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REVELATIONAL FOUNDATIONALISM: A CONSTRUCTIVE
SYNTHESIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF CORNELIUS
VAN TIL AND ALVIN PLANTINGA

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REVELATIONAL FOUNDATIONALISM: A CONSTRUCTIVE
SYNTHESIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF CORNELIUS
VAN TIL AND ALVIN PLANTINGA

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PREFACE

Throughout the course of my education, I have received much support and assistance from several individuals and organizations. This dissertation is not so much the culmination of the work of a single individual as it is a representation of the hard work and dedication of those who have made sacrifices on my behalf.

As a student of Southern Seminary for more than a decade, I am indebted to both the leaders and teachers of such a fine school. I am grateful for Southern Seminary's executive committee, which provided an ongoing opportunity for military members to continue uninterrupted in their studies at the school during a time of administrative change. The theological faculty at Southern Seminary has always pointed me in the right direction on issues of doctrine and spirituality. In particular, I am indebted to Albert Mohler for always finding the time to take my calls and make book and faculty recommendations commensurate with my research goals. His wisdom ensured that the marathon of dissertation writing started on solid ground. Likewise, my faculty supervisor, Stephen Wellum has been instrumental in funneling my academic interests toward a specific subject matter. Without his guidance, this project would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank John Frame for his insightful and pastoral correspondence over the course of a decade from which much of the material for this dissertation was birthed. Through his work, I was first introduced to the major interlocuters at play in the current discussion of Reformed and presuppositional epistemology. Additionally, Brad Green, Timothy Jones, and James Anderson have also generously donated their time to ensure that each voice in this paper received fair treatment and accurate representation.

I could not have completed this project without the love and support of my family. My parents, sister, and in-laws have helped shape who I am and have always provided helpful feedback during my studies. The contributions of my own family throughout my academic career have been immense. My three children are a constant support and a joy to behold. My wife, Julia, has sacrificed in countless ways for me to pursue my academic goals, and I could never have completed my degree without her love and encouragement.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, postmodernism has unleashed a critique of the assumptions of the modern world brought about by the Enlightenment.¹ The Enlightenment cherished reason as the authoritative test for reality which was assumed to be accessible to the human mind.² Reason was not subject to tradition or community and could transcend the boundaries of external limitations as an autonomous self.³ What was true was true for all people, in all places, at all times. However, today the quest for certainty, objective, and universal knowledge is no longer in vogue or viewed as possible. The subjective influence that one's values exert on one's interpretation of reality has become a cardinal ingredient in contemporary formulations of epistemology.⁴

Foundationalist conceptions of knowledge which attempt to achieve indubitable certainty have come under fierce criticism.⁵ In fact, Merold Westphal comments, "That [foundationalism] is philosophically indefensible is so widely agreed

¹ For a discussion of postmodernism's critique of the Enlightenment, see John R. Franke, "Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory: Theology and the Nonfoundationalist Turn," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 105–22.

² Steven B. Sherman, *Revitalizing Theological Epistemology: Holistic Evangelical Approaches to the Knowledge of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 254.

³ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 4.

⁴ Michael A. Van Horn, *Within My Heart: The Enlightenment Epistemic Reversal and the Subjective Justification of Religious Belief* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 2.

⁵ Foundationalism has many variants. Unless otherwise indicated, my use of the term "foundationalism" is shorthand for classical foundationalism. Foundationalism, in general, is a theory of knowledge in which propositions are justified by being believed on the evidential basis of other propositions until one reaches a foundational level belief (basic belief) which is not accepted on the evidential basis of other beliefs. Classical foundationalism maintains that the only acceptable basic beliefs are those that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. For a discussion and definition of classical foundationalism, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82–85.

that its demise is the closest thing to a philosophical consensus in decades.”⁶ In the midst of such uncertainty, according to John Franke, “foundationalists are convinced that the only way to solve this problem is to find some means of grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge on invincible certainty.”⁷ Yet, the project of classical foundationalism and its quest for epistemological certitude appears dead, or at least terminally ill.⁸

Offering a contemporary critique of classical foundationalism, Alvin Plantinga argues in “Reason and Belief in God” that foundationalism itself has been in retreat for some time and that even non-classical forms of foundationalism have attracted strong suspicion if not outright opposition.⁹ One is left wondering whether a foundation for knowledge is even possible in the first place.¹⁰ If so, then what implications does this have for theology and apologetics?

In light of the foundationalist demise, many have offered alternative non-foundationalist approaches to knowledge.¹¹ Others have sought to revive the

⁶ Merold Westphal, “A Reader’s Guide to ‘Reformed Epistemology,’” *Perspectives* 7, no. 9 (November 1992): 10–11.

⁷ Franke, “Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory,” 109.

⁸ James Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology: An Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga’s Religious Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 54.

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93; see also Plantinga’s latest treatment of classical foundationalism in Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 94–97.

¹⁰ One contemporary attempt to wrestle with this question is Randal Rauser, *Theology in Search of Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Notable alternatives include Ted Poston, *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009); Paul Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). For nonfoundationalist connections to theology, see John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

foundationalist project by adjusting some of its constituent elements.¹² Alvin Plantinga, for example, critiques classical foundationalism, but he still believes that a revised version of foundationalism is viable for Christian theology and knowledge in general. He argues in his subsequent work *Warrant and Proper Function* that classical foundationalism cannot account for knowledge stemming from memory beliefs, *a priori* beliefs, moral beliefs, and beliefs about the mental lives of other persons.¹³ In Plantinga's estimation, "a weak foundationalism" can account for such beliefs if knowledge is warranted true belief and if that warrant is obtained by the proper function of human cognitive faculties in a good design plan aimed at truth.¹⁴

Plantinga uses his epistemological schema to make a contribution to Christian philosophy and theology by ruling out *de jure* objections against Christianity's epistemic status.¹⁵ In the final volume of Plantinga's trilogy on warrant, *Warranted Christian Belief*, he proposes that "if theistic belief is true, then it seems likely that it does have warrant."¹⁶ Further, he argues that the proper basicity of certain beliefs about God can

¹² Classical foundationalism is often called strong foundationalism, while non-classical foundationalism is often called weak foundationalism. For some weak foundationalists proposals, see Steven L. Porter, *Restoring the Foundations of Epistemic Justification: A Direct Realist and Conceptualist Theory of Foundationalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006); Scott F. Aikin, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Jack C. Lyons, *Perception and Basic Beliefs: Zombies, Modules, and the Problem of the External World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell, eds., *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Paul K. Moser, *Empirical Justification* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1985).

¹³ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

¹⁴ See Plantinga's discussion of weak foundationalism in Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 11 (1982): 194ff. For Plantinga's initial assessment of the necessary conditions for warrant, see Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 17.

¹⁵ Oliver Wiertz, "Is Plantinga's A/C Model an Example of Ideologically Tainted Philosophy?," in *Plantinga's Warranted Christian Belief: Critical Essays with a Reply by Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Dieter Schönecker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 85.

¹⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 188–89.

serve as a sufficient foundation for knowledge.¹⁷ Yet, Plantinga’s work in providing an account for weak foundationalism has some significant lacunae from a biblical-theological perspective. In all fairness, given his overall approach in addressing these issues from within the university, Plantinga’s intention is not to provide all of the biblical and theological material which undergirds his epistemology, although he does provide some. Still, more needs to be said, and some aspects of his proposal would benefit from a more robust theological treatment.¹⁸

In close intellectual and historical proximity to Plantinga, Cornelius Van Til also offers insight into what may be the foundations of knowledge but in a more theological way, with certain philosophical implications, and in a different context. Van Til was trained in philosophy, but his calling was to train men for ministry. Thus, he possesses a strong theological orientation. His works sustain a tighter focus on theology as he seeks to combat the encroachment of all forms of non-Christian thinking in the church. Van Til’s overall project is to present a consistent Reformed apologetic in the context of applying J. Gresham Machen’s antithesis between orthodox Christianity and liberalism.¹⁹ As a clarion call to be faithful to Christ in all of one’s thought-life, Van Til seeks to make the Christian epistemologically self-conscious by elaborating on the antithesis between believing and unbelieving thought.²⁰ Being dependent on the triune God of Scripture and his Word as the only presupposition²¹ which preserves the

¹⁷ Paul Helm, *Faith, Form, and Fashion: Classical Reformed Theology and Its Postmodern Critics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 218–19. Note that this form of foundationalism is classified as weak or modified foundationalism.

¹⁸ See, for example, the short list of objections against Plantinga’s framework in William D. Dennison, *In Defense of the Eschaton: Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. James Douglas Baird (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 34.

¹⁹ John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 41–42.

²⁰ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 46.

²¹ The term “presupposition” as used here means the necessary preconditions for knowledge.

intelligibility of human thought, and having a robust doctrine of creation and natural revelation, Van Til's method sought to provide a self-consciously biblical and theological approach to account for the foundations of knowledge.²²

Van Til's approach to dealing with questions of epistemology has led to the attribution that he is the father of presuppositionalism.²³ He argues that not only *can* Christianity provide the foundation for knowledge, a sentiment with which Plantinga would agree, but that *only* Christianity provides the foundation for knowledge.²⁴ The exclusive nature of Van Til's assertion is quite different from Plantinga's. For Plantinga, his primary effort is to remove objections to the rationality of Christianity and then to demonstrate that Christianity is probably warranted if it is true. However, in Van Til's thought, nothing is even probable unless Christianity is true.²⁵ Both men are making important points, given their respective contexts. What is needed is a more robust epistemology and apologetic that combines the insights of both men. The more consistent Reformed theological system from which Van Til develops his epistemology provides some helpful corrections to Plantinga's framework. Yet, Van Til's explication is also not without its flaws. Van Til suffers in many places from a lack of clarity, and some aspects

²² Steven D. West, *Resurrection, Scripture, and Reformed Apologetics: A Test for Consistency in Theology and Apologetic Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 179.

²³ Presuppositionalism has various meanings depending upon who is using the term. For a summary of the various meanings, see James K. Beilby, *Thinking about Christian Apologetics: What It Is and Why We Do It* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 99–100. Van Til uses the term “presupposition” to indicate a belief which must be held in order for any part of reality to be intelligible. For Van Til's use, see Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 58–59.

²⁴ Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: P&R, 1971), 21.

²⁵ K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 18. Van Til does not use the term “warrant.” Plantinga uses the term in reference to that enough of which grants true belief the status of knowledge. For Van Til, the very ideas of possibility and probability already presuppose the ontological Trinity. See Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 197.

of his epistemology require modification.²⁶ There are many areas of Van Til's thought that could benefit from the analytic precision of Plantinga's Reformed epistemology.

The close connection between the two men and their systems of thought are striking. Both Plantinga and Van Til studied at Calvin College under the same tutelage of philosopher William Harry Jellema.²⁷ Both men came from Dutch Reformed Calvinist traditions. Both men make significant contributions to the fields of philosophy and apologetics. Unfortunately, however, neither of them seriously interacted with the work of the other.²⁸ In subsequent literature, the situation does not fare much better.²⁹ The philosophical systems of Plantinga and Van Til are not often compared side by side, and few have allowed them to interact with one another.³⁰ One reason for the non-interaction between these two thinkers is that Van Til is often misunderstood.³¹ Plantinga writes,

Perhaps [John Calvin] means to say that those who don't know God suffer much wider ranging cognitive deprivation and, in fact, don't really have any knowledge at all. (This view is at any rate attributed (rightly or wrongly) to some of his followers, for example, Cornelius Van Til.) That seems a shade harsh, particularly because

²⁶ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 32.

²⁷ A brief introduction to the intertwining history of Plantinga and Van Til can be found in Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott*, A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements, and Ideas in the English-Speaking World 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 125, 140.

²⁸ Plantinga's development of Reformed epistemology was not influenced by Van Til either positively or negatively. See Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 31.

²⁹ John Frame laments the fact that Van Til has not been taken seriously by those who ought to be interested in what he has to say—for example, the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. See Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 37.

³⁰ Some notable exceptions are James N. Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (April 2005): 49–75; B. A. Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox: An Interpretation and Refinement of the Theological Approach of Cornelius Van Til* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014); Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016); Owen Anderson, *Reason and Worldviews: Warfield, Kuyper, Van Til, and Plantinga on the Clarity of General Revelation and Function of Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008); Brian K. Morley, *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015); K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006).

³¹ See the discussion of Van Til's isolationism in contemporary academia in Water A. Elwell, ed., *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 162.

many who don't believe in God seem to know a great deal more about some topics than most believers do.³²

If Plantinga believes that Van Til teaches that the unregenerate can have no knowledge of anything, it is understandable that he did not seriously consider Van Til's thought. Yet, there are other reasons for Plantinga's lack of engagement with Van Til. The two men are in different contextual circles of Reformed Christianity. There are intramural theological debates within these circles regarding the doctrine of sin, common grace, Calvinism, and anthropology. Additionally, Plantinga is integrated into a university setting and his writings are cast into the wider sphere of higher education. Van Til, on the other hand, worked primarily within a seminary and church setting.

Thesis

I will argue that a constructive synthesis of certain select philosophical and theological ideas of Plantinga and Van Til, as they are taken together and allowed to critically interact, provides a more robust Christian epistemology than either of them can deliver on their own. There are some aspects of Van Til's epistemology which benefit from Plantinga's. There are also some areas of Plantinga's epistemology which benefit from Van Til's. Had each man personally known the other, they would perhaps have developed such a synthesis on their own. Sadly, they never worked together on such a collaborative project. The task, then, lies to later thinkers to put the pieces together and formulate something with more scriptural explanatory power.

The goal of this project is not merely to compare and contrast the two thinkers, although that will certainly be a part of the project. What each man has said is well documented already, and it would not be too difficult to pinpoint some their differences,

³² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 217.

as has already been observed.³³ Yet, no complete comparison between Van Til and Plantinga exists. It will be important to this project to provide an account of the two thinkers in their own contexts to serve as the backdrop upon which further analysis is possible. This study builds on the comparative and moves to the integrative. My goal is to learn from both thinkers and to bring them into conversation with each other with the goal of a contribution to Christian epistemology. The integrative approach of the current project is not merely descriptive but also synthetic. How can we learn from both men and then bring them together to provide a contribution to Christian theology? In what ways can the ideas of both men be combined to answer relevant questions more comprehensively? Can we explain the foundation of knowledge better by combining the philosophical and theological work of Plantinga and Van Til? I believe the answer to this latter question is yes, but these are the questions which this dissertation is concerned to answer.

Methodology

In order to develop the thesis, I will concentrate on several key areas of philosophical and theological debate. No one project can say everything that can be said about any particular topic and thus this work is necessarily selective. The written corpus of each author spans a multitude of subjects. The ones selected for examination in this project have a special connection to the development of a Christian epistemology and an explanation of the foundations of knowledge.

Additionally, the particular *loci* under consideration are relevant to both philosophers. Each thinker must have something to say, whether directly or indirectly, about the given topic. This is not to say that the terms that the two philosophers use must

³³ A helpful enumerated list of agreements and disagreements can be found in James N. Anderson, "Cornelius Van Til and Alvin Plantinga: A Brief Comparison," Proginosko, 2002, https://www.proginosko.com/docs/cvt_ap_comp.html.

be the same. It is to say, however, that in order to integrate a concept from one philosophical system into another, there must be a place for it.

Each chapter will introduce a particular topic which is of great significance for the development of a Christian epistemology. After describing the general nature of the subject, I will present what Van Til and Plantinga have to say on the matter using a combination of primary and secondary source material. Having thus surveyed the development of the topic from both men, each chapter will then analyze the thought of one philosopher in light of the other, making modifications and adjustments where necessary. The results of the constructive analysis will be concluded at the end of each chapter and will serve as anchors from which the final pages propose a specific version of Christian epistemology I am calling “revelational foundationalism.”³⁴ This theory is the fruit of a critical appropriation of the philosophies of both Plantinga and Van Til and will help to show the thesis that what is produced by a mixture of their philosophies is a more robust Christian epistemology than either man arrives at on his own.

No work can begin unless some assumptions are made at the beginning. There is no view from nowhere.³⁵ One’s worldview affects how one reasons and how one evaluates which reasons count as good ones.³⁶ As a matter of intellectual honesty and in order to provide some context from which the reader may follow the argument, the

³⁴ Christian theology in general has argued for a kind of revelational foundationalism. See Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 1, *God Who Speaks and Shows* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 325–26. The term has been used by some in a pejorative sense in which knowledge is grounded in the revelation of God, whether in general revelation or special revelation. See Jason A. Springs, *Towards a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 119, 125; Juha Ahvio, *Theological Epistemology of Contemporary American Confessional Reformed Apologetics* (Helsinki: Luther Agricola Society, 2005), 191; Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 300. However, I use the term to affirm the historical position in Christian theology that the foundation of knowledge is general revelation but also that there is a specific relation of general revelation to special revelation.

³⁵ Alan G. Padgett, *Science and the Study of God: A Mutuality Model for Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 24.

³⁶ See the discussion of the nontheoretical foundations of theoretical thought in Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 23–24.

following are some of the underlying commitments which guide the development of the thesis.

I am writing within historic Reformed Christianity holding to the five principles of *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Deo gloria*. I hold to Scripture as the final arbiter in all subject matters.³⁷

The general approach in this project is theological and philosophical. It is theological because both Plantinga and Van Til are influenced by Reformed theology in varying degrees. John Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* features prominently in their epistemological proposals. Yet, there are theological differences between the two men which lead them to different, but similar, conclusions. My approach is also philosophical because Van Til and Plantinga are Christian philosophers who seek to explain how believers and unbelievers can have knowledge. Analyzing the contributions of both men will necessarily involve some distinctive philosophical vocabulary.

Summary of Research

Many philosophers throughout the ages have attempted to develop an epistemology informed by Scripture and theology.³⁸ The works of Plantinga and Van Til are examples of such attempts. Yet, very few thinkers have made the conscious effort to bring the insights of both of these men together in a constructive way such that the thoughts of one are allowed to influence the system of the other and vice versa. The summary of research that follows is a collection of some essays that at least make mention of both Plantinga and Van Til together in the context of a Christian

³⁷ It is also possible that one's interpretation of Scripture is at fault. Yet even here, Scripture rules over hermeneutical method. See Jason B. Hunt, *Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of God and Its Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 209.

³⁸ See Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing: A Scriptural Epistemology of Error* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013); Sherman, *Revitalizing Theological Epistemology*.

epistemology. After a brief description of each of the works, I will make a few remarks concerning how their purpose differs from my own.

James Anderson has written an essay on the theistic arguments of Plantinga and Van Til.³⁹ In this work, he argues that both men share similar concerns in their apologetic methodology. Both men argue from a Christian worldview. Van Til is explicitly transcendental in his methodology, whereas Plantinga makes use of traditional *modus ponens* argumentation.⁴⁰ Anderson presents several arguments from each philosopher for the existence of God and compares and contrasts them with one another. He offers a way forward by identifying some ways in which the arguments could be improved upon by drawing on the insights of the others. The development, however, is mostly left for future projects, this current one being a direct response to Anderson's call. Anderson's work is an important conversation starter, but now that conversation needs to progress.

B. A. Bosserman offers an expanded account of the idea of paradox or mystery within Van Til's framework.⁴¹ He discusses Anderson's unique contribution to theological paradox using both the philosophy of Van Til as well as Plantinga. Both thinkers regard the belief in God as properly basic, in need of no further inductive or

³⁹ Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God."

⁴⁰ Transcendental, as used here, refers not to arguing for a transcendent being nor arguing from a transcendent intuition but rather arguing in a way that transcends deductive and inductive reasoning by setting forth the necessary preconditions for logic, reasoning, and argumentation. For an overview of various ways of arguing transcendentially, see Peter Bieri, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, and Lorenz Krüger, eds., *Transcendental Arguments and Science: Essays in Epistemology* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1979). For more specific examples of transcendental argumentation, see Ronney Mourad, *Transcendental Arguments and Justified Christian Belief* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005); Sean Choi, "The Transcendental Argument," in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 231–47; Bálint Békefi, "Van Til versus Stroud: Is the Transcendental Argument for Christian Theism Viable?," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 2, no. 1 (2017): 136–60; Adrian Bardon, "Performative Transcendental Arguments," *Philosophia* 33 (2005): 69–95; Don Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (Fall 2003): 289–306; Robert Stern, ed., introduction to *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2003), 1–12.

⁴¹ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*.

deductive proof.⁴² Both Plantinga and Van Til are reliant upon John Calvin's insistence that knowledge of the Creator is integrated with human self-knowledge. They differ, however, in their theories of epistemic justification. Bosserman's main concern in his book is to develop a model of Christian paradox which only Christian monotheists can affirm. Thus, he does not further elucidate the synthesis already undertaken by Anderson in setting Plantinga and Van Til together constructively. My project seeks to develop a robust synthesis of Plantinga's and Van Til's epistemology.

K. Scott Oliphint extensively discusses Plantinga in light of Reformed theology in *Reasons for Faith*.⁴³ He highlights that the apologetic approach of Van Til is between every line of the work since he claims that he has been profoundly influenced by Van Til's theology and philosophy. Oliphint seeks to bring Van Til's thinking into contemporary philosophical discussion. Yet, the way that he does this is difficult to trace to Van Til directly. Oliphint admits that citations and "references to the work of Van Til . . . are few."⁴⁴ The reader is mostly left to guess what parts of Oliphint's analysis come directly from Van Til.⁴⁵ Still, Oliphint's project is laudable for its use of Van Til's philosophy to comment on Plantinga and contribute to the contemporary discussion of Reformed epistemology. My own endeavor is similar to Oliphint's. However, my focus is narrower as it is concerned with the philosophies of Van Til and Plantinga in light of one another. I also seek to explicitly discuss Van Til with Plantinga so that the reader will be able to see exactly where Van Til's insights are so helpful to the conversation.

⁴² Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 169. Properly basic beliefs are those beliefs which are not accepted on the evidential basis of other beliefs and are the foundations of one's noetic structure. See also Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 83.

⁴³ Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*.

⁴⁴ Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, x.

⁴⁵ Oliphint's bibliography lists only two works of Van Til, and the index only lists eight places where he explicitly mentions Van Til, with half of those being footnotes.

Oliphint also briefly addresses the relationship between the epistemologies of Van Til and Plantinga in his forward to Van Til's work on Christian theistic evidences.⁴⁶ For Plantinga, classical foundationalism is untenable because it says both too much and too little. It says too little because it is too restrictive in its ability to account for much of what is taken to be true.⁴⁷ Classical foundationalism says too much because it cannot meet its own criteria of proper basicity.⁴⁸ Instead, Plantinga moves to a broader Reidian common sense foundationalism which can incorporate additional constituent elements to derive proper basicity. Van Til, on the other hand, while he may agree with Plantinga's reasons for rejecting classical foundationalism, also rejects any starting point that merely affirms a generic belief in God and argues that one must presuppose the triune God and his revelation in order to account for any fact.⁴⁹ Other than a broad stroke contrast between Plantinga and Van Til's epistemological approach, Oliphint does not offer an in-depth analysis of Plantinga with explicit references to Van Til. He introduces a necessary conversation, but more needs to be done. This project introduces a newly articulated epistemology drawing from an in- depth synthesis of both Plantinga and Van Til.

Owen Anderson provides a historical treatment of Plantinga's and Van Til's response to Enlightenment skepticism.⁵⁰ He makes a few comparisons between the two, but he does not allow them to significantly interact with one another. Anderson favors Warfield's evidentialist approach to affirming the God of the Bible and he is therefore most concerned to compare Plantinga and Van Til against Warfield rather than one another. He also does not identify the similarities between Van Til and Plantinga which

⁴⁶ Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, xxvi.

⁴⁷ Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, 143. It cannot account for truths such as "I was in Las Vegas last year" or "I had eggs for breakfast" or that other minds exist.

⁴⁸ It is not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses that classical foundationalism is true.

⁴⁹ Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, xxix.

⁵⁰ Anderson, *Reason and Worldviews*.

makes a synthesis between them advantageous. My project is more concentrated in its efforts to analyze Van Til and Plantinga in light of each other rather than to a third party.

Brian K. Morley articulates the main similarities and differences between Plantinga's and Van Til's approach to apologetics.⁵¹ He finds fault with both approaches. Taking up Norman Geisler's mantle, he charges Van Til's transcendental method with failing to see that transcendental reasoning is also affected by sin. He also argues that Plantinga's Reformed epistemology suffers from a contingency in which the antagonist refuses to accept modal logic.⁵² Plantinga and Van Til are set forth in their own paradigm and construction of a synthetic view is never attempted. While both sides have certain faults, my project attempts to resolve them by presenting insights gained from the other.

Many more works have been written on the philosophy of either Plantinga or Van Til individually which are important in their own right.⁵³ Works which include them both are scarce. Van Til is uncompromising in his commitment to Reformed theology and its place in the doing of philosophy. Plantinga's philosophy is influenced by his theology, but one does not get the impression that his theology is driving his philosophy as much as Van Til's is. With the exception of Oliphint's *Reasons for Faith*, and even then only in an implicit way, none of the works surveyed above provide an explicit robust synthesis of Plantinga and Van Til. This dissertation seeks to do just that.

⁵¹ Morley, *Mapping Apologetics*.

⁵² Morley, *Mapping Apologetics*, 262.

⁵³ Some notable works are Deane-Peter Baker, ed., *Alvin Plantinga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1985); James F. Sennett, ed., *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Schönecker, ed., *Plantinga's Warranted Christian Belief*; Thomas M. Crisp, Matthew Davidson, and David Vander Laan, eds., *Knowledge and Reality: Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006); Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty, eds., *Two Dozen (or So) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jonathan L. Kvanvig, ed., *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008); Hunt, *Van Til's Doctrine of God*; Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*; Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998); Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1995); Rousas John Rushdoony, *Van Til and the Limits of Reason* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2013).

Significance

Although a few writers have attempted a synthetic analysis of the epistemology of Plantinga and Van Til, no one has yet to develop an explicit and robust treatment of each of them in light of the other. This project will help develop the unique ideas that stem from a combination of both thinkers. In particular, it has the potential to shed new light on philosophy, theology, and apologetic methodology.

In a Christian epistemology, one must wrestle with how a person can both know and not know God and how both of these knowings affect man's ability to know other things. The Bible describes fallen man under both circumstances. Van Til takes both conditions into account, but he lacks in clarity and precision as he sometimes speaks of knowledge in terms of metaphysical and epistemological, and other times he uses different terms for the same distinction.⁵⁴ Plantinga has a place for man both knowing and not knowing God, but he does not trace the logical consequences of the relationship between these two kinds of knowing to man's ability to know other things.⁵⁵ One's ability to know other things based on one's knowledge of one thing epitomizes foundationalism. My articulation and development of revelational foundationalism into the contemporary epistemological discussion should be a welcome contribution in the field of epistemology.⁵⁶

In theology, the noetic effects of sin and the noetic transformation that takes place at regeneration are key concepts. Although man's will is set in rebellion against God in that its volitional powers are enslaved to his fallen nature, the effect of the fall on man's cognitive faculty is also consequential. Van Til views the noetic effects of sin as

⁵⁴ See Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 405–16.

⁵⁵ See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 213, where he limits the noetic effects of sin to man's knowledge of God, ourselves, and other people.

⁵⁶ Revelational foundationalism is a special form of foundationalism that insists that God's revelation generates properly basic beliefs that serve as the basis for other beliefs.

creating a presuppositional dichotomy in the mind of man.⁵⁷ However, Van Til did not develop an account of the noetic effects of sin in terms of epistemic justification.

Plantinga acknowledges that sin has had an important effect upon the cognitive faculty, but he does not explain what the effect is and how it relates to his epistemology.⁵⁸ This work will highlight the noetic effects of sin on human cognition specifically in terms of epistemic justification to bring together Van Til's and Plantinga's ideas into a more cohesive whole.

In the field of apologetic methodology, Van Til prefers an explicitly transcendental method.⁵⁹ A transcendental method seeks to discover the preconditions for intelligibility, and to answer the skeptic who says we cannot have objective knowledge.⁶⁰ Plantinga's formulations are not so explicit, although, with modification, they can still be cast in a transcendental manner, since he is wrestling with the warrant required for human knowledge. Van Til develops the transcendental argument at the worldview level because he is convinced that it is the Christian position alone that provides the pre-conditions for intelligibility.⁶¹ He wants to be more consistent with his overall theology, especially his understanding of the Creator-creature distinction and his view that the triune God alone is the source and standard of truth. Plantinga spends more effort on a wider apologetic arsenal as his two dozen (or so) arguments for God illustrate.⁶² My contribution to apologetic methodology highlights the similar transcendental nature of Van Til's

⁵⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 192. Fallen man operates according to the principle of autonomy by which he suppresses the principle of being made in God's image.

⁵⁸ Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 78.

⁵⁹ Ian Hugh Clary, "An Introduction to Presuppositional Apologetics," *Hope's Reason: A Journal of Apologetics* 1, no. 1 (2010): 64; Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 311–22.

⁶⁰ See Morley, *Mapping Apologetics*, 113.

⁶¹ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 96.

⁶² Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments," in Baker, *Alvin Plantinga*, 210–27.

approach and Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism, which functions as a kind of transcendental argument. It also stresses the need for regeneration in order to set straight man's improperly functioning cognitive faculty in order to rightly interpret the arguments and evidences for Christianity.

Overall, my proposal is not without precedent but builds upon the suggestions of others who have already begun a conversation bringing Plantinga and Van Til together. In particular, this project seeks to describe the work of each thinker in their own context, evaluate their respective contributions in light of one another, and bring them together in a constructive way as an impetus for ongoing conversation.

Argument

Postmodernism's critique of the Enlightenment has resulted in the necessity of including the way a knowing subject's values alter interpretations of factual data in an overall epistemological framework. Classical foundationalism does not have the machinery to provide for such considerations. Its demise has spawned a rejoinder of a lesser foundationalism that pays closer attention to the nature of the subject which formulates beliefs and possesses knowledge. At the forefront of contemporary philosophy arguing for a weak foundationalism is Alvin Plantinga. His response to the challenges of postmodernism has provided Christian theologians with Reformed epistemology as one way of conceptualizing human knowledge. However, in order for a theologian to embrace Plantinga's epistemology, one must consider the Bible's teachings regarding revelation and the disastrous effects brought upon man as a result of sin. Van Til supplies a theological account of the noetic effects of sin upon man's cognition, an area which is explanatorily deficient in the work of Plantinga. Yet, Van Til's epistemology would still benefit from certain insights of Plantinga's philosophy especially concerning the notion

of warrant as “that further quality or quantity (perhaps it comes in degrees), whatever precisely it may be, enough of which distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief.”⁶³

Chapter 2 will analyze the epistemological systems of Plantinga and Van Til in terms of internalism and externalism. Some have charged Van Til with being an internalist, but things are not always as they seem.⁶⁴ Internalism and externalism, as philosophical categories, did not come into prominence until the end of Van Til’s career.⁶⁵ One would not expect Van Til to use the terms explicitly. Still, Van Til speaks in a way that might lead some to the conclusion that the presuppositions that one has and upon which knowledge is dependent are in some sense accessible to the knower.⁶⁶ Plantinga’s epistemology, on the other hand, is externalist in nature.⁶⁷ His purpose is to show that belief in God can be warranted even without evidence known to the believer. The focus of this chapter is to analyze the distinctives of each system and show how a mixture of Van Til’s and Plantinga’s insights are helpful.

Chapter 3 will inspect the notions of properly basic beliefs and presuppositions. Of particular interest for this chapter is the way in which these beliefs interact with other beliefs. Whether properly basic beliefs are starting points or exert some kind of controlling influence upon a person’s other beliefs is critical to discern. Van Til speaks in terms of presuppositions, but, according to John Frame, he never explicitly defined the term.⁶⁸ Yet, the way that Van Til uses the term indicates that he would agree with Bahnsen’s definition:

⁶³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 153.

⁶⁴ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 119n44.

⁶⁵ Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 70.

⁶⁶ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 126.

⁶⁷ See Mourad, *Transcendental Arguments and Justified Christian Belief*, 47; Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 183.

⁶⁸ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 136.

A “presupposition” is an elementary assumption in one’s reasoning or in the process by which opinions are formed [A] presupposition is not just any assumption in an argument, but a personal commitment that is held at the most basic level of one’s network of beliefs. Presuppositions form a wide-ranging, foundational *perspective* (or starting point) in terms of which everything else is interpreted and evaluated. As such, presuppositions have the greatest authority in one’s thinking, being treated as one’s least negotiable beliefs and being granted the highest immunity to revision.⁶⁹

For Van Til, presuppositions affect the way one interprets everything else. Plantinga speaks in terms of properly basic beliefs, and he clearly defines the term.⁷⁰ Yet, for Plantinga, even such basic beliefs as the belief that God exists are able to be defeated by other beliefs.⁷¹ Plantinga’s categorization of the belief in God as a properly basic belief is different than Van Til’s classification of God as a presupposition in that the presupposition of God for Van Til cannot be defeated by other beliefs.⁷² Additionally, Plantinga articulates that the formation of knowledge is dependent upon a teleology in which human cognitive faculties function properly according to the design which God gave them.⁷³ If human cognitive faculties are not functioning properly, their ability to acquire knowledge appears to be in jeopardy. Both Plantinga’s and Van Til’s insights are helpful and need to be brought together.

Chapter 4 will explore the noetic effects of sin.⁷⁴ Man has what John Calvin called a *sensus divinitatis* whereby he possesses a disposition for or an actual knowledge of God his Creator.⁷⁵ In man’s rebellion against his creator, his cognitive abilities became

⁶⁹ Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 2n4.

⁷⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 70.

⁷¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 344.

⁷² Some presuppositions are able to be overturned. However, one’s that are held as the foundational interpretive principle for all of reality are not normally able to be overturned.

⁷³ Alvin Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in Sennett, *The Analytic Theist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 346.

⁷⁴ This is a neglected topic in the field of theology and is essential to the formation of a Christian epistemology. The most comprehensive treatment to date on this important subject is Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin*.

⁷⁵ There is some debate about whether Calvin intended the *sensus divinitatis* to refer to the very formation of the belief in that God exists or as a mechanism for forming true beliefs. See Paul Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 147–53.

corrupted.⁷⁶ This corruption of man’s cognitive ability is called the noetic effects of sin. Plantinga traces Reformed epistemology back to John Calvin as “the *fons et origo* of all things Reformed and thus Reformed epistemology.”⁷⁷ However, Plantinga only ever alludes to Calvin’s view of the noetic effects of sin.⁷⁸ He does not provide a robust treatment of the noetic effects of sin in his epistemology.⁷⁹ In light of this lacuna, some have raised questions as to how Reformed Plantinga’s epistemology actually is.⁸⁰ Van Til, on the other hand, takes the noetic effects of sin most seriously.⁸¹ Speaking of man’s cognitive ability, Van Til states, “Accordingly every one of fallen man’s functions operates wrongly.”⁸² He elaborates further, “[Man’s] claim to be able to interpret at least some area of experience in a way that is essentially correct, is mistaken.”⁸³ The degree of cognitive malfunction and its resulting effects cannot be underestimated in the development of a Christian epistemology. Greg Bahnsen keenly observes,

This is something that nearly all philosophers, and even the most Christian philosophers, overlook or disregard at the very outset of their philosophical theorizing. The normalcy and competence of human reasoning, as well as the honorific “rationality” of man (or at least one’s own personal “rationality”), are taken for granted. Van Til urged apologists to give serious consideration to the noetic effects of the Fall.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ For a brief overview of the noetic effects of sin in relation to man’s cognitive faculty see Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 110.

⁷⁷ Alvin Plantinga, “On Reformed Epistemology,” *Reformed Journal* 32 (January 1982): 16.

⁷⁸ Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 66.

⁷⁹ Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin*, 77.

⁸⁰ See John Beversluis, “Reforming the ‘Reformed’ Objection to Natural Theology,” *Faith and Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (April 1995): 189–206; Derek S. Jeffreys, “How Reformed Is Reformed Epistemology? Alvin Plantinga and Calvin’s ‘Sensus Divinitatis,’” *Religious Studies* 33, no. 4 (December 1997): 419–31. For a counterargument, see Michael Czapkay Sudduth, “Calvin, Plantinga, and the Natural Knowledge of God: A Response to Beversluis,” *Faith and Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (January 1998): 92–103.

⁸¹ Ahvio, *Theological Epistemology*, 365.

⁸² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 97.

⁸³ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 116.

⁸⁴ Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 396n261. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Bahnsen are Bahnsen’s commentary on Van Til and not Bahnsen citing Van Til.

Van Til's analysis of sin's noetic effects will help to fill out Plantinga's Reformed epistemology.

Chapter 5 will examine the nature of common ground between the believer and the unbeliever. Van Til was adamant that there is no *epistemological* common ground between believer and unbeliever.⁸⁵ Yet, he still acknowledged that fallen man retains the ability to weigh, measure, and do a thousand other things, and, thus, at the metaphysical level, has some knowledge.⁸⁶ Thus, according to Van Til, common ground must be divided into metaphysical and epistemological. Plantinga acknowledges that there is some common ground.⁸⁷ He divides knowledge into various subject matters, some of which are held in common between believer and unbeliever. Other subject matters are reserved exclusively for the Christian believer. Plantinga writes that the Christian epistemologist's account of knowledge

will of course be designed to fit and illuminate the kinds of knowledge we all have in common: perception, memory, reason, and the like; she is thus in the world. But it will also be designed and perhaps specially designed to fit and illuminate kinds of knowledge her unbelieving compatriot will dismiss: our knowledge of God, of the great truths of the gospel, and of how to appropriate the latter for our own lives; she is thus not of the world.⁸⁸

This chapter will examine whether common ground is best represented by dividing knowledge into various subject matters or by viewing knowledge in terms of metaphysical and epistemological categories.

Chapter 6 will assess the apparent link between believing and unbelieving thought specifically in terms of borrowed capital. Here, the reliance of the non-Christian system upon the Christian system for its foundation is paramount. Van Til articulated that

⁸⁵ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 107–8.

⁸⁶ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 407.

⁸⁷ See Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," 16.

⁸⁸ Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," 351–52.

the unbeliever discovers truth on the basis of borrowed capital from Christianity.⁸⁹ The only way that an unbeliever can come to a knowledge of truth is because he unwittingly borrows from the Christian worldview in order to come to his own conclusions. In contrast, Plantinga explains that the unbeliever uses the properly functioning cognitive equipment he currently possesses to acquire truth.⁹⁰ The unbeliever can come to his own conclusions using his own method and cognitive faculties. Just how it is possible that the unbeliever can make as much pragmatic progress in life as the believer will be explored at length. The definition of properly functioning cognitive equipment is also of great importance especially in light of the consequences of the fall of man into sin.

Chapter 7 will consider the apologetic methodology of both thinkers. Van Til championed the use of transcendental methodology in his apologetic approach.⁹¹ He sought to show that any argumentation at all, even the argumentation used by the unbeliever in arguing for atheism, already presupposes the existence of the triune God because such a God is a precondition of all meaning, intelligibility, predication, and argumentation. Plantinga, however, never used the term transcendental, but the thrust of his evolutionary argument against naturalism can be recast in transcendental terms.⁹² In effect, Plantinga's and Van Til's arguments are two sides of the same coin, one making a positive case for Christianity and the other a negative case for non-Christianity.

Chapter 8 will provide a culmination of the foregoing synthesis in terms of what may be the foundation of knowledge. Using the insights of both Plantinga and Van

⁸⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 152–53.

⁹⁰ Plantinga explains that the noetic effects of sin do not affect our knowledge of the natural world. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 205. However, similarly to Van Til, Plantinga does acknowledge that the unbeliever's acquisition of truth is tied to God's existence, God's creation of the world, and God's design for humans to know the world.

⁹¹ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1932), 11.

⁹² Transcendental methodology seeks to determine the necessary preconditions for the intelligibility of reality.

Til, a good case can be made that revelation is the foundation for knowledge. At the metaphysical level (in Van Til's terms), general revelation produces the belief in God and certain of his divine qualities foundationally necessary for the natural man to attain further true beliefs.⁹³ Yet, the true beliefs that the unregenerate possess end up all being unwarranted at the epistemological level because the process by which they are produced does not involve properly functioning cognitive faculties, which, according to Plantinga, is a necessary condition of warrant, which, in turn, is a necessary condition of knowledge. At the epistemological level, regeneration is necessary to remove the natural man's presupposition of autonomy and replace it with the special revelation presupposition of Christian theism. This replacement removes the necessity of cognitive malfunction in such a way as to satisfy the condition of warrant for knowledge and also allow that warrant to be transferred from the foundation to other beliefs.

Chapter 9 will provide a summary of the previous chapters and offer some concluding remarks. More work needs to be done than can be completed in this one project. I will suggest areas for further research which can build on the work already done. It is my hope that others will see the value of taking Plantinga and Van Til together and will continue the ongoing conversation in the development of a Christian epistemology.

⁹³ My use of the term "natural man" refers to man in his fallen condition as a sinner.

CHAPTER 2

INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM

Central to contemporary epistemological formulations is the issue of epistemic justification.¹ Laurence BonJour summarizes the current discussion as revolving around two main dichotomies. He writes,

On the one hand, there is the dichotomy between *foundationalist* and *coherentist* accounts of epistemic justification, and especially of empirical epistemic justification. Does such justification derive ultimately from “foundational” beliefs whose justification somehow does not depend at all on that of other beliefs, or does it derive instead from relations of coherence or agreement or mutual support among beliefs, with no appeal to anything outside the system of beliefs? On the other hand, there is the dichotomy between *internalist* and *externalist* accounts of such justification. Must epistemic justification depend on elements that are internal to the believer’s conscious states of mind in a way that makes them accessible to his conscious reflection (at least in principle), or might it derive instead from factors that are external to those states of mind, entirely outside the scope of his conscious awareness? These two dichotomies cut across each other, so as to generate four *prima facie* possible overall positions: internalist foundationalism, externalist foundationalism, internalist coherentism, and externalist coherentism.²

The status of one’s beliefs or even a single belief can be of two kinds, either justified or unjustified.³ Within each category there are degrees of strength. One belief may be justified to a stronger degree than another. Yet, what is it that justifies a belief? A belief is justified if it meets specific criteria. Foundationalists and coherentists differ on what those criteria are. Foundationalists insist that a belief is justified if it depends on another more foundational justified belief until a most foundational belief is held which does not

¹ Laurence BonJour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 5. See also Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 3.

