

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Or

*Bob's Crazy Day With The Dandelions*

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. It attempts to answer questions regarding the origin of human knowledge, and considers especially *how* we can know with certainty. Epistemological answers are basic and necessary building blocks of any philosophy, worldview, or belief system. In fact, of the four major components of philosophy and worldview (epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and socio-political thought), none can be adequately addressed until we answer the question of *how* we can know. Regarding metaphysics, for example, we can't make legitimate assertions about the character of God or the existence of the human soul until we first address how such assertions can be verified or falsified. Further, unless we have a means for validating ethical prescriptions as either worthy or unworthy, we have no warrant for choosing one prescription over another – especially when we encounter apparently competing or conflicting goods. And if we have no mechanism for authentication, then how can we even arrive at a definition of *what is good* in the first place? Finally, in socio-political thought, on what basis can we choose one system of government over another, or how can we determine whether a law is commendable? Without correct epistemological answers, there is no basis for our understanding or choosing one thing over another. In short, epistemology is really about authority, verifiability, truth, and certainty.

Imagine a person – we'll call him Bob. Bob has just received the gift of consciousness. For the first time in Bob's existence he is *aware*. Bob examines his surroundings and he finds himself standing in rolling sun-drenched fields of dandelions under a beautifully clear mid-day sky. Of course, Bob has no knowledge of what anything around him is or what any of it means, because this is the first time he has ever encountered any of these things. Bob begins to ponder. "*Here I am, I suppose, now what?*" Bob has to figure out how to answer that question before he takes his first step, lest he make the wrong assumptions and step in the wrong direction. He begins a quest to decipher the right understanding of who and what he is, and how he must proceed, but he isn't certain of whether or not he has the right tools for the task. In fact, he isn't certain of anything.

### *Descartes' Rationalism*

Rene Descartes engaged a similar exercise in his *Meditations*. He first describes things that we may doubt, acknowledging that the senses sometimes deceive us, and that "it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in

that by which we have even once been deceived.”<sup>1</sup> Descartes begins with the assumption that a benevolent God exists who allows people sometimes to be fooled by their senses, and Descartes considers that if God allows for occasional deceptions, it is theoretically possible that God, Himself, is constantly deceptive (though Descartes ultimately concludes that God is not deceptive). Descartes wonders how we can come to certainty of truth if instead of a benevolent God there exists a malevolent demon that is constantly deceiving us. Descartes engages a process of elimination to discover the things that cannot be doubted, irrespective of the existence and nature of God. He concludes, “I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind.”<sup>2</sup> Descartes suggests that his own thinking is verification of his existence, and cannot be doubted. This is the *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am)<sup>3</sup> which undergirds his epistemology. Because Descartes considers reason as something that cannot be doubted, he values it above all else. With respect to the existence of God, for example, Descartes reasons *to* the existence of God, and the existence and nature of God is ultimately subject to the guided use of reason. In the end, Descartes’ epistemology undermines any authority claimed by special revelation, instead depending on reason guided by method as the ultimate arbiter of truth.

#### *Hume’s Naturalistic Empiricism*

Unlike Descartes, David Hume values experience over reason. Hume distinguishes between thoughts or ideas and impressions or perceptions, preferring the latter as more reliable for discovering truth. He explains:

All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure: the mind has but a slender hold on them; they are apt to be confounded with other resembling ideas...on the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid; the limits between them are more exactly determined; nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them.<sup>4</sup>

Hume adds that this proposition, understood properly, “might render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings, and drawn disgrace upon them.”<sup>5</sup> Hume suggests that in order to resolve metaphysical questions we must prioritize impressions over ideas. This leads Hume to conclude against the metaphysical, because he argues that there are no true impressions of the supernatural. For example, with respect to miracles, Hume asserts that,

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations*, trans. John Veitch, 1901, 1:3.

<sup>2</sup> *Meditations*, 2:3.

<sup>3</sup> Found in Descartes’, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, Part IV.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from David Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, as quoted in Christopher Cone, *Life Beyond the Sun: An Introduction to Worldview and Philosophy Through the Lens of Ecclesiastes* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009), 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous...When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact which he relates should really have happened...<sup>6</sup>

Hume is pre-committed to the least miraculous outcome – that which is least likely to violate experiential norms. This illustrates his understandable but inadequately justified dependence on the senses for ascertaining reality. Hume's epistemology can be correct insofar as his impressions and their interpretations are accurate, but wherever the senses are limited in scope there is much potential for error.

