blatantly commits an is/ought fallacy. That is, it argues that because something is the case—indeed, couldn’t be otherwise—it follows that it ought to be the case. But it clearly doesn’t follow that just because all reasoning that humans actually do is circular, all

human reasoning therefore ought to be. My argument has not been that there *are* successful arguments for the existence of God that do not presume the conclusion in the premises, although I think there are. My argument has been, rather, that there is no point in making an argument for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity that begs the question, because such an argument serves no rational purpose. If it were true that all human knowledge was circular, there could be no knowledge at all. But since we clearly do have some knowledge, and since circularity implies that there couldn't be knowledge, demonstrative knowledge isn't circular, and any theory that implies that it is circular is false.

### **Frame's Objections in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God***

John Frame anticipates in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* the objection that broad circularity does not have a proper use and therefore cannot be rationally persuasive. He gives several reasons to think that broadly circular arguments have a rational role.<sup>[21]</sup> I will list and respond to them in order.

*“A circular argument displays more vividly the meaning of the conclusion.”*

This response does not save broadly circular arguments from argumentative impropriety. Even if the conclusion is self-evident, the inferential steps do not serve to make the conclusion better known than before. As I noted before, carefully attending to a self-evident proposition can bring one to know it over time. This may even occur in a broadly circular argument. Nevertheless, the inferential steps are accidental to the process of becoming aware of the proposition's veracity. If the inferences were rationally essential to know the truth of the conclusion, then the proposition wouldn't be self-evident. Thus, broadly circular arguments do not “display more vividly the meaning of the conclusion,” even if they are the occasion for vivid attention to the conclusion.

*“A circular argument sets forth the conclusion together with its true rationale.”*

The “true rationale” is “the reasons why it should be accepted.” For Frame, the true rationale for believing in God’s Word appeals to God’s Word. “That is all that an argument can do.” This is a simple misunderstanding of the notion of reasons. Reasons are the sorts of things we articulate in answer to “why” questions. They explain why it is that we ought to believe something. Such explanations can be acceptable only if they are better known than the propositions they demonstrate. My argument in this chapter has been that if Christianity or the Scriptures are the first principle of all reason, then *there is no rationale* for belief in them. *Perspicua vera non sunt probanda*. Evident truths are not to be proved.

“*Everyone already knows that Christianity is true.*”

Frame claims that the unbeliever already knows Christianity is true “at some level of his consciousness,” and will thus accept the conclusion of the circular argument. This is a red herring. It may be true that the unbeliever accepts the *conclusion*, but it does not follow that premises in circular arguments give the unbeliever (or anyone, for that matter) *reason* to accept the conclusion. Universal knowledge of God and his law does not show that circular arguments are proper forms of argumentation.

“*The circular argument presents a framework for the interpretation of Christianity.*”

Frame says, “[T]he circular argument presents a framework for the interpretation of Christianity—a presuppositional methodology, a conceptual scheme—and that is always an aid to understanding the cogency of a position.” If Christianity or the Scriptures are the first principle of reason, then the cogency of that first principle cannot be brought out any more than it already is except by attending to it directly. Again, as I’ve argued, broadly circular arguments do not make their conclusions more convincing.

### **Changing the View: Some Parts or No Parts of Scripture are Fundamental**

Someone might try to save the view in question by altering it slightly. One move would be to say that not all *parts* of Scripture are basic to all

knowledge. This view has some plausibility, since it appears to be confirmed by a simple test. Consider the following passage:

Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,  
the oppressing city!  
She listens to no voice;  
she accepts no correction.  
She does not trust in the Lord;  
she does not draw near to her God.  
She does not trust in the Lord;  
she does not draw near to her God.

Now consider this passage:

I have cut off nations;  
their battlements are in ruins;  
I have laid waste their streets  
so that no one walks in them;  
their cities have been made desolate,  
without a man, without an inhabitant.

Which passage is the inspired word of God and which is apocryphal? If this experiment was successful, readers suffered an inability to recognize God's Word. Some may know the Bible and Apocrypha well enough to know the answer to this question. But even for them, the experience of recognizing scriptural and non-scriptural passages should alert them to the fact that it is their memory, rather than the Bible as a principle basic to all knowledge, that tells them which passage is a part of the 66-book canon. An uncharitable objector might think that this refutes by counter-example the claim that Scripture is the sole basis of all knowledge.<sup>[22]</sup> And certainly, it does refute one version of that claim, which is that every *part* of Scripture is a manifest basis of knowledge, and thus it can be recognized as such. It would be unfair, however, to saddle advocates like Frame with this view.<sup>[23]</sup>

As I see it, there are two ways to preserve the claim that Scripture is the basis of all knowledge while avoiding the claim that *every part* of it is the basis of all knowledge. First, one may say that the whole of Scripture is such a basis, but not necessarily the parts. This seems wrong, however, since Scripture's whole is determined by a priority of the parts. In

particular, some texts are accepted as God's Word on the basis of other texts. Take again the prescription concerning claims to prophecy in Deuteronomy 18. A genuine prophecy received by the people of God must be tested by this passage. This suggests that the prophecy was not known as a prophecy by its mere presentation. The passage that tests it, however, is Scripture of the basic sort. It is not authenticated by the passage authenticated by it. So Scriptural confirmation of Scripture does not work in any direction. In other words, Deuteronomy 18 is the foundation for knowledge that some prophecy is genuine, but not the other way around. This, of course, presumes knowledge that Deuteronomy 18 is Scripture. We have already seen, however, how the authority of Moses was authenticated to the people of Israel—not merely by the proclamation of the Word, but also by works that suggest that one who speaks does so with the authority of God. But where is the biblical norm? At the end of the day, particular texts—ones you can point to and read, identifying them as such—must be the basis for knowledge. Thus, if there is a biblical standard for verifying non-basic biblical texts, particular texts must be used to verify particular texts.

Second, one may suppose that some parts of Scripture are basic to knowledge but not others, and the basic ones supply the principles of verification for the non-basic ones. This option also fails, however. First, it is unlikely that some particular revelations would be the sole basis of knowledge just by being revelations while others are not. It is important to distinguish the claim under review from the claim that Scripture is self-authenticating. It is perfectly acceptable to think God might make certain revelations with manifest authority and others without it. Alternatively, if a revelation of God is the sole basis of all knowledge just in virtue of being a revelation of God, then it seems odd that other revelations are not basic since they share the same feature that makes revelations basic. Second, the basic texts related to verification will have an undesirable consequence for the same reason I have stated before. They involve pointless verifications. Presumably, the basic texts must at least be the ones that make no appeal, explicitly or tacitly to other texts, or that are confirmed by other texts. For instance, genuine prophecy was confirmed by Deuteronomy 18, and Deuteronomy 18 was confirmed by the authority of Moses. But the authority of Moses was confirmed by Exodus 4 and the ensuing narrative,

which are the first suggestions that Moses speaks for God. Again, on this view, the Bible gives a “broadly circular” argument for itself and is thus absurd. It is more plausible to interpret the authentication Moses achieves, rather than presenting “biblical standards,” as appealing to standards which those who have not received revelation would be rationally capable of accepting.

If it could be shown that only non-basic passages are verified by Scripture, then this view could avoid the problem I am recognizing here. In that case, verification would not be pointless since it would genuinely increase the credibility of a claim, that this or that text is the genuine Word of God. This view would still have to explain why some revelations are basic just in virtue of being revelations while others aren't. Nevertheless, these verifications would not be “broadly circular” either, which remains a problematic form of argument. This seems unlikely, however, not only because Exodus 4 involves verification of God's word and would clearly have to be a basic text. Also, as Habermas notes, the testing of Scripture seems to be a pattern that characterizes the whole.

### **The Reformed View of the Bible's Authority**

Some might be worried that my thesis constitutes an argument against the Reformed view of the Bible's authority. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* represents one standard Reformed view of the Bible's authority. I will repeat four often cited claims of the Confession here.

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

5. ... [O]ur full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof [of the Bible], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

There is a lot of work to be done about the nature, clarity, and certainty of knowledge as it is understood in these four articles. I understand these passages to entail, among other things, that Scripture is self-authenticating and that it is the sole infallible source of knowledge. It follows from neither of these propositions that Scripture is the sole source of *all* knowledge. My argument does not entail that the Bible is not self-authenticating, nor does it imply that the Bible requires external evidence in order to be known. On the contrary, these claims oppose the spirit of my thesis, which is that the arguments that Scripture affirms presume multiple sources of knowledge.

Take an example. Imagine that a man is standing trial for a crime he in fact committed and knows he committed. The criminal pleads not guilty and dishonestly denies having done the deed. Now, clearly, he knows what he is doing. He knows that he committed the crime and that he might get away with it by manipulating the presumption of innocence in our justice system. Now, further imagine that, for some reason, camera footage of the defendant committing the crime has been discovered and introduced into the court. The footage unambiguously shows him doing the thing he denies having done. The defendant (and, more importantly, the jury) has been given evidence for a bit of information that he already knew on the basis of his memory, but without depending in any way on his memory.

Similarly, the claim that good arguments for belief in God and the Christian Scriptures do not presume belief in God or the Bible is compatible with the claim that everyone has sufficient knowledge of God. In other words, belief in God and the Bible does need not be the basis of all knowledge to be universal. Knowledge of God and the Bible also need not be the basis of all knowledge in order to be absolutely overriding. It should be clear by now that my thesis does not compromise the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Scripture being the sole infallible guide to faith and morals is compatible with the claim that there are other (fallible) sources of knowledge.<sup>[24]</sup>



## CONCLUSION

First principles are known indemonstrably. They are not known by inference from some other proposition. No argument can be given for first principles, but the Bible seems to assume that arguments for divine revelation can be given. Thus, Frame has not shown us why we should not read Scripture as *prima facie* evidence against the view that Scripture is the first principle of all knowledge. In fact, he makes matters worse by suggesting we “broaden the circle.” Increasing the distance between, say, “God exists” in the conclusion and “God exists” in the premises only gives the appearance of demonstrative knowledge. But in fact, insofar as such arguments are subjectively persuasive, they present a first principle as if it were something else. This is telling since it does not necessarily count against a belief to be put forward as self-justifying. But they should be asserted in their naked glory so that they can be known by themselves (*per se*) or their lack of self-evidence acknowledged. This constant inclination to regard Christianity as demonstrable may, I suggest, be the result of the operative but unacknowledged belief that it does not form the basic principle of all knowledge.

Scripture provides examples of God’s Word being tested. Further, these instances of verification are not plausibly explained as broadly circular arguments, that is, circular arguments that incorporate several premises. Broadly circular arguments include premises and sub-arguments that do not provide evidence for the conclusion. They do not make the conclusion more credible than otherwise. Thus, they are not useful as arguments. They are psychologically useful or persuasive, as my argument notes, but this is the very problematic thing about them. Their usefulness is not in any rational element in them, and thus they are deceptive as arguments. It is therefore not flattering to Scripture to understand it as putting forth broadly circular arguments when alternative interpretations are available.

This result prompts us to consider that there may be multiple first principles of knowledge rather than just one. Knowledge is not a system neatly worked out from a single indemonstrable axiom. Rather, there are many sources of knowledge—sensory experience, testimony, memory, conscience, and divine revelation—working together to inform our

judgments.<sup>[25]</sup> I leave the task of working out these various faculties of knowledge for another day.<sup>[26]</sup>

*II:*  
**FAITH AND THE NATURAL LIGHT OF REASON:  
HOW VAN TILLIAN ANTHROPOLOGY FAILS**

**Kurt Jaros**

*Going off to the right by denying common grace or going off to the left by affirming a theory of common grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome is to fail, to this extent, to challenge the wisdom of the world.*

—Cornelius Van Til<sup>[27]</sup>

What separates presuppositionalism from the traditional Reformed approach to apologetics? In his lecture, “Apologetics and Theology,” contemporary defender of presuppositionalism Scott Oliphint claims, “If I have a disagreement with someone on apologetic methodology, that disagreement needs to find its focus in theology first.”<sup>[28]</sup> Oliphint believes that theology must be the source of disagreement. Elsewhere he contrasts theology and philosophy, appearing to treat the two disciplines as mutually exclusive, but failing to provide an explanation for why we should do so.<sup>[29]</sup> Is not the biblical Creator of the universe also the Creator of natural and logical truths? When we read the Bible for the very first (or any) time, do we not also presuppose that the text can be rationally understood? Lastly, when Oliphint asks that the disagreement happen in theology, what if we were to recognize that our opponent makes invalid logical inferences when doing theology? Is that disagreement then a philosophical one or a theological one? The answer is “both,” because these two realms of knowledge are not mutually exclusive. Theological reflection could also be described as thinking philosophically about Christian doctrine. Yet in a more qualified sense, Oliphint is correct: There are theological differences between presuppositionalism and traditional Reformed approaches to apologetics.<sup>[30]</sup>

I will argue that one of the fundamental differences between presuppositionalism and the traditional Reformed approach is found in the doctrine of man, specifically the doctrine of inability. First, I will provide a

basic explanation of Cornelius Van Til's methodology. Second, I will explain how Van Til saw the differences between B. B. Warfield and Abraham Kuyper on apologetic methodology. Third, I will elaborate and critique Van Til's views of the clarity of common grace and anthropology insofar as it pertains to his apologetic methodology. In doing this we shall see that Van Til fails to offer a third way on common grace for his apologetic methodology, thereby failing to challenge the wisdom of the world by his own standard. Therefore, it should be rejected as a distinct, viable option for apologetic methodology.

### **Van Til's Method**

Van Til is concerned that traditional arguments from natural theology compromise the Reformed faith.<sup>[31]</sup> They do not take seriously the doctrine of total depravity and, in practice, the disposition of the unregenerate man. Furthermore, they fail to account for Scripture's testament of God's universal revelation to all humans. Van Til states that "The revelation of God to man in the created universe is said to be clear. Men therefore cannot help but know God."<sup>[32]</sup> Van Til believes that "All men, even after the fall, know deep down in their hearts that they are creatures of God, that they should therefore obey, but that they have actually broken the law of God."<sup>[33]</sup> As such, they don't need evidence to know that God exists.

As they do not need evidence to know that God exists, man's rebellion is, therefore, not an intellectual one but an ethical one. "The whole point of the distinction between the antithesis as being ethical rather than metaphysical is that as a creature made in God's image, man's constitution as a rational and moral being has *not* been destroyed."<sup>[34]</sup> As a matter of principle, the unregenerate man is opposed at *every* point to the things of God. "The sinner's efforts, so far as they are done self-consciously from his point of view, seek to destroy or bury the voice of God that comes to him through nature, which includes his own consciousness."<sup>[35]</sup> This is not to say that the natural man is absolutely depraved (i.e. doing the worst possible sins all the time). Common grace serves an important function for Van Til as a limiting concept.

Because of God's common grace, this ethical antithesis of God on the part of the sinner is restrained and thereby the creative forces of

man receive the opportunity of constructive effort. In this world the sinner does many “good” things. He is honest. He helps to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow men. He “keeps” the moral law. Therefore the antithesis, besides being ethical rather than metaphysical, is limited in a second way: It is one of principle, not one of full expression.<sup>[36]</sup>

Van Til’s concern is whether through his own, sinfully-minded interpretation of the world, natural man can know the world.

Now it is true, of course, that God has planted such laws of belief into our very being. It is this point on which Calvin lays such great stress when he says that all men have a sense of deity. But the unbeliever does not accept the doctrine of his creation in the image of God. It is therefore impossible to appeal to the intellectual and moral nature of men, *as men themselves interpret this nature*, and say that it must judge of the credibility and evidence of revelation.<sup>[37]</sup>

Van Til’s theme of thesis and antithesis plays out here in the realm of what believers can know and what unregenerate, nonbelievers can know on their own frameworks (or more appropriately, cannot know on their own frameworks). “We conclude then that when both parties, the believer and the non-believer, are epistemologically self-conscious and as such engaged in the interpretative enterprise, they cannot be said to have any fact in common.”<sup>[38]</sup> For Van Til, there is no common ground, epistemologically, between believer and unbeliever. This leads him to the conclusion that, “In contradistinction from both Roman Catholics and Arminians, however, the Reformed apologist cannot agree at all with the methodology of the natural man.”<sup>[39]</sup> As we will show, Van Til’s model is ultimately no different from Abraham Kuyper’s, because it goes “off to the right by denying common grace” for apologetic methodology.<sup>[40]</sup>

## **Warfield Versus Kuyper**

Van Til was aware of the tension between the apologetic methodologies of B.B. Warfield (Old Princeton) and Abraham Kuyper (Amsterdam). “It is only that, in apologetics, Warfield wanted to operate in neutral territory with the nonbeliever.”<sup>[41]</sup> Kuyper, on the other hand, believed that the natural principles were defective and were a knock against the value of special revelation. Van Til, commenting on Kuyper, wrote, “The natural

principle takes an antithetical position over against the special principle and seeks to destroy it by means of logical manipulation.”<sup>[42]</sup> Oliphint concurs: “Kuyper’s point here is that if the ‘natural principle’ (generally speaking, the natural man) can judge rightly, it thereby undermines the sufficient reason (*ration sufficiens*) of special revelation.”<sup>[43]</sup> This is a position which Van Til tailors for his own model, because he believed the Old Princeton method of apologetics seeks to “ask [men] only to apply the same principle that they have already applied to the realm of nature.”<sup>[44]</sup> Thus, between Warfield and Kuyper, Van Til sides with Kuyper:

So far as choice had to be made between the two positions, I took my position with Kuyper rather than with Hodge and Warfield. But there were two considerations that compelled me finally to seek a combination of some of the elements of each position. Negatively Kuyper was surely right in stressing that the natural man does not, on his principles, have any knowledge of the truth. But Hodge and Warfield taught the same thing in their theology. It was only in their apologetics that they did not lay full emphasis upon this teaching.<sup>[45]</sup>

Van Til believed Hodge and Warfield were inconsistent in applying their theological anthropology into their applied apologetic methodology. He states, “I hold the appeal to reason as autonomous to be both illegitimate and destructive from the point of view of Reformed faith that I am bound to reject...Old Princeton apologetics.”<sup>[46]</sup> After all, how could the unregenerate human reason with the Christian about the things of God? Here is what Van Til has to say on the effects and affect of sin:

Amsterdam and Old Princeton agree on the doctrine of sin. Both teach total depravity. Total depravity for both mean that sin has affected man in all his functions. But it does not merely mean that. It also indicates how *deeply* sin has affected all his functions. Man is “wholly defiled,” not partly defiled in all his functions. He hates God and his neighbor. He therefore seeks to suppress the truth within him. He worships and serves the creature more than the Creator. He *cannot but* sin.<sup>[47]</sup>

Van Til makes a fine distinction on the depth of sin’s effect on human nature, noting the doctrine of inability, here observed in the phrase “cannot but sin,” applies to apologetic methodology for Van Til.

While Van Til seeks to be a third way on common grace, the connection to Kuyper's anthropology is undeniable. The question is: does Van Til do enough to distance himself from Kuyper's view on anthropology? It is not apparent that he does. "In seeking to reduce the difference between Kuyper and Warfield to one of emphasis, Masselink [one of Van Til's critics], in effect, chooses for Warfield."<sup>[48]</sup> This is important for us to recognize because Van Til himself contrasts Kuyper and Warfield as holding two exclusive frameworks. Then, he goes on to embrace Kuyper, but makes a qualification.<sup>[49]</sup> He says that "I am unable to follow him when, from the fact of the mutually destructive character of the two principles, he concludes to the uselessness of reasoning with the natural man."<sup>[50]</sup> This is to say, Van Til believes it is useful to reason with the natural man, but only on some issues. As we have shown above, does not Van Til's anthropology collapse into this very position that Van Til is seeking to avoid? Oliphint believes it does not. "Van Til has retained much of Kuyper's notion of the antithesis and yet, because of the sense of deity in all men, has also retained the idea, supported by Warfield, that apologetics is a central and necessary theological discipline."<sup>[51]</sup> Let us consider this issue further.

### **The Clarity of General Revelation and the Role of Common Grace**

Van Til argued that general revelation was necessary and sufficient for accountability, but clear only for the person with the right framework. General revelation is necessary because it shows "not merely what comes to man through the facts surrounding him in his environment, but also that which comes to him by means of his own constitution as a covenant personality."<sup>[52]</sup> And this is connected with the sufficiency of general revelation, vis-à-vis "historical sufficiency." "It is sufficient for such as have in Adam brought the curse of God upon nature. It is sufficient to render them without excuse."<sup>[53]</sup> But, thinks Van Til, it is insufficient to *provide* evidence of the Creator for the nonbelievers. Note that for the presuppositionalist, the unregenerate man has *innate* knowledge of the Creator and does not need evidence for that knowledge. There are no atheists, in principle. But if presuppositionalism is true, would there be generic theists or bare theists?

Presuppositionalists critique classicalists as only defending bare theism (a description of some of God's attributes without going further into detailing God's special revelation). So, if there are no atheists in presuppositionalism, are there any bare theists? Van Til writes, "Created man may see clearly what is revealed clearly even if he cannot see exhaustively. Man does not need to know exhaustively in order to know truly and certainly."<sup>[54]</sup> But Van Til only means this in light of a person's believing in Christian theism. The very next sentence qualifies: "When on the created level of existence man thinks God's thoughts after him, that is, when man thinks in self-conscious submission to the voluntary revelation of the self-sufficient God, he has therefore the only possible ground of certainty for his knowledge."<sup>[55]</sup> So when Van Til states that "Created man may see clearly what is revealed clearly even if he cannot see exhaustively," he is using obscure language. First, the chief issue is not whether humans can know exhaustively (as if we could possibly even know all truths about God), but whether humans can know truthful propositions about the universe, including spiritual truths. Second, and more closely related to what we are concerned about, is that Van Til does not mean that all created humans can have certainty of their knowledge of the Creator God. He denies this in saying that the "only possible ground of certainty" comes from holding to Christian theism. Further on he notes, "It is accordingly no easier for sinners to accept God's revelation in nature than to accept God's revelation in Scripture."<sup>[56]</sup> And that "All this is simply to say that one must be a believing Christian to study nature in the proper frame of mind and with the proper procedure."<sup>[57]</sup> In a nutshell, natural or general revelation is only clear for a person, even in a minute detail of truth, if one first adopts Christian theism.

Just as general revelation is only clear for a person who holds to Christian theism, so too the arguments from natural theology are only valid for the person who is already a Christian. "If then man rightly interprets this revelation he has an absolutely valid argument for the truth. But the sinner, so far as he works from his adopted principle which rests in himself as autonomous, does not interpret the facts of the universe rightly. How could he? He assumes himself to be ultimate."<sup>[58]</sup> The ultimacy of man (that humans are the final stop on the epistemology ride) is a symptom of fallen



man (if not an act of rebellion itself) because primacy is given to humanity and not to the divine. That is how the arguments from natural theology get off on the wrong footing. Van Til writes, “When the theistic proofs are thus constructed they do not convey the revelation of God; they then become the means of suppressing that revelation in terms of the monistic assumption of the natural man. How could ‘the theistic proofs’ then be sound, for if they ‘prove’ that the God of Aristotle exists, then they disprove that the God of Christianity exists.”<sup>[59]</sup> Given that the theistic proofs only bring one to a generic theism, or Aristotle’s God, this endeavor solidifies man’s attempt to craft the creator after the creature.

The presuppositionalist believes that God has not given the unregenerate man common grace such that he could look to the stars and infer God’s existence. Rather, the unregenerate man knows innately that God exists.

It is only against the background of this stress on the perspicuity of the natural revelation of God about and *within* man, and these as related to the original supernatural revelation vouchsafed to Adam in paradise, that the meaning of the statement that the natural man and the regenerated man have nothing in common epistemologically must be taken.<sup>[60]</sup>

This statement from Van Til is ambiguous, for, how can it be true both that all men know God and that some men do not know God? Nonbelievers know God exists, but they do not know God exists (on their epistemological framework)? Van Til attempts to clarify what he means: “The point is that when and to the extent that the natural man is engaged in interpreting life in terms of his *adopted principles then, and only then*, he has nothing in common with the believer.”<sup>[61]</sup> Perhaps it is the case that the nonbeliever suffers from self-deception. Even Van Til admits that man can never completely suppress the truth.<sup>[62]</sup> So, if men never completely suppress the truth, could the natural man and regenerated man have any epistemological common ground? The answer, it seems, is in fact, “Yes.” The natural man *really does* have common epistemological beliefs with believers, because the natural man knows God and fails to live in a manner fully consistent with his rejection of God (according to Van Til). If natural men, in their inconsistency, have common ground with believers, then one might argue,

believers can and should utilize those points of contact to draw men to embrace the truth. Warfield observes how common grace can work in the light of nature for all men:

It is further to be observed that the [Westminster] Confession, in asserting the perfection or completeness of Scripture, forgets neither the subjective disabilities of fallen man, nor his needs outside the sphere of “things necessary for God’s glory, man’s salvation, faith and life,” in which sphere alone Scripture is asserted to be objectively complete or perfect. The Confession explicitly recognizes the “inward illumination of the Spirit of God” as necessary to enable man “savingly to understand such things as are revealed in the Word.” And it as explicitly recognizes that there are “circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the Church, *common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence.*”<sup>[63]</sup>

Notice, here, Warfield’s explanation of the *Westminster Confession* as describing that common to all humans are actions ordered by the revelation (i.e. light) of nature which are good (i.e. worship of God), but which nevertheless are to be contrasted with the illumination of the Spirit that is necessary for a saving faith.

In regards to how common grace affects apologetic methodology, Van Til holds to a relatively weak model of common grace. He believes that “Reformed theology teaches that man by nature [i.e., through reasoning from what is known about nature,] has no knowledge of God or of morality at all.”<sup>[64]</sup> He thinks that there are no atheists because of the *innate* knowledge of God, but there is no natural knowledge of God in the sense that we perceive the world and deduce the proposition “God exists.” For Van Til, common grace serves the function of restraining the loss of the innate knowledge of God and the loss of an innate sense of morality, but common grace does not provide the ground through which the nonbeliever comes to knowledge of the Creator God. “The Reformed confessions speak of *small* remnants of the knowledge of God and of morality possess by the natural man. And these small remnants must be upheld by common grace.”<sup>[65]</sup>

Common grace does more than restrain the natural man, but these other functions go beyond the scope of apologetic methodology; it “gives good gifts to men, makes them live the truth in a sense, causes them to produce civil righteousness.”<sup>[66]</sup> Carefully observe Van Til’s term “in a sense,” because even God’s gifts which produce civil goods are merely “‘relative good’ that God himself gives him [i.e., the nonbeliever] in spirit of the principle of sin within him.”<sup>[67]</sup> Like non-presuppositionalists, Van Til rejects the idea that unbelievers are not able to do “anything that is good in any sense.”<sup>[68]</sup> He affirms the Christian Reformed Church 1924 statement on common grace. That statement contains three points: that common grace is active in the lives of nonbelievers, that common grace restrains sin, and that nonbelievers can perform civic goods. But as far as apologetic methodology is concerned, common grace plays a very weak role because “as far as the principle of the natural man is concerned, it is *absolutely* or utterly, not partly, opposed to God.”<sup>[69]</sup> This approach aligns with Kuyper’s view of common grace. Kuyper believed that common grace was a taming grace. “It leaves the inner impulse of the ego of man to its wickedness, but prevents the full fruition of wickedness. It is a limiting, a restraining, a hindering power which brakes and brings to a standstill.”<sup>[70]</sup>

In this section, we have analyzed Van Til’s view of general revelation and common grace. We explained the distinction that Van Til makes between the natural man’s metaphysical status and the natural man’s epistemology, *in principle*. Sometimes this distinction is blurry, but even if clear, I will show that it remains contradictory. If the natural man really believes God exists, then this would serve as a point of common ground between the believer and non-believer. Moreover, why could there not be other points of common ground between the believer and the non-believer, points even across epistemologically consistent lines? Ultimately, this question will be found further in Van Til’s doctrine of man. At times, Van Til attempts to clarify that he believes his criticism does not apply to man’s abilities (both believer and unbeliever are metaphysically the same). And yet, at other times, Van Til says they are not the same. In the next section I will show that Van Til is inconsistent in his approach to the doctrine of inability, and if he were consistent, then his attempt at a third way on common grace for apologetic methodology fails.

## Human Nature

The defining feature of Van Til's view of anthropology, and that which distinguishes it from the classical Reformed position, is his view of the extent of human inability. Although he does not use this term to explain his distinctiveness, it is useful for providing a faithful representation of his position. As we will show, unlike traditional Reformed theologians, Van Til applies the doctrine of inability not just to salvific knowledge of God, but even to natural knowledge of God.

Van Til says that man's rebellion is ethical, not intellectual. He believes there are no metaphysical differences between the natural man and the believer, only epistemological differences.<sup>[71]</sup> He says that "we must begin by emphasizing the *absolute ethical antithesis* in which the 'natural man' stands to God."<sup>[72]</sup> By this, he means the best place to start in understanding human nature is that unregenerate man does not want to accept the truth. If this really were Van Til's starting point, it would be a poor way to differentiate Van Til's approach from the classical Reformed model. Rather, I would like to suggest that for Van Til, the starting point is not the absolute ethical antithesis, but his rendering of the doctrine of inability. Van Til believes that all humans know God and yet they live in rebellion against Him. Unregenerate humans are *unable* to correct their beliefs about the world unless they are regenerated by divine grace. Common grace serves as a retardant to the depth of human sinfulness and is the source of the natural and civic goods we enjoy. Common grace does not, however, correct the natural man's ethical disposition toward God. As such, common grace does not correct the natural man's will to accept truths about God known from natural theology.<sup>[73]</sup>

For the presuppositionalist, the unregenerate man is unable to will any objective good at all.<sup>[74]</sup> The unregenerate man is incapable of choosing any objective good, in this case specifically honoring a Creator. Only an act of God's grace would make such an act possible. This position, which I shall elaborate on shortly, indicates an inconsistency: Van Til does believe there are metaphysical differences between the natural man and the believer.

In *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, Van Til argues that, "We must rather reason that unless God exists as ultimate, as self-subsistent, we could

not even know *anything*; we could not even reason that God must exist, nor could we even ask a question about God.”<sup>[75]</sup> Then he goes on to describe what the nonbeliever must do: “In order to do this, in order to negate himself as ultimate and as correlative: *the natural man must first negate himself as normal. This he will not and cannot do.*”<sup>[76]</sup> Here, Van Til makes a universal claim about the ability of unregenerate persons; they are *unable* to do anything, metaphysically, to support their own epistemology “on account of the fact of sin man is blind with respect to the truth wherever the truth appears.”<sup>[77]</sup>

Unregenerate man’s inability to believe in the Creator God, through general revelation, is a distinctive theological feature of presuppositionalism. Thus, not only does Van Til believe that the natural man has, in principle, an epistemology wholly contrary to Christian doctrine, but also that natural man is unable to recognize truth, wherever it may be. Van Til believed that “in sinning, man, as it were, took out his own eyes, so that he could no longer see God in his general revelation.”<sup>[78]</sup> Van Til confirms his position explicitly just a few pages later: “The necessity of special revelation appears not only with respect to man’s failure to know and react to *spiritual* things right, but also with respect to his inability to interpret ‘natural’ things aright.”<sup>[79]</sup> As odd as it may seem to be, Van Til says that special revelation is necessary even to understand general revelation.

Earlier we observed that Van Til believed “the unbeliever does not accept the doctrine of his creation in the image of God. It is therefore impossible to appeal to the intellectual and moral nature of men, *as men themselves interpret this nature*, and say that it must judge of the credibility and evidence of revelation.”<sup>[80]</sup> When Van Til says that it is impossible to appeal to unregenerate men, he means this only insofar “as men themselves interpret this nature”; thus, we know that he is referring to the non-believers’ worldview as a means of discovering truth (i.e. their view *in principle*), not the actual state of human capability (a metaphysical claim). Let us explore some trouble with this position.

First, Van Til’s remark is a *non-sequitur*. Why ought we to think that simply because natural man rejects his status as an image-bearer of God, that he is unable to use those God-given functions to reason with us about

his *telos*? The unbeliever's self-deception on one point is insufficient grounds for concluding he cannot accurately reason or perceive moral truths. Second, the contextual evidence suggests Van Til means to claim that unregenerate humans are truly incapable of reasoning about the things of God. It appears Van Til is making a metaphysical claim. On the other side of the unbeliever is the believer, whose "reason has already been changed in its set...by regeneration."<sup>[81]</sup> Thus, for the unregenerate, reason has not already been changed in its set. It would be inaccurate, Van Til thinks, to hold that the nonbeliever has "the ability rightly to interpret and rightly to employ the powers of his own nature."<sup>[82]</sup> Natural man will seek to defend his own ultimacy and his intuition of freedom.<sup>[83]</sup>

The classical Reformed position holds that God's common grace and general providence can bring the natural man to recognize the existence of a Creator-God.<sup>[84]</sup> Van Til accuses the Roman Catholic and non-Calvinist approaches by saying that "they do not distinguish carefully between the natural man's own conception of himself and the biblical conception of him...If we make our appeal to the natural man without being aware of this distinction, we virtually admit that the natural man's estimate of himself is correct."<sup>[85]</sup> This remark is misguided for two reasons. First, it is demonstrably false that theologians other than Reformed ones do not distinguish carefully between the two types of humans.<sup>[86]</sup> Second, this remark is also a *non-sequitur*. Even if one were unaware of the distinction between natural man and regenerated man, it would only follow that one would not know the difference between the two types of men, not that one would necessarily grant natural man's self-conception. Finally, natural man's view of himself could be partially correct and partially incorrect. Thus, even on the natural man's epistemology, he could have true beliefs and knowledge as those truths correspond to reality. For the Reformed traditionalists, natural man is unable to do anything toward his own *salvation*. Knowledge of the Creator God is not salvific knowledge, so the traditionalist parsing of inability is not as extensive as the presuppositionalist version.

But here we reach a further problem with Van Til. If the unbeliever's rebellion is strictly, exclusively an ethical choice, what function does apologetics serve? It seems that apologetic conversations on the existence



of God are superfluous and apologetic conversations for Christian theism are strictly defensive (i.e., there is nothing any believer can say to win the natural man over to the Gospel). This would make Van Til's model no different from Kuyper's with regard to apologetic methodology. Yet, he argues that Christians *should* engage in intellectual discourse with nonbelievers through two points of contacts: the *imago dei* and the law of God.<sup>[87]</sup> Man knows in his heart that God exists and that he is a law breaker. "Only by thus finding the point of contact in man's sense of deity that lies underneath his own conception of self-consciousness as ultimate can we be both true to Scripture and *effective in reasoning with* the natural man."<sup>[88]</sup> By using Van Til's own standard, however, "the unbeliever does not accept the doctrine of his creation in the image of God."<sup>[89]</sup> As he wrote earlier, "It will be quite impossible, then, to find a common area of knowledge between believers and unbelievers unless there is agreement between them as to the nature of man himself. But there is no such agreement."<sup>[90]</sup>

Thus, Van Til makes two competing and contradictory claims:

- 1) It is ineffective to appeal to the natural man on the grounds of the *imago dei* and man as a law breaker.
- 2) It is effective to appeal to the natural man on the grounds of the *imago dei* and man as a law breaker.

To this, one might object that in #1, Van Til is merely referring to the nonbeliever's epistemology. That is, the Christian ought not to appeal to *their* view. Yet in this context, Van Til specifically argues that only regenerated persons have the proper use of the faculty of reason, because "It has by God's grace permitted itself to be interpreted by God's revelation."<sup>[91]</sup> Unregenerate persons are, literally, unable to reason about the things of God: "If, on the other hand, the person using his reason is an unbeliever, then this person, using his reason, will certainly assume the position of judge with respect to the credibility and evidence of revelation."<sup>[92]</sup> This, of course, is the heart of Van Til's concern against alternative apologetic methodologies. If Van Til means this about the intellectually consistent unregenerate person, and holds that there are in actuality no perfectly consistent unregenerate persons, this creates further problems for his view of general revelation.<sup>[93]</sup> First, if the unregenerate person converses with a regenerated person and grants the propositions that

God exists and that he (the human) is a sinner, then the unregenerate person knows this either via general revelation or special revelation. If the unregenerate person knows this via general revelation, then Van Til's anthropology is shown to be false, since it holds that this sort of knowledge via general revelation is impossible. Second, if the unregenerate person knows this (i.e. accepts the propositions about God and man's sinfulness) via special revelation, he was not unregenerate.<sup>[94]</sup> Not only would this make the language of "unbeliever" awkward and equivocal, but it would be unnecessary.

As a final conundrum, if all unregenerate persons know God (i.e. there are no atheists) and they are inconsistent in their worldviews, then they inconsistently create inconsistent worldviews ("He therefore never reads the 'book of nature' aright even with respect to 'natural' things."<sup>[95]</sup>). If unregenerate persons inconsistently create inconsistent worldviews, then it would be false that it is "impossible to appeal to the intellectual and moral nature of men, as men themselves interpret this nature."<sup>[96]</sup> Put another way, according to Van Til, even as unregenerate men interpret their nature, they do so inconsistently, but this means *we can reason* with them on their models. Yet if Van Til means to say that we cannot reason with them on the basis of views they would hold if they were being consistent (whatever that means), this seems to be a moot point—since Van Til grants that no unbeliever is perfectly consistent. Furthermore, were he perfectly consistent, it would follow, according to Van Til, that in any instance when the non-believer disagrees on a spiritual topic with the presuppositionalist, the presuppositionalist is necessarily correct.<sup>[97]</sup> But this assaults common sense. Sometimes non-believers believe accurate spiritual propositions and sometimes believers believe inaccurate spiritual propositions. As Richard Howe has stated it, "even if one granted that the Presuppositionalist was right in claiming that human beings are estranged from God by virtue of mankind's rebellion against God, it does not follow from this that human beings are totally estranged from reality itself."<sup>[98]</sup> Unregenerate humans can know reality and know it truly, even if they fail to understand it fully. Van Til claims that rebellion is merely ethical, but we have provided evidence that Van Til believes there is a metaphysical component as well to the mental operations of the natural man.



Whether one agrees with my critical remarks about Van Til or not, one thing is clear: By arguing that the natural man is unable to think the things of God, Van Til denies the function of common grace for that purpose. This is made explicit by Van Til: “To be sure I do deny that this natural knowledge of God and of morality is the result of common grace.”<sup>[99]</sup> Instead, Van Til believes that all men, innately, have the knowledge of God. In this, he believes he is closely following Calvin. Elsewhere he states that his position is the consistently Reformed position: “For it is the essence of Romanism to argue with the non-believer on the ground of a supposedly neutral reason. No Reformed person could espouse such a position and then honestly claim that his position was uniquely Calvinistic.”<sup>[100]</sup> Yet it is far from obvious that Van Til’s claim to be the consistent Calvinist is true.<sup>[101]</sup> Calvin believed that all humans could *acquire* and *perceive* the knowledge of God and that there was common ground between believer and unbeliever.<sup>[102]</sup>

Van Til believes the opposite: in method, natural theology is useless because there is no common epistemological ground. He claims that the ideas of natural theology and common grace, “If they are used independently of Scripture in order by means of them to effect a common territory of quasi- or complete neutrality between those who believe in God and those who do not, they are apologetically worse than useless.”<sup>[103]</sup> But if the traditional arguments of natural theology do lead people to faith (not just belief) in God and are part of a process which ultimately leads them to faith in Christ, then Van Til’s claim that traditional natural theology is “apologetically worse than useless” is demonstrably false. The traditional method of apologetics proves itself to be a fact known from experience. Calvin’s view is contrary to Van Til, who concedes that “if the idea of a neutral territory does fairly represent the ‘traditional view,’ then I can only disagree with it.”<sup>[104]</sup> To this, we would agree with Van Til: he does not represent the traditional Reformed position.

What Van Til did not realize, however, is that, as a result of his position, he fails to offer a third way in the debate on common grace for the value of apologetics in reaching nonbelievers. He goes “off to the right by denying common grace” and thus, to his own extent, fails “to challenge the wisdom of the world.”<sup>[105]</sup> Ultimately, Van Til provides no third way

between Kuyper and Warfield. With regard to apologetic methodology, Van Til's anthropology is the same as Kuyper's anthropology.

If special revelation assumes that in consequence of sin the normal activity of the natural principium is disturbed, this implies of itself that the natural principium has lost its competency to judge. He who considers it possessed of this competency declares thereby *eo ipso* that it is still normal, and thus removes all *sufficient reason* for a special revelation. You must either deny it the right of judgment, or, if you grant it this right, the object disappears upon which judgment shall be passed.<sup>[106]</sup>

In Kuyper's apologetics methodology, if natural man retained any normalcy in his thought via general/natural revelation, special revelation would be unnecessary. Furthermore, "Since revelation was the acknowledged principium of the church, there seemed to be no common ground between the regenerate and the unregenerate, according to Kuyper,"<sup>[107]</sup> not even metaphysical ground.<sup>[108]</sup> He believed that apologetics was good for only two purposes: "In the first place to disqualify pseudo-theology from its *vitium originis*, which men come to adopt from the side of philosophy, and in the second place to maintain the principles which are inseparable from Dogma, as actually the only trustworthy ones to maintain, over against false principles of wayward Philosophy."<sup>[109]</sup> There would be, then, no purpose for apologetics in leading some to Christian theism, much less leading people to the knowledge of the Creator God. As Edgar and Oliphint observe, "Warfield contends that if Kuyper's classification and delineation of the task of apologetics is correct, then Christianity remains 'the great assumption.'"<sup>[110]</sup> It is no coincidence that Van Til's apologetic methodology ultimately falls in line with Kuyper's.

## Conclusion

Above, we argued that Van Til has an explicit contradiction in his methodology: he argues that it is both effective and ineffective for reasoning with the natural man. The natural man cannot reason about the things of God, Van Til argues. If the natural man rejects the existence of God and will not accept it as a conclusion, there is nothing that another human can say to convince him otherwise. This is why the Holy Spirit must

regenerate the natural man before he can understand *any* spiritual truths. Van Til makes categorically universal statements about unregenerate humans which, without noticing how he (less frequently) qualifies these statements, can be perplexing. This is perhaps one of the reasons why presuppositionalists claim Van Til is frequently misunderstood. Nevertheless, even apart from this claim, which is not implausible, Van Til's theological anthropology contains numerous non-sequiturs, fallacious inferences, and inconsistent remarks.

Moreover, why should we presuppose Van Til's interpretation of Scripture and consequent theological model to be correct? He advocates, "Herewith we are led back to the question of Scripture as identifying itself as the Word of God and of the system of truth set forth in Scripture as that in terms of which alone human experience in all of its aspects has meaning. The ideas of natural theology...and the idea of common grace...must themselves be interpreted in terms of this self-attesting Scripture."<sup>[111]</sup> Certainly we should agree with Van Til that the Scripture should clarify or guide us on the issues of natural theology, but Christians are not immune to making inaccurate conclusions. Thus, we ought to be open to recognizing that our interpretations of some passages of Scriptures could be mistaken. Sometimes it is our knowledge of natural theology which not only leads us somewhat to the knowledge of God, but may force us to reconsider our interpretations of Scripture.

*III:*  
**the place of autonomous human reason  
and logic in theology**

**John M. DePoe**

Autonomy is derived from two Greek words: *auto*, which means “self,” and *nomos*, which means “law” or “rule.” Hence, the common meaning of autonomy is to be self-ruled or self-governed—to think for oneself, rather than to accept the authority of others to decide what to believe or do. Autonomous reasoning is often associated with the notion of an individual taking personal responsibility for what he believes. Among apologists, one of the fundamental issues that decisively shapes the content and delivery of their messages is whether autonomous human reasoning is capable of seeking and finding truths about God. Should an apologist present evidence for Christianity in order to change the minds of unbelievers, or are appeals to reason inevitably futile given the unregenerate state of those who are lost? Opposing answers to this subject divide presuppositionalists and classical apologists (also referred to as “evidentialists” throughout this chapter). Presuppositionalists standardly reject the possibility that man in his fallen state can use reason appropriately to discover knowledge of God. Classical apologists believe that it is possible for unbelievers to discover truths about God through sound reasoning applied to a collection of evidence or facts. This chapter will make the case that the classical view on autonomous human reason is correct.

**PRESUPPOSITIONALISM      OPPOSED      TO      HUMAN  
AUTONOMY**

Cornelius Van Til takes aim at the role of autonomous human reason in his essay, “My Credo.” In spelling out his dissent with classical apologetics he writes, “[Classical apologetics] compromises the sinfulness of mankind resulting from the sin of Adam by not understanding man’s ethical depravity as extending to the whole of his life, even to his thoughts and

attitudes.”<sup>[112]</sup> Presuppositionalists are quick to remind their readers that the depravity of man is total, corrupting not only man’s will but also his mind and passions. “The natural man is in no position to pass judgment upon the reality and reliability of God’s special revelation at the tribunal of reason,” writes Greg Bahnsen in *Presuppositional Apologetics*. “His powers of appraisal are incompetent, his standards are distorted.”<sup>[113]</sup> The idea that man’s mind has been corrupted by the influences of sin is commonly referred to as the noetic effects of sin.<sup>[114]</sup>

Because the noetic effects of sin have corrupted human thinking, not only are humans no longer capable of rationally seeking and finding God, claim presuppositionalists, but it is a moral affront for human reason to judge whether the triune God exists or that the Bible is God’s Word. Van Til makes this point, once again, in “My Credo”:

On the traditional position the Word of God’s self-attesting characteristic, and there with its authority, is secondary to the authority of reason and experience. The Scriptures do not identify themselves, man identifies them and recognizes their “authority” only in terms of his own authority.<sup>[115]</sup>

In other words, presuppositionalists believe that to allow human reason to weigh the evidence in determining whether the Bible is God’s Word is to place man’s reason as an authority over God and His Word. Bahnsen informs his readers that to use any authority besides God’s “does not honor the greatness of divine wisdom,” and “it is foolishly and audaciously erected on the ruinous sands of human authority.”<sup>[116]</sup> Allowing human reason to stand in judgment of God, claim presuppositionalists, is completely inappropriate.

The presuppositionalist alternative to human autonomy is to begin with the authority of God’s Word. Rather than trusting in human reason, they say apologists must begin by presupposing the existence of the triune God and the Bible as His revealed Word. If one is looking to establish an apology for Christianity, it is apparent that presuppositionalism’s approach resembles circular reasoning. Even the advocates of presuppositionalism admit that their reasoning is circular,<sup>[117]</sup> however, they dismissively deflect the charges of circularity by maintaining that circularity is unavoidable when thinking about fundamental commitments.<sup>[118]</sup> Thus, the divide between

presuppositionalists and classical theists on human autonomy relates to the core differences in the two views. Classical apologists affirm the possibility that unregenerate human reason can examine the evidence and discover truths about God, while presuppositionalists resolutely deny the possibility of unbelievers coming to know these kinds of truths without presupposing them in the first place.

### **THREE POINTS IN DEFENSE OF AUTONOMOUS HUMAN REASON**

Presuppositionalism's stance on autonomous human reason may sound pious, but it is undeniably mistaken, as this essay will show. It is important to keep in mind that the presuppositionalist view is not that some unsaved people are incapable of using reason to seek and find truths about the triune God of the Bible. No, they are committed to the stronger thesis that no person in his unregenerate state is capable of using reason to discover these truths. Classical apologists have always recognized a range of limitations and difficulties for unbelievers to find the truth about God and His Word, but they believe that these challenges are not impossible to overcome in every case. To show the plausibility of the classical apologists' position, the use of autonomous human reason will be examined as it relates to the teachings of the Bible, how its denial is self-contradictory, and why it is practically inescapable in apologetics.

#### **The Bible and Autonomous Human Reason**

As previously mentioned, presuppositionalists commonly reject the use of autonomous human reasoning. They say that it is unfit for the task due to the noetic effects of sin as well as that it is inappropriate for man to stand in judgment of God. These claims may sound reverent, but what does God's Word say about using human reason to discern what to believe about Him and His Word?

Remarkably, the Bible itself regularly invites human discernment in thinking about God and His Word. In the Pentateuch, God sends Moses to Pharaoh's court with miraculous signs to confirm his message (Ex. 4:1–8). Through these signs, the magicians in Pharaoh's court come to know that

“This [Moses’s miracles] is the finger of God” (Ex. 8:19).<sup>[119]</sup> Elsewhere, Israel is instructed to test those who claim to speak for God (Deut. 18:21–22). The criterion of authenticity given in this passage is whether the prophet’s words come to pass or not. Notice the evidential nature of this judgment (contrary to a presuppositional one), and how it lays responsibility on individuals to determine whether the prophet is truly from God. The Old Testament regularly makes a case for Yahweh over idols by inviting the people of Israel to put them both to a test and then to allow people to judge based on the evidence. In one instance, Elijah goes head-to-head with the priests of Baal to show that Yahweh is real, and the other gods are not (1 Kings 18:20–45). Rather than distrusting human reasoning to discern what is true, the Bible records a straightforward appeal to evidence: “you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God” (vs. 24). The prophet Isaiah also invites people to employ evidential reasoning in thinking about the reality of God (Is. 41:21–29; 42:9; 44:6–8, 24–28; 46:10; 48:5, 14; 52:6). Here is one of Isaiah’s tests to judge the truth about God: “Who is like Me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen” (44:7). The underlying implication behind such tests is that people are capable of making these kinds of judgments on their own and that there are circumstances when relying on one’s own reason is entirely apposite.

The New Testament teaches that the exercise of human reason is appropriate and competent to draw conclusions about God and His Word. When John the Baptist’s disciples ask Jesus if He is the Messiah, he responds by performing miracles and telling them to testify to these miraculous deeds (Luke 7:18–23). When asked to give a sign, Jesus ironically tells the Pharisees they will receive no sign, except for the sign of Jonah, that is, His resurrection (Matt. 12:38–41). In the preaching of the early church, the resurrection is regularly given as evidence for believing that Jesus is the Messiah (e.g., Acts 2:22–24; 3:15; 4:10; 10:40; 13:30; etc.). When Paul presents the gospel to the Bereans, they respond by “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Apparently, the Bereans conducted an investigation to determine by their own



understanding whether the prophecies and teachings about Jesus were true, and their findings confirmed the message delivered by Paul. The most famous verses on natural theology, Psalm 19:1–6<sup>[120]</sup> and Romans 1:18–20, <sup>[121]</sup> also take for granted that one can reason from the evidence of the created world to its Creator. Noticeably absent from all of these passages is any censure for applying human reasoning in thinking about God and His Word, any command to submit to the authority of Scripture without reason, or any attempt to pry into presuppositions that may support different beliefs between believers and unbelievers. The general view given by the whole of Scripture confirms that there are times and places when it is appropriate and fruitful to point unbelievers to evidence and let them draw their own conclusions from it.

One last group of Bible passages to consider concerns invitations to all people to seek the Lord and promises that those who seek will find Him. Jeremiah 29:13 says, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” Proverbs 8:17 declares, “those who seek me diligently find me.” Jesus echoes these words in his teaching, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7). The invitation to seek is given to unbelievers with the subsequent promise that their seeking will end in finding. As further evidence that all people are able to seek and find, the Gospel of John describes Jesus as the “true light which gives light to *everyone*” (1:9, with added emphasis). The invitation to seek and the promise of finding would be perverse and unjust if these promises were extended without any capability of lost souls redeeming them. It is contrary to the character of God to extend promises in bad faith. Thus, from the fact that God extends to unbelievers an invitation to seek and find, it follows that they are able to do so.

Presuppositionalists will likely respond that other passages from Scripture show the shortcomings of the classical approach. Pharaoh, the prophets of Baal, and the Pharisees were given clear evidence about God, but they nonetheless failed to repent and believe. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that “The human heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.” Isn’t the classical apologist neglecting the noetic effects of sin and trusting human reason to accomplish a task it isn’t suited to complete?



The problem with this presuppositionalist response is that it takes one possible response from unbelievers and then treats it as if it is the only possible response that unbelievers can give when confronted with compelling evidence. Classical apologists have long recognized that unbelievers can fail to draw the proper conclusions from the available evidence due to their sinful pride and stubborn resistance to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Just because this is one common response to the evidence does not imply that this is the only response unbelievers can give in their fallen state. Sometimes when the unbeliever is confronted with incontrovertible evidence for Christianity, he reveals that his intellectual objections were a smokescreen to hide some other basis for rejecting Christ. Other times, evidence can convince an unbeliever to change his mind and believe the truth. In light of the general testimony of Scripture given above, it is clear that the Bible does not teach that the only response unbelievers can give is suppression and self-deceiving rationalization. In sum, the Bible itself affirms the use of evidential reasoning to evaluate God and His Word in many circumstances. There is no prohibition given in Scripture against the use of human reasoning, either because it is ineffectual in the unbeliever or it is inappropriate for humans to make intellectual judgments about God and His Word. To the contrary, the Bible encourages unbelievers to seek Him with the promise that they shall find Him.

### **Denying Autonomous Human Reason is Self-Contradictory**

Often the categorical rejection of human autonomy in reasoning is made on the grounds that one must have sound theology in place prior to exercising human reason. Without the proper starting point, presuppositionalists insist, the unfettered human mind cannot find truth. This line of reasoning has already been shown to be misguided from the teachings of Scripture, but there is a further reason why it must be mistaken. Autonomous reasoning cannot be rejected, because doing so is self-contradictory.

How is it self-contradictory to deny autonomous human reasoning and opt instead for starting with the right theological framework? It is self-contradictory because one must employ epistemic principles and exercise rational discernment in rejecting human autonomy. In other words,

presuppositionalists are asking people to draw the conclusion that they shouldn't draw their own conclusions. The very task of rejecting human autonomy must be initiated by an act of human autonomy. Therefore, there's no escaping the use of autonomous human reasoning.

Even if we ignore the glaring internal contradiction of the presuppositionalists' prescription, there is an additional problem with taking theology as the starting point for epistemology. Why start with a Protestant Christian theology, rather than Zen Buddhism or Sunni Muslim theology? Traditionally, Christians have held that there are good reasons for accepting Christian theology over these other traditions, which can rationally justify accepting it over the others. But to take a theological commitment as a starting point is to require people to embrace a theological framework in a baseless and arbitrary way—without any reasons. Logically prior to theology, then, there must be some exercise of autonomous human reason as a basis for accepting a given theological framework. Asking people to do otherwise is to invite them to make a blind leap into some theology, which is an even more radical and dangerous exercise of human autonomy since it is divorced from reason.

Even supposing that there is a non-arbitrary way to start with a Christian theological tradition, the complete rejection of autonomous human reasoning still cannot be avoided. After all, Christians will need to read their Bibles and study sound theology in order to establish the appropriate starting point for the rest of their thinking. But in order to do all of this, Christians will first need to rely upon epistemic principles related to sense perception, memory, rational judgment, and the like. To start with the Bible and theology is to rely on the autonomy of human reason in trusting the deliverances of one's own mind in learning what is taught from the Bible and some theological framework. Thus, once again, human autonomy cannot be completely circumvented.

By way of summary, then, autonomous human reasoning is unavoidable.<sup>[122]</sup> What presuppositionalists are asking people to do is self-contradictory. Effectively, they want people to use their reasoning to infer that they shouldn't use their reasoning. Rather than making God's Word a firm starting point for all thought, they make it into an arbitrary and

baseless leap. This does not honor God, nor does it provide a confident foundation for faithful followers of Christ.

### **The Practical Limits of Autonomous Human Reason**

The third point that bears upon the use of autonomous human reason pertains to the application and practice of apologetics. In its application and practice, autonomous human reason has played a significant role in bringing people to the knowledge of God and His Word. One place where this is evident is the dramatic conversion stories of skeptics who became convinced of the truth of Christianity by diligently examining the evidence, such as Simon Greenleaf, C. S. Lewis, Joshua McDowell, Holly Ordway, William Ramsay, Lee Strobel, J. Warner Wallace, and a myriad of others. When presuppositionalists deny that humans are capable of using reason to follow the evidence to the truth, they must also deny that these believers' conversion stories represent honest and sound reasoning.

Another practical point about the exercise of autonomous human reasoning is that apologetics in all of its forms makes an appeal to people's autonomous reasoning. Whether the apologetic approach is evidential or presuppositional, the apologist is always asking someone to change his mind about God based on reason. The presuppositionalist, for instance, may try to show the unbeliever that his secular worldview is incoherent in some important way, and therefore he ought to embrace the Christian worldview. Yet, this appeal is still directed toward the unbeliever's reason and asks him to change his mind. Even a transcendental argument is an argument, and the apologist who delivers it assumes the person who hears it is capable of drawing the intended conclusion. Rather than denouncing autonomous human reasoning, the whole task of apologetics depends upon it.

But why should apologists trust human reason generally? Isn't one of the supposed strengths of presuppositionalism that it acknowledges the total depravity of man, including the depravity of his reasoning? Here it may be helpful to consider the doctrine of "common grace."<sup>[123]</sup> Common grace is the doctrine that God has blessed all humans with unmerited gifts regardless of their moral standing before Him. Among the gifts regularly included in common grace are intellectual capacities. Christians have traditionally recognized that these intellectual capacities that are part of common grace explain how unbelievers are capable of knowing and discovering all kinds

of things, ranging from the mundane to the profound. Just as unbelievers are capable of using their intellectual capacities to know periods of ancient history, quantum physics, and non-Euclidean geometry, so too they can apply their reasoning to the extant evidence to know that Jesus Christ has fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and was raised from the dead. The basic epistemic principles that underwrite sound evidential reasoning—deductive logic, inductive logic, explanatory reasoning, methods of evaluating evidence, etc.—are among the things all people can know because of common grace. To claim that the intellectual capacities bestowed through common grace allow unbelievers to know all kinds of knowledge, but not the knowledge that God exists and has revealed Himself in the Bible, is both unnecessarily pessimistic and inconsistent. After all, the same basic principles of reasoning that can be applied to any historical investigation are the same ones that many classical apologists utilize in making a historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for instance.

Sometimes presuppositionalists draw a contrast between “human logic” and “God’s logic.” For instance, John Frame writes, “Human logic is fallible, even though God’s logic is infallible.”<sup>[124]</sup> Statements like this play on an ambiguity in the word “logic.” Logic in this context can mean either the formal principles of logic or a description of the way someone is reasoning. The principles of logic describe necessary truth-preserving inferences that apply to all possible worlds. Thus, it is a misnomer to distinguish human logic and divine logic used in this sense. There is only one true set of sound logical principles, and they apply impartially to both God and man.<sup>[125]</sup> Knowledge of these principles are part of what’s included with common grace. The second sense of logic, describing a way of reasoning, is indisputably recognized as fallible. It is commonly recognized that people make mistakes in reasoning, undervalue important pieces of evidence, and obstinately resist the relevant implications of the evidence that they are examining. The implications that this has for apologetics, however, is not to abandon or deprecate “human logic.” Rather, apologists must be vigilant in examining their reasoning and those of their interlocutors. The fact humans are fallible is a reminder to exercise humility, to examine the arguments others put forward fastidiously, and to tackle intellectual pursuits in community. Scripture states, “Iron sharpens

iron” (Prov. 27:17) and that a threefold cord is not as easily broken as a single or double strand (Eccl. 4:12). Apologists and scholars should follow these principles by relying on the fellowship of other Christians to encourage, criticize, and correct them to guard against mistakes in reasoning.

In sum, then, presuppositionalism’s dismissal of autonomous human reasoning is impractical. It must ignore or reject the many accounts of individuals who have accepted the truth of Christianity as a result of their intellectual endeavors. In practice, all apologetics must appeal to autonomous human reason, and thereby it cannot be avoided even in following the presuppositional method. Finally, presuppositionalism unnecessarily censures human reasoning when the doctrine of common grace permits a perspective that corresponds to what is commonly experienced. Once again, the presuppositionalist perspective on autonomous human reason has been tried, tested, and found wanting.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The case presented in this chapter has established that presuppositionalists’ denial of autonomous human reason fails. There are no biblical reasons to reject the autonomy of human reason, and there are unavoidable incoherencies that result from attempting to repudiate it. Indeed, the opposite is true—there is no way to avoid autonomous human reasoning.

Lest anyone conclude that this chapter affirms that humans are dispassionate logical calculators who will always respond to logic and evidence appropriately, it is wise to convey some final words about the effects of sin on man’s reason. After the fall of man, the effects of sin touch all aspects of his being, including his mind.<sup>[126]</sup> This fact cannot be ignored in the practice of apologetics. Many unbelievers are not interested in submitting their lives to Christ, nor are they particularly interested in truth for its own sake. Consequently, a strictly logical and evidential appeal will fail to move many people. Evidentialists have long noted that this general apathy concerning the truth is a moral failing. For example, Joseph Butler, the eighteenth-century divine stated, “The evidence of religion not appearing obvious may constitute one particular part of some men’s trial in

the religious sense: as it gives scope, for a virtuous exercise, or vicious neglect of their understanding, in examining or not examining into that evidence.”<sup>[127]</sup> Likewise, William Paley maintained that a man’s inquiry into the question of God is a task that tests virtuous character.<sup>[128]</sup> More recently, others have also acknowledged the moral dimension in pursuing the question of God.<sup>[129]</sup>

In practice, this means that some unbelievers have erected intellectual barriers as facades to cover the true motives for their unbelief. The task of the apologist is not only to remove these intellectual barriers but also to expose the true motives of unbelief. The work of apologetics is not merely to win arguments but to minister to the lost. Consequently, apologists would do well to develop a broader range of persuasive skills than logical argument by itself.<sup>[130]</sup>

*IV:*  
**The Structure of Knowledge  
in Classical Reformed Theology:  
Turretin and Hodge**

**Nathan Greeley**

IN HIS recent book *Thomas Aquinas*, the presuppositional apologist K. Scott Oliphint criticizes Aquinas for several alleged errors. These errors, he contends, make it impossible that the great medieval doctor's thought can be regarded as compatible with a consistently Reformed theology. The most fundamental of the problems that he calls attention to appears to be Aquinas's position on the existence of natural knowledge and its relation to revealed knowledge, or, in other words, Aquinas's understanding of the relation between philosophy and theology.<sup>[131]</sup> Oliphint is convinced that Aquinas badly misconstrues this relation, and thereby fails to properly understand the epistemological significance of special revelation; as such, Aquinas's thought suffers from a fatal, congenital flaw that makes it antithetical to Reformed theology.

Because he finds Aquinas's perspective so wrongheaded, Oliphint appears somewhat baffled and clearly dismayed that there are Reformed Christians today who have a high estimation of Aquinas and his contributions, particularly with respect to the very issue Oliphint flags as an egregious misstep on Aquinas's part. Without much historical perspective, it may be possible to take Oliphint's account of Aquinas's incompatibility with Reformed thought at face value, and thus to adopt his frowning puzzlement with respect to contemporary Reformed appropriations of Aquinas. Knowledge of the Reformed tradition, however, will likely lead to a different perspective on Oliphint's complaints. When consulting the history of the Reformed tradition that Oliphint claims to speak for, and examines the epistemological standpoint adopted by the vast majority of Reformed thinkers prior to the twentieth century, one sees that it is Oliphint and his presuppositional standpoint that are out of step with the mainstream of this tradition. In fact, as surprising as it might be for some who have been

influenced by Oliphint and his mentor Cornelius Van Til,<sup>[132]</sup> virtually all earlier Reformed theologians held views on the relationship between natural and revealed knowledge that largely echo Aquinas'—views, it might be added, which are noticeably incongruent with Oliphint's own tenets.

Historical Reformed theology thus has some bearing on understanding the significance and assessing the legitimacy of Oliphint's critique of Aquinas. The purpose of the present article is to offer a conspectus of the main characteristics of the classical Reformed understanding of the relationship between natural knowledge and revealed knowledge. Doing so will not suffice to refute Oliphint's presuppositional epistemology, for such an effort would require other considerations than the historical ones that are the primary focus of the present essay. But it will call into question his repeated assertions that Reformed theology is deeply incongruous with Aquinas's epistemology, since, as mentioned, the classical Reformed view is much closer to that of Aquinas than that of Oliphint.

One could profitably consult a great many figures from the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries to establish the basic shape of this classical understanding. Of those eminent theologians who wrote incisively on this topic, however, arguably none are greater than the Genevan theologian Francis Turretin (1623–1687) and the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge (1797–1878). Both were among the best and most influential Reformed thinkers of their times, both sought to uphold the consensus of orthodox divines, and both wrote a significant amount of material answering epistemological questions. Examining the writings of Turretin and Hodge will, therefore, substantiate the claim that Oliphint's critique of Aquinas, far from defending the Reformed faith against an alien Thomistic influence, is only evidence that Oliphint's epistemological position is a departure from the historic mainstream of his own tradition.<sup>[133]</sup>

In the first part of this essay I will establish what Oliphint takes to be the most important points of difference between Aquinas and a consistently Reformed position on the question of natural knowledge and revealed knowledge, or philosophy and theology. I will then sketch the salient views of Turretin and Hodge, which are in fundamental agreement with each other. In a final section, I will briefly compare the position of Turretin and Hodge with that of Aquinas, and comment on how Oliphint's critique of



Aquinas inadvertently establishes his distance from Turretin, Hodge, and the mainstream of the classical Reformed tradition.<sup>[134]</sup>

## OLIPHINT ON THE STRUCTURE OF KNOWLEDGE IN AQUINAS

In examining Aquinas's thought, Oliphint appears to be most concerned with what he takes to be the epistemological starting point of Aquinas's thought—Aquinas's "*principium cognoscendi*," as he chooses to put it. Though he also discusses aspects of Aquinas's metaphysics in *Thomas Aquinas*, particularly in the latter half of the book, it appears evident that, for Oliphint, epistemological questions have a methodological priority and hence are of chief importance.<sup>[135]</sup> Aquinas's errors, from Oliphint's presuppositional standpoint, are first and foremost due to the medieval theologian's faulty epistemological views.

Oliphint first notes that, for Aquinas, there is a twofold division in the objects of human knowledge: on the one hand there are those things which can be known through the use of our natural powers, and on the other there are those which can be known only on the basis of divine testimony (i.e., special revelation).<sup>[136]</sup> Having possible knowledge of the former objects is, according to Aquinas, always prior to our attaining actual knowledge of the latter. He also holds that what can potentially be known through the use of our natural powers is not restricted to created things, but also extends, by means of these objects, to God's existence and some of his attributes. Hence any person with sufficient intellectual resources can know, through reflecting upon creation, that God exists and that He is simple, immutable, eternal, and so forth. Aquinas writes that "from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God *whether He exists*, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him."<sup>[137]</sup>

For Oliphint, this epistemological picture is deeply mistaken, for it fails to sufficiently highlight the dynamic established by the noetic effects of human depravity and the counter-effects of spiritual regeneration.<sup>[138]</sup> Human knowledge, on Aquinas's account, appears to be largely unaffected

by any explicit theological considerations.<sup>[139]</sup> “The traditional Roman [Catholic] and Thomist view,” Oliphint asserts, “has been that philosophy enjoys an autonomy from theology, as it takes its place outside of the realm of theology. Though philosophy is unable to grasp some of the deepest truths of theology, it can, in and of itself, grasp much truth about God and his character.”<sup>[140]</sup> Indebted to pagan thought more than the Bible, this picture fails to acknowledge the all-important effects of human depravity and regeneration. As such, Aquinas’s point of view rests on a false, overly sanguine anthropology that makes it nigh worthless, and which leads him to put forward an account of the human epistemological situation that must be rejected by any truly biblical thinker.