² BonJour and Sosa, *Epistemic Justification*, 7.

³ “Justified” is usually reserved for internalist epistemologies, and “warranted” is usually reserved for externalist epistemologies. See below for why Plantinga prefers the term “warrant” as opposed to “justified.”

depend on any other beliefs for its justification.⁴ These basic beliefs—beliefs that lie at the base of one’s noetic structure—serve as the foundation upon which all other beliefs are justified. Coherentists, on the other hand, assert that a foundation is not necessary and that beliefs can be justified by having coherent relations with other beliefs entirely within the system of beliefs.⁵ Beliefs are justified together in a web of beliefs rather than individually in a chain reaching down to a foundation.⁶

Internalists and externalists differ on the location of the criteria of justification being either internal to the knower, external to the knower, or some kind of combination of the two. Epistemic internalism is the view that a belief’s epistemic status as rationally justified is only dependent upon matters which are internal to the mind of the thinker.⁷ It requires that one be able to give reasons as evidence for one’s belief and those reasons must be cognitively accessible to the knower. Epistemic externalism is the view that a belief’s epistemic status as rationally justified is partially dependent upon factors which are external to the thinker. On this view, a person does not need to be able to give reasons as evidence for certain beliefs that lie at the base of one’s noetic structure.

This chapter will argue that Plantinga’s and Van Til’s epistemologies mutually reinforce each other. In order to develop the argument, first, I will detail Plantinga’s epistemology focusing on two primary areas: his idea of what constitutes knowledge and his concept of foundationalism. Second, I will examine Van Til’s epistemology in terms of epistemic justification. Third, I will point out some ways that each of their views could mutually help each other.

⁴ Richard Fumerton, “Classical Foundationalism,” in *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism*, ed. Michael R. DePaul (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 3.

⁵ Ted Poston, *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism* (London: Springer, 2014), 2.

⁶ Steven Bland, *Epistemic Relativism and Scepticism: Unwinding the Braid* (London, Ontario: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 8.

⁷ Jessica Brown, “Externalism in Mind and Epistemology,” in *Internalism and Externalism in Semantics and Epistemology*, ed. Sanford C. Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

Alvin Plantinga's Externalist Foundationalism

Alvin Plantinga's overall epistemology is one example of externalist foundationalism.⁸ Yet, it has several components which need to be carefully delineated in order to appreciate the value of his philosophy. Each component fits together and is complementary to the others. Throughout his various works, Plantinga examines the nature of knowledge, what constitutes it, and how beliefs come to be justified.

Defining Knowledge

Plantinga has what is known as a proper functionalist theory of knowledge.⁹ He explains that knowledge is warranted true belief.¹⁰ Thus, the primary components of knowledge are beliefs, truth, and warrant. Each of these components deserves some comment. With respect to beliefs, Plantinga has in mind the propositional beliefs that we each hold in everyday life. For example, I have the belief that the dog outside is barking. I have the belief that I had eggs for breakfast this morning. I have the belief that George Washington was the first president of the United States. I could not be said to know that the dog is barking outside if I did not believe the dog was barking outside. Plantinga articulates that belief is "thinking with assent."¹¹ Belief is not merely thinking. It is a step beyond having a thought because it requires that one assent to or affirm that thought. A belief is more than a conceptual idea. I can have in my mind the concept of a unicorn, yet I do not affirm or assent to the fact that unicorns exist. Beliefs involve mental assent to a

⁸ James N. Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (April 2005): 71.

⁹ Plantinga names his own theory "Proper Functionalism" in Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), vii.

¹⁰ Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 84.

¹¹ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, vi.

proposition.¹² Yet, merely having a belief is not enough to constitute knowledge. More is needed.

One requirement for a belief to count as knowledge is that the belief in question must be a *true* belief.¹³ Plantinga writes, “In the theory of knowledge, naturally enough, we try to come to some understanding of knowledge. But where and how shall we start? First, there is nearly universal agreement that knowledge requires truth; a person knows that all men are mortal only if it is true that all men are mortal.”¹⁴ If I believed that the dog was barking, but the dog was not in fact barking, then I could not be said to have knowledge of the dog barking. If I had the belief that I ate eggs for breakfast this morning, but I did not actually have eggs for breakfast this morning, my belief could not count as knowledge because it was a false belief. Knowledge only results from true beliefs, not false ones. Yet, mere true belief is not enough to constitute knowledge.

A second requirement for a belief to count as knowledge is that it be *warranted*. To see why this is so, Plantinga offers a couple of examples. He writes,

You are congenitally given to pessimism; you believe that the stock market will plunge tomorrow, even though you have no evidence; even if you turn out to be right, you didn't know. You have traveled two thousand miles to the North Cascades for a climbing trip; you are desperately eager to climb. Being an incurable optimist, you believe it will be bright, sunny, and warm tomorrow, despite the forecast, which calls for high winds and a nasty mixture of rain, sleet, and snow. As it turns out, the forecasters were wrong, and tomorrow turns out sunny and beautiful: your belief was true, but didn't constitute knowledge.¹⁵

According to Plantinga, beliefs that turn out to be true by accident do not constitute knowledge.¹⁶ There is an element which must be added to true belief in order for it to

¹² Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 248.

¹³ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, v.

¹⁴ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, v.

¹⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 153.

¹⁶ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 197.

count as knowledge. That element Plantinga calls *warrant*. Plantinga defines warrant as “the property, enough of which, distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief.”¹⁷

Plantinga explains the nature of warrant in his *Warrant: The Current Debate*. He says, “To say that a belief is *warranted* or *justified* for a person is to evaluate it or him (or both) *positively*; his holding that belief in his circumstances is *right*, or *proper*, or *acceptable*, or *approvable*, or *up to standard*.”¹⁸ According to Plantinga, the attribution of warrant to a belief involves an evaluative judgment on that belief. This judgment is a common occurrence. We constantly evaluate the beliefs and skepticisms of others. Because warrant has some component of evaluation as to what one should believe, warrant has certain deontological associations, but Plantinga prefers the term “warrant” over the term “justification” because of the less intense deontological baggage that comes along with it.¹⁹ Justification, in the deontological sense, involves being in direct control of one’s beliefs and being able to do one’s best to fulfill his or her epistemic duty. Plantinga argues that neither direct control nor being able to do one’s best are an adequate basis for justification.²⁰ Plantinga prefers the term “warrant” because he wishes to distance himself from internalist conceptions of justification.

Plantinga also affirms that warrant comes in degrees.²¹ One true belief might have more warrant than another true belief. My belief that I hear a barking dog has more warrant for me than does my belief that I will visit a friend tomorrow.

¹⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 204.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 3.

¹⁹ Kevin Diller, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 113n67.

²⁰ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 25–29. See also James N. Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 161.

²¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10.

Warrant also has its own constituent elements. Plantinga discusses the necessary conditions for warrant in his work *Warrant and Proper Function*. It is here that Plantinga most clearly distinguishes “warrant” from “justification” in that the constituent elements of which warrant is composed are all external to the knower. First, he explains that one’s beliefs must be formed by cognitive processes which are functioning properly.²² Plantinga provides several qualifications for this proposal. First, properly functioning faculties must be distinguished from normally functioning faculties.²³ What occurs the most often is not necessarily what should occur. Second, Plantinga clarifies that warrant does not require all of one’s faculties to be functioning properly, only the one(s) which are involved in the production of the belief in question.²⁴ For example, even if one’s memory plays tricks on him or her, he or she may still have warrant with respect to introspective beliefs such as being appeared to redly. Third, properly functioning faculties “need not be working properly over the entire range of their operation.”²⁵ I need not hear the high notes of a musical tune to learn much by way of the notes that I can hear. Fourth, faculties which require outside aid can still furnish warrant, given the outside aid.²⁶ I can have warrant for auditory propositions even though I need a hearing aid to hear them. Plantinga also distinguishes between *properly* functioning faculties and *perfectly* functioning faculties.²⁷ Visual beliefs can constitute knowledge even if one’s vision is not 20/20. Plantinga leaves open the question of how well one’s faculties must

²² Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 10.

²³ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 10.

²⁴ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 10.

²⁵ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 10.

²⁶ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 10.

²⁷ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 10.

be functioning in order to be considered properly functioning. He suggests that the less well one's faculties function, the less warrant one will have.²⁸

Another necessary condition for warrant is that the environment of the believer must be similar to the environment for which his epistemic powers have been designed.²⁹

Plantinga admits of some vagueness to this idea. He writes,

Here, of course, we encounter vagueness; there is no precise answer. Further, suppose I *know* that the environment is misleading; and suppose I know in just which ways it is misleading. (I'm on a planet where things that look square are really round.) Then, clearly enough, the fact that my environment is misleading need not deprive my beliefs of warrant.³⁰

Compensating for a misleading environment and for malfunctioning faculties can still lead to warranted beliefs, but it must be possible for one to compensate. The environment must be sufficiently similar to the one for which the believer was designed such that compensation is possible.

Another necessary condition for warrant is that our cognitive faculties must function according to a certain design plan. Plantinga writes,

We take it that when the organs (or organic systems) of a human being (or other organism) function properly, they function *in a particular way*. Such organs have a *function* or *purpose*; more exactly, they have several functions or purposes, including both proximate and more remote purposes. The ultimate purpose of the heart is to contribute to the health and proper function of the entire organism But of course the heart also has a much more circumscribed and specific function: to pump blood. Such an organ, furthermore, normally functions in such a way as to fulfill its purpose. . . . We seem to have been constructed in accordance with a set of specifications, in the way in which there are specifications for, for example, the 1992 Buick. . . . Similarly, there is something like a set of specifications for a well-formed, properly functioning human being. . . . Suppose we call these specifications a "design plan."³¹

Yet, for Plantinga, a design plan is not enough. It must be a certain kind of design plan.

²⁸ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 11.

²⁹ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 11.

³⁰ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 11.

³¹ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 13–14.

Plantinga argues that the design plan must be one which is aimed at the production of true beliefs. He says,

It is clearly possible that the purpose or function of *some* belief-producing faculties or mechanisms is the production of beliefs with some other virtue—perhaps that of enabling us to get along in this cold, cruel, threatening world, or of enabling us to survive a dangerous situation or a life-threatening disease. So we must add that the belief in question is produced by cognitive faculties such that the purpose of those faculties is that of producing true belief. More exactly, we must add that the portion of the design plan governing the production of the belief in question is aimed at the production of true belief (rather than survival, or psychological comfort, or the possibility of loyalty, or something else).³²

Plantinga explains that Sigmund Freud objects to Christianity because he believes that human cognitive faculties produce religious belief in accordance with a design plan aimed at wish-fulfillment.³³ A person may wish that it is sunny outside because he or she feels depressed. It may turn out that it is sunny outside, but this true belief does not count as knowledge because the design plan according to which it was formed was not aimed at truth but at wish-fulfillment for the purpose of helping one cope with depression. Thus, Plantinga argues that the design plan must be aimed at truth.

The next necessary condition for warrant is that the believer must be inside of a design plan *successfully* aimed at truth.³⁴ Plantinga explains,

So imagine that a young and untutored apprentice deity sets out to build cognitive beings, beings capable of belief and knowledge. Immaturity and incompetence triumph; the design contains serious glitches. In fact, in some areas of the design, when the faculties work just as they were designed to, the result is ludicrously false belief: thus when the cognitive faculties of these beings are working according to their design plan, they constantly confuse horses and hearses, forming the odd beliefs that cowboys in the old West rode hearses and that corpses are usually transported in horses. These beliefs are then produced by cognitive faculties working properly in the right sort of environment according to a design plan aimed at truth, but they still lack warrant. What is missing? Clearly enough, what must be added is that the design plan in question is a *good* one, one that is *successfully*

³² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 155.

³³ Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 25.

³⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 156.

aimed at truth, one such that there is a high (objective) probability that a belief produced according to that plan will be true (or nearly true).³⁵

Plantinga defines a good design plan as being one in which “the objective probability of a belief’s being true, given that it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning in accord with the relevant module of the design plan, is high.”³⁶ Plantinga does not say how high the probability must be, but he does state that reliability varies proportionally to the firmness of one’s belief.

As a summary of his development of the concept of warrant Plantinga offers a concluding definition saying,

We may say that a belief B has warrant for S if and only if the relevant segments (the segments involved in the production of B) are functioning properly in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which S’s faculties are designed; and the modules of the design plan governing the production of B are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those modules (in that sort of cognitive environment) is true; and the more firmly S believes B the more warrant B has for S.³⁷

Plantinga takes this summary as only an approximation, which could be amended and supplemented if needed. His conception of warrant plays directly into his account of foundationalism.

Foundationalism

Plantinga distinguishes between two commonly held notions of justification. On the one hand, justification has something to do with evidence. A belief is justified if there is enough evidence for that belief.³⁸ Internalist conceptions of justification are tied to the notion of evidence wherein one must be able to provide enough evidence for the justification of a given belief. On the other hand, justification has something to do with

³⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 156.

³⁶ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 17.

³⁷ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 19.

³⁸ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 11.

duty, obligation, or moral rightness. One is justified in holding a certain belief if that person is fulfilling his or her obligations in holding that belief and not going contrary to duty in holding to it.³⁹ For an internalist, both notions of duty and evidence are tied together. One is fulfilling his or her duty if he or she believes a proposition for which there is enough evidence. Propositional evidence is one kind of evidence, and Plantinga points out that a person cannot have propositional evidence for every belief because every train of beliefs will have to start somewhere. He writes, “The ultimate premises from which it starts will not themselves be believed on the evidential basis of other propositions; they will have to be accepted in the *basic* way, that is, not on the evidential basis of other beliefs.”⁴⁰ Some beliefs must be properly basic and be justified without further evidential justification.

According to classical foundationalism, there are three kinds of basic beliefs.⁴¹ First there are beliefs which are incorrigible. Plantinga defines an incorrigible belief as follows: “*p* is incorrigible for *S* if and only if (a) it is not possible that *S* believe *p* and *p* be false, and (b) it is not possible that *S* believe $\sim p$ and *p* be true.”⁴² An incorrigible belief is immune from error. One cannot be mistaken about feeling pain. One cannot be mistaken about what seems to be true to oneself. Second, there are beliefs which are evident to the senses. Keith Parsons defines evident to the senses as a proposition “that an

³⁹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 13.

⁴⁰ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 14.

⁴¹ Plantinga’s definition of classical foundationalism is a combination of ancient and medieval foundationalists, who held that a belief is basic if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses, and modern foundationalists such as Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz who hold that properly basic beliefs are either self-evident or incorrigible. See Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 135. Regardless of whether Plantinga is correct in his definition of classical foundationalism, I am assuming that he is correct in what follows.

⁴² Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 58.

immediate sense perception reveals to be true.”⁴³ Examples of beliefs that are evident to the senses are that some things in the world are in motion, some things are red, and some things are cold. Third, there are beliefs which are self-evident. Richard Swinburne defines self-evident beliefs as “those necessary propositions . . . which we cannot understand without believing them to be true.”⁴⁴ Examples of self-evident beliefs include analytic tautologies such as all bachelors are unmarried males, that $1 + 1 = 2$, that if A is bigger than B and B is bigger than C, then A is bigger than C, and that nothing can be black and white in the same place at the same time.⁴⁵ The classical foundationalist holds that any belief that is not a basic belief, namely, incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses is a derived belief and it must be rationally justified by grounding it in basic beliefs.⁴⁶

For the classical foundationalist, the belief in God is not incorrigible, evident to the senses, or self-evident. It is not a basic belief. Therefore, one must be able to justify their belief in God by appealing to other beliefs which are basic. Plantinga rejects the idea that the belief in God must be grounded in other basic beliefs. The problem, for Plantinga, lies with classical foundationalism. Plantinga argues that classical foundationalism cannot live up to its own criteria.⁴⁷ Classical foundationalism is itself neither incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses. Therefore, it cannot be a basic belief. It must be grounded on other beliefs which are basic. If one believes that one must have propositional evidence for all non-foundational beliefs, then one must have propositional evidence for even that belief. But there is no propositional evidence for that

⁴³ Keith M. Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989), 40.

⁴⁴ Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

⁴⁵ For details on how Plantinga’s explanation is influenced by Aquinas, see Erik Baldwin and Tyler Dalton McNabb, *Plantingian Religious Epistemology and World Religions: Prospects and Problems* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 5.

⁴⁶ Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in Sennett, 129.

⁴⁷ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 15.

belief. So, classical foundationalism is not basic, but neither can it be grounded by other basic beliefs. Therefore, it must be rejected.

Another problem for classical foundationalism is that it cannot account for beliefs that all people seem to assume and operate with such as beliefs about the past. Plantinga argues that there are no good arguments that are incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses that there really has been a past.⁴⁸ Memory beliefs likewise have no good propositional evidential arguments which can justify them. He writes,

I believe I had breakfast this morning; this too is basic for me. I do not believe this proposition on the basis of some proposition about my experience—for example, that I seem to remember having had breakfast. In the typical case I will not have even considered *that* question—the question whether I *seem* to remember having had breakfast; instead I simply believe that I had breakfast; I take it as basic.⁴⁹

For Plantinga, classical foundationalism simply will not do. He is concerned that it relegates the belief in God to a nonfoundational position, which ends up reducing one's confidence in his beliefs about God and is a disservice to faith. He writes,

The Christian doesn't *need* natural theology, either as the source of his confidence or to justify his belief. Furthermore, the Christian *ought* not to believe on the basis of argument; if he does, his faith is likely to be unstable and wavering. From Calvin's point of view, believing in the existence of God on the basis of rational argument is like believing in the existence of your spouse on the basis of the analogical argument for other minds—whimsical at best and not at all likely to delight the person concerned.⁵⁰

Plantinga wants to be able to place the belief in God at the foundational level of one's noetic structure but is unable to do so within the bounds of classical/strong foundationalism. Therefore, in its place Plantinga proposes what he calls weak foundationalism.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 16.

⁴⁹ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Sennett, 130.

⁵⁰ Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 11 (1982): 191.

⁵¹ See Plantinga's discussion of why he rejects strong foundationalism and puts weak foundationalism in its place in Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," 193–95.

Weak foundationalism differs from strong or classical foundationalism in that it allows for a wider variety of beliefs to count as properly basic beliefs. Whereas classical foundationalism restricts basic beliefs to those that are incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses, weak foundationalism accepts memory beliefs, beliefs about the past, beliefs about other persons, and the belief in God to be properly basic.⁵² Thus, for Plantinga, one's belief in God does not require any evidence on internalist grounds in order for it to be justified. Additionally, on Plantinga's account, even if belief in God was properly basic, it would not be incorrigible. He writes,

A person can accept belief in God as basic without accepting it dogmatically—that is, in such a way that he will ignore any contrary evidence or argument. And now a second question: Suppose that belief in God *is* properly basic. Does it follow that one who accepts it dogmatically is within his epistemic rights? Does it follow that someone who is within his rights in accepting it as basic *remains* justified in this belief, no matter what counterargument or counterevidence arises? Again, surely not. The justification-conferring conditions mentioned above must be seen as conferring *prima facie* rather than *ultima facie*, or all-things-considered, justification. This justification can be overridden. . . . Like the fourteen-year-old theist, perhaps I have been brought up to believe in God and am initially within my rights in so doing. But conditions can arise in which perhaps I am no longer justified in this belief.⁵³

For Plantinga, the properly basic belief in God that we are within our epistemic rights to believe can be defeated by other beliefs. It is possible that God may not exist in fact. One may be mistaken in his belief in God. The same holds true for other properly basic beliefs. These beliefs are subject to correction and defeat. Yet, Plantinga's main aim in his development of weak foundationalism is to allow for the belief in God to be rationally warranted. He is concerned to show that there are no *de jure* reasons why the belief in God is irrational. Defeaters for the belief in God cannot be defeaters in principle but must be defeaters in fact. He argues,

⁵² J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The State of Claims to Rationality," in *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*, ed. J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 38.

⁵³ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 86.

no viable *de jure* objection lies in the neighborhood either of justification or of internal rationality. . . . [H]ence any objection to [Christian belief] having warrant will have to be an objection to its being true; but in that case the alleged *de jure* objection either becomes or presupposes a *de facto* objection. Accordingly, a common agnostic attitude—I have no idea whether Christian belief is true, but I do know that it is irrational (or unjustified, or . . .) cannot be defended.⁵⁴

In summary, Plantinga’s epistemology is a weak foundationalism, allowing the belief in God to reside in the foundations, with an externalist account of warrant which avoids *de jure* objections to the belief in God.

Cornelius Van Til’s Theory of Justification

Cornelius Van Til’s theory of epistemic justification is more difficult to pin down than Plantinga’s. James Anderson notes that a significant weakness of Van Til’s epistemology is that he does not supply an analysis of knowledge itself nor use contemporary parlance regarding terms such as foundationalism, coherentism, internalism, or externalism.⁵⁵ Some writers have argued that Van Til displays an internalist view of justification, while others argue that Van Til is an externalist. Anderson is an example of the former. B. A. Bosserman is representative of the latter. Examining each of their perspectives will shed light on the issue at hand.

Anderson states, “Van Til’s arguments . . . often seem to assume (at points where specificity might be significant) an internalist perspective that tends to weaken the arguments.”⁵⁶ Anderson cites two examples from Van Til to support his internalist label. First, Van Til says that non-Christians do in fact and also need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their accomplishments even as they verbally reject it.⁵⁷ There are two ways of understanding the term “presuppose.” It either means

⁵⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 498–99.

⁵⁵ Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 27.

⁵⁶ Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 28.

⁵⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 103.

that a person implicitly assumes Christian theism as a precondition of scientific knowledge, or it means that a person must stand in some positive epistemic relation toward Christian theism.⁵⁸ The latter meaning requires an internalist theory of epistemic justification because the unbeliever must be aware of Christian theism as he stands in positive epistemic relation to it. The former meaning does not necessarily require an internalist interpretation.

Anderson's second line of evidence pertains to Van Til's argument for Christian theism from the unity of knowledge. This also may be taken in two ways. Either a person can know some fact only if that person knows how every other fact bears upon it, or a person can know a fact if the epistemic faculties they employ in knowing that fact were constructed by some other person who knows how every other fact bears upon it.⁵⁹ The former interpretation requires internalism, while the latter is an externalist view. Anderson concludes that Van Til would be helped by some disambiguation with regard to the internalist/externalist interpretation of his arguments.⁶⁰

In contrast to Anderson, B. A. Bosserman argues that Van Til is an externalist saying, "Because of Van Til's hefty emphasis on coherence, James N. Anderson discerns that Van Til implicitly embraced an internalist theory of epistemic justification, if he embraced any theory of epistemic justification at all. With this perspective we will have to disagree."⁶¹ Bosserman explains that, for Van Til, a true belief is a belief which

⁵⁸ Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 28.

⁵⁹ Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 29.

⁶⁰ Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 29.

⁶¹ B. A. Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox: An Interpretation and Refinement of the Theological Approach of Cornelius Van Til* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 119. In a personal correspondence, Anderson has communicated that Bosserman's interpretation of Anderson is not correct. Anderson emphasized that he merely meant to observe that it is not clear whether Van Til was an externalist or an internalist and that Van Til tends toward internalist assumptions in his arguments for Christian theism as a precondition for knowledge.

corresponds to the mind of God, while a false belief does not so correspond.⁶² The nature of this correspondence is analogical, not univocal. There is an impregnable distinction between the Creator and the creature which precludes a univocal correspondence between the mind of God and the mind of man.⁶³ The goal of man with respect to coming to true beliefs is to “think God’s thoughts after him.”⁶⁴ True beliefs are faithfully receptive to God’s revelation, and as such Bosserman argues, “simple mathematical equations (e.g., $3 + 1 = 4$), and basic matters of fact (Mount Everest is over 29,000 feet high), are basically false (and frustrating to human enterprise) when the matters involved are not conceived of as creations, which exist as they do, by and for the plan of God.”⁶⁵ Van Til’s view on truth is qualified in three ways. First, all humans have an awareness of the Creator. Second, scientific and technological progress is short lived and condemning. Third, God frustrates unbelievers’ mastery over creation.⁶⁶

Bosserman argues that Van Til’s distinct theory of truth lends itself to an externalist coherentist view of epistemic justification. Van Til denies internalist foundationalism, externalist foundationalism, and internalist coherentism because he denies self-evident foundations for knowledge.⁶⁷ For Van Til, fallen man’s beliefs are completely false, and therefore epistemic justification does not pertain to individual beliefs but entire belief systems. Van Til’s externalist coherentism is rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity wherein each person exhaustively comprehends the eternal dynamic of the three and in which their knowledge is justified in an internalist coherentist

⁶² Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 115.

⁶³ See the discussion of analogical knowledge in Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 112.

⁶⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 77.

⁶⁵ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 117.

⁶⁶ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 118.

⁶⁷ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 119.

fashion.⁶⁸ Human knowledge is justified by its external coherence with God's plan. After the fall, it is impossible for man to justify his own beliefs, and so Christ must come to grant man a new self-conception as redeemed creatures.⁶⁹ Only through regeneration are man's beliefs justified.⁷⁰ Bosserman concludes, "At the moment of conversion, one's beliefs not only become true (as correspondent with the mind of God, and coherent with special revelation), they become justified (set on a trajectory to develop and to embrace ever greater depths of divine truth)."⁷¹ Regeneration grants beliefs the status of being true and justified.

What are we to make of Anderson's and Bosserman's critiques? Whether Van Til should be construed as a foundationalist or coherentist or perhaps both is difficult to discern. However, a close examination of the requirements of an internalist epistemology reveal that, in some sense at least, Van Til may be as much an externalist as Plantinga. Yet, Van Til also displays internalist characteristics especially regarding how he grounds his beliefs in Christianity using transcendental reasoning.⁷²

It is important to note that internalism and externalism are not distinguished by whether there are any contributing factors to justification which reside within the conscious mind of the thinker, for then one could be both an internalist and an externalist by simply having one single contributing factor that resides within the thinker's conscious mind and another single contributing factor that resides outside the thinker's conscious mind. Rather, internalism supposes that all of the contributing factors which establish a belief's justification reside within the mind of the thinker, and externalism

⁶⁸ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 121.

⁶⁹ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 122.

⁷⁰ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 123.

⁷¹ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 125.

⁷² Van Til does not, however, think that one must argue transcendently to be warranted in his belief in God.

supposes that at least one contributing factor which establishes a belief's justification resides outside of the conscious mind of the thinker.

All forms of internalism require that a person holding a justified belief be aware of something contributing to that belief's justification.⁷³ Such awareness must be some kind of reflection such as introspection, rational intuition, or memory. Michael Bergmann calls this the awareness requirement, which he defines as "S's belief B is justified only if (i) there is something, X, that contributes to the justification of B—e.g. evidence for B or a truth indicator for B or the satisfaction of some necessary condition of B's justification—and (ii) S is aware (or potentially aware) of X."⁷⁴ Similarly Laurence Bonjour argues that internalism involves the justifying reason for a basic belief be "cognitively available to the believer himself, within his cognitive grasp or ken."⁷⁵ The justifying reason cannot be hidden from his view or inaccessible to him.

From one perspective, Van Til could be understood as affirming internalism especially as he makes use of transcendental reasoning to argue against the unbeliever. Reasoning transcendently, Van Til writes, "Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism. Even non-Christians presuppose its truth while they verbally reject it."⁷⁶ On the surface, it seems that Van Til believes that the unbeliever has Christian theism as a presupposition of which he is aware due to his being surrounded by the revelation of God, but that he willingly rejects it in defiance against God. If the unbeliever is aware of his presupposition, then Van Til could be conceived of as an internalist. K. Scott Oliphint, however, does not believe that the presupposition to which Van Til refers here is one of which the unbeliever is aware. He

⁷³ Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness*, 9.

⁷⁴ Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness*, 9.

⁷⁵ Bonjour and Sosa, *Epistemic Justification*, 24.

⁷⁶ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 126.

comments in an editorial footnote, “the notion of presupposition that Van Til uses here has to do more with a state of affairs than with a belief one holds.”⁷⁷ Yet, there is additional evidence indicating that Van Til believes the unbeliever is aware of his presupposition. He notes, “The more self-conscious men become with respect to the real meaning of their own position, the more clearly do they realize their systems are escape-mechanisms by which sinners seek to hide the truth from themselves.”⁷⁸ If it is possible that the natural man become more self-conscious of his own position and presupposition, then the internalist label raises its head.

At the same time, Van Til shows a proclivity toward an externalist account of epistemic justification as he explains the nature of the innate knowledge of God implanted by God into every human heart. Romans 1:19 says,

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

This passage indicates that all men in some sense know God. Van Til says, “But the important point, we would note again, is that this thought content is, at bottom, involuntary. It springs up within man in spite of himself. It is for this reason that it appears most clearly at the intuitional or non-ratiocinative level of man’s consciousness.”⁷⁹ Here we have an example of Van Til acknowledging an intuitional consciousness that one has of the innate knowledge of God that every human possesses. However, this consciousness is involuntary. An involuntary, intuitional, non-ratiocinative consciousness may not be the awareness that internalists are looking for. If, not, then Van

⁷⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 126n12.

⁷⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 182.

⁷⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 312.

Til could be understood as an externalist. Further, Van Til elsewhere affirms that “in the course of history the natural man is not fully self-conscious of his own position.”⁸⁰ In order to help resolve Van Til’s combination of both internalism and externalism we must understand Van Til’s two senses of knowledge.

Metaphysical and Epistemological Knowledge

Van Til writes, “What is meant by knowing God in Scripture is knowing and loving God: this is true knowledge of God; all other knowledge of God is false.”⁸¹ Here, Van Til distinguishes between a kind of true knowledge and a kind of false knowledge. Some have criticized Van Til on this point. For example, R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley write, “That puts it beyond dispute that, in spite of statements which affirm it, Van Til does not believe the unregenerate have knowledge of God. Their ‘knowledge’ is not ‘true’ knowledge; it is ‘false’ knowledge. If it is totally false, then it is no knowledge at all.”⁸² Instead of saying “true knowledge” the authors argue that Van Til ought to say “saving knowledge.”⁸³ However, in another place Van Til says,

We are well aware of the fact that non-Christians have a great deal of knowledge about this world that is true as far as it goes. That is, there is a sense in which we can and must allow for the value of knowledge of non-Christians. This has always been a difficult point. It is often the one great source of confusion on the question of faith in its relation to reason. We should admit that we cannot give any wholly satisfactory account of the situation as it actually obtains.⁸⁴

Van Til acknowledges the difficulty of the problem. Yet, he consistently affirms, “The physical world cannot be truly known when it is cut loose from God.”⁸⁵ The question

⁸⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

⁸¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 48.

⁸² R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 219.

⁸³ Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 306.

⁸⁴ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 63.

⁸⁵ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 148.

remains: What does “true as far as it goes” and “truly known” actually mean? For Van Til, the natural man knows nothing truly as he ought to know it.⁸⁶ He says that the unregenerate person is “basically mistaken in his notions about the atoms and laws of gravitation. From this ultimate point of view the ‘natural man’ knows nothing truly.”⁸⁷ It is not simply that the unbeliever does not savingly know God and therefore does not truly know God. Van Til is saying something more. He writes, “at all times the natural man is as blind as a mole with respect to natural things as well as with respect to spiritual things.”⁸⁸ The unbeliever does not know any fact truly. But, if he does not know anything truly, in what way does he know it, falsely?

Van Til seeks to alleviate the problem by distinguishing two different aspects of knowledge. On the one hand, the unregenerate have true knowledge of God by virtue of God’s objective revelation impressing himself upon man’s attention.⁸⁹ On the other hand, to the extent that the unregenerate man interprets things according to an assumption of self-ultimacy, he misinterprets all things.⁹⁰ Thus, Van Til writes, “The actual situation is therefore always a mixture of truth with error.”⁹¹ On the distinction between these two aspects of knowledge, Van Til writes, “This distinction is not only true, but important to make. Many non-Christians have been great scientists. Often non-Christians have a better knowledge of the things of this world than Christians have.”⁹² Further, he explains, “from an ultimate point of view the natural man knows nothing truly, but from a relative point

⁸⁶ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 64.

⁸⁷ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 64.

⁸⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 148.

⁸⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 65.

⁹⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 65.

⁹¹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 65.

⁹² Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 150.

of view he knows something about all things. He knows things *after a fashion*, and his fashion is best when he deals with earthly things such as electricity, etc.”⁹³

Van Til is keen to make a distinction between two aspects of knowledge. He does this by utilizing the terms “epistemological” and “metaphysical.” He writes,

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. On the other hand, it must be asserted that they have every fact in common. . . . Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common.⁹⁴

Van Til maintains a consistent distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of knowledge.⁹⁵ Metaphysically, man has knowledge by virtue of being created in the image of God and living in God’s objectively created and planned world. Metaphysically, knowledge is justified in an externalist sense. On the other hand, epistemologically, man has knowledge by self-conscious ratiocination or intuition from his own adopted principles.⁹⁶ Epistemologically, knowledge is justified in an internalist sense. Metaphysically, knowledge has God as its root as God has implanted the *sensus divinitatis* into man.⁹⁷ Epistemologically, knowledge has man as its root as he seeks to think, understand, analyze, and know.⁹⁸ Greg Bahnsen, one of Van Til’s foremost

⁹³ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 150.

⁹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 9.

⁹⁵ Van Til uses these terms in a technical sense. Van Til is making the distinction between a consistent and an inconsistent application of one’s worldview. When he speaks of metaphysically knowing, he means that which non-Christians know in spite of their worldview, which is made possible by being made in the image of God and also borrowing ideas from Christian theism. When he speaks of epistemologically knowing, Van Til means that which is known through a consistent application of one’s interpretive principle, which no non-Christian does. See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 407.

⁹⁶ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 87.

⁹⁷ The metaphysical aspect of knowledge contains more than the *sensus divinitatis* but not less. One could not know many facts about the world merely through the *sensus*. However, the *sensus* furnishes one with the operational basis for properly functioning cognitive faculties which interpret the world in light of it.

⁹⁸ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 66n146.

disciples, acknowledges that the mixed condition of the unbeliever regarding his two aspects of knowing is awkward to articulate.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the distinction of knowledge into metaphysical and epistemological aspects is helpful for analyzing Van Til with respect to internalism and externalism.

The unbeliever's metaphysical knowing is justified in an externalist fashion. Although he is, in some sense, aware of God, he is not aware of God as the principle of justification for his beliefs. In fact, he denies that God is the principle of justification for his beliefs and he replaces God with the presupposition of autonomy as the justifying principle of his beliefs. Additionally, the process by which the unbeliever comes to have his awareness of God does not involve ratiocination since it is involuntary. The *sensus divinitatis* implants the knowledge of God into his consciousness.

The unbeliever's epistemological knowing could be understood to be justified in an internalist fashion. Epistemologically, knowledge is dependent upon how the unbeliever reasons or accounts for his knowledge. What man knows to be true metaphysically, he suppresses and uses all kinds of arguments to deny what he knows, especially in relation to God. Epistemologically, he reasons from the presupposition of autonomy, and because this belief, presupposition, or interpretive principle is false, his epistemological knowing cannot be justified in an internalist way. Because Van Til's category of epistemological knowing is tied to an internalist sense of justification, it is dependent upon one's presupposition or principle of interpretation. At the same time, one could conceive of an externalist sense of warrant as applying to how the unbeliever knows. His cognitive faculties are malfunctioning as he reasons from an interpretive principle of autonomy. Thus, the unbeliever's false interpretive principle of autonomy precludes them from having justification for their true beliefs, epistemologically speaking, in an internalist sense. Additionally, the unbeliever's false interpretive principle

⁹⁹ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 415.

of autonomy precludes them from having warrant for those true beliefs in an externalist sense because of their improperly functioning interpretive principle. In contrast to unbelievers, believers have a different interpretive principle. They reason from an acknowledgement of the triune God as the source and standard of knowledge due to his eternal plan and creation of that plan and a world to reflect it. With the Christian worldview as their interpretive principle, believers can be justified, epistemologically speaking, in their true beliefs in an internalist sense. Additionally, believers, operating on the interpretive principle of the Christian worldview, are cognitively functioning properly and can have epistemologically warranted true beliefs in an externalist sense. For Van Til, believers and unbelievers have nothing in common epistemologically. Their starting presuppositions are different, epistemologically speaking, and the unbeliever has no ultimate grounding for what he or she believes.

Thus, Van Til could be both internalist and externalist depending upon which aspect of knowledge is under consideration. As he speaks of the unbeliever's false principle of interpretation, and as Van Til argues against the unbeliever transcendently, Van Til is an internalist. As he speaks of the unbeliever's knowledge of God given by the sense of deity, and the commonality that all men have by being created in the image of God, Van Til is an externalist.

Constructive Synthesis

Both Plantinga and Van Til have much to say with respect to knowledge and how one can attain it. Yet, there are important aspects of their views which could helpfully be supplemented by the other. Bringing together the views of both men provides a beneficial way forward in thinking about a Christian epistemology.

What Is Truth?

In Plantinga's Reformed epistemology, the justification of truth is not explicitly and robustly developed.¹⁰⁰ Granted, his purpose is to demonstrate Christianity as rational, not necessarily as true, so we might not expect him to provide such a robust treatment. However, because his notion of knowledge as warranted true belief involves the notion of truth, a more thorough and theological explanation of truth would be helpful.¹⁰¹ Plantinga devotes the majority of his analysis focusing on the nature of warrant. He does not closely examine the nature of truth itself.¹⁰² He does not explain what he means when he says, "let us agree . . . that knowledge requires truth."¹⁰³ Adding to what Plantinga has done, a more complete Christian epistemology will involve some discussion of the justification of truth and not merely the rational grounds for belief. Richard Fumerton states, "The most natural theory of truth for virtually all foundationalists, internalists and externalists alike, is a correspondence theory of truth."¹⁰⁴ Given that Plantinga is a foundationalist, we may assume that he would ascribe to a correspondence theory of truth. On a correspondence theory of truth, truth is a property of propositions which involves a correspondence between the proposition and the reality to which it refers.¹⁰⁵ Van Til helpfully articulates that truth is not a

¹⁰⁰ There is no doubt that Plantinga believes in truth, but his project is focused on the rationality of belief in God. Thus, his work is a robust account of justification or warrant for true beliefs rather than truth itself.

¹⁰¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

¹⁰² Ronney Mourad, *Transcendental Arguments and Justified Christian Belief* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 40.

¹⁰³ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, vi.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 131.

¹⁰⁵ Joshua Rasmussen, *Defending the Correspondence Theory of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

correspondence between propositions and reality (taken as facts out there) but rather a correspondence between the mind of man and the mind of God.¹⁰⁶ He argues,

True human knowledge corresponds to the knowledge which God has of himself and his world It is clear what we mean by correspondence is not what is often meant by it in epistemological literature. In the literature on the subject, correspondence usually means a correspondence between the idea I have in my mind and the “Object out there.” In the struggle between the “realists” and the “subjective idealists” this was the only question in dispute. They were not concerned about the question uppermost in our minds, i.e., whether or not God has to be taken into the correspondence. We may call our position in epistemology a Correspondence Theory of Truth, if only we keep in mind that it is opposed to what has historically been known under that name.¹⁰⁷

For Van Til, truth is to “think God’s thoughts after him.”¹⁰⁸ When man’s thought corresponds to God’s thought it is said to be true.¹⁰⁹ Although man can have knowledge of the world that is true, it can never be exhaustive. Van Til explains that because we are created, our knowledge can never be exhaustive, but because we are created in God’s image, our knowledge is true.¹¹⁰ Further, man’s knowledge is not identical to God’s in the univocal sense. Man’s knowledge is analogical to God’s. Van Til states, “Man’s system of knowledge must therefore be an analogical replica of the system of knowledge which belongs to God.”¹¹¹ Man’s knowledge is partial and analogical, but nevertheless true.

Although correspondence is of prime importance to Van Til, he also speaks of coherence in a specific way. He writes, “only the Christian can obtain real coherence in his thinking. If all of our thoughts about the facts of the universe are in correspondence

¹⁰⁶ Van Til says, “Truth out of all relationship to any mind is a pure meaningless abstraction.” Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1932), 11.

¹⁰⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1969), 16, 208.

¹⁰⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 56–57.

¹¹⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 61.

¹¹¹ William D. Dennison, *In Defense of the Eschaton: Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. James Douglas Baird (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 142.

with God's ideas of these facts, there will naturally be coherence in our thinking because there is a complete coherence in God's thinking."¹¹² Coherence is a byproduct of human thought corresponding to God's thought. Yet, for God, coherence comes first. Van Til explains,

Accordingly, the determining factor must be a consideration of that which is most fundamental in our theory of correspondence or of coherence. Now this depends upon the question whether we have God's knowledge in mind first of all, or whether we begin with human knowledge. For God, coherence is the term that comes first. There was coherence in God's plan before there was any space-time fact to which his knowledge might correspond, or which might correspond to his knowledge. On the other hand, when we think of human knowledge, correspondence is of primary importance. 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.¹¹³

Van Til has room in his epistemology for both correspondence and coherence. Van Til's approach to correspondence and coherence in a theological way is a helpful supplement to Plantinga's epistemology.