### *Nietzsche's Existentialism*

Friedrich Nietzsche seems driven by a pre-commitment to skepticism of absolute moral value. While he does not fully develop a theory of the mind,<sup>7</sup> he does affirm some definitive epistemological principles. Phenomenal reality (or experiences) can be verified by the senses, but noumenal (or absolute) reality cannot be verified at all. Nietzsche does not necessarily deny that absolute meaning exists, but he argues we can't interface directly with it if it does exist; consequently, absolute reality and meaning are irrelevant to us, therefore we must make our own realities.

Nietzsche's agnostic assertion that *we cannot know* leads him to a curiously confident metaphysical interpretation and ethical prescription:

I entreat you, my brothers, remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! They are poisoners, whether they know it or not. They are despisers of life, atrophying and self-poisoned men, of whom the earth is weary: so let them begone!<sup>8</sup>

As Nietzsche generally asserts that we cannot know, he does seem certain in his knowledge that we cannot know. In this inconsistency it is illustrated that his epistemology is less an attempt to coherently interpret knowledge than it is a mechanism to justify his amoral pre-commitment. In this Nietzsche shows that his first step is an assertion of will rather than an objective attempt to understand reality. In fact, Nietzsche's ultimate prescription for humanity is the culmination of that assertion of will:

That is your entire will, you wisest men; it is a will to power; and that is so even when you talk of good and evil and of the assessment of values...Where

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, as quoted in Christopher Cone, *Life Beyond the Sun: An Introduction to Worldview and Philosophy Through the Lens of Ecclesiastes* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009), 323.

I found a living creature, there I found will to power; and even in the will of the servant I found the will to be master.<sup>9</sup>

In Nietzsche's thinking, especially, we see the intersection of the four major components of philosophy and worldview (epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and socio-political thought), and the impossibility of practical agnosticism applied in these areas. These components demand commitment, and Nietzsche exposes inconsistency in the assumptions and conclusions of the agnostic commitment.

The views of Descartes, Hume, and Nietzsche represent three prominent epistemological perspectives undergirding worldview. For Descartes, reason is the ultimate arbiter of truth, and we can know with certainty by the proper use of reason. For Hume, experience is the ultimate arbiter of truth, and we can know with certainty through sensory verification. For Nietzsche, we cannot know with certainty, therefore we must simply pursue what is valuable to us.

The Bible offers an alternative epistemological model. Remember Bob? Imagine Bob standing in the field taking in and considering the new sights, sounds, smells, and sensations he is experiencing. He looks down and sees a Bible at his feet. He bends down, and reaching out his hands he picks up the Bible. He opens it, and recognizing that the words on the pages are orderly and expressive representations of meaning – just like his own thoughts are – he begins to read in Genesis. He continues through the entire Bible, and then closes it, gazing around him one last time before taking his first step. His first thought after gaining consciousness was, “*here I am, I suppose, now what?*” The Bible answers the question for him, and encourages him to take his first step. But how?

### *A Biblical Epistemology*

The first epistemological statement in the Bible is actually made by the serpent in the Garden: “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). Satan prescribes knowledge through contradicting God's design for knowledge. The fact that Satan chose epistemology as an early battleground underscores the strategic significance of epistemology in God's design. In this context Satan challenges Eve to consider a different starting point than God had prescribed, and if she does, Satan promises, Eve will have a better outcome – that her knowledge will be more complete, even to the point of making her godlike. While the actions Satan prescribed *did* result in particular knowledge (Gen 3:22), it was a distortion of God's design for knowledge and resulted in tragedy and not blessing. These events invite the reader to inquire as to God's ideal for human knowledge, and the answer is provided especially in the writings of Solomon, to whom it was granted to be exceedingly wise (1 Kin 3:12).

In the book of Proverbs Solomon identifies the first epistemological step undergirding a Biblical worldview: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7); “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov 9:10); and again, “The fear of the Lord is the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 326.

instruction for wisdom” (Prov 15:33). The word for wisdom is the Hebrew *yirah*, and does not simply denote respect, but is the term normally used of fear – as in fear for one’s life.<sup>10</sup> In context, the fear of the Lord involves the right perspective of and response to God.<sup>11</sup> Though Solomon uses a different word for fear in Proverbs 28:14, the contrast to appropriate fear is hardness of heart.<sup>12</sup> In short, the fear of the Lord involves the inner man’s responsiveness to God. Notice the critique of the atheist in Psalm 14:1: “The fool has said in his *heart* (Heb., *leb*) “There is no God.” The fool is unresponsive toward God, and sets his will against God, whereas the one who would possess wisdom acknowledges God and is responsive to Him.

