

# Priority of the moral over epistemology and the genesis of modernity

Review of Stephen N. Williams, *Revelation and Reconciliation: An Angle on Modernity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2021) 190 pages.

This book is a second edition, an extensive rewriting of a book that first appeared in 1995. The author offers the best introduction to his book. The first edition was a critique of modernity from a specific perspective:

Its polemic was directed against those who highlighted epistemological issues in the intellectual breakdown of Western Christianity. ... I argued that underlying the surface contrast and collision between reason and revelation was the contrast and collision between what may loosely be called moral self-sufficiency and the Christian claim that God has acted in history for our reconciliation.

In this he finds common ground with Nietzsche who wrote that “the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy have every time constituted the real germ of life out of which the entire plant has grown....I accordingly do not believe a ‘drive to knowledge’ to be the father of philosophy.” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, quoted in Williams, p. vii.) This accounts for material about Nietzsche occupying a large, in fact excessive, part of the book. Williams continues:

The reason for turning the searchlight on the question of epistemology was that some theologians had appropriated and endorsed observations by Michael Polanyi that called for critical investigation. (p. viii)

What Augustine did was to establish publicly the main elements of a Christian world-view by unashamedly starting with dogma, specifically, Christian dogma. Following Augustine’s act of intellectual creation came intellectual transgression, featuring Descartes, who led the way in persuading us to start our intellectual constructions with doubt rather than dogma. ... From then on, the critical method expanded, eventually to implode under the pressure of its own logic, leaving the stark and sinister Nietzschean will as the source of understanding. Responding to this state of affairs, Newbigin [one of the theologians alluded to in the previous paragraph] offered a rationale for a new Augustinianism, making belief again the starting-point of knowledge. His modern mentor in this project was Michael Polanyi. .... While Polanyi did not espouse Augustine’s Christian faith in particular, he made room for and gave support to a contemporary repriming of Augustine’s basic epistemological approach, viz., the grounding of knowledge in faith and the presentation of truth on a foundation of dogma. (pp. xi, xii)

At this point, Williams cites the influence on his thought of the writers H. G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, and Charles Norris Cochrane’s *Christianity and Classical Culture: a study of thought and action from Augustus to Augustine*. “While Cochrane certainly made much of Augustine’s reconstruction of epistemology, he also made clear that Augustine located the error of Classical culture morally in the realm of self-will even more fundamentally than in the intellectual realm of epistemological method.” (pp. xvi-xvii) Williams says that “Luther, Calvin and Pascal took this general line”, and quotes as a late example Kierkegaard, who wrote: “People try to persuade us that the objections against Christianity spring from doubt. The objections against

Christianity spring from insubordination, the dislike of obedience, rebellion against all authority.” (*Works of Love*, quoted in Williams, p. xvii)

Most of the anticipated readers of this review will have had their ideas on this issue formed or influenced by the Reformed presuppositionalists such as Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer and their successors. It should be helpful, then to underline an important difference between their approach to this issue and that of Williams, as well as to divert later discussion to contrast them with what these more familiar writers thought. Williams is saying that the moral attitude is more fundamental than epistemology in the formation of the philosophy of modernity and its turn away from Christianity. In making his argument he tends to distinguish them, and to diminish the importance of epistemology. In his analysis of key pioneer figures of the Enlightenment, he will bring out a difference between the epistemology as such, and the manner in which it is put to use, such that the fault cannot always be placed on the thinker’s view of reason, for example, but is in the separate matter of their doctrines of moral self-sufficiency directed against Christianity.

Van Til, Schaeffer and their followers, in contrast, conflated, some might say confused, the two issues of moral revolt and epistemology, with epistemology being a disguised form of moral self-sufficiency, which Van Til in particular set out to deconstruct into moral categories. It is at this point that many find Van Til’s explication of actual philosophers to be contrived and unconvincing. When in the course of the review we get into cases, we will find how the presuppositionalists’ unwillingness to make the distinction got them into conundrums. Williams’s book, then, emerges as a double-edged sword, directed against modernity’s view of itself as the inevitable self-emancipation of man from dogma, but at the same time undercutting those theological critics of modernity who launched their program from a platform now revealed to be problematic.

As Williams approaches these issues through the writings of his chosen guides, which he also subjects to a critique, what we end up with is a critique of Williams critiquing his authors, who are critiquing the original writers of historical prominence. Williams’s method is to lay the burden of proof of the correct interpretation onto these intermediate writers, and as often as possible to say that they illustrate the issues, but that his argument does not depend on them being correct. Working indirectly in this way makes the book somewhat more tedious than it ought to be. We are in almost all cases much less interested in these intermediate writers than is Williams, and will try to feature Williams and the original sources over them as much as possible.

