NOTE TO USERS

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HART AND PLANTINGA ON OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

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Abstract

The thesis explores and takes a stand with respect to the differences between the religious epistemologies of Alvin Plantinga and Hendrik Hart. For Plantinga, direct rational knowledge of God "in Himself" is possible because it is grounded in the experience of our rational faculties. For Hart, direct rational knowledge of God's nature is impossible because God transcends the created order and, therefore, the limits of rational understanding. Our knowledge of God, as a consequence, can only be faith knowledge that is decidedly indirect and metaphoric in nature. Plantinga believes that such views are Kantian in inspiration and that they turn our knowledge of God into nothing more than rationally incoherent "disguised nonsense." The thesis shows that Plantinga's own philosophical theology fails to meet the rational standards he sets for religious knowledge, his critique of Kantian religious epistemologies fails to apply to Hart's position, and that he himself allows for indirect knowledge of God in certain instances. The thesis concludes by noting if our knowledge of God can be indirect in *some* instances without also being rationally incoherent disguised nonsense, then perhaps Hart is not wrong for regarding it to be indirect in *all* instances.

To Dorothy

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

One of the more important recent developments in philosophy and epistemology has been the emergence of a school of thought that was given the name "Reformed epistemology" by Alvin Plantinga, one of its founding members.[1] According to Plantinga, Reformed epistemology is a position in the epistemology of religious belief; it is a contemporary response to "the question whether religious belief—Christian belief, let's say—is *rational* or *reasonable* or *acceptable* or *justified.*"[2] Plantinga, along with colleagues Nicholas Wolterstorff and William P. Alston, answers this question in the affirmative: Christian belief *is* rational, reasonable, acceptable and justified.[3] It follows that our knowledge of God, the specifically theistic component of Christian knowledge and the subject of this thesis, is also rational and reasonable. It is possible to know rationally, for example, "that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly good person (a person without a body) who has created us and our world," and it is possible to know "not only that there *is* such a being but also that we are able to address him in prayer,

[1] Nicholas Wolterstorff gives a brief history of Reformed epistemology and credits Plantinga as the one who named it in his article "The Reformed Tradition," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, eds., Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Malden, Mass., Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997): 165-170.

[2] Alvin Plantinga, "Reformed Epistemology," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, p. 383.

[3] Early on, Wolterstorff's usage of "rational" was similar to Plantinga's usage. For both of them, "rational" was often identical in meaning to words like "proper," " "permissible," and "acceptable." See his "Can Belief in God be Rational if it has no Foundations?" in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds., Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), hereafter, "Can Belief in God be Rational?" and *Faith and Rationality*. But in his later work on John Locke he questions this terminological usage. That is, he questions why rationality should have a special link to normativity. It should be pointed out, however, that he still regards belief in God as rational. See his *John Locke and the ethics of belief*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): xii-xiii.

refer to him, *think* and *talk* about him, and predicate properties of him. We have some kind of cognitive access to and grasp of him."[4]

Making a case for the rationality of theistic belief, however, is nothing new in the history of western philosophy. What separates the Reformed epistemologists from the pack is the way in which their case is connected to the Reformed theological tradition. Reformed epistemologists identify themselves with, and take their name from, the Reformed tradition because of their interpretation of Reformed theology's views on the rationality of religious belief.[5] Reformed theologians like John Calvin (1509-1564), the tradition's founder, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), the leaders of the tradition's NeoCalvinist revival in the Netherlands, and Karl Barth (1886-1968), the father of Neo-Orthodoxy, are understood to take belief in God in a way that Plantinga characterizes as "properly basic," as opposed to "non-basic," (i.e., derived or secondary). Theistic belief is not simply rational, it is rational in the epistemically *primary* way; it is rational in the properly *basic* way. Reformed theologians, according to Plantinga, think that belief in God can be more than a *result* of inferential reasoning, more than a *product* of natural theology. It can be a properly basic *premise* or *starting point* for rational argumentation.[6] Theists do not have to prove the validity of their belief on the basis of evidence in order to be accounted as rational, because theistic belief can be rational apart from argumentation based on evidence, because theistic belief can be

[4] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 3-4.

[5] An exception to this is Alston, an Episcopalian, who shows little interest in this label. Plantinga tells us he is holding out for "Episcopalian epistemology." See Plantinga's "Reformed Epistemology," p. 383.

[6] See Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God," *in Faith and Rationality*, pp. 17, 71-74. See also "The Reformed Tradition," pp. 165-167.

properly basic.[7] It is possible to *directly* experience and know God through divine revelation and this possibility eliminates the need for the arguments of natural theology. After all, why should one have to prove the existence of that which one has personally experienced?

> 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 unlikely to delight the person concerned.[8]

Standing in contrast to Reformed epistemology is an older strand of Reformed philosophy: "Reformational philosophy." Reformational philosophy had its origins in the 1920's and 30's in the Netherlands under the leadership of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) and Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978).[9] It has been and is represented in North America by H. Evan Runner, Calvin Seerveld, John Vanderstelt, Hendrik Hart, James Olthuis, Roy Clouser and Albert Wolters, among others. Reformational philosophy, like its cousin Reformed epistemology, shares the Reformed tradition's conviction that our experience and knowledge of God is based upon the various forms of God's revelation and thus also shares the conviction that theistic belief does not require the support of evidence and argument. For these reasons, Dooyeweerd quotes Calvin in support of his rejection of natural theology:

> we understand that this is the most correct way and appropriate order to seek God; not that in an audacious curiosity we try to penetrate into an

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[7] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 259.

[8] "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 67-68.

[9] Vollenhoven is best known for his work in the history of philosophy, and Dooyeweerd for his work in systematic philosophy. Dooyeweerd's magnum opus is *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1953-1958). Hereafter, *A New Critique*. The best introduction to Vollenhoven's systematics is his class syllabus, *Isagooge philosophiae* (Amsterdam: Theja, 1943)

> examination of His essence, which is rather to be adored than scrupulously to be examined; but that we contemplate Him in His works by which He comes near to us, makes Himself familiar to us and in some way communicates Himself.[10]

And because religious conviction is grounded in revelation, as opposed to evidence and argument, Reformational philosophy also shares the Reformed tradition's inclination to take religious belief as a *starting point* for rational thought. For Reformational scholars, theistic and Christian beliefs function as religious *presuppositions* that give direction and orientation to theoretical thought.[11]

Unlike Reformed epistemology, however, scholars in the Reformational tradition do not believe that we can *directly* experience and know God through divine revelation and, therefore, our knowledge of God cannot be first and foremost *rationally qualified* theoretical knowledge. After all, how can one rationally conceptualize that which is not directly available for such rational analysis? Rather, God is experienced and known *indirectly* through revelation and our knowledge of God is first and foremost *faith knowledge* or *religiously qualified* knowledge that simply accepts, and surrenders to, divine revelation on the indirect, creatiomorphic and metaphoric terms in which it is presented to us without submitting it to the demands and logical criteria of an autonomously conceived rational capacity.[12] From the Reformational point of view, just because God has been revealed to us, just because we can speak of and think about God,

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[10] The quotation from the *Institutes*, I, 5, 9, is on p. 517, note 1, of Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique,* Vol. I.

[11] That theoretical thought is guided by presuppositions that are essentially religious, as opposed to rational, in nature is one of the main points of Herman Dooyeweerd's introduction to his philosophical system, *In The Twilight Of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical thought* (Nutely, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1972). I will have more to say about presuppositions in Chapter 3.

[12] See, for example, Hendrik Hart's *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1984): 321. Hereafter, *Understanding Our World.*

it does not follow that God exists within the same basic ontic environment as the creation and that we can rationally understand God with the same kind of logical rigor that we can rationally understand created realities. For Hendrik Hart, as we shall see, theistic beliefs born of faith are trans-rational, they go beyond the rational without eliminating the rational, and they are also essentially metaphoric in nature.[13] There is a rational, conceptual dimension to such beliefs, but the rational dimension does not dominate or qualify the beliefs. Through these "metaphors of faith," God as *father*, *shepherd*, *good*, *just*, etc., we actually experience and come to know the God who is the Origin of, and thus transcends, all creational and rational categories.[14]

It is the plan of this thesis to explore and take a stand with respect to these differences between Reformed epistemology and Reformational philosophy. In particular, to explore and take a stand with respect to Alvin Plantinga's and Hendrik Hart's position on these issues. Chapter 1 gets the thesis underway with a basic summary of Plantinga's epistemology of religious belief. For Plantinga, our knowledge of God is rational knowledge. Further, our knowledge of God is rational knowledge in the properly basic way. Further still, our knowledge of God is rational knowledge in the properly basic way because it is grounded in the experience of our rational faculties. Natural theology is not necessary for rationality in theistic belief because God is directly available to our rational faculties. Theists are rationally warranted when they take belief in God in the epistemically basic way.

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[13] Ibid., p. 321.

[14] See Hart's "Whither Reason and Religion," in *Search For Community In A Withering Tradition: Conversations Between A Marxian Atheist And A Calvinian Christian*, by Kai Nielsen and Hendrik Hart (Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1990): 223-235. Hereafter, *Search for Community*.

In Chapter 2, I argue that built into the Reformed epistemological position are certain anti-Kantian rationalistic tendencies. In support of this, I first point out that they understand our knowledge of God to be *direct*, rational comprehension of God "in himself," of God's very nature. Our rational capacities can penetrate to the very essence of God. Three illustrations of this idea are given, the most important for our purposes being Plantinga's critique of the Kantian tradition on these matters. Kant, of course, rejected the idea that theoretical reason can directly access God "in himself;" he rejected the idea that our rational concepts can apply directly to God's nature. Plantinga believes that Kant and his followers are wrong on this score and they undermine our knowledge of God by turning it into nothing more than "disguised nonsense" that appears to be knowledge of God but is really nothing of the sort. He believes that this approach, therefore, is essentially incoherent.[15] Further support for the anti-Kantian nature of Reformed epistemology is provided by pointing out its rejection of Reformational philosophy's view of these matters. Reformational philosophy is rejected precisely because it takes our knowledge of God as first and foremost *indirect* faith knowledge of God revealed through creational realities rather than direct rational knowledge of God's very nature. For the Reformational scholar, following his own interpretation of Calvin and Reformed theology, we cannot know God "in himself," we can only know God indirectly through the things made by God. Thus this knowledge, so says Hart, is best described as being metaphoric and fiduciary in nature. Reformed epistemology rejects this understanding because it is thought to be more Kantian in inspiration than Calvinist or Reformed. From Wolterstorff's point of view, for example, Hart has turned our

[15] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 4.

knowledge of God into a "facon de parler" (his more polite version of Plantinga's "disguised nonsense"), that appears to be actual knowledge of God but in reality is nothing more than a manner of speaking about God that fails to epistemically capture divine reality.[16]

In Chapter 3 Hart's defense of the Reformational position and his critique of rationalist views of our knowledge of God is presented in greater detail. In contrast to Plantinga, Hart maintains that our knowledge of God is fiduciary knowledge, rather than rational knowledge. Further, our knowledge of God is fiduciary knowledge that is presuppositional in nature, rather than properly basic in nature. Further still, our knowledge of God is fiduciary knowledge that is presuppositional in nature because it is grounded in the experience of faith, rather than being grounded in the experience of our rational faculties. *Direct*, rational conceptualization of God's nature is impossible and our knowledge of God is primarily an indirect, metaphorical knowing through faith. Any rational explication of our knowledge of God is thoroughly limited to the parameters established by the biblical metaphors of faith and cannot, therefore, achieve the level of scientific or philosophic discourse that Plantinga and Reformed epistemology assumes is possible; philosophical theology is impossible. Rational thought can give an exposition, clarification, or defense of our knowledge of God through faith, but it cannot give us rational knowledge of God "in himself."

In Chapter 4, I shall critically assess the philosophical theology that goes hand in hand with Plantinga's Reformed epistemological position. That is, coupled with Plantinga's Reformed epistemological belief that we can have direct rational knowledge

[16] See Wolterstorff's, "Once again, creator creature," *Philosophia Reformata*, 46 (1981): 65.

of God is a Platonically oriented philosophical theology that claims God is conditioned and determined by certain abstract properties—properties like omnipotence, goodness, and omniscience. God can be known rationally because God exemplifies certain rationally understandable abstract properties. I shall question if this philosophical theology actually succeeds in being rationally coherent, as Reformed epistemology demands. Is it really possible to develop a theory of God that goes beyond the metaphorical, that is consistently internally rational? I shall show that Plantinga's theory fails in this respect, that it is troubled by a number of logical incoherencies. Further, I shall show that this theory suffers from certain religious difficulties as well. How can the sovereign God of all be conditioned and determined by objects other than God? Ironically, it would appear that Reformed epistemology has sacrificed a measure of biblical acceptability in a vain attempt to achieve the internal rational coherency in philosophical theology it treasures. And if full rational coherency cannot be achieved anyway, there seems to be no good reason to reject the supposedly incoherent Reformational position.

In Chapter 5, I shall critically assess Plantinga's critique of the Kantian position, his critique of the idea that our rational concepts cannot apply directly to God's nature, his contention that our knowledge of God *must* be a direct, rational grasping of God's essence or beliefs about God are nothing more than incoherent, disguised nonsense. My main goal in this section is to determine if Plantinga's critique applies to Hart and the Reformational position. Are Hart's Reformational views incoherent because he thinks our knowledge of God cannot be direct, rational knowledge? I answer this question in the negative. Our knowledge of God is not rationally incoherent just because it is fiduciary

and metaphorical in nature. Indeed, there are indications that Plantinga himself has made room in his philosophy for indirect metaphorical access to God. He seems to have done this in order to fully account for the ways that we know God. And if our access to God can be acknowledged as indirect in some instances without being rationally incoherent disguised nonsense, then perhaps Hart is not so far off the mark for regarding it to be indirect in *all* instances.

I shall then conclude the thesis with a brief Epilogue.

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CHAPTER 1

PLANTINGA"S VERSION OF REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

The thesis gets underway by placing Plantinga's epistemology of religious belief on the table. As mentioned in the Introduction, for Plantinga, our knowledge of God is *rational* knowledge. Further, it is rational knowledge of God in the properly basic way. Further still, it is rational knowledge of God in the properly basic way because it is grounded in the experience of our rational faculties. The evidence and arguments of natural theology are unnecessary because direct, rational experience of God is a real possibility. God is existentially available to the human race by means of divine revelation. Thus, one does not have to prove the existence of God before one can be thought of as a rational person—a person can be rational in the fullest sense of that word apart from argument.

A. Our Knowledge of God is Rational Knowledge

In order to adequately grasp Plantinga's understanding of our knowledge of God it is necessary to take a brief excursus into some of his general epistemological ideas. Knowledge, for example, is taken in the traditional way as involving truth and belief. With respect to truth, ". . . a person knows that all men are mortal only if it is *true* that all men are mortal." With respect to belief, ". . . a person knows that all men are mortal only if, among other things, she *believes* that all men are mortal." Knowledge then, whatever else it may be, is *true belief.* Belief, furthermore, is taken in the classical rationalist sense of "thinking with assent;" it is the acceptance of the

concepts and propositions produced by our rational faculties.[1] To my knowledge, Plantinga has never argued that there might be other forms of knowing that go beyond the acceptance of concepts and propositions, never considered that there might be other kinds of belief that count as knowledge besides rational belief. The fundamental assumption of his epistemology is that knowledge is essentially limited to rational conceptualization, and all belief that is true belief or knowledge must be rationally qualified belief. And as we shall see as the thesis progresses, this limitation and reduction of knowledge to the rational level is an important point of difference between Reformed epistemology and Reformational philosophy, for it virtually eliminates the possibility that Hart's "trans-rational" metaphoric beliefs of faith can be considered epistemically viable, can be considered a form of knowledge.

The "faculties" or "powers" that Plantinga speaks of are "rational" or "intellectual" or "cognitive" in nature because their *purpose* is the production of true belief or knowledge.

> Going all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, it has been assumed that there are intellectual or cognitive or rational *powers* or *faculties*, or (possibly) *virtues*: for example, perception and memory. Joining the computer craze, we might say that these faculties have inputs and outputs; their outputs are beliefs. It is these processes that produce in us the myriad beliefs we hold. These faculties are also something like *instruments*; and, like instruments, they have a *function* or *purpose*. If we thought of ourselves as created and designed either by a Master Craftsman or by evolution, these cognitive faculties would be the parts of our total cognitive establishment or total cognitive design whose purpose it is to produce *beliefs* in us. Their overall purpose, furthermore, is presumably to produce *true* beliefs in us; to put it a bit less passively, they are designed in such a way that by using them properly we can come to true belief.[2]

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[1] Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): v.-vi. "Belief" is a notoriously slippery term. In this thesis I will be using it in two fundamentally different senses. *First*, I shall use it in the way that Plantinga almost exclusively uses it. That is, as referring to a concept or proposition that is assented to. A belief in this sense is rational; it is what I refer to as a "rationally qualified belief." *Second*, I shall use the term in one of the ways that Hendrik Hart uses it (for Hart also uses it in Plantinga's sense). That is, as a product of faith or confession; a fiduciary belief as opposed to a rational belief; a belief that is qualified by faith rather than rationality, without being irrational. The differences in meaning will become evident as the thesis unfolds, and I will try to keep these two senses clearly and distinctly differentiated.

[2] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 146.

Plantinga works with a roughly Aristotelian anthropology and thinks of the human person as a "rational animal" who has "*ratio*, the power of reason," that includes within itself the rational faculties.[3] These faculties have access to, and give us knowledge of, virtually everything: our "immediate environment," the "external world at large," "the past," "numbers, propositions, and other abstract objects and the relations between them," "other people and what they are thinking and feeling," "what the future will be like," and "right and wrong." They are also able to give us knowledge of God.[4]

Besides *perception* and *memory*, examples of rational faculties include *reason* (narrowly conceived, that is, conceived as a rational faculty rather than as ratio itself), which gives us beliefs that are independent, in some way, of experience. Included among these beliefs are the self-evident and "simple truths of arithmetic and logic, such as 2 + 1 = 3 and *if all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal.*" Further, reason produces the beliefs that arise from arguments that are not immediately evident. In this capacity, as we shall see, reason is the source of the arguments of natural theology. Reason is also the faculty that detects the logical relationships and coherency of propositions. *Introspection*, "by which I learn such things about myself as that I am appeared to a certain way, and believe this or that." The proposition *I seem to see something green*, for example, is a belief produced by introspection rather than perception, because it reveals how I am appeared to, rather than what I see external to myself. *Induction*, "whereby (in a way that defies explicit statement) we come to expect the future to be like the past in certain respects, thereby being able to learn from experience." There is also what Plantinga refers to as Thomas Reid's *sympathy*, "whereby we come to be aware of what other people are

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[3] Ibid., p. 109.

[4] Ibid., p. 146.

thinking, feeling, and believing." Another faculty is *testimony* or *credulity*, "whereby we learn from others, by believing what they tell us." More controversial is *moral sense*, a faculty aimed at true beliefs about what is right and wrong. More controversial still is what Plantinga refers to as the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity), "a natural, inborn sense of God, or of divinity," and the *inward invitation or instigation of the Holy Spirit* or *faith*, a special case of testimony—divine testimony, whereby a believer comes to accept the central truths of the gospel, including theistic beliefs.[5] *All* of these faculties are rational in nature, even the sensus divintatis and faith, because all of them are powers of reason that have the purpose of producing true beliefs or knowledge. They are all rational in essence because they help us to conceptually grasp the nature of reality. Although Plantinga recognizes that there is more to faith than rationality—there are also affections of the will such as love and trust that interact with the rational beliefs of faith in a complicated interplay—insofar as faith involves knowledge, it is rational knowledge.[6]

Continuing our brief excursus into Plantinga's general epistemology, the word "rational," he tells us, is "multiply ambiguous,"[7] "multifarious," and "polyphonous."[8] And I shall not take the time to differentiate the many ways that it has been used, nor the many ways that Plantinga himself uses the term.[9] He does have, however, a particular pattern of usage that should be mentioned. On the one hand, he often uses the term "rational," and its cognates, in a general, overarching normative sense. We have already encountered this usage when we learned that

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[5] Plantinga's brief descriptions of *perception*, *memory*, *reason* and all the rest of the rational faculties can be found on pp. 146-148 of *Warranted Christian Belief.*

[6] Plantinga's discussion of the nature and relationship of will and intellect can be found in chapter 9 of *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 290-323.

[7] Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): vii.

[8] *Warranted Christian Belief*, 109

Reformed epistemology is an answer to the question whether Christian belief is "*rational* or *reasonable* or *acceptable* or *justified*." In this general, normative sense, rationality is achieved when our beliefs, beliefs formed by our rational faculties, meet *all* the requirements there are for the production of true belief. Beliefs that successfully meet the requirements can be said to be "right, rational, reasonable, and proper,"[10] or "intellectually acceptable," and "intellectually respectable."[11] Beliefs that fail to meet the standards are, of course, lacking in these virtues; they are "irrational" or "rationally unacceptable," and the like.[12]

On the other hand, "rational" and "reasonable" take on more specific meanings in those contexts in which Plantinga articulates the *specific* requirements that hold for belief formation. Designating a belief as "rational," or "irrational," in the more global senses of these terms does not really tell us much. The more pertinent question is *exactly how*, or in what *specific way,* a belief is rational or not. And in fact, Plantinga complains that many authors fail to do this; they fail to specify exactly how a belief is rational or irrational.[13] He believes that the way to avoid this lack of clarity is to differentiate between the three main requirements for proper belief formation. These are the requirements that our rational powers ought to meet in the production of beliefs. What follows is a brief sketch of these requirements.

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[9] Plantinga gives us a partial list on p. 109 of *Warranted Christian Belief.*

[10] "Reason and Belief in God," p. 17.

[11] *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. viii and ix.

[12] Ibid., p. x.

[13] For example, in *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. ix-x.

First, a belief should meet the requirements for *justification.*[14] That is, a belief should be rational in the more specific sense of being justified; it should be a *rationally justified* belief.[15] To have beliefs that are rationally justified means that a person has met her obligations and responsibilities to ascertain the truth of a matter; she has done her level best to discover truth, including listening to and considering any counter claims. Given the fulfillment of these responsibilities, a person has the *epistemic right* to believe as she does. There is no guarantee that true belief or knowledge will be the result of these efforts, but it will not be because she has failed in her epistemic duties.

> There could be something *defective* about her, some malfunction not apparent on the surface. She could be *mistaken*, a victim of illusion or wishful thinking, despite her best efforts. She could be wrong, desperately wrong, pitiably wrong, in thinking these things; nevertheless, she isn't flouting any discernable duty. She is fulfilling her epistemic responsibilities; she is doing her level best; she is justified. . . . And this is not only true, but *obviously* true. . . . How could she possibly be blameworthy or irresponsible, if she thinks about the matter as hard as she can, in the most responsible way she can, and she still comes to these conclusions? Indeed, no matter what conclusions she arrived at, wouldn't she be justified if she arrived at them in this way? Even if they are wholly unreasonable, in some clear sense?[16]

It follows from this that a person can be rational in certain ways, but not in others. A person could be rational with respect to justification, but irrational or unreasonable in other respects.

Second, over and above rational justification, a belief can be rational in the more specific

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[14] Plantinga deals with justification in Chapter 3 of *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 67-107.

[15] Usually, Plantinga will simply use the terms "justification," "justified," and "justifiable" apart from the modifiers "rational" or "rationally." That he understands justification as a specific form or kind of rationality, however, is indicated by his sometime use of the formulations "rational justification," "rationally justified," and "rationally justifiable," for example, on pp. 67-68 of *Warranted Christian Belief.* In certain contexts he will also refer to this kind of rationality as "deontological rationality," for example, on p. 109, and note 1 on p. 109 of *Warranted Christian Belief.*

[16] Ibid., p. 101.

and narrow senses of being *internally* and *externally rational.*[17] Internal rationality is a matter of "proper function of all belief producing processes 'downstream from experience'."[18] It requires the formation of appropriate beliefs in response to experience. One kind of experience Plantinga has in mind here is *sensuous imagery*. If a person is internally rational, then "I will form beliefs appropriate to the phenomenal imagery I enjoy: for example, when appeared to in the way that goes with seeing a gray elephant, I will not form the belief that I am perceiving an orange flamingo." Another kind of experience is what Plantinga refers to as *doxastic experience.* Doxastic experience is the kind of experience a person has when a belief "forces itself upon you; it seems somehow inevitable (the right words are hard to find). The belief *feels* right, acceptable, and natural; it feels different from what you think is a false belief."[19] A person who is internally rational will form and maintain the appropriate beliefs in response to this kind of experience as well.

Another important aspect of internal rationality is that all of a person's beliefs formed downstream from experience should be coherent; they should all hang together in a coherent belief system.

> A person is internally rational only if her beliefs are *coherent*, or at any rate are sufficiently coherent to satisfy proper function. If she is internally rational, then if she believes that her head is made of earthenware, she will not also believe that it is made of flesh and blood—or at least won't believe these both within the confines of the same thought, so to speak.[20]

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[17] Plantinga deals with internal and external rationality in Chapter 4 of *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 108-134

[18] Ibid., p. 110.

[19] Ibid., p. 110-111.

[20] Ibid., p. 112.

Further, internal rationality involves the drawing of proper conclusions from the beliefs one has formed on the basis of experience.

> An internally rational person will draw the right inferences when the occasion arises: for example, someone who is internally rational but believes that her head is made of earthenware will probably believe that playing football (at any rate without a really good helmet) is very dangerous.[21]

Internal rationality also seems to embrace within itself rational justification, because part of being internally rational is to do "what proper function requires with respect to such things as preferring to believe what is true, looking for further evidence when that is appropriate, and in general being epistemically responsible."[22] Internal rationality goes beyond mere rational justification, and thus cannot be identified with it, but Plantinga does seem to include it within its embrace

External rationality, in contrast, concerns the proper function of belief producing processes "upstream" from experience. That is, it concerns the proper formation and function of the sensuous, doxastic, and any other kinds of experience upon which beliefs are based. A person could be fully rational in the internal way, but irrational at the external level. The person who believes her head is made of earthenware, and thus infers that she should not play football, is internally rational, but externally irrational.[23]

Third, a belief can be rational or reasonable in the more specific sense of being *warranted*.[24] Earlier I pointed out that Plantinga thinks of knowledge as true belief. There is, however, another element that true belief must possess before it can be said to be knowledge.

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[21] Ibid., p. 112.

[22] Ibid., p. 112.

[23] Ibid., pp. 112. See also p. 246.

[24] Ibid., pp. 112. See also p. 246.

> There is wide agreement that knowledge requires true belief; but as far back as Plato's *Theaetetus*, there is also recognition that it requires more. I may believe that I will win a Nobel Prize next year; by some mad chance my belief may be true; it hardly follows that I know the truth in question. What more is required? What is the elusive further quality or quantity which, or enough of which, stands between knowledge and mere true belief? What is it that, added to true belief, yields knowledge; what is it that *epistemizes* true belief?[25]

The other element is warrant. Warrant is that "quality or quantity" that turns a true belief into full-fledged knowledge. In order to flesh-out the exact meaning and nature of warrant, Plantinga distinguishes four basic conditions:

The *first condition* is that a belief is warranted for a person only if it is produced by rational faculties that are functioning as they are supposed to; true belief becomes knowledge, true belief is warranted, only when a person's rational, cognitive faculties are functioning appropriately.

> a belief has warrant only if it is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly, subject to no disorder or dysfunction—construed as including absence of impedance as well as pathology. The notion of proper function is fundamental to our central ways of thinking about knowledge.[26]

Further, the notion of proper function is tied up with the notion of a *design plan*. Rational faculties are properly functioning if they are functioning in accordance with the design plan for that functioning. Human beings have been so constructed that there are ways in which their various physical organs and rational faculties are supposed to work. Although Plantinga doesn't argue the point, he believes that God constructed humans in accordance with the design plan.

> We needn't initially take the notions of *design plan* and *way in which a thing is supposed to work* to entail *conscious* design or purpose. I don't here mean to claim that organisms are created by a conscious agent (God) according to a design plan, in something like the way in which human artifacts are constructed and designed (although in fact I think something like that is true). . . . I mean, instead,

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[25] *Warrant: the Current Debate*, p. vi.

[26] *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 153-154.

> to point to something nearly all of us, theists or not, believe: there is a way in which a human organ or system works when it works properly, works as it is supposed to work; and this way of working is given by its design or design plan.[27]

It follows that true belief has warrant for a person, true belief becomes knowledge for a person, only if his rational faculties function properly in the production of that belief by functioning in accordance with the design plan. The first condition of warrant must, therefore, include within itself the other requirements for proper belief formation. Just as a person's internal rationality must include within itself rational justification, so in turn a person's rational warrant must include within itself internal and external rationality. Warrant, considered as proper function in accordance with the design plan, goes beyond justification and internal and external rationality, but a person must meet these requirements before she can be rationally warranted.[28] True belief never becomes knowledge without meeting all the requirements.

But warrant includes more than proper function. Thus, the *second condition* of warrant is that a belief has warrant only if it is produced by rational faculties that are functioning properly "in the sort of cognitive environment for which they have been designed (by God or evolution)."[29] The idea here is that one cannot expect rational faculties to produce warranted true beliefs if this is done in a cognitive environment which is not suitable for such activity.

> Many systems of your body, obviously, are designed to work *in a certain kind of environment*. You can't breathe under water; your muscles atrophy in zero gravity; you can't get enough oxygen at the top of Mount Everest. Clearly, the same goes for your cognitive faculties; they too will achieve their purpose only if functioning in an environment much like the one for which they were designed (by God or

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[27] Ibid., p. 154.

[28] I base these observations on p. 204 and p. 112 of *Warranted Christian Belief*. Given this all-inclusive understanding of warrant as proper function, it comes close to being synonymous with rationality in the general, overarching normative sense I referred to earlier because it includes within itself every element of rationality there is.

[29] "Reformed Epistemology," p. 387.

> evolution). Thus they won't work well in an environment (on some other planet, for example) in which a certain subtle radiation impedes the function of memory.[30]

The *third condition* is that a belief has warrant only if it is produced by cognitive faculties that have as their purpose the production of true belief. There are some cognitive faculties that are not aimed at true belief. The cognitive process of wishful thinking, for example, is aimed at the production of beliefs that "enable you to carry on in the sad and difficult world of ours." There is also the cognitive process "whereby women don't remember childbirth to be as painful as it actually is; perhaps this is aimed at willingness to have more children." And "Other belief-producing mechanisms might be aimed at the production of beliefs that permit and enhance friendship; a real friend will give you the benefit of the doubt and continue to believe in your honesty after a careful and objective look at the evidence would have dictated a reluctant change of mind."[31] Although these belief-forming processes "are produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly in an environment for which they were designed," they are not aimed at true belief and thus their deliverances are not rationally warranted and are not instances of knowledge.[32]

The *fourth condition* is that a belief has warrant only if it is produced by rational faculties that are successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs. That is, the design plan in question must be a good design plan: "one such that there is a high (objective) probability that a belief produced according to that plan will be true (or nearly true)."[33]

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[30] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 155.

[31] "Reformed Epistemology," pp. 187-188.

[32] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 155.

[33] Ibid., p. 156.

Given the information acquired from this brief excursus into Plantinga's general epistemological view of belief, knowledge, and the three specific requirements that belief must fulfill in order to be counted as rational knowledge, we are in a better position to understand his Reformed epistemological claim that Christian belief, specifically for our purposes, theistic belief, can be "*rational* or *reasonable* or *acceptable* or *justified*." What Plantinga is trying to express with this formulation is that belief in God can be rational in the fullest sense of the word; it can meet all the specific requirements there are for proper belief formation. Our knowledge of God is a rational grasping of God through concepts and propositions that can be rationally justified, internally and externally rational, and rational in the sense of being warranted. And for the rest of the thesis, unless otherwise indicated, I shall use the word "rational" or "reasonable" in connection with Plantinga's position as embracing these three specific forms of rationality.

But Plantinga's formulation assumes more than this. Because our knowledge of God is a rational grasping *of God* in concepts and propositions, it follows that it must be *possible* to grasp God with concepts and propositions; our concepts of God must *apply* to God in an appropriately formal and rational manner. Plantinga's philosophical theology makes possible his epistemology of religious belief. And it is his philosophical theology that first sets Plantinga apart from Kant. For Plantinga, in contrast to Kant, God exists within an epistemically friendly environment that makes it possible for us to have rationally qualified knowledge of God.