Oliphint therefore refuses to accept Aquinas’s assertion that fallen human beings can, through sufficient intellectual industry, attain a true knowledge of divine things. Even more significantly, he holds that Aquinas construes the relationship between our potential knowledge of creatures and our knowledge attained on the basis of divine testimony in a way that is opposed to the truth. For Aquinas holds that philosophy, as it derives from natural human powers, has a certain natural priority to theology, based as it is on divine testimony. As such, he claims that philosophical inquiry can discover truths by the use of these powers without the assistance of theology or revealed knowledge. Indeed, on Aquinas’s view, if human knowers lacked these basic powers, they would be unable to acquire any knowledge, including that granted by revelation. He thus writes that “faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected.”<sup>[141]</sup> On the contrary, Oliphint alleges that we can only have true knowledge of anything after we have accepted whatever divine testimony has to say about it. He doesn’t deny that our powers operate without affirming such testimony, but he believes that we must acknowledge and believe this testimony before we can properly conceive and state any truths about God and His creatures. Rather than the crediting of revelation presupposing natural capacities for knowledge, it is instead the case that knowledge of all kinds presupposes belief in revelation. Grace therefore does not presuppose nature, for there can be no genuine knowledge of nature prior to grace.<sup>[142]</sup>

This way of conceiving matters has the consequence that there is an epistemological divide or antithesis between those who have been enabled by the Holy Spirit to credit divine testimony and those who have not.<sup>[143]</sup> Only those who have credited this testimony are able to interpret or conceive of potential objects of knowledge correctly (by understanding them in relation to their creator) and hence to know truths about them. Those who have not accepted this testimony are in the position of not really having genuine knowledge about anything.<sup>[144]</sup> At most, such people have a kind of pragmatic knowledge; they have a mode of knowledge which interprets created objects in relation to our fallen modes of thinking and willing, but which therefore fails to understand what these things truly are.<sup>[145]</sup> With respect to having knowledge of God, however, all that is possible for the unregenerate is “to produce an idol, a god of our own imaginings.”<sup>[146]</sup> Such “knowledge,” wholly distorted and corrupted as it is, is not in any way useful or beneficial, but only serves to deepen the culpability of the unregenerate.

This way of thinking about matters appears to have the result of giving theology all honor and legitimacy at the expense of philosophy considered as merely human wisdom, which ceases to have any legitimacy at all. The unredeemed do not have anything that can be called knowledge without significant qualification, for nothing can be understood truly apart from knowledge of the true God, and such knowledge is solely the possession of the regenerate.<sup>[147]</sup> It is unsurprising that many Reformed Christians find this denial that grace presupposes nature quite appealing, since it appears to offer a much more “theocentric” picture of human knowledge than that set forth by Aquinas. However, as already mentioned, it is not the view that one finds in virtually all earlier exponents of Reformed theology. As will be made clear in the remainder of this essay, earlier thinkers held to a position that has a structural resemblance to that of Aquinas, and, as will be discussed, they believed that there are good reasons for affirming such a position.

## **TURRETIN ON THE STRUCTURE OF KNOWLEDGE**

Two of the most noteworthy theologians who held to this older view were Francis Turretin and Charles Hodge. Turretin’s views are well

expressed in his magnum opus, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Early in this massive work, Turretin signals that his epistemological orientation is significantly different from that put forward by Oliphint. He writes:

it is not repugnant that one and the same thing in a different relation should both be known by the light of nature and believed by the light of faith; as what is gathered from the one only obscurely, may be held more certainly from the other. Thus we know that God is, both from nature and from faith (Heb. 11:6); from the former obscurely, but from the latter more surely. The special knowledge of true faith (by which believers please God and have access to him, of which Paul speaks), does not exclude, but supposes general knowledge from nature. <sup>[148]</sup>

Here Turretin provides what one could regard as a condensed statement of his entire understanding of the relation of natural and revealed knowledge. In the remainder of this section, I will attempt to unfold what I take to be the most salient points implied in it.

It is especially important to note Turretin's assertions that some things can be known by means of both natural human powers and from divine testimony, and that knowledge arrived at through faith in this testimony presupposes a prior knowledge derived from nature. In both cases, the importance and efficacy of these powers is acknowledged. He affirms that, due to these powers, there are truths or principles known by the light of nature and thus common to all men, and he asserts that it is upon these principles that "supernatural theology is built."<sup>[149]</sup> Such principles have a twofold importance with respect to theological matters. On the one hand, they allow for the possibility of natural theology and the knowledge, even among the unregenerate, "that there is a God" and "that he must be worshipped, etc."<sup>[150]</sup> On the other hand, they are prerequisite for grasping and assenting to the divine testimony made known in special revelation.

It was seen above that Oliphint is of the view that any reasoning performed by the unregenerate in an attempt to acquire knowledge of God will terminate in idolatry, and hence that it is not only worthless but downright pernicious. Turretin, however, has a more generous estimation of the import of what can be discovered about God by the use of one's natural powers. He writes that natural knowledge of God

has various ends and uses: (1) as a witness of the goodness of God towards sinners unworthy even of these remains of light (Acts 14:16, 17; Jn. 1:5); (2) as a bond of external discipline among men to prevent the world from becoming utterly corrupt (Rom. 2:14, 15); (3) as a subjective condition in man for the admission of the light of grace because God does not appeal to brutes and stocks, but to rational creatures; (4) as an incitement to the search for this more illustrious revelation (Acts 14:27); (5) to render men inexcusable (Rom. 1:20) both in this life, in the judgment of an accusing conscience (Rom. 2:15) and, in the future life, in the judgement which God will judge concerning the secrets of men (Rom. 2:16).<sup>[151]</sup>

The number of noteworthy functions that Turretin mentions makes it clear that natural knowledge of God is in his view pertinent to the entire fabric of Christian theology. Of particular interest for determining his understanding of the nature of the knowledge possessed by unregenerate men are the third and fourth functions mentioned. The former affirms that the possession of natural powers capable of attaining knowledge is a necessary condition of the saving reception of divine testimony. The latter is salient because it appears evident that natural knowledge could only serve as such an incitement if it were genuine so far as it goes. If natural knowledge of God was entirely non-existent among unregenerate men in any form except that of gross idolatry, then it is impossible to see how this knowledge could serve to inspire the search after God as He is known through special revelation. Turretin confirms this judgment when he asserts that, through employing powers natural to mankind to reflect on God's "works of nature and providence," God "might be known and distinguished from idols."<sup>[152]</sup> Clearly if such powers have the potential to provide knowledge sufficient to distinguish the creator from entirely false notions of deity, then such knowledge must be genuine, at least to some extent. It cannot be doubted that Turretin would affirm that Jews, Muslims, and many other non-Christians know some truths about God, even though they reject the special revelation necessary to worship him properly and be in his favor.

Additional evidence that Turretin holds that the natural powers of the unregenerate are capable of discovering truth about God is found in his teaching that atheists may be moved from their position by means of

philosophical reason. “By the principles of reason,” he writes, “the prejudices against the Christian religion drawn from corrupt reason may be removed.”<sup>[153]</sup> He also states that philosophy “serves as a means of convincing the Gentiles and preparing them for the Christian faith.”<sup>[154]</sup> All of these remarks suffice to prove that, for Turretin, the attainment of genuine knowledge by the unregenerate is doubtless possible; the unregenerate, therefore, can at least occasionally lay legitimate claim to possess more than the mere semblance of knowledge that Oliphant regards as being within their grasp.<sup>[155]</sup>

The discussion up to this point may leave one with the impression that Turretin has little criticism of the natural powers of postlapsarian humanity, and therefore that he does not attribute any significant noetic effects to sin. Such an appraisal of human powers, if it existed in his thought, would indeed be difficult to square with a biblically faithful and consistent articulation of Reformed Christianity. However, there is no incongruence, because there is no undue confidence placed in such powers. Not only is human reason inherently and necessarily unable to comprehend all truths due to its finitude, but it is also contingently vitiated by sin. Turretin writes that

we readily grant that there are things which far surpass the comprehension not only of men, but even of angels, the disclosure of which was a work of supernatural revelation. We also grant that reason is not only incapable of discovering them without revelation; not only weak in comprehending them after being revealed; but also slippery and fallible (readily pursuing falsehood for truth and truth for falsehood), and never believing the word of God and its mysteries unless enlightened by the grace of the Spirit.<sup>[156]</sup>

Later in the *Institutes* he writes that original sin

corrupts not only the inferior part of the soul (or the sensitive, *to aisthetikon*), as the papists wish (for the purpose of favoring free will), but also the superior part (or the logical [*to logikon*], to wit, the intellect and the will). Hence blindness and ignorance of mind, rebellion and contumacy are attributed to the will, and the whole man is to be said to be altogether corrupt, so that he can neither know any



truth nor do any good and so needs regeneration and sanctification, as to both parts of himself. [\[157\]](#)

This last passage makes it especially clear that reason's limits and faults must not be downplayed so as to suggest that special revelation and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit is superfluous or unnecessary. Turretin even goes so far as to say that the unregenerate cannot know any truth, which *prima facie* might appear to echo Oliphint's position. In context, however, it is clear that he is referring to spiritual truths and the ultimate significance of mundane truths—not to knowledge *tout court*.

The truth, for Turretin, is that both the enervation and the remaining efficacy of natural powers must be maintained and held in tension. He believes that it would be entirely wrong to exaggerate the faults of human natural powers to the point of removing them altogether. This is made clear when he discusses the doctrine that man is made in the image of God. Insofar as this image refers to man having intellect, will, and liberty, Turretin regards it as essential to man. As such, it cannot be lost without the loss of humanity itself. Insofar, however, as the image refers to man's original righteousness and holiness, it is accidental, and can be lost with no change to his essence or substance. It is not absurd, he avers, "that the image should be partly lost and partly conserved, and that in the same subject there is the image of God and of the Devil in different respects (*kat' allo kai allo*). The former, indeed, in the essence of the soul and in the gifts remaining after the fall; the latter, however, in depravity and pollution." [\[158\]](#)

Turretin elaborates on what he takes this essential image to be, and what its implications are with respect to human knowledge, when he writes that

although the human understanding is very dark, yet there still remains in it some rays of natural light and certain first principles, the truth of which is unquestionable: such as, the whole is greater than the part, an effect supposes a cause, to be and not be at the same time are incompatible (*asystatous*), etc. If this were not the case, there could be no science, nor art, nor certainty in the nature of things. These first principles are true not only in nature, but also in grace and the mysteries of faith. Faith, so far from destroying, on the contrary borrows them from reason and uses them to strengthen its own

doctrines. Although reason and faith are of different classes (the one natural, the other supernatural), they are not however opposed, but hold a certain relation and are subordinate to each other. Reason is perfected by faith and faith supposes reason, upon which to found the mysteries of grace. [\[159\]](#)

This passage provides great help in establishing with certainty what Turretin believes about our natural powers. A few points warrant particular notice. The first is that, although the human understanding is “very dark,” it is not darkened to such an extent that it does not deserve to be called understanding. There are powers and capacities that remain in fallen humanity, and if they did not, then none of the activities that we take to be characteristic of mankind (viz., the development of the sciences and arts), would be possible. The very fact that sciences and arts exist (sometimes in highly developed forms) among non-Christians provides an argument as strong as one could want for the reality and genuineness of human knowledge, even in the unregenerate.

Another position worth noting is that Turretin does not posit any opposition between reason, insofar as it is constitutive of the essential image, and faith. These are simply two modes of knowing that are distinguished by the nature of their objects—the former mode corresponds to those truths that can be discovered and affirmed on the basis of natural human powers, the latter corresponds to those that are given through divine testimony and accepted due to the work of the Holy Spirit. In no case are these modes of knowing, with their corresponding truths, in any real conflict, nor can they be, since God is the ultimate author of both. Turretin affirms that

[a]lthough every truth cannot be demonstrated by reason (the boundaries of truth being much more widely extended than those of reason), yet no lie against the truth can be sheltered under the protection of true reason, nor can one truth be destroyed by another (although one may transcend and surpass the other) because whatever the one may be—whether below, according to or above reason, and apprehended by the senses, the intellect or faith—it has come from no other source than God, the parent of truth. [\[160\]](#)



In another place he writes that “although theology teaches many things which philosophy knows not, it does not follow that a thing may be false in philosophy that is true in theology because truth is not at variance with truth, nor is light opposed to light.”<sup>[161]</sup>

Reason, therefore, is perfected by faith in the sense that faith grants knowledge that is unobtainable by reason alone. Yet, as has been shown, faith supposes reason in the sense that there must be natural powers of understanding in man if there is to be any grasping of those truths made available to faith. Testimony of any kind cannot be delivered to him who has no capacity to understand it. Turretin affirms that though natural powers, due to their limitations, can have no legitimate role in standing in judgment over the truths revealed through divine testimony, they rightly have the tasks of defending, embracing, contending for, and adorning such truths.<sup>[162]</sup> Philosophy, in other words, has the potential to confirm and clarify the content of revealed knowledge, though it has no business attempting to repudiate it.<sup>[163]</sup>

In sum, Turretin’s account of the structure of knowledge combines two noteworthy features, both of which, he believes, express important elements of the truth. One is his view that natural knowledge is not and cannot be sufficient for finite, fallen human beings. Left to rely on his own powers, no one would have knowledge of God sufficient for salvation. Knowledge of several objects requisite to salvation is only made available through divine testimony, and only accepted through the empowering witness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>[164]</sup> Just as important, however, is the truth that finite, fallen human beings cannot be bereft of the capacity for genuine natural knowledge if they are to receive divine testimony and be converted. To assent to divine testimony requires the ability to reason and distinguish truth from falsehood. Those who were lacking all such capacity could never acknowledge any testimony of any kind. Because of this, the efficacy of human natural powers, even in the unregenerate, must be admitted, albeit with the qualifications mentioned above. It makes perfect sense to say, on Turretin’s view, that “grace does not destroy nature, but makes it perfect. Nor does the supernatural revelation abrogate the natural, but makes it sure.”<sup>[165]</sup>

As will be seen in the next section, this basic structure reappears even more conspicuously in the writings of the great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge.

### **HODGE ON THE STRUCTURE OF KNOWLEDGE**

The most important source for establishing what Hodge believes about the structure of human knowledge is his three-volume *Systematic Theology*. Though he also makes remarks in his essays and commentaries that contribute to understanding his views, the *Systematic Theology* presents a clear and quite thorough account of the existence and nature of natural knowledge and how it is to be properly related to revealed knowledge.

At the start it should be noted that key elements of Hodge's position are borrowed from the doctrines of Scottish common sense philosophy, which was highly regarded in American colleges and seminaries throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>[166]</sup> One of the most important teachings of this philosophy is that all human beings are created by God to recognize certain propositions as self-evidently true. These are propositions that are not capable of being proven by means of inference or successfully confuted, since they are more indubitable than any premises from which they could conceivably be either inferred or disproven. As such they rest at the basis of all our reasonings as the immovable foundations of our knowledge. God creates human beings with these "laws of belief" to ensure that they will have knowledge of certain fundamental principles upon which their knowledge of other truths can be erected. Without an innate and immutable respect for these principles, nothing could be taken for granted, and hence no conclusion could ever be established. Skepticism would be the inescapable result. Having such a foundation is thus necessary if human beings are to be capable of obtaining justified beliefs about anything, including God's revelation to mankind. Examples of such principles include the truths that one's thoughts are the thoughts of a mind or soul, that memory and the senses are generally reliable, and that the powers by which we make judgments about truth and error are not fallacious.<sup>[167]</sup> To put the matter succinctly, the writings of the common sense philosophers teach that human beings are intended and designed by the creator to be knowers, and this is an essential and irrevocable part of what makes them human.<sup>[168]</sup>

An additional, yet related element that Hodge takes over from these philosophers is the importance of employing an inductive method in order to ensure that one's theories are solidly grounded on objective and observable facts. He holds that such a method, because it eschews groundless and unverifiable speculations, is the most reliable means of inquiry available. Whereas in natural science one would employ such a method with respect to the facts of the physical world, and in moral philosophy with respect to the facts of mental phenomena, in theology one must use it with respect to the facts communicated in Holy Scripture. The only thing needed to fruitfully employ such a method in any of these areas of inquiry is to assume the objective truth of the common sense principles just mentioned. In natural science, this means that one must take it for granted that our senses and mental operations are reliable and that the ordering of all causes and effects is intelligible. In the realm of theology, the inquirer must likewise "assume the validity of those laws of belief which God has impressed upon our nature," but here additional principles play a part as well.<sup>[169]</sup> Hodge mentions "the essential distinction between right and wrong; that nothing contrary to virtue can be enjoined by God; that it cannot be right to do evil that good may come; that sin deserves punishment, and other similar first truths, which God has implanted in the constitution of all moral beings, and which no objective revelation can possibly contradict."<sup>[170]</sup>

Hodge believes that special revelation will never contain anything that contradicts these principles because both have a common source, namely God. In fact, the truth of such principles is corroborated by the authors of the Bible, who clearly take them for granted in their inspired texts. Hodge writes that "all truth must be consistent, God cannot contradict himself. He cannot force us by the constitution of the nature which he has given us to believe one thing, and in his Word command us to believe the opposite... All the truths taught by the constitution of our nature or by religious experience are recognized and authenticated in the Scriptures."<sup>[171]</sup>

This consistency is also reflected in the manner in which testimony about the nature and existence of God as found in Holy Scripture in no way contradicts or undermines what can be discovered about these things by

means of reflection on creation—i.e. by natural theology. Since the Bible, Hodge asserts,

contains one class of facts or truths which are not elsewhere revealed, and another class which, although more clearly made known in the Scriptures than anywhere else, are, nevertheless, so far revealed in nature as to be deducible therefrom, theology is properly distinguished as natural and revealed. The former is concerned with the facts of nature so far as they reveal God and our relation to him, and the latter with the facts of Scripture. This distinction, which, in one view is important, in another is of little consequence, inasmuch as all that nature teaches concerning God and our duties, is more fully and authoritatively revealed in his Word.<sup>[172]</sup>

Hodge thus readily acknowledges the possibility of natural knowledge of God while maintaining the orthodox conviction that Holy Scripture reveals truths concerning which there can be no natural knowledge. He insists that “the Bible reveals truths of the highest order, not elsewhere made known. Truths which meet the most urgent necessities of our nature; which solve the problems which reason has never been able to solve.”<sup>[173]</sup> Most importantly, he asserts, it answers the questions “How can man be just with God? or, How can God be just and yet justify the ungodly?”<sup>[174]</sup> But as already noted, these answers, though above the reach of valid reasoning premised on common sense principles, cannot be opposed to or inconsistent with it.

It is also evident from what Hodge writes that he holds that common sense principles, and beliefs that are justly inferred on the basis of them, constitute genuine knowledge, even in the unregenerate. He is adamant that the unregenerate cannot be deprived of their powers to acquire genuine knowledge, for he holds that they belong to human nature as such. In this connection he, like Turretin, invokes the notion that man is made in the image of God, and distinguishes between the essential aspects of this image and its accidental aspects. Those natural powers by which knowledge is attainable belong to the essential image, and as such they cannot be lost without humanity as such ceasing to exist.<sup>[175]</sup> “Reason,” Hodge claims, “is in such a sense natural to man that without it he ceases to be a man.”<sup>[176]</sup>

This does not mean that he has no place for the traditional Protestant position that mankind's natural powers have been adversely affected by the fall. He affirms that "our cognitive, as well as our emotional nature is involved in the depravity consequent upon our apostasy from God," and hence "in knowing as well as in loving or willing, we are under the influence and dominion of sin."<sup>[177]</sup> But he believes it is important to distinguish in what respects these powers remain operational in the unregenerate and in what respects they are wholly dysfunctional. He writes that

when the Scriptures declare that men are spiritually dead they do not deny to them physical, intellectual, social, or moral life. They admit that the objects of sense, the truths of reason, our social relations and moral obligations, are more or less adequately apprehended; these do not fail to awaken feeling and excite action. But there is a higher class of objects than these, what the Bible calls "the things of God," "the things of the Spirit," "the things pertaining to salvation." These things, although intellectually apprehended as presented to our cognitive faculties, are not spiritually discerned by the unrenewed man.<sup>[178]</sup>

The dysfunction is thus only thoroughgoing with respect to one's ability to acknowledge or believe those things which are inseparable from salvation. With respect to things not immediately implicated in such matters, he believes that "God has so constituted our nature, that we are authorized and necessitated to confide in the well-authenticated testimony of our senses, within their appropriate sphere. And in like manner, we are constrained to confide in the operation of our minds and in the conclusions to which they lead, within the sphere that God has assigned to human reason."<sup>[179]</sup> Thus, if the unregenerate properly exercise their God-given powers in connection with objects of knowledge which are not inseparably related to faith, genuine knowledge is, by God's design, the natural result. Such things can include, in Hodge's view, truths about the existence and nature of God, and moral facts.

Though Hodge, like Turretin, was not writing in a context in which anyone denied the possibility of genuine natural knowledge apart from revealed testimony, he makes it incontrovertible that he would not condone

such a view by the roles that he assigns to human natural powers with regard to revelation. "In the first place," he writes,

reason is necessarily presupposed in every revelation. Revelation is the communication of truth to the mind. But the communication of truth supposes the capacity to receive it... Truths, to be received as objects of faith, must be intellectually apprehended. A proposition, to which we attach no meaning, however important the truth it may contain, cannot be an object of faith. If it be affirmed that the soul is immortal, or God is a spirit, unless we know the meaning of the words nothing is communicated to the mind, and the mind can affirm or deny nothing on the subject. In other words, knowledge is essential to faith. In believing we affirm the truth of the proposition believed. But we can affirm nothing of which we know nothing. The first and indispensable office of reason, therefore, in matters of faith, is the cognition, or intelligent apprehension of the truths proposed for our reception. [\[180\]](#)

In other words, the operation of reason, Hodge holds, is necessarily prerequisite to understanding and assenting to the objects of revealed knowledge. He sees that if it were impossible to rightly conceive of any truths in an unregenerate state (as Oliphant holds) then one would never be in a position to assent to revealed truths and thus become regenerate. As such, human reason must be capable of arriving at genuine knowledge in its own right, prior to becoming familiar with the objects of revealed knowledge, for otherwise it could be of no use with respect to them, and all people would remain incapable of discerning the meaning of them and therefore of affirming their truth.

A second office that Hodge grants to reason is the necessity of judging the credibility of a supposed revelation. By this he means simply whether or not a revelation is a possible object of belief as opposed to that which it is impossible to believe. The latter, he claims, is to be said of such things as that which involves an evident contradiction, that which implicates God in wrongdoing, that which is in clear conflict with the laws of belief that God has implanted in mankind, and that which is inconsistent with well-established truths of any kind. Any alleged revelation marked by such difficulties can be seen by means of our natural powers to be absurd, and

Hodge avers that as such we not only have a right to refuse to believe it, but that we would have no ability to believe it in any case.<sup>[181]</sup> Since Hodge gives this prerogative, with respect to revelation, to these powers, and since it is obvious that to judge correctly of impossibility requires that one rightly conceive of things, it is evident that making judgments about impossibility presupposes genuine knowledge. It is likewise evident that he holds that our natural powers are capable of attaining such knowledge in independence of any special revelation, and moreover that one must be in prior possession of it to justifiably assenting to any putative revelation. In this connection, Hodge insists that

we can neither believe nor know anything unless we confide in those laws of belief which God has implanted in our nature. If we can be required to believe what contradicts these laws, then the foundations are broken up. All distinction between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong, would disappear...We are to try the spirits. But how can we try them without a standard? And what other standard can there be, except the laws of our nature and the *authenticated* revelations of God.<sup>[182]</sup>

In this passage he makes it very clear that our standard for judging what is possible must be the nature that God has given us and the knowledge that it makes possible. We cannot justifiably commence with special revelation, since it lacks the self-evidence that common sense principles possess for us. To put special revelation first is to start with what is less known and use it to validate what is more known—an obvious fallacy.

One additional role that Hodge grants to reason must be mentioned. This is that “reason must judge of the evidence by which a revelation is supported.”<sup>[183]</sup> For the acceptance of any purported revelation, salient evidence must be available, and such as is sufficient “to command assent in every well-constituted mind to which it is presented.”<sup>[184]</sup> Hodge points out that in the biblical writings, it is always supposed that belief is inseparable from evidence.<sup>[185]</sup> In fact, without this connection, unbelief would lose its sinful character, since it would be identifiable with simple ignorance, and not the intentional and culpable denial of that which should be conspicuous.<sup>[186]</sup> It is clear that if revelation is to be assessed in this way, then Hodge (in apparent agreement with the Bible) must hold that human natural powers,



even in an unregenerate state, are in principle capable of evaluating evidence in such a way as to successfully distinguish those instances of putative divine testimony that command assent from those which do not. This would likewise demand that such powers are able to produce examples of genuine knowledge, since knowledge is presupposed in any assessment of plausibility.

Hodge offers a summation of his position on the uses of our natural powers in relation to special revelation when he writes that “God requires nothing irrational of his rational creatures. He does not require faith without knowledge, or faith in the impossible, or faith without evidence.”<sup>[187]</sup> Faith in divine testimony is, in other words, always attended by that which belongs to the province of nature, and what belongs to this province must, by the very nature of the case, have priority to this testimony, since the proffering of testimony in every case presupposes certain conditions of its reception that must obtain if the testimony is to be understood and justifiably accepted. It might be objected by Oliphint and other followers of Van Til that these conditions can in fact only be met by the power of the Holy Spirit accompanying and working through special revelation, and thus that nature is not in fact necessarily prior to the perfecting of knowers by grace. Hodge, however, would likely claim that this would remove any means of distinguishing between a justified belief in a true revelation and a baseless commitment to a false one. Since he holds that in the Bible faith is always related to evidence, he would find this position untenable.

Hodge’s faith in the efficacy and importance of human natural powers is further demonstrated when he explicitly takes up the topics of the nature of philosophy and the natural sciences, and their relation to theology. Philosophy and theology, he claims, seek “knowledge of the same truths,” but “their methods are essentially different.”<sup>[188]</sup> The former depends primarily on the acuteness of our natural powers, whereas the latter is founded on divine testimony as apprehended by these powers. Though different, both methods are wholly legitimate ways of arriving at knowledge. With respect to our natural powers, he writes that “Christians do not deny that our senses and reason are reliable informants; that they enable us to arrive at certainty as to what lies in their proper sphere.”<sup>[189]</sup> Because of their reliability, and the fact that both our natural powers and



divine testimony have the same ultimate source, Hodge does not hesitate to assert that the Holy Scriptures cannot in principle contradict the genuine truths discovered by philosophy and natural science.<sup>[190]</sup> Philosophy and science, he claims, “have a large and important sphere of investigation. It is admitted that with that sphere they are entitled to the greatest deference. It is cheerfully conceded that they have accomplished much, not only as means of mental discipline, but in the enlargement of the sphere of human knowledge, and in promoting the refinement and well-being of men.”<sup>[191]</sup>

Hodge clearly does not intend his comments to refer only to the inquiries of Christian philosophers or Christian scientists who have been enlightened by the knowledge of biblical revelation; for him, the starting point of these methods of inquiry is not special revelation, but those laws of belief that God has universally impressed upon human nature. He emphasizes the importance of these laws for securing the human epistemological situation, when he writes with particular reference to our power of sense perception that

confidence in the well-authenticated testimony of our senses, is one of those laws of belief which God has impressed upon our nature; from the authority of those laws it is impossible that we should emancipate ourselves. Confidence in our senses is, therefore, one form of confidence in God. It supposes him to have placed us under the necessity of error, to assume that we cannot safely trust the guides in which, by a law of our nature, he constrains us to confide. All ground of certainty in matters either of faith or knowledge, is destroyed, if confidence in the laws of our nature be abandoned. Nothing is then possible but absolute skepticism. We, in that case, cannot know that we ourselves exist or that the world exists, or that there is a God, a moral law, or any responsibility for character or conduct.<sup>[192]</sup>

It should be pointed out that, if knowledge of these things named would be impossible without confidence that our natural powers are reliable and conducive to forming true beliefs, knowledge of divine testimony would likewise be impossible. Hence, to attain any of these items of knowledge, one must presuppose the possession of natural powers capable of discovering truth and furnishing genuine knowledge. Nature and its works,

in other words, form a necessary prerequisite for receiving the testimony by which grace is obtained.

It might be objected that Hodge, by insisting on the efficacy of human natural powers, has portrayed nature as if it possesses some sort of independence from God, and can be conceived as an ultimate epistemological starting point. This, however, would be to misconstrue his position. Since he holds that God formed nature and gave it the capacities it has, the indubitable beliefs impressed on human nature, which ensure that humans have some genuine knowledge, can only be regarded as forming a derivative and ancillary starting point. Hodge writes: “that our senses do not deceive us; that consciousness is trustworthy in what it teaches; that anything is what it appears to be; that our existence is not a delusive dream, has no other foundation than the truth of God. In this sense all knowledge is founded on faith, i.e., the belief that God is true.”<sup>[193]</sup> Indeed, in Hodge’s view, to posit nature as something opposed to or irrelevant to what grace makes possible would be to fundamentally misunderstand nature, for nature itself, even after the fall, is necessarily a testament to the reality of a trustworthy God.

It has been shown in this section that Hodge takes up an understanding of human powers derived from Scottish common sense philosophy and incorporates it into the same classical picture of the structure of human knowledge that one finds in Turretin. Thus, for Hodge just as much as Turretin, grace presupposes nature. Though Hodge discusses the relationship of nature and grace less often than Turretin, and though he uses Scottish common sense realism to articulate this relationship, it is clear that the substance of what Turretin means is present in Hodge’s theology as a guiding principle. In one essay, he writes that ours “is a faith which does not destroy or demand the destruction of reason, but elevates and perfects it.”<sup>[194]</sup> This statement is entirely consistent with Turretin’s anthropological and epistemological views, and it sums up the classical Reformed view of the structure of human knowledge.

## **CONCLUSION: THE AGREEMENT OF TURRETIN AND HODGE WITH AQUINAS**

Having looked in some detail at Turretin's and Hodge's views on the structure of knowledge, we are now in a position to review Oliphint's criticisms of Aquinas and note what connection, if any, Oliphint's censures have to the positions of Turretin and Hodge. It should be recalled that Oliphint sees some major difficulties in Aquinas's epistemological position, which in his view make it deeply incompatible with a Reformed and truly biblical theology. One such difficulty is that Aquinas sees human natural powers as capable of producing a body of truths about God independent of the knowledge of God revealed in Holy Scripture and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. For Oliphint, such a view of natural theology fails to properly acknowledge the noetic effects of sin and the radical change to one's noetic powers wrought by regeneration. Postlapsarian man, apart from regeneration, can only acknowledge idols, and as such he is unable to seek or discover any truths about the living God of the Christian faith. An even more fundamental, yet related problem, is that Aquinas holds that grace presupposes and perfects nature. By doing so, he fails to understand that grace and the knowledge of special revelation must precede any real knowledge of nature, since apart from regeneration and assent to the truths contained in the Bible, no man can rightly and truly conceive of anything, which makes genuine knowledge impossible. Aquinas, in holding that efficacious natural powers are necessary prerequisites to comprehend and therefore to assent to the truths contained in special revelation, is said to overlook the stark antithesis between the epistemological situations of Christians and non-Christians, and he attributes to the unregenerate a capacity for genuine knowledge that they do not possess.

In the writings of Turretin and Hodge, however, one finds a picture of the structure of knowledge remarkably similar to that which appears in Aquinas. Both Turretin and Hodge affirm that natural theology is possible even for non-Christians. They likewise affirm, with Aquinas, that nature has a certain logical, metaphysical, and epistemological priority to grace. We have seen that for both, man must have the potential to acquire knowledge by means of his natural powers if he is to have any possibility of understanding special revelation and justifiably assenting to its contents. Though neither theologian in any way discounts the effects of sin on these powers, or the need for the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order to create faith, they refuse to condone the idea that man's natural powers could be so

effaced by sin as to strip him of genuine knowledge in any sphere. To do so, to deny of him reason and knowledge, would be to deny of him that which is essential to humanity itself. Though highlighting this may be unnecessary, it can be noted that without human nature remaining intact after the fall, the Christian message would be absurd, since the incarnation would be unintelligible in a world without beings exemplifying humanity; creatures who are subhuman cannot, in any case, be held to be moral or responsible beings. Hence, from the viewpoint of Turretin and Hodge (and Aquinas), there are strong incentives for holding that the natural man is indeed capable of acquiring genuine knowledge.

As conceded at the beginning of this essay, examining the epistemological views of Turretin and Hodge does not directly serve to show that Oliphint's presuppositional epistemology is false. However, it does suffice to show both that Oliphint's epistemology has little in common with that of Turretin and Hodge, and it further demonstrates that their views are in substantial continuity with one another. Moreover, it establishes that the epistemological picture adhered to by Turretin and Hodge is, at least in the areas considered here, largely in agreement with that of Aquinas. Therefore, if one admits that Turretin and Hodge are authentic and venerable representatives of the Reformed tradition, one will be forced to concede that Oliphint's thesis—that Aquinas's epistemology is deeply inconsistent with Reformed theology—is misinformed. The old tomes of Turretin and Hodge provide devastating counter-examples to this thesis, and it is important to keep in mind that they are only two out of many theologians who could be enlisted to make this argument. As a final consideration, if one holds the view (as I do) that Turretin and Hodge appear to have strong and compelling reasons for accepting a Thomistic picture of the structure of knowledge, and for holding that grace presupposes and perfects nature, then these reasons may provide some help in discerning where Oliphint's presuppositional epistemology is flawed and stands in need of criticism and correction.

V:  
**moderate realism and the presuppositionalist confusion of  
metaphysics and epistemology**

**J. T. Bridges**

**WHAT IS A REALIST SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHY?**

What is a systematic realist, and what are his views of theology proper and philosophy of religion? In what way does this approach provide an alternative to presuppositionalism? Regarding the latter, it seems that most presuppositionalism is a reaction to elements of modern philosophy. The degree to which we avoid such philosophical commitments, then, is the degree to which we can adopt an alternative to these presuppositionalist reactions. Regarding the former, a recent debate between a Catholic philosopher and William Lane Craig on the doctrine of divine simplicity reveals that a systematic realist does not see his commitments in theology proper (including the doctrine of divine simplicity) in isolation from a commitment to a *system* of realist philosophy.<sup>[195]</sup> Contemporary philosophers, especially those trained in an analytic tradition, largely do see issues of theology proper, indeed nearly all issues, in isolation from *systematic* philosophical commitments.<sup>[196]</sup> It would almost be scandalous to suggest, for example, that a contemporary philosopher adopt positions in his metaphysics that complement his ethical theory or theodicy or epistemology. Eclecticism is the rule of the day. The notion of a systematic approach to philosophy (let alone a dogmatic commitment to that system) seems at best a foreign curiosity or at worst wildly implausible. After all, what does one's commitment to substratum vs. bundle theory say about one's commitments in ethics? Such a question, to contemporary ears, sounds strange.

When I say "dogmatic," I am not suggesting an impenetrable obstinance to correction or exploration or an irrevocable commitment to unchanging ideas. By dogmatic, I mean a philosopher who is committed to his ideas as *really true*. In metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc., he

believes that his descriptions are actual descriptions of reality. This is the “realism” in realist philosophy and the basis for the belief that such an approach can yield a system of thought. Inasmuch as one believes reality to be a unified whole and not merely a jumble, one may accept that such a system of realist philosophy is possible. If one believes himself to have discovered this system, dogmatism follows. Admittedly this is not the fashion of the day (of course, philosophers are subject to fashions as well). A note from Étienne Gilson is helpful:

There are many countries where no professor of any science could hold his job for a month if he started teaching that he does not know what is true about the very science he is supposed to teach, but where a man finds it hard to be appointed as a professor of philosophy if he professes to believe in the truth of the philosophy he teaches. The only dogmatic tenet is that, if a philosopher feels reasonably sure of being right, then it is a sure thing that he is wrong... [\[197\]](#)

Now, at this point the reader might balk and think that this cannot be the attitude of contemporary philosophers. Who does not think the position that he espouses is right? But notice, dogmatism does not arise simply because one thinks he is *right*; it arises when he thinks his position is *true*. I may think that I am right in holding to a just war theory. But since I am no student of the history of war or its theories, I hold this particular theory with some degree of faith in its proponents. This means that I think this position is right, but it could possibly be wrong. If I think a moderate-realist metaphysics is true, I think all other positions which are not compatible extensions of it are wrong. That is the basis for dogmatism.

Furthermore, many respectable contemporary philosophers do not even think their positions are *right*. Noted philosopher Peter Van Inwagen is representative here:

[We] should be aware of an important way in which textbooks of metaphysics differ from a textbook of geology or tax law or music theory... You can be required to take examinations on the content of these textbooks, and, unfortunately, your answers may well be wrong... Metaphysics is not like that. In metaphysics there is no information, and there are no established facts to be learned. More exactly, there is no information and there are no facts to be learned

besides information and facts about what certain people think, or once thought, concerning various metaphysical questions...The situation confronting the student of metaphysics is in no way different from the situation confronting the student of any part of philosophy.<sup>[198]</sup>

If one cannot be objectively mistaken in metaphysics (or any other part of philosophy) because there are no facts of the matter and no information, then one also cannot be objectively correct for the same reasons. This attitude necessarily precludes any goal of reaching the truth or any dogmatic stance. The most one can hope for is rational consistency.

The above explains why, when a systematic realist disagrees with his contemporary analytic counterpart, there is another level of disagreement that is unstated and largely unperceived. That is, the systematic realist is committed to an entire fabric of philosophy that makes up an integrated, systematic approach to the variety of issues that emerge in one's philosophical investigations. When one of these issues is disputed, for example the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence, the systematic realist sees the implications of this distinction as they spread throughout the system. The eclectic contemporary philosopher typically sees only a singular, isolated topic of discussion and fails to note how its inclusion or exclusion in one's philosophy has larger ramifications.

Historian of philosophy F. C. Copleston contrasts a systematic approach with an eclectic one. He writes,

Whatever one may think about the perennial value of Aquinas's thought, there was a lot to be said in favour of approaching philosophy by way of the system of an outstanding thinker and thinking on systematic lines, in terms, that is to say, of certain basic philosophical principles and of their application instead of following the rather wishy-washy eclecticism which had tended to prevail in ecclesiastical academic institutions.<sup>[199]</sup>

And later,

An outstanding thinker doubtless shows his talent in the way in which he develops the implications of his premises and steers clear of any patchwork eclecticism which tries to combine elements which do not really fit together. But constructive talent of this kind does not entail the validity of the premises.<sup>[200]</sup>

In the above quotations, Copleston has done us a great service. First, he has gestured in the direction of the value of working within the system of a great thinker. Second, he has hinted at the process of doing so, namely, working out the implications of the system as its principles apply to interesting problems (and he opposes this with a distasteful “patchwork eclecticism”). Finally, he reveals that just applying the principles of the system consistently does not mean that these principles are true or the application thereof is valid.

In the next section, I will introduce the reader to some elements of the system as a system. This can in no way be comprehensive, either in the number of areas explored or the depth to which each area is explored. The benefit, however, will be to expose the reader to what the systematic realist finds attractive in such an approach. To be clear, I am dogmatically committed to a particular tradition of realism—existential Thomism. The commitments of such a tradition will become clearer over the next few pages, but suffice it to say that this tradition provides the best grounds for: 1) A systematic realism in philosophy leading to 2) classical theism and, 3) the grounds for a robust alternative to presuppositionalism. I hope to give the reader a sense of what Copleston indicates, that there is a type of satisfaction to be obtained by working out a system along true principles applied to interesting problems. And, further, to show that this is not only satisfying but superior to the kind of patchwork eclecticism that is all too common today. Finally, whether one is attracted to a systematic approach to philosophy or comfortable with a looser eclecticism, one should at least be cognizant of these two distinct approaches.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO REALIST SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHY**

This section can only be a tour of some of the more important aspects of the existential realist system of philosophy. I cannot spend time here defending the positions against their detractors. If the reader is so inclined, he can follow the footnotes to the original sources or look to the chapter’s bibliography to begin engaging with these issues. The point is to give the reader an overview of some of the interrelations within the system, that is, how the various positions are connected by the principles involved. The



more important aspects will be the major philosophical areas of metaphysics and epistemology (these will also be the more important areas of contrast with presuppositionalism).

### **Prolegomena to Metaphysics**

Just as in the preliminary remarks to the chapter, before launching into a discussion of facets of a realist metaphysics, we should ask a preparatory question: what is metaphysics? Here the point of the question is not to decide whether or not metaphysics studies being *qua* being (realist tradition), or only our experience of it (anti-realist or phenomenological traditions), or our language about it (positivism). Rather, it is intended to probe a certain mindset among realist metaphysicians.<sup>[201]</sup> Joseph Owens helpfully observes,

The teaching of metaphysics is meant first and foremost to develop in the student's mind a living habit of thinking (in the Aristotelian sense of *habitus*, the first subdivision of the category of quality)... Metaphysics is primarily a vital quality and activity of the intellect, and not a collection or systematic organization of data either in print or in the memory...In keeping *things* themselves steadily in mind rather than *jejune formulae* and definitions constructed in the human intellect's abstraction, the pursuit of metaphysical wisdom will stand the best chance of developing its *habitus* in the individual student...<sup>[202]</sup>

To be clear, Owens is not arguing against a *system of philosophy*; rather, he is arguing against turning our metaphysical studies into simply a collection of data and formulae. His latter point about keeping *things* in view rather than *formulae* is a criticism of a common approach to metaphysics today.

Take, for example, the introduction to Michael Loux's *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (a book I use as a class textbook). He states,

Now, to provide a complete metaphysical theory is to provide a complete catalogue of the categories under which things fall and to identify the sorts of relation that obtain among those categories...A complete catalogue of this sort would represent a general account of all

there is. Aristotle believed that an account of this sort is the goal of the metaphysical enterprise.<sup>[203]</sup>

This is a fine goal for metaphysics and offers little difference from what Owens has indicated. Look, however, at the focus of the next chapter on platonic realism. Some of the potential benefits of being a platonic realist are answers to issues like subject-predicate discourse and abstract reference. “The subject-predicate sentence is about as basic a form of discourse as there is. The following sentences are examples of this discourse: (1) Socrates is courageous; (2) Plato is a human being; (3) Socrates is the teacher of Plato.”<sup>[204]</sup> And later, regarding abstract reference,

The [Platonic] realist wants to claim that an arbitrary subject-predicate sentence, (20) *a* is *F*, is true only if the referent of ‘*a*’ exemplifies the universal (*F*-ness) expressed by ‘*F*.’ But, then, our original sentence, (20), is true only if a new subject-predicate sentence, (21) *a* exemplifies *F*-ness, is true...<sup>[205]</sup>

Notice how, having in the introduction explained that the proper goal of metaphysics is to have a catalogue of everything that exists and the relations between them, Loux quickly turns his attention to *sentences* about things and *formulae* intended to capture the metaphysical relations entailed. We cannot spend the time here to explore how this approach has come to dominate the contemporary landscape. I raise the issue only to explain to the reader that the existential realist approach to metaphysics is one that truly does focus on reality. Before exploring this existential realist system, we have to clear up one more potential misunderstanding.

### **Will the Real Existentialism Please Stand Up?**

When I use the term “existentialism” or “existentialist” in the context of Thomism there is, among philosophically informed readers, a tendency to think of it in the same vein as the philosophies of thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, or Foucault. This is a common mistake, but it is a mistake. Even van Inwagen, prominent metaphysician, is guilty of it.<sup>[206]</sup> Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain offers a corrective,

Let it be said right off that there are two fundamentally different ways of interpreting the word existentialism. One way is to affirm the primacy of existence, but as implying and preserving essences or

natures and as manifesting the supreme victory of the intellect and of intelligibility. This is what I consider to be authentic existentialism. The other way is to affirm the primacy of existence, but as destroying or abolishing essences or natures and as manifesting the supreme defeat of the intellect and of intelligibility. This is what I consider to be apocryphal existentialism, the current kind which ‘no longer signifies anything at all.’ I should think so! For if you abolish essence, or that which *esse* posits, by that very act you abolish existence, or *esse*. Those two notions are correlative and inseparable. An existentialism of this sort is self-destroying.<sup>[207]</sup>

Maritain has given us direction. The continental view of being, typified by a Heidegger or Camus or Sartre, affirms the primacy of existence that supersedes and indeed abolishes the natures of things. The tendency here is to say that something “is” and then becomes “what it is” (“existence precedes essence”). Such a metaphysics is wholly at odds with an objective natural law ethics. What is the relationship between existence and essences such that there is held to be a primacy of existence (hence a kind of “existentialism”) but one which preserves essences or natures? How, then, do we embrace a *Christian existentialism*? This is the goal of the next section.

## **The Real Distinction Between Essence and Existence**

One fundamental principle of existential metaphysics is that of the *real distinction* between a thing’s essence and its existence or act of being.<sup>[208]</sup> Before noting that a thing’s act of being is distinct from its essence, however, it will be helpful to be clear about the role that essence plays in Thomistic metaphysics. Gavin Kerr explains,

Above it was noted that for Aquinas essence is that through which and in which a being has *esse*. Essence then for Aquinas is subject to *esse*, such that no material essence would exist unless it possessed a distinct act of existence. But if it is the case that essence is subject to *esse* and that no essence exists unless composed with *esse*, then essence must encompass all that is subject to *esse* in the material substances, which includes both matter and form...the essence of a material thing must include its matter, in which case the essence of a

thing as signified by its definitional content is the composite of matter and form.<sup>[209]</sup>

Taking the last bit first, what we mean by “essence” in the scope of this chapter is everything that is signified by the definition of a thing. “Signification,” simply put, is when we use a term/word to reference a thing. When we use an essential term, what we are referencing is the totality of what makes something *what* it is. For material substances, this breaks down to a composition of form and matter. Typically, in the literature, one will find references to “dog-ness” or “human-ness” or “humanity.” These are all attempts to signify the totality of a material essence.<sup>[210]</sup> What Kerr is saying above is that the totality of what is essential to a *kind* of thing (e.g. for humans it is an embodied rational soul) is “subject to being,” that is, that the essence makes a thing the *kind* of thing it is (including formal and material principles), but the essence does not make the thing *be*. Whatever else is contained in the definitional signification that the essence picks out, existence is not part of it. This is another way of getting at the idea that the essence of a thing is *really distinct* from its act of being or existence.

Before noting the differences between three types of distinctions, Owens affirms a difference between *real being* and *cognitional being*.<sup>[211]</sup> *Real being*, obviously enough, refers to the way in which a thing exists in the world (or we might say, in the created order). *Cognitional being* is that being that the essence of a thing takes on in the intellect of a rational agent; this is also known as intentional being. Owens states, “The thing has to remain the same if there is to be knowledge of it. But it does come to *be* in a new way every time it is known, even though it is not affected at all in itself or in its real existence.”<sup>[212]</sup> This leads us to the threshold of epistemology, but we must not cross over it yet. Keeping on our metaphysical line, if we are to have a realist epistemology (wherein the object of human knowing is the really existing thing) then this demands that the essence of a thing (that metaphysical facet that makes a thing *what* it is) be distinct from its act of being. This is so because a realist epistemology demands that what the object is stays the same and that this same object comes to exist in the mind with the same features that it possesses in reality. This coming-to-be in the mind is what Owens means by cognitional being.

So, what do we mean by real distinction? Here we will be guided again by Joseph Owens. He writes,

What type of distinction, though, falls between such things [sensible, material things] and their being? Is it a distinction that is present in the things as they exist in reality, regardless of any work of the human mind? A distinction of that type is found, for instance, between an apple and its red color. The apple was an apple before acquiring the ripe color, and so is different from the color prior to any consideration by a human intellect. This kind of distinction is called a **real distinction**.<sup>[213]</sup>

He then goes on to show the difference between a real distinction and a *conceptual distinction*. The distinction between iron and metal is conceptual. The meaning of “iron” and the meaning of “metal” are distinct, but in reality, all iron is metal, and so this conceptual distinction does not apply in reality. Finally, there is a *verbal distinction*. The difference between Mohamed Ali and Cassius Clay is a verbal distinction. Ali and Clay are two different names for the numerically identical person; there is no difference either in concept or reality, but in name only. What is meant by a *real distinction* between essence and existence is, following from a metaphysical analysis, the metaphysical principle that makes something what it is (essence) is distinct in reality from the metaphysical principle that makes it exist (*esse*).<sup>[214]</sup>

Several important metaphysical implications follow from this distinction. In the world of sensible objects, there are two distinct fundamental metaphysical principles: The Order of Being/Existence and the Order of Essence. The more fundamental of these two is the Order of Being; it is the power of existing that makes anything exist that does exist. As Kerr notes above, “essence is subject to *esse* and that no essence exists unless composed with *esse*.” Existence is an act of synthesizing. It acts to compose form/matter composites into individual entities.<sup>[215]</sup> There is nothing in the order of essences that accounts for *this* form being in *this* matter, nor is there anything in the order of essences that makes a particular secondary essence (accident) inhere in a particular subject.<sup>[216]</sup> The composition in the order of essences is accounted for by a different metaphysical order, the order of being/existence.

Thomist philosopher Frederick Wilhelmsen puts it this way,

The real world we live in is *existentially synthetic*. Although the analytic [work of the intellect] does function as a moment within the real, it is linked together in our experience in such a fashion that the synthetic *unity* thus produced is not reducible to any deduction... Within metaphysics, as I conceive the discipline, the act of existing is simultaneously the act of synthesizing essential functions into unity and non-contradiction...<sup>[217]</sup>

There is a danger in raising the distinction between the order of existence and the order of essences. That danger is that for us to think about “existence” we naturally tend to turn it into a concept, and concepts are apprehended from essences. So, we naturally tend to turn existence into another essence, which it is not. Wilhelmsen points out, “*The most striking paradox about the act of existing is that it neither is nor is not...* The ‘to be’ of a tree does not subsist or exist in itself. Existence is totally of the thing that is, a concrete reality that unfolds and develops in time.”<sup>[218]</sup>

To better understand this point, imagine a huge warehouse filled with a variety of gadgets. All of these gadgets run, in some way or another, on electricity. No matter how many things you catalogue in the “order of gadgets,” you will never note the thing you need to make them “go.” What you need to make them “go” is of another order entirely. Electricity is not another gadget among the gadgets, but the very source of power and that which gives them their “life.” This is, I think, a good way of characterizing the difference between the order of essences (the gadgets) and the order of being (the electricity). Further, it is not the electricity that makes the gadget function in the particular way that it does. The fact that a refrigerator keeps things cold and that an oven heats things up is entirely a matter of the nature of these objects (it is found in the order of essences). The electricity is the power running through each that allows them to cool or heat. Similarly, Wilhelmsen’s point above is that existence is not itself a thing that exists, it is the power of being totally taken up in the existing thing (e.g. a tree).

This section has been a very brief foray into the heart of existential Thomism. It elaborates Maritain’s description of an “authentic existentialism” that affirms a primacy of existence in its metaphysics but without annulling or destroying natures/essences (and, in his mind, thus

preserving the intelligibility of things). Below, we will see how these metaphysical insights play a role in building one's theology proper.

### **Essences on the Contemporary Landscape**

In contemporary literature (a sample of which is the Loux quote above), essences are typically referred to as “abstract objects” since they prescind from the concreteness of real being; and contemporary philosophers have largely ignored the category of cognitional being. What remains are the contemporary options: 1) Platonic Realism treats essences as real entities existing in their own kind of reality (the “Platonic heaven”); 2) Nominalism treats essences as aberrations of language or useful fictions or in any other way that reduces essences to a collection of concrete individuals; 3) Conceptualism treats essences as not something in reality, nor a mere aberration, but something created by the mind. In order to see how the moderate-realist position retains the strengths and avoids the weaknesses of these options we will turn to a quote from Thomist philosopher Edward Feser. He explains how the moderate-realist view of universals/*abstracta* differs from Platonism, Nominalism, and Conceptualism. He writes:

Consider a universal like “animality” (i.e. the feature of being an animal)...animality cannot be said to exist as a substance or thing in its own right; that is to say, it cannot be said to be a Platonic form...How does it exist then? In the real, mind-independent world it exists only in actual animals...There is animality in Socrates, but it is there inseparably tied to his rationality, and specifically to his humanness. And there is animality in Fido, but it is there inseparably tied to non-rationality, and specifically to dog-ness. Animality considered in abstraction from these things exists only in the mind.

The senses observe this or that individual man, this or that individual dog; the intellect abstracts away the differentiating features of each and considers the animality in isolation, as a universal. This is not nominalism, for it holds that universals exist. Nor is it conceptualism, for while it holds that universals *considered in abstraction from other features* exist only in the mind, it also holds that they exist in the extra-mental things and that the abstracted universals existing in the intellect derive from our sense experiences of these



objectively existing things, rather than being free creations of the mind [as in conceptualism].<sup>[219]</sup>

So far, then, we have two major pieces of Thomistic metaphysics that make it a unique vantage in understanding reality. We have the primacy of existence as what is most metaphysically basic in any created thing and we have a moderate-realist view of essences such that they exist only in isolation given the work of an abstracting intellect (i.e. they have cognitional being), while in real being they are one metaphysical facet of complex composite beings. One's metaphysical commitments lay the ground for one's philosophical theology. These principles lay a solid metaphysical foundation for classical theism. We turn, now, to an analysis of how the metaphysics of the form/matter composition of sensible, material beings emerges into a philosophical anthropology, from which, in turn, emerges a realist epistemology.

## **PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

Anthropology, as the reader may already be aware, is a study of man. Typically, this is done in the context of sociology, but it can also be approached from a higher level of abstraction in philosophy. A small part of one's philosophical anthropology will be one's philosophy of mind. What follows here is a simple overview of how a form/matter metaphysics becomes the grounds for a Thomistic philosophy of mind, as part of a greater philosophical anthropology.<sup>[220]</sup> This section, like the previous one, is merely a transition from our metaphysical commitments to our epistemological ones. As such, it will be brief.

Here we will follow the lead of the Thomist philosopher of mind James D. Madden. His work *Mind, Matter, & Nature: A Thomistic Proposal for the Philosophy of Mind* is a well-organized treatise leading up to the kind of hylomorphism espoused by Thomists. Madden takes pains to interact with substance-dualist, materialist, and emergentist positions regarding the philosophy of mind. One of the wonderful aspects of the book is that he takes an entire chapter to introduce the reader to a broader Aristotelian-Thomistic [A-T] philosophy of nature before delving into an A-T philosophy of mind. The reason he does this is that, as was noted above with Kerr, sensible, material beings in the created order are, on this



model, thought to be form/matter compositions. The human being is one sensible, material thing among others and so it is true of the human being that he is also a form/matter composite. This is the philosophy of nature facet.

But the human being is not the same as the rest of the sensible, material order. A Christian philosophy of mind has to give a philosophical account of this difference. One of the dominant positions among Christian philosophers is substance-dualism. An often-overlooked option is A-T hylomorphism. I think it is overlooked because, as the structure of Madden's text assumes, accepting a hylomorphic view of human nature demands a hylomorphic view of the natural order, and this view is largely ignored.<sup>[221]</sup> As substance-dualism is the dominant Christian philosophy of mind, we will ignore Madden's interactions with the varieties of materialism and emergentism in order to focus on the difference between a substance-dualist account of man and an A-T hylomorphist position.<sup>[222]</sup>

Before citing Madden's presentation of the difference between hylomorphism and substance-dualism, however, I'd like to remind the reader of the assumptions of Madden's approach. The specific form/matter composition for the human being is the soul/body union. Following Aristotle's definition of man as a "rational animal," this view of the human seats the powers of his rationality in his intellect, which is in turn only one of the powers of the soul (the soul is the principle of animation for the human body and has one other distinct spiritual power, the will). The body, being the material cause of the human being, receives these powers and is, thus, a single, unified, composite being. Cartesian dualism (the classic version of substance-dualism) sees the human soul as a "thinking thing" and as a substance distinct from the substance of the body.<sup>[223]</sup>

One immediate and glaring problem for the substance dualist is known as "the interaction problem" because it asks the dualist to give an account of how a purely spiritual substance (the soul) can interact with a purely material substance (the body)?<sup>[224]</sup> Madden uses this issue to point out one of the major differences between a substance-dualist and hylomorphist account of the person. He writes,

Take the mind-body interaction problem, in any of its various guises, for example, supposed unintelligibility, conservation laws, the

causal closure of the physical, and the like. Even if the dualist can answer these worries (and at the end of the day he might be able to do so), such a case needs to be made. On the dualist model, we have two fundamentally different substances, one physical and the other non-physical interacting as efficient causes, even though the laws of physics determine the physical substance. This problem does not even arise for the Aristotelian hylomorphist, however, because the fundamental relationship between the soul and the matter composing the body is not that which might adhere between two independently subsistent entities. That is, the soul and the body are not fundamentally different kinds of substances engaged in causal interaction, because they aren't substances at all. Of course, the human soul is a subsistent entity, but the prime matter that ultimately composes the human body has no actuality independent of some substantial form or other...The matter composing a human being is actually a human body only because it is in union with the soul... [\[225\]](#)

Edward Feser, in his introductory work *Philosophy of Mind*, suggests seven distinct advantages that the hylomorphist account of the human person has over a substance-dualist view. [\[226\]](#)

As noted, there are competent philosophers of mind and philosophers of religion who take issue with the hylomorphist view. Philosophers of mind are predominantly working with a materialist or otherwise naturalistic view of mind, and therefore reject the immaterial soul entailed by the hylomorphist account. Christian philosophers of religion, however, tend to ask pointed questions about identity, the resurrection, and other more specific metaphysical aspects of hylomorphism. This short overview is not the place to respond to such inquiries. The point, in the context of this chapter, in raising the hylomorphist view, is that as we move on to our explanation of epistemology, we must have in mind what the human is as a knower. In order to understand the kind of epistemological realism in the next section, the reader must have in mind both the hylomorphic commitments of a broader philosophy of nature (sensible, material beings) and the hylomorphic view of man that sees the human as a unified metaphysical composite—an embodied soul. This means that all the powers of sensation are ultimately rooted in the animating principle of the rational

soul. In the next section we'll look at how the embodied soul as a knower functions in a world of sensible, material form/matter composites.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE REALIST SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHY**

It may be obvious to the reader at this point, but as we enter into a discussion about epistemology, our theory of human knowing, it is important to note the degree to which we are committed to a pre-modern view of knowledge. Here we will explore, somewhat superficially, a Thomistic epistemology, its fundamental tenets and motivations, and how it differs from a specifically Cartesian view of knowledge.<sup>[227]</sup> Toward the end of this section I will give a recap of the process of knowledge which will set the stage for understanding the doctrine of analogy and its influence on classical theism.

In the beginning of his introduction to Thomistic realist epistemology, Frederick Wilhelmsen, sets about distinguishing this approach from a Cartesian one. He writes,

“Epistemology” is a derivative from the Greek words meaning the “science of knowledge.” Presumably, a study of epistemology would be an exploration of that science. But the presumption is somewhat deceptive because there is no such thing as a single “science of knowledge.” Science, in the Thomistic sense of the term, means an understanding of things through their causes, but the causes of knowledge are many...Knowledge is a way of existing: as a way of existing, knowledge is properly considered by metaphysics. Knowledge is a psychological operation: as a psychological operation, knowledge is properly investigated by the philosophy of man... Although it is certainly true that there is no distinct science known as “epistemology,” it does not thereby follow that there is no such thing as a philosophical investigation which is properly epistemological in nature.<sup>[228]</sup>

Wilhelmsen, unhelpfully, seems to indicate contrary things here. On the one hand, he clearly does not agree with approaching epistemology as an isolated endeavor. On the other hand, he seems to agree that there is a “philosophical investigation which is properly epistemological in nature.” The explanation of this tension will help us understand this unique realist

approach. The first thing to note in the above, is that a realist approach to knowledge will not leave aside metaphysics. The second thing to note is that a realist approach to knowledge will not leave aside philosophical anthropology.

Another explanation from Wilhelmsen will bring together these elements in the realist epistemological endeavor while also distinguishing it from a modern-contemporary approach:

Knowing is a knowing of this or that thing in the existing world. The critical philosopher [e.g. Descartes] first abstracts this act of knowing from the man possessing the act. Secondly, this abstracted act of knowing turns about and finds it can throw into doubt both the existence of the man who has the act of knowing and the existence of the thing known in the act of knowing...In order to grasp the point more concretely, concentrate for a moment on the fact that you are here and knowing this piece of paper before your eyes. The situation involves three elements: (1) the piece of paper, (2) being known, (3) by you. Now suppress the first and third elements; that is, the fact that there is a piece of paper and that you—a flesh and blood human being—know the piece of paper. Retain only the act of knowing...once you have done this, you are in the position of the critical philosopher... [229]

The above gives the reader a bit more insight into the first quotation. That is, how is it that in a proper philosophical explanation of knowledge one can pursue something that is uniquely epistemological without losing the elements of metaphysics or philosophical anthropology?

What Wilhelmsen does not explain, but bears mentioning, is that in a realist systematic philosophy one is conscious of how the elements of the *system* bear on a particular question. In this case, when one is investigating the issue of human knowing, one does not leave aside the commitments of a moderate-realist philosophy of nature (the fact that we believe the universe of sensible, material objects which are a collection of form/matter composites) nor that the human being is a unique specific kind of form/matter composite (the soul/body composition). “The realist is a philosopher who does not forget that he is a man when he begins to philosophize. As a man, if he be sane, a philosopher has not the faintest shade of doubt that he exists in a world of things existing in independence

of his cognition.”<sup>[230]</sup> What then of Cartesian doubt? What is our account of human knowing “in a world of things existing in independence of our cognition”?

A student of mine once raised the point that Descartes begins his critical epistemology with doubt, but Aquinas seems to skip over these important questions of doubt (essentially, “is it possible for the human to have true knowledge?”) and simply stipulates the existence of things independent of the mind. One response to this challenge is that as a realist, if Aquinas is going to deal with doubt, then he is going to deal with *real* doubt. This Descartes does *not* do. Descartes, rather, introduces a *hyperbolic* doubt into his inquiry as an element of *methodology*. The question seems to be: How is it that, once a thing outside the mind has gotten into the mind, we can verify its existence outside the mind? Notice something about this question, however. This question only becomes really pressing on the assumption of substance dualism. That is, if you, in your philosophical anthropology, assume that a human is made of two very different substances (one wholly immaterial, the other material) then the epistemological relation of that which is in the intellect to that which is first grasped by the senses is exacerbated. It becomes an epistemological expression of the interaction problem we faced in the philosophy of mind. As ahylomorphist, on the other hand, there is a substantial monism in the knowing subject so that it is neither the mind that knows, nor the senses (technically speaking). Rather, it is the individual person who knows *via* his senses and *via* his intellect. Wilhelmsen comments,

True, the senses can only grasp particulars and the intellect universals, but sense and intellect are not distinct entities at war with each other. They are powers of a single knowing subject, and *through their mutual interpenetration* the intellect “sees” the universal in the singular...Once it is understood that the knowing subject is in direct, living communion with beings that are in act, the supposed problem of bridging the gap between an abstract mind and an equally abstract being is seen in all its poverty...<sup>[231]</sup>

It is this difference in philosophical anthropology that leads to these radical differences in epistemology. L.M. Regis puts it this way:

Cartesian idealism makes him a thinking substance, with a body thrown in as a kind of useless appendage. Kantian idealism makes him a pure reason chained by sensibility, which it informs without knowing the why, or how, and of which it is, in truth, a prisoner. Real metaphysics, by contrast, sees in man a creature, therefore a being essentially directed towards an end by his Creator Who is at the same time the source and perfection of everything he is. Placed on the confines of two orders, he is related to spirits and to bodies without being one or the other exclusively. He is a substantial composite of flesh and spirit, a hylomorphic creature, which means his oneness is not the oneness of simplicity but of composition. [\[232\]](#)

The rejection of Cartesian epistemology, therefore, begins by rejecting his view of man. Next is a clarification of the task of epistemology. Recall that Wilhelmsen says that when we do epistemology we must keep in mind the nature of the knower and the thing known. The knower is an embodied soul. As such he has two distinct powers of knowing: sensation and intellection. Regis summarizes,

The object [of knowledge] is not external reality taken in the absolute, but external reality in so far as it bears a relation to the knowing subject, in so far as it exists in the soul. For since the soul is endowed with sensibility and intelligence, it has two possible existences of things in it, two objects of knowledge specifically distinct: sensible objects and intelligible objects; whence arises the two major categories of truth: sensible truths which are essentially contingent and changeable; and intelligible truths which are necessary and unchangeable. The confusion of these two kinds of truth leads to skepticism; the denial of one or the other leads to idealism [or naturalism]; but the acceptance of both, while their distinction is still maintained, is the very essence of the Thomistic epistemology, its basic realism, and the only realism that truthfully takes account of the complexity of human knowledge. [\[233\]](#)

The two aspects of human nature (soul and body) give rise to two distinct types of knowledge. Knowledge of particulars through sensation and knowledge of universals through intellection. One mistake of Descartes was to hold sensation to a standard derived from intellection. Because

sensation could not provide “essentially necessary and unchangeable” truths, it was rejected as a legitimate facet of human knowing. Regis makes the point that severing our ideas from existing things leads to idealism.

With the above analysis we have shown that hylomorphism regarding sensible things and the nature of man is a superior position from which to posit the human as a knower. But if our epistemology is not to set about critiquing the possibility of knowledge, then what precisely is the task of epistemology in the context of our broader philosophy?

It is a very laudable intention to answer the problem of historical skeptics. But before attempting it, the philosopher should consider whether an answer is possible, and whether the problem has been posed correctly throughout history. The fact of the matter is that there can be no rational problem about the basic validity of man’s knowledge, for any valid reasons offered to vindicate a doubt would destroy the doubt through their validity. Therefore, no one should attempt to answer a sceptic, since he has an ill-posed and irrational problem. No one can answer the sceptic, for, if truthful powers are not acknowledged as a fact in beginning epistemology, all its further conclusions will remain in the realm of the “possibly true”...However, acknowledging truth as a fact does not excuse the epistemologist from all usefulness. It must still be admitted that a correct judgment in the mind about objects outside the mind, constitutes a mysterious phenomenon and amply merits the philosopher’s wonder. It is still important to give a philosophical justification of knowledge...When it comes to the criterion of true judgment and the motive of certitude, epistemology has nothing to prove. Its only function is to employ reflection and analysis in order to render clear what the normal student has confusedly known all his life.<sup>[234]</sup>

The authors have explained that total skepticism regarding the possibility of true judgments or the basic validity of human reason are irrational claims. The task of epistemology, therefore, is not to begin with the *possibility* of knowledge followed by a critique of knowledge. This is the trajectory of modern philosophy and it ends with Hume’s skepticism followed by Kant’s rational empiricism leading to agnosticism. The task of epistemology, properly understood, is to take the *fact* of human knowing



and by analysis offer a philosophical account of it. This account should also include the ability to explain the complexity of human knowing and when true judgment fails (the problem of error). This type of analysis will treat human knowing as a basic set of data that demands philosophical explanation. A realist explanation will tend to satisfy the non-philosopher because it will “render clear what the normal student has confusedly known all his life.”

### **A Short Overview of the Process of Human Knowing**

As has been said above, to understand the human knower, one must understand what the human is and what is his knowing environment (the potential objects known), and the powers of knowing. In summary, the human is an embodied spirit in an environment of form/matter composite individuals with the diverse knowing powers of sensation and intellection. In the process of knowing, the intellect “sees” the universal in the particular. The classic text on this is Aquinas’s comments in question 85 of the *Summa Theologiae*. He writes,

The human intellect stands in the middle [between animals and angels]. It is not the form of a corporeal organ [as is an animal intellect], although it is a faculty of the soul which is the form of a body, as is clear from what was said earlier. Accordingly, it is proper for it to know forms which, in fact, exist individually in corporeal matter, yet not precisely as existing in such or such individual matter. Now to know something which in fact exists in individuated matter, but not as existing in such and such matter is to abstract a form from individual matter, represented by sense images. Thus, we have to say that our intellect understands material things by abstraction from sense images. [\[235\]](#)

The way that a sensible particular, say the coffee cup in front of me, gets into an immaterial intellect is by this process of abstraction. In the above, Aquinas doesn’t detail this process, he merely mentions that it is the way that a material object’s formal aspects come to exist in an immaterial intellect. The late John Deely, Thomist philosopher and semiotician gives some more details, writing,



The world “external” to the knower as an animal organism becomes “internal” to the knower through the *esse intentionale* of the *species sensuum externorum* as the means by which things are known, and just this “externality” is incorporated into the “internality” proper to the universe of knowing at its higher levels of perception and understanding.<sup>[236]</sup>

Parsing the Latin for the reader, what Deely is saying is that the object external to the knower (having *real being*) takes on a new kind of being, a new kind of *esse* called *esse intentionale* or *intentional being*. This is the way concepts and judgments exist in the knower. It is alluded to in the Aquinas quote above and made explicit here by Deely. The formal qualities that make the individual thing the *kind* of thing it is (its “species” in Scholastic language; as opposed to any modern biological uses), impress themselves from the individual thing on the “external senses” (sight, smell, hearing, touch, or taste) and inform the internal senses (memory, imagination, or the cogitative power). Something quasi-immaterial exists in the human knowing faculties. An object in the world comes to exist in, say, the imagination. This object as existing in the imagination is called a *phantasm*. The phantasm retains the particular qualities of the sensible thing in an immaterial way. Think of a set of triangles, from a street sign, to a child’s homework problem, to a building design. Each of these triangles has some particular qualities (size, orientation, color, or materials, out of which they are made). None of them rise to the universal concept of “triangularity.” This happens when the intellect appropriates the phantasm and abstracts from it solely intelligible elements. The product of this abstraction is called the intelligible species. The species in the world, that makes the thing what it is, has come to exist in an immaterial intellect.