Additionally, Van Til's analysis of the relation of correspondence and coherence fits well with Plantinga's discussion of warrant by way of testimony. Plantinga writes,

The warrant of a proposition I come to believe by way of testimony will depend (among other things) upon the warrant enjoyed by the same belief on the part of my source (and not conversely). We may therefore say that testimony is a sort of parasitic faculty: if you tell me that you spent your summer vacation in the Tetons, the warrant that belief has for *me* depends upon the warrant it has for *you*.¹¹⁴

Plantinga's description of warrant by way of testimony is with respect to human testimony. His concern is how humans have warrant by way of testimony from other humans. Van Til's approach to testimony concerns divine testimony through revelation. Although the testimonies come from two different places, we could apply the notion of

¹¹² Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (1932), 2.

¹¹³ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (1932), 12; see also Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 27.

¹¹⁴ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 180.

warrant to both senses. More particularly, the way that human testimony contributes to warrant could be seen as patterned after the way that divine testimony contributes to warrant. Just as human knowledge is analogous to God's, the function of testimony as it contributes to warrant is analogous from the creature to the Creator. God's knowledge is completely coherent and absolute, and all of his beliefs enjoy maximum warrant.

Through the mechanism of divine revelation, God reveals truth about himself and the world. The revelation of God is a divine testimony.¹¹⁵ As a testimony, the propositions we come to believe by way of that testimony will gain the warrant that God enjoys.

Believing what God has revealed grants us maximum warrant for those beliefs. Plantinga does acknowledge that what is true is whatever God believes, but his thought would be greatly assisted by Van Til's.¹¹⁶

False or Unwarranted Knowledge

One area where Van Til could be supplemented by Plantinga is with respect to Van Til's description of the unbeliever's epistemological knowing as false knowledge. Plantinga's schema may offer a potentially clearer way of making the distinction between metaphysical and epistemological aspects to knowledge which would avoid the objectionable label of "false knowledge" while preserving the concept itself. Plantinga does not use the terms "true knowledge" and "false knowledge," but neither does he distinguish knowledge in terms of metaphysical and epistemological. For Plantinga, truth is a necessary condition of knowledge. If the belief in question is false, it cannot count as knowledge. He does, however, speak in terms of warranted true belief and unwarranted true belief. If we were to appropriate Van Til's aspects of knowing metaphysically and epistemologically and explain the difference between them in terms of warrant rather

¹¹⁵ Plantinga discusses the nature of Scripture as a testimony in Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 61.

¹¹⁶ See Alvin Plantinga, "Divine Knowledge," in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 40–66.

than truth, the unbeliever's beliefs about reality could be counted as true (avoiding the label "false knowledge") but would be either warranted or unwarranted depending upon whether we are speaking of knowledge metaphysically or epistemologically. Plantinga writes, "According to St. Paul, it is unbelief that is a result of dysfunction, or brokenness, failure to function properly, or impedance of rational faculties."¹¹⁷ Using Plantinga's terminology and Van Til's categories, with respect to knowing metaphysically, the unbeliever has warranted true belief. With respect to knowing epistemologically, the unbeliever has unwarranted true belief. In this way, Van Til's conceptual scheme remains intact while updating the vocabulary used to make the distinction.

Does Knowledge Require Knowing God?

Another area in which Van Til seems to be a helpful supplement to Plantinga is in his insistence that all of knowledge is connected in such a way that one must know God in order to know anything else. Plantinga allows for the possibility of knowledge (even if only hypothetically) apart from its connection to an absolute God. For example, in his discussion of whether belief in God is warrant-basic, Plantinga says,

Freud doesn't really *argue* that theistic belief has no warrant if taken in the basic way: he seems to assume that such belief is false, and then infers in rather quick and casual fashion that it is produced by wish-fulfillment and hence doesn't have warrant. Here (despite the appearance of carelessness) perhaps Freud's instincts are right: I shall argue that if theistic belief is false, and taken in the basic way, then it probably has no warrant.¹¹⁸

Plantinga entertains the possibility that if theistic belief were false, it would probably have no warrant. Van Til would not entertain that hypothetical situation. For him, argumentation that leads from the falsity of theistic belief to some conclusion is not possible. This is because, for Van Til, possibility and probability have no meaning apart from Christian theism. He writes,

¹¹⁷ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 43.

¹¹⁸ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 37.

To say that the evidence, when fully and fairly considered, merely shows that God *probably* exists is tantamount to saying that he does not at all exist. The God of Christianity is the God whose counsel or plan is the source of possibility. The word *possibility* has no possible meaning except upon the presupposition of the existence of the self-contained ontological Trinity as the source of it.¹¹⁹

For Van Til, there is no possibility that theistic belief be false because the notion of possibility demands Christian theism. Thus, one may not hypothetically argue, as Plantinga does, about what would be the case if theistic belief were false.

Van Til insists, “All knowledge is interrelated. The created world is expressive of the nature of God.”¹²⁰ Van Til ties together the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the world. He says, “we cannot know nature truly, and man truly, unless we know God truly.”¹²¹ Knowing God truly is so connected with knowing nature truly that unless one knows the former truly, one does not and cannot know the latter truly. This is because Van Til sees the whole universe as a revelation of the glory of God.¹²² He argues, “the existence and meaning of every fact in this universe must in the last analysis be related to the self-conscious and eternally self-subsistent God of the Scriptures.”¹²³ Again Van Til writes, “The knowledge of God and of ourselves is most important to us. All other knowledge centers on our knowledge of God and of ourselves. If we are correct in our interpretation of knowledge here, we shall be correct everywhere; if we are mistaken here, we shall be mistaken everywhere.”¹²⁴ For a more practical example, Van Til says, “We do not mean, of course, that one must go to the Bible rather than to the laboratory if

¹¹⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 197.

¹²⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 64.

¹²¹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 176.

¹²² He writes, “The flowers of the field and the cattle on a thousand hills are a revelation of God.” Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 120.

¹²³ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 58.

¹²⁴ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 183.

one wishes to study the anatomy of the snake. But if one goes only to the laboratory and not also to the Bible, one will not have a full or even true interpretation of the snake.”¹²⁵

Van Til recognizes the Reformed Scholastic notion that God is the *principium essendi* of all knowledge. He writes,

We must not argue as though we can already know a great deal about nature by itself but that, inasmuch as we cannot know all that ought to be known about it, there must be one who knows infinitely more than we do. 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.¹²⁶

The existence of God is necessary for man to know anything.¹²⁷ But Van Til also acknowledges the Reformed Scholastic notion that God’s revelation is the *principium cognoscendi externum* of all knowledge. It is not simply that man may know nature if God exists, but man may know nature only if God exists and provides revelation to man. Van Til argues that both general and special revelation are necessary for man to know anything truly. He writes, “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.”¹²⁸ On Van Til’s view, it would be a mistake to suppose that general revelation furnishes man with enough knowledge to know God as Creator but not enough knowledge to know him as Savior. Rather, he argues,

No one, on the basis of present general revelation alone, actually knows God aright as Creator. It is not as though man by himself and on the basis of natural revelation alone can truly know God as the Creator, but that he cannot truly know God as Savior. Man *ought*, to be sure, from nature to know God as Creator, seeing that nature clearly displays the Creator. But since man has become a sinner . . . , he

¹²⁵ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 20.

¹²⁶ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 179.

¹²⁷ Van Til comments that the difference between science and theology is not that God is any less necessary for the one than for the other. Rather, the difference lies in the degree of directness with which God is brought into it. Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 36.

¹²⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 194.

therefore never reads the “book of nature” aright even with respect to “natural” things.¹²⁹

In order for man to truly know anything, he needs to truly know God, and general revelation, although necessary as the backdrop of special revelation, is not sufficient to truly know God, even as Creator. Even prior to the fall, special revelation was necessary to truly know God and rightly interpret nature.

Not only are general and special revelation necessary to interpret nature and God, but man needs to have a specific special revelation of his final end in history in order to correctly interpret anything in the present. Van Til insists,

It is of prime importance to observe that even in Paradise man was never meant to study nature by means of observation and experiment without connection with positive *supernatural* thought communication given to him by God. Nature could not be observed for what it actually is except in relation to history, and history cannot be seen for what it is at any stage except it be viewed in relation to its final end. And only by direct supernatural revelation could man have an adequate notion of this end.¹³⁰

For Van Til, natural revelation does not stand on its own. Man needs general revelation and also a special revelation from God concerning his final end in order to make sense of history and, consequently, nature.

In summary, in this chapter we have seen how Plantinga’s and Van Til’s views on epistemology are a helpful supplement to one another in at least three ways. First, Van Til supplements Plantinga’s notion of truth through his theological treatment of man’s knowledge as corresponding to God’s internally coherent knowledge. Second, Van Til’s distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of knowledge may be better articulated using Plantinga’s terminology of warrant than requiring the label of “false knowledge.” Third, Plantinga could also benefit from Van Til’s insistence that all knowledge is interrelated in such a way that it depends upon God and knowing God in a

¹²⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 194.

¹³⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 126.

certain way. In the next chapter we will consider the distinctions and similarities between Plantinga's concept of properly basic beliefs and Van Til's notion of presuppositions.

CHAPTER 3

PROPERLY BASIC BELIEFS

Michael Bergmann explains the generic structure of a foundationalist epistemology as follows: “A belief has positive epistemic status E if and only if either (i) it is not inferred from another belief and it satisfies the conditions C; or (ii) it is inferred in way W from another belief with positive epistemic status E.”¹ The letter C “refers to the conditions under which a basic (or non-inferential) belief counts as properly basic.”² Beliefs of this sort lie at the base of one’s noetic structure. They are basic beliefs. All other beliefs receive their support in terms of justification from basic beliefs. Classical foundationalism limits the kinds of beliefs which can be counted as basic to three. Basic beliefs are those which are either self-evident, such as all bachelors are unmarried males, evident to the senses, such as I see a tree in the field, or incorrigible, such as I am a thinking being.³

Classical foundationalism has not gone unchallenged. Plantinga is one of its foremost opponents. He provides a devastating critique of classical foundationalism and in its place formulates the notion of weak foundationalism which posits the belief in God as an exemplar of a belief which is properly basic and not able to be justified in the way demanded by strong or classical foundationalism.⁴ In a similar fashion, Van Til views the

¹ Michael Bergmann, “Foundationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 254.

² Bergmann, “Foundationalism,” 254.

³ Graham Oppy, “Natural Theology,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24.

⁴ Michael G. Harvey, *Scepticism, Relativism, and Religious Knowledge: A Kierkegaardian Perspective Informed by Wittgenstein’s Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2014), 113.

belief in God as having positive epistemic status not formed on the basis of another belief.⁵ However, he conceives of the belief in God as not only basic, but also as a presupposition.⁶ While there are many similarities between Plantinga's notion of properly basic beliefs and Van Til's notion of presupposition, the way these two men treat the belief in God, the terminology they use, and the consequences they assign to such a belief are distinct.

This chapter argues that Van Til's idea of a presupposition and Plantinga's explanation of properly basic beliefs complement and critique one another and that they should be taken together as they are allowed to refine one another. To show how this is so, first, I will examine Plantinga's notion of properly basic beliefs and take note of how they function in one's noetic structure. Second, I will explore Van Til's concept of presuppositions and what influence they have over the person who holds them. Third, I will offer a constructive analysis in which each view helps to mutually reinforce each other by way of supplementation and critique.

Plantinga's Properly Basic Beliefs

According to Plantinga, classical foundationalism incorporates three central theses.⁷ First, every rational noetic structure includes a set of beliefs taken as basic, which are not accepted on the basis of any other beliefs. They do not require evidence in order for them to be counted as justified. They can stand on their own. Second, non-basic belief is proportional to support from the foundations. If the foundational belief has much support, then the belief that is built on top of it has more support. If a foundational belief

⁵ Van Til remarks that his starting point is the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. See Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: P&R, 1971), 3.

⁶ The notion of presupposition here is transcendental in that it serves as a necessary precondition of rationality.

⁷ These points are delineated in Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

has less support, then those beliefs which rest upon it will likewise have less in the way of justification. Third, basic beliefs must be self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible.

Plantinga sees a critical flaw lurking within the concept of classical foundationalism. His meticulous critique can be summarized by the following points. First, according to classical foundationalism only beliefs which are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible are properly basic. Second, many of our beliefs are properly basic which do not fit into the categories of classical foundationalism. These beliefs include that physical objects endure in the world external to the mind, that the future will be like the past, that memory and sense perception are generally reliable, that there are other conscious minds besides one's own, and that the earth has existed for more than ten minutes.⁸ Third, classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent because it is not self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Therefore, classical foundationalism is false.

It is important to note that Plantinga does not take issue with foundationalism itself. He only rejects a particular view of foundationalism, that of *classical* foundationalism.⁹ This type of foundationalism Plantinga also labels "strong foundationalism."¹⁰ In its place he proposes an alternative foundationalist view he calls "weak foundationalism." Plantinga writes, "*weak* foundationalism is the view that (1) every rational noetic structure has a foundation, and (2) in a rational noetic structure, non-basic belief is proportional in strength to support from the foundations."¹¹ Plantinga has eliminated the third criteria of strong foundationalism from his definition of weak

⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98.

⁹ Erik Baldwin and Tyler Dalton McNabb, *Plantingian Religious Epistemology and World Religions: Prospects and Problems* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 6.

¹⁰ Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 11 (1982): 195.

¹¹ Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," 194.

foundationalism. In this way, he is able to include a wider range of types of beliefs which can count as properly basic. No longer is foundationalism constrained to count as basic only those beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible.

One of Plantinga's primary interests in his reformulation of foundationalism is to set forth the belief in God as a properly basic belief. According to Plantinga's model of epistemology, a model which he labels the Aquinas/Calvin model, theistic beliefs about God can be counted as basic. Like other basic beliefs, they are not arrived at by way of inference or argument.¹² Ratiocination does not factor in to the process of the attainment of the natural knowledge of God. One does not come to the knowledge of God through the famous theistic proofs of natural theology such as the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, or the moral argument. Rather, the knowledge of God is arrived at in an immediate way. According to the model, the natural knowledge of God comes by way of what John Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis*.¹³ Plantinga explains that the *sensus divinitatis* is a kind of faculty or cognitive mechanism, which, in a wide variety of circumstances, produces the belief in God in us.¹⁴

The belief in God arising from the *sensus divinitatis* has several important features. Plantinga remarks that the belief in God is not something chosen as if someone could decide to believe it or not. Rather, the belief in God, as produced by the *sensus divinitatis* is formed in us apart from a voluntary decision to acquire it.¹⁵ Plantinga elaborates, "These beliefs are *formed in us* in those circumstances; in the typical case we

¹² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175.

¹³ Calvin remarks as follows: "That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 9.

¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 33.

¹⁵ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 34.

don't consciously choose to have those beliefs. Instead, we find ourselves with them, just as we find ourselves with perceptual and memory beliefs."¹⁶ Whether one is aware that he holds to the belief in God Plantinga does not say. However, he does say that an awareness of God is natural, widespread, and not easy to forget or destroy.¹⁷ One need not be aware that he has the belief in God to be aware of God.

Plantinga also argues that the *sensus divinitatis* is not a belief that is formed from conception. It is not an innate belief. Rather it is a capacity for the knowledge of God which is innate, instilled at conception, which comes to fruition under the circumstances of normal human development. Plantinga explains, "The *capacity* for such knowledge is indeed innate, but a bit of maturity is required before it actually shows up. What one has from his mother's womb is not a knowledge of God, but a capacity for it."¹⁸ There is some lapse of time from conception to the production of the belief in God. Plantinga does not say how much time is required, only that a bit of maturity is required. Thus, on Plantinga's view, there could be many individuals of insufficient maturity to possess the natural knowledge of God that comes through the faculty of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Plantinga offers a few comments on the circumstances in which the *sensus divinitatis* produces the knowledge of God. There is not just one circumstance which occasions the activity of the *sensus divinitatis*. There are many various circumstances which occasion the belief in God. Plantinga specifically mentions a few circumstances such as the glories of nature, an awareness of divine disapproval for wrongdoing, and a perception of forgiveness upon confession and repentance.¹⁹ In circumstances such as

¹⁶ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 33.

¹⁷ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 33.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 33–34.

¹⁹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 34–35.

these, the *sensus divinitatis* produces the belief in God in an individual. Yet, this does not always occur.

While the capacity for the knowledge of God is given by God to every individual, it is yet subject to malfunction. Plantinga says, “perhaps it is sometimes diseased or even inoperative. It can also be impeded in the usual ways, and its deliverances can perhaps sometimes be extinguished by the wrong kind of nurture.”²⁰ In the case of malfunction, the *sensus divinitatis* does not produce the belief in God in an individual. Plantinga clarifies that the malfunction which may come upon the *sensus divinitatis* is not due to some defect in God’s design, but rather the sin of man. Sin is the source of any dysfunction within the capacity of the *sensus divinitatis*.

The *sensus divinitatis*, as the capacitive faculty which triggers the knowledge of God, does not produce knowledge that is arrived at by inferences drawn from premises. Plantinga says, “It isn’t that one beholds the night sky, notes that it is grand, and concludes that there must be such a person as God. . . . It is rather that upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower these beliefs just arise within us.”²¹ Thus the *sensus divinitatis*, like the faculty of perception, delivers basic beliefs, beliefs not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions.²² Plantinga explains, “They are *occasioned* by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them.”²³ Just as perception, memory, and *a priori* beliefs are starting points for thought, the same goes for the sense of divinity.²⁴

Theistic belief as produced by the *sensus divinitatis* is basic. Yet, this belief is not just basic, it is *properly* basic. The difference between a basic belief and a properly

²⁰ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 33n6.

²¹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 35.

²² Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 36.

²³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175.

²⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 176.

basic belief is that a properly basic belief is one in which the believer is justified in holding it in a basic way.²⁵ Plantinga explains,

A foundationalist will also typically claim that not just any belief is *properly* basic; some propositions are such that if I accept them in the basic way, there is something wrong, something skewed, something unjustified about my noetic structure. Imagine, for example, that because of an inordinate admiration for Picasso, I suddenly find myself with the belief that he didn't die; like Elijah, he was directly transported to heaven (in a peculiarly warped sort of chariot with a great misshapen eye in the middle of its side). If I don't believe this proposition on the evidential basis of any others, it is basic for me. But there is something defective, wrong, unhappy in my believing this proposition in the basic way; this proposition is not *properly* basic [A] proposition is properly basic, for a person S, if and only if it is self-evident for S, or incorrigible for S, or evident to the senses for S.²⁶

While the classical foundationalist will not accept the belief in God as properly basic because the belief is not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, Plantinga insists that the belief in God is properly basic “with respect to warrant and rationality as well as justification.”²⁷

Plantinga argues that theistic belief is properly basic with respect to warrant. The beliefs that Christians have in God by way of the *sensus divinitatis* are not only basic, but they can also have warrant sufficient for knowledge. Warrant requires properly functioning cognitive faculties operating in a similar environment for which they were designed within a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs. All of these criteria are met in the case of the *sensus divinitatis* producing the belief in God. In the case of improperly functioning cognitive faculties, or a design plan aimed at something other than truth, a person may have a properly basic belief but an unwarranted one. But this is God's world. Humans live in an environment designed by God with a capacitive faculty designed to produce the true belief in God. Therefore, Plantinga concludes, a believer is within his epistemic rights in accepting theistic belief and he also

²⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 178.

²⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 83–84.

²⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 268.

has warrant for it.²⁸ The belief in God produced by the *sensus divinitatis* has warrant and therefore counts as knowledge.

Not only is the belief in God properly basic, but Plantinga says that other kinds of Christian beliefs can be properly basic. He writes,

I don't *need* a good historical case for the central teachings of the gospel to be warranted in accepting them. I needn't be able to find a good argument, historical or otherwise, for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or for his being the divine Son of God, or for the Christian claim that his suffering and death constitute an atoning sacrifice whereby we can be restored to the right relationship with God.²⁹

Christian beliefs do not need to be validated by outside sources, that is, sourced outside of the Christian faith. There is, rather, an internal source which validates Christian belief. This source is Scripture, and Scripture is self-authenticating. Plantinga gets the notion of Scripture as self-authenticating from John Calvin.³⁰ Plantinga notes the utter certainty of which Calvin speaks with respect to the firmness of the believer's repose in the teachings of Scripture while also acknowledging that faith is always mixed with unbelief and doubt.³¹ He comments that belief in the central truths of the gospel "takes place within the context of a whole interlocking system of beliefs" and that "it obtains some of its warrant from its coherence with a coherent system."³² Christian beliefs nevertheless retain warrant that they don't get by warrant transfer from other beliefs (outside of Scripture). The beliefs of the Christian faith are in Plantinga's words "a proper starting point for thought."³³ In other words, Scripture and its propositional content are properly

²⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 179.

²⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 259.

³⁰ See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 33–34.

³¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 260n35.

³² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 267–68.

³³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 343.

basic beliefs with sufficient warrant for knowledge and also serve as the foundation or starting point of thought.

In Plantinga's model, theistic belief, although properly basic, is not immune to defeat. This holds for basic beliefs in general. He argues, "So it is not true, in general, that if a belief is held in the basic way, then it is immune to argument or rational evaluation. . . . I wouldn't so much as mention this, except that there seems to be a fairly widespread impression to the contrary."³⁴ Christian belief, like other belief is subject to defeaters. Plantinga defines a defeater as follows:

D is a purely epistemic defeater of *B* for *S* at *t* if and only if (1) *S*'s noetic structure *N* at *t* includes *B* and *S* comes to believe *D* at *t*, and (2) and person *S** (a) whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly in the relevant respects, (b) who is such that the bit of the design plan governing the sustaining of *B* in her noetic structure is successfully aimed at truth (i.e., at the maximization of true belief and minimization of false belief) and nothing more, (c) whose noetic structure is *N* and includes *B*, and (d) who comes to believe *D* but nothing else independent of or stronger than *D*, would withhold *B* (or believe it less strongly).³⁵

Examples of defeaters for Christian belief are evil, suffering, and pluralism. It is possible that a Christian come to have defeaters of sufficient strength against their beliefs which would render them irrational in holding to their Christian belief. Plantinga does not think that any defeaters have been successful thus far, but he leaves the possibility open that there might be such a defeater produced in the future.³⁶

Van Til's Presuppositionalism

Van Til was a staunch defender of the idea that the belief in God, particularly the trinitarian God of the Bible, was the starting point for knowledge.³⁷ Van Til's idea of starting point is that of an ultimate foundation. R. J. Rushdoony explains,

³⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 344.

³⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 363.

³⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 486.

³⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1969), 12–13.

It is necessary to distinguish with Van Til between an immediate and an ultimate starting point. He explains it by the analogy of a diving board. A diver, standing on the tip of a board and seeing nothing around him but water can state that the end of the board is his starting point in an immediate sense. But in an ultimate sense the foundation of the whole board is his starting point, and he cannot eliminate from his recognition of his situation all except the tip and the water. As Van Til insists, the question at issue in philosophy is “not that of the immediate starting point. All agree that the immediate starting point must be that of our everyday experience and the ‘facts’ that are most close at hand. But the exact charge we are making against so many Idealists as well as Pragmatists is that they are taking for granted certain temporal ‘facts’ not only as a temporary but as an ultimate starting point.”³⁸

Van Til’s starting point serves as the foundation for all knowledge, not just the foundation for Christian reasoning, but for any reasoning whatsoever.³⁹ It is held at a most basic level in the thinker’s belief system. Van Til comments, “For [the Christian] the most basic fact of all facts is the existence of the triune God.”⁴⁰ Van Til argues, “for the human mind to know any fact truly, it must presuppose the existence of God.”⁴¹ The knowledge of all other facts is built upon the foundation of knowing the existence of God. Van Til does not merely mean a god in general. Rather, he means the Trinity.⁴² All possible predication rests upon the presupposition of the actuality of the existence of the self-contained ontological Trinity.⁴³ Van Til explains,

God, as self-sufficient, as the one in whom the one and the many are equally ultimate, as the one in whom the persons of the Trinity are interchangeably exhaustive, is the presupposition for the intelligent use of words with respect to

³⁸ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Van Til and the Limits of Reason* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2013), 51.

³⁹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 5.

⁴⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 5.

⁴¹ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 58.

⁴² He says, “Our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition.” Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 59.

⁴³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 39.

anything in the universe, whether it be the trees of the garden or the angels in heaven.⁴⁴

In order to use words and predicate things about reality, one must presuppose the ontological Trinity. Elaborating on Van Til's thought, James White comments,

No understanding of any fact can take place unless it is seen in right relation to Christ as Creator-Redeemer. As Roberts notes, for Van Til the "ontological trinity is made the category of interpretation for all things and the final reference point in all human thinking." Van Til proposes that God must be taken as the prerequisite of both the possibility and the actuality of the relationship between humanity's various concepts and propositions of knowledge, an "analogical replica" of the system of knowledge which belongs to God. No truth in human thought exists outside of these presuppositions.⁴⁵

Predication and meaning relate facts to facts. But, unless those facts are related to the Trinity, they cannot be understood for what they are.

Additionally, all interpretations of facts rest upon an assumed philosophy of fact. Van Til states, "every student of nature approaches the task of describing nature and its facts in terms of the presuppositions of a philosophy of fact."⁴⁶ Interpretation operates upon a prior commitment to a certain set of propositions concerning what facts are and what makes them facts. For Van Til, God makes facts what they are, and they must be seen in relation to him.

Van Til further declares that science itself is a discipline which is made possible only on the presupposition of Christian theism.⁴⁷ With a slightly different meaning of "presupposition," Van Til here means that science is only possible because there is a God who created an orderly world and designed humans to be able to gain knowledge through studying that world. The significance of the discoveries of science are also grounded in the presupposition of God. Van Til elaborates,

⁴⁴ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 180.

⁴⁵ James Emery White, *What Is Truth? A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Shaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 45–46.

⁴⁶ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 152.

⁴⁷ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 58.

For man, self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness. . . . For Adam in paradise, God-consciousness could not come in at the end of a syllogistic process of reasoning. God-consciousness was for him the presupposition of the significance of his reasoning on anything.⁴⁸

All meaning and intelligibility rests upon the presupposition of the God of Christian theism.

Although Van Til, himself, did not furnish a precise definition of a presupposition, his student, Greg Bahnsen, did. Bahnsen writes,

A “presupposition” is an elementary assumption in one’s reasoning or in the process by which opinions are formed. A “presupposition” is not just any assumption in an argument, but a personal commitment that is held at the most basic level of one’s network of beliefs. Presuppositions for a wide-ranging, foundational *perspective* (or starting point) in terms of which everything else is interpreted and evaluated. As such, presuppositions have the greatest authority in one’s thinking, being treated as one’s least negotiable beliefs and being granted the highest immunity to revision.⁴⁹

This is a common definition of presupposition that Van Til appears to be working with in his various works, but he does not use it this way in all contexts.

Believing and Unbelieving Presuppositions

Van Til often draws a comparison between the presuppositions of one individual and another. The line of demarcation Van Til uses to make the distinction is regeneration. For Van Til, there are only two kinds of individuals, believers and unbelievers. Thus, for Van Til, the presuppositions of the believer and the presuppositions of the unbeliever are distinct. He writes, “Theism holds that all predication presupposes the existence of God as a self-conscious being, while anti-theism holds that predication is possible without any reference to God.”⁵⁰ The believer and unbeliever differ over how predication is possible. They also differ in reference point. Van Til says, “When man became a sinner, he made himself instead of God the ultimate

⁴⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 115.

⁴⁹ Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 2.

⁵⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 81.

or final reference point. And it is precisely this presupposition, as it controls without exception all forms of non-Christian philosophy, that must be brought into question.”⁵¹ Believing and unbelieving presuppositions are distinct. Unbelieving presuppositions undergird an unbelieving view of science. Van Til observes, “the idea of brute, that is utterly uninterpreted, ‘fact’ is the presupposition to the finding of any fact of scientific standing.”⁵² Believers do not presuppose the existence of brute facts but rather that all facts are what they are by the interpretation of God.⁵³ Van Til’s rejection of brute facts is rooted in the nature of God. He explains, “There are *no brute facts* for God. As to his own being, fact and interpretation are co-extensive. There are no hidden unexplored possibilities in God. And as to the universe, God’s interpretation logically precedes the denotation and the connotation of all facts of which it consists.”⁵⁴ Van Til affirms that the presuppositions that lie at the heart of believing and unbelieving thought are opposite. He writes, “Christian methodology is therefore based upon presuppositions that are quite opposite of those of the non-Christian.”⁵⁵ The believer’s and unbeliever’s presuppositions stand opposed to one another.

What a Presupposition Does

Van Til’s idea of a presupposition becomes clearer when we examine what it does or the role that it plays in one’s thinking. For Van Til, presuppositions serve as a governing mechanism within one’s noetic structure. It not only lies at the starting point of knowledge (where it is), but it determines the outcome of that knowledge (what it does). It serves as a sail on a ship which directs it along a particular path to a specific end. One’s

⁵¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 98.

⁵² Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 8.

⁵³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 4.

⁵⁴ Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 93.

⁵⁵ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 128.

presuppositions about God drives the rest of one's knowledge. In his discussion of *a priori* and *a posteriori* ratiocination, Van Til states, "the one without the other is meaningless. Both give us true knowledge on the right presupposition; both lead to skepticism on the wrong presupposition."⁵⁶ For Van Til, the presupposition that one starts with is determinative for whether the destination at which one arrives is knowledge or skepticism.

Presuppositions also require us to think in certain ways. For example, Van Til explains that "full acceptance of these presuppositions requires us to think of the whole created universe as clearly revelatory of God. The very being of any created 'fact' whether man, 'nature,' or 'history,' is exhausted in its revelatory character."⁵⁷ To the modern mind, often science is put in place as the guiding principle of one's thinking. Not so for Van Til. He reasons, "is it not of the very essence of a truly scientific attitude that it must be ready to follow out the facts to any conclusion whatsoever? . . . In reply the Christian apologist claims that on its presuppositions alone is science possible."⁵⁸ The Christian does not follow science wherever it leads because she recognizes that the only way science could lead anywhere at all is if Christian theism is already true.

The Content of Presuppositions

We have spoken of what a presupposition does, but presuppositions also have content to them. What is it that presuppositions presuppose? Van Til speaks of a variety of different propositions that make up the content of his idea of the presupposition which serves as the starting point of knowledge. At the most basic level, Van Til writes, "God is always the most basic and therefore the ultimate or final reference point in human

⁵⁶ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 124.

⁵⁷ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 197.

⁵⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 58.

interpretation.”⁵⁹ However, Van Til also expands this content. In his discussion of the necessity of special revelation, Van Til argues that the presuppositions of biblical theism “are the existence of the ontological Trinity, the temporal creation of the universe *ex nihilo*, and man’s creation in the image of God.”⁶⁰ The content of Van Til’s presupposition is not simply God, but an entire Christian system of truth, a worldview. Van Til elaborates further on the content of the presuppositions which are necessary for knowledge as he writes, “the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe is the only presupposition that can account for the uniformity of nature that the scientist needs.”⁶¹ Here, Van Til adds the notion of the plan of God and the control that plan has over all the affairs of the universe as essential to the content of the presuppositions. In another place, Van Til says, “It is the actual existence of the God of Christian theism and the infallible authority of the Scripture, which speaks to sinners of this God, that must be taken as the presupposition of the intelligibility of any fact in the world.”⁶² Van Til sees the authority of Scripture as a necessary component to the content of one’s presuppositions. Thus, in order to have knowledge or in order to meaningfully predicate something, one must believe certain propositions concerning God, creation, providence, and Scripture.

Those who do not believe those certain propositions have no grounding for meaningful predication. This group of individuals Van Til classifies as unbelievers or unregenerate. While unbelievers do not have the presuppositions necessary for knowledge, they do still have presuppositions. Van Til describes some of the content of their presuppositions as well. For Van Til, the unregenerate presupposes that predication

⁵⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 100.

⁶⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 197.

⁶¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 133.

⁶² Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 153.

is possible without any reference to God.⁶³ Van Til elaborates, “It is he himself as ultimate, by means of laws of logic that operate independently of God, who determines what is possible and probable.”⁶⁴ The unregenerate see themselves as the final reference point with the ability to judge accurately in matters of fact and faith.

Constructive Analysis

Plantinga’s properly basic beliefs and Van Til’s presuppositions show some striking similarities. They both appeal to the knowledge of God as the starting point for thought, at least intelligible thought. They both also treat the belief in God as a most basic principle in one’s noetic structure. Yet, each of their views has some shortcomings which could be assisted by appropriating some of the ideas of the other. The concepts of basic beliefs and presuppositions are better together than separate.

The Scope of Basic Beliefs

One area in which Plantinga’s analysis could be assisted by Van Til’s is with respect to the scope of the properly basic belief in God. For Plantinga, the belief in God produced by the *sensus divinitatis* is involuntary, and it might also reasonably be said to be unconscious.⁶⁵ Additionally, the *sensus divinitatis* does not operate normally in the unregenerate. In their case, it does not produce a belief in God. Due to the malfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*, unbelievers do not hold the belief in God as a properly basic belief, and they do not know God.⁶⁶ On Van Til’s view, the belief in the God of Christian theism is not only held by the believer but by the unbeliever as well. Because Van Til distinguishes knowledge in terms of metaphysical and epistemological, he is able to

⁶³ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 81.

⁶⁴ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 83.

⁶⁵ See the connection between involuntary belief and unconscious beliefs in Ronney Mourad, *Transcendental Arguments and Justified Christian Belief* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 67n20.

⁶⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 217.

maintain that the unbeliever has knowledge of God but only in terms of the metaphysical. The scope of the belief in the God of Christian theism in the metaphysical sense is universal. Van Til is able to muster the biblical support of the apostle Paul for his contention. Commenting on Romans 1, he writes,

Paul says that men do actually in some sense see the truth. We do not do justice to his passage by merely saying that all men or most men believe in a god or believe that God probably exists. Paul says that the revelation of the only existing God is so clearly imprinted upon man himself and upon his environment that no matter how hard he tries, he cannot suppress this fact.⁶⁷

All men know God (in the metaphysical sense) and yet unbelievers suppress what they know out of ethical hostility to God, as they remain true to their unbelieving thought. Because Romans 1 and other biblical passages teach a universal belief in God, space needs to be made in Plantinga's system for a universal belief in God even though the *sensus divinitatis* has been damaged by the fall.

Accounting for Warrant

At the same time, Van Til's view of presuppositions could be assisted by Plantinga's formulation of proper function. For Van Til, the unbeliever has true beliefs about God that he suppresses. These true beliefs are more than beliefs, however. Van Til says, "even in [the unbeliever's] virtual negation of God, he is still really presupposing God."⁶⁸ In some sense, the unbeliever, like the believer, presupposes God. Yet, the unbeliever also suppresses this presupposition. This suppression is a result of cognitive malfunction. John Frame, a former student of Van Til, argues that when Van Til asserts that unbelievers also presuppose God in their thinking, he is using "presupposition" in a different sense than when he uses it to refer to the presuppositions of believers.⁶⁹ Frame

⁶⁷ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 166.

⁶⁸ Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 13.

⁶⁹ John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 9.

comments, “Clearly, when the unbeliever presupposes God in this sense, he is not acknowledging God as his ultimate commitment.”⁷⁰ But might it be the case that the unbeliever has dual dueling heart commitments? Metaphysically the unbeliever possesses the knowledge of God he has by virtue of being created in the image of God. Epistemologically, the unbeliever cannot account for what he metaphysically knows because he refuses to acknowledge God, being committed to his own principle of autonomy. The fact of these two opposing beliefs just is the problem for the unbeliever. That one belief conflicts with the other and that the beliefs in question serve as foundational level presuppositions in his thinking cause him cognitive dysfunction.

Given Plantinga’s requirement for proper function as a necessary condition for warrant, the most an unbeliever could have with respect to God, epistemologically speaking, is *unwarranted* true belief. If the insights of Plantinga and Van Til are viewed side by side, we might say that what amounts to the unbeliever’s knowledge of God, metaphysically speaking, for Van Til would be equivalent to warranted true belief in God for Plantinga. And the unbeliever’s knowledge of God, epistemologically speaking, for Van Til would be equivalent to unwarranted true belief in God for Plantinga. Yet, the comparison could be taken further to include not just the belief in God but knowledge of anything at all. This situation appears to be what Bahnsen had in mind when he says, “Being lost in sin and thus mentally turning away from God, man has lost his bearings with respect to knowing anything; he cannot really justify the things he claims to know, even though in some sense he clearly does continue to know things about himself and the world.”⁷¹ The unbeliever knows and does not know things in different senses. He knows things metaphysically, but he does not know things epistemologically. Metaphysically speaking, the unbeliever has warranted true beliefs and therefore knowledge.

⁷⁰ Frame, *Apologetics*, 9.

⁷¹ Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 196.

Epistemologically speaking, the unbeliever has unwarranted true beliefs and therefore no knowledge. Bringing Plantinga and Van Til together allows for four logical categories of true beliefs.

- (i) Metaphysical warranted true belief
- (ii) Metaphysical unwarranted true belief
- (iii) Epistemological warranted true belief
- (iv) Epistemological unwarranted true belief

Unbelievers live in the land of (i), (ii), and (iv). Because they have the *sensus divinitatis* implanted in their minds as creations in the image of God, they can have metaphysical warranted true belief about God, the world, and a thousand other things. Additionally, their metaphysical true beliefs may not always be warranted for a variety of reasons. For example, they may happen to believe something that turns out to be true by accident. Finally, the unbeliever's epistemological true beliefs are all unwarranted due to their cognitive dysfunction at the presuppositional level.

Belief in God as Certain

Another way in which Plantinga can be supplemented by Van Til is with regard to how firmly properly basic beliefs are held, or at least how firmly some of them are held. Plantinga has already shown that the belief in God is properly basic for the believer.⁷² Yet, in his discussion of warrant-basic beliefs, he argues that if the belief in God is true, then it probably has warrant. He leaves it open for some chance, however small, that a true belief in God may not have warrant. Plantinga reasons,

This isn't certain; the argument is not deductively valid. It is abstractly possible, I suppose, that God has created us with a faculty for knowing him; for one reason or another, this faculty always malfunctions, and some other faculty created to produce some *other* beliefs often malfunctions in such a way that *it* produces belief in God. Then our belief in God wouldn't have warrant, despite the fact that it is true.⁷³

⁷² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 259.

⁷³ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 40.

Plantinga assumes here that God could create two always-malfunctioning faculties which accidentally end up producing the belief in God such that the belief in God is true but unwarranted. Because of this possibility, however unlikely, the properly basic belief in God cannot be held with absolute certitude.

In his discussion of faith in the gospel, Plantinga says that the believer need not hold to the truths of the gospel in a basic way. He writes,

They *could* be accepted on the basis of other propositions, and perhaps in some cases are. A believer could reason as follows: I have a strong historical and archeological evidence for the reliability of the Bible (or the Church, or my parents, or some other authority); the Bible teaches the great things of the gospel; so probably these things are true. But to think these things *probably* true falls short of that “conviction” and “deep-rooted assurance.”⁷⁴

Plantinga seems to recognize the problem with only positing Christian truth as “probably true.” Yet, he does not alleviate himself from this difficulty.

Van Til would vehemently disagree that Christianity is only probably true or that Christian belief could be arrived at by accident or through some undesigned coincidence in the plan of God. For him, God is known by the believer with certainty. He argues, “Christians are interested in showing to those who hold that ‘God’ possibly (or probably) exists but possibly (or probably) does not exist, that the words possibility and probability have no meaning unless the God of Christianity actually exists.”⁷⁵ In order to assert that God possibly exists, one would have to have an idea of what “possibly” means, and this requires Christian theism. Regarding Plantinga’s hypothetical creation of two always-malfunctioning faculties, Van Til would say that if God could be responsible for two always-malfunctioning cognitive faculties, then it is not God we are talking about but some other imaginative being whose design is either imperfect or who intentionally

⁷⁴ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 60n7.

⁷⁵ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 39.

deceives. Neither conclusion comports with Scripture's revelation of who God is, which, for Van Til, is taken as a presupposition.

The important point is to notice that Plantinga's basic beliefs and Van Til's presuppositions are functioning differently. Plantinga is not using basic belief in a strong transcendental sense of necessary conditions for predication that Van Til uses with presuppositions. Van Til's purpose is intended to provide the grounds for rational thought. Plantinga's purpose is to explain how we have rational thought.

Belief in God as Incorrigible

Another critique of Plantinga's epistemology has to do with the corrigibility of the properly basic belief in God. Plantinga defines incorrigibility as follows: "S has incorrigible knowledge of a proposition p if and only if it is not possible that p be false and S believe it, and not possible that p be true and S believe -p."⁷⁶ Plantinga allows for defeaters to impede or preclude the formation of basic beliefs.⁷⁷ For him, beliefs that are properly basic such as the belief in God can be mistaken and corrected later on, given the right kind of defeater. He elaborates, "Of course that is not to say that a believer can properly reject proposed defeaters out of hand, without examination; nor is she committed to refusing to think she could be wrong. No doubt she can be wrong: that is part of the human condition."⁷⁸

For Van Til, however, there can be no defeater for the belief in God for at least two reasons. First, the belief in God is part of the *imago Dei*. It cannot be erased because it is part of the human constitution designed by God. All humans, metaphysically speaking, have knowledge of God. Although this knowledge can be suppressed, it cannot

⁷⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49.

⁷⁷ Keith A. Mascord, *Alvin Plantinga and Christian Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 148.

⁷⁸ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 65.

be erased. Second, the belief in God is required at the metaphysical level for all rationality and hence any notion of what a defeater is or might be in the first place.

Placing the belief in God's existence into Plantinga's definition of incorrigibility given above yields the following: S has incorrigible knowledge of the proposition God exists if and only if it is not possible that God not exist and S believe it, and not possible that God exists and S believe that God does not exist. If God did not exist, S would not be here to believe anything and there would be no such thing as rationality. Additionally, because God has implanted knowledge of himself into every person, it is not possible for him to exist and a person to believe that he does not exist. Thus, metaphysically speaking and given the definition of incorrigibility that Plantinga provides, the belief in God is incorrigible even for the unbeliever. But what of the believer?