> Christians ordinarily take it for granted that it is possible to refer to God as 'the all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe', and possible, furthermore, to predicate properties (wisdom, goodness) of the being thus referred to. Of course, such a description succeeds in actually naming something only if there really *is* a being who is all-powerful and all-knowing and created the universe. Furthermore, it must be possible, if I can think about God and predicate properties of him, not only that there *be* such a being, but also that *my concepts apply to it*. If not, then I

am not in a position to assert or believe or even entertain any of the propositions mentioned above, if indeed there *are* any such propositions.[34]

Plantinga's Reformed epistemological assumption is that rational knowledge of God is a real possibility because our concepts and propositions actually grasp the real God who is *available* for such rational comprehension. And the above quotation makes it clear that for Plantinga this is the *only* way that God can be known. If God could not be formally grasped within concepts and propositions, knowledge of God would not be possible. And these beliefs can fulfill every requirement for rationality there are: they can be justified, internally and externally rational, and warranted. In this way, Plantinga's philosophical theology, his view of God's nature, makes room for his Reformed epistemological views. We can come to know God rationally, because God's nature is available for such rational comprehension.

B. Our Knowledge of God is Rational Knowledge in the Properly Basic Way

As I mentioned in the Introduction, defending the rationality of theistic belief is nothing new in the history of western philosophy. What separates Plantinga and the Reformed epistemologists from the others in the west is their connection to the Reformed theological tradition. Plantinga believes that Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, Barth and virtually every Reformed theologian understands belief in God in the properly basic way, as opposed to the non-basic, derived or secondary way. Belief in God can be more than a *product* of the faculty of reason's argumentative powers; it can be a properly basic *starting point* for rational arguments of various kinds. As we shall see, Plantinga thinks that theistic belief born of faith and the sensus divinitatis

[34] Ibid., p. 4.

can fulfill the three main requirements for rationality—justification, internal and external rationality, and warrant—*immediately*, apart from the arguments of reason, and thus, in the properly basic way.

In Plantinga's article "Reformed Epistemology," he paints a picture of the difference between basic and nonbasic beliefs.

> This picture starts from a distinction between beliefs that are accepted in the basic way and those that are not accepted in that way. To accept a belief in the basic way is to believe, but not believe on the evidential basis of other things you believe; a basic belief is a sort of starting point for thought. Thus I believe the proposition (6+1=7) in the basic way; I don't reason or argue to it from other propositions I believe; my belief is immediate, unmediated by other beliefs serving as premises in an argument of which the belief in question is the conclusion. On the other hand, I believe the proposition 341x269=91,729 (I've just calculated it) on the basis of other propositions: such propositions as that 1x269=269, 4x9=36, and the like. . . . This is an arithmetical example, but of course there are many more examples from every area of thought.[35]

For Plantinga, the significance of Reformed theology's taking belief in God as rational in this basic way is that it contradicts the ancient Greek, medieval Christian, and modern Enlightenment tendency to view religious belief as non-basic and secondary knowledge.[36] Especially since the Enlightenment, the dominant view on the rationality of religious belief has been that such beliefs can be rational *only* if there is sufficient *evidence* for them. Plantinga refers to this stipulation as "evidentialism."[37] "Evidence" is understood in this context as concepts and propositions about various facets and features of the universe that support belief in God. These concepts and propositions are either themselves held in the properly basic way, or are grounded in concepts and propositions that are so properly basic and can thereby function as rational grounds or

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[35] "Reformed Epistemology," pp. 384-385.

[36] "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 55-59.

[37] "Reformed Epistemology," p. 384.

premises for arguments that have as their conclusion the existence of God—just as 1x269=269 and 4x9=36, etc. can serve as the evidential, propositional support for the belief 341x269=91,729. Thus, for the evidentialist,

> some propositions are properly basic and some are not; those that are not are rationally accepted only on the basis of *evidence*, where the evidence must trace back, ultimately, to what *is* properly basic. The existence of God, furthermore, is not among the propositions that are properly basic; hence a person is rational in accepting theistic belief only if he has evidence for it.[38]

From the evidentialist perspective, belief in God can never be rational in anything more than the secondary or derived sense. For belief in God to be rational, it should come about as the result of inference and argument born of the faculty of reason. Theistic belief that comes about in a basic, *immediate* way from the faculties of faith or the sensus divinitatis cannot be rational. Thus, it is incumbent upon the theistic believer to *prove* her belief with compelling arguments based on evidence.

Some examples of the arguments for God's existence include the *cosmological argument* (the argument that the existence of the moving, changing cosmos demands the existence of a first mover, or first cause), the t*eleological argument* (the argument that the incredibly complex and interwoven design the cosmos displays demands the existence of an intelligent designer), the *ontological argument* (the argument for the existence of a being than which none greater can be conceived, the argument for the existence of a supreme being), and the *moral argument* (the argument that there could not be any such thing as genuine moral obligation apart from the existence of God). From the evidentialist point of view, belief in God should only exist if it comes about on the basis of properly formed theistic arguments such as these. Further, it should only come into existence if a person can also *refute* the anti-theistic arguments that have been

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[38] "Reason and Belief in God," p. 48.

offered up by scholars—arguments such as the *deductive argument from evil* (the argument that the idea of a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good is rationally incompatible with the existence of evil in the world). A person who does her homework in this area by seriously weighing the relative strengths of these various arguments will then have the epistemic right to believe in God—*if* she thinks the arguments for God's existence are the stronger ones.[39] From the evidentialist perspective, the science of natural theology is a requirement for rationality in religious belief.

According to Plantinga's interpretation then, by taking belief in God as basic, Reformed theology frees theistic believers from the necessity of having to make arguments to defend their belief. Indeed, because belief in God is taken in the epistemically *superior* and *prior* way of proper basicality, believers in God need not make *any* arguments at all. They are entirely within their epistemic rights in *starting* with belief in God, taking *it* as basic and as the evidence or the premise for arguments to *other* conclusions. Even further, theistic believers *shouldn't* believe in God on the basis of argument, because that would make them dependent upon the wavering trends of academic fashion.[40] And that would be an unstable foundation for a person's faith.

> If my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favorite argument. This could be bothersome and time-consuming; and what do I do if someone does find a flaw in my argument? Stop going to church?[41]

Believers do not have to take such drastic steps in order to remain intellectually respectable because belief in God is, in fact, *properly* basic. A person can be rational with respect

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[39] "Reformed Epistemology," pp. 383-384.

[40] "Reason and Belief in God," p. 72

[41] Ibid., p. 67.

to justification, internal and external rationality, and warrant by believing in God in this way. With respect to justification, because a theistic believer need not have flouted any epistemic duties in believing in God in the basic way; with respect to internal rationality, because beliefs formed in this way can be appropriate responses to, as we shall see below, experiences of various kinds, and can be fitted into a rationally coherent belief system; with respect to external rationality, because there need be no cognitive malfunction in that part of our cognitive apparatus that produces the experiences theistic beliefs are based upon; with respect to warrant, because there is no reason to think that a believer's rational faculties (in this case, the *sensus divinitatis* and *faith*) cannot function properly in the appropriate environment and in accordance with the design plan for such belief formation.[42]

If Reformed theologians, as Plantinga interprets them, are correct in taking belief in God as properly basic, then on what grounds have ancient, medieval and modern thinkers *denied* proper basicality to theistic belief? Why does the evidentialist demand good evidence and argument for the existence of God if theistic belief is to be rationally acceptable?

The reason for this has to do with an even more basic and general line of thought characteristic of western epistemology other than evidentialism: what Plantinga refers to as "classical foundationalism."[43] According to Plantinga, classical foundationalism maintains that only *some* propositions can be appropriately accepted in the basic way.

> Next we note a further and fundamental feature of classical varieties of foundationalism: they all lay down certain conditions of proper basicality. From the foundationalist point of view not just any kind of belief can be found in the

[42] See *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 177-179 and 245-246.

[43] Plantinga offers two different descriptions of classical foundationalism. The first is located in his article "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 55-59. The second is in his article "Reformed epistemology," pp. 384-385. The difference between them is that the second description eliminates ancient and medieval foundationalism from the mix. To my knowledge, Plantinga never discusses his reasons for the shift.

> foundations of a rational noetic structure; a belief to be properly basic (that is, basic in a rational noetic structure) must meet certain conditions. It must be capable of functioning foundationally, capable of bearing its share of the weight of the whole noetic structure.[44]

In his 1983 article "Reason and Belief in God," Plantinga defines classical foundationalism as embracing ancient, medieval, and modern versions of foundationalism. He specifically mentions Aquinas, Descartes, Locke and Leibniz.[45] According to his definition, these classical versions of foundationalism acknowledge only three kinds of propositions that have the ability to function in the properly basic way: propositions that are either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible.

With reference to the first of these three, self-evident propositions, ". . . the outstanding characteristic of a self-evident proposition is that one simply sees it to be true upon grasping or understanding it. Understanding a self-evident proposition is sufficient for apprehending its truth."[46] And it is this characteristic of a self-evident belief that makes it suitable to function as a properly basic foundation for a person's rational noetic structure, or otherwise put, a person's rational belief system. As we have seen, self-evident propositions are those born of the rational faculty Plantinga knows as *reason.* Among the examples he gives are simple arithmetic truths such as: 2 + 1 = 3; simple truths of logic such as *No man is both married and unmarried*; and certain propositions that express identity and diversity such as *Redness is distinct from greenness*.[47] Plantinga maintains that every version of classical foundationalism, ancient,

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[44] "Reason and Belief in God," p. 55.

[45] Ibid., pp. 58-59. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 82, note 17, Plantinga acknowledges a point made by several of his critics that Aquinas is an evidentialist *only* with respect to *scientific* knowledge. For Aquinas, it is perfectly reasonable to accept theistic belief solely on the basis of faith apart from argument.

[46] Ibid., p. 56.

[47] Ibid., pp. 55-56.

medieval, and modern, has acknowledged the properly foundational status of self-evident beliefs born of reason.

With respect to the second kind of proposition, those evident to the senses, Plantinga maintains that only ancient and medieval foundationalists (he specifically mentions Aquinas as an example) acknowledge them as capable of functioning foundationally in a rational belief system. These are propositions that are born of the rational faculty Plantinga knows as *perception*. The reason why ancient and medieval philosophers believed that perceptual beliefs can be properly basic is because their truth can be ascertained simply by utilizing one or another of our perceptual faculties. Examples include the propositions: *There is a tree before me*, *I am wearing shoes*, and *That tree's leaves are yellow*.[48]

Modern foundationalists (Plantinga specifically mentions Descartes, Locke and Leibniz), also accept self-evident propositions as properly basic, but reject propositions evident to the senses. Instead, they favor propositions that are incorrigible for a person. Incorrigible propositions are those that make claims about one's own mental life, that is, they are propositions born of the rational faculty Plantinga knows as *introspection*. Some of his examples are: *It seems to me that I see a tree*, and *I seem to see something green*. What makes these propositions better suited for properly basic status from the modern foundationalist's perspective is that they seem to enjoy a kind of immunity from error that perceptual beliefs lack: "I could be mistaken in thinking I see a pink rat; perhaps I am hallucinating or the victim of an illusion. But it is at the least very

[48] Ibid., pp. 57-58. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 84, Plantinga also includes Locke, with some qualifications, as one who acknowledges the proper basicality of propositions evident to the senses.

much harder to see that I could be mistaken in believing that I *seem* to see a pink rat, in believing that I am appeared pinkly (or pink ratly) to."[49]

Thus, on classical foundationalist principles, only self-evident, perceptual or incorrigible beliefs can be properly basic. Any other beliefs that a person holds should be held only on the evidential basis of these three sorts of beliefs, and only if one can come up with good arguments for them based on the evidence provided by these three. It follows that beliefs and propositions born of any of the other faculties that Plantinga considers to be legitimate rational faculties cannot produce certain beliefs according to classical foundationalist principles. Propositions born of memory, sympathy, testimony and the like should not function foundationally for a person. And of course, neither should the Christian and theistic concepts and propositions born of faith and the sensus divinitatis.

Theistic beliefs cannot function foundationally, then, because they are not self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. They are not self-evident beliefs of reason, because you can understand them without being forced to accept them; they are not perceptual beliefs, because God is not generally thought to be sensible; and they are not incorrigible beliefs born of introspection, because they are beliefs in God, not in what *seems* to someone to be God.

> Why should not belief in God be among the foundations of my noetic structure? The answer, on the part of the classical foundationalist, was that even if this belief is *true*, it does not have the characteristics a proposition must have to deserve a place in the foundations. There is no room in the foundations for a proposition that can be rationally accepted only on the basis of other propositions. The only properly basic propositions are those that are self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses. Since the proposition that God exists is none of the above, it is not properly basic for anyone; that is, no well-formed rational noetic structure contains this proposition in its foundations.[50]

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[49] Ibid., p. 58.

[50] Ibid., p. 59. See also "Reformed Epistemology," p. 385.

And thus classical foundationalism, of whatever variety, ancient, medieval or modern, leads to evidentialism. Since theistic belief is not self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, it cannot be rational in the properly basic way and must achieve its rationality, if it can, on the basis of evidence and argument.

It is just this kind of rigid limitation of properly basic rationality to these three kinds of beliefs and propositions that Reformed epistemology, following its interpretation of Reformed theology, takes exception to. The objection is not to the idea of foundationalism or rationalism itself. Indeed, the principal claim of Reformed epistemology is that theistic belief can be properly basic, rational knowledge. The objection instead is to the *classical* part of classical foundationalism, that is, the objection is to the limitation of properly basic rationality to beliefs born of the faculties of reason, perception and introspection and the exclusion of beliefs born of the sensus divinitatis and faith. The basic objection is that our knowledge of God born of these faculties can indeed be rational in the properly basic way.

If Plantinga's objection is correct, if theistic belief is, in fact, properly basic, what does this imply for the classical version of foundationalism and its criteria for proper basicality? Plantinga makes the case that classical foundationalism has *collapsed* and can no longer support the evidentialist's demand that the believer in God ought to prove her belief with arguments based on the epistemically more basic beliefs she has.[51] He gives two main arguments for this contention that I will briefly summarize:

First, If Classical Foundationalism is true, then much of what people take as basic in ordinary life is taken to be so unjustifiably.

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[51] Ibid., pp. 59-63.

> One crucial lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy—Descartes through Hume, roughly—is just this: relative to propositions that are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable—at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable. Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me; at any rate no one has given good reason to think any of them is. And now suppose we add to the foundations propositions that are evident to the senses, thereby moving from modern to ancient and medieval foundationalism. Then propositions entailing the existence of material objects will of course be probable with respect to the foundations, because included therein. But the same cannot be said either for propositions about the past or for propositions entailing the existence of persons distinct from myself; as before, these will not be probable with respect to what is properly basic.[52]

The trouble here is that many propositions that do not meet the conditions of self-evidency, incorrigibility, or the evidence of sensation are, nonetheless, properly basic for people in ordinary life. Beliefs about the past and the reality of other minds, for example, should not be taken for granted in a properly run noetic system if classical foundationalism is true, because none of them meets the criteria for proper basicality. And Plantinga thinks that this idea is enough to show that classical foundationalism is false.[53]

Second, in addition to this first argument he adds the stronger argument that the basic idea of classical foundationalism is itself self-referentially incoherent; classical foundationalism fails to meet its own criteria for proper basicality. This is because it certainly isn't self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses that beliefs must be self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses in order to be properly basic. That is, the belief that a belief is properly basic *only* if it meets any of these three criteria is, obviously, not *itself* self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to

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[52] Ibid., pp. 59-60.

[53] Ibid., p. 60.

the senses. If this is so, might not the criteria be defended on the basis of an argument instead? Plantinga maintains that so far no one has put forth an argument that shows that a belief must be self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible on the basis of beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses or incorrigible—and he doubts that such an argument is possible.[54]

The upshot of Plantinga's critique is that there is no reason for the believer in God to submit to the demands of evidentialism, because the classical foundationalism that ruled out belief in God as properly basic in the first place is itself rationally incoherent.

On what basis, then, does the believer in God take her belief as basic? Is Plantinga suggesting that we must come to possess *another* criterion, other than the three mentioned so far, that justifies belief in God in the properly basic way? No, he believes that one does not need a set of criteria in order to take certain beliefs, including belief in God, as basic or non-basic.

> How *do* we rightly arrive at or develop criteria for meaningfulness, or justified belief, or proper basicality? Where do they come from? Must one have such a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgments—positive or negative—about proper basicality? Surely not. Suppose I do not know of a satisfactory substitute for the criteria proposed by classical foundationalism; I am nevertheless entirely within my epistemic rights in holding that certain propositions in certain conditions are not properly basic.[55]

One does not need a well developed epistemological theory, and specifically, one does not need a well developed epistemology of religious belief, before one can take belief in God, or any belief for that matter, in the basic way.

Taking the critique of classical foundationalism to an even deeper level, Plantinga has also questioned the very status of these criteria for knowledge, proper basicality or justified belief. One should not just declare *ex cathedra* what those criteria must be. But in putting forth

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[54] Ibid., pp. 60-61.

[55] Ibid., p. 75.

self-evidency, incorrigibility, and the evidence of the senses as criteria for proper basicality that is precisely what classical foundationalism seems to have done. And the question is: "how could one know a thing like that? What are its credentials?"[56] Since classical foundationalism is not itself self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, and since there does not appear to be any argument that supports it, its status as the standard of proper basicality appears to be nothing more than an arbitrary, unwarranted belief. Moreover, an arbitrary, unwarranted belief that is prejudicial against theistic belief.

If classical foundationalism's criteria for proper basicality no longer hold, and if a person no longer needs to offer up evidence and arguments for his religious beliefs, does it follow that virtually *any* belief can be properly basic for a person? Or to put it another way, just what is it that Reformed theology sees in theistic belief that gives it this epistemically desirable status? Surely belief in God is not basic simply because Reformed theology takes it that way. In order to show how theistic beliefs can be *properly* and *appropriately* basic, Plantinga makes a point about properly basic beliefs in general.

> The central point here, however, is that a belief is properly basic only in certain conditions; these conditions are, we might say, the ground of its justification and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself. In this sense basic beliefs are not, or are not necessarily, *groundless* beliefs.[57]

As we have seen, some of the beliefs that people hold are held on the foundation of other beliefs that they hold. Beliefs of this sort are not properly basic, because beliefs of the properly basic kind do not have the support of other beliefs. This does not mean they are *groundless*, however, because they rest instead upon certain conditions. And Plantinga, following his take on

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[56] Ibid., p. 75.

[57] Ibid., p. 80.

the Reformed tradition, is saying that belief in God is like that. It does not rest on other beliefs but on certain conditions, conditions that support the belief. Further on in this context, he gives some idea of what these conditions might be:

> There are therefore many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God: guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, a sense that he speaks, perception of various parts of the universe. A complete job would explore the phenomenology of all these conditions and of more besides. This is a large and important topic, but here I can only point to the existence of these conditions.[58]

For Plantinga, the circumstances and conditions that "call forth" belief in God seem to be various kinds of experience. Theists have rational grounds for their belief in God, not because they have successfully argued to God's existence on the evidentiary basis of certain facets and features of the universe, but because they have had any of a number of different kinds of experience. The grounds that support belief in God seem to be a number of different kinds of *religious experience*. Apparently, belief in God can be a properly basic reality in a person's life because God is accessible to the human race, because God is being revealed to the human race. And as I have already pointed out, Plantinga does believe that human beings have certain rational *faculties* or *abilities* that enable them to become aware of such disclosure on God's part. If this is so, then belief in God can be based on more than mere evidence and inference; it can be based on the deeper and more profound foundation of actual experience.

[58] Ibid, p. 81.

C. Our Knowledge of God is Rational Knowledge in the Properly Basic Way Because it is Grounded in the Experience of Our Rational Faculties

But what kinds of religious experience are there, and exactly how do they ground belief in God? Exactly how does theistic belief derive its properly basic rationality from experience? Earlier we noted that internal rationality is dependent upon sensuous imagery and/or doxastic experience. Does this mean that belief in God, since it can be internally rational, is rational because it is grounded in sensuous imagery, or doxastic experience, or both? Plantinga is reluctant to take a *formal* stand on such issues. That is, he refuses to show in a definitive fashion if the rationality belief in God enjoys comes by way of experience.[59] This does not mean that he believes no such experiences occur, or that they are not the ground for theistic beliefs. In his *Warranted Christian Belief* he has even taken the trouble to catalogue the various kinds of experience associated with the sensus divinitatis that yield theistic beliefs and strongly suggests that there is an experiential basis for faith and Christian belief as well.[60] At one point he even goes so far as to say that the question as to whether or not Christian belief is properly basic is the same question as that of whether or not Christian belief derives its rational warrant from religious experience.[61] It seems safe to conclude, therefore, that since he believes theistic and Christian belief *is* properly basic, he also believes it is grounded in some (as yet formally unspecified) way in religious experience.

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[59] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 182-184.

[60] With reference to the catalogue of experiences, see the list in the next paragraph. With reference to the experiential basis of faith, see *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 265.

[61] *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 135-136.

As I have pointed out, there are two faculties that produce beliefs about God: the sensus divinitatis and faith. Given the immediately previous discussion, we now know that the beliefs produced by these faculties are rational in the properly basic way because they are grounded in religious experience. What we do not know as of yet is what kinds of religious experience support the beliefs produced through these faculties. In order to answer this question, Plantinga has put forth two "models" to describe how this actually happens in the case of each faculty. The models are based on certain claims made by Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin and are ultimately based in Scripture. Hence, the "Aquinas/Calvin model" describes the production of theistic belief through the sensus divinitatis, and the "extended Aquinas/Calvin model" describes the production of Christian (and theistic) belief through faith.[62] What follows below, then, is Plantinga's list of the various kinds of experience that are associated with the sensus divintatis as described in the Aquinas/Calvin model in *Warranted Christian Belief*.[63] I will deal with the experiential basis of faith as described in the extended version of the model after this.

First, doxastic experience is certainly involved with theistic (and Christian) belief, because doxastic experience is involved with *every* instance of proper belief formation. This means that belief in God can "feel natural, right, acceptable." *Second*, there is "indirect perception" of God; there are perceptual experiences of God that involve sensuous imagery. Indirect perception of God involves "the perception of God mediated by the perception of something else (the night sky, the mountains)." *Third*, there is what William Alston has called "mystical perception" of God; there are perceptual experiences of God that do not involve

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[62] Plantinga discusses the specific claims of Aquinas and Calvin and the Aquinas/Calvin model itself in Chapter 6 of *Warranted Christian Belief*. He discusses their further claims and the extended version of the model in chapter 8.

[63] The following list is a distillation of the distinctions and comments Plantinga makes in his discussion of this issue on pp. 180-184 of *Warranted Christian Belief*.

sensuous imagery: "To the believer, the presence of God is often *palpable.* A surprising number of people report that at one time or another, they *feel* the presence of God, or at any rate it *seems* to them that they feel the presence of God—where the 'feeling' also doesn't seem to go by way of sensuous imagery."[64] *Fourth*, there is Rudolph Otto's "sense of the numinous:" ". . . a sort of awe, a sense of the numinous; a sense of being in the presence of a being of overwhelming majesty and greatness." *Fifth*, there are situations of "guilt, danger, gratitude," where there doesn't appear to be any perceptual experience, with or without sensuous imagery, but beliefs about God arise nonetheless. Great danger, for example, can often induce belief in God: "They say there are no atheists in foxholes."[65]

With the exception of doxastic experience, which is involved in every instance of belief formation, none of these different types of experience is inevitably involved with the formation of theistic belief. Plantinga admits, however, despite his reluctance to offer a formal argument on the relation of religious experience to belief formation, that perhaps no instance of theistic belief formation fails to display one or another of these varieties of experience.[66]

Thus, by means of the sensus divinitatis God is experienced in these ways, and the rational beliefs we form about God have properly basic status because they are grounded in these experiences. The name was borrowed from Calvin's theology, and it is meant to designate a *natural,* God-given ability to experience and know God; it is a rational, belief-forming mechanism that generates theistic belief on the basis of these kinds of religious experience.[67]

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[64] Alston discusses mystical perception throughout his *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), but primarily in Chapter One. Hereafter, *Perceiving God.*

[65] *Warranted Christian Belief,* p. 174.

[66] Ibid., p. 183.

[67] Plantinga introduces an extended discussion of the sensus divinitatis on p. 172 of *Warranted Christian Belief.*

Although Plantinga acknowledges that the knowledge of God produced through this mechanism can be and is partially suppressed by sin, its product can still be counted among the "deliverances of reason" every bit as much as belief in other minds, the past, or perceptual objects.[68] It is rational, in other words, to form beliefs about God in the properly basic way based on one's experience of divine revelation. And despite the damage of sin, the sensus divinitatis cannot be obliterated. We all have some knowledge of God, even in the state of sin, and even apart from the regeneration available through Christ Jesus. Indeed, even "the demons believe and they shudder (James 2: 19)."[69]

For Plantinga, sin is a malfunction of ratio and will. It involves the dysfunction of ratio, but it is primarily a defect of will. At a certain level of consciousness we intellectually know God and what is right and true, but under the power of sin the will does not want to acknowledge this fact, even to ourselves.

> Original sin involves both intellect and will; it is both cognitive and affective. On the one hand, it carries with it a sort of *blindness*, a sort of imperceptiveness, dullness, stupidity. This is a cognitive limitation that first of all prevents its victim from proper knowledge of God and his beauty, glory, and love . . . . But sin is also and perhaps primarily an *affective* disorder or malfunction. Our affections are skewed, directed to the wrong objects; we love and hate the wrong things. Instead of seeking first the Kingdom of God, I am inclined to seek first my own personal glorification and aggrandizement, bending all my efforts toward making myself look good . . . . In this condition, we know (in some way and to some degree) what is to be loved (what is objectively lovable), but we nevertheless perversely turn away from what ought to be loved and instead love something else. (As the popular song has it: "My heart has a mind of its own.") We know (at some level) what is right, but find ourselves drawn to what is wrong; we know that we should love God and our neighbor, but we nonetheless prefer not to.[70]

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[68] "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 89-90. By "deliverances of reason," Plantinga is obviously taking "reason" in this context in the more general sense of "ratio," rather than in the more narrow sense of the faculty of reason. In other words, he is not here claiming that the beliefs produced by the sensus divinitatis are self-evident, or the product of inferential reason or natural theology.

[69] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 291.

[70] Warranted Christian Belief, p. 291.

But sin and its resultant noetic confusion has been the occasion for God to provide the remedy for this deplorable state of affairs.

> sin induces in us a *resistance* to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* . . . God himself, however, has provided a remedy for sin and its ruinous effects, a means of salvation from sin and restoration to his favor and fellowship. This remedy is made available in the life, atoning suffering and death, and resurrection of his divine son, Jesus Christ.[71]

The remedy, among other things, repairs the operation of the sensus divinitatis so that we can once again come to know God in the kinds of situations for which it was designed to work.[72]

But the major noetic affect of God's salvation was to provide the human race with *another kind* of belief-forming process, another kind of rational faculty. The operation of this faculty is described by Plantinga in his extended Aquinas/Calvin model. God needed a way to inform people of the plan of salvation, so a three-tiered cognitive process was established: Fi*rst*, God arranged for the writings of Scripture.[73] The Bible is a collection of writings by many different authors each of whom was inspired by God in such a way that God can be said to be the principal author. The Bible provides us with much for our belief and action, including beliefs about God, but its main purpose is to inform us of the good news of the gospel. *Second*, correlative with the Bible and necessary to its proper function is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that the ravages of sin are repaired, suddenly or gradually, and to a greater or lesser extent. And it is through the Holy Spirit that people come to accept the great

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[71] Ibid., p. 205.

[72] Ibid., pp. 280-281.

[73] Plantinga briefly summarizes the three tiers on pp. 243-244 of *Warranted Christian Belief.*

things of the gospel. *Third*, Plantinga tells us that the main work of the Holy Spirit is the production of *faith* in the hearts of Christian believers.

> Like the regeneration of which it is a part, faith is a gift; it is given to anyone who is willing to accept it. Faith, says Calvin, is "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit" . . . Faith therefore involves an explicitly cognitive element; it is says Calvin, *knowledge*.[74]

As I pointed out earlier, Plantinga refers to this new faculty as the *internal invitation or instigation of the Holy Spirit* or *faith.* Because faith yields knowledge, and because knowledge is rational for Plantinga, faith is a *rational* faculty; it is a faculty of ratio. As we have seen, faith is also involved with the will, but in this capacity it yields the affections—love, trust, hope, etc.—not beliefs and knowledge. Intellect and will have a complicated interrelationship in Plantinga's thought, but they are clearly distinguished as well.[75] And because the beliefs of faith come into being through the power of the Holy Spirit, faith is uniquely different from the *natural* belief forming processes we were originally created with: memory, perception, testimony, sympathy, the sensus divinitatis and the like. With faith, the direct action of the Holy Spirit is the immediate cause of the beliefs.[76] They are, therefore, a *supernatural* gift.[77] The beliefs of faith are born of a *special kind* of testimony—*divine* testimony.[78] Thus, our knowledge of God through faith is

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[74] Ibid., p. 244. Plantinga's Calvin quotation is from the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans, Ford Lewis Battles and ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960): III, 7, p. 551. Hereafter, *Institutes.*

[75] Plantinga discusses this complicated interplay in *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 295-304.

[76] Ibid., p. 256.

[77] Ibid., pp. 245-246.

[78] Ibid., pp. 245-246.

unique, special, and supernatural, whereas our knowledge of God by way of the sensus divinitatis is simply natural.

Like the sensus divinitatis, however, the beliefs born of faith are grounded in experience of God's revelation---specifically, experience of God in Scripture; it is, as I noted, a special case of testimony; it is the experience of the Scriptures as *divine* testimony. In this way, faith can be seen as simply another kind of rational faculty, another kind of cognitive belief-forming process along side of memory, reasoning, perception, the sensus divinitatis, etc.[79] Just as we may encounter God through "a sense of God's presence," or in a "perception of various parts of the universe," so likewise may we actually encounter God in divine testimony.

> If faith is such an extraordinary way of holding belief, why call it 'knowledge' at all? What about it makes it a case of knowledge? . . . . The believer encounters the great truths of the gospel; by virtue of the activity of the Holy Spirit, she comes to see that these things are indeed true. And the first thing to see is that . . . faith is a belief-producing *process* or activity, like perception or memory. It is a cognitive device, a means by which belief, and belief on a certain specific set of topics, is regularly produced in regular ways. In this it resembles memory, perception, reason, sympathy, induction, and other more standard belief-producing processes. It differs from them in that it also involves the direct action of the Holy Spirit, so that the immediate cause of the belief is not to be found just in her natural epistemic equipment. There is the special and supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, faith is a belief-producing process.[80]

Faith is not grounded in perception or perceptual givens of any kind, as are some of the operations of the sensus divinitatis; it is not that we see or hear God, or perhaps, perceive God in some mystical way.[81] But it is an experience of God nonetheless. Plantinga speculates, again refusing to take a definitive stand, that the particular kind of experience involved is *doxastic*

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[79] Ibid., pp. 258-259.

[80] Ibid., p. 256.

[81] Ibid., p. 263.

experience.[82] And because faith has this experiential basis, it has a certain appearance or look to it. He describes the phenomenology of this process thus:

> We read Scripture, or something presenting scriptural teaching, or hear the gospel preached, or are told of it by parents, or encounter a scriptural teaching as the conclusion of an argument (or conceivably even as an object of ridicule), or in some other way encounter a proclamation of the Word. What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying, "Yes, that's right, that's the truth of the matter; this is indeed the word of the Lord." I read, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself"; I come to think: "Right; that's true; God really was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself!" And I may also think something a bit different, something about that proposition: that it is a divine teaching or revelation, that in Calvin's words it is "From God."[83]

The similarity of this kind of experience to Plantinga's notion of doxastic experience seems evident. Through this kind of experience, what would under other circumstances be a reading of mere *human* testimony, becomes a reading of *divine* testimony.

Further, and perhaps most importantly, because the beliefs born of faith are actual experiences of God they are, like the beliefs born of the sensus divinitatis, *properly basic*. They are not accepted by way of inference or argument from other propositions, or on the evidential basis of other propositions. Although grounded in religious experience, they are not the result of an *argument* from religious experience.

> Suppose we think that . . . the beliefs of faith do get their warrant by way of experience---that is, by way of *doxastic* experience---and suppose we describe that experience as *religious* experience. What is crucially important to note is that we don't have here an *argument* from religious experience to the truth of these Christian beliefs. . . . The experience in question is an *occasion* for the belief in question, not a phenomenon whose existence serves as a premise in an argument for that belief.[84]

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[82] Ibid., p. 265.