Space does not allow us to revisit in detail all the different elements involved in the above. As was stated at the beginning of the chapter, this is merely a tour of a systematic realist philosophy and not a full-bodied defense of its claims. Notice, however, that Aquinas and Deely are not attempting to defend the possibility of human knowing; rather, they are giving an explanation of the fact of human knowing (as Hassett, Mitchell, and Monan advocate). And as Wilhelmsen said earlier, the proper

epistemological inquiry will be at the crossroads of metaphysics and the psychology of knowledge.

One final point to be made, because it is a common mistake for those just beginning to study Thomistic epistemology, is that the object of knowledge is not the concept or judgment in the mind; it is the thing in the world. Of the options which are commonly discussed in epistemology, I think we would be safe in classifying Thomism as some form of *direct realism*. Often when this is done the question arises, “How can Thomism be a direct realism, when it clearly entails this very complicated process by which the external material object of sensation becomes the immaterial object of intellection?” Here philosopher Max Herrera offers an insightful clarification; he writes,

The direct realist is correct to assert that Aquinas affirms that we know things, not our concepts or sense impressions. Understanding happens prior to conceptualization, and therefore, there are no intermediaries that must be known prior to being cognizant of the world. Human beings understand particulars via their external and internal senses, and they understand the nature of a thing when the intelligible species is received into the intellect. Given that the species are *means* of cognition and not *objects* of cognition, it is coherent to maintain that Aquinas is a direct realist *epistemologically*, but one must deny that he is a direct realist *causally*.<sup>[237]</sup>

Following this, David Braine notes, “Their [intelligible species’] existence in the intellect consists in the intellect’s thereby having the means of understanding real things of a certain kind, e.g. in the case of the intellectual species of a cow the means of understanding the nature of cows as cows.”<sup>[238]</sup>

Taken together, these quotations from Herrera and Braine make it clear that when the intellect obtains the intelligible species of an object it does not thereby make up a new object of knowledge. Rather, it obtains the *means of understanding* the thing in the world as the kind of thing that it is. The fact that it is the object in the world that is known makes Aquinas’s epistemology a kind of direct realism, not causally, but epistemologically.

All of the above is more than the reader might like to know about a systematic realist approach to philosophy. Keep in mind that much more

could be elaborated regarding the same system in its philosophy of logic, aesthetics, philosophy of science, natural law and virtues ethics, and the political philosophies following from these latter studies. For those interested in a systematic approach to philosophy that can aid or stand in congruity with a systematic theology, the realist system introduced here is a valuable asset. For the purposes of this chapter, we will see how the realist philosophical commitments inform a particular type of classical theism and, from there, see how this system is an alternative to the presuppositionalist approach.

### CLASSICAL THEISM EMERGING FROM REALIST SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHY

Since there are several other chapters in this volume dedicated to presenting classical theism and its tenets, I will leave it to others to demonstrate the classical attributes and their value in one's systematic theology. The task of this present chapter is to set the philosophical stage for why the classical theist approaches the divine attributes in the way he does. Again, there is a whole chapter in this text about the relationship between faith and reason, so this issue will have to be set aside as well. The thing to note at this point is that given the philosophical commitments expressed above, the approach of classical theism to the divine attributes stems from, it seems to me, three fundamental intuitions:

1. A principled recognition of the *limitations of human knowledge* (its natural powers of sensation and intellection and in its natural objects being sensible beings) and the *limitations of human language* (as fundamentally a product of human knowing and sharing its limitations).<sup>[239]</sup>

2. These limitations must be kept in mind when *thinking and speaking about Ultimate Reality*, God, which is Singular (not an object of an inductive process), Pure Spirit (i.e. wholly immaterial and not available for abstraction from sensation), Infinite (beyond the capacities of finite minds), and Subsistent Existence itself (*esse subsistens*).

3. The Bible is *not a metaphysical treatise* about the divine essence. In the same way that it presents but does not explain natural

phenomena (for this we needed to develop natural sciences), it presents but does not explain the divine essence (for this we need to develop philosophical theology).

The reason these commitments can be said to undergird the thinking of classical theists is that the first two commitments ground analogical god-talk. If human language is bound to the limitations of human reasoning, then our language is naturally pointed at sensible, material objects. Given that this is the natural context for our language, we have to be extra sensitive when applying this language in other contexts (as applied to say: the disembodied soul, angels, and God). If our theology proper gives us a being, God, who defies multiple aspects natural to human knowing, then we have to be extremely careful in the way we talk about God while recognizing these difficulties. Often, we see presuppositionalist thinkers avoid or contradict one or more of the above intuitions, which leads to drastically different conclusions.

Human concepts are products of an inductive process. That is, by seeing individuals of the same kind over and over, we come to understand what is common to that kind of thing (above we used triangles and triangularity). We understand the species *via* its individuals. But God is one and so is not open to such a process, so we cannot have a concept of *what* God is. Further, if God is infinite spirit, then a mind conditioned to finite, material, sensible realities cannot have a *concept* of God. Finally, if God's very nature is pure existence itself, and existence defies conceptualization (since conceptualization is focused on the order of essences), then humans cannot have a concept of *what* God is. This is why, in our natural knowledge of God, we come to know Him *via* metaphysical deductions about what He is not (*via negativa*), by analogies from the perfections we see (e.g. goodness and wisdom), and as the cause of the effects in the world (e.g. Creator, sustainer, etc.). These commitments provide the theologian a guide for determining which aspects of the biblical descriptions of God should be taken literally (that He is Love, Good, and Just), and which should not (that He is jealous, repentant, or has hands/arms/eyes).

A few quotes from philosopher of religion Brian Davies will leave us with a balanced view of the kind of analogical god-talk that supports classical theism. He writes,

Aquinas's distinction between univocal, equivocal, and analogical is a distinction between *literal modes of discourse*. Students of Aquinas sometimes suppose that this is not the case. They often think that, when, for example, Aquinas says that "good" is applied to God and to creatures "analogically," his meaning is God is only good "so to speak" or "after a fashion." But this is by no means true...On his [Aquinas's] account we may, for example, say that Solomon and God are both wise. And, for him, that is because Solomon and God really are wise. In "Solomon is wise" and "God is wise" the word "wise," Aquinas thinks, is used in different but related ways. And both are uses are literal.<sup>[240]</sup>

Davies elaborates elsewhere the balance to what we mean when we say we cannot know what God is (given some of the reasons listed above) and the limits of analogical discourse even when taken literally. Following a discussion of apophatic [negative] theology he writes,

So the language we use to speak of God is at one level inadequate and we do not know what God is. But in speaking of God we can, says Aquinas, speak truly. And we can know that we are doing so. In other words, his view is that what we can say of God can be literally true, though the full reality signified by our words defies our comprehension. We can speak of God and mean what we say, but we cannot comprehend the reality which makes our statements true. Words such as "good" and "wise" truly characterize God, but they "fail to represent adequately what he is."<sup>[241]</sup>

This is a way of balancing a quasi-rationalistic approach to theology which takes our statements about God as direct and univocal judgments about the divine essence and a theology that is so wholly mysterious that God is worshipped as something wholly beyond all being or intelligibility (like Plotinus's "the One").

At this point we have come full-circle in our attempt to show why it is that a philosopher dogmatically committed to a systematic realist philosophy evaluates issues in classical theism in a manner distinct from a philosopher who adopts a loose eclecticism in his approach to philosophy. The latter brings this non-systematic philosophy to bear on issues in theology proper in a much more piecemeal manner. Having tied up our

discussion thus far, we must now turn to consider the presuppositionalist understanding of the relation of metaphysics and epistemology.

## **A REALIST SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PRESUPPOSITIONALISM**

We have taken pains in the preceding sections to engage in a brief overview and introduction to salient elements of Aquinas's systematic realist philosophy. Given the focus of this larger work on dissecting and responding to aspects of presuppositionalist thought, which is becoming dominant in some Reformed circles, this chapter would be incomplete without some reference to whether such a system of philosophy is a better alternative than what the presuppositionalist offers. In order to have a focus for this assessment, I will be engaging one very recent work on Aquinas from a prominent presuppositionalist apologist, K. Scott Oliphint.

In his book on Aquinas, Oliphint makes many points, some of which we will analyze below, but the crucial point for our purposes is how he concludes his text. He writes,

[W]e hope to have made it clear that any adopting or adaptation of Thomas's philosophical theology must be filtered through the biblical theology of Reformed thought. With that filter in place, there are elements of Thomas's work that could be instructive and useful, at least from a historical perspective. Even so, every word and doctrine must be read through the grid of Thomas's two ultimately incompatible *principia*—the neutrality of natural reason, on the one hand, and the truth of God's revelation, on the other. These two incompatible *principia*, more than likely, contribute substantially to the confusion that remains among Thomists with respect to some of his most significant teachings. [\[242\]](#)

I could not disagree more. What we will see below as we delve into the reasons that brought Oliphint to such a conclusion, is that he has very little justification for claiming that Aquinas has two incompatible principles of knowledge. Further, the counterclaim I want to defend is that when Oliphint does introduce presuppositionalist concerns into his critique of Aquinas's work, it is just to that degree that he introduces weaknesses to an otherwise coherent system of thought.

In the beginning of his assessment of Thomism, Oliphint accepts unquestioningly Ralph McInerny's judgment of Étienne Gilson's position. That is, Oliphint continually paints Gilson's position on Aquinas's view of philosophy and theology as a "new position" in Thomism and typifies it: "the new interpretation of Thomas sees this text from Exodus [3:14] as the beginning point of Thomas's discussion of being."<sup>[243]</sup> This makes much too much of Gilson's position. What Gilson actually thinks is that to rightly understand Aquinas's thought, one must keep in mind that his philosophy is always in service to theology. In his own words, Gilson writes,

If we want to recapture the true meaning of Thomism we have to go beyond the tightly-woven fabric of its philosophical doctrines into its soul or spirit. What lies back of the ideas is a deep religious life, the interior warmth of a soul in search of God...St. Thomas regards man as marvellously equipped for the knowledge of phenomena; but he does not think that the most adequate human knowledge is the most useful and most beautiful to which man can aspire. He sets up man's reason in its own kingdom, the sensible. But to equip it for exploring and conquering this kingdom, he invites it to prefer another which is not merely the kingdom of man but of the children of God...If we grant that a philosophy is not to be defined from the elements it borrows but from the spirit which quickens it, we shall see here neither Platonism nor Aristotelianism but, above all, Christianity. It is a philosophy that sets out to express in rational language the total destiny of the Christian man.<sup>[244]</sup>

This is Gilson writing as a historian of philosophy. Far from setting up, as Oliphint seems to suppose, a system of thought wherein Aquinas demands that we begin with revelation for a philosophy of being and not reason, Gilson's concern here is to remind us that Aquinas is a monastic. That is, he is a deeply religious individual, and when we look to the heart of the man who wrote the *Summa Theologiae*, we will see a heart burning for God. To be sure, Aquinas is a formidable thinker and considered a genius for creating a system of thought incorporating elements of Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Arabic existentialism, and Christianity. Gilson reminds us that as Aquinas is doing his remarkable "tightly-woven" philosophy, he is animated by uniquely Christian desires and has in mind religious ends.



This fairly mild point of contention (to what degree can we think of Aquinas's philosophical endeavors apart from his theological goals) among Thomists, in Oliphint's hands, becomes a wedge driving Gilson decidedly to one side of a "traditional" vs. "new interpretation" divide. Oliphint paints the conflict as one centering on the question, "Does Aquinas think his metaphysics of being must begin with an interpretation of Exodus 3?" Anyone familiar with his thought would see that the obvious answer is "no, he doesn't." Further, it is also obvious that Gilson never thought this either. I would challenge anyone to read Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers* or *God and Philosophy* and come away with Oliphint's characterization of his position. In the latter, Gilson writes,

As a philosopher, Thomas Aquinas was not a pupil of Moses, but of Aristotle, to whom he owed his method, his principles, up to even his all-important notion of the fundamental actuality of being. My only point is that a decisive metaphysical progress or, rather, a true metaphysical revolution was achieved when somebody began to translate all the problems concerning being from the language of essences into that of existences...The metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas was, and still remains, a climax in the history of natural theology... Obviously, to ask us to view the universe as a world of particular existential acts all related to a supreme and absolute Self-Existence is to stretch the power of our essentially conceptual reason almost to the breaking point...The human mind feels shy before a reality of which it can form no proper concept. Such, precisely, is existence.<sup>[245]</sup>

I give the fullness of the quotation above for several reasons. First, it directly contradicts, in the author's own words, the mischaracterization that Oliphint utilizes consistently in his work. Gilson here is taking pains to place Aquinas in his proper place in the history of metaphysics and give him credit for his revolutionary contribution to philosophy and natural theology. Second, the latter part of the quotation re-emphasizes the philosophical context within which the existential Thomist does his theology proper. If we are going to find the reasons why the human mind cannot appreciate God as He is, we can do so on proper philosophical grounds.



The actual importance in referencing Exodus 3, for the Thomist, is as a means of combatting the charge that, when the existential Thomist ends his natural theology with God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* (the totality of being subsistent), his philosophical analysis has led him to an Ultimate Being which could not possibly be the God of the Bible. Some contemporary Christian philosophers argue in just this way. The Thomist can point to at least one biblical text that is compatible with, arguably, his existential analysis. Exodus 3 can indeed be read as God revealing to Moses that His nature is Existence Itself. Gilson's point in *God and Philosophy* is that, due to his advancements in metaphysics and natural philosophy, Aquinas provided, for the first time in the history of Christian philosophy, the means by which to give a precise philosophical account of the God of all Being found in Exodus. The conclusions of his natural philosophy and revelation coincide.

Oliphint's approach to Aquinas on this point is indicative of his broader handling of Aquinas's thought. While a good deal of Oliphint's research finds its mark, the limitations of his understanding shine forth in his critiques of Aquinas. When Oliphint criticizes Aquinas for denying that God's existence is self-evident to us, for example, he uses Romans 1 as a means of rebuttal. Aquinas's point is that the proposition "God exists" is self-evident *in itself* (because our metaphysical analysis will reveal that God is Existence itself) but not *to us* because not all men know that the term "God" means "*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*." This point is not at all in conflict with Paul's assertion in Romans 1 that some of God's attributes can be clearly perceived from what has been made but that, owing to human sinfulness, man obscures this perception.

Besides some of his criticisms being grounded in misinterpretations of Aquinas's thought, when Oliphint launches into an analysis of the doctrine of divine simplicity, he does so with clear commitments to presuppositionalism. He writes, "natural reason alone provides no reason to believe in divine simplicity."<sup>[246]</sup> Given that Aquinas deals with simplicity exclusively as an element of natural theology, I was interested to see what Oliphint's "biblical view of God's simplicity" was going to be. As it turns out, Oliphint thinks that the doctrine of the Trinity is a direct response to questions that arise about divine simplicity. He writes,

But when we see simplicity in the light of the ontological Trinity, we recognize that there are three *ad intra* persons, who are themselves distinct subsistences, *ad intra*. Those subsistences, far from undermining or denying the simplicity of God, are intrinsic to our understanding of God (including his simplicity), according to his revelation. So, we confess the simplicity of God as necessarily including three distinct and real (though not substantial) *ad intra* modes of existence in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Surely if God's simplicity must include distinct *modes* of existence—modes that are really distinct and not just rationally attributed—then other modes necessary to God's character in no way undermine or negate his simplicity.<sup>[247]</sup>

First, it is not clear that this description of the Trinity is orthodox. What does it mean for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to have three distinct modes of existence? Does a distinction in a person's mode of existence change what the person is, essentially? It is unclear that describing the three Persons of the Trinity as having distinct modes of being preserves orthodoxy. Regardless of these important theological questions, there is a more pertinent one in terms of Oliphint's contribution to the discussion of divine simplicity: How does this begin to address the concerns of the doctrine of divine simplicity? Recall that the doctrine addresses the fact that God has multiple, seemingly diverse, attributes in his one undifferentiated being. That is, what we call God's power, wisdom, goodness, love, mercy, are differentiated by our notions and by the effects in the created order to which they point, but as they exist in the divine essence they do so as God's self-identical being wholly without composition. There is nothing in Oliphint's trinitarian offering that even remotely addresses these questions from theology proper. The only thing such a response does, is to preserve his presuppositional mantra that whatever we know about God must begin with biblical revelation. When he tries to deploy such methodology, however, the results are irrelevant to answering the issues at hand.

As a bit of an aside, it seems to be the consistent tone of presuppositionalist authors that there is something more pious about saying that all we know about God comes from biblical revelation. But there is little evidence that the writers of the Bible or its greatest characters (e.g.

Jesus or Paul) thought this way about natural reason. On the contrary, the Bible seems to assume (and not argue for, since it is not a philosophical treatise) that man has the ability to see and know the world around him basically as it really is. And that from this knowledge he can discern God's invisible attributes.<sup>[248]</sup> This is not salvific knowledge, but it is enough to ground the culpability of the unrighteous. I simply do not understand the presuppositionalist tendency to exalt God by minimizing the natural abilities of man. Once we acknowledge the limits of human knowing and the nature of God as infinite being, we already have the means by which to say that the divine essence is wholly beyond human comprehension, which seems the proper way to magnify the mystery of the divine.

Given the presuppositionalist view of the inability of human reason to know God, what is the alternative? With what would Oliphint replace the classical theism which emerges from our systematic existential realism, in order to have a uniquely presuppositional view of being? The following gives us some clue:

reality is exhaustively *revelational*. There is no such thing as the “purely natural.” Since the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19.1), since God speaks through all that he has made (Rom. 1:19–20), that which is “natural” is, at the same time, the very “supernatural” communication of God to his creatures. If that communication occurred only through his special revelation, then there would be a need for a natural substructure. But since *all of reality* is revelational, there can be no substructure that is not, at the same time, revealing God and his character to us.<sup>[249]</sup>

This is a good example of presuppositional rhetoric. It replaces very helpful and sensible distinctions with a more ambiguous and sweeping generalization with strikingly pious overtones. Take the phrase “all of reality is revelational...[which is] at the same time, revealing God and his character to us.” Some clarifying questions: Is all of reality revelation in the same way? Does all of reality reveal all of God? In what way, if any, does all of reality reveal God in his triunity?

Even if we were to agree that “all of reality is revelational,” we would still be able to distinguish *kinds* of revelations. The way God reveals himself to Adam in the Garden is not the same way that He reveals himself

to Israel in a pillar of fire. The way God reveals himself in the starry host is not the same way that God reveals himself in the Law of Moses or how He reveals Himself in the moral law. And these latter are certainly different from the way in which God reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. Further, it is plain that we cannot simply look around at the created order (a product of the unified creative activity of God) and deduce God's triunity. This had to be revealed by God in a way distinct from making stars and mountains and oceans. Once we begin asking these clarifying questions, the well-worn (and justified) distinctions of special revelation and natural revelation re-assert themselves.

From the above, we can conclude that the commitments of presuppositionalism add nothing to the systematic realist philosophy. Far from needing to use these commitments to filter the contributions of Aquinas, what we have seen is that they introduce artificial and unhelpful constraints on our thinking that lead to either unfruitful dichotomies or unhelpful attempted solutions. The tone and rhetoric of many presuppositionalist authors attempts to replace clear and coherent thinking with piety. But as Gilson rightly observes,

Excellent as a rule of personal devotion, and as long as it is restricted to the sphere of religious feeling, such a principle can become dangerous when used as a criterion of theological truth...In theology, as in any other science, the main question is not to be pious but to be right. For there is nothing pious in being wrong about God!

[\[250\]](#)

The reason personal piety is dangerous when taken as a criterion for theological truth is that there is no restriction to what can be considered an object of piety and therefore an object of personal devotion. One could argue that many on the political left utilize feelings of personal piety directed at unholy causes to rouse people to their side. We need not meet this ungodly piety with godly piety, rather we can pursue rational discourse whereby the truth is uncovered, and individuals held responsible in light of its clarity.

## **CONCLUSION**

God being the ground of all being is not the same as God being the ground of human knowing. Once we describe what the human knowing powers are and how knowledge arises in our interaction with things (the task of epistemology) we can see how this view of knowledge is assumed by the biblical authors. On this common ground with scripture, we can pursue a science of metaphysics that leads to our robust philosophical theology cashed out along classical theistic lines. It is also a ground for philosophical apologetics that arises, again, from a systematic realist approach to philosophy that in its theological modes, preserves the attributes of classical theism. In existential Thomism we have a systematic realist philosophy that (when divorced from its accidental relations with Roman Catholic ecclesiology and coupled with Protestantism's reliance on guidance from Scripture for faith and practice) can stand alongside theology proper, systematic theology, hermeneutics, and biblical theology, acting as their handmaid and doing what Aquinas himself did, namely, using the tools of philosophy to clarify and cogently articulate the truths of the Christian faith. In an era of increasing skepticism, atheism, and the rejection of traditional Christianity such assistance is invaluable. The following is a short summary and guide to the logic of the above materials.

### **THE EXISTENTIAL SYSTEMATIC REALIST, CLASSICAL THEISM, AND EVANGELICALISM IN A SNAPSHOT**

1. The Bible demands a realist epistemology (that the object of human knowledge is the thing in the world as it really is).
2. If we do not have the real distinction between being and essence, then we cannot have realist epistemology (because if existence is bound up with essence and not metaphysically distinct, then the *esse intentionale*, the coming to be in the mind, would change the essence of the thing so that knowledge would not be knowledge of what the thing is).
3. We affirm whatever the Bible demands.
4. Therefore, there is a real distinction between being and essence. (On 1, 2, & 3).

5. If there is a real distinction between being and essence, then every finite composite being receives its existence from another (otherwise “being” and “being what” would be identical, but they are distinct).
6. (From 4 &5) Every finite composite being receives its existence from another.
7. This “other” cannot itself be a finite, composite being otherwise the reception of being would go on to infinity, which would not explain the present fact of the existence of finite composite beings.
8. But the denial that this “other” is finite and composite means that this “other” is infinite (the denial of finitude) and simple (which is the denial of composition).
9. God’s infinity and simplicity in the order of being/existence is entailed by classical theism.
10. Therefore, if we affirm a realist epistemology, then we must also affirm simplicity as a central element entailed by classical theism.
11. We do affirm a realist epistemology (on 1 & 3), therefore we affirm simplicity as a central element of classical theism.
12. Given the logical entailments of simplicity with other attributes (e.g. pure actuality, immutability, eternality, aseity, and impassibility), by affirming simplicity in the order of being, these other attributes are necessarily entailed.
13. These other attributes comprise the commitments of classical theism, on an existential realist rendering.
14. Therefore (from 11, 12, & 13), We affirm the commitments of classical theism on an existential realist rendering.

This, in a snapshot, is the connection between a moderate-realist metaphysics, direct realist epistemology, classical theism, and evangelical theology (given that we want to affirm what the Bible demands).

VI:  
**presuppositions in presuppositionalism  
and classical theism**

**Winfried Corduan**

My task in this chapter is somewhat precarious. To compare how presuppositions function in the two apologetics methods under consideration, I find myself facing the horns of a very real dilemma, owing to my need to clarify what I mean by the word “presupposition.” How can I do so in a fair and accurate manner? If I should try to identify a shared meaning of the concept, I would likely create a generalization so empty that no one would own up to it. On the other hand, if I begin by positing a distinction in the meaning of the concept between both schools of apologetics, I am likely to do an injustice to any number of apologists who do not observe the distinction.

Not being so ingenuous as to escape between the horns of this dilemma, I will nonetheless attempt such a leap. To guard against accidentally reinventing presuppositionalism, I will take Cornelius Van Til, one of the leading presuppositionalists of the twentieth century, as my guide;<sup>[251]</sup> for the classical view, I shall use my own construction of apologetics, since that is the one that I understand best.<sup>[252]</sup> My strategy will be to exemplify how different kinds of presuppositions function in logic in general, followed by what we can learn from them in the context of apologetics. I trust that presuppositionalists will forgive me for slips in vocabulary and that classical apologists will find my rendition not too idiosyncratic to be counted among their number.

### **Premises and their Relatives**

#### **In General**

A very basic, but not very helpful, understanding of presuppositions might be that they are *content beliefs that are assumed to be true prior to*

*any further rational cogitations.* Take the following example:

1. Nairobi is in Kenya.
2. Kenya is in Africa.
3. Therefore, Nairobi is in Africa.

I accept my conclusion as true based on my presupposition of the truth of my premises. If I did not believe that Nairobi is located in Kenya, which, in turn, can be found in Africa, I could not have any confidence in my apparently “new” belief that Nairobi is, indeed, a city on the African continent.

As everyone learns during the first week in a course on elementary logic, an argument is *valid* if it is impossible for its premises to be true while the conclusion can possibly be false. If I actually know that the premises and conclusion are true and that there is no fault in the logical structure, we call such an argument *sound*. Still, even if the truth of the premises is debatable, for the sake of evaluating the validity of the argument I need to stipulate their truth for the moment in order to see if the conclusion can be anything but true.

Thus, if I am serious about constructing a sound argument, I must be convinced of the truth of my premises. How I have come to know the truth of the premises is irrelevant at that specific moment for that particular argument. In the example above, I might have visited Nairobi personally, consulted a map, believed the premises on the basis of a teacher’s authority, received them as a divine revelation, or accepted them on the basis of the many other available sources of knowledge. Of course, the source of my beliefs and their justifications do matter significantly in the overall realm of epistemology. Nevertheless, within the very limited context of testing the validity of a single argument, the only thing that matters is that we assume the premises to be true so that, assuming no glitches in the logic, the “newly-found” conclusion will also be true. The truth values of the premises are, at a minimum, fleeting momentary presuppositions.

Now let us stipulate that I am not just constructing arguments for my own edification, but that I’m also interested in having other people agree with my conclusion. What does one usually presuppose when attempting to build a simple argument?

For one thing, we must have the same fundamental, intuitive awareness of validity, which can be expressed in formal terms. Here are



some examples among others; the list could go on by extending the consequences of each principle and finding different ones that we use—often without realizing that we are applying a logical principle.

1. *Identity*: a. A *truth* we may call “A” is always the same truth “A.” b. A *thing* we may call “A” is identical with itself. [\[253\]](#)

2. *Excluded Middle*: a. A *statement* “A” that conveys content is either true or false. b. A *thing* “A” either exists or does not exist. [\[254\]](#)

3. *Contradiction*: a. A *content statement* “A” cannot be both true and false at the same time in the same sense. b. A *thing* “A” cannot exist and not-exist at the same time in the same sense. [\[255\]](#)

4. *Modus Ponens*: If it is true that if a *statement* “A” is true then “B” must be true, and if we know that “A” is true, then “B” must also be true. [\[256\]](#)

Efforts by some philosophers to argue that in theory this principle could be dispensed with, are clearly self-defeating. E.g., “If it is possible that logical principles are not necessarily immutable, and *modus ponens* is a logical principle, then *modus ponens* is not necessarily immutable.” The logic behind this statement obviously takes the form of *modus ponens* and turns the purported argument into gibberish because, even with the best intentions, we could not test its validity. [\[257\]](#)

5. *Set Transitivity*: a. From the perspective of the larger set: A set called “C” includes a set called “B,” and if the set called “B” includes “A,” then “C” also includes “A.” b. From the perspective of the smaller set: If a set of items (statements or things) called “A” is a subset of another set “B,” and if “B” is a subset of a set “C,” then “A” is also a subset of set “C.” [\[258\]](#)

I believe that relationships such as these are built into our basic intellectual equipment, not in their formal expressions, of course, but as basic intuitions that cannot be taught, but whose proper use can be nourished. Although one cannot understand or apply them without content, by themselves they do not tell us anything about how things are in the world. They do help us make sense of states of affairs, but as they are expressed in their vacant forms, all we can do with them is to deduce further vacant forms. In short, these are not fundamental truths from which

we can derive further truths, but hypothetical expressions of what may or may not be true given certain conditions of what already is true in reality.

Furthermore, we assume a certain amount of shared meaning in the language we use. It would be futile for me to try to convince others that Nairobi is in Africa if they are clueless about what “Nairobi” and “Africa” refer to. The logical validity will still stand, but there could be no significant communication.

To be sure, it may be that the meaning of these terms turns out to have vastly different connotations—perhaps even denotations—for the person to whom I am addressing my argument, and that in the context of the conversation I may need to be careful not to assume too much. To use a rather extreme example, let us assume for the moment that the idea of Africa, along with its countries and cities, is simply an illusory concept with no correspondence to physical reality. In that case, the assignment of a truth value to my statements by my audience entails that the listener would have to share my presupposition, at least for the moment, no matter how bizarre it is.

A special class of statements that can serve as presupposed premises in an argument is constituted by self-evident logical truths. These can then be filled in by content which exactly mimics the first premise. Thus, I might argue:

1. Person A is identical with Person B if they share all properties and no other person shares those exact same properties.

2. St. Thomas Aquinas and the author of the *Summa Theologica* share all properties, and no other person shares those exact same properties.

3. Therefore, Thomas Aquinas is the author of the *Summa Theologica*.

I trust that there is nothing startling in this argument. It begins with a purely logical principle, and thus, whatever names and properties we may substitute for “person A” and person “B,” the conclusion will inevitably follow logically, and the truth of the argument rides entirely on the truth of the second premise.

In short, in a logical argument, the truth of the conclusion depends on the truth (or vacuity) of the premises. The person attempting to convince someone of the soundness of an argument should be committed to the truth

of the premises, although, formal implications aside, it may take some further effort to convince someone else of the intended meaning and truth of the premises before the argument becomes persuasive. The truth of the premises is presupposed by the originator, but not necessarily by the receptor, except provisionally to test the validity of the argument.

### **In Apologetics**

Apologetics is a rational enterprise. It is not to be confused with evangelism, even though they are often intertwined. By “evangelism,” I understand the communication of the gospel so that people will be able to trust Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection for their sins in order to be saved. For many people the Holy Spirit may already have removed all barriers, and, upon hearing the gospel, they will respond immediately. Others may be too hungry, too cold, too rejected by other people, and so forth, to listen to the gospel, and it may take various works of mercy in order for their ears to be opened. Yet others may have intellectual difficulties concerning the message of the Bible, in which case apologetics becomes the instrument to remove those barriers.

What I have described above for arguments in general also applies to the reasoning used in apologetics. First of all, Christians and non-Christians all share the basic innate principles to which I referred above. I am including here the so-called “Eastern” systems of logic that are said to differ from their “Western” counterparts. In many cases the difference arises, not because of a distinct understanding of rationality, but because of epistemological concerns. For example, in Jain logic the principle of identity is qualified, though far from abandoned, precisely in order to prevent contradictions. If I were to point to a water jug and say, “This is a pot,” I might accidentally commit a contradiction because there are two or more ways of interpreting the thing at which I am pointing. I could refer to the material clay structure of which the pot is made, in which case my statement is true. However, I can’t help but simultaneously point to the inner space of the clay structure that actually holds the water or to the air that surrounds it and contributes to the perception of its shape, in which case the statement would be false. So, Jain formal logic adds the word “maybe” (*syadvada*) and lists possible alternative configurations in order to

maintain the fundamental rationality that applies to all human beings.<sup>[259]</sup> Nevertheless, this *caveat* does not constitute any essential difference from the function of the basic laws or thought in so-called Western logic.

Moving on, we assume that a rational conversation between a Christian and a non-Christian is possible. We need to be careful to refrain from drawing unwarranted conclusions from isolated, extreme assertions. I can say that it is clearly the case that Christians and non-Christians do not share the same presuppositions, and that they understand language in different ways. All of our thoughts and expressions are (or should be) affected by whatever occupies the center of our lives, either Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, or some object or image created by ourselves. Nevertheless, those differences are not fatal to the possibility of communication. A Christian can share the gospel, and his interlocutor may understand the language so as to come to faith in Christ. Whether this possibility is due to nature or grace is a question that we will look at towards the end of this essay.

There is no question that Christians and non-Christians share the same capacity to reason in a purely logical sense. Thus, the above example of St. Thomas's identity would be true for both of them. But logic itself is empty, and the differences arise once we apply non-trivial content.

When the Christian says "sin," the non-Christian will most likely understand a different meaning for that word than the Christian, but there seems to be some residual meaning that at least makes it possible for these two persons to go on talking about the subject and clarify their intended meanings to each other.<sup>[260]</sup> For the Christian, the fundamental meaning of "sin" is derived from the Bible, and the concept entails our alienation from God. In the non-Christian's context, the word will most likely either have to do with breaking inconsequential rules or some form of self-delusion from which one must free himself. Still we can talk to each other and help each other understand the other's concepts to varying extents. If we took the idea that meaning in language is exclusively determined by a person's set of beliefs—and that these beliefs are opaque to all others—to an extreme, the Christian and non-Christian could not understand anything that the other says. Nor would it be possible for the Christian apologist to place himself heuristically into the shoes of the non-Christian. Either there is shared

meaning, no matter its origin, or there is no possibility of any communication. It makes no sense to insist that the Christian and non-Christian don't speak the same language, only to move on to confront the non-Christian with the fact that he is a sinner and can be saved by Jesus Christ. Spoken languages in the real world do not come with subtitles.

As I understand it, when Cornelius Van Til engaged in personal evangelism, he would confront people with the fact that they were "covenant breakers." As fallen human beings they were living in breach of the covenant that God had made with humanity, and they were personally responsible to return to God by means of the reconciliation that God is offering to us in Christ. Now, I must admit that, if someone came up to me and told me, "Did you know that you're a covenant breaker?" I would be quite confused at first, even though my argot includes those terms. For a non-Christian, who is not used to such phraseology, the statement would very likely be utterly opaque. However, language is what we use to communicate, and, to stay with this example, I assume that Professor Van Til trusted that, by God's grace, his words would provide a point of contact (not "common ground") so as to be able to explain sin and redemption to his friend.

We will return to this topic further when we go on to discuss systems of belief more thoroughly.

### **Conclusions as Presuppositions?**

There is a certain misconception that one encounters from time to time about the structure of a formal argument and its conclusion: it begs the question. Let me supply a very simple example on which to build my larger point.

1. The capital of China is in Asia.
2. Beijing is the capital of China.
3. Therefore, Beijing is in Asia.

There is nothing profound in this little inference; in fact, one might think of it as nothing more than a definition. But it really is an argument, specifically a syllogism with two premises and a conclusion. Once we have accepted the truth of the premises, we must also accept the truth of the newly generated conclusion: Beijing is located in Asia.

Now, someone with a little exposure to logic may step in and complain that this argument is a sham. There is nothing new about the conclusion. Everybody already knows that Beijing is located in Asia, and—even if no one else had known—I certainly did when I wrote it out. So, this critic might say that I’m actually arguing in a circle. I have already decided what continent Beijing is located on, and my syllogism is therefore fallacious, pretending to argue for something I had already assumed.

Similar criticisms sometimes come up in apologetics with, say, Anselm’s ontological argument or Aquinas’ “Five Ways.” Obviously, these authors already believed in God, and so did the people who constituted their original audience. Why pretend that they could come up with a supposedly new conclusion by means logical inferences when it is believed and accepted already by the ones formulating the arguments and those reading them?

There are several levels on which we can respond:

1. The fallacy of arguing in a circle (*petitio principii*) only occurs when the content of the conclusion is already stated as true in the premises. My premises did not include the specific idea that Beijing is in Asia; it was necessarily implied by those premises, and that’s the point. The idea that a conclusion is implied by its premises is the fundamental principle without which there could be no such thing as a logically valid argument.

2. An objector might reply that, implication or not, once one understands the premises, the conclusion is obvious—why pretend that it’s a conclusion to a non-circular argument? Anybody can see the conclusion once he’s understood the premises.

- a. Depending on their mental agility, some people see through certain premises to a conclusion more easily than others. If I may bring up another non-theological example, many important proofs in mathematics are sound and elegant, but far from immediately transparent. They include Aristotle’s proof that the square root of two is an irrational number,<sup>[261]</sup> and Euclid’s demonstration that there cannot be a highest prime number.<sup>[262]</sup> Surely, their conclusions are entailed by their premises, but just as obviously, they are not known to be true without the labor of drawing logical inferences by means of the

rules of a logical system, and, thus, they are anything but circular in nature.

b. We should be able to agree on the heuristic principle that people do not attempt to construct valid arguments for conclusions that they do not already believe. The value of these arguments does not only necessarily lie in their conclusions. Of course, the scholars of the Middle Ages already believed in God. No doubt, Aristotle and Euclid were convinced of their respective conclusions before they wrote out their arguments.<sup>[263]</sup> The point is not that they uncovered new truths, but that they showed that these truths could be rationally inferred from some given information.

c. Furthermore, it appears to me to be unthinkable that contemporary evangelical apologists would advance arguments without believing in the gospel as revealed in Scripture. Apologetics stands in the service of evangelism. We don't evangelize without believing what we preach, and, to pick one example, we do not let arguments for the existence of God replace the gospel. The truth we presuppose in our hearts and minds is not intentionally hidden, but neither is it a premise which is intended to pull itself up by its own bootstraps. If this kind of thinking is behind John Frame's insistence that we all need to be, at a minimum, "presuppositionalists of the heart," it would seem that we are close to being on the same page.<sup>[264]</sup>

### **Block House Methodology in Evangelism and Apologetics**

Cornelius Van Til objected to apologetics carried out by those evangelicals whose method he likened to the building of a block house. One begins with a foundation and then adds the material necessary for the first story, followed by building the second story, putting up the roof, perhaps with a chimney, and so forth. In application, this word picture illustrated Van Til's understanding of how some prominent evangelical apologists carry out their task. There are many levels in such an apologetic method, and each one must be erected before the next one can be built on top of it. You cannot build the first story unless you have the foundation. There is nothing you can do to cover the building with the roof until the rest of the structure is in place. So, we must first establish the existence of God. Then

we need to show that Jesus Christ really lived in history and that he was the Son of God. Along the way we have to establish that the Bible is not only true but is also the inspired Word of God. We must demonstrate that Christ really died on the cross before we can commit to the idea that he atoned for our sins on the cross. And what good would it do to have the assurance of eternal life if we omitted to give proof that the resurrection of Jesus was a well-attested event in history?

If by any chance someone reading this article is familiar with my apologetics textbook, *No Doubt About It*, he may notice that Van Til is criticizing something like my approach. However, there is the need for one serious revision in this description, one that undoubtedly applies to most classical apologists. I do believe that it is possible and profitable to demonstrate the truth of Christianity by lining up the various issues, from the very fundamental philosophical ones to the very specific historical ones, and on from there to the personal need for redemption in Christ. However, which issue one addresses depends on which questions are relevant at the moment.

The importance of my point became clear in a private conversation at a conference with a distinguished American evangelical scholar who followed the presuppositional apologetics of Gordon Clark, and a notable Christian author from outside of the American evangelical circle who also took a presuppositional approach. Although the details of the conversation escape me, I must identified myself as a “non-presuppositionalist,” and our guest from another country had a somewhat puzzled look on his face. The distinguished American theologian immediately helped him understand: “You see, here in America there are people who believe you must first of all prove the existence of God and that Christ was God...” He went on to recite a few more of the supposedly necessary stages. What struck me was his use of the modal verb “must” and the idea that it is “necessary” to prove certain items to lead up to the full gospel. Granting only for the moment that it is legitimate to describe the classical apologist’s method as “block house,” the sections are connected by “may,” not “must.”

The reason lies in the difference, to which I have already alluded, between evangelism and apologetics. The gospel is never a “block house” that can be attained by stages. Accepting Jesus Christ entails becoming a new creature. It is an all-or-none commitment. On the other hand,



apologetics may, but does not have to, consist of sequential stages. The classical apologist in action answers questions as they arise. If someone already believes in the God of the Bible, but is uncertain about the historicity of the resurrection, we have the privilege of showing them the evidence there is. However, in that case we need not go back and convince the person of, say, the self-refutation of relativism or the truth of theism. Examples can, of course, be multiplied, but the point is that the various stages of arguments that a classical apologist uses represent a “may” and a “can,” but not a “must.”

The difference between this exposition and Van Til, along with some other presuppositionalists, is that he would apply “may not” to using separate proofs for particular issues concerning Christianity. We will come back to this after describing the idea of “systems” of belief or “world views.”

## **Systems**

Let us take a quick excursion to the philosophy of science in the twentieth century. The brilliant American philosopher W. V. O. Quine declared:

The statement, rather than the term, came with Bentham to be recognized as the unit accountable to an empiricist critique. But what I am now urging is that even in taking the statement as unit we have drawn our grid too finely. The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science.<sup>[265]</sup>

This pronouncement can use some unpacking.

## **Precursors: Hume and Logical Positivism**

The roots of this utterance go back more than two hundred years to the Scottish philosopher David Hume, whose philosophy of language required that no single word (or “term”) can be meaningful to someone unless he had a prior sensory impression of what the term referred to. Thus, we know what the word “blue” means because we have seen the color blue. We understand the word “harmony” because we have heard harmonic sounds. Our senses (which constitute our “empirical” equipment) make language

meaningful. In these two examples, a blind or deaf person respectively would not be able to understand the terms because they have no empirical foundation for them.<sup>[266]</sup>

Along came the philosophical school of logical positivism, which did not limit itself to single words, as Hume did, but expanded the part of language under scrutiny from individual words to entire sentences. Emulating natural science, the members of this philosophical orientation held that a purportedly content-bearing statement could be meaningful only if it were possible to specify how, in principle, the truth of the statement could be tested by an observation.<sup>[267]</sup> As it turned out, the method not only rendered propositions in metaphysics, religion, and ethics meaningless, but also propositions of science. For example, a scientist cannot directly see a nerve impulse, but only the spike on the oscilloscope. Insofar as science must make universal statements or appeal to abstractions such as “force” or “distance,” it very quickly starts to resemble metaphysics. Thus, the attempt to model philosophy on natural science backfired and made natural science its victim rather than its role model.

## **Quine and Science**

Quine rejected the idea that individual sentences get their meanings due to their empirical verifiability. Meaning does not reside in a method applied to single propositions, but from the entire system in which they are embedded. For Quine, aligning himself with his positivist heritage to that extent, the system is “science.” Thereby he sought to continue the positivists’ agenda of letting philosophy mimic science as well as improve on the means of attaining that goal.

Quine’s view of science was pragmatic; an object discovered by the scientist does not have reality in itself, but its reality is described by the action of the scientist in constructing it. For him, the “myth” of physical objects was superior to the myth of the Homeric gods, but “only by degree.”<sup>[268]</sup> Still, despite the inherent vagueness of such a starting point, “science” as a complete system was the primary reference point for the meaning of individual sentences. Particular propositions could not be tested for their empirical validation, but their truth could be assessed by how well they fit into this vague self-subsisting cloud of “scientific knowledge.”

Coherence with science as a total web of beliefs is the standard against which truth must be assessed.

Each man is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic.

Whether beliefs are labelled as “true” or not depends on how well the beliefs work in their conceptual framework.

### **In Apologetics**

The naturalistic heirs of positivism rose to give Quine a standing ovation. Had they known of this development, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, or Cornelius Van Til would presumably have yawned. They had been saying similar things long before Quine’s awakening. However, their interpretive framework was not some ill-defined illusory system called “science,” but the bedrock of God’s revelation in Christ and in His Word.

For present purposes, I’m going to refer to large-scale frameworks of knowledge as “world views” and “systems,” though below I will point out an important caveat in applying this terminology. Furthermore, for now, I will take the liberty of describing a world view as a more-or-less connected net of declarative propositions. Imagine a net where each particular piece of string represents a single belief which is connected to others. Theoretically, there is no limit as to how many other strands a single belief may be linked up to it. However, no belief is intended to be disconnected, even if the one who holds a particular set of beliefs is gluing them together with logical non sequiturs.

Some beliefs will reside at the very center of the web. We can think of these as core beliefs, the most foundational beliefs a person may hold. Presumably, every person believes that he or she exists in some fashion. Further core beliefs include (for myself) that I am human, that I am the son of other humans, that God exists, that God knows me, that I am in a relationship to God thanks to his grace, and so forth.

Other beliefs may reside on the fringe of the web, and they may be quite fragile. Their connections to other beliefs are relatively loose. For example, if I were to believe that a certain store had better bargains than

another one, it would take a lot of effort to discover how this belief relates to others, particularly those at the core. On the other hand, insofar as it is possible to change beliefs that are a part of my framework, it could be easily dislodged; for example, by acquainting myself with the goods and prices at another store.

Even though it may not be easy to discover the connection between certain beliefs and their surrounding systems, we should not assume that there isn't one. Everything that we believe and think, including what we feel, is colored by our conceptual frameworks. When I say that a certain store has the best deals, the very fact that I'm making this statement, not to mention the content and my manner of saying it, is influenced by my other beliefs. We can trace a jagged line from this little insignificant belief to the very core of what I hold to be true. This line would touch on what I think is true concerning my needs to purchase material items, my understanding of personal and corporate finances, the value of material things in my life and my community, a Christian perspective on buying and selling, and, thus, ultimately, onto my core beliefs on my relationship to God. People who have looked over my life and writings may judge that my beliefs are not nearly as coherent and consistent as I think they are, but, along with most human beings, my own take is that all of my beliefs are consistently integrated into my total "system."

It is, of course, possible for someone to go through a period of cognitive dissonance, caused by the collision of two sets of beliefs of apparently equal weight. I'm thinking, for example, of the college freshman who feels torn between what he has been taught by his pastor as the biblical depiction of creation and his atheistic biology professor's advocacy of materialistic evolution. Here are some ways with which he might seek to rescue himself from this intellectual crisis:

1. At first, he might simply dismiss the professor's beliefs because there is no room for them in his world view. As time progresses, he may let the matter rest there forever, retaining his system intact in all of its purity. This option is the most common and, perhaps counterintuitively, the most preferable one. In the so-called developed world, our minds are constantly bombarded by claims on behalf of supposedly greater, higher, and more user-friendly truths, and we need to ignore the majority of them just to keep from going crazy.

2. On the other hand, he may try to ease his mind with a compromise by making it a part of his system that these two beliefs are permanently irreconcilable. However, whether he wants to admit it or not, such an *ad hoc* agnosticism sends ripples throughout his system, stopping just short of the core. After all, if he suspends judgment on a set of beliefs that he had previously thought of as true outcomes of his core beliefs, some such earlier beliefs must diminish in importance, and a subset of them can no longer be linked up in the same way to the core as before. Some information included in his system can remain there only at the cost of never making reference to it, and, thus, he must either retain some of the original cognitive dissonance or douse it with a bit of self-stultification by deliberately overlooking some obvious questions.

3. The student may allow himself to be convinced by the atheistic professor. I am sneaking in the word “allow” here because there must be an act of the will at work. He could not help but realize that buying into atheistic evolution involves changing not only a segment of his web of beliefs, but the actual core. The initial change would have many corollaries. Some beliefs would have to go; others would become mandatory in order to accommodate the innovation in a reasonably coherent collection of beliefs. The entire system would take on a new hue; in fact, it would be a new system. Because of the radical implications of a system change, he might just decide that the cost for changing his one belief on creation/evolution is too high and resort to some other option instead, perhaps one of the two I mentioned above.

Similar things may occur if an atheist hears a clear and cogent summary of the gospel. He may dismiss it because it does not fit his worldview. When I was an undergraduate zoology major, upon laying out evidences for the truth of Christianity to my instructor in a philosophy course, he responded along this line, “I admit that you’ve got me snowed. I don’t know what to say right now, but I know that something must be wrong.”<sup>[269]</sup>

The fact that propositions do not swirl in our heads isolated from other propositions is commonly accepted among all apologists today, I believe.

We know that beliefs occur in more or less rigidly connected webs, that all beliefs are colored to some extent by our core beliefs, so that, as remarked above, theoretically there can be neither neutral beliefs nor common ground between differing systems. This statement may be considered awkwardly phrased or insufficient in its coverage by either classical apologists or presuppositionalists, but I trust the general thought it expresses rings true.

Then where is the difference between the two supposed camps? If I may get by with one more generalization: It lies in the degree to which it is possible for two people with different systems to communicate, and, more specifically, for a Christian to communicate with a non-Christian. We need to flesh out the earlier observation of this point to understand the issue.

### **Important Distinctions**

So far, I have tried as much as possible to show that the apparent disparity

between the need for presuppositions among classical and presuppositionalist apologists is not as great as may be expressed at times. At least some contemporary writers in the classical vein do not close the door on contrasting systems of thought as a whole, or, more specifically, the Christian framework based on God's self-disclosure vs. non-Christian systems based on the illusion of human autonomy.<sup>[270]</sup> But then, is there any significant difference between the two approaches?

The answer does not depend so much on what apologetics and evangelism have in common, but on how much apologetics needs to take theological truth into account. As stated very early in this essay, I find the idea absurd that someone might be putting forward serious arguments on behalf of Christianity without presupposing the truth of God's redemption. But how much does this truth need to influence apologetic methodology?

The Bible teaches us that before God's work in us through Christ, we are dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1–5). The metaphor is a drastic one. At its most literal, it declares that a non-Christian is a corpse who cannot even hear the gospel in order to accept it or even reject it. Taking the context and other biblical teachings into account, Paul is saying that the non-Christian has chosen to abide by values that make it impossible for him to accept the truth

of the gospel, apart from a crisis brought about by divine intervention that enable him to see his need for salvation.

Yes, God makes it possible for Christians and non-Christians to communicate, but there can be no common core between a system whose basic propositions rule out redemption from sin and one that is centered on God's revelation and plan of redemption. The so-called noetic effects of sin amount to the fact that non-Christians cannot understand the biblical message on their own terms.

As a consequence, insofar as the non-Christian can understand anything of biblical truth, he can do so only thanks to the illumination of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14). It is impossible for him to come to Christ unless he has first been drawn to him by God the Father (John 10:44), and Jesus will accept anyone who comes to him by the Father's will (John 10:37). In short, only those who belong to Christ by divine grace can even understand what the Christian is saying. I accept this statement as true, which may cause some readers to wonder why I am not a presuppositionalist.

So then, here we are confronted with theological truth and its impact on apologetic method. One can go into at least two directions, and I will reveal beforehand that I favor the second one and close this chapter with these two descriptions.

a) The presuppositionalist believes that he is looking at a theological impasse. There is, as we said, neither neutrality nor common ground between Christian and non-Christian. Thus, it is impossible to build up a case for Christianity step by step. If we tried, the disparity between Christian and non-Christian will prevent any successful communication. The only thing we can and must strive for is for the non-Christian to see the inability of his system to ground the values that he attempts to live by and to show him that only the sovereign Lord who has revealed himself in the Bible and in Christ can provide such undergirding.

Let us line up two quotations from Van Til. The first one describes the barrier between the Christian and non-Christian, based on the fact that there is no neutral standard to which both can appeal.

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon

by both parties in the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference point required to make the “facts” and “laws” intelligible. The question is as to what the “facts” and “laws” really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes that they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?

And yet they do communicate, and the Christian can put forward a rational case so that the non-Christian can recognize the absurdity of his present system. Van Til draws a picture of a man made of water living in water trying to escape the water with a ladder made of water, which he intended as an illustration of the problem for the non-Christian to attain the objective values that he desires. He continues,

So hopeless and senseless a picture must be drawn of the natural man’s methodology based as it is upon the assumption that time or chance is ultimate. On his own assumption his own rationality is a product of chance. On his assumption even the laws of logic which he employs are a product of chance. So then the Christian apologist whose position requires him to hold that Christian theism is really true and as such must be taken as the presupposition which alone makes the acquisition of knowledge in any field intelligible, must join his “friend” in his hopeless gyrations so as to point out to him that his efforts are always in vain. It will then appear that Christian theism...is the only position which gives human reason a field for successful operation and method of true progress in knowledge. [\[271\]](#)

The indirect method that Van Til advocates can be understood as a *reductio ad absurdum* followed by a transcendental argument. First, he shows the non-Christian that the values by which he attempts to live cannot be grounded in a system in which he makes his own, supposedly autonomous, decisions. Since he can hardly be said to be in control of the universe, his decisions are undermined by the factors of time and chance. Thus, there can be no abiding ideals that regulate our lives. As a second step, Van Til demonstrates to the non-Christian that Christianity, or, more specifically, Reformed Christianity alone can provide a coherent context in which the values by which we want to live have a basis. And, of course, what Van Til has in mind is the entire message of sin and redemption.



However, an obvious question is, given the fact that there is no neutrality or common ground between the Christian and the non-Christian, how is it possible to go through this procedure? The presuppositionalist answers by pointing to God's common grace. Now, please do not get confused here: Grace is not nature, and nature is not grace. But neither is nature ever just nature; it is always creation. God built the world in such a way that a human being can see that God exists and that the human person has broken the accompanying moral responsibilities. Clearly, the non-Christian's system prohibits him from acknowledging those truths, but, by God's common grace, they are visible, and the non-Christian is accountable for accepting or rejecting them. It appears that is the reason why Van Til believed he could find a point of contact (not "common ground") in telling non-Christians that they are covenant breakers before God. He states that the genuine Reformed (presuppositionalist) apologist is not only consciously aware of the barriers between him and the non-Christian, but also that deep in his heart the non-Christian is more aware of his true position than he may let on.

[The Reformed apologist] knows that man is responsible not in spite of but just because he is not autonomous but created. He knows that the idea of analogical or covenant personality is that which alone preserves genuine significance for the thoughts and deeds of man. So he also knows that he who is dead in trespasses and sins is nonetheless responsible for his deadness. He knows also that the sinner in the depth of his heart knows that what is thus held before him is true. He knows he is a creature of God; he has been simply seeking to cover up this fact to himself. He knows that he has broken the law of God; he has again covered up this fact to himself. He knows that he is therefore guilty and is subject to punishment forever; this fact too he will not look in the face. [\[272\]](#)

Thus, presuppositionalism is effective because the non-Christian's system is superimposed on Christian truths that can be brought to the surface by the Holy Spirit.

b) The classical apologists may accept the fundamental theological truths mentioned above, but does not believe that, therefore, apologetics has to be limited to presenting the entire system alone. Whereas Van Til argued

that apologetics must not differ from preaching, that is to say, it must always present the entire Word of God, the classical apologist believes that apologetics supports preaching and evangelism and is a help in addressing the intellectual issues as they arise. Whether he wants to describe the connection between Christian and non-Christian as “common ground,” “common grace,” or “general revelation,” he finds that two people with different world views can communicate.

The classical apologist denies the idea that arguments for the existence of God and similar projects are sinful because they supposedly constitute a neutral sector that may or may not be occupied by God depending on the outcome of our arguments. Instead, what the classical apologist is doing is precisely the opposite, namely, demonstrating to the non-Christian that neutral ground is impossible. For example, when I present the cosmological argument, I’m already assuming that the features of the world bear the unmistakable mark of their Creator; otherwise I would not go to the trouble. [273] Of course, as we argued earlier, I cannot use my conclusion as a premise, but my thoughts are deeply embedded in the Christian system, and the whole point of making such an argument is to show that the facts that go into the argument are not neutral. By their very existence they testify to the existence of the Creator. My version, at least, of the cosmological argument is also a transcendental argument: Unless there is a God, there cannot be a world. If you can look at the world and not recognize that it needs a Creator and Sustainer, you’re not looking at the world correctly.

Furthermore, the classical apologist believes that he has Scripture on his side. Clark H. Pinnock declared in a volume dedicated to Van Til and his legacy that

...as soon as the Scripture is allowed to speak, we perceive that the Christian faith is not an abstract metaphysical system supported by presuppositionalism, but a belief grounded in nonrecurrent historical events seen to be revelatory on the basis of which limited statements are made about the ultimate nature and structure of reality. It is ironical that the criticism against the man who makes so much of an inerrant Bible has to be that he has disregarded its contents in his epistemology. For there is no possible way to deny that Scripture presents the revelation of God occurring in the cosmic and historical stuff of the

universe, general and special revelation, and that this divine self-disclosure is objectively valid to all men (Romans 1:19f; Acts 17:31).

[274]

If the Bible permits such arguments, surely we may follow its precedent. The classical apologist agrees with the presuppositionalist that divine truth can only be understood by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. However, he sees no good reason to believe that the Holy Spirit may not also enlighten the steps in a sequential apologetics system. Furthermore, representatives of neither side can know, when they are engaged in evangelistic work, whether the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of the person to whom they are speaking.

The classical apologist should never think that God's grace can be achieved in stages; demonstrations of the existence of God, for example, are possible and helpful, but are not the gospel. However, he is confident that his rational arguments are sound. Furthermore, if he has been doing evangelism with the help of classical apologetics for a while, he may have already experienced that non-Christians can be persuaded by such items as theistic proofs on their way to becoming Christians. If I may repeat myself one more time, the cosmological argument, for instance, is not the gospel, but I have seen it used by God to change a person's view of the world from atheism to theism, and eventually to the matter that really counts, namely fully embracing the whole gospel. So, when the classical apologist subsequently reads the declaration by a presuppositionalist that what he did cannot be done, all he can say is, "By God's grace, he used what I just did to his glory."

*VII:*  
**presuppositionalism and philosophy  
in the academy**

**Thomas Schultz**

The debate between varied schools of apologetics within Christendom has a long history. There are clearly dominant positions, yet there are also significant schools that have developed in light of cultural and intellectual settings. This chapter will focus on one of those schools, presuppositionalism, and more specifically Van Tillian presuppositionalism. We will here concentrate on how this school grew out of a philosophical milieu that arose within the academy. There are definitely Christian influences in the development of presuppositionalism, but one must also consider the non-Christian philosophical milieu that contributed to the rise of this school of Apologetics. This chapter will not discuss the strengths and weaknesses of presuppositionalism as an apologetic system (though this author is committed to a classical apologetic approach and is convinced that the weaknesses of presuppositionalism outweigh the strengths). The chapter's focus will be primarily to discuss the academic philosophical impact on the development of presuppositionalism. This is somewhat controversial, as some within presuppositionalism would claim that there is primarily, and perhaps only, biblical/theological influence that is fundamental to its rise and development as an apologetic system. This chapter will attempt to show this claim to be inaccurate.

### **Three Methodological Tools**

It is challenging for historians of ideas to ascertain who has influenced a given thinker. If the thinker acknowledges the influence, the question is whether the earlier influence was properly understood. If the person in question does not directly acknowledge the earlier thinkers' influence on himself, one must show this connection through an intermediate thinker (when possible) who would indirectly tie the later thinker to the earlier one.

If the later thinker refuses to concede or admit, or even denies, influence from another, then it becomes more challenging to show influence, but it can be done by showing parallel modes of thought between the authors in consideration. While difficult, this makes it possible to show both the later author's familiarity with the earlier and how the later author adopted the earlier's work. This connection can only be, at best, probable/possible and therefore not as strong as the first two connections of earlier to later.

This, then, offers at least three ways of connecting a later thinker to an earlier source. There are other ways of making connections—like showing dependency on the same kind of argumentation, showing period milieu concept dependency, and so on—but these are even more difficult to demonstrate. Nonetheless, the three categories or ways of establishing or arguing for influence of an earlier thinker on a later thinker that will be used here are as follows.

### **Direct Connection**

This is where the author quotes and/or acknowledges being influenced by the other (either individual or school of thought) as a source of generation of her idea. This can be seen in a statement where the earlier influence is recognized as the source of the idea by the latter or if the latter cites the former positively. Whether the later thinker properly understood the earlier thinker is another matter.

### **Indirect Connection**

This connection usually link a series of influences. The individual in question may never cite or acknowledge the remote influence but does recognize a more proximate influence, who was in turn influenced by a still earlier person. This could be presented in the form of a hypothetical syllogism form of argumentation as illustrated below.

If a influenced b,  
and b influenced c,  
and c influenced d,  
then, a influenced d.

One still has to show evidence of influence of each individual on the next (in the way described in category 1). Still, this can be a very effective way of showing influence of one thinker on another.

### **Parallel Thinking Connection**

As was indicated above, this is the hardest way (of these three methods) to show a connection between two or more individuals, and it only offers a possible or likely connection between the two. Still, a strong parallel between the two (or more) being considered can make the case for a possible linkage. The problem is that it is very difficult to prove *influence*. Two or more people may have come up with the same or similar positions independently, particularly if they are living in a similar place or time. The influence may be there, but not in any direct or even indirect sense recognized by the latter thinker.

As one is considering sources of influence on another, some of the questions which need to be asked are as follows:

- 1) What did they accept from the one who influenced them?
- 2) How did the accepted ideas influence the later way of thinking and the specific ideas that she had?
- 3) Further, what implications do those ideas have for the latter's views and system of thought?

There are many other concerns that could be considered, but they will be looked at later on in this article.

In light of the above, the focus of this article will be on a couple of very influential presuppositional apologists and the schools of philosophy that influenced their thought. One of the presuppositionalists considered here, Cornelius Van Til, the intellectual father of the movement, often would claim that his source of influence was primarily Scripture.<sup>[275]</sup> He would rarely admit to influence from philosophical schools, whether Christian or secular, in identifying the generation of his ideas, save for those within the Reformed community who, he argued, derived their views from Scripture as well. He was also critical of others who adopted positions from philosophical schools of thought, and he argued that they were adopting unbiblical positions in doing so, unlike himself.

The second thinker who will be discussed is one of Van Til's influential students, John Frame. He follows rather closely, with some important modifications and revisions, this understanding of Van Til's system. There are important differences between Van Til's students concerning what presuppositionalism is and should be, but Frame is a strong advocate for a very influential strain of Van Tillian

presuppositionalism. Other presuppositionalists from various schools, like Greg Bahnsen, Scott Oliphint, Gordon Clark, Ronald Nash, and Carl Henry, share similar connections, so it would be repetitive to look at them here.

This chapter will develop the position being presented by, firstly, presenting a brief outline of the apologetic methodology employed by Van Til. From there it will consider direct, indirect, and parallel linkage of the philosophical academy to the thoughts and ideas of Van Til. The next step will be to examine key elements of Frame's position and his various links to the philosophical community. There will then be offered a summary of the case that has been made for Van Tillian presuppositionalism's dependency on the philosophical academy in the development of that position and why this issue is important in the larger debate over apologetics.

### **A Summary of Van Til's Apologetic System**

Van Til's Apologetic is claimed to be simple by some, complex by others, and is probably not completely understood by any. This is exemplified in a

debate among his students and others in interaction with the criticism of Van Til's method by the Sproul/Gerstner/Lindsley team. Greg Bahnsen, a strong defender of Van Til's apologetic, accused the three men of not understanding Van Til in his review of their book *Classical Apologetics*.<sup>[276]</sup> However, John Frame, another strong defender of Van Til, claimed that for the most part they did understand Van Til's position.<sup>[277]</sup>

Nevertheless, this paper will attempt to give a summary of Van Til's presuppositional apologetic. For this summary, I will use Van Til's own summaries of his own position as given in *Christianity Today* and *New Horizons*,<sup>[278]</sup> *Jerusalem and Athens* (the latter was a festschrift dedicated to Van Til in which he wrote as a respondent to a number of the articles), *In Defense of the Faith*, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, and his *Apologetics*. The last three books were written by him in an attempt to develop and defend his apologetic system.

Van Til's system was built upon two foundations. First, a person is either a "covenant keeper" or a "covenant breaker" in his relationship to God.<sup>[279]</sup> The reason for man being in one of these two positions is the

historical fact of the fall. Van Til believed that, at the fall, man reared his head up against God in an ontic rebellion. In an attempt to make himself “the final court of appeal,” man willfully refused to recognize God’s authority and “declared his autonomy as over against God.”<sup>[280]</sup> As a result, man fell into a state of existence which was overwhelmingly and thoroughly permeated by sin. This sin had an impact upon the noetic structure of man which made him incapable of reasoning rightly. Van Til wrote, “the ‘reason’ of sinful men will invariably act wrongly.”<sup>[281]</sup>

This leads one to the second problem from which Van Til developed his apologetic method. According to Van Til, Roman Catholic, Arminian, and inconsistent Calvinistic apologetic methods work on the assumption that man’s reason can work rightly. Van Til wrote:

Romanism and Evangelicalism, however, do not attribute this assumption of autonomy or ultimacy on the part of man as due to sin. They hold that man should quite properly think of himself and of his relationship to objects in this way. Hence, they do injustice to Paul’s teaching with respect to the effect of sin on the interpretative activity of man. As they virtually deny that originally man not merely had a capacity for the truth but also was in actual possession of the truth, so also, they virtually deny that the natural man suppresses the truth... They do not distinguish carefully between the natural man’s own conception of himself and the Biblical conception of him. But for the question of the point of contact this is all-important. If we make our appeal to the natural man without being aware of this distinction, we virtually admit that the natural man’s estimate of himself is correct. We may, to be sure, even then, maintain that he is in need of information. We may even admit that he is morally corrupt. But the one thing which, on this basis, we cannot admit, is that his claim to be able to interpret at least some area of experience in a way that is essentially correct, is mistaken.<sup>[282]</sup>

Van Til argued that the assumption that a fallen person is able to reason rightly is false. Roman Catholics and the others, according to Van Til, are working with a system that is built on a faulty foundation.

Another problem Van Til perceived within the evidential apologetic method (as he called it) is that, in all their attempts to prove God, they could



not provide enough proof. In fact, even if they could give enough proof, there would be the question as to whether they could even understand the proof. Van Til wrote, “this method compromises God Himself by maintaining this existence is only ‘possible’ albeit ‘highly probable,’ rather than ontologically and ‘rationally’ necessary.”<sup>[283]</sup> Van Til was convinced that the arguments were inadequate because they do not prove the Christian God but only an initial creator of the world. The initial creator of the world is not the same as the God of Christianity, Van Til argued. He was also concerned that any proof which only proved the possibility of God was inadequate.<sup>[284]</sup>

Not only did Van Til reject the “Evidentialist” approach, he also did not believe that Abraham Kuyper’s system was completely adequate either. Unlike Van Til, Kuyper did not want to try to reason with natural man.<sup>[285]</sup> But what was Van Til’s method of reasoning? He did not use the classical arguments for God.<sup>[286]</sup> What, then, did he do? Van Til wrote:

Only a clear recognition of the three types of consciousness, of the total inability of the non-regenerate consciousness of itself to accept the truth of Christianity, of the necessity of a consistent presentation of the Christian position (this would be Calvinism) together with the firm reliance on the grace of God, can help us to reason fruitfully with men.<sup>[287]</sup>

What then, does all this involve? Van till described it well when he stated:

The Reformed apologist must also seek a point of contact with the systems constructed by natural man. But this point of contact must be in the nature of a head-on collision. *If there is no head-on collision with the systems of the natural man, there will be no point of contact with the sense of deity in natural man.*<sup>[288]</sup>

Van Til explains what he meant in this statement in the following quote:

The point of contact for the Gospel, then must be sought within the natural man. Deep down in his mind every man knows that he is the creature of God and responsible to God. Every man, at bottom, knows he is a covenant breaker.<sup>[289]</sup>

This is the key to Van Til’s system. One should practice apologetics with the awareness and knowledge that all humans have an inward

realization of God's existence. This is one of Van Til's foundations that he would call a theistic proof.<sup>[290]</sup> From there the presuppositional apologist would present Christianity as understood by a Reformed theologian explaining the Scriptures. The presuppositional apologist would then show Christianity's inner consistency and its relevance for the fallen natural man.<sup>[291]</sup> Then, at this point, the presuppositionalist would wait for the grace of God within the context of God's sovereign will to work in the life of the natural man and draw him into a saving relationship with God in Christ.