### *Descartes*

Williams actually begins with John Locke, as it was Locke who provided the statement of the contrast of faith and knowledge so objectionable to Machael Polanyi, and the theologians who followed him. Locke used the word “faith”, whereas Polanyi says “belief”. Locke: “This is the highest the nature of the thing will permit us to go in matters of revealed religion, which are therefore called matters of faith;” Polanyi: “Belief is here no longer a higher power that reveals to us knowledge lying beyond the range of observation and reason, but a mere personal acceptance which falls short of empirical and rational demonstrability. ... Here lies the break by which the critical mind repudiated one of its two cognitive faculties and tried completely to rely on the remainder.” Since Locke was speaking of the product of revelation, and Polanyi was speaking of a cognitive faculty, there is a difference of subject matter that seems to have escaped Polanyi, and which Williams and his theologians don’t seem to

properly appreciate, though Williams at least notes it. Williams summarizes the result attributed to Locke's theory of knowledge:

It goes like this: Locke so discredited belief that it either tended towards or attained subjectivity. Although Polanyi noted that Locke allowed for exceptions to be made in the case of religion, he judged this concession to be epistemologically barren because the foundations of Locke's general epistemology are too weak to give birth to and sustain an epistemology that warrants religious belief. ... The various participants in this discussion make no relevant distinction between faith and belief; they have in view simply the cognitive dimension of faith. ( p. 3)

For Williams, Polanyi is describing something of "momentous historical significance. This gives us our bearings for the argument that proceeds in this volume. ... As far as Polanyi was concerned, it is well-nigh impossible to exaggerate what was at stake in his reading of the place and role of epistemology in history." Williams quotes Mark Mitchell: "For Polanyi, the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarianism resulted directly from a critical framework that precludes at the onset any possibility of making meaningful moral claims." (p. 4)

If that is the issue, that is not yet the true origin of the problem, for "the *éminence grise* lurking behind all talk of doubt, epistemology and modernity is, of course, René Descartes..." (p. 6) But Descartes was responding to the skepticism of Michel de Montaigne. "If getting Locke in perspective means stepping back to Descartes, getting Descartes in perspective means stepping back to Montaigne." (p. 8) Here Williams seems to be following Stephen Toulmin, who in his *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, had brought Montaigne to the forefront. "Montaigne was the model of *honnêteté* in that world of *honnêtes hommes* too refined to attach themselves to – and too refined to live by – Christian faith." (Williams, p. 10) For Williams it was Montaigne who created that "public of *honnêtes hommes*". While Descartes responded to Montaigne's skepticism, Pascal responded to Montaigne's indifference to man's relation to God.

This idea that Montaigne showed up and created his own audience of religiously indifferent sophisticates is not credible. The audience must have grown up out of something over an extended time. For an explanation we go to H. A. Enno Van Gelder, *The Two Reformations In The 16<sup>th</sup> Century: a study of the religious aspects and consequences of Renaissance and Humanism* (1961).

At the time of the Renaissance, i.e. between 1450 and 1560, there took place, as I wish to show, together with the many new things that the Renaissance brought in other fields of spiritual life, a religious reformation which went considerably further than what is usually termed the Reformation. In the sixteenth century (and in succeeding centuries) we have to distinguish side by side with Catholicism and Protestantism a third religious movement, parallel to both but not between them, and having a more modern aspect. It is a well-defined religious opinion, even if it is not laid down in any confession of faith. (Van Gelder, p. 7)

Van Gelder calls this the greater reformation, because it went further from medieval Christianity than the Reformation. This movement "saw salvation in a new light, and rejected even more radically the traditional means to it. It was a path whereby the religious element was bound, in the end, to lose its importance, and the philosophical-ethical element to attain exclusive preeminence." Quoting Rudolf Stadelmann: "This new mode of thought makes of the individual a creator who knows Truth because it is within him, and desires, or should desire, Good as an idea (but not as God). The intellect has become

a principle, and has transmuted the reality of the Governor of the world and the Redeemer of the soul into an abstract substance, which by its nature is of the same kind as that which constitutes man.” (p. 9) Van Gelder sets out to show “how in Western civilization since the sixteen century religion evolved from the idea of salvation to that of morality, and how Christian salvation thus generally lost its mystical character and its value, at least for many people. Most of these people were, however, convinced that they were not in this repudiating Christianity, but rather restoring true Christianity to its original form, and shedding what they regarded as later additions.” (Van Gelder, p. 10) This is exactly the mentality of the deists from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century through the 18<sup>th</sup>, but here we have an account of its genesis developing during the 150 years previous. Van Gelder only reaches Montaigne near the end of his book (pp. 386-393), calling him one of the most radical adherents of the major reformation. If we were to give the whole history of this movement it would run from the humanists contemporary with the Reformers up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it merged with the modernism of the mainline Protestant denominations.