[83] Ibid., p. 250.

[84] Ibid., p. 265.

Through faith, faith born of the Holy Spirit, we actually encounter God in divine testimony and have no essential need for such argumentation.[85] And because these beliefs are held in the *properly* basic way, the theistic believer meets all the standards for the rationality of religious belief there may be.

> In the typical case, therefore, Christian belief is *immediate*; it is formed in the *basic* way. It doesn't proceed by way of an argument from, for example, the reliability of Scripture or the church. As Jonathon Edwards puts it, "This evidence, that they, that are spiritually enlightened, have of the truth of the things of religion, is a kind of intuitive and immediate evidence. They believe the doctrines of God's word to be divine, because they see divinity in them." Christian belief is basic; furthermore, Christian belief is *properly* basic, where the propriety in question embraces all three of the epistemic virtues we are considering. . . the believer is *justified* in accepting these beliefs in the basic way and is *rational* (both internally and externally) in so doing; still further, the beliefs can have warrant, enough warrant for knowledge, when they are accepted in that way.[86]

Summing up Plantinga's position, there are two fundamental ways that we encounter God, two fundamental kinds of rational, cognitive activity that in their own ways produce beliefs about God: the natural sensus divinitatis and supernatural faith. And in each case, the beliefs these faculties yield are *rational,* in the fullest sense of that word. Thus, people who believe in God have rational grounds for their belief, belief in God is *properly* basic, because God is accessible to us, because God has been revealed to us. Reformed theology rightly rejects the necessity of rational argument and proof because theistic beliefs rest upon more than thin air. God can actually be encountered through divine revelation, and our knowledge of God is rational knowledge in the properly basic way because it is grounded in the experience of our rational faculties.

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[85] Ibid., p. 250.

[86] Ibid., p. 259.

CHAPTER 2

THE ANTI-KANTIAN RATIONALISM IN REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

In the previous discussion of Plantinga's views, it could already be ascertained that the particular brand of rationalism that Reformed epistemology inclines toward in the epistemology of religious belief is of the anti-Kantian variety. In this Chapter, further support for this claim is provided. *First*, I argue that the Reformed epistemologists take our knowledge of God as *direct* rational knowledge of God's nature. In contrast to Kant and his followers, they believe it is possible for our rational faculties to penetrate to the very essence of God. Three illustrations of this point of view will be given, one from each of the main adherents of Reformed epistemology. The most important of these for our purposes is Plantinga's critique of Kant's thesis that our rational concepts do not apply to God's nature. *Second*, I argue that this understanding of our knowledge of God as direct rational knowledge of God's nature includes and implies the rejection of the idea that our knowledge of God is exclusively *indirect* knowledge of God revealed through the medium of created reality. That is, it includes and implies the rejection of Reformational philosophy's contention that our knowledge of God is *indirect* faith knowledge, rather than *direct* rational knowledge. The main reason for this rejection is precisely because it is too close to Kant's position for Reformed epistemological appreciation.

A. Our Knowledge of God is *Direct* Rational Knowledge of God's Nature

Plantinga, along with the other principal adherents of Reformed epistemology, Nicholas Wolterstorff and William P. Alston, interprets Reformed theology's view of the availability of

God in a distinctively positive way. Each of these philosophers has, of course, a unique perspective on these matters. But I believe that what they have in common may be summarized by saying that in their eyes God is, in the right circumstances, *directly* accessible to our rational faculties, natural and supernatural, just as the common entities of the creation are, in the right circumstances, directly accessible to the appropriate natural rational capabilities. God is directly accessible because God exists within the parameters of, and is determined by, an intelligible essence; God, like the things of creation, exemplifies the properties of a nature or essence;[1] God can be rationally understood because God exemplifies rationally understandable properties; God exists within an epistemically friendly environment. Just as it is possible for a person to directly encounter the things of creation and form concepts of their natures, so likewise is it possible to directly encounter God and form concepts of the divine nature. These religious beliefs are *rational* apart from argument *precisely because* God is directly available to us. God can be grasped in terms of the concepts and propositions produced by our rational faculties because we can directly experience the God who exemplifies the properties of the divine essence. The philosophical theology of the Reformed epistemologists thus goes hand in hand with their positive rationalist views in the epistemology of religious belief.

Although this interpretation of Reformed theology implies the rejection of western epistemology's, and especially the Enlightenment's, penchant for evidentialism and *classical* foundationalism, it does not imply a radical rejection of the Enlightenment's penchant for foundationalism or rationalism. In line with the Enlightenment, beliefs are still divided into those

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[1] In the thesis, "essence" and "nature" are synonymous. That God has properties and a real nature or essence that can be known conceptually is one of the main points of Plantinga's *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee University Press,1980), and "Part Four" and the "Epilogue" of Wolterstorff's *On Universals: An Essay in Ontology* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970). Hereafter, *On Universals.*

that are rational in the basic way and those that are rational in the non-basic, derived way. For the Reformed epistemologist, no less than the Enlightenment rationalist, theistic belief must be, like all belief, rational belief if it is to be a case of knowledge. Even the beliefs formed through faith, although born of a cognitive process that is supernatural and, therefore, distinct from natural processes like the sensus divinitatis, perception and memory, are rational beliefs born of a rational faculty. From the Reformed epistemological perspective, the difference between the Enlightenment and Reformed theology is not that the latter thinks of belief as something more or other than rational belief. Rather, the difference is that they do not regard it as necessary, at least initially, to achieve rationality in religious belief by way of argumentation and evidence. In this interpretation, therefore, Reformed theology is not so much a rejection of Enlightenment ideals as it is a fulfillment of those ideals in a way that the Enlightenment did not accept. That is, Reformed theology fulfills the Enlightenment demand for rationality in religious belief, but by rejecting *classical* foundationalism and taking theistic belief as rational in the properly basic way instead of relegating it to derived and secondary status. The experience of God through the sensus divinitatis and faith was not generally considered to be a source of rational certitude by Enlightenment scholars and, as a consequence, they demanded instead that theistic belief should be proven by the faculty of reason on the basis of evidence and argument apart from divine revelation. Reformed theology, so says Reformed epistemology, rightly rejects this evidentialist demand born of arbitrary and self referentially incoherent classical foundationalist principles.

Reformed epistemology's rationalist interpretation of the Reformed tradition is rationalist in a way that reflects philosophical and epistemological realism. In contrast to Kant's idealism, it reflects a commitment to the mind-independent existence of intelligible properties and natures that constitute the very core of things and to which our logical concepts apply in a direct, non-

arbitrary, non-metaphorical way. For the realist mind-set, there are real properties located in real essences to which our rational concepts apply directly.[2] This tendency towards rationalism in a realist vein also manifests a Reidean emphasis on the rational capabilities of the average person.[3] From within this point of view, *ordinary* people are thought to have the rational capabilities necessary to directly know the things of creation *and* God, which are what they are independently of what we think of them. Alston puts it this way:

> In the present intellectual climate it would be well to make it explicit that this discussion is conducted from a full-bloodedly realist perspective, according to which in religion as elsewhere we mean what we assert to be true of realities that are what they are regardless of the "conceptual scheme" we apply to them . . [4]

Further, the anti-Kantian realism of the Reformed epistemologists at times exhibits Platonic features. This is especially evident in Wolterstorff's book *On Universals*.[5] But the Platonic perspective is, with some modifications as we shall see in Chapter 4, present in

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[2] In his article "How To Be An Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1982), for example, Plantinga identifies Alston as a realist (p. 47), and advances his own opinion on the issue. Truth, he says, is independent of *our* minds (thus indicating his realism), but it is not independent of *God's* mind (thus indicating the only way that one can be an anti-realist) (see pp. 68-70). Plantinga's "anti-realism," then, is simply the traditional Christian realism of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. I will have more to say on this issue in Chapter 4.

[3] There are many references to Thomas Reid in the work of Plantinga, Wolterstorff and Alston. See, for example, Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 218-227. In his *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): x, he identifies his position as "broadly Reidean," and says that ". . . the global outline of Thomas Reid's epistemology seems to me to be largely correct." See also, Alston's *Perceiving God,* pp. 151-155, 162-165, an also Wolterstorff's "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" pp. 149ff.

[4] *Perceiving God,* p. 4.

[5] Wolterstorff's Platonic side comes through best in "Part Four" and the "Epilogue" of *On Universals.* Although *On Universals* is an early work of Wolterstorff (1970), and actually precedes the advent of Reformed epistemology, to my knowledge he has consistently held to the basic position in philosophical theology that it exemplifies throughout his career. He was still holding to this view, after the start of Reformed epistemology, in his *Philosophia Reformata* article "Once again, creator creature" (1981), an article written in response to Hart's critique of his views in "On the Distinction of Creator and Creature: Discussion of a central theme in N.P. Wolterstorff's *On Universals", Philosophia Reformata* 44 (1979 - N.R. 2), hereafter, "On the Distinction.". And Hart was reminded once again of the same views when he read Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). See Hart's comments on this aspect of *Divine Discourse* in his review in *Philosophia Reformata* 65 (1998), p. 211. The reason why I am using this work instead of a later work is because of its clarity of expression on the matters at hand.

Plantinga's work as well. When this Platonic dimension comes to the fore, God is taken as having a *real* nature that not only exists independently of our logical concepts, but also exists independently of God. In this view, God exemplifies the properties that make up the independently existing divine nature; like the things of creation, God is conditioned by certain intelligible structures that make it possible for the appropriate natural and supernatural rational powers to access God directly.[6] As a consequence of this view, Reformed epistemology *tends* to minimize the mystery of the essentiae Dei, the mystery of God's radical difference from the creation. Because God inhabits the same ontic space and the same order of discourse as that of finite creatures, it is possible to make metaphysical claims about the nature of God, and positive epistemological claims concerning our rational access to the divine nature.

Although direct rational knowledge of God's nature is their primary concern, the Reformed epistemologists do not deny that there are *indirect* forms of access to God. Alston, for example, believes that there are occasions when God can be perceived, not directly, but indirectly *through* objects of sensation. Examples of this form of perception, to which he refers as "indirect perception," include seeing God in the beauties of nature or hearing God's voice in the words of a sermon.[7] But there is a marked tendency to disparage this mode of access to God in comparison to what are considered to be the more direct forms. If one accepts the distinction between direct and indirect knowledge of God, it necessarily follows that the direct forms of access are superior. Perceiving or knowing something indirectly through something else can never be as epistemically favorable as perceiving or knowing it directly. Thus, Alston can say: ".

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[6] I deal with the Platonic features of Plantinga's thought in Chapter 4 of the thesis. His *Does God Have A Nature?* has a strong Platonic emphasis.

[7] *Perceiving God,* p. 25.

. . if we experience God as looking or sounding a certain way, that can't be the way He is, not even approximately."[8]

We have also seen that Plantinga acknowledges the existence of indirect perception. Indirect perception, for him, is one of the ways in which the sensus divinitatis encounters God. And we also know that he acknowledges the existence of indirect access to God through divine testimony. Certain passages in the Scriptures, for example, reveal God as having arms, eyes, ears, hands, etc. But like Alston, he tends to disparage this mode of experience. He has referred approvingly, for example, to John Calvin's view that when God is revealed in the Bible as having corporeal attributes, God is *merely* "lisping" to us "as nurses commonly do with infants." The implication is that indirect forms of revelation through sensory objects or creaturely entities cannot give us the kind of real insight into God's nature that direct forms of access can give us. Indirect forms of revelation do not reveal the God who, Plantinga goes on to say, "in himself," is "infinite, spiritual, and incorporeal."[9] Indeed, it is unusual to find Reformed epistemologists referring to the more obviously indirect modes of revelation and indirect forms of access. In his philosophical work, for example, Plantinga will speak of God as the "all-powerful [omnipotent] and all-knowing [omniscient] creator of the universe," as "infinite, transcendent, and ultimate," or as having "wisdom, goodness."[10] But seldom is God referred to or discussed as "father," "rock," "shepherd," or "light," or as having corporeal and sensory properties.

Despite this prioritization, Plantinga cannot avoid acknowledging the existence of indirect revelation and indirect access to God because people actually have these kinds of experience and the Bible often speaks in these terms. As we shall see in Chapter 5, however,

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[8] Ibid., p. 20.

[9] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 46. The Calvin quotation is from the *Institutes* I, xiii, 1, p. 121.

acknowledging the existence of indirect revelation of God and indirect access to God is problematic for Plantinga and Reformed epistemology. If the only kind of *knowledge* we can have of God is direct, rational knowledge of God "in himself," what are we to make of the status of beliefs that arise in connection with experiences that are indirect in nature, that reveal God indirectly through sensuous imagery, corporeal objects and creaturely entities, or that arise in connection with the divine testimony of such things? It seems obvious that in these instances indirect experience of God cannot be understood as the rational ground for knowledge of God "in himself." Does it follow, then, that in these instances we do not know God at all? Does this mean that when we sensitively experience God in a certain way, or come to know God through the Bible as a father, a rock, a shepherd, or a light, we do not really have *knowledge* of God? Does the Bible *itself* give us examples of the "disguised nonsense" that Plantinga believes is incoherent?

Given this penchant to ignore or downgrade the more obviously indirect aspects of our knowledge of God, the God presented in Plantinga's philosophical works is in many respects the traditional "God of the philosophers," and despite the tenor of our times, he is prepared to defend the rationality of our beliefs about this God. A good example of this is his attempt to show that the ideas of God as omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good are not logically inconsistent with the idea that evil is a reality in the world. Thus, it is possible to adequately respond to those who argue against the reality of God because of the existence of evil in the world. Plantinga summarizes this objection to God's existence in the following way:

> according to Christian belief, we human beings have been created by an all-powerful, all-knowing God who loves us enough to send his son, the second person of the divine Trinity, to suffer and die on our account; but given the

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[10] Ibid., p. 4.

> devastating amount and variety of human suffering and evil in our sad world, this simply can't be true.[11]

In opposition to this objection, Plantinga forcefully argues in his "Free Will Defense" that evil can be explained logically. Summarizing the essence of this argument, evil is a by-product of the reality that God has created a world containing freedom and moral good. *Full* moral good can *only* be achieved when there is evil present in the world. Logically, therefore, it is *possibly* beyond God's power to create a world which has moral good but no moral evil.[12]

Perhaps the following illustration puts flesh and bones on what Plantinga has in mind. Winston Churchill was, prior to the events of World War II, a relatively minor figure in the history of the western world. That he now holds a much more exalted place in our minds and hearts is no doubt due to the nefarious career of Adolph Hitler. It is clear that Churchill would never have achieved the good that he did late in life apart from the great evils perpetrated by Hitler. The fullness of the moral good that Churchill accomplished would not have been possible apart from Hitler's moral evil.

If this illustration gets at the essential meaning of the Free Will Defense, then it seems obvious that Plantinga has made a rational defense that leads to conclusions that are foreign to, if not in outright contradiction to, the Bible. Nowhere does the Bible make any statement that comes close to what Plantinga is saying in the Free Will Defense. Nowhere does the Bible make the claim that God was powerless to create a world that has moral good but no moral evil. The

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[11] Ibid., p. viii.

[12] Plantinga's "Free Will Defense" comprises the major part of Chapter IX in *The Nature of Necessity*: "God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom," pp. 164-195. In this chapter he states: "The heart of the Free Will Defense is the claim that it is *possible* that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this one contains) without creating one containing moral evil," p. 167. Plantinga, therefore, is not saying that his argument is the actual rationale for evil in the world. He thereby avoids an open conflict with the Bible, which does not speak in these terms.

Defense presumes to eliminate what is mysterious from the biblical point of view; it presumes to give rationally possible answers to questions the Bible leaves open and unanswered. And in doing this, the Defense, because of its assumed movement *within* the space of logic and reason, suggests all sorts of *other* inferential possibilities; possibilities that *are* in open conflict with, and thus do not sufficiently cohere with, other elements of the biblical witness. That is, by interpreting our knowledge of God as *rational* knowledge, Plantinga cracks open the door to the possibility of inferential reason dictating terms to divine revelation.

For example, does the necessity of evil for the achievement of full moral good mean that full moral perfection could not have existed in the Garden of Eden prior to the fall of humanity into sin? If so, then Plantinga's Defense contradicts a fundamental theme of the Bible: the original goodness of the creation. Further, if full moral good can only be achieved in the presence of moral evil, must evil once again rear its ugly head in the new heavens and earth that God will make? The new heavens and earth are presumed by Christian theology to be the fulfillment of God's redemption in Christ Jesus, the fulfillment of all perfection. Given Plantinga's argument, the evil necessary to make this supremely good situation possible must be of immense proportions. Once again, Plantinga's Defense implies something that openly conflicts with the Bible. How could there be evil in a world God promises will be free of it? And further still, if the new heavens and earth will be the supremely perfect situation as God promises, does it then logically follow that there cannot be any freedom or responsibility within it? Since the Bible generally regards humans as responsible creatures, this too seems to conflict with the biblical testimony.

Apparently unaware or unperturbed about difficulties such as these, Plantinga and the Reformed epistemologists have maintained their belief in our ability to directly, rationally access God's nature, and to fit the beliefs that arise from such activity into a rationally coherent belief system, thereby attempting to fulfill all requirements for internal rationality in religious belief.[13] Given this perceived success of direct rational knowledge of God, it is not surprising that they devote most of their attention to this form of access. Here are three illustrations of this emphasis taken from the three main proponents mentioned above.

1st Illustration

In Nicholas Wolterstorff's book *On Universals*, he develops a certain position in philosophical theology that goes hand in hand with the belief that we have direct rational access to God's nature. He maintains that God's nature is made up of certain predicables, properties or universals that have an ontic status independent of God, and which hold for and determine God.[14] Hendrik Hart, in an article on this aspect of Wolterstorff's work, maintains that these properties function in his thought like laws that govern and condition God.[15] God exists, in Platonic fashion, *under* these laws or conditions; God exists within the parameters of law in the same way that created things do. One way that Wolterstorff expresses this is by saying that God exists within a structural framework he refers to as the "predicable/case/exemplification structure."

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[13] Thus Plantinga returns to the problem of evil in Chapter 14 of *Warranted Christian Belief,* "Suffering and Evil," where he takes on a number of objections to his view that God's omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness are compatible with the existence of evil in the world.

[14] See Part Four "Predicables in Divine and Human Life," and the Epilogue of *On Universals.*

[15] "On the Distinction," pp. 183-184. For Wolterstorff's response to this charge, see his "Once again, creator/creature," p. 61.

> The predicable/case/exemplification structure holds for all reality whatsoever—necessarily so. Everything whatsoever is either a predicable, a case of a predicable, or an exemplification of a predicable. Nothing does or can fall outside this structure; everything falls within it. Nothing is unique in that it falls outside this fundamental structure of reality. God too has properties; he too acts. So he too exemplifies predicables. The predicable/case/exemplification structure is not just the structure of created things. Nor is it just the structure of 'appearance'. Nor is it just a structure of our thought about things. Nor is it just a structure of our language about things. It is a structure of reality, of what there is.[16]

That God might be the *Origin* of the predicable/case/exemplification structure of reality is not considered by Wolterstorff. It is just assumed that because we are able to speak and think about God, the divine being *must* exist within this framework.

Some of the predicables that hold for God and that can be predicated of God include "being faithful" and "having been able to create."[17] These properties, and others similar to them, are neither identical to God nor brought into existence by God. God has not created "all things" because properties are not dependent upon God for their existence. Indeed, the reverse appears to be true. God appears to depend upon properties, including the ones that make up the divine nature. As a result of this position, Wolterstorff is forced to challenge the traditional view that God is the origin of everything other than God:

> There are certainly prima facie grounds for suspecting that the biblical teaching on creation is being misinterpreted when it is interpreted as entailing that everything is either identical with or brought into existence by God. For can it plausibly be supposed that the biblical writers, when they confessed their belief in God the Creator, had universals in view in speaking of "all things"? If so, why are they never mentioned? Would anyone now, unless he were engaging in some theoretical inquiry, have universals in mind when he spoke of "all things"? When the biblical writers drew the contrast between things in heaven and things on earth and things in the sea and all that is in them, did they mean to include universals? Where would universals fit into this classification?[18]

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[16] *On Universals,* p. 299.

[17] Ibid., pp. 291-292.

[18] Ibid., p. 293.

The existence of these predicables is the foundation for our ability to speak and think about God. Since God, like the things of creation, *exemplifies* predicables, rational thought is able to say things about the divine nature. God's exemplification of predicables makes it possible for us to directly access God, and makes it possible for us to rationally conceptualize the properties that make up the divine essence. Scripture, from this perspective, includes statements about God that reveal the divine nature and on the basis of these statements we may legitimately draw logical inferences as to how God *must be* that go beyond the Scriptural testimony.[19] And it is a fundamental assumption for Wolterstorff that all of the beliefs we have about God, properly basic beliefs and beliefs inferred from the properly basic ones, should be rational. That is, all of them ought to be in accord with all the standards that hold for rationality, including the laws of logic. All of them must hang together in a rationally coherent system of beliefs. If theistic belief fails to meet these standards, especially in a person who is in a position to know this, it is a trying situation:

> Of course, for a believer who is a member of the modern Western intelligentsia to have his theistic convictions prove nonrational is to be put in a deeply troubling situation. There is a biblical category which applies to such a situation. It is a trial, which the believer is called to endure. Sometimes suffering is a trial. May it not also be that sometimes the nonrationality of one's convictions that God exists is a trial, to be endured?[20]

From the fact that it is not rational for a specific person in a specific situation to believe in God, it does not follow that he ought to give up that belief.[21] But it is a trial that will require endurance. I believe we may also presume that, in Wolterstorff's view, the trial will come to its

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[19] ". . . implications can be drawn from what Scriptures says about God." "Once again, creator/creature," p. 67.

[20] "Can Belief in God be Rational?" p. 177.

[21] Ibid., p. 177. The reason being that "Rationality is only *prima facie* justification; lack of rationality, only *prima facie* impermissibility."

end *only* when the rationality of theistic belief is reestablished for the person. The theistic believer may no longer be required to have rational arguments to support the *initial* formation of his belief, because theistic belief can be properly basic, but he will have to have plenty of them to defend this initial formulation from its inevitable detractors. From the Reformed epistemological perspective, there is no escaping the rational standards for belief formation and no escaping the judgment of reason as to the rationality of religious belief. If religious belief is to be knowledge, rather than, say, wishful thinking, then it should be rational.

2nd Illustration

William Alston, in his *Perceiving God,* develops some of the more interesting implications of the Reformed epistemological position. If God is experientially available, if concepts and beliefs about God are grounded in God's revelation as opposed to argument, it may well be that some kind of *perceptual* access plays an important role on occasion in supporting religious belief. In drawing out these implications he takes the same positive, realist approach as do Wolterstorff and Plantinga. He defends the idea that certain individuals, on certain occasions, *directly* perceive God. This capability is different from his notion of *indirect perception.* As we have seen, indirect perception involves sensory experience of God's revelation (seeing God in the beauties of nature, for example). *Direct perception*, in contrast, is a *nonsensorial* perception of God. It is a cognitive process that actually perceives God "as He is," and not simply as God sensorially appears to us.

> The focus [of *Perceiving God*] will be on what are taken to be *direct, non-sensory* experiences of God. In calling them "experiences" I am thinking of them as involving a *presentation*, *givenness*, or *appearance* of something to the subject,

> identified by the subject as God. It is this *presentational* character of the experience that leads me to range them under a generic concept of perception.[22]
>
> It seems clear that a non-sensory appearance of a purely spiritual deity has a greater chance of presenting Him as He is than any sensory presentation. If God appears to one non-sensorially, as loving, powerful, or good, the appearance, so far as it goes, could correspond fairly closely with the way God is Himself. While if we experience God as looking or sounding a certain way, that can't be the way He is, not even approximately.[23]

Just as our concepts apply directly to God and give us knowledge of God's nature, so also is it possible to have direct *perceptual* access to God. As I mentioned earlier, Alston refers to this perceptual process as "mystical perception."[24] This non-sensorial type of perception is epistemically superior to any possible indirect experience of God because it gives us access to God "in Himself." Mystical perception can pierce the deceptive veil of sensation and access God "as He is." Even God's revelation in Christ does not give us the kind of *purely* direct access that mystical perception affords.

> according to Christian doctrine Jesus of Nazareth is both man and God; so that to see him, even in human form, is to see God. This means that the doctrine that God is a purely spiritual being is qualified in Christianity. Nevertheless, even here the fact remains that God in his essential nature is purely spiritual. In the case of Christ there is a distinction between the divine and the human nature, and only the latter is physical and directly sensorily perceived. Hence it remains true that a non-sensory experience gives us a better chance of grasping what God is like in Himself than does any sensory experience.[25]

Alston's theory of mystical perception, consequently, does not leave room for Christ's physical

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[22] *Perceiving God,* p. 5.

[23] . Ibid., p. 20. See also notes 9 and 10 on p. 20.

[24] Alston's understanding of this non-sensorial "mystical perception" can be found on p. 5, and its distinction from mystical experience, sense perception and sense experience, on page 11 of *Perceiving God.* His understanding of the more specific "Christian mystical perception" can be found on pp. 7, 30, and 193-254.

[25] Ibid., p. 20

appearance to have revelatory significance. In order to recognize Christ as God, one must have a mystical perception, and thus direct mystical experience of God is superior to any form of indirect experience.

3rd Illustration

Finally, there is the illustration that will occupy much of our attention in Chapter 5. Plantinga believes that Kant was wrong. Our concepts *do* apply to God and we *can* say things about God's nature. In Plantinga's view, God is directly accessible to the sensus divinitatis and faith, and we can, as a consequence, form concepts of God's very nature. Kant, on the other hand, believed that our concepts are limited to the realm of mere appearance and do not apply to the real world, much less to God:

> To try to apply them beyond the world of appearance to the realm of reality is to employ reason in an area where it cannot profitably venture; it is to fall victim to *Transzendental Schein* . . . But if our categories do not apply to the realm of reality or to things in themselves, then they do not apply to God, who is a thing in himself *in excelsis*.[26]

Plantinga, in contrast to Kant's idealistic epistemology, philosophizes in a more realistic mode. We can know God "in himself" and we can, therefore, gain insight into God's real nature. The mystery of God can become less mysterious. This *must* be possible for us, because anything short of it jeopardizes our ability to assert or believe *anything* about God:

> the suggestion is that Kant showed us, somehow, that there are real, perhaps insurmountable problems in the idea that there is a being like that acknowledged in traditional Christianity, to whom we can refer and to whom our concepts apply. . . . for if this suggestion is right . . . then, the sentences Christians use to express (as they think) their beliefs, do not really express the kinds of propositions or thoughts Christians think they express. Indeed, perhaps they don't express any

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[26] *Does God Have A Nature?*, pp.11-12.

> propositions or thoughts at all but are a sort of disguised nonsense: they look as if they express propositions but in fact do not.[27]

There is, therefore, no middle ground or third alternative. Our concepts of God either directly apply to God or they do not apply to God in any fashion whatsoever; our knowledge of God is *rational* knowledge or it is nothing more than "disguised nonsense" that has the appearance of knowledge but is in fact no knowledge at all. Consequently, when Christians express their beliefs about God they are not simply making use of words and concepts in order to confess their faith. They are making rationally qualified predications about the divine nature. These concepts and propositions must apply to God in a direct, literal, non-metaphoric, formal/rational way or Christian religious belief is in jeopardy. Our conceptual knowledge of God must move within the same universe of logical discourse and must be of the same order as our rational knowledge of created things—or knowledge of God is impossible.

Philosophers and theologians who continue to speak and think about God while adhering to Kant's thesis fail to see the incoherency of their views; they fail to see that it is an all or nothing proposition; they fail to see they have turned knowledge into disguised nonsense. If our concepts do not directly apply to God, then *all* discourse about the divine being is rendered impossible:

> This way of thinking begins in pious and commendable concern for God's greatness and majesty and augustness; but it ends in agnosticism and incoherence. For if none of our concepts apply to God, then there is nothing we can know or truly believe of him—not even what is affirmed in the creeds or revealed in the Scriptures. And if there is nothing we can know or truly believe of him, then, of course, we cannot know or truly believe that none of our concepts apply to him.[28]

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[27] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 4.

[28] *Does God Have A Nature?*, p. 26.

To be sure, Plantinga acknowledges that there are properties in God's nature that we don't know about or even properties of God that we could not so much as form a conception of. Our knowledge of God is "limited, fragmentary, halting and inchoate." In this way, Plantinga still leaves some room in his view for the mystery of God. But this does not mean that the Kantian thesis is correct, because ". . . this truth is compatible with our knowing something about God—that he exists and created the world and loves us, for example." It is merely to admit that we don't know *everything* about God, or that there may be some things about God that are difficult to understand. The fact remains that our natural and supernatural rational faculties have direct access to God and can form rational beliefs and concepts of the divine essence.[29]

B. Our Knowledge of God is not the Kantianism of Reformational Philosophy

That Reformed epistemology has anti-Kantian rationalist tendencies is further supported by its *rejection* of Reformational philosophy's position on these matters. As mentioned in the Introduction, Reformational philosophy shares with Reformed epistemology the Reformed tradition's conviction that our experience and knowledge of God is based upon the various forms of God's revelation. Consequently, it also shares the aversion to the notion that religious belief, theistic and Christian belief, must *of necessity* be justified by supporting evidence and arguments. And because religious conviction is grounded in revelation, as opposed to evidence and argument, Reformational philosophy also shares the Reformed tradition's inclination to take religious belief as a *starting point* for thought. For Reformational scholars, theistic and Christian beliefs function as religious *presuppositions* that give direction and orientation to thought.

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[29] Ibid., p.18. See also *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 13-14.

Unlike Reformed epistemology, however, scholars in the Reformational tradition do not interpret God's availability in the same distinctively positive, direct, and rationalistic way. They do not simply assume that because God has been revealed and we can speak of and think about God, that God therefore exists within the same basic ontic environment as the creation and that we can directly perceive and rationally conceive of God "as He is." Theistic beliefs that serve as presuppositions for, and give orientation to, rational thought are not themselves considered to be simply, purely, and abstractly rational in kind. Thus, Reformational scholars do not agree with Plantinga that *all* beliefs which yield knowledge must be rationally qualified beliefs. For Hendrik Hart, the idea that not every belief is rational in kind is obviously true.

> The belief that all our beliefs must either be rational-empirical beliefs or else risk being incoherent is itself not obviously a rational-empirical belief. As a second order belief about beliefs it does not evidently meet its own criteria. Someone with a significant investment in reason should therefore reflect on the nature of such a belief. Of course, among our beliefs we do and should find rational-empirical beliefs. But the belief that ideally all our beliefs should be of that kind is not itself of that kind. To believe that it is of that kind would be self-referentially incoherent. I do not mean to suggest that having beliefs which are not simply rational-empirical is a problem. I believe that we both have and should have trans-rational beliefs.[30]

Reformational scholars like Hart tend to think of the theistic beliefs that give ultimate orientation and direction to rational thought as belonging to this trans-rational order of beliefs.[31] There is, obviously, a conceptual dimension to such beliefs, but the conceptual dimension does not dominate or qualify the beliefs. This is a subject I will return to in more detail in Chapter 3 of the thesis, but for now it is important to understand that the word "belief," in Reformational

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[30] Hendrik Hart, "The Religion of Reason in Nielsen's Atheism," in *Search For Community,* pp. 1-2. Hereafter, "The Religion of Reason."

[31] Hart discusses this kind of belief in his *Understanding Our World,* pp. 329-335. He refers to them in this context as "ultimate beliefs," or "ultimate assumptions."

circles, can refer to what I am calling *rationally* qualified beliefs (what Plantinga knows as concepts and propositions coupled with assent) or *religiously* qualified beliefs (what Hart, as we have seen, sometimes refers to as trans-rational beliefs).

Each of the scholars in the Reformational tradition has, as is the case with each of the Reformed epistemologists, a unique perspective on these matters. But I believe that what they have in common may be summarized by saying that in their eyes God is, indeed, available to us, but not directly. Rather, God is available *indirectly* through the things of creation. *All* of God's disclosures are indirect in nature and there is always something of the creation mediating God's availability to us. Thus, direct access to God "in himself," to God's nature, does not happen.[32] From a Reformational perspective, Reformed epistemology illegitimately differentiates between direct and indirect forms of disclosure and access, and as a consequence, arbitrarily elevates some of the indirect forms to direct status. And as we shall see below, it is this exclusive limitation of our knowledge of God to indirect knowledge that Reformed epistemology rejects because of its similarities to Kant's position.