For a Christian, the belief in God is also incorrigible, but it is incorrigible both in a metaphysical and in an epistemological sense. Again, using Plantinga's definition of incorrigibility, and inserting the belief in God for the Christian, we reach two conclusions. First, it is not possible for God to not exist and the Christian to believe that he does exist. According to 1 Corinthians 12:3, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."⁷⁹ The Holy Spirit produces the belief in God in the believer in an epistemological way through regeneration. Second, it is not possible for God to exist and the Christian to believe that God does not exist. If the Christian did not believe that God existed, he would not be a Christian. Thus, with respect to incorrigibility, the belief in God metaphysically speaking is incorrigible for unbeliever and believer alike. Epistemologically speaking, the belief in God is also incorrigible for the believer.

If incorrigibility can be maintained as an aspect of the belief in God, then a further revision of Plantinga's Reformed epistemology may be needed. Plantinga set

⁷⁹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version*.

aside strong foundationalism because it could not account for the justification of certain beliefs among which is the belief in God. If the belief in God is, in fact, incorrigible given Plantinga's definition, then it can satisfy the requirements of strong foundationalism. There may be other reasons for rejecting classical foundationalism, reasons which would include the necessity of being able to justify memory beliefs and beliefs about the past, etc. But as it pertains to the belief in God, one need not give up strong foundationalism purely on account of seeking a way to justify that belief. Or perhaps Plantinga's definition of incorrigibility needs revision.

Conclusion

In summary, in this chapter we have seen how Plantinga's view of properly basic beliefs and Van Til's view of presuppositions are similar but different. Both are found at or near the foundations of one's thinking. Both can be arrived at due to God implanting them into the mind. Some of the content of each of them are also the same. Yet, Plantinga's view of properly basic beliefs in God is not transcendental in nature and those beliefs are subject to defeat. The properly basic belief in God is also narrower in scope in that it is not a universally held belief. Plantinga's view of the corrigibility of the belief in God could be assisted by implementing Van Til's distinction between epistemologically and metaphysically knowing. The belief in God is both corrigible and incorrigible depending upon whether the belief is viewed epistemologically or metaphysically and whether the one who holds the belief is regenerate or unregenerate. Van Til's view on presuppositions could obtain further clarification by appropriating Plantinga's notion of warrant in order to see with more clarity how the unbeliever has and does not have knowledge. In the next chapter we will explore the noetic effects of sin and how these effects are accounted for in Plantinga's and Van Til's epistemologies.

CHAPTER 4

THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN

Man's cognitive powers were once in pristine condition when Adam and Eve were first created and placed into the garden of Eden. According to John Calvin, reason was a universal gift, able to distinguish what should be followed from what should be avoided.¹ Yet, Adam and Eve rebelled against God and have now come under the curse of God. The results of the fall were disastrous, and all parts of the mind and soul are now infected by sin.² Sin's effect on the mind is known as the noetic effects of sin. The noetic effects of sin are part of the larger doctrine of total depravity, which teaches that the fall affects all aspects of humanity. This includes man's body, will, emotions, and dispositions but also his cognitive reasoning process.³ Calvin explains the noetic effects in terms of blindness to the proper knowledge of God.⁴ Yet, Calvin also grants a natural knowledge of God that persists after the fall which is corrupted but not destroyed. The nature and degree of these effects are treated extensively by both Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til. However, the two men have different ways of explaining the

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 111.

² Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 3.

³ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Gary DeMar (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007), 28; For more on the doctrine of total depravity, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 629–83; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 75–158; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 270–73; Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 279–338.

⁴ Dewey J. Houtenga Jr., *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 164. The proper knowledge of God is a knowledge of piety, a knowledge had in the proper relationship to God.

consequences of the fall on human reasoning which directly influences their systems of epistemology.

This chapter argues that the explanations of the noetic effects of sin on human cognition as explained by Plantinga and Van Til should be brought together because each view has qualities which enhance or correct the other. In order to show this, I will first examine Plantinga's explanation of the noetic effects of sin and how they contribute to his Reformed epistemology. Second, I will analyze Van Til's account of the noetic effects of sin and how they fit into his theory of knowledge. Third, I will attempt to synthesize the views of both men in a way that is both constructive and critical.

Plantinga's View

Plantinga's formulation of the noetic effects of sin is heavily indebted to Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. Plantinga calls his model of theistic belief's having warrant the Aquinas/Calvin model.⁵ Both Aquinas and Calvin agree that there is a natural knowledge of God. Aquinas asserts, "To know that God exists in a general and indefinite way is implanted in us by nature."⁶ For Aquinas, God has made himself known to man through nature. In his commentary on Romans 1, Calvin says, "By saying that God has made [himself] manifest, he means, that man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and that eyes were given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author himself."⁷ Calvin believes that there is a natural instinct in the human mind that is aware of divinity.⁸ The awareness of divinity that Calvin mentions

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 168.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers), I, q. 2, a. 1 (p. 21).

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 19 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 70.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 9.

Plantinga calls a *sensus divinitatis*, which is a kind of faculty or cognitive mechanism which produces beliefs about God in us.⁹

Plantinga is uncertain if Calvin's view of the *sensus divinitatis* implies that one has knowledge of God from birth that is *innate* or whether Calvin's meaning is that there is only a *capacity* for the knowledge of God which is innate from birth. According to his model, however, he takes the stance that the *sensus divinitatis* is a capacity for knowledge rather than innate knowledge itself.¹⁰ Thus, according to the model, the *sensus divinitatis* is a disposition or ability to form theistic belief in a variety of circumstances. Plantinga further argues that the knowledge arrived at by the *sensus divinitatis* is basic since it is not arrived at by any inference or argument.¹¹ The belief in God produced by the *sensus divinitatis* is also properly basic since it is deontologically justified in an internalist sense.¹² Plantinga says that one who believes in God "is within his epistemic rights, is not irresponsible, is violating no epistemic or other duties in holding that belief."¹³ This belief is also properly basic with respect to warrant. Plantinga argues,

On this model, our cognitive faculties have been designed and created by God; the design plan, therefore, is a design plan in the literal and paradigmatic sense. It is a blueprint or plan for our ways of functioning, and it has been developed and instituted by a conscious, intelligent agent. The purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* is to enable us to have true beliefs about God; when it functions properly, it ordinarily *does* produce true beliefs about God. These beliefs therefore meet the conditions for warrant; if the beliefs produced are strong enough, then they constitute knowledge.¹⁴

The *sensus divinitatis* meets all the necessary conditions for warrant and so can constitute "warranted true belief" which is Plantinga's definition of knowledge.

⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 172.

¹⁰ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 173.

¹¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175.

¹² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 178.

¹³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 178.

¹⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 179.

According to Plantinga's Aquinas/Calvin model, the fall of man into sin has resulted in ruinous cognitive consequences.¹⁵ Man's original knowledge of God has been damaged and distorted. Plantinga writes that the natural knowledge of God has been "compromised, weakened, reduced, smothered, overlaid, or impeded by sin and its consequences."¹⁶ The effects of sin upon the *sensus divinitatis* have narrowed the scope of and partially suppressed the knowledge of God.¹⁷ The *sensus divinitatis* has become subject to cognitive disease.¹⁸ Plantinga affirms that the effects of sin are both cognitive and affective, and there is a complex interaction between the two which makes insight into the noetic effects of sin more difficult.¹⁹

Plantinga affirms several consequences of the fall on man's cognitive ability. He argues, "we no longer know God in the same natural and unproblematic way in which we know each other and the world around us."²⁰ Plantinga assumes that the noetic effects apply to the knowledge of God in a different way than they apply to the knowledge of other things. He seems to say here that we know each other and the world in a natural and unproblematic way, but we come to a knowledge of God in an unnatural and problematic way. Plantinga tends to divide the way human cognitive powers function according to the subject matter upon which those cognitive powers ruminate. On the one hand, there are natural subject matters such as science, history, and philosophy. On the other hand, there are subject matters pertaining to God. For Plantinga, only the latter come under the influence of the noetic effects of sin. Elsewhere Plantinga intimates that the noetic effects of sin affect the way we see other people. He writes, "the noetic effects of sin are

¹⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 47.

¹⁶ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 37.

¹⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 184.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 37.

¹⁹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 49.

²⁰ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 47.

concentrated with respect to our knowledge of other people, of ourselves, and of God; they are less relevant to our knowledge of nature and the world.”²¹ This earlier observation (since Plantinga wrote *Warranted Christian Belief* fifteen years before *Knowledge and Christian Belief*) conflicts with Plantinga’s later statement that the noetic effects do not apply as much to knowing each other and the world. Perhaps Plantinga has changed his mind on these matters. In any case, what is apparent is a distinction of the degree of the noetic effects of sin depending upon the subject matter under consideration.

Another consequence of the fall on human cognition is that it brings with it a kind of blindness which prevents man from having a proper knowledge of God.²² Plantinga does not define what kind of knowledge is a proper knowledge. Yet, he describes this kind of knowledge under the category of knowledge of fact. Plantinga explains, “we human beings typically have at least some knowledge of God, and some grasp of what is required of us; this is so even in the state of sin and even apart from regeneration.”²³ The knowledge of God has not been completely erased by sin. There remain traces of it. Plantinga remarks that the *sensus divinitatis* remains partly functional in most of us, but he refrains from asserting that it is partly functional in all of us.²⁴ He writes,

Our original knowledge of God and his glory is muffled and impaired; it has been replaced (by virtue of sin) by stupidity, dullness, blindness, inability to perceive God or to perceive him in his handiwork. Our knowledge of his character and his love toward us can be smothered: it can even be transformed into a resentful thought that God is to be feared and mistrusted; we may see him as indifferent or even malignant.²⁵

²¹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 213.

²² Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 49.

²³ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 51.

²⁴ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 51.

²⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 214–15.

Plantinga cites Calvin's notion that a departure from Christ results in the necessity of being deceived about everything.²⁶ He comments that he is unsure whether Calvin was referring to being deceived about God as the most important truth about everything else or whether Calvin's meaning is that those who do not know God do not know anything at all. He writes, "[Calvin] may mean to go even further, however: perhaps he means to say that those who don't know God suffer much wider ranging cognitive deprivation and, in fact, don't really have any knowledge at all. (This view is at any rate attributed (rightly or wrongly) to some of his followers, for example Cornelius Van Til.)"²⁷ This is the only place in Plantinga's work where he mentions Van Til, most likely because he disagrees with the principle involved. Plantinga continues,

That seems a shade harsh, particularly because many who don't believe in God seem to know a great deal more about some topics than most believers do. . . . As it stands, this suggestion is desperately wide of the mark; surely many nontheists do know *some* things, for example their age to the nearest year or so, to whom if anyone they are married, and which university it is that employs them. (If this weren't so, contemporary academia would display even more confusion than it does.)²⁸

Plantinga firmly believes that the unbeliever does have knowledge, even knowledge of God in a certain sense, but that the noetic effects have distorted his view of God while leaving his knowledge of the world intact.

In addition to knowledge of fact, Plantinga also mentions that the noetic effects of sin have impaired man's knowledge of value. Plantinga writes, "it also prevents him from seeing what is worth loving and what is worth hating, what should get sought and what rejected."²⁹ What fallen man values is at odds with the values of God. Not only does

²⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 217.

²⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 217.

²⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 218–19.

²⁹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 49.

the unbeliever not know some things, but he does not desire to know some things that he should want to know.

Another consequence of the fall upon the powers of human cognition according to Plantinga is a resistance to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*.³⁰ The deliverances are still present, but, Plantinga reasons, “we don’t *want* to pay attention to its deliverances.”³¹ There is an ethical resistance to God and his ways. Man, in a sense, knows God or is aware of God, but he suppresses this awareness because of his ethical hostility to God.

Plantinga’s understanding of the noetic effects of sin raises a couple of important questions regarding epistemology. In Plantinga’s words, “The account of knowledge speaks of faculties functioning properly; can faculties damaged by sin function properly? If not, is there any knowledge?”³² Plantinga seems to anticipate the dilemma one is likely to perceive in the relationship between properly functioning cognitive faculties and the effect of sin on those faculties. He offers a partial answer when he writes, “it is really the *unbeliever* who displays epistemic malfunction; failing to believe in God is a result of some kind of dysfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*.”³³ As Plantinga sees it, faculties damaged by sin do not function properly. An evidence of this malfunction is the unbeliever’s failure to believe in God. However, Plantinga does not elaborate on whether the unbeliever’s cognitive dysfunction prevents him from having knowledge in general. As we have seen, Plantinga believes that the unbeliever has knowledge about many kinds of things. What he lacks knowledge of, in a certain sense, is the knowledge of God. However, this knowledge of God that the natural man lacks does

³⁰ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 47.

³¹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 47.

³² Alvin Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 349.

³³ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 37.

not have much, if any, effect on his ability to know other things, particularly the natural world.

Van Til's View

Van Til's epistemology centers on the notion that one must presuppose God to know any fact about anything.³⁴ This notion is not set aside when Van Til explains the effects of the fall on the human mind. Van Til takes the noetic effects of sin as a most serious matter.³⁵ Van Til's account of the fall is important for recognizing the central consequences of the fall on the human mind. Van Til explains that Satan tempted Adam and Eve by suggesting that what God said regarding the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not determinative of reality. Satan suggested that Adam and Eve could make the determination for themselves. Thus, based on the power of their own reasoning, Adam and Eve could decide what was possible and what was moral.³⁶ They became the ultimate judge or standard of truth and morality. In so doing, Adam and Eve assumed that God's word was just one word among many which they could evaluate on their own terms. In their assumption of the role of judge over truth, Adam and Eve denied the absoluteness of God in their epistemology.³⁷ Jason Hunt summarizes Van Til's account of the fall saying, "When man sinned, he sought to interpret reality without reference to God. The revelatory character of every fact, even his own consciousness,

³⁴ Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: P&R, 1971), 21. Here Van Til uses "presuppose" in the epistemological or grounding sense. Used this way, Van Til is arguing that the triune God and his revelation must be assumed from the outset in order to have the preconditions necessary to account for knowledge.

³⁵ Juha Ahvio, *Theological Epistemology of Contemporary American Confessional Reformed Apologetics* (Helsinki: Luther Agricola Society, 2005), 365.

³⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 33–34.

³⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1932), 21.

was denied.”³⁸ Without God as his starting point, man is doomed to err in his interpretation of nature.

Van Til stresses that the question of knowledge is an ethical question at its root.³⁹ He maintains that it is possible to be theoretically correct about God without loving God. He states, “what is meant by knowing God in Scripture is *knowing and loving* God: this is *true* knowledge of God: the other is *false*.”⁴⁰ Van Til ties together the intellect and the ethical. He writes,

When we say that sin is ethical we do not mean, however, that sin involved only the will of man and not also his intellect. Sin involved every aspect of man’s personality. All of man’s reactions in every relation in which God had set him were ethical and not merely intellectual; the intellect itself is ethical.⁴¹

For Van Til, the intellectual effects of the fall and the ethical effects go together.

However, while there is an ethical antithesis between believer and unbeliever or between unbeliever and God, sin also brings catastrophic consequences to the area of epistemology.

Van Til distinguishes several effects of the fall with regard to man’s intellect. One effect is that man’s interpretation of reality has become corrupted. Van Til argues, “The result [of the fall] was that man tried to interpret everything with which he came into contact without reference to God. The assumption of all his future interpretation was the self-sufficiency of intra-cosmical relationships.”⁴² Man’s reference point for his interpretation of the world is now self-centered rather than God-centered. Man was meant to reinterpret God’s interpretation because human thought is designed to be analogical to

³⁸ Jason B. Hunt, *Cornelius Van Til’s Doctrine of God and Its Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 128.

³⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 38.

⁴⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 39.

⁴¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 70.

⁴² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 70.

God's thought. But now, the natural man holds to an ultimacy of the created universe and to the ultimacy of the mind of man itself.⁴³

Because man's reference point for his interpretation of reality is himself, he no longer has anything epistemologically in common with God, and on his own terms has no way to account for the preconditions of knowledge. Van Til's distinction between epistemologically knowing and metaphysically knowing is crucial to maintain. With respect to the knowledge of God, Van Til argues that the unbeliever has lost the knowledge of God, epistemologically speaking.⁴⁴ Van Til considers the epistemological aspect of knowing to be the result of one's own principle of reasoning. For the unbeliever, this principle is that of autonomy, which on the unbeliever's worldview ultimately destroys the grounds for knowledge. Therefore, in principle, since the unbeliever is absolutely opposed to God, he does not have knowledge of God epistemologically speaking.

In addition to the unbeliever's loss of the knowledge of God, Van Til argues that the unbeliever is also mistaken with respect to all other matters besides God. That is, not only does he not have the knowledge of God in the epistemological sense, but the unregenerate person, on his autonomous starting point, has no way to account for or justify the grounds of knowledge in the epistemological sense. Van Til asserts that man not only does not interpret spiritual things aright, but that he also fails to interpret natural things aright.⁴⁵ He writes, "to the extent that he interprets nature according to his own adopted principles, he does not speak the truth on any subject."⁴⁶ The principle of

⁴³ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 71.

⁴⁴ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 190.

⁴⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 194.

⁴⁶ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 194–95.

interpretation that the unregenerate has does not lead to truth, nor can it account for knowledge.

Van Til does not divide knowledge along the lines of subject matters. He does not see spiritual things as a distinct class of knowledge from natural things. Rather, for Van Til, the distinction lies in the subject, not the subject matter. Whether the person doing the thinking is regenerate or unregenerate is the determining factor as to whether one can have knowledge in the epistemological sense and have sufficient grounds for it. The noetic effects of sin cause the unregenerate to lose all knowledge, epistemologically speaking. Yet, this does not mean that the natural man has no knowledge, metaphysically speaking, given that the natural man is not consistent with his beliefs and worldview that stand opposed to God.

Van Til insists that the unbeliever does have knowledge, metaphysically speaking, due to him being an image-bearer, living in God's world, and because of God's common grace. In answering objections to his view Van Til writes,

Do you mean to assert that non-Christians do not discover truth by the methods they employ? The reply is that we mean nothing so absurd as that. The implication of the method here advocated is simply that non-Christians are never able to, and therefore never do, employ their own methods consistently.⁴⁷

The unbeliever does discover truth, yet his method of discovery is inconsistent with his epistemological principle of interpretation of autonomy. At the metaphysical level, he still obtains true beliefs given the objectivity of God's revelation in nature and God's continual revelation of himself through nature. Thus, Van Til can say, "Even non-Christians presuppose its truth while they verbally reject it. They need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own accomplishments."⁴⁸

Unbelievers still have the knowledge of God within them as a metaphysical principle due

⁴⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 125.

⁴⁸ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 126.

to God's revelation of himself in nature and in humans as image-bearers. Van Til affirms, "[the unbeliever] has in him the knowledge of God by virtue of his creation in the image of God."⁴⁹ Van Til agrees with Calvin on this matter. He writes,

I have never denied that [the unbeliever] has true knowledge. My appeal has constantly been to Calvin's position. Calvin argues that as created in God's image every man, of necessity, has a knowledge of God. This "innate knowledge" is correlative to God's revelation in man's environment. And try as he may, the sinner cannot efface this knowledge. He can only seek to suppress it. Without first knowing God, he could not seek to deny it. He must be originally in contact with the truth in order to love and propagate the lie.⁵⁰

Van Til's interpretation of Calvin is that Calvin argued for an innate knowledge present in every person rather than merely a capacity for knowledge that may or may not, but most often does, come to fruition. Because the natural man has the knowledge of God in a metaphysical sense, he is able to have knowledge of the world, or better, to have some knowledge of the world although on his own terms he cannot account for knowledge in a justified sense. He cannot epistemologically account for what he metaphysically knows. Van Til explains, "Many non-Christians have been great scientists. Often non-Christians have a better knowledge of the things of this world than Christians have."⁵¹ In the metaphysical sense, the unbeliever knows God and the world around him. The issue, for Van Til, was whether this kind of knowledge could be accounted for by the unbeliever's epistemological principle of autonomy. He reasons, "Now the question is not whether the non-Christian can weigh, measure, or do a thousand other things. No one denies that he can. But the question is whether on his principle the non-Christian can account for his own or any knowledge."⁵² Van Til believes he cannot.

⁴⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

⁵⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 281.

⁵¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 282.

⁵² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 283.

Another consequence of the noetic effects of sin is that the natural man suppresses the idea of God that he has metaphysically by his false principle of autonomy.⁵³ The *sensus divinitatis* supplies man with the notion of God, but man tries to stamp out this idea. Van Til writes, “The unregenerate man has knowledge of God, that is of the revelation of God within him, the sense of deity which he seeks to suppress.”⁵⁴ God supplies every person with the knowledge of himself, but man seeks to rid himself of it. Yet, he is unsuccessful at doing so, for his principle of autonomy is suppressed by the restraining power of the Holy Spirit in God’s common grace. Thus, the unbeliever operates from two principles and cannot be consistent with either one.⁵⁵ Van Til explains,

Every sinner looks through colored glasses. And these colored glasses are cemented to his face. He assumes that self-consciousness is intelligible without God-consciousness. He assumes that consciousness of acts is intelligible without consciousness of God. He assumes that consciousness of laws is intelligible without God. And he interprets all the facts and all the laws that are presented to him in terms of these assumptions. This is not to forget that he also, according to the old man within him, knows that God exists. But as a covenant breaker he seeks to suppress this. . . . Neither do I forget that no man is actually fully consistent in working according to these assumptions.⁵⁶

Thus, in principle, the natural man seeks to suppress the knowledge of God, but in practice is restrained from doing so by God.⁵⁷ The unbeliever’s suppression of the truth is itself not consistently applied due to God’s common grace. The unregenerate always cognitively operate from two conflicting worldviews. In the metaphysical sense, he knows due to God’s creation, being made in the image of God, common grace, and God’s presence in his thinking in terms of the *sensus divinitatis*. Yet, in his rejection of God, he loses the grounds or justification for what he knows.

⁵³ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

⁵⁴ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 301.

⁵⁵ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

⁵⁶ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 258.

⁵⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 277.

The rebellion of man against God as it issues forth in a suppression of what man knows metaphysically about God and the world is not piecemeal as if it were at one time or another. Rather, man is always constantly suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness. Van Til writes, “Man is always reacting ethically to this revelation of God.”⁵⁸ Yet the sinner cannot suppress the truth fully. He is not successful in his efforts to eradicate the truths of God from his mind.⁵⁹ Why are the unregenerate unsuccessful at suppressing the truth of God? Van Til says,

Common grace is therefore a favor to sinners by which they are kept from working out to the full the principle of sin within them and thereby are enabled to show some measure of involuntary respect and appreciation for the law of God that speaks to them even through their own constitution, as well as through the facts of the world outside.⁶⁰

The constancy of man’s suppression of truth is met with a constancy of God’s common grace to restrain him from being consistent with his principle of autonomous interpretation.

Constructive Analysis

Both Plantinga and Van Til offer a fascinating foray into the effects of sin upon the human mind. They both appeal to Calvin regarding the sense of divinity that is implanted into every person. Yet, Plantinga and Van Til both have some views which would be helpfully supplemented by the other.

Noetic Effects as Central

One area where Plantinga could use supplementation is with respect to the central role that the noetic effects of sin have on human reasoning.⁶¹ For Plantinga, and

⁵⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 54.

⁵⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 54.

⁶⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 55.

⁶¹ Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin*, 77.

even Reformed epistemology in general, the noetic effects of sin do not play a central role.⁶² Merold Westphal laments that while Reformed epistemology “shows the failure of foundationalism, with exceptional clarity, the alternative it proposes does not take advantage of the new opportunity to make sin an essential epistemological category.”⁶³ Plantinga raises the question of how one could have knowledge if his cognitive faculties are malfunctioning due to sin, but he does not do much in the way of answering the question. He writes, “The account of knowledge speaks of faculties functioning properly; can faculties damaged by sin function properly? If not, is there any knowledge?”⁶⁴ He mentions that the unbeliever displays cognitive dysfunction, but what effect does that have on his noetic structure?⁶⁵ Do the noetic effects of sin affect the unbeliever’s noetic structure at the level of belief, truth, warrant, or some combination of the three?

Van Til at least applies the consequences of sin to each aspect of one’s noetic structure. As for belief, Van Til explains that the unregenerate both believe in God and do not believe in God. Epistemologically, the unregenerate do not believe in God. Metaphysically, they do. In relation to truth, Van Til explains that if the unregenerate were consistent with their beliefs, epistemologically speaking, they would not have true beliefs about anything. But metaphysically speaking, unbelievers do possess many true beliefs due to living in God’s world and God’s work of common grace.⁶⁶ In terms of how to account for the true beliefs that one has, Van Til concludes that in the epistemological sense the unregenerate cannot account for the true beliefs that they have. In the

⁶² William D. Dennison, *In Defense of the Eschaton: Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. James Douglas Baird (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 34.

⁶³ Merold Westphal, “Taking St. Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 211.

⁶⁴ Plantinga, “Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century,” 349.

⁶⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 184.

⁶⁶ Whether it is best to construe the situation in terms of true and false beliefs or in terms of warranted and unwarranted beliefs will be discussed below. At this point, it is important to note that Van Til’s language speaks in terms of true and false beliefs.

metaphysical sense, the unbeliever's knowledge of God is already accounted for by God himself who will not let this knowledge be erased.

For Van Til, the noetic effects of sin affect everything stemming from a core problem with knowing God. He writes, "It will not do to say that though the natural man knows nothing of God, he knows many other things well."⁶⁷ One must interpret reality with the Christian worldview as the core principle. For Plantinga, the noetic effects of sin can be more or less relegated to the knowledge of God without affecting all other aspects of noetic activity. Van Til insists that all subject matters are affected by sin because the core subject of God is affected.⁶⁸ Without bringing God in from the outset of our thinking, all non-Christian thought cannot account for knowledge and, as such, renders it problematic. Plantinga could use a more thorough treatment of how the noetic effects of sin apply to each aspect of his epistemological model and how these effects might traverse the elements of the model by way of infectious spread.

Truth vs. Knowledge

One area where Plantinga's analysis is helpful for Van Til is with respect to Van Til's treatment of the idea of truth within the mind of the unbeliever. Van Til reasons, "to the extent that he interprets nature according to his own adopted principles, he does not speak the truth on any subject."⁶⁹ Epistemologically speaking, man interprets all of reality according to his own adopted principles, and therefore does not speak truth on any subject. If knowledge is composed of warranted true belief as its necessary constituent elements, then Van Til's statement would deprive the unbeliever of knowledge by depriving him of truth. Again, he says, "From this ultimate point of view

⁶⁷ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 64.

⁶⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 64.

⁶⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 194–95.

the ‘natural man’ knows nothing truly.”⁷⁰ Van Til’s distinction between metaphysical and epistemological knowing might be better articulated in terms of warrant as opposed to truth. For example, instead of saying that the unbeliever does not know truth, might it be better to say that the unbeliever does not have warrant for his true beliefs? Plantinga’s model would allow Van Til to maintain a denial of knowledge, epistemologically speaking, to the unbeliever, while also allowing for the unbeliever to have true beliefs. Thus, the problem for the unbeliever is not necessarily that of having only false beliefs but of having only unwarranted beliefs. For Plantinga, knowledge is not just true belief, but warranted true belief. On this schema, the unbeliever could arrive at true beliefs, and hence the ability to positively interact with his environment to make scientific advancements, for example, and yet not have the warrant required for knowledge. In this way, Van Til’s insistence that the unregenerate have no knowledge epistemologically speaking would remain true, while at the same time allowing the unbeliever to obtain true beliefs to use for the advancement of society, something which Van Til was also eager to affirm.⁷¹ The unbeliever, epistemologically speaking, has unwarranted true beliefs. His beliefs are true and can be productive, but because they are unwarranted they do not constitute knowledge.

Division of Subject Matters

One area where Plantinga could use a dose of Van Til’s epistemology is with respect to the degree the noetic effects of sin apply to different subject matters. For Plantinga, the degree to which the noetic effects of sin affect the cognitive apparatus of the individual is differentiated according to the subject matter.⁷² Thus, for Plantinga, the effects of sin are more consequential in the doctrine of God than, say, microbiology.

⁷⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 64.

⁷¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 282.

⁷² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 213.

Plantinga does not offer an explanation of why this is so. He merely asserts it. In contrast, Van Til argues that the principle of interpretation is so crucial to human understanding of the world, that if one were to get their principle wrong, they also get everything else wrong. If one does not have their ultimate interpretive reference point in the ontological Trinity and his revelation, then they will not be able to accurately interpret any fact whatsoever. Van Til qualifies his position on the importance of ultimate interpretive principle by insisting that the unregenerate have two conflicting interpretive principles. One functions at the metaphysical level which is the presupposition of God. The other functions at the epistemological level which is the presupposition of autonomy. Van Til does not divide the noetic effects of sin upon the lines of subject matters. Its effects are felt more or less equally across the spectrum of the fields of study. Van Til recognizes that it is the root presupposition which man must get right in order to get anything else right, or better, to account for what he knows. It is not as if the noetic effects of sin apply to the knowledge of God more than they apply to the knowledge of mathematics. It is rather that the consequences of the noetic effects upon the knowledge of God necessarily spill over into every other subject matter that could be studied because unless God is presupposed as the ground for our knowledge, humans cannot account for knowledge in any objective way, including the domain of science.

Knowing and Accounting

Another area where Plantinga is useful for Van Til concerns the distinction between knowing and accounting for one's knowing. For Plantinga, one need not be able to account for knowing in order to know.⁷³ Otherwise an infinite regress of supplying reasons or evidence for the justification of the belief in any proposition would ensue. Basic beliefs are ones which do not require that one be able to give an account in order to

⁷³ Alvin Plantinga, "Replies," in *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1985), 391–92.

be justified in holding them. Van Til, on the other hand, seems to imply that the reason why the unbeliever has no knowledge, epistemologically speaking, is because he cannot account for what he knows. He writes, “Now the question is not whether the non-Christian can weigh, measure, or do a thousand other things. No one denies that he can. But the question is whether on his principle the non-Christian can account for his own or any knowledge.”⁷⁴ For Van Til, the question is not whether the unregenerate know things. He affirms that they do. Van Til insists the question is whether the unbeliever can epistemologically account for what he metaphysically knows. Van Til believes that the unbeliever cannot do so.

Van Til demands that the unbeliever be able to account for his knowledge in a way consistent with his worldview (an internalist demand). Although he knows things metaphysically, he cannot account for them, and therefore does not have knowledge epistemologically speaking. To add Plantinga’s terms to the schema, the unbeliever’s cognitive faculty can function properly metaphysically such that he can have metaphysical warranted true belief. However, the unbeliever’s mind cognitively malfunctions epistemologically such that he can only have epistemological unwarranted true belief. In addition, for Van Til, “warrant” could not be explained on non-Christian assumptions. The justification for warrant must ultimately be grounded in the Christian worldview.

Conclusion

In summary, the noetic effects of sin have wreaked havoc on man’s cognitive faculties, especially with regard to the *sensus divinitatis*. Plantinga and Van Til have different ways of explaining the effects of sin. However, their views should be incorporated together. Van Til is helpful for seeing the interconnectedness of all

⁷⁴ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 283.

knowledge and his distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing help resolve some difficulties in explaining how sin affects our thinking. Plantinga is helpful for his analysis of warrant and how the unbeliever may be said to still have true beliefs and yet lack warrant in a certain sense. In the next chapter we will explore how the unbeliever borrows from the Christian system in order to make sense of the world around him.

CHAPTER 5

BORROWED CAPITAL

The unbeliever does not acknowledge that God and his revelation is the foundation for all knowledge and that apart from him, objective knowledge is not grounded. As such, he does not interpret reality through the lens of the Christian theistic system revealed in Scripture. He believes that he can be the judge of what is true and false, what is right and wrong on creaturely terms without the triune God as the foundation. The unregenerate presuppose autonomy in their reasoning process.¹ Their cognitive powers are malfunctioning.² They set themselves in ethical hostility to God and his ways and appeal to the created realm instead of the Creator as the foundation for knowledge. Were they to be consistent in their application of their interpretive principle, which involves their view of reality, namely, God, the self, and the world, and were they to be persistent in their cognitive dysfunction, the unbeliever would need to deny having knowledge of anything at all.³ Yet, Plantinga and Van Til acknowledge that the unbeliever does have knowledge. How is it possible that the unbeliever has knowledge, given his resistance to the *sensus divinitatis* and his principle of autonomous reasoning? In short: inconsistency and borrowed capital. Inconsistency applies to the process of knowing and borrowed capital applies to the content within the inconsistency. The unbeliever is inconsistent with his own principles, and therefore the anticipated results of

¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1995), 13–14.

² Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 184.

³ Owen Anderson, *Reason and Worldviews: Warfield, Kuyper, Van Til, and Plantinga on the Clarity of General Revelation and Function of Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 56.

his reasoning do not play out, and the unbeliever borrows ideas from the Christian system of truth in order to provide a foundation for the things which he believes he knows on his own worldview.

This chapter argues that the ideas of inconsistency and borrowed capital as explained by Plantinga and Van Til should be synthesized together because each brings insights helpful to the other. In order to demonstrate the value of integrating their views, I will first detail Plantinga's writings on the nature of the unbeliever's attempts to gain knowledge. Second, I will examine Van Til's notions of borrowed capital and inconsistency and how they factor into the unbeliever's noetic structure. Third, I will provide a constructive account of how their insights can be brought together in way that is helpful for understanding a Christian epistemology.

Plantinga's Borrowed Capital

Plantinga acknowledges the fact that unbelievers rely on borrowed capital from the Christian worldview even in formulating objections against Christianity. He specifically mentions borrowed capital as the background to the argument against the belief in God from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Marx supposes that religion arises from a world-consciousness that is perverted.⁴ Religion is a result of cognitive malfunction due to social dysfunction. Freud argues that belief in God is a result of wish-fulfillment. In man's effort to cope with hurt, fear, pain, and death, man unconsciously invents a good and benevolent Father in heaven.⁵ Marx's criticism aims at properly functioning cognitive faculties, while Freud's criticism aims at a design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs.⁶ Both criticisms attack some aspect of the nature of warrant. Both criticisms, if true, would result in the conclusion that theistic belief lacks warrant.

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 21.

⁵ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 24.

⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 192.

Plantinga does not explain at length why he believes that Marx and Freud are borrowing from the Christian worldview. Here merely states, “what we see here is part of Freud and Marx’s extensive borrowing from Christian and Jewish ways of thinking.”⁷ Yet, it would appear that Plantinga is correct in his assertion. Marx and Freud make certain assumptions about the world in order to argue the way they do. Plantinga writes, “[Marx] thinks first that theistic and religious belief is produced by cognitive faculties that are not functioning properly.”⁸ Marx assumes that there is such a thing as properly functioning cognitive faculties. For him, if these faculties were to function properly, then they would conclude that the belief in God is irrational. The rational belief to hold is that there is no God. Because Marx focuses his attack on Christianity over whether it is rational to believe in God or not, he also implicitly assumes that there is such a thing as rationality, true statements, the capacity of man to know propositions about the way things are, that there is a moral imperative to believe in accordance with what is rational, and many others. Where does Marx get his validation for these assumptions?

In the same way, Freud makes many assumptions in his critique against Christianity. Plantinga writes,

According to Freud, theistic belief is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly, but the process that produces it—wishful thinking—does not have the production of true belief as its purpose; it is aimed, instead, at something like enabling us to carry on in the grim and threatening world in which we find ourselves.⁹

Freud assumes that pain is real, that pain is bad and should be avoided, that there is such a thing as illusion, which in turn assumes that there is something true to which that illusion does not correspond, and that there is a moral imperative to shed beliefs which

⁷ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 37n8.

⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 162.

⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 161.

are the result of wish-fulfillment. From where does Freud get his validation of these assumptions?¹⁰

While the details of Marx and Freud's assumptions are not spelled out, Plantinga would say that all of the aforementioned assumptions are rooted in a Christian conception of the world. Hence, Plantinga, after demonstrating that it is actually unbelief that is irrational and a result of cognitive dysfunction, concludes, "what we see here is part of Freud and Marx's extensive borrowing from Christian and Jewish ways of thinking."¹¹ In order for Marx and Freud to issue their arguments against Christian belief, they have to build their case upon the foundation of various assumptions which come from the Christian view of the world. They rely upon borrowed capital, ideas embedded in the Christian worldview, to support their arguments against Christianity.

Plantinga's criticism of Freud and Marx goes beyond their borrowing from Christian ways of thinking. Plantinga highlights the connection between a belief's origin and the warrant that the belief in question enjoys for the one who holds to it. He writes, "true, questions of origin are ordinarily not relevant to the question of the *truth* of a belief; but they can be crucially relevant to the question of the *warrant* a belief enjoys."¹² Freud and Marx suppose that the origin of Christian belief lies in either improperly functioning cognitive faculties or wish-fulfillment. If correct, Freud and Marx have not shown that Christian belief is false, only that it has little by way of warrant. However, the same question of origin may be asked of Freud and Marx's criticism. From where did Freud and Marx get their belief that Christianity is a result of cognitive malfunction or wish-fulfillment? Plantinga answers, "According to St. Paul, it is *unbelief* that is a result of dysfunction, brokenness, failure to function properly, or impedance of rational

¹⁰ Plantinga does not go into detail in just how Marx and Freud borrow from the Christian worldview, so I have tried to fill out what I believe Plantinga has in mind.

¹¹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 37n8.

¹² Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 194.

faculties. Unbelief, he says, is a result of sin; it originates in an effort, as Romans 1 puts it, to ‘suppress the truth in unrighteousness.’”¹³ For Plantinga, the complaints that Freud and Marx express against Christianity are rooted in sin. They originate from an attempt to suppress the truth of God. The genesis of the beliefs that Marx and Freud hold do not originate from the right source but from the wrong source. Because their beliefs are sourced in sin, they do not have the warrant required for knowledge. Thus, Marx cannot claim to know that Christian belief results from improperly functioning cognitive faculties, and Freud cannot claim to know that Christian belief is a result of wish-fulfillment.

Van Til’s Borrowed Capital

Van Til is clear that unbelievers do know things despite the fact that their interpretive principle, their worldview, is the wrong one. In spite of their refusal to acknowledge God as foundational to knowledge, the unbeliever is still able to come to a knowledge of many things. Speaking of this inconsistency, Van Til writes,

Fortunately, the natural man is never fully consistent while in this life. As the Christian sins against his will, so the natural man “sins against” his own essentially Satanic principle. As the Christian has the incubus of his “old man” weighing him down and therefore keeping him from realizing the “life of Christ” within him, so the natural man has the incubus of the sense of deity weighing him down and keeping him from realizing the life of Satan within him. The actual situation is therefore always a mixture of truth with error.¹⁴

Due to the unbeliever’s inconsistency, he is able to obtain truth about the world. He is unable to fully eradicate the sense of deity from his principle of interpretation. He should operate upon his stated principle of autonomy, but he does not and cannot fully do so. The process by which the unbeliever arrives at truth is a process which waivers between the principle of autonomy and the principle provided by the sense of deity. The wavering

¹³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 198.

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 65.

back and forth between these two principles generates the inconsistency in the unbeliever's approach to interpreting reality.

In his inconsistent approach to interpreting reality, the unbeliever relies on borrowed capital from the Christian interpretive principle. The unbelievers' reliance on borrowed capital causes Van Til some reticence in lauding the unbeliever's accomplishments. On the one hand, Van Til recognizes the contributions that unbelievers have made to science and philosophy. On the other hand, he tempers the goodness of those contributions. He argues, "non-Christian science has worked with the borrowed capital of Christian theism, and for that reason alone has been able to bring to light much truth."¹⁵ The only way the unregenerate can obtain knowledge is because they also presuppose the God of the Bible in the metaphysical sense.¹⁶ For Van Til, the unbeliever "must rather be told that, when he finds truth, even in the realm of the 'phenomenal,' he finds it in terms of principles that he has 'borrowed,' wittingly or unwittingly, from Christianity."¹⁷ Christianity provides the unbeliever what he needs in order to find reality meaningful.

Van Til offers several analogies for understanding the unbeliever's dependence upon Christian principles. One analogy pertains to the unbeliever's attacks on Christian belief. He writes,

The non-Christian needs the truth of the Christian religion in order to attack it. As a child needs to sit on the lap of its father in order to slap the father's face, so the unbeliever, as a creature, needs God the Creator and providential controller of the

¹⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 113.

¹⁶ In this instance, "presuppose" means an assumption of truthfulness. The unbeliever assumes that the Christian view of God and the world are true metaphysically speaking and therefore have satisfied the preconditions for knowledge, even though epistemologically speaking they suppress this truth. Thus, in their attainment of further knowledge, they are dependent upon their assumption of the Christian view of God and the world.

¹⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1963), 106–7.

universe in order to oppose this God. Without this God, the place on which he stands does not exist.¹⁸

The unbeliever stands upon the assumptions of Christianity as he attempts to argue against the existence of God. He questions the very existence of God who is necessary for the intelligibility of the question. Van Til argues, “No one can even ask questions about God or deny his existence unless God, the Triune God of Scripture, is present to his conscience, however deep this conscience be covered over by his false attempts at an interpretation of life.”¹⁹ In order for the unbeliever to deny God’s existence, he relies upon God being present in his thinking. Marx, for example, denies the existence of God, but acknowledges such things as proper cognitive function, rationality, the ability of man to know things, and a certain morality. Yet, Marx needs the Christian conception of God and the world to account for these things. Proper cognitive function requires that there is a standard for “proper,” and having a standard for something requires the uniformity of nature, which prevents that standard from randomly changing. The Christian conception of God involves his design and immutability such that there can be such a thing as standards. It also involves God’s design of creatures with a capacity to know things and a world suitable for the connection between the human mind and the world in terms of knowing facts. God, as a rational being, grounds the existence of rationality, and his design and creation allows humans to also be rational beings. God is also a moral being such that all standards of right and wrong are grounded in him. If God and the world were not as the Christian believes them to be, then there would be no cognitive function, rationality, morality, etc. In asserting the existence of these things, Marx has presupposed the Christian view of God and the world while also denying it.