Van Gelder’s book does not appear to have been very influential; I have seen it cited only once. He seems also to have his flaws, exaggerating the secular nature of the Renaissance. Yet without him what we have instead is a big gap in the usual accounts of the rise of unbelief in Europe, with its abrupt appearance in a single generation during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Something like what Van Gelder relates must have been what really happened. It could to a measure live underground, as the free thinkers could live outwardly as practitioners of whatever religion was established in their area. They had no institutional church, no theological office which required profession of its doctrines, and no confession. That is, there was no doctrine that must be confessed, and sincerely as well, in order to attain salvation. They could in public go along with the established church, and keep their skeptical ideas for when among friends. Further, they were the elite, and could not be kicked around as easily as the common people. Certainly the authorities knew this attitude was abroad, but as long as it did not challenge the establishment, they might not see it as a significant problem. At least not until it spread to a significant point.

Montaigne, then, was at most responsible for making the problem too big to ignore, or too prominent because of the quality of his writing. With this in mind we should also hold a reservation about whether Descartes, Locke or any of the other big figures in intellectual history were quite as decisive as the histories tells. There was always plenty else going on, little fish swimming the intellectual stream along with the big ones.

We come at last to the interpretation of Descartes, who for Williams’s chosen interpreters is the spirit of the Enlightenment, “the spirit of moral autonomy.” “Tracing the connections between Descartes and the French Enlightenment, [Peter Schouls] demonstrates to just what a considerable extent the central Enlightenment themes of freedom, mastery and progress are sheer Descartes.” (p. 18) “The will has a foundational role in Descartes’s work such that” it was “the unrelenting exercise of free will which for him established the autonomy of reason.” (p. 17, quoting Schouls) “The fall has not affected the freedom of the human will.” “Reason is liberated by a combination of method and free will”, in which freedom is more basic.

Descartes did affirm a sort of Christianity, “Descartes observes that although ‘what has been revealed by God is more certain than any knowledge... faith in these matters, as in anything obscure, is an act of will rather than an act of understanding.’” (p. 30) Still, Williams does not come up with a definite critique of Descartes. He has suggested parallels to Enlightenment thought by quoting other authors,

with the qualification that he is not committed to their conclusions. What we can perhaps rescue from this chapter is a contrast between Descartes and Pascal in their response to Montaigne. Descartes embraced Montaigne's skepticism. He made a method of doubt, and upon this doubt erected a new edifice of knowledge, by finding the limits to doubt and constructing this new edifice on what could not be doubted. We can compare this to Kant in that Descartes also makes a sort of Copernican revolution in epistemology, by starting with disbelief, and following its implications, as Descartes saw them. Pascal, instead of accepting Montaigne's premise and reversing its effects, thought that the "source of unbelief lies in the passions rather than in reason. The heart rather than reason is the organ of religious discernment." (p. 14) As Williams concludes: "Pascal believed that the fundamental religious crisis of his day was, from a theological point of view, a matter anthropology and soteriology, into which the epistemological question was folded." (p. 15)

### Locke

With the chapter on Locke we enter the core of Williams's argument for the separation of the moral and epistemological basis of the Enlightenment, as he himself tells us. "In challenging Polanyi's reading of Locke, my ultimate aim is to put pressure on the position that highlights epistemological factors at the origins of modernity." (p. 34) Where Polanyi quoted Locke's *Third Letter on Toleration*, Williams goes to a much sounder starting point to gather Locke's view of knowledge, from his book on that subject, the *Essay on Human Understanding*. Williams begins by debunking the claim by Thomas Torrance that for Locke belief is only "ungrounded persuasion". It is enthusiasm that Locke called ungrounded persuasion. "Locke studiously, pointedly, deliberately and programmatically distinguished enthusiasm from faith as well as from reason. 'Enthusiasm' constitutes a third ground of assent to a given proposition alongside grounds in faith and in reason and it is a ground that, unlike those two grounds, is categorically rejected." (p. 37) Williams also distinguishes Locke's use of the term 'faith' in chapter xv from that in chapter xix. In the former, faith "is what is maximally attainable when we fail to demonstrate a proposition delivered by reason. What Locke is describing is the exercise of deducing the rational probability of a proposition and the appropriate form of assent to it." In the latter "we have moved onto religious epistemology.... In this latter context, 'faith' is the mode in which we grasp a proposition not deduced or delivered by reason at all, but proposed in the name of revelation." (p. 38)