This is, briefly presented, the apologetic methodology employed by Van Til in light of what he is convinced is a biblical and theologically sound Reformed worldview. John Frame put it more briefly and succinctly in his article, "Van Til, His Simplicity and Profundity." Frame edited Van Til's system down to two essential points. First, "God is Lord." And second, "God is Savior."<sup>[292]</sup>

By "God is Lord," Frame meant that God is sovereign and is the ultimate criterion of truth that needs to be accepted, as such, to know any truth at all. By "God is Savior," Frame explained that sinful man, in rebellion, ignores his sense of God and needs to acknowledge who God is so that he can come into an understanding of truth. If he is able to acknowledge this (due to the work of God's work of regeneration) he will be able to hear the truth that he has been rebelling against due to his own false sense of autonomy.

In summary, Van Til believed that the Scripture taught that man had apodictic certitude of the existence of God. He further argued that the classical proofs of God understood in light of man's natural knowledge cannot provide this kind of certitude. As a result, he developed a revelationally based system of apologetics in light of his understanding of natural man's rebellion. Further, he recognized the need to confront natural man with his flawed and confused understanding of the nature of reality and God as the true source of all. This system was founded on the proof of the testimony of God's Word. Van Til was convinced that one could only have apodictic certainty of knowledge which was already present to him through the source of God's Word and based on God's authority. The only way one could obtain this understanding, while in his rebellion, would be through God supplying it to him—he could never come to that kind of certain

knowledge on his own. It is from this epistemological structure that Van Til developed his apologetic methodology of Gospel-confrontation and collision with the flawed ideas maintained by natural man. This has come to be known as Van Til's presuppositional apologetic system.

### **Van Til and the Philosophical Academy**

After the death of B. B. Warfield, Princeton had a great influx of higher critical thinking. Both J. Gresham Machen and Cornelius Van Til, as well as others, came to the conclusion that to continue the theological tradition of the old Princetonians, they would have to leave Princeton and begin a new school that was loyal to orthodox Calvinism. This was the beginning of Westminster Theological Seminary.<sup>[293]</sup> It was at this institution that Van Til developed what has come to be known as presuppositional apologetics.<sup>[294]</sup>

There is really no question about the fact that Van Til was influenced by the Bible and Reformed thought. He expresses great allegiance to the absolute authority of the Bible, and, in fact, his whole system is built around its authority (as has been shown above). He also claimed that Scripture, properly understood, communicates a theology that was rightly comprehended and expressed in Reformed thought. Van Til, in his discussion of what he identified as Reformed apologetical method, would regularly use the phrase, "But Calvin following Paul argues..."<sup>[295]</sup> Van Til was thoroughly convinced that Reformed Theology was an expression of Biblical theology.<sup>[296]</sup>

Van Til was influenced by the Dutch strain of Reformed theology (as will be shown later), but he was also influenced by the Princetonian theological giant B. B. Warfield. The Dutch tradition leaned heavily in a subjectivist direction, as seen in the work on apologetics written by Abraham Kuyper. Warfield was critical of that orientation and was thus critical of Kuyper on that issue (a thinker for which he otherwise had great respect). This is seen in Warfield's essay on apologetics in his introduction to Francis Beattie's work on apologetics.<sup>[297]</sup>

Van Til tried to walk between these two thinkers by creating an apologetic that was not subjective at root, but still recognized the noetic effects of sin on fallen humans. This is illustrated by Bahnsen: "A person who can explain the ways in which Van Til agreed and disagreed with both

Warfield and Kuyper, is a person who understands presuppositional apologetics.”<sup>[298]</sup> Van Til stood within what he was convinced was a biblical and Reformed position. The salient issue here, however, is whether there were other influences on his apologetic method outside of that approach.

Van Til was a man of the twentieth century. His apologetic system was set up in opposition to the philosophical tradition of modernism<sup>[299]</sup> and championed what he considered to be a proper interpretation of Calvinism.<sup>[300]</sup> Van Til considered his position to be the true “Christian philosophy” that was drawn out of nothing but revelation from God as its primary source.<sup>[301]</sup> Van Til recognized and declared dependence on various theologians and philosophers, including Benjamin Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Herman Dooyeweerd. He was convinced that all these men were drawing their systems of theology from the Scripture. There was disagreement among them, and his system was an attempt to harmonize their theologies into a coherent, Reformed, apologetic method.<sup>[302]</sup>

I contend that Van Til’s system was, as well, very much dependent on secular philosophical systems, even though Van Til did not admit that dependence in his writings. It is likely that Van Til was aware of certain modern philosophical schools of thought, but it is also the case that he likely saw his view, even if similar, as different enough that it was original to him. This may be why he didn’t connect his developing system to similar philosophical schools. As a result, the links I will discuss between Van Til’s thought and those of secular philosophers will largely be of the second (indirect) kind as well as the third (parallel) kind. If Van Til does recognize his dependence upon philosophy, I have not been able to find any statement from him in that regard.

Van Til’s “Christian philosophy” grew out of what this author is convinced was an uncritical acceptance of modern philosophical movements, at least at certain key points. These include the positions of Kant, Hume, Wittgenstein, James, and Kierkegaard. In the short space of this chapter, it is not possible to consider these philosophers in any depth. This chapter will, however, focus on the common points between each of these thinkers and Van Til. To be clear: I am not arguing that Van Til’s

positions completely overlap with any of these philosophers' (indeed, they are very diverse and contradict one another at innumerable points); rather, I argue that Van Til drew on certain select key elements of their philosophical positions.

And again, this chapter is not an attempt to show Van Til to be incorrect in his epistemology. That is beyond the scope of this chapter. The intention of the chapter is to show that Van Til, within his system of apologetics, uncritically accepts and adopts particular points illustrated in the philosophers' thought. All this is in an attempt to properly place Van Til in his intellectual setting.

### **Immanuel Kant and Van Til**

Van Til readily admitted a great dependence upon the works of Herman Dooyeweerd (although not an uncritical dependence).<sup>[303]</sup> Dooyeweerd, however, readily admitted significant dependence on Kant's philosophical thought. In fact, he regularly referred to himself as a Christian Kantian. Dooyeweerd's whole system was built out of the systems established in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, though Dooyeweerd was convinced he had thoroughly Christianized Kant's thought. This then, is an example of indirect linkage. Van Til was dependent upon Dooyeweerd who was dependent on Kant in developing the system that he held.

There are two points that Van Til uncritically accepted from Dooyeweerd and then Kant. First, Van Til accepted Kant's attacks on the arguments for the existence of God as a way of undermining their credibility as sound arguments.<sup>[304]</sup> Second, these attacks were principally founded on the dichotomy that Kant created between faith and what is rational. It was necessary for Van Til to accept Kant's dichotomy in order to accept Kant's criticism of the proofs for God, as the criticism of the proofs is rooted in the problem of the dichotomy explained by Kant. Kant's dichotomy claimed that man could not properly know God by reason because reason, for Kant, could only be used in the phenomenal realm, or the realm of things as man perceives them in light of the categories in the mind. Knowledge of God, on the other hand, could only be found in the noumenal realm or the world of things as they actually are. Man could not penetrate by his own ability the noumenal realm.

In doing this, Kant believed he was showing the limits of reason in order to make room for faith. There is a legitimate question as to whether he actually ended up making issues of faith irrelevant, but Van Til would not have agreed with that aspect of how his thinking has been interpreted. Kant was convinced that it was only through faith that man could properly conceive of God. Van Til, for very different reasons, maintained this role of faith as one's proper source of knowing God throughout his presuppositional apologetic system. A distinction he would make from Kant is that Van Til believed man could know God through special revelation. It is not known whether Kant actually held that position.<sup>[305]</sup>

Van Til actually rejected Kant's dichotomy when it was applied to what a believer could know, as the believer could know with certainty, based on God's authority, what is true about reality (or what Kant would have called the noumenal realm). Still, there is clearly a parallel that exists for Van Til in the knowledge of natural man as described by Kant. The reason natural man cannot know reality, however, would be different for both Kant and Van Til. For Kant, it would be rooted in the limits of reason. For Van Til, it would be rooted in human rebellion against God. Still, the human, for whatever cause, has no knowledge of God apart from God. So even though the causal structure of the problem is not the same for each, their positions regarding a natural human's state of knowing are very similar.

### **David Hume and Van Til**

Kant readily admitted foundational acceptance of key points held by Hume in his theory of knowing. Kant would have been critical of the limits Hume set on the possibility of human knowledge, but he recognized that Hume did show important key limitations that needed to be addressed. Kant's system was an attempt to address those limitations. Hume, among a number of other issues regarding human knowledge, said one could not see causal relationships and understand them. This implied that cause/effect relationships could not be known according to Hume.<sup>[306]</sup>

Hume's criticism of the knowledge of causal relationships was foundational to Kant's thinking. Kant ultimately rejected Hume's skepticism of this issue, but he did end up arguing that causal knowledge



was one of the categories of the mind and as such was limited to knowledge of the phenomenal realm. This effected Kant's understanding of, and gave rise to his criticism of, the arguments for the existence of God. As was seen earlier, Van Til accepted Kant's criticism of the arguments for the existence of God rooted in Kant's epistemological system. In so doing, this required that Van Til must have, on some level, accepted Hume's criticism of causal knowledge to the degree that Kant accepted Hume's criticism of causal knowledge. This is an indirect linkage of Van Til through Dooyeweerd, and through Kant, to Hume, but it is also parallel to Van Til's understanding of natural man's flawed understanding of causal knowledge.

Van Til also accepted Hume's view and criticism of probability.<sup>[307]</sup> In fact, this is, aside from Kant's points of concern, one of the principal reasons Van Til rejected natural man's possibility of understanding the classical causal arguments for God as intelligible.

It is the case that Van Til did not want merely to have probabilistic knowledge of God.<sup>[308]</sup> Hume was convinced that probability was not a sufficient ground or reason to claim to have something like knowledge regarding God's existence. Causal relationships were regarding physical relationships and the observations of them. Habit became the ground for observation of causal relationships for Hume. But habit based on probability could not supply reason for moving from the natural to the supernatural as far as Hume was concerned.

Van Til agreed with Hume at this point. Van Til would argue probability was poor grounds for arguing and making a case for the existence of God. As a result, Van Til developed an epistemology which he believed would provide and supply apodictic certainty regarding God, His existence, and knowledge of Him. Still, it is because of Hume's notion of cause, and his understanding of probability based on habit as the limits of understanding causality, that there was even a need for an epistemology that would provide for apodictic certainty. The theologians and philosophers before Hume did not consider knowledge of cause and effect a significant epistemological problem. Van Til, however, in light of Hume's thought, did see knowledge of cause and effect as a significant problem and created an epistemology to resolve this problem by grounding knowledge of reality in the authoritative Word of God.

Humans in their rebellion would not necessarily understand the true nature of causation, but humans that recognized the authority of God's Word could then begin to properly understand the nature of causation and draw correct conclusions in light of that causal structure due to recognizing the grounding of truth in knowledge of God. Here again we see Van Til, in adopting Dooyeweerd's system, then necessarily having to adopt, with revision, Kant's system, which would then require him to adopt Hume's concerns as well. It is also the case that one sees in Van Til's writings, parallel usage of both Kant's and Hume's criticism of knowledge due to problems in probability and causal relationships, even though he qualified and modified the possibility of human knowing in light of his developing epistemological system.

### **Ludwig Wittgenstein and Van Til**

The argument for linkage here will be based on parallel ideas being used by each figure. It is not necessarily the case that each agrees with the other in all respects concerning the particular issue at hand. In fact, I will argue that they do not agree with each other entirely, though there are still some methodological similarities, and even some theoretical overlap on the issues that are parallel. One must be aware that this third form of linkage is the weakest of the three connections being used here. However, due to the philosophical milieu and the usage by each author of these ideas, it does seem likely that there is some causal relationship in terms of the generation of the idea.

Wittgenstein is famous for his division of language worlds. In his writings, he has argued that no one field, in its own language world, can properly get past the barriers of communication with another language world. An example of this would be a biologist interacting with an historian. Each would use different language worlds and as a result might talk past each other in dialogue due to the different ways of using the language of their respective fields.<sup>[309]</sup>

This construct has implications for religious language as well. For example, a religious man cannot necessarily communicate with a non-religious man because of the different language worlds each is in. For Wittgenstein, and this is key, either the whole system has to be accepted and



adopted or none of it can be, as it would be perceived as unintelligible, each by the other.

Van Til, whether consciously or not, largely accepted the Wittgensteinian dichotomy. This is seen in his claim that Christians cannot communicate with non-Christians because of the different mindset (or perhaps language world) that each has about their understanding of reality. The non-Christian is a “covenant-breaker” in rebellion to God and therefore cannot accept the truth (presuppositions) of the Christian who holds her position.<sup>[310]</sup>

It is the case that the very idea of “covenant-keeper” and “covenant-breaker” is a strong parallel to Wittgenstein’s separation of language worlds and figures in each of them. The religious man and the non-religious man separation would be very similar to Van Til’s keeper and breaker. The “covenant-breaker” will not be able to understand the thought and position of the “covenant-keeper” for reasons that are parallel to Wittgenstein’s separation of people into different language worlds. This is not to say that for Van Til the issue is language. For Van Til, the issue is rebellion. Still, the situations, however different in cause, are parallel in the human situation and in the effect had on humans and human discourse.

There is yet another parallel between Wittgenstein and Van Til. Wittgenstein would not attempt to argue that people in different language worlds should use data to support their position in a discussion with an opponent. He believed that because of the language world gap, the weight of the facts used would be meaningless as each individual would not understand the use of those facts as understood by the other person. What he argued one should attempt to do when engaging in language worlds dialogue, would be to invite the opposition to consider his system as a unit. At this point the advocate of a particular view would hope that the other would see the superiority of his worldview as it was considered holistically. In his system, Van Til used a very similar methodology when a “covenant-keeper” is in dialogue with a “covenant-breaker.” He even used similar terminology to Wittgenstein in his discussion of that kind of dialogue. These two points seem to be very strong parallels in both the methodology and thought of Van Til’s apologetic and Wittgenstein epistemological approach. The parallels are so strong that it seems unlikely that there was

not some causal relationship between Wittgenstein's position and Van Til's position (or, at least, some evidence that they were both influenced by the same philosophical schools of thought).

### **William James and Van Til**

This argument for linkage is of a parallel kind. Again, this weaker linkage is not claiming that the reasons for James' position and Van Til's position are the same. This is more a discussion of methodological style and some theoretical links between James to Van Til.

William James, an American psychologist and philosopher, is a key figure in the development of pragmatic philosophy. James recognized that his system was very dependent upon Immanuel Kant's thought. He accepted Kant's dichotomy and accepted that religious knowledge was bound up in the noumenal realm. As a result, he had to find a new way of coming to conclusions about various claims in religious thought. He, along with Charles Pierce and John Dewey, established what is now known as the pragmatic test of truth. The traditional test of truth, that statement X is actually true in as much as it accurately reflects that of which it speaks, was no longer sufficient given Kant's dichotomy. James did have respect for evidence, but he did not necessarily think that it always resolved the issues subject to a debate. What he was doing was challenging the idea of a correspondence theory of truth and introducing something different. Truth, under the pragmatic test, shifted to the claim that something is true because it works and is consistent with a given worldview, which is a modified form of the coherence test and theory of truth.<sup>[311]</sup>

An example of this test of truth in action is seen in his defense of the freedom of the will. In his essay "The Dilemma of Determinism," he described both free-will and determinism. Toward the end of his essay he came to the conclusion that even though indeterminism had many theoretical problems that made it difficult to hold, it was easier to accept indeterminism than it was to accept determinism.<sup>[312]</sup> The reason for his advocacy of indeterminism over determinism was not forced by any evidence. James argued that it was because of his desire to accept the conclusion for indeterminism as it better related to his worldview and provided him reason for seeing man as moral as opposed to determined.

The ground for this decision was not in the evidence but in the coherence of the worldview and the pragmatic benefit that it produced for that worldview.

Van Til has similarly made internal consistency a test of Christianity's truth. Consistency is one reason to see Christianity as superior to other systems: they are not internally consistent and so fail. Why is Christianity superior? Because it is coherent.<sup>[313]</sup> The test of truth that Van Til is using in his apologetic methodology is very similar to James' pragmatic test of truth.

Again, Van Til would not agree with James on the reasons as to why this is the best test of truth. He would not talk merely in terms of internal coherence. He would argue also for the weight of God's authoritative Word as necessary to having knowledge. Nonetheless, Van Til's and James' positions have significant parallels regarding how one argues for the truth of a particular claim. The similarity is not regarding the foundation of truth but regarding the means of testing and supporting truth in dialogue.

### **Søren Kierkegaard and Van Til**

The linkage between the ideas of Kierkegaard and Van Til is likely the weakest linkage of all of the figures being considered here. Still, there is some parallel between how each of these thinkers talked about religion. We are thinking primarily of various understandings of Kierkegaard concerning the role of faith in the life of the believer. Some of those interpretations are fideistic in nature, others are not so committed to reading Kierkegaard in a fideistic way. That issue will not be resolved here. All that will be discussed are some central ways in which both Van Til and Kierkegaard talk about commitment to faith in God.

Kierkegaard believed that in approaching God one had to have an encounter with God. Kierkegaard defined faith as "that the self in being itself and in willing it to be itself is grounded transparently in God."<sup>[314]</sup> Many understand from this that Kierkegaard believed that one had to accept God, then, without reason.<sup>[315]</sup> God had to be accepted based on one's felt need for God as he looked at the world. Van Til certainly had something similar to this position incorporated into his apologetic system and theology. Van Til would not have affirmed the idea of having no reasons for

taking one's position regarding belief in God, so in that sense he would not agree with this understanding of Kierkegaard's position. However, Van Til did argue that acceptance of the triune God of Christian Scriptures is the grounds for any and all knowledge of God. One already knows that there is a God independent of proofs for God. This is very similar to the position taken by Kierkegaard. Van Til was convinced that based upon the testimony of the Holy Spirit one was to accept God and become a "covenant-keeper."<sup>[316]</sup> The testimony of the Holy Spirit allows the believer to hold the claims of Christianity with apodictic certainty independent of any external reasons. One may, in light of his knowing and holding a proper understanding of knowledge grounded in God's authoritative Word, and after being confronted by the Holy Spirit, be able to offer some evidence for his position. Still, the reason he holds the position is not based on the evidence but on God's authoritative Word. Both Kierkegaard and Van Til argued that faith and awareness of God precede the need for evidence. They may have had a different view of evidence, but they would both hold that belief in God was not necessarily based on evidence as its foundation.

### **Summary of Outside Influences on Van Til's Position**

Van Til developed his epistemology and his apologetic system in a modern philosophical world. Hume, and later, Kant had tremendous influence on that world. Van Til, while at Princeton, studied under scholars who were influenced by the modern philosophical thought of Kant and the Idealists. It is clear that Van Til had much to disagree with regarding the systems of thought developed in the modern philosophical academy. Still, as this chapter has shown, he was also, in important ways, influenced by this modern philosophical community. Evidence in the form of indirect and parallel linkage has been offered to show how Van Til was a thinker working in the milieu of the modern philosophical academy. We will now turn to another presuppositional apologist who attests to the influence of the modern philosophical academy on both himself and his mentor, Cornelius Van Til.

### **John Frame on Philosophical Influences on Presuppositional Apologetic Thought**

The second presuppositional apologist to consider is a student of Van Til. He has been quoted above as offering a defense and explanation of Van Til's system. John Frame studied under Van Til at Westminster Theological Seminary, becoming an advocate for the presuppositional apologetic method and a strong defender of Van Til and his system. He has recently retired from Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando where he held the J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy.

Even though he is a loyal defender of Van Tillian Apologetics, his advocacy was not without qualification. He offered modifications and some revision of Van Til's system and far more readily recognized philosophical influences on Van Til's position. This is important because he offers direct linkage to philosophical schools of thought in his writings.

Despite his modifications of his mentor's system, Frame is still comfortably aligned with Van Til's presuppositionalism. As a result, I will not review his whole position, as the issues of differentiation do not really impact the focus in the article. What will be considered is his recognition of the philosophical influences (with his qualifications on that influence) on Van Tillian Apologetics. The focus of this section will also look at one specific argument that Frame defends and advocates (as did Van Til in a qualified sense) and its connection to philosophers before him.

### **Frame's Recognition of Philosophical Influence on Presuppositional Thought**

In one of Frame's recent works on apologetics, he develops what he is convinced is the key element of a presuppositional justification of Christian belief: the rejection of the idea of human autonomy and the transcendental nature of the Christian claims. As far as Frame is concerned, these key points provide the foundation for a sound critique of false worldviews and a means of providing a support/justification of Christian belief.

There are a number of central claims that Frame makes in defense of his apologetical model. The first is that Van Til and presuppositionalists following him can appeal to evidence in two ways. First, evidence bolsters the Christian in his position (this is especially so in the evidence for the resurrection).<sup>[317]</sup>

Second, the evidences are, in light of a Christian worldview, sure supports for the truth of Christianity. In rejecting the false notions of human autonomy and identifying the borrowed (from Christianity) understanding of reason and truth, the apologist can use evidence to support the claims of Christianity as long as they are evidences that “appeal to scriptural criteria.”<sup>[318]</sup>

For Frame, this means that the presuppositionalist is not a fideist, since he recognizes the value of grounding his claims in a solid foundation. Frame, in fact, claims that the presuppositionalist has a higher view of evidence than even the evidentialist, as the presuppositionalist only holds to “sure and certain” evidence and not merely probabilistic evidence.<sup>[319]</sup> This sure evidence supports his second point. The evidence is sure because it is rooted in the perspicuity of Scripture and therefore stands under the authority of God as opposed to the authority of man.

Thirdly, the discussion of the false and borrowed ideas is important for Frame. The secular thinker is often working with false ideas that corrupt his understanding of the world and the truth found in it. Due to the human condition as a “covenant-breaker,” thinkers tend to try to ground their claims in their own autonomy, and this is a false basis for finding truth which is certain. They also reject Christian truth, such as a proper notion of causation (not recognizing God behind all causation), and, as a result, end up with a weakened or compromised view of causation. The compromised view can at best provide only possible or probabilistic ideas of causal relations and not the apodictic certainty that God’s Word provides. In fact, they often give up on the possibility of certainty and only talk of probability in reasoning, if even that. Some even end up in skepticism. This flawed position makes it impossible to see true causation. The one following this understanding of causation ends up, therefore, reasoning poorly. This thinker also ends up reaching wrong conclusions because of the flawed understanding of causation that is being held. Contrarily, when they do recognize causality in any legitimate sense, they only do so by borrowing from the Christian position without recognizing that is their source or foundation, and, again, draw false or confused ideas.

This is where one can begin to see a generation of ideas for presuppositionalist thought while still distancing oneself from the source of

the originator of the ideas. This provides for the first direct linkage that Frame identifies.

Frame recognizes that the theistic arguments, properly understood in light of a Christian framework, end up supporting the Christian position. However, in the context of a fallen person, that conclusion will not be reached as she has adopted a fallen perspective of causation. Frame recognizes that this fallen understanding of causation finds its root in the thinking of David Hume.<sup>[320]</sup>

According to Frame, Hume's position provides, at best, a probabilistic relationship between cause and effect and may very well lead to skepticism. Hume, then, is recognized to be the source of a Van Tillian critique of the theistic arguments as perceived by the fallen person. This will cause them to be more "likely to raise objections to such proofs on the basis of a more consistently non-Christian frame of reference."<sup>[321]</sup> So, for the presuppositionalist, the criticism of the proofs is, in part, based upon the causal thinking of Hume. The believer will recognize a better position on causation but that is only within a Christian worldview. The secular man will not see the weight of the argument due to his flawed understanding of cause adopted from Hume.

This illustrates two key elements of Frame's position. First, one can recognize the flawed reasoning of the secular thinker as the source of part of the presuppositional critique of natural knowledge. Nonetheless, secondly, one can be critical of that source in light of the proper reasoning of the person holding the Christian worldview. Here then, Frame credits Hume as the source of much of the presuppositional criticism of theistic arguments while simultaneously rejecting Hume's understanding of them as rooted in a flawed understanding of causality.

Frame makes the same kind of argument regarding direct influence from Kant on presuppositional thought. Frame recognizes that Kant offered an important distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal realms and a person's inability to know the truth held in the noumenal realm. Still, the ability to reason about what is understood in the phenomenal realm does exist for humans (the phenomenal realm is a realm governed by our understanding of reality as interpreted by the categories of the mind). The insight gained in the observations in the phenomenal realm may or may not



accurately line up with actual reality of the noumenal realm. In fact, whether they accurately line up is impossible to know, so the best one can do is try to understand what one can, which is what is knowable in the phenomenal realm. This understanding and distinction contributed to the presuppositional critique of autonomous human reason and the ability of the secular mind to know truth. This, according to Frame, is in fact the foundation for recognizing that “all claims to knowledge are governed by presuppositions.”<sup>[322]</sup>

So then, Kant’s critique of theistic arguments (he thinks most of them are invalid or flawed in their reasoning as they try to know the unknowable, the noumenal) is part of the presuppositional critique of natural reason. Further, Kant’s challenge to the limits of reason are part of the presuppositional critique of human knowing. Still, the problem is that fallen humans (including in some sense Kant himself) think that they have autonomous reasoning ability apart from God. So, again, Kant is the source of this presuppositional critique. Still, the critique is rooted in a flawed idea of human autonomy and ends up holding to flawed conclusions, as they do not understand the need for God as the ground of reason. This connection is seen very clearly in Frame’s statement,

Orthodox Christian apologists have always believed in the supreme authority of scripture over all human reasoning—the essence of the Van Tillian position. On the other hand, they have also spoken of various kinds of reasoning that in some sense legitimately “precede” faith. The apparent contradiction here was, in general, not perceived as a problem until after Kant’s “Copernican Revolution,” which greatly increased the epistemological sophistication of theologians and philosophers. Only after Kant could the logic of presuppositions be systematically investigated (as it was, even before Van Til, by thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, and by Christian apologists such as James Orr). Thus, to ask whether Calvin was a Presuppositionalist or an evidentialist is a bit like asking whether Augustine was a Protestant or a Catholic.<sup>[323]</sup>

There are some key insights in this quote. Presuppositionalism is a system indebted to the insight of Kant. Without Kant’s systematic challenge to knowledge, presuppositionalism may never have developed as an



approach to Apologetics. Others, as Frame's list of thinkers in the quote suggests, also contributed to the development of the presuppositional model. Nonetheless, the development, and insight, is flawed as it is rooted in human autonomy.<sup>[324]</sup>

So, Frame is recognizing that presuppositionalism is developmentally indebted to Kant's (and others) insights (and this is an important confession, as many presuppositionalists, including even Van Til, have not always formally recognized this influence). This is the second direct link, and perhaps more, given the list of thinkers he offers, that Frame makes to earlier philosophical influences. Still, he claims that Kant's system is fatally flawed as a worldview. Kant nonetheless, forced a dialogue out of which presuppositionalism arose; however, the presuppositionalist recognizes that the dialogue created by Kant will only end in futility, as it does not recognize the Christian worldview as the sound and sure source of truth (or so thinks Frame).

### **Frame on a Sound Theistic Argument**

Finally, our focus will turn to a specific argument that Frame and other presuppositionalists (including Van Til, in a shadow form) see as a credible theistic argument. Not only do many presuppositionalists see it as a credible argument, but it is indeed a key element in the larger justification for Christian belief. This argument is known as the Transcendental Argument for God or The TAG argument. The merits, demerits, or even the substance of the TAG argument, will not be discussed here (although this author finds the argument wanting). We are concerned with looking at the intellectual source of this argument.

In his discussion of the TAG argument, Frame begins by discussing the fact that it was derived from Kant. Here Frame is arguing for what we have called a direct intellectual linkage to Kant.<sup>[325]</sup> He also recognized that Van Til drew from Kant and the Idealists, following Kant in his use of this kind of argumentation. Frame stated,

Like Kant, Van Til was unhappy with empiricism and rationalism, and with traditional ways of combining reason and sense experience such as that of Aquinas. Kant found these approaches to knowledge

logically invalid. But for Van Til they were also wrong in a distinctively theological way.<sup>[326]</sup>

The problems Frame refers to are neutrality (the idea that man can approach facts from a neutral position) and autonomous human reason. As a result, Van Til used the Kantian Transcendental Argument, and was largely in agreement with Kant's use of it, which claimed that logic, mathematics, science, and other enquiries will not get off the ground without assuming God as the source or foundation of that knowledge. Still, he modified Kant's argument, according to Frame, by arguing that,

The condition of universal intelligibility is the biblical God. But that approach seems to be viciously circular: presupposing God in our epistemology and then using that epistemology to prove his existence. Van Til answered the charge of circularity by claiming that the Christian Circle is the only kind that renders reality intelligible on its own terms.<sup>[327]</sup>

Here Frame is employing the same method that was shown formerly in the paper. Still, here he is also claiming that Van Til was aware of the Kantian position and recognized Kant as the source of this approach. The method used by Frame is to recognize the source but then offer a significant or essential modification of it in light of a Christian worldview, and rejection of the flawed idea, which in this case is the claim of autonomous human reason held by Kant. This author has not found in Van Til such a strong recognition of Kant as the source of his transcendental argumentation (although at Princeton, Van Til did study under Kantians and Idealists, so there is little doubt that he was aware of their position on this topic). Still, Frame recognizes Kant is the source of the TAG argument, and he was here arguing that Van Til was aware of Kant as that source as well.

Granted, Van Til's modified usage of it is important (and may, in part, explain why Van Til did not attribute his argumentation line to Kant as it was quite different in important ways). However, there is little doubt that Kant was influential in the generation of the TAG argument that Van Til and the presuppositionalists who follow within his tradition use. We see, here, that Frame is recognizing a direct linkage to Kant in his usage of the TAG argument. Furthermore, Frame is claiming that Van Til had direct linkage to Kant as well.

What has been shown in this overview of Frame's position is that he recognizes direct influence by Hume, Kant, and a number of other thinkers, on key claims made by presuppositionalists in the implementation of their apologetic approach. These key claims include a proper understanding of human knowing, the limits of human knowing, the limits of probabilism in knowledge and the need of apodictic certainty, the weaknesses of most of the theistic arguments, the generation of a dialogue which, in a fundamental way, led to the development of presuppositionalism as an apologetic approach, and lastly, a key argument in the presuppositional system, which Frame sees as grounding much of the Van Tillian presuppositional apologetic methodology, which is also key to their, in his view, justification of Christian belief and their denial of fideism.

## **Conclusions**

This essay has shown that Van Til has strong indirect linkage to the philosophical ideas of important figures in the philosophical academy. A key figure on this list is Immanuel Kant. Another key figure in the indirect linkage is David Hume. This linkage is established through Van Til's affirmation that he was directly influenced by figures like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, and others who recognize their system was influenced by Hume, Kant, and others.

Further, this chapter has shown the third type of linkage (parallel ideas) of Van Til's system to important philosophical thinkers which include (but are not limited to) Kant, Hume, Wittgenstein, James, Kierkegaard, and as was seen in a quote from Frame, Hegel and Marx.

The chapter then supported the claim that Frame recognizes and even attributes the generation of presuppositional ideas and perhaps even Apologetic presuppositionalism itself to the figures mentioned above, in a certain sense, on very specific points. Frame further argues that a key argument in the presuppositional system has its generation in the thought and writings of Kant. He then further states that Van Til recognized Kant as the source of that argument although one is hard pressed to find Van Til formally claiming any direct influence.

Now, why is the connection between presuppositionalism to the philosophical academy so important?

First, it is intellectually honest to recognize the source and origin of one's ideas. After all, as Christians, we claim that there is nothing new under the sun.

Second, it is quite common for many lay and trained presuppositional apologists to claim that their position and system is primarily and solely biblical and Reformed in its origin. If one can show direct, indirect, and parallel linkage to the philosophical academy in the generation and development of presuppositional apologetics, this exclusivist claim of origin and source is rather substantially undermined. Now, this does not mean that it cannot also be biblical and Reformed, only that it cannot be claimed to be exclusively developed from the Bible and Reformed thought.

Thirdly, to properly understand a position, it is necessary to understand how the foundational ideas for that position were generated, where they came from. Bahnsen evidenced this understanding when he stated that one best understands presuppositionalism when one understands how Van Til walked between the positions of Kuyper and Warfield. Understanding the generation of a position is an important key to properly understanding the position itself.

Fourthly, the fact that presuppositionalism, as a system, has ideas which contributed to its development as a system that are distinct from the Bible and distinct from Reformed theology means that presuppositionalism can be criticized as a system without necessarily attacking a biblical or Reformed view of apologetics, if one can show that the position the presuppositionalist gained from the philosophical academy is not identical with biblical or Reformed theological thought on apologetics, on that particular issue. This also means that it is possible to be biblical and Reformed while not holding to this type of presuppositionalism.

Fifth and finally, a common method of criticism of a particular position is to show weaknesses in earlier positions that are foundational for the position under consideration. For example, if a system is dependent on a view held by Kant, and one can show that Kant's position is problematic or flawed in regard to the way that the dependent view uses Kant's position, then one can challenge the dependent later view by criticizing the former view on the point held by both. In fact, that is part of the method employed by presuppositionalists in their criticism of other systems. They should be subject to that kind of criticism of their system as well, and this can only

happen if linkage between the former and later positions is seen. Also, its weight as a criticism will be most effective if the adherent of the later system recognizes her dependency on the earlier idea.

This paper has shown that presuppositionalism as expressed by Van Til, Frame, and those who follow them, has some direct, indirect, and parallel linkage to some important schools of thought in the philosophical academy. This does not necessarily show presuppositionalism to be wrong. It does, however, show that it can be assessed and even undermined as a system without necessarily challenging the Bible or Reformed thought, and even more broadly, Christian apologetics.

*VIII:*  
**The Use of Aristotle in Early  
Protestant Theology**

**Manfred Svensson**

**Introduction**

“After moving from my homeland to Wittenberg, the first thing I read was your *Dissertation Against the Antiperipatetics*.” So writes Bartholomeus Keckermann in a dedicatory epistle to Philip Scherb. Scherb’s work had helped him to leave behind the Stoicism that he describes as arid, sandy, and sterile, and move on to the florid land of the Aristotelians. From then on, Keckermann continues, he had espoused the Peripatetic philosophy wherever he had the opportunity to teach in the learned academies of Germany.<sup>[328]</sup> We scarcely think about Wittenberg as the place where one would convert to Aristotelianism, but stories like these about students’ experience in Wittenberg are not unusual. A preface to Victor Strigel’s commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* dwells on Strigel’s time as a student in Wittenberg without even mentioning Luther’s critique of Aristotle. Instead, being introduced to Aristotle through Melanchthon is reported as a characteristic Wittenbergian experience.<sup>[329]</sup>

Compare these early Protestant reports to the image of Aristotle one gets in the works of Cornelius van Til, where Aristotle is portrayed as a philosopher who builds “upon the assumption of man as autonomous.”<sup>[330]</sup> Even though this kind of critique has Aquinas rather than Aristotle in view, it frequently leads to a harsh disdain for the philosophers of classical antiquity. In the words of Van Til, if Paul’s message were true, the Greeks “would have to admit that they were wrong in their interpretation of everything.”<sup>[331]</sup> Aristotle’s God is portrayed by Van Til as finite, and hence as an idol that no Christian should call God. The analogy of being, Van Til further tells us, “assumes that God and man are partakers in one Being that in depth of metaphysical conception precedes them both.”<sup>[332]</sup> The crude view according to which the theology of Rome is basically Aristotelian lies

behind much of this critique.<sup>[333]</sup> It is a critique that focuses mainly on the knowledge of God that one could reach following Aristotle's reasoning. According to Van Til, in Aristotle "it is the emptiest of empty negations that is decorated with the name of God."<sup>[334]</sup> Potentially, however, this critique applies to the whole of Aristotle's philosophy. "Rome's semi-Aristotelian epistemology influences, and accords with, its semi-Aristotelian ethics."<sup>[335]</sup>

The transformations of Protestant theology that led to views like Van Til's will not be dealt with in this chapter. I simply aim at setting the record straight about the role played by Aristotle in earlier Protestant thought, when he was neither rejected as a pagan nor dismissed as a tool of Roman Catholicism. Such a clarification is needed not only vis-à-vis the uninformed views that circulate in presuppositionalist circles. The idea that a break with Aristotle took place as a consequence of the Reformation is a widely held position both in general presentations of Reformation thought and in influential accounts of the main shifts of our moral culture.<sup>[336]</sup> Scholars working in the intersection of Reformation studies and medieval or Renaissance philosophy may have the impression that these views have already been debunked and that this chapter is beating a dead horse. I would not only reply that this is too optimistic about the way the specialized discussion is received even by those whose professional duty is to be informed. I would also add that there is a tendency, as Herbert Butterfield warned around a century ago, "to patch the new research into the old story even when the research in detail has altered the bearings of the whole subject."<sup>[337]</sup> A general overview may thus be helpful.

I will start by paying attention to the criticism of Aristotle that could sometimes be heard during the sixteenth century. This criticism is neither inexistent nor irrelevant, but it is very different from the critiques of Aristotle one finds in twentieth-century Reformational thought. In the next step, I will offer an overview of the positive reception of Aristotle in the Reformation and post-Reformation, a more consequential and widespread phenomenon than this criticism. Finally, I will focus on one particular area of reception. While most chapters in the present book deal with the knowledge of God, I will rather focus on practical philosophy. Since the *Nicomachean Ethics* was the Aristotelian work most emphatically critiqued

by Luther, the positive reception of Aristotle's ethical and political thought among other early Protestants is a particularly significant example of early Protestant Aristotelianism.

### **Luther and Early Protestant anti-Aristotelianism**

Luther's anti-Aristotelianism, as we will see throughout this chapter, is an exception among his fellow early Protestants. But it is not an exception in the history of philosophy, and we should take some care to identify its precise nature and lineage. After all, the rejection of Aristotle was a quite central feature of early modern thought. Rejecting "the metaphysics, politics, and ethics of Aristotle, the frivolous distinctions, the barbarous terms, and obscure language of the Schoolmen," is central to Hobbes's project in *Leviathan*.<sup>[338]</sup> For those who want to see Luther at the origin of every modern problem, it is of course very tempting to stress the continuity between his and these Hobbesian criticisms of the Stagirite. If we rush to that conclusion, however, we are ignoring a tradition in which Luther's critiques are more obviously at home.

It is, indeed, much more plausible to read Luther as standing in a long chain of Augustinian critics of Aristotle. The Augustinian and the Aristotelian tradition had of course been integrated in various creative ways during the thirteenth century, and we should definitively set aside the idea of the Augustinian tradition as being necessarily hostile to Aristotle. Aquinas, as is increasingly acknowledged, represents an integration of Aristotelian elements within an Augustinian view of creation.<sup>[339]</sup> But things started to change with the emergence of Radical Aristotelianism during the late thirteenth-century at the University of Paris. In the hands of scholars like Siger of Brabant and Boetius of Dacia, a version of Aristotle was developed that stressed the attainability of happiness in this life, the eternity of the world, and other doctrines that were rather difficult to harmonize with Christian doctrine.<sup>[340]</sup> This development led not only to Aquinas' critique of this movement (for instance, in his famous treatise *On the Unity of the Intellect Against the Averroists*), but also to a growing polarization between Augustinian theology and Aristotelianism. In other words, while harmonization between Platonic-Augustinian and Aristotelian elements had been the norm since Late Antiquity and until mid-thirteenth



century, at the end of this period one begins to find more pointed Augustinian critiques of Aristotle.

These late-medieval critiques of Aristotle typically focus on subjects like the eternity of the world, the immortality of the soul, and God's knowledge of individual things. Such had been the points of tension in the Jewish and Muslim reception of Aristotle as well. These points had variously been dealt with in Latin Christendom during the reception of Aristotle, but the dispute intensified during the flourishing and condemnation (in 1277) of radical Aristotelianism. If we want to understand Luther's critique of Aristotle, it is crucial to look at his statements within the context of this ongoing discussion. And once we make that exercise, it becomes quite clear that he represents a specific variation of this medieval Augustinian critique: where previous Augustinian critiques pointed to a tension between Aristotle and Christian doctrine within the domain of theoretical philosophy, Luther's critique tends to focus on such tensions in the realm of practical philosophy. For him, it is Aristotle's *Ethics* that counts as "the worst enemy of grace."<sup>[341]</sup> The reason for this position is by no means peripheral to Luther's theological breakthrough. Both in his *Commentary on Romans* and in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther repeatedly compares Aristotle's understanding of justice—a justice that emerges out of human actions—with the view of justice he found in Augustine's *De spiritu et littera*.<sup>[342]</sup> Whether such a contradiction between the Aristotelian and the Augustinian view is necessary is an open question. Aristotle himself, after all, raises the question of how someone who has become unjust could become just again, and he is by no means optimistic (NE III, 5, 1141 a12–22).<sup>[343]</sup> Indeed, under different conditions of historical reception, one could well imagine Luther using these Aristotelian reflections to support his own position. But whatever one thinks about that possibility, the crucial point here is the lack of any connection between this critique and the early modern critiques of Aristotle that, for instance, rejected the very ideas of final causality or common good.

In the immediate aftermath of the Reformation, Luther's critique was partly continued among the Gnesio-Lutherans. The one case in which it was further developed, leading to a significant controversy, was in the debates involving Daniel Hofmann at Helmstedt University around 1600 (the same

period in which the “return of metaphysics” to Lutheran theology takes place). Hofmann was the first professor of theology at the university, an institution dominated by Melanchthonian scholars like Owen Günther, Duncan Lidell, Johannes Caselius, and Cornelius Martini. There he would take up Luther’s positions and develop them systematically, even reasserting the idea of a double truth. But the outcome of the disputes around Hofmann’s work was not a generalized rejection of Aristotle or of the place of philosophy in a Christian culture. On the one hand, this episode led to the development of rival interpretations of Luther. On the other hand, it helped to make the discussion about the legitimacy of philosophy in a Christian framework even more explicit than it had hitherto been.<sup>[344]</sup> Hofmann himself, however, was dismissed.

There were, to be sure, further critiques of Aristotle in the Reformation era. But Vermigli’s *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* can serve to illustrate their origin and limited impact. In a preface to this work, Vermigli’s former pupil Santerenziano mentions that “the majority opinion” assumes “a constant disagreement and perpetual warfare” between Aristotle and Christian theology.<sup>[345]</sup> But he then describes this warfare not in terms of a fundamental incompatibility between Aristotle’s philosophy and the Christian vision. It is rather explained as a reaction to previous times when, according to Senterenziano, Aristotle was held in the same (or higher) esteem as Moses and Paul. As a reaction, he tells us that now “everyone” wrote harsh works against Aristotle.<sup>[346]</sup> This is hardly a faithful description of the approach to Aristotle in his century, and it is certainly not what one finds in the work he is prologuing. Vermigli had actually been nurtured in the same late-medieval Augustinianism as Luther, but this background did not lead him to the same position vis-à-vis Aristotle.

Let us consider a last version of Protestant anti-Aristotelianism, namely Ramism. That Ramism was influential in early Reformed academies, that from there it spread to England, and that it played an enormous role in American education throughout the eighteenth century, remains an established fact. But how far the movement was anti-Aristotelian is a different question. Understanding it in such terms was the dominant view for a long time, but this is now being replaced by a somewhat modified account. Ramism is increasingly seen as a program of

pedagogical simplification. The traditional instruction via commentaries on Aristotle was abandoned, instead favoring textbooks arranged around the universal concepts, the subject matter, and the internal order of each discipline. Avoiding both the philological mastery cultivated by the humanists and the philosophical detail of the scholastics, Ramists offered pedagogical tables that made the advance in science easier for those who could not afford a life devoted to learning.<sup>[347]</sup> Whatever one thinks of this pedagogical innovation, it implies no necessary rejection of fundamental Aristotelian theses. Indeed, in a later phase, the movement could develop into a Phillipino-Ramism in which the Aristotelian element played a strong role again. In that context, one can find authors like Keckermann, with whom we opened this chapter. His position has been described as opposed to “textual Peripateticism,” but representative of a “methodical Peripateticism.”<sup>[348]</sup> It is time, then, to turn to the extraordinary presence of Aristotle in early Protestant thought.

### **Early Protestant Aristotelianism**

As David Bagchi has shown, early Roman Catholic polemicists were aware of Luther’s critique of Aristotle, and they made his rejection of Aristotle and Aquinas a quite central feature of their own polemics.<sup>[349]</sup> But in this matter, they may have taken Luther more seriously than Protestants themselves did. For in these issues teachers in Protestant institutions definitively looked for guidance from Melanchthon rather than Luther. Luther’s anti-Aristotelianism must unequivocally be described as a minority position. Since this simple fact is routinely ignored by general surveys of this period’s intellectual history, it is important to state it as clearly as possible. Luther’s famous statement in a letter to Johannes Lang, that Aristotle was on his way to perpetual ruin, while “our theology and St Augustine prosper,” is not a description of facts but an expression of Luther’s wishes.<sup>[350]</sup> Though contemporary scholars routinely quote this letter as a proof of a Reformation break with Aristotle, the curriculum in Wittenberg not only retained a teaching model for the Arts based on Aristotle’s works, but even expanded the teaching of Aristotle while Luther was uttering this opinion.<sup>[351]</sup> We don’t have any reason to consider this a failure. Unless we take Luther to be a norm of critical judgment in the

history of philosophy, it is fully sensible to believe that his fellow Protestants, who retained much of the previous Christian adaptation of Aristotle, were acting reasonably. The fact that Luther accepted Melancthon's practice of teaching Aristotle next door to him is, after all, quite telling in itself. And if Luther's judgments on Aristotle did not become dominant in Wittenberg, elsewhere they were even less relevant.

At the first centenary anniversary of the Reformation, the Strausburg Academy celebrated with a long set of public disputations. From the side of the philosophers, Laurentius Walliser contributed with a series of disputations "in defense of Aristotle's *Ethics*, and offering a true and genuine understanding of some sayings of Luther."<sup>[352]</sup> The disputation offers an extraordinary perspective on the way learned Protestants dealt with these sayings. Walliser's first step is to distinguish between philosophy *per se* and its abuse. Luther, he contends, always and obviously aims at the latter. To this, however, he added a historical observation: the dismissive observations on Aristotle come from the early Luther, who was involved in controversy with scholastics who held Aristotle in too high esteem. Walliser quotes several appreciative comments of the older Luther on Aristotle. Finally, he tackles specific issues like the this-worldly nature of Aristotle's understanding of happiness and the question as to whether we become just through just actions or the other way around. As Walliser sees it, Luther's critiques in these areas can be dealt with if adequate distinctions, for instance between political justice and justification before God, are made. Walliser may be overconfident in his attempt to respond to every critique of Aristotle with such distinctions. But it is important to note that these distinctions can be read as attempts to save Luther as much as Aristotle. Where Luther writes that "We are not from beginning to end lords of our actions, but servants," Walliser sides with Luther writing that "we deny this as well, but we deny it using the remedy of a distinction."<sup>[353]</sup> If Luther's critique of Aristotle was mostly ignored among the early Protestants, Walliser's text is a good example of the ways in which they could take it into account without being overpowered by its appeal.

The early Protestant appropriation of Aristotle was a massive phenomenon. Professors in the Faculty of Arts often held the title of *professor philosophiae aristotelicae*. Curricular changes would sometimes

banish Aristotelian *compendia*, only to replace them with the teaching of Aristotle's own works. As Charles Schmitt has written, between 1550 and 1650 "the tradition was stronger among the Protestants than among Catholics."<sup>[354]</sup> With this observation, he was referring to the tradition of commentary on Aristotle, as well as to the teaching based on his works. But beyond this use of Aristotle in the strict realm of philosophy, the tools he had shaped were present in the theological discussion as well. Thus, when rejecting the idea that original sin is now men's substance, the *Formula of Concord* states that the division of reality into substances and accidents is axiomatic in theology; it is presented as a language that should be avoided when dealing with simple believers but as useful for clearing disputes.<sup>[355]</sup>

This is not to say that critique of Aristotle's adoption as "the Philosopher" was absent. But the kind of critique that one finds during subsequent generations is significantly different from Luther's. Take, for instance, the concern that one sometimes finds about Aristotle being quoted even in sermons. I know of no such Aristotelianizing sermons, but Melanchthon himself decries their existence in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*.<sup>[356]</sup> A few decades later, one can find the same concern in the work of Theophilus Aenetius, professor at Jena early in the seventeenth century. "Some have preached Aristotle's *Ethics* in the place of Sacred Scripture to the people in the assembly."<sup>[357]</sup> As these examples show, a reasonable concern about overenthusiastic appropriations of Aristotle was present in both the Reformation and the post-Reformation. One might, moreover, guess that Aristotle would not object to being banished from sermons. But these very works by Melanchthon and Aenetius show us that this caution was compatible with praise and with cultivating Aristotle's vision. Indeed, Melanchthon immediately adds that Aristotle in fact "wrote so perfectly on public morality (*de moribus civilibus*), that nothing needs to be added,"<sup>[358]</sup> while Aenetius makes his own cautionary observation in the preface to his commentary on the *Ethics*.

As the observations by Melanchthon, Santerenziano, and Aenetius suggest, the Protestant reception of Aristotle can be described as a critical reception. Sometimes the critique—like the one banishing the Stagirite from sermons—does not affect the substance of Aristotle's thought. Other early Protestants were, however, aware of some deeper tensions between

Christianity and Aristotle's philosophy. Antonius Walaeus, for instance, stressed his desire of a greater degree of critique of Aristotle among Christian philosophers.<sup>[359]</sup> But though they were aware that as Christian philosophers they would need to correct certain views of Aristotle, these writers were also aware of how their own predecessors had engaged this task. Take, for instance, Rudolph Goclenius' "supercommentary" on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, an edition of Peter Martyr Vermigli's and Andreas Hyperius' commentaries on this work with Goclenius' own *scholia*. In the prologue to this work, Goclenius extensively praises Vermigli for his acute corrections of Aristotelian positions. The exclusively temporal happiness aimed at by Aristotle is one typical case of such a contested point, though here Vermigli is joined by several Protestant Aristotelians who rush to emphasize their differences with Aristotle in this regard.<sup>[360]</sup> But, as Goclenius observes, Vermigli also focuses on man's place in the cosmos.<sup>[361]</sup> Aristotle had argued for the superiority of theoretical over practical wisdom partly on the ground of the superior object of theoretical knowledge. "It is absurd to think that Political Science or Prudence is the loftiest kind of knowledge, inasmuch as man is not the highest thing in the world."<sup>[362]</sup> But if man is superior to the celestial bodies—as not only Vermigli, but also van Giffen pointed out—this may alter the way we think about theoretical and practical knowledge.<sup>[363]</sup> Thus, while Van Til denounces the "man-centered thinking" of the Greeks, one might say that some Reformation scholars rather critiqued Aristotle for not being anthropocentric enough.<sup>[364]</sup>

### **Aristotelian Practical Philosophy and Classical Protestant Thought**

Luther's most critical remarks on Aristotle, as we have seen, focus on his *Ethics*. It may thus be reasonable to finish this brief straightening of the historical record with a consideration of the way Aristotle's practical philosophy was received in early modern Protestantism.<sup>[365]</sup> Since politics was barely being established as a regular object of teaching, the reception of Aristotle's *Politics* and of his *Ethics* is very different. There are close to forty extant commentaries on the *Ethics*, a number that speaks clearly about its place in early Protestant learning. On the *Politics*, by contrast, there are less than half that number. However, as we will see, fundamental positions



of Aristotle's political thought were as strongly adopted as his moral philosophy.

One notable feature of the commentaries on the *Ethics* is their even distribution along Lutheran and Reformed lines. They are also evenly distributed throughout time: half of these commentaries were first published in the sixteenth century, half in the seventeenth. There is an obvious institutional explanation for this regular attention paid to the *Nicomachean Ethics*: nearly everywhere it was the basic textbook for the teaching of ethics. Given this fact, it is easy to conclude that Aristotle was the object of uncritical reception, as standard textbooks often are. But we have already seen how unfounded the myth of an uncritical reception is. And such an explanation would certainly not apply to the first great commentator, Philip Melanchthon. Melanchthon had arrived in Wittenberg with a youthful enthusiasm for Aristotle that included plans of a new German edition of his work, but he fell under the spell of Luther's critique and rejected Aristotle for a few years. He started teaching his *Ethics* again after taking Luther's critiques to heart, but he evidently concluded that Aristotle could be taught without damage to an anti-Pelagian understanding of justice. In the following years, he would always preface his writings on Aristotle with a discussion of the law-gospel distinction, a feature that would stand out in many of the later Protestant commentaries on the *Ethics*.

Above, I stressed the fact that Protestant commentators were reasonably alert to areas in which they might want to correct Aristotle. But once that point is clear, we should equally stress how strong the reception of central Aristotelian positions was. Even a superficial look at these commentaries will show, for instance, to what a significant degree the early Protestants arranged their moral philosophy around the idea of virtue. They shared, as well, an Aristotelian understanding of the nature of practical philosophy. With Aristotle, they defended an understanding of practical philosophy that avoids overly precise demonstrations while simultaneously claiming that in this field there is real knowledge, *firmitas*, and not merely opinion.<sup>[366]</sup> There are no traces of biblicism or voluntarism in these writings; if they depart in some sense from Aristotle's teaching, it is above all in the way they merge his theses with a doctrine of natural law. That doctrine is barely present in Aristotle's work, but it was already a feature of

medieval Aristotelianism. In other words, even where they depart from Aristotle, that departure is deeply embedded in the earlier Christian intellectual tradition shaped by the Stagirite's work.<sup>[367]</sup>

Political Aristotelianism remained an important feature of early Protestant thought as well. During the last century, it has often been affirmed that early Protestants took political authority to be a postlapsarian phenomenon. Against Aristotle's assertion of the natural character of the political community and of political authority, the "primordial truth" of Calvinism—in the words of no less than Abraham Kuyper—is that "God has instituted the magistrates, by reason of sin."<sup>[368]</sup> Given the existence of a medieval dispute around this question, and given the fact that the Reformation was a broadly Augustinian movement, it is easy to assume that the Reformers would indeed side with Augustine against Aristotle on this issue. But even their contemporary Roman Catholic adversaries knew that this was not the case. Introducing Bellarmine's *Writings on Temporal and Spiritual Authority*, Stefania Tutino affirms that, for the Catholic theorists, the political order arises directly out of the law of nature, while for Luther and Calvin only those endowed with God's grace could be just political leaders.<sup>[369]</sup> Bellarmine himself, however, writes that "not only Catholics" like Aquinas, but also Protestant Reformers like Melanchthon, Luther, and Calvin "most aggressively and broadly oppose" that view.<sup>[370]</sup> And he is right. Not only did they do this in their theological works (Bellarmine points to book 4, ch. 20 of Calvin's *Institutes*), but in their philosophical writings as well. In his *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, Melanchthon not only affirms the naturalness of the *polis* in the quite traditional terms that one might expect in such a commentary, but he also engages in polemics with Wyclif, the late medieval source of this idea, whom the Thomists of the School of Salamanca castigated for the same reason.<sup>[371]</sup> Protestants were not engaged in the kind of political theology that scholars today often attribute to them, and their contemporary Catholic adversaries were perfectly aware of this fact.

This approach persists as a significant feature of Lutheran and Reformed thought during later generations. Lambert Danaeu deals with the question in terms of the discussion we've already seen taking place in Vitoria, Bellarmine, and Melanchthon. He asks, namely, "whether republics



and kingdoms would have emerged in a state of innocence.”<sup>[372]</sup> Here Danaeu shows a more speculative spirit than the other authors we have considered, inspired by the “wonderful discussion” implied at this point. Like many of his medieval and Reformation predecessors, Danaeu is arguing against those who consider that the growth of the species in a state of innocence only would have led to some kind of “domestic kingdom.” Plato’s *Statesman*, with its denial that there is any difference in kind between ruling a city and ruling other kinds of community like the home, is the *locus classicus* for this position.<sup>[373]</sup> But “in the first book of Aristotle’s *Politics*,” Danaeu writes, this “rival thesis has been impressively refuted.”<sup>[374]</sup> Two Aristotelian theses, that of the naturalness of the *polis* and of a difference in kind between *polis* and household, come together here. But something new emerges in the horizon. Once we turn to Danaeu and Keckermann, Wycliffe has disappeared from the discussion, and Aristotle begins instead to be turned against incipient modern political thought. Thus, in his preliminary “Letter to the Reader,” Danaeu explains that he will not follow Machiavelli, whom “most of those who are seated in the government of republics now follow.”<sup>[375]</sup> Keckermann writes in similar terms about Jean Bodin. Both Danaeu and Keckermann present Aristotle as an antidote to the new teachings.<sup>[376]</sup> Working within a broadly Aristotelian understanding of practical philosophy was not only a way in which the continuity with the earlier Christian intellectual tradition became manifest. It was also one of the vehicles through which the interaction with the emergent modern political thought was made possible.

### **Final considerations**

The uniformity of the Aristotelian tradition is rather a creation of its early modern critics than a phenomenon its students ever come across. As we have seen, this applies to the Protestant branch of the tradition as well. The degree to which Protestant scholars engaged in critique of Aristotle or rather limited themselves to faithful expositions of his work varies enormously. Some considered that their task was that of accurate explanation of sources. Others emphasized their desire for a greater degree of Christian critique of Aristotle. Whichever of these alternatives we stress in our expositions, whichever one we approve in our contemporary

appropriations, the massive Protestant reception of Aristotle—present from writings on the Arts to some confessional documents—can no longer be ignored.

Over the last years, a significant movement of theological *ressourcement* has shown how firmly the Reformation was steeped in classical theism. It should by now be clear that there is an equally significant argument to be made concerning the way practical philosophy, in all its branches, was cultivated in a classical spirit. Though still ignored by a broad public in the church and academy, this reception of Aristotle forms a significant part of the way Protestants have faced their duty of integrating faith and knowledge. It was one of the ways in which they were rooted in the past efforts of the Christian philosophical tradition, and it was one of the ways they responded to the challenges of early modernity. Simple concern for the truth might be enough reason for correcting misleading portrayals of their accomplishment. But a contemporary interest should be added to that picture, since Aristotelianism is a living force in present-day practical philosophy.<sup>[377]</sup> A better knowledge of the discerning approach of our forebears to the Aristotelian movement of their time would surely help us to develop both the intellectual virtues and the variety of approaches to Aristotle we need today.

*IX:*  
**The Use of Aquinas in EARLY  
Protestant Theology**

**David Haines**

Over the past decade or so, scholars have begun debating the reasons for what appears to be a “sudden” interest among Protestants in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Some have even suggested that this renewed interest has driven some young scholars to Catholicism. Is this true? Does reading and appreciating Aquinas—even siding with Aquinas on a number of issues—lead to Catholicism? Is Aquinas the arch-nemesis of Protestantism? For K. Scott Oliphint, for example, it is impossible to synthesize Thomistic teachings with a consistent biblical theology; thus, Aquinas is not of much worth for true Reformed theology.<sup>[378]</sup> Francis Schaeffer appears to blame Aquinas for giving birth to the humanistic Renaissance, Secularism, Rationalism, and, essentially, the onset of existentialism and agnosticism.<sup>[379]</sup> Of course, Oliphint and Schaeffer are both following Cornelius Van Til in his criticism of Aquinas as the Catholic theologian who introduced the autonomy of reason into Christian theology, and therefore as a theologian whose influence one must flee.<sup>[380]</sup>

Other contemporary scholars would disagree with this judgment, arguing, on the contrary, that Protestants have much more in common with Aquinas than the nay-sayers would like to admit. In 1975, Norman Geisler published the article “A New Look at the Relevance of Thomism for Evangelical Apologetics.”<sup>[381]</sup> In this article, Geisler surveys the negative protestant responses to Aquinas, and then proposes a number of areas in which Aquinas’s approach to both philosophy and theology should be used in Protestant thought. Then, in 1985, two Reformed authors published their thoughts about the importance of Thomas Aquinas: Arvin Vos, a reformed philosopher, published a remarkable little book titled, *Aquinas, Calvin, & Contemporary Protestant Thought*,<sup>[382]</sup> and R. C. Sproul published an article titled “Thomas Aquinas” in the book *Chosen Vessels: Portraits of Ten Outstanding Christian Men*.<sup>[383]</sup> Geisler followed this up, in 1991, with

*Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*,<sup>[384]</sup> and Sproul published an article titled “Thomas Aquinas: A True Gift of God” in the *TableTalk* magazine of May 1994.<sup>[385]</sup> This 1994 journal also included articles by other Protestant scholars who interacted positively with the thought of Thomas Aquinas, such as John H. Gerstner,<sup>[386]</sup> Ronald Nash,<sup>[387]</sup> and Norman Geisler.<sup>[388]</sup> Such an interest in Aquinas among Protestant scholars was not novel, even in the twentieth century. As Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen point out, a couple of Anglican scholars, E. L. Mascall and Austin Farrer, and a Lutheran theologian, Per Erik Persson, openly embraced Thomism in the 1950s.<sup>[389]</sup> In his 2019 book, *Reforming Apologetics*, J. V. Fesko presents evidence that, on a number of important theological issues, John Calvin’s theology stands in continuity “with the medieval past, in particular with the formulations of Thomas Aquinas.”<sup>[390]</sup>

Perhaps, however, this contemporary interest in Aquinas is an unfortunate blister on the face of a Protestantism that, until recently had been left unblemished by the filth of Aquinas? After all, as noted church historian Michael Haykin says, “Although Aquinas was indebted to Augustine’s theology of grace, which has deeply informed the Reformed tradition as well, his use of Aristotelian philosophy and his development of such Reformation bugbears as transubstantiation made Reformed thinkers generally wary of him. Moreover, the ardent opposition to the Reformation by a number of sixteenth-century Thomists such as Thomas Cajetan didn’t help make Aquinas popular among the Reformers and undoubtedly provided a further reason for the Reformed tradition’s suspicion of the Dominican theologian.”<sup>[391]</sup> It is certainly true that Martin Luther, when he spoke explicitly of Thomas Aquinas, had no apparent use for the Angelic Doctor, accusing him of subjugating the Holy Scriptures to the thought of Aristotle.<sup>[392]</sup> However, D. Stephen Long suggests that “his rejection of Thomas, however, arose because he associated Thomas with Aristotle, and he rejected the strict Aristotelianism among some sixteenth-century Thomists.”<sup>[393]</sup> Some, therefore, think that Reformed theologians have traditionally tended to shy away from Aquinas because of his Aristotelianism, his doctrine of transubstantiation, and the fact that he was used by the counter-reform to oppose the Reformation.

On the other hand, the bulk of the historical research done in the last fifty years on the writings of Protestants in the early modern period seems to tell an entirely different story. It reveals not only that many of these theologians tended to use Thomistic terminology, but that some of them may be rightly described as Protestant Thomists. Such an idea, however, seems to be almost offensive to some modern-day Reformed theologians, who paint Aquinas as the arch-nemesis of Reformed theology. Perhaps talking about Reformed Thomism is going too far? Is there any warrant for such a title? Is there room, within the realm of Protestant orthodoxy, for Protestant or Reformed Thomism? We will discuss this question directly near the end of this article.

In order to answer it, we will need, first of all, to define what it means to “be a Thomist.” We will then look at the philosophical and theological claims of a number of prominent Protestant theologians in order to determine whether they agree with Aquinas. Our purpose is not to prove that they were Thomists, but to show (1) that there was not as much overt opposition to Aquinas as has been suggested, and (2) that many of their doctrinal claims agreed with distinctively Thomistic positions. There are two ways of accomplishing this task: one is by looking for explicit reference to Aquinas, and the other is to pinpoint key Thomistic doctrines and see whether the theologians in question accepted them or rejected them. Once we have compared the positions of these early Protestant theologians with the Thomistic distinctives, we will conclude with some thoughts concerning the question of a “Reformed Thomism.”

### **Identifying Thomists**

In the book *Le Philosophe et la Théologie*, Étienne Gilson includes a short chapter titled “The Art of Being a Thomist.” The article begins as follows:

“How do we become a Thomist? At what moment? This is very difficult to say. For some reason a philosopher begins to read St. Thomas Aquinas. If he is allergic to this kind of thinking, he will stop reading and will not start again; but if there is any elective affinity between him and St. Thomas, he will continue and start again. Whether he speaks about it, whether he writes about it for the sole

purpose of helping others get out of their ignorance as he himself is getting out, he can do this, but many will not hear it in this way. What they want to know is not what St. Thomas Aquinas thinks, but rather if you are a Thomist.”<sup>[394]</sup>

In this section we will attempt to provide a clear description of what it means to be a Thomist. This is, of course, a more difficult task than it might seem at first glance.

Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen note that “There was a time...when Protestant theologians and philosophers read Aquinas’s work widely. Describing these authors as ‘Thomists’ would be misleading, but they paid careful attention to his writings and would often side with him on important questions.”<sup>[395]</sup> According to Svensson and VanDrunen, then, a thinker cannot be labeled a Thomist for the simple fact that he reads Aquinas and agrees with him on important questions. On the other hand, Thomistic philosopher Josef Pieper, in his collection of essays known as *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, suggest that such a fact is all that is needed to label someone as a Thomist. He proposes that we understand the term Thomism “in its broad current usage as the designation of all forms of Thomistic discipleship, and particularly of the world view elaborated in the works of St. Thomas. Thomism in this sense means nothing more nor less than the teaching of St. Thomas.”<sup>[396]</sup> For Pieper, to talk about Thomism or Thomists is to suggest that there is a school or system of thought which can be broadly outlined in clear-cut propositions. “But,” says Pieper, “it would seem to me quite impossible to compress the doctrine of St. Thomas into the framework of a ‘school’ system of propositions, *unless one leaves out something of fundamental importance*. The majestic elaboration of thought manifested in St. Thomas’s work is far too rich for such treatment and also far too flexible.”<sup>[397]</sup> Pieper suggests that the way Aquinas assimilates and weaves together both the riches of the Scriptures and the riches of the greatest thinkers of Western and early Christian thought (such as Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, and even Augustine) terminates in “a structure of the highest intellectual order, but not in any way a closed system of school propositions.”<sup>[398]</sup> This would seem to imply, therefore, that either there is no system of thought that can be properly called “Thomism,” or that anybody who, inspired by the writings of Aquinas, is influenced by the

Scriptures and the best of Western literature, would be a Thomist. Thankfully Pieper is not the only one who has written on the question of what it means to be a Thomist.

Indeed, much has been written about just what it means to be a Thomist, both by Protestants and by Roman Catholics. Many authors have sought to articulate lists of theories or doctrines, or even mindsets, to which one must adhere in order to be considered a Thomist. This, of course, has proven to be particularly difficult as even a brief perusal of these writings reveals that Thomists recognize that they do not always agree with each other about what it means to be a Thomist. We will begin with some of the most common articulations. These views often turn on nothing more than an appreciation of the work of Thomas Aquinas, borne from a frequent interaction with his writings, and which culminates in the creative articulation of Thomistic thought in engagement with contemporary philosophy and theology.

