

## The Epistemological Problem of Common Ground between Believer and Unbeliever in the Search for a Biblical Method of Apologetics

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There exists an internal battle within the Reformed scholarly community that may prove useful to scholars both within and outside of Reformed scholarship. The battle concerns apologetics and specifically the believer's ability to effectually communicate with unbelievers. One of the assumptions integral to Reformed theology that must be considered is man's total depravity as it relates to the intellect. Dutch Reformed apologist Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) indicated that this depravity not only includes the intellect but also has culminated in an absolute, epistemological antithesis between believer and unbeliever.

For Van Til, we must hold two positions in tension. On the one hand, "We are well aware of the fact that non-Christians have a great deal of knowledge about this world which is true as far as it goes. That is, there is a sense in which we can and must allow for the value of knowledge of non-Christians." Yet, on the other hand, Van Til states,

In order to hem in our question [can believer and unbeliever engage in argument] we are persuaded that we must begin by emphasizing the *absolute ethical antithesis* in which the 'natural man' stands to God. This implies that he knows nothing truly as he ought to know it. It means, therefore, that the 'natural man' is not only basically mistaken in his notions about religion and God but is as basically mistaken in his notions about the atoms and the laws of gravitation. From this ultimate point of view the 'natural man' knows nothing truly. He has chains about his neck and sees shadows only.<sup>2</sup>

Metaphysically, believers and unbelievers have all things in common. Epistemologically, believers and unbelievers have no common ground. Because the epistemological act is an ethical one and because the epistemological act begins already pitted against God and pitted against the truth conveyed by common notions, the unbeliever and believer are left with no true common knowledge between them.

Professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, MS), J. V. Fesko, however, believes there exists at least some common knowledge between believers and unbelievers despite the noetic effects of sin:

In a fallen world, humans still reason, albeit corrupted by sin, to access and interpret the world around them. Corrupted by sin, people are unable and unwilling to submit to the authority of general revelation. Instead, they use and twist it to their own ends. Because of the noetic effects of sin,

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<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1974), 64.

humanity's divinely given, naturally acquired, but sin-infected knowledge is inadequate for salvation. But this does not mean, contrary to the claims of Van Til, that testimony of the Holy Spirit is therefore necessary even for general human knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

On the Van Til side, common knowledge is not possible between believer and unbeliever. On the Fesko side, some common knowledge is possible between believer and unbeliever. This paper will defend Van Til's position by demonstrating how it is that Van Til justifies the existence of this kind of epistemological antithesis and detail how Van Til's approach allows for the possibility of true communication between believer and unbeliever despite this absolute epistemological antithesis.

We want to be extremely clear when we speak about overcoming this epistemological antithesis. When we discuss a believer and unbeliever engaging in debate utilizing a method of debate, one important criterion for true communication is agreement in terminology and word usage. We, therefore, find it necessary to narrow our focus to what we mean by "agreement." We want to know if true agreement between two parties is reached when two parties merely *assent* to the truth of a fact or if more is needed for agreement. Put simply, we are asking if agreement requires mere assent, common between both parties, or if agreement must entail formal *knowledge*, common between both parties. The requirement of the latter would demand that both parties not only assent to the truth of a fact but also *account* for that fact correspondingly. We hope, then, to ultimately answer the question: from a Reformed perspective, can a method of debate be used properly if agreement between the believer and unbeliever exists only in the *assent* to natural truths, while disagreement remains back of that assent due to the disjunctive accounting of those natural truths?

### *Reformed Orthodoxy and Natural Theology*

So far, we have not challenged the proposition that God's general revelation is infallible. Nor have we challenged the proposition that God's general revelation speaks with equal clarity to believers and unbelievers alike.

Van Til, in fact, depends on those two propositions as the basis of his entire program. What remains at task is how the unbeliever reacts to this clear, infallible general revelation. Typically, when an unbeliever is confronted with God's general revelation in his own experience or by way of a believer's defense of the faith, this confrontation involves what is called *natural theology*. Natural theology is a field of study that seeks to understand God and his attributes through creation, specifically through reason and observing nature rather than by referring to special revelation.

Whatever one's view of it, the use of natural theology introduces what appears to be a legitimate concern within a Reformed, post-Fall anthropology. This concern emerges from the central issue of whether epistemological common ground exists between believers and unbelievers.

Michael Sudduth directed an unusually helpful focus on the tension between natural theology and Reformed theology. He clearly addresses the true point of tension when he defines natural theology in light of a post-Fall context as that which "refers to what can be known or rationally

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<sup>3</sup> J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 207.

believed about the existence and nature of God on the basis of human reason or our natural cognitive faculties.”<sup>4</sup>

Sudduth’s interest in natural theology relates to the question we are concerned with here. Is it the case that epistemological common ground exists between believers and unbelievers? After all, Romans 1–2 appears to indicate that all men are able to have a natural understanding of God in a post-Fall world. But Sudduth acknowledges that despite Romans 1–2, “some Protestant historians and theologians have argued that the endorsement of natural theology in the Reformed tradition represents a departure from Reformed theology.”<sup>5</sup> The main thrust of his work is to dispel the idea that natural theology must be understood as a “rational, pre-dogmatic foundation for revealed theology.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, he maintains that natural theology, particularly within Reformed orthodoxy, is not meant to be a pre-theological, rational grounding on which theological orthodoxy is then built.