Religious and rational faith are not the same thing. When Locke is discussing *general* epistemology, faith is *not* contrasted with reason; it is contrasted with knowledge, faith and knowledge being alternative *products* of the operations of reason. On the other hand, when Locke is discussing *religious* epistemology, faith is contrasted with reason, for it furnishes here an alternative *method* to the general rational method of attaining cognitive grip on a proposition. (p. 38)

So, when you have rational proof of something, it is knowledge, but when you only have persuasive reasons, then you put your faith in it, but it still is something less than knowledge. In both cases, the belief is the end product of the rational operations of the mind. In religion, on the other hand, there might be doctrines that are the product of rational proof, but other doctrines which are delivered by revelation, which are then accepted on faith, because of the prior acceptance of the reality of revelation.

Locke presents a heralded and superficially rigid distinction between what we know, admitting of certainty, and what we may judge to be the case, admitting of no more than probability (IV.ii). Probability is in principle capable of reaching such a high degree that it raises our assent

to a given proposition practically to knowledge and we are in the vicinity of certainty. Yet, even at such high altitude the distinction between knowledge and judgement, between certainty and probability, is not supposed to lapse. ... Assent to it is a matter of faith. ... Life, says Locke, is lived mostly 'in the twilight of probability.' (p. 39)

So what happens when Locke moves onto religious epistemology? Now that he has contrasted faith with *knowledge*, both of these being the potential product of rational operations, he asks what we are to make of a contrast we familiarly encounter, namely, the contrast between faith and *reason*. ... If we are to uphold it in a way that is valid and useful, we must get rid of its usual invalid and dangerous deployment in much contemporary discourse. We may validly speak of faith as opposed to speaking of reason. We may not validly speak of faith as being opposed to reason.

In matters religious, we must have reason for believing. That is where the 'enthusiasts' go astray. They reject that principle. When reason cannot be made to serve their purposes, the cry ascends: 'It is a matter of faith and above reason' (xviii.2). For all they care, the enthusiasts' 'above reason' can be contrary to everybody else's reason. ... As far as Locke is concerned, there is no valid sense of rationality whereby it would be rational to maintain a position such as that maintained by the enthusiasts. (p. 41)

There are propositions 'above reason' in the sense that they are not rationally deduced, but "they may validly procure our assent on the condition that they are not opposed to what is rationally known to be true." (p. 41) This may even include things that are contrary to our common experience, such as miracles, when they are well attested. There is also another case. "Assent in this case is unimpeachable warranted on the ground that it is a proposition to which God testifies. ... It is a *revealed* proposition." But, we must be "properly intellectually satisfied – a need not felt by the enthusiast – that we are in actuality dealing with a revealed proposition. ... Furthermore, we need to understand the said proposition before it procures our assent."

This is a point at which the reason that conducts us in life and in our general epistemology is brought to bear on putative revelation. Reason does three things in this respect. First, it can ascertain the intelligibility of the proposition in question. Second, it can reject any claims to revelation that stands in contradiction to what is known. Third, it should produce evidence that the proposition in question is actually revealed. In all this, Locke is crystal clear about the fact that, in the cases now under discussion, reason is not the *source* of a revealed proposition. (pp. 43-44)

Reason, though, implies limits. "Nothing believed on the basis of revelation can command assent of firmer confidence than something known by reason. ... Locke insists that nothing can be rightly received as revelation if it contradicts rational knowledge...." (p. 44)

We can go further with this than do Locke and Williams. How is revelation actually known? That is, how is the mind able to acquire it? It is by the exegesis of texts. First there is the ability to understand the meaning of words, the vocabulary of the text. The meaning of specific words we learn from our social environment. Then there is the ability to process the grammatical relations of words, the awareness of syntax. This seems to be innate in the human mind. But when we come to a text we find that there are available to us a range of meanings, and we evaluate the relationship of all the meanings

of the text according to which ones gives a rationally coherent meaning. In this we fall back on our knowledge of the world to determine rational coherence. There is no knowing revelation through texts of language without a prior rational competence and mental representation of the world.