For the Reformed epistemologist, as we have seen, when one speaks of God as a "shepherd" or "father," one is merely speaking indirectly or metaphorically of God, but when one speaks of God as "omniscient," "spiritual," "incorporeal," "just," or "good," one is speaking directly, literally, rationally of real properties in God's nature.[33] From the Reformational point of

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[32] On p. 517, note 2, Volume I of his *A New Critique*, Dooyeweerd quotes Calvin to support this idea: "Moreover we must remember His virtues by which is described to us not what He is in Himself, but how He is in respect to us," *Institutes*, I, 10, 2.

[33] Wolterstorff, for example, says that God's being a father, unlike other designations for God, is metaphoric in his article "Once again, creator/creature," p. 64. Don Sinnema, a former student of James Olthuis and Hart, argues against this kind of distinction making in his student paper, "The Uniqueness Of The Language Of Faith," (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1975): 12-13.

view in contrast, the divine essence, if it even makes sense to speak of the divine essence, lies outside the range of our rational powers and the rationally qualified beliefs they generate. God can only be accessed indirectly through the things of creation and any beliefs we form in response to this revelation must be religiously qualified, trans-rational beliefs. Thus, God's wisdom and goodness can only be, like God's being a father or a shepherd, religiously qualified beliefs of the indirect, non-literal or metaphoric variety. Reformed epistemology rejects Reformational philosophy's views on our knowledge of God because they believe more can be achieved; they believe that we can go beyond indirect forms of access and achieve *direct* access to God, and to God's very nature, through our rational faculties. For them, to know God as just, good, or wise is to understand the very essence of God.

In taking their stance for indirect knowledge, Reformational thinkers believe that they are following through on the central thrust of John Calvin's basic theological position. It follows that they have their own distinct interpretation of Calvin's theology that is quite different from Plantinga's. From their point of view, Calvin not only rejects the necessity of natural theology, he also lends no support to the Enlightenment demand that religious belief must be rational in essence. Consider, for example, Herman Dooyeweerd's favorable comments on Calvin's negative view, not *only* of the arguments of natural theology, but of *any* pretense to a rational access of the divine essence:

> Calvin radically rejected the speculative natural theology. He called it an "audacious curiosity" of human reason that seeks to intrude upon the "essentiae Dei", which we can never fathom, but can only worship. Again and again he warned against the "vacua et meteorica speculatio" on God's essence apart from His revelation in His Word. Calvin expressed the true critical religious attitude concerning knowledge of God, an attitude grounded in the humble insight into the essential boundary between the Creator and the creation, in timidity with respect to the deep mystery of God's majesty."[34]

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[34] *A New Critique*, Vol. I, p. 517.

For Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and their followers, God's essence can never be accessed or fathomed by any of the rational powers of humanity. This does not mean, as Hart puts it, that "there is no role for reason in religion" or that a rational explication or defense of one's religious beliefs cannot be undertaken. But it does mean that such undertakings do not achieve the level of theory or science; philosophical theology, understood as the rational investigation of God's very essence, is not possible.[35] Perhaps this is the most fundamental and significant difference between Reformed epistemology and Reformational philosophy. From the Reformed epistemological perspective, given its anti-Kantian brand of rationalism and its interpretation of Reformed theology, the rejection of philosophical theology is evidence of Reformational philosophy's roots in the Continental and Kantian tradition rather than its roots in Calvin and the Reformation. In the following quotation, for example, Wolterstorff takes note of the major difference between the "American strand" of Reformed philosophy (which he takes to be the same thing as "Reformed epistemology") and the "Dutch and South African strands" (what I have been referring to as "Reformational philosophy"):

> Though a sizable body of philosophical scholarship emerged within each of these three strands, it is only within the American strand that philosophy of religion, and more specifically philosophical theology, has flourished. Its failure to flourish in the Dutch and South African strands is probably to be attributed to the neo-Kantian cast of Dooyeweerd's thought. Dooyeweerd held that our concepts lack applicability beyond the "temporal horizon," as he called it. We can talk about human religion, and we can talk about revelation; but about the God revealed we can say nothing beyond how God is revealed within the temporal horizon. Philosophical theology, understood as philosophers speaking about God, was thus ruled out of court.[36]

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[35] Hart sees a limited role for reason in religion in his "Whither Reason and Religion," pp. 215-216. But a *theory* of God's nature is not possible. See his *Understanding Our World,* pp. 318-324.

[36] "The Reformed Tradition," pp. 168-169.

And in his article "Once again, creator/creature," Wolterstorff has also pointed out and criticized what he understands to be the Kantian elements of Reformational philosophy, and the Kantian elements of Hendrik Hart's philosophy in particular. From Wolterstorff's point of view, Hart's position turns any sentence uttered in reference to God into nothing more than a "facon de parler," a more polite expression for Plantinga's "disguised nonsense," that appears to say something meaningful of God, but in actuality fails to say anything epistemically truthful or meaningful at all.

> When we appropriately use a sentence of the form, 'God is F', we are simply expressing the resolve to speak and think of God as if he were F; and the choice as to which among all the sentences of this form we are to utter is to be made by reference to which we can find in Scripture, for confining ourselves to Scripture is what will most benefit our human religious existence. *Truth* has here completely fallen out of the picture.[37]

From Wolterstorff's point of view, Hart's apparent Kantianism means that our speech and thought of God has no actual referent at all.

The main reason why Reformational philosophers believe that we do not experience God directly and our rationally qualified beliefs or concepts do not apply to God in the direct and literal way that Reformed epistemology advocates is because God's transcendence above the created order is taken seriously. To be sure, Reformed epistemologists also believe that there is a fundamental difference between God and the creation. They, too, are theists. But this does not mean that God and the creation do not exist, as we have seen in Wolterstorff's case, within the same basic metaphysical framework, nor that God's essence cannot be accessed by our rational powers. Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven's understanding of the difference between God and creation, on the other hand, do not involve any common structure or common denominator. In

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[37] "Once again, creator/creature," p.66.

their formulation of this issue, a formulation inspired by Calvin's theology, a boundary is said to exist between God and the things of creation, and this boundary is taken to consist of the law of God. That is, the laws that God has established and faithfully upholds for the governance of created reality, *including* the laws of logic. The kind of philosophical speculation on God's essence that Reformed epistemology advocates is regarded as a speculative transgression of this boundary, and as an intrusion upon the very throne of God.

> Calvin's judgment: "Deus Legibus Solutus Est, Sed Non Exlex", ("God is not subject to the laws, but not arbitrary") touches the foundations of all speculative philosophy by laying bare the limits of human reason set for it by God in his temporal world-order. This is the alpha and omega of all philosophy that strives to adopt a critical position not in name but in fact . . . I wish to cut off at the root the interference of speculative metaphysics in the affairs of the Christian religion. An authentic critical philosophy is aware of its being bound to the cosmic time-order. Its task, worthy of God's human creation, is great; yet it is modest and does not elevate human reason to the throne of God.[38]

For thinkers like Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, God does not exist within the same ontic environment as the creation. God is the *Origin* of all structures and laws and is outside their control. Law holds for the creation, not for God, and God should not be described as *exemplifying* any laws or predicables.

Dooyeweerd maintained that the "law-boundary" is a part of or a side of God's creation and Vollenhoven thought of it as a third reality existing between God and creation, but for each of them, God is differentiated from the entities of created reality by an order of law.[39] Thus transcending the law, according to this reading of Scripture, God is not to be equated in any *essential* way with created things. Given this understanding, Hendrik Hart refers to the

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[38] *A New Critique*, Vol. I, pp. 93. See also pp. 518-519.

[39] Hendrik Hart briefly summarizes the similarities and differences between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven on this issue in his article "On the Distinction," p. 183.

distinction between God and the creation as "the radical distinction."[40] In Hart's view it is impossible to grasp God's nature through theoretical reason.

> the structure of analysis is bound by the order of the world. It is only possible to analyze whatever is within those bounds. God is the origin of order. Theoretical analysis of God would require God to be within those bounds. But God is never subject to an order, nor limited by any structure.[41]

And James Olthuis underscores this point of view by saying that one cannot theologize about God's nature: "Theological study is not about God per se (How can the Creator God be the object of human scientific investigation?)."[42]

Speaking in general of the Reformational point of view, the only reason that we know about God is because of God's gracious revelation in *creational* terms. God is revealed to us by the taking on of creaturely properties and attributes so that we may know and relate to God.[43] God is known *indirectly* through these qualities and attributes and our knowledge of God applies to *them*, not to the essentiae Dei. Further, although our knowledge of God of necessity involves perceptual, conceptual and other elements, scholars in the Reformational tradition emphasize the leading and decisive role of faith and trust in this knowledge. From the beginning our knowledge of God has been knowledge qualified by faith, has been religiously qualified *fiduciary knowledge*, rather than knowledge qualified by reason and rationality. And thus faith is not understood to be, nor reduced to, a faculty of reason, as it is for Plantinga, and the beliefs of faith

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[40] *Understanding Our World,* pp. 361-363.

[41] Ibid., p. 319.

[42] James H. Olthuis, "Dooyeweerd on Religion and Faith," in *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd: Reflections on Critical Philosophy in the Christian Tradition*, ed., C.T. McIntire, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press, 1985): 31.

[43] Dooyeweerd, perhaps overstating the case, goes so far as to say that "the transcendent light of eternity *must force* its way through time."(italics mine) His idea in this passage seems to be that God is wholly other than created reality and must take on attributes alien to the divine essence in order to successfully become available to human experience. *A New Critique*, Vol. II, p. 561.

are not reduced to rationally qualified beliefs. Instead, faith is taken to have its own distinct and unique nature and the beliefs born of faith are religiously qualified, trans-rational beliefs. Theistic beliefs, therefore, are much less rationally understood facts as they are confessions of faith expressed through words and concepts.[44] In complete contrast to Plantinga and Wolterstorff, Reformational scholars deny that theistic belief is rational in qualification, and thus deny that a rationally qualified or focused *theory* of God's essence is possible.[45] Our knowledge of God is first and foremost fiduciary knowledge and not a "deliverance of reason," and thus there are no demands placed on this knowledge to meet the criteria that hold for theoretical, rationally qualified knowledge. Religious, theistic beliefs do not need to be, nor can they be, forced into a systematic web of logically coherent concepts, and it is not possible to logically infer any new properties and qualities of God's essence, because faith knowledge is not rationally qualified activity and thus does not give us the requisite *rational* starting point for such speculative inference making. Religious faith knowledge has its own unique nature that is not qualified by rationality despite the fact that concepts are necessary to express this knowledge. Thus, our knowledge of God is essentially a matter of trust, not reason, although it has rational, conceptual dimensions.

Since God cannot be accessed directly, faith is required in order to believe that it is actually God who is indirectly revealed through the ordinary entities of created reality. Since we cannot directly perceive or rationally conceive of God "as He is" or "in Himself," since we can only perceive and conceive God indirectly through other realities, faith is essential in order to be

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[44] See the way that Hart puts this idea in *Understanding Our World*, p. 331.

[45] See, for example, Hendrik Hart's, "Conceptual Understanding And Knowing *Other*-Wise," in *Knowing **Other**-Wise: Philosophy at the threshold of spirituality*, ed., James H. Olthuis (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997): 44-47. Hereafter, *Knowing **Other**-Wise.*

open to the reality of God. Our faith in God keeps us from mistaking God for the things of created reality; it keeps us from reducing our experiences of God to mere manifestations of the creaturely. From this perspective, consequently, the mystery of the essentiae Dei is not a problem that needs to be eliminated or solved through direct experience and direct, rationally qualified conceptualization. We cannot gain "mastery over mystery," nor should we attempt to.[46] Instead, the mysterious elements of our experience of God are crucial to our knowledge of God. They are the indications of Deity that faith latches on to. It follows that speech and thought about God cannot eliminate the mysterious, nor can it translate the more indirect and metaphorical varieties of faith into a closed system of rational concepts. Hart puts it this way:

> If within faith we speak of matters such as God's right hand, we are not articulating beliefs in the originally rational-conceptual sense of the word, but using metaphors to express our trust. All faith-talk is in that way metaphorical. It breaks through the limits of given language to remain open to saying what lies beyond being said. It does not lend itself to closed logical-conceptual relationships. God-as-father is an image of a certain time. No conclusion as to essential divine maleness is possible here.[47]

From the Reformational point of view, even our references to God's unrevealed being that are mainly, but not exclusively, put to use in theoretical and philosophical contexts, references like Calvin and Dooyeweerd's "essentiae Dei," Alston's references to God "in Himself" and "as He is," references to God's "transcendence," "aseity," or "infinity," do not directly grasp the essence of God or properties in the essence of God. They are not meant to indicate that God has the property of transcendence, nondependence, infinity and the like. They are words and concepts drawn from the created order that are pressed into service in order to

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[46] Gary R. Shahinian, "The Narcotic of Rationality and the Problem of Evil," in *Philosophy as Responsibility: A Celebration of Hendrik Hart's Contribution to the Discipline*, eds., Ronald A. Kuipers and Janet Catherina Wesselius (Lanham, New York, Oxford: University Press of America, 2002): 112.

[47] *Knowing **Other**-Wise*, p. 45.

rationally explicate why it is that God is that which, as Hart put it in the previous quote, "lies beyond being said." Although such references may be used in a rationally qualified context, may be used in a rationally qualified explication of our religious beliefs, they do not provide us with a *closed* rational/conceptual understanding of the mysterious God who is not a creature; they are not concepts within a *theory* of God. For then God's property of transcendence would logically preclude any kind of divine disclosure within the creation, and God's aseity would logically imply that God never depends upon anything in the creation. Thus, these attempts to rationally explicate biblical revelation concerning God do not give us insight into the real properties of God's essence and cannot serve as the starting point for any speculative inferences about God's nature. Such references are thoroughly dependent upon Hart's "metaphors of faith,"[48] and they are merely what Clouser calls "limiting ideas" that have no essential conceptual content.[49]

It follows from this that revelation is not revelation of God's essential nature and cannot serve as the rational ground for *properly basic* religious beliefs about that nature. Indeed, theistic beliefs *are not* properly basic in the rationalistic sense of Plantinga. Nor, for that matter, are they inferred or secondary beliefs. Theistic beliefs *are* basic—Hart refers to them as "basic beliefs" or "basic assumptions"—but they are beliefs born of *faith* and *trust* as opposed to reason and cannot be forced into a rationally closed system of beliefs, nor serve as the starting point for speculative inferences about the divine nature.[50] They *can* serve as presuppositional orientation for

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[48] "Whither Reason and Religion," pp. 223-235.

[49] Roy Clouser, "Religious Language: A New Look at an Old Problem," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, eds., Hendrik Hart, Johan Van Der Hoeven, Nicholas Wolterstorff (Lanham, Md.: The University Press of America, 1983): 392-395. Hereafter, "Religious Language."

[50] Hart deals with basic beliefs and assumptions in his "Appendix: A Concluding Prescientific Postscript," in *Understanding Our World.*

theoretical thought, but are not themselves theory or the result of theory.[51] Thus, Clouser can say of his own "accommodation view" of God's revelation:

> the accommodation view counsels extreme caution in dealing with the nature of God . . . it cuts off all speculation about God's own being. We cannot spin out an extended account of God's nature beyond what he has revealed on the assumption that he conforms to the laws of logic (or any other created laws) in such a way that we can reconstruct his nature by doing rationalistic metaphysical theology. Our trust in God, for example, is based on our experience of the truth of his word, and not on some logical proof that it is impossible that he lie. Running a logical credit check on God is to subject the creator to the laws he has set over creatures, and thereby reduces him to creaturely status.[52]

Since everything authoritative known of God is derived from the Scriptures, anything we say of God should have Scriptural warrant. This does not mean that we can't say new things about God, but it does mean that whatever we say ought to be limited and normed by particular Scriptural contexts; abstract speculation, therefore, is unfruitful. And so, Clouser goes on to say:

> [the accommodation view] requires that we confine ourselves as much as possible to precisely what God has revealed of himself. Some inferences from what is revealed may be necessary and unavoidable, but for the most part our knowledge of how he accommodates himself to us depends on his telling us about it. (Here I am reminded of Calvin's sage advice "never to think or speak of God beyond what we have Scripture for our guide.")[53]

Clouser's limitation of our knowledge of God to the parameters established by divine revelation flies in the face of Reformed epistemology's acceptance of rational speculation as to God's essence and serves as a clear demarcation of the deep and fundamental differences between the two schools of thought despite their common spiritual heritage.

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[51] An example of this idea comes from Hart. He says, "Theorizing without commitment is impossible, but so is a theory of the ultimate ground of one's commitment." *Understanding Our World,* p. 318.

[52] Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Beliefs in Theories* (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991): 184-185. Hereafter, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality.*

[53] Ibid., p. 185.

CHAPTER 3

HART'S DEFENSE OF THE REFORMATIONAL POSITION

In this section I shall present Hart's defense of the Reformational position and his critique of rationalist epistemologies of religious belief.[1] As I mentioned in the Introduction, in contrast to Plantinga, Hart maintains that our knowledge of God is fiduciary knowledge, rather than rational knowledge. Further, our knowledge of God is fiduciary knowledge that is presuppositional in nature, rather than properly basic in nature. Further still, our knowledge of God is fiduciary knowledge that is presuppositional in nature because it is grounded in the experience of faith, rather than being grounded in the experience of our rational faculties. Direct rational comprehension of God's nature is impossible and our knowledge of God is first and foremost faith knowledge of the indirect and metaphorical variety. Although Hart acknowledges that one can rationally reflect on the metaphors of faith, this reflection is thoroughly limited to the parameters established by these beliefs and cannot, therefore, be a direct rational knowing of God "in himself," of God's very nature. Thus, our knowledge of God cannot be the logically rigorous knowledge of scientific or philosophic discourse and it cannot be placed within the confines of an internally rational system of beliefs, because that would imply the ability to access the essential nature of God. Theistic belief, nevertheless, is not irrational—it is trans-rational.

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[1] In this explication of Hart's thought, I use quotations from his work that span a period of over 20 years. During this time Hart's thought and terminology have not remained exactly the same. In the interest of unity of exposition, I rely mostly, although not exclusively, on the thought and terminology of his magnum opus, *Understanding Our World* (1983). Although Hart would no doubt now say some things differently, I have been assured by him that he is still in basic agreement with the points being made in this section.

A. Our Knowledge of God is Fiduciary Knowledge

Hart's reflections on our knowledge of God at first appear to be somewhat paradoxical. The paradox centers on the relationship of our knowledge of God in general and philosophical theories of God specifically.

On the one hand, like all the Reformed philosophers and theologians mentioned in this thesis, Hart believes that it is part of our original created nature to be able to know God. This created ability is activated through God's self-disclosure, God's revelation. God can be experienced and known in any of a number of different ways. He mentions, for example, that the Old Testament speaks of God manifesting "in the form of a wind, a cloud, a person, or an angel."[2] Indeed, he maintains that "God reveals in terms of the creation and does not shun *anything* in that creation when it comes to divine revelation."[3] (italics mine) God is available to us through revelation, and divine self-disclosure has made it possible from the beginning to have knowledge of God.

On the other hand, Hart does not believe that a scientific or philosophic *theory* of God is possible.[4] Unlike the Reformed epistemologists, Hart denies that it is part of our original noetic make-up to be able to know the properties in the divine nature in a formal/rational way, if it even makes sense to speak of a divine nature. Philosophical theology is not possible. This is because God has not made the divine essence available.

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[2] *Understanding Our World*, p. 321.

[3] Ibid., p. 323.

[4] Ibid., p. 318.

> God is only what God says, not anything else. We do not know God "in God's essence," for example, because God has not made any self-revelation known in that way. We do not even know whether God is anything "in essence." God makes self-disclosures known in the way God chooses and in no other way.[5]

But how can this be true? That is, how can Hart hold on to these two views at one and the same time? How can he say that God can be known, but we cannot formulate a theory of God? One would think that the Reformed epistemologists are correct. If it is true that God has become available to us through revelation, if God has been "exposed" so to speak, and can, therefore, be experienced and known, it seems only natural to assume that a rational, theoretical grasping of this revelation is possible; it seems natural to think that the properties in the divine essence and the divine essence itself are conceivable.

Although Hart's response to this paradox has similarities to the Kantian thesis, he deals with it more in terms of the Calvinist beliefs of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven than in Kantian terms. God transcends the creation, as well as the laws God originated for the governance of the creation, the laws for logic included. This means that there are no analogies or similarities whatsoever between the two.

> Creator and creature are fully distinct and have nothing in common. There are no analogies. God is God and only God. Only Yahweh is God. God is not a creature in any way and is not *like* a creature in any way. God has no creaturely properties in creaturely ways, even though we might hear God speak in this manner.[6]

Theories of the divine essence, therefore, are impossible because they imply that God, like creaturely realities, exists within the parameters of the laws that God has established for the governance of creation; they assume that God, at the very least, is subject to the laws for logic;

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[5] Ibid., p. 335. See also pp. 320-321.

[6] Ibid., p. 345.

they assume that God shares in at least some of what it is to be a creature. But because God is *not* a creature, philosophical theology of God's essence is out of the question.

> To make valid theoretical assertions concerning God, rules of inference must normally apply. But God would then have to be subject to these rules. My rejection of this is related to the Christian belief that the Creator is the origin and ground of everything other than God. I take this belief to imply that rules of inference and all other order must also have their ground and origin in God. If my understanding of this Christian belief is applicable, then we cannot in any straightforward way assume the Creator of the laws of logic to be simultaneously subject to them.[7]

Hart's contention here is that God establishes and thus transcends the laws that hold for the creation, the laws for logical inference included. For Hart, laws are the God ordained conditions that determine "what things essentially are . . . setting the limits of what it is proper for something to be, making possible whatever is possible, making necessary whatever is necessary." Since laws are correlated with and hold for the creation—the empirical world—they should not be identified with that world. No condition or law, then, is itself conditioned, nor is it a part of the empirical world. A useful analogy that Hart employs is that there "is no traffic in a modern city that is exempt from the rules, no traffic that itself sets the rules, and no traffic rules that are subject to traffic rules." Laws or conditions "are only determinative for and of what exists, they universally hold for what they determine. They also determine what is true and necessary, without themselves being true or necessary, since what is true or necessary is determined."[8] Hart's contention then is that God, being the source of all law, is not subject to law as the creaturely, empirical world is subject, and one should not expect God to be limited and bound by law as creatures are bound. And further, just because God, despite this transcendence,

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[7] Ibid., p. 320.

[8] Ibid., pp. 441-442.

becomes available to us through divine self-disclosure *within* creation and within the parameters of its laws, one should not expect God to be available in the *same way* that creatures are available; one should not expect that God *must* be available in the *direct* way that Reformed epistemology advocates. Since God transcends all order, God is under no obligation to be *anything* created. There is no law that determines God's revelations to us *must* be in such a way that theoretical inspection and analysis of God's essence is possible.

> But if God reveals Himself in terms of creation, this does not warrant the conclusion that he then becomes one of those creatures whose existence continues in accord with the divine counsel for creation. And this in turn does not give us ground to deal logically with God as we do with creation.[9]

For Hart, if God is revealed as a wind, a cloud, a person, or whatever, it does not follow of necessity that God is actually defined and limited by any of these forms of being. It also means that God is under no obligation to make any of these divine revelations meet any specific conditions for proper creational functioning. God's revelation in the form of a cloud, for example, is not limited by the conditions that hold for proper cloud functioning. Certainly the cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness was no ordinary cloud.

But if all this is so, then in what way *is* God available, and in what sense can it be said that we know God?

The answer to the first part of this question is that God is available to us *indirectly* through created things. God is not a creature, God transcends the creaturely, but God is revealed to us *exclusively* within terms of the creaturely.

> we must take seriously what God is not, as well as what God is, in terms of God's own revelation to us. God is not a subject and is not a creature . . . God is not a

[9] "On the Distinction," p. 188.

> creature and can therefore be approached via creation *only indirectly*, whether physically, semantically, or logically.[10] (italics mine)

In principle, and in many circumstances, it is possible to acquire knowledge of creaturely realities *directly*, apart from the mediation of any other created thing. With God, Hart is saying, this *never* happens. With God, our knowledge is *always indirect* in nature. This does not mean, as Wolterstorff's Kantian interpretation of Hart suggests, that our knowledge of God is not knowledge *of God*. It just means that this knowledge only comes to us through the mediation of creation and within the parameters of its order and laws. In Hart's Reformational position there can be no distinction between direct and indirect knowledge. God is *only* approached *via* creation and all knowledge of God is indirect in kind. It follows that what is taken as direct knowledge of God by the Reformed epistemologists, knowledge of God as wise and good, for example, is every bit as indirect as knowledge of God as cloud and wind. This is because, from Hart's point of view, the properties of wisdom and goodness are determined by God's law, just as the properties of clouds and winds are so determined; wisdom and goodness are *creational* properties that God makes use of in divine revelation.

Furthermore, because it is *God* who is available, despite being revealed within the context of the various facets and features of created reality, these revelations are often out of the ordinary and mysterious. In fact, it is the unusual features of the revelations that indicate to us that it is God who has been made known.

> So if a visible manifestation of God comes in the form of a wind, a cloud, a person, or an angel---as these are described in the Old Testament---the order that applies to wind and clouds and persons and angels will apply here as well. They might do so in an unusual way, but the application is still possible. The same would hold true for speech. And by the unusual nature of the cloud, the wind, the speech, or the burning bush we could see how God in self-revelation is not really

[10] *Understanding Our World*, p. 324.

> the same as these; *God is not subject to their order as they are.* So the bush will burn but not be consumed. The wind will sound as if speaking. And the speech will be characterized by use of such terms as omnipotent."[11] (italics mine)

It is precisely because of this indirect character to our experience of God, and precisely because this indirectness includes a measure of the miraculous and the mysterious that we can know God *as God*; but it is also why we do not perceive or know God "as He is," and cannot, therefore, rationally conceptualize the divine nature. Despite the fact that God is existentially available to us in a number of ways, rational thought cannot get an abstract, conceptual handle on the divine essence because God is not available to us for the kind of *direct* inspection and analysis theory has need of in order to conceptually grasp the properties in an essence. For Hart, knowledge of God is not "scientific information, publicly observable, and inferentially accessible to everyone."[12] Theoretical thought attempts to rationally conceptualize the fundamental structure or essence of things, the general and unchanging patterns that things exhibit as members of their respective kinds.

> But what is involved in a concept's being general? First and foremost, a concept's generality ideally refers to the inclusion in the concept of a coherently patterned or ordered integration of as many properties and relationships as possible that are common or shared and continuous or constant with respect to the thing conceived. Generality as an ideal aims at universality, that is, it aims at a concept which includes all the properties that are shared by all the individual things of some kind. The concept "elephant" aims at the inclusion of all the common, constant, and continuous properties of elephants . . . . we refer to what the concept grasps as the essence of things, their nature, their lawful order, and more such meanings, . . [13]

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[11] Ibid., p. 321.

[12] Ibid., p. 324.

[13] Hendrik Hart, "Sorting Out Reason," Chapter 9 of *Anti-Foundationalism, Faith and Community*. Co-authored with William Sweet. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2004., pp. 178-179. Hereafter, *Anti-Foundationalism*.

But God, in being revealed *indirectly* through created things, does not give us access to the divine "kind." Although God is faithful and reliable in divine revelation, we cannot rationally, conceptually capture the "common, constant, and continuous properties" of God's nature in itself because these are not given to us in divine revelation.

Further, as if to underscore this point, and to prevent us from assuming we have *directly* grasped the divine essence when in fact we have only come to know God *indirectly*, God does not limit the kinds of creatures used for purposes of self-disclosure. As we saw earlier, Hart tells us that God does not shun anything in the creation for his purposes in revelation; God has made use of a bewildering array of different kinds of creaturely reality. Theory is thereby frustrated, because theory depends upon structure and order, conceptual access to the *unchanging* essence of the thing analyzed. But God, who transcends all order and structure, *conceals* the essentiae Dei behind a vast array of creaturely realities at the same time they are used to reveal that which God wants revealed. These revelations, as a consequence, have the status of the indirect, the creatiomorphic, the figurative, the metaphorical, and the mysterious, rather than the status of the direct, the conceivable, the unchanging, and the essential. God's revelations are indirect manifestations, and should not be interpreted as direct manifestations. And thus they altogether elude rational, theoretical thought's basic need to conceptualize the properties in an essence.

> to have a concept of God we need to be able to grasp and logically conceive the nature of God, the *kind* God, the order to which God, in being God, is subject. We need to determine the properties of the *kind* God. And if God exemplifies some of these properties, then truly God *must* have them. All this, I believe, is in flagrant contradiction with biblical teaching.[14]

Thus, If we are to have an answer to the second part of the question, if we are to discover

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[14] *Understanding Our World*, pp. 320-321.

the sense in which it can be said that we have knowledge of God, that knowledge will have to be knowledge of *another kind* than that developed in theories. Such knowledge, Hart maintains, is the knowledge that comes by way of faith and commitment.[15] It is the theistic and Christian version of what I refer to in this thesis as *fiduciary knowledge* or *faith knowledge* or *religiously qualified knowledge*. God's revelatory self-disclosures existentially confront us on all sides in indirect, creatiomorphic and mysterious ways that claim or assume divine status and we take them at face value, we accept them to be what they claim. We choose in faith—under the motivation of God's Spirit[16]—to trust God's revelation to be revelation *of God*, despite our inability to directly experience or to rationally grasp God "in himself." "The Bible says we see God through a glass, darkly. God is known when we *surrender* ourselves trustfully *to the terms of* God's revelation."[17] (italics mine) It is through the surrender of faith and trust born of God's Spirit that we come to know the mysterious God who indirectly reveals within the various entities and aspects of created reality.

> It seems fair to say that, generally speaking, the Bible refers to God's mysteries becoming known as revelation, and assumes that such revelation gains entrance through faith, that is, through being trusted in spite of its mysteriousness. The late Reformed theologian G. C. Berkouwer's work was known by his view of the correlation of faith and revelation. Revelation is first and foremost the becoming known of the mystery to, in, and through trust . . . . Yet, a mystery that has become known remains a mystery. This, in my view, points to its being known focused in trust rather than known focused in understanding. We claim to understand far too much and we too often excommunicate those whose understanding of what they trust differs from ours.[18]

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[15] Hart's discusses commitment, belief, assumptions, ultimate assumptions, faith and knowledge on pages 325-335 of *Understanding Our World.*

[16] For Hart, it is through the Spirit that we become opened up to God. That is, open to God as revealed to us in creation, Jesus Christ and the Bible. See his section on "God's Word and Spirit," pp. 338-341, and his section on "Humanity's special calling," pp. 357-359, in *Understanding Our World.*

[17] Ibid., p. 324.

Coming to know God through faith, therefore, does not mean, as it does for Plantinga, that we have directly grasped God's unchanging essence in rational concepts and propositions and have thereby eliminated a portion of the mystery. It means that we have surrendered in trust to the indirect terms of God's revelation despite its mysteries. There are many people who have a certain rational understanding of God but who, from Hart's point of view, do not know God. For Hart, one does not know God until one has placed *trust* in God; one does not know God until one *believes in* God.

It follows that for Hart there is a distinct difference between activity that is qualified by faith and trust, and activity that has a rational qualification. In speaking of the dimension of reality that qualifies faith knowledge, what Hart refers to in *Understanding Our World* as the *pistic* dimension, he uses such terms as "commitment," "acceptance," "trust," and "submission," whereas the terms he uses to describe the dimension of reality that qualifies rational knowledge, the *analytic* dimension, include "rational," "conceptual," "propositional," "inferential," and the like.[19] Faith knowledge, in other words, is a very different kind of knowing than knowledge which is rational in qualification. In Hart's philosophy, unlike Plantinga's, faith is not a *faculty* of reason, and faith knowledge is not rational knowledge. Nor is faith knowledge merely an *inadequate* form of rational knowledge. For Hart, faith knowledge is distinct and different: "Faith and reason are not competitors but irreducibly different. Science and religion, that is, ought not to

[18] Hendrik Hart, "Focused in Faith: the epistemology of faith as a way of knowing." This article comprises Chapter 10 of *Anti-Foundationalism*, p. 232.