After giving a cursory history of the use and development of natural theology in Reformation and post-Reformation theology, Sudduth helpfully bifurcates natural theology into two aspects. First, natural theology is concerned with the natural knowledge of God (what he refers to as *knowledge*  $\alpha$ ). Second, natural theology is concerned with theistic arguments (what he refers to as *knowledge*  $\beta$ ).<sup>7</sup> He explains that the Reformed tradition understands the natural knowledge of God (knowledge  $\alpha$ ) to be implanted knowledge. This kind of knowledge is “non-inferential or spontaneously inferred from principles internal to the mind.”<sup>8</sup> The second (knowledge  $\beta$ ) refers to knowledge that is acquired by way of “reflection and argumentation” or “spontaneous inference.”

In maintaining a distinction between these two senses of knowledge, Sudduth demonstrates that Reformed objections to natural theology do not concern knowledge  $\alpha$  but rather knowledge  $\beta$ . Put simply, within a Reformed context, it is indisputable that the implanted knowledge of God is in every man and that every man is able to know that God exists and to know his nature from his creation. The question at hand is how *acquired* knowledge is possible for unbelievers in a post-Fall world.<sup>9</sup> Although Sudduth makes a strong case that knowledge  $\alpha$  is common to believers and unbelievers, in the Reformed view, it does not follow from logical necessity that knowledge  $\beta$  (acquired knowledge) is also common.

Sudduth rightly concludes that no legitimate Reformed objection to knowledge  $\alpha$  exists. He points out that even Calvin in his *Institutes* understood all believers *and* unbelievers as having a natural knowledge of God—that this natural knowledge is “‘naturally implanted’ (1.3.3), ‘by nature engraven’ (1.4.4), ‘taught by nature’ (1.5.12), and ‘sown in [men’s] minds out of the wonderful workmanship of nature’ (1.5.15).”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Sudduth, *Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2009), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 112–15.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, quoted in Sudduth, 114.

But what about knowledge  $\beta$ ? Does it follow from common knowledge  $\alpha$  (implanted knowledge) that knowledge  $\beta$  (acquired knowledge) is also common? Put another way, in the cognitive process of coming to an understanding of an idea or concept, is it true that the believer and unbeliever really share *common* (acquired) *knowledge* for the sake of achieving true communication? Common knowledge is not mere common assent to natural truths but also includes common accounting of those natural truths.

Van Til indicates that a problem does indeed exist in knowledge  $\beta$  between believers and unbelievers. This problem is exhibited in the unbeliever's cognitive *modus operandi*, i.e., suppression (Rom 1:18). For Van Til particularly, the unbeliever's mode of cognition entails hostility toward God and, therefore, hostility toward truth. The differing cognitive modalities of the believer and the unbeliever could cause major epistemological discontinuities regarding knowledge  $\beta$  (acquired knowledge).

Sudduth also discusses Calvin's language in the *Institutes* regarding knowledge  $\beta$  in relation to the noetic effects of the Fall. Although the implantation of the knowledge of God appears to be identical in believers and unbelievers, once the modality of acquired knowledge begins, Calvin maintains epistemological differences. Sudduth reviews Calvin's postlapsarian view of noetic effects: "God's revelation of Himself in nature is said to 'flow away without profiting us' (1.5.11) and 'in no way lead[s] us into the right path' (1.5.14). '[Men] ought, then, to break forth in praises of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride' (1.5.4). He concludes: 'we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God' (1.5.15). In these passages, Calvin contrasts the pre-lapsarian ethical and religious efficacy of the knowledge of God with its post-lapsarian failure in this regard."<sup>11</sup>

Although Calvin appears to be making a distinction in epistemological modality (knowledge  $\beta$ ) between believers and unbelievers, we have yet to address what practical effect this difference in cognitive modality has as a believer attempts to communicate with an unbeliever. If the difference is too great, it becomes unclear how believers and unbelievers can agree on terms and assumptions in order to truly communicate.

The model we have presented already we might call the *common-assent model*. In this model, two parties have assented to the truth of natural phenomena. This assent appears to be satisfactory enough to move a debate forward. However, back of the assent of the truth of a natural phenomenon is a radically different accounting for the possibility of that truth.

Using this model, the believer engages the unbeliever in knowledge  $\beta$ , assuming there is agreement on meaning of terms and propositions for the possibility of advancing the argument. This "agreement" on terms and propositions, however, is merely the assent to the truth of those terms and propositions, not agreement on the common knowledge of those terms and propositions. In this model, descriptions of natural truths might be agreed on, while the explanation of how those descriptions are possible remains (even if temporarily) outside the discussion. In essence, the two

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<sup>11</sup> Sudduth, 115.

parties are moving a debate forward based on agreement of assent *that* something is true, but both parties remain without common knowledge of terms they are using for engagement.

For instance, Steven Hawking and a Christian physicist might have agreed that light acts like a particle and a wave and travels at 186,282 miles per second. Although their descriptions might “agree,” their explanation of how those things are possible would be vastly different. The common-assent model holds that genuine agreement is obtained when both parties assent to the truth of light acting like a particle and a wave and traveling at 186,282 miles per second even though no accounting has been established for the possibility of those facts.

Our question finds its place here. Where the common-assent model allows distance between the descriptions of natural truths and their explanation (accounting), a *common-knowledge model* would require description and explanation to be in reliance on each other always. We return, therefore, to our original question: from a Reformed perspective, can a method of debate be used properly if agreement between the believer and the unbeliever exists only in the *assent* to natural truths, while disagreement remains back of that assent due to the disjunctive justifications of those natural truths?

### *The Necessary Union of Description and Explanation*

Our question has in view the common ground necessary for a believer to engage with an unbeliever. As we have discussed earlier, this communication appears problematic because of the supposed epistemological antithesis between believer and unbeliever.