¹⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979), 89.

¹⁹ Cornelius Van Til, “The Development of My Thinking,” letter written to John Vander Stelt, 1968.

Van Til also affirms that borrowed capital is used by the unbeliever in his scientific endeavors. With regard to science, Van Til likens borrowed capital to the prodigal son. He writes, “science and philosophy may flourish with borrowed capital as the prodigal flourished for a while with his father’s substance. But the prodigal had no self-sustaining principle.”²⁰ The prodigal son took of his father’s riches and used it to live a lavish lifestyle. Yet, he had no money on his own. All that he had was borrowed from his father. In the same way, the unbeliever steals from the Christian worldview and lives a productive life only made possible by that stolen capital.²¹ Yet, the unbeliever has no way to sustain himself. He is totally dependent upon Christian theism for his scientific accomplishments.

The unbeliever’s discoveries in science cannot be accounted for except upon the assumption of the Christian God. Van Til argues,

The Christian claims that non-Christians have made and now make many discoveries about the true state of affairs of the universe simply because the universe is what Christ says it is. The unbelieving scientist borrows or steals the Christian principles of creation and providence every time he says that an “explanation” is possible, for he knows he cannot account for “explanation” on his own. As the image-bearer of God, operating in a universe controlled by God, the unbeliever contributes indirectly and adventitiously to the development of human knowledge and culture.²²

In this example, Van Til details that it is not simply a matter of presupposing God to account for the deliverances of science. Van Til also recognizes that the content of the unbeliever’s borrowed capital includes notions of creation and providence. Because God has created the world and governs it in a particular way, man is able to study it and draw conclusions about the way that it works. Bahnsen explains that any explanation of a fact

²⁰ Cornelius Van Til, “Introduction,” in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1948), 68.

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The God of Hope: Sermons and Addresses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1978), 240.

²² Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: P&R, 1971), 17–18.

“depends upon [a] framework in that it is through one’s presuppositions that facts are interpreted and related. No one lives or operates in a vacuum where the mind is a ‘blank slate’ and facts are uninterpreted. Were that the case, ‘brute facts’ would exist independently of God and have no logical relationship to one another. Accordingly, man could not know them.”²³ When science explains a fact, it assumes that there are logical relationships between one fact and another. However, that logical relationship requires that there be the Christian God who knows all facts, gives them their meaning, creates them, and providentially controls their logical relationships to one another.

In another place, Van Til provides some elaboration on the concept of creation as borrowed capital. He says,

The apparent success of modern science should not blind us to the fact that the whole structure is built upon sand. The success of modern science, we believe, is due to the fact that it really works with borrowed capital. If there really were brute facts, there would be no science. There can be no brute facts. All facts are, as a matter of fact, created and controlled by God. So too the mind of man is created by God. There are real universals in the world because of the creation of God. Even the mind of sinful man can see something of this in spite of his sin. Hence, though built upon a metaphysic which is basically false, the science of the non-Christian may reveal much of truth.²⁴

Creation is what it is because of the working of God. All facts are pre-interpreted by God to be what they are. Thus, science depends upon God for the discovery of any fact.

The unregenerate also depend upon borrowed capital for their artistic creations. Van Til was once asked to explain how art could be expressed with Calvinistic convictions. He was unsatisfied with his answer at the time, but after reflecting on the encounter, Van Til ruminated about how someone else might better explain the matter. He writes,

Perhaps you will use [common grace] then to help explain how even unbelievers in spite of their basic covenantal allegiance to Satan, do produce marvelous works of

²³ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 38.

²⁴ Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 120.

art. Is it because of common grace that unbelievers are not always fully conscious of their own basic principle? Is it because they are not fully conscious of their own principles that they least express their hostility to ours? And is it when they seem least hostile to our principles of covenant obedience that they do their best work as artists? I suppose that you will add that in any case, even when unbelievers are most expressive in their hostility to God, their work may still be exceedingly beautiful, so completely self-frustrative are all the efforts of Satan and his servants in this world. The unbeliever must borrow, or rather steal, his capital from the believer. Thus do all the works of unbelieving artists always testify against the unbelief of their creators in lesser or in greater degree.²⁵

Van Til acknowledges that the unbeliever can produce beautiful works of art. However, he can only do so because he steals concepts from the Christian worldview. The unbeliever assumes the world is a world of chance. In such a world, there is no reason why the relationship of colors to one another or the strokes of a brush to one another should be more or less proportional to others. No relationship of one part of the artist's creation could be established toward another, because the logical relationships of size, shape, color, sheen, etc., only occur by chance and are always in flux with no standard. The unbeliever assumes that there are such standards that make one expression of art beautiful and another not so much. Only the Christian worldview can ground and supply the existence of logical relationships between different facets of a work of art that makes it a work of art in the first place. God is the original creator who is himself beautiful. As made in the image of God, man has a derivative capacity for artistic expression. God is the ground of all universals such as size, shape, and color.

The acts of borrowing from the Christian system are covert even to the unbeliever himself. That is, the unbeliever does not acknowledge that he is stealing. He is unaware that he is assuming Christian theism which is enabling him to come to know the world in which he lives. Brian Morley points out that the unbeliever is engaged in a form of intellectual hypocrisy.²⁶ However, this hypocrisy is self-deceptive. Van Til writes,

²⁵ Cornelius Van Til, "Calvinism and Art," *Presbyterian Guardian* 17 (1948): 274–75.

²⁶ Brian K. Morley, *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 73.

No created mind can function in any field, even for the fraction of a second, without taking for granted the fundamental rationality of the universe and of the coherence of the human mind in relation to it. But the universe has no rationality and the human mind has no coherence within itself or in relation to the world except upon the presupposition of the truth of Christianity. So then the non-Christian scientist must live on “borrowed capital.” If he had to live by his own capital he would choke forthwith even as a scientist. To be sure, the non-Christian does not self-consciously borrow the Christian’s principles. . . . But as the prodigal was able to live and prosper in spite of being a prodigal so also the non-Christian scientist can describe the “uniformities of nature” in spite of his worship of Chance.²⁷

Bahnsen explains that the uniformity of nature,

predicts that what happens at any given time in the material world will, under sufficiently similar conditions, occur again. That is, the same material causes under the same material conditions will produce the same material results. . . . Science is absolutely dependent upon this uniformity because without it we could not infer from past events what we can expect under like circumstances in the future. Physical science absolutely requires the ability to predict the future action of material entities. Scientific experimentation, theorizing, and prediction would be impossible were nature non-uniform. Scientific investigation is only possible in an orderly, rational, coherent, unified system.²⁸

The uniformity of nature is required even in daily mundane tasks. Bahnsen illustrates, “When you successively put one foot in front of the other and lean forward, you expect to move a certain distance over the surface of the earth, not turn into an octopus or become a mathematical formula.”²⁹ A universe operated on the basis of chance would give us no assurance that at our next birthday, we should not be changed into a tree or that when I approach a second redlight, it means to stop like the first. There is no reason the future should be like the past because Chance could change the rules in a single moment. In order to establish the uniformity of nature, an immutable and rational God who providentially controls all things must be assumed. The unregenerate covertly borrow from Christianity to establish the uniformity of nature in order to reason about the world.

²⁷ Van Til, *The God of Hope*, 243.

²⁸ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Gary DeMar (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007), 187.

²⁹ Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis*, 188.

Constructive Analysis

Both Plantinga and Van Til are helpful in pointing out the nature of the unbeliever's borrowing of Christian assumptions for their accomplishments. Yet, they approach the matter in different but complementary ways. By bringing these ways together, the Christian epistemologist may have a fuller account of the unregenerate's reliance on Christian principles.

The Necessity of the Trinity

Plantinga analyzes Marx and Freud's objections to Christianity and concludes that their objections borrow heavily from Christian and Jewish ways of thinking.³⁰ For Plantinga, one could just as easily appeal to the Jewish worldview to supply the requisite preconditions for reasoning than the Christian worldview. Van Til would disagree. On his view, the Trinity is necessary for rationality, and this is something that a Jewish oneness monotheism cannot provide. Van Til writes,

The Trinity, as taught in the Scriptures, gives the most basic description possible of God as the *principium essendi* of knowledge for man. The whole problem of knowledge has constantly been that of bringing the one and the many together. When man looks about him and within him, he sees that there is a great variety of facts. The question that comes up at once is whether there is any unity in this variety, whether there is one principle in accordance with which all these many things appear and occur. All non-Christian thought, if it has utilized the idea of a supra-mundane existence at all, has used this supra-mundane existence as furnishing only the unity or the *a priori* aspect of knowledge, while it has maintained that the *a posteriori* aspect of knowledge is something that is furnished by the universe. In distinction to this, Christianity says that *there once was no a posteriori aspect to knowledge at all*. When God existed alone, there was no time universe, and there were no new facts arising. The only knowledge activity that existed was completed in the circuit of the mutually exhaustive personalities of the triune God. It is only with respect to man that we can speak of a relation of the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* elements of knowledge. Such a distinction cannot exist in God. The plurality of the Godhead cannot be compared with the arising of new facts as we see it in the created universe. The plurality of God is as eternal as the unity of God.³¹

³⁰ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 37n8.

³¹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 30–31.

The Trinity is necessary to solve the problem of the one and the many. Solving this problem is critical to answering the problem of knowledge.³² Bahnsen highlights the nature of the problem,

Philosophers see in the world certain particulars as well as a basic underlying unity. For instance, many particular dog breeds exist: dachshunds, Dobermans, terriers, pit bulls, etc. Yet all of these have a basic unity, which we might call “dogness.” They are all members of the one biological family known as Canidae. The *many* dogs are related by their *one* dogness. . . . Everywhere we look in the Universe we see an array of particulars; yet we see underlying unities tying these together and ultimately being related into an overall unified system of reality. You must have basic unity in order to organize and understand the various particulars of experience. So the philosopher wonders: Which is more basic: The one, or the many? Yet, the problem of the one and the many is resolved in the biblical doctrine of God. God is both One (the Trinity) and Many (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Christianity holds to the equal ultimacy of Oneness and Manyness in that the Trinity is equally as important as each of its individual members, and vice versa.³³

In God, oneness and threeness are equally ultimate. Each person exhaustively indwells the others in perfect harmony, and each person exhaustively knows and comprehends the others.

B. A. Bosserman elaborates on Van Til’s use of the Trinity in solving the problem of the one and the many. Bosserman writes,

The doctrine of the Trinity, despite its apparent contradiction, turns out to be the most logical, and indeed most necessary of all ideas. For, even if we cannot comprehend His nature entirely, we may, and indeed already have, deduced that only such a person can be free from the one-many problem in himself, and as such, be the indispensable authority and reference point of human reasoning.³⁴

The Trinity is an eternal and personal harmony between unity and diversity. The one God cannot be an abstract universal because he is defined in relation to three persons. The three persons cannot be irrational particulars because they are defined by the one

³² While demonstrating this point would require another dissertation, I am here providing for the reader what Van Til argues and also what some of the discussion has been. This area of study is fruitful ground for further research.

³³ Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis*, 82.

³⁴ B. A. Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox: An Interpretation and Refinement of the Theological Approach of Cornelius Van Til* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014)90.

Trinitarian dynamic.³⁵ The Trinity is necessary for logic and human reasoning. It is also necessary for predication. Bosserman argues, “For, nothing can be accurately predicated of a strictly unitary deity, since the multiplicity involved in predication is at odds with his nature.”³⁶

James Anderson helpfully summarizes Van Til’s argument that only Christian theism solves the problem of the one and the many as follows:

- (i) The ontology of the universe is such that either (a) unity is ultimate and not plurality, or (b) plurality is ultimate and not unity, or (c) unity and plurality are co-ultimate.
- (ii) If unity is ultimate and not plurality, then knowledge of the universe (even in part) is impossible.
- (iii) If plurality is ultimate and not unity, then knowledge of the universe (even in part) is impossible.
- (iv) Knowledge of the universe is *not* impossible.
- (v) Therefore, the ontology of the universe must be such that unity and plurality are co-ultimate.
- (vi) Therefore, Christian theism is the case (because Christian theism posits an ontology in which unity and plurality are co-ultimate).³⁷

It is not just a monotheistic god which can solve the problem of the one and the many but specifically Christian theism. Plantinga’s view on borrowed capital would be helped by the realization that it is the Christian trinitarian God which is assumed in rational predication. This is the God who has revealed himself in the *sensus divinitatis* and this is the God that the unbeliever must assume for the validation of his reasoning. Marx and Freud borrow not just from theism but from Christian theism.

The Scope of Borrowing

Another area in which Plantinga could use the insights of Van Til is with respect to the scope of the borrowing from Christianity. Plantinga does not speak to whether the unbeliever in general borrows from the Christian view of the world. His only

³⁵ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 88.

³⁶ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 101.

³⁷ James N. Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (April 2005): 63.

examples were Freud and Marx. One might question whether other unbelievers also borrow from Christian ways of thinking or if such borrowing is confined to the particular examples of Marx and Freud.

Van Til affirms that all unbelievers rely on borrowed capital from the Christian system.³⁸ The scope of borrowed capital is universal. It is not just that only agnostics or atheists or pluralists need to borrow from the Christian worldview to make sense of reality. Rather, every unbeliever necessarily borrows from the Christian belief system in order to reason about reality. Plantinga would benefit from describing in more detail how every person is guilty of stealing from the Christian system in order to gain knowledge about anything to include the possibility of making arguments against Christianity.

The Content of Borrowing

Plantinga would also be helped by incorporating some of Van Til's observations with respect to the content of what is borrowed. Plantinga does not explicitly say what the unbeliever borrows from Christianity, only that he does in fact borrow from Christianity. Van Til, however, provides more detail concerning the content of what the unbeliever borrows from Christianity in a response to A. E. Taylor's observations on the connection between the uniformity of nature and the scientific enterprise. Taylor writes,

The fundamental thought of modern science, at any rate until yesterday, was that there is a "universal reign of law" throughout nature. Nature is rational in the sense that it has everywhere a coherent pattern which we can progressively detect by the steady application of our own intelligence to the scrutiny of natural processes. Science has been built up all along on the basis of this principle of the "uniformity of nature," and the principle is one which science itself has no means of demonstrating. No one could possibly prove its truth to an opponent who seriously disputed it. For all attempts to produce "evidence" for the "uniformity of nature" themselves presuppose the very principle they are intended to prove.³⁹

³⁸ Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis*, 103.

³⁹ A. E. Taylor, *Does God Exist?* (London: MacMillan, 1943), 2.

Taylor recognizes that the principle of the uniformity of nature is presupposed even if one were to attempt to argue against it. However, there are more presuppositions back of the uniformity of nature which can account for it. Van Til responds,

Our argument as over against this would be that the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe is the only presupposition which can account for the uniformity of nature which the scientist needs. But the best and only possible proof for the existence of such a God is that his existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all things in the world. We cannot *prove* the existence of beams underneath a floor if by proof we mean that they must be ascertainable in the way that we can see the chairs and tables of the room. But the very idea of a floor as the support of tables and chairs requires the idea of beams that are underneath. But there would be no floor if no beams were underneath. Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism. Even non-Christians presuppose its truth while they verbally reject it. They need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own accomplishments.⁴⁰

Van Til claims that the unbeliever presupposes several ideas which are inherent in the Christian system. The unbeliever presupposes the existence of God. God is necessary to account for control over the universe in a rational and predictable way. The unbeliever also presupposes the plan of God as controlling all things in the universe, the design and order of the nature governed by the plan, the correspondence between subject and object, and the gift of rational faculties to the mind of man. All of nature is planned, designed, ordered, and controlled in such a way that it is recognizable and meaningful for man so that he can learn of its patterns and workings. The unbeliever presupposes the truth of Christian theism. All of these presuppositions which the unbeliever has are examples of borrowed capital whereby the unbeliever steals ideas from within Christianity in order to support his own conclusions while at the same time denying the fact of those same Christian ideas. Plantinga's account of the unbeliever's borrowing from the Christian faith would be helped by Van Til's examples of the content of exactly what is borrowed.

⁴⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 125–26.

The Application of Borrowing

Although Plantinga's purpose is not to show how borrowed capital plays out in the unbeliever's life, we could build on his work with the help of Van Til on the application of borrowed capital. Plantinga helpfully focuses on Freud and Marx and their arguments against Christianity and shows that they only aim at the *de jure* objection. One might wonder whether the idea of borrowed capital only applies when an unbeliever is attempting to make an argument against the God of Christianity.

As we have seen, Van Til discusses the nature of borrowed capital from the standpoint of science especially in reference to the uniformity of nature upon which science is based. So, borrowed capital surely applies to issues of science. However, Van Til also provides another application of the principle of borrowed capital. He argues that when a teacher engages in teaching students, he does so on the basis of borrowed capital. Van Til writes, "The fact that [the non-Christian] can and does teach is intelligible only because that which he assumes not to be true is actually true. He teaches, therefore, but he teaches by accident. He is able to teach because his own principle is not true and because the principle of Christianity is true."⁴¹ Any teacher in a field of study applies certain logical rules or laws of logic in order to make arguments and draw conclusions so that the student may learn. Yet, as Anderson and Greg Welty point out, the laws of logic are dependent upon the existence of the Christian God.⁴² They conclude, "every logical argument presupposes the existence of God The irony must not be missed: one can logically argue against God only if God exists."⁴³ The unbeliever borrows from Christianity even as he seeks to teach and persuade others in an intelligible way. Van Til is helpful for Plantinga here because he shows that borrowed capital applies not just to

⁴¹ Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education*, 89.

⁴² See James N. Anderson and Greg Welty, "The Lord of Noncontradiction: An Argument for God from Logic," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 2 (2011): 321–38.

⁴³ Anderson and Welty, "The Lord of Noncontradiction," 337–38.

sophisticated philosophical arguments against Christianity but is involved even in such mundane matters as an unbelieving mother teaching her children how to tie their shoes or clean up their rooms because such teaching relies on rules governing logical relationships which presupposes God's existence.

Origin and Warrant

One area in which Plantinga's insights would be helpful for Van Til concerns the connection between a belief's origin and the warrant that the belief has for the one who holds it. Plantinga's analysis of Marx and Freud deals, in part, with the origin of their unbelief. Since their unbelief has its origin in sin and is a result of improperly functioning cognitive faculties, it is not a warranted belief and therefore cannot count as knowledge. However, applied to Van Til's way of explaining borrowed capital, the connection between origin and warrant shows that the unbeliever does have knowledge in a certain sense.

The unbeliever borrows from the Christian view by presupposing a myriad of Christian beliefs including the existence of God, God's plan, design, and control over the universe, and notions of creation and providence. The origin of these beliefs is the *sensus divinitatis* which God gives to every human person. Romans 1:19–20 states, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." God has ensured that all people know him and certain of his attributes. Thus, the origin of the unbeliever's borrowing from Christianity is God himself. Since the origin of a belief is connected to the warrant that the belief has, the unbeliever enjoys maximum warrant by way of origin for the beliefs he borrows from Christianity. These warranted true beliefs then constitute knowledge. But this knowledge is knowledge in a certain sense. Given Van Til's distinction between metaphysically and

epistemologically knowing, and the integration of Plantinga's notion of warrant into this distinction, the unbeliever enjoys maximum warrant by way of origin metaphysically speaking by means of borrowed capital. The unbeliever then proceeds to deny what he metaphysically knows and epistemologically reason on the basis of autonomy.

Improper Function

Van Til would also benefit from Plantinga's insistence that unbelief is evidence of cognitive dysfunction, especially in how this dysfunction is tied to warrant. As unbelief is improper function of the cognitive faculty, the unbeliever never has warrant for his unbelief. Unbelief can never count as knowledge.

Van Til affirms that unbelief is due to sin, but it is also helpful to note that the essence of borrowed capital, though it comes from a proper origin, is a result of cognitive malfunction. It involves stealing and self-deception. Had the unbeliever's cognitive faculty been functioning properly, there would be no need to borrow from the Christian system in order to support his non-Christian system.⁴⁴ Borrowing in this way reveals cognitive malfunction. While the content of what he is borrowing is not defective, and the process by which the Holy Spirit provides him the *sensus divinitatis* is not defective, the act of borrowing what one intends to destroy is dysfunctional. While borrowed capital is a good thing in that the content of what is borrowed allows the unbeliever to engage the world in a meaningful way, the nature of the borrowing involves the unbeliever's epistemological interpretive principle of autonomy. Without the epistemological principle of autonomy, there is nothing to borrow, for man would have the *sensus divinitatis* and reason from that position. Only when man has assumed the non-Christian system is there the possibility of borrowing in the first place. Since proper function is required for warrant, the unbeliever cannot enjoy warrant by way of his borrowing. Thus,

⁴⁴ There is more to the unbeliever's sin nature than a dysfunctional cognitive faculty. Sin affects his will, affections, and physical body as well. However, the focus of this dissertation is on the cognitive aspect of human nature.

epistemologically speaking, when the unbeliever reasons according to his principle of autonomy, and reasons in such a way as to borrow from the Christian worldview (a borrowing which is necessary for him to reason on his own principle), he is not capable of achieving warrant due to his improperly functioning cognitive faculties. Therefore, the unbeliever's cognitive content, epistemologically speaking, is unwarranted true belief.

Conclusion

Plantinga and Van Til both discuss the unbeliever's reliance upon the Christian belief system in terms of borrowing from that system. Each has contributions which would be helpful for the other. Van Til's insights as to the necessity of the Trinity for the resolution of the problem of the one and the many is a helpful corrective to Plantinga's allowance for the unbeliever's borrowing to come from non-Christian belief systems, specifically the Jewish way of thinking. Van Til is also helpful for pointing out that the scope of borrowed capital is universal to unbelievers. None can escape stealing from the Christian worldview. Van Til also details some of the content of the unbeliever's borrowing which is lacking in Plantinga's analysis. He also shows how the unbeliever's borrowing from Christian theism takes place in such simple everyday tasks as teaching. On the other hand, Plantinga contributes to Van Til's views in his observation that warrant is connected to a belief's origin. He also shows that improper function is involved within the borrowing process. In the next chapter, we will explore the question of common ground. Since the unbeliever borrows from the Christian view of thinking, do both believer and unbeliever share some kind of common ground over what has been borrowed?

CHAPTER 6

COMMON GROUND

The unbeliever borrows from the Christian worldview in order to reason about the world.¹ He has presupposed certain propositions concerning God and the world which are necessary preconditions for predication and meaning while also presupposing an interpretive principle of autonomy. Reasoning epistemologically, he has deceived himself regarding his ability to determine the meaning of reality. The *sensus divinitatis* furnishes him with several key presuppositions without which the unbeliever could not engage in rational discourse or predication. Both believer and unbeliever receive the deliverances of the sense of deity given by God to every human person. God has ensured that his revelation about himself given through the created order does not fail to reach humanity. In addition, believers and unbelievers appear to reach the same conclusions regarding such things as mathematics, historical facts, physics, many points of philosophy, and others. Given this similarity and the universal success of the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* one might legitimately ask whether there is some kind of epistemological common ground between the believer and unbeliever. Do they have the same understanding of some subject matter which could be used as a starting point in the doing of apologetics? Or, do believer and unbeliever differ on their understanding of every fact such that there is no epistemological point of contact between them with which to begin to reason? Plantinga and Van Til have different answers to these questions. Yet, their insights also show some similarities.

¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Gary DeMar (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007), 103.

This chapter argues that the observations of Plantinga and Van Til regarding whether there is common ground between believer and unbeliever should be taken together such that they are more helpful together than apart. In order to show this, I will first examine Plantinga's understanding of the notion of common ground between believer and unbeliever. I will then explore Van Til's analysis of shared epistemological territory and point of contact. I will then conclude with a constructive analysis which allows each interlocutor to critique and benefit from the other.

Plantinga's Affirmation of Common Ground

Plantinga affirms that there is much epistemological common ground between believer and nonbeliever. He writes,

[A Christian epistemology] will of course be designed to fit and illuminate the kinds of knowledge we all have in common: perception, memory, reason, and the like. . . . But it will also be designed and perhaps specially designed to fit and illuminate kinds of knowledge [unbelievers] will dismiss: our knowledge of God, of the great truths of the gospel, and of how to appropriate the latter for our own lives.²

According to Plantinga, believer and unbeliever have both a shared portion of knowledge and also an unshared portion of knowledge. The common ground or shared portion of knowledge between believer and unbeliever comes from perception, memory, and reason. What is not common between believer and unbeliever is the knowledge of God, the gospel, and the application of the gospel to life.

Plantinga appears to have a kind of two-tiered structure to his view of kinds of knowledge. On the lower level, each person has equal access to what is stored there. On the upper level, only believers have access to the content found there. The lower level contains knowledge about such things as math, science, physics, and history. The upper story contains knowledge about God, Christ, and salvation. Plantinga assesses Calvin's idea that "as soon as ever we depart from Christ, there is nothing, be it ever so gross or

² Alvin Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 351–52.

insignificant in itself, respecting which we are not necessarily deceived.”³ Instead of concluding that Calvin means that the unbeliever has no knowledge, Plantinga concludes that Calvin means that unbelievers do not know that all things come from God. He is aware, however, that Calvin may mean that unbelievers do not have knowledge at all. Yet, Plantinga disagrees. He writes,

Many who don't believe in God seem to know a great deal more about some topics than most believers do. (Could I sensibly claim, for example, that I know more logic than, say, Willard van Orman Quine, even if I can't do any but the simplest logic exercises, on the grounds that at any rate I know *something* about logic and he, being an unbeliever, knows nothing at all about that subject or indeed anything else?) As it stands, this suggestion is desperately wide of the mark; surely many nontheists do know *some* things, for example, their age to the nearest year or so, to whom if anyone they are married, and which university it is that employs them.⁴

For Plantinga, Calvin cannot mean that unbelievers are so affected by sin that they have no knowledge of anything because it appears as though many unbelievers do have knowledge of many things, even to a greater degree than believers in certain subject matters.

Plantinga posits common ground between believer and unbeliever in natural subject matters. On his view, sin is not so serious as to drive an absolute antithesis between what the believer knows and what the unbeliever knows. Plantinga indicates, by his preferred interpretation of Calvin, that the difference between what believers and unbelievers know is a matter of quantity, not quality. Believers know something about God which unbelievers do not. Yet, they both know many things about logic, for example. The believer knows some additional facts about everything in that he knows that all things exist by the creative activity of God and that all things are preserved and governed by God. Thus, the difference between believing and unbelieving thought is that

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, trans. John King (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 64.

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 217–18.

believing thought has some additional information in the subject matter of the supernatural. Natural subject matters are equally accessible and can therefore serve as common ground for believers and unbelievers.

Plantinga also reveals his positive attitude toward the notion of common ground between believer and unbeliever when he evaluates the noetic effects of sin. He writes, “the noetic effects of sin are concentrated with respect to our knowledge of other people, of ourselves, and of God; they are less relevant to our knowledge of nature and the world.”⁵ Human knowledge of nature remains mostly unaffected by the noetic effects of sin. If there is nothing which affects the unbeliever’s notions of nature and the world, then he can have the same knowledge of those things as the believer. Nature and the world are two categories or subject matters which are common ground for believers and unbelievers.

Plantinga also implies a common ground between believer and unbeliever when he discusses the effects of regeneration. Regeneration not only heals and repairs the affective effects of sin, but it also heals, in embryonic form, the cognitive consequences of sin.⁶ Plantinga details what those cognitive consequences which are healed are as he writes,

First, there is the repair of the *sensus divinitatis*, so that once again we can see God and be put in mind of him in the sorts of situations in which that belief-producing process is designed to work. The work of the Holy Spirit goes further. It gives us a much clearer view of the beauty, splendor, loveliness, attractiveness, glory of God. It enables us to see something of the spectacular depth of love revealed in the incarnation and atonement. Correlatively, it also gives me a much clearer view of the heinousness of sin, and of the degree and extent to which I am myself enmeshed in it. It gives me a better picture of my own place in the universe. . . . There is also a certain reflexive benefit. . . . [I]t also gives us a clearer view of our world: we now see what is most important about all the furniture of heaven and earth—namely, that it has been created by God. We can even come to see, if we reflect, what is most important about numbers, propositions, properties, states of affairs, and possible worlds: namely, that they really are divine thoughts or concepts. Still further, it

⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 213.

⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 280.

enables us to see what is most important about ourselves. . . . It restores us to a position of seeing that we have been created in God's image.⁷

In this passage, Plantinga explains that the effects of regeneration correspond with the noetic effects of sin. Just as the noetic effects of sin cognitively impair the unbeliever with regard to his knowledge of God, regeneration allows the believer to know God especially with regard to his glory. Just as the noetic effects of sin cognitively impair the unbeliever with regard to his knowledge of himself, regeneration allows man to see his depravity and status as a creature made in God's image.

Interestingly, Plantinga also says that regeneration gives the believer a clearer view of the world. In his discussion of the noetic effects of sin, Plantinga argued that those effects were less relevant to our knowledge of nature and the world. If this is so, then what is it about human knowledge of the world that needs to be corrected, since there was no or at least minimal damage to that knowledge to begin with? For Plantinga, regeneration does not bring a correction of damaged knowledge of the world but rather adds some additional facts to it. The believer, because of regeneration, knows that the world has been created by God and that numbers, propositions, etc. are divine concepts. Plantinga sees the difference between believing and unbelieving thought in quantitative terms. What the unbeliever needs in order to be brought up to the level of the believer in the area of knowledge is additional information.

Plantinga's concept of the noetic effects of sin appears to result in a two-story structure of knowledge.⁸ The lower story consists of natural knowledge. The upper story consists of supernatural knowledge. According to Plantinga, certain facts about God, man, and the world are inaccessible for the unbeliever due to the noetic effects of sin. The unbeliever only has access to natural knowledge of the world and himself. Regeneration

⁷ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 280–82.

⁸ For a contemporary approach to Christian epistemology which is founded upon a two-story model, see J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 203–20.

provides access to the upper story of the house of knowledge. The believer has access to supernatural knowledge: namely, knowledge about God, that the world reflects God's ideas, and that man is made in God's image. The lower story of the house of knowledge is common ground for both believer and unbeliever. Regeneration provides the key which unlocks the second story and this key is only given to the believer.

Van Til's Denial of Common Ground

In contrast to Plantinga, Van Til is adamantly opposed to the idea that the believer and unbeliever share any kind of *epistemological* common ground to which the believer could appeal in order to persuade the unbeliever that the unbeliever's views are false. Van Til clearly understands the nature of the question and expends a great deal of effort in answering it. Van Til writes,

The first matter to be considered will be that of the point of contact. Is there something on which believers in Christianity and disbelievers agree? Is there an area known by both from which, as a starting point, we may go on to that which is known to believers but unknown to unbelievers? And is there a common method of knowing this "known area" that need only to be applied to what the unbeliever does not know in order to convince him of its existence and its truth?⁹

The question of common ground involves a certain distinction. Van Til distinguishes what is known with the method of knowing. We will deal with each of these in turn.

What Is Known

Van Til draws a connection between knowledge and the nature of man himself. He writes, "The human mind, it is now commonly recognized, as the knowing subject, makes its contribution to the knowledge it obtains. 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."¹⁰ Because man contributes to

⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 84.

¹⁰ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 84.

his knowledge, the nature of man and what he thinks himself to be will necessarily affect the knowledge that he obtains. Van Til denies that there is any agreement between believer and unbeliever concerning what man himself is. He argues,

The conception of man as entertained by modern thought in general cannot be assumed to be the same as that set forth in Scripture. It is therefore imperative that the Christian apologist be alert to the fact that the average person to whom he must present the Christian religion for acceptance is a quite different sort of being than he himself thinks he is.¹¹

The unbeliever believes himself to be a free and independent being. That is, he believes that he is not dependent upon God for his existence and role in the world. Van Til's argument is that the unbeliever's conception of himself is false. In reality, he is a creature of God and he is made in God's image and he is to think God's thoughts after him. Thus, believer and unbeliever do not have common ground over what man is.

Further, Van Til insists that it is not mere information that the unbeliever needs to view himself correctly. Van Til believes this is an error that Roman Catholic theology makes concerning man's ability to perceive himself correctly. Van Til quotes Charles Hodge who gives an account of how Roman Catholic theology explains the original righteousness that was given to Adam in the garden of Eden.¹² Hodge writes,

Protestants hold that original righteousness, so far as it consisted in the moral excellence of Adam, was natural, while the Romanists maintain that it was supernatural. According to their theory, God created man soul and body. These two constituents of his nature are naturally in conflict. To preserve the harmony between them, and the due subjection of the flesh to the spirit, God gave man the supernatural gift of original righteousness. It was this gift that man lost by his fall; so that since the apostasy he is in the state in which Adam was before he was invested with this supernatural endowment. In opposition to this doctrine, Protestants maintain that original righteousness was concreated and natural.¹³

Van Til explains that, given the Romanist conception of man, the unbeliever has his rational faculties still intact, and that he is correct in what he himself thinks of his power

¹¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 85.

¹² Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 90.

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 2:103.

of intellect. Van Til believes that this view exemplifies the position in which the unbeliever only needs Christianity in order to provide him with more information concerning his understanding of the world and of himself. Van Til explains,

Christianity therefore needs, on this basis, to be presented to the natural man as something that is merely information additional to what he already possesses. The knowledge of Christianity is to be related to the knowledge derived from the exercise of man's powers of reason and observation in a way similar to that in which at the beginning original righteousness was added to the image of God.¹⁴

But this is wrong. According to Van Til, "every one of fallen man's functions operates wrongly."¹⁵ He does not merely need more information than he already has, as if there was nothing wrong with his principle of interpretation, only a lack of a certain amount of information. Van Til compares the situation of the unbeliever to a carpenter with a buzz-saw. He illustrates,

Let us say that a carpenter wishes to cut fifty boards for the purpose of laying the floor of a house. He has marked his boards. He has set his saw. He begins at one end of the mark on the board. But he does not know that his seven-year-old son has tampered with the saw and changed its set. The result is that every board he saws is cut slantwise and thus unusable because too short except at the point where the saw first made its contact with the wood. As long as the set of the saw is not changed, the result will always be the same.¹⁶

One example which illustrates Van Til's point can be found in Matthew 12:22–38:

Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to [Jesus], and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."

The problem with the Pharisees is not that they did not have evidence or information. Their problem was that their conclusions from the signs that they perceived were controlled by their faulty assumptions. The Pharisees had already presupposed that Jesus

¹⁴ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 92.

¹⁵ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 93.

¹⁶ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 93.

could not be the Son of God, so when he did miracles, they concluded that he must have done them from the power of Satan.

Another example which highlights Van Til's point is the objection that Islamic scholars often offer against the truthfulness of the Christian Bible. Where the Bible contradicts the Qur'an, it is because the Bible has been corrupted in history.¹⁷ Because their presuppositions are committed to the truthfulness of the Qur'an, these scholars argue that anything contradicting it must have been corrupted. Showing another biblical passage which contradicts the Qur'an is not what the Islamic scholar needs, for he will interpret that passage as having been corrupted just like the rest. The point is that in evaluating evidence or reasons, presuppositions play a vital role.

The unbeliever needs to have his presupposition of autonomy replaced. He needs to have his buzz-saw reset. He needs to understand that it has been tampered with. The unbeliever needs to be made aware that his rational faculties are impaired. So long as he remains convinced that he can interpret reality on his own principle, he will never do so correctly. Man must have a Christian view of his nature to correctly see reality. The doctrine of man as presented in Scripture is necessary for the unbeliever to understand not only himself, but the rest of reality, due to the connection between what man thinks he himself is and what man knows of other things. Hodge explains that man does not need to be renewed *by* knowledge but *unto* knowledge.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit must set the saw, not merely present more boards to cut.

Yet, it is not merely a correct doctrine of the nature of man that is required for man to reason correctly about reality. Man needs the full Christian theistic system in

¹⁷ Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 214.

¹⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:99.

order to interpret reality aright.¹⁹ Van Til writes, “It has already become plain that [a Reformed apologetic] implies a refusal to grant that any area or aspect of reality, any fact or any law of nature or history, can be correctly interpreted except it be seen in the light of the main doctrines of Christianity.”²⁰ The unbeliever cannot correctly interpret mathematics, physics, history, etc. without seeing those subjects through the lens of Christianity. There are no objects of knowledge which are neutral, which the unbeliever and believer can both understand correctly. For Van Til, all objects of inquiry must be seen as part of the Christian system in order to be seen for what they really are. He writes, “No proposition about historical fact is presented for what it really is till it is presented as a part of the system of Christian theism that is contained in Scripture.”²¹ Facts must be interpreted as part of the unit of Christian theism as a whole. Van Til says,

All facts of the created universe are what they are by virtue of the plan of God with respect to them. Any fact in any realm confronted by man is what it is as revelational through and through of the God and of the Christ of Christian theism. . . . Christian theism must be presented as that light in terms of which any proposition about any fact receives meaning.”²²

Facts must be viewed through the lens of Christianity to be seen for what they are. If the believer does not challenge the unbeliever with respect to his lens of interpretation, all agreement as to the facts is just a façade.

Van Til argues that there is no point of agreement between the believer and unbeliever epistemologically speaking. All agreement is in appearance only. Because there is no epistemological point of contact, no neutral ground (in the epistemological

¹⁹ While we may not be able to develop an exhaustive list of the necessary beliefs in such a Christian theistic system, we can say that those beliefs which are normally required when the Holy Spirit regenerates a person would be a minimum. Examples of beliefs would be the existence and attributes of God, the doctrines of creation and providence, the nature of man as sinner, the person and work of Christ, the nature of faith, and that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ.

²⁰ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 124.

²¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 149–50.

²² Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 150.

sense), every point the Christian makes will challenge the unbeliever's system. Van Til writes, "only the Reformed statement of Christianity is consistent with itself and therefore challenges the non-Christian position at every point."²³ If no epistemological point is held in common, then every point is a point of contention. Because the interpretive principles of the believer and unbeliever are at odds, any fact which they interpret will be necessarily affected by their principle. Thus, there is no real agreement between believer and unbeliever regarding any area of knowledge.

The *Sensus Divinitatis*

According to the apostle Paul, all men have a knowledge of God their creator (Rom 1:18-32). For Van Til, the *sensus divinitatis* is not merely the capacity for knowledge but actual knowledge. He writes,

Of course, when we thus stress Paul's teaching that all men do not merely have a capacity for but are in actual possession of the knowledge of God, we have at once to add Paul's further instruction to the effect that all men, due to the sin within them, always and in all relationships seeks to 'suppress' this knowledge of God.²⁴

The question is whether this knowledge of God that the natural man possesses can be common ground or a point of contact to which the believer can appeal to the unbeliever.²⁵

Van Til asserts that the knowledge of God produced by the sense of deity can in fact be a point of contact.²⁶ He writes, "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 that he is a

²³ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 196.

²⁴ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 118.

²⁵ It is necessary to distinguish between epistemological and metaphysical common ground. Van Til does not always explicitly specify which kind of common ground or point of contact he has in mind. As will be shown below, Van Til's point of contact is a metaphysical point of contact and not an epistemological point of contact.

²⁶ This point of contact is metaphysical and not epistemological.

covenant breaker. But every man acts and talks as though this were not so.”²⁷ For Van Til, there is some degree of common ground between believer and unbeliever in that they both know that they are God’s creatures and that they are sinners. The knowledge of God given to the unbeliever through the sense of deity is what the believer should appeal to in his apologetic toward the unbeliever. Van Til concludes, “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.”²⁸ The point of contact lies beneath the unbeliever’s suppression of the truth of God he has by virtue of the sense of deity.

Van Til adds a qualification to the common ground of the sense of deity. He writes,

The non-regenerate therefore have in their sense of deity, though repressed by them, some remnant of the knowledge of God. . . . The non-regenerate man seeks by all means to “keep under” this remnant of a true theistic interpretation that lingers in his mind. . . . In so doing he sins, to be sure, against his better knowledge. He sins against that which is hidden deep down in his own consciousness. And it is well that we should appeal to this fact. But in order to appeal to this fact, we must use all caution not to obscure this fact. And obscure it we do if we speak of the “common consciousness” of man without distinguishing clearly between what is hidden deep down in the mind of natural man as the revelation and knowledge of God within him and what, in rejecting God, he has virtually adopted as being his final interpretive principle.²⁹

Although there is common ground between believer and unbeliever, the believer cannot appeal to this common ground as if the unbeliever can understand it on his own principle. This is why Van Til says, “There are no *capita communissima* (general principles), on which believers and non-believers can agree without a difference.”³⁰ The fact that there is

²⁷ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 119–20.

²⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 121.

²⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 82–83.

³⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 78.

a kind of common ground is of no epistemological use to the unbeliever because his adopted principle of autonomy necessarily suppresses it. Thus, for Van Til, the kind of common ground that is involved via the *sensus divinitatis* is a metaphysical common ground, not an epistemological one.