Robert J. Henle, in his reaction to a book by Gerald McCool, distinguishes between what he calls, “1. The Neo-Thomistic Movement; 2. Authentic Thomism; 3. Thomistical Development.”<sup>[399]</sup> He then distinguishes between four different types of Thomistical development: “First, there exist writings which profess to explain authentic Thomism but fail to do so.”<sup>[400]</sup> “Second, one finds creative developments of St. Thomas’ doctrines.”<sup>[401]</sup> “Third, Thomistical literature contains work that applies Thomistic principles to entirely new areas of culture.”<sup>[402]</sup> “Fourth, we find attempts to develop a separate philosophy.”<sup>[403]</sup> Authentic Thomism is described, first of all, as the very writings of Aquinas himself, but, also, “the work of those who with utmost loyalty to the original and with careful historical scholarship, have established the meaning of the Thomistic texts and explained their doctrines.”<sup>[404]</sup> Examples of Thomistical development, according to Henle, include the works of Joseph Owens, George Klubertanz, and Martin O. Vaske.<sup>[405]</sup> John F. X. Knasas, in the preface to *Thomistic Papers VI*, says “For me a Thomist is this: a philosopher whose seminal ideas derive from the texts of Aquinas as that philosopher understands them.”<sup>[406]</sup> Victor B. Brezik, in an article in the same collection, says, “I take the word ‘Thomist’ to refer to those who profess to follow the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas.”<sup>[407]</sup> According to Brezik, “To



be a Thomist for Gilson and to learn Thomism, it is necessary to read the theology of St. Thomas and in doing so, imbibe the philosophy which it employs and contains.”<sup>[408]</sup> Joseph Owens notes that “In the widest sense, anyone in the nineteenth or twentieth century who worked for the restoration of Thomistic thinking in today’s world may be called a Neo-Thomist, much as some may dislike the designation.”<sup>[409]</sup>

Brezik notes that according to Maritain, one distinguishing feature of the Thomists is that they, like Aquinas himself, seek to “purify the stream of Christian thought coming down from St. Augustine, scrape off, as it were, the rust of foreign accretions, so that it might flow on with pure waters.”<sup>[410]</sup> In other words, says Brezik, “Modern Thomists must be contemporary in their thinking after the manner in which St. Thomas, using principles drawn from Aristotle, was contemporary in his day.”<sup>[411]</sup> Indeed, Étienne Gilson himself notes that notes that “A Thomist is a free spirit. This freedom certainly does not consist in having neither God nor master, but rather in having no other master than God, who frees from all others. For God is the only protection of man against the tyrannies of man.”<sup>[412]</sup> Thomists, then, for both Maritain and Gilson, engage contemporary thought in such a way that they are always contemporary, but always tied to the historic truths of the Church—servants of God and not of men. This means, of course, that there must be flexibility in our classification.<sup>[413]</sup>

In two fairly recent books, the purpose of which is to provide an outline of the history of Thomistic thought, Romanus Cessario provides some hints at what he thinks are the determining factors by which a thinker may be classified a Thomistic thinker. Cessario goes further than most other thinkers in attempting to outline the positions which clearly distinguish a Thomist from any other thinker. Other thinkers who have provided fairly extensive lists of what they consider to be Thomistic distinctives include Vernon J. Bourke and Robert J. Henle. By enumerating what these thinkers see as essential to Thomistic thought, as combined with the observations of other Thomists, we come up with the following list of distinctively Thomistic positions.

The problem with identifying the fundamental positions that a thinker must hold in order to fit into some school of thought is that those who we would normally classify under one position often hold differing views about



others. For example, Aquinas could be rightly classified as an Augustinian; however, he explicitly rejects Augustine's entire theory of knowledge and learning. From what we have seen above, a thinker may be broadly classified as a Thomistic thinker when their approach to philosophy and theology is molded by broadly Thomistic categories.<sup>[414]</sup> This specifically entails, *in regard to philosophy*, that they are metaphysical, epistemological, and moral realists.<sup>[415]</sup> There is a real distinction, in all created beings, between being and essence.<sup>[416]</sup> Thus, they also hold that existence is prior to essence, and act is prior to potency.<sup>[417]</sup> All sensible things are composed of form/essence and matter; in humans, the soul is the substantial form of the body.<sup>[418]</sup> Essences are instantiated in really existing beings, and can be known, to a certain extent, by human knowers. The particular sensible beings instantiate the forms in the mind of God who is the author and sustainer of every created being.

*As concerns theology*, Thomists hold that there is one transcendent creator that is entirely distinct from His creation.<sup>[419]</sup> Something of God can be known *via* human reason alone based upon our observations of the sensible universe,<sup>[420]</sup> but, that which is necessary for salvation can only be known through divinely revealed scriptures. Thomists adhere to and defend the classical proofs for the existence of God, the classical attributes of God, the orthodox articulation of the Trinity, and the Divinity of Jesus-Christ.<sup>[421]</sup> In fact, it might be easiest to say that Thomists are creedal theologians who adhere to the Apostle's creed, the Nicaean-Constantinople Creed, and the Chalcedonian symbol. As Aquinas taught, the Holy Scriptures are divinely inspired, and are the ultimate authority for doctrine and practice. Thomists teach that there can be no true contradiction between what is known from nature and what is known from divine revelation.<sup>[422]</sup> They teach that nature is perfectible, and that grace perfects it.<sup>[423]</sup> "The human person acts both as a true secondary cause and as a free agent."<sup>[424]</sup> God is absolutely sovereign, provident,<sup>[425]</sup> and ultimate goodness.<sup>[426]</sup> Not all Thomists emphasize each of these points, but where they don't explicitly defend them, they do not usually explicitly or implicitly deny them.

In what follows we will take some of these doctrines and use them as a filter through which we will pass a number of the early Protestant

theologians. In this way we will be better able to determine how they looked at Aquinas.

### **Aquinas and the Protestant Reformers**

In the past fifty years, researchers have begun giving a great deal of attention to the early writings of the Protestant Reformers from the 1500–1700s. What they have discovered is that the early Reformers were far less “wary” of Aquinas and Aristotle than some have suggested. For example, though John Patrick Donnelly thinks that Peter Martyr cannot be called a Thomist, because “Martyr disagrees with Saint Thomas nearly as often as he explicitly adopts his teaching...there is a strong scholastic substratum in his theology that depends upon Saint Thomas more than upon any other medieval theologian.”<sup>[427]</sup> Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen also note that “There was a time, however, when Protestant theologians and philosophers read Aquinas’s work widely. Describing these authors as ‘Thomists’ would be misleading, but they paid careful attention to his writings and would often side with him on important questions.”<sup>[428]</sup> Svensson and VanDrunen go on to note that “Today, however, the majority of scholars see the Thomist understanding of things as the prevailing position among early Protestants in important areas of philosophy and theology.”<sup>[429]</sup> Stephen Hampton, in his *Anti-Arminians: The Anglican Reformed Tradition from Charles II to George I*, notes that in their articulation of the doctrine of God, Anglican theologians of the 1700s were predominantly Thomist.<sup>[430]</sup> Hampton notes that he calls these theologians “Thomists” not so much because they parroted Aquinas, as that “they are identifiably working within the tradition of thought which looked to Aquinas as a major influence, and which sought to present its teaching as an organic development of his.”<sup>[431]</sup> A number of early Protestant thinkers who clearly rely on key elements of Aquinas’s thought, some of whom have occasionally been identified as Protestant Thomists, include Franciscus Junius, Johann Dorsch, Jerome Zanchi, Peter Martyr Vermigli,<sup>[432]</sup> Michael Wolf, Kaspar Ebel, Martin Bucer,<sup>[433]</sup> and John Owen.<sup>[434]</sup> A great deal of work has already been done on these thinkers, so we will give our attention primarily to others.

We will be considering a number of different theologians from different Protestant traditions. We will consider two early English Reformed theologians, Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) and John Jewel (1522–1571), who were influential in the English Reformation; we will also consider the Continental Reformed theologians Theodore Beza (1519–1605), Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), Jerome Zanchi (1516–1590) and Peter Martyr Vermigli, who admittedly lived much of his productive theological life in England (1499–1562); from the Lutheran camp, we will be considering primarily Johannes Brenz (1499–1570). Note that most of the Protestant theologians we will be considering are either first-generation Reformers, or the colleagues and successors of the first-generation Reformers.<sup>[435]</sup>

### **Explicit Reference to Aquinas**

Most early Protestant thinkers do not name Aquinas as a direct source, though we do find the occasional reference. This means that it is difficult, though not entirely impossible, to demonstrate a direct dependence of any one early Protestant author on Aquinas. Take John Calvin, for example, who may have never read Aquinas and never explicitly mentions Aquinas in his works. Careful research has shown that, protestations aside, many of the clear distinctions and theological doctrines which are articulated by Calvin were also propounded by Aquinas some 300 years earlier.<sup>[436]</sup> Vos compares Calvin and Aquinas in relationship to their views of faith and knowledge, of types of faith, of the preambles to faith, and on the nature and grace distinction. He argues powerfully that, on each of these subjects, the differences are only apparent (on the level of method and vocabulary), but that there are many profound agreements between the two thinkers. This type of analysis, of course, does not prove dependence, though it should at least work to dispel the negative view that some contemporary Protestant theologians seem to have of Aquinas. Some of the early Reformed theologians did occasionally refer directly to Aquinas, and though it was sometimes negative (usually in the context of their discussions of transubstantiation), it was also quite often positive.

Thomas Cranmer's *A Confutation of Unwritten Verities* directly quotes Thomas Aquinas in support of the claim that the writings of the Fathers, without the Scriptures, are not sufficient to determine doctrine.<sup>[437]</sup> John

Jewell (1522–1571), bishop of Salisbury, quotes Aquinas in support of the Protestant interpretation of James on faith and works, saying, “If Mr. Harding shall think Augustine's authority herein is not sufficient, Thomas Aquinas will avouch the same. His words are these: ‘James, in this place, speaks of such works as follow faith; which works are said to justify; not as justification is the procuring of righteousness; but in that it is an exercise, or a showing or a perfecting of righteousness. For we say, a thing is done, when it is perfected or known to be done.’”<sup>[438]</sup> Jewel also shows knowledge of contemporary debates amongst the different schools of theology when, in his *Apology*, he points out that the Scotists and the Thomists disagree on many points.<sup>[439]</sup>

Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) also directly refers to Thomas Aquinas. In the ninth sermon of the first decade, Bullinger calls upon the authority of Aquinas in explaining how to properly interpret the statement, in the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe the Holy Church.”<sup>[440]</sup> In his work on the sacraments, when arguing that the only author of the sacraments is God, he appeals to Aquinas as his authority.<sup>[441]</sup> He explicitly refers negatively to Aquinas in relation to the doctrine of transubstantiation,<sup>[442]</sup> yet, in other subjects relating to the Eucharist, such as the fact that Judas partook of the Lord’s Supper, he cites Aquinas as an authority who agrees with this teaching.<sup>[443]</sup> He also refers negatively to Aquinas as one of the medieval doctors who depended upon and recommended Lombard’s sentences, and “endeavoured to mingle philosophy with divinity, and to couch them together into one body.”<sup>[444]</sup>

Jerome Zanchi (1516–1590) refers directly to Thomas Aquinas as one who agrees with Zanchi’s claim that “In consequence of God's immutable will and infallible foreknowledge, whatever things come to pass, come to pass necessarily; though, with respect to second causes, and us men, many things are contingent: i.e. unexpected, and seemingly accidental.”<sup>[445]</sup> He says, after having noted that this is essentially what Luther and Melancthon also teach, “I could cite, to the same purpose *Austin* [Augustine], *Aquines*, and many other learned men; but, for brevity sake, forbear. That this is the doctrine of scripture, every adept in those sacred books cannot but acknowledge.”<sup>[446]</sup> Concerning Zanchi’s use of Aquinas, Stefan Lindholm notes that “Zanchi held Aquinas in higher regard than

other scholastics, sometimes calling him the purest among them (*OT*, IV, 112). He had extensive knowledge of Aquinas and frequently made explicit reference to Aquinas's works, citing a large portion of his corpus."<sup>[447]</sup> D. Stephen Long notes that in his *De Natura Dei* alone, Zanchi quotes Aquinas some forty-one times.<sup>[448]</sup>

Thus, although there are few explicit references to Aquinas in the early Protestant thinkers, and one might therefore be led to believe that the early Reformers were not either dependant on Aquinas or even in agreement with Aquinas, such a conclusion would be a mistake. Many of the writings of the early Reformers were not the type of texts in which one would quote his sources, such as catechisms and confessions. Furthermore, it is evident from what has just been demonstrated that there are many positive references to Aquinas. At the very least, the notion that Thomas Aquinas was the arch-enemy of the Protestant reform must be, once and for all, buried. As we will see, the Protestant thinkers continued to affirm and defend many of the basic philosophical and theological positions of Aquinas.

## **Philosophical Positions**

### *Metaphysical Categories*

Even a cursory reading of the majority of the Protestant theologians of the early-to-mid-1500s reveals two things: first, most of them did not go into great detail concerning the metaphysical principles or categories they used, and, second, most of them seem to have taken a simple form of realism for granted, not, contrary to a popular myth concerning the metaphysical positions of the Reformers, nominalism. Realism refers to that approach to reality which claims: (1) there are real natures; (2) everything that in any way is, is what it is—an existing particular nature; (3) human beings are able to come to some knowledge of these natures by sensorial observation of the things that present themselves to us in different ways. Nominalism denies each of these claims, stating that there are no real natures, but only the human classification of things into sets, which are loosely defined by characterizing "properties." In other words, for nominalism, the "name" that we give to X does not pick out the essence or nature of X; it is just a word that we use to order our world. There are different schools of realism and nominalism, and one's adherence to one of

these schools becomes apparent quite rapidly when one begins discussing philosophy or theology.

Thomas Aquinas was a neo-Aristotelian realist. When we read the writings of the Protestant theologians of the 1500–1700s, we discover that most of them also clearly adhere to some form of realism—in many cases, a form of neo-Aristotelian realism. While this does not make them “Thomists,” it is important to note that, in relation to their fundamental philosophical outlook, there was no difference between many Protestant theologians and Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), in his many disputations concerning the nature of the Eucharist, constantly refers to substances, accidents, and natures. He argues, for example, that accidents exist only in substances. Having noted that though natural reason cannot supplant the claims of God’s word, when it is joined with God’s word it is helpful in confirming the truth. He then presents an argument against the doctrine of transubstantiation in which he assumes the categories of Aristotelian realism. He first accepts that nature abhors a vacuum; then notes that if the substance (the bread or wine) in which the accidents inhere be removed, then there is a vacuum (the lack of a substance). This contradicts the assumption. Thus, the notion of transubstantiation is contrary to nature and natural reason.<sup>[449]</sup> Throughout this lengthy treatise, we see Cranmer using the terms “nature,” “substance,” “accident,” and even “alteration” in ways that are clearly in line with the Thomistic-Aristotelian usage of these terms. He notes that though God performed miracles in which certain natural things acted contrary to their nature, as with the crossing of the Jordan, there was no alteration of their natures. He goes on to argue that, “Therefore as in these alterations of natures the substances nevertheless remained the same that they were before the alterations; even so doth the substance of bread and wine remain in the Lord's Supper, and be naturally received and digested into the body, notwithstanding the sacramental mutation of the same into the body and blood of Christ.”<sup>[450]</sup> It is interesting that even where he would disagree with Aquinas on a certain doctrine, his disagreement is explained in a way that is clearly in line with Thomistic-Aristotelian philosophy.



We also see Cranmer using the term “nature” to refer to “what a thing is” on numerous occasions, not only in discussions of the sacraments, but also in discussions of the gospel. He frequently notes how Jesus put on human nature in order to suffer in our stead, for our justification. He states, for example, that God the Father “hath given his own natural son, being God eternal, immortal, and equal unto himself in power and glory, to be incarnated, and to take our mortal nature upon him, with the infirmities of the same, and in the same nature to suffer most shameful and painful death for our offences, to the intent to justify us, and to restore us to life everlasting.”<sup>[451]</sup> He notes that Jesus is both God and man, “but we reserve to both his natures their own properties.”<sup>[452]</sup> Concerning the state of Christ’s human nature post-ascension, “in the truth of his human nature, Christ be in heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father.”<sup>[453]</sup> A little later he elaborates on this point, and reinforces his argument with a short discussion of the nature of a body:

“Of these words of St. Augustine it is most clear, that the profession of the catholic faith is, that Christ, as concerning his bodily substance and nature of man, is in heaven, and not present here with us in earth. For the nature and property of a very body is to be in one place, and to occupy one place, and not to be every where or in many places at one time.”<sup>[454]</sup>

It seems, then, that though Cranmer does not write any explicitly metaphysical treatise in which we find his views explained, he is clearly working within a broadly Thomistic-Aristotelian metaphysics. He takes for granted that there are real natures, that accidents exist only in substances, that accidental change does not affect that nature of the substance but that substantial change implies the destruction of the accidents, and so on. On all of these accounts he is clearly Thomistic. John Jewel, like Cranmer, also uses the traditional terms of “nature” and “substance,” not only to explain the doctrine of God and the divine Trinity,<sup>[455]</sup> and the nature of the Eucharist,<sup>[456]</sup> but also to discuss human nature, and how Christ took on human nature.<sup>[457]</sup>

Theodore Beza (1519–1605) used the same basic categories in his catechism’s explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity, explaining that the scriptures teach “That there is one divine essence, and three persons, the

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>[458]</sup> He goes on to ask what is meant by the term essence, and responds that it is “The nature which is common to the three persons.”<sup>[459]</sup> He continues properly using these terms throughout his explanation of the Trinity, and his later explanation of the Hypostatic Union.<sup>[460]</sup> In his explanation of this union he defines an essential property as “that which, if it is removed, the thing of which it is a property would necessarily no longer be what it was.”<sup>[461]</sup> In discussing the corruption of the human nature, he explains that it is not just the accidents that are corrupted, but the very essence of man, in which these accidents inhere.<sup>[462]</sup> Heinrich Bullinger uses precisely the same terminology, not only when discussing the doctrine of the Trinity, but also in his definition of faith<sup>[463]</sup> and even when explaining various natural things in the world, such as the nature of the resurrected body of Christ.<sup>[464]</sup> In a treatise on natural and human law, Bullinger defines “nature” as follows: “Moreover, that which we call nature is the proper disposition or inclination of every thing.”<sup>[465]</sup> Bullinger clearly has a great deal of respect for both Aquinas and Aristotle, and adopts their basic metaphysical positions in relation to reality, human nature, and knowledge.

In case there was any confusion about what is meant by these terms, the *Formula of Concord*, originally published in 1576, explains just what the Lutheran theologians who wrote it meant when they used the term “nature”: “For sometimes nature signifies the very substance of man, as when we say: God created human nature.”<sup>[466]</sup>

### *Natural Law, Natural Theology, and Natural Reason*

When one turns to the early Protestant approaches to questions related to natural knowledge, whether it be related to natural law, natural theology, or the actual abilities of natural reason, we find that a great majority of them clearly teach that human natural reason is useful for, among other things, knowing something of God (natural theology) and morality (natural law).

Johannes Brenz (1499–1570) was a leading Lutheran Reformer and church administrator in the German Reformation movement. He became a Lutheran Reformation theologian after having heard Luther’s theses at the Heidelberg disputation. He was one of the lead theologians working to



reform the churches in the city of Schwabisch-Hall, and wrote numerous treatises defending the Lutheran doctrines related to the Eucharist and church polity. He also wrote one of the first Lutheran catechisms. He clearly teaches that, though human reason is weakened and darkened because of the fall, man is still able to know something both of God and of true morality. He says, for example, in explaining why it is necessary to catechise our children,

“For though natural reason has some knowledge of God and of the faith; in spite of this, she is darkened because of sin, and has not knowledge of the Gospel of the Son of God our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we obtain by faith true justice and salvation. Seeing, therefore, that the darkness of the human intellect is so great, it is necessary that Parents take care to teach their children the Catechism from their youth.”<sup>[467]</sup>

He explains, using the traditional notion of the two books which reveal God, that God is known both through the book of nature and through revealed Scripture.<sup>[468]</sup> The book of nature, says Brenz, is composed of “the sky, the earth, the sea, and everything contained within.”<sup>[469]</sup> Brenz goes on to explain that,

“From these things we naturally know that there is a God. Because when we see the greatness, the beauty, the order and organisation of the things of this world, the admirable turning and changing of the monuments [perhaps movements] of the heavens and of time, it seems evident to us that there is a divine spirit and intellect which governs all these things.”<sup>[470]</sup>

He supports this claim by appealing, as did most Christian theologians and philosophers throughout history, to Romans 1:19 and 20, Acts 14, and Job 12.<sup>[471]</sup> He also thinks there are many other clear evidences in nature of the existence of God.<sup>[472]</sup> Later, in the same document, he explains that “Human reason naturally knows some things of God, so much so that the Gentiles called God τὸν ἄγαθόν, which means Good...And they spoke thus of God, because he is the author of all good. But, because human reason, due to the great temptations, allows itself to be shaken by Satan from this knowledge of God, it is, therefore, necessary that we be armed with the testimonies of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>[473]</sup> He teaches, elsewhere, that it is due to

the corruption of sin, the attacks of Satan, and the problem of evil that men deny that God exists,<sup>[474]</sup> and that it is due to the weakness of the human intellect that it is necessary to have recourse to the Holy Scriptures.<sup>[475]</sup>

Concerning Natural Law, Brenz says

“The knowledge of those things, which are commanded in the decalogue, is divinely imprinted in human reason, from the beginning of her creation. And, of course, the decalogue was not written from the beginning of the world, but it was written in human reason, so much so, that afterwards those things which were later put into writing, were written in order to keep them before our minds. St. Paul, writing to the Romans, says, ‘That which can be known of God is manifest to them. Indeed, God manifested it to them.’ But, if those things which can be known of God were revealed to human reason, even more so those things which he could know, concerning what man must do towards his neighbour. This is why that which is written in St. Matthew 7, ‘all that you want men to do to you, do to them as well’, is properly called the natural law, because it is known from nature...by human reason.”<sup>[476]</sup>

One might suggest that Brenz was breaking with Lutheran tradition, but, as R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley have shown,

“Following Melanchthon’s *Loci Communes*, Orthodox Lutheran systematic works began with natural theology. E. D. Hirsch illustrates the Lutheran view by citing J. Musaeus, who, in *Introductio in Theologiam* (1679), writes typically: ‘God, through the guidance of the light of nature, is known by two different ways; first, through innate knowledge, and then through acquired.’”<sup>[477]</sup>

Some might still contest that this is a corruption of Martin Luther’s own approach to natural reason, theology, and law. However, although Luther is often portrayed as being more skeptical of natural reason than other Reformers, even those who were his immediate colleagues, he still had room, in his theology, for natural theology,<sup>[478]</sup> natural law,<sup>[479]</sup> and natural reason.<sup>[480]</sup>

Thomas Cranmer constantly appeals to natural reason and philosophy in support of his refutations of the Catholic teachings concerning the Eucharist. For example,

“Now forasmuch as it is proved sufficiently, as well by the holy Scripture, as by natural operation, by natural reason, by all our senses, and by the most old and best learned authors and holy martyrs of Christ's church, that the substance of bread and wine do remain, and be received of faithful people in the blessed sacrament, or Supper of the Lord.”<sup>[481]</sup>

He concludes the second book of this work by noting that,

“In these answers is no absurdity nor inconvenience, nothing spoken either contrary to holy Scripture, or to natural reason, philosophy, or experience, or against any old ancient author, or the primitive or catholic Church; but only against the malignant and papistical Church of Rome. Whereas on the other side, that cursed synagogue of Antichrist hath defined and determined in this matter many things contrary to Christ's words, contrary to the old catholic Church and the holy martyrs and doctors of the same, and contrary to all natural reason, learning, and philosophy.”<sup>[482]</sup>

Rather than creating an unbridgeable chasm between reason and faith, Cranmer thinks that natural reason is useful, even in refuting theological errors. In fact, Cranmer holds the very same position as Aquinas and many medievals concerning the relationship between reason and faith. He notes, in response to a critique of some of his writings, that “as for natural reason, I make no mention thereof in all my five books, but in one place only, which is in my second book, speaking of transubstantiation. And in that place I set not reason before faith, but, as an handmaiden, have appointed her to do service unto faith, and to wait upon her.”<sup>[483]</sup>

In his *Catechismus*, Cranmer teaches the very same thing as Brenz and Aquinas concerning natural knowledge of God:

“If you will lift up your minds to God, good children, to know his divine majesty, his infinite power, wisdom, goodness, and his other godly perfections ; look not upon a deaf, dumb, blind, lame, and dead image, made by a painter or carver's hands : but look upon heaven and other creatures made by God's own handiwork ; look upon man, who can speak, see, smell, hear, feel, and go, and hath life, will, and reason, and whom no man, but God himself, made to be his lively image and similitude.”<sup>[484]</sup>

John Jewell, the Bishop of Salisbury, also consistently refers to natural reason and natural law in his writings. When contrasted with Scripture, natural reason is as the darkness to the light.<sup>[485]</sup> However, this is not to say that natural reason or philosophy is useless. Rather, Jewell reminds us that human reason is God-given in order to help us to pursue the truth and to guide our will.<sup>[486]</sup> Indeed, by human reasoning a person may gain a great deal of natural knowledge, which, though useless for salvation, is still reckoned as truth.<sup>[487]</sup> Those things which are necessary for salvation cannot be discovered by natural reason alone, but are revealed in Scripture.<sup>[488]</sup> In all of this, Jewel clearly agrees with Thomas Aquinas, and with the majority of early Protestant thinkers. Jewel even has a place for natural law in his writings, appealing to nature in condemning certain sins, in explaining why a church should support its pastor, and so on.<sup>[489]</sup>

Theodore Beza does not appear to differ greatly from Cranmer and Jewell, clearly teaching that natural reason is not entirely effaced by the fall, but is useful for discovering many truths. He notes, for example,

“God hath preserved in our minds certain seeds of knowledge and good arts, without which, of men we should become beasts. Hence it is that the principles and general notions of all Arts are naturally imprinted in every mans understanding, which made Plato think that when men by teaching begin to know that whereof before they seemed ignorant, they do not so much learn any new thing, as remember that which they had forgotten.”<sup>[490]</sup>

Indeed, Beza considers that, though the philosophers did indeed make many errors, they also, without any written revelation or prior belief in the triune God of Christianity, discovered many important and helpful truths. Though he is familiar with and quotes freely from the Platonists, the Stoics, and the Epicureans, he is of the opinion that of all the philosophers the Aristotelians are the best and most helpful.<sup>[491]</sup> In this he is very much in line with Thomas Aquinas.

Not only is the natural light of reason still useful, even after the fall, for discovering truth, but there are at least two types of truths that it is able to find: naturally known truths about God, and naturally known truths about morality. He clearly believes that natural reason is capable of attaining to some knowledge about God, but not saving knowledge. Saving knowledge

depends upon that which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. In answering the question, “But, are not the knowledge of God and the principles, like the common sentences, imprinted in the nature of man, even though it is so corrupted?”,<sup>[492]</sup> Beza says “They obviously are, though they are like the ruins of a magnificent building. Most importantly I say that this faith [in the previous question Beza describes what is typically understood as “saving faith”] does not consist of natural knowledge, but it is necessary to add that which God particularly revealed to the world through the Prophets & Apostles, which flesh and blood could never deduce. This final point must be noted, that in which we find the special difference between faith and natural knowledge, that is, that each believer particularly applies to himself the promise of eternal life, whose testimony the Scriptures call certainty.”<sup>[493]</sup> In the preface to his *Commentary on Job*, Beza notes that in the book of Job we find an example of the true use of the natural sciences—that is, that they reveal the providence and goodness of God. He goes on to note how many pagan scientists and philosophers have discovered all kinds of truths, but that they have erred in various ways.<sup>[494]</sup> Some of the truths that Beza thinks can be naturally known by the natural light of reason, and which was discovered by the philosophers, include: 1. That God is the provident and sovereign Creator. 2. That all events are providentially directed by God. 3. That all secondary causes are providentially directed by God to their ends. 4. Therefore, that nothing happens against the divine will.<sup>[495]</sup>

Finally, Beza teaches that those laws which were written in the ten commandments are nothing more than that which can be known, by natural reason alone, of morality: natural law. Commenting on Romans 2:14–16, Beza says,

“that to the Gentiles their conscience was a Law accusing or excusing the deeds of everyone of them. And surely so it is. For whereas God in the Mount Sinai delivered to his people the ten Commandments contained in two tables, we are not thereof to gather, that then and not before, God prescribed what duties men were to perform to God and their neighbours, but rather, that he then renewed that immutable law of Nature, which was from the beginning written

in the hearts of all men, and from whence all good laws have been derived.”<sup>[496]</sup>

Heinrich Bullinger’s approach to natural reason, theology, and law is similar to those already mentioned. Though Bullinger clearly articulates the corruption of reason caused by sin, and the many errors that the philosophers have fallen into,<sup>[497]</sup> he does not think that, therefore, the natural light of reason is without use or ability to know that truth. He states, for example, “I do not utterly condemn all the parts of philosophy, knowing very well that some points thereof are very necessary and profitable to the zealous lovers of God and godliness.”<sup>[498]</sup> Indeed, this faculty of reason is put in man by God himself,<sup>[499]</sup> and by it, says Bullinger, man is able to reason rightly about language, logic, law, philosophy, theology, and mathematics.<sup>[500]</sup>

Bullinger articulates a very traditional view of both natural law and natural theology. Based upon the classical interpretation of Romans 1:19–20, Bullinger explains that,

“So then, the Gentiles knew God; yea, they knew whatsoever might be known of God. But what teacher had they, or what master? They had God to their master. In what order taught he them, or out of what book? Not out of the written books of Moses, or the prophets; but out of that great and large book of nature. For the things that are not seen of God (in which sort are his everlasting eternity, his virtue, power, majesty, goodness, and Godhead), those he would have to be esteemed of according to the visible things, that is, the things which he hath created...So then it is manifest, that the law of nature doth expressly teach, that there is a God which is to be acknowledged and reverently worshipped.”<sup>[501]</sup>

When he turns to examine the ten commandments, beginning with the first, he notes what the philosophers have rightly said about the true God, beginning with Pythagoras,<sup>[502]</sup> and then, among others, Cicero and Seneca.<sup>[503]</sup>

In another sermon, on how man comes to know God, he explains that God has made His existence known, both in nature and in Scripture, such that even pagan philosophers recognize that God exists.<sup>[504]</sup> For Bullinger,

then, natural reason knows not only many true moral norms and something of the nature and existence of God, but even that the soul is immortal.<sup>[505]</sup>

We have, here, shown that five major theologians who were early representatives of the three Magisterial Reformation movements (Lutheran, Anglican, and Calvinist) each made room for natural reason and philosophy, natural theology, and natural law. Their approach to this subject was very much the traditional approach that we find in the writings of the early Church Fathers, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. They were not unique or oddities. Rather, it can be demonstrated that just about every single Protestant theologian from the 1450s to the end of the 1700s held similar positions (with varying degrees of pessimism or optimism concerning the corruption of fallen reason). Others who could have been mentioned here include John Calvin, Martin Luther, Richard Baxter, Stephen Charnock, William Ames, William Perkins, Franciscus Junius, William Tyndale, the Westminster Divines, those present at the Synod of Dort, most of the Puritans, and many others.<sup>[506]</sup> Indeed, the magisterial theologians typically grouped those who rejected natural reason, natural theology, and natural law with the Socinian heretics and the radical reformers.

### *Conclusions*

In considering the basic philosophical outlook of the reformers of the 1500s to the 1700s, we have found that they were, for the most part, realists who accepted the objectivity of the created universe as a source of knowledge. For them, natural reason, though darkened by the Fall, is still useful for about everything except what concerns salvation. Furthermore, they all are able to find a place for both natural theology and natural law. Paul Helm, in a recent book on the Reformed approach to human nature, argues convincingly that though some of the reformers (such as John Calvin)<sup>[507]</sup> tended more towards an Augustinian Platonic anthropology, others, such as Peter Martyr Vermigli, were quite clearly influenced by a Thomistic-Aristotelian anthropology.<sup>[508]</sup> Heinrich Bullinger holds to a similar philosophical anthropology, as can be seen from his analysis of human nature.<sup>[509]</sup> Though it would be false to say that all of these Protestant theologians were philosophical Thomists, it is undeniable that



many of them explicitly agreed with Aquinas on almost all of the distinctively Thomistic philosophical positions that we mentioned above. Based upon what we have seen above, and the list of Thomistic philosophical distinctives, it seems likely that some of these reformed theologians were Reformed Thomists.

### **Theological Positions**

There are too many Thomistic theological distinctives to allow us to make an exhaustive study of how much the early Protestant theologians agreed or disagreed with Aquinas. However, it is worth noting that in two key areas, the Protestant theologians would be considered quite Thomistic: their attitude towards the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers, and their exposition of the divine attributes.

#### *Reliance on the Scriptures and the Patristic Writings*

Almost every important Protestant theologian between 1500 and 1700 clearly emulates the Thomistic approach to authority in Christian theology by relying on the Scriptures as the ultimate authority in theological discourse and using the patristic and medieval writings as helpful guides. The Thomistic approach can be seen in Aquinas's statement that,

“Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors. Hence Augustine says (*Epis. ad Hieron.* xix, 1): ‘Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem everything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning.’”<sup>[510]</sup>



Thomas Cranmer, in *A Confutation of Unwritten Verities*, brings the teachings of the greatest Christian theologians, from the patristic and medieval periods, to bear on a number of important theological subjects. Each chapter begins with a statement, followed by quotations from the patristic and medieval theologians. Notably, Cranmer brings forward Thomas Aquinas as a testimony to the ultimate supremacy of the Scriptures in the determination of doctrine.<sup>[511]</sup> In the second chapter of this book, Cranmer addresses the following question, “That the writings of the old Fathers, without the written word of God, are not able to prove any doctrine in religion.”<sup>[512]</sup> The entire chapter is composed of a selection of quotes supporting this claim from important theologians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Athanasius, Basil, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory, Anselm, and John Duns Scotus.

In his important defense of the nature of the eucharist, against the doctrine of transubstantiation, Cranmer constantly brings the Church Fathers forward as witnesses. One major section of this work bears the title, “The Papistical doctrine is contrary to the faith of the old authors of Christ’s Church.”<sup>[513]</sup> Here he calls to the bench such notable patristic theologians as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Cyprian, Eusebius, Hilary, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, John Dun Scotus, etc. If to use the Scriptures and the patristic theologians in the determination of theological truths, all while giving priority to Scripture, is Thomistic, then Cranmer is clearly, on this point, Thomistic.

John Jewell also refers frequently to the patristic and medieval theologians in his articulation and defense of Protestant theology. In his *Apology for the Church of England* he responds to the accusation of innovation. In this response, he notes how the accusers argue that the church cannot err, to which he responds as follows:

“No doubt, if that Church may err which hath departed from God's word, from Christ's commandments, from the Apostles' ordinances, from the primitive Church's examples, from the old fathers' and Councils' orders, and from their own decrees, and which will be bound within the compass of none, neither old or new, nor their own, nor of others, nor man's law, nor God's law; then it is out of all question, that

the Romish Church hath not only *had power* to err, but also that it *hath* shamefully and most wickedly erred in very deed.”<sup>[514]</sup>

In other words, Jewell’s response to the accusation of innovation is that the church of Rome, not the Protestants, has denied the early Fathers. Not only does Jewell refer to the Church Fathers in defense of Protestant principles, he even notes that the Protestants have great respect for the councils.<sup>[515]</sup>

Heinrich Bullinger also finds a great deal of use for the early Church Fathers. Even a cursory reading of the sermons that make up his *Decades* demonstrates not only that he has extensive knowledge of the Fathers and the medieval theologians, but that he is able to properly interpret and apply their teachings to whatever subject he is treating. In his treatment of the Apostle’s Creed, for example, which takes up a number of sermons,<sup>[516]</sup> Bullinger constantly grounds each statement of the creed in the Holy Scriptures and quotes the early Church Fathers and the medieval doctors to assist in explaining various elements of the creed. Some of the theologians to whom he refers include, Cyprian, Augustine, Tertullian, St. Hierome, Bishop Fulgentius, Bishop Vigilus, Paschasius, Gregory the Great, and even Pope Leo. He not only quotes the more well-known works of these authors, but even refers to lesser known writings of these authors, such as Augustine’s ninety-ninth epistle to Evodius,<sup>[517]</sup> and his epistle *Ad Neophytos*.<sup>[518]</sup> Theodore Beza, in his writings, also constantly quotes the early Church Fathers as authorities on various subjects, however, the Scriptures are always considered to be the supreme authority. They contain, for Beza, all that we must believe in order to be saved.<sup>[519]</sup> In his *Questions et Réponses Chrestiennes*, and his commentary on Job, he frequently quotes Cyprian, Gregory, Chrysostom, and Augustine. Johannes Brenz, like the others, also refers to most of the Church Fathers in his writings, not giving them precedence over the Scriptures, but as authoritative witnesses to the meaning of the Scriptures.

This is but a short survey of a handful of Protestant theologians, but they are each dependant first upon the Scriptures, and secondly upon the Church Fathers. The Protestant theologians agreed very much with Aquinas concerning the authority of the Scriptures, in relation to all other books, whether they be written by doctors of the church or by the philosophers.

## Conclusion

Our little experiment seems to demonstrate that many early Protestant thinkers not only adopted positions which are clearly in agreement with the distinctive claims of Thomas Aquinas, but that some of them actually turned to Aquinas as both an inspiration and an authority. This leads us to the conclusion that most of the early Protestant thinkers did not see Aquinas as either an enemy or a theologian to be avoided. Furthermore, many of them freely quoted Aquinas, used his distinctions and definitions, and followed his example of integrating the truths discovered by the philosophers (especially Aristotle) and the Church Fathers into their theological work. They were neither wary of Aquinas nor suspicious of him. Some of these early Protestants, such as Zanchi, Beza, Vermigli, and Bullinger, followed Aquinas so closely that they might even be called "Reformed Thomists." That is, if to be a Thomist is to adhere to most of the so-called Thomistic distinctives (both theological and philosophical); and if, as we have seen, many of these early Protestant theologians held to, and defended, these distinctives; then it would seem that they are rightly classified as Reformed Thomists.

With so much evidence revealing the early Protestant appropriation of Thomas Aquinas in the articulation and defense of Protestant theology, one is led to wonder why there is so much opposition to Aquinas amongst contemporary Protestant theologians. What could possibly motivate such opposition? Perhaps Aquinas, as a moderate realist who clearly thinks that the natural light of reason in man, though tainted by sin, is still able to know about the true God and true morality, threatens the adoption of perspectivalism (whether this be the presuppositionalism of Van Til, Oliphint, Frame and others, or the critical realist perspectivalism of Alister McGrath and others). Protestant classical theists, from the beginning of the Reformation to the present day, have never been afraid of Aquinas, but have seen him as an ally in the right articulation and the coherent defense of the historic Christian faith. This does not imply an uncritical adoption of everything that Aquinas says, just as classical Christian theists do not uncritically adopt everything that Augustine, Anselm, John Calvin, Martin Luther, or any other Christian theologian says.

Is there room for a “Reformed Thomism”? The history of Protestant theology seems to say yes. In fact, from what we have seen, those who would disparage Aquinas or those Protestant scholars who find their inspiration in Aquinas, must also disparage the greatest Protestant thinkers of the Reformation. What then, is a Reformed Thomist? A Reformed Thomist is a Protestant thinker who adheres to most of the “Thomistic distinctions” listed above, though not uncritically, and who uses right reasoning and the right interpretation of Scripture to defend to truths of the Gospel that were taught throughout the entire history of the church, and which were re-emphasized with exceptional vigour during the Reformation.

**X:**  
**Classical Theism and Natural Theology in  
early Reformed Doctrines of God**

**Andrew Payne**

The theistic views held among the academic theologians during the early Reformation were hotly contested, yet almost all fall solidly within a general classical theist paradigm. Those that differed from such commitments were typically, with few exceptions, rejected as heretics. This claim is the ultimate thesis of this chapter. However, such a claim is far too expansive to demonstrate in a single chapter. In order to translate it into a more manageable task, we will look at the great Reformer John Calvin and his relation to perhaps the greatest classical theist, Thomas Aquinas. Since even this task would require its own book, we must amend it further: we will demonstrate their affinities through a consideration of the two most essential doctrines of Calvinism: the doctrine of God and man and the doctrine of providence.

When presented with the task of demonstrating Calvin's relation to classical theism, particularly with the views of Thomas Aquinas, it is tempting to simply place the claims of the two men side by side and let the relation reveal itself. In such a presentation the relation is simply self-evident. To a certain extent, that is essentially what I have done. Nevertheless, this fact is still debated, requiring a bit more work to demonstrate the truth of my claim. We will need an argument.

The argument of this chapter will be advanced across four subsections. The first outlines the stance of the classical theist on the two doctrines here considered. The second then outlines the academic background of Calvin, demonstrating his intellectual relation to this tradition and the exegetical basis for understanding Calvin's claims. Essentially, he expresses the claims of classical theism in a style that is marked by Renaissance humanism. Thus, if one were to object that Calvin does not explicitly espouse the scholastic doctrines, we may safely reply that he differs only in style, not in substance. Next, we shall turn to Calvin's claims themselves, looking first

at the doctrine of God and man and second at the doctrine of predestination. The discussion of the doctrine of God and man is motivated by two goals. The first is to dismiss what has become known as the Reformed objection to natural theology. The second is to demonstrate that the relation between God and man that serves as the foundation for Calvin's doctrine is itself rooted in the classical theist's understanding of God as the Uncaused Cause. Finally, we will look briefly at Calvin's doctrine of predestination, wherein it will be demonstrated not only to follow in a basically Thomist line of reasoning, but furthermore the very mechanisms through which God's sovereignty operates will be revealed to be rooted in the classical theist's understanding of God as the Uncaused Cause.

This thesis, of course, is anything but universally accepted. For many in the contemporary Reformed tradition, it has become a basic truism to assert that the Reformers rejected the God of the philosophers for the God of the Bible. The theology of this "false god" of the philosophers is said to be comprised of claims made by pagans in accordance with the fallen reasoning of man. By contrast, the God of the Reformers is the God of the Old and New Testaments; the God of truth, Who reveals Himself in and through His word. The philosophers are said to place reason's authority on a par with God's revelation, and through this prideful approach denigrate the concept of God to what seems reasonable to our fallen sensibilities. The Reformers, it is said, in response to such blasphemy cried out in unison, "*sola scriptura!*" and turned to God's Word alone for all their knowledge of Him.

This theme has become a tired platitude in contemporary Reformed thought, safely asserted without the slightest fear of pushback from Reformed theologians or church historians. According to Cornelius Van Til, for example, Calvin represents perfectly the Reformed and Christian epistemological worldviews. He stood resolute, free from the stain of non-Christian speculation. According to Van Til, the atheism of early-twentieth century existentialism represents the opposite end of the spectrum from Calvin. In the middle, hopelessly attempting to combine the two extremes of the Christian and the secular, Van Til sees Aquinas, and this is why Aquinas is destined to fail. He has compromised true Christianity.<sup>[520]</sup> This narrative has been echoed by those who follow generally in Van Til's

tradition. Most notably, Francis Schaeffer employed this view in his polemic against the secular world, as he analyzed how it fell into decadence.<sup>[521]</sup> Many more in this tradition have presented this narrative time and time again in our own day.

Could it be that this entire tradition has been built around a misunderstanding of ancient and medieval philosophers and theologians? Still worse, could it be that this tradition has been built around a misunderstanding of the Reformers themselves—Calvin most of all? The contemporary “Reformed” narrative of antagonism toward classical theism and natural theology was constructed largely independent of any historical-exegetical research, by those who, more generally, failed to grasp both the history and significance of philosophical discourse. It is precisely these failures that are to be subsequently illuminated.

### **Providence and God in Classical Theism**

Classical theism englobes a panoply of philosophers and theologians. As a result, it is impossible to give a complete definition and summary of “classical theism” without prioritizing the insights of some thinkers above others. We will focus on the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas, who is, by most accounts, the greatest and most systematic of classical theists. Focusing on Thomas will enable us to better analyze the relations between the classical medieval tradition and the theism of the Calvinist tradition.

The main work we will appeal to is Aquinas’ magnum opus, the *Summa Theologiæ* (hereafter *ST*). This work consists of four “parts,” each composed of a series of questions that build upon each other. Thus, it is very difficult—and by some accounts impossible—to merely accept part of it without committing oneself to the whole system.

Aquinas’ views on providence and predestination are discussed early on in Part 1, Questions 22–23. There, Aquinas first discusses providence and then moves on to predestination as a theoretical unpacking of the implications of providence. In keeping with the other questions, however, Aquinas presents the reader with a teaching that builds upon what was said before and is ultimately derived from Question 2 about the existence of God. In other words, if a person accepts the cosmological argument presented in Question 2 (also known as the famous Five Ways of Thomas

Aquinas), he has already accepted the foundation of the doctrines of providence and predestination. Many Catholic theologians have attempted to diminish this fact in order to keep Aquinas (the preeminent Church Doctor) more in line with Catholic dogma on predestination, but the reasoning nevertheless stands on its own as a coherent thesis beginning with the existence of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* and concluding with His providential control of all things.

Our second doctrine, the doctrine of God and man, will build upon a foundation of what will be laid in our overview of providence and predestination. This doctrine, in brief, states that man will never properly understand who he is until he considers himself in his dependence on God, and he will never properly understand who God is until he understands God in His gratuitous relation to man. We will focus on the aspect of this doctrine drawing on Calvin's statement that, "our very being is nothing but subsistence in God alone."<sup>[522]</sup> Through the use of the work of twentieth-century philosopher Jacques Maritain, it will be shown how the Thomist commitment to being as first known not only begins the intellect's assent to reality, but further, it sets in motion the intellect's recognition of the world as created, and therefore as proclaiming the need for a Creator.

### **Providence and the Existence of God**

While it is common in contemporary literature to assert that Aquinas' famous Five Ways are to be interpreted as apologetic in nature, there has been, in recent years, a growing recovery of the interpretation that holds his meaning to be theological instead. According to this interpretation, Aquinas' purpose is to demonstrate what can be known about God from creation. As Helm put it, "Thomas Aquinas is no longer automatically read through Enlightenment eyes. Instead, his natural theology is regarded as being internal to his Christian theology, a case of faith seeking and gaining understanding, rather than a necessary prolegomenon to faith."<sup>[523]</sup> It is in the tradition of the non-Enlightenment interpretation of Aquinas that we will survey Aquinas' claims.

Aquinas begins by stating that the existence of God is a self-evident truth revealed through nature. This is because it is God's nature to exist (hence the Latin phrase, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*), and as a result, to claim



that He exists is merely tautological. Though such a proposition is “obvious in itself,” it is not necessarily obvious to all who hear it. Thus, Aquinas follows this claim by making it clear how the proposition is self-evident through a consideration of the nature of existence. It is at this point that we encounter the Five Ways.<sup>[524]</sup>

As some commentators have noted, “These five ways are really essentially one way: the ‘cosmological argument,’ or argument from the cosmos. The logical structure of all five proofs is the same.”<sup>[525]</sup> This is because the emphasis of each point rests on a consideration of existence *per se*. Let us first explain the reasoning through an analogy. Suppose you have a philosophy examination tomorrow on Plato’s ethics, but, because you were a very poor student, you neglected to learn anything about Plato’s view. Your ignorance is not because you are somehow unable to learn about Plato. You have the *potential* to learn his views; you simply have not *actualized* that potential. It is at this point that you realize that merely being potentially in possession of understanding is not the same as actually possessing understanding. Even an infinite series of individuals who potentially possess understanding would fail to add up to even the minutest part of actual understanding.<sup>[526]</sup> Thus, what is needed is someone with actual understanding to impart it to you.

Contingent things, in virtue of their contingency, are not responsible for their own existence. They are like those individuals who are potentially in possession of knowledge about Plato. They cannot actualize themselves but are rather reliant upon another for their actualization. Thus, a contingent existent cannot cause itself to exist. Even an infinite series of contingently existing things cannot account for the slightest part of their actual existence. There must be a being, then, that does not exist contingently and that continually gives existence to all contingently existing things. This Being we call God.<sup>[527]</sup>

What is perhaps most striking about Aquinas’ argument (at least for our present purposes) is the fifth formulation of this argument. This formulation states that it is evident that God exists through the fact that the world is governed (*gubernatione rerum*). This argument is commonly interpreted as being an early “design argument” for God’s existence. While this is generally true, the language Aquinas employs is evocative of the

classical discussions of providence. Because of this, it would be better to call it the argument from governance. In the corresponding passage from Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas, calling attention to its relation to Aristotelian metaphysics, states that the argument from governance (*gubernatione*) is "another argument for the same conclusion" as the other ways just discussed.<sup>[528]</sup> Furthermore, it is repeated in his discussion of providence found a few questions later. There, Aquinas states, "Two things pertain to the care of providence—namely, the 'reason of order,' which is called providence and disposition; and the execution of order, which is termed government (*gubernatio*). Of these, the first is eternal, and the second is temporal."<sup>[529]</sup> Thus, there is a close association between God's act whereby He imparts existence to creation and His providential governance. It is not incorrect to say that providence and the imparting of existence are largely synonymous—both reference the same act, considering it in answer to two different questions.

In summary, then, Aquinas essentially argues as follows: it is impossible to understand the nature and mechanism of providence unless one also understands the metaphysics of creation. God's creative and sustaining acts are essentially the same act considered under two different modes: the first bringing something forth from nothing, the second preventing it from returning to nothing. All that exists is preserved only by God's existential activity. Thus, not only *that* a thing exists, but also *how* it exists is subject to God's governance. God's governance extends as far as contingent existence, because God's governance is performed through His impartation of existence. It follows that a person who admits to the truth of the Five Ways has conceded the nature and structure of providence. Thus, no sooner do we realize the self-evident truth that God exists than do we realize our servitude to Him as creatures governed by His providential hand.<sup>[530]</sup>

An inverse point must also be made. As soon as one denies this existential relation to God, one also denies the metaphysical mechanism through which providence operates. This mechanism permits us to say that predestination does not oppose the will of the creature. God does not override our wills because His providential act is the condition of the *being* of our wills. Without this metaphysical point, we are left bereft of a defense

against absolute determinism—a view rejected by both Calvin and Aquinas. Thus, those truths which are revealed in natural theology are no arbitrary truths that may be discarded as “corruption from the Greeks” or some other such strawman. If they are taken away, so too is the coherency of the Reformed view of providence.

### **Some Soteriological Entailments of Aquinas’ View**

The central difference between the Protestant and Catholic views of salvation concerns the nature of grace. In this, Aquinas was a good Catholic and accepted the Church’s teachings. However, beyond the nature of grace, Aquinas’ views on predestination and the elect are virtually indistinguishable from Calvin’s. It will be profitable to take a moment to survey his claims here to better measure them against the claims of the Reformed tradition.

Aquinas insists upon double predestination. Predestination, as a doctrine, is something Aquinas believed to naturally develop out of a consideration of the providence of God—a fact attested to both by reason and more importantly by the Scriptures. Thus, Aquinas concludes that, “God loves all men and all creatures, inasmuch as He wishes them all some good; but He does not wish every good to them all. So far, therefore, as He does not wish this particular good—namely, eternal life—He is said to hate or reprobate them.”<sup>[531]</sup> Furthermore, this double act of predestination and reprobation is said to be personal: God is personally active in electing some to salvation, and others to damnation.<sup>[532]</sup>

Aquinas’ reasoning is even stronger when considering whether this election could be based on foreknowledge. Simply put: such a thesis would be absurd. As Aquinas himself wrote, “Nobody has been so insane as to say that merit is the cause of divine predestination as regards the act of the predestinator.”<sup>[533]</sup> This is because, given God’s providential act, there is nothing that can exist in the thing which did not first exist in God as the ultimate cause. If God is not ultimately the cause, then there is no cause at all. Thus, to presuppose that some merit could arise in the creature apart from God’s providential activity is to posit something coming into being from nothing apart from God’s activity. And, as Aquinas has already demonstrated, no contingent being—and by extension no contingent

property in a contingent being—can come into being apart from God’s existential causation. Thus, “It is impossible that the whole of the effect of predestination in general should have any cause as coming from us; because whatsoever is in man disposing him towards salvation, is all included under the effect of predestination; even the preparation for grace.”<sup>[534]</sup> In virtue of this fact, then, and given the rejection of universalism, the atonement must be limited by God.<sup>[535]</sup> According to Aquinas, the number of the predestined is certain, and they have been personally selected by God. Election only comes about “by reason of [God’s] deliberate choice and determination.”<sup>[536]</sup>

To any casual reader, the thesis of Aquinas could easily be mistaken for the writings of Calvin or some ardent Calvinist. Nevertheless, here is found the denial of any salvific merit being found in those who are elected to salvation that is of themselves. Put in Calvinist terms, this is unconditional election. As well, the number of the elect is limited by God’s free and sovereign choice. Thus, we find in natural theology evidence of the truths proclaimed in the Scriptures by Paul and renewed in the teachings of the Reformers. The relation of Calvin’s teachings to this thesis should by now be unmistakable. Richard Muller implies this when he claims that, “[T]he underlying assumptions governing the doctrine of God during the eras of the Reformation and Protestant orthodoxy are very little different from those governing the discussion during the Middle Ages.”<sup>[537]</sup> It is now time to turn to the Calvinist paradigm itself and explore more in depth how it appropriated such doctrines.

### **The Milieu of Calvin**

The Reformation grew out of cultural and intellectual revolution. The Renaissance was in full swing and the ethos of Renaissance humanism had spread beyond the academy to the common man. One cannot properly understand the Reformation until one also understands the cultural events that gave rise to it. Because our present focus will be on the Calvinist paradigm, it is fitting that we take a glance at Calvin’s academic world. This is warranted for several reasons. Firstly, as Bernd Moeller famously declared, “Without humanism, no Reformation.”<sup>[538]</sup> Thus, we must seek to understand how Calvin was influenced by humanism. Secondly, playing off

of Moeller's claim, Paul Grendler has added, "Without universities, no Reformation."<sup>[539]</sup> It is well known that the Reformation was effectively started by an academic exercise, and nearly every major first and second-generation Reformer was shaped by his experiences in the university system. This was certainly the case for Calvin, who in all likelihood was brought to Protestantism through his many humanist friends and professors.

That Calvin was a very accomplished academic in his early career is a matter of historical record. What has fascinated historians more, however, is the degree to which his inclinations dovetailed with the humanism of his time. Indeed, Calvin was very much caught between the worlds of scholasticism and humanism. It is true that there were no clear lines dividing humanists and scholastics, but it is also true that both "schools of thought" vied for dominance in Calvin's day. To the scholastics belonged rigorous and logical disputation. For Calvin, these were the scholastics of the Sorbonne, a place that became a beacon of Catholic rhetoric. The Scholastics actually spent much of their time discussing exactly the same writings as the humanists, albeit in a more technical way. Theirs was a difference in style.

During Calvin's undergraduate experience at the Collège de la Marche, he would have been educated in the "scholastic" philosophical tradition and would have learned about the classical philosophers and the great Scholastics such as Aquinas and Scotus. This education would have been thoroughly Aristotelian even though his own personal interests, shaped likely by his various friendships, were in the direction of Renaissance humanism.<sup>[540]</sup> Calvin's humanist leanings would not so much have contradicted his education in theory as much as in style. If there was one thing that unified the Renaissance humanists under a common banner, it was the desire/goal of rhetorical eloquence.<sup>[541]</sup> This desire, though, as one scholar rightly notes, often gave rise to a revival of sophism—the desire to place eloquence and persuasiveness above accuracy or truth.<sup>[542]</sup> Calvin's rhetorical style was clearly shaped in a humanist milieu, though his commitment to truth was wed to his pious convictions. Thus, he did not imbibe everything from his peers. Nevertheless, it is likely the case that it was through his humanist influences that Calvin was first instilled with an

amicable disposition toward Platonism which would eventually be brought to fruition in his study of Augustine.<sup>[543]</sup>

Clearly, then, Calvin is to be situated between the academics and humanists of his day. His later theological works pervasively cite Aristotle, and even when “the philosopher” is not cited, Calvin echoes his terminology. Indeed, Calvin’s technical vocabulary is essentially an amalgam of Aristotelian categories and Augustinian theology. By contrast, his style of presentation was essentially humanistic. Ozment describes Protestant humanism as adopting the style of their less religious counterparts while jettisoning their worldlier behaviors. Protestants sought to take classical wisdom and represent it in more rhetorically powerful and homiletic ways.<sup>[544]</sup> Calvin was the greatest exemplar of this movement. Thus, when we read Calvin’s writings, we never come across “scholasticism”—that is, the expression of classical theistic doctrines using fine scholastic distinctions. Instead, Calvin presents these doctrines in sermons and rhetorically wrought prose, rendering the scholastic and humanistic influences alike unmistakable.

### **John Calvin on God and Man**

Calvin took his doctrine of God and man from the theology of Ulrich Zwingli.<sup>[545]</sup> Whereas Zwingli tucked the doctrine away deep within his theology, Calvin placed it front and center, going so far as to say that neither God nor man could be properly known if understood apart from each other. This claim echoed throughout the Protestant tradition and even made its way into many philosophical writings, including the later works of Hegel and Kierkegaard—the latter of which characterized his search for selfhood as being incomplete until he found himself before God.<sup>[546]</sup> In Turretin, a third generation Reformer trained in Calvin’s seminary, the doctrine is synthesized with a fairly Thomist assessment of the nature of theology.<sup>[547]</sup> Thus, it is no stretch to claim that this doctrine—even more than the doctrine of predestination that Calvin is so famous for—resides at the core of Calvinism. It is also the case, as we shall see, that the doctrine of God and man is built upon a classical theological foundation.

It is only natural that we too should begin with this doctrine when assessing the role of classical theism within Calvin’s thought. It is necessary



here to cite at length the opening passage of Calvin's *Institutes*:

Our wisdom (*sapientiae*), insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of our selves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts toward the God in whom he lives and moves (*vivit et movetur*); because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; no, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone. In the second place, those blessings which unceasingly distill to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain. Here, again, the infinitude of good which resides in God becomes more apparent from our poverty. In particular, the miserable ruin into which the revolt of the first man has plunged us, compels us to turn our eyes upward; not only that while hungry and famishing we may thence ask what we want, but being aroused by fear may learn humility.<sup>[548]</sup>

There are many varying interpretations of this passage, and it would take a whole article to sort them out, but before we endeavor to interpret this passage further, we must first endeavor to do away with one of the most common misinterpretations.

### **Epistemology or Soteriology?**

It is commonly asserted by those who write about Calvin's *Institutes* that this passage (and the first five chapters of the *Institutes* in general) is the introduction to Calvin's *epistemology*. Such an interpretation has been offered by scholars from the Dutch Neo-Reformers in the nineteenth century to K. Scott Oliphint and John Frame in our day.<sup>[549]</sup> Herman Bavinck, for example, appealed to this doctrine in his *Philosophy of Revelation* lectures given at Princeton, wherein he interprets Calvin's meaning broadly in accordance with the dominant philosophical view of his day, drawing from the systematic thought of Schleiermacher and Hegel. In all such interpretations, the relation of God and man is understood to be essentially that of what Dooyeweerd called a "ground-motive." We might also understand it in the Van Tillian sense of "the necessary precondition of

intelligibility,” or even more broadly in the Plantingian sense of a “properly basic belief.”<sup>[550]</sup>

It is typically through this epistemological interpretation that Calvin—and “Reformed epistemology” more broadly—has been pitted against classical theism. Indeed, this interpretation is the catalyst of Plantinga’s famous “Reformed Objection to Natural Theology.”<sup>[551]</sup> According to these interpreters, Calvin holds man’s noetic abilities to be so corrupted as to impede his being able to rationally recognize that the true God exists. Kuyper took this view so far as to put forth the self-refuting claim that we are reduced to the ignorance of animals before nature by the all-encompassing stain of sin.<sup>[552]</sup> There seems to be a rather basic equivocation occurring in these interpretations. It is clear that Calvin is discussing the nature of theological knowledge (*sapientiae*), but this is not the same as discussing the nature of knowledge in general.

So what could Calvin mean by *sapientiae*? The word denotes *wisdom* directly and (to state the obvious) is further qualified by Calvin through a consideration of the relation between God and man. It is only through this relationship that either one is understood properly. Calvin is here evoking Augustine’s definition of wisdom, namely, “*Hominis sapientia pietas est*”—or, “Man’s wisdom is piety.”<sup>[553]</sup> As one scholar put it, “Augustinian wisdom is the internal conformity of the soul to God who lives in it by grace and charity.”<sup>[554]</sup> Calvin essentially adopts this definition without any changes. It should further be noted that this definition is not epistemological, but *soteriological*. Those who seek to understand Calvin’s meaning by emphasizing the “*knowledge (cognitione)* of God and of ourselves” are guilty of giving precedence to the wrong term in this passage, and by this error are led to understand Calvin’s meaning in epistemological terms. The term Calvin was interested in was not “*knowledge (cognitione)*,” but *wisdom (sapientiae)*. The “*knowledge*” intended here is qualified by “*wisdom*,” and not the other way around. Wisdom is piety, and piety is the Christian life.

Calvin did intend to use these opening passages as a theoretical prolegomenon for what follows. Nevertheless, what follows is no treatise on philosophy (or any of the sub-disciplines of philosophy) and does not build upon any particularly philosophical knowledge. If the passage in



question—as well as the first five chapters in general—were meant to outline an epistemological prolegomenon, then we should expect to discover echoes of these epistemological doctrines found throughout the rest of the work. However, these echoes are never heard. Instead, what is found is a consistent emphasis on the sinful state of man before God, and the prideful attempts of man to conform the image of God to that which is more amenable to his own desires. There is no explanation of how we come to know God—not even when dealing with the innate sense of the divine—that examines the mechanisms of knowledge, or the structure of reasoning (or even if reason has a structure).<sup>[555]</sup> Such discussions would be critical for any epistemology. Instead, the innate sense of the divine is left as a general, empirical fact, lacking almost any qualification beyond that of a mere observation.

Once we dismiss the epistemological interpretation of the first five chapters of the *Institutes*, we find that the progression of Calvin’s reasoning is fairly straightforward. After introducing the dynamic of God and man in chapter one, Calvin proceeds in the next chapter to explain that true piety seeks more than just mere knowledge that God exists. To be a Christian is not just to know that God exists, but to *know Him*. Everyone knows the former, but only the Christian knows the latter. This latter class of knowledge is the result of true piety. As Calvin defines it, piety is “that union of reverence and love to God which the knowledge of His benefits inspires.”<sup>[556]</sup> To further clarify his point, Calvin then discusses what piety is not. Piety is not mere factual knowledge about God. To that degree, it does not matter what one knows about God at all if one is not also pious. Factual knowledge of God is utterly insufficient to bring salvation. Presumably, a person could even know and believe that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God who died for our sins, but, if he lacked piety, he would not be saved. The salvific insufficiency of this knowledge is made worse when it is paired with the depravity of the fallen will. The fallen will does not care so much *that* God exists, but it runs from *who* He is. This is the point of chapters 3–4, before Calvin switches to discuss the theology of true piety. This knowledge begins, as Calvin outlined in the passage cited above, with a recognition of God’s sovereignty (see Book 1, Chapter 5 through the end of Book 1).

The concern of Calvin is that we understand God rightly and ourselves before Him. Thus, we must understand ourselves as fallen, sinful, and utterly dependent upon God, and we must understand God as perfect, unquestionable, and the gracious Creator and Sustainer of our very existence. But, as Pauck points out, this doctrine implies Calvin's most famous doctrine of predestination. "Just as man lives by the gratuitously given grace of God, over which he has no control whatsoever and which he must receive in faith, so he must understand his ultimate destiny as being in all respects dependent upon the will of God."<sup>[557]</sup> There is a direct line between Calvin's thesis about God and man to his thesis about predestination, and, as has been stated already, this thesis is primarily concerned with the pious life. Piety, not epistemology, is the issue. But in what way, we should ask, is the doctrine of God and man tied to predestination?

### **Classical Theism in Calvin's View of God and Man**

What does wisdom reveal to us about God? To begin with, Calvin makes several claims that assume elements of classical theism. Most notably, the doctrine of God and man assumes the causal relation that Aquinas highlights in his Five Ways. Calvin stressed that wisdom first recognizes that God is the First Mover.<sup>[558]</sup> Employing very scholastic language, Calvin states that our continued existence is contingent upon God's existential act. Thus, as Calvin would elsewhere state, God is not only the creator of a moment but the perpetual sustainer of all things. This fact is for Calvin the first and most manifest aspect of man's pious relation to God. It is simultaneously a recognition of God as the necessary Creator, and it can induce a recognition of His goodness. It further instills within us a profound sense of servitude, or rather, of humility before God. This is the sense of humility that definitively marks the nature of wisdom. It is always humble before God because this humility recognizes the ontological dependence man has upon God, as well as God's gratuitous goodness in sustaining us. Furthermore, the humility of piety highlights the absurdity and the vileness of our rebellion. He whose very nature is expressed in His perpetual goodness, who created us out of nothing, sustains us above the abyss of annihilation, is the one against whom we rebel. Natural theology

declares the supremacy of God and pride declares the supremacy of man. The two cannot be reconciled.

Given that the Five Ways conclude with an argument for God's existence that entails a providential hand, it is also striking that the first of Calvin's pious observations would highlight God as the First Mover, while the second would highlight God as the providential hand that governs the universe. The two doctrines are always related. Thus, no sooner do we recognize God as Creator than we recognize God as the providential governor of the universe. Essentially, Calvin's move from creation to providence is the natural progression of the doctrines of God revealed in nature and confirmed in Scripture. Such a similarity is no mere coincidence, but stands as evidence of outright agreement in doctrine with classical theism.

Because the doctrine of God and man extends to all other doctrines found in the *Institutes*, its presence is evident in Calvin's discussion of the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity). For Calvin, this term denotes a general principle that is not wed to any particular way in which God may be known. It is an empirical fact that the vast majority of human beings believe in God, and it follows that this belief is somehow natural to the human condition. The first of these ways spoken of, as we saw, is evinced in the cosmological argument. The twentieth-century Thomist Jacques Maritain put this notion forward as *l'intuition de l'être*—"the intuition of being." Here, the individual surveys his own existence and is led by it to a realization that God exists and is the sustainer of each and every other existing thing. This inference is given a concrete instance by Maritain when he recounts his wife's conversion experience. He quoted her as saying, "Before receiving the faith...I often would experience a sudden intuition of the reality of my being, of the profound first principle, which forms me out of nothingness. A powerful intuition whose violence sometimes frightened me and which first gave me the knowledge of a metaphysical absolute."<sup>[559]</sup> This intuition of being could be set off by even the most mundane of existential encounters. "Even more, at the sight of something, a blade of grass, a windmill, a soul will know in an instant that these things are not of themselves, and that God is. Suddenly...all creatures appeared to me as symbol, and seemed to me to have the unique purpose of revealing the Creator."<sup>[560]</sup>

Whereas the cosmological argument of Aquinas reasons from the principles of being to the reality of an uncaused being, the veracity of such an argument, Maritain seems to indicate, is known in an instant, before an act of reflection. The truth that is acknowledged in both instances is the same, but the method of its unveiling is different. We are not our own creators. It is not I who bring myself forth out of nothing; it is Another. And it is His very action that makes me to be, and to be in the way in which I am. Consider again the claim of Calvin: my very existence (*esse*) is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.<sup>[561]</sup> This inference may be fairly straightforward to a Christian way of thinking, but it rests upon a rather complex metaphysical system—one also referred to in natural theology.

While it is the case that such a belief is innate, this is not an innate idea, as the Cartesians would propose roughly one-hundred years later. Rather, this recognition is intuited—almost emoted—by our very existence. In knowing what we are as dependent beings, we know intuitively—not by rational inference, but by a knowledge of a deeper origin—that there is one upon whom we depend. Calvin refers to it as a “natural instinct” rather than something rooted in a conceptual mode of knowing.<sup>[562]</sup> Even so, it is an intuition no less rooted in the classical understanding of the hierarchy of being found in Aquinas’ proofs of God’s existence.<sup>[563]</sup>

The question remains, what is the intuition of? The answer, which likely seems obvious, is that our intuition is of *ens* (being). Thus, the highest abstraction in our natural mode of knowing is not the highest abstraction that knowledge can achieve. The contingency of intuited being (*ens*) necessitates that there is a higher category: *esse*. *Esse* is prior to *ens* because *ens* is the formation (or determination) of *esse* into a thing. *Esse* is the “to-be” of a being (*ens*). Yet in a being, there is not only “being” as a “that” which we find, but also “being” as a “what.” In Maritain’s words, “All of this amounts to saying that the concept of existence cannot be detached from the concept of essence.”<sup>[564]</sup> Being is encountered in all its complexity, from the immediacy of its determinate being to its dependence upon a determining Being. In other words, it is within this complexity that God is revealed as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, the Self-Subsisting Being.

Maritain held that this intuition is not only attained via the experience of beings, but also, teleologically, via one’s religious experience. The

intuition of being not only sets in motion the intellect's assent to being (*ens*), but also its assent to God through some other form of experience. Thus, we must also note that there is yet another pathway to the intuition of being: religion. To the religious individual, the intuition is echoed in the longing of the heart for its Creator and is known in the immediate contingency of *ens*. Being declares the glory of God, and points the way to His throne room. Unsurprisingly, then, this is the first step of piety: recognizing God as the Supreme Being, and we ourselves as belonging to Him. Truly, as Calvin writes, unpacking the implications of Acts 17:28, our existence is nothing but subsistence in Him; and truly it is madness and the ultimate impiety to seek to overturn this self-evident truth.