If an epistemological antithesis does exist between believer and unbeliever, we will have to show, using Van Til, how common ground is possible so that communication between them can be meaningful. Informal ways to do this exist, but our interest is in a formal method of engagement, in which common ground has a higher expectation of precision. The engagement with the scholastic method, for instance, is possible if and only if common ground exists between the interlocutors as to what words mean, what distinctions are acceptable, and how to define differences once distinctions are made. If believers and unbelievers are to have true communication via a formal method, is it enough for the parties to give common *assent* to the truth of particular facts, or does true communication demand common *knowledge* of particular facts?

As stated above, J. V. Fesko believes there exists at least some common knowledge between believers and unbelievers despite the noetic effects we have already discussed:

In a fallen world, humans still reason, albeit corrupted by sin, to access and interpret the world around them. Corrupted by sin, people are unable and unwilling to submit to the authority of general revelation. Instead, they use and twist it to their own ends. Because of the noetic effects of sin, humanity’s divinely given, naturally acquired, but sin-infected knowledge is inadequate for salvation. But this does not mean, contrary to the claims of Van Til, that testimony of the Holy Spirit is therefore necessary even for general human knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Reforming Apologetics*, 207.

Fesko rightly understands general revelation to be insufficient for salvation due to man's depravity. Yet for Fesko, just because this general revelation is twisted by the unbeliever's "sin-infected knowledge," that does not mean that Scripture is necessary for something as common as what Fesko terms "general human knowledge." There appears to be, in Fesko's estimation, a neutral set of knowledge that is common to believers and unbelievers—knowledge in which Scripture does not need to correct the unbeliever's final reference point. This knowledge, because it is general, would still need to meet the criteria for knowledge we have already covered.

Fesko's view of knowledge appears to be untenable in light of what we have discussed so far. He appears to be saying that knowledge is possible based on assent alone since unbelievers will not account for the truth as finding its final reference point in God, as a believer would.

Nonetheless, let us take a more generous view of Fesko's comments. Perhaps Fesko is aware of the traditional criteria for knowledge in the history of epistemological research. Maybe Fesko is really saying that there is no reason to hold that a believer and an unbeliever cannot both assent to natural truths, but since their accountings are contradictory, those accountings can be *bracketed* until (later in the debate) the opposing accountings come into question.

What about the common assent to truth? Perhaps the fact that the believer and the unbeliever can both assent to the truth of a fact is sufficient for them to have true communication even though they do not share common knowledge. The problem is that we cannot make this bracketing work. A cursory overview of basic epistemology will show that assent is not knowledge, and that knowledge *requires* truth, belief, *and* accounting of that belief.

Since Plato, genuine knowledge has been understood to obtain by an individual if all three aspects of a fact are present: First, a fact must be true. Second, the fact must be believed by the individual. Third, and most importantly, the individual must have a justification for that fact being a true belief. This basic understanding of knowledge has become known as "justified true beliefs."<sup>13</sup> Knowledge, then, requires a fact to be true, believed, and justified (or accounted for). Little, if any, difference can be detected between Van Til and this epistemological tradition of justified true beliefs.

Defining knowledge as a justified true belief is not a problematic project for Christian thinkers because the justification is nondual, terminating in the God of the Bible. For unbelievers, however, the project of justifying true beliefs is quite problematic. As an illustration, in 1997 Donald Davidson, scholar, professor, and giant in the field of epistemology, was interviewed by Professor Michael Martin of University College London. After being asked about the project of defining knowledge in terms of justified true beliefs, Davidson helpfully demonstrated why justification is so problematic for philosophers (and from the Christian's point of view, unbelievers in particular). He explained,

It seemed to me that there's a sense in which this project can't be carried out. The problem concerns the last feature, of course [justification]. As Plato discovered in the *Theaetetus* the hard thing is to account for the conditions in which a belief is justified or justified in just the right way to make it knowledge if it's true. And I guess I became convinced that it's not just that nobody has ever gotten it

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<sup>13</sup> For a helpful primer on justified true beliefs see, Richard Foley, "Justified Belief As Responsible Belief," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 313–326.

right but that there are reasons in principle why there isn't any one right answer. It's not that we don't know a lot about justification in particular cases, but that there should be one account which is *the* satisfactory one, seems to me then, and seems to me now, very unlikely.<sup>14</sup>

The unbeliever is perplexed at the very point that knowledge becomes knowledge: at *justification* (what we have been calling accounting until this point). For Davidson this perplexity should not come as a surprise. To advocate for a justification in which all facts terminate in a final reference point would make knowledge monolithic. There would have to be some objective, eternal final reference point of all facts that could penetrate the appearance of duality in the world and convince the individual of that one justification for all facts.

This illustration allows us to see the important distinction between mere common assent and the more robust concept of common knowledge. Although two parties might have common assent of the truth of a natural phenomenon, they cannot share common knowledge of that phenomenon if their justification of that true belief is not also shared. Without common knowledge, the parties cannot have true communication. This dilemma is particularly poignant if two parties wish to engage in a kind of communication characterized by a method of debate. It is unclear how any effective method of debate would succeed without common knowledge. Mere common assent would produce only an appearance of common ground, not an actual common ground between them.

Many have missed this important distinction. It is this distinction between common assent and common knowledge that has characterized Van Til's construal of the epistemological antithesis between believer and unbeliever (knowledge=the spiritual reality of natural truths).