From whence comes the fear of the Lord? “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth comes wisdom and understanding” (Prov 2:6). If the first step or first principle of Biblical epistemology is to fear the Lord, the authoritative source for the data we need to do so is identified as Scripture itself – a revelation which presupposes the existence of the Biblical God, and makes no effort to defend that first and most vital principle. So when Bob begins to read the Bible, he discovers therein the limitations of human reasoning – and thus, the inadequacies of rationalism (Gen 6:5; 1 Cor 2:14); he encounters the limited scope of human experience and of the uninformed arrogance of naturalistic empiricism (Job 38:4, 34-35, 39:26-27, 41:11, 42:5-6); and he discovers that there is indeed discernable meaning and truth – *noumenal reality*, created and revealed by God, and relevant for everyday human life – even if God hasn’t revealed its fullness (Ecc 3:11; Jn 20:31; Jam 3:17-18; 1 Jn 5:13).

Bob is left with an important choice, and he must choose between mutually exclusive first principles: rationalism, naturalistic empiricism, existentialism, or Biblical presuppositionalism.<sup>13</sup> Each of the four claims to be the arbiter of truth, and each demands presuppositions regarding the nature of evidence. Rationalism requires total trust in human reason, naturalistic empiricism is premised on the complete reliability of the senses, existentialism demands practical certainty in the idea that there can be no certainty, and Biblical presuppositionalism bids us trust in the words of a book that Bob found in a field of dandelions – a book that claims to be God’s word, and the only way to have certainty regarding who and what we actually are. Whichever of these options Bob selects will – if he is consistent in its application – set the course of his entire worldview, whether he realizes it or not. C’mon, Bob. We’re counting on you. Do the right thing. But Bob has a problem, and, having read the book, he is beginning to understand that problem.

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., Gen 15:1, 32:11; Prov 3:25, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Discussions regarding the fear of the Lord are found also in the NT in passages such as Romans 3:18; 2 Corinthians 5:11, 7:1; Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:17; and Revelation 14:7.

<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew *leb*, translated here as *heart*, is generally used to reference the heart, mind, will, and/or inner man.

<sup>13</sup> The term *presuppositionalism* is borrowed from Cornelius Van Til, and is employed here to account for the idea that the Bible presupposes, rather than defends, the existence of God, and that according to the Bible the proper understanding of reality depends entirely on and works from the acceptance of that presupposition – *that the God of the Bible exists*. In other words, whereas rationalism argues *to* God, and naturalistic empiricism and existentialism argue *against* God, Biblical presuppositionalism argues *from* God.

### *Four Pillars*

Some years ago I published a paper, entitled “Presuppositional Dispensationalism,”<sup>14</sup> in which I attempted to summarize the Biblical epistemological model with the illustration of four pillars. Pillar #1 is the existence of the Biblical God. As first principal, the God of the Bible exists, and not merely as one god among many, but as the One who has disclosed Himself in such a way that His exclusivity is unavoidable. Further, He is characterized above all else by *holiness* (Is 6:3; Rev 4:8), and all that He does is to be understood through that lens. The recognition of this first principle does not advocate *faith* as the sole or final source of understanding truth;<sup>15</sup> rather it is an invitation to step into the Biblical perspective, to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8).

Pillar #2 is the principle that God has divinely and authoritatively disclosed Himself for the purpose of His own glorification, through general revelation (creation, Rom 1:18-20), special revelation (the Bible, 2 Tim 3:16-17), and personal revelation (Jesus Christ, Jn 1:1-18). General revelation renders every man without excuse, providing an inescapable awareness of God. But general revelation is intentionally incomplete and ineffective for providing regenerative grace – special and personal revelation is needed for that. In special revelation God chose human language as the vehicle for His self-disclosure. As evidenced by His use of it, language is a reliable medium for God’s communication. Consequently, insofar as God has revealed Himself in Scripture, He may be understood. As the product of the self-disclosing God who speaks with authority as the Creator, the Bible does not appeal to human reason nor to human experience as proof of its authenticity. Rather the Bible presents itself to humanity as possessing the requisite authority, and renders humanity accountable for our response to that authority. A central theme of the Bible is its description of God’s personal revelation through Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and provides for us the payment for and offer of life. “*Taste and see that the Lord is good*” (Ps 34:8).