[19] Hart discusses the various irreducible dimensions of reality, experience and knowledge that he recognizes on pp. 173-198 of *Understanding Our World.*

be viewed as two rival belief systems, each with its own antagonistic truth claims."[20] The difference between them is not one of value or degree, but of kind. The knowledge of God through faith is true knowledge, but knowledge of a different order than that which comes by way of theoretical analysis. The idea that faith knowledge is rational in kind, or merely a lesser form of rationality, is one of the arbitrary conceits of Western rationalism.

> The mystery of knowing God is the mystery of total submission, a mystery which can be known *only* in that submission. The fear to let go of the ultimacy of logical categories is Western, born of the worship of rationality. The dominance of this tradition is what has led to seeing faith as belief and belief as acceptance of propositions, to see Christianity as a system of doctrine, and to see Christian truth as dogma.[21] (italics mine)

Knowledge then, in contrast to Plantinga, should not be limited or reduced to rationally qualified knowledge.[22] Whatever the Reformational tradition may owe to Kant, it does not owe him anything on this point. Instead of Kant's radical distinction between knowledge and faith, Hart advocates the multi-dimensionality of knowledge:

> It seems entirely reasonable even at this stage of philosophical development to look at knowledge as perhaps always having a strong relation to conceptual awareness, though not being reducible to conceptual understanding. If knowledge is multi-dimensional and trust is one of its dimensions, then it is certainly thinkable that there are forms of knowing in which conceptuality dominates ("being the sum of three and four") and knowing in which trust dominates ("the destiny of the human race").[23]

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[20] "Whither Reason and Religion," p. 206.

[21] *Understanding Our World*, note 60, p. 424.

[22] Hart views such reductionistic views of knowledge as typically western and he combats it with what he regards as a more biblical point of view. That is, he combats it with a perspective that is biblically multidimensional, instead of exclusively rational/conceptual. In the Bible, for example, love is a form of knowledge See his discussion of knowledge and truth in *Understanding* Our world, pp. 355-357.

[23] "Whither Reason and Religion," p. 183.

In Hart's view, our knowledge of God has many dimensions, including the perceptual and rational/conceptual dimensions so important to the Reformed epistemologists. There must always be, for example, some kind of sense perception or internal awareness if knowledge of God is to be possible: we must *see* the cloud, *hear* the voice, *sense* the presence of God, be *aware* of divine guidance, or hear God's voice in Scripture. There must also always be a rational/conceptual dimension: we must understand the terms of God's revelation, and understand the significance thereof. But neither of these dimensions is what typically characterizes our knowledge of God. For Hart, knowledge of God is that type of knowledge in which the trust element *dominates* or *qualifies* every dimension of the activity. It is fiduciary activity rather than rational activity. This means that, although perception and conception are unavoidably involved in our knowledge of God, perceptions and conceptions of God are not sufficient for there to be knowledge of God. We do not know God until we place our trust in God.

> It is often said that faith in God presupposes belief that God exists. But that can also be turned around. It is possible to say that faith in God enables us to say that God exists. In that case the faith would determine what it means to say that God exists.[24]

Knowledge of God, then, is *first and foremost* our trust and acceptance of God's revelation on the terms it presents to us. Faith enables us to know God, it opens us up to God. Through the mediation of created realities, faith can actually experience that which lies beyond experience, that which "transcends experience."

> Our experience of God is first and foremost an experience of faith. And faith, though not irrational does transcend rationality. It is of the order of faith that it

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[24] Ibid., p. 180.

> experiences what transcends experience. And this can itself only be understood in faith.[25]

Our faith knowledge willingly accepts God's revelation as revelation *of God* despite its indirect nature, despite the many variations of its creaturely cloak, and despite its mysteries. This knowledge is not irrational because there is always the rational/conceptual dimension involved with it. But the rational/conceptual dimension of this knowledge is dominated and transcended by the acceptance in faith of God's revelation for what it actually is, or as it actually presents itself, and not in what rationally qualified knowledge thinks it ought to be, or thinks it must essentially be, or thinks it could be. The following quotation, written some 20 years after the previous quotation, reveals the consistency of Hart's position on this issue over the years.

> This kind of knowledge is what the Bible knows as faith, where faith is not so much believing—that is, having beliefs of some kind, having propositional attitudes—but rather is living in confidence or trust with regard to what, as we say, transcends creation as mystery. Since the experience of faith, as a whole experience, is, like all experience, multidimensional, propositional attitudes and conceptual moments are not absent. But they play their role within the dominance of faith and receive their meaning from that faith.[26]

When faith dominates an activity, the conceptual element of that activity is also qualified by the dominance of faith. For example, when God is revealed as our father, when we come to know God through faith as father, when through faith we form the religious belief that God is our father, it is a belief of the trans-rational variety. The rational concept *father* is part and parcel of that knowledge; it is the rational/conceptual dimension of our faith knowledge; it is what enables faith activity to *understand* God as father. But because this knowledge is religiously qualified knowledge of that which transcends fatherhood and every other creaturely designation, rather

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[25] *Understanding Our World*, p. 423, note 57.

[26] "Focused in Faith," pp. 222-223.

than rationally qualified knowledge of that which is determined by an unchanging essence, we do not assume, nor should we assume, that God's fatherhood includes all the rational implications inherent within this concept.

> Such experience, when expressed in language, is characteristically expressed in symbolic, figurative, or metaphorical terms. We speak of God's right arm, though not believing God has arms. We speak of omnipotence, though do not believe what philosophers make of that when they say this creates a problem for evil in the world or that an omnipotent God could make objects too heavy to lift even for God. We speak of God giving us children, though we do not deny intercourse, pregnancy, and birth.[27]

In faith, although we know God as father, we do not know God as the father who married our mother and sired our siblings. Faith knowledge of God as father requires an understanding of fatherhood in relation to God, but does not expect or demand the logical implications of this understanding. In faith knowledge, understanding of what God *must be* logically gives way to surrender and acceptance of what God *actually is* in revelation.

So faith and religious belief *transcend* the rational/conceptual dimension, but cannot occur apart from the rational/conceptual dimension; they go beyond the rational, but do not leave the rational behind; they are trans-rational, but not irrational.[28] Although we make use of concepts to know God, "God cannot be *defined*, cannot be grasped *within* a concept."[29] Because of our creatureliness and humanity, we must use concepts in order to have knowledge of God. But that does not mean that divinity itself can be enclosed or limited within the confines of a concept or proposition.

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[27] Ibid., p. 234.

[28] *Understanding Our World*, p. 422, note 53.

[29] Ibid., p. 422, note 54.

> Religious faith is not irrational. But its rationality is that of faith. Just like leaves are colored, but if we would assess them as colors we would miss the point; so to treat religious belief as though it should be all rationality is beside the point. . . why not consider the possibility that believing or having faith are not first of all matters of rationality?[30]

God is revealed as our father, but there is no biblical warrant for concluding that God cannot, therefore, be revealed as a cloud, a rock, or a consuming fire. God cannot be limited or enclosed within the confines of any concept because God transcends the creaturely and the lawful conditions that govern and limit the creaturely, including the laws of logic. If God were limited and contained within the parameters of law then, according to the laws of logic, God's fatherhood should entail a host of implications that would do violence to the biblical witness of God. But logic and rationality are not the dominant factors in faith knowledge. Logical categories and concepts are used in connection with God, but are transformed into metaphor and symbols.

> [The language of faith] is not a language which, when giving rise to large bodies of confessional literature, allows us to read such literature as internally coherent in an empirical-logical sense. Trust gives us different glimpses, in different experiences, and at different times. The expression of this diversity makes for tensions, paradoxes, contradictions, and absurdities if trust were to be subjected to the requirements of logical rigor. In faith we can tell stories of God's omnipotence . . . . But omnipotence cannot be a scholarly theological or philosophical term that can be explored with logical rigor. As a term of confession omnipotence gives comfort, as a conceptual term of ordinary logic it makes a mockery of both faith and objectors to faith.[31]

If, contrary to this teaching of Hart, one were to follow Plantinga and interpret faith, and the theistic belief born of faith, *as if* it were merely rationally qualified conceptual or propositional/theoretical knowledge, it would be a misinterpretation:

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[30] Hendrik Hart, "The Religion of Reason in Nielsen's Atheism," in *Search For Community,* p. 4. Hereafter, "The Religion of Reason."

[31] "Focused in Faith," p. 225.

> Treated as "belief" in this conceptual way, the trust in God is misunderstood. This is because, within faith, the role of beliefs is not that of accepting understood concepts. Rather, in proposition-like language the symbols of trust are being expressed.[32]

For Hart, fiduciary knowledge involves beliefs that go beyond Plantinga's notion of belief as accepted concepts and propositions. These fiduciary beliefs transcend rational beliefs, but cannot be expressed without rational beliefs.

From Hart's point of view, faith knowledge has no problem with, and even thrives on, the various creatiomorphic figures, metaphors and mysteries associated with God's revelation. For the person of faith, it is not a problem that the Bible reveals God in a multitude of different ways: as a king, a consuming fire, a father, a cloud, or as holy and good, yet capable of vengeance and wrath, as sovereign and omnipotent, nonetheless expecting responsible obedience from human subjects. Theoretical reason, in contrast, left unchecked by biblical revelation to its own devices, demands direct access to God "as He is," or "in Himself," demands access to the uncloaked naked essence of God, demands proof of identification, works to fit concepts of God within a logically coherent and defensible theoretical system, and works for the resolution of all mystery. Theoretical reason expects to know if God's sovereignty and omnipotence cancels out human freedom and responsibility, and if God's goodness overrides the existence of evil in the world. But for these very reasons, theory cannot get a handle on God's nature. God's revelation is not susceptible to that kind of knowledge, because God transcends the creaturely and our theoretical knowledge is limited to the creational order. From Hart's point of view, the failure to realize this can only lead to the failure to accept the *fullness* of God's revelation.

> If we refuse to accept the limits of our knowledge, we will not be able to hold together the often ill-fitting fragments of transcendence that break into our

[32] "The Religion of Reason," p. 220.

> experience, nor will we understand that fundamental faith experiences are uniquely individual and timed events that not only cannot be repeated, but that also differ fundamentally from realities that have the generality of rational-theoretical views we call theories.[33]

The person who *thinks* he has grasped God's essence in a direct rational/conceptual abstraction has in fact reduced an indirect religious, fiduciary belief to a theoretical belief, has misinterpreted a religious, confessional metaphor for a rationally qualified concept. Such ideas, *ironically*, cannot provide the logical consistency they are supposed to have.

> And what people concretely say about God makes sense within the full context of human experience, from the point of view of faith, but not in conceptual abstraction. Thus, in one context we might say God is sovereign. Or in another context we might say God is omnipotent. These could be pastoral contexts in which some person was worried about God's ability to heal or control things. But if we were to work out an abstract theory of sovereignty and omnipotence, we would see that such a theory would yield untenable conclusions.[34]

And thus people who believe that God is omnipotent in a formal/logical sense rather than in the trans-rational, fiduciary sense—and Hart has Plantinga in mind here—cannot escape logical difficulties—no matter how they define omnipotence.

> the notion of omnipotence, if taken in a strictly formal logical sense, will lead to absurdities no matter how we view it, as soon as we take it to its logical consequences. If omnipotence means logically limited it cannot mean omnipotence. If omnipotence means absolutely without limit one would have to accept contradictory notions, which is also logically unacceptable. For me this implies that the notion of omnipotence cannot be taken to have formal conceptual meaning, but only confessional-conceptual meaning. Formal conclusions made in abstraction do not apply.[35]

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[33] "Focused in Faith," pp. 237-238.

[34] *Understanding Our World*, pp. 321-322.

[35] Ibid., p. 422-423, note 56. In this note Hart refers us to Plantinga's *God and Other Minds*, p. 118. In this passage, Plantinga makes the statement that God's omnipotence is limited by the laws of logic. Plantinga makes the same claim in *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 167.

And further, we have seen in Chapter 2 that Plantinga's taking of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness in a formal/rational manner, and his attempt to logically reconcile this understanding with the reality of evil in the world, leads to a number of logical incoherencies with other elements of God's revelation. This seems to justify Hart's contention that the "fragments of transcendence," the fullness of God's revelation, cannot be adequately captured within the confines of a rational belief system.

The knowledge we have of God by faith, therefore, is contextual knowledge, and is contextually determined. The concepts integrally interconnected with our faith have an applicability that is limited to the context. *Within* these contexts our speech and thought about God must follow God's laws for speech and thought.[36] But any attempt to abstractly universalize them such that their applicability extends to all contexts, and all circumstances, can severely misrepresent what God is all about. The reason for this is that although *our* speech and thought is governed by God's law, *God* is not so governed, and cannot be limited to, nor bound by, any creaturely context, word or idea used for revelatory purposes. Faith knowledge that surrenders to God allows us to remain open to the transcendent God who selectively reveals in a variety of creaturely contexts, but abstract knowledge that tries to dictate terms or possibilities to God, that tries to determine what God must be or could be in essence, closes us off to the *real* God of revelation by making the fundamental error of mistaking God for, and limiting God to, particular creaturely forms and contexts.

> This does not imply that people thinking about God can dispense with logicality. It only implies that conclusions arrived at on the basis of *abstract* and *formal* reasoning alone are likely to miss the mark. God cannot be defined, cannot be grasped within a concept.[37] (italics mine)

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[36] Ibid., p. 320.

[37] Ibid., p. 422, note 54.

The apparent paradox associated with our knowledge of God, therefore, is no paradox at all. This is because rationally qualified theoretical thought cannot conceive the divine essence, or any properties in the divine essence, because the divine essence is not available for that kind of knowing. Indeed, we are not even in a position to know if there is such a thing as the divine essence. Any attempt to enclose God within the confines of a rationally coherent belief system leads to a diminishment of God, a reduction of God to creaturely status, a limitation of God to creaturely forms and categories. But we can experience and know God through faith, because God is readily available and accessible for that kind of knowing. Faith accepts God on the terms that God presents to us, faith surrenders to God without demanding rational/conceptual limitation, coherence and finality. The paradox does not apply because Hart considers fiduciary knowledge and theoretical knowledge to be irreducibly different. Faith gives us knowledge of God by accepting the indirect terms of God's revelation through particular creational forms and contexts, whereas theoretical knowledge gives us direct knowledge of created things, but cannot give us direct, abstract knowledge of God's essence.

> The price paid for placing reason at the center and foundation was the adoption in principle of cultural opposition to religion, to myth, to faith. From reason's point of view, these could only have given access to real reality and truth in an unenlightened and not yet emancipated culture. If, in fact, however, faith is meant to give us a disclosure, a revelation of the mystery that is beyond our limits, the limits of human thought, the limits of creaturely reality, then that mystery remains closed when the light of reason aims to bring all mystery within our human limits and eliminate faith, trust, mystery, and revelation.[38]

From Hart's point of view, Plantinga's interpretation of our knowledge of God as rationally qualified knowledge misinterprets that knowledge. For Hart, the God who becomes

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[38] "Sorting Out Reason," pp. 195-196.

known in *that* way is the *rationally manufactured* God of the philosophers, rather than the *real* and *actual* God of divine revelation.

B. Our Knowledge of God is Fiduciary Knowledge that is Presuppositional in Nature

Hart's distinction between fiduciary knowledge and rational knowledge is not meant to imply that the two forms of knowing are walled off from one another. The multi-dimensionality of knowledge assumes that faith and reason are integrally interconnected. In this section I will show how Hart sees faith knowledge, and specifically faith knowledge of God, as impacting, directing and giving orientation to rationally qualified knowing. Hart, in concert with Plantinga and the Reformed tradition, believes that our knowledge of God is a starting point for theoretical thought. One does not need to theoretically argue for the existence of God before the knowledge of God may play a role in theory. Unlike Plantinga, however, the starting point for our rational endeavors is not itself rational in nature; it is not direct, properly basic, rational knowledge of God's essence, but indirect, fiduciary knowledge of God that functions as a presupposition for rational thought.[39] As we shall see, this means, among other things, that one should not use a religiously qualified belief, belief in God as creator, father, good, or sovereign, for example, as if it were a rationally qualified belief about God's nature, as if it were a starting point for further abstract speculation as to God's nature. But one can use such trans-rational beliefs as basic presuppositions or assumptions that establish the boundaries for acceptable philosophical,

[39] In his article "Can Faith Be Justified," *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift*, (May 2001): 61-62, Hart compares and contrasts Reformational epistemology and Reformed epistemology on this point.

theoretical thought.[40] Faith knowledge of God can be a starting point for theory, but it cannot be a starting point for speculative forays into God's essence or other elements of a rational belief system.

As I stated above, Hart believes that our knowledge of God through faith may play a role in theoretical pursuits. Even more strongly, he believes that theoretical thought *of necessity* is directed and guided by one's ultimate commitments and beliefs, whether they are Christian beliefs or nonChristian beliefs.[41] Although a theory of God's essence is, as we have seen, not feasible, Hart does not believe that this means the knowledge we acquire through faith cannot play a role in theory. Hence, "Theorizing without commitment is impossible, but so is a theory of the ultimate ground of one's commitment."[42] For Hart, faith is an integral dimension of created reality. In contrast to Plantinga's notion of faith as a *supernatural* gift, Hart understands faith to be a *natural* dimension of reality and human experience. It is part of the original equipment humanity was created with from the beginning. To be sure, *what* a person places his faith in may vary, the Christian appropriately placing his faith in God's revelation and the nonChristian inappropriately placing his faith in some other pseudo-revelation, but faith itself is unavoidable.[43] Thus, every philosophical theory is grounded in faith knowledge of some kind and has to deal

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[40] With the words "presupposition" and "presuppositional," I am attempting to get at the fact that Hart acknowledges the existence of one particular way of knowing (among quite a few others)—the previously discussed fiduciary way of knowing—over which we have no full rational mastery, but without which no rational mastery of any kind is possible. This way of knowing, which shares some of the characteristics of Gadamer's pre-judgments and Polanyi's tacit knowledge, is presupposed in all forms of knowing, including rational theoretical knowing. Insofar as it is presupposed in theoretical knowing it is presuppositional in nature.

[41] *Understanding Our World*, pp. 329-335, "Introduction to Ultimate Assumptions."

[42] Ibid., p. 318. See also pp. 360-370.

[43] This is Hart's opinion of Kai Nielsen, for example: "he covertly depends on a pseudo deity," "Whither Reason and Religion?", p. 148. Hart's explication of Nielsen's religion can be found in his "The Religion of Reason," pp. 1-15.

with the consequences of this commitment: "In this trust we open ourselves to the vulnerability of not owning ourselves. In trust we either will be deeply misled or we will become redemptively oriented to our world and ourselves."[44] And the following quotation seems to imply that this is true for naturalistic philosophers no less than Christian philosophers.

> There is no way we can prove or even justify the assertion that the world is its own origin. It is another belief to which we come without rational justification, conclusive evidence, or compelling grounds. It is, however, an assertion we might arrive at through a firm commitment to the ultimacy of empirical reality. There will likely be more support for this type of commitment in the contemporary climate than for a commitment to God as Creator. Nevertheless, I am committed to God the Creator and I reject all propositions about a self-originating world. So I will have to deal with the philosophical consequences of my beliefs on their own merit. At important points I know they will collide with opposing positions.[45]

For the Christian, then, the knowledge of God that comes through faith may certainly play a role in theory-making, even if a theory of God is impossible, for it is faith alone that gives us ultimate orientation in our world.

The Christian's faith knowledge, as we have seen above, is the kind of knowledge that opens us up to God, because it is the kind of knowledge that accepts God's indirect revelation within the created order, because it is the kind of knowledge that accepts God's revelation for *what it is* without dictating, demanding, or speculating as to how *it should be* or *must be* or *possibly could be*. For Hart, faith and revelation go together. In one of its most important applications, faith *is* trust in revelation.[46] Once again, this is true for everyone, Christian or

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[44] "Focused in Faith," p. 224.

[45] *Understanding Our world*, p. 361.

[46] For Hart, faith and commitment are not exclusively correlated with revelation. One may also have faith in created realities. See *Understanding Our World*, p. 183.

nonChristian. Christians are not the only ones who have faith in something they take as revelation.

> We believe what we see to be true about the world in the light of our commitment, which contains ultimately assumed beliefs. This is known as believing through revelation . . . It is simply what is made known to us through commitment to an ultimate. Something is revealed if it is made known to us . . . I will use the term *revealed* only when I speak of something made known to us through commitment to an ultimate.[47]

Everyone has faith and this faith is in what they take to be revealed to them as ultimate. NonChristians are not to be distinguished from Christians on the basis of a lack of faith, or that they are *unfaithful.* The difference between them is a difference in spiritual orientation to whom or what is ultimate. This difference is a difference with some finality. We can discuss these differences, but we do not share them.[48] For the Christian, God is ultimate. Thus, the Christian opens up in faith to God and God's revelation. And it is the knowledge that results from this faith that plays a role in theory. Indeed, it is because the Christian takes religious belief born of faith in God to be *true knowledge* that such belief may naturally enter into the theoretical task proper. This is how Hart, for example, sees his own ultimate beliefs functioning in his philosophy.

> the discussions and explorations of this Appendix can hardly be explanatory, nor will it be possible to give rational justification for the ultimacies I introduce. But I do believe them to be true. And that belief *brings them into* the discussion. They are the basic assumptions through which I account for my positions in the preceding pages. These assumptions ultimately explain what has gone before them. What follows can at best be an exposition and clarification of what I believe.[49] (italics mine)

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[47] Ibid., p. 331.

[48] For Hart, faith—functioning in trust—is guaranteed by the very order of the universe as established by the world origin, viz., God. It is impossible for a person not to function pistically. What one puts her faith in, however, can vary. Faith, then, should not be automatically associated with Christian, or any other, faith. See *Understanding Our World*, pp. 182-188, pp. 190-191. The Appendix also includes a lot of material in this area.

[49] *Understanding Our World*, pp. 325-326. The appendix Hart refers to is his "Appendix: A Concluding Prescientific Postscript." In this appendix, Hart gives an exposition and clarification of the ultimate beliefs that have guided and directed the philosophical positions he has taken in the preceding pages of *Understanding Our World.*

The various pathways that Hart takes to articulate this thesis usually wend their way through an analysis of the structure of theoretical thought itself. This analysis builds on the idea that theoretical thought cannot operate without presuppositions, commitments or basic assumptions. For Hart, as I quoted him earlier, "Theorizing without commitment is impossible," and he adds to this, "Without commitment, our realm of study is bound to be a philosophy without truth."[50] At the foundation of every theory are certain basic beliefs, certain ultimate assumptions that give guidance and orientation to the theory, that serve as presuppositions for theory, and that determine what will be true and rational. These basic assumptions or beliefs are born of a person's commitment or faith in that which is experienced by them, and assumed to be revealed to them, as ultimate.

> Such an ultimate belief is much more an accepted belief than an understood fact. We understand and explain many things by reference to other things we know and understand. With ultimate beliefs this is not possible. They are accepted because of our commitment. They are a part of our commitment. And the commitment is made in trust. The meaning of the world is given to those who accept what they see in the light of these assumptions.[51]

And thus these ultimate beliefs differ from and precede beliefs that are essentially rational or theoretical in nature and qualification. For Hart, ultimate beliefs *are* religious beliefs, religiously qualified, trans-rational beliefs.[52] These fiduciary beliefs by their very nature cannot be fully explained, but also, by their very nature, form the parameters within which everything else can be understood. As such, they become the starting points for rationally qualified activity.

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[50] Ibid., p. 318.

[51] Ibid., p. 331

[52] Ibid., p. 432, note 65.

And, consequently, basic religious beliefs should not be understood to be the product of rationally qualified processes:

> Conceptually we cannot work out the beliefs of commitment solely on the basis of principles of inference. Our believing experience of the meaning of these beliefs limits inferential approaches. We will have to accept the conceptual meaning of these beliefs, without prior rational justification, for their own worth. Only then can inferential approaches to them be trusted. And this is normal.[53]

For Hart, a Christian's basic theistic beliefs, beliefs in God's sovereignty, God's goodness, or God's wisdom for example, are ultimate assumptions born of faith and trust that form the parameters within which theoretical thought understands the world. Although they have perceptual, conceptual and other foundations, at bottom, one cannot explain our acceptance of them, or rationally prove or justify them, on the basis of these foundations: "Such acceptance is ultimately not based on rational or factual evidence or on observable realities."[54] We do not put our faith in God, and believe what we do about God, solely on the basis of what we have perceived and understood. Theistic beliefs become basic beliefs for the Christian simply because they have been accepted in faith on their own terms—in the same way that the naturalistic philosopher has accepted the ultimacy of the natural world. This is in contrast to Plantinga, for whom such beliefs are properly basic religious beliefs, born of the rational faculties of faith or the sensus divinitatis, that are rationally justified, internally and externally rational, and warranted *because* they are grounded in direct rational experience of God's essential, unchanging nature. As a result, such beliefs may serve as the rational starting point for new knowledge about God, knowledge not given through revelation. For Hart, the failure to see that beliefs of this type are trans-rational, without being irrational, the failure to see that such beliefs are *religiously*

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[53] Ibid., p.363.

[54] Ibid., p. 184.

qualified beliefs, is a crucial mistake. For him, it is evidence of a rationalistically reductionist epistemology;[55] an epistemology that, as we have seen, inevitably leads to self-referential incoherency:

> The belief that all our beliefs must either be rational-empirical beliefs or else risk being incoherent is itself not obviously a rational-empirical belief. As a second order belief about beliefs it does not evidently meet its own criteria . . . To believe that it is of that kind would be self-referentially incoherent. I do not mean to suggest that having beliefs which are not simply rational-empirical is a problem. I believe that we both have and should have trans-rational beliefs.[56]

From Hart's point of view, Plantinga fails to see that his belief in the rationality of belief, and thus the rationality of religious belief, is not itself rational in nature.

Speaking of his own philosophical work, *Understanding Our World*, as an example of these ideas, Hart says "Many themes in this study are based on the assumption that God is the Creator." At the same time he maintains that this conviction cannot be justified or developed by means of theoretical thought.[57] The knowledge of God *is* present within Hart's theoretical pursuits, but as a basic *presupposition* born of faith in God's revelation, and not as the *result* of rational conceptualization. Faith knowledge of God *precedes* theoretical pursuits and can, as a consequence, only function in theory as a presupposition. Any attempt to theoretically justify one's assumption of God, or the basic assumptions of any theory for that matter, is really self-justification and cannot in and of itself inspire trust in someone who does not share those presuppositions. Thus, the foundations of rational justification, if there are such foundations and if there is . . .

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[55] See Hart's "The Religion of Reason," p. 1.

[56] Ibid., pp. 1-2.

[57] *Understanding Our World*, p. 319.

> such justification, would in any case not themselves be rationally justifiable, lest rational justification turns out to be self-justification, a form of justification which seldom inspires trust.[58]

Hart's point here is not that one should never rationally defend one's religious beliefs.[59] His point is that all theoretical arguments presuppose religious commitments, and so it is impossible to make such arguments on a neutral, autonomous basis. That is, on a basis devoid of the knowledge that comes by faith in revelation (whether Christian or nonChristian faith). Consequently, all such argumentation will tend to be suspect for someone who has not previously committed herself in faith to the same basic set of assumptions.

> In a discussion of ultimate assumptions, their role will be assumed to be that of true beliefs. We will not find any ground for undermining our acceptance of them. We may examine such beliefs and ask questions about them in order to understand them better. But they will be assumed and, in that sense, remain unquestioned. If any discussion with respect to beliefs can possibly be neutral, objective, or unprejudiced with respect to ultimate assumptions---which I think is not the case---in any case a discussion about ultimate assumptions cannot be thus unprejudiced.[60]

And thus Hart's point of view is, despite the shared Calvinist worldview, radically different from the Reformed epistemological project. For Plantinga, properly basic religious beliefs are *rationally* qualified beliefs, whereas Hart's basic assumptions are *religiously* qualified beliefs. Reformed epistemology proceeds on the assumption that God is directly accessible to us and that our belief in God can be rational, rationally warranted and defensible. For Hart, contrariwise, God is indirectly accessible and religious belief is born of faith, not reason, and cannot be definitively defended on a purely rational basis because such a defense presupposes the

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[58] Ibid., p. 422, note 52

[59] Hart himself does not often make arguments of this kind in his philosophical work, although they are not totally absent. See, for example, "The Religion of Reason," pp. 9-10.

very beliefs it is attempting to justify. For Hart, it follows that all talk of one's basic religious beliefs, whatever they may be, is circular in nature.

> In my opinion, truth and certainty flow authoritatively from the source of our commitment. The ultimate assumptions are the confessed beliefs of those who do not doubt what they hear, see, or discover in the light of these assumptions. This view of ultimate assumptions implies that all talk of them is unavoidably circular. We always start from ultimate commitments in the justification of any belief and we assume them throughout.[61]

Although the Reformed epistemologists make much of the idea that argument is *not* necessary to justify or give warrant to belief in God, this does not mean that religious beliefs are not rational in essence and, therefore, not vulnerable to critical, rational attack. One's properly basic religious beliefs are merely *prima facie* rational. For Plantinga, the properly basic rationality of religious belief is, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, based on certain conditions and circumstances, conditions and circumstances that are essentially religious experiences. But because the beliefs born of these experiences are merely prima facie rational, they are always susceptible to being overridden by some new argument.

> 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.[62]

Consequently, although a person's religious beliefs may function as a legitimate rational starting point for theoretical thought, this does not mean that they are safe from the onslaught of reason. Because they are taken to be rational in essence, they are perpetually vulnerable and susceptible to being overridden. Even if the initial formulation of a religious belief is made on a

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[60] *Understanding Our World*, p. 330.

[61] Ibid., p. 333.

[62] "Reason and Belief in God," p. 83.

properly basic rational basis, that belief can never be taken for granted, can never remain unquestioned. In certain situations, the theistic/Christian believer will be obligated to *show* that her beliefs are rationally justified, internally or externally rational, or warranted. That is the burden Wolterstorff places on the modern *Christian* member of the Western intelligentsia. That is why Plantinga has felt obligated to offer up his Free Will Defense.

For Hart, in contrast, because our knowledge of God by faith precedes and lies behind the Christian's theoretical pursuits, and since faith knowledge is a different kind of knowledge than theoretical knowledge—the only kind that can accept God's indirect revelation, the only kind that can accept *anything* as revelatory—it follows that reason lacks the resources in and of itself to definitively override faith's deliverances. Indeed, the reverse is true. Reason needs the direction provided by faith and commitment in order to operate. Reason needs the orientation provided by revelation, any revelation, in order to find its place in the world. Those who have failed to see this, those who have thought of reason as neutral and autonomous, ignore the fact that reason has been used by any number of ultimate perspectives.

> The story of reason as the rock bottom of trust in the rationality tradition points to a source of authority which in itself has no resources to guide a culture to a truly happy life. Reason alone lacks the transrational norms that need to guide the rational critique. Without such guidance it is not surprising that reason is used by left and right, progressive and conservative, capitalist and socialist.[63]

Thus, even if one were to make an attempt to theoretically justify the knowledge of God acquired by faith, it would fail to *definitively* show through argument that faith is rationally warranted or unwarranted. God's revelation to us, God's self disclosure to us, is either accepted in faith or rejected for faith in some other assumed ultimate. Rational concepts are certainly involved in our knowledge of God, but they do not *rationally* ground our knowledge. The

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[63] "Sorting Out Reason," p. 203.

knowledge of God is grounded in our faith in that which we experience to be revealed as ultimate.

Thus, a theory of God's essence is not possible even while it may also be said that knowledge of God is, not only possible, but an important component of theory for a Christian. Because knowledge of God through faith is a distinctively different kind of knowledge than theoretical knowledge, it can play an important presuppositional role for theory, but cannot itself come about as a result of theory.

C. Our Knowledge of God is Fiduciary Knowledge that is Presuppositional in Nature Because it is Grounded in the Experience Faith

The reason why trans-rational beliefs born of commitment and faith *precede* the rational-empirical beliefs of theoretical thought, the reason why they are presuppositional for rational thought rather than properly basic, is because we *indirectly* experience God *prior* to any attempt at theoretical analysis of the world. Prior to theoretical analysis, God is presented to us in divine revelation, God confronts us from all sides. Prior to theoretical analysis, a person either surrenders in faith and knows, or resists in unbelief and does not know, God. And for Hart, if by the power of the Holy Spirit one comes to know God through faith, then that knowledge may certainly play a role in theory.

> A theory of God is impossible, but this does not deny God a role in theory. God is present in theorizing if a theorist believes God's revelation and allows his beliefs to influence his theorizing . . . [64]

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[64] *Understanding Our World*, p.322.