In the next few sections, we will discover Van Til's defense of this traditional epistemological model (justified true beliefs). We will see that the *complaint* brought against Van Til's epistemology appears to be a neglect of this model. We will then see that Van Til's epistemological model (justified true beliefs) becomes particularly necessary in regard to his post-Humean *context*. Given Van Til's epistemological framework, lastly, we will explicate Van Til's *conditions* for true communication between parties who wish to debate each other.

### The Complaint

An important aspect of Van Til's conception of the epistemological antithesis between believers and unbelievers is that a mere description of facts entails such an antithesis. Although some might concede that there is antithesis between believers and unbelievers in their justification of a fact, they may not agree that there is antithesis within the unbeliever's mere description of that fact.

William Dennison has observed that some of Van Til's critics have accused him of rejecting a distinction between the scientific *description* of phenomena and the *explanation* of those phenomena. Dennison explains,

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Davidson and Michael Martin, "Davidson on Knowledge & Perception—Martin Discussion (Epistemology)," Philosophy Overdose; accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrxn451Br68> (quotation begins at 4:00).

Van Til set forth two ideas which became a point of contention on the part of his critics: 1) ‘the believer and the non-believer differ at the outset of every self-conscious investigation’ and 2) the believer and non-believer have everything metaphysically in common, but nothing epistemologically in common. Van Til’s critics respond by saying that he cannot be serious; these two points seem to destroy any conception of common grace and a common point of contact while accenting the notion of total depravity. With respect to the first point, his critics may concede that a basic difference between a self-conscious investigation on the part of a believer and an unbeliever exists concerning *an explanation* of the facts, but there is no such difference in the mere *description* of the facts.<sup>15</sup>

For instance, the way Stephen Hawking *describes* the behavior of photons should not be epistemologically different from a believer’s description of the behavior of photons. It is only when the question of how one *explains* that phenomenon that Hawking moves to human autonomy and the Christian turns to God. In other words, for the critics with whom Van Til was interacting, there should be no epistemological antithesis between the believer and the unbeliever when both parties are giving a description of the facts, but one *would* expect such an antithesis when they are explaining (or accounting for) those same facts.

Van Til, however, disagrees. He contends that there is epistemological antithesis between believers and unbelievers in *both* their descriptions *and* their explanations. Dennison writes that, for Van Til,

from the very outset of every self-conscious investigation into the facts, the Christian and the non-Christian differ. Specifically, Van Til maintained that every description is an explanation of a fact—the description of a fact is not a neutral category that exists irrespective of God. As Van Til wrote: ‘According to any consistently Christian position, God, and God only, has ultimate definitory power. God’s description or plan of the fact makes the fact what it is.’ Since God describes and interprets (explains) the facts, no fact is neutral. Every *self-conscious* investigation into the facts does not separate the description from the explanation.<sup>16</sup>

For Van Til, every instance of thought occurs in the context of a pre-interpreted world. This interpretation is God’s interpretation. Therefore, any engagement of the world, any engagement of facts, is engagement with God. All facts are subject to God’s pre-interpretation. Engaging facts cannot be done knowledgeably if God is excluded from the engagement. This even includes mere description of facts.

Given that the fallen intellect is naturally hostile to God, engaging facts becomes a delusional interaction. When an unbeliever attempts to describe what he observes, he does so not as a neutral observer using neutral descriptors, but rather he does so as the primary interpreter. His very descriptions of facts are constructed to assimilate the unbeliever’s God-absent interpretation. Van Til explains:

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<sup>15</sup> William D. Dennison, *In Defense of the Eschaton*, ed. James Douglas Baird (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



The scientist, even when he claims to be merely describing facts, assumes that at least some aspects of Reality are non-structural in nature. His assumption is broader than that. He really assumes that all Reality is non-structural in nature. To make a batch of ice-cubes Mother needs only a small quantity of water. But to hold the ice-cubes intact till it is time to serve refreshments, Mother must control the whole situation. She must be certain that Johnny does not meanwhile handle them for purposes of his own. So the scientist, if his description of even a small area, or of an aspect or a dimension, of Reality is to stand, must assume that Reality as a whole is non-structural in nature until it is structured by the scientist. The idea of brute, that is utterly uninterpreted, “fact” is the presupposition to the finding of any fact of scientific standing. A “fact” does not become a fact, according to the modern scientist’s assumptions, till it has been made a fact by the ultimate definitory power of the mind of man. The modern scientist, pretending to be merely a describer of facts, is in reality a maker of facts. He makes facts as he describes. His description is itself the manufacturing of facts.<sup>17</sup>

Van Til is saying that the delusion of neutral thought and of neutral observation by the modern scientist is rooted in the presupposition that the world lies before him uninterpreted. Man is the one who brings meaning to the observation and even brings meaning to the facts. His description must be constructed in such a way that once reverse-engineered, it inevitably leads to an explanation in which God is either not present or not necessary. As Hawking phrased it, “Because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. . . . Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going.”<sup>18</sup>

Van Til did not overlook a distinction between description and explanation. Rather, he was acknowledging the conditions necessary for knowledge. Those conditions included not merely assenting to a true belief as is done in description, but also, these true beliefs, as described, must be directly related to that which gives these beliefs the quality called “true.” Put another way, assent to a true belief requires that the truth of that belief have representation even within the description. Therefore, descriptions are not neutral observations but are rather *interpretations* requiring presuppositions that make those interpretations possible. Those presuppositions contain no neutrality whatsoever. A description, as interpretation, is fully reliant on its presupposed explanation for it to have any coherence. Not only that, but the explanation that gives it coherence is also the essential element that defines this coherence as either *knowledge* or a false belief.