Pillar #3 is the incapacity of natural man to comprehend (receive) God’s revelation. Of course, humanity can cognitively understand and experientially interact with general and special revelation, and is enlightened further in Christ’s incarnation (Jn 1:9), but just as natural man rejects that which we know about God through creation (Rom 1:18-20), and just as natural man fails to receive the spiritual truths of the word (1 Cor 2:14), natural man likewise rejects God’s revelation in the Person of Christ (Jn 3:19). This is not just Bob’s problem, it is yours and mine as well: without some type of additional divine aid, humanity consistently fails to receive that which God has revealed. Humanity is characterized by sin, depravity, and brokenness (or deadness) in the apparatus for thinking, feeling, and choosing.

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<sup>14</sup> Originally published as Christopher Cone, “Presuppositional Dispensationalism” in *The Conservative Theological Journal*, Volume 10, Issue 29 (May 2006), presently accessible with permission at <http://www.drcone.com/2012/09/23/presuppositional-dispensationalism-part-1/>, and later expanded into a dissertation entitled, “Prolegomena: A Survey and Introduction to Method in Theology, Beginning With Presuppositional Epistemology and Resulting in Normative Dispensationalism,” and is presently available in its revised and expanded form as *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method* (TSP, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Thus Biblical presuppositionalism is not subject to the charge of fideism.

Importantly, this is why simple mental ascent to Biblical principles is not sufficient for accomplishing the fundamental change necessary. We don't move from death unto life simply by means of thinking rightly. It is here that we see the limitations of epistemology: a correct understanding of the Biblical design does not save, even though it allows us to interact with and understand accurately the data we need. But God<sup>16</sup> the Father draws (Jn 6:44), chooses (Rom 9:15-16; Eph 1:4-6), and calls (Gal 1:4-6); God the Son reveals (Jn 1:9) and redeems (Eph 1:7); and God the Spirit convicts (Jn 16:8) and enables (1 Cor 12:3). There is divine enablement needed and provided, according to His own will, for overcoming the deficiencies of humanity inherited through sin.

Pillar #4 is the necessity of a consistently applied hermeneutic. Scripture claims God-breathed authority and has been revealed in particular known human languages that are composed of finite vocabularies and grammatical concepts. These two principles demand two corresponding hermeneutic principles: (1) that we understand the meaning of the text in the normal sense of these languages (i.e., the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic), and (2) that we are hermeneutically consistent in deference to the authority of the text, and in recognition that it is the Revealer who is enthroned and not the interpreter.

The conclusions derived through application of this natural way of handling the text are decisively premillennial and dispensational. Even opponents of dispensational conclusions admit that those conclusions are grounded in a literal approach. As outspoken non-dispensationalist John Gerstner asserts, "on points where we differ there is a tendency for dispensationalists to be literalistic where the non-dispensationalist tends to interpret the Bible figuratively."<sup>17</sup> Because the Biblical epistemological model demands a consistent literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, and dispensationalism is grounded in that hermeneutic more than any other theological system, in comparison to other theological systems, dispensational theology best follows the Biblical epistemological model. But *best* isn't good enough if dispensationalism is simply the least inaccurate of many inaccurate systems. We should not strive simply to be better than other deficient systems, rather we should strive to be Biblically accurate in *every* aspect. Our pursuit is *a more Biblical theology*, and that pursuit demands careful adherence to Biblical epistemology. Bob doesn't need a better explanation; he needs *the truth!*

### *Implications for Dispensational Theology*

Sadly, in the past few hundred years of more formalized dispensational thought, it seems dispensationalists, in comparison to other theological traditions, have devoted little effort to epistemology. If one were to Google the phrase *dispensational epistemology*, they might be shocked (perhaps even appalled) at the novelty of the most popular results. That simple exercise is indicative of our historical deficiency in this area. Instead of doing our own work, and discovering a Biblical theology from the ground up, working from sound (i.e., Biblical) first

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<sup>16</sup> Notice that in the two key Biblical discussions of how we move from death unto life, the transition is introduced by the words, "But...God" (Rom 3:21 ; Eph 2:4).

