

Thomas Reid, Foundationalism, and Presuppositionalism

We begin with the comments of Willis B. Glover on the origin of the modern Western mind.

The late scholastics concentrated on the problem of our knowledge of the world and in so doing they defined and refined that cast of mind which allowed the West, and only the West, to break through the closed systems of cosmological thought to the development of modern science. They also gave to Western philosophy that dominant interest in epistemology that has characterized it ever since. (p. 39, *Biblical Origins of Modern Secular Culture: An Essay in the Interpretation of Western History*, Mercer University Press, 1984)

Nominalism, empiricism, and skepticism concerning any absolute certainty in human knowledge were salient characteristics of fourteenth-century thought; and despite some deviations in the age of the Renaissance and since, they have become fundamental parts of the structure of the modern Western mind. All these characteristics were derivations from the Christian doctrine of creation. (p. 40)

It is true, to be sure, that God's purpose involves the establishment by him of an order in the world, but this order is in no way binding upon him. Since the purposes of God are largely inscrutable, and since, even when he has made his purpose known, he pursues it in the absolute freedom of omnipotence, a trustworthy knowledge of the natural world cannot be achieved by deduction. There is no eternal cosmic order in terms of which man can have absolute, certain, necessary knowledge of nature. (p. 42)

This was not the attitude taken by modern philosophy which tried in various ways to establish rational certainty about the world through a combination of assertions about fundamental reality and a method to best know that reality. The result? "Nothing is more characteristic of modern philosophy than a recurrent sense of crisis—along with a recurring triumphal conviction on the part of those who newly identify the crisis that they have met and overcame it themselves. The sound of modern philosophy in the West is the ringing of changes on these two themes."¹ So Nicholas Wolterstorff informs us in his introduction to an article on Thomas Reid.

The figures in this continuing crisis who preceded Reid and provided the problem for him to solve were Locke, Berkeley and Hume. We find them engaged in an investigation into the nature of human perceptions and ideas, and how these ideas are related to and might be derived from the perceptions. On the assumption that that is all there is to the knowledge of the external world and that any certainty must be accounted for through these processes, the outcome was a broad skepticism, for which Hume is particularly noted.

Berkeley had tried to solve matters by denying the physical world as an independently existing thing. To be is to perceive or to be perceived, he said, and for that only minds need exist. Reid sought to defend realism, that there was an external world which is the source of our sensations that bring us to to

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality", *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrick Hart, Johan Van Der Hoeven and Nicholas Wolterstorff (University Press of America, 1983) p. 43.

a knowledge of it. How, then, do we know that our mental representations consequent to these perceptions are of this external world? As one Reidian scholar puts it:

Reid maintains his realist stance; he tries not to slip into idealism, even if he does slip into dogmatism. God is guaranteeing our *knowledge* of the real world. It is not our constitution that *makes* the unrevisable propositions necessarily *true*. Rather, our constitution is designed by God to *reveal the truth*. ... Reid saves his realism only by appeal to dogmatism. Without God, Reid's nativism, with its unrevisable beliefs, might in fact push him into the very idealism and skepticism it was intended to save him from. (pp. 118, 119. Norman Daniels, *Thomas Reid's 'Inquiry': The Geometry of Visibles and the Case for Realism*, Stanford University Press, 1974, 1989)

Reid is taking the same stance as the nominalists. God's action is behind the world, including man and his experience of it. And it is God that makes these cohere. But now in the twentieth century such a perspective is not allowed. Notice Daniel's term "dogmatism." God is to be admitted to philosophy only when God can be derived as a conclusion, an implication of human investigation, never as a starting point. To make God the starting point is to go outside of respectable philosophy and to fall into dogmatism.