### The Context

To understand Van Til’s position, it is important to remember his context. Van Til was responding within a post-Humean world. If we think of description as an effect and explanation as a cause, we begin to see how some philosophers deconstructed this relation. David Hume took the distinction between description and explanation to its logical conclusion by questioning cause and effect *per se*.

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<sup>17</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2012), 180.

For Hume, the perception of the mind's ability to predict and infer is only possible based on experience—what Hume calls impressions. Experience is useful only insofar as it allows us to predict what we have not experienced. This prediction is possible only if we take for granted that the unobserved will resemble the observed. Hume views this assumption as unprovable, and it has no basis in knowable fact other than our own subjective biases (or assumptions). The reflection upon our experiences or impressions become ideas. Ideas are less trustworthy than impressions because they are more easily open to error.<sup>19</sup> For Hume, we must imply our own perspectives of meaning into our ideas to make sense to us, but those perspectives or meaning-making assumptions may not have anything to do with reality.

Hume applies these meaning-making assumptions to cause and effect. The mind believes there is a connection between the cause and the effect, what he calls “necessary connection.”<sup>20</sup> Hume concludes that this necessary connection is a subjective feeling that is projected onto the world. In reality, a connection may not exist at all—no *actual* cause and effect. For Hume there is no way to know this for certain.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to mention here that Hume is not saying that, ontologically, events do not arise without a cause. He was speaking epistemologically.<sup>22</sup> How can we know the connection we are assuming is actual? Part of what Hume was reacting to was whether a description of the world could be held in isolation from its explanation. In other words, Hume was questioning the reliability of descriptions of the world that are justified epistemologically by our ideas. If our ideas (reflection upon the world) are in question, what can it mean to say we know anything, regardless of our assent to its truth? When a description of a fact is considered in isolation from its explanation, the fact can be considered “true” but groundless. If truth is the cause of coming to know a fact, the knowledge of the fact is an *effect* of the cause (truth). If a fact is isolated, even temporarily, it must be held (even for a moment) that a fact is a fact absent from a grounding causal truth. This isolating of the description from the explanation proved to lead to an absurdity because a description was to be considered true without a grounding that was the *cause* of its truth.

If we were to think about descriptions as facts, when a fact is isolated from its explanation, the fact becomes incoherent. Considering an unexplained, ungrounded fact leaves one with two options. Either the one considering the isolated fact eases the tension by merely inserting his own subjective explanation to maintain coherence or the one considering the isolated fact has to accept the possibility of a “true” but incoherent fact.<sup>23</sup> Both options are absurdities if two parties are attempting to “know” the same fact.

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<sup>19</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I.1.2.1, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, I.3.2.2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I.4.7.8.

<sup>22</sup> Wright refers to Hume's letter to John Stewart on February 1754 in which Hume states that he “never asserted so absurd a Proposition as that any thing might arise without a Cause.” John P. Wright, *Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature': An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 93.

<sup>23</sup> A true but incoherent fact is not referring to a fact that is difficult to understand. For instance, the Trinity might *seem* to be an incoherent fact. However, although the Trinity is impossible to understand fully, it is grounded in

This separation of a fact's description from its explanation led to a radical skepticism. If description can logically be separated from explanation, then description is merely undefined perception. In such a case, perceiving a fact is possible absent the fact's defined identity in its explanation. There is no grounding of the description for its coherence. When description is incoherent, description is meaningless. For this reason, Hume relegated description to what he viewed as mere representation. Detached from an objective explanation, perception became subjective in the most dubious way.

For Van Til, Immanuel Kant's response to Hume was unacceptably autonomous,<sup>24</sup> but Kant did understand that at the center of the debate was the question of how knowledge is possible.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Kant and the rest of the world were forced to ask the next question: What are the conditions necessary for knowledge to be obtained? The post-Humean world began to recognize that separating the description of a fact from its explanation was a death sentence to the possibility of knowing. Knowing would need criteria, and that criteria would have to include the explanation (or justification) of the fact's description.

More recently, scientific communities came to understand the problem of dividing true beliefs from their justification as well. The entire point of Hawking's book *The Grand Design* was to demonstrate that the theory of everything (explanation) was inextricably tied to how the appearance of design is described.<sup>26</sup>

For Hawking, the problem of scientific knowledge is the human element of interpreting data (description of observations). Hawking explains the problem is that "There is no way to remove the observer—us—from our perception of the world, which is created through our sensory processing and through the way we think and reason. Our perception—and hence the observations upon which our theories are based—is not direct, but rather shaped by a kind of lens, the interpretive structure of our human brains."<sup>27</sup> The solution to this problem was to develop a theory that accounted for all facts, a theory of everything. This kind of theory allows a more objective way of describing observations. Put simply, our minds require an interpretive structure; therefore, we need an explanation that informs and "shapes" our descriptions of the world.

Long before Hawking's book on design, Thomas Kuhn had already developed the idea that scientific observations (description) are heavily influenced by shared, delimiting paradigms across scientific communities. Different communities share different paradigms. For a paradigm to be shared,

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Scripture. In this case, a true but incoherent fact would have to be something that one assumes to be true without any grounding whatsoever.

<sup>24</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 109, 133–134.

<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt and F. Max Müller (London: Penguin, 2007), A56/B80–81.