Van Til maintains that the distinction between the epistemological and the metaphysical is crucial to maintain.³¹ He says,

We do well to take careful note of a distinction of which we have spoken only in passing. It is the distinction between the psychological and the epistemological. If there be such things as “common notions,” psychologically speaking, it does not follow that there are such things as “common notions,” epistemologically speaking. . . . Psychologically there are no atheistic men; epistemologically every sinner is atheistic.³²

The common ground that the believer and unbeliever share is a metaphysical common ground. It exists by virtue of the work of God. Epistemologically, the regenerate and unregenerate have nothing in common. Van Til explains,

[Man’s knowledge of God] is that which all men have *in common*. For the race of men is made of one blood. It stood as a unity before God in Adam. This confrontation of all men with God in Adam by supernatural revelation presupposes and is correlative to the confrontation of mankind with God by virtue of creation. If, then, the believer presents to the unbeliever the Bible and its system of truth as God speaking to men, he may rest assured that there is a response in the heart of every man to whom he thus speaks. This response may be, and often is, unfavorable. Men will reject the claims of God, but, nonetheless, they will own them as legitimate. That is, they will in their hearts, when they cannot suppress them, own these claims. There are no atheists, least of all in the hereafter. Metaphysically speaking then, both parties, believers and unbelievers, have all things in common; they have God in common, they have every fact in the universe in common. And they know they have them in common. All men know God, the true God, the only God.³³

³¹ Van Til sometimes refers to the metaphysical point of contact as a psychological point of contact. I have maintained the language of metaphysical/epistemological throughout the dissertation for sake of clarity.

³² Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 66–68.

³³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 176–77.

All common ground is metaphysical. Thus, the question over common ground is not so much with respect to the fact of common ground as to the nature of common ground.³⁴ The nature of common ground is metaphysical. It is not epistemological.

The Method of Knowing

Van Til not only argues that the believer and unbeliever understand the objects of reality differently, but he also argues that they stand opposed to one another in their method of acquiring knowledge. Van Til states, “So also, disagreeing with the natural man on the nature of the object of knowledge, the Reformed apologist must disagree with him on the method to be employed in acquiring knowledge.”³⁵ Not only is there no epistemological common ground with respect to the understanding of the objects under investigation, but there is also no common ground concerning how to go about investigating those objects. This is because, for Van Til, “every method, the supposedly neutral one no less than any other, presupposes either the truth or the falsity of Christian theism.”³⁶ The principles of interpretation between believers and unbelievers rely on different presuppositions. The unbeliever views reality through the lens of autonomy. The believer views reality through the lens of Scripture.

The unbeliever goes about the business of acquiring knowledge by assuming the ability to judge for himself in matters of truth and goodness. On his principle of autonomy, the unbeliever searches for truth and meaning in the world. The believer, on the other hand, seeks to acquire knowledge in submission to the authoritative Word of God. For him, Scripture serves as the final authority in matters of truth and goodness.

³⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1969), 258–59.

³⁵ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 127.

³⁶ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 129.

Constructive Analysis

Both Plantinga and Van Til argue for a kind of common ground between believer and unbeliever. There are some differences, however. Plantinga's affirmation of common ground is more implicit, while Van Til's affirmation is explicit. Van Til devotes much more time to examining the question of common ground, while Plantinga deals with the issue in passing. The most significant point of contention between their two views is with respect to the nature of the common ground. Both have insights which would be helpful for the other to incorporate into his epistemology.

The Two-Story Model

One area in which Plantinga could be helped by Van Til's analysis concerns the two-story model of knowledge that Plantinga appears to implicitly affirm. Van Til directly argues against a two-story conception of knowledge. He writes, "If the natural man is given permission to draw the floor-plan for a house and is allowed to build the first story of the house in accordance with his own blueprint, the Christian cannot escape being controlled in a large measure by the same blueprint when he wants to take over the building of the second story of the house."³⁷ If the unbeliever is allowed to share the first story with the believer, the unbeliever will have control over what can be built on top of it.

Van Til argues that in every case a differentiation must be made between the regenerate interpretation and the unregenerate interpretation of a given subject matter.³⁸ He explains, "It is not that in some lower dimension no differentiation, epistemological or psychological, needs to be made by believers. It is not that there is even a square foot of neutral territory. . . . The problem, as already suggested, faces us in every dimension."³⁹

³⁷ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 144–45.

³⁸ Van Til argues this way because he is concerned to defend the truth of Christianity.

³⁹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 104.

There is no neutral territory in the house of knowledge on which the believer and unbeliever will agree. The unbeliever's knowledge of the subject matters contained in the lower story of the two-story model is as mistaken as the unbeliever's knowledge in the upper story. Van Til elaborates,

This point that the knowledge of the phenomena is as basically mistaken from an ultimate point of view as the knowledge of God, if the phenomena are not brought into relation to God, has been greatly obscured in the history of Christian thought by a common distinction made between knowledge of natural things and knowledge of heavenly things. It is often presented as though Christians and non-Christians would then be different only in that the former, in addition to knowing earthly things, also know heavenly things, while the latter know earthly things only.⁴⁰

The two-story model of human knowledge is fundamentally flawed. Unbelievers do not share the same knowledge with believers with regard to natural things, epistemologically speaking. This is because any engagement between the two involves interpretive principles which necessarily affect the interpretation of any of the facts.

However, Van Til also qualifies his description of the house of knowledge by allowing the noetic effects of sin to be more or less operative according to the subject matter at hand. He says,

There is no single territory or dimension in which believers and non-believers have all things wholly in common. As noted above, even the description of facts in the lowest dimension presuppose a system of metaphysics and epistemology. So there can be no neutral territory of cooperation. Yet unbelievers are more self-conscious epistemologically in the dimension of religion than in the dimension of mathematics. The process of differentiation has not proceeded as far in the lower, as it has in the higher, dimensions.⁴¹

The more self-conscious the unbeliever is with respecting a certain subject matter, Van Til argues, the more it will appear that their understanding of that subject matter is at odds with the believer's. The more consistently the unbeliever applies his interpretive principle of autonomy without resorting to his borrowed capital, the further away he will appear to reach agreement with a believer on a specific issue. The reverse is also true.

⁴⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 148.

⁴¹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 102.

The less consistent the unbeliever is in applying his interpretive presupposition of autonomy, the closer he will appear to be in agreement with the regenerate understanding of the subject matter. Van Til is saying that the unbeliever is more consistent in his principle of autonomy respecting religious matters (which is why he appears to differ so widely on the nature and existence of God), and the unbeliever is less consistent in his principle of autonomy respecting subject matters such as math and science (which is why there appears to be so much agreement between believer and unbeliever respecting these topics).

While the noetic effects of sin are more prevalent with respect to the knowledge of God, they are nevertheless present in every area of study. Thus, Van Til articulates a model of knowledge that is not like a two-story house but rather like two adjoining rooms. The unbeliever remains in one room, while the believer remains in the second room. Each room contains the same objective revelation of God, but the believer and unbeliever interpret all of it differently. How differently they interpret each object is a matter of degree, but that degree never reduces to zero. The Holy Spirit holds the key to a one-way door. Upon regeneration, the unbeliever is transported through the door into the believer's room. Plantinga's allowance for widespread agreement between believers and unbelievers concerning natural subject matters needs more nuance. There is a difference between apparent agreement and actual agreement. Metaphysically, believers and unbelievers have mutual understanding. Epistemologically, they share nothing in common, although the degree to which they appear to have epistemological common ground is somewhat a function of the subject matter since the unbeliever is more or less consistent in his autonomy depending upon the subject matter.

Common Ground and Warrant

One area in which Plantinga's system would be helpful for Van Til's notion of common ground is Plantinga's development of the constituent elements of knowledge.

Van Til locates the believer's point of contact with the unbeliever in what the unbeliever metaphysically knows. As stated earlier, metaphysically, the unbeliever has warranted true belief. The unbeliever has warrant for the knowledge that he has metaphysically. His cognitive equipment for the reception of (as opposed to the ratiocination upon) the knowledge of God as given by the *sensus divinitatis* functions as it was intended. It also functions according to the design plan which God intended it and it is successfully aimed at truth. The believer shares common ground with the unbeliever in the metaphysical sense. Particularly, the shared common ground is belief, truth, and warrant. Believer and unbeliever both have common beliefs about God. Those beliefs about God are also true beliefs. The believer's and unbeliever's true beliefs about God, metaphysically speaking, are also warranted. Thus, the commonality shared between believer and unbeliever, metaphysically speaking, involves shared belief, truth, and warrant.

Epistemologically speaking, the unbeliever and believer do not share common ground due to their different starting points and overall beliefs. However, there is a sense in which they still have some commonality with one another. The unbeliever's cognitive content, epistemologically speaking, is unwarranted true belief. And the believer's cognitive content, epistemologically speaking, is warranted true belief. While there is a difference in warrant, there is still commonality with respect to both belief and truth. When Van Til insists that believer and unbeliever have nothing in common epistemologically, he is referring to *warranted* true belief. The unbeliever does not have warranted true belief, while the believer does. When Plantinga insists that believer and unbeliever both have knowledge, it could be interpreted as a common ground of truth and belief epistemologically speaking. Unbelievers and believers share some common beliefs. Some of those common beliefs are also true both for the believer and the unbeliever. Thus, epistemologically speaking, there is a kind of common ground between believer and unbeliever. When knowledge is viewed in its constituent elements, both belief and

truth are shared by believers and unbelievers. What is not shared, epistemologically, is warrant.

Whether the believer and unbeliever have common ground depends upon whether knowledge is being viewed as a whole or whether knowledge is being viewed in its constituent elements. If knowledge is viewed as a whole, then common ground only exists in the metaphysical realm. If knowledge is viewed in its parts, then there is a kind of common ground which can be had epistemologically as well.

Conclusion

Both Plantinga and Van Til have a place for common ground between the believer and the unbeliever with respect to knowledge. Van Til restricts common ground to the metaphysical, while Plantinga allows it in general. Plantinga's conception of knowledge is a two-story structure divided along the lines of subject matters. Van Til's system helpfully corrects Plantinga's structure by flipping it on its side. Plantinga's development of knowledge as warranted true belief provides Van Til with additional resources for analyzing common ground between believer and unbeliever. Both Plantinga and Van Til are helpful and their views should be integrated even as they critique certain aspects of one another. In the next chapter, we will examine how their apologetic methodology is expressed through argumentation.

CHAPTER 7

APOLOGETIC METHODOLOGY

Alvin Plantinga has devoted much of his academic career to defending the intellectual credibility of Christian theism.¹ One of his chief projects has been to demonstrate that theistic belief is rational.² Plantinga holds that one is rationally justified in his or her belief in God even without evidence and that there are no *de jure* objections against Christian theism. However, Plantinga has moved beyond merely taking a defensive posture against those who would claim that Christian theism is irrational and has proceeded to engage in a strategy of offense toward those who espouse naturalism and evolution. Plantinga has offered a claim that one who holds to metaphysical naturalism and evolution is irrational in doing so.³ He argues that the acceptance of naturalism and evolution provides an undefeatable defeater for the belief that human cognitive faculties are reliable. Since the belief in naturalism and evolution arise by way of cognitive faculties, they cannot rationally be held together.⁴ This argument is called the evolutionary argument against naturalism (hereafter EAAN).

¹ James Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), vii.

² See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism: An Initial Statement of the Argument," in Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*, 1–2.

⁴ Brandon Fitelson and Elliott Sober, "Plantinga's Probability Arguments against Evolutionary Naturalism," in *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics: Philosophical, Theological, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Robert T. Pennock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 411.

Van Til expended great effort developing an argument for Christianity that he considered to be transcendental.⁵ It seeks to demonstrate that the preconditions for meaning and intelligibility can only arise from Christian theism. Van Til's method of doing apologetics was to argue transcendentially. That is, it verifies propositions by seeking to determine what are the necessary preconditions for that proposition to be true or false. While Plantinga's EAAN is not formally stated in a transcendental way, it can be modified in light of Van Til's insights so that it becomes explicitly transcendental.

This chapter argues that Plantinga's and Van Til's arguments should be taken together and integrated into each other because they are better together than apart. They provide a more wholistic defense of Christianity when viewed as supplementary to one another. In order to develop the argument, I first examine Plantinga's argument in detail. A robust account of EAAN will be helpful in order to see its continuity and discontinuity with Van Til's approach. Second, I outline the unique features of transcendental argumentation and the presuppositional logic which stands behind Van Til's strongest use of it. Presuppositional logic does not follow the same rules as traditional logic. Third, I describe Van Til's transcendental argument for Christianity including a more recent proposal by one of Van Til's disciples. Finally, I offer a comparison of Van Til's approach and a modified version of Plantinga's EAAN to highlight their similar transcendental nature and how they complement one another.

Plantinga's Argument

Plantinga's EAAN is a three-step process. First, he argues that given naturalism and evolution, the conditional probability that humans have reliable cognitive faculties is low.⁶ Plantinga's argument is not against naturalism per se, nor is it against

⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 35.

⁶ Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*, viii.

evolution in itself. Rather it is an argument against the conjunction of both naturalism and evolution.⁷ Only when they are held together is there a low probability of the reliability of cognitive function. The form of Plantinga's first step of the argument is as follows:

- (a) If naturalism and evolution are true, then the probability that human cognitive faculties are reliable is low
Naturalism and evolution are true (so say the naturalistic evolutionists)
Therefore, the probability that human cognitive faculties are reliable is low

Evolution works by means of natural selection.⁸ The mechanism of natural selection is aimed at adaptive behaviors which are beneficial for the survival of the species.⁹ Through the process of random genetic mutation, species develop certain adaptations which allow them to be more survivable in their environment. The mechanism of natural selection does not aim at truth. Truth is irrelevant for survival.¹⁰ To see why this is so, consider a rabbit.¹¹ This particular rabbit, under the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection possesses a hereditary belief that foxes are flowers. The rabbit also possesses a belief, due to the same process of natural selection, that he is supposed to run from flowers because flowers are dangerous. When the rabbit meets a fox in the field, the rabbit believes that he sees a flower. The rabbit also believes that he is in danger because he believes that flowers are dangerous. The rabbit then quickly runs away from what he believes is a flower. In this case, the beliefs that the rabbit held concerning flowers and danger were false beliefs. He did not actually see a flower, and flowers are not dangerous for the rabbit. Yet, the rabbit's false beliefs ensured his

⁷ Plantinga, "The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 1–2.

⁸ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 21.

⁹ Michaelis Michael, *Evolution by Natural Selection: Confidence, Evidence, and the Gap* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2016), 49.

¹⁰ Plantinga, "The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 4.

¹¹ See further discussion of the rabbit and cognitive function in Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology and the Problem of Religious Diversity: Proper Function, Epistemic Disagreement, and Christian Exclusivism* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011), 22.

survival from the ravenous fox. The mechanism of natural selection succeeded in providing for the survival of the rabbit. Yet, the mechanistic process of survival had no relevance to the truth of the rabbit's belief system. There are innumerable other beliefs that the rabbit could hold regarding the fox that ensure his survival and yet are not true. The rabbit could believe that he sees a rainbow but that rainbows sting, and therefore, the rabbit must avoid rainbows. The rabbit could believe that he sees an ant but ants are especially smelly, and so the rabbit must flee the ant. The rabbit could believe that he sees a rock and that rocks are too noisy, and therefore, he must stay at a distance from rocks. Given the enormity of the possibilities of the rabbit's beliefs which would be both false and yet beneficial, the probability that the rabbit happens to have the belief that he sees a fox as opposed to any other belief and that foxes are dangerous as opposed to say, sweet as honey, or warm and cuddly, is reduced to a very small number. The probability of a beneficial belief actually being true is low.

Plantinga reasons that, given naturalism and evolution, the beliefs that humans have of the world would likewise be produced by the same mechanism of natural selection which is aimed at survival and not at truth. Those beliefs would have a very low probability of being true even if they were beneficial for human survivability. The beliefs that humans hold would be helpful for survivability, but most likely untrue. Thus, the probability that human cognitive faculties are reliable, that is, actually achieve truth, is very low given evolution and naturalism.¹²

The second step in Plantinga's EAAN involves a person coming to realize that the probability of having reliable cognitive faculties given evolution and naturalism is low. If a person were to believe in naturalism and evolution and also that the probability of the reliability of cognitive function is low given naturalism and evolution, then that

¹² Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 314.

person would have a defeater for the proposition that human cognitive faculties are reliable.¹³ If a person believes argument (a), then that person has a defeater for the belief in the reliability of cognitive function. Thus, the second argument is,

- (b) If a person believes (a), he or she has a defeater for the belief that human cognitive faculties are reliable
A person believes (a)
Therefore, a person has a defeater for the belief that human cognitive faculties are reliable

The defeater produced by argument (b) is undefeatable by other beliefs because any defeater-defeater would involve other beliefs which would be subject to the same initial defeater.¹⁴

The third step in Plantinga's argument is to argue that if a person has an undefeated defeater for the belief that human cognitive function is reliable, then that person has a defeater for all of his or her beliefs because all of a person's beliefs are a function of human cognition. The form of the argument is:

- (c) If a one has a defeater for the reliability of human cognitive faculties, then one has a defeater for all of one's beliefs
Naturalism and evolution are one's beliefs
Therefore, one has a defeater for naturalism and evolution

If all of one's beliefs have a defeater, then this includes the belief in naturalism and evolution.¹⁵ One who believes in naturalism and evolution should not believe in evolution and naturalism because their cognitive faculties are most probably unreliable and this unreliability is a defeater for the belief of the truth of evolution and naturalism.¹⁶ To believe in naturalism and evolution with an undefeated defeater is irrational.

¹³ Michael C. Rea, *World without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182.

¹⁴ Rea, *World without Design*, 182n11.

¹⁵ Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 314.

¹⁶ Plantinga, "The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 12.

Plantinga's form of argument for the EAAN is that of logical implication.¹⁷ Through a series of *modus ponens* arguments, Plantinga shows the irrationality of holding to the conjunction of naturalism and evolution. Cornelius Van Til arrives at the same conclusion of the irrationality of unbelief, though not in the form of implication but of transcendentals.

Transcendental Argumentation

Transcendental argumentation often involves a unique form of logical procedure. This form of argument is not the same as the deduction, induction, or abduction, yet it is a logical form of argumentation. Transcendental arguments of certain varieties seek to establish the grounds or the preconditions for conducting deductive, inductive, and abductive arguments in the first place. Therefore, one may question whether we can make use of classical deductive logic in the formulation of a transcendental argument.¹⁸ Presuppositionalists, a special kind of transcendentalists, argue that rather than relying on classical logical deduction to provide the rules for governing the validity of a transcendental argument, one must make use of presuppositional logic.¹⁹

However, even within the ranks of those who espouse transcendental argumentation, there is some debate over which set of validating rules best represents the unique method involved. As a result, several forms of the transcendental argument have been offered. Some of these forms remain within the realm of classical logical deduction.

¹⁷ Plantinga's EAAN has transcendental implications, which we shall see below. But thus far, note that the way in which the argument is formally stated involves "if, then" statements.

¹⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1969), 8–11.

¹⁹ See the discussion of presuppositional logic in Peter F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London: Methuen, 1952), 175; Madhumita Chattopadhyay, "Presupposition and Supervaluation," in *Logic Identity and Consistency: Studies in Philosophical and Non-Standard Logic II*, ed. Pranab Kumar Sen (Jadavpur University, Calcutta: Allied, 1998), 179–80; Scott Lehmann, "More Free Logic," in *Handbook of Philosophical Logic*, vol. 5, ed. Dov M. Gabbay and Franz Guenther (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Science & Business Media, 2002), 210–239.

Others, however, do not. In any case, common to all the forms is the assumption that the truth of the conclusion rests upon the validity of the form and the soundness of the premises. Because this chapter is not concerned to prove the truth of the conclusion of the arguments, the focus of this section is on form and validity.²⁰ An analysis of some of the relevant forms of the transcendental argument will help elucidate the uniqueness of the presuppositional form and how Plantinga's EAAN can be adapted to use it.

Transcendental Forms

There are four main views regarding the form of transcendental arguments.²¹ One view maintains that transcendental arguments take the same form as in classical logic.²² A. C. Grayling and Peter Strawson both argue that presuppositional arguments are distinguished only by their content and aim.²³ In their view, the formulation of a transcendental argument is just the classical deductive form of *modus ponens*²⁴:

- (1) A implies B
A
Therefore, B

As a classical *modus ponens* argument, the negation of A would leave the truth value of B as either true or false:

²⁰ Sean Choi acknowledges that proving the soundness of the transcendental argument is much more difficult than establishing the validity of a particular form; see Sean Choi, "The Transcendental Argument," in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 231–47.

²¹ These four views are outlined in summary fashion in Bálint Békefi, "Van Til versus Stroud: Is the Transcendental Argument for Christian Theism Viable?," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 2, no. 1 (2017): 136–60.

²² John M. Frame, "Reply to Don Collett on Transcendental Argument," Works of John Frame & Vern Poythress, May 24, 2012, <https://frame-poythress.org/reply-to-don-collett-on-transcendental-argument/>.

²³ A. C. Grayling, *The Refutation of Scepticism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 94–95.

²⁴ Bas C. van Fraassen, "Presupposition, Implication, and Self-Reference," *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968): 137.

- (2) A implies B
Not A
Therefore, either B or not B

If A is intelligibility and B is the Christian worldview the argument would read:

- (3) Intelligibility implies the Christian worldview
Not intelligibility
Therefore, either the Christian worldview is true, or it is not

Presuppositionalists such as Van Til maintain that the unbeliever relies on borrowed capital from the Christian worldview in order to even make a claim regarding intelligibility, either true or false.²⁵ Greg Bahnsen, a proponent of Van Til's transcendental methodology, intends more than implication when he says that "there is no way to account for reason in a non-Christian system."²⁶ For presuppositionalists, the relationship between A and B in argument (2) is such that B is a necessary condition, not just for the truth of A, but for the falsity of A as well. The traditional *modus ponens* form of logical deduction fails to capture this presuppositional concern.

A second view of the form of transcendental arguments is a modal view.

Robert Stern states that transcendental arguments "involve a claim of a distinctive form: namely, that one thing (X) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (Y), so that (it is said) the latter cannot obtain without the former."²⁷ A modal form of a transcendental argument would be:

- (4) Necessarily, A
Necessarily, if A, then B
Therefore, necessarily, B

Substituting the Christian worldview for B and intelligibility for A yields:

²⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 64.

²⁶ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Gary DeMar (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007), 66.

²⁷ Robert Stern, ed., introduction to *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2003), 3.

- (5) Necessarily, intelligibility
Necessarily, if intelligibility, then the Christian worldview is true
Therefore, necessarily, the Christian worldview is true

The modal form of the transcendental argument concludes with the necessity of the Christian worldview, which is what presuppositionalists are concerned to preserve. However, James Anderson notes that the type of necessity involved in the modal form of the transcendental argument is relative, indexed to human thought.²⁸ If the necessity involved is relative to human thought, then in possible worlds where there are no humans, the argument is not valid. The presuppositionalist would want to affirm that in eternity before the creation, God's own thoughts grounded intelligibility.²⁹ It is not just that intelligibility for humans presupposes the Christian worldview, but that intelligibility at all presupposes the Christian worldview. Given that the Christian worldview is tied to Scripture which is tied to God's own thoughts, the relationship of intelligibility to the Christian worldview should not be human-indexed.³⁰ The modal form of the transcendental argument does not clearly display the absolute nature of the relationship between intelligibility and the Christian worldview.

A third view of transcendental arguments is that they take on a performative inconsistency form.³¹ Adrian Bardon argues that transcendental arguments show that a denial of one of the premises results in a self-defeating proposition as in:

- (6) If the negation of A is self-defeating, then A is true
The negation of A is self-defeating
Therefore, A is true

²⁸ James N. Anderson, "No Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument: A Response to David Reiter," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (2011): 193.

²⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 5, *God Who Stands and Stays, Part One* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 342.

³⁰ See the discussion of God's pre-interpretation of facts in Steven D. West, *Resurrection, Scripture, and Reformed Apologetics: A Test for Consistency in Theology and Apologetic Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 146.

³¹ Adrian Bardon, "Performative Transcendental Arguments," *Philosophia* 33 (2005): 69–95.

Given a self-falsifying inconsistency form, the force of the transcendental argument from self-defeat only comes into play when a concept is negated. In its Christian form, the argument reads:

- (7) If the negation of the Christian worldview is self-defeating, then it is true
The negation of the Christian worldview is self-defeating
Therefore, the Christian worldview is true

Presuppositionalists wish to affirm that intelligibility is tied to and affirms the Christian worldview regardless of whether the Christian worldview is affirmed or negated.³² While it is true that the negation of the Christian worldview is self-defeating, and therefore the Christian worldview is true, the performative inconsistency form of the transcendental argument does not tie together intelligibility and the Christian worldview such that the affirmation of intelligibility also somehow shows the Christian worldview to be true. The argument from self-defeat fails to reveal this presuppositionalist concern.

A fourth view regarding the form of the transcendental argument is that it involves a distinct presuppositional form in which the negation of one of the premises does not change the truth or reliability of the conclusion.³³ There are two variations of the term presupposition. Bas van Fraassen uses the term presupposition as a semantic notion.³⁴ He formulates the concept of presuppositions as: “A presupposes B if and only if A is neither true nor false unless B is true.” In other words, as Lauri Karttunen argues, the truth of B “is a condition for the bivalence of A.”³⁵ In the context of a semantic notion, a presupposition is only a relation between sentences, and it does not involve the

³² Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (1969), 2.

³³ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 501–2.

³⁴ Lauri Karttunen, “Presuppositions of Compound Sentences,” *Linguistic Inquiry* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 169.

³⁵ Karttunen, “Presuppositions of Compound Sentences,” 169.

speaker or listener. The other concept of presupposition is that it is a pragmatic notion which does involve the speaker and listener.

A presuppositional form of the transcendental argument is:

- (8) A presupposes B
A
Therefore, B

The form of the transcendental argument given above is analogous to the *modus ponens* argument in classical logic.³⁶ The *modus ponens* argument is formulated as:

- (9) If A, then B
A
Therefore, B

In a presuppositional argument, however, A and B are related in such a way that the conclusion does not depend upon the truth or falsity of A. When A is negated in a *modus ponens* argument, the truth value of the conclusion is either true or false:

- (10) If A, then B
Not A
Therefore, either B or not B

The minor premise fails to satisfy implication. In a presuppositional argument, however, a denial of the second premise does not change the truth value of the conclusion as in:

- (11) A presupposes B
Not A
Therefore B

Most observers might dismiss argument (11) as a formal fallacy.³⁷ However, given the nature of presuppositions, the argument is valid. Thus, while the presuppositional argument looks like an instance of *modus ponens*, it is not.³⁸ The truth value of the conclusion is not a function of the truth value of the minor premise. In classical logic, the

³⁶ Van Fraassen, "Presupposition, Implication, and Self-Reference," 137.

³⁷ John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 76.

³⁸ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 7th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1986), 296.

truth value of the conclusion is a function of the truth value of the minor premise. A presuppositional argument which captures this distinction is:

- (12) A presupposes B
A or not-A
Therefore, B

Don Collett observes, “Generally speaking, then, presuppositional or transcendental arguments may be distinguished from traditional arguments based upon standard propositional logic, for instance *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*, in terms of ‘the truth-functional relation of their conclusions to their premises.’”³⁹ The truth of the conclusion does not functionally depend upon the truth of the premises. Due to Collett’s observation about the truth-functional relation of the premises in a presuppositional argument, John Frame has retracted his earlier position that presuppositional argumentation is the same as traditional implication, yet he still maintains that classical logic can reach transcendental conclusions.⁴⁰

An additional distinguishing mark of presuppositional logic surfaces when the presuppositional argument is compared to a classical *modus tollens* form. In a classical *modus tollens* argument the denial of the apodosis results in a denial of the protasis as in:

- (13) If A, then B
Not B
Therefore, not A

However, in a presuppositional argument a denial of what is presupposed results in the inability to assign a truth value to the conclusion because the antecedent has no truth value unless the consequent is true. Consider the following presuppositional argument:

³⁹ This quote is taken from an updated essay published online; see Don Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument Revisited,” Trinity School for Ministry, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://www.tsm.edu/wp-content/uploads/Collett%20-%20Van%20Til%20and%20Transcendental%20Argument%20Revisited.pdf>. It originally appeared in Don Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (Fall 2003): 289–306, and it was updated in Don Collett, “Van Til and the Transcendental Argument,” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, by K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 271.

⁴⁰ See Frame, “Reply to Don Collett.”

(14) A presupposes B
Not B
Therefore, neither A nor Not-A

If B fails to obtain, then there is what is called a failure of the presupposition. The only way for A to be assigned a truth value is for B to obtain. The earlier conclusion of argument (10) also resulted in an inability to assign a truth value to the conclusion. However, with argument (10) the conclusion has a truth value, it is just unknown; it could be either B or not B, either true or false. Argument (14) reveals not an unknown truth value, but an impossibility of having a truth value. Thus, the failure of a presupposition is a stronger form of contradiction than in classical logic.⁴¹ In classical logic, conjoining A to something which denies A is self-contradictory. However, Strawson argues that it is a different kind of logical absurdity to conjoin A to the denial of something which is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of A.⁴² For both *modus ponens* and for *modus tollens*, the assertion that ‘A implies B’ and ‘A presupposes B’ are deductively equivalent is false. The rules governing the validity of a presuppositional argument are distinct from those governing a classical deductive argument.⁴³

Van Til’s Argument

The transcendental argument is unlike other arguments for the truth of the Christian worldview.⁴⁴ Whereas other arguments present unbelievers with propositions and sets of data to evaluate on their own terms, the transcendental argument calls into question the very norms by which the unbeliever evaluates anything in the first place.⁴⁵ It

⁴¹ Peter F. Strawson, “Identifying Reference and Truth-Values,” *Theoria* 30, no. 2 (1964): 106.

⁴² Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory*, 175.

⁴³ See the distinctions between two-valued and three-valued logical systems in Ruth M. Kempson, *Semantic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 139ff.

⁴⁴ Ian Hugh Clary, “An Introduction to Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Hope’s Reason: A Journal of Apologetics* 1, no. 1 (2010): 64.

⁴⁵ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended*, ed. Joel McDurmon (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision Press, 2008), 78.

provides an account of what the necessary conditions must be for there to be such a thing as a truth claim, including a negative truth claim, to be intelligible.⁴⁶ When used by Van Til, the transcendental argument seeks to show that only Christianity makes knowledge possible and allows inductive and deductive reasoning to be meaningful.⁴⁷ Van Til's presuppositional form of the transcendental argument can be stated in this way:

- (15) Intelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview
Intelligibility exists
Therefore, the Christian worldview is true

The first premise is the most crucial and encapsulates the main concern of presuppositional apologetics, which Bahnsen summarizes, "only the Christian worldview provides the philosophical preconditions necessary for man's reasoning and knowledge in any field whatever."⁴⁸

The best formal structure to apply to the transcendental argument for the Christian worldview is the presuppositional form:

- (16) A presupposes B
A or not A
Therefore, B

Let A be intelligibility, and let B be the Christian worldview:

- (17) Intelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview
Intelligibility or not intelligibility
Therefore, the Christian worldview is true

Argument (17) is a formal way of stating what John Frame observed of Van Til's apologetic, that Van Til "seeks to show that all intelligibility depends on, or presupposes, Christian theism."⁴⁹ Argument (17) is formally valid according to the rules of

⁴⁶ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 502.

⁴⁷ Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 261.

⁴⁸ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 5.

⁴⁹ John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 314–15.

presuppositional logic in form (16). Reflecting on the rules of presuppositional logic and tinkering with the premises of the transcendental argument further elucidate its features.

One must be careful not to interpret argument (17) in such a way as to make it affirm what it does not actually affirm. At first glance, it appears that the argument can be construed as to say that not-intelligibility proves that the Christian worldview is true. Thus, Frame highlights an important caution regarding the legitimacy of the argument when he correctly reasons that presuppositionalists do not intend to affirm that unintelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview.⁵⁰ Notice that argument (17) does not premise that unintelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview, only that intelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview. The non-truth functionality of a presuppositional argument means that it does not matter whether the minor premise is true or false. The important point is that the assertion of either intelligibility or unintelligibility demonstrates the Christian worldview is true because intelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview.⁵¹ Frame's objection against concluding the truth of the Christian worldview from unintelligibility is a warning not to reintroduce truth-functionality back into the minor premise.

The power of the presuppositional argument form is displayed when one attempts to deny the minor premise:

(18) Intelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview
Not intelligibility
Therefore, the Christian worldview is true

If there is no intelligibility, the conclusion that the Christian worldview is true remains the same. Whether the second premise is intelligibility or not intelligibility does not change the outcome of the argument. The reason for the non-truth functionality of the

⁵⁰ Frame, *Apologetics*, 78.

⁵¹ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 62.

second premise is that the concept of intelligibility is present whether one attempts to affirm its existence or deny its existence. To highlight this feature, consider a unicorn. For two individuals to argue over the existence of a unicorn, they both have to have an idea of what a unicorn is in order to either affirm or deny its existence. In the same way, in order to predicate something meaningful regarding intelligibility, a person has to have some idea of what intelligibility is. Connotation precedes denotation, and the latter is not intelligible without the former.⁵² To assert “not intelligibility” is to affirm something about the concept of intelligibility. It is impossible to assert or deny something which is devoid of meaning. Therefore, the truth value of the second premise does not function in a way as to affect the conclusion of the argument.

If the truth of the Christian worldview is denied, the failure of a presupposition occurs:

(19) Intelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview
Not the Christian worldview
Therefore, neither intelligibility nor unintelligibility

The failure of the presupposition of the Christian worldview results in the inability to assign intelligibility a truth value of either true or false. In this case, all meaning and predication become impossible. This is what the transcendental argument set out to prove. Argument (19) represents a *reductio ad absurdum* wherein the universe becomes absurd without the presupposition of the Christian worldview. Arguments (18) and (19) cumulatively reinforce the idea that the Christian worldview is the precondition for intelligibility and meaning.

Presuppositional logic allows the transcendental argument to affirm the primitive status of the existence of God contained within the Christian worldview rather

⁵² Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 24.

than a derivative status where God's existence is derived from first principles.⁵³ Van Til was concerned to preserve the Christian conception of God and the world at the beginning of the process of reasoning instead of as a conclusion to be reached starting from neutral ground.⁵⁴ The transcendental argument argues from the position of the Christian worldview that the Christian worldview must come in at the beginning of intelligibility.⁵⁵ It preserves God from succumbing to derivation.⁵⁶

Whether intelligibility is affirmed or negated, the truth of the Christian worldview is the conclusion. The logical absurdity which results in the presuppositional form when the Christian worldview is denied is a stronger absurdity than in other forms of the argument. Van Til believed that arguing transcendently was the strongest form of argument with which to show the inconsistency of the unbeliever's worldview.⁵⁷ The inability to affirm or deny intelligibility without concluding the truth of the Christian worldview in the presuppositional form of the transcendental argument clearly articulates the force of Van Til's argument.

The presuppositional form of the transcendental argument for the Christian worldview is unique.⁵⁸ While the transcendental argument is not the only argument for the truth of the Christian worldview, it does highlight the indispensable nature of the

⁵³ See the discussion of primitive and derivative propositions in Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument."

⁵⁴ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 506–7.

⁵⁵ This is a unique feature of presuppositionalism where the method of apologetics is derived from faithfulness to Scripture rather than from what might be the most persuasive to the unbeliever. Presuppositional apologetics is consistent with Reformed theology which is most objectionable to the unbeliever. Compare Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 134; and John S. Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 32.

⁵⁶ By "derivation" I mean the conclusion of a deductive or inductive argument.

⁵⁷ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 135.

⁵⁸ While transcendental arguments are not new, the presuppositional form of the argument formally expressed as "A presupposes B, A, therefore B" is new.

Christian worldview for all predication.⁵⁹ Without it, one could not even begin to argue for it. Rather than only conclude with the Christian worldview as in traditional apologetics, the transcendental argument shows that one must also begin with it. Christianity is the only reasonable position to take.⁶⁰ Bahnsen writes that Christianity “must be secretly presupposed even in the attempt to argue against it.”⁶¹

A Contemporary Approach

Following in the footsteps of Van Til, James Anderson has developed a contemporary approach to transcendental argumentation by examining the relationship between knowledge and God. Anderson argues that human knowledge presupposes the existence of God.⁶² The form of the argument is as follows:

(20) Knowledge presupposes God
Knowledge
Therefore, God

Van Til had argued that unless God exists and reveals truth to man, man could not know anything or even seek to know anything.⁶³ Knowledge requires the existence of God. It also requires creation and providence. Man cannot know unless he exists, and his existence depends upon his creation by God. Yet, even if man were to simply exist, unless he was formed in such a way as to be able to obtain knowledge about God and his environment, he would still be without knowledge.

Anderson’s argument shows that God is necessary for knowledge. If one attempts to deny the possibility of knowledge, then what is the denial? One would have to

⁵⁹ Ultimate starting points must be argued for in a transcendental way.

⁶⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 255.

⁶¹ Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 113.

⁶² James N. Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (April 2005): 50.

⁶³ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 179.

know something in order to make the denial claim. Meaning and predication fall apart if one were to deny all forms of knowledge. Additionally, in the presuppositional argument, if one were to deny the presupposition, then one could not affirm the truth or falsity of knowledge. The burden of proof would lie upon the antagonist to show how there could be a third option between knowledge and not-knowledge if he wished to continue to make meaningful predications.

A Transcendental EAAN

Transcendental arguments seek to show what must be the case in order for knowing to be possible. In other words, what conditions must be met in order for man to have knowledge. Plantinga's EAAN is, on the surface, not in the form of a transcendental argument.⁶⁴ It does not say that one thing presupposes another. It does not answer what must be the case for man to have knowledge. However, if modified, it does show what must *not* be the case for man to have knowledge. Anderson helpfully points out that the EAAN is centrally concerned not with the truth or falsity of naturalism but with a person's belief in naturalism. He writes,

The argument in question is not that if naturalism is *true*, then we have (or can have) no knowledge; it is that a person's *belief* in naturalism will lead to that person having no knowledge – and then only on the additional condition that the person recognizes a certain probability relation between naturalism and the reliability of their cognitive faculties.⁶⁵

Yet, we must probe deeper. As stated, EAAN shows that a person who believes in naturalism, evolution, and the unreliability of cognition is irrational. In argument (a), Plantinga posits a relation between naturalism/evolution and cognitive reliability. The truth of naturalism and evolution would force the probability of cognitive reliability to be low. Regardless of whether one believes their cognitive faculties are reliable or not, if

⁶⁴ Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 69.

⁶⁵ Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 69.

naturalism and evolution are true, cognitive reliability is not probable. Cognitive reliability is here conceived of as the ability of the mind to produce true beliefs.

Plantinga's form of the EAAN can be strengthened if we consider to whom the argument is aimed. Those who argue for naturalism and evolution are not merely concerned to state that naturalism and evolution might happen to be true beliefs that some people hold. If they were so content, then they would also be content with the reply that some other people happen to hold the belief that evolutionary naturalism is false, and that would be the end of the conversation. Rather, the context into which Plantinga's EAAN is cast is one in which the antagonists claim to *know* that naturalism and evolution are true and that there is some defect present in the protagonists position that naturalism and evolution are not true. Happening to believe that something is true does not cause antagonism.⁶⁶ Claiming to know that something is true causes antagonism.

Plantinga's argument becomes stronger if cast into terms of knowledge instead of cognitive reliability. Yet, cognitive reliability and knowledge are related. Cognitive function is, at least in part, responsible for the attainment of knowledge.⁶⁷ Thus, one might be tempted to argue that if naturalism and evolution are true, the probability of a person having knowledge is low. Evolutionary naturalism would, by chance, grant knowledge to some people about certain things, and not grant knowledge about other things. The situation is more complex, however. The complexity has to do with the definition of knowledge.

Granted, naturalism and evolution, if true, may happen to produce true beliefs on some occasions (yet statistically few of them). But knowledge is more than possessing

⁶⁶ See the conversation between Plantinga and Christopher Insole in Rupert Shortt, "Alvin Plantinga and Christopher J. Insole: The Philosophy of Religion," in *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, ed. Rupert Shortt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 58.

⁶⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 197.

a true belief by accident or chance.⁶⁸ In order for a true belief to count as knowledge, it must be produced in the right sort of way. Plantinga contends that warrant, the additional property enough of which transforms true belief into knowledge, must satisfy necessary criteria of properly functioning cognitive faculties, a propitious cognitive environment for the exercise of cognitive powers, and a design plan aimed at the production of true belief.⁶⁹ While whether the first two criteria can be met by naturalistic evolution is debatable, it is at least clear that the last criteria cannot be met by naturalistic evolution because, by definition, the design plan is not aimed at truth but survivability. If naturalism and evolution are true, it is not the case that the probability of a person having knowledge is low. It is the case that the probability of a person having true beliefs is low. But the probability of a person having knowledge is zero. Given naturalism and evolution, knowledge is impossible.⁷⁰ In other words, a necessary condition of knowledge is not-naturalism/evolution. Transcendental arguments argue what must be the case for something to obtain. With respect to knowledge and naturalism/evolution, a modified and transcendental EAAN may be restated as:

(21) Knowledge presupposes not-naturalism/evolution
 Knowledge
 Therefore not-naturalism/evolution

Recall that in a presuppositional argument, it does not matter whether the apodosis is affirmed or denied. Therefore, the argument could be expanded as:

(22) Knowledge presupposes not-naturalism/evolution
 Knowledge or not-knowledge
 Therefore not-naturalism/evolution

⁶⁸ Michael R. DePaul, "Value Monism in Epistemology," in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 178.

⁶⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

⁷⁰ Dieter Schönecker, "The Deliverances of Warranted Christian Belief," in *Plantinga's Warranted Christian Belief: Critical Essays with a Reply by Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Dieter Schönecker (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 37–38.