Besides this starting point of God's actions behind the world, the second and consequent step is to investigate those sensations and beliefs we have while living within the world. It is not necessary to justify the beliefs by being able to reason to them from the sensations to prove their ability to represent the world and do so correctly. But assuming man's fitness for living in the world and knowing the world in a sufficient way, a very extensive study can then be carried out about how these perceptions really function by an empirical and inductive review of cases and comparison of how far humanity agrees in relating beliefs to experiences. Reid's philosophy included a detailed critique of what earlier empiricists said about sensation and belief formation, and this is what has interested historians of philosophy, who make this out to be *the* philosophy of Reid, and the part about God to be an unfortunate lapse he made to plug some holes in his epistemology.

To take an example of a novel way that Reid analyzed perceptions and beliefs about the world, he noticed that the geometry of vision and the geometry of touch were different. The world we can reach and feel, as far as our touch extends, is a Euclidean world, where parallel objects go on indefinitely maintaining the same spacial relation to each other. But in vision this is not the case. If we look at railroad tracks (to make an example that did not exist in Reid's time) as they recede into the distance they look closer and closer together until they meet at a point at the limit of vision, unless they go over a horizon first. The world of visual perception is a non-Euclidean world with no parallel lines. Yet the model of the world that we hold in our beliefs is Euclidean, unlike the world of visual sensation, but like the world of touch, and also in Reid's belief the real world. We automatically take the world to be this way with without reasoning to this model of the world.

This is opposed to the way previous empiricists taught that we understood the world. Their view was that perception started from simple apprehensions, and these being compared together reveal agreements or disagreements which we generalize to an idea, and this idea we take to be a

representation of some object in the external world. That is what Reid called the Way of Ideas. Having produced one of these ideas in our mind we are left to wonder what this mental entity, the idea, really has in common with the non-mental thing out there it is supposed to stand for. (Of course Berkeley simply dispensed with the thing out there, holding that the world of ideas was the world itself. Also Berkeley held that we could not form mental representations that were general ideas, but only specific instances. That is, for example, you can't represent in your mind men in general, but only specific men.) Reid held that the objects of our knowledge were not mediating ideas that represented the world but intentional intuitions about the world itself.

Daniels gives us another way of understanding Reid by comparing him, not to the other British empiricists, but to Kant.

What is the difference between Reid's claim, that certain beliefs we have "by our constitution" must be assented to and are guaranteed true by God's benevolence, and Kant's claim, that certain judgments are necessarily true because, say, they reflect the *a priori* "form of our intuition"? At first it might seem as if there really is no difference. Reid seems to be saying that we bring certain concepts and beliefs *to experience* "by our constitution," so of course we have the "testimony of sense" to confirm these beliefs. But it is really very far from Reid's view that our minds are instrumental in constructing the world. Reid never thinks that we *impose* a structure on experience, so that the world comes "necessarily" to have those features we put into it. To be sure, there is always Kant's disclaimer that we construct only the phenomenal world, and not the noumenal world. But this disclaimer still leaves Kant a quasi-idealist making concessions to idealism that Reid fights tooth and nail. Reid could never accept the distinction between phenomenal and noumenal worlds. Reid saves his realism only by appeal to dogmatism. ...

On the other hand, Reid does share some common ground with Kant. For example, it is not an empirical question, to be settled by experiment, what the geometry of space is. ... Still, there is a difference even here. For Kant, the space we live in is Euclidean *because* the *a priori* form of our intuition determines its mathematical structure. For Reid, we know "by our constitution," which does not deceive us, that real space (tangible space) *is* Euclidean. Our constitution reveals the structure of space; it does not establish it. (pp. 118, 119)

Wolterstorff on Reid

Nicholas Wolterstorff (Gifford Lectures, published as *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 2004) is an example of even a Reformed philosopher who is interested only in Reid's consequent investigation of philosophy, not the starting point. This is because Wolterstorff is interested in fitting Reid into the Reformed Epistemology about properly basic beliefs. Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga are the two most prominent names associated with the Reformed Epistemology. Plantinga defends what he calls properly basic beliefs; basic because they are not held as the implication of some other belief, and proper because one is within one's rights to believe them. This is in contrast to the view called classical foundationalism. In that view there are certain basic beliefs that must be beyond question, and the rest of the belief system rests on them in some relationship of logic or evidence. Plantinga held that, to the contrary, beliefs might be properly held that were not part

of such a system. From childhood we hold a large number of beliefs which have not been justified in the classical foundational manner and we are within our rights to believe. Further, Plantinga went on the offensive against the plausibility of classical foundationalism, pointing out that the conception of justified belief of classical foundationalism had itself not been justified according to its own standards. It is neither an unquestionably basic belief nor is it derived from any beliefs that are.