So prior to receiving revelation in Locke's sense of judging that it does not contradict rational knowledge, we also use rational knowledge to recognize the meaning of the text we propose to then evaluate. In order to do this competently, exegetes go to great pains to acquire knowledge of ancient languages and cultural concepts.

Just how controversial within Christian theology is Locke's claim about the place of reason? We can get an idea of this by comparing the views of Cornelius Van Til and other theologians of the Christian Reformed type on this topic. Our source will be Herman Hoeksema's analysis of the Clark-Van Til Controversy, which appeared in 1944 in the *The Standard Bearer*, the magazine of the Protestant Reformed Church, reprinted in *The Trinity Review* of November/December 2005. Certain theologians, Cornelius Van Til, R. B. Kuiper, and N. B. Stonehouse, had brought charges against Gordon H. Clark, alleging his unfitness to be ordained to the ministry, because, as they said, he was a rationalist and an antinomian.

The accusation of rationalism is based on the contention that Dr. Clark tries to solve problems, paradoxes, and contradictions, particularly the problem of the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Anyone who makes an attempt to solve this problem, who tries to harmonize these two, who claims that this solution is possible – and especially he who is ready to offer his solution of this problem – is, according to the complainants, a rationalist. We quote from the *Complaint*: “Dr. Clark asserts that the relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility to each other presents no difficulty for his thinking and that the two are easily reconcilable before the bar of human reason. He expresses surprise that so many theologians find an insuperable difficulty here.”

And then the complainants continue:

Here then is a situation which is inadequately described as amazing. There is a problem which has baffled the greatest theologians in history. Not even Holy Scripture offers a solution. But Dr. Clark asserts unblushingly that for his thinking the problem has ceased to be a problem. Here is something phenomenal. What accounts for it? The most charitable, and no doubt the correct, explanation is that Dr. Clark has come under the spell of rationalism. It is difficult indeed to escape the conclusion that by his refusal to permit the scriptural teaching of divine sovereignty and the scriptural teaching of human responsibility to stand alongside each other and by his claim that he has fully reconciled them with each other before the bar of human reason Dr. Clark has fallen into the error of rationalism. To be sure, he is not a rationalist in the sense that he substitutes human reasoning for divine revelation as such. But, to say nothing of his finding the solution of the problem of the relation to each other of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the teaching of pagan philosophers who were totally ignorant of the teaching of Holy Writ on either of these subjects, it is clear that Dr. Clark regards Scripture from the viewpoint of a system which to the mind of man must be harmonious in all its parts. The inevitable outcome is rationalism in the interpretation of Scripture. And that too is rationalism. Although Dr. Clark does not claim actually to possess at the present moment

the solution of every scriptural paradox, yet his rationalism leaves room at best for only a temporary subjection of human reason to the divine Word...

At the point, the accusation against Gordon Clark is not that he rejects revelation because he has found rational contradictions in it. It is that by not finding rational contradictions, he has rejected its character as revelation! Hoeksema continues his analysis:

The complainants speak of a "situation which is inadequately described as amazing," and of "something phenomenal." I must confess that these words express exactly my sentiment when I read this part of the *Complaint*. There is here, indeed, something that is more than amazing, that is really unbelievable, that might almost be catalogued as another paradox: the phenomenon that theologians accuse a brother theologian of heresy because he tries to solve problems!

For, mark you well, it is exactly this that these complainants do in this part of the *Complaint*. They simply accuse him of trying to find a solution, of claiming to have found a solution. Whether Dr. Clark has actually succeeded or not to discover a solution of the problem of God's sovereignty in relation to man's responsibility is not the question at all. Whether his solution is right or wrong has nothing to do with this part of the *Complaint*. The mere fact that Dr. Clark attempts to harmonize things makes him a heretic, a rationalist.

But what about the accusation of rationalism? Is it really rationalism to make the attempt to bring Scripture into harmony with itself? The complainants maintain that it is:

Dr. Clark regards Scripture from the viewpoint of a system which to the mind of man must be harmonious in all its parts. The inevitable outcome is rationalism in the interpretation of Scripture. And that too is rationalism.