<sup>26</sup> Hawking's conclusion was that M-theory is the key explanation that is needed for proper descriptions of the phenomena in the universe. *The Grand Design*, 179–181.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

particular common commitments must be formed regarding the use of the paradigm by a particular community. Kuhn called these commitments *rules*, which are derived from the paradigm.<sup>28</sup>

Although rules are extremely difficult to determine in a particular community whose members share a paradigm, the presence of these common commitments or rules is evidence that the community sharing the paradigm must obtain epistemological common ground as a basis for regulating the paradigm.<sup>29</sup> Without this epistemological common ground within the community, the paradigm becomes useless since it requires rules to operate and maintain coherence within the community. Kuhn determined that descriptions are common only among those who share the paradigm. For Kuhn, the paradigm is the explanation. The rules from the explanation inform the way in which descriptions of observations are to be rendered. Description has no universal common ground that transcends specific paradigms within scientific communities. Description and explanation are inextricably linked.

Van Til was right to insist that description and explanation are epistemologically linked, inseparable constructs that are mutually reliant on each other for their meaning and coherence. Even the philosophical and scientific communities understand that description is the exercise of interpretation, and that interpretation has no coherence without its relation to the *conditions* that make interpretation possible. A true belief requires its justification for knowledge to exist as coherent. For Van Til, the conditions are always the presupposition of the reality of the one true God and his pre-interpretation of the world. To be coherent, the description must always be in relation to those conditions.<sup>30</sup>

The relevance of Van Til's insistence that the very description of a fact is included in the epistemological antithesis is this: From a Reformed perspective a formal method of communication between a believer and an unbeliever cannot include the assumption of common knowledge. More specifically, mere common assent is insufficient for true communication within a formal method of debate since believers and unbelievers cannot bracket justification. Even their descriptions are informed by and related to their explanations. Considering this description/explanation relation, common assent alone does not allow for true common ground.

For Van Til, true communication between believers and unbelievers, then, must involve, not a bracketing of justification but rather a focus on justification as it differs between the two parties. Nonetheless, Van Til rightly maintained the mutual reliance of description and explanation. We find ourselves confronted with Van Til's seemingly sweeping statement, "Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common."<sup>31</sup> Such an antithesis appears to disallow any true communication between believers and unbelievers. With the antithesis in mind, we will need to flesh out the conditions necessary for the possibility of true communication

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

because if the believer and the unbeliever have no epistemological common ground, how is it possible for them to have true communication?

### The Conditions for True Communication

We have already seen the extent of the epistemological antithesis, for Van Til, between believers and unbelievers. The unbeliever's act of epistemological interpretation (description) is warped because it is inseparable from his accounting (explanation) for that interpretation. This is the case since interpretation has no coherence without the framework of the explanation. Put simply, the explanation supplies the truth aspect of the true belief.

How then can there be true communication between believer and unbeliever with this kind of antithesis between them? Van Til delineates three conditions that must obtain between parties for such communication: (1) reliable common notions, (2) a common context, and (3) the common ability to become self-consciously aware of their own epistemic principles. These three conditions are made possible by the psychological aspect of personality.

First, Van Til defended the *reliability of common notions*. In Van Til's statement, "Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common,"<sup>32</sup> we see two aspects of human personality: the metaphysical and the epistemological. For Van Til, it is within the metaphysical aspect of personality that common notions are possible between believers and unbelievers. These common notions are what Van Til calls the "point of contact," a commonality between the two parties that is genuine, clear, and universal:

[The truly biblical view] is assured of a point of contact in the fact that every man is made in the image of God and has impressed upon him the law of God. In that fact alone he may rest secure with respect to the point of contact problem. For that fact makes men always accessible to God. That fact assures us that every man, to be a man at all, must already be in contact with the truth. He is so much in contact with the truth that much of his energy is spent in the vain effort to hide this fact from himself. His efforts to hide this fact from himself are bound to be self-frustrative.

Only by thus finding the point of contact in man's sense of deity that lies underneath his own conception of self-consciousness as ultimate can we be both true to Scripture and effective in reasoning with the natural man.<sup>33</sup>

In these paragraphs we see some vital elements in Van Til's metaphysical common notions shared by believers and unbelievers. First, truth is present in and known to all men by way of common notions. All men begin already in contact with the truth, rightly interpreted, and revealed by God to them (Rom 1:18-21). This truth is not merely one particular aspect of the world but rather is the *sensus divinitatis* that is the key to reality itself. That is to say, man is positioned directly within the spiritual reality that makes all particular truths meaningful and coherent.

Van Til was presenting man not as ignorant in the sense of lacking genuine knowledge. But Van Til did not minimize the seeming problem this genuine knowledge of the truth causes for the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008) 117.

doctrine of total depravity. In light of the depraved mind, Van Til points out the dilemma: “If a man is wholly ignorant of the truth, he cannot be interested in the truth. On the other hand, if he is really interested in the truth, it must be that he already possesses the main elements of the truth.”<sup>34</sup> Van Til satisfied the dilemma by viewing common notions as the conduit to truth in the unbeliever.

Within his category of psychological common notions, Van Til understood man as already knowing the truth, having been made in the image of the Author of truth and inhabiting a universe that cannot be understood without the spiritual reality of truth-knowing and image-bearing. Van Til views man’s mind as *habitually* rebelling and suppressing the truth epistemologically. Psychologically, it is through common notions that truth—properly interpreted—has been revealed to man. Epistemologically, man suppresses that truth.

Next, Van Til defended a *common context* between believer and unbeliever. Through psychological common notions, every person (even though fallen) is positioned within a *context* where all the conditions are present to direct him to know truth. He is made in the image of God and dwells within God’s pre-interpreted universe. This universe is his immediate environment but not his ultimate environment. As Van Til confirms, “God is man’s ultimate environment, and this environment is completely interpretative of man who is to know himself.”<sup>35</sup> The spiritual reality of God is both within man and all around him, making every natural truth possible. Man begins already living, already defined, and already dependent on a world that exists as interpreted by God. His context directs a way of knowing that begins with revealed, interpreted truth so that he may have all the conditions necessary for thought itself.