<sup>17</sup> John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Morgan, PA: Sole Deo Gloria, 2000), 93.

principles, we have borrowed extensively from theoreticians in the Thomistic and Reformed traditions. Thomism is quite at home with rationalism, predating Descartes' version. Reformed epistemology is not far removed from the Biblical model, but Reformed theological pre-commitments (like replacement theology) are justified through methodological inconsistencies. As grand as are the successes of Cornelius Van Til's presuppositional thought, for example, his theologically driven hermeneutic inconsistencies are equally magnificent in their failings.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than depending upon inconsistently applied methodology for the discovery of our theology, it would be far better to ascertain a Biblical methodology, to apply it consistently, and to allow the theological chips to fall where they may. In short, our loyalty must not be to a theological tradition – dispensational or otherwise. Instead, our loyalty lies where He tells us we find wisdom: *in His word*. Now, of course, we recognize that the Bible understood through the lens of the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic produces dispensational conclusions. Of course we recognize that the primary hallmark of dispensational theology is its usually effective commitment to being Biblically derived, but we cannot with one hand claim to be Biblical in our methodology when with the other hand we are methodologically inconsistent (unless we are willing to assert that the Bible itself prescribes an inconsistent method, and I, for the record, am not).

*Dispensationalism is absolutely not a hermeneutic*. It should be, on the other hand, simply the product of a methodology and a hermeneutic *consistently applied*. If we treat dispensational theology itself as a hermeneutic lens, then we are no better off than those who appeal to historical theology as their authority for understanding Scripture (as the Catholic Catechism prescribes its followers must do<sup>19</sup>). Consequently, the prescription for a more Biblical theology is not that we do *more theology*, it is that we be *more Biblical* – and that starts with a Biblical epistemology, which reveals a Biblical hermeneutic (literal grammatical-historical), and results in Biblical conclusions.

### *Conclusion*

Just as Bob stood amidst the dandelions looking for answers, we all face (consciously or not) the same epistemological questions as we take our first steps in the pursuit of truth. Unfortunately, often we don't test the answers ourselves, deferring instead to the efforts of *thinkers* like Descartes, *feelers* like Hume, and

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<sup>18</sup> One example of such inconsistency is in Van Til's equating of Israel and the church, a characteristic *one people of God* doctrine within Reformed theology, and one that Van Til assumes, rather than defends: "...The Israel of God was tired of building alone, and was gradually accepting of more aid from the Samaritans. The antithesis between the church and the world was dying out..." (from Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1969), 61.); "Here, in the midst of this people Israel and nowhere else, the true obedience, the true patience, and the true hope of faith was found. As in the ark the family, the church, and human culture were preserved and redeemed..." (from Cornelius Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1979), 25.); "Christianity is here as elsewhere restorative. And this is true of the Old Testament dispensation as well as of the New..." (from Cornelius Van Til, "The Ten Commandments" (65-page syllabus from Westminster Theological Seminary, 1933), 58.).

<sup>19</sup> see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), Prologue III:11; Part 1, Article 2:III:92; and especially Part 1, Article 3:III:113.



*willers* like Nietzsche. In so doing, we fail to properly evaluate how first principles set the course of our entire worldview. This failure contributes to our own misunderstanding of reality – both in theory and practice, and it detracts from our ability to account for the sometimes-gigantic differences between us in how we understand that reality. Our epistemological differences are at the very core of our metaphysical and ethical differences. Whether we realize it or not, our disagreements are not grounded as much in conclusions as they are in our epistemological methodology.

If we are employing non-Biblical methodology for explaining reality, then our conclusions will generally be incongruent with the Biblical data. If this is so, then why have we given so little attention to these foundational issues? It is one thing to say that the Bible is our authority; it is another to *actually do theology, philosophy and worldview – to do life* – that way. When any aspect of our theology is grounded on any authority other than the Bible itself, it is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that we will arrive at purely Biblical conclusions. When we borrow from other worldviews to ground our theology, then we should not be surprised at the systematic inconsistencies that arise. On the other hand, if we answer the epistemological questions correctly, then we can base our subsequent steps on the proper authority. As a result we are able, by His design and through His assistance, to confidently *verify* truth. This makes Bob very happy.