### **John Calvin on Providence**

Though we have already discussed it to a certain degree, we must now turn

to the doctrine of providence. Perhaps the strongest evidence of the indebtedness of Calvinism to the classical theistic views worked out by the Medieval Scholastics is found here. David Hogg has gone so far as to claim that the scholastic treatment of this topic by Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas should be viewed as “preparatory and foundational” to the Reformers’ own teaching.<sup>[565]</sup> Similarly, Helm asserts that Calvin’s view of providence is “the standard Christian view,” and as a result is essentially the same as that of Aquinas.<sup>[566]</sup> Turretin himself found solidarity with the Thomist view of providence and predestination, citing it against a number of burgeoning heresies of his day.<sup>[567]</sup>

Speaking of the related doctrine of simplicity, James Dolezal states that the Reformers did not so much alter the doctrine as much as they “made the biblical motivations for the doctrine more explicit.”<sup>[568]</sup> Much the same can be said of the doctrine of providence. Thus, while his philosophical commitments may not be as explicit as Turretin’s, Calvin’s own treatment of this doctrine is essentially a more pastoral translation of the high-tower Scholastic teachings with (appropriately) greater emphasis placed on the teachings of the Scriptures.

Calvin most explicitly treats of the doctrine of election in the third book of the *Institutes*, defining it as follows:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or death.<sup>[569]</sup>

This is not the only place where he discusses the doctrine of predestination, and we should certainly never isolate Calvin's treatment of predestination specifically from providence more generally. Predestination is defined as "the eternal decree of God" above, yet this same definition also is applied to "providence" in Book 1.<sup>[570]</sup> Providence, then, is best understood as concerning God's decreeing all things insofar as they exist, while predestination is a subcategory of providence, concerning God's decree regarding the ends of his creatures, be they good or bad, particularly with regard to salvific matters. Thus, it is a mistake to read these two doctrines in isolation. They are most properly understood as being functionally the same doctrine discussed in several differing lights.

If we extend our survey beyond the *Institutes* alone, we find that the topic is directly discussed in Calvin's *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*. There, he provides us with a better definition of providence:

We mean by providence not an idle observation by God in heaven of what goes on in earth, but His rule of the world which He made; for He is not the creator of a moment, but the perpetual governor. Thus the providence we ascribe to God belongs not only to His eyes but to His hands. So He is said to rule the world in His providence, not only because He watches the order of nature imposed by Himself, but because He has and exercises a particular care of each one of His creatures. For it is indeed true, that, as the creation of the world was beautifully ordained by the admirable wisdom of God, so it is unable to persist in being unless it be sustained by His virtue.<sup>[571]</sup>

As we have seen, Calvin's thesis held that providence is the narrative unfolding of God's "power of motion."<sup>[572]</sup> A little later Calvin reinforces this claim with the assertion that, "Providence consists in action."<sup>[573]</sup> Both of these terms, "motion" and "action," are understood in scholastic thought



as expressing the dynamism of being. Thus, in essence, Calvin's claim is the same as Aquinas': providence extends as far as contingent existence itself. If a thing exists in creation, its existence accords with God's providential decree. It is by God's decree that the world came into existence, and it is through this same decree that it remains in existence. Thus, an end cannot be reached if not by God's guidance. This is no less the case in terms of the teleology of nature, and of the narrative of God's salvific plan.

Predestination is a doctrine that Calvin thought was clearly taught in the Scriptures, but which he understood as functioning metaphysically in the same way that Aquinas expressed it in *ST*, Part 1, Question 22–23. Calvin's view of predestination is not that of a meddling God seeking to overturn the wills of His creatures. His view is that of a God who is the very grounding condition of the wills of His creatures. Indeed, the only real difference between Aquinas's account and that of Calvin is that Aquinas separates God's providential acts into the two categories of "predestination" and "reprobation," whereas Calvin combines the two into the one term "predestination." Predestination, as a doctrine, is perhaps the most relevant issue in Calvin's theology that evinces "faith seeking understanding." And it should be clear by now that this understanding is bolstered by a commitment to classical theism, rooted in that existential knowledge of God that can be gleaned from nature.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown, there is no animosity between classical theism and the Calvinist paradigm. We have at the present surveyed only two doctrines, albeit two doctrines that reside at the heart of catholic Christianity. There are other related doctrines we could very easily have turned to. Turretin, for example, plainly expressed a commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity. But by now the point should be clear.

It is a gross caricature to say of the classical theist's reliance upon natural theology that he has turned to "Greek theism as a foundation for Christianity."<sup>[574]</sup> If this view purports to be the Reformed or "Calvinist" view, it is mislabeled. The impiety it seeks to charge the classical theist with is, within the Calvinist system, no impiety at all. There is no deeper-rooted

rebellion at work. In fact, bereft the sort of rebellion outlined in the Calvinist system above, it is difficult to see what coherent meaning could be given to such a charge.

Suffice it to say for now that classical theism resides at the very heart of Calvinism, and it resides there as the metaphysical foundation of two of the most important doctrines in the whole system. If it is rejected, one might as well reject Calvinism altogether.



*XI:*  
**Van Til's Transcendental Argument  
and Its Antecedents**

**John R. Gilhooly**

In this chapter, I survey the transcendental arguments of Cornelius Van Til and their historical antecedents. The purpose of the survey is to show the manner in which Van Til's arguments depart from traditional transcendental accounts and in what manner their structure is similar.<sup>[575]</sup>

In section 1, I lay out some key terms that are found in discussions of Van Til. In section 2, I discuss two major transcendental arguments from major historical thinkers, Aristotle (384–322 BC) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804 AD). In section 3, I argue that if Van Til's arguments are merely disguised deductive or abductive arguments, then they fail. Nevertheless, he insists that they are altogether different. I try to show how one might construe that defense. In section 4, I conclude that the best reading of Van Til's approach does distinguish it from prior arguments but only with respect to the boldness and reach of his transcendental premise.

### **Van Til on Transcendental Arguments**

One of Van Til's most famous students, Greg Bahnsen, summarizes his teacher's use of the transcendental argument as follows:

The unbeliever attempts to enlist logic, science, and morality in his debate against the truths of Christianity. Van Til's apologetic answers these attempts by arguing that only the truth of Christianity can rescue the meaningfulness and cogency of logic, science, and morality. The presuppositional challenge to the unbeliever is guided by the premise that only the Christian worldview provides the philosophical preconditions necessary for man's reasoning and knowledge in any field whatever. This is what is meant by a "transcendental" defense of Christianity...In short, presuppositional apologetics argues for the truth of Christianity "from the impossibility of the contrary."<sup>[576]</sup>

This method for grounding basic commitments of philosophy, such as logic and inference, is well-established philosophically. In fact, Aristotle provides such indirect proofs for axioms as early as *Metaphysics*. In contemporary philosophy, Van Til's approach is frequently compared to the methodology of Immanuel Kant as found (e.g.) in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Van Til must conceive of his argument as being different in kind from both of these prior examples because he sees his project as radically Christian, unlike either Aristotle's or Kant's. Nevertheless, what Van Til has in common with these other thinkers is his desire to reflect on what must be the case regarding some fact  $x$  if  $x$  is to be  $x$ . In other words, he writes, "a truly transcendental argument takes any fact of experience which it wishes to investigate, and tries to determine what the presuppositions of such a fact must be, in order to make it what it is."<sup>[577]</sup>

It is important to recognize that a "presupposition," for Van Til, does not refer to an explicit but ultimately revisable hypothesis held by the proponent of the Christian position. Instead, he means a *transcendental* conviction that serves as the regulative principle of a person's worldview. In that sense, presuppositions are strikingly similar in function to the practical postulates of Kant's ethics (the theological, cosmological, and psychological ideas). Hence, the presuppositions are not, for Van Til, merely those premises that have logical priority in man's reasoning. Neither are they those facts about the world that a man first learns. Instead, they are the "ultimate or final reference point in human interpretation."<sup>[578]</sup>

### **Historical Versions of the Argument**

In philosophy, the term "transcendental argument" is most frequently associated with Immanuel Kant. He introduces it in an attempt to explain a type of argument with a unique structure and purpose, namely, establishing the validity of certain theoretical principles against the skeptic. In other words, transcendental arguments are anti-skeptical arguments. The structure of the arguments is unique in that they contain a certain premise (hereafter TP for "Transcendental Premise") which asserts that some condition  $X$  is required for the intelligibility, rationality, or possibility of  $Y$ , where  $Y$  is an agreed-upon fact or principle. Hence, the arguments "proceed backwards" from some phenomenon to the causal or logical apparatus necessary to

make that phenomenon possible or explicable. While the methodology is particularly acute in Kant, because of his worries about Humean skepticism, the technique, broadly construed, is ancient. [\[579\]](#)

In this section, I will discuss the transcendental arguments of Aristotle and Kant. Of course, these are not the only two thinkers to make use of the technique. It can be found in Aquinas, [\[580\]](#) Descartes, [\[581\]](#) Wittgenstein, [\[582\]](#) and, I am sure, others. I chose Aristotle and Kant because their treatments are well-cited in the literature. The purpose of this survey is not to give an exhaustive treatment of either thinker on this subject—a task made essentially impossible by the weight of secondary musings on the issue. Instead, my goal is to provide “stock” interpretations of the two thinkers’ use of transcendental arguments with an aim of uncovering the basic structure of their reasoning in favor of particular principles. It is with respect to the structure of the arguments that they can be seen to anticipate Van Til. Clearly, Van Til uses the technique for a purpose alien to the goals of Aristotle or Kant. [\[583\]](#) Nevertheless, the emphasis on the broad outlines of the structure is important because of Van Til’s claim to produce a uniquely Christian apologetic methodology. If the transcendental arguments in whatever form cannot be clearly distinguished structurally from other forms of argument, then the claim that they provide a unique methodology collapses. This collapse would be independent of whether the argument was sound or effective.

## **Aristotle**

Many scholars construe Aristotle’s argument for the Law of Non-Contradiction as a transcendental argument. The argument comes from his *Metaphysics*. [\[584\]](#) Some scholars have referred to his approach as a “retorsive” argument, which merely means it turns the opponent’s assertion back on itself. [\[585\]](#) It works by showing that some claim that the opponent makes implicitly or explicitly contains the contrary assertion. Hence, the opponent’s claim is self-defeating. The difference between this type of argument and a standard *reductio* is that this argument relies on only one claim rather than a conflict between premises in the argument at some stage of entailment. In other words, Aristotle’s refutation proceeds by showing that, *whether the opponent knows it or not*, the opponent relies on the

principle in question whenever he denies it. So, there is a logical commitment to a principle even if that is so unclear to the opponent that he can assert the denial of that principle.

In Aristotle's case, the issue is whether it is possible to judge that the same thing both be and not be (at the self-same time and respect). It strikes Aristotle that the claim is self-evidently false and that a demand of proof for the principle of non-contradiction is ignorant. However, a negative proof of the principle is available, namely, that the opponent makes any assertion at all. If one asserts *anything*, even something as straightforwardly false as "a and  $\sim$ a," he is already committed to some fact (i.e., whatever he asserted). Hence, skepticism about such principles is self-defeating. The pre-condition of any meaningful denial is the law of non-contradiction. Hence, denying the law of non-contradiction makes discourse impossible. If, however, the opponent will not speak, then he is not worth refuting since he will then be, as Aristotle says, no better than a vegetable. So, while Aristotle does not conceive of this tactic as a proof *per se*, he does think it is sufficient to establish the firmness of our commitment to the law of non-contradiction. Notice that the consequence of this mode of arguing is that he does not prove the law of non-contradiction but rather that no one can really fail to believe that it is true. That means that this dialectic method of arguing produces an epistemological result, if not an ontological one. And that is perfectly acceptable for Aristotle, who thinks the nature of the argument and evidence should be isomorphic to the field of inquiry.

**Kant**<sup>[586]</sup>

The most famous transcendental approach to argument comes from Immanuel Kant, who is generally credited with the technique. After Kant, the technique is found in many twentieth-century authors. The most notable version of the argument for our purposes is found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>[587]</sup> Like Aristotle, Kant employs the technique as an anti-skeptical argument. In his case, the worry was whether certain basic ideas of what seems to be experiential knowledge (say, the existence of material objects or causation) could count as knowledge. In fact, Kant's "transcendental program" is aimed at examining human knowing to determine the *a priori* elements of our thought or, in other words, what we contribute to our

knowledge in virtue of the types of minds that we have. So, transcendental, for Kant, is generally employed in opposition to empirical.

Kant takes it that a person's perceptions are received by just one subject (the person or self), who is conscious of his own perceptions. But, the fact of this unity of perception means that something has united all the various perceptions (say, color, heat, what-have-you). However, this synthesis can only be explained by an activity of the understanding. Hence, it is generated (partially) in virtue of *a priori* faculties. Hence, the unity of my perceptions (or at least the *perceived* unity of my perceptions) presupposes that *a priori* concepts can attach to empirical objects. [\[588\]](#)

The generic form of the transcendental argument is clear enough in this rough sketch. In order for us to have unified perceptions of objects (whether they are external or not), we would have to have a means of producing the unity. The *a priori* categories are that means. Therefore, our perceptual objects are shaped by the *a priori*, and synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible. Hence, skepticism (of the Humean type) fails. Or, so goes the argument.

### **Structure of Historical Arguments**

The purpose of a transcendental argument is anti-skeptical, but the structure of the two arguments here considered is different. The difference has largely to do with the nature of the skepticism that the two arguments address.

Daniel Coren has recently construed Aristotle's argument thusly: [\[589\]](#)

- (1) A skeptic may either say something or nothing.
- (2) If a skeptic says nothing, she cannot reason with anyone. Nor can anyone reason with her.
- (3) To say "something" is to say something that is significant to oneself and to another.
- (4) If something is said, then at least one thing is determinate.
- (5) If at least one thing is determinate then not everything is "so and not so."
- (6) Either the skeptic cannot be reasoned with and no one can reason with her, or she concedes that not everything is "so and not so."

Now, Aristotle's argument does not constitute a proof of the law of non-contradiction, as he admits. After all, the law of non-contradiction is a first principle of thought, and, hence, not the type of thing that could be proved. The transcendental nature of the "proof" we have in view here shows that the activity of the skeptic (i.e., his assertions) are caught up in a tacit belief or use of the law—even though he may deny as much. No direct proof is possible since it would be question-begging (and thus not a proof). But one can show that the skeptic's activity involves a commitment to a certain principle. If this is not accepted, then there is no point in discussing the matter further, since any rational person will accept the legitimacy of the law.

In this instance, Aristotle has attempted to show that some TP makes it the case that the initial premise *requires* a commitment to some disputed fact.<sup>[590]</sup> For example,

(7) Empedocles asserts  $x$ .

(8) If Empedocles asserts  $x$ , then Empedocles is committed to the law of non-contradiction.

(9) Hence, Empedocles is committed to the law of non-contradiction.

Coren's reconstruction above (1–6) is intended to show how Aristotle would argue for (8), which is the TP of his transcendental argument.

In Kant's case, the argument is slightly different. He does think proving his contention is possible (but notice that the disputed issue here is not an axiom of reason). He holds that (e.g.) one can know that there is an external world. George Dicker constructs his argument as follows:<sup>[591]</sup>

(10) I am conscious of my own existence in time; i.e., I am aware, and can be aware, that I have experiences that occur in a specific temporal order.

(11) I can be aware of having experiences that occur in a specific temporal order only if I perceive something permanent by reference to which I can determine their temporal order.

(12) No conscious state of my own can serve as this persisting frame of reference.

(13) Time itself cannot serve as this persisting frame of reference.

(14) If (11) and (12) and (13), then I can be aware of having experiences that occur in a specific temporal order only if I perceive

persisting objects in space outside me by reference to which I can determine the temporal order of my experiences.

(15) Therefore, I perceive persisting objects in space outside me by reference to which I can determine the temporal order of my experiences.

In this case, the initial premise is something with which both Kant and his interlocutor would agree. In other words, both Kant and the opponent would agree that they are conscious of temporal order. Kant then argues that the condition for this fact obtaining is the perception of external objects. So, the transcendental argument is simplified as:

(16) If I perceive temporal succession, then I perceive external objects.

(17) I perceive temporal succession.

(18) Hence, I perceive external objects.

So, again, we find a certain conditional—the undergraduate version being (16)—that establishes the condition upon which some agreed upon fact is possible. In both cases, (8) and (16), what is crucial for the success of the gambit is an independent argument for the veracity of the TP. Now, the entailment expressed in the TP is what presuppositionalist apologists call a presupposition.<sup>[592]</sup> The transcendental argument pulls the opponent from the initial agreement into some other entailment on pain of contradiction or nonsense.

What is striking in Van Til's use of the technique is that he applies it not to broad skepticism (say, about axioms, external objects, or causation) but to unbelief in the (existence of the) Christian God revealed in the Bible. It would be one thing to apply it to the conception of God (i.e., the omni-God of the philosophers) solely, but Van Til's ambition is greater than that. He wants to show that the entirety of the Christian religion is (virtually) presupposed in certain basic activities of every human person.<sup>[593]</sup> So, at first glance, the uniqueness of Van Til's approach is not structural. Instead, what is unique about his approach is the boldness of his TP.

The other departure from the historical accounts of the transcendental argument is that Van Til sees his project as a uniquely Christian apologetic and distinct from other arguments and apologetical methods utilized by Christians. In part, some of his reason for distinguishing his own account



has to do, I will suggest, not with the structural capacities of the arguments he employs but with the boldness of his TP and his refusal to admit neutral ground in the discussion.

### **Construals of Van Til's Argument**<sup>[594]</sup>

Part of the difficulty in assessing the similarity or reliance of this type of reasoning is that Van Til's writing is opaque. Furthermore, he often rests on assertions without explicating how they would be justified even in his own system.<sup>[595]</sup> Hence, even his closest students have substantially disagreed regarding what he hoped to accomplish with his apologetic method, what alternative arguments he would countenance, how his transcendental argument in particular worked, etc. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Van Til discusses what appears to be a generic method of apologetics rather than any distinct proof of the existence of God or the truth of Christian theism. In part, this is because he finds any direct proof to be either redundant or idolatrous. Notice that this is a different concern about direct proof than with Aristotle. Aristotle says that in principle no argument can be offered for the law of non-contradiction since any such argument would be question-begging. Van Til's concern is that the opponent is not on equal footing with the Christian. Hence, any putatively direct proof concedes that there is some shared intellectual space between atheist and Christian in which reason can function autonomously. Since his presuppositions tell him that this is not true, the method of direct proof is inappropriate. Hence, an indirect method is necessary, and a transcendental approach provides such an indirect method.

The TP for his method is repeated with some regularity in his writing. For example, he says:

The only "proof" of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of "proving" anything at all.<sup>[596]</sup>

Christians can bear witness of this God only if they humbly but boldly make the claim that only the presupposition of the existence of this God and of the universe in all its aspects as the revelation of this God is there any footing and verge for the interpretive efforts of man.

<sup>[597]</sup>



I propose to argue that unless God is back of everything, you cannot find meaning in anything. I cannot even argue for belief in Him, without already having taken Him for granted. And similarly I contend that you cannot argue against belief in Him unless you also first take Him for granted. Arguing about God's existence, I hold, is like arguing about air. You may affirm that air exists, and I that it does not. But as we debate the point, we are both breathing air all the time. Or to use another illustration, God is like the emplacement on which must stand the very guns that are supposed to shoot him out of existence. [\[598\]](#)

Regardless of the specific content at issue in an apologetic encounter, on Van Til's method, the non-Christian position borrows capital (unconsciously) from the Christian one. Hence, the non-Christian position is self-defeating and susceptible to transcendental argument. The upshot of this type of reasoning is that the intelligibility of the world (under whatever heading is being discussed) is always predicated on an (at least) tacit commitment to the truths of Christian theism. For Van Til, to deny that such is the case leads to absurdity or the inability to say anything meaningful at all.

Now, all Christian apologetics has as its goal to demonstrate that Christian theism is true and that opposing positions are false. In fact, any abductive argument for God's existence (such as the numerous versions employed by classic apologetics) intends to show that all the evidence is in favor of theism and that atheism has nothing to recommend it. If Van Til's approach is truly distinctive, the distinctiveness of Van Til's approach must be found in the nature of argument he employs (the putatively transcendental argument). It seems clear that Van Til believes that the transcendental argument is what makes his approach unique.

In this section, I offer several possible construals of a transcendental argument for God. The key is to show how his TP functions. This analysis will show that Van Til's apologetic is not as distinctive as he usually suggests for two reasons. First, Van Til's TP is so ambitious that deductively valid versions of his transcendental argument amount to question-begging, and hence fail as arguments. Now, Van Til says that he does not consider the argument to be deductive, but neither does he spell

out why this is the case (say, by offering a partial logic analysis or many-valued logic, etc.). Second, abductive construals of his argument require classical apologetic arguments to get off the ground. Hence, if his argument is really a disguised abductive argument, then his method is not distinctive nor is it a conclusive proof. These types of considerations, I believe, led John Frame to hold that Van Til's methodology is not as distinctive as he sometimes claims.<sup>[599]</sup>

Greg Bahnsen dissents from this view, however, insisting the transcendental approach does not reduce to some deductive or inductive argument.<sup>[600]</sup> After considering why the transcendental argument for God might be a disguised deductive or abductive argument, we will consider Bahnsen's defense of the distinctive character of the transcendental approach.

### **Deductive Arguments**

The transcendental argument may be a generic strategy for proof along the lines suggested above without reducing to any particular proof. Hence, we might understand the "proof" portion as a simple deductive proof. For example, suppose the atheist is committed to two basic propositions:

- (1) *Atheism*: There is no God.
- (2) *Intelligibility*: The world is (in some measure) intelligible to human persons.

But, on Van Til's view, the Christian should be committed to the following TP:<sup>[601]</sup>

- (3) *Predication*: If *Atheism*, then not *Intelligibility*.

These three propositions are sufficient to provide a deductive proof for:

- (4) *Theism*: God exists.

The method is straightforward.

- (5) *Atheism* and *Intelligibility*. (Atheist Commitments)
- (6) Hence, *Atheism*. (from 5)
- (7) If *Atheism*, then not *Intelligibility* (*Predication*)
- (8) Hence, not *Intelligibility*. (from 6 and 7)
- (9) But, *Intelligibility*. (from 5)
- (10) So, *Intelligibility* and not *Intelligibility*! (from 6, 7, and 9)
- (11) So, not *Atheism*. (from 6)

(12) In other words, *Theism*. (from 11)

The obvious weakness with such an argument is *Predication*. Notice that the contradiction (10) rests on (6), (7), and (9). Since the atheist is antecedently committed to *Atheism* and *Intelligibility* (5), he would not reject *Atheism*. He would reject *Predication*. After all, *Predication* is the theist's assumption. Hence, the atheist shows no inconsistency in his own thinking by holding (1) and (2) unless (3) is correct. But it is axiomatic that *if* the theist is correct, then the atheist is not. That is true on their commitments to *Atheism* and *Theism* alone. In other words, *Predication* does no real heavy lifting in the argument. It might do some heavy-lifting if there were an independent reason for the atheist to believe it. Notice, however, that any such reason would itself be a defeater for *Atheism*. Hence, the argument actually fails as a *transcendental* argument because its TP is superfluous. In consequence, it tacitly begs the question.

If the contradiction is going to rest on an assumption/assertion that the theist provides, then one could as well provide an argument like this:

(13) *Atheism* (Atheist Commitments)

(14) Not *Atheism* (Christian Assumption)

(15) So, *Atheism* and not *Atheism*! (from 13 and 14)

(16) So, not *Atheism* (from 13 and 15)

This argument plain-facedly begs the question. Hence, the argument from *Predication* does as well. What the presuppositionalist needs, then, is an independent argument for *Predication* (the TP in question). With that in hand, he can make a much cleaner argument against the atheist. For example,

(17) *Intelligibility*. (Shared Assumption)

(18) If *Atheism*, not *Intelligibility*. (*Predication*)

(19) So, not *Atheism*. (by *modus tollens*)<sup>[602]</sup>

So, this deductive argument really stands or falls by *Predication*.

Although one can assert *Predication ad infinitum*, Van Til offers no particular philosophical argument for it.<sup>[603]</sup> Hence, if the transcendental method is not to be question-begging, then one needs an independent argument for *Predication*. Of course, classical apologetics offers lots of philosophical arguments for *Predication*, most of which are *a posteriori* deductive arguments or abductive arguments. If it turns out that *Predication*

needs such an argument to serve as its justification, then Van Til's approach would be consistent with and in some measure dependent on classical apologetics.<sup>[604]</sup> In any case, it would not be a successful transcendental argument unless he could show exactly how the opponent was implicated in the TP. In fact, on the analysis above, it is questionable whether it is a transcendental *argument* at all.

But it is important to recognize that Van Til thinks (3) is true because Christianity is true. And, by his lights, he thinks Christianity is true not because he naturally finds that it makes more sense than atheism, has greater explanatory power, etc., but because of God's sovereign mercy. In other words, it is consequent to conversion that, for Van Til, the rationality of Christianity becomes clear. Because he believes that Christianity is true because of divine action and the atheist does not, no argument will convert the atheist to Van Til's point-of-view. We will revisit this theme in a later section because this underlying reasoning is the basic reason (I think) that Van Til's method differs both from other apologetic techniques and from the traditional transcendental arguments.

### **Abductive Arguments**

If Van Til's argument is not deductive, one might think that his method is really an exercise in abductive argument. An abductive argument is an argument to the best explanation.<sup>[605]</sup> Abductive arguments attempt to argue that  $x$  is the case (or, weaker, that one should believe or may justifiably believe  $x$ ) because  $x$  best explains  $y$ , where  $y$  is some mutually agreed upon observation or fact about the world and "best explains" means meets some set of desirable criteria, such as parsimony, internal coherence, and compatibility with other significant beliefs. A common abductive argument for God's existence is the argument from morality, a version of which might read like:<sup>[606]</sup>

- (20) There are objective moral values and obligations.
- (21) (20) is explained either by chance or by God.
- (22) It cannot be explained by chance.
- (23) Hence, it is explained by God.
- (24) Hence, God exists.

Another example might be something like:<sup>[607]</sup>

- (25) We find complex biological organisms in our world.
- (26) Such organisms are either due to chance, necessity, or design.
- (27) It is improbable that they are due to chance.
- (28) They cannot be due to necessity.
- (29) Hence, they are due to design.
- (30) Hence, there is a designer.

This is not the place to weigh the merits of these arguments. The point is that *if* we construe Van Til's transcendental arguments as merely deductive arguments from *Predication*, then they are no different than many of the arguments used by classical apologetics. Likewise, if the difference amounts to the fact that in Van Til's constructions only one disjunct in the abductive base happens to be proffered, this does not amount to a structural difference between his putatively distinctive methodology and any other apologetic method. In fact, again, this would raise the question whether the argument he provides is in fact a transcendental argument. The TP in a transcendental argument is not merely supposed to suggest the probability of some condition Y for X to obtain. It is supposed to say that, in principle, X requires Y. Hence, a transcendental argument should be immune to skepticism about the TP without which it fails (precisely because it is a putatively anti-skeptical argument). The criteria for a successful abductive argument is not nearly as strong, since the *possibility* of alternative explanations is not denied in an abductive argument. By contrast, the TP should elucidate the *only* condition on which the shared proposition should obtain.

### **Kantian Revision**

It might be, however, that Van Til has in mind a more unusual premise than *Predication*. Certainly, Bahnsen thinks so. Bahnsen holds that the logical structure of the deductive and abductive arguments is fundamentally different than the structure of Van Til's transcendental argument. He writes:

A deductive demonstration takes particular premises and draws a necessary conclusion from them; but if, in this rational argument, one of the relevant premises were to be negated, the conclusion would no longer follow or be established. Likewise, in an inductive or empirical argument, the premises include particular claims (or instances) of a

definite sort; from them the conclusion draws a generalization with probability. However, if a component or relevant premise (or sets of instances) were to be negated, the general conclusion would no longer be the same as before...To put it simply, in the case of “direct” arguments (whether rational or empirical), the negation of one of their premises changes the truth or reliability of their conclusion.<sup>[608]</sup>

By contrast,

a transcendental argument begins with *any* item of experience or belief whatsoever and proceeds, by critical analysis, to ask what conditions (or what other beliefs) would need to be true in order for that original experience or belief to make sense, be meaningful, or be intelligible to us. Now then, if we should go back and negate the statement of that original belief (or consider a contrary experience), the transcendental analysis (if originally cogent or sound) would nevertheless reach the very same conclusion.<sup>[609]</sup>

But what does this mean? It seems like a mistake to hold that there is really anything in Bahnsen’s objection that makes the transcendental arguments different in structure from a deductive or an abductive argument. Rather, the emphasis should be given to the goal of the project if a difference is sought.<sup>[610]</sup> In this case, we can follow Bahnsen’s instructions and still find deductive arguments. But this is key: the rejection of “deduction” from Van Til seems to be a rejection of methodology, i.e., a structural complaint about the nature of building an argument, rather than a rejection of any deductive elements intrinsic to the argument itself.

Suppose I start with an item of experience, say, that I am typing. What are the conditions that would have to be true in order for it to be meaningful that I was typing? There seem to be many. For example, I would have to have a computer, be near it, know a language, etc. These are not, of course, what Van Til has in mind. He wants to say that in order for my experience to make sense or the claim “I am typing” to be meaningful, Christian theism would have to be true in its entirety.<sup>[611]</sup> So,

- (31) If “I am typing” is meaningful, then Christian theism.
- (32) “I am typing” is meaningful.
- (33) So, Christian theism.

Left by itself this would merely be an (extremely odd) argument for the existence of God by deduction. But Bahnsen's insight is that Van Til wants to say that the argument will go through even if we negate the original belief. So suppose I start with the contrary experience, namely, that I am not typing. Then,

(34) If "I am not typing" is meaningful, then Christian theism.

(35) "I am not typing" is meaningful.

(36) So, Christian theism.

But that doesn't help, since we now have two "direct" arguments by deduction, which reinforce rather than repudiate the contention that the methodology is indistinct. We could take seriously the scare quotes that Van Til uses regarding this "proof," and revise *Predication* according to this new scheme.

(37) *Predication\**: Unless Christian theism, nothing makes sense.

This is not merely the claim that atheism is too impoverished to explain basic human experiences, nor is it the claim that Christianity *better* explains the world than other potential systems. It is the claim that Christian theism is the only system that makes it possible for anything to go at all. Now, we can use such a claim to manufacture deductive arguments. For example,

(38) Stuff makes sense.

(39) *Predication\**

(40) So, Christian theism.

But that is not the purpose of the claim. The purpose of the claim is to stake out something larger, namely, that there is no shared ground between the atheist and Christian in which there is a neutral set of resources.<sup>[612]</sup> So the Christian can argue that, given what the atheist says, the atheist position is incoherent. Likewise, the Christian can say that, given what the Christian believes, the world makes sense. But for Van Til, this exercise is ultimately futile because "the actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of 'proof' itself."<sup>[613]</sup>

It seems to me, then, that Van Til doesn't offer a transcendental argument (where "transcendental" means containing no deductive or abductive elements) since any argument would have to be construed as deductive or abductive. At least, any defenses of the TP would have to be construed as deductive or abductive. Instead, he wants to reject any



methodology that would grant a shared set of assumptions between atheist and Christian. In that sense, his methodology is a significant departure from Kant's—because Kant's goal is to show that shared, quotidian experiences have a structure that *we together* can see requires the truth of certain other facts. The approach of Van Til is more similar to Aristotle in that he only hopes to show that conceptual necessity of a certain commitment since it is (in his view) so foundational that everyone already holds to it in some measure.<sup>[614]</sup> If they deny as much, they show by their denial that they hold to it or that they are not worth addressing as a peer. Since Van Til takes (his reading of) Christian theism to be presupposed by all intellectual activity, accusation of question-begging or failure to engage in premised arguments would be (on his view) beside the point. In that sense, Van Til's argument seems to be more anticipated by the fundamental transcendental reasoning of Aristotle than even of Kant (whom Van Til cites as a pagan inspiration in that regard). His method, nevertheless, would fail as direct argument for the same reason as Aristotle's would have had he attempted to prove non-contradiction by direct means: namely, any direct Van Tillian argument would beg the question.

## Conclusion

According to Van Til, his usage of “transcendental” is different from Kant because Kant did not interpret reality solely in terms of eternal categories. Hence, Van Til thinks that his approach takes into account not some specific fact (say, contingent human experience or skepticism about non-contradiction) but the entirety of a person's thought-life. Certainly, that makes the view distinct from Kant because, obviously, the two men have wildly different projects. But that doesn't answer the question whether the technique employed—the transcendental argument itself—is the same in both thinkers (or in Aristotle, or Descartes, or Wittgenstein).

Van Til's technique seems *not* Kantian because those methods implicate the opponent in a shared sphere of activity that, crucially, the opponent acknowledges in thought (not merely by action). Furthermore, Kant's arguments establish no fact about things-in-themselves. In his transcendental arguments, the initial premise is shared territory (e.g., that we have unity of apperceptions). From that shared territory, the TP unfolds



the entailments that serve the anti-skeptical ends of the transcendental arguer. Hence, the TP is what needs justification. In Aristotle, by contrast, the thing to be proved is so fundamental that the interlocutor acknowledges the truth of it by his action. That is, unbeknownst to him, he makes use of the principle that he denies. This is much more akin to Van Til's treatment.

Now, in the historical cases that we examined, it seems obvious that the TP is true—it being in the nature of the consequent that it is entailed by the antecedent. But Van Til's TP is far too grandiose to reproduce the method employed by the earlier thinkers—even though it seems to be his intent to borrow Kant's general method without succumbing to his, by Van Til's lights, idolatrous short-comings.<sup>[615]</sup> In fact, his commitment to Christian theism is so significant that his argument ends up with more a family resemblance to Aristotle than to Kant. So, while transcendental arguments are not new, Van Til's seems to be—at least, his ambition for what it could accomplish is.

A transcendental project such as Van Til's seems to be a viable option for Christian apologetics, but he tries to do too much in one fell swoop. Even if it is the case that, without appeal to theism—or even Christian theism—an atheist is left with no justification for his beliefs on existence, goodness, or truth, arguing as much would merely show that there was nothing to recommend their viewpoint. That tactic is largely the purview of classical and evidentialist apologetics. In fact, to prove to an atheist that he cannot reason is obviously impossible. In other words, if *no* ground is common, then there ceases to be any sense in which Christians can engage in the apologetic task. Because Van Til so strongly enlarges his transcendental premise, he places everyone who disagrees into the category of the Pyrrhonic skeptic (even other Christians!). But that goes too far.

*XII:*  
**A Tale of Two Theories:  
Natural Law in Classical Theism  
and Presuppositionalism**

**Bernard James Mauser**

*“Folks are dumb where I come from they ain’t had any learnin’  
Still they’re happy as can be doin’ what comes naturally.”  
—Irving Berlin in *Annie Get Your Gun**

Natural law has long been respected in the Christian tradition.<sup>[616]</sup> This is partly due to Paul’s reference to it in the second chapter of Romans. Roman Catholics have developed many different theories of natural law and apply them to contemporary issues today. While Reformed theologians from the 1500s to the 1800s all held to natural law, Protestants are only now enjoying a modest revival of natural law theory. Still, not all Protestants adhere to it, and different arguments against it have been developed in circles that promote presuppositional apologetics.

This chapter will explore several areas related to the debate about the role of natural law in society and the church. The first section will unpack what is meant by natural law. The second explores some of the popular arguments levelled against this theory. The third unpacks and responds to some of the criticisms of natural law that presuppositionalist apologists have marshalled, as represented by John Frame. I hope that the explanation provided below may serve as a starting point for a renewed interest in using natural law to guide our culture and reach our neighbors.

### **WHAT IS NATURAL LAW?**

For natural law to be retrieved, we must understand what it is and how objections to it miss the mark. This section will broadly describe the elements of natural law theory. The view that is described here contains general insights about morality that men have made, some of whom had access to the Christian Scriptures and some of whom did not.

Though the terms “natural” and “law” can be used in many different ways in different contexts, when moral philosophers discuss natural law theory, they are describing a *moral* theory that has both teleological and ontological elements. The ontological aspect refers to the type of being man is. Because man has a certain nature, he ought to act accordingly. The teleological aspect of humanity recognizes several things. It notes the evident truth that all men act for an end or purpose. Some ends are more important than others, and these often compete. We can rank these ends hierarchically. The lower ends are important, but they often are mere means to the higher ends. Higher ends, in turn, are subservient to the highest end. This highest end has different names depending upon the theorist: happiness, beatitude, or human flourishing.

Natural Law theorists tend to argue that the essence of man influences how man should act. Essence and obligation ought to be inseparable. Theologically, the Judeo-Christian tradition has held that man is unique from other animals in being created in God’s image (what is known as the *imago dei*). Philosophers have noted that man is unique because he possesses reason, which other animals lack. Human actions are considered natural when they are done in accordance with reason or rationality. We use our reason to discover what the proper end of man is.

In sum, the basics of this natural moral law include a comprehensive view of the human and how to act. It provides an account of the nature of man, his proper end, and how he should act based on these. Tim Hsiao explains that natural law “holds that morality is about fulfilling our human nature. Good actions are those which promote or are consistent with proper human functioning, and bad actions are those which conflict with it.”<sup>[617]</sup> Thus, the “natural” in natural law refers to the rational, which is based on the teleology of a person’s nature. Our moral actions are for some end. The morality or immorality of an action is judged by whether it leads us to flourishing or away from flourishing.

## **VIRTUES AND THE NATURAL LAW**

The idea of virtue must be subsumed under a discussion of human nature. Virtues are habits or dispositions of excellence that one should develop.<sup>[618]</sup> The cardinal virtues traditionally include prudence,

temperance, fortitude (*i.e.*, courage), and justice.<sup>[619]</sup> Virtue theorists insist that every culture recognizes these virtues to be good. C. S. Lewis, for example, in his article “Men Without Chests,” states, “Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.”<sup>[620]</sup> Lewis goes on to quote numerous authorities from quite different cultures and societies to show that they all agree upon the importance of developing the virtues. Though each of these traditions differ on the details, “What is common to them all,” says Lewis, “is something we cannot neglect. It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”<sup>[621]</sup> Later, in the same volume, he provides a collection of moral claims from different cultures, showing that they all held to the moral objectivity of certain claims, including that it is wrong to murder or slander someone and right to preserve life as much as possible, to be kind, and to do good to each other.<sup>[622]</sup>

The cardinal virtues seem to be accepted, in one form or another, in every culture. They are universal. In other words, every human recognizes these to be qualities for which humans ought to strive. This observation is a devastating blow to the theory of moral relativism, which claims that there are no universal moral norms.

How do we know this to be true, even in societies where systematic injustice, intemperance, cowardice, and foolishness are present? The answer comes in a couple of ways. First, that these things are practiced does not indicate that they are recognized as good. You can see this in the way people react when they are treated unfairly. Everyone insists that others deal fairly with them even when they aren’t treating others fairly, indicating that, at some level, they think fair treatment is a moral imperative.<sup>[623]</sup> Secondly, to argue against the existence of universal moral norms is to affirm a self-stultifying position. That is, the claim “there are no universal or absolute moral standards” is a claim about morality which is both universal and absolute. That such a claim is self-stultifying implies that it is a false claim. If it is false to say that there are no absolute or universal moral standards,

then it is true, at least, to say that there are some absolute or moral standards.

How are the cardinal virtues recognized? One way to understand these is to recognize the human powers that are picked out with each of the virtues. Upon reflection one can discern that various elements of human action: we note the intellective powers, the appetitive powers,<sup>[624]</sup> locomotive powers, sensitive powers, and what some, such as Aquinas, have called vegetative powers.<sup>[625]</sup> The intellectual powers include reason, whose virtue is called prudence. The appetitive powers are of two kinds: intellectual and sensitive. The intellectual appetite includes human will, which is directed towards the good as such. The sensitive appetites can be divided into the irascible and the concupiscible appetites. We can discuss, then, three types of appetites: intellectual, irascible, and concupiscible. These appetites either lead us to or away from goods that are presented to us. When a person properly uses the intellectual power of reason in relation to determining his proper good (which has an impact both on theory and action), this is called prudence. A person whose will is rightly ordered to the good as such will develop the virtue known as justice. A person who finds within himself the power to face and overcome difficult goods is rightly using what has been called the irascible appetite. When we habitually exercise this power to persevere in the face of difficulty, it is called fortitude or courage. There is also the appetite for pleasure or for pleasant goods. This appetite has been called concupiscence. When this is properly ordered the corresponding virtue is called temperance. Within our circles of relationships, whether they be family, friends, or coworkers and fellow citizens, there are certain ways to act properly towards them. We have particular duties indicating how to properly treat them. The obligations that arise from each of these relational circles are often identified as rights. When we deal with others properly this is the realm of justice. Justice is giving to others what is properly due them. A just man treats others as he ought to. An unjust man does not. The virtuous man has developed the excellence of habit in acting properly as it relates to his appetites and his end.

As it relates to human nature, it has often been argued that there is a hierarchy within the appetites. The rational or intellective power, being the

highest, is followed by the intellectual appetite of the appetitive power, the will, then by the irascible appetite (which is directed towards the difficult good) and the concupiscible (or the pleasure seeking) appetite. Insofar as we have relationships with others, the habit of treating others properly forms in us a just disposition, or a virtue.

In this thumbnail sketch, one can find many aspects that remain unpacked. For example, what is all that is entailed in human nature? Entire tomes have been written on this subject alone, but we do not have the space here to adequately address the various subtleties involved. We must now turn to popular arguments against this theory with the aforementioned description of natural law in mind.

## **POPULAR ARGUMENTS AGAINST NATURAL LAW**

There are three popular arguments that have been levelled against natural law. Different philosophers have unpacked each argument and many of these claims have come to be widely believed. These are as follows: 1) no culture can entirely agree with others about the good, 2) David Hume has proven that a person cannot reason from what is the case to what ought to be the case, and 3) one engages in the fallacy of circular reasoning when appealing to discovering virtuous acts by looking at the virtuous man. I will consider each of these arguments in turn.

### **Can No Culture Agree on What is Good?**

The first claim is that no culture agrees entirely with others about the good. We are told, for example, that there are frequently divergences in the practices of various culture. This is a widely believed among advocates of moral relativism, who call it the diversity thesis. There are a couple of problems with this thesis. First, one can distinguish between universal guiding principles and the application of those principles. For example, one may claim that love for one's neighbor is a universal moral imperative. But this must be applied: how should one express that love? Should one shovel his neighbor's driveway after a heavy snow, bring a neighbor chicken soup when she's sick, give free food or meals to one's industrial workers during Ramadan, as some employers have done in Middle Eastern countries, or

leaving an unlocked fridge filled with food outside during Ramadan for those who are in need? When certain practices which are thought to be immoral in one culture are moral in another, this is often due merely to differing particular expressions of the same universal principle. Second, the conclusion is a non-sequitur. Suppose it were the case that people do not agree about right and wrong in their culture. It does not follow from disagreement on moral issues that morality is therefore relative. People disagree about the shape of the earth, but it does not mean that the earth has no shape. If the earth is spherical (and it is), then the Flat Earth Society is wrong. The same goes even if not every culture knows what is good. The ontological aspect (i.e., that which deals with the existence of) of morality still applies. This objection confuses epistemology and ontology or the question of knowing with the question of being. So, even in the worst case, if this claim were true, it still does not follow that universal moral principles, that apply everywhere and to all people, do not exist. All that one can conclude is that not everyone knows them. Third, the claim that there are no universal moral standards is simply not true. Here are some things that every culture recognizes, as anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn has noted,

Every culture has a concept of murder, distinguishing this from execution, killing in war, and other “justifiable homicides.” The notions of incest and other regulations for sexual behavior, the prohibitions upon untruth under defined circumstances, of restitution and reciprocity, of mutual obligations between parents and children—these and many other moral concepts are altogether universal.<sup>[626]</sup>

Combined with the anthropological observations of Kluckhohn, C.S. Lewis documents a list of universal principles gleaned from different cultures and religions at the end of *The Abolition of Man*.<sup>[627]</sup> As noted before, the cardinal virtues—such as one ought to pursue wisdom, exhibit courage and temperance in certain situations, and a longing for justice—occur among all peoples. This points to the evidence that there is a universal moral law.

### **Has David Hume Shown Natural Law is Untenable?**

What of Hume's argument that one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*? Essentially what this argument says is that one cannot get more in the conclusion than one has in the premises. Hume argues that we cannot arrive at moral standards based upon matters of fact, nor are they offspring of reason. In relation to reason, Hume argues thus,

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason, and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. [\[628\]](#)

In relation to matters of fact, Hume concludes his arguments with the following statement,

Nor does this reasoning only prove that morality consists not in any relations that are the objects of science; but, if examined, will prove with equal certainty that it consists not in any matter of fact which can be discovered by the understanding. [\[629\]](#)

In natural law, the argument runs, the theorist illicitly moves from what is the case to what ought to be done. But one cannot move from *is* to *ought*. Consider Hume's example:

Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. [\[630\]](#)

Hume goes on to note that in many of the treatises he has consulted on morality, the authors tend to move from matters of fact (God exists, or



something related to human affairs) to normative propositions including the terms “ought” or “ought not.” However, as he proposes to have shown in the preceding sections, this move is something that simply cannot be done. We cannot move from is to ought.<sup>[631]</sup>

Hume makes the claim that there is nothing immoral in the act of murder itself. A person who watches a murder feels disapproval. The reason for judging an action like murder to be bad does not extend beyond the emotion or sentiment in his heart. It is the feeling itself that is the basis for calling it bad, not the action. Hume reasons that one must reduce all moral judgments to this feeling, and not go beyond that to the action itself.<sup>[632]</sup>

The central problem with Hume’s argument is that it is question begging.<sup>[633]</sup> In one respect, Hume points out something that everyone would agree with: one cannot get more in the conclusion than he has in the premises. However, he has begged the question by assuming that there is nothing in human nature itself that prescribes certain actions and prohibits others. That is, he attempts to argue that one cannot reason from the fact that something is and arrive at a morally normative statement. However, this argument must assume that there is nothing in human nature itself that could be morally normative. It therefore assumes what it seeks to prove.

Humans, as even Hume grants to some extent, have a nature. But the nature of a being determines what constitutes good or bad actions for that being.<sup>[634]</sup> Let’s consider the nature of a knife as it relates to its goodness. How does a human judge whether a knife is good or bad? If a knife functions the way it ought to, cutting cleanly, it is good. If it does not, then it is bad. The formal cause (nature) of the knife allows us to recognize what it is supposed to do (final cause), and, therefore, make a judgment about whether it is adequately obtaining its final cause (whether it is good or bad). Similarly, when a man acts rationally in a way that leads him to flourish and attain his proper end, the action is good. This is why the classical natural law theorist says there is no gap between the *ought* and *is* in the case of moral evaluation of our actions. We ought to act rationally, as it is in our nature to do so. When we do not, the action is immoral.

*Is Natural Law Reasoning Circular in Appealing to Virtue?*

What of the objection that it is circular to reason from the virtuous man to

the existence of virtue? Michael S. Jones explains the circle that is involved here:

It argues that we can look to the virtuous person for an example of moral living and that through doing so we can determine what actions are moral. However, if we do not know what actions are moral, it may be impossible to determine who is a virtuous person. This is because a person who is performing immoral actions cannot be virtuous, but we cannot know if a person is thus disqualified from being virtuous unless we already know what actions are immoral. Hence we need to know what is moral in order to determine who is virtuous while at the same time we need to know who is virtuous in order to determine what is moral. [\[635\]](#)

Here we find the circle fully explained. Like the others, this objection misses the mark. When a person is struggling to discern the morally right action, he finds someone wise to advise him. This is reasonable and a wise course of action. If you find a person of great virtue, due to the observation of her wisdom, courageousness, temperance (or self-control), and treating others properly, it should come as no surprise that she acts virtuously even in difficult matters.

People can recognize what the virtuous action is in the majority of cases. It is the virtuous man who continually practices these and takes delight in doing what is good. He has developed the habit of doing so. The action of the virtuous man is not virtuous just because the virtuous man has done it. The man only became virtuous through the repeated habit of performing virtuous acts. There is no circle here. If an action is good, and one has developed the habit of performing this good act, we call this excellence of habit “virtue.” If an action is bad, and one has developed a bad habit of acting this way, we call this “vice.”

What happens when two virtuous people act differently in the same situation? We should keep in mind the insight of Aristotle, that one should not demand more precision than a given science allows. Ethics is not mathematics. Ethics does not possess mathematical precision. Perfect moral decisions often require knowledge of certain facts that we do not currently

know. In such cases, we are responsible to make the best decision with the knowledge we have. Two virtuous people may have different insights into the nature of reality, or, one or both of them may be mistaken. In either case, they are led to different decisions.

## **JOHN FRAME'S CRITICISMS OF THE SUFFICIENCY OF NATURAL LAW**

John Frame has succinctly made some arguments against the sufficiency of natural law to govern culture. I will leave it to another to decide whether the reason for this lines up with other tenets of presuppositional apologetics. One can find Frame's explanation on this topic in writing against both the sufficiency of natural law to govern society and in his arguments against the "Two Kingdoms" doctrine explicated by Michael Horton and David VanDrunen. Both men defend the usefulness of natural law in society to guide our actions. Both Scripture and the Reformers say natural law is important. This section will detail some of Frame's objections and answer some of his criticisms about the sufficiency of natural law to govern culture. Before doing so, it will be helpful to clarify what has been traditionally held as the difference between general and special revelation, as this distinction plays a large role in the debate.

While general revelation gives us truths about reality from creation independent of Scripture, special revelation gives us truths about reality given directly from the word of God. Even those who do not have the word of God can discover the truths of general revelation through the proper use of the faculty of reason. General revelation tends to be more difficult to discern due to this reasoning. It is also broader in many of the truths it reveals, like truths about mathematics, other religions, and world history. The truths about what other people believe or the French Revolution are matters of general revelation. Truths about one God revealing Himself as three persons or that salvation comes by grace through faith are only found in the Bible, which is special revelation.

John Frame offers many reasons as to why he thinks that natural law is insufficient as a to guide culture.<sup>[636]</sup> 1) Natural revelation was not sufficient before or after the fall of Adam. 2) Natural revelation is not sufficient for salvation. 3) Natural law is not sufficient for pleasing God in

any sphere. 4) The only remedy for the distortion of natural revelation is God's grace, which comes from Scripture. 5) We cannot understand natural revelation without distortion, unless we view it biblically. 6) God has never authorized any social institutions or activities to govern themselves without the use of His spoken and written words. 7) Natural revelation is not sufficient for our public dialogue with non-Christians. 8) Jesus Christ rules all spheres of human life, including politics. Due to this we should seek God's glory and witness to God's lordship. 9) The Gospel will transform the whole creation. I will take each of these in turn.

As to the first objection, Frame may be said to prove too much. He notes that Adam in the garden needed special revelation to guide him and that God did not leave him to general revelation alone. However, what this proves is that even special revelation was insufficient, in a certain sense, for guiding mankind in the garden. It is no different outside the garden, as the Israelites broke God's law even after receiving it from Mount Sinai. There is a broader point: Even when man has what he should do revealed as clearly as possible, it does not guarantee that he will do what is right. What this passage does not show is that natural revelation cannot also show mankind how he should act. The testimony of Scripture is that, even with special revelation from God, man may and will act wrongly.

To Frame's second argument, nobody claims that natural law alone is sufficient for salvation from our sins. There are certain actions that natural law prohibits. Those that obey these actions can be said to keep from harming their neighbor. Those who follow natural law do save their neighbors from being murdered, stolen from, and cheated among other things. Owing to natural law, they know they have a moral obligation to do so, even apart from Scripture. This, however, has nothing to do with salvation.

To point three, Frame seems to be suggesting that, for example, a government should rule following Scripture alone. At the very least, this would appear to imply that civil government is not distinct from the church. He inappropriately conflates the two. It would appear that he thinks that the functions of the two are one and the same. In other words, if natural law is useless for right rule in a nation, and, if only divinely revealed scriptures are useful for the right rule of a nation, then it follows that the only rightly ruling government is that government which is submitted to Holy Scripture.

This view is known as theonomy or reconstructionism. This theory has a number of problems. I will only highlight a few. First, as Norman Geisler points out, “It confuses the gospel mandate (Matt. 28:18–20) with the creation mandate” (Gen. 1:28).<sup>[637]</sup> The creation mandate is directed to all men over all of creation. The gospel mandate is directed towards believers to go and reach the world with Christ’s teachings. Second, the governments of the world only rule because God has allowed them to, as His servants, whether they recognize this or not (Rom. 13:1–6).

It is the role of government to prevent injustice by punishing those who break the moral laws. This is why government holds the sword. The primary purpose of the sword of government is to punish crime. J. Budziszewski explains,

Society is justly ordered when each person receives what is due to him. Crime disturbs this just order, for the criminal takes from people their lives, peace, liberties, and worldly goods in order to give himself undeserved benefits. Deserved punishment protects society morally by restoring this just order, making the wrongdoer pay a price equivalent to the harm he has done. This is retribution, not to be confused with revenge, which is guided by a different motive. In retribution the spur is the virtue of indignation, which answers injury with injury for a public good. In revenge the spur is the passion of resentment, which answers malice with malice for private satisfaction.<sup>[638]</sup>

The role of government is to help establish order within society, and to ensure that each person receives his due. To conclude our response to Frame’s third point, as a result of those who follow natural moral law, we are saved from much injustice. As believers, we can also use the natural moral law as a springboard to share the gospel for eternal salvation. Of course God is “pleased” that my non-Christian neighbors don’t steal from me or murder my family. Acting this way in our society, which is the sphere in which we live, is proper.

As for his claim that natural law is distorted, such a statement is clearly unbiblical. It is man who is distorted and not natural law. Natural law, as proceeding from God, cannot be distorted. Frame is simply wrong here and I suspect that he really wants to make a point about our knowledge of what is good as fallen creatures. This, however, is also off-base for a

couple reasons. First, just because a person is saved does not mean that he suddenly understands what is morally right better than someone who is not saved. Second, some non-Christians understand more clearly what is good, and act better than Christians accordingly.

To his sixth point, as was already mentioned, Romans 13 makes it clear that even those governments that God has not spoken to are only in power due to God's providence. His seventh point also seen to miss the mark when one considers the common ground we do have as fellow humans that can recognize the natural moral law. Frame emphasizes that many natural law arguments commit "a naturalistic fallacy, an attempt to reason from fact to obligation, from 'is' to 'ought.'"<sup>[639]</sup> To this latter point, remember what was said above against Hume: humans have a certain nature and should act accordingly. As rational creatures who are created in the image of God, we can discover our proper end and how to act in order to attain this end. Only when we do so do we find happiness, human flourishing, or beatitude. In this point, Frame has more in common with the great skeptic David Hume than the Reformers. One may also point out where Frame conflates the gospel and the law. The gospel is the good news of what Jesus did for us as sinners. The law is what none of us have perfectly followed.

What of his eighth point? Of course, the Christian should apply God's word to every area of his own life. He should also apply it to his children. When they are grown, the Christian parent no longer has the authority to force his child to follow all of God's word. If this "paternalism" is beyond the pale for parents with adult children, *a fortiori* the government should not force its citizens in what it sees as the proper application of God's word to their daily lives. Each individual Christian should seek God's glory and Lordship in every area of his or her life. In other words, the government cannot, and should not attempt to, bind the consciences of its citizens.

What of the last claim, that the gospel transforms all of creation? Again, Frame seems to conflate God's eschatological rule with human rule now. Even knowing that it is the case that God will transform all of creation, it does not follow that the truths we can glean from natural law cannot be sufficient to govern culture. This is simply a *non-sequitur*.

## **Remembering Natural Law**

The early church, the Reformers, and many of the founding fathers of the United States of America believed strongly in the natural moral law. In a way that will benefit us all, it can help us to make arguments about what is morally good independent of the Scriptures in alignment with the Scriptures. For example, there are many people who are now reengaging with the natural law tradition in an attempt to resolve moral problems that have come from advanced technology. Insofar as we can reintroduce this way of thinking into our society, we can start restoring justice to evil places and evil practices. Of course, we know that true peace and happiness will not come until the King of Kings returns. But, for now, we are called upon to stand for justice and use all the tools God has given us, including natural law, to point people to truth, goodness, and beauty. In the best and worst of times, among believers and skeptics, in the season of light and darkness, let us wisely believe in the light God has given us through natural law and follow Him with all our heart. [\[640\]](#)

*XIII:*  
**Van Til's Trinitarianism:  
A Reformed Critique<sup>[641]</sup>**

**Travis James Campbell**

For reasons of which we are not quite sure, Cornelius Van Til believed it was necessary to depart from the understanding of the Trinity traditionally expressed in the Reformed tradition. That is to say, Reformed Trinitarians, by and large, inherited the view of the Trinity held by theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, whose articulation of the doctrine upheld the divine simplicity, eternity, impassibility, as well as the real distinction between the divine persons *sans* any real distinction between the persons and the divine essence. For example, this understanding of the Trinity was upheld by two of Van Til's favorite theologians, Bavinck and Hodge.<sup>[642]</sup> Here we will exposit Van Til's trinitarian theology, noting along the way defenses of his doctrine given by his students. Our sad conclusion is that Van Til's Trinitarianism is a departure from both Reformed orthodoxy and sound reason at specific points. Indeed, left unchecked, Van Tillian Trinitarianism leaves the Christian bereft of a sound apologetic for the faith.

In his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til begins his discussion of the Trinity with the following insights:

The fact that God exists as concrete self-sufficient being appears clearly in the doctrine of the Trinity. Here the God who is numerically and not merely specifically one when compared with any other form of being, now appears to have within himself a distinction of specific and numerical existence. We speak of the essence of God in contrast to the three persons of the Godhead. We speak of God as a person; yet we speak also of three persons in the Godhead. As we say that each of the attributes of God is to be identified within the being of God, while yet we are justified in making a distinction between them, so we say that each of the persons of the Trinity is exhaustive of the divinity itself, while yet there is a genuine distinction between the persons. Unity and plurality are equally ultimate in the Godhead. The persons of the



Godhead are mutually exhaustive of one another, and therefore of the essence of the Godhead. God is one-conscious being, and yet he is also a tri-conscious being.<sup>[643]</sup>

At the beginning of this discussion, we should note three serious problems in his initial presentation. In drawing attention to these potential problems, we will set the course for this essay, determining whether and to what degree Van Til errs. First, Van Til says that, in speaking about the Trinity, we “speak of the essence of God in contrast to the three persons of the Godhead.” Left unguarded, this statement suggests that the divine essence and the three persons are distinguished from one another, which would in turn seem to violate the doctrine of divine simplicity. In order to preserve simplicity, classical Trinitarians have insisted that, while there is a real distinction between the persons and one another, there is no real distinction between the divine persons and the divine essence. Second, Van Til states that, just as the attributes are identical in the divine essence, though they are nevertheless distinguished, so also the persons exhaust the divine nature while also remaining genuinely distinct. This may suggest a confusion concerning the way the attributes and persons relate to the divine essence. Finally, we are told that the persons exhaust each other and the divine essence; hence, God is both one-consciousness and tri-consciousness. However, this may suggest that, as far as Van Til is concerned, we should affirm a formal contradiction in our conception of God. Also, his statement may indicate that the meaning of the word “person” *just is* the modern notion of “a center of self-awareness (or self-consciousness)” without *any* qualification of this definition. To be sure, this paragraph is merely his opening salvo, and so it is certainly possible that as he develops his doctrine he will smooth over these difficulties.

Unfortunately, our initial concerns deepen as we read Van Til’s exposition. For after offering a fair overview of the doctrine’s history, Van Til warns that we should always resist the temptation of falling into two extremes regarding the Trinity. First, there is the temptation to identify with those who “maintain that the Trinity can be shown to the non-Christian man to be a rational doctrine upon his own assumptions.” Second, we might end up identifying with those who “maintain that the Trinity is a mystery in the sense that it is irrational.”<sup>[644]</sup> Left unchecked, his point, as stated, gives us

a false dichotomy. Indeed, the Christian tradition in general, and the Reformed tradition in particular, is virtually unanimous on its insistence that the Trinity is not a deliverance of natural theology, and so will never subsume itself under the dictates of human reason. On the other hand, the Reformed tradition, following thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, also insists that God, who is truth itself, will never lie or contradict himself (Titus 1:2; 2 Tim 2:13). Hence, no true mystery can ever be irrational; and so, no mystery of the faith can formally break the laws of logic.<sup>[645]</sup> Thus, the orthodox notion of mystery must be deemed neither rational (as in, dictated by human reason) nor irrational (as in, formally contradictory) but rather *suprarational* (as in, above and beyond natural revelation or human discovery and comprehension). Hence, no one can ever discover how it is that the same numerical essence subsists in three persons. This we must accept by faith in divine special revelation.

Of course, Van Til seems to recognize all of this, at least in a sense. For at the beginning of his discussion, wherein he distinguishes the rational from the irrational approaches to the Trinity, he implies that many thinkers begin their reasoning about triunity “at the wrong end.” How so? By assuming they “can reason about the triune God without having first presupposed him.”<sup>[646]</sup> Indeed, such thinkers are reasoning “univocally instead of analogically.”<sup>[647]</sup> However, we are at a loss as to what thinkers Van Til has in mind when he says this. If he is speaking against Enlightenment rationalists who deny the Trinity, he has a point. But if he is speaking against classical apologists and theologians who have bequeathed to us an immensely profound notion of the divine processions, then we can only wonder what he wants to replace it with. His departure from Reformed orthodoxy at specific points sadly suggests that his target here is the classical theistic tradition and its apologetic for the Trinity.

Van Til clearly wants to employ a doctrine of analogy in order to show that God is above and beyond human modes of rationality. Of course, this can be variously construed. For example, God could be above reason in the sense that he never formally breaks the laws of logic, though he does at times reveal truths that cannot be proved or even grasped by such principles. In that case God would, again, be suprarational. This is the way of Augustine and Aquinas. Thomas, for example, tells us that “it is

necessary for man to receive from God as objects of belief even those truths that are above the human reason,”<sup>[648]</sup> and yet, since, “therefore, only the false is opposed to the true, as is clearly evident from an examination of their definitions, it is impossible that the truth of faith should be opposed to those principles that human reason knows naturally.”<sup>[649]</sup> Turretin concurs with Augustine and Aquinas, saying, in his own words, “*May the judgment of contradiction be allowed to human reason in matters of faith? We affirm.*”<sup>[650]</sup> In the previous question, Turretin had advocated a ministerial use of reason (i.e., one that is held captive to the Word of God [cf. 2 Cor 10:3–5]), since the human mind is naturally finite and darkened by immorality. In saying this, Turretin follows the Reformed tradition in noting, more strongly than Thomas,<sup>[651]</sup> the noetic effects of sin.<sup>[652]</sup> Thus, when he speaks of the judgment of contradiction being used in matters of faith, he is not saying that human reason is the foundation of faith. “This we deny,” he says.<sup>[653]</sup> For the reasoning of the unbeliever is darkened by sin, and “the mysteries of the faith are beyond the sphere of reason to which the unregenerate man cannot arise.”<sup>[654]</sup> Again, reason is a minister to faith, not its master.<sup>[655]</sup> Turretin is saying that first principles of nature are self-evident (known of themselves). This is the only way it can be, for we take these principles *to the Scriptures at the outset* of our study of them. But when it comes to the *application* of these first principles, we must submit ourselves to Scripture, holding all of our thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ. In Turretin’s own words:

Although light is not contrary to light, and natural and revealed truths are not at variance with each other, yet natural truth itself is often not what human reason dictates, which is often mistaken by an abuse of natural and revealed light. Therefore revealed truth can be opposed to ratiocination and human conceptions, although it may agree with natural truth which reason often does not see or apprehend. Thus here the first principles of nature (known of themselves) must be distinguished from the conclusions and conceptions of reason which are deduced from those principles. The former are true and sure, the latter obscure, often erroneous and fallible.<sup>[656]</sup>

Because first principles have not been lost in the fall, though their *use* has been corrupted by human sin, Turretin says they can be used to convert

unbelievers to the faith: “Although reason is not the principle of faith, it does not follow that atheists cannot be converted. The manner of dealing with them can be *either* theological (by arguments founded on Scripture) or philosophical, so that by the principles of reason the prejudices against the Christian religion drawn from corrupt reason may be removed.”<sup>[657]</sup> This is possible, not because humans are autonomous, but because the first principles of logic are laws established by God.<sup>[658]</sup> And here Bavinck would agree, saying that, while common analogies and arguments for the Trinity fail to actually *demonstrate* the doctrine, they can at least “show that what Scripture teaches us is neither impossible nor absurd and demonstrate that the belief of our opponents is ill-grounded and contrary to reason itself.”<sup>[659]</sup> Hodge agrees with Augustine, Aquinas, Turretin, and Bavinck, writing,

That reason has the prerogative of the *judicium contradictionis*, is plain, in the first place, from the very nature of the case. Faith includes an affirmation of the mind that a thing is true. But it is a contradiction to say that the mind can affirm that to be true which it sees cannot by possibility be true. This would be to affirm and deny, to believe and disbelieve, at the same time. From the very constitution of our nature, therefore, we are forbidden to believe the impossible. We are, consequently, not only authorized, but required to pronounce anathema an apostle or angel from heaven, who should call upon us to receive as a revelation from God anything absurd, or wicked, or inconsistent with the intellectual or moral nature with which He has endowed us. The subjection of the human intelligence to God is indeed absolute; but it is a subjection to infinite wisdom and goodness. As it is impossible that God should contradict himself, so it is impossible that He should, by an external revelation, declare that to be true which by the laws of our nature He has rendered it impossible we should believe.<sup>[660]</sup>

He then writes:

The ultimate ground of faith and knowledge is confidence in God. We can neither believe nor know anything unless we confide in those laws of belief which God has implanted in our nature. If we can be required to believe what contradicts those laws, then the foundations are broken up. All distinction between truth and falsehood, between

right and wrong, would disappear. All our ideas of God and virtue would be confounded, and we should become the victims of every adroit deceiver, or minister of Satan, who, by lying wonders, should call upon us to believe a lie. We are to try the spirits. But how can we try them without a standard? And what other standard can there be, except the laws of our nature and the authenticated<sup>[661]</sup> revelations of God.<sup>[662]</sup>

We insist that God neither “discovers” these laws for himself (since then he would be subservient to them), only to impose them on us (for then they would be arbitrary); nor does he create the laws of logic out of nothing (for, again, they would then be arbitrary). Indeed, the law of noncontradiction, for example, cannot be created, for then there would be no distinction between a “time” when the law obtained and a “time” when the law did not obtain. In other words, if there was once no law of noncontradiction, then there was no “before” it came into being in contradistinction to “after” it came into being. For such a distinction presupposes the very law that, *per our assumption*, does not exist eternally. And, if there is no distinction between these moments in time, then it would be just as legitimate to speak of the law as eternal as it would be to speak of the law as temporal. And yet, if it is now legitimate to say the law is eternal, then (*as per the principle itself*) the law cannot be temporal. What this proof illustrates, of course, is that the laws of logic are necessary truths and, hence, are just as eternal as God is. Now, these universal laws are either independent of God, like a Platonic form, or they eternally inhere in God’s nature. If the former, then God is not a transcendent being. Hence, it must be the latter. But if the latter, then they inhere within the nature of God distinctly or indistinctly. If the former, then there are real distinctions in God, and so he is not simple. So, as per the doctrine of simplicity, it must be the latter.<sup>[663]</sup> And, if the latter, God’s simple nature is intrinsically logical. To say that God cannot be illogical is to simply affirm the fundamental truth that God cannot lie or deny himself (cf. Heb 6:18; 2 Tim 2:13). For God himself is pure logic, and so when we think logically, we are, in a limited and analogical way, reflecting what God is like. Hence, no formal contradiction can ever be true of God.<sup>[664]</sup>

Unfortunately, when Van Til suggests that God is above reason, he does not seem to mean what the Augustinian-Reformed tradition has said this means. Indeed, it would appear that, for Van Til, formal contradictions can be true of God. This is strongly implied in his most famous (or, perhaps, infamous) assertion about the Trinity:

It is sometimes asserted that we can prove to men that we are not asserting anything that they ought to consider irrational, inasmuch as we say that God is one in essence and three in person. We therefore claim that we have not asserted unity and trinity of exactly the same thing.

Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person. We have noted how each attribute is co-extensive with the being of God. We are compelled to maintain this in order to avoid the notion of an uninterpreted being of some sort. In other words, we are bound to maintain the identity of the attributes of God with the being of God in order to avoid the specter of brute fact. In a similar manner we have noted how theologians insist that each of the persons of the Godhead is co-terminous with the being of the Godhead. But all this is not to say that the distinctions of the attributes are merely nominal. Nor is it to say that the distinctions of the persons are merely nominal. We need both the absolute coterminousness of each attribute and each person with the whole being of God, and the genuine significance of the distinctions of the attributes and the persons. "Each person," says Bavinck, "is equal to the whole essence of God and coterminous with both other persons and with all three" (Vol. II, p. 311)...Over and against all other beings, that is, over against created beings, we must therefore hold that God's being presents an absolute numerical identity. And even within the ontological Trinity we must maintain that God is numerically one. He is one person. When we say that we believe in a personal God, we do not merely mean that we believe in a God to whom the adjective "personality" may be attached. God is not an essence that has personality; He is absolute personality. Yet, within the being of the one person we are permitted and compelled by Scripture to make the

distinction between a specific or generic type of being, and three personal subsistences.<sup>[665]</sup>

The common claim of Trinitarians has long been that there is no formal contradiction in the Trinity precisely because God is one and three in different senses (i.e., one with respect to the divine essence, three with respect to the divine persons). Van Til says that “this is not the whole truth of the matter.” Of course, this is true in one sense: the heart of Trinitarian theology is that no doctrine of the Trinity could ever, in principle, exhaust this incomprehensible mystery. As countless theologians have said, no one can comprehend God, hidden as he is in ineffable light. Unfortunately, as we read through the rest of his paragraph, Van Til does not seem to mean what other theologians mean when he says there’s more to this issue. Indeed, far from moving *beyond* the common apologetic, Van Til actually moves *against* it. For him, God is not merely one essence; He is also one person. Does Van Til anywhere attempt to qualify this assertion? For example, does he say, “God is one person in one sense of the term, and three persons in another sense of the term and, unfortunately, I cannot explain the difference in senses”? No, he doesn’t. In fact, he makes several more assertions that require explaining. For example, he tells us that the divine attributes are coterminous with God’s being. By this he seems to mean that God is simple. He also says that the divine persons are coterminous with God’s being. And this would seem to follow, given the simplicity of the divine nature. He then says that the distinctions of the attributes and the persons are not merely nominal. So far so good, as Reformed-Thomists have insisted upon a merely virtual distinction between the attributes and a real distinction between the divine persons, even though there is no real distinction between either the attributes or the persons and the divine essence. And yet Van Til goes on to say that we “need...the genuine significance of the distinctions of the attributes and the persons.” We cannot be absolutely sure what Van Til means by this statement, but he seems to be saying that there are genuine or real distinctions between the divine attributes. If so, Van Til is telling us, without any qualification, that God is both simple and complex; he is one person and three persons.<sup>[666]</sup>

Lane Tipton has offered a seemingly plausible interpretation of Van Til which, if true, demonstrates the coherency of his Trinitarianism. Tipton



offers evidence suggesting that, when Van Til says that God is “one-consciousness and tri-consciousness,” or “one person,” he is appealing to the doctrine of *perichoresis*,<sup>[667]</sup> as it is expressed by Charles Hodge. For example, Hodge writes:

As the essence of the Godhead is common to the several persons, they have a common intelligence, will, and power. There are not in God three intelligences,<sup>[668]</sup> three wills, three efficiencies. The Three are one God, and therefore have one mind and will. This intimate union was expressed in the Greek Church by the word *περιχώρησις*, which the Latin words *inexistentia*, *inhabitatio*, and *intercommunio*, were used to explain.<sup>[669]</sup>

A little later Hodge goes on to express again this idea of *perichoresis*, along with his conviction that, ultimately, these truths about God are incomprehensible:

This fact—of the intimate union, communion, and inhabitation of the persons of the Trinity—is the reason why everywhere in Scripture, and instinctively by all Christians, God as God is addressed as a person, in perfect consistency with the Tripersonality of the Godhead. We can, and do pray to each of the Persons separately; and we pray to God as God; for the three persons are one God; one not only in substance, but in knowledge, will, and power. To expect that we, who cannot understand anything, not even ourselves, should understand these mysteries of the Godhead, is to the last degree unreasonable. But as in every other sphere we must believe what we cannot understand; so we may believe all that God has revealed in his Word concerning Himself, although we cannot understand the Almighty unto perfection.<sup>[670]</sup>

Hence, as Tipton rightly notes, Hodge affirms that God is one consciousness.<sup>[671]</sup> In his own words, “A common knowledge implies a common consciousness.”<sup>[672]</sup> And so, according to Tipton, the movement of Hodge’s “view is as follows: one will, one mind, and one consciousness.” Hence, “Hodge extends the perfectly acceptable observation that God has ‘one will and mind’ to the insight that God has ‘one consciousness.’ From this, Hodge makes the natural inference that it is appropriate to address God in this sense as ‘a person.’”<sup>[673]</sup> Thus, in summarizing Hodge’s thought,



Tipton says that “God is not only one in his essence, but he is one person in a manner consistent with his tripersonality.”<sup>[674]</sup> And yet this is not what Hodge actually says. Hodge says that, *in Scripture and by Christians*, “God as God is addressed as a person, in perfect consistency with the Tripersonality of the Godhead.” He does not say that God *is* one person, but merely that in holy writ he is *addressed as* a person. Presumably, what Hodge means here is that God is often addressed in the Bible *as if* he is one person. This is, to be sure, a subtle point, and yet it needs to be stressed that nowhere in either Scripture or Hodge’s tome is God actually called “one person.” To call God “one person” is to contradict the tri-personality of God; to address God analogously *as if* he is a person is neither objectionable nor inconsistent with the divine triunity.

It should also be stressed that, while Hodge does affirm the unity of the divine consciousness, he nowhere says that God is “one-consciousness and tri-consciousness.” In fact, he implicitly denies this strange manner of speaking in the quotations given above. Indeed, such a formulation—at least, when it is proffered with no qualification whatsoever—is contradictory; and while Hodge clearly embraces the *mystery* of the Trinity, he refuses to affirm *formal contradictions* in his notion of God (as we have seen).

More importantly, one will notice that Van Til seems to define personhood in the modern sense as “a center of self-awareness.” For what else could Van Til mean when he says God is “tri-consciousness” if not that God is, among other things, three persons precisely in the sense that he is three centers of self-awareness? However, according to classical Trinitarianism, it is not proper to speak this way while explicating the *ontological* Trinity,<sup>[675]</sup> though it *may* be appropriate to speak this way, at least via remote analogy, while explicating the *economic* Trinity.<sup>[676]</sup> Unfortunately, Van Til nowhere makes these qualifications. Thus, it would seem that, in discussing the ontological Trinity, Van Til opts for the modern notion of person as a “center of self-awareness.” At least, this is the view accepted by one of Van Til’s most respected interpreters: “The term ‘person’ has a rather different meaning in its modern use from any meaning attached to it (Greek: hypostasis) at the time of the Nicene creedal formulation. Van Til’s use is more like the modern than like the

ancient.”<sup>[677]</sup> Unfortunately, in making this move, Van Til veers in the direction of Tritheism.

According to Tipton, Hodge’s doctrine of perichoresis helps us avoid the heresy of tritheism.<sup>[678]</sup> He states that “Van Til is perfectly within the confines of Princeton’s catholic Trinitarian orthodoxy when he affirms that the person/essence formula, when formulated in a manner that neglects perichoresis, ‘is not the whole truth of the matter,’ since ‘God...the whole Godhead, is one person.’” While perichoresis may be of some aid to the interpreter who wants to introduce coherence into Van Til’s system, Van Til himself never appeals to this doctrine while articulating his own view of the Trinity. To be sure, he does quote Hodge’s statement concerning the perichoresis in his discussion of the Nicene Creed.<sup>[679]</sup> But after that one mention, the notion is never fully utilized to explain Van Til’s view that God is one person.

How does Van Til justify his seemingly incoherent doctrine of the Trinity? Not via perichoresis, but by an appeal to the antithesis between the reasoning of the would-be autonomous man and the Christian who has submitted his thinking to divine revelation. Thus, if “we are Christians, all our interpretation is in terms of this God of whom we speak. It is he who has first revealed himself in his creation before we could know anything of him.”<sup>[680]</sup> The unbeliever, on the other hand, will balk at the notion of a tri-personal God. “To say that God is one person and at the same time to say that he exists as three persons, he will say, is not merely to contradict yourself verbally, but is to say that all predication is analytic.”<sup>[681]</sup> In other words, the non-Christian will use his logic to analyze the doctrine of the Trinity, which says that God is one person and three persons, and show that it is contradictory. The Christian will admit this is so and bow the knee to the God who is above and beyond human reason. How shall we resolve the dispute between the Christian and non-Christian, then? Van Til’s answer is that there “is no possible way of softening this dilemma. Nor should we wish to tone it down.” Indeed, if “we say that we can explain the doctrine of the Trinity to the satisfaction of the natural man by reducing the objectionable irrational element to his own non-objectionable irrational, we are in fact setting up an irrational that is objectionable from the Christian point-of-view,” since “Christians and non-Christians cannot pool or trade

their mysteries as long as they are true to their positions.”<sup>[682]</sup> For Van Til, the worldview of the Christian and the worldview of the non-Christian are incommensurable, completely antithetical to one another. There is no common ground between them. Hence, all either party can do is step inside the other’s circle of assumptions, at least for argument’s sake, and discover which set of presuppositions is actually destructive of human rationality—or, in other words, “whose super-rationality is really objectionable.”<sup>[683]</sup>

We therefore think that Oliphint has rightly captured the tone of a truly Van Tillian Trinitarianism in his own apologetical works. According to Oliphint, “Logic, like all else save God himself, is *created*.”<sup>[684]</sup> Because of this assumption, Oliphint argues that logic can never legislate reality, for only God can do that. Van Til makes Oliphint’s point in the following way: “The law of contradiction, therefore, as we know it, is but the expression on a created level of the internal coherence of God’s nature. Christians should therefore never appeal to the law of contradiction as something that, as such, determines what can and cannot be true.”<sup>[685]</sup> The unbeliever uses the laws of logic to demonstrate that the idea of a Triune God is illogical. And, according to Oliphint, he is right about that. In Oliphint’s own words, “The Holy Spirit is no more or less God than is the Father. All that the Father is, the Spirit is also. The two are two and one at the same time *and in the same way*.”<sup>[686]</sup> The would-be autonomous unbeliever rejects this because it is a contradiction. The believer embraces this contradictory truth, knowing that it comes from the very Being who created his fallible logic in the first place.

The problem with Van Til and Oliphint’s approach, of course, is that it is absurd, as well as inconsistent with Christianity in general and the Reformed tradition in particular. The laws of logic simply cannot be created, as we have seen. Augustine, Aquinas, Turretin, Bavinck, Hodge and others all gloried in the mystery of the Trinity, but not at the expense of reason. Indeed, when Van Til construes the issue in terms of antithesis, wherein the believer and unbeliever are simply looking at a fact from two different vantage points—i.e., the logic of revelation vis-à-vis the logic of autonomous reason—he is actually postulating two different orders of logic—i.e., the logic of God vis-à-vis the logic of man (or the natural world). The same goes for Oliphint. When he says that God created logic, and so that which is formally illogical can be true, at least from a certain vantage

point (i.e., God's perspective), he is actually creating an antithesis between the realm of the divine (which no one can reach via created logic) and the realm of nature. This is not traditional Christianity, but Kantian agnosticism, wherein the noumenal realm is separated from the phenomenal world by an unsurpassable gulf.

The implicit Kantianism of Van Tillian thought is ironic, to be sure, since Van Til and his students have always explicitly shunned Immanuel Kant's thinking.<sup>[687]</sup> And yet we need to remember that, in many respects, Kant's critical philosophy, which includes his transcendental method, sets up the program for the Van Tillian apologetic.<sup>[688]</sup> The only question is, does Van Til ever really remove the gulf separating the phenomenal from the noumenal world, or does he presuppose it? The following quotation has been used by Van Tillians to suggest that he removes it: "If there is to be true coherence in our knowledge there must be correspondence between our ideas of facts and God's ideas of these facts. Or rather we should say that our ideas must correspond to God's ideas."<sup>[689]</sup> In direct response to this statement of Van Til's, Bahnsen says, "This is far from being an avenue to theological skepticism or irrationality, as unsympathetic critics insist."<sup>[690]</sup> However, what does Van Til mean by this? Must our ideas correspond to God's *only as revealed*, or *also as God is in and of Himself*? If the latter, then a knowledge of who and what God is (like) has been preserved; if the former, then we have no way of knowing whether what God reveals *really* corresponds to who and what God is. And it would seem that Van Til unfortunately never got around to settling the issue in his own mind. As Frame informs us, "So Van Til's doctrine of anthropomorphism does not settle the question of whether human language can speak literally of God. I asked him once about that, and his reply was that he had never thought much about it and had not formulated a position on the matter."<sup>[691]</sup> This is unfortunate, since so much of what Van Til says has a strong Kantian flavor to it. For example, when Frame defends Van Tillian Trinitarianism, he points out that "Van Til never says that the doctrine of the Trinity is contradictory. His view of contradiction here is consistent with what he teaches elsewhere: 'While we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory we embrace with passion the idea of the *apparently* contradictory.'<sup>[692]</sup> In other words, down here, in the phenomenal world,

the Trinity looks contradictory, and we should embrace this with passion, knowing that actually, in the noumenal realm, God is perfectly coherent.

We therefore think that Oliphint has taken Van Til to his logical conclusion, wherein he explicitly affirms the Kantian gulf, and then offers a Christian solution to it:

There is a great chasm fixed between God and his creation, and the result of such a chasm is that we, all of humanity, could *never* have *any* fruition of God, unless he saw fit, voluntarily (graciously), to condescend to us by way of covenant. That condescension includes God revealing himself in and through his creation, including his word, to man. We begin, therefore, with respect to who we are and to what we can know, with a fundamental distinction between the Creator and the creature.<sup>[693]</sup>

The Van Tillians believe that God alone can cross over the gulf and provide us with a revelation whereby humans can come to know the Triune mystery. Unfortunately, this Kantian schema ultimately appears to kill any purported revelation from God; for the words of the Bible were produced by humans using human logic on this side of the gulf in the phenomenal world. Scripture is, among other things, the product of a long historical process, written in human language and utilizing creaturely categories. And, since the Van Tillians insist that we cannot use such categories to get to God, we can never know that the propositions of holy writ are genuine descriptions of the Great Being. At best, they are the way God might want us to think of him, but not actual truths describing his very person and nature.<sup>[694]</sup> If Van Tillian theology is true, then it is false, for on its own assumptions there can never be any verifiable *logos* regarding the *theos*.<sup>[695]</sup>

Since Van Tillian philosophy wreaks havoc of theology, whether in its theology proper or its view of revelation, it is not difficult to see how it also destroys any hope of a viable apologetic for the faith. For the better part of two thousand years Christians have answered the call to give a reasoned defense of our beliefs (2 Pet 3.15). One religion that often challenges the essential doctrine of the Trinity is Islam, dedicated as it is to a strict, unitarian, monotheism.

In one of his apologetical works, Oliphint offers us a series of hypothetical dialogues to illustrate how the Van Tillian approach to

apologetics is able to highlight the antithesis between believer and unbeliever, and then demonstrate how the unbelieving position is problematic. One example of a dialogue he offers is a hypothetical discussion between a Christian and a Muslim. The following is a partial quotation of this conversation. We begin in that part of the dialogue where the Christian (or covenantal) apologist is teeing up an argument that exploits a fundamental contradiction in Islam. I have taken the liberty to add to this dialogue in order to show just how easy it will always be for a Muslim to escape the dialectical net the Van Tillian is trying to trap him in. Oliphint's own presentation is in regular print, and my own additions are in italics:<sup>[696]</sup>

[Covenantal Apologist]: How, then, Ishiāq, do you *know* that the Qur'an is his [Allah's] will?

[Ishiāq Muhammad]: We know because the Qur'an as I have said, is Allah's eternal speech, which always was, but which has come to be through the Great Prophet, Muhammad.

CA: But if I have heard you correctly, Allah's will does not in any way *constrain* him. Allah does now, and will always do, whatever he wants to do. And what he wants to do later could be the opposite of what he has revealed through Muhammad. This is why you can have no guarantees with respect to Allah's will, which is the sum and substance of Islamic religion. Is that correct?

IM: Yes, theoretically, that is correct. He cannot be constrained because he transcends all. But Muslims have hope that Allah will delight in our deeds and so bring us to heaven.

CA: I understand. But that hope is only an empty hope. And, like your understanding of mystery, it has no basis in *knowledge*. It is, as we like to say, a blind faith. Since the Qur'an is a revelation of Allah's will, and what Allah may do is in no way constrained by the Qur'an, what he wills to do in the end may be the opposite of his will revealed in the Qur'an. Correct?

IM: Yes. Allah be praised. That is correct.

CA: Well, Ishiāq, if that is true, then it just may be that what I believe and what you believe are the same thing, though you could never know that.



*IM: Well, maybe. But the same thing can be said of your theology. What I believe and what you believe could all be the same, from your own point-of-view, although, of course, you could never know that!*

*CA: What do you mean?*

*IM: Tell me, is God one and three at the same time and in the same sense?*

*CA: Yes.*

*IM: You would agree, then, wouldn't you, that your Trinity is formally contradictory?*

*CA: Only when looked at from the human vantage point. However, because God himself created the laws of logic, he is in no way constrained by them. Therefore, from the divine point of view, there is no real contradiction in his triune nature. It only looks that way from a creaturely perspective that rejects divine truth.*

*IM: This would mean, would it not, that there may be many things in your Bible that are apparently contradictory—even formally so—that are not contradictory in the divine realm.*

*CA: Yes, of course!*

*IM: Well, then, if your ultimate principle, the Trinity, is formally contradictory, at least from your perspective, how do you know that it is true?*

*CA: Because, apart from the presupposition that the Triune God exists, all predication is meaningless.<sup>[697]</sup>*

*IM: How so?*

*CA: Well, imagine if you will that atheism is true, and everything is therefore a product of space, time, and chance.*

*IM: Ok.*

*CA: In that case, my mind would be a product of space, time, and chance—in which case it would be unreasonable to trust it, even long enough to know that it is a product of space, time, and chance.*

*IM: Ok, I'm with you so far.*

*CA: On the other hand, if you step into my circle, and presuppose the Triune God who lives, one now has a foundation for trusting in the deliverances of reason.*

*IM: I'm with you, as long as we change our presupposition from "Triune God" to "the one and true living God." For I, too, believe in the Creator God, just as you do; and I agree that atheism is utterly absurd, precisely for the reason you just laid down.*

*CA: No, it cannot be a generic theism that is the precondition for intelligibility; it must be the Triune God.*

*IM: I am not advocating a generic theism, but the living God of the Abrahamic traditions—one who is living, is our Creator and Sustainer, and is even the locus of our moral values.*

*CA: But the true God must also be Triune!*

*IM: Why?*

*CA: Because he alone gives us the preconditions for intelligibility.*

*IM: How so?*

*CA: Because the Trinity alone answers the problem of the one and the many. [\[698\]](#)*

*IM: How so?*

*CA: Well, philosophers have long been perplexed by the unity and diversity we experience in our world. For example, you and I are both the same—we have unity—and yet we are also two—there is diversity. Some philosophers, like Parmenides or Plotinus, embraced unity at the expense of diversity; while others, like Heraclitus or Democritus, embraced diversity at the expense of unity. The Trinity solves this, for just as our world manifests a unity and diversity, the Christian's ultimate principle, the Triune God who lives, is both a unity and a diversity from all eternity. [\[699\]](#)*

*IM: Ok, but all you're saying is that there is a temporal unity and diversity that is grounded in a higher, eternal, unity and diversity. So, just as Aristotle raised the ire of the "Third Man" against Plato, why can't I simply ask how you now explain the unity and diversity in the Trinity?*

*CA: Because the unity and diversity of the Trinity is equally ultimate.*

*IM: Why can't someone just assert, similar to what you just did, that the unity and diversity of our world is equally ultimate?*



CA: Because then there would be no explanation of the one and the many.

IM: If I need an explanation for the one and the many “down here” in the temporal world, why don’t I need one for the unity and diversity “up there” in the eternal world?

CA: Because that unity and diversity, the Trinity, is ultimate and necessary. And whatever is necessary is in no need of an explanation. It just is.

IM: Ok, then the one and the many I experience in this world is ultimate and necessary, and therefore in no need of an explanation.

CA: But that would entail pantheism.

IM: Yes, so?

CA: Well, you’re not a pantheist, are you?

IM: Of course not! I am a Muslim. But my point is that your argument for the Trinity is unable to defeat pantheism.

CA: But pantheism itself is full of problems.

IM: Such as?

CA: It is a contradiction to say that the changing and finite world we live in is necessary.

IM: True, but you yourself admit that your Trinity is formally contradictory. If you’re willing to embrace a formal contradiction in your system, you can’t critique another person for doing the same regarding his system. Sauce for the goose, my friend.

CA: But I am not, in the sense you’re suggesting, admitting a formal contradiction in my system. I have mystery, and my mystery is ultimately rational, even while transcending my ability to understand. The mysteries brought about via pantheism are ultimately irrational. You might say that, while I embrace a sort of proximate irrationality into my system, I at the same time embrace by faith ultimate rationality which is my Triune God. The irrationality of the pantheist is both proximate and ultimate.

IM: Yes but you don’t really know that. You don’t know that your Trinity is ultimately rational, for the doctrine formally breaks the laws of logic. Yours is just a sheer statement of faith, wherein you believe that, when all is said and done, the transcendent Trinity reconciles all formal contradictions appearing here on our plane of existence. A

*pantheist could say something similar. For example, he could say that, in this illusory world the One appears contradictory, however, when I, an emanation of God, am absorbed back into the One, all will be reconciled. Thus, my ultimate mystery is, at the end of the day, rational as well.*

*CA: But how can an impersonal principle, the pantheistic One, be rational?*

*IM: The laws of logic appear to us as impersonal, and they are eminently rational.*

*CA: But the Trinity transcends creation; while nature, on pantheism, has no truly transcendent principle.*

*IM: So?*

*CA: But we need transcendence to explain the temporal world we live in.*

*IM: So you say. But you have offered nothing to convince the pantheist of that. And, I submit, any argument you can offer the pantheist to move him from his position is one that I, being perfectly consistent with Islam, will be able to use as well.<sup>[700]</sup> Besides, if an ultimate principle must be both a unity and a diversity in order to explain the one and the many, why limit yourself to three persons? There are, after all, billions of objects existing in our one cosmos. Perhaps the ultimate principle reflects the one and the many in precisely that way—i.e., maybe it's one being in a trillion persons.*

*CA: But God has revealed himself as a Trinity, not a Quaternity or anything more. There are only three persons in the Godhead—not four, or five, or a trillion!*

*IM: How do you know that?*

*CA: Because God says so in his word, which I must presuppose to make sense of anything.*

*IM: But you don't know the Bible is the word of God, since (i) no transcendental argument ever proved such a thing and (ii) your God is formally contradictory. But let all of that pass, and let me ask you one more question: Is your God constrained by the laws of logic?*

*CA: Of course not, since he created them and is therefore sovereign over them.*

*IM: This would mean, would it not, that contradictions “down here” in the temporal realm may not be contradictions “up there” in the realm of God?*

*CA: Of course! I have already admitted this with respect to the Trinity.*

*IM: And so, just because our beliefs, Islam vis-à-vis Christianity, are contradictory “down here,” they may amount to the exact same set of beliefs “up there,” even though this side of heaven we’ll never know that!*

*CA: Yes, but ....*

*IM: Let me remind you of the quandary you’re in. For if you insist that God revealed himself this way, and that’s how you know you’re right and I’m wrong, then you’re not really offering me a transcendental circle of assumptions that procure for you a rational foundation for reasoning and/or predication. You’re just arguing in a vicious circle. On the other hand, if you give me a proof, or a reason, or at least a rationale for why God must be three and only three persons and/or why our beliefs are not really the same, then you’re implying that the laws of logic we utilize here in the temporal realm can be used to understand the eternal God. And, once you grant me that, I now have the right to use the laws of logic to evaluate the Trinity—to wit, if it is formally contradictory, as you admit, then it is false. In fact, a formally contradictory idea cannot serve as a transcendental foundation for anything. For the law of noncontradiction is a transcendental also, since I cannot deny it without using it. It is a necessary precondition for all human predication. Now, I can easily see why the law of noncontradiction is a transcendently necessary principle; but I can’t see how the Trinity is. And, if what is not yet established as transcendently necessary breaks a law that has been established as transcendently necessary, then I can know for sure that the idea that breaks such a law cannot be a precondition for intelligibility. Nothing can be transcendently necessary if it contradicts what is transcendently necessary! Therefore, there is no viable transcendental argument for the Trinity. In fact, such an argument is, in principle, impossible, since you admit a formal contradiction in the idea. And it makes no sense to say that*

*the Triune God who lives is the precondition for logic when this very notion breaks the laws of logic! You may just as well say that a square-circle is a precondition for logical thinking!*

*I want to thank you, my covenantal apologist friend, for you have made short work of my arguments against your system. Your classical apologetic colleagues are extremely stubborn, insisting that there is no formal contradiction in the notion of a Trinity, and so I find myself engaging in lengthy arguments against them all the time. But you have done me a great favor. For since you admit that your God is a logical contradiction, I know that he can't exist. To be sure, you may find a problem or two in the contents of the Qur'an, the revelation of Allah. Maybe they are problems I can never resolve. But I would rather deal with problems in the revelation I receive than in the God I worship. I trust in Allah, and while I am faced with intellectual problems in my conception of him, at least I am not facing a bona fide contradiction as I contemplate the divine himself. At the very least, I can say that my God could very well exist, which is not something I can say about yours. So, thank you for spending the time you have with me. You have given me every reason to think your religion is false. I would like to encourage you to come to my Mosque this coming Friday. There you will encounter a God of reason who is the only monotheistic conception of God that could possibly give us the preconditions of intelligible experience.*

## **Conclusion**

While we have not stressed this point in our essay, we most note gratefully in our conclusion that Van Til and his school have been an immense and helpful influence to apologists seeking a strong internal critique of non-Christian systems of thought. Unfortunately, as we have shown, when we apply Van Til's own principles consistently we can no longer uphold the Van Tillian apologetic, for the Van Tillian school has significantly departed from the Reformed tradition regarding the Trinity. In doing so, it has opened itself not only to the charge of incoherency and even heresy, but it also bereaves the Christian apologist of a good reason for the hope within. [\[701\]](#)

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[1] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 125.

[2] John M. Frame, “Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 282.

[3] The argument goes back at least as far as Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* (72b33–73a5). See Christopher Shields’ *Aristotle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 133, for a presentation and discussion of Aristotle’s argument against conceptions of demonstrative reasoning as circular.

[4] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 317.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, any further mention of “first principles” refers to first principles of discovery.

[6] These two features are necessary but not sufficient to make a proposition a first principle, according to Aquinas. The further feature required is motivated by the difficult problem of how we come to know first principles. See Scott MacDonald “Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), 169–70. My thanks to David Haines for pointing this out. We need not discuss this problem here, however, since the description of first principles above is sufficient for my argument.

[7] This does not imply that first principles are infallible. As the next few paragraphs will show, a source of knowledge can be without a foundation and fallible.

[8] Gordon Clark, Trinity Lectures, “How Does Man Know God?”, 27:22.

[9] See Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) for a standard defense of this claim.

[10] Frame, “A Presuppositionalist’s Response,” 81.

[11] John Frame notes in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), 130–31, that “Circularity in a system is properly justified *only* at one point: in an argument for the *ultimate* criterion of the system ... Allowing circularity at one point in a system, therefore, does not commit us to allowing circularity at all points.” This point is puzzling, however, since, as we will see, Frame develops the notion of a “broadly circular” argument that infers (e.g.) the existence of God from (e.g.) causation understood on a theistic basis. But then, if we can infer a view of causation from God’s existence, and God’s existence from our view of causation, circularity is not only a feature of “arguments for the *ultimate* criterion of the system.” So, it is not clear, however, how one can stop circularity from justifiably entering other “points” in a system once it has been let into the system at all. Further, the notion that circularity can provide rational justification is opposed to the idea of a foundation or “ultimate criterion,” which is motivated by the fact that circular demonstration is impossible.

[12] Frame, “Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic,” 288.



[13] Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1998), 482–483.

[14] Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130.

[15] Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Den Dulk Foundation, 1969), 12. Quoted in R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 321.

[16] K. Scott Oliphint, “Covenant Model,” in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Brian Davis (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 77.

[17] Gary Habermas, “An Evidentialist’s Response,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 245.

[18] John Frame, “A Presuppositional Apologist’s Closing Remarks,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 357.

[19] See also Frame’s, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130–133, for discussion of the distinction between broad and narrow circular arguments.

[20] Again, for discussion of this argument, see Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, II.19, and Aquinas’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, I.8.

[21] Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 131–32.

[22] Michael Kruger says, “It is a caricature to argue that a self-attesting canon means that even the smallest portions of Scripture, down to even a single word, can be immediately identified by Christians as divine. Such a caricature is built on the presumption that the Spirit simply tells Christians which words are from God and which are not. But the Spirit, as noted above, does not deliver private revelations to Christians as they read a text (or do textual criticism), but simply allows them to see the divine qualities of Scripture that are already objectively there. Since such qualities are bound up with the broader meaning, teaching, and doctrine communicated by a book, they are not as applicable to individual textual variations (which,

on the whole, tend to be quite small and change very little of the overall meaning). As a result, two different copies of the book of Galatians, though they would differ at minor points, would *both* still communicate divine qualities” *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 101n37. Later he says, “[T]he biblical teaching that Christ’s sheep hear his voice [i.e. that the biblical canon is self-authenticating] does not require perfect reception by the church with no periods of disagreement or confusion, but simply a church that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, will collectively and corporately respond (*Canon Revisited*, 107). Kruger here anticipates the objection against the self-attesting view of the canon on the basis of thought experiments like the one above.

[23] The answer to the question is that neither is apocryphal. They are both from the third chapter of Zephaniah (vv. 1, 2 and v. 6, respectively, ESV).

[24] John Calvin grants that non-circular arguments *can* be given for the reverence of the Scriptures (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.3). He suggests, however, that arguments are weak because, if we believe the Scriptures because of reason, then reason has authority *over* the Scriptures, and reason can later contradict or oppose the Scriptures. Many have said similarly. Cf. also Kruger in *Canon Revisited*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 80. But “the Bible is not the ultimate authority” does not follow from “the authority of the Bible can be demonstrated by reason” in any way that risks undermining Scriptural authority. The Scriptures cannot be known to be true unless the law of non-contradiction were epistemically prior to it, but it doesn’t follow that reason has authority over the Bible. If the best arguments tell us that Christianity is true and the Scriptures reliable, then a better argument cannot come along and show the opposite. Furthermore, reason does not “decide” the truth, but discerns it, and therefore submits to it. This is often overlooked; some speak as if reason could “decide” Scripture isn’t authoritative if it could “decide” that it is. For example, if reason could establish Scriptural authority, it is thought, then reason’s testimony that miracles can’t happen could override the Bible’s witness to miracles. But if reason discerns the Scriptures are authoritative, then it can’t, properly speaking, “decide” miracles are impossible. Thus, it is

possible that one can reasonably demonstrate that God's word is the ultimate authority on which it speaks. Muller reminds us that God and the Scriptures are said to be first principles only loosely ("Principium Theologiae" in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 288–89). Even though they are made self-evident by the Spirit, they can be demonstrated via reason. And what can be demonstrated through reason is not a first principle strictly speaking.

[25] Although I cannot work out this suggestion, it should assuage those who insist the truth of Christianity or the Christian Scripture is the basis of all knowledge. Frame contends "allegiance to our Lord demands that we be loyal to Him, even when we are seeking to justify our assertions about him" (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130). Reasoning that does not presume Christianity, according to this worry, is "secular." Thus, it fails satisfy the demand that everything, including reasoning, be done to the "glory of God" and therefore under Christ's lordship (1 Corinthians 10:31). But if there are multiple principles of knowledge—however fallible—arguments for the truth of Christianity that do not presume the truth of Christianity (that is, the arguments do not contain the proposition "Christianity is true" in any premises even if the Christian interlocutor does not suspend belief in Christianity) do not thereby fail to be submitted to the lordship of Christ.

[26] My thanks to Harrison Lee and David Haines for comments on this paper, and to the attendees of the 2nd Annual Davenant Institute Regional Carolinas Convivium, who asked penetrating and insightful questions which forced me to sharpen and clarify this paper.

[27] Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2015), 168.

[28] Scott Oliphint, "Apologetics and Theology, Part 1" WTS Lecture Series, timestamp 4:40, <https://faculty.wts.edu/lectures/ap101-apologetics-and-theology-part-1/>.

[29] Oliphint, "Apologetics and Theology, Part 1." timestamp 5:01, "It's not because we've got different philosophical views, we may have those. But fundamentally it's going to find its focus in a theological difference." timestamp 11:30, "There is a significant part of the tradition of apologetics in the history of the church that has argued and continues to argue that its

basis, its foundation, lies not in God's special revelation, but its foundation lies in common human reasoning."

[30] The caveat (contra Oliphint's statement) being that the disagreement does not *need* to be theological in the first place.

[31] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 341.

[32] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 186.

[33] Cornelius Van Til, Appendix to Chapter 2 in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 45.

[34] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 228.

[35] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 185.

[36] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 45.

[37] Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 103, emphasis mine.

[38] Cornelius Van Til, "Common Grace—I," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 8, no.1 (November 1945): 43.

[39] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 126.

[40] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 168.

[41] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 351.

[42] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 347.

[43] Oliphint in Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 347, fn. 5.

[44] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 210.

[45] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 212.

[46] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 223.

[47] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 216.

[48] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 351.

[49] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 351, "For myself I have chosen the position of Kuyper."

[50] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 351.

[51] Oliphint in Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 352, fn. 27.

[52] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 73.

[53] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 74.

- [54] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 77.
- [55] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 77.
- [56] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 79.
- [57] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 81.
- [58] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 207.
- [59] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 209–210.
- [60] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 186, emphasis mine.
- [61] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 186–187.
- [62] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 187.
- [63] B. B. Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 4, no. 13 (Philadelphia: MacCalla & Co., 1893), 635.
- [64] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 187.
- [65] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 187.
- [66] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 187.
- [67] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 385.
- [68] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 169.
- [69] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.
- [70] Abraham Kuyper, *De gemeene gratia*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Donner, 1902), 1:251.
- [71] Van Til, “Common Grace,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 8, no.1 (November 1945): 43, “Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common.”
- [72] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 64.
- [73] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 199, “I do not think it is the function of common grace to maintain the metaphysical *status quo*.”
- [74] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 190, “The case is similar with respect to the knowledge of unbelievers and their ability to do that which is *relatively good*” (emphasis mine).
- [75] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 179, emphasis mine. Note the universal term “anything.”
- [76] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 179, bold emphasis mine.
- [77] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 92.

[78] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 191.

[79] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 194.

[80] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 103, emphasis mine.

[81] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 104.

[82] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 104.

[83] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 105.

[84] See chapters eight and nine in this volume for a fuller account of this view.

[85] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 119.

[86] The Roman Catholic Catechism certainly makes a distinction between the fallen man and the renewed man; likewise the Arminians. Simply because one disagrees with those models does not provide warrant for claiming they are careless.

[87] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 120.

[88] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 121, emphasis mine.

[89] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 103.

[90] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 84.

[91] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 104.

[92] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 104.

[93] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 195, “The natural man does not thus self-consciously work from his principles. There is operative within him the sense of deity; he cannot efface it without effacing himself.”

[94] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 80, “And it is only when the Holy Spirit gives man a new heart that he will accept the evidence of Scripture about itself and about nature for what it really is. The Holy Spirit’s regenerating power enables man to place all things in true perspective.”

[95] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 104.

[96] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 103.

[97] Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 146, “Therefore Calvinism cannot find a direct point of contact in any of the accepted concepts of the natural man. He disagrees with every individual doctrine of the natural man because he disagrees with the outlook of the natural man as a whole.”

[98] Richard Howe, “Some Brief Critical Thoughts on Presuppositionalism.”



[http://richardghowe.com/index\\_htm\\_files/SomeBriefCriticalThoughtsonPre-suppositionalism.pdf](http://richardghowe.com/index_htm_files/SomeBriefCriticalThoughtsonPre-suppositionalism.pdf) (date accessed 9/14/19).

[99] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 182.

[100] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 223.

[101] Calvin appears to embrace the block-house methodology. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.II.1, “I speak only of the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright.” Calvin is not optimistic about its success (Calvin, *ICR*, I.IV.1, “But barely one man in a hundred can be found who nourishes in his own heart what he has conceived.”), but he still finds it possible for natural theology to succeed in leading some to the natural knowledge of God.

[102] Calvin, *ICR*, I.V.6, “Now I have only wanted to touch upon the fact that this way of seeking God is common both to strangers and to those of his household, if they trace the outlines that above and below sketch a living likeness of him.”

[103] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 199, emphasis mine.

[104] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 177.

[105] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 168.

[106] Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Henrik De Vries, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898), 381.

[107] William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint, *Christian Apologetics Past and Present* (Crossway; Wheaton, IL, 2011), 2: 333.

[108] Edgar and Oliphint, 333, Kuyper’s sense of antithesis carryings a metaphysical notion, “in which the ‘two kinds of men’ to which Kuyper alludes in this illustration really and truly have nothing in common.”

[109] Edgar and Oliphint, 332, cf. *Ibid.*, fn. 4.

[110] William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint, *Christian Apologetics Past and Present* (Crossway; Wheaton, IL, 2011), 2: 332, fn. 3.

[111] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 199.

[112] Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geerhan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 3–21, accessed December 11, 2018, [https://reformed.org/apologetics/My\\_Credo\\_van\\_til.html](https://reformed.org/apologetics/My_Credo_van_til.html).

[113] Gregory Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended*, ed. Joel McDurmon (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2008), chap. 1.

[114] The term “noetic” is derived from the Greek word *nous* that means mind. Hence, noetic means pertaining to the mind or intellect.

[115] Van Til, “My Credo.”

[116] Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended*, chap. 1.

[117] A prime example is John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987), 130–133; for a more recent example, see K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2013), 24.

[118] Contrary to the claims often given by presuppositionalists, the inescapability of circular reasoning is not conceded by all epistemologists nowadays. For a few examples see Timothy J. McGrew and Lydia McGrew, *Internalism and Epistemology: The Architecture of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2007), chap. 4; Richard A. Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 177–179; and Jonathan Vogel, “Reliabilism Leveled,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 11 (2000): 602–623.

[119] All quotations from the Bible come from the English Standard Version.

[120] Tremper Longman, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 119 states without any qualification that “God makes Himself known through his creation.” Longman connects this idea with the teaching in Romans 1:20 that God has provided sufficient evidence of himself.

[121] As for the passage from Romans, take note of its wording that the knowledge of God is gained from perceptual knowledge of the world (not some innate knowledge). The relevant passage tells us that the knowledge of God is “clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (1:20). In the Greek, the verbs commonly translated “having been clearly perceived” are more literally rendered, “[*nooumena*] being understood [*kathoratai*] are perceived.” The first verb



[*nooumena*] refers to a purely intellectual activity and the second verb [*kathoratai*] refers to physical sight. The implication is that Paul is describing the inferential reasoning from experience that is typical of natural theology. See Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 80. According to Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 86, the knowledge of God is “mediated through observation of the natural world.”

[122] John Frame suggests that Van Til and other presuppositionalists mean “standard of truth” when they are discussing “starting points.” He thinks that this offers some way out of this problem. However, it is not apparent to me how this escapes the problem since the same problem applies to standards of truth. One must use a standard of truth in making a judgment about which standard of truth to follow. For Frame’s perspective see John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, ed. Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2015), Appendix A.

[123] See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), chap. 31.

[124] Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, chap. 8.

[125] To those who worry that this introduces a problem for God’s omnipotence by limiting His power to those that conform to the principles of logic, I recommend James C. McGlothlin, *The Logiphro Dilemma: An Examination of the Relationship between God and Logic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

[126] For more details on this Christian doctrine see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chap. 24.

[127] Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion*, reprint ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1860), 277, part II, chapter 6.

[128] William Paley, *Evidences of Christianity*, reprint ed. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 470, part III, chapter 6.

[129] Such as Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 210–211; Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 267–272; and John M. DePoe, “The Epistemic Framework for Skeptical

Theism,” in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, ed. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32–44.

[130] An excellent starting point for Christian apologists to study the art of persuasion is Os Guinness, *Fool’s Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2015).

[131] See K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 25–31, 50–53.

[132] Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), the most influential presuppositional apologist, published many works that articulated the presuppositional method in apologetics and argued for an approach to Reformed theology consistent with this method. Some of his most widely read writings are *Christian Apologetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), and *The Defense of the Faith*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).

[133] The inspiration for this article, at least in part, comes from Paul Helm’s essay “Nature and Grace,” in *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 219–247. Helm in this work helpfully discusses the influence of Aquinas’s understanding of nature and grace on several Reformed theologians, including John Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Francis Turretin, and John Owen. In this paper, I attempt to supplement what Helm wrote by saying more about specifically epistemological matters against the backdrop of Oliphint’s critique of Aquinas.

[134] This is not to say that Oliphint’s picture of Aquinas is an accurate exposition of Aquinas’s thought. Oliphint’s portrait has been recognized by multiple scholars to have significant problems. My interest here, however, is not to criticize the accuracy or fairness of Oliphint’s work (a task which has been ably performed by others) but to show that Oliphint’s criticisms of Aquinas serve to separate him from the mainstream of his own tradition. For an incisive critical review of Oliphint’s book, see Paul Helm, “*Thomas Aquinas* by K. Scott Oliphint: A Review Article,” *Journal of IRBS Theological Seminary* (2018): 169–193. Another critical review can be

found in Richard A. Muller, “Reading Aquinas from a Reformed Perspective: A Review Essay,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2018): 255–88.

[135] This is indicative of Oliphint’s commitment to a modern, post-Cartesian way of understanding the relationship of epistemology to metaphysics. Ancient and medieval thinkers commonly understood the starting point of philosophy to be questions concerning what must exist, and they then arrived at conclusions about how things are known on the basis of what they held to exist. The possibility of knowledge is assumed from the outset. Modern thinkers, by contrast, have generally asserted the primacy of epistemology—that before any clarity can be obtained concerning what exists, we must first establish what can be known, if anything. It should not be surprising that the order in which these questions are raised will have a significant influence on the answers at which one can arrive. Modern thought, by giving pride of place to epistemology, is much more prone to skeptical conclusions than most ancient and medieval thought, simply because it insists that one must argue for the possibility of knowledge, and few philosophical arguments are highly successful.

[136] See Oliphint, 12.

[137] Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q.12, a.12, resp. (emphasis in original). Quoted in Oliphint, 13.

[138] See Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, 33.

[139] See Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, 15.

[140] Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, 27.

[141] Aquinas, *ST I*, q.2, a.2, ad 1. Quoted in Oliphint, 28.

[142] Van Til avers that the unregenerate man “knows nothing truly as he ought to know it. . . . [He] not only is basically mistaken in his notions about religion and God, but is as basically mistaken in his notions about the atoms and laws of gravitation.” Van Til, *An Introduction*, 64. He holds this view because he believes that truth is an interconnected whole in which every truth is internally related to all others. Hence, he writes that “it may seem as though it is straining at a gnat to insist on the point that the natural man does not even know the flowers truly, as long as it is maintained that he does not know God truly. The point is, however, that unless we maintain that the natural man does not know the flowers truly, we cannot logically

maintain that he does not know God truly. All knowledge is inter-related. The created world is expressive of the nature of God. If one knows ‘nature’ truly, one also knows nature’s God truly” (Van Til, *An Introduction*, 64.). In other words, since the unregenerate man cannot know God truly without being moved by the Holy Spirit to affirm the revelation contained in the Bible, and he cannot know nature truly without knowing God truly, he must know the Bible before he can truly know nature. Van Til thus asserts that “no one truly understands the revelation of God in nature unless he first understands the revelation of God in Scripture. In this respect, then, the special testimony is prior to the general testimony” (Van Til, *An Introduction*, 112). It should be noted that for Van Til God’s revelation in nature is inclusive of everything created, thus no genuine knowledge of nature is possible without prior knowledge of Scripture. It should also be pointed out that this claim, that all truth comprises a single indivisible truth that one either knows or does not, is a view that is entirely alien to classical Christian thought. It is rather derived first and foremost from nineteenth century idealist philosophies and the coherence theories of truth that they engendered. Such philosophies, insofar as they claim that truth is not determined by things but by relations, tend towards relativism in various forms.

[143] See Oliphint, 34. For a highly charitable discussion of the notion of antithesis as it appears in the writings of Oliphint’s mentor Van Til, see John Frame, “Van Til on Antithesis,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 57 (1995): 81–102.

[144] See Oliphint, 34–35. Van Til asserts that there are no “general truths” that Christians and non-Christians hold in common. See Van Til, *An Introduction*, 116.

[145] Borrowing terminology from Kant, Van Til compares this to a knowledge of phenomena that fails to grasp the noumenal reality behind the phenomena, and thus cannot truly know the phenomena. See Van Til, *An Introduction*, 148.

[146] Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, 53.

[147] This view of knowledge is predicated on an understanding of the nature of facts that is significantly different from the understanding presupposed in classical thought. In classical thought, existing things have

an inherent intelligibility, such that one who is sufficiently acquainted with them will be able to have knowledge of them. On Oliphint's Van Tillian view, by contrast, the meaning of things is not to be found in the things themselves but is a function of how they are interpreted by God. Christians have knowledge of things only insofar as they interpret things in light of divine revelation, and thereby interpret things in terms of God's own interpretations. Non-Christians, however, since they refuse to acknowledge God, do not interpret things in this way, and hence they can only interpret things wrongly. Literally speaking, as noted above, they can know nothing. A notable problem for this view is that it is hard to see how there can really be any knowledge of God obtainable in principle by means of created things, since no created object can carry its intelligibility or significance within itself, and therefore all meaning can only be discovered by means of divine testimony about God's interpretation of created things. Van Til writes that "man cannot interpret anything aright unless his interpretation is thought of as a reinterpretation of God's interpretation." Van Til, *An Introduction*, 325. He also asserts that "God, in special revelation, actually brings the true interpretation into possession of the souls whom he has chosen. It is by virtue of this true interpretation that man can now interpret truly" (Van Til, *An Introduction*, 222). This position ultimately assigns the ground of truth to the subject, not the object of knowledge, and hence is a form of anti-realism.

[148] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 8.

[149] Turretin, *Institutes*, 10. Later in his *Institutes*, he notes that theology "presupposes certain previously known things upon which it builds revelation." Turretin, 20.

[150] Turretin, *Institutes*, 10.

[151] Turretin, *Institutes*, 10.

[152] Turretin, *Institutes*, 11.

[153] Turretin, *Institutes*, 28.

[154] Turretin, *Institutes*, 45.

[155] Calvin, too, attributes significant genuine knowledge to non-Christians. In his *Institutes*, he asks the following questions concerning

classical pagans: “Shall we deny that the truth shone upon ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are...Those men whom Scripture [I Cor. 2:14] calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 2, ch.ii, 15, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 274–275.

[156] Turretin, *Institutes*, 29.

[157] Turretin, *Institutes*, 638.

[158] Turretin, *Institutes*, 466. Distinguishing between the image of God in a broad and narrow, or essential and accidental sense is common in classical Reformed theology. One finds this distinction also in Hodge, as will be shown below.

[159] Turretin, *Institutes*, 29–30.

[160] Turretin, *Institutes*, 44.

[161] Turretin, *Institutes*, 47. It is pertinent to here consider the comments of Turretin’s younger contemporary Hermann Witsius (1636–1708) on the natural powers of man as found in his short treatise *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason in Matters of Religion*, since they show an understanding of the matter that is virtually identical to that of Turretin, and, as will be shown later in this essay, that of Hodge. Witsius, who was a highly respected Dutch Reformed theologian, writes the following in his treatise:

“But reason, although depraved, yet reason still remains; that is the faculty whereby man knoweth and judgeth, insomuch that man can know



and judge of nothing whatever except by his reason, as the first principle and cause of knowledge and judgment; therefore if divine things, if the mysteries of religion be known, it can be no other way but by reason. Faith itself, considered as knowledge and assent, is an operation of reason, or understanding; and this is so clear that he who doubts of it ought not to be considered a rational being.

Moreover, notwithstanding what we have affirmed concerning the depravity of reason, there are still remaining, through the mercy and forbearance of God, certain sparks of light in the mind, by the help of which, reason forms to itself certain principles, or axioms, of truth so evident, that they compel anyone attending thereto, by their own light, to assent to the same; nor is it in the power of man to yield his assent to the contrary; wherefore, indeed, they seem not so much formed by reason, as implanted in it; for as often as a man thinks about them he always falls into the same conclusion, and in the same manner. These are what some call *koinas ennoias, the dictates of common sense*.

Furthermore, there is still that force in reason that it can deduce from these principles, clear in themselves, certain inferences by ratiocination; so that, the connection being clear, and every part agreeing with the whole, assent is necessarily drawn thereto by the evidence of the deduction. And these things, as well the principles as the conclusions rightly drawn from them, may be justly called *right reason*, or the true and certain dictates of reason, according to the ability of the person exercising his reasoning faculty.

Moreover, seeing God is the author of our reason, and of all that light which shines in it, and excites reason itself to use that light, and guides it in the right use of it; what reason so *rectified* and guided *teaches*, according to that light, *that* God himself is accounted to teach. . . . So that these dictates of reason may likewise, so far be called, after a certain manner, the dictates of God.” Hermann Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason in Matters of Religion*, trans. John Carter (Norwich: Crouse, Stevenson, and Matchett, 1795), 10–12. (Italics in original.)

[162] See Turretin, *Institutes*, 31. For a helpful article that distills what Turretin takes to be the uses and abuses of reason in theology, see Sebastian

Rehman, “Alleged Rationalism: Francis Turretin on Reason,” *Calvin Theological Journal* vol. 37 (2002): 255–269.

[163] See Turretin, *Institutes*, 45.

[164] See Turretin, *Institutes*, 11–16.

[165] Turretin, *Institutes*, 44. See also Turretin, *Institutes*, 31.

[166] For helpful overviews of this philosophy and its distinctive tenets, the following books are recommended: S.A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), George Davie, *The Scotch Metaphysics: A Century of Enlightenment in Scotland* (London: Routledge, 2001), and Douglas McDermid, *The Rise and Fall of Scottish Common Sense Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For a valuable discussion of this philosophy’s reception and influence in the United States, see Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971).

[167] For the most famous listing of principles of this kind, see Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 266–293.

[168] Van Til, commenting on Scottish common sense philosophy, writes that “we cannot say that reason was perverted by sin, while intuition was not. Reason, to be sure, because of its greater extensiveness, errs more often and more violently than does intuition. Yet, inherently, reason has not been affected by sin any worse than has intuition. There is not one spot in the personality of man that has not been vitiated by sin.” Van Til, *An Introduction*, 162. It is difficult to see how this claim is not a recipe for skepticism, since it would seem to preclude certainty of anything at all.

[169] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013), 10.

[170] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 10.

[171] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 15.

[172] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 19.

[173] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 38.

[174] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 28.

[175] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 97–99.

[176] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 104.

[177] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 256.



[178] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 33. Hodge also makes some illuminating comments pertaining to the distinction between knowledge of worldly truths and knowledge of spiritual truths in his commentary on First Corinthians. There he writes: “Sometimes the knowledge of God, in Scripture, means that speculative knowledge which human reason is adequate to derive from the works of God, and which renders their idolatry inexcusable; at other times, it means saving knowledge. Hence it is perfectly consistent to say in the former sense, that men by wisdom may attain the knowledge of God; and in the latter sense, that they cannot attain that knowledge.” Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 21. He also asserts with respect to this topic that “it is plain from this whole discussion, that by the wisdom of the world, Paul means that knowledge of God and divine things which men derive from reason. It is also plain that what he says of the worthlessness of that knowledge has reference to it as a means of salvation” (Hodge, *An Exposition*, 33).

[179] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 47.

[180] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 49.

[181] See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 51–52.

[182] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 52–53. Emphasis added.

[183] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 53.

[184] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 53.

[185] In the New Testament, it is clear that one of the primary purposes of the miracles performed by Jesus and the apostles is to provide evidence for their claims. Luke, for example, states in the opening of the book of Acts, that Jesus wished to provide evidence for his resurrection to his disciples, which is why he “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs.” (Acts 1:3a).

[186] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 54.

[187] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 55.

[188] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 56.

[189] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 56

[190] See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 56–59.

[191] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 59.

[192] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 60.

[193] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 437.

[194] Charles Hodge, “Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy of the Conditioned,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, vol. 32, no. 3 (July 1860): 510.

[195] See <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/videos/video-lectures/bishop-barron-william-lane-craig-symposium-part-1–divine-simplicity/>

[196] Craig admits that he crafts his arguments for theism in a non-systematic way. See <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/are-my-theistic-arguments-dependent-upon-a-metaphysical-system/>

[197] Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), viii–ix.

[198] Peter Van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015), 10–11.

[199] F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. IX, *Modern Philosophy from the French Revolution to Sartre, Camus, and Levi-Strauss* (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1994), 250.

[200] Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 265.

[201] I stated above that this is not the proper context for debating metaphysics or epistemology broadly, but to introduce the reader to a more narrow and systematic approach.

[202] Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), viii-ix. [emphasis added]

[203] Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.

[204] Loux, *Metaphysics*, 21.

[205] Loux, *Metaphysics*, 32.

[206] He writes, “The continental philosophy of being is, I believe, rooted in Thomism.” Peter Van Inwagen, *Ontology, Identity, and Modality: Essays in Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

[207] Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1957), 13.

[208] The act of being accounts for several important aspects of a composite thing. Among them are unity, composition, and individuation.

[209] Gavin Kerr, *Aquinas’s Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 41.

[210] Those unfamiliar with Aristotelian metaphysics will have to accept the assertion that for Aquinas following Aristotle, material substances are composites of form and matter. For a good overview of Aristotelian philosophy see F.C. Copleston's *History of Philosophy: Volume 1* or Johnathan Lear's *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand*.

[211] In my conversation with William Lane Craig and Peter Van Inwagen on the nature of God and *abstracta*, it became painfully obvious that this distinction between real being and cognitional being is foreign (perhaps even repulsive) to many contemporary analytic philosophers. Read the exchange in "Three Views on Creation, Causality and *Abstracta*," *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 17, no. 2, 2015.

[212] Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, 35. [emphasis in original]

[213] Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, 37. [emphasis in original]

[214] Let me note here, this is an argument for a real *distinction* between essence and existence. It is not an argument that essence and existence are *separate* realities. For example, there is a real distinction between a man's height and his humanity, but in the individual man there are not two separate realities (humanity on the one hand and height on the other). These distinctions exist in the numerically one existing man. Similarly, though essence and existence are distinct metaphysical principles, this does not entail that they are separate realities. They pick out distinct metaphysical facets of the one existing thing.

[215] Form and matter are in the order of essences. Form is actual/actualizing essence. Either as substantial form, that makes something the kind of thing that it is, or accidental forms that modify the substance in some way. E.g. Red apple (the apple is the substance; the red color is the accidental modification of the substance). Matter is the potency to receive essences. Prime matter receives substantial form and designated matter receives accidental forms in a subject. More technically, in a sensible thing there is informed matter and individuated form.

[216] This is why the existential realist may value the contributions of more Aristotelian Thomists (e.g. David Oderberg or Edward Feser), but find their analysis to the level of hylomorphism lacking a crucial underlying

existential ground that one comes upon given a complete metaphysical analysis.

[217] Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 50–51. [emphasis in original]

[218] Wilhelmsen, *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence*, 54.

[219] Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend: IN; St. Augustine’s Press, 2008), 61.

[220] Space does not permit a full-blown philosophical anthropology (which would include a detailed looked at the senses and the will). This present overview will function as the grounds from which to elucidate a realist epistemology.

[221] If the apple is red because it has entered into the nexus of exemplification with apple-ness and redness (the Platonic rendering), then it is incoherent to suggest that when we say “The apple is red” we are pointing out how a secondary essence (the accidental quality “red”) inheres in a more fundamental metaphysical reality (the substance, “apple”), which in turn only exists because the entire material being is given extrinsically an act of existing every moment of its being.

[222] To be sure, hylomorphism has its explicit detractors. See, for example, the late Lynne Rudder Baker, “Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection,” *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 338–48; or, Richard Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), for some criticisms of hylomorphism.

[223] Here “substance” stands for, loosely, “existing as a distinct ontological unit” or some similar rendering.

[224] One might say that the difference between hylomorphism and substance-dualism is that hylomorphism holds that the soul and body are *essentially* unified substantial parts of a substance which can be *accidentally* separated (as in a temporary disembodied state after death and before resurrection). The substance dualist, on the other hand, seems to treat the soul and body as *accidentally* unified but distinct substances, which are *essentially* separate.

[225] James D. Madden, *Mind, Matter & Nature: A Thomistic Proposal for the Philosophy of Mind* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 275.

[226] Edward Feser, *Philosophy of Mind: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 226–227.

[227] There are two dominant views of epistemology coming from the modern era, arguably, a Cartesian approach and a Kantian one. It is this author's opinion, however, that Kant inasmuch as he is trying to make peace between elements of Hume and the science of his day, would not have been motivated to his task without the skepticism of Hume, which in turn is a result of epistemological commitments that have a decidedly Cartesian origin. In setting forth a Thomistic account *contra* Descartes, therefore, we are avoiding the entire trajectory of modernity regarding epistemology.

[228] Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1956), 3.

[229] Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality*, 26–27.

[230] Frederick Wilhelmsen “Foreword” to Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 15.

[231] Gilson, *Thomistic Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 19. [emphasis mine]

[232] Louis-Marie Regis, *St. Thomas and Epistemology* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1946), 51.

[233] Regis, *St. Thomas and Epistemology*, 53–54.

[234] Joseph D. Hassett, Robert A. Mitchell, and J. Donald Monan, *The Philosophy of Human Knowing* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1961), 159–161.

[235] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 85, a. 1.

[236] John Deely, *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation* (Chicago, IL: University of Scranton Press, 2007), 58.

[237] Max Herrera, “Arabic Influences in Aquinas's Doctrine of Intelligible Species,” unpublished dissertation, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2010), 227. [emphasis in original]

[238] David Braine, “The Active and Potential Intellects: Aquinas as a Philosopher in His Own Right” in *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the*

*Thomistic and Analytic Traditions*, ed. John Haldane (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 18–35.

[239] The Deely text referenced above, as the title would indicate, delves into the interconnections of epistemology and semiotics.

[240] Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 70–71. [emphasis added]

[241] Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 62.

[242] K. Scott Oliphint, *Great Thinkers: Thomas Aquinas* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 126. [emphasis in original]

[243] Oliphint, *Great Thinkers*, 60.

[244] Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 375–378.

[245] Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 67–69.

[246] Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, 90.

[247] Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, 14. [emphasis in original]

[248] Paul in Romans 1:18–20

[249] Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, 80.

[250] Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1964), 41–42.

[251] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969).

[252] Winfried Corduan, *No Doubt About It* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 1997, orig. *Reasonable Faith*, 1997), Website: “How to do Apologetics” <http://www.wincorduan.com/apologetics08.html>.

[253] In formal symbolism:  $A = A$ .

[254] In formal symbolism:  $A \vee \sim A$ .

[255] In formal symbolism:  $\sim (A \cdot \sim A)$ .

[256] In formal symbolism:  $A \square B, A, \therefore B$ .

[257] E.g., W. V. O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” in *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper, rev. ed., 1963), 41, suggests the continuity between content (synthetic) statements and self-evident (analytic) statements. But note that he also rejects the acceptance of so-



called deviant logics in Quine, *Philosophy of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 80–94. If a system does not follow the rules of logic it is something other than logic.

[258] In formal symbolism:  $C \sqsubset B, B \sqsubset A, \therefore C \sqsubset A$ . This principle, which may look a little complicated when displayed in this way, is what makes the traditional Aristotelian syllogism work. “The set of mortal beings includes human beings; the set of human beings includes the set of teachers of Plato in fourth-century Athens answering to the name of “Socrates.” Therefore, the set of mortal beings includes the set the teachers of Plato in fourth-century Athens answering to the name of “Socrates.”  $M \sqsubset H, H \sqsubset S, \therefore M \sqsubset S$ . [I could have just inserted the name “Socrates” as a constant, but I am referring to him as a set with just one member in order to illustrate my point.]

[259] For a discussion in a little more depth, please see my *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012).

[260] Whether this “residual meaning” is a natural phenomenon in the present fallen state of humanity or a direct intervention by the Holy Spirit at the given point of time is a very serious and important question. Nevertheless, from my point of view as the one sharing the gospel and relying on the Holy Spirit’s power, I don’t need to have parsed that point; I may simply go ahead and talk about the important points of God’s truth.

[261] For a full version of this proof and the legend associated with it, see Robert and Ellen Kaplan, *The Art of the Infinite*, (New York: Oxford, 2003), 17–23.

[262] Kaplan, *The Art of the Infinite*, 61.

[263] There are some mathematical hypotheses that still wait for proof or disproof. See, for example, “Goldberg Conjecture,” Wolfram|Alpha Data Base. <https://www.wolframalpha.com/input/?i=goldbach%20conjecture>

[264] John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994), 85–88.

[265] Quine, “Two Dogmas,” 42

[266] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 11–12.

[267] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New York: Dover, 1946), 35.

[268] Quine, “Two Dogmas,” 44.

[269] Eventually both of us read and discussed Van Til’s *Defense of the Faith*. He is featured as “Jerry” in a vignette in *No Doubt About It*, 65–78.

[270] Corduan, *No Doubt About It*, 65–81.

[271] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 100.

[272] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 144.

[273] Corduan, *No Doubt About It*, 102–122.

[274] Clark H. Pinnock, “The Philosophy of Christian Evidences” in E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on The Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 421.

[275] Cf. For example, towards the end of his *My Credo*, in Section III. Toward a Christ-Centered Apologetic, Van Til discusses S. Hackett’s position. While focusing on Hackett’s criticism of a “Calvinist” apologetic, Van Til shows his loyalty to scriptural authority when he states, “Rather the Christian offers the self-attesting Christ to the world as the only foundation upon which a man must stand in order to give any ‘reasons’ for anything at all. The whole notion of ‘giving reasons’ is completely destroyed by any ontology other than the Christian one. The Christian claims that only after accepting the biblical scheme of things will any man be able to understand and account for his own rationality.” (Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo”, in E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem & Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publication Co, 1993), 18.

[276] Greg Bahnsen, “A Critique of Classical Apologetics,” *The Presbyterian Journal* 4, no. 32, (December 4, 1985): 8.

[277] John Frame, “Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 2 (Fall 1985): 279–280. Frame doubles down on this evaluation in his book, *Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 2015), 5n11. And he actually argues there that Sproul is sympathetic to presuppositionalists so much so that he calls him an honorary presuppositionalist. This author is convinced that that is a misrepresentation and overstatement.



[278] Cornelius Van Til, “Outline of Van Til’s Apologetic,” *Christianity Today* (December 30, 1977): 18–19. And Cornelius Van Til, “Van Til’s Defense of the Faith,” *New Horizons* 6, no. 8 (October 1985): 2–3. This summary. It is also in his “My Credo”, in E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co. 1971).

[279] Cornelius Van Til, “Apologetics,” *Class syllabus for Westminster Theological Seminary* (1963), 55.

[280] Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), 34–35.

[281] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 83.

[282] Van Til, *Apologetics*, 55.

[283] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 2.

[284] Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1969), 296–297.

[285] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 265.

[286] Some like: Thom Norato, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, NJ, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 55–56, argue that Van Til is willing to use the evidences. The question becomes, “what are the evidences?” Norato describes Van Til’s argument as, if one does not posit God, one has no way to posit anything.

[287] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 50.

[288] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 98–99

[289] Van Til, *Apologetics*, 55.

[290] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 197–198.

[291] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 195.

[292] John Frame, “Van Til: His Simplicity and Profundity,” *New Horizons* 6, no. 8 (October 1985): 2–3.

[293] Robert Godfrey, “The Westminster School,” ed. David F. Wells, *Reformed Theology in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. P. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 91.

[294] Wesley A. Roberts, “Cornelius Van Til”, *Reformed Theology in America*, 119–120.

[295] Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1964), 107 as well as in his, *My Credo*, 16, for two examples of this kind of reference

[296] This author's thesis, Thom A. Schultz, *The Noetic Effects of Sin in John Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, with its Implications for the Apologetic Methodology of B.B. Warfield and Cornelius Van Til*, M.A. thesis, (St Louis, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1987), argues that even though Van Til stood within Calvin's tradition, he did so inconsistently compared to Warfield who was more consistent with Calvin's system of thought on the subject of Apologetics.

[297] See B.B. Warfield, "Introduction", in Francis R. Beattie, *Apologetics or the Rational Vindication of Christianity*, (Richmond, Va., The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903).

[298] Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1998), 597.

[299] Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 120.

[300] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 5.

[301] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 31, 51.

[302] Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 597. See Greg Bahnsen for his discussion of the intellectual relationship Van Til had with Warfield and Kuyper.

[303] E. R. Geerhan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co. 1971), 91–92.

[304] See, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), 495–524. For Kant's criticism of the classical arguments for the existence of God and, Wesley A. Roberts, *Cornelius Van Til*, in *RTA*, 121 for a discussion of Van Til's rejection of the arguments for God.

[305] See Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 29.

[306] David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., 1955), 79–89.

[307] Hume, *Inquiry*, 69–71.

[308] Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 279.

[309] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row Inc., 1961).

[310] See Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 14–16. And Van Til, "My Credo", 7, 15.

[311] William James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. A. Castell (New York: The MacMillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1974), 160.

[312] William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 176–179.

[313] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 24, 100–101.

[314] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Double Day and Co. Inc., 1954).

[315] This is the mainline interpretation of Kierkegaard and, as well, Christian Existentialism. It is not helpful or appropriate to discuss here whether this is the case or not. However, there are some who reject this interpretation of Kierkegaard, claiming that he did not reject all natural theology and rational argumentation. He was, however, only trying to bring back the subjective side of Christianity, as well as, allowing the objective side. See C. Stephen Evans, “A Misunderstood Reformer,” *Christianity Today* (September 21, 1984): 26–29. See also, C. Stephen Evans, *Existentialism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 100–118.

[316] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 109.

[317] Frame, *Apologetics*, 26.

[318] Frame, *Apologetics*, 24.

[319] Frame, *Apologetics*, 24.

[320] Frame, *Apologetics*, 79.

[321] Frame, *Apologetics*, 79.

[322] Frame, *Apologetics*, 194–195.

[323] Frame, *Apologetics*, 221.

[324] This was argued earlier in the work. Frame, *Apologetics*, 194.

[325] Frame, *Apologetics*, 67–68.

[326] Frame, *Apologetics*, 68.

[327] Frame, *Apologetics*, 69.

[328] Bartholomeus Keckermann, *Operum Omnium Quae Extant Tomi Duo* (Geneva: Apud Petrum Aubertum, 1614), 1769–70.

[329] Victor Strigelius, *Aristotelis Stagiritae ad filium Nicomachum, de vita et moribus scripti libri X* (Lipsiae: Ioannes Steinman, 1572), 4.

[330] Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2015), 209.

[331] Cornelius Van Til, *The Great Debate Today* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1971), 178.

[332] Van Til, 21; Van Til persistently portrays the analogy of being as implying a denial of the distinction between Creator and creature. See, for instance, Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 124.

[333] See, for instance, Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2008), 97.

[334] Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 59.

[335] Van Til, 45.

[336] For examples of these narratives see Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[337] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell, 1931), 6.

[338] Hobbes, *Leviathan* 47, 16.

[339] Matthew Levering, Barry David, and Michael Dauphinais, eds., *Aquinas the Augustinian* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

[340] On this see John Wippel, *Mediaeval Reactions to the Encounter Between Faith and Reason* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995).