Where Plantinga talks about properly basic beliefs, Wolterstorff prefers to say justified beliefs. Right away we are in the field of ethics: “Justification in beliefs, as I understand it, is essentially connected to duties and responsibilities. Justification is a normative concept.” Though preferring to avoid the term ethics, he speaks of “duties and responsibilities pertaining to one’s use of the intellect.” “Justification consists in doing one’s duty by one’s believings.” (“Thomas Reid on Rationality,” *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, University Press of America, 1983, pp. 45, 46) Plantinga and Wolterstorff go on to argue that among those justified beliefs are not only everyday ones, such as the apple is on the table, but religious beliefs about God, etc. This is so without the religious beliefs, such as the existence of God, being either foundational for the other beliefs nor, in the opposite relation, being proved from them. They are beliefs along side of, so to speak, beliefs about everyday objects.

Before going further, we should mention that Reid himself did not reject the foundational model, as he held that there were beliefs that were self-evident when one thought them over, as well as beliefs that one would not help believing, as were many beliefs about the world. The existence of God was one of the foundational beliefs. Paul Helm, in an article in the same collection in which Wolterstorff’s appears, and edited by Wolterstorff, argues the point emphatically with supporting quotations from Reid.²

Nevertheless, Wolterstorff later wrote that when he came across Reid’s writing: “At once I recognized a soul-mate, a metaphysical realist who was an anti-foundationalist. Indeed, Reid was the first great anti-foundationalist of the modern tradition; intervening centuries have dimmed neither the rhetorical brilliance nor the philosophical power of his attack.” (*John Locke and the Ethics of Belief*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. xii.) Wolterstorff went on to give a detailed analysis of Reid in the Gifford Lectures (*Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*).

How to reconcile these two claims? Wolterstorff may mean that Reid was not a classical foundationalist, in that he allowed among his basic beliefs those which did not meet the traditional qualifications of incorrigibility. For example, we have beliefs about the world that we accept as certain in an involuntary manner, but later find out that they resulted from some sort of abnormal experience, and come to reject them.

As noted, what interests Wolterstorff is the consequent part of Reid’s philosophy, where he undertakes an investigation into our belief forming processes, not the fact that both man with his belief forming processes and the world he seeks to know are the product of the unitary will of God and were made for each other.

2 Paul Helm, “Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism”, *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrick Hart, Johan Van Der Hoeven and Nicholas Wolterstorff (University Press of America, 1983) pp. 72, 73.

A helpful succinct summary of the book on Reid is at the Gifford Lectures site (<https://www.giffordlectures.org/books/thomas-reid-and-story-epistemology>). One chapter deals with Reid's response to skepticism.

From his works it is clear that Reid understands a skeptic in Cartesian fashion as someone who admits the existence of thoughts and sensations but insists that the existence of the external world, and indeed everything else, must be made evident by the light of reason. As Wolterstorff suggests Reid's skeptic is therefore an example of a classically modern foundationalist. He is someone who holds that all beliefs must be founded on intuitive acquaintance or the deliberations of reason. Reid held that while such a position is not unworthy of a philosopher it is also doomed to failure. For since on his view our beliefs are carried along by our perceptions irresistibly, any attempt to doubt universally will be utterly futile. Moreover, he insists that such skepticism is also arbitrarily discriminatory, for while it wishes to adjudicate everything else by the standards of introspection and reason it has nothing by which it may adjudicate introspection and reason themselves. Indeed, Reid was insistent that both reason and especially introspection could seriously mislead us. To attempt to use reason to justify our beliefs is thus like attempting to lift oneself up by one's own bootstraps – utterly futile. As Wolterstorff suggests what is so striking about this discussion is Reid's antirationalism, his willingness to take perception and reason entirely on trust even when no grounds for this trust can be offered which are not themselves viciously circular. For Wolterstorff it is this stance of trust, of acceptance of the mystery of reality, which distinguishes Reid from so many other philosophers.