Man is not able to think beyond his environment but is able only to rely on its already God-constructed, God-interpreted existence to think at all. Van Til states, “God is man’s ultimate environment, and this ultimate environment controls the whole of man’s immediate environment as well as man himself. The whole of man’s own immediate environment as well as man himself is already interpreted by God. Even the denotation of the whole universe exists by virtue of the connotation or plan of God.”<sup>36</sup>

But can man “step back” and objectively distance himself from his own God-interpreted context and become his own interpreter? The concept that man is able to distance himself from his context in order to metaphorically turn around and interpret the world objectively has often been referred to in philosophy as the *Archimedean point*. This was a reference to Archimedes, who was thought to have said that if he could distance himself far enough from the earth and had a lever long enough, he could move the world. This distancing was applied epistemologically in philosophy as a metaphorical way of achieving an objective vantage point from which to make judgments regarding the world. For Van Til, the Archimedean point has two fatal flaws: (1) it cannot deliver what it promises and therefore is a delusion, and (2) it assumes man is capable of interpreting himself rightly.

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<sup>34</sup> *The Defense of the Faith*, 109.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

One must begin his epistemic distancing already finding himself within a world which has already been interpreted. The parameters of his observations, the biological sensations that make his observations possible, the rational laws that organize those observations, the cultural construct that allow for contextualization of those observations are all what we might call *meaning-structures*.

These meaning-structures are in themselves pre-interpreted facts that are not assessed but used to assess. Put simply, man cannot distance himself epistemologically from his own context because the tools he would use to do so cannot allow distance to be obtained. Archimedes' lever cannot leave the earth. Man finds himself unable to interpret originally because he cannot get behind his pre-interpreted context. Van Til writes, "In the last analysis the 'facts of experience' must be interpreted either in terms of man taken as autonomous, or they must be interpreted in terms of God. There is no third 'possibility.' The interpretation which takes the autonomous man as self-interpretive is an 'impossible possibility.'"<sup>37</sup>

In light of Van Til's position, a better metaphor than the Archimedean point might be an image of a man on a raft stranded in the middle of the ocean. He wishes to distance himself from the ocean in order to get a better vantage point of his position in the ocean. He therefore rows a quarter mile from his previous position, thinking he can now look back with a better perspective of the ocean and his position in it. This is the delusion of the Archimedean point when applied to epistemology. This delusion is what Van Til had in mind when he insisted that the apologist must "point out to [the unbeliever] that he has to presuppose the truth of the Christian position even to oppose it. I saw a little girl one day on a train sitting on the lap of her 'daddy' slapping him in the face. If the 'daddy' had not held her on his lap she would not have been able to slap him."<sup>38</sup> For Van Til, even the act of rejecting the spiritual reality of one's pre-interpreted context must be done by means of utilizing its structure, laws, and framework to do it.

We will now address the Archimedean point as assuming man's capability of interpreting himself rightly. The Archimedean point presupposes that the interpreter has accurately interpreted himself. In other words, the usefulness of distancing oneself to engage the broader picture is for the purpose of achieving an objective perspective. The interpreter, then, must be capable of that kind of achievement. The interpreter must, therefore, self-interpret. Van Til recognizes that there exists no unbeliever who, "does not actually seek to interpret himself and the universe without God."<sup>39</sup>

The assumption that man is a suitable interpreter remains unproven. Even in a field like scientific study one would think this assumption would be challenged or at least examined. Instead, science is often used as the distancing agent, believed to produce some kind of objectivity. Van Til contends, "When the modern man says: 'Science has proved,' or 'We now know,' the evangelical Christian knows that such statements are made on the assumption that man, and especially modern man, understands himself. Yet modern man cannot offer an intelligible interpretation of himself."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 45.

<sup>38</sup> E.R. Geehan, *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 98.

<sup>39</sup> *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 336.

Without God, man's attempt to interpret himself is an absurdity. The mere possibility of self-interpretation leads to a number of questions: How can man get behind his own being to interpret it? How can he set himself prior to himself or step behind his own epistemological framework without the assistance of his own epistemological framework? From what standard would he draw in order to determine any objective truth regarding himself? Where could man stand that would locate himself properly distanced from himself to begin his interpretation? From the perspective of the unbeliever, this is the irrational expectation of the Archimedean point. Man is forced to accept the monumental absurdity: the uninterpreted interpreter is appropriately suited to accurately interpret the world.

We have been discussing Van Til's conditions for communication between believer and unbeliever. First, we analyzed the reliability of common notions. Second, we detailed man's common context, and now we will explain man's *common ability to become self-aware* of his own system and principles of thought.