The language of the complainants is somewhat ambiguous here, whether the ambiguity is intentional or accidental. The words might convey the impression that Dr. Clark begins with a system of thought, not derived from the Scriptures, and that now he proceeds to explain Scripture in such a way as to support that preconceived philosophical system. And that would, indeed, be rationalism. Scripture would then be distorted to fit Dr. Clark's system. But the complainants do not openly accuse him of this. The words may also mean that, according to Dr. Clark's view, there is in the revelation of the Word of God itself a harmonious system of truth, which, by careful exegesis, comparing Scripture with Scripture, the theologian attempts to bring to light and to formulate. And this seems to be the truth. Thus, at least, *The Answer* interprets Dr. Clark's attempt to harmonize divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We quote: "It is pertinent to note that Dr. Clark, instead of approaching these problems on a rationalistic basis, reaches his conclusion from an exegesis of Scripture".

We have here in view the popular presuppositionalist theology of Van Til which has been in vogue at Westminster Seminary. The contrast to the theology of John Locke is stark. But between what modes of thought is this contrast? Is it a contrast between Christian belief and the Enlightenment? Or is it perhaps a contrast between a particular modern theology and more traditional views? Hoeksema draws what he thinks are the implications.

But if the contention of the complainants is true, it certainly follows that all theology, and especially all dogmatics, is rationalistic, for it proceeds from the assumption that the truth revealed in the Bible can be formulated into a logical system.

No theologian has ever proceeded from the assumption of the complainants. Dogmatics is a system of truth elicited from Scripture. And exegesis always applied the rule of the *regula Scripturae*, which means that throughout the Bible there runs a consistent line of thought in the light of which the darker and more difficult passages must be interpreted. The complainants virtually deny this, at least, and that, too, rather arbitrarily, with relation to the problem of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

Who does not know that Reformed theologians have always interpreted those passages of Scripture, which at first sight seem to be in favor of the Arminian view, in the light of the current teaching of Holy Writ that salvation is of the Lord, that grace is sovereign, that the atonement is particular, and that man is not free to do good? According to the contention of the complainants, this is rationalism.

The complainants simply ride a recent Christian Reformed hobby.

As to "contradictions," I maintain that there are no such things in the revelation of God in Scripture, for the simple reason that Scripture teaches us everywhere that God is One, and that he cannot deny himself. His revelation, too, is one, and does not contradict itself.

No, but the complainants would say, there are no *real* contradictions, but there are *apparent* contradictions in the Bible nevertheless, and them we must leave severely alone, without even making an attempt at solution. We must simply and humbly accept them.

I most positively deny all of this.

By *apparent* contradictions the complainants mean propositions or truths that to the human mind, and according to human logic, are contradictory. I deny that there are such propositions in the Bible. If there were, they could not be the object of our faith. It is nonsense to say that we must humbly believe what is contradictory. This is simply impossible. The complainants themselves cannot believe contradictions. Contradictions are propositions that mutually exclude each other, so that the one denies the truth of the other. The principles of contradictions are: 1. That a thing cannot at the same time *be* and *not be*. 2. That a thing must either be or not be. 3. That the same property cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time of the same subject. A is A. A is not Not-A. Everything is either A or Not-A.

There is much more in the article, which the reader can look up online. The pertinence of this material will become more evident when we get to Williams's discussion of Karl Barth. For now we leave it with a reference to an essay by John Frame in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, edited by Gary North. Frame attempts to identify and list all the paradoxes that Van Til found in the Bible. According to Frame, Van Til believed that sometimes we should try to resolve paradoxes, and sometimes we should not, regarding them as part of revelation. Further, Van Til gave no criteria for when we should resolve them or let them stand. This does not seem to bother Frame. Here is a suggestion for a Master's thesis project in theology: examine the paradoxes that Frame lists, and

compare them to the noumenal/phenomenal divide in Kant's philosophy, especially the antinomies of pure reason.

Coming back to Locke, we find, then, a divided opinion whether Locke's stand on reason is a deviation from the Christian position. For some who claimed to represent orthodoxy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a complete betrayal of Christianity to Enlightenment thought, and for others it was the necessary condition of having revelation which men could believe, in the sense of finding meaning in it, that is, it is necessary to Christianity.

This is not to suggest that Locke's epistemology is not flawed. Those who want to explore the problems may study Nicholas Wolterstorff's *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief*. (Note that it has a long section on "How Descartes's Project Differed".) But Williams thinks that he has sufficiently vindicated Locke from the charge that it was his view of reason that turned Europe away from Christianity.