Wolterstorff, in his earlier essay ("Thomas Reid on Rationality," *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, University Press of America, 1983) says "All the commentators of whom I am aware suggest that Reid is answering skepticism concerning knowledge.... It seems clear to me, however, that it is skepticism concerning justified belief that Reid is anxious to counter." (p. 45) It seems to me that Wolterstorff is wrong here. Reid holds that perceptions and the beliefs that accompany them are apprehensions of reality, they are knowledge. It is not just that we have done our duty and are entitled to our beliefs, whether we got them right or not, but that what we have is knowledge, and even if we get it wrong some times because of a failure in the knowledge process, it is the hits that count and not the misses, and when we are succeeding this is knowledge.

If the result of our apprehensions of the world were only justified belief, we would be like the people in Plato's cave seeing shadows. They had justified belief but not knowledge. They were not in a relation to the world where their perceptions gave them knowledge. But according to Reid: "Common sense and reason have both one author; that almighty Author" (*Inquiry*, V. 7.) In Reid's model man's knowledge acquisition and the world have been set up to work together to produce knowledge. But how do we know that is true? That at this point is the wrong question, for we are arguing against Wolterstorff, not whether Reid's model of the knower and the world is justified, but what the model is. For Reid man is not in Wolterstorff's cave doing his duties and getting justified beliefs, but he is living in God's knowledge producing system.

Wolterstorff has a reply to this:

Reid says that “now I yield to the direction of my sense, not from instinct only, but from confidence and trust in a faithful and beneficent Monitor, grounded upon the experience of his paternal care and goodness” (*Inquiry* VI, 20). So when all is said and done, the person who believes in a good God does, thereby, have a belief from which he can appropriately infer the reliability of his native noetic faculties. But to accept God’s goodness as a reason for trusting in one’s native noetic faculties is, or course, already to trust one’s power of reasoning. (“Thomas Reid on Rationality,” p. 57.)

We should consider more closely the order in which these beliefs come to us in Reid’s philosophy. According to Reid there are certain belief formations that are inescapable. However much we may entertain skeptical theories, when faced with a specific immanent danger we cannot help but trust our senses and react accordingly. Similarly in encounters with other people we take it that they have minds and are not automatons, however much solipsistic theories may appeal to us when at leisure. We can also say that we cannot help but to think and that logical processes also are intrinsic to thought and unavoidable. Is belief in God something that presents itself with the same inescapable immediacy? I think that this is clearly not the case, as vast numbers of people do not believe in God, and even more believe in gods but conceive of them very differently than the divine nature essential to the Christian concept of God.³

Some might at this point introduce the auxiliary hypothesis that in his original nature man had the same immediate knowledge of God as of Reid’s unrevisable propositions but that this was lost in the Fall, which damaged man’s constitution. Even so, we do not have that knowledge now. Theologians may speak of a *sensus divinitatis*, but it does not provide the specific theological content about God’s activity that we are speaking of here. In fact it is hard to make out what theologians, especially Calvinist ones, think about this, as when they deal with the Fall they do their best to emphasize the destruction of the image of God and man’s noetic abilities, but when they come to man’s responsibility before God on account of what he knows, they ramp them up.