This is why theoretical thought can never be a neutral activity. It presupposes the prior religious response to God's self-disclosures within created reality. God is indirectly present within the created order in a variety of ways, in nature and Scripture for example, and a fiduciary, rather than a rational, response on our part is unavoidable. On Hart's account, all theoretical activity is guided by a person's basic religious beliefs born of a spiritual response to God's revelation, whether positive or negative. These basic beliefs are beliefs in what is assumed to be ultimate, they are the person's ultimate assumptions. And being the basic assumptions for theory, they are not theoretical themselves, and cannot be explained or determined theoretically.

> the ultimate assumptions of a theory do not belong to the theory in the sense that they can be theoretically explained and accounted for. They are the foundation for one's analysis and they cannot themselves be analytically justified. We believe them in the pistic or confessional sense of the term *belief*.[65]

None of this implies that there is no place for reason in religion or that reason does not impact faith. Hart grants that it is possible and proper to rationally articulate and defend God's revelation and the religious belief it inspires. When Hart denies that a theory of God is possible, he is not denying that we can think about God. He is denying that such reflection can reach the level of science or philosophy, that it can grasp the properties in God's nature and understand them within the context of a rational belief system. For Hart, one cannot rationally determine or decisively defend one's religious beliefs on a purely logical basis. Indeed, as we have seen, it is only after we have become believers in something as ultimate that our inferential approaches to these beliefs can be trusted by us.[66] This is because we do not have direct perceptual or rational access to the essence of God and because our knowledge of God is first and foremost indirect

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[65] Ibid., p. 319.

[66] Ibid., p. 363.

faith knowledge mediated by creaturely realities. Faith knowledge by its very nature precedes rationally qualified theoretical thought. Consequently, "it will not be possible to justify our commitment through analysis."[67] Once, however, God has been allowed into our experience through faith in divine revelation, once God has become known through faith, it becomes possible to think about and defend those beliefs and that revelation. But such rationally qualified activity can only occur within the parameters of the terms revelation presents to us, can only occur within the indirect contexts of God's self-disclosures: "Believers assess their religious beliefs from within their faith. No other avenue is open."[68] For Hart, rational reflection on the knowledge of faith must always occur from within, and assuming, that faith. Our knowledge of God is presuppositional for theory because it is grounded in our experience of God through faith, experience that occurs prior to rational reflection.

> I do not mean to say there is no role for reason in religion. I do not want to say either that genuine beliefs within the bounds of religion cannot be rationally defended against challenges. But the role of reason is limited to grasping what religion in fact is, rather than prescribing what it should rationally be. Reason's role is not that of determining whether or not people should be religious (most will be anyway), but of trying to grasp conceptually what the peculiar role of religion in fact is.[69]

Hart's point here is similar to Clouser's. Within activity qualified by faith, our concepts apply to the God revealed through faith, and not to God's unrevealed essence. One may certainly engage in rational "exposition and clarification"[70] of these ultimate beliefs, one may "examine

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[67] Ibid., p. 319.

[68] "The Religion of Reason," p. 15.

[69] "Whither Reason and Religion," pp. 215-216.

[70] *Understanding Our World*, pp. 325-326.

such beliefs and ask questions about them in order to understand them better,"[71] but this rational reflection is only of the God who has been previously disclosed within the parameters established by divine revelation, only the God whose creatiomorphic and metaphoric revelations have been previously experienced and known through faith. Rationally qualified thinking about God, therefore, should never be understood to have a *neutral* and *abstract* conceptual nature—as if it could bypass God as revealed in the Bible and elsewhere and grasp the divine essence, as if the Bible itself has an abstract formal nature that facilitates philosophical theology of God's essence. Instead, rational thought about God must be thought to have a contextual, metaphorical nature.

> These problems would not be so bad if Christians did not think or speak about God or, if in doing so, they would do it only "as a manner of speaking." . . . Why can Christians not understand all speech about God in this way? Who could object if we said all speech and thought about God is metaphorical, figurative, nonliteral, and creatiomorphic? If God reveals creaturely to creatures, God's self-revelation could be viewed in terms of God taking on creaturely dimensions and functions.[72]

Given this view, Hart's position is more radical than the traditional analogical theory exemplified in Herman Bavinck's Reformed theology, whose position is more radical than Plantinga's more univocal view. For Bavinck, although our faith in God has an indirect, metaphorical dimension to it, a dimension that Plantinga's more direct, rationalist position denies or denigrates, it is not *purely* metaphorical. There must always be an epistemic connection to the real essence of God, because he regards symbolic or metaphoric knowledge of God as arbitrary.[73]

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[71] Ibid., p. 330.

[72] Ibid., p. 321.

[73] See Bavinck's *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans., Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1956): 134. *Our Reasonable Faith* first appeared in 1909 in the Netherlands under the title *Magnalia Dei (the Wonderful Works of God)*, and is a compendium or synopsis of Bavinck's 4 volume *Reformed Dogmatics* (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1895-1901). "The knowledge which we get of God by way of His revelation is therefore a knowledge of faith. It is not adequate, in the sense that it is not equivalent to the being of God, for God is infinitely exalted above all His creatures. Such knowledge is not purely symbolical either—that is to say, couched in expressions which we have arbitrarily formed and which do not correspond to any reality; instead

For Hart, in contrast, faith knowledge is fully metaphorical and Bavinck's fears are unwarranted. Since it is God who takes the initiative to reveal in terms of the creaturely, since God "reveals creaturely to creatures," such revelation is never arbitrary.[74] It is indicative of what God actually wants to communicate to humanity. "God is only what God says, not anything else. We do not know God 'in God's essence' . . . "[75] Confronted by this revelation, the appropriate thing to do is submit or surrender in faith, and only later reflect upon the implications of one's acceptance.

Thus, rationally qualified reflection on God's revelation cannot go further than to explain one's beliefs "through clarification, exposition, examples, and illustrations."[76] One can rationally articulate one's faith, but one cannot rationally determine it. And any defense of faith can never be neutral or definitive in an ultimate logical sense. Any notion that more can be achieved, any attempt to systematically conceptualize the essence of God in a philosophical theology, any attempt to rationally justify such an attempt to master the mystery in a rationalistic epistemology of religious belief, fails to succeed as advertised, and bypasses and misinterprets the real God of revelation. God's self-disclosures do not make God available for that kind of knowledge. Further, it mistakes faith activity for rational activity, and elevates reason to the position of super-judge over biblical religion and all other non-rationalistic perspectives.

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this knowledge is ectypal (ectype: an impression, as in printing) or analogical (analogy: correspondence or similarity in form) because it is based on the likeness and relationship which, not-withstanding God's absolute majesty, nevertheless exists between God and all the works of His hand. The knowledge which God grants us of Himself in nature and in Scripture is limited, finite, fragmentary, but it is nevertheless true and pure."

[74] An example of Hart's view that God's revelation, though creatiomorphic and metaphorical, is not arbitrary, can be found in *Understanding Our World*, pp. 340-341. There Hart maintains that the word "Word" in the Bible, understood as the origin of order in the universe, "is not arbitrary," and is "probably quite significant."

[75] Ibid., p. 335.

[76] Ibid., pp. 319-320.

> The mistake of seeing religion as identical with a [rationally coherent] belief system, trust as assent to doctrine, has its complement in seeing reason as super-judge. The peculiar role reversal of reason and religion in the West has been to make reason the only religion . . . and to make religion (other than that of reason) irrational and hence unseemly for (religiously) rational people.[77]

From Hart's perspective, Plantinga's interpretation of biblical religion as a rationally closed and coherent belief system undermines his idea that theistic beliefs can function as starting points for thought. If belief in God is rational in essence it is, as a consequence, susceptible to rational rules and arguments; it can be judged and assessed by standards other than its own; it can be judged by standards it was never meant to meet. Although the initial formulation of a theistic belief may be accomplished apart from rational argument, it is only a temporary respite from the argumentation that must inevitably come.

And thus Hart's argument against all rationalistic epistemologies of religious belief, including Reformed epistemology, is not based ultimately on reason itself. Hart does not believe that he is putting forth an argument that will convince all rational people, nor is his critique of the various rationalistic views that they are irrational.[78] His argument is based instead on his experience of how God is *actually* presented to us in divine revelation, it is based on the trust that this revelation has inspired, it is grounded in the knowledge that he actually possesses of the God who has been made available to him. Thus, the essence of his argument is that the picture of God painted in Christian, rationalistic belief systems and arguments, arguments like Plantinga's Free Will Defense, do not present to us the same God as the one he has experienced and known in the Scriptures and elsewhere. For Hart, orthodox, rationalistic, Christianity fails to present an *authentic* version of biblical religion; it fails to present God as actually revealed in the Bible.

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[77] "Whither Reason and Religion," p. 216.

[78] *Understanding Our World*, pp. 423-424, note 59.

> What is unavoidably correct here is that Christianity, certainly orthodox Christianity, is a *de facto* belief system, a system of doctrine . . . But I want to argue that Christianity is itself a product of taking Biblical religion into the rationality tradition and that Biblical religion loses nothing of its authenticity—to the contrary, may gain in authenticity—in shedding its image as a belief system.[79]

For Hart, then, biblical authenticity is everything, and rational warrant, acceptability, and respectability have meaning only within the parameters established by God's revelation. Any attempt to rationally enclose God's revelation in a logically coherent system does violence to that revelation; it encloses what cannot be enclosed; it logically limits what must remain open; it usurps the starting spot from its rightful owner.

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[79] "Whither Reason and Religion," p. 205.

CHAPTER 4

ON PLANTINGA'S PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

In contrast to Hart's belief that God can only be related to and known indirectly by faith through the mediation of created realities, Plantinga believes that it is possible to gain direct, rational access to God and to God's nature. It is possible to experience God "as He is" and "in Himself," and to conceptually grasp or enclose the properties in the divine nature. This knowledge is said to be fully rational in nature, inclusive of internal rationality. In this Chapter I question whether Plantinga actually succeeds in this respect. That is, I question whether or not the things Plantinga says about God actually do hang together in a rationally coherent system of belief. I shall show that Plantinga's view of God is troubled by a number of logical incoherencies, and further, is troubled by a number of religious difficulties as well. As I mentioned in the Introduction, my main goal here is to show that Reformed epistemology does not gain the internal rational coherency in religious belief that it treasures even when it takes a position in philosophical theology that does not do full justice to the biblical teachings about God.

A. God Has a Nature

In the opening paragraphs of Plantinga's *Does God Have A Nature?,* he observes that most Christians have commonly held that some of the most important facets of God's greatness

> are his *aseity*—his uncreatedness, self-sufficiency and independence of everything else—and his *sovereignty*—his control over all things and the dependence of all else on his creative and sustaining activity. Most Christians claim that God is the

> uncreated creator of all things; all things depend on him, and he depends upon nothing at all.[1]

Most Christians, so Plantinga seems to be saying, acknowledge the fundamental characteristics of Hart's Reformational position: that God transcends the creation, that there is a radical difference between creator and creature, and that everything depends on God and God does not depend on anything. He goes on to say that with respect to the creation itself this idea does not seem to present any problems. It seems correct to say that the creation is dependent on God, but that God is in no way dependent on the creation.

> Mountains, planets, stars, quarks, you and I and all the rest of us—we have all been created by God and we exist at his sufferance. On the other hand, he does not depend on us, either for his existence or for his properties.[2]

In Plantinga's view, however, problems arise when one considers the realm of *abstract objects.* By "abstract objects," Plantinga is referring to realities that include, among other things, Wolterstorff's "predicables," "universals," "kinds," and "properties." As we shall see, Plantinga's abstract objects also have something in common with Hart's notion of law, that is, with the idea that there are conditions that determine the nature of things. For Plantinga, the view that most Christians hold, the view that seems to be the same as Hart's Reformational stance, *falters* when one starts thinking about abstract entities. And the reason for this is that these abstract realities, in contrast to the things of creation, seem to exist *independently* of God. Indeed, he states that it is "natural to think" that abstract objects are *everlasting* and *necessary* objects.

> What does or might seem to create a problem are not these creatures of God, but the whole realm of abstract objects—the whole Platonic pantheon of universals, properties, kinds, propositions, numbers, sets, states of affairs and possible worlds. It is natural to think of these things as *everlasting,* as having neither beginning nor end. There was a time before which there were no human beings,

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[1] *Does God Have A nature?* pp. 1-2.

[2] Ibid., p. 2.

> but no time before which there was not such a thing as the property of being human or the proposition *there are human beings* . . . . Abstract objects are also naturally thought of as *necessary* features of reality, as objects whose non-existence is impossible. There could have been no mountains or planets; but could there have been no such thing as the property of being a mountain or the proposition *there are nine planets?* That proposition could have been false, obviously, but could it have been *non-existent?* It is hard to see how.[3]

The problem that Plantinga sees with abstract objects, as opposed to created entities, is that they seem to exist outside of God's sovereignty—because they are outside of divine control, and they seem to violate God's aseity—because God may be more dependent on them than they are on God. It does not appear to be the case, in other words, that God creates them or sustains them in being. At this stage of his argument Plantinga comes close to Wolterstorff's rather strict Platonic point of view as articulated in *On Universals*.[4] Like Wolterstorff's Christian version of Platonism, there appears to be a fundamental *exception* to what most Christians, and Reformational philosophers, believe about God being the creator of *all* things.

> According to Augustine, God created everything distinct from him; did he then create these things? Presumably not; they have no beginning. Are they dependent on him? But how could a thing whose non-existence is impossible—the number 7, let's say, or the property of being a horse—depend upon anything for its existence?[5]

Plantinga points out that this is the problem that caused Augustine to transform Plato's theory of ideas in such a way that abstract objects become, in some obscure way, a part of God. This is one of the features of the traditional Augustinian position in which God and abstract objects are identified with one another; it is one of the features of the doctrine of divine

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[3] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

[4] See especially "Part Four" and the "Epilogue" of *On Universals*.

[5] *Does God Have A Nature?*, pp. 4-5.

simplicity. Augustine felt obligated to do this in order to preserve his view of God as the origin of all things other than God.

> It is easy to see why Augustine took such a course, and easy to see why most later medieval thinkers adopted similar views. For the alternative seems to *limit* God in an important way; the existence and necessity of these things distinct from him seems incompatible with his sovereignty.[6]

God's being limited by various everlasting and necessary abstract objects becomes even more problematic when one considers God's own properties, for God's properties are also abstract objects and can be rationally grasped in concepts. Just as the properties of created things seem to exist independently of God, so likewise God's own properties seem to exist independently of God.

> And what about his own properties—omnipotence, justice, wisdom and the like? Did he create them? But if God has created wisdom, then he existed before it did, in which case, presumably, there was a time at which he was not wise. But surely he has *always* been wise; he has not *acquired* wisdom.[7]

And Plantinga goes on to say that God's properties seem to condition, limit, and determine God. It follows that the abstract objects that make up God's properties are much more than mere intelligible objects. As I noted above, they function in a way that is similar to the way that law functions in Hart's philosophy, except that here they hold for God as well as the creation. Using Reformational terminology, God's properties are laws that God is subject to and that govern God. God has apparently no control over the *existence* or the *characteristic nature* of the divine properties. They are the necessary *conditions* of God's being the way that God is and,

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[6] Ibid., p. 5.

[7] Ibid., p. 6.

as a consequence, it appears that God is neither independent of them nor in sovereign control over them.[8]

Going even further, Plantinga considers the possibility that God has a nature. By the term "nature," he means a property that something has essentially that includes each property essential to it.

> One property includes another if it is not possible that there be an object that has the first but not the second. Thus the property of being a horse includes the property of being an animal. The nature of an object can be thought of as a conjunctive property, including as conjuncts just those properties essential to that object. Accordingly, an object has a nature if it has any essential properties at all.[9]

If it is true that God has a nature, then every property God has essentially is a property that God cannot fail to have. If God is essentially omniscient, for example, then God cannot fail to be omniscient. God has no control over divine omniscience. God *must be* omniscient. If God has a nature, then God's essential properties determine God in such a way that God has nothing to do with it and has no control over it.[10]

And Plantinga recognizes that this is problematic. It does not do justice to Augustine's view that God is the creator and sustainer of everything other than himself. It does not do justice to the belief of most Christians that God is the uncreated creator of all things. And it strongly contrasts with the basic religious presuppositions of Hart's philosophy. Plantinga is well aware of this last implication and he acknowledges it by quoting Hart on the difficulties of holding to the view that God is limited by, or subject to, properties that are not created by God, nor identical to

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[8] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[9] Ibid., p. 7, note 1.

[10] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

God. In this quotation, Hart is pointing out the difficulties with Wolterstorff's views on this issue; views that are essentially the same as Plantinga's at this stage of his argument.

> As far as I can see, a view that commits one to holding that God is subject to laws (exemplifies predicables) that are neither created by him nor identical with him, is a view that commits one to holding that God is neither sovereign nor omnipotent.[11]

Despite Hart's warning, Plantinga's position on the relation of abstract objects to God at this stage *appears* to be close to Wolterstorff's Christian Platonism. In contrast to Hart's position, in which God transcends the creation and all law, and in which law is controlled by God and not the other way around, Plantinga thus far seems to be taking the position that God is conditioned and limited by abstract objects, inclusive of the ones that make up the divine nature. In fact, early on in *Does God Have A Nature?* he says that he intends to *defend* the idea that "God *has* a nature which is *not* identical with him."[12] (italics mine) At the end of this same work, however, he asks certain questions that, if answered in the affirmative, would seem to modify this Christian Platonism somewhat. That is, he asks certain questions that, if answered affirmatively, would soften his Platonic inclinations with at least a measure of Hart's more traditional theistic view. The main idea behind these suggestions is that abstract objects may be dependent upon God in an important sense after all.

Plantinga begins his questioning by noting that it is part of God's nature as an omniscient being to believe or affirm the existence of abstract objects.

> if the number 7 or the proposition *all men are mortal* exist necessarily, then God has essentially the property of affirming their existence. That property, therefore,

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[11] "On the Distinction," p. 184. Cited by Plantinga on p. 8 of *Does God Have A Nature?*

[12] *Does God Have A Nature?*, p. 10.

> will be part of his nature. Indeed, for any necessarily existing abstract object *O*, the property of affirming the existence of *O* is part of God's nature.[13]

Prior to this line of questioning at the end of *Does God Have A Nature?,* God's believing and affirming the existence of numbers and other abstract objects would not have implied that these objects are *dependent* upon God's believing and affirming them. Plantinga's earlier philosophical work is decidedly different from Hart's on this point. In Hart's philosophy, God sovereignly establishes, and transcends, the conditions and laws that govern created reality. Law, having been established by God and sustained in existence by God, obviously cannot be thought of as everlasting (because it has a beginning), nor necessary (for Hart, as we have seen, law determines what is necessary, but is not necessary itself).[14] For Plantinga in contrast, prior to this line of questioning, abstract entities were definitely not understood to be dependent upon God's believing and affirming.

> God hasn't *created* the numbers; a thing is created only if its existence has a beginning, and no number ever began to exist . . . And of course the same goes for other necessarily existing abstract objects. Though God affirms the truth of only some propositions, he affirms the *existence* of them all; and if no proposition could have failed to exist, then for any proposition *p*, it is part of God's nature to affirm that *p* exists. The same holds for states of affairs and possible worlds; each possible world is such that God affirms its existence.[15]

Thus, the believing or affirming the existence of everlasting and necessary abstract objects on God's part does not in and of itself imply that these objects have been created by God

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[13] Ibid., p. 142.

[14] On p. 65 of *Understanding Our World*, Hart specifically rejects the form of realism that postulates the eternal existence of conditions or order. On p. 441-442 he gives definition to the terms "condition," "law," "norm," etc. On p. 449 he defines "necessity." See also the Appendix, 8.1.1., "The sovereign God," pp. 335-338. From Hart's point of view, arguing for the existence of everlasting and necessary abstract objects assumes the ability of inferential reason to answer questions only God's revelation can answer.

[15] *Does God Have A Nature?*, pp. 142-143.

or are dependent upon God in any important sense. Plantinga's new line of questioning, however, begins by wondering whether this might be the case after all. The specific example he uses is the necessary proposition 7 + 5 = 12. He questions if it could be that because it is part of God's nature to believe 7 + 5 = 12, that 7 + 5 = 12 is true? Does God's believing and affirming this proposition *make it true*, *explain it* or *ground it* in some way? And is, conversely, 7 + 5 = 12 itself *not* the explanation or ground of God's believing 7 + 5 = 12?[16] Plantinga refuses to answer these questions in *Does God Have A Nature?*, but he makes an observation that implies an affirmative answer to them would modify the Christian Platonism of his earlier work.

> These are good questions, and good topics for further study. If we can answer them affirmatively, then perhaps we can point to an important dependence of abstract objects upon God, even though necessary truths about these objects are not within his control.[17]

It would appear that what Plantinga is aiming for in these speculations is a synthesis of two separate worlds. On the one hand, he apparently wants to hold on to certain features of the Platonic position. He wants to hold on to the idea that the *truth* of abstract entities is not within God's control. On the other hand, he seems to be suggesting a more traditional theistic position in which the explanation, ground, and even the truth of abstract objects are in some important—and as yet unspecified—way dependent upon God. In these questions and suggestions he does not even bring up what one would think is a rather urgent and important implication, given the fact that *Does God Have A Nature?* is, indeed, about God's nature. If God's believing and affirming in some way explains, grounds or makes true abstract objects, and since God's nature *is* an abstract object, does God's believing and affirming the divine nature and the properties in

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[16] Ibid., pp. 145-146.

[17] Ibid., p. 146.

the divine nature explain, make true or ground the divine nature? Does God, in some important way, determine the divine nature? Is Plantinga making the seemingly incoherent claim that God's ideas of the divine nature produce the very nature that seems to limit and condition God? Is he abandoning the idea he wished to defend at the beginning of *Does God Have A Nature?*, that God *has* a nature that is *not* identical to God?

In Plantinga's article "How to Be an Anti-realist," he returns to some of these issues, and extends and refines his position on them. He defends a view that he names "divine creative anti-realism," the main feature of which is a synthesis of the basic intuitions of anti-realism and realism.[18] On the one hand, anti-realism's basic intuition is that truth must be the product of a person's noetic activity. This is the element of the synthesis that is clearly non-Platonic in nature. On the other hand, realism's basic intuition is that truth must be independent of *our* noetic activity. This is the element of the synthesis that is still Platonic in nature. The synthesis of these two elements that Plantinga proposes softens his Platonic inclinations somewhat and brings him to a more Augustinian position in which truth is associated with the thoughts in God's mind. Truth in this perspective is independent of *our* noetic activity, but it is not independent of God's.[19] Propositions, for example, can only be true if they are believed by a person, that person being God.

> The suggestion I mean to endorse can be put as follows: truth is not independent of mind; it is necessary that for any proposition p, p is true only if it is believed, and if and only if it is believed by God . . . In the same way propositions themselves, the things that are true or false, are not independent of mind.[20]

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[18] Alvin Plantinga, "How to Be An Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1982): 69.

[19] Ibid., p. 68.

[20] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

An important clarification of this position, however, is that although propositions are the thoughts of God, can only be true if they are thought by God—apparently because they are dependent upon God for their *existence*—the *truth* of propositions is not up to God. It is not the case, therefore . . .

> that God's believing *p* is prior, in some important sense, to *p*'s being true. God's believing *p* is not, in general, an explanation of *p*'s being true, or what makes *p* true, or the reason for *p*'s being true . . . On the other hand it is the case, I think, that a proposition exists because God thinks or conceives it. For propositions, as I see it, are best thought of [as] the thoughts of God.[21]

In these last two quotations it would appear that Plantinga is making the rather paradoxical claim that in order for a proposition to be true God must believe it, because a proposition cannot be true if it does not exist, but the proposition is not true *because* God believes it.

In any case, it seems evident that Plantinga has begun to give some *affirmative* answers to the questions he posed at the end of *Does God Have A Nature?*. But it also appears that he has, somewhat confusingly, answered them in the *negative* as well. That is, he is now willing to affirm that at least one class of abstract objects, *propositions*, are dependent upon God for their *existence*, but he is not willing to affirm that the *truth* of propositions is caused by God's believing them. There would appear to be a divorce between the existence and the truth of propositions. It seems to be the case that necessary propositions like 7 + 5 = 12 can perhaps be *explained by,* or *grounded in,* or even *made true by* the fact that God believes and affirms them, because without God's believing and affirming they would not exist, but the *truth* of 7 + 5 = 12 is not explained by, grounded in, or determined by any overt dependence on God. Instead, God

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[21] Ibid., pp. 69-70.

believes propositions *because* they are true.[22] One might legitimately say that for Plantinga the truth of propositions, although dependent upon God for their existence, nonetheless determine and limit what God can believe. The idea here seems to be that the demands of traditional theism can be met, that is, the demand that God be the origin of everything other than God, without sacrificing the Platonic commitment to, if not the independent existence of propositions, then at least the independence of the truth of such propositions.

A further feature of the theory of divine creative anti-realism is that it does not follow from the fact that propositions are thoughts in God's mind, and are dependent upon God for their existence, that they are unnecessary or contingent. Their necessity is derived from God's being a necessary being.

> God is a necessary being who has essentially the property of thinking just the thoughts he does think; these thoughts, then are conceived or thought by God in every possible world and hence exist necessarily.[23]

In other words, the everlasting and necessary character of propositions remains, but is now derived from and dependent upon God's own necessity as a being. The necessity of propositions is now grounded, in Augustinian fashion, in God's necessity, instead of being grounded, in Platonic fashion, in themselves. Perhaps Plantinga would still be willing to say that propositions have not been created by God (because their non-existence is impossible), but the impossibility of their non-existence is now said to be grounded in God's necessity, rather than in themselves. Perhaps one could say that Plantinga believes that propositions have been dependent upon God for their existence from all eternity. Whatever is the case, it seems clear that the truth of propositions *is not* dependent upon God, but their existence and necessity *is* dependent on God.

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[22] Ibid., p.70.

[23] Ibid., p. 70.

Furthermore, Plantinga, in his article "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," extends the above ideas beyond propositions to *all* abstract objects (properties, relations, numbers, sets, possible worlds, etc.).

> how shall we think about so-called abstract objects such as propositions, states of affairs, sets, properties, possible worlds and the like? . . . Perhaps it is part of God's very nature to think and thereby *produce* these objects, and perhaps God exists necessarily; in that case abstract objects would be necessary beings that are nevertheless causally dependent upon something else.[24] (italics mine)

By construing abstract objects in Augustinian fashion as thoughts which God thinks essentially, the theory implies that a theist can couple the everlasting and necessary existence of Platonic entities with their eternal dependence upon God for existence.

B. Logical and Religious Problems

Although I believe it is fair to say that in "How to Be an Anti-realist" and in "Augustinian Christian Philosophy" Plantinga has made a transition from the rather strict Christian Platonism that dominated the greater part of *Does God Have A Nature?,* to a more Augustinian perspective in which abstract objects are thoughts in God's mind (whether this also includes Augustine's doctrine of divine simplicity is not mentioned), it is also true that he has not worked out the implications of this theory with reference to the divine nature. That is, he has not yet stated if the theory of divine creative anti-realism cancels out the independent existence of God's nature, the defense of which was the main point of *Does God Have A Nature?*. Is the divine nature still

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[24] Alvin Plantinga, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist* 75 (1992): 309.

understood to be independent of God, or is it now, like all other abstract objects, dependent upon God's believing and affirming for its existence?

Although Plantinga has not yet answered these questions, they are *implied* by the theory of divine creative anti-realism. Let us, then, temporarily assume for the purposes of argument that the theory of divine creative anti-realism does include the idea that God's nature is dependent upon God's believing and affirming like every other abstract object. What could be said about such a theory? The first three of the following four criticisms make this assumption, and draw out the implications.[25]

Before making such a critique, however, it should be brought to mind once again that Plantinga believes that reason has direct access to God and to the divine nature. Our concepts and propositions concerning God can be, therefore, fitted into a logically coherent belief system, they can be *internally rational.* Indeed, we can be rationally warranted in our theistic belief partly because these beliefs can be internally rational. The relationship between God, the divine nature, abstract objects, created entities, etc. can and should make logical sense. But the following three criticisms show that this is far from being the case. All three of them deal with what could be termed "chicken and egg difficulties." That is, they all turn around the issue of what has ontological priority: God, or abstract objects. Given the assumption we are making for the purposes of argument, there is an apparent dialectical tension within Plantinga's theory of divine creative anti-realism between its Augustinian, anti-realistic component and the lingering Platonic

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[25] In the first three of the following four criticisms I am indebted to Stephen Montague Puryear's "Could Abstract Objects Be The Thoughts Of God?, *Christian Apologetics Journal*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Spring 1998), and Brian Leftow's "God And Abstract Entities," *Faith And Philosophy*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (April 1990). Puryear's and Leftow's articles, however, are not focused on Plantinga, but on Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel's "Absolute Creation,"*American Philosophical Quaterly*, 23 (1986): 353-362. Morris and Menzel's work makes an effort to follow through on some of the implications inherent within Plantinga's position. It follows that I am indebted to Puryear's and Leftow's criticisms of this effort for my critique of what is only *implied* in Plantinga's work thus far.

elements of the theory. This is not to say that there are no significant religious problems associated with Plantinga's ideas (one could question whether it is biblically appropriate, for example, to think of abstract objects as ideas in God's mind), but I shall focus on the logical difficulties.

First: a.) It will be remembered from the above that Plantinga understands God's nature to be a property. Specifically, God's nature is a "conjunctive property," which includes as conjuncts all the properties that are essential to God being God.[26] b.) Further, the main reason for his shift from strict Christian Platonism to the more Augustinian theory of divine creative anti-realism is to ensure that abstract objects are dependent upon God for their existence, if not their truth. God effectuates this dependence by believing and affirming them. c.) Even further, because God's nature is a property, it *is* an abstract object. That is, it is an intelligible object that can be enclosed within the conceptual. This is an essential point in Plantinga's epistemology of religious belief. For him, it is what makes our knowledge of God possible. The various essential properties included within God's nature---wisdom, omnipotence, immutability, etc.---can be grasped and understood by human reason. Presumably, God can also believe and affirm them. d.) It follows from the above considerations that God's nature, being the abstract object it is, is dependent upon God's believing and affirming for its existence. That is, the essential nature of God, which limits and determines who and what God necessarily is, and is thus ontologically, if not temporally, prior to God's actual existence, is itself dependent upon God for its existence. And this seems logically impossible. How can the conditions which make possible the existence of a being themselves be dependent upon that being for their existence?

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[26] *Does God Have A Nature?*, p. 7, note 1.

Second: a.) The way in which abstract objects are rendered dependent by God including, so I am speculating, the abstract objects that make up the divine nature, is by believing and affirming them. This is how Plantinga seeks to escape the non-theistic elements of Platonism. God's believing abstract objects *produces* their existence, if not their truth. b.) In order for God to actually believe and affirm anything, however, it seems evident that God must first exemplify a number of properties. These properties would be the necessary conditions that make divine believing possible. After all, Plantinga has told us that it is part of God's *very nature* to believe and affirm abstract objects. Perhaps included among them would be *being able to affirm*, or *being able to believe*. c.) But such properties, being abstract objects, are apparently *produced* by God's intellectual believing and affirming. And thus, there again appears to be a logical difficulty. How can the nature which makes possible God's actual believing and affirming itself be the product of that believing and affirming?

Third: a.) From the quotation given above, we have seen that Plantinga says . . . "Perhaps it is part of God's very nature to think and thereby produce these objects" (i.e. abstract objects). God, in other words, is structured *by nature* to be a producer of abstract objects. b.) God's nature, however, being a property that is a conjunction of various other properties (wisdom, goodness and the like), is itself an abstract object. c.) It follows that God must produce the abstract object which determines that God is a producer of abstract objects. Again, this seems impossible. How can God be the producer of the very nature that determines God to be the producer of natures?