I have not, however, forgotten the recently reviewed book by Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, by Pierre Manent (*Histoire intellectuelle du libéralisme: Dix leçons*, 1987). He holds that in political theory, Locke like other natural law theorists put man in the center, in an ongoing modern project to "escape decisively from the power of the singular religious institution of the Church". It was in the moral sphere, particularly, rather than in Locke's epistemology, that this took place. For Locke, the church was a voluntary society, and the value of worship depended on the sincerity of the worshippers. In neither politics nor religion did he accept that the authority of God passed by delegation to the state or the church. The content of his *The Reasonableness of Christianity* is distant from that of any church dogmatics. He believed in revelation, but his interpretation of revelation was his own. There is in Locke a very evident shift in the ideas about authority. He says that "nobody that I know, before our Savior's time, ever did, or went about to give us a morality. It is true, that is a law of nature; but who is there that ever did, or went about to give it to us all entire, as a law..." He blames this on political and religious authorities who twisted and truncated it for their own advantage.

### *Deism*

The deists were a quite varied group of writers who taught a monotheistic religion based on natural reason, but were opposed to the Christian ideas of the Trinity, the fall and redemption. Williams takes Matthew Tindal and his *Christianity as Old as Creation*, as his example of this thought. "In so far as Tindal deployed principles of religious epistemology, he had recourse to Locke. ... His discussion certainly helps bear out the claim that when the deists made epistemological use of Locke, they were 'flashy and superficial.'" (p. 57) The deists did not have cause, however, to reject what Locke said about reason, but they had did have a need, in fact were against what he said about revelation. For what they thought was religiously valid was what they thought could be deduced by natural reason, and what they rejected was what only revelation could tell us, namely a fall, sin, a Mediator and redemption. "It is clear that the claims of general epistemology Tindal makes are motored by religious concerns. He never tires of repeating that the only scheme of knowledge compatible with deity is a scheme that bestows universal, knowable religious truth. The substance of that truth is essentially moral and the moral is the religious." (p. 58) In the moral standards of the deists, a religion that required revelation for salvation was immoral, as it was only open to those who had received such a revelation. "Either you have morality or you have a God acting in history." (p. 59) There might be revelation, but it was only of secondary importance, as everything that was important could be known by what was evident to reason.

With deism, then, we do have an opposition between reason and Christian revelation at least, but it is a moral opposition between what the two things teach. This is probably the reason for deism's long trajectory, from the latter 17<sup>th</sup> century into the early 19<sup>th</sup>, and then surviving in popular consciousness among anti-clerical people into the 20<sup>th</sup>; it enabled people to think themselves better than the common church-going crowd. But deism is not yet an opposition between reason and the possibility of revelation.

### *Barth*

Williams puts the question this way, referring to Karl Barth's *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*: "Barth argued that the introduction into Protestant dogmatics of reason as a judge of religious truth opened the door and eventually led to the elimination of revelation. He also argued that the natural knowledge of God as a regulative principle in dogmatics, which enabled reason to adopt this role, was theologically disastrous. This seems to be all about epistemology. But is faulty theological epistemology really the root of all evils as far as Barth is concerned in this volume?" (p. 64)

The first problem with this approach is that it is essentially a history of post-Kantian German, or at least continental, Protestant theology, which took off from a misinterpretation of Kant, one shared by Barth also. The explanation of this error comes from Willis Glover's *Biblical Origins of Modern Secular Culture*.

Kant's philosophy is not a true ontological dualism. There is a kind of epistemological dualism between the way we know phenomena and the more direct way we are aware of some noumenal realities. In some of Kant's followers, however, the epistemological distinction he had made was transformed into an ontological dualism. In other words, whereas Kant had said we are aware of one reality in more than one way, some Kantians came to conceive of a phenomenal reality as distinct from a noumenal, or spiritual, reality. It is this perversion of Kant that became the dominant basis of Protestant theology. (Glover, p. 100)

The mistake, or as Glover calls it, perversion, is fundamental to Barth's understanding of the history of Protestant theology. It is also part of the mentality of the Christian Reformed theology we have been following as a secondary issue in this review. Whether Cornelius Van Til, *et. al.*, got this directly from Barth or, more likely, took it in as part of their Dutch continental heritage, it influenced their ideas of what was theologically possible.

Williams says that Barth "searched for some psychological common denominator that would furnish us with the clue to the inner life of eighteenth-century 'man'. He found it by focusing on Renaissance humanist man, celebrant of complete rational autarchy in a rational world governed by God. This man migrated from antiquity into northern Europe and thence to eighteenth-century Europe." (Williams, p. 66) Here is mistake number two: a distorted idea of the Renaissance as the underpinning of his intellectual history. From here Barth concludes to an "eighteenth-century man" who "found himself 'something eternal, almighty, wise, good, glorious'".