So God as the faithful and beneficent Monitor is not one of Reid’s unrevisable propositions. Does Reid instead deduce this God from the basic inescapable beliefs as an implication? He does not do that either. Nor, going in the other direction, does Reid proceed from an account of God’s activity to deduce that “native noetic faculties” must be reliable after all. Reliance on these faculties is inescapable anyway; what Reid in the quotation calls instinct. What is Reid adding when he says “not from instinct only”? I don’t think he is saying that the account of God’s activities strengthens the operation of the noetic faculties, but that besides pointing to these faculties he is able to add an account explaining why the faculties function as they do to produce knowledge, and this account gives him confidence at the theoretical level in addition to the inescapable reliance he has at the immediate practical level. There are two types of knowledge here, an instinctive immediate knowledge and a discursive rational knowledge. With the idea of the creator God Reid at the discursive level can account for what is going on at the instinctive level.

3 Paul Helm notes that Reid held that “a supreme being exists” is a necessary truth, but concludes that Reid must have meant that God was ontologically necessary. p. 74.

Reid was aware that there were those who would deny beliefs which should be accepted as certain. The remedy he saw for that was to point out the absurd consequences which would follow from such a denial. Another remedy would be to point out the contradictions between this denial and other certain beliefs. A third is the *ad hominem* argument that the basis for a view that someone rejects, is of the same epistemic standing as another which he accepts as knowledge.

What is the epistemic status of the explanation based on the idea and activity of God? If it is not one of the inescapable beliefs, it might yet be one of Wolterstorff's justified beliefs, having been acquired in a dutiful way. Or is it more like a presupposition, introduced because it serves as an underlying explanation for the world and the things in it? Wolterstorff spends several pages in his "Thomas Reid on Rationality" essay working through this issue without getting much help from Reid.

Presuppositionalism

This brings us to a group of belief systems that call themselves presuppositionalism. Presuppositionalists hold that every belief system has foundational beliefs that determine what can be accepted as true in that system. Not only do they see themselves as foundationalists, but they believe that it is true of everybody, as it is in human nature to have these basic belief commitments, even if unacknowledged. Presuppositionalists put forward a set of foundational beliefs, or presuppositions, that they favor and which they hold to justify the system of beliefs based on them, but unlike classical foundationalism, they do not say that these are unquestionable or proven beliefs, but rather that everyone must start from some basis, and everyone starts with a foundational belief set that they have chosen or perhaps thoughtlessly adopted without prior justification. There can be no prior justification of foundational beliefs as there is no neutral area outside a belief system in which to begin the process of justification and construction of a set of foundational beliefs.

The presuppositionalists, however, have more in common with the modern philosophers and their continuing crisis described by Wolterstorff, than they do with Reid or with contemporary philosophy. The presuppositionalists believe that beliefs must be justified based on special foundational beliefs. These are not beliefs of everyday experience such as Reid accepted as knowledge. They are beliefs like those that the modern philosophers made their starting point, with the one difference that they are not rationally or empirically established as beyond doubt, but they are *chosen* as the components of a *system*, that supports other belief. Just what these beliefs are, and how true knowledge is built on them is another matter.

Having been schooled in the succession of modern philosophies and exposed to the systems of Christian apologetics, both traditional and presuppositional, I arrived in graduate school to discover that no one was interested in those questions. The philosophers did not look for foundations. Rather they took it as a fact that people had knowledge, and their job was to undertake a critical investigation to describe how the process of acquiring knowledge works. They had at last recovered from the mistake of previous philosophy of supposing that the starting point was to supply unquestioned foundations. Christian philosophy, to their minds, was pointless as an epistemological exercise, and of

interest only if could provide reasons to take seriously the existence of certain interesting entities, such as God, for example.

Christian apologetics, including also the non-presuppositional schools, has assumed this common ground with modern philosophy, but now instead of each claiming to have found the uniquely correct answer to the problem of philosophy, rather as each of the modern philosophers had, they appeared as the pointless residue of modernism.

Nevertheless, presuppositional systems vary considerably, and we begin by distinguishing hard from soft presuppositionalism. In hard presuppositionalism all beliefs beyond the presuppositions must follow as a strict consequence of the presuppositions and no other knowledge is allowed. For soft presuppositionalism the presuppositions limit what may be accepted as true in the system, but may allow for other means of knowledge acquisition as long as contrary beliefs are not introduced.