Applying the rules for the failure of a presupposition, the argument becomes:

- (23) Knowledge presupposes not-naturalism/evolution
Naturalism/evolution
Therefore, neither knowledge nor not-knowledge

The logical absurdity of affirming naturalism/evolution in the modified EAAN is readily apparent. The presuppositional form of the modified argument is the same kind of argument that Van Til makes with respect to Christianity. They differ in what they seek to prove. Van Til is concerned to prove that the Christian worldview is the necessary condition for knowledge. The modified EAAN is concerned to prove that a necessary condition for knowledge is the falsity of naturalistic evolution. Further, Plantinga not only rejects naturalistic evolution but also makes a positive case for Christian theism in his *Warranted Christian Belief*. If one rejects naturalism, then the only alternative is supernaturalism. Plantinga argues for a specific variety of supernaturalism, namely, the Christian variety. Summarizing Plantinga's project on Christian belief, Dieter Schönecker writes, "Theism is true, if anything is true . . . , if anything is warranted, then Christian belief is warranted."⁷¹ Plantinga's original emphasis in the EAAN was against naturalism. Yet, going beyond rejecting naturalism, Plantinga argues that Christian theism is required for knowledge. The two arguments are connected. If Christian theism is true, then it cannot be the case that naturalistic evolution is true because those two views are contradictories. In Plantinga's articulation, the EAAN leads to Christian theism. On the other hand, Van Til's emphasis is for Christianity. In his argument one moves from Christianity to the rejection of everything else including naturalistic evolution.

Perhaps a better term for the modified EAAN would be the epistemic argument against naturalistic evolution (EAANE). The original EAAN is not formally transcendental (yet it has transcendental implications), but given some additional

⁷¹ Schönecker, "The Deliverances of Warranted Christian Belief," 38.

tweaking, and taking into account Plantinga's articulation of what constitutes knowledge, one can formally produce a transcendental argument, and a presuppositional one at that. The EAAN naturally lends itself to arguing for knowledge on the presupposition that naturalistic evolution cannot be true.

Conclusion

Plantinga and Van Til both offer apologetic arguments from their conviction that Christianity is true. Van Til's argument takes the strongest form of a transcendental argument in that it is the presuppositional form. He argues that the Christian worldview is the precondition of rationality and intelligibility and knowledge. On the other hand, Plantinga argues that the evolutionary naturalist who believes that his or her cognitive reliability for producing true beliefs is likely low is irrational. Modified to take into account Plantinga's epistemology, the argument is that not-naturalistic evolution is a precondition of knowledge. Combining the two transcendental arguments together would look something like this:

- (24) Knowledge presupposes not-naturalism/evolution and the Christian worldview
Knowledge or not-knowledge
Therefore, the Christian worldview is true, and naturalism/evolution is false

The Christian worldview is not naturalism, but not-naturalism is not necessarily the Christian worldview. The EAAN chips away at unbelieving thought by rejecting naturalistic evolution, but Van Til's formulation brings the argument full circle. Both are useful in their own way and deserve a place in the conversation between faith and reason. Plantinga shows that the naturalistic evolutionist should question their belief system and that their view cannot account for knowledge. Van Til argues that the only thing which accounts for knowledge and intelligibility is the Christian worldview. In rejecting naturalism, one should walk to Christianity. In embracing Christianity, one is rejecting naturalism. Plantinga and Van Til could be compared to faith and repentance in the theological *loci* of soteriology. In repenting from sin one embraces Christ in faith. In

embracing Christ in faith, one turns away from unbelief. Plantinga and Van Til belong together as two sides of the same coin.

CHAPTER 8

FOUNDATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

We have seen how the insights of Plantinga and Van Til in a variety of areas are complementary to one another. This chapter serves as a culmination of what has preceded it. Plantinga and Van Til have offered models for thinking about epistemology, although for slightly different purposes. Plantinga’s model centers on knowledge as warranted true belief. Van Til’s model centers on presuppositions. The question is whether those models can be brought together in a way that makes a contribution to contemporary epistemology.

This chapter argues for a particular model of epistemology. One might call it “revelational foundationalism” (hereafter the RF model). Such a model is not new to the way Christian theologians throughout history have conceived of knowledge.¹ However, this model seeks to combine the insights of Plantinga and Van Til in such a way that may prove helpful for contemporary theologians and philosophers who see the necessity of forming theories of epistemology in a specifically Christian way.²

In order to argue for the RF model of epistemology, this chapter is structured according to the name of the proposed model. The first section details a kind of foundationalism. The second section examines the nature of revelation and how that expands upon the particular view of foundationalism offered in the first section.

¹ See Titus Chung, *Thomas Torrance’s Meditations and Revelation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Colin E. Gunton, *Revelation and Reason: Prolegomena to Systematic Theology*, ed. P. H. Brazier (London: T&T Clark, 2008); Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

² One contemporary example is Deane-Peter Baker, *Tayloring Reformed Epistemology: Charles Taylor, Alvin Plantinga, and the de Jure Challenge to Christian Belief* (London: SCM Press, 2007). See also W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998).

Foundationalism

As Plantinga has pointed out, classical foundationalism does not have the means to justify certain beliefs which we hold to be justified.³ In particular, beliefs about the past, the belief that there are other minds, and memory beliefs do not measure up to the demands of the classical foundationalist.⁴ What counts as a basic belief must be expanded to allow for the justification of these types of beliefs. Thus, in the RF model, classical foundationalism is rejected for being too narrow in scope with regard to what types of beliefs can be properly basic. Instead, the RF model subscribes to a foundationalist model similar to Plantinga in that beliefs about the past, memory beliefs, and the belief in other minds can be properly basic. Those beliefs do not require propositional evidence to justify their being believed.⁵

The RF model differs from Plantinga's weak foundationalism in that it affirms that the belief in God does not require weak foundationalism. The belief in God can be justified in a strong foundationalist sense.⁶ Recall that Plantinga defined incorrigibility (one of the types of beliefs that strong foundationalism counts as properly basic) as follows: "S has incorrigible knowledge of a proposition p if and only if it is not possible that p be false and S believe it, and not possible that p be true and S believe -p."⁷ In other words, it is not possible that someone believe a proposition and that proposition be false, and it is not possible that a proposition be true and a person believe that it is false.⁸

³ James Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology: An Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 47.

⁴ Philip L. Quinn, *Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Christian B. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 8.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 178.

⁶ Strong or classical foundationalism accepts beliefs as basic which are either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. The belief in God is incorrigible for both believer and unbeliever in the metaphysical sense due to the *sensus divinitatis*. The belief in God is also incorrigible for the believer in the epistemological sense due to the Holy Spirit's sealing of it on the human heart.

⁷ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 49.

⁸ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 49.

The RF model takes the belief in God as properly basic but also more than properly basic. Both Plantinga and Van Til affirm that God is the starting point for thought.⁹ Van Til also affirms that this belief in God is not the belief in a generic God but a belief in the God of the Bible, the ontological Trinity and the entirety of his self-revelation. Yet, the RF model also takes the belief in God as a “presupposition.” Presuppositions are stronger and even more foundational than basic beliefs in that they exert a kind of controlling influence over the rest of one’s thinking.¹⁰ Some presuppositions, such as the one considered here, are also stronger than basic beliefs because they are not subject to defeaters.¹¹ The RF model argues that the ontological Trinity and his revelation is the *precondition* for the possibility of all knowledge, predication, intelligibility, meaning, and rationality. Thus, according to the model it is not possible that the belief in God be false. It is not possible for someone to believe that God exists and for God to not exist. This satisfies the first part of Plantinga’s definition of incorrigibility. The RF model also acknowledges the teaching of Romans 1 that all men know God and the articulation of Van Til that this knowing is in the metaphysical sense.¹² Thus, all men do in fact believe in the existence of God, although they do not necessarily acknowledge it, since we cannot “know” anything apart from knowledge’s transcendental ground in God and his revelation. The sense of deity which God instills into the fabric of every person’s noetic structure guarantees that, as Van Til says, there

⁹ See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 176, 343; Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1969), 12–13.

¹⁰ Owen Anderson, *Reason and Worldviews: Warfield, Kuyper, Van Til, and Plantinga on the Clarity of General Revelation and Function of Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 55.

¹¹ See John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 136.

¹² Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 66.

are no atheists in the metaphysical sense.¹³ This satisfies the second part of Plantinga's definition of incorrigibility. However, although the belief in God is incorrigible for the unbeliever in the metaphysical sense due to the *sensus divinitatis* and also incorrigible to the believer in the epistemological sense due to the sealing of it upon the heart by the Holy Spirit, the RF model is not an Enlightenment strong foundationalist model.¹⁴ It acknowledges that beliefs such as the existence of other minds, memory beliefs, beliefs about the past, etc. are basic beliefs. Thus, one might view it as a kind of weak foundationalism for some of the same reasons Plantinga critiqued strong foundationalism. However, a major difference between revelational foundationalism and Plantinga's weak foundationalism is that RF does not need to become weak to accommodate the belief in God as properly basic. Additionally, the RF model has God and his revelation as a transcendental ground for all knowledge.

RF as Internalist and Externalist

The RF model is also both an internalist model of justification and an externalist model of warrant. Whether beliefs are justified in an internalist sense or warranted in an externalist sense depends upon the *origin* and the *subject* of the belief in question. As to its *origin*, a belief may arise as a result of the unbeliever's principle of autonomy involving self-conscious intuition and ratiocination. On the other hand, it may be produced by the *sensus divinitatis* in which case it arises in the unbeliever involuntarily. As to its *subject*, the one who holds the belief may be either regenerate or unregenerate. Van Til's distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing is crucial to maintain. Metaphysically speaking, beliefs are warranted by factors

¹³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 177.

¹⁴ By "strong foundationalist" I have in mind Plantinga's use of the term in which every basic belief must be either incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses. There is another sense in which the RF model is a strong foundationalist model in that it is grounded in God and his revelation which is the strongest foundation one can have.

completely external to the thinker. The created order provides the occasion for the sense of divinity inherent in man as a part of his being created in the image of God to form the belief in God.¹⁵ The process by which the belief in God occurs is inaccessible to the person. It happens automatically. The unregenerate have a very limited set of beliefs which are produced by the sense of deity.¹⁶ Yet, those beliefs are warranted in an externalist sense. They are not justified upon cognitively accessible factors that are internal to the thinker. Instead, they are warranted by factors inaccessible to the thinker. They arise due to the proper functioning of the cognitive faculty of the *sensus divinitatis* within an environment for which they were created according to God's good design plan successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs. Thus, the RF model is externalist with regard to knowledge metaphysically speaking.

Epistemologically speaking, the unregenerate suppress the belief in God they have by way of the sense of divinity.¹⁷ They reason on the basis of an interpretive principle of autonomy which is at odds with their belief in God.¹⁸ This interpretive principle lies at the foundational level of the unbeliever's epistemological structure. The unbeliever's cognitive faculties are dysfunctional. This malfunction does not simply apply to the belief in God as if that belief could be separated from all other beliefs. Rather, the RF model holds that all facts are what they are in relation to God.¹⁹ Thus, to not interpret a fact in its relation to God is to not interpret a fact properly, and thus not to provide ultimate justification for it. The unbeliever is constantly subject to cognitive

¹⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 33.

¹⁶ See Michael Sudduth, "John Calvin," in *Early Modern Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 59–60.

¹⁷ K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 102–3.

¹⁸ See David F. Wells, *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 127.

¹⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 4.

malfunction. Cognitive malfunction is not mentally accessible with respect to justification. Because of this cognitive malfunction, every belief the unregenerate person holds, in the epistemological sense, is unwarranted in an externalist sense.

For the unbeliever, cognitive malfunction and the principle of autonomy are related to one another in such a way that it may not be possible to determine which is the cause of the other. Is the principle of autonomy the cause of cognitive malfunction, or is cognitive malfunction the cause of the principle of autonomy?²⁰ The way in which one answers this question may cause one to gravitate toward either an internalist or an externalist direction. In any case, the RF model maintains that internalism and externalism are both needed. Only the Christian worldview can account for the *warrant* of externalism. Only Christian theism can account for properly functioning faculties and their ability to yield truth. The RF model uses a transcendental internalist argument to ground externalist warrant. Further, unless God and his revelation are the precondition for knowledge, we cannot account for knowledge, warrant, or truth.

With respect to the regenerate, the RF model affirms that they have a new epistemological interpretive principle which functions properly. Furthermore, in making God and his revelation the starting point of knowledge, RF also argues that knowledge is then properly accounted for, which no non-Christian view can do on its own terms. All non-Christian thought assumes the presupposition of the Christian worldview. However, merely reasoning with the right interpretive principle is not enough for knowledge. The RF model holds that beliefs must be warranted in an externalist sense. Accordingly, all the necessary conditions of warrant must also be met for a true belief to become knowledge. If they are, then the regenerate are warranted in an externalist sense.

One might be tempted at this point to conclude that RF is purely an externalist account. However, the RF model also incorporates transcendental arguments to justify

²⁰ See Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 198.

the truth of itself. The RF model uses externalism to show how God has created the world and humans in such a way that we are able to have knowledge. Yet, the model itself needs to be justified, or ultimately grounded. The RF model employs an internalist transcendental argument to justify externalist warrant. The necessary precondition for Plantinga's notion of warranted true belief is God and his revelation. It is not merely rational for a person to hold the Christian worldview. The Christian worldview must be true if anything is rational. Only Christian theism provides the grounds for meaning and rationality. If anything is rational, Christianity is true. Rationality presupposes God and his revelation.

Warranted True Belief

The RF model defines knowledge within the context of the distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing. Both aspects of knowledge require true belief that is warranted or justified. I will briefly address the nature of belief and then detail the specific view of truth in the RF model.

Beliefs consist of assertions about propositions. Beliefs either affirm or deny propositions. In order for something to count as a belief, there must be some cognitive content in the form of an idea in the thinker's mind. The thinker conceives of the cognitive content in terms of a proposition or set of propositions. Then the thinker expresses a motion of affirmation or denial toward that proposition. Thus, the idea of a unicorn, for example, can reside in my mind, but the idea itself does not count as a belief. My denial of the existence of unicorns counts as a belief because it deals with the proposition "unicorns exist" in a negative motion. One cannot have knowledge unless one has a belief concerning some proposition.

The RF model also incorporates, but does not limit itself to, a specific view of truth. It employs both a correspondence and coherence view of truth.²¹ It adheres to a correspondence theory of truth in the context of an analogy between God's knowledge and man's knowledge. Van Til recognized that man's knowledge was analogical to God's. He states, "the idea of human knowledge is to think God's thoughts after Him analogically."²² From the biblical account of man's creation, Van Til argues that all of man's knowledge is an analog to God's. He writes,

A created being or a created reality in general cannot furnish a novelty element that is to stand on a par with the element of permanency furnished by the Creator. . . . Christians believe in two levels of existence, the level of God's existence as self-contained and the level of man's existence as derived from the level of God's existence. For this reason, Christians must also believe in two levels of knowledge, the level of God's knowledge, which is absolutely comprehensive and self-contained, and the level of man's knowledge, which is not comprehensive but is derivative and reinterpreted. Hence we say that as Christians we believe that man's knowledge is analogical to God's knowledge.²³

Because God is rational, and man is made in the image of God, man's knowledge is also rational. Man depends upon God for his rationality. Thus, Van Til says, "it is only in God's light that we see light."²⁴ Just as man's existence is dependent upon a voluntary act of creation by the Creator, man's knowledge is dependent upon a voluntary act of revelation by the Creator. Van Til concludes, "Thus every bit of knowledge on the part of

²¹ A correspondence view of truth defines truth as that which corresponds to something else. In RF, truth is that which corresponds to reality as known by the mind of God. A coherence view of truth defines truth as consisting in a proposition's coherence with other propositions. In RF, God knows all truths and they all cohere in God. As man forms true beliefs, those beliefs also cohere with God's beliefs and, therefore, to each other.

²² Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 49.

²³ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 32–33.

²⁴ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 33.

man is derivative and reinterpetative. This is what we mean by saying that man's knowledge is analogical."²⁵ Man is designed to reflect God's interpretation of reality.²⁶

An important aspect of man's knowledge as analogical to God's is that the meaning of a fact is determined by its relation to God. Van Til affirms, "As the absolute and independent existence of God determines the derivative existence of the universe, so the absolute meaning that God has for himself implies that the meaning of every fact in the universe must be related to God."²⁷ All facts are related to God, but more than that, the manner in which man knows facts is analogical to God's knowing. The relation of man's knowledge to God's by way of analogy is most clearly expressed by a correspondence theory of truth.²⁸

Truth by Correspondence

In the RF model, because man's knowledge is analogical to God's, for man to know something implies that there is some kind of correspondence between what man knows and what God knows. Since man is ontologically distinct from God, man's knowledge cannot be univocal to God's knowledge.²⁹ Otherwise, man's thoughts would just be God's thoughts. If man's thoughts and God's thoughts were identical, then there would be no correspondence between the two because there would not be two things but

²⁵ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 34.

²⁶ Another way of saying this is to say that man's interpretation is theomorphic. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 64.

²⁷ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 58.

²⁸ Wilhelmus à Brakel explains the connection of archetypal knowledge and ectypal knowledge in terms of correspondence; see Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 5.

²⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 181–85.

one thing.³⁰ Man's thoughts are to correspond to God's thoughts, and if they do, then man has truth. Yet if man's thoughts just are God's thoughts, then correspondence disappears.

In order to distance himself from such an identity of God's thoughts and man's thoughts, Van Til argues for an indirect correspondence between human and divine knowledge.³¹ For him, there is no point of identity between man's knowledge and God's knowledge. There is no identity of thought. Instead, he appeals to analogy. For Van Til, thinking analogically to God entails thinking under the authority of the Word of God.³² God pre-interprets reality and gives that interpretation of reality in divine revelation. Man re-interprets reality based on the Word of God and if man's interpretation corresponds to God's in an analogous way, man is said to have truth, yet not comprehensively.³³ Man is not afforded interpretive creativity which creates new meaning. Rather, in subjection to God's word, man interprets re-constructively according to the pre-interpretation already present in the words God gives.³⁴ If one does not leave room for analogy as a form of knowing, the divide between the finite and the infinite appears to collapse.³⁵

According to the RF model, the nature of the correspondence between the mind of man and the mind of God with respect to knowledge is adapted from the Post-Reformed Scholastic distinction between *archetypal* and *ectypal* theology.³⁶ God's

³⁰ Bertrand Russell once quipped that "even where the relation asserted is identity, there must be two identical terms, which are therefore not quite identical" in Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2010), 213.

³¹ James Emery White, *What Is Truth? A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Shaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 50.

³² Jim Halsey, "A Preliminary Critique of Van Til: The Theologian," *Westminster Theological Journal* 39, no. 1 (Fall 1976): 125.

³³ White, *What Is Truth?*, 49.

³⁴ Jason B. Hunt, *Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of God and Its Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 115.

³⁵ White, *What Is Truth?*, 106.

³⁶ Van Til acknowledges this distinction in Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 324.

knowledge is archetypal. Man's knowledge is ectypal. During the period of the Post-Reformation Scholastics, the concept of theology was developed with more complexity by making distinctions concerning its various kinds, modes, and degrees. The principle line of distinction concerned the subject in whom the theology resided.³⁷ In other words, the determining factor in the content of theology a being has is the epistemic capacity of the subject who holds the content.³⁸ By treating theology according to the capacity of the subject in whom it resided, the Reformed Scholastics were able to maintain a consistent and clear Creator/creature distinction with respect to the knowledge of God while also allowing for a point of contact or correspondence between God and man.³⁹

Archetypal knowledge is the native knowledge God has of himself from eternity. Richard Muller notes that it "is in God formally and eminently" as essential to him.⁴⁰ It "is uncreated (*increated*), essential, possessed of a definite form (*formalis*), without components or any kind of sequence (*tota simul*), absolute, infinite, and—considered in itself—incommunicable."⁴¹ Archetypal knowledge, according to Louis Berkhof, is God's "immediate knowledge of all things" both in their relations and in their essence.⁴² Archetypal knowledge is God's perfect self-knowledge.⁴³ Its only subject is God, for only God knows himself fully.⁴⁴ It is also the source of all knowledge.

³⁷ See Abraham Anderson, *Lectures on Theology* (Philadelphia: Wm. S. Young, 1857), 19.

³⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *Sacred Theology* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2001), 100–101.

³⁹ The Post-Reformation Scholastics often spoke in terms of theology, but I have taken their analysis and applied it more broadly to knowledge in general. Thus, where I have paraphrased their statements, I use the word "knowledge" rather than "theology" when it would add clarity to the discussion.

⁴⁰ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 230.

⁴¹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:235.

⁴² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 94.

⁴³ Jordan J. Ballor, *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis: The Dynamics of Protestant and Catholic Soteriology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, Matthew T. Gaetano, and David S. Sytsma (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 136.

⁴⁴ Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 244.

Archetypal knowledge cannot be investigated into.⁴⁵ Since archetypal knowledge is in God, it is God himself who is the *principium essendi* of all knowledge. All knowledge has its origin in God. Archetypal knowledge is the pattern after which ectypal knowledge is modelled.⁴⁶ The pattern set by the archetype means that God's thoughts in himself are the basis for ectypal knowledge.⁴⁷

Ectypal knowledge of God is a reflection of archetypal knowledge. It is an image or subset of the archetype.⁴⁸ Abraham Kuyper says that it is both “governed and formed” by archetypal knowledge.⁴⁹ As such it is a derived knowledge. It is “discrete (*discreta*)—that is, composed of distinct parts”—and finite.⁵⁰ Ectypal knowledge has various forms. First, it may be considered in itself. Ectypal knowledge *in se* is the “ideal case” of communicable knowledge.⁵¹ Willem van Asselt notes that it is “the whole wisdom concerning divine things communicable to creatures in respect of the communicator.”⁵² Ectypal knowledge is “readied in the mind of God for communication” to creatures.⁵³ It does not just pertain to that knowledge which is in fact communicated to the creature but also to that knowledge which may be communicated to the creature.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Willem J. van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64, no. 2 (2002): 327.

⁴⁶ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 280.

⁴⁷ John Barber, *The Road from Eden: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Palo Alto, CA: Academica Press, 2008), 470.

⁴⁸ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:230.

⁴⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1898), 252.

⁵⁰ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:235.

⁵¹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:1:235.

⁵² Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology,” 327.

⁵³ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:235.

⁵⁴ God could reveal more than he has, in fact, revealed. God will reveal more at some point in the future as revelation is progressive in nature.

Sometimes *theologia ectypa in se* is referred to as *theologia ectypa simpliciter dicta*.⁵⁵

The *simpliciter dicta* is the absolute form of the ectypal knowledge of God not considered in some specific respect.⁵⁶⁵⁷

The Protestant Scholastics also distinguished between *theologia ectypa simpliciter dicta* and *theologia ectypa secundum quid* in order to draw attention to that ectypal knowledge which is possible for God to communicate and that ectypal knowledge which God has chosen to actually communicate. Peter van Mastricht described this distinction in terms of prototypal and ectypal theology.⁵⁸ The former is eternal while the latter is temporal. The body of knowledge which God could communicate is greater than that which God does in fact communicate. The *secundum quid* is a revealed knowledge and is also a relational knowledge which God graciously transmits to his creatures.⁵⁹

In addition to being considered in itself, ectypal knowledge is also considered according to the nature of the subject in whom it resides. *Theologia ectypa* as it exists within a subject is relational to the kind of subject that possesses it. Thus, the Reformed Scholastics distinguished between *theologia ectypa secundum quid* and *theologia ectypa in subiecto*. In an actual creaturely subject, ectypal knowledge is fragmentary, being conceived of piece by piece. The goal of the *secundum quid* is that the knowledge that God has would be received by the human mind as *theologia ectypa in subiecto*.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 281.

⁵⁶ Dolf te Velde, *Paths beyond Tracing Out: The Connection of Method and Content in the Doctrine of God, Examined in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School* (Delft, The Netherlands: Eburon, 2010), 82.

⁵⁷ That is, it is not considered with respect to a certain subject who holds it or to the amount of it that gets communicated.

⁵⁸ Adriaan Cornelis Neele, *Petrus Van Mastricht (1630–1706): Reformed Orthodoxy: Method and Piety* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 87n22.

⁵⁹ Velde, *Paths beyond Tracing Out*, 81.

⁶⁰ Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology*, 245.

Human knowledge owes itself to the act of divine accommodation.⁶¹

Accommodation involves the use of human words for the communication of divine truth without the loss of truth and authority.⁶² It refers to the mode of revelation and not to the quality of the subject matter. Due to the Creator/creature distinction, any knowledge that man has of God is the result of divine accommodation.⁶³ It is by divine accommodation that God produces a context wherein man's knowledge of God is analogously related to God's knowledge of himself and also wherein man's knowledge of God has a point of contact with God's knowledge.

God's accommodating activity takes place as the *theologia archetypa* is converted or adapted to the *theologia ectypa in se*. The latter is accommodated to human forms of understanding.⁶⁴ The former is God's native mode of divine knowing. John Webster says that the *theologia ectypa in se* is "unoriginal, communicated, non-essential, discrete, mutable, and so forth."⁶⁵ Ectypal knowledge is not univocal to archetypal knowledge but is analogous to it. Ectypal knowledge flows from archetypal knowledge as its source and is not the source itself.

⁶¹ While there are various views of accommodation, I have assumed the classic Reformed doctrine. For details on the various views, see Martin I. Klauber and Glenn Sunshine, "Jean-Alphonse Turretini on Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?," *Calvin Theological Journal* 25, no. 1 (1990): 7–27; Vern S. Poythress, "A Misunderstanding of Calvin's Interpretation of Genesis 1:6–8 and 1:5 and Its Implications for Ideas of Accommodation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 1 (2014): 157–66; Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 31, no. 1 (1977): 19–38; Dirk Jellema, "God's 'Baby Talk': Calvin and the 'Errors' of the Bible," *Reformed Journal* 30 (1970): 25–47; Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006); Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁶² Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 19.

⁶³ Michael S. Horton, "Consistently Reformed: The Inheritance and Legacy of Van Til's Apologetic," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 137.

⁶⁴ Guy M. Richard, *The Supremacy of God in the Theology of Samuel Rutherford* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 27.

⁶⁵ John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 140.

Maintaining a strong distinction between *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa in se* allows for the type of analogy that Van Til was so concerned to preserve. Ectypal knowledge is derived from the archetype. It is not an original creative body of knowledge, but it is, in a sense, re-created and patterned after the archetype. Ectypal knowledge must be held in subjection to and under the archetype. There can be no strict identity in the univocal sense between ectypal and archetypal knowledge.⁶⁶ Were the two to be identical, there would be no room left for accommodation. Thus, the location of accommodation in the Scholastic system is the move from archetypal to ectypal knowledge.⁶⁷ Yet, in this move, God does not lose his archetypal knowledge as though God's archetypal knowledge has been transformed to now become ectypal knowledge with the *theologia ectypa simpliciter dicta* replacing the *theologia archetypa*. Rather, the archetype is accommodated to human capacities of knowing which produces a new product that is ectypal knowledge. Because, as Muller says, ectypal knowledge is "in the mind of God," God has both archetypal and ectypal knowledge.⁶⁸ This point must be stressed because it reveals, as we shall see, both an analogous point of contact and a univocal point of contact depending on what is compared to what. Within the mind of God, there is both archetypal knowledge and ectypal knowledge. Both properly belong to him. The *theologia archetypa* and the *theologia ectypa simpliciter dicta* coexist in God.⁶⁹

One should not neglect the importance of distinguishing the *theologia ectypa simpliciter dicta* and the *theologia ectypa secundum quid*. Just because God has accommodated his archetypal knowledge to human capacity in his ectypal knowledge does not mean that man can autonomously reach that ectypal knowledge from himself or

⁶⁶ Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 129, 141.

⁶⁷ Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology*, 33–34.

⁶⁸ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:235.

⁶⁹ Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 93.

from the bottom up. Rather, God's ectypal knowledge must actually be communicated from the top down, as it were, to reach the mind of man. The communication of the *simpliciter dicta* is divine revelation.⁷⁰ The mere possession of *theologia ectypa simpliciter dicta* in God does not render it possible that man may have objective truth even in an analogous way. God must take of the *simpliciter dicta* and reveal it. The *simpliciter dicta* becomes *secundum quid* as it is revealed. Yet, the accommodation does not occur at the level of the *secundum quid*. Accommodation occurs at the level of the *simpliciter dicta*. While revelation is an act of charity with God graciously making himself known to man, God is under no obligation to reveal himself to man.⁷¹ By an act of will, God allows himself to be known by means of the *secundum quid*. Thus, the revelation that God gives to man is not the process of accommodation itself. Accommodation has already occurred by the time revelation is given.

The *secundum quid* does not undergo any qualitative change from the *simpliciter dicta*. The *simpliciter dicta* is the bucket of knowledge from which the cup of *secundum quid* is drawn.⁷² The difference between the two is one of quantity. God could reveal more than he in fact does. God could have revealed less than he in fact did. Thus, the body of knowledge contained in the *secundum quid* is quantitatively restricted, but it is not qualitatively restricted when compared to the *simpliciter dicta*. Accommodation does not occur between the *simpliciter dicta* and the *secundum quid*. Therefore, there is a relation of correspondence between the *simpliciter dicta* and the *secundum quid*. What God reveals just is part of his *theologia ectypa simpliciter dicta*.

The point of correspondence between man's knowledge and God's knowledge can be viewed in two ways. With respect to God's archetypal knowledge, the

⁷⁰ Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 93.

⁷¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 2, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part I* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), 8.

⁷² Asselt, "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology," 329.

correspondence is indirect and by way of analogy. Van Til stresses the analogous way that man thinks God's thoughts after him.⁷³ The reason why it is analogous is because of God's accommodating activity and the Creator/creature distinction. When man's ectypal knowledge is compared to God's archetypal knowledge, the relationship is one of analogy. The RF model is in agreement with Van Til on this point. Yet, Plantinga seems to favor univocity at least when it comes to theological description.⁷⁴ He writes,

Someone might object that our language about God, according to Aquinas, is *analogical* rather than univocal, so that when we predicate "being a property" or "being identical with his nature" of God, what we say doesn't mean the same as when we predicate these things of other beings The teaching that our language about God is analogical rather than literal is another large and difficult topic—one I cannot discuss here.⁷⁵

Plantinga's tone with respect to analogical language indicates that he may favor a more univocal connection between God's knowledge and man's knowledge, at least at some level. Paul Helm notes that "Modern philosophical theologians resist accounts of language about God that involve a theory of analogy or accommodation, for example. They prefer accounts that are univocal even while they stress human cognitive limitations."⁷⁶ Helm goes on to comment in a footnote that "In the entire discussion of Alvin Plantinga's *Does God Have A Nature?* There is no suggestion that human language needs qualifying when discussing the divine nature and actions."⁷⁷ Elsewhere, Plantinga affirms an analogous relation between God's knowledge and man's. He says,

What about God's knowledge? God is the premier example of someone who knows; but of course his faculties are not designed either by himself or by someone else. So how shall we think of his knowledge? The answer, I think, lies in the following

⁷³ Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 16–17.

⁷⁴ Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 72.

⁷⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "Does God Have a Nature?," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 239.

⁷⁶ Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31.

⁷⁷ Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 31n60. See also B. A. Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox: An Interpretation and Refinement of the Theological Approach of Cornelius Van Til* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 193n18.

neighborhood: “Working properly” is used analogically when applied to God’s cognitive faculties and ours.⁷⁸

Plantinga’s proclivity with respect to some kind of univocal language when speaking about God may be assisted by the second way in which the point of correspondence between God’s and man’s knowledge may be viewed. Since ectypal knowledge resides in God’s mind and in man’s mind, when God’s *ectypa simpliciter dicta* is compared to man’s ectypal knowledge, there is a direct and univocal correspondence between them. This univocal correspondence occurs entirely within the *ectypal* realm. Thus, there is a sense in which God’s knowledge and man’s have a univocal correspondence.

While the RF model maintains a detailed theory of correspondence between the mind of God and the mind of man for the concept of truth, the RF model also acknowledges that correspondence results in *coherence*. Since God’s knowledge is absolute and coherent, man’s knowledge, as it reflects the divine mind, will also be coherent. Coherence is a byproduct of correspondence with respect to man’s knowledge. With respect to God, coherence is primary, for, without creation, there would be no external reality to correspond to the mind of God. With respect to man, however, correspondence is primary. That is, it is more important for the mind of man to correspond to God’s mind than it is to cohere with itself. At the same time, As the mind of man corresponds to God’s mind, it will also be coherent because God’s mind is completely coherent. The RF model is both a model of correspondence and coherence as it is tied to man thinking God’s thoughts after him.

In addition to the RF model’s particulars regarding knowledge requiring necessary components of true belief, it also acknowledges, that true belief is not enough for knowledge. Like Plantinga’s model, the RF model holds that knowledge requires warrant in addition to true belief. Warrant, in the RF model, like in Plantinga’s, is that property enough of which transforms true belief into knowledge. Warrant requires

⁷⁸ Alvin Plantinga, “Justification and Theism,” in Sennett, *The Analytic Theist*, 186.

properly functioning cognitive faculties in an environment sufficiently similar to the one for which they were created in a good design plan aimed at the successful production of true beliefs.

Metaphysical and Epistemological

Building on Plantinga's model, however, the RF model incorporates Van Til's distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing. The RF model brings the externalist account of how one acquires knowledge together with Van Til's distinction. Thus, there are four ways of speaking of true belief: epistemological unwarranted true belief, epistemological warranted true belief, metaphysical unwarranted true belief, and metaphysical warranted true belief. With these four categories as an analytical tool, the RF model offers a more satisfactory account of the noetic common ground between believer and unbeliever in the midst of an absolute ethical antithesis between them.

Metaphysically speaking, both the regenerate and the unregenerate have warranted true beliefs. They share metaphysical common ground by the fact they are both created in the image of God with an implanted sense of deity which gives them warranted true beliefs about God.⁷⁹ The believer and unbeliever share common metaphysical ground. Additionally, insofar as the unbeliever is inconsistent with his interpretive principle of autonomy, he can share further metaphysical common ground with the believer.

Epistemologically speaking, however, the regenerate and the unregenerate have different interpretive principles.⁸⁰ Epistemologically speaking, the unbeliever has

⁷⁹ See John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 9.

⁸⁰ They have different worldviews which govern their perception of the world. These beliefs are prior to interpretation. See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 43.

many true beliefs, but these beliefs are all unwarranted because his cognitive faculties are malfunctioning, not relating those beliefs to the belief in God. In addition to his failure of interpreting facts in their relation to God, the unregenerate also display cognitive malfunction when they engage in intellectual thievery whereby they take true beliefs which can only be accounted for upon the Christian presupposition and make them their own as if they could account for them themselves. This borrowed capital, or more precisely, the activity of stealing from the Christian system is another instance of cognitive dysfunction. Both in his faulty interpretive principle and in his cognitive thievery, the unregenerate cognitive faculty constantly malfunctions epistemologically. Epistemologically speaking, his beliefs, then, although true perhaps, are all unwarranted. All that the unregenerate have, epistemologically speaking, is unwarranted true belief.

The regenerate, on the other hand, are given a new epistemological interpretive principle which is not at odds with what they metaphysically know.⁸¹ For this reason, their cognitive faculties, epistemologically speaking, may function properly, and, when they do, the regenerate can have warranted true beliefs in the epistemological sense.⁸² Plantinga argues that Christians (the regenerate) get warrant for their distinctively Christian beliefs from the Holy Spirit. He says,

These beliefs do not come to the Christian just by way of memory, perception, reason, testimony, the *sensus divinitatis*, or any other of the cognitive faculties or processes with which we human beings were originally created; they come instead by way of the work of the Holy Spirit, who gets us to accept, causes us to see the truth of these great truths of the gospel.⁸³

⁸¹ Kevin Vanhoozer highlights the fact that in a fallen world, the sense of deity needs a sense of Scripture as authoritative. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 62–63.

⁸² The regenerate's new interpretive principle or presuppositions function as a theistic matrix from which to view the world. See Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 18.

⁸³ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 56.

The warrant required for knowledge in the case of the regenerate is partially dependent upon the Holy Spirit. The beliefs of a regenerate person about a variety of subject matters, if they are true beliefs, can be produced by a belief-forming process functioning properly in a cognitive environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth.⁸⁴ The Holy Spirit sets the regenerate's cognitive faculty as it pertains to its interpretive principle in proper working order.

As a result of the Holy Spirit's work, the believer is under no necessity of cognitive malfunction. Plantinga argues, "all of her cognitive faculties can be functioning properly." She may still have episodes of cognitive malfunction for other reasons, but not for the reason of having a faulty foundational interpretive principle. Epistemological cognitive malfunction is a necessity for the unregenerate but not for the regenerate. Freedom from bondage to sin brings with it freedom from bondage to cognitive dysfunction with respect to interpretive principle. Thus, epistemologically speaking, the believer and unbeliever have nothing in common. Van Til writes, "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.*"⁸⁵ The regenerate person has knowledge, epistemologically speaking, and the unregenerate person has none. They both have true beliefs, but the unbeliever's true beliefs are unwarranted due to cognitive malfunction and he cannot account for them due to his presupposition of autonomy. Believer and unbeliever share common ground, epistemically speaking, with respect to truth and belief, not with warrant. Metaphysically speaking, the believer and unbeliever share common ground with respect to truth, belief, and warrant. Yet, this common ground is of no apologetic advantage, for as soon as the unbeliever begins to reason about it, he reasons from autonomy.

⁸⁴ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 56.

⁸⁵ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 187.

Revelation

We have seen that the RF model is foundationalist and also how it incorporates internalist and externalist elements to show how one comes to have knowledge and how one is grounded in thinking this way. But how is RF revelational? In what way does the foundationalism in the RF model depend upon revelation? What makes it, specifically, *revelational* foundationalism?

The Innocent Man

The correspondence theory of truth explained above necessitates revelation from God. However, it is not just truth, but interpretation that also requires revelation. The biblical storyline demonstrates man's dependence upon revelation for his interpretation of reality. Prior to the fall, God interacted with mankind in a direct, and intimate way. On the sixth day of creation, God created man. Yet, the manner of man's creation was different than God's other creations. Like the other things God created, he spoke, and it was so. Yet, unlike God's other creations God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26). The creation of man was dependent upon God's word to make it so, and man was created in a way to image or represent God on the earth. God did not leave man to himself, to explore the world and make up his own goals.⁸⁶ Rather, God spoke to man and gave him specific purposes. God said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28). God also explained that man was to sustain his own life by eating food, and that he was to ensure that the animals' lives were sustained by eating food. God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth,

⁸⁶ See Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:4.

everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food” (Gen 1:29-30). God also gave man a specific command regarding a limitation of the plants that he could eat from. God said, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17). Thus, God revealed to man what he was to do and what he was not to do.

God did not leave man to himself in his task of governing the created order. God directly assisted him. One of the tasks that man had was to name the animals. The Bible says that God “brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen 2:19). Naming a creature was something that only one in authority over that creature could perform. Additionally, God determined that Adam should have a helper to assist in exercising dominion over the earth. After Adam recognized that there was no helper suitable for him among the creatures he was to rule over, God took of Adam’s side and made a woman, Eve, to be his helper. In this way, God revealed to Adam that a suitable helper would be one of the same flesh as he and made in the same image of God as he.

Prior to the fall, man gained knowledge in direct dependency upon God’s revelation.⁸⁷ Man was dependent upon God’s revelation for the knowledge of his very *presence*. God spoke to man as his Creator, and man spoke to God as God’s creature. Man was dependent upon God’s revelation for knowing his *place* in the creator order as being over the animals and plants. God revealed that Adam and Eve were rulers over the creation. Man was dependent upon God’s revelation for the knowledge of his *purpose* as being a caretaker of the garden and filling the earth. Man was dependent upon God’s revelation for knowing what was to be his *provision* in the eating of plants for food. Man

⁸⁷ I have not specified special or general revelation here because I argue that both are necessary. Natural revelation is given in the created order and special revelation is given in verbal form to Adam and Eve as to how they should interpret general revelation.

was dependent upon God's revelation for the *principle* of his interpretation of reality in that whatever God spoke was so. Whatever God said was true. Man was given natural revelation to explore and study, but he was also given special revelation to enable him to explore and study it correctly. Thus, there is a relationship between natural revelation and special revelation in which, although both are necessary, where special revelation is given, it takes priority in the interpretation of natural revelation.

Van Til speaks of man's reason in the state of innocence in terms of an Adamic consciousness. He says,

This reason was derivative. Its knowledge was, in the nature of the case, true, though not exhaustive. This reason was in covenant with God, instead of at enmity against God. It recognized the fact that its function was that of the interpretation of God's revelation. In Paradise Adam had a true conception of the relation of the particulars to the universals of knowledge with respect to the created universe. He named the animals "according to their nature," that is, in accordance with the place God had given them in his universe. Then too, Adam could converse truly with Eve about the meaning of the universe in general and about their own life in particular. Thus the subject-object and the subject-subject relationship was normal. In Paradise, man's knowledge was self-consciously analogical; man wanted to know the facts of the universe in order to fulfill his task as a covenant keeper.⁸⁸

Man had true knowledge that was not exhaustive. He recognized his dependence upon God's revelation for his interpretation of reality. A correct interpretation of reality involved God's supernatural revelation.⁸⁹ Van Til elaborates,

It is of prime importance to observe that even in Paradise man was never meant to study nature by means of observation and experiment without connection with positive *supernatural* thought communication given to him by God. Nature could not be observed for what it actually is except in relation to history, and history cannot be seen for what it is at any stage except it be viewed in relation to its final end. And only by direct supernatural revelation could man have an adequate notion of this end.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 63.

⁸⁹ See John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 535.

⁹⁰ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 126.

Adam and Eve were not placed into the garden of Eden to discover the world apart from some instructions regarding the proper understanding of the world. They were dependent upon God's special revelation to them in order to understand the natural revelation around them.