These three criticisms of Plantinga's theory of divine creative ant-realism are somewhat speculative in nature, because I'm essentially criticizing him for certain implications inherent within his thought—implications that appear to follow from the things he has said, but

implications that he himself has not drawn out.[27] The following criticism of the theory of divine creative anti-realism, however, is based on actual positions Plantinga has taken. It concerns his idea that the existence of propositions can be dependent upon God, but the truth of propositions determines and limits God; it concerns the divorce between the existence and the truth of propositions. What I am suggesting is that in this case there is a definite logical incoherency within the theory of divine creative anti-realism between its Augustinian anti-realist component and one of its remaining Platonic components.[28]

Fourth: a.) Plantinga tells us that propositions exist through divine believing and affirming. God *causes* propositions to exist by believing and affirming their existence. This is the Augustinian part of his position by means of which he introduces at least a measure of mainline theism. b.) But God cannot believe or affirm just anything he wants to. He must believe and affirm propositions *because* they are true. This is the definite Platonic element in his theory of divine creative ant-realism. God's believing and affirming, one could say, is limited and determined by the truth of propositions. c.) But the proposition's whose truth limits and determines what God believes and affirms are said to be the very result of God's believing and affirming. So again, there is a logical difficulty. How can the truth of a proposition that limits and determines what God believes and affirms do this prior to God's actually producing said proposition by believing and affirming it? That is, how can the truth of a proposition be in the

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[27] Although Plantinga has not developed these implications, Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel have done so. They have seen the ideas implied in Plantinga's work, and have worked them out in their article "Absolute Creation." See note 25 above.

[28] As far as I can tell, Puyear's and Leftow's criticisms of Morris and Menzel (see note 25 above) do not include the following criticism. Perhaps this is due to the presence of Platonism in their positions.

position to determine God prior to God's producing the proposition? How can the truth of a proposition be divorced from the existence of a proposition?

If Plantinga refuses to draw out the implication I assumed to be the case in the first three criticisms above then, technically speaking, he still holds to the view that God has a nature that is *not* identical to God. But even if he does draw out this implication, his theory of divine creative anti-realism still asserts that the truth of abstract objects, if not their existence, is independent of God's believing and affirming. It follows that either way, Plantinga still has strong attachments to the strict Christian Platonism that dominated the greater part of *Does God Have A Nature?*. Either God's properties and nature, or the truth of abstract objects (if not their existence), are taken as distinct from God, independent of God, and determinative of God.

What follows is a critical assessment of the religious implications of this more Platonic side of Plantinga's philosophical theology. Although this side of his thought is not without logical difficulties of its own (we have seen, for example, the logical problems that ensue when one takes the property of "omnipotence" in a formal/rational way), the problems I shall focus on are primarily religious in nature. Plantinga is well aware of these difficulties—we have seen that he is aware of Hart's criticism of Wolterstorff's Platonism—and no doubt they played a role in his transition to the theory of divine creative anti-realism; that is, they played a role in his attempt to evade the religious difficulties of Christian Platonism. These difficulties are at least three in number.

First: It seems obvious that Plantinga's Christian Platonism demotes God in status with respect to abstract objects (or at least the truth of abstract objects). In order to pave the way for reason's direct conceptual access to God, and in order to guarantee truth apart from divine control, God must be thought of as having a nature, being limited and determined by that nature,

and being limited and controlled by the truth of abstract objects themselves. God, like the things of creation, must exemplify, and must be limited and controlled by, abstract entities. And thus, so I maintain, God is brought down to the level of a form of being, albeit the *supreme* form of being. The God of Plantinga's Platonic phase is a dependent being that is not in full sovereign control over everything other than God. It is telling that he refers to God in several places as "the first being of the universe."[29] In this formulation, God is first, but God is also included within the universe as a mere member. God, therefore, like the things of creation, is dependent upon and controlled by structures that make God part of the universe and afford reason direct conceptual access to God like everything else in the universe. And this view, so I maintain, does not do as much justice to biblically based theism as does Hart's Reformational position. I have five points to make in support of this criticism:

a.) The Bible seems to make it quite clear in many places that God is the creator of "all things" (for example: Ps. 103:19-22, Rom. 11:36, I Cor. 8:6, Eph. 3:9, and Col. 1:16). And Hart has pointed out that the entry for the word "all" in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, makes the case that the meaning of the word "is dependent on the complete inclusion of all things whatsoever. Nothing that is not God can be independent of God."[30] From this point of view, therefore, abstract objects should be counted among the "things" created by God.

b.) In Chapter 2 we saw that Wolterstorff attempts to exclude abstract objects from the "all things" of the Bible by arguing that the biblical writers could not have had universals (abstract objects) in view, for they are never specifically mentioned. According to this criterion

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[29] See, for example, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 211 and "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," p. 299..

[30] "On the Distinction," p. 192.

however, as Hart points out, "there is much that we take to have been created that may well not have been created. I suspect that this might make our own status as creatures suspect."[31] The Bible's failure to specifically mention abstract objects as part of God's creations is *no argument* against their inclusion. What is more important is the meaning of the word "all." And as pointed out, the word appears to mean all-inclusive.

c.) Clouser has shown that the Bible's view of God's sovereign, creative control is so varied and extensive that it is easy to see abstract entities and properties as part of the package. Indeed, he maintains that in certain passages certain abstract objects *are* mentioned: 1.) He points out that in Gen. 8:22 the Bible "teaches that the law-like order of things is God's creation." If Clouser's interpretation is correct, and given the fact that the law-like order of things is determined by abstract properties and entities in Plantinga's view, it follows that this passage is teaching that God creates abstract entities. 2.) Gen. 22:16 and Heb. 6:13 teach that there is nothing greater than God, and thus they "rule out anything to which he [God] could be subjected in any sense." 3.) Isa. 44:24ff teaches that God's sovereignty extends over much more than the ordinary entities of the creation. It also extends over "darkness" and the "events in the course of history, peace, evil, and human decisions." 4.) Eph. 1:3-2:2 extends God's sovereignty over the course of history and the election of those who believe; Eph. 3:9-10 extends it over "principalities and powers;" Rom. 8:38-39 "explicitly calls life, death, angels, principalities, and powers, 'things present,' and 'things to come,' *creations.*" And he also mentions that the abstract properties of "height' and 'depth' are also covered here as creations. 5.) Phil. 3:21 extends "all things" to the future renovations of believers resurrected bodies; Col. 1:16-20 emphasizes that

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[31] Ibid., p. 192.

immaterial and invisible realities are also to be understood under the rubric of "all things." 6.) I Cor. 4:7, "on any natural reading," teaches that ". . . the properties and dispositions of every human are God's creations." 7.) Prov. 8:22-31 teaches that wisdom, that is, God's wisdom (which Clouser takes to be a property) "is declared to be God's creation." 8.) Rom. 1:25 teaches that humans have only two options: "(a) the service of God or (b) the service of something God created which is wrongfully accorded God's status." Thus, Clouser concludes, "everything whatsoever is either God or a creation of God's. There are no other alternatives."[32]

d.) In another context, Clouser has further developed his thought on the Prov. 8:22-31 passage.[33] "Wisdom," in this passage, is the wisdom of God, which is specifically said to have been brought into existence by God. That is, God is specifically said to have brought into existence one of the divine properties. This seems to be biblical evidence for the idea that, contrary to Plantinga's Platonic phase, God is in sovereign control even of the divine properties.

e.) A number of passages in Isaiah, including 40:18, teach of the incomparability of God. The gist of the passages is that there is nothing that comes close to God, nothing that is above or on the same level as God. Although abstract objects are not specifically mentioned, it seems that Isaiah's intent is to portray God as ultimate in an absolute sense. From this point of view, the problem with Plantinga's position on God is that it renders God *eminently* comparable. For Plantinga, many of the words and concepts we use of God are univocal as opposed to metaphorical. God is brought down to the created level and divine incomparability is sacrificed.

Given the extensiveness and the variety of the Bible's teaching on God's ultimacy and

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[32] See Clouser's "Religious Language," pp. 386-389.

[33] See Clouser's *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, pp. 178-179.

sovereign creative control outlined above, it seems to be a violation of the Bible's basic spirit to exclude *anything* from divine power. The idea that there is a class of objects excluded from this control and dependence strikes one as an idea born more from the needs and dictates of an autonomously conceived rationality than from biblical teaching. And is it not more desirable for a position with such important philosophical ramifications to be shown to have clear biblical support?

Second: The second problem follows from the first. If I am correct in saying that Plantinga's Christian Platonism reduces God in status with respect to abstract entities, then it follows that he has at the same time elevated these objects to a status *above* God's. They have, in effect, usurped God's divinity. God is reduced in status to that of a dependent or semi-dependent being, but the Platonic abstract objects are elevated to non-dependent, divine status. Thus, an irony arises in Plantinga's position. In order to render God less mysterious, in order to bring God within the limits of the directly experienceable and the rationally conceivable, in order to limit God with respect to truth, a new mystery has been created. Instead of *God* being the great mystery that Hart insists cannot be understood or explained theoretically, *abstract objects* (and *truth*) now take on that quality. They determine, control and explain all things, even God, but are not themselves determined, controlled or explained. What is true of God from Hart's point of view is now true of abstract objects from Plantinga's point of view: we have no clue as to *their* natures and we have no clue as to *their* origin. Hart can say the same thing of Plantinga's notion of abstract objects that he once said of Wolterstorff's notion of predicables and universals.

> a doctrine of entities which control God, over which He has no control, whose origin we do not know, whose nature is unknown to us, which do not tell us about themselves and give us no grounds for their existence except themselves, such a doctrine does not augur well for rational man's belief in a sovereign God who can be trusted completely. Indeed, rational man has taken a course with respect to God

> that was dictated by the conditions of rationality rather than by Biblical revelation.[34]

Within Plantinga's Christian Platonic phase there is no explanation for abstract entities; they just are. Abstract entities are the ultimate mystery beyond reason's ability to explain. Indeed, in *this phase* of his thought, Plantinga seems to take the same attitude toward abstract objects that Hart says we should take toward God. What I mean here is that Plantinga does not rationally speculate about abstract objects as he speculates about God. He simply accepts *them* as being ultimate, as being independently everlasting and necessary. One might say that in this Platonic phase of his thought he simply accepts them on the terms that he understands them to be presenting themselves to him, and his position seems to depend upon no one asking any questions about them. But again, given the points raised above, it seems legitimate indeed to question whether this is an appropriate conviction to have from a Christian point of view. And of course Plantinga *has*, to a degree, questioned this position, and as a result, has introduced the more Augustinian theory of divine creative anti-realism. But as seems evident, the primary problem with the new theory is that it does not take us *far enough* from the Platonic point of view. Truth (if not the divine nature), is still thought to be independent of and determinative of God. Plantinga has made an effort to address the religious problems inherent in the Christian Platonist position, but without giving up key Platonic elements that contribute to these problems.

Third: It would seem that Plantinga's Platonic phase does not do as much justice to biblical authority as does Hart's position. It would be wrong, however, to simply assert that the Reformed epistemologists believe that rational reflection on God's nature apart from the Scriptures is on a par with or is superior to the revelation of God in the Bible. It would be wrong

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[34] "On the Distinction," p. 193.

to say, in other words, that the Reformed epistemologists understand reason to be autonomous, for they hold the Scriptures to be authoritative for philosophy.[35] Although Plantinga concurs in this, it does not appear to be the case that he is actually doing this in this area of his philosophy. The ultimate conflict here is, on the one hand, what Hart and most Christians believe based on biblical testimony: that God is the uncreated creator of all things. On the other hand, in contrast, stands the Platonic phase of Plantinga's thought based on what he takes to be a sound rational argument: that the properties of God's nature must of necessity limit and determine God.

> And what about his own properties---omnipotence, justice, wisdom and the like? Did he create them? But if God has created wisdom, then he existed before it did, in which case, presumably, there was a time at which he was not wise. But surely he has *always* been wise; he has not *acquired* wisdom. Furthermore, he seems to be somehow conditioned and limited by these properties, and dependent upon them. Take the property *omniscience* for example. If that property didn't exist, then God wouldn't have it, in which case he wouldn't be omniscient. So the existence of omniscience is a necessary condition of God's being the way he is; in this sense he seems to be dependent upon it. Omniscience, furthermore, has a certain character: it is such that whoever has it, knows, for any proposition *p*, whether or not p is true. But its displaying this character is not up to God and is not within his control. God did not bring it about that omniscience has this character, and there is no action he could have taken whereby this property would have been differently constituted. Neither its existence nor its character seems to be within his control. Furthermore, its existence and its having the character it does are necessary conditions of God's being the way *he* is.[36]

The ultimate conflict, in other words, is between a religious belief based on faith in God's revelation, based on how God is *actually* presented to us in Scripture, and what would appear to be an alternative view of God based, not on God's actual revelation, but on the dictates of an autonomously conceived reason. Unlike Hart, Plantinga is not telling us how God is presented to

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[35] In "The Reformed Tradition," p. 169, Wolterstorff notes that it is characteristic of all those Reformed philosophers who engage in philosophical theology that "Scripture is always treated as speaking with authority."

[36] *Does God Have A Nature?*, pp. 6-7.

us in revelation; he is telling us how God *must be*, given certain rational, speculative arguments. His view of God in this phase of his thought makes no appeal to the biblical witness; abstract objects are given ultimate, divine status above God on the basis of what is taken to be a good argument. But to Reformational scholars like Hart, that just can't be the way it goes, because the way that God is actually presented to us in revelation (functioning in its capacity as a presupposition for thought), negates this line of argumentation. From the Bible's perspective, as we have seen, God is ultimate and there is no other. No rational argument can effectively undermine this position because any rational explication of our knowledge of God is of necessity dependent upon, and governed by, the knowledge born of faith in revelation that comes *prior* to any rational reflection. Prior to rational reflection, we surrender in faith to God's revelation as it actually is and know God, or we fail to surrender and reject God. Reason cannot dictate how God must be, because reason is dependent upon the knowledge that comes by way of faith; reason is incapable of grasping God "in Himself;" reason is incapable of ascertaining the mystery that transcends experience.

Further, given Hart's account that ultimate beliefs can only be religious beliefs born of faith and commitment, given his idea that our knowledge of divinity is first and foremost a knowledge born of faith, it follows that any alternative to Christian belief in the ultimacy of God will also be a position of faith, no matter how many reasons are given to justify the position. Because no rational argument will ever be able to ultimately, definitively determine the identity and nature of the ultimate, any answer given is by definition a religious answer. Plantinga's ascription of primacy and ultimacy to abstract objects, then, has more to do with a commitment to the primacy and ultimacy of abstract objects than to sound rational argumentation. Although

Plantinga makes it seem that his position is dependent upon good argument alone, this is simply not the case.

Evidence for this contention comes from the fact that not everyone follows Plantinga's line of argumentation here. That is, you don't have to be a subscriber to Hart's Reformational position in order to disagree with Plantinga on this point. Not all philosophers have accepted Platonism or the arguments that support Platonism, much less Plantinga's Christian version of Platonism. John Dewey, to cite just one example, does not believe that abstract properties, kinds, numbers, etc. are independently everlasting and necessary. For Dewey, numbers and mathematical truth are dependent upon experiential success and failure; mathematical truth is simply what works, not everlasting and eternal verities.

> Mathematics is often cited as an example of purely normative thinking dependent upon [absolute rules] and [other-worldly] material . . . The present day mathematical logician may present the structure of mathematics as if it had sprung from the brain of a Zeus whose anatomy is that of pure logic. But . . . [math has] a history in which matter and methods have been constantly selected and worked over on the basis of [experiential] success and failure.[37]

For Dewey, mathematical truths are merely tools created by humanity to successfully control the environment.

Given the diversity of opinion on this issue, given the failure of rational arguments to definitively settle issues of this sort, I believe that Plantinga's willingness to elevate abstract objects in this way in his strict Platonic phase has more to do with a fundamental commitment of faith on his part than with his rational argumentation. For those committed in faith to some other ultimate it is not "natural to think" *at all* of abstract objects as independently everlasting and

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[37] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) p. 137. My quotation here is taken from Clouser's *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, p. 118.

necessary.[38] Although Plantinga appeals to reason for his view on this issue, it would appear that his position has more to do with a fundamental religious commitment on his part. And again, it seems more biblically appropriate to follow Hart and acknowledge God as being ultimate, acknowledge God as the source and origin of *all* reality, as opposed to merely being just another kind of being, even *if* the supreme kind of being or the first being. And Plantinga, as I mentioned above, seems to be sensitive to this kind of criticism; his development of the theory of divine creative anti-realism is an attempt to escape the religious difficulties of Christian Platonism. But, as I said, this theory does not appear to have gone far enough—and thus Hart's Reformational position appears to do better justice to the authority of the Scriptures.

So why *doesn't* Plantinga go all the way and join Hart in acknowledging God's full sovereignty and aseity? Given the significant religious (and logical) problems associated with his Christian Platonism, given the significant logical (and religious) problems associated with his Augustinian theory of divine creative anti-realism, why does he not bite the bullet and abandon these positions? I believe there are several reasons for this. The first two follow below. I will deal with a third in the next chapter.

First, Plantinga finds it difficult to believe that God could create or take on the properties that are revealed to us in Scripture and elsewhere. As I quoted him earlier:

> if God has created wisdom, then he existed before it did, in which case, presumably, there was a time at which he was not wise. But surely he has *always* been wise; he has not *acquired* wisdom.[39]

> God no more creates the property of being red than that of omnipotence. Properties are not creatable: to suppose that they have been created is to suppose

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[38] *Does God Have A Nature?*, pp. 3-4.

[39] Ibid., p. 6.

> that although they exist now, there was a time at which they did not; and this seems clearly false."[40]

In response to this line of reasoning, I have already pointed out Clouser's view that Proverbs 8:22-31 *specifically says* of God's wisdom that it was created and depends on God. Thus, in verse 22, personified wisdom says of itself: "The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began."(NIV) In this passage God is actually presented as being in sovereign control over divine qualities and that they have a beginning. Thus, Plantinga's argument does not fully take into account how God is actually revealed in Scripture, and he has recourse instead to a line of argumentation that dictates how God must be from a rationally speculative point of view that has as its guiding presupposition (as opposed to Hart's guiding presupposition) the ultimacy of abstract objects.

Furthermore, from Hart's Reformational point of view, it does not follow from the belief that God creates, reveals in terms of, or takes on certain properties, that God fails to have them prior to taking them on. What Hart's position entails is that this is simply unknown to us. We know how God *reveals*; but we don't know what God is "in Himself." Thus, there can be no logical inference as to the nature of God's unrevealed being on the basis of what has been revealed, one way or the other. If God is revealed as being wise, that is not a rational ground for speculating that God must have had wisdom from all eternity, and that God must be determined by the abstract property of wisdom. Hart's position is dependent upon surrender in faith to the terms of God's revelation in the face of the unknowns. Plantinga, in contrast, has a high view of reason's ability to grasp things Hart believes are outside the range of reason, and thus he offers

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[40] *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 169.

answers to questions Hart would say cannot be answered. Indeed, how *could* Plantinga know that the wisdom God speaks of in divine revelation has been possessed from all eternity? Plantinga's position *presupposes* the possibility of rational insight into God's nature, the very thing Hart calls into question on the basis of the biblical testimony of God's transcendence over, and incomparability with, anything created.

Secondly, I believe Plantinga rejects the Hartian Reformational position because he is *committed* to the everlasting and necessary truth of propositions and the mind's ability to understand these propositions. For Plantinga, it is inconceivable that 7 + 5 = 12 is not an everlasting, necessary truth. The Reformational position is too close to Descartes' position, a position that Plantinga finds absurd. Descartes, like Hart, believed that God is the source and origin, not only of the ordinary entities of the creation, but also of all laws and conditions.

> it is clear that nothing at all can exist which does not depend on Him. This is true, not only of everything that subsists, but of all order, of every law, and of every reason of truth and goodness.[41]

Plantinga believes that Descartes' position entails that if God is in sovereign control over all things, then anything is possible for God, and nothing is logically impossible. He refers to this position as "universal possibilism."[42] According to Plantinga:

> Descartes does not intend to say that for God, the logically impossible is possible; he means to say instead that nothing is logically impossible. He does not mean to claim that a contradiction, for example, is logically impossible but possible for God; he claims instead that contradictions are, in fact, possibly true because it is within God's power to make them true.[43]

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[41] *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans., E. Haldane and G. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), Vol. II, p. 250.

[42] Plantinga's discussion of Descartes' universal possibilism can be found on pp. 92-140 of *Does God Have A Nature?*.

[43] Ibid., p. 116.

Cartesian universal possibilism means that anything goes and God could have brought it about that 2 x 4 = 8 is *false*, or God could have made "God has created Descartes, but Descartes has not been created" *true*.[44] Plantinga *assumes* that if God's sovereignty is unchecked by everlasting and necessary truths, then Cartesian universal possibilism is *unavoidable*. God could bring it about that logical contradictions are true.

Clouser has shown in his article "Religious Language," however, that the problems associated with Descartes' position do not stick to the Reformational position simply because they both agree that God is the source and origin of all conditions and laws.[45] The Reformational position does not entail that God could have made 2 x 4 = 8 false, or that God can violate the laws of logic. For Clouser, such inferences do not follow from the view that all laws and conditions are dependent upon God for their existence.

> it is incorrect to interpret the position being maintained here as saying that God can violate the logical laws. Since "can" means "is logically possible," such a position would amount to holding that it is logically possible for God to do what is logically impossible! But that is not at all what is being maintained. For an entity to *violate* a law, the law must hold for that entity. And precisely what we are saying is that the laws do not hold for God. To interpret this position as saying God can violate the laws is therefore to beg the question against it. We would be making a meta-level assumption of its falsity . . . In sum, God's sovereignty over laws means that they depend on him and that they are not to be applied to him except insofar as they apply to the created properties he has taken on.[46]

For Clouser, and the Reformational position in general, declaring what God could or could not have done is to place God in subjection to laws that God has, according to the biblical witness, established. Humans are subject to these laws, but it does not follow from this that God

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[44] Ibid., pp. 112-113.

[45] "Religious Language," pp. 395-401.

[46] Ibid., pp. 399-400.

is so subject. Thus, with respect to what God could or could not have done, the appropriate answer is silence.

Summing up this Chapter, it would appear that Plantinga has been unable to develop a position in philosophical theology that is logically coherent—as should be the case according to Reformed epistemological principles if there is to be rational warrant in religion. And further, the position he has taken does not seem to be as compatible with biblical teaching as it should be. Thus arises the irony of Reformed epistemology taking a position in philosophical theology that is not fully compatible with biblical religion in order to satisfy the demands of reason—but without actually satisfying the demands of reason. If all of this is so, then there does not seem to be any good reason for rejecting the Reformational position on these matters.

CHAPTER 5

ON PLANTINGA'S CRITIQUE OF KANTIANISM

At the end of the last chapter I suggested 2 reasons why Plantinga does not abandon his position and follow Hart's apparently more biblical Reformational formulation. Perhaps the most important reason why Plantinga does not do this, however, is because of its similarities to Kant's philosophy. If one accepts the Platonist tendencies of Plantinga's position in philosophical theology, the Kantian view of our knowledge of God does not make much sense at all. Indeed, Plantinga believes that it is "fatally ensnarled in self-referential absurdity."[1] Kant's view that our concepts do not apply to the divine nature directly makes no sense if God is limited and determined by an intelligible essence, if God exemplifies predicables, and if God's nature is thereby made available to our rational faculties.

> It seems many theologians and others believe that there is real difficulty with the idea that our concepts could apply to God—that is, could apply to a being with the properties of being infinite, transcendent, and ultimate. The idea is that if there is such a being, we couldn't speak about it, couldn't think and talk about it, couldn't ascribe properties to it. If that is true, however, then, strictly speaking, Christian belief, at least as the Christian understands it, is impossible. For Christians believe that there is an infinite, transcendent, ultimate being about whom they hold beliefs; but if our concepts cannot apply to a being of that sort, then there cannot be beliefs about a being of that sort.[2]

Plantinga's assumption here is that our knowledge of God is a rationally qualified knowing, and that our concepts of God apply *directly* to God's nature and the properties in that nature, or we cannot have knowledge of God *at all*. For Plantinga, philosophers and theologians

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[1] *Does God Have A Nature?*, p.26.

[2] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 4.

who continue to speak and think about God while adhering to Kant's thesis fail to see the incoherency of their views. They fail to see that it is an all or nothing situation. If our concepts do not apply to God in the direct and rational way, then all discourse and thought about the divine being is rendered impossible.

But is Plantinga correct in this assessment? Is it true that those who follow Kant are being led into incoherency? As we have seen, Hart believes that God's nature cannot be grasped *within* a concept, and that our experience of God is experience of "that which transcends experience." Is Hart's position incoherent as a result of it's similarity to the Kantian position? In the following section of this chapter I will lay out Plantinga's critique of Kant and Gordon Kaufman and in the second section try to determine if his critique applies to Hart's Reformational position. I answer this question in the negative. Hart's Reformational position is not incoherent because he believes our concepts of God do not apply to God "in himself," to God's very nature. Our knowledge of God is not reduced to "disguised nonsense" because it is indirect metaphoric faith knowledge of God revealed through creational realities.

A. Kant and Kaufman

According to Plantinga, Kant's view implies that our concepts and categories are limited to the "temporal horizon," and thus do not apply to God.[3] And he maintains that Kant often said things that are incompatible on this issue, but among the things he said . . .

is that such fundamental concepts or categories as those of *negation* and

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[3] *Does God Have A Nature?*, p. 10.

> *substance-property* have application only within the world of experience or the world of appearance; they do not apply to things as they are in themselves, apart from the conceptual activity of human beings.[4]

The world of appearance is constructed by us out of the raw material of experience in terms of our concepts and categories. We construct a world in which there are substances with properties and in which the category of negation applies. And because of this constructive activity on our part we are led to believe that the world is actually composed of substances that have properties. To think thus, however, is to be deluded.

> We are obliged thus to think; but why suppose reality as such, independent of our noetic activity, is under any obligation to conform to this structure? Our categories are properly applicable within the realm of appearance—a realm that owes its basic contours to our own formative activity. To try to apply them beyond the world of appearance to the realm of reality is to employ reason in an area where it cannot profitably venture; it is to fall victim to *Transzendental Schein*.[5]

And if our concepts cannot even grasp *things* in themselves, then they certainly cannot grasp *God* "in Himself," or "as He is." We cannot claim that the substance/property categories, the category of negation, nor any other categories apply to God. And thus, we cannot say one way or another if God has a nature.

> we cannot sensibly claim that God has a nature; to do so is to suppose that he has properties and that the thing-property category applies to him. But neither can we sensibly claim that God does *not* have a nature; for to do so is to apply the category of negation to him.[6]

The whole question of God's nature and how God is related to the divine properties cannot even be discussed. We must be totally agnostic with respect to it because it naively presupposes that

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[4] Ibid., pp. 10-11.

[5] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[6] Ibid., p. 12.

our conceptual categories apply beyond the realm of experience.

Plantinga tells us that this viewpoint has been popular in recent theology and he illustrates this point by delving into the thought of Gordon Kaufman. Kaufman, according to Plantinga, finds the idea of God problematic.

> the problem seems to be that God is not identical with any finite reality (which is true) and hence is not identical with anything of which we have experience (which does not follow).[7]

For Kaufman, according to Plantinga, if the term "God" does not denote anything of which we have experience, then there is a problem about what it denotes, if it denotes anything. And Kaufman resolves the problem by making a distinction between what he calls the "real referent" of the term "God," and the "available referent." The real referent of the term "God" is not available to us and our concepts do not apply literally to it.

> The real referent for "God" is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content.[8]

> God is ultimately profound Mystery and utterly escapes our every effort to grasp or comprehend him. Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable.[9]

Kaufman is not saying that we cannot speak or think about God, but our thoughts are limited to the available referent, and thus have non-literal, metaphoric status. And he understands the available referent to be nothing more than an "imaginative construct."

> it is the *available referent*—a particular imaginative construct—that bears

[7] Ibid., p. 14.

[8] Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972): 85. Cited by Plantinga on p. 15 of *Does God Have A Nature?*.

[9] Ibid., p. 95. Cited in *Does God Have A Nature?* on p. 15.

> significantly on human life and thought. It is the "available God" whom we have in mind when we worship or pray; . . . it is the available God in terms of which we speak and think whenever we use the word "God."[10]
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> Does this mean, then, that the conclusion is, after all, that God really does not exist, that He is only a figment of our imaginations? If these words are intended to put the speculative question about the ultimate nature of things, then, as we have seen, there is no possible way to give an answer.[11]

Thus, the essence of Kaufman's position is that the term "God" applies to an available referent, which is a human construction. There might be a real referent of the term but, if there is, it transcends our experience and is, ultimately, an "unknown X," to which our concepts and terms do not apply. One cannot even raise the question whether God has a nature or not because, if God does have such a nature, it is not available to us anyway.

Plantinga believes that this claim is totally untenable, but before he shows that this is the case, he believes that it is necessary to distinguish Kaufman's view from two others.

First, Kaufman's view that our concepts do not apply to God is different from his own view that "our knowledge of God is bound to be limited, fragmentary, halting and inchoate. What we know about God must be minuscule indeed in comparison with what we do not know." Further, "there must be a great deal about him of which we can form no conception at all."[12] Plantinga gives no reason as to why these things are the case, but he believes that neither of them means that we cannot know anything of God, nor that none of our concepts apply to God. There

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[10] Ibid., p. 86. Cited in *Does God Have A Nature?* on p. 16.

[11] Ibid., p. 111. Cited in *Does God Have A Nature?* on p. 16.

[12] *Does God Have A Nature?*, p. 18.

is nothing in these observations that could derail the question as to God's nature. We might not know everything we would like to know of God, but this does not mean that we cannot know anything of God. Our concepts can give us some insight into God's real nature.

That Plantinga offers no reason for this assessment of our knowledge of God seems significant. Given his conviction that we can achieve direct, rational access to God's nature, on what basis is it that "there must be a great deal about him of which we can form no conception at all." What is it that limits our rational knowledge of God? This would appear to be a deviation from the typical optimism of Plantinga's epistemology of religious belief and a potential opening to Hart's more sanguine view of the possibility of rational access to God. Unfortunately, Plantinga does not develop this idea.

Second, Kaufman's view that our concepts do not apply to God is also different from the traditional *via negativa*: "According to this idea, what we can know of God is essentially negative; there are no properties such that we know of them that God has them, although there are some properties we know he *lacks*." Plantinga believes that those who held to the via negativa never thought that one cannot raise the question of God's nature, unlike contemporary philosophers such as Kaufman, and that they did in fact believe that God has a nature.[13]

> The whole medieval tradition of negative theology also finds reference to God problematic. The difference is that the medievals took it for granted that, of course, we *can* refer to God, the problem is to explain just how this can be accomplished. For the contemporaries I am thinking of, however, the difficulties (whether apparent or real) lead them to doubt that we *can*, in fact, refer to and talk about a being that is ultimate and transcendent.[14]

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[13] Ibid., p. 19.

[14] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 5, note 3.

In this observation, Plantinga seems to have missed the point of the medievals. The medievals acknowledge that God has a nature and can be referred to, but they also acknowledge that there are deep problems with this knowledge. It is true that they thought we can access and refer to the divine nature, but they also placed real limits on this knowledge, limits that Plantinga does not appear to acknowledge.

At any rate, having thus distinguished these two positions from the Kantian point of view, Plantinga advances his critique of Kaufman by asking the question as to what it means to have a concept of something. And his answer is that concepts are concepts of properties.

> To say that someone has the concept of being a horse is to say that she grasps or understands or apprehends the property *being a horse*. To say she has the concept of prime number is to say she grasps or apprehends the property *being a prime number*; she knows what it is for something to be a prime number.[15]

And of course, saying that one has a concept of the property of being a horse implies that there is such a property as *being a horse*.[16] Plantinga's assumption here is that if we can speak and think of such things, there must be a real entity, a *real* abstract principle, which corresponds to the concept. Such concepts *apply* to something if the thing to which the concept applies actually has the property in question.

> And what is it for one of my concepts to *apply* to something? Here the answer is satisfyingly obvious. I have the concept *horse* if I grasp the property of being a horse; and that concept *applies to* something if that thing is a horse, has the property of being a horse. Our concept *being a horse* applies to each thing that has the property of being a horse; my concept of prime number applies to all the prime numbers.[17]

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[15] *Does God Have A Nature?*, p. 20.

[16] Ibid., p. 21, note 4.

[17] Ibid., pp. 21-22.

Given this understanding of how concepts grasp properties and apply to the things which actually have those properties, Plantinga maintains that it makes no sense to say that our concepts do not apply to God.