An example of hard presuppositionalism is Gordon Clark's philosophy. Clark posited the presuppositions to be the axioms contained in Scripture, and everything that was deduced by logical inference from these axioms was knowledge, but nothing else. As mentioned above, a presuppositional system may claim certain presupposed beliefs, to itemize them is another matter, and they are generally left vague. Clark is an exception as he make the propositions of Scripture to be his foundation. This specifies them, but isolating the particular propositions is another matter.

But Clark was not done here. Even though these axioms of Scripture were posited as basic and not proven, he did attempt to debunk all competing philosophical systems, so that one was left with his Scripturalism, as he called it, as the last remaining system with a claim to knowledge. So there is a sort of justification process for the system taking the form of a demolition derby for all the rivals.

This still leaves obvious difficulties. Supposing one started from the propositions of Scripture. Does one have to acquire a knowledge of them? Does this mean it is necessary to have competence in the languages of Scripture and all the background cultural elements that make it possible to understand the meaning of this language? Is this competence already knowledge, and if not, how can it turn texts into known propositions? Are the propositions of Scripture the sentences as they are in the Bible, full of metaphor and other figures of speech? Or are the propositions that which we would arrive at were all the figures of speech to be identified and interpreted into literal expressions. Bullinger's *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* is 1104 pages! (Think about that term "literal" for a moment. It comes from the letters of the texts. The letters represent sounds, the sounds make up words, the words form the sentences full of figures of speech ... we are back where we started. "Literal" it turns out is a metaphor, referring to sentences without figures of speech. But what is a figure of speech? Isn't a "figure" a visual pattern, and aren't we talking about sound? Oh, it is another metaphor. Now just try to explain all this without using any metaphors.) Or does Clark mean that his starting point is these propositions and the means of getting to them is outside of what he defines as knowledge and so is somehow immaterial to his system? Then we come to the matter of all the things of everyday life, which are not stated in nor proved from Scripture. Many of them matter very much, but they remain in the area of opinion, not knowledge. The Scripturalist must live out his existence mainly outside the body of knowledge. And

does opinion have any probability, plausibility or other epistemic status? How is this established in the Scripturalist framework? Strangely, though, these are not the criticisms most often made by other presuppositionalists, but instead it is that, as his system is deductive, he uses logic and this makes him a rationalist!

The origins of presuppositionalism in America are generally traced to Cornelius Van Til at Westminster Seminary. Van Til came from a Dutch Reformed background and had graduate training in idealist philosophy. When J. Gresham Machen decided to set up a new Presbyterian seminary as a replacement for Princeton, he found that he had to staff it mainly with Dutch Reformed professors. They saw their chance to pull off a theological coup and replace American Presbyterian theology with Dutch theology, and that is part of the explanation for the disappearance of Reid's philosophy there. Van Til was particularly taken with the European liberal Protestant interpretation of the philosophy of Kant, that posited a basic ontological, not just epistemological, distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal. Van Til thought this to be a basic presupposition of non-Christian thought, and detected it everywhere. Even the Fall came about because Adam and Eve accepted the distinction, reasoning that the phenomenal fruit could not have anything to do with the noumenal realm of ethics. What were to be the Christian presuppositions to put in its place, though, is where Van Til had his biggest problem, and he was never clear. Much of the time he sounded like his own version of Kant. God's ideas had to be completely distinct from man's; they could not coincide at any point. Between what was true for man and what was true for God there could only be an analogy. This was not the medieval idea of analogy where, for example, God's love and man's love could be compared because there was some point in common to make the analogy.⁴ Van Til's idea of analogy was that there was no point in common, which contradicts the idea of analogy. In effect, Van Til only posited a whatsit that he could not explain.