[341] Luther, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, WA 1, 226.

[342] Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, WA 56, 172. *Heidelberg Disputation*, WA 1, 364; WA Br 1, 70.

[343] See Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles. Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 175–93.

[344] For a complete account see Markus Friedrich, *Die Grenzen der Vernunft. Theologie, Philosophie und gelehrte Konflikte am Beispiel des Helmstedter Hofmannstreits und seiner Wirkungen auf das Luthertum um 1600* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004). I think, however, that Friedrich overemphasizes the shift that thus took place.

[345] Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Kirksville, MO.: Truman State University Press, 2015), 3.

[346] Vermigli, *Commentary on Aristotle*, 3–4.

[347] For a very informed account of this interpretation of Ramism see Howard Hotson, *Commonplace Learning: Ramism and Its German Ramifications 1543–1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[348] Hotson, *Commonplace Learning*, 136–52.

[349] David Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists 1518–1525* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 76.

[350] WA Br 1, 99.

[351] Luther is taken at face value, for instance, by Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 63; and McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 61; For a more thorough discussion see Heinz Scheible, “Aristoteles und die Wittenberger Universitätsreform. Zum Quellenwert von Lutherbriefen,” in *Aufsätze zu Melanchthon*, by Heinz Scheible (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 125–51.

[352] Laurentius Walliser, “Quaestionum miscellaneorum, ad ethicae Aristotelicae defensionem”. Non paginated, part of the volume *Iubilaeum Lutheranum Academiae Argentoratensis sive Acta Secularis Gaudii*.

[353] Laurentius Walliser, Disputation vii. “Num Domini simus Actuum Nostrorum a Principio usque ad Finem.”

[354] Charles Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 26.

[355] *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (Gotinga: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 861–62.

[356] *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 161.

[357] Theophilus Aenetius, *Peri ethon pragmateia seu Doctrinae de moribus ab Aristotele in decem libris Nicomachicis propositae delinatio et explanatio* (Halaе Saxonum: Typis Erasmi Hynitzij, 1604), Ep. dedic.

[358] *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 161.

[359] Antonius Walaeus, *Compendium ethicae aristotelicae ad normam veritatis christianae revocatum* (Lugduni Batavorum: Impensis Asingae Elhardi, 1625), 6 optem tamen Philosophos Christianos majori libertate in hisce castigandis nonnumquam uti.

[360] Thus, for instance, Joachim Camerarius, *Ethicorum Aristotelis Nicomachiorum explicatio accuratissima* (Francofurti: Andreas Wechel,

1578), 15–16.

[361] Rudolph Goclenius, Petrus Martyr Vermigli, and Andreas Hyperius, *Meditationes ethicae sive Aristotelis ethicorum Nikomacheion perspicua ac perquam erudita, cum moribus sacris, id est, in sacra pagina descriptis, collata explicatio* (Lich: Nikolaus Erben, 1598), Praef.

[362] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947), VI, 7; 1141a 20–22.

[363] Goclenius, Vermigli, and Hyperius, *Meditationes ethicae*, Praef.; Hubert van Giffen, *In decem libros Aristotelis ad Nicomachum* (Francofurti: Impensis Lazari Zetzneri, 1608), 3.

[364] Van Til, *The Great Debate Today*, 178.

[365] Here I summarize conclusions I have backed with more detail in “Aristotelian Practical Philosophy from Melanchthon to Eisenhart. Protestant Commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1529–1682,” forthcoming in *Reformation and Renaissance Review*.

[366] For some of the many illuminating discussions see Johannes Avenarius, *Selectarum philosophiae practicae quaestionum dodecades XVII ad seriem X librorum Eth. Nicom. Arist. accommodatae* (Wittebergae: Ex typographia Augusti Boreck, 1622), Dodecades I, q. 5; Hieronymus Weixelberger, *Brevis introductio in libros decem Aristotelis ethicos nicomachios* (Noribergae: Cura Simonis Halbmayeri, 1627), 17.

[367] I argue this point more broadly in Manfred Svensson, *Reforma protestante y tradición intelectual cristiana* (Barcelona: CLIE, 2016).

[368] Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 81.

[369] Stefania Tutino, “Introduction,” in *On Temporal and Spiritual Authority*, by Robert Bellarmine (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), xiii–xv and again in n.2 of page 5.

[370] Roberto Bellarmino, *On Temporal and Spiritual Authority: On Laymen or Secular People; On the Temporal Power of the Pope, Against William Barclay; On the Primary Duty of the Supreme Pontiff* (Liberty Fund, 2012), 7.

[371] CR 16, 450. Above I pointed to Bellarmine to illustrate this fact, but the same applies to some scholarship on Vitoria. Though Vitoria is evidently discussing the American situation, Anthony Pagden has argued



that Vitoria was actually not that concerned about the particulars of the American case that readers of his *Relectio de indiis* would expect. In Pagden's view this was merely interesting in view the chances it provided "for a refutation of Lutheran and, later, Calvinist theories of sovereignty." Anthony Pagden, "Dispossessing the Barbarian: The Language of Spanish Thomism and the Debate over the Property Rights of the American Indians," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 83. Affirming the natural character of political authority would not primarily constitute a defense of the indigenous peoples, but a critique of a rival political theology. But in Vitoria's lectures on the Indians there is no hint of such a concern for the Reformation. He does have adversaries beyond the bounds of the Roman Catholic Church, but he mentions neither Luther nor Calvin. John Wyclif is indeed the closest we find to an explicitly identified rival on this issue.

[372] Lambertus Danaeus, *Politices Christianae Libri VII* (Geneva: Apud Haeredes Eustatii Vignon, 1596), I, 4.

[373] Danaeus, *Politices*, I, 4.

[374] Danaeus, *Politices*, I, 4.

[375] Danaeus, "Ad lectorem benevolum."

[376] Bartholomeus Keckermann, *Systema Disciplinae Politicae* (Frankfurt: Apud Ioannem Stöckle, 1625), 8; references to Danaeus and Aristotle throughout.

[377] For a searching discussion of this movement see Franco Volpi, "The Rehabilitation of Practical Philosophy and Neo-Aristotelianism," in *Action and Contemplation. Studies in the Moral and Political Thought of Aristotle*, ed. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 3–26.

[378] K. Scott Oliphint, in his 2017 introduction to Aquinas, states that "Whatever 'Reformed Thomism' might be, or might mean, in our current context, it cannot be a synthesis of biblically foreign Thomistic teachings and a consistent, biblical theology" (K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 3.). He argues, in his book that Aquinas made an error in the starting point of his theology, which brings him to the conclusion that "the value of reading Thomas—which is

significant in terms of its historical and theological impact—must always be measured against this initial, seminal, foundational, theological misstep” (120). The misstep, for Oliphint, is that he started with human reason and not with divine Scriptures (124.).

[379] Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (1968; repr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 10. He says, for example, that “In Aquinas’s view the will of man was fallen, but the intellect was not. From this incomplete view of the biblical Fall flowed all the subsequent difficulties. Man’s intellect became autonomous” (11). Or, “Aquinas had opened the way to an autonomous Humanism, an autonomous philosophy, and once the movement gained momentum, there was soon a flood” (13). The poison of Aquinas soon spread to the arts and literature; Secularism was a fruit of the thought of Aquinas (51), as was Rationalism (33.) and the New Theology (75.). Eventually nature took over and devoured grace. (Schaeffer says, “Nature was killing grace” [16], and, later, “Nature has totally devoured grace” [33]).

[380] When Cornelius Van Til critiques Bavinck’s approach to knowledge, he notes how, unfortunately, “it appears that he has not entirely escaped the influence of Thomas Aquinas in formulating what he calls a ‘moderate realism.’ (Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, vol. 5 in *In Defense of the Faith* (1974; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Co, 1982), 44.)” Van Til continues to note the unfortunate influence of Aquinas on Bavinck throughout his entire critique of Bavinck’s realism (45–48.).

[381] Norman Geisler, “A New Look at the Relevance of Thomism for Evangelical Apologetics”, *Christian Scholar’s Review* 4, no. 3 (1975): 189–200.

[382] Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, & Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views of the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1985).

[383] R. C. Sproul, “Thomas Aquinas”, in *Chosen Vessels: Portraits of Ten Outstanding Christian Men*, ed. Charles Turner (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1985).

[384] Norman Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (1991; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003).



[385] R. C. Sproul, “Thomas Aquinas: A True Gift of God”, *TableTalk* (May 1994): 4–6, 49.

[386] John H. Gerstner, “Aquinas was a Protestant”, *TableTalk* (May 1994): 13–15, 52. Gerstner argues that Aquinas essentially affirmed the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone.

[387] Ronald Nash, “Aquinas and Natural Law”, *TableTalk* (May 1994): 10–12, 55.

[388] Norman Geisler, “Aquinas’s View of Scripture”, *TableTalk* (May 1994): 7–9. Geisler explains that Aquinas recognized the supreme authority of Holy Scriptures, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scriptures, and the material principle of *Sola Scriptura*. His point is that, in relation to his doctrine of scriptures, Aquinas can be used and appreciated by protestants.

[389] Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, “Introduction”, in Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, eds., *Aquinas Among the Protestants* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 15.

[390] J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 50.

[391] Michael A. G. Haykin, “Foreword”, in K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), xi-xii.

[392] Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. & ed. William Hazlitt (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), 212.

[393] D. Stephen Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God: Aquinas and His Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 124. Long goes on to note that, in fact, “Luther did not reject Aristotle outright” and “His objections to Thomas then were often objections to Thomistic theologians’ use of Aristotle. (124.)”

[394] Étienne Gilson, *Le Philosophe et la Théologie* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960), 217. My Translation. In French we read, “Comment devient-ton thomiste? A quel moment? Cela est bien difficile à dire. Pour une raison quelconque un philosophe commence à lire saint Thomas d’Aquin. S’il est allergique à ce genre de pensée, il cessera de lire et ne recommencera plus; mais s’il existe entre lui et saint Thomas quelque affinité élective, il continuera et recommencera. Qu’il en parle, qu’il en écrive dans la seule intention d’aider les autres à sortir de leur ignorance à

mesure qu'il s'en tire lui-même, il peut le faire, mais plusieurs ne l'entendront pas ainsi. Ce qu'ils veulent savoir, ce n'est pas ce que pense saint Thomas d'Aquin, mais plutôt si vous êtes thomiste.”

[395] Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, “Introduction: The Reception, Critique, and Use of Aquinas in Protestant Thought”, in Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, eds., *Aquinas Among the Protestants* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 1.

[396] Josef Pieper, “The Timeliness of Thomism”, in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O’Connor (1957; repr., Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co., 1965), 81.

[397] Pieper, *Silence of St. Thomas*, 82.

[398] Pieper, *Silence of St. Thomas*, 82.

[399] Robert J. Henle, “Apropos of *From Unity to Pluralism* by Gerald McCool, S.J.”, *Thomistic Papers VI* (Houston, TX: The Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), 140. Ed Feser provides a helpful overview of different Thomistic schools in his two-part blog post “The Thomistic Tradition”. Here he describes Thomistic positions: (1) Neo-scholastic Thomism, (2) Existential Thomism, (3) Laval or River Forest Thomism, (4) Transcendental Thomism, (5) Lublin Thomism, and (6) Analytical Thomism. (Cf. Ed Feser, “The Thomistic Tradition, part I”, <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2009/10/thomistic-tradition-part-i.html> (published Oct. 15, 2009; accessed Feb. 4, 2019), and Ed Feser, “The Thomistic Tradition, part II”, <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2009/10/thomistic-tradition-part-ii.html> (published Oct. 18, 2009; accessed Feb. 4, 2019).)

[400] Henle, *Apropos*, 141.

[401] Henle, *Apropos*, 141.

[402] Henle, *Apropos*, 142.

[403] Henle, *Apropos*, 142.

[404] Henle, *Apropos*, 141.

[405] Henle, *Apropos*, 147.

[406] John F. X. Knasas, “Preface”, *Thomistic Papers VI* (Houston, TX: The Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), ix.

[407] Victor B. Brezik, “Maritain and Gilson on the Question of a Living Thomism”, *Thomistic Papers VI* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic

Studies, 1994), 2.

[408] Brezik, *Maritain and Gilson*, 19.

[409] Joseph Owens, “Neo-Thomism and Christian Philosophy”, *Thomistic Papers VI* (Houston, TX: The Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), 36.

[410] Brezik, *Maritain and Gilson*, 6.

[411] Brezik, *Maritain and Gilson*, 9.

[412] Gilson, *Le Philosophe et la Théologie*, 221. Translation mine. In French it reads, « Un thomiste est un esprit libre. Cette liberté ne consiste assurément pas à n'avoir ni Dieu ni maître, mais plutôt à n'avoir d'autre maître que Dieu, qui affranchit de tous les autres. Car Dieu est la seule protection de l'homme contre les tyrannies de l'homme. »

[413] This is certainly what Pieper is attempting to express in his articulation of the nature of Thomism (see above). Cf. Pieper, *Silence of St. Thomas*, 80–4.

[414] For more details on the specific claims of Thomistic Philosophy, see Bernard J. Wuellner, *Summary of Scholastic Principles* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1956). See, especially, the “Twenty-four Thomistic theses” found on pages 119–124 of this book. The twenty-four Thomistic theses are primarily concerned with the principle elements of Thomistic Metaphysics.

[415] In fact, it is not the case that all Thomists hold to Moderate Direct Realism. Some Thomists have been Critical Realists, which is why we note that, to be a Thomist, one must adhere to some form of realism—the real things of mind-external reality are the source of our ideas, and not vice versa. Real essences exist and can be known, and they ground our ideas. Cf. Étienne Gilson, “The Distinctiveness of the Philosophic Order”, in Anton C. Pegis, ed., *A Gilson Reader: Selections from the writings of Etienne Gilson* (New York: Image Books, 1957), 59. Vernon J. Bourke agrees with Gilson; Cf. Vernon J. Bourke, “Thomistic Philosophy is not Pluralistic”, *Thomistic Papers VI* (Houston, TX: The Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), 61. Owens, *Neo-Thomism and Christian Philosophy*, 39–40. Cessario, *Short History*, 22–23. Cessario and Cuddy, *Thomas and the Thomists*, xii. Peter A. Redpath, “The Unity of Thomistic Experience—A Gilsonian Rejoinder to Gerald McCool S.J.”, *Thomistic Papers VI*

(Houston, TX: The Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), 82–83. Peter Redpath sees the following as the reason Pope Leo XIII, in *Aeterni Patris*, called for a return to Thomism: “Leo was recommending...the classical method of philosophical realism and the proper way of relating such philosophical realism to the Catholic faith and to revealed theology. As Leo saw it, the Scholastics preserved the wisdom of the ancient Greeks by not losing realism in the method of deriving their first principles, and St. Thomas had perfected the method of using this ‘philosophical-principle-realism’ as a handmaiden for theology” (Redpath, *The Unity of Thomistic Experience*, 82.). Consider what Raymond Dennehy says: Thomism “draws its life from the principle, ‘The material object of the human intellect is the essence of sensible being’; put in other terms, ‘There is no knowledge in the intellect that does not come through the senses.’ Any representation of Thomism that collides with that principle is surely mistaken” (Raymond Dennehy, “Maritain’s Realistic Defense of the Importance of the Philosophy of Nature to Metaphysics”, *Thomistic Papers VI* (Houston, TX: The Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), 108.). Cf. Henle, *Apropos of From Unity to Pluralism*, 149.

[416] William Marshner, “Introduction to the Transaction Edition”, in Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Being and Knowing: Reflections of a Thomist* (1991; London, UK: Transaction Publishers, 2016), x. Pieper notably dissented: “A celebrated discussion between Martin Grabmann and Franz Pelster at the International Thomistic Congress in Rome in 1925 made it evident that the most important of the controverted doctrines, that of the real distinction between essence and existence, had for St. Thomas himself only a subordinate value, and that his earliest pupils thought it possible and legitimate to interpret it in several ways” (Pieper, *Silence of St. Thomas*, 80).

[417] Marshner, *Introduction*, x.

[418] Romanus Cessario, *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2005), 22.

[419] Cessario, *Short History*, 69.

[420] Cessario, *Short History*, 23. Continuing his comments on Leo’s neo-Thomistic reform, Redpath, “In other words, it is precisely because the ancient philosophers were realists, precisely because, that is, they had

derived their philosophical first principles from their knowledge of the natures of physical things that, for Pope Leo, these philosophers were able to prove many ‘invisible things’ about God by their natural reason alone. (Redpath, “Unity of Thomistic Experience”, 83.)”

[421] It is also worth noting the importance of analogical predication concerning the divine nature. Cf. Cessario, *Short History*, 23.

[422] Cessario, *Short History*, 70.

[423] Cessario, *Short History*, 69–70.

[424] Cessario, *Short History*, 70.

[425] Cessario, *Short History*, 71. Cessario and Cuddy, *Thomas and Thomists*, 99.

[426] Cessario, *Short History*, 71.

[427] John Patrick Donnelly, “Calvinist Thomism”, *Viator*, 7 (Jan. 1, 1976): 443.

[428] Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, “Introduction: The Reception, Critique, and Use of Aquinas in Protestant Thought”, in Manfred Svensson and David Van Drunen, eds., *Aquinas Among the Protestants* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 1.

[429] Svensson and VanDrunen, *Introduction*, 11–12.

[430] Steve Hampton, *Anti-Arminians: The Anglican Reformed Tradition from Charles II to George I* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 221.

[431] Hampton, *Anti-Arminians*, 221.

[432] Despite Donnelly’s comment, it is probably best to classify Vermigli as a Reformed Thomist. Not only did he use Aquinas’s works quite frequently, and relied primarily on Aristotelian philosophy, but he also can be shown to agree with Aquinas on almost every single Thomistic distinctive listed above. For example, Vermigli clearly adheres to the classical views of Natural Reason, Theology, and Law; he holds a Thomistic-Aristotelian anthropology (cf. Paul Helm, *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 41–53. Joseph McClelland, “Translator’s Introduction”, in Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology*, trans. & ed. Joseph C. McClelland (1996; repr., Moscow, ID: Davenant Press, 2018), xxiii-xxv.); he holds a Thomistic epistemology (cf. McClelland, “Translator’s Introduction”, xxiv-xxv.); he is a moderate realist

(McClelland, “Translator’s Introduction”, xxvi.); he adheres to Aquinas’s Grace and Nature distinction (McClelland, “Translator’s Introduction”, xxii. Here, McClelland notes that “for Vermigli as for Aquinas, grace does not destroy nature but crowns it.”); he accepts Aquinas’s teachings about the relationship between faith and reason in philosophy and theology (McClelland, “Translator’s Introduction”, xxix, xxxviii-xxxix.). His approach to predestination, the divine nature and our knowledge of the divine nature, and the role of Scripture and the use of the early church fathers, all are in line with Aquinas’s views. It seems, then, that it is best to accept that Vermigli was indeed a Reformed Thomist.

[433] Joseph McClelland notes, of Martin Bucer, that “Bucer was a Dominican and therefore a Thomist. (McClelland, “Translator’s Introduction”, xxx.)”

[434] Cf. Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (2013; repr., New York: Routledge, 2016). Long, *PSTG*, 126, 151–57.

[435] This is an important point, as some contemporary theologians have suggested that Calvin and Luther rightly moved away from Aquinas and Aristotle, in their reforming activities, but that their influence was unfortunately lost by the misguided return to Aquinas, Aristotle, and Scholastic modes of thought that are found in the writings of Beza, Vermigli, and Zanchi. McClelland notes that this narrative has been rightly disputed by Muller and Holtrop. “Muller further notes that the exaltation of Calvin as ‘chief codifier’ of Reformed doctrine ignores the collegial work of Bullinger, Musculus, Vermigli, and others. (McClelland, “Translator’s Introduction”, xxviii.)” Indeed, the study of historical theology has demonstrated that far from being the exclusive result of the work of Luther and Calvin, it came from the work of a panoply of different scholars living all around the same time, mutually influencing and critiquing each other’s thoughts. This is why it seems so difficult to provide an authoritative list of who were first generation Reformers and who were second generation Reformers. If we suggest that the Reformation officially started on October 31, 1517, and if a generation is 25–30 years, then the first generation of Reformation thinkers includes not only Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Thomas Cranmer, William Farel, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and William Tyndale, but, also, John Calvin, Girolamo Zanchi, Theodore Beza,



Heinrich Bullinger, John Knox, Philip Melancthon, Johannes Brenz, and maybe John Jewel. These theologians were all visiting each other, learning from each other, influencing each other, critiquing each other, and creating a veritable wave of theological treatises. The Reformation was not the idea of one or two people, but an awakening across Europe. Another way of looking at different periods of development in Reformed thought is proposed by Richard Muller: Early Orthodoxy (1565–1640), High Orthodoxy (1640–1725), and Late Orthodoxy (post-1725) (cf. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2003), 31–32.). According to this division of the periods of Reformed theological development, all of the theologians we will be considering belong to the period of early Reformed Orthodoxy.

[436] Cf. Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11. Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, & Contemporary Protestant Thought*.

[437] Thomas Cranmer, “A Confutation of Unwritten Verities,” in *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. Henry Jenkyns (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1833), 4: 191.

[438] John Jewel, “Extracts from Bishop Jewell's Defence of the Apology, in Answer to Harding the Jesuit,” in *Writings of John Jewel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 397.

[439] John Jewel, *The Apology for the Church of England* (New York: Henry M. Onderdonk, & Co., 1846), 80–81.

[440] Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger: the first and second decades*, trans. H. I., ed. Thomas Harding (Cambridge: The University Press, 1849), 160–161.

[441] Bullinger, *Decades*, 239.

[442] Bullinger, *Decades*, 443.

[443] Bullinger, *Decades*, 464.

[444] Bullinger, *Decades*, 485.

[445] Jerome Zanchi, *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination Stated and Asserted*, ed. Augustus Toplady (New York: Paul & Thomas Printers, 1811), 83.

[446] Zanchi, *Doctrine of Absolute Predestination*, 84.



[447] Stefan Lindholm, “Jerome Zanchi’s Use of Thomas Aquinas” in Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, *Aquinas among the Protestants* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 76.

[448] Long, *Perfectly Simple Triune God*, 150. Long goes on to note that “One of those citations sets forth the relationship among divine perfection, simplicity, and the divine relations that shows Zanchi to be a faithful interpreter of Thomas. (150)”

[449] Thomas Cranmer, “A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ”, in *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. Henry Jenkyns (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1833), 2: 317. Cf. Cranmer, *DTCD*, 2:381–319.

[450] Cranmer, “Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine,” 2:350.

[451] Thomas Cranmer, “Homily of Salvation”, in *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. Henry Jenkyns (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1833), 2: 149.

[452] Cranmer, “Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine,” 2:361.

[453] Cranmer, “Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament” 2 :295. Cf. *Ibid.*, 2:311.

[454] Cranmer, “Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament” 2: 363. A little bit later he reinforces his point as follows: “For although his Divinity be such that it is infinite, without measure, compass, or place ; so that, as concerning that nature, he is circumscribed with no place, but is every where, and filleth all the world : yet, as concerning his human nature, he hath measure, compass, and place ; so that when he was here upon earth, he was not at the same time in heaven ; and now that he is ascended into heaven, as concerning that nature he hath now forsaken the earth, and is only in heaven. (2: 365.)”

[455] Jewell, *Apology*, 31.

[456] Jewell, *Apology*, 55, 149. Cf. John Jewell, *Sermons: Romans 6:19*, in *Writings of John Jewell* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 479–80.

[457] Jewell, *Apology*, 31. Cf. John Jewell, *An Epistle from Jewell to Scipio, Concerning the Council of Trent*, in *Writings of John Jewell* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 433. John Jewell, *Sermons: Romans 6:19*, 472.

[458] Theodore Beza, *Questions et réponses Chrestiennes* (Eustace Vignon, 1584), 1 : 3. My Translation. In French we read, « Qu'il y a une essence de Dieu, & trois personnes, le Père, le Fils, & le S. Esprit. »

[459] Beza, *Questions*, 1 : 3. My translation. In French we read, «La nature commune à ces trois personnes. »

[460] Beza, *Questions*, 1: 7–8.

[461] Beza, *Questions*, 1: 15. My translation. In French we read, «Cela, qui étant ôté de fait, il faut necessairement que la chose ne soit plus ce qu'elle était. » Cf. *Ibid.*, 1 : 17.

[462] Beza, *Questions*, 1:41.

[463] Bullinger, *Decades*, 82.

[464] Bullinger, *Decades*, 174.

[465] Bullinger, *Decades*, 194.

[466] *The Formula of Concord*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 104.

[467] Johannes Brenz, *Le Catechism* (Tubingue, 1563), 12. My translation. In French we read, « Car combien que la raison naturelle aye quelque cognoissance de “Dieu, & de la foy : neantmoins elle est a cause du pèche obscurcie, & n'a aucune cognoissance de l'Evangile du Fils de Dieu notre Seigneur Iesu Christ, par lequel nous obtenons par foy la Vraye justice & salut. Veu donc que les ténèbres de l'entendement humain sont si grandes, il est nécessaire que les parens ayent soing de faire enseigner leurs enfans au Catéchisme des leur enfance. »

[468] Brenz, *Catechism*, 57.

[469] Brenz, *Catechism*, 57.

[470] Brenz, *Catechism*, 57. My translation. In French we read, « De ces choses on cognoit naturellement, qu'il y a un Dieu. Parce que quand nous voyons la grandeur, la beauté, l'ordre certain, & l'attrempement des choses de ce monde, le tour & changement admirable des monuments [ou, peut-être, mouvements] du ciel, & du temps, il nous signifie apparemment, qu'il y a un esprit & entendement divin, qui gouverne toutes ces choses. »

[471] Brenz, *Catechism*, 57.

[472] Brenz, *Catechism*, 57.

[473] Brenz, *Le Catechism*, 62. My translation. In French we read, « & la raison humaine cognoit naturellement telle chose de Dieu, d'autant que pour cette cause les Gentilz ont appelé Dieu τὸν ἀγαθὸν, qui signifie Bon...Or ont-il ainsi appelé Dieu, pource qu'il est autheur de tout bien. Mais pource que la raison humaine à cause des grandes tentations se laisse par satan esbranler de cette cognoissance de Dieu, pourtant est-il nécessaire, que nous soyons munis des tésmoignages du S. Esprit. »

[474] Brenz, *Le Catechism*, 57–58.

[475] Brenz, *Le Catechism*, 64.

[476] Brenz, *Catechism*, 261–262. My translation. In French we read, “la cognoissance des choses, lesquelles sont commandées au décalogue est imprimée divinement en la raison humaine, des le commencement de la création d'icelle. Et certes le decalogue n'a point esté écrit des le commencement du monde, mais il a esté écrit en la raison humaine, tellement, que puis après les choses qui par après ont este mises en écrit, ont esté parcy devant retenues par cognoissance. S. Paul escrivant aux “Rom dit. Ce qu'en peut coignoistre de Dieu est manifeste en eulx: certes “Dieu leur a manifesté. Or si les choses qui se peuvent coignoistre de Dieu ont esté manifestées à la raison humaine, par plus forte raison les choses lui ont esté cogneues, que l'homme doit faire envers son prochain. A cause de quoy ce qui est escrit en S. “Math. 7. Tout ce que vous Voulez, que les hommes vous facent, faites leur aussi : est proprement appelé la loy naturelle, pource qu'il est cogneu de la nature, ...de la raison humaine. Car des le commencement du monde il a esté cogneu & prefché, qu'il fault seulement adorer un vrai Dieu createur du ciel, & de la terre. »

[477] R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 208.

[478] Concerning natural theology he says, “For all idolatry in the world arises from this, that people by nature have had the common knowledge, that there is a God, without which idolatry would remain unpractised. With this knowledge engrafted in mankind, they have, without God's Word, fancied all manner of ungodly opinions of God, and held and esteemed these for divine truths, imagining a God otherwise than, by nature, he is”

(Martin Luther, *The Table Talks of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed. William Hazlitt (London : H. G. Bohn, 1857), 72.).

[479] Concerning natural law, he notes, in his explanation of the ten commandments, that “The very law of nature convinces us of the justice and equity inherent in every one of these commandments” (Martin Luther, “The Law, Faith, and Prayer,” in *Luther’s Two Catechisms Explained by Himself in six classic writings*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis, Minn.: The Luther Press, 1908), 194.).

[480] Though he famously called reason the Devil’s greatest whore, he also said “I don’t say that men may not teach and learn philosophy; I approve thereof, so that it be within reason and moderation. Let philosophy remain within her bounds, as God has appointed, and let us make use of her as of a character in a comedy; but to mix her up with divinity may not be endured” (Martin Luther, *The Table Talks of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed. William Hazlitt (London : H. G. Bohn, 1857), 23.).

[481] Thomas Cranmer, “A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ”, 2: 333.

[482] Cranmer, “A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ”, 2:354.

[483] Thomas Cranmer, “The Answer of Thomas against the false calumniations of Dr. Richard Smyth” in vol. 3 of *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. Henry Jenkyns (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1833), 7–8.

[484] Thomas Cranmer, “Catechismus, that is to say A Short Instruction into Christian Religion”, in *The Writings of Thomas Cranmer* (London: The Religious Tract Society), 115.

[485] Cf. John Jewell, *Of the Holy Scriptures*, in *Writings of John Jewell* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 72.

[486] Cf. John Jewell, *On the First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, in *Writings of John Jewell* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 186.

[487] John Jewell, *On the second Epistle to the Thessalonians*, in *Writings of John Jewell* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 252.

[488] John Jewell, *Defence of the Apology*, in *Writings of John Jewell* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 387.

[489] Cf. John Jewell, *Sermons: Romans 13:12* in *Writings of John Jewell* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 459. Jewell, *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*, 278. Jewell, *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, 147.

[490] Theodore Beza, *Job* (London: John Legatte, 1589), ch. 1, v.1.

[491] At one point when he is critiquing all the philosophers, he says that even Aristotle does not escape his critique, though he is “in my judgement the chief of all the rest. (Theodore Beza, *Job* (London: John Legatte, 1589), ch. 1, v.1.)” He later says that the Aristotelians are the smartest of the philosophers.

[492] Beza, *Questions*, 38–39.

[493] Beza, *Questions*, 39. My translation. The French version reads, « Elles y sont voirement, mais ce sont comme les ruines d’un magnifique bastiment. D’auantage ie di que ceste foye ne consiste point en cognoissance naturelle, mais qu’il faut ajuster ce que Dieu a particulièrement manifesté au monde par ses Prophètes & Apôtres, dequoy la chair & le sang n’eussent jamais peu s’aduiser. Finalement il faut aussi noter ce poinct, en quoy est comprinse specialement la difference de la foy d’avec ceste cognoissance naturelle, à sçauoir que chasque croyant applique particulièrement à soy la promesse de la vie éternelle en Christ, lequel tesmoignage l’Escriture appelle certaineté. »

[494] Beza, *Job*, preface.

[495] Beza, *Job*, ch. 1, v. 1.

[496] Beza, *Job*, ch. 1, v.1.

[497] Cf. Bullinger, *Decades*, 101, 349.

[498] Bullinger, *Decades*, 368.

[499] Bullinger, *Decades*, 194.

[500] Bullinger, *Decades*, 483.

[501] Bullinger, *Decades*, 196–97.

[502] Bullinger, *Decades*, 197–98.

[503] Bullinger, *Decades*, 198–201.

[504] Bullinger, *Decades*, 125.

[505] Bullinger, *Decades*, 385–6.

[506] Cf. David Haines, “Natural Theology in Reformed Orthodoxy”, in Joseph Minich, ed., *Philosophy and the Christian: The Quest for Wisdom in the Light of Christ* (Lincoln, NE: Davenant Press, 2018), 250–291.

[507] Paul Helm, *Human Nature*, 27–40. Helm notes that though Calvin’s fundamental anthropology is primarily a form of Augustinian Platonism, he does not reject Aristotle outright, but finds room for a number of Aristotelian doctrines, for example, “Though the remote influences on Calvin may be Platonism and Augustine, there are also positive references to Aristotle that reveal the proximate influence on him of a more detailed faculty psychology...Calvin’s approach is to bolt the more developed faculty psychology of Aristotle onto his Platonic view of the soul, as in his early work *Psychopannyachia*. (Ibid., 32.)”

[508] Paul Helm, *Human Nature*, 41–53. Consider also his discussion of the views of other Reformed theologians, including John Flavel, Robert Purnell, Matthew Hale, Edward Reynolds, Nicholas Mosley, Francis Turretin, John Owen, and Gisbertus Voetius (Ibid., 59–78.).

[509] Bullinger, *Decades*, 272. Here he states that “Man consisteth of soul and body ; and these most contrary in natures between themselves make one person, not two; and whosoever attributed! and defendeth that which is proper to either of them, doth not divide the person. The body sleepeth, the soul sleepeth not: these properties of parts make not two persons.” His approach bears some resemblance to a form of substance dualism (cf. 272, 368–9.), however, the insistence that it is the composition that is one person leads one to think that there may something of a confusion between hylomorphism where the soul and body are substantial parts of one substance, and Augustinian-Platonism, where the soul is a subsisting substance.

[510] Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, *ad* 2. Trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

[511] Cf. Cranmer, “Confutation”, 4 :191.

[512] Cranmer, “Confutation”, 4:173.

[513] Cranmer, “A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine”, 2:320.

[514] Jewell, *Apology*, 177.

[515] Jewell, *Apology*, 191ff.

[516] Bullinger, *Decades*, 122–179.



[517] Bullinger, *Decades*, 138.

[518] Bullinger, *Decades*, 159.

[519] Beza, *Questions*, 1 : 3

[520] Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 200–202.

[521] Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, cited in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 209–212; Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 43.

[522] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4.

[523] Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210. Garrigou-Lagrange stated that the Five Ways were to be understood as intended to demonstrate the principles by which we may deduce the divine attributes from nature. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*, trans. Patrick Cummins (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1950), 61.

[524] See Aquinas, *ST*, Part 1, Question 2, Article 3.

[525] Peter Kreeft, *Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 62. Garrigou-Lagrange states that the common “principle” of each of the Five Ways is that “there is no process to infinity in directly subordinated causes.” Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The One God*, trans. Bede Rose (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1954), 135.

[526] Joseph Owens put it, “Even an infinite regression of these caused causes, however, would not account for the least being in the world. In every instance and in all the instances together there would be only nature that contained no being, nature that merely remained open to receive being from something else. There would be an infinite series of existential zeros. They would never add up to any being at all. In their sum total they would remain from start to finish existentially zero.” Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 2011), 80.

[527] A much better explanation can be found in, John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated*



*Being* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 439.

[528] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 1, Chapter 13.

[529] Aquinas, *ST*, Part 1, Question 22, Article 1. This thesis is again repeated in Part 1, Question 103.

[530] It is this point that resides at the heart of Calvin's doctrine of God and man.

[531] Aquinas, *ST*, Part 1, Question 23, Article 3.

[532] Aquinas, *ST*, Part 1, Question 23, Article 4.

[533] Aquinas, *ST*, Part 1, Question 23, Article 4.

[534] Aquinas, *ST*, Part 1, Question 23, Article 4.

[535] Some might object that I am conflating the meaning of "predestination" with "atonement." The two terms are indeed distinct, and there are many subtleties that should be discussed with relation to the extent and application of the atonement. Nevertheless, these discussions fall well beyond our current thesis and as such must be dismissed. Suffice it to say that this author believes Aquinas' view to be far closer to Calvin's own, regarding this matter, largely due to the fact that they share in the same line of reasoning that we are presently discussing.

[536] Aquinas, *ST*, Part 1, Question 23, Article 7.

[537] Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Doctrines: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520–1725* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), III: 97.

[538] Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 36.

[539] Paul Grendler, "The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57.1 (2004): 14.

[540] Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 348–349. Copleston points out, "Aristotelianism really meant, at that time, philosophy itself." Frederick Copleston, *Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*, vol. 3 of *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday 1993), 3.

[541] Hanna H. Gray, "Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24.4 (Oct. 1963): 497–514.

[542] Albert Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1951), 141.

[543] On the relation between Plato and Renaissance humanism in Calvin's milieu, see Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation*, 148–150. Lucas also noted that Neoplatonic thought thrived in France's humanistic quarters. See, Henry Lucas, *The Renaissance and the Reformation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934), 383.

[544] Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250–1550* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1980), 302–303–305.

[545] Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 162.

[546] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13–14.

[547] Turretin goes so far as to favorably cite Thomas Aquinas' definition of theology when providing his own definition of the term in the opening passages of his *Institutes*. Turretin, *Institutes*, I:2. Ultimately the relation of “God and man” is expressed through the fact that God is “our God”; that He is “covenanted in Christ as he has revealed himself to us in his word not only as the object of knowledge but also of worship.” *Ibid.*, 16.

[548] Calvin, *Institutes*, 5.

[549] K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006), 190. See also, K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 42–43. Frame calls his basic presuppositionalist epistemology “nothing less than generic Calvinism.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 90.

[550] For example, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[551] Alvin Plantinga, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 11.3 (1982): 187–198.

[552] Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom & Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2011), 55.

[553] See, Augustine, *Enchiridion*, §2; *The City of God*, XIV, §28.

[554] «*La sagesse augustinienne est une haute conformité intérieure de l'âme à Dieu qui vit en elle par la grâce et la charité.*» P. Fulbert Cayré, *La contemplation augustinienne* (Bruges-Paris: Desclée et Brouwer, 1954), 266. Translation my own.

[555] The closest we come to such a discussion is found in Book 1, Chapter 15, §6, wherein Calvin wrote: “As man was undoubtedly created to meditate on the heavenly life, so it is certain that the knowledge of it was engraved on the soul.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 109. This passage ultimately finds Calvin agreeing with Plato’s belief that the greatest good for humanity is found in the contemplative life. However, this passage is not presented in epistemological terms, as much as it serves as a jumping off point for Calvin to discuss the moral constitution of man. It goes without saying that Calvin saw the moral constitution of man as an issue of piety.

[556] Calvin, *Institutes*, 7. The first of these benefits, as stated in the opening of the *Institutes*, is the recognition that our very existence is contingent upon His providential act.

[557] Wilhelm Pauck, “Calvin’s ‘Institutes of the Christian Religion’,” *Church History* 15.1 (Mar. 1946), 24. See also, Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), III:130.

[558] This much is evident, as we have already seen, from the opening of the *Institutes*, which declares, ‘that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.’ Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Beveridge, 5. Paul Helm, further, notes that Calvin’s treatment of God as the ‘first cause’ is in direct connection with His providential control of all things. Helm, *Calvin’s Ideas*, 101.

[559] «*Avant d’avoir reçu la foi...il m’est souvent arriver d’expérimenter par une intuition subite la réalité de mon être, du principe profond, premier, qui me pose hors du néant. Intuition puissante, dont la violence parfois m’effrayait et qui la première m’a donné la connaissance d’un absolu métaphysique.*» Jacques Maritain, *Distinguer Pour Unir ou Les Degrés du Savoir* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1946), 552.

[560] «*Ou bien encore, à la vue d’une chose quelconque, d’un brin d’herbe, d’un moulin à vent, une âme saura en un instant que ces choses ne*

sont pas par ells-mêmes, et que Dieu est. Subitement...toutes les creatures m'ont apparu à l'état de symbole, m'ont semblé avoir pour unique fonction de designer le Créateur.» Maritain, *Distinguer Pour Unir*, 552

[561] Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.

[562] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1.

[563] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, Part 1, Question 2, Article 3.

[564] «Tout cela revient à dire que le concept de l'existence ne peut pas être détaché du concept d'essence.» Jacques Maritain, *Court Traité De L'Existence et de L'Existant* (Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1947), 46. See also, Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1956), 139–140.

[565] David S. Hogg, “‘Sufficient for All, Efficient for Some’: Definite Atonement in the Medieval Church,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 75.

[566] Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 95.

[567] Turretin, *Institutes*, I:502.

[568] James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 8.

[569] Calvin, *Institutes*, 610.

[570] Calvin, *Institutes*, 116.

[571] John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke and Co., 1961), 162.

[572] Calvin, *Institutes*, 114.

[573] Calvin, *Institutes*, 116.

[574] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 239.

[575] I do not intend to demonstrate historical influence between Van Til and any previous thinker, though he acknowledges his gleanings from Immanuel Kant. The goal here is a synthetic analysis of the structure and function of his transcendental arguments. Full entries on Transcendental Arguments with accompanying bibliography and discussion of the literature can be found in Robert Stern. “Transcendental Arguments,” *The Stanford*

*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/transcendental-arguments/> as well as Adrian Bardon. “Transcendental Arguments,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (eds.), URL = <http://www.iep.utm.edu/trans-ar/>

[576] Greg Bahnsen. *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998): 5–6.

[577] Cornelius Van Til. *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1969): 10.

[578] Cornelius Van Til. *In Defense of the Faith*, rev. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co, 1967): 77.

[579] There is a worry among writers on this type of argument (whether historians or ethicists) that the term transcendental arguments has been too broadly construed. Although I think the worry is well-justified, I won’t spill any ink on it here.

[580] *Super Boethium De Trinitate* 1.1.c

[581] Enrique Chavez-Arviso, *Descartes: Key Philosophical Writings*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. (Herfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997): 140.

[582] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969): para. 383.

[583] As he admits with reference to Kant.

[584] 1005b35–1006a28.

[585] Christian F. R. Illies. *The Grounds of Ethical Judgement: New Transcendental Arguments in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003): 45–47. Illies distinguishes between two ways of taking the transcendental argument, the exploratory and the retorsive.

[586] For a (relatively) succinct and lucid treatment of Kant’s approach (and the secondary discussion), see Derk Pereboom, “Kant’s Transcendental Arguments,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/kant-transcendental/>.

[587] His so-called “Transcendental Deduction” A84–130/B116–169. Kant’s use of deduction does not mean that he construes the argument of the

section as deductive in our sense.

[588] Obviously, this makes quick work of an enormous amount of material. For discussion, see Peter Frederick Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Methuen, 1966); Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Lawrence Kaye, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories: Unity, Representation, and Apperception* (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

[589] Daniel Coren, "Why Does Aristotle Defend the Principle of Non-Contradiction Against its Contrary?" *The Philosophical Forum* 49 (2018): 39–59. See also Michael V. Wedin, "Aristotle on the Firmness of the Principle of Non-Contradiction" *Phronesis* 49 (2004): 225–265.

[590] It won't do to attempt to analyze the argument that he made using now-standard definitions from the literature, especially because he was a peculiarly insular thinker and those definitions are unlikely to capture his intentions. Since this chapter is not intended to defend the transcendental argument (against skepticism or for the existence of God), I leave it as homework whether developments in partial logics can strengthen (or salvage) his project.

[591] George Dicker, "Kant's Refutation of Idealism," *Nous* 42: 80–108.

[592] In the philosophical literature, the notion of presupposition is somewhat contested, but generally Strawson's account is standard. He says that  $x$  presupposes  $y$  just in case  $y$  is true if  $x$  is true or false. Van Til may have something like this in mind, although he never presents any technical arguments in an analytic style. In fact, his usual strategy was to present the view without recourse to the devices of academic philosophy. Bahnsen gives the example of Van Til's pamphlet, *Why I Believe in God*, and writes, "It was not intended to be philosophically complex in content or overly scholarly in its style ... It offers a profound and readable illustration of the 'transcendental' argument for the truth of the Christian worldview, but without resorting to calling it that or using other philosophical parlance." See *Van Til's Apologetic: Reading and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998): 120. This fact sometimes adds confusion for the academic analysis of the structure of his argument, since he may be using



words (e.g., presupposition) that have a technical meaning in twentieth century analytic philosophy but without submitting to the same lexicon.

[593] He assumes this throughout, but see, for example, Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 84; or, Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1963), 103–4.

[594] Again, the point here is not whether we can formulate a peculiarly strong account of the transcendental argument for God. The point is what we can construe Van Til to have had in mind and how that bears structural similarities to earlier forms of transcendental argument.

[595] It seems one of the biggest complaints against Van Til (particularly with reference to the transcendental argument) is that he does not clearly state what it is. For example, Gordon Clark, “Apologetics,” in *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, 140, or Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 58; both suggest what he is calling a transcendental argument is really fideism.

[596] Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971): 21.

[597] Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 198.

[598] Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* Tracts for Today, no. 9 (Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s Committee on Christian Education), 1948. For the text of the original see, Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 120–143. In this last example, we see clearly the distinction between presupposition and assumption in a more standard sense.

[599] John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994): 73.

[600] Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 500.

[601] I take (3) to be a representative TP given Van Til’s cited comments above.

[602] In fact, Frame seems to hold that Van Til’s argument is something similar: “Without God, there is no meaning (truth, rationality, etc.); therefore, God exists.” John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994): 70.

[603] He offers a theological defense of it. Hence, the reason that he can decry (e.g.) Arminians as well as Catholics and atheists. None of those



groups, on his account, get enough right to have a coherent epistemology.

[604] Again, Frame (rightly in my judgment): “I question whether the transcendental argument can function without the help of subsidiary arguments of a more traditional kind.” Frame, *Apologetics*, 71.

[605] The term “abduction” originates with C. S. Pierce although he meant something different by it than argument to the best explanation.

[606] Such arguments are more plentiful and more sophisticated than the illustrative schematic given here. For examples, see C.S. Lewis *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952); Adams, Robert M., “Moral Arguments for Theism,” in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 144–163; Linda Zagzebski “Does Ethics Need God?” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 4: 294–303; Angus Ritchie *From Morality to Metaphysics: The Theistic Implications of our Ethical Commitments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[607] For discussion of these types of arguments, see William Dembski *The Design Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Rodney Holder *God, the Multiverse, and Everything: Modern Cosmology and the Argument from Design* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Robin Collins “Modern Cosmology and Anthropic Fine-Tuning: Three Approaches,” in *Georges Lemaitre: Life, Science and Legacy*, eds. Rodney Holder and Simon Mitton. (Berlin: Springer, 2012).

[608] Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 501.

[609] Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 502.

[610] Consider, concurring, Barry Stroud, who notes that what makes an argument “transcendental is not its logical form or its subject matter, but its aim or goal. We might speak rather of a transcendental strategy or project, or a transcendental enterprise.” See Barry Stroud, “The Goal of Transcendental Arguments,” in *Transcendental Arguments*, Robert Stern, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999): 157.

[611] And, here he means his confession of Presbyterian theology with all its particularities—even over against other Protestant interpretations on secondary issues.

[612] In this regard, it is important, perhaps, to notice how quickly Van Til moves between philosophical and theological argumentation. Since he

holds that there is common ground between the believer and unbeliever that is nevertheless not neutral ground, it is methodologically consistent for him not to parse a strong distinction between philosophical and theological argumentation.

[613] Van Til, “My Credo,” 21.

[614] Which Van Til believes on authority of Paul in Romans 1:20–21

[615] He, for example, makes no serious inquiry into interpretational issues (whether in terms of biblical hermeneutics or general hermeneutics) which is an unfortunate lacuna in Van Til’s approach.

[616] Throughout most of the history of Christianity, Christian theologians have affirmed the natural law as explained in Romans 2:14–16. Some, however, have contested this understanding, such as Augustine, or Thomas Schreiner, in the 2nd edition of his commentary on Romans (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 131.). Douglas Moo provides an excellent overview of the various positions held on these verses in Romans 2:14–16. In his commentary he argues that it is best to understand Paul as “almost certainly pressing into service a widespread Greek tradition to the effect that all human beings possess an ‘unwritten’ or ‘natural’ law—an innate moral sense of ‘right and wrong.’ (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996), 150.)”

[617] Tim Hsiao, “Consenting Adults, Sex, and Natural Law Theory,” *Philosophia* (2016) 44:515.

[618] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, trans. Ralph McInerny (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 57.

[619] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions*, 107–113. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., London: Collins-Fontana books, 1956), 70.

[620] C. S. Lewis, “Men Without Chests”, in *The Abolition of Man* (1944; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 14–15.

[621] Lewis, “Men Without Chests”, 18.

[622] C. S. Lewis, “Illustrations of the Tao”, in *The Abolition of Man* (1944; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 83–101.

[623] Cf. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 15–16.

[624] An appetite essentially being a desire for some type of good.

[625] Cf. Aquinas, *Disputd Questions*, 23, 107–113, 133, 138.

[626] Clyde Kluckhohn, “Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non” *Journal of Philosophy*, LII (1955).

[627] Lewis, *Abolition of Man*.

[628] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, part 1, section 1, in *Hume’s Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), 33.

[629] Hume, *Human Nature*, 42.

[630] Hume, *Human Nature*, 42.

[631] Hume, *Human Nature*, 43.

[632] Cf. R. Scott Smith, *In Search of Moral Knowledge: Overcoming the Fact-Value Dichotomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 90.

[633] Edward Feser also develops many other problems with David Hume’s philosophy in *The Last Superstition*. Among many other insights, Feser points out that Hume has a problem when he denies that there is any human nature (since he is a nominalist) and yet writes an entire treatise on human nature.

[634] Cf. Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010), 139ff.

[635] Michael S. Jones, *Moral Reasoning: An Intentional Approach to Distinguishing Right From Wrong* (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2017), 41.

[636] John Frame, “Review of David Van Drunen’s *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*”, *The Works of John Frame & Vern Poythress*, <https://frame-poythress.org/review-of-david-van-drunens-a-biblical-case-for-natural-law/> (published May 10, 2012, accessed May 3, 2019).

[637] Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology in One Volume*, (Minneapolis, Bethany House Publishers, 2011): 1200.

[638] J. Budziszewski, *The Line Through the Heart: Natural Law as Fact, Theory, and Sign of Contradiction*, (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011): 114.

[639] John Frame, *Is Natural Revelation Sufficient to Govern Culture?*; <https://frame-poythress.org/is-natural-revelation-sufficient-to-govern-culture/> (Accessed 1/5/2019)

[640] This was inspired from the opening of Charles Dickens work *A Tale of Two Cities*.

[641] As this book was going to press, I learned that Scott Oliphint, professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary and a former mentor of mine, has changed his views concerning the divine attributes and their relationship to the divine essence. By all accounts, he has endeavored to bring his views into closer alignment with the classical theism expressed in the Westminster Standards. I am happy to hear of these changes. Had they been publicized prior to my penning of this chapter, my criticisms of Dr. Oliphint's theology proper would have taken them into account. Nevertheless, his other books—those I quote from—remain in print, and there has been no public indication of which I am aware that they will be updated to reflect the changes in Dr. Oliphint's thinking. Thus, I do not think changes to my chapter are necessary, since (1) I am quoting material still in print and (2) Dr. Oliphint's change of heart notwithstanding, my critique of his former views remains sound.

[642]<sup>2</sup> Cf. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Trinity and God the Creator: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa, Ia*, q. 27–119 (trans. Frederic C. Eckhoff; St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Company, 1952), 76–334; Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation* (Vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 256–334; and, albeit less formally, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 Vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1872), 1:442–534. On the continuity between Medieval Scholasticism and Reformational Theology on this score, see Richard A. Muller, *The Triunity of God* (Vol. 4 of *Post-Reformational Reformed Dogmatics*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 414–420.

[643] Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, vol. 5 of *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 220.

[644] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 229.

[645] As we will later see, Van Til and his students reject the last clause of this proposition.

[646] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 229.

[647] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 229.

[648] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles—Book One: God* (trans. Anton C. Pegis; London/Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 1.5.1—henceforth, *SCG*).

[649] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.7.1. This is also the view of Augustine: “That which truth will reveal cannot in any way be opposed to the sacred books of the Old and New Testament” (*De genesi ad litteram*, II, c. 18; quoted in Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.7.6).

[650] Francis Turretin, *First Through Tenth Topics* (Vol. 1 of *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 32 (italics in original)—henceforth, *Institutes* (vol. 1)).

[651] Thomas held that sin affects the mind indirectly, as original sin is a loss of original justice/righteousness bequeathed to humans via the *donum superadditum*. It infects the will first, and via concupiscence and other sinful desires, goes on to infect all other powers of the soul—including the power to reason. Cf., e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. Ia-Iae.82.3; 83.2–4; 85.3.

[652] Turretin argues that, in articulating a doctrine of original sin, two errors must be avoided. First, we must refrain from the excessive doctrine of original sin, which places its corruption in “the very substance of the soul.” This would so vitiate human nature that we would lose even our ability to know we’re sinning, and so we could not be held responsible for it; and even Christ himself would not be able to take on our nature. It would, indeed, entail “that man after his sanctification and resurrection is different from what he was before” (*Institutes* (vol. 1), 363). Second, there are Roman Catholics who insist that original sin *merely* consists in the lack of original justice. However, Turretin notes that Scripture describes original corruption not merely privatively but positively, for humans “are not only destitute of righteousness, but also full of unrighteousness” (*Institutes* (vol. 1), 637). Of course, Thomas comes quite close to Turretin on this score, since he did *not* believe original sin was *merely* the loss of original justice (cf. n. 10 above).

[653] Turretin, *Institutes* (vol. 1), 24.

[654] Turretin, *Institutes* (vol. 1), 24–25. Aquinas concurs with Turretin here, at least in broad strokes. According to Aquinas, there is a twofold cause as to why people generally never attain a correct natural theology—(1) their limited cognitive faculties (i.e., partly from falsity inhering in their judgments/conclusions derived from first principles; partly from being bound by sense images, thereby being unable to rise up to metaphysical truths), which often lead them to error; and (2) the blindness of their hearts due to sinful malice. For more on this, see Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.4.5; along with his *Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (trans. Matthew L. Lamb; Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), 176.

[655] Turretin, *Institutes* (vol. 1), 25.

[656] Turretin, *Institutes* (vol. 1), 28.

[657] Turretin, *Institutes* (vol. 1), 28—italics added. Notice that, for Turretin, our arguments with atheists can be *either* theological *or* philosophical, meaning that philosophical arguments can, indeed, stand on their own as *proofs* for God’s existence.

[658] “Although the judgment of contradiction is allowed to reason in matters of faith, it does not follow that the human intellect becomes the rule of the divine power (as if God could not do more things than human reason can conceive). God’s being able to do something above nature and human conception (which is said with truth in Eph. 3:20) is different from his being able to do something contrary to nature and the principles of natural religion (which is most false). Nor is the power of God in this manner limited by the rule of our intellect, but our mind judges from the word what (according to the nature of a thing established by God) may be called possible or impossible” (Turretin, *Institutes* (vol. 1), 34).

[659] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 330. Later, while discussing God’s triunity, Turretin answers the common objection that the Trinity is inherently contradictory, not by disparaging human reason, but by showing that the doctrine in no way breaks the law of noncontradiction: “One in number substantively as to essential unity cannot be three in the same respect; but it can be three adjectively and personally as to the personal Trinity” (*Institutes* (vol. 1), 271).

[660] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 Vols.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1872), 1:52.



[661] Notice that Hodge is referring not merely to a *claim* to revelation, but an *authenticated* revelation. For a few modern works that have offered such an authentication, see Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Jason Lisle, *Faith in an Age of Reason: Refuting Alleged Bible Contradictions* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2017); Gleason L. Archer Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); James E. Smith, *What the Bible Teaches about the Promised Messiah* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993); Michael L. Brown, *Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Vol. 3 of *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Graham Twelftree, *Jesus: The Miracle Worker* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999); and Gary R. Habermas & Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004); R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005), 63–90; John W. Wenham, *Christ & The Bible* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Wayne A. Grudem, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; D. A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 19–59; Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Vol. 1 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*; ed. Ethelbert D. Warfield, William Park Armstrong, and Caspar Wistar Hodge; 1932 repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 229–391); Hugh Ross, *Navigating Genesis: A Scientist’s Journey Through Genesis 1–11* (Covina, CA: Reasons to Believe, 2014); Hugh Ross, *Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job: How the Oldest Book in the Bible Answers Today’s Scientific Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); and Robert Sheldon, *The Long Ascent—Genesis 1–11 in Science and Myth: Volume 1* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2017)). For an historical vindication of the continuity between classical apologetics and Reformed theology, see J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classical Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019). For a full defense of the distinction between sufficient and efficient grace, which seems to be a crucial doctrine for making sense of the classical apologetic, see Travis James Campbell, *The Wonderful Decree: Reconciling*



*Sovereign Election and Universal Benevolence* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), chapter 7.

[662] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:52–53.

[663] Thankfully, there are many resources out there defending the vital doctrine of simplicity. For a very helpful, recent, work on this issue, see Joseph Minich and Onsi A. Kamel, eds., *The Lord is One: Reclaiming Divine Simplicity* (The Davenant Press, 2019).

[664] To say that God is “pure logic” is no more problematic than saying he is “pure goodness.” Just as it is appropriate to say that goodness itself is uncreated, and we creatures can analogically exemplify goodness when we think and act righteously, so also we say that logic itself is uncreated, and we creatures can analogically exemplify logic when we think and act consistency.

[665] *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 229.

[666] Van Til’s quotation of Bavinck cannot help him get out of the tight spot in which he has placed himself, for there Bavinck is agreeing with the Thomists when they insist that the persons are not distinct from the essence, even though they are distinct from one another. Cf. Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 304.

[667] I.e., the spiritual and intimate “inter-penetration” of the members of the Trinity in such a way that, functionally speaking, the act as if they are one person.

[668] Notice that, in denying there are three intelligences in God, Hodge is implicitly denying Van Til’s assertion that God is both one-consciousness and tri-consciousness. As Hodge himself says, God is “one mind.”

[669] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:461.

[670] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462.

[671] Lane G. Tipton, “The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002): 292.

[672] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:461.

[673] Tipton, “Function of Perichoresis,” 292.

[674] Tipton, “Function of Perichoresis,” 293.

[675] I.e., the eternal *processions* of the divine persons within the divine essence. This is God’s nature without any consideration of how God relates

to the creature, wherein the divine persons are co-eternal, consubstantial, and thus co-equal with one another (cf. John 10:30).

[676] I.e., the eternal *missions* of the divine persons for the purpose of redeeming humankind. This is God's nature via an understanding of how God relates to the creature, wherein each member of the Trinity takes upon himself a specific task or role or function or mission in the story of redemption. Thus, in the divine economy of redemption, wherein each person takes on a specific role in salvation, there is a functional subordination of one member with respect to another (cf. John 14:28). Hence, in a remotely analogical and economical sense, God the Son is a center of self-awareness who is distinct from the self-consciousness of his Father.

[677] John M. Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective* (ed. Gary North; Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1979), 307 (n. 56). One could *possibly* maintain that Van Til is defining "person" this way only with respect to the economical Trinity. However, in context, as Frame himself notes, it is the *Nicene* formulation of which he speaks and, thus, he is addressing the ontological Trinity.

[678] Tipton, "Function of Perichoresis," 293.

[679] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 225; cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:461.

[680] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 230.

[681] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 230.

[682] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 231.

[683] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 231.

[684] K. Scott Oliphint, "Cornelius Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint & Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), 285—italics in original.

[685] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 11. Bahnsen, who is perhaps Van Til's greatest interpreter, is somewhat ambiguous on the issue of whether the laws of logic are created. See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), 110 (n. 65); and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Presuppositional*

*Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (ed. Joel McDurmon; Powder Springs, GA & Nacogdoches, TX: American Vision Press & Covenant Media Press, 2008), 104.

[686] Oliphint, “Van Til and the Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” 293 (italics added).

[687] Cf., e.g., Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 133–139. This chapter I am citing here is actually a prior written essay for the *Calvin Forum* entitled, “Kant or Christ?”

[688] Cf. John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 45–46.

[689] Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, vol. 2 of *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, n.d.), 3—henceforth, *Survey*.

[690] Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 169 (n. 40).

[691] Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 94.

[692] Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 67.

[693] K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 40–41—italics in original. Elsewhere Oliphint offers a helpful exposition of Kant, and also shows how modern theologians, like Don Cupitt, have been affected by his critical philosophy (cf. K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 63–79). He then critiques the Thomistic *analogia entis* and replaces it with an *analogia revelationis* (*Reasons for Faith*, 105–119). Oliphint believes his analogy of revelation allows us to say that, when Scripture says “God is good,” we are learning something that is true of God’s essence (*Reasons for Faith*, 119–120). Unfortunately, this whole schema is exploded in a single footnote: “... because God’s *modus essendi* [i.e., essential mode] partakes of both essential and covenantal (accidental) properties, the predication of God as good can refer to God’s covenantal properties and, thereby, relate also to his essential character. In other words, *as revelation*, the goodness of God is itself a condescension of God to us in order to speak to us in a way that we might meaningfully know him” (*Reasons for Faith*, 117 (n. 30)—italics in original). If God’s *modus essendi* lacked covenantal (accidental)

characteristics, then we would never know the divine essence. But notice that “goodness” itself is a covenantal property. How does the essence of God relate to his covenantal properties? Are they creations of his, serving as a sort of blueprint of how God wants us to think of him? If so, then they are creations of God that we know, but fail to really manifest the essential God standing behind them. So Kant’s gulf still remains. As Oliphint himself says, God’s “*modus essendi* is not and cannot be known *as such* (that is, we cannot fully comprehend the concept of simplicity), but can be known as revealed” (*Reasons for Faith*, 117—italics in original). Or, perhaps they are contingently related to God in the sense that they have been absorbed into the divine essence itself. But this would introduce contingency into the one who is pure act. God would then become a contingent being, a composition of actuality and potentiality, and, thus, composite or not simple. He would therefore need a cause for his own existence. Oliphint seemingly embraces this startling conclusion when he tells us that “it is not the case that God cannot himself ‘contain’ passive potentialities. He can, and does ‘contain’ those potentialities as a covenant God, as a God who makes the object of his will something other than himself” (*Reasons for Faith*, 251). Notice that Oliphint places the word *contain* in quotes, perhaps to suggest that this is merely a *façon de parler*, indicating that, in reality, these covenantal characteristics are not actually a part of the divine essence. If so, the gulf remains and we still don’t know God *himself* via his revelation.

[694] So, notice the following words of Oliphint: “Contrary to some opinions, God is in fact Totally Other. But there is nothing intrinsic to this truth that would preclude God from revealing himself to his creatures” (*Covenantal Apologetics*, 41). Actually, there is! Indeed, to speak of God as “wholly other” or “totally other” is, in fact, to say that God is *wholly* equivocal. Therefore, the word “good,” for example, when predicated upon God must mean something *totally other* or *wholly different* than what it means when we use the word in day-to-day discourse. Thus, we simply do not know what we mean when we say that “God is good.” The same is true of *all* of the divine attributes. God remains aloof and unknowable in his “wholly other” realm. Thus, again, even the contingent or covenantal properties God takes on at creation can never be true manifestations of the divine essence itself, but they are, at best, ways in which God wants us to

think of him. This is not really divine propositional revelation, but a human-divine encounter that can never really be described in human language. We thus have no verifiable Word from God, telling us who and what God really is! This entire schema contradicts Scripture, which (on the one hand) says God is *radically* (though not wholly) other than his creatures (Isaiah 55:8–9), and yet (on the other hand) says that we are made in the divine image and are even able to be partakers of the divine nature itself (Gen 1:26; 2 Pet 1:4). In other words, God’s nature is extremely different than ours is, and yet this difference itself does not exclude any and all similarity between the Creator and the creature. What is this biblical teaching, if not (in seed form) an endorsement of Thomas’ *analogia entis*? In preserving the analogy of being between Creator and creature, we at one and the same time lay a foundation for both sacred theology (e.g., the propositional revelation of holy writ) and natural theology (e.g., using first principles to attain a clearer knowledge of the Creator). For a full defense of the analogy of being, see Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis—Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* (trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

[695] These insights are not original. And yet, there is not a specific source from which they are derived. They come from my interactions via lectures from and conversations with classical apologists over the years. Thus, I am indebted to thinkers such as Norman Geisler, Richard Howe, and many others for these insights. Rather than allow Kant to set the program on how to defend the faith, classical apologists have always resisted Kantianism altogether, insisting that the entire tree (root and branch) must be cut down, rooted out, and thrown into the flames. For full critiques of Kant, see Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God—His Existence and Nature: A Thomistic Solution to Certain Agnostic Antinomies* (2 Vols.; trans. Dom Bede Rose; St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Company, 1934), 1:3–241; 2:268–445; Robert Flint, *Agnosticism* (1903 repr.; Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 140–190; and Stuart C. Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism: Prolegomena to Christian Apology* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 37–113.

[696] The dialogue begins on 235, ending on 257 of *Covenantal Apologetics*. We begin on 247.

[697]. This, in a nutshell, is the transcendental argument, which is central to Van Tillian apologetics. The argument *may* be construed as follows: presuppose  $p \vee \sim p$ ;  $p$  is the necessary precondition for reliably affirming either  $p \vee \sim p$ . More carefully,  $q$  presupposes  $p$  iff  $q \rightarrow p \vee \sim q \rightarrow p$ . For other formulations, see Don Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument,” in *Revelation and Reason*, 269–275; Michael R. Butler, “The Transcendental Argument for God’s Existence,” in *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen* (ed. Steven M. Schlissel; Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 65–124; Robert Stern, ed., *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), *passim*; and Immanuel Kant, *The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (trans. Gordon Treash; Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). Aristotle gave a similar argument for the law of noncontradiction in *Metaphysics*, Bk 4. He rightly points out that any attempt to deny the law of noncontradiction is really an affirmation of it. This should convince us that the idea that the laws of logic are created is absurd, for these principles of right reason are eternal and necessary truths. Van Til himself says that “the only argument for an absolute God that holds water is a transcendental argument.” Hence, “It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or in affirmation, unless it were for God’s existence” (Van Til, *A Survey*, 11). Three major problems continue to plague most Van Tillian formulations of transcendental arguments. First, as Craig notes, many presuppositionalists often confuse “transcendental reasoning with what medievals called *demonstratio quia*, proof that proceeds from consequence to ground” (William Lane Craig, “A Classical Apologist’s Response,” in *Five Views on Apologetics* (ed. Steven B. Cowan; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 233). For example, in his famous debate with Gordon Stein, Greg Bahnsen argued that, apart from God, there can be no immaterial laws of logic, laws of morality, nor laws of induction (which actually presuppose the uniformity of nature, and serve as the foundation for the natural sciences). But, so formulated, his argument is not formally transcendental, for in each case one is arguing from a consequence (e.g., objective morality) to its ground (i.e., God). Second, even if the non-Christian is forced to admit, on pain of irrationality, that



God is the necessary precondition for human rationality, he need not concede the specifically *Christian* perspective. For while the Van Tillian often *does* demonstrate the utter absurdity of atheism, for instance,—a good example being Bahnsen vis-à-vis Stein—he has yet to demonstrate, via *transcendental* reasoning, any doctrine *unique* to *Christianity* (e.g., the Trinity; the Incarnation). Thus, even after one concedes the conclusion of the transcendental argument—i.e., God exists—Judaism and Islam remain live options. For more on this, which includes an analysis of the Bahnsen-Stein debate, see Sean Choi, “The Transcendental Argument,” in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith* (ed. Norman L. Geisler & Chad V. Meister; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 231–247. Finally, as we note in the dialogue, if your ultimate principle is formally contradictory, then it cannot serve as a transcendental for anything. It is truly ironic that the Van Tillian strongly criticizes the classicist *and* evidentialist for concluding, on the basis of their apologetical arguments, that Christian theism is only *probably* true. For his promise to us that we can know with certainty that *Christian* theism is true via the *transcendental* method is an empty promise which has never been fulfilled. In the end, Van Tillians can only give us a *feeling* of *certitude* that will always fall short of genuine certainty.

[698]. “The whole problem of knowledge has constantly been that of bringing the one and the many together” (Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 10).

[699]. “As Christians, we hold that in this universe we deal with a derivative one and many, which can be brought into fruitful relation with one another because, back of both, we have in God the original One and Many. If we are to have coherence in our experience, there must be a correspondence of our experience to the eternally coherent experience of God. Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition” (Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 23—underlining in original).

[700]. Any Van Tillians reading this may begin to wonder how I might offer a critique of Islam. My critique would look quite similar to Bahnsen’s (*Van Til’s Apologetic*, 525 (n. 126)). Note, however, that Bahnsen’s critique



of Islam is not much different than the one offered in Norman L. Geisler & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), Part Two. The point here is that, any rational internal critique the Van Tillian may offer nontheistic systems is equally available to the other Abrahamic faiths. And any internal critique the Van Tillian may offer to Islam, for example, has already been offered by the classical Christian apologist. So, again, while the transcendental argument may very well prove the existence of the infinite-personal God of Abrahamic theism, it cannot prove any *essential* and *unique* tenet of *Christian* theism.

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