Although the unbeliever suppresses the truth, the truth remains in his mind and even in his consciousness. Van Til maintains, "The non-regenerate man seeks by all means to 'keep under' this remnant of a true theistic interpretation that lingers in his mind. His real interpretative principle, now that he is a covenant-breaker, is that of himself as ultimate and of impersonal laws as ultimate." In this suppression of the theistic interpretation that still lingers, the unbeliever views the one true God as impossible. Something of truth, however, remains in fallen man's consciousness. Van Til explains that in suppressing the knowledge of God, "he sins against that which is hidden deep down in his own consciousness. And it is well that we should appeal to this fact."<sup>41</sup>

We are able to appeal to that conscious knowledge of God that is habitually suppressed. Van Til speaks of the sense of the divine within the fallen consciousness that remains accessible. It is not readily accessible, however. Truth remains deep within the consciousness: "The Reformed apologist must seek his point of contact with the natural man in that which is beneath the threshold of his working consciousness, in the sense of deity which he seeks to suppress. And to do this the Reformed apologist must also seek a point of contact with the systems constructed by the natural man."<sup>42</sup> In other words, the believer is able to bring the unbeliever to a point at which the unbeliever is self-aware of his condition as a suppressor and self-aware of his epistemological system as a system of suppression. The unbeliever's awareness of his own suppression is a truth that is accounted for with God as a final reference point. This is the seed of our answer to our question of the possibility of true communication between believer and unbeliever. *Bringing an unbeliever to a self-awareness of his own suppression of the truth is central to true communication between believer and unbeliever.*

We have established Van Til's criteria for the possibility of communication between believer and unbeliever is common notions, common context, and a common ability to recognize one's own system of thought. It is through these criteria that Van Til's approach to apologetics is realized. For proper engagement of the unbeliever, he did not require that God be proven but rather that God be assumed at the outset as the God of Scripture. The goal of this engagement was to demonstrate that

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<sup>41</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 83.

<sup>42</sup> *The Defense of the Faith*, 121.



the unbeliever's own position requires God as the grounding assumption. Based on these conditions as transcendent truths, Van Til's apologetical approach was termed *the transcendental method*. It is through this approach that, despite the epistemological antithesis, Van Til lays out the grounding for the possibility of true communication between believers and unbelievers.

*An Answer to the Question of True Communication*

Therefore, our question as to how true communication is possible between believer and unbeliever despite the epistemological antithesis between them can be answered with Van Til's transcendental approach. To see this clearly, it is important to remember that Van Til's approach can be boiled down to understanding his view of the unbeliever's *principle* and *system*. The unbeliever begins his thought with the principle of autonomy—that he himself is the final reference point of his interpretation of the world, not God.<sup>43</sup> The unbeliever's system is the complex explanation of facts designed to bolster that principle.<sup>44</sup> Van Til's approach presupposes that the principle of autonomy is a lie, and that a biblical apologist does not believe it appropriate to imagine that the unbeliever is able to have faith in God upon the grounding of the unbeliever's principle of autonomy.<sup>45</sup> Van Til's approach, then, is designed to lead the interlocutor to become self-consciously aware that his system, when consistently followed, leads to absurdity.<sup>46</sup> Not only this, but this breakdown of the system allows for the unbelieving interlocutor to be self-consciously aware of his own principle of autonomy.

Bringing the unbeliever to the recognition of the impossibility of the contrary creates a moment in which the unbeliever is fully, self-consciously aware of his own principle of autonomy. For Van Til, the apologist “shall show that all explanations without God are futile. Only when we do this do we appeal to that knowledge of God within men which they seek to suppress.”<sup>47</sup> When successful, a moment is created in which the unbeliever is consciously aware of their suppression. This moment cannot be overstated in Van Til's approach. It is at this moment that believer and unbeliever are able to participate in true communication. This is the case because as Van Til has already established above, the unbeliever *knows* that God is the final reference point of all facts.<sup>48</sup> This knowledge is suppressed within the unbeliever.<sup>49</sup> Van Til's approach forces the unbeliever to recognize the very principle the unbeliever is utilizing to suppress the truth. His principle of autonomy is what he uses to suppress the truth.<sup>50</sup> When the unbeliever recognizes both the truth of his common notion that God is the final reference point for all facts and that he is suppressing the truth with his principle of autonomy, there

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<sup>43</sup> *The Defense of the Faith*, 191–192.

<sup>44</sup> *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 151.

<sup>45</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003) 120–121.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 152–153.

<sup>47</sup> *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 294.

<sup>48</sup> *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 122.

<sup>49</sup> *Christian Apologetics*, 194–195.

<sup>50</sup> *The Defense of the Faith*, 196.

is a *sense* of common knowledge between believer and unbeliever at that moment. Van Til refers to the Reformed apologist as one who knows that the unbeliever

who is dead in trespasses and sins is none the less responsible for his deadness. He knows also that the sinner in the depth of his heart knows that what is thus held before him is true. He knows he is a creature of God; he has been simply seeking to cover up this fact to himself. He knows that he has broken the law of God; he has again covered up this fact to himself. He knows that he is therefore guilty and is subject to punishment forever: this fact too he will not look in the face.<sup>51</sup>

Epistemologically, the unbeliever remains outside of common ground from the believer because of the continued rebellion of the unbeliever remains despite what the unbeliever knows. But this does not change the fact that he does indeed *know*.<sup>52</sup> Common knowledge is obtained even if the structure of the unbeliever's epistemological activity remains radically different from the believer's epistemological activity. Van Til states, "It is thus in the mixed situation that results because of the factors mentioned, (1) that every man knows God naturally (2) that every sinner is in principle anxiously striving to suppress that knowledge of God and (3) that every sinner is in this world still the object of the striving of the Spirit calling him back to God, that cooperation between believers and unbelievers is possible."<sup>53</sup>

The unbeliever remains unsubmitted to the truth that God has implanted in him by way of his common notions. But that does not change the fact that (at the moment of self-conscious awareness) he knows God as the final reference point *and* that his suppression is now recognized *and* even the principle of autonomy that he is using to do this suppressing is known.

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<sup>51</sup> *Christian Apologetics*, 196.

<sup>52</sup> *The Defense of the Faith*, 177.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.