The same problem applies to his view of revelation and Scripture as the word of God. To compare Van Til to Karl Barth, the Bible in Barth's view was plainly a human writing in human language, which we can understand as we understand the same words in everyday speech. Therefore, being on the human side of the divide between God and man, the Bible could not be the word of God, but somehow God elected it to be the place where we encounter the word of God in some mysterious way. For Van Til as truth was in the absolute God, Scripture could only contain analogies. In doctrine Van Til revised the doctrine of the Trinity to be one Person in Three Persons, making God more appropriately noumenally mysterious. There is an essay by John Frame in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Ross House books, 1979) where he documents some of Van Til's

4 Medieval analogy also is misunderstood, according to the Thomists. Ralph McInerny, author of *The Logic of Analogy*, makes these claims: "Students of St. Thomas, even while reluctantly acknowledging a logical dimension to his teaching on analogy, persist in speaking of it as chiefly a metaphysical doctrine. That is, the dominant interpretation remains that 'analogy' directly names a real relation between God and creature, despite the fact that the key passages in the text of Aquinas will not bear this reading. ...

It is then still necessary to emphasize that when St. Thomas Aquinas uses the term 'analogy' and related terms (*analogia*, *analogice*, *secundum analogiam*), he is more often than not speaking about speaking and not directly about the way of the world. The doctrine of analogy is, in short, a logical doctrine and not a metaphysical one. Thomas rarely seems to use the word to refer to real relations among things but usually has in mind relations among several meanings of a single term. Ralph McInerny, "Analogy and Foundationalism in Thomas Aquinas", *Rationality, Religious Belief, & Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithica, Cornell University Press, 1986) pp. 271, 272.

statements along this line. (For Frame's own views see, "Rationality and Scripture" in the previously cited *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*.) While Van Til made claims that Christian presuppositions and the acceptance of the revelation in the Bible were fundamental to the possibility of meaning, both cognitive and moral, in human existence, given the problems we just mentioned, it is hard to outline from Van Til's assertions a theory of knowledge based on foundational propositions.

Someone who tried to organize presuppositionalism in a more lucid form was Francis Schaeffer, and he will be our example of soft presuppositionalism. According to Schaeffer a creator God, who was personal, rational and moral, who is responsible for making the world and man in it, and who revealed this knowledge to man through the Scripture, were the essential presuppositions for man to have knowledge of his place in the world and how to live meaningfully in it. He also, like Van Til and Clark, made a critique of prominent non-Christian philosophies, detailing how each failed to produce a basis for meaning and ethics. But he did not make his presuppositionalism into a closed system such as Clark's, where something was only knowledge if deducible from the foundations. Within his account of the world God made, there was the possibility for there to be knowledge producing processes in man's engagement with the world, and new knowledge arising when man made use of these processes.

There was also an issue about the epistemic status of the person with non-Christian presuppositions. From Van Til's point of view, such a man had no right to a claim to knowledge. Does this also mean that he had no knowledge? Was there an area where he could be engaged in dialogue? Well, obviously, if he was the butcher and you wanted to buy a cut of meat from him, you could engage him in dialogue, but apparently there were topics where you couldn't unless he agreed to come over to your presuppositions. Schaeffer said somewhere⁵ that people trained under Van Til, when trying to tell someone about Christianity would reach a point of disagreement, and then they would say "I can't talk to you any further unless you agree to my presuppositions." In a way, Schaeffer said, Van Til's apologetics were like Barth's. There was no point of contact, so you could only witness to the truth and wait for the grace of God to strike.

Schaeffer said that his view of man in this regard was different from Van Til's. A man might have presuppositions contrary to the truth, but this man was also a real man with a nature, living in a real world with a nature, and thus forced to operate to a considerable degree according to the way things are, rather than according to the way his presuppositions implied. This area of reality of the life of man in the world meant that there was always an area of common ground for dialogue where the man could be pressed to choose between his presuppositions and his realism. Here he is approaching Reid who likewise held that to reject evident truths produced absurd conclusions, and that therefore the rejection could be argued against. Both believed that all men also shared mechanisms for forming true belief.