In the garden of Eden, man had certain beliefs about reality. He had beliefs about God, his purpose, his environment, etc. Without the entrance of sin in the world, all of his beliefs arose in dependence upon God's special revelation to properly evaluate God's natural revelation. Man held the Word of God (special revelation) as his interpretive principle through which to view all of life (natural revelation). Prior to sin, man had only warranted true beliefs. He only had knowledge. He had knowledge, metaphysically speaking, as constituted in the image of God, and he had knowledge, epistemologically speaking, as he submitted his interpretation of reality to the authority of God's revelation. Man did not have exhaustive knowledge of the world, but his knowledge only increased. He held no false beliefs, and he held no unwarranted beliefs. During this time frame, there would have been no distinction between metaphysically knowing and epistemologically knowing. Man's principle of interpretation was in accordance with the special revelation he had received from God. There was no suppression of his interpretive principle and his cognitive faculties were subject to no dysfunction. The garden of Eden was a state of epistemic bliss in dependence upon the special revelation of God as an interpretive principle.

The Unregenerate Man

After the fall, man became subject to disastrous consequences with respect to his cognitive ability. Man now necessarily exhibits an attitude of suppression against the special revelation of God given to him through the created order. His mind is cognitively

malfunctioning and his noetic structure has become a complex mixture of truth and error, rationality and irrationality, belief and unbelief.⁹¹

In a state of sin, man both believes and does not believe in God. He has a sense of deity which is an awareness of God.⁹² As a creature made in the image of God, fallen man retains a belief in God.⁹³ Yet, at the same time, he suppresses that belief and puts in its place a denial of God.⁹⁴ Yet, fallen man is never able to completely eradicate the belief in God from his mind.⁹⁵ This is due to the common grace of God which restricts how far God lets the unbeliever persist in his rebellion against God. If God did not extend his common grace to the unregenerate, the suppression of the *sensus divinitatis* would be complete and the unbeliever would not even be able to form true beliefs. According to the RF model, fallen man's ability to come to true beliefs, epistemologically speaking, is dependent upon his having warranted true beliefs, metaphysically speaking.⁹⁶ Although he suppresses the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*, the unregenerate person still has a properly functioning sense of deity, metaphysically speaking.⁹⁷

⁹¹ K. Scott Oliphint explains the nature of the unregenerate as a mixture of rationality and irrationality in K. Scott Oliphint, "The Old-New Reformed Epistemology," in Oliphint and Tipton, *Revelation and Reason*, 216.

⁹² Steven Duby points out that the knowledge that the unregenerate have is given to them from without, and though suppressed remains in its basic elements. Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 127.

⁹³ Carl F. H. Henry explains the epistemic point of contact between the divine and human mind; see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 1, *God Who Speaks and Shows* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 77.

⁹⁴ Guy Waters argues that human beings are passive recipients to natural revelation. Thus, the suppression occurs after the reception of the natural revelation of God. Guy Prentiss Waters, *For the Mouth of the Lord Has Spoken: The Doctrine of Scripture* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2020), 19.

⁹⁵ The unregenerate operate in a kind of "imagination" as James K. A. Smith explains it, by which he makes sense of the world but that flies under the radar of conscious reflection. See James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 19.

⁹⁶ This is another reason why epistemological knowledge is justified in an internalist sense.

⁹⁷ See K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006). Oliphant points out that the malfunction lies outside of the sense of deity.

The unbeliever views reality as one of brute facts, facts which he can interpret based on his own understanding. Van Til comments, “The idea of brute, that is utterly uninterpreted, ‘fact’ is the presupposition to the finding of any fact of scientific standing. A ‘fact’ does not become a fact, according to the modern scientist’s assumptions, till it has been made a fact by the ultimate definitory power of the mind of man.”⁹⁸ Since all facts are what they are by the interpretation of God, the unbeliever relies on borrowed capital from the believer to make scientific progress. Van Til explains,

The success of modern science, we believe, is due to the fact that it really works with borrowed capital. If there really were brute facts, there would be no science. There can be no brute facts. All facts are, as a matter of fact, created and controlled by God. . . . Hence, though built upon a metaphysic which is basically false, the science of the non-Christian may reveal much of truth.⁹⁹

The four categories of true belief generated from the integration of Plantinga’s and Van Til’s epistemologies are related to revelation as it pertains to the unregenerate in the following summary statements. The unregenerate’s knowledge, metaphysically speaking, is what allows him to gather true beliefs, epistemologically speaking. Thus, even in a state of sin, fallen man is dependent upon the natural revelation of God in the created order as the sense of deity makes use of that natural revelation to give him further knowledge. God’s natural revelation is the foundation for unregenerate man’s knowledge, metaphysically speaking. Thus, the RF model has the natural revelation of God as the cognitive content which establishes the foundation from which the unregenerate gains both metaphysical warranted true belief and epistemological unwarranted, but true, belief. The RF model is *revelational* foundationalism because natural revelation is foundational for unregenerate knowledge, metaphysically speaking, and for unregenerate unwarranted true belief, epistemologically speaking.

⁹⁸ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 8.

⁹⁹ Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 120.

The unbeliever operates on the basis of two fundamental presuppositions. Of these presuppositions Greg Bahnsen notes,

[There is] one acknowledged and one unacknowledged (or denied)—one which he makes his regulating ideal, and the other which makes it possible for him to know anything. . . . When the apologist speaks of the unbeliever’s “presuppositions,” then, he must keep in mind the difference between the presuppositions that the non-Christian espouses epistemologically (those propounded in his argumentation against his faith) and the presuppositions that he employs psychologically in order to be intelligible (which are contrary to what he propounds).¹⁰⁰

Operating on his own principle of autonomy, the unbeliever cannot account for what he metaphysically knows, and has no knowledge, epistemologically speaking. Van Til writes, “In *principle* man is therefore blind. If he is to see the truth about God and himself he must be born again. He must be born again *unto* knowledge.”¹⁰¹ The next section relates revelation to the regenerate in terms of the four categories of true belief generated by incorporating Van Til’s and Plantinga’s epistemologies.

The Regenerate Man

We have so far spoken of the knowledge of man from a state of epistemic bliss in the garden of Eden and also of the knowledge of man as he stands in a state of sin. But what of the new man renewed unto knowledge. How does regeneration factor into the RF model especially as it concerns divine revelation?

All those in Christ are new creatures. Their minds have been renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration brings a whole host of cognitive benefits for the believer.¹⁰² For one, his epistemological interpretive principle of autonomy is replaced

¹⁰⁰ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 450–51.

¹⁰¹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 188.

¹⁰² For a discussion of how regeneration affects man’s ability to conduct natural theology, see Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 146.

with an interpretive principle which is in submission to the Word of Christ.¹⁰³ A submission to the authority of Christ personally connects the correspondence of the mind of the believer to the mind of God in a new way.¹⁰⁴ Whereas Adam and Eve believed God on the basis of his Word that they received external to them, the regenerate believe God on the basis of his Word that dwells within them.¹⁰⁵ The revelation of God has an internal principle to it which the Spirit of God impresses upon the human conscience.¹⁰⁶ The Scripture says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). The Spirit speaks and moves internally to the regenerate that they may submit to God’s revelation.¹⁰⁷

Regeneration also replaces man’s interpretive principle of autonomy with the interpretive principle of the Christian worldview through the use of special divine revelation.¹⁰⁸ The content of the interpretive principle of the regenerate with respect to divinity is greatly expanded over the content of the interpretive principle of man in the state of innocence. Plantinga recognizes the cognitive content of faith. He writes, “But even if faith is *more* than cognitive, it is also and *at least* a cognitive activity. It is a matter of ‘knowledge,’ Calvin says, and hence involves believing something.”¹⁰⁹ Faith

¹⁰³ See John Frame’s explanation of the believer’s use of the spectacles of Scripture in Frame, *Apologetics*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 115.

¹⁰⁵ Because Christ indwells the regenerate, we might say that knowledge in an epistemological sense enacts the mind of Christ everywhere, at all times, and to everyone. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 5.

¹⁰⁶ K. Scott Oliphint addresses how the interpretive principle applies even to exegesis in K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 28–29.

¹⁰⁷ Kevin Vanhoozer explains that Scripture is not only content but a scheme of interpretation. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “On the Very Idea of a Theological System: An Essay in Aid of Triangulating Scripture, Church and World,” in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 168.

¹⁰⁸ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 135.

¹⁰⁹ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 58.

has a definite content. Plantinga says, “the content of faith is just the central teachings of the gospel.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, Van Til affirms that “for [the Christian] the most basic fact of all facts is the existence of the triune God.”¹¹¹ The Christian holds their beliefs in God, man, Christ, and the world as given in Scripture as basic and as a presupposition, and as such, they do not require any further evidence to give them warrant.¹¹²

Upon the interpretive principle of the Christian worldview, the regenerate person is able to obtain knowledge of other things, epistemologically speaking.¹¹³ The cognitive content of the Christian faith is foundational to gaining further knowledge. For the regenerate, there are no brute facts. Van Til says,

If there are no brute facts, if brute facts are mute facts, it must be maintained that all facts are revelational of the true God. If facts may not be separated from faith, neither may faith be separated from facts. Every created fact must therefore be held to express, to some degree, the attitude of God to man. Not to maintain this is to fall back once again into a natural theology of a Roman Catholic sort. For it is to hold to the idea of brute fact after all. And with the idea of brute fact goes that of neutral reason. A fact not revelational of God is revelational only of itself.¹¹⁴

All facts are tied to the revelation of God. In the regenerate state, believers know facts from a position of faith, not in addition to faith.¹¹⁵ The regenerate person takes Christian theism as a unit and uses it as a principle of interpretation.¹¹⁶ Van Til writes,

¹¹⁰ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 59.

¹¹¹ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 5.

¹¹² Sinclair Ferguson discusses the effects of regeneration on the human mind in terms of reaching to the foundational impulses of an individual. Thus, the term “presupposition” fits the idea quite well. See Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 122.

¹¹³ Oliphint explains that regenerate reason is able to function appropriately as a judge; see Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, 22.

¹¹⁴ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 86.

¹¹⁵ Smith argues that rationality needs to be faithful, not just presented with more facts. See Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 13.

¹¹⁶ Smith helpfully points out that the regenerate hermeneutic is special because the Author indwells the reader to illumine the text. James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 221.

Thus Christian theism stands before us as a unit. It offers to men the conception of God the Creator and Redeemer as the ultimate category of interpretation of every fact of the world. It claims that no fact is intelligible unless seen in relation to central creating-redeeming activity of God as Creator and Redeemer.¹¹⁷

The content of the Christian faith is what was spoken of by the prophet Jude when he says, “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The regenerate person is dependent upon the revelation of Christ in the gospel as the foundation of knowledge about every other fact. Thus, the believer views Christianity as being the only reasonable faith. Van Til writes, “Christianity is the only reasonable position to hold. It is not merely as reasonable as other positions, or a bit more reasonable than other positions; it alone is the natural and reasonable position for man to take.”¹¹⁸ For the regenerate, special revelation is necessary to account for what they metaphysically know and for epistemological warranted true belief. The RF model is *revelational* foundationalism because special revelation is foundational for knowledge, epistemologically speaking.

Conclusion

The foundation for knowledge is always the revelatory activity of God.¹¹⁹ For metaphysically speaking, the foundation is the natural revelation that God provides in the created order which the sense of deity uses to produce true beliefs about God in the unregenerate. The unbeliever seeks to suppress this knowledge but is not fully successful at doing so. Instead, he borrows capital from the Christian system in order to come to further true beliefs. For the unregenerate, the natural revelation of God serves as the foundation of his metaphysical warranted true beliefs as well as his epistemological unwarranted, but true, beliefs.

¹¹⁷ Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 94.

¹¹⁸ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 77.

¹¹⁹ Richard Gaffin argues that Jesus taught that revelation is the exclusive and comprehensive principle for human knowledge in Richard Gaffin, “Epistemological Reflections on 1 Corinthians 2:6–16,” in Oliphint and Tipton, *Revelation and Reason*, 19.

What the unregenerate person needs in order to account for what he knows in the metaphysical sense and regain epistemological warrant is regeneration.¹²⁰ Regeneration removes the suppression against the truth of God from man's interpretive principle. Yet, regeneration does not happen in an epistemic vacuum. Rather, certain truths about God, man, Christ, and salvation are the normative cognitive prerequisite to regeneration.¹²¹ The unregenerate person needs to have in his possession ideas concerning the great truths of the gospel.¹²² No doubt, his beliefs about them will be to reject them in his unregenerate state.¹²³ Yet, the possession of those truths serve as the soil from which the Holy Spirit brings new life.¹²⁴ In a way, the Christian faith, specifically the content of the gospel, is foundational even for regeneration. It is not that the natural man must believe, or assent to, these truths, for he cannot. He is unregenerate and is unable to believe them. Regeneration precedes faith. Yet, the cognitive content of the great truths of the gospel must be in the unbeliever's possession for the Holy Spirit to regenerate him under normal circumstances. Thus, there is always a necessity for the proclamation of the gospel, to plant the seeds of truth into the unbelieving mind. The cognitive content of the gospel which is God's special revelation to man serves as the foundation of knowledge for the regenerate, epistemologically speaking. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit acts upon the mind of the regenerate and causes him to accept the

¹²⁰ Michael Sudduth discusses the unbeliever's lack of warrant due to the noetic effects of sin in Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, 112–43.

¹²¹ For a discussion of how regeneration is paired with the Word of God, see Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration*, ed. J. Mark Beach, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 131ff.

¹²² Peter Van Mastricht notes that the content of the gospel is previously heard and received in apprehension prior to regeneration in Peter Van Mastricht, *A Treatise on Regeneration* (New Haven, CT: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 16.

¹²³ John Owen discusses the unregenerate's judgment that the gospel is unintelligible in John Owen, *The Holy Spirit: His Gifts and Power* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 193.

¹²⁴ See George Marsden's discussion of how truth must be apprehended before it is believed or accepted in George Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 240.

revelation of God in Christ.¹²⁵ This revelation, then serves as the foundation for the regenerate's warranted true belief. This revelation becomes a presupposition (interpretive principle) for the regenerate. As a presupposition it also is incorrigible. This presupposition is guarded by the Spirit. It is sealed by a supernatural work of the Spirit upon the noetic structure of the regenerate. To summarize the relationship of revelation to the RF model we may say the following: natural revelation is foundational for metaphysical warranted true belief and special revelation is foundational for epistemological warranted true belief. In either case, revelation is the foundation of knowledge.

¹²⁵ J. Todd Billings explains that those who are in Christ participate in Christ's knowledge of God. See J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 88–89.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Plantinga and Van Til are both remarkable philosophers who have contributed greatly to a Christian view of epistemology. Plantinga hails from an analytical philosophical tradition, while Van Til was immersed in the tradition of idealist philosophy. Their Dutch-Reformed theological heritage has brought them closer together than they otherwise would have been. Thus, their approaches to knowledge share many similarities but also significant differences. As we have seen, when weaved together, the insights of Plantinga and Van Til produce a rich tapestry from which to source new contributions to an ongoing discussion within the field of contemporary epistemology. The foregoing chapters have viewed this tapestry from a variety of perspectives. Yet, undoubtedly, more angles would also prove fruitful.

This chapter seeks to accomplish two goals. First, it will summarize the conclusions each of the previous chapters have drawn concerning the mixture of Plantinga's and Van Til's epistemologies to include the most salient points within the *loci* of each chapter's subject matter. Second, this chapter will offer suggestions for further research. No one monograph can say everything that needs to be said. There are some specific areas of interest which would be helpful for further articulating the impact of combining Plantinga and Van Til in matters of epistemology.

The Deliverances of Inquiry

In chapter 1, we discovered that the Enlightenment project of pure and undefiled reason has given way to an approach to knowledge which highly values the influences of the subject upon reason to such a degree that in Postmodernism, no one

perspective is any more authoritative than any other. There is no common foundation, agreed upon by all, which serves as the starting point for the acquisition of knowledge. In an effort to revive foundationalism, Plantinga discards an overly restrictive tenet of strong foundationalism and advances what is leftover as a weak foundationalism. He argues that Christian theism can satisfy the necessary conditions for knowledge. Christian theism is a rationally viable option and one cannot dismiss it out of hand based on a *de jure* objection.

Van Til seeks to bring the Bible to bear on all aspects of life to include epistemology. He views approaches to knowledge as an antithesis between believing and unbelieving thought. He argues that knowledge is possible only upon the presupposition of Christian theism. For Van Til, the existence of a *de jure* or a *de facto* objection to Christian theism is only possible if Christian theism is already true.

Neither Plantinga or Van Til significantly interacted with the work of the other. A complete treatment of their similarities and differences is a noticeable lacuna in current literature. Yet, a constructive synthesis of their ideas provides a more robust epistemology than either of them develop on their own. Bringing the insights of both men together sheds light on issues in philosophy, theology, and apologetics.

In chapter 2, we saw that Plantinga's epistemology is a weak foundationalism with an externalist account of epistemic justification. He defines knowledge as warranted true belief. Knowledge requires belief in the form of assent to a proposition. The belief must also be true. It must also be warranted. Warrant is that property enough of which transforms true belief into knowledge. It requires properly functioning cognitive faculties operating in an environment sufficiently similar to the one for which they were created in a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief. Plantinga rejects classical or strong foundationalism for being self-referentially incoherent and for failing to account for basic beliefs such as the belief in God, the belief in other minds, beliefs about the past, and memory beliefs.

Van Til's epistemology is more difficult to classify using contemporary terms. James Anderson argues that Van Til is an internalist. Van Til insists that non-Christians presuppose the truth of Christian theism to account for their accomplishments. If Van Til means that a person must stand in positive epistemic relation toward Christian theism as a precondition of scientific knowledge, then Van Til is an internalist. B. A. Bosserman argues that Van Til is an externalist with respect to epistemic justification. Beliefs are justified through regeneration. Van Til's use of transcendental arguments indicates that he has an internalist view of epistemic justification. Van Til's insistence on an involuntary consciousness of the natural man's sense of deity indicates an externalist account of epistemic justification. Van Til's distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing provides a way for Van Til to be both an internalist and an externalist. Knowledge is acquired in an externalist fashion, but internalist transcendental arguments are needed to ground rationality and the externalist system itself.

Van Til supplies Plantinga with a robust account of truth as correspondence. Truth is an analogical correspondence between the mind of man and the mind of God. Because God's thoughts are completely coherent and self-contained, any correspondence between the human and divine mind will entail a certain level of coherence within the human mind. Van Til also supplies Plantinga with the notion that all knowledge is connected in such a way that one must know God to know anything else. The very ideas of possibility and probability demand Christian theism.

Plantinga supplies Van Til with an account of warrant transfer whereby the strength of warrant for one subject can be transferred to another subject by way of testimony. Human reliance on God's revelation as a divine testimony transfers God's high degree of warrant to the human subject. Plantinga also offers an alternative to Van Til's explanation of unregenerate knowledge as false knowledge. Instead, epistemologically, the unregenerate's cognitive content could be conceived of as

unwarranted true belief, with the unbeliever's problem lying in the area of warrant rather than truth.

In chapter 3, we examined properly basic beliefs and presuppositions. Foundationalism demands that some beliefs lie at the base of one's noetic structure. Other beliefs are built upon these basic beliefs. The belief in God is not formed on the basis of other beliefs. Plantinga affirms that belief in God is properly basic. It is arrived at in an immediate way via the *sensus divinitatis*. Belief in God from the sense of deity is not chosen but is involuntary. It is not innate but formed under certain circumstances. All men possess the capacity for the belief in God, but this capacity sometimes malfunctions. Yet, the belief in God, when it arises, meets the conditions for warrant. All kinds of Christian beliefs can similarly be properly basic. Scripture provides the content of those beliefs and they are justified on Scripture's own authority, not on the basis of any external evidence. The beliefs of the Christian faith are warranted true beliefs and also serve as the starting point of thought. Yet, they are subject to defeat.

Van Til likewise insists that the belief in God is the starting point for knowledge. The belief in God is not just a belief in a generic god but the ontological Trinity. All interpretation of any fact rests upon the presupposition of God and his revelation. Believer and unbeliever differ over how predication is possible and in their final reference point. One's presuppositions govern one's knowledge. They require us to think in specific ways. The presupposition of the Christian worldview leads to knowledge. The presupposition of human autonomy, consistently applied, leads to skepticism. The content of what believers presuppose consists of such things as God, the Trinity, creation *ex nihilo*, man's creation as being in the image of God, providence, God's counsel as controlling all things, Christ's person and work, and the authority of Scripture.

Van Til's analysis supplements Plantinga's with respect to the scope of the properly basic belief in God. Both believers and unbelievers hold the belief in God. The

unbeliever's belief in God is knowledge, metaphysically speaking. The scope of the belief in God is universal. Van Til also supplies Plantinga with the firmness with which some basic beliefs are held. Van Til insists that it cannot be the case the Christianity is only probably true or possibly true. Possibility and probability have no meaning unless Christian theism is true. Van Til also shows that the belief in God is undefeatable. Metaphysically speaking, the belief in God is incorrigible for all men. Epistemologically speaking, the belief in God is incorrigible for the Christian.

Plantinga supplies Van Til with an account of proper function with respect to warrant. The unbeliever's suppression of truth is an example of improper function. The unbeliever presupposes God metaphysically and presupposes autonomy epistemologically as his interpretive principle. That these two presuppositions conflict is another example of the unbeliever's improperly functioning cognitive faculty. Metaphysically, the unbeliever knows God due to the *sensus divinitatis* and can therefore have warrant and knowledge about other things. Epistemologically, the most he has is unwarranted true belief since he cannot account for what he knows.

In chapter 4, we analyzed the noetic effects of sin. Due to the sin of Adam and Eve, all men suffer certain cognitive defects. Plantinga's understanding of the noetic effects of sin are heavily indebted to Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. Man's original knowledge of God has been damaged and distorted. We can no longer know God in a natural and unproblematic way like we know the world. Plantinga divides the noetic effects of sin according to the subject matter under consideration. Mostly unaffected are subject matters such as science and history. Subject matters pertaining to God are negatively affected. However, there remain traces of the knowledge of God in most of us. Sin also affects man's knowledge of value. He no longer wants to pay attention to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Van Til locates the origin of the noetic effects of sin in Adam and Eve's usurpation of God's role as judge. He ties together the intellect and the ethical. Due to the

fall, man's interpretation of reality has become corrupted. Man uses himself as his final reference point rather than God. Epistemologically, man has nothing in common with God. Epistemologically, fallen man has lost the knowledge of God and consequently, the knowledge of all other matters. Rather than dividing kinds of knowledge along the lines of subject matters, Van Til divides knowledge according to the knower. The unbeliever has knowledge of God and the world metaphysically speaking, but he has no warrant, epistemologically speaking, as he attempts to give an account for anything he knows. The unbeliever operates with two opposing presuppositions. His epistemological principle of autonomy is not completely successful at suppressing his metaphysical principle of God due to common grace.

Van Til supplements Plantinga with respect to the impact of sin of all areas of the human noetic structure. For belief, the unregenerate both do and do not believe in God. For truth, the unregenerate have true beliefs epistemologically and metaphysically. Metaphysically, the unbeliever's belief in God is warranted. Epistemologically, none of the unbeliever's beliefs are warranted. Van Til insists that man's lack of knowledge of other things stems from his disbelief in God. Van Til also supplies Plantinga with a stronger account of the noetic effects of sin. Rather than the noetic effects of sin being relegated to certain subject matters, Van Til argues that its effects are felt across the spectrum of all subject matters.

Plantinga is helpful for Van Til in the area of the unbeliever's possession of truth. Van Til deprives the natural man not just of knowledge but of truth, epistemologically speaking. Plantinga's model allows Van Til to maintain a denial of knowledge for the unbeliever, epistemologically speaking, while also allowing him true beliefs. With these true beliefs, the unregenerate make scientific progress in society. Plantinga also supplements Van Til with respect to the distinction between knowing and accounting for one's knowing. Van Til implies that the unbeliever has no knowledge because he cannot account for it. Plantinga argues that one need not be able to account

for something in order to know it. Otherwise, an infinite regress of accounting would ensue before one could know any single fact. The unbeliever has no warrant for the true beliefs he has, epistemologically speaking. Yet, one can only account for externalism with a transcendental internalist argument. Only Christian theism accounts for the possibility of knowledge, warrant and truth. The Christian worldview is a necessary precondition for rationality.

In chapter 5, we explored the notion of borrowed capital. In spite of his interpretive principle of autonomy, the unbeliever does obtain knowledge. He obtains knowledge because he is inconsistent with his interpretive principle and because he borrows ideas from the Christian system of truth in order to provide a foundation for the things which he believes he knows on his own principle. Plantinga acknowledges the extensive borrowing by Freud and Marx of the Christian system even as they object to the system. Plantinga argues that a belief's origin, while not affecting the truth of the belief, does affect the warrant that the belief enjoys. Unbelief is a result of cognitive dysfunction. It has its origin in cognitive corruption. Therefore, unbelief is unwarranted.

Van Til also acknowledges that unbelievers know things in spite of their faulty interpretive principle. The unbeliever is unable to fully eradicate the sense of deity from his principle of interpretation. He waivers back and forth between two interpretive principles. The unbeliever relies on borrowed capital from the Christian system. Because of this, even his accomplishments are unwitting accomplishments. In order for the unbeliever to deny God's existence, he relies on God being present in his thinking. His discoveries in science cannot be accounted for except upon the assumption of the Christian God. The unbeliever assumes notions of creation and providence. He borrows Christian conceptions of beauty and creativity that only Christianity supplies.

Van Til supplements Plantinga in the area of borrowed capital by insisting that it is the ontological Trinity and his revelation that is borrowed as a precondition for reasoning rather than a generic monotheistic god that could come from Jewish theology.

The Trinity is necessary to solve the problem of the one and the many. Van Til is also helpful for Plantinga regarding the scope of the unbeliever's borrowing from the Christian system. Van Til argues that all unbelievers rely on borrowed capital, not just a particular religious group. Van Til is also helpful for detailing the content of what is borrowed. The unbeliever borrows the existence of God, the counsel of God as controlling all things in the universe, notions of creation, providence, and purpose. Van Til also shows that borrowing takes place in all areas of life including science, teaching, predication, and meaning.

Plantinga's insights are helpful for Van Til with respect to the connection between a belief's origin and the warrant that the belief enjoys. The unbeliever borrows many Christian beliefs from the Christian worldview. The origin of those beliefs is the *sensus divinitatis*. God is the origin of the unbeliever's beliefs with respect to borrowed capital. Thus, the unbeliever enjoys maximum warrant for the beliefs that he borrows from Christianity. Unbelief in God has its origin in sin and is unwarranted. Plantinga also supplements Van Til concerning how cognitive dysfunction is tied to warrant. Unbelief, as improper function, can never count as knowledge. Borrowing from the Christian system is an example of improper function.

In chapter 6, we detailed whether unbeliever and believer share some kind of common ground upon which they could reason together in an epistemological way during an apologetic encounter. Plantinga affirms that there is common ground between believer and unbeliever. The location of the common ground has to do with the subject matter under discussion. Both believer and unbeliever have common access to subject matters such as math, science, history, and physics. They do not have common ground with respect to God, Christ, and salvation. Believer and unbeliever share common ground about natural subject matters. The difference between what they know is quantitative rather than qualitative. The unbeliever needs more information concerning God and the supernatural. Regeneration brings some additional knowledge of facts about the world.

Van Til denied all epistemological common ground between believer and unbeliever. Because man contributes to his knowledge, what he thinks himself to be will affect the knowledge he obtains. Believers and unbelievers disagree about who man is. Van Til argues that man does not merely need more information than he already has. He needs to be made aware that his rational faculties are impaired and that he cannot interpret reality correctly on his principle of interpretation. Van Til argues that all facts must be interpreted in light of the main doctrines of Christianity. Any agreement between the regenerate and the unregenerate is only apparent. However, there is a metaphysical point of contact. The unbeliever has knowledge of God, metaphysically speaking. This is what the believer should appeal to in apologetic encounters. Yet, the unbeliever cannot account for this common ground on his own principle. Thus, while there is common ground, metaphysically speaking, this common ground is of no epistemological use. The unbeliever assumes the position of judge over interpretation. The believer recognizes the authority of Scripture in interpretation.

Van Til's analysis is helpful for Plantinga in its rejection of a two-story model of human knowledge. Van Til argues that there is not even a square foot of neutral territory shared between believer and unbeliever. The unbeliever's knowledge of the lower story is as much mistaken as his knowledge of the upper story. Van Til articulates a two-room model of knowledge with believer and unbeliever in separate rooms. The unbeliever may only cross over upon regeneration.

Plantinga's view is helpful for Van Til with regard to the constituent elements of knowledge applied metaphysically. The believer shares common ground with unbeliever in the area of belief and truth. Metaphysically speaking, they also share warrant. Epistemologically, believer and unbeliever share belief and also truth. Where they differ, however, is with respect to warrant. Because the unbeliever lacks warrant for his true beliefs, epistemologically speaking, he cannot account for what he metaphysically knows.

In chapter 7, we outlined the apologetic methodology of Plantinga and Van Til. Plantinga offers an argument against naturalistic evolution. Because evolution is aimed at the production of beliefs that help one to survive rather than at true belief, the probability that one has a true belief is very low. If one comes to discover that the probability of his cognitive faculties producing a true belief is low, then he has a defeater for all of his beliefs. To believe in naturalistic evolution with an undefeated defeater is irrational. The unbeliever should not claim to know truth, only that he might happen to have a true belief. Additionally, Plantinga argues that warrant requires a design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs. Since natural selection is only aimed at survival, none of the beliefs produced by it will have warrant. The probability of a person obtaining knowledge, and not just a true belief, given naturalistic evolution, is zero.

Van Til makes use of transcendental argumentation. There are several forms of transcendental argumentation. Forms that simply make use of classical logic cannot explain how Christianity is not just necessary for the affirmation of intelligibility, but for the denial of it as well. Modal forms of transcendental arguments fail to make logic God-indexed rather than human-indexed. Performative inconsistency forms of transcendental arguments fail to show force in the affirmation of a proposition in addition to the denial of a proposition. Presuppositional transcendental arguments have the strongest form of affirmation and denial and are not subject to these criticisms. Van Til argues that intelligibility presupposes the Christian worldview. God is not a conclusion at the end of an argument but must come in at the very beginning.

Plantinga is helpful for Van Til in showing that a necessary condition for knowledge is not-naturalistic evolution. Naturalistic evolution undercuts the possibility of knowledge and it undercuts the probability of true beliefs. A naturalistic evolutionist should believe that his belief in naturalistic evolution is very improbable and also that he cannot have knowledge about it at all.

Van Til is helpful for Plantinga in that he shows that Christianity is the only reasonable position to take. Thus, while it is true that naturalistic evolution is false, Van Til argues that only Christianity is true. Plantinga and Van Til are like two sides of the same coin. In turning from naturalistic evolution, one must turn to Christianity. Naturalistic evolution is false because only Christianity is true.

In chapter 8, we developed a particular epistemology labelled revelational foundationalism. Classical foundationalism cannot account for certain kinds of basic beliefs. The RF model rejects classical foundationalism for being too narrow in scope and has some similarities to Plantinga's weak foundationalist model. However, in the RF model, the belief in God does not require weak foundationalism because it is incorrigible. The belief in God is properly basic but more than that. It is also a presupposition. It controls the rest of one's thinking. It is not subject to defeaters. Additionally, the RF model employs transcendental reasoning to show that only Christian theism is the precondition of all rationality.

The RF model is both internalist and externalist. Metaphysically, knowledge is justified by factors external to the thinker. They arise due to the proper functioning of the sense of deity in certain environments. Epistemologically, knowledge is justified in an internalist sense. All facts are what they are in relation to God. Internalist transcendental argument are necessary to ground rationality and the externalist system of warrant. The Christian worldview is a precondition for meaning.

The RF model recognizes the distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing. It also employs a specific correspondence theory of truth. Man's knowledge is always analogical to God's. Man knows after a fashion. Man's knowledge is designed to reflect God's knowledge. Meaning is always in relation to God. The nature of correspondence between the mind of God and the mind of man is articulated well by the Post-Reformation Scholastics. God accommodates his archetypal knowledge to creaturely capacities for knowing. This ectypal knowledge resides in God's

mind along with his archetypal knowledge. God then decides to reveal a portion of his archetypal knowledge to man. Both univocity and analogy are available for Van Til and Plantinga's concerns about human language and knowledge. Correspondence between God's mind and the human mind results in coherence in the human mind.

The RF model acknowledges the nature of knowledge as warranted true belief. Metaphysically, both regenerate and unregenerate have warranted true beliefs about God. Epistemologically, the regenerate and unregenerate only have true beliefs in common, not warrant, and therefore, not knowledge. The unregenerate steals from the Christian system which is an example of improper function.

God is the starting point for thought. Revelation has always served as the basis for man's knowledge. God ensured that Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden were furnished with specific revelation in order for them to have knowledge of their presence, place, purpose, provision, and principle of interpretation. Man is always dependent upon God's special revelation for his interpretation of natural revelation.

Prior to the entrance of sin in the world, man's cognitive faculty always functioned properly. Man had only warranted true beliefs. There was no distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing. After the fall, man's noetic structure became a complex mixture of truth and error. In a state of sin, man both does and does not know God. Insofar as the natural man operates according to his principle of autonomy, his beliefs are all unwarranted and he cannot account for his knowledge. Insofar as the unbeliever operates according to the sense of deity, his beliefs can be warranted and he can have knowledge, metaphysically speaking.

All the regenerate are new creatures in Christ. The believer submits to the word of Christ in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit grants faith to the believer. Faith contains a measure of cognitive content. The Christian takes the content of the faith as basic. Regeneration removes man's interpretive principle of autonomy and replaces it with an interpretive principle of the Christian worldview which allows his cognitive

faculty to function properly. Special revelation is the foundation for knowledge, epistemologically speaking. Natural revelation is the foundation for knowledge, metaphysically speaking.

Areas for Further Research

This dissertation will not be the last word on the matter of integrating Plantinga and Van Til in the area of epistemology. The topics selected for analysis above are not the only ones which would be helpful for contributing to a contemporary Christian epistemology. In what follows, I offer a few suggestions for continuing research which may prove beneficial for thinking about how knowledge is possible and how man comes to acquire such knowledge.

One area which could use further research concerns how Christ might serve as an example of how the human mind thinks God's thoughts after him. While this dissertation has focused on human knowledge and the effect that the Holy Spirit in regeneration brings to that knowledge, one should not neglect the necessity of Christ for this knowledge. How is Christ necessary for human knowledge? The Scriptures are the Word of Christ. The regenerate hold this word as a presupposition and foundation in their reasoning process. But how is the person of Christ related to human knowledge? J. Todd Billings has provided a foretaste of what needs to amount to a much larger project in his work *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church*.¹ According to Billings, humans participate in God's knowledge as mediated through Christ. If Christ is, in some sense, the mediator of the knowledge of God and the point of contact between the divine and human mind, then there is an additional argument as to why the believer and unbeliever have nothing in common epistemologically. The believer is united to Christ. The unbeliever is separated from him. The nature of the union and its effect on

¹ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

man's capacity for knowledge both in an epistemological sense and in a metaphysical sense needs to be explored in detail. Additionally, in the person of Christ, there exists a hypostatic union whereby two natures, the nature of God and the nature of man, are united in one person. The Post-Reformation Scholastics referred to the knowledge of Christ as a *theologia unionis*. The nature of this knowledge may be helpful in shedding light on how man's knowledge can correspond to God's.

Another area in need of further research is with respect to the effects of residual sin in the regenerate on warrant. I have argued that the regenerate are given a new principle of interpretation, the Word of God, and have their old principle of autonomy removed. Yet, the regenerate are sometimes still at war with themselves. Their sanctification is not complete. They struggle with doubt in some sense. What effect do the doubts that arise in the believer have on the warrant that they have for their epistemological true beliefs? The Holy Spirit will never let a believer fully and finally fall away from the faith because he preserves him unto the day of glory. But until that time, the struggle with indwelling sin persists. The apostle Paul writes, "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom 7:15-16). How is this kind of cognitive malfunction related to the necessary condition of proper function for warrant?

Another area for further research concerns the degree of warrant one must have in order to have knowledge. Plantinga states that warrant comes in degrees. A true belief may be more or less warranted due to a variety of factors. Does any amount of improper function decrease the amount of warrant to zero, or is there some kind of relation of proportionality between the degree of improper function and the degree of warrant a belief enjoys? The doctrine of total depravity teaches that no part of the human psyche is left untouched by the effects of sin. However, it does not maintain that every man is as sinful as he could possibly be. There are degrees of depravity. The question is whether

the degree of depravity affects warrant proportionally or *in toto*. If sin only affects warrant proportionally, then the natural man might have some warrant for his true beliefs. The question then becomes whether he can have enough warrant for his true beliefs to count for knowledge.

Further research would also be fruitful respecting the effects of sin upon the other necessary conditions for warrant besides proper function. Warrant not only requires proper cognitive function but also a certain environment and a certain design plan. Sin affects the environment. The natural world has been placed under the curse of God. Might there be deceptive influences within the natural world which affect whether one can have warrant or how much warrant one could have for a true belief? Additionally, Satan and his demons roam the earth and seek to deceive all of its inhabitants. What effect do the deceptive influences of fallen angels have on the environment in relation to warrant? Further, the design plan of God, considered from a universal perspective includes the fact that there are deceptive spirits and that there are deceptive humans in the world. God's design plan, conceived in this maximal perspective, does not always aim at the production of true beliefs. Sometimes it aims at the production of false beliefs. How does this design plan factor in to whether one can have warrant for true belief and to what degree one can have warrant for true belief?

Another area for further research concerns Van Til's teaching on the principle of autonomy of the natural man. If the unregenerate have all put themselves as ultimate in their principle of interpretation, how can we account for other worldviews where the ultimate authority appears to be something other than the individual self? A devout Roman Catholic, for example, appeals to the church as ultimate in the interpretation of Scripture. How is the principle of autonomy functioning within their appeal to the church as a final authority? A devout Muslim appeals to the Qur'an as an ultimate authority. Whatever does not align with the teachings of the Qur'an is cast aside. How does the principle of autonomy function within an appeal to the Qur'an as a final authority? A

devout Mormon takes the Book of Mormon as a final authority. Whatever contradicts the Book of Mormon is rejected as error. How does the principle of autonomy factor in to the Mormon appeal to the Book of Mormon as a final authority?

Further research would also be helpful on the practical application of the epistemological common ground that believers and unbelievers share with respect to true belief. When taken as a whole, or as knowledge which requires warrant, the regenerate and unregenerate have nothing in common epistemologically. However, when knowledge is broken down into its constituent elements, believers and unbelievers still share true beliefs, epistemologically speaking. What does the shared true beliefs between the two parties allow? If the unbeliever communicates in unwarranted true beliefs, can the believer take those comments and add the warrant necessary for them to become knowledge and then use them in society? Can the warranted true beliefs that the believer presents to the unbeliever function in a useful way after the warrant is stripped away in the unbeliever's mind? What does the interaction between warranted true beliefs and unwarranted true beliefs look like and what can it produce?

Conclusion

In summary, Plantinga and Van Til are fascinating characters whose contributions to epistemology should be carefully sifted. Their insights are helpful to one another. It is better to take them together than to separate them. Future studies will hopefully affirm the same conclusion. In the meantime, Christian epistemologists would do well to consider how the theology, philosophy, and apologetics of Plantinga and Van Til can be synthesized to strengthen and better articulate the worldview they hold so dear. Revelational foundationalism appears to be good candidate for a Christian theory of knowledge.

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ABSTRACT

REVELATIONAL FOUNDATIONALISM: A CONSTRUCTIVE SYNTHESIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL AND ALVIN PLANTINGA

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Chair: Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Cornelius Van Til and Alvin Plantinga are titans in the arena of Christian philosophy. They both come from Dutch Reformed Calvinist traditions and studied under William Jellema at Calvin College. Yet, their approaches to philosophy are distinct, stemming from their different academic and social contexts. Sadly, they never seriously interacted with one another. Currently, a lacuna of scholarship exists integrating both philosophers together. I propose that a constructive synthesis of certain select philosophical and theological ideas of Plantinga and Van Til, as they are taken together and allowed to critically interact, provides a more robust Christian epistemology than either of them can deliver on their own.

While some take Van Til to be an internalist, others still see some externalist criteria in his epistemology. Plantinga is explicitly an externalist. Plantinga's externalism emphasizes how a person acquires knowledge while Van Til's approach provides the grounds for all rationality, including the very possibility of externalism.

Van Til has a deep biblical understanding of the noetic effects of sin. He explains these effects in such a way as to limit the ability of fallen man to understand anything truly, distinguishing knowledge in terms of epistemological and metaphysical. Plantinga affirms the reality of the noetic effects of sin. However, he accounts for the noetic effects as mostly limited to the subject matter of the knowledge of God.

Van Til allows no epistemological common ground between unbeliever and believer while Plantinga believes there is vast agreement between the two depending on the subject matter. Van Til argues that the unbeliever relies on borrowed capital from the Christian worldview in order to reason intelligibly while Plantinga ties epistemic progress to properly functioning cognitive faculties.

Van Til's approach to apologetics centers on transcendental arguments and the necessary preconditions for rationality. Plantinga's approach shows the self-defeating nature of evolutionary naturalism.

Given Van Til's distinction between metaphysically and epistemologically knowing, his understanding of how presuppositions function within one's worldview, and Plantinga's understanding of the necessary conditions for knowledge, general revelation is the foundation for metaphysical warranted true belief, and special revelation is the foundation for epistemological warranted true belief.

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