> It is a piece of sheer confusion to say that there is such a person as God, but none of our concepts apply to him. If our concepts do not apply to God, then he does not have such properties as wisdom, being almighty and being the creator of the heavens and the earth. Our concept of wisdom applies to a being if that being is wise; so a being to whom this concept did not apply would not be wise, whatever else it might be.[18]

And now it is apparent why Plantinga thought it important to establish that God has a nature and why he does not go all the way to Hart's position. God *must* have a nature full of properties so that humans may conceptually grasp and come to know God. If our concepts do not apply to God, then God must not have any of the properties and attributes that Christians normally apply to God. God, in that case, is not loving, almighty, wise, a creator or redeemer. Indeed, God will not have *any* of the properties of which we have concepts; properties such as "self-identity, existence, and being either a material or an immaterial object, these being properties of which we have concepts."[19] Given the Kantian thesis, God will not have any properties *at all.* God will become nothing more than Kaufman's "imaginative construct." From the point of view of Plantinga's Christian Platonism the alternatives are clear. We either acknowledge a real God with real properties in a real nature that the human mind can directly access, or we are left with a purely subjective imaginative construct that is cut off from the real God of the Christian faith. As Bavinck feared, there will be nothing left of God but an arbitrary

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[18] Ibid., p. 22.

[19] Ibid., p. 22.

and subjective symbol.

There is, however, no need to fear the Kantian/Kaufman position because Plantinga believes that it is completely indefensible. That is, the implications of this point of view transform God into a being that is completely incomprehensible.

> But how could there be such a thing? How could there be a being that didn't exist, wasn't self-identical, wasn't either a material object or an immaterial object, didn't have any properties? Does any of this make even marginal sense? It is clearly quite impossible that there be a thing to which none of our concepts apply.[20]

Plantinga suggests that the reason why someone might believe what he considers to be an extraordinary view might be because of an argument that runs along the following lines:

> (1) God transcends human experience; we cannot observe or in any other way experience him.
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> Therefore:
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> (2) Our concepts do not apply to God.[21]

Plantinga believes that this argument is defective in two fundamental ways. *First*, (1) does say something about God. It says that God transcends human experience. This presupposes that the person making the argument has some grasp of what it means to transcend human experience, otherwise she would not be able to draw the conclusion that (2) is true. But if it is true that God transcends human experience, and that we have some grasp of what this means, the conclusion must be false.

So the person who offers this argument must suppose both that God transcends

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[20] Ibid., p. 23.

[21] Ibid., p. 23.

> human experience, and that we know what it is to transcend human experience. But if those suppositions are true, then at least one of our concepts *does* apply to God: in which case (2), the conclusion of the argument, is false.[22]

Plantinga believes that the difficulty illustrated above will attach itself to *any* attempt to argue for (2). The reason for this is that any attempt to argue for (2), the main principle of the Kantian point of view, will have to specify some property that God has; some property of God that is the reason why our concepts fail to apply to God. And this will automatically result in self-referential incoherence. The person will have to suppose both that God has said property and that we have the concept of this property, and draw from this the conclusion that our concepts do not apply to God.

Secondly, Plantinga believes that the conclusion *itself* cannot be coherently maintained. The reason for this is that the person who maintains (2) says something about God—she says that our concepts do not apply to God.

> He must therefore suppose that God has that property. And if he is serious about maintaining or asserting (2), he must suppose that some of us, at any rate, grasp or apprehend what it is for a thing to be such that our concepts do not apply to it. Accordingly, we have the concept *being such that none of our concepts applies to it.* If (2) is true, this concept applies to God. But then at least one of our concepts does apply to God, in which case (2) is false.[23]

The upshot of Plantinga's argument is that a person who is committed to (2) must believe that (2) is both true and false, and consequently, (2) cannot be coherently asserted. Thus, the attempt to respect God's greatness and majesty by asserting that our concepts do not apply to God ends in agnosticism and incoherence.

For if none of our concepts apply to God, then there is nothing we can know or

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[22] Ibid., p. 24.

[23] Ibid., p. 25.

> truly believe of him—not even what is affirmed in the creeds or revealed in the Scriptures. And if there is nothing we can know or truly believe of him, then, of course, we cannot know or truly believe that none of our concepts apply to him. The view that our concepts don't apply to God is fatally ensnarled in self-referential absurdity.[24]

The alternatives, in Plantinga's mind, are clear. Our knowledge of God is rationally qualified, literal knowledge that applies directly to the properties in the divine essence or we have no knowledge at all. We must have direct access to God, or we must be agnostic and silent, lest our speech and thought about God land us in self-referential absurdity.

B. Does Plantinga's Critique Apply to Hart?

The question I propose to answer in response to Plantinga's critique of the Kantian thesis is not whether it holds water with respect to Kant or Kaufman. I am more interested in whether or not it applies to Hart. For Hart, as we have seen, "It is of the order of faith that it experiences what transcends experience," and although we must use concepts in order to know God, "God cannot be grasped *within* a concept."[25] Can Hart's thesis, then, escape Plantinga's charge of self-referential incoherency? I believe that it can, but before going into the arguments in defense of Hart, it should be noted that Plantinga's critique of the Kantian thesis assumes an answer to the question of whether our knowledge of God is direct or indirect knowledge. That is, Plantinga's critique of Kant and those who follow him assumes that God can be accessed directly, and that indirect access to God is, if it exists at all, of a lower order than direct knowledge. Apart from

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[24] Ibid., p. 26.

[25] *Understanding Our World*, p. 423, note 57, and p. 422, note 54.

the fact that there does not appear to be any good reason for determining which revelations of God are direct and which are indirect, which actually reveal God "in himself" to us and which fail in this respect, the problem with this view is that many of the most important revelations of God are clearly indirect in nature. God's revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, Ezekiel's vision at the Kebar River, and God's revelation in Jesus Christ are clear examples of indirect revelation. Plantinga's critique of the Kantian thesis, so I shall argue below, does not seem to adequately allow for examples such as these. That is, Plantinga's conviction that God is available to us directly, that our knowledge of God is a direct, rational conceptualization of God "in himself," God's very nature, seems to eliminate or denigrate *all* indirect forms of access to God, and thus cannot adequately account for these examples that Hart and Plantinga would agree are revelatory of God.

First: Perhaps the main features of Plantinga's critique of the Kantian thesis are its implicit reductionism and rationalism. It is assumed that *all* of our beliefs must be rationally qualified beliefs (concepts and propositions coupled with assent) if we are to have knowledge of anything, and consequently, all of our beliefs *about God* must be rationally qualified beliefs if we are to have knowledge of God. The assumption is that our knowledge of God must be a *direct*, literal, rationally qualified grasping or enclosing of the properties in the divine essence that meets all the standards for rationality there may be if it is to count as knowledge at all. This means that what I have referred to as religiously qualified beliefs, fiduciary beliefs that are trans-rational without being irrational, cannot count as knowledge in Plantinga's epistemology. Because these beliefs make use of the conceptual while going beyond the conceptual, because they resist being forced into a rigidly logical system of beliefs, and because many of them are indirect and

metaphoric in nature, they cannot be instances of knowledge. For Plantinga, if our concepts cannot apply directly to God, then knowledge of God is impossible: "Christians believe that there is an infinite, transcendent, ultimate being about whom they hold beliefs; but if our concepts cannot apply to a being of that sort, then there cannot be beliefs about a being of that sort."[26] But as we have seen, this fundamental belief on Plantinga's part is, from Hart's point of view, self-referentially incoherent.

> The belief that all our beliefs must either be rational-empirical beliefs or else risk being incoherent is itself not obviously a rational-empirical belief. As a second order belief about beliefs it does not evidently meet its own criteria . . . the belief that ideally all our beliefs should be of that kind is not itself of that kind. To believe that it is of that kind would be self-referentially incoherent.[27]

Thus, Plantinga's critique of the Kantian thesis does not allow for the distinction that Hart makes: the distinction between knowledge that has a *fiduciary* qualification and formal/rational knowledge that has an *analytic* or *rational* qualification. For Hart, fiduciary beliefs are unavoidable because it is their job to inform us of that which is ultimate for us, how we are to relate to the ultimate, and what we can know of the ultimate. Consequently, from Hart's Reformational point of view, Plantinga is not being sufficiently self-critical about his own basic religious commitments, his own trans-rational, fiduciary beliefs. That is, he fails to see that he is in possession of such beliefs himself. Plantinga's conviction that all our beliefs, including our theistic beliefs, must be rational beliefs, is a fiduciary belief. Further, it is a fiduciary belief that uncritically presupposes another fiduciary belief: the belief that abstract properties are ultimate; that they transcend, condition, and control God. Plantinga, in other words, does not

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[26] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 4.

[27] "The Religion of Reason," pp. 1-2.

realize that his belief that abstract properties are ultimate is a fiduciary belief. He fails to realize that it is a fiduciary belief about that which establishes and makes possible his belief that all our beliefs, even our theistic beliefs, can be rational in nature. It is the fiduciary belief that God exists within the same epistemic universe as creaturely reality, that God is subject to lawful conditions that limit and determine God in the same way that creatures are limited and determined, and that abstract entities exist independently of God and govern God. This belief is not rational in kind because it is a belief that establishes and makes possible the rational nature of our experience and knowledge of God.

It would seem to be the case, therefore, that someone who does not share this same belief about God and abstract objects, someone who, on the basis of biblical revelation believes that God is the one who is transcendent, ultimate and the origin of *all* things, including the conditions that determine and govern rationality along with everything else, need not be intimidated by Plantinga's critique. For if, as now seems to be the case, there are such things as beliefs qualified by faith, if there are trans-rational, fiduciary beliefs whose job it is to tell us of the ultimate, how to relate to the ultimate, and what we can know of the ultimate, it follows that one may certainly speak and think of God in that way without fearing self-referential incoherency. Indeed, this would have to be the first and foremost way that God is referenced and known because God transcends all creaturely categories and limitations. This means that, from Hart's point of view, the concepts involved with fiduciary beliefs, concepts like father, friend, love, or omnipotent, may certainly "apply to" God in an *indirect* way without having to "apply to" God in Plantinga's *direct,* rationalistic sense. Hart, in other words, certainly does not deny that we use concepts in our references to God all the time. Indeed, from the point of view of Hart's ontology, it is

impossible to have beliefs about God in the fiduciary, confessional sense without the use of concepts.[28] Their application, however, cannot be in the direct, rationally qualified sense Plantinga takes to be the only way that they can apply. And the reason why Hart thinks this way is precisely because of his ultimate fiduciary belief that *God,* rather than abstract objects, is ultimate and cannot, as a result, be intellectually confined within any creational context, word or concept. Because we are human and creaturely, we have to use words and concepts to have fiduciary beliefs about God. But it is a self-absorbed conceit of western humanity to assume that God can be limited, determined, and enclosed within the confines of our creaturely words and concepts.

Thus, although God cannot be grasped *within* a concept, our faith knowledge of God, because of the multi-dimensionality of knowledge, is never *without* concepts.[29] When we speak and think of God as our father, we make use of the concept *father.* But that concept gets caught up in the religious qualification characteristic of faith activity and language. The concept is used to express faith and commitment, not to rationally enclose God within its confines—as if God were literally a father who must, therefore, have all the qualities and attributes of all human fathers. It is not self-referentially incoherent to reference God in this way because the reference is not to an unchanging essential property of God's nature; it is a reference to the actual way that God is revealed to us.

Second: Plantinga's belief that the Kantian thesis is "fatally ensnarled in self-referential

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[28] Hart's understanding of the different kinds of functional levels, including the analytic level, and how they relate to one another can be found in *Understanding Our World*, pp. 149-201.

[29] Ibid., p. 422, note 53.

absurdity" only makes sense if there is, indeed, only the *direct way* of referencing and knowing God. If the sentences we utter in reference to God can only be formal/rational assertions about the divine nature, then anyone who holds anything similar to the Kantian thesis and yet speaks of and claims to know God is, of necessity, self-referentially incoherent. But if there actually is another way of knowing and speaking of God, Plantinga's charge does not hold water.

Thus, Plantinga's specific charge, that (1) actually *does* say something about God, it says that God "transcends human experience," fails to grasp that (1) need not be understood to be a grasping in the theoretical, formal/rational manner of a property in the very essence of God as Plantinga assumes it does. From Hart's point of view, it *should not* be understood in that way. To do so would be to misinterpret God, because it would be to assume that our words and concepts have actually grasped God's nature. From Hart's point of view, we cannot help using concepts in order to speak of and know God—we are mere creatures after all—but we cannot enclose the essence of God within our concepts, for the precise reason that God is not a creature and is not *enclosable* within creaturely categories and concepts. God is not limited by the laws of logic, God is the origin of the laws of logic, and the concepts we use in reference to God do not capture the nature of God within the parameters of logical necessity. As we have seen, although we speak of God as our father, although we know God as our father, God transcends and is the origin of fatherhood and is not subject to all the logically necessary limitations inherent within the concept *father*. This does not mean that we do not actually *know* God as father, or that this knowledge is defective in some way. It only means that we do not know God as father in the direct, formal/rational way; it means we know God indirectly through the concept *father*.

Thus, from Hart's point of view, (1) does not have to mean that God has the property of *transcending human experience* which can be rationally grasped in a concept. If that is what Hart

means when he says that God transcends experience, he *would* have incoherency problems, for such a property would preclude any experience or knowledge of God *at all,* and Hart believes that we can experience and know God—we can experience and know that which transcends experience. From Hart's point of view, to infer that experience and knowledge of God is precluded because God transcends human experience does not follow logically because "transcends human experience" is not being asserted as a theoretical grasp of God's essence. The phrase, "transcends human experience," then, does not preclude our ability to experience God. It can't mean that because Hart believes that we actually do experience and know God. We do this when we experience and know God as father, even though God transcends and is the origin of fatherhood; we do this when we experience and know God as good, even though God transcends and is the origin of goodness; and we do this when we experience and know God as wise, even though Proverbs tells us that God transcends and is the origin of divine wisdom. When Hart tells us that our knowledge of God is "experience of that which transcends experience," it is an attempt by reason to explicate the experience and knowledge that Christians have on a regular basis; it is an attempt to generalize the specific ways that we come to experience and know God. But this explication does not imply a theoretical grasp of God's essence. Quite the opposite, it is just another way of saying that we experience and know God *indirectly* through the mediation of creaturely realities.

"Experience of that which transcends experience," therefore, is an attempt to understand our knowledge of God, but this attempt is not based on a generalization of philosophical theology in the classical sense that God has the property of *transcending experience.* If it were, it would have to meet all the standards for logical activity and would obviously fail in that respect. But in that case logic and reason would be dictating to that which transcends logic and reason and we

would not be able to rationally express the *actual way* that we experience God. Indeed, the very meaning of the phrase "experience of that which transcends experience" is meant to convey the idea that our knowledge of God is of that which lies outside all limitations, categories and concepts. Through this phrase, we come to an understanding of the actual way that we experience and know God: *indirectly*. The phrase is meant to convey the idea that our knowledge of God is not of an entity with properties and a nature, is not of a creature, even though we, as creatures, must use creaturely categories, concepts and propositions in order to know God.

Thus, what is true of the phrase "transcends human experience" is true of all the words and concepts we press into service in order to rationally explicate our experience of that which transcends and is the origin of words and rationality. They can all escape Plantinga's charge of self-referential incoherency because they are all being used to express our trans-rational, indirect, non-literal, fiduciary knowledge of God.

It follows that Plantinga's second charge, that (2) also says something about God, it says that our concepts do not apply to God, fails to grasp that (2) need not be understood as a theoretical, formal grasp of a property in God's essence either. From Hart's point of view, what (2) is trying to convey, or rather, what Hart tries to convey with his idea that "God cannot be grasped within a concept," is not that concepts cannot be used in reference to God, not that they do not *apply* to God. Indeed, it *couldn't* mean that for Hart (and Kaufman as well), because we use them in reference to God *all the time*. If *that* is what Hart means by saying that God cannot be grasped within a concept, then again, he would be self-referentially incoherent. But Hart, of course, doesn't mean that at all. What Hart means is that our concepts cannot grasp, and do not apply to, God in the *manner* that Plantinga desires. God's nature cannot be grasped and enclosed within a rationally qualified concept because that would mean that God is enclosable, that God is

not ultimate, that there is something greater than God that conditions and determines God. And for Hart, that is just not acceptable on biblical grounds. It fails to appreciate God in the manner God has been revealed in Scripture. It fails to do justice to the biblical witness of God. It fails to accept God on God's own terms. Thus, in saying that our concepts cannot enclose God, Hart is not claiming that God has that property. He is saying the exact opposite. He is saying that God is the *Origin* of properties and natures.

Third: As we have seen, for Plantinga, *all* talk of God, even "ordinary" Christian speech and thought about God, has an exclusively formal/rational intent to it. This seems clear from the quotation I cited in Chapter 1:

> Christians ordinarily take it for granted that it is possible to refer to God as 'the all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe', and possible, furthermore, to predicate properties (wisdom, goodness) of the being thus referred to . . . . . it must be possible, if I can think about God and predicate properties of him, not only that there *be* such a being, but also that *my concepts apply to it*. If not, then I am not in a position to assert or believe or even entertain any of the propositions mentioned above, if indeed there *are* any such propositions.[30]

And it would appear that this is an assumption that can be challenged, that is, it would appear that it can be challenged on an empirical/evidentiary basis. Is that actually how it goes? Do Christians *actually* speak and think about God in this way? No doubt Christians believe that their speech and thought *applies* to God. But do they actually believe that it applies to God in the formal manner that Plantinga intends? Do they ordinarily take their speech and thought about God to be rational predications of real properties in God's nature that, consequently, cohere in a strictly logical manner? I think not.

If it were true that Christians ordinarily understand their speech and thought about God in

[30] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 4.

this way, then it would follow that they would be prepared to accept any and all of the implications of the various concepts and propositions they use in reference to God. Indeed, it would be natural for them to draw out the implications of their assertions. If they say that God is sovereign and omnipotent, for example, they would be prepared to accept the implications inherent within the formal notion of sovereignty and omnipotence: that there is *absolutely* nothing outside of God's control and power, that God can do anything. God can create a rock too heavy for God to lift, and there couldn't possibly be any such thing as human freedom and responsibility because it would limit divine sovereignty and omnipotence. If they speak of God as father, they would be prepared to accept all the implications contained within this concept. That God, as father, must have a wife, and must have had sexual relations, etc.

But ordinary Christians are far from prepared to accept such inference making and do not under "ordinary" circumstances make such inferences. Because of the limited, contextual, fiduciary nature of such talk, such implications, rarely, if ever, cross their minds. Outside of the halls of academia, such inference-making is not brought up. Reducing ordinary Christian's God-talk to the rational or abstractly intellectual level misinterprets the real intent of their activity. Ordinary religious faith language and thought about God does not have the same character and intent as theoretical/rational language and thought. When Christians describe God as wise or good there is no attempt to define God. There is a lack of theoretical precision, and it is not intended to be univocal or denotative in orientation.

It follows that Hart's thesis that God-talk is fiduciary, confessional and contextual seems to more appropriately describe what ordinary Christians *actually* do. Plantinga assumes that such speech applies to God "in himself," applies to God's very essence. His assumption is that such speech is abstractly intellectual in character and that its intent is primarily to understand the

nature of God in an abstractly formal manner. But ordinary Christians in ordinary, non-theoretical contexts speak of God in biblical and contextual ways as opposed to formal/rational ways. They speak and think of God as actually revealed in the Scriptures, or their lives, and not as dictated by the demands of reason and inference.

Fourth: But what is true of ordinary talk of God is true of God-talk in more formal, academic circumstances. If Hart is correct in believing that God *cannot* be enclosed within concepts and propositions, it *must* be true that all of our references to God, all of our concepts and propositions that reference God, will have an indirect, metaphorical or creatiomorphic character to them willy-nilly. Whether one uses the more obviously indirect and creatiomorphic biblical references to God, references to God's arms, hands, shepherdship, fatherhood, etc., or whether one uses the less obviously indirect and creatiomorphic biblical references, references to God's goodness, sovereignty, wisdom, etc., and even whether one uses the rational explications of biblical revelation common to academic circumstances, references to God's transcendence, infinity, aseity, etc., one will always, unavoidably, be speaking of God metaphorically and thus one will never be engaging in an actual science or philosophy of God.

> I would not myself refer to God as an infinite individual transcending the universe. But even if I did, I would take that as a metaphor and not as a genuine concept . . . I think, in fact, that in the area of trusting mysteries whose reality transcends our experience, we will have to be content with metaphors in principle.[31]

And the failure to acknowledge this does not mean that one escapes its necessity.

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[31] "Whither Reason and Religion?, p. 175.

If Hart is correct, it follows that Plantinga should not make the claim that his taking certain key concepts (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, transcendence, etc.) as being conceptual graspings of real properties in God's essence is actually definitive of God, actually delimits God. If Hart is correct, he should not make the claim that his beliefs about God are rationally qualified and fit coherently into a rational belief system impervious to logical inconsistency. It could not be that his favored concepts and propositions about God break through to the real properties of God's essence. It *could not* be that way. For if it were that way, then God would, indeed, *only be* another form of being; would only be a limited and conditioned, semi-sovereign, member of the universe, and abstract objects would have usurped God's position.

The failure to realize this only means that one will then illegitimately treat arbitrarily favored notions of God which are indirect and metaphoric in nature *as if* they were direct conceptualizations of the divine nature. And then, the philosophical theologian is faced with the unlovely choice of either: 1.) Absolutizing her favored formulations and ignoring or denigrating other equally biblical teachings in a vain attempt to evade the inevitable logical contradictions which will ensue between them (just as a rationally consistent understanding of God's omnipotence and sovereignty unjustifiably eliminates the possibility of human freedom and responsibility, or just as Plantinga's Free Will Defense allows for human freedom and responsibility but limits God's sovereignty and omnipotence), or, 2.) Vainly attempt to juggle the alternative biblical formulations within a supposedly logical system, but in actuality sink into a morass of irrationality.

Fifth: We have seen that for Plantinga our concepts must apply to God in the direct way or we cannot have *any* true beliefs or knowledge of God; to wit:

> Christians believe that there is an infinite, transcendent, ultimate being about whom they hold beliefs; but if our concepts cannot apply to a being of that sort, then there cannot be beliefs about a being of that sort.
>
> it must be possible, if I can think about God and predicate properties of him, not only that there *be* such a being, but also that *my concepts apply to it.* If not, then I am not in a position to assert or believe or even entertain any of the propositions mentioned above, if indeed there *are* any such propositions."[32]

But, in contrast to this seemingly absolute general rule, there is evidence that Plantinga *himself* does not eliminate experiences and beliefs about God that arise from indirect sources. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, he makes room in his epistemology of religious belief for indirect perception of God, that is, perception of God through the mediation of created realities. Indirect perception is one of the ways that the sensus divinitatis becomes aware of God. Further, he acknowledges that divine testimony at times reveals God in indirect terms. Presumably, we also respond in faith to these passages of Scripture and form beliefs about God. As I also noted in Chapter 2, Plantinga depreciates these forms of experience and belief formation, but he does not eliminate them. And by not eliminating them, Plantinga leaves room for the legitimacy of an approach such as Hart's Reformational position.

With respect to indirect perception of God, Plantinga follows Alston in acknowledging this form of experience.[33] For Plantinga, indirect perception is one of the ways, along with doxastic experience, mystical perception, a sense of the numinous, and certain experiences such as guilt and danger, that the sensus divinitatis becomes aware of God. This is the form of perception in Alston's epistemology of religious belief that involves sensuous imagery; it is

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[32] Both quotations can be found in *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 4.

[33] Plantinga's essential endorsement of Alston's book, *Perceiving God*, and the indirect form of perception that Alston speaks of in Chapter I (pp. 20-28), can be found on pp. 180-184 of *Warranted Christian Belief.*

revelation of God mediated by creaturely forms or actual creatures. Alston and Plantinga must acknowledge this form of experience because the Bible itself, as I pointed out earlier, is full of examples of indirect revelation and indirect perception of God. Here are some examples from the Bible of God's revelation through creaturely forms: Moses' auditory experience of God's voice at the burning bush (Ex. 3) and his visual experience of God's "glory" and "goodness," specifically in the form of God's back, on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 33); Ezekiel's vision of "the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ez. 1); Isaiah's vision of God robed, and seated on a throne (Isaiah 6); God's voice from heaven that sounded like thunder at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (John 12); and Stephen's vision of the glory of God at his stoning. And here are some examples from the Bible of God's revelation through actual creatures: God's revelation through the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire in the leading of the Israelites through the wilderness (Ex. 13); the revelation of God in the natural universe that is often spoken of in the Psalms and is also referred to in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans; the main example of this form of experience, of course, is Jesus Christ. Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus is God in the form of a human.

Given their priorities, the Reformed epistemologists do not spend much time reflecting on the nature of indirect perception. And in the few places where it is mentioned, just in passing, they tend to depreciate it, or rather, they tend to selectively depreciate or ignore certain of its deliverances. I pointed out that Alston, in his *Perceiving God*, says ". . . if we experience God as looking or sounding a certain way, that can't be the way He is, not even approximately."[34] What is specifically depreciated is the sensuous imagery and experience involved with indirect perception. And, of course, the reason for the depreciation is that God, being God and not a

[34] *Perceiving God*, p. 20.

creature, obviously cannot, "in himself," be the way that these experiences portray God: as being human or creaturely in form, having a back, sounding a certain way, etc. Nonetheless, despite his depreciation, Alston still includes indirect perception as one of the ways that God can be experienced.

Plantinga, like Alston, is primarily interested in knowledge of God "in himself," because that is the only kind of knowledge we can have of God that is worthy of being called knowledge. Following Alston, and in concert with the Scriptural witness, however, he also includes indirect perception as one of the ways that God is experienced and known; it is one of the experiential elements of the sensus divinitatis. Now the sensus divinitatis gives us knowledge of God. Moreover, it gives us direct, properly basic, rational knowledge of God's very nature, of God "in himself." Consequently, the deliverances of the sensus divinitatis that give us this kind of knowledge, and that arise from the involvement of indirect perception, cannot include, in Plantinga's epistemological scheme, true beliefs or knowledge about the more sensuous elements of the sensus divinitatis, because they clearly cannot convey God "as He is;" they are obviously creatiomorphic in nature. The only beliefs, so it seems, that Plantinga considers as arising from indirect perception, and that give us knowledge of God, are beliefs that he believes can be understood as direct beliefs about God's nature. Thus, through natural revelation, you can form the belief that God is great.

> You see the blazing glory of the heavens from a mountainside at 13,000 feet; you think about those unimaginable distances; you find yourself filled with awe and wonder, and you form the belief that God must be great to have created this magnificent heavenly host.[35]

And from Calvin you can learn that the sensus divinitatis reveals that God is wise and glorious.

[35] *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 173.

> Even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host. It is, accordingly, clear that there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show his wisdom.[36]

> Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. . . . But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory . . Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory.[37]

Through indirect perception, therefore, Plantinga will allow that we can come to know that God is great or glorious or wise, but he says nothing about our knowledge of God as having a back, or sounding like thunder, or sitting on a throne, despite the fact that he acknowledges that there are experiences that do involve sensuous imagery of this kind. Indeed, he acknowledges that some of these experiences involve "vivid sensuous imagery of more than one kind."[38]

With respect to the beliefs that the rational faculty of faith produces based on the divine testimony of Scripture, the same kind of selectivity seems to be at work. In those passages of Scripture where we learn of God's goodness or greatness or love, we are receiving direct, rational knowledge of the divine essence. But in those passages in which we learn that God has a mouth, arm, ears, eyes, and hands Plantinga follows Calvin:

> [Because] God is a spirit, we can't properly attribute corporeal characteristics to him. He concedes that Scripture does seem to attribute such characteristics (a mouth, an arm, ears, eyes, hands) to him, but those who therefore take it that he

[36] Ibid., p. 173. The Calvin quotation is from the *Institutes*, I, v, 2, p. 53.

[37] Ibid., p. 174. The Calvin quotation is from the *Institutes*, I, v, 1, p. 52.

[38] Ibid., p. 181.

> has such bodily characteristics fail to understand that "as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us.[39]

Thus, Plantinga denigrates this form of access to God in comparison to the more direct form of access he believes is possible by reducing it to a mere "lisp" on God's part. But he thus acknowledges that it is, nonetheless, at least a "lisp" on God's part. Nurses do communicate things to their charges through their lisping. Although Plantinga denigrates this form of belief formation he does not eliminate or demonize it. Presumably faith responds to this form of revelation as well and we come to know certain things about God, even if it is of a lower order than direct knowledge.

The problem with Plantinga's perspective on this issue, then, is not that he depreciates the more sensuous forms of access to God. This is not the problem because, as I pointed out above, it is certainly the case that these forms of access *do not* take us to God's very nature, if we can even speak of God as having a nature. The problem is that he depreciates these forms of access because he believes there *are* more direct forms of access; the problem is that he thinks we can access God's nature. But is this actually the case? I think not. As we have seen, even Calvin thinks that all of God's perfections that can be enumerated are borrowed from the creation.

> [I]n the enumeration of his perfections, [God] is described [in Scripture] not as he is in himself, but in relation to us, in order that our acknowledgment of him may be a more vivid actual impression than empty visionary speculation. . . . [E]very perfection . . set down [in Scripture] may be found in creation; and hence, such as we feel him to be when experience is our guide, such as he declares himself to be by his word.[40]

From Calvin's point of view, God's perfections, God's greatness, glory, wisdom, power, sovereignty, etc., are indirect manifestations of God. That is, all the properties that Plantinga

[39] Ibid., p. 46. The Calvin quotation is from the *Institutes*, I, xiii, 1, p. 121.

[40] *Institutes,* I, x, 2.

takes as real properties in God's very essence are, according to Calvin, *creational* properties and qualities put to service by God for revelatory purposes. Their revelatory status, then, is no greater than the revelation of God as having arms, eyes and ears. One might say that God is "lisping" to us in these instances as well. And from Hart's point of view, Calvin has it right in this instance, not only because these perfections obviously are drawn from the creational order, but also because, as we have seen, it is not possible to understand them or fit them together into a logically coherent system of belief.

Thus, even though Plantinga fails to do justice to the indirectness of our knowledge of God, he does not eliminate it altogether. And unless he is willing to assert that this form of biblical revelation and access has *nothing* to say of God *at all,* that it is an improper and deceptive form of communication ("disguised nonsense"), he must admit that it does reveal something of God to us; it is at the very least a "lisp." He must admit that from the biblical perspective, metaphoric language and beliefs about God have revelatory significance, even if it is true that they do not say anything about the divine nature in itself.

So if it is true that Plantinga himself allows for indirect access to God, whether this is indirect personal experience of God through the sensus divinitatis, or indirect experience of God through the testimony of the Scriptures, it would seem that not *every* indirect, metaphorical word or concept spoken or thought of God is necessarily impossible; it means that one can speak and think of God in indirect terms without being self-referentially nonsensical; it means that there is at least some thought and language of God that legitimately violates Plantinga's general rule; and it means that propositions like "God transcends human experience," and "our concepts do not apply to God," could well be used in nonliteral, metaphoric ways without necessarily falling into self-referential incoherence.

And it means that it is at least feasible that Hart is correct in saying "Who could object if we said that *all* speech and thought about God is metaphorical, figurative, nonliteral, and creatiomorphic?" (italics mine) If it is acceptable to speak and think of God in this way in *some* instances, then perhaps it could be seen as acceptable to do so in *all* instances. If Plantinga would allow such a concession, the great advantage is that the religious problem he has felt the need to address would be eliminated.

EPILOGUE

Let us assume that Hart is correct on the issues under discussion. Does it follow that our knowledge of God is nothing more than an imaginative, metaphorical construct? Is Kaufman correct, and is Hart following Kant's disciples in *this* respect as well? Are Plantinga's fears justified that unless our concepts apply to God in a direct and formal way it means, ultimately, that God is not who we think and that, perhaps, there is no God? Are Bavinck's fears warranted that unless our concepts put us in contact with God's essence, even if only in an inadequate way, our knowledge of God will be subjective and arbitrary?

In Chapter 3 on Hart's position I showed that none of these fears are warranted from his point of view. Although our knowledge of God is fully indirect and metaphorical, God is the one

who has taken the initiative to reveal indirectly within the creation. For Hart, it is *God* who "reveals creaturely to creatures." God's revelation, therefore, is never arbitrary. Rather, God's disclosures are revelatory of what God actually wants to reveal to humanity and nothing more. For Hart, the person of faith knows that this is true, and Hart has surrendered in faith to what God has revealed and is at rest in this knowledge. Those who cannot so find rest in this commitment free reason from biblical revelation and direction and set out for a more direct route to God. The irony of this endeavor, and the main conclusion of this thesis, is that in so doing, reason does not escape faith in something taken as being ultimate. Instead, the rationally searching person surrenders reason to a different ultimate, an ultimate other than God, and thereby distorts the very knowledge of God she seeks by mistakenly reducing God in status in reference to it.

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