The Transcendental Argument

We now come to the conundrum of the Transcendental Argument and its place in presuppositional systems. Its problematic nature is brought out by John Frame:

5 In one of his talks at L'Abri distributed on audio cassettes.

The transcendental method...does not try to prove that genuine knowledge is possible; rather, it presupposes that it is. Then it asks, What must the world, the mind and human thought be like if this presupposition is true? The transcendental method then goes ahead to ask what the necessary conditions of human knowledge are. The answer must first of all be the existence of the God of Scripture. To Van Til, this principle was not only a fact, but an argument for the existence of God. Without God there is no meaning (truth, rationality, etc.); therefore, God, exists. (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, pg. 70)

Here Frame calls it a method, and says it is not an attempt at a proof, but merely making presuppositions. He immediately goes on to call it an argument for the existence of God, used by Van Til. Which is it?

It may seem that Frame is adopting the method of contemporary analytic philosophy alluded to above. But this philosophy investigates the noetic processes of the mind, and what relation those have to the world, whereas the Transcendental Argument claims that certain metaphysical conditions must obtain for knowledge to be possible. Further, it does not propose an investigation but offers a proof.

Gregg Bahnsen is credited with giving a more organized and direct account of presuppositionalism and of the Transcendental Argument for God (TAG). But while it is possible to find general descriptions of the Transcendental Argument, an exact statement of it in logical form is another matter. The Apologetics Wiki gives an outline as follows:

The TAG posits the necessary existence of a particular conception of God in order for human knowledge and experience to be possible at all. The TAG argues that, because the triune God of the Bible, being completely logical, uniform, and good, exhibits a character in the created order and the creatures themselves (especially in humans), human knowledge and experience are possible. This reasoning implies that all other worldviews (such as atheism, Buddhism, and Islam), when followed to their logical conclusions, descend into absurdity, arbitrariness or inconsistency.

This tells us what the Transcendental Argument does, but it also makes apparent that the actual argument would be a very extended dissertation on many subjects. A philosophical literature has grown up around the argument, with people pointing out flaws in the way it is formulated, others repairing the problem, followed by another round criticism and repairs, as is typical in analytic philosophy.

But suppose that the Transcendental Argument is valid. It has a surprising consequence, as it not only proves the Christian God, but also proves an epistemological model. It shows that Christian principles (no longer presuppositions, because they are now proven) are the necessary foundations for a successful model of knowledge, and in doing so establishes the certainty of these foundations. In other words, it establishes classical foundationalism as the correct model of knowledge and refutes Plantinga's objections to classical foundationalism. The Transcendental Argument establishes that Christian foundations are known with certainty to be true, and that they are the foundations of a system of knowledge, because it from their necessity as foundations that the Transcendental Argument proves their truth. Also because these are now certain, proved, foundations, they are not presuppositions, and

the Transcendental Argument, if correct, effectively shows presuppositionalism as a model of knowledge to be false.

Can presuppositionalism make do without the Transcendental Argument? Some call it a method, without formulating it as a theistic proof, but is the argument implicit in the method anyway? What about other presuppositionalists like Gordon Clark, who engage in the demolition derby of other views to leave the presuppositional model of Christian knowledge as the only option? Is the Transcendental Argument also implicit there? It seems that all presuppositionalists who raise their approach to a philosophical level resort to this.

Also any version of presuppositionalism that claims that without the proper presuppositions we do not have knowledge is incompatible with the TAG, as the TAG proceeds from the assumption that we do have knowledge, and are seeking to establish the only possible way this can be. But are the presuppositions actual presuppositions anymore? We are now proceeding on the acceptance of various beliefs being knowledge, as did Reid before us. We then provide an account of how it works, namely we are in a world made by God operating with cognitive equipment made by God, as did Reid before us. But like Reid we take it that we have beliefs that are reliably formed and constitute knowledge through the use of the cognitive equipment, rather than being presupposed. Does not the TAG take us right out of presuppositionalism and into Reid's common sense philosophy? It puts them right into the nominalist tradition, which they claim to hate.