At this point, Barth lets loose with a hostility unequalled in his attitude towards any other group or individual in any other group. Pietism is the trouble. It is the religion of grasping, not of being grasped. It is the twin of rationalism and no true heir to the Reformation.

...

Barth's discussion of Pietism reaches its term in his criticism of its doctrines of grace and justification; in other words, in its soteriology. Pietism had an unhealthy concern for what takes place within us rather than an adequate orientation to what is in Christ for us. They head back to Pelagianism. Moralism is the enemy at the gate. At the root of the will for form, expressed by reason, is the will for morality, which is moralism. (p. 68)

This looks like a willful refusal to make proper distinctions, because of overriding philosophical commitments. In the first place what side of Pietism is the problem? The focus on feeling and subjective experiences, or the desire to be transformed by the indwelling power of the Spirit? One is Romanticism, the other is the point of Christianity. If what matters is only what is in Christ and not what happens to us, then Christianity can be ignored on earth as irrelevant to life. Second is the question of moralism, which can be very tricky. If Christianity is a matter of attending church ceremonies, and otherwise living like a pagan, then what point is there to it? But moralism come in when the contrary view takes over, namely that Christianity is a matter of living according to certain norms. For the moralist, living by these codes is what really matters in Christianity, and again the transformation of the person disregarded. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century moralism has so taken over that the mainline Protestants saw no conflict between the essence of Christianity and the deist-like theology that was taking its place.

But for Barth, these distinctions don't matter, as what he has in mind as Christianity seems to be a sort of existential stance toward life, one that was not incompatible with a sort of moral indifference of, say, a life-long adulterer as Barth himself was.

"However," Williams continues, "when Barth comes to the story of theology, it does indeed, unfold *on its surface* as the story of the tragic fate of theological epistemology. For Barth this is the essential tragedy of Protestant theology." (p. 69) "At some stage after the Reformation, Protestant theology took a fatal step in the way it related religion and revelation. ... In this connection the guilty parties are two: Salomon van Til (Reformed) and Buddeus (Lutheran). ...

Both van Til and Buddeus specify the content of our natural knowledge of God, including the affirmation that it cannot lead to salvation. Like [Salomon] van Til, Buddeus is clear that *religio naturalis*, stemming from the natural knowledge of God, must indispensably be supplemented by revelation. Nevertheless, *religio naturalis* contains the *notiones* that constitute the *bases et fundamenta omnis religionis* [the bases and foundations of all religion] by means of which we can identify the supplementary revelation. Natural religion thus functions in two ways. Firstly, by virtue of its insufficiency for salvation, it enables us to discern the need for revelation. Secondly, by the religious direction it is able to provide on the bases of its knowledge, it enables us to identify that revelation when it appears. (p. 71)

This is Barth's next big mistake. For the corrective we turn to Stephen J. Grabill's *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics*. Grabill finds "an ancient moral and legal tradition" of natural law. "That tradition, to a large degree, remained unbroken in the theology of the Protestant Reformers and their orthodox sixteenth- and seventeenth-century successors, but sometime after 1750, succumbed to rationalist currents ..." "Questions pertaining to the efficacy of natural law and its place

in the economy of salvation constitute the central concerns of Reformed writers who address the topic of natural law during the period of confessional orthodoxy (*ca.* 1520 to *ca.* 1725). (Grabill, p. 2)

Among twentieth-century Protestant systematic and historical theologians, a primary reason contributing to the unfavorable assessment of natural law has been the influence of Karl Barth's epistemological criticism of natural theology, his (along with Emil Brunner's) reinforcement of Calvin as the chief codifier and lodestar of Reformed doctrine, and his advocacy of a strong version of divine command theory.... Suffice it to say that particularly within the arena of Reformed theology, the discontinuity thesis was underscored by Barth's acerbic criticism not only of natural theology, but also of any theological formulation not immediately derivable from Christocentric premises.

A second reason is that ... Protestant intellectuals ... have typically regarded the natural-law tradition to be doctrinally and philosophically tied to Roman Catholicism... This viewpoint has been articulated by a number of prominent twentieth-century Protestant theologians and ethicists including such luminaries as Jacques Ellul, Stanley Hauerwas, Carl F. H. Henry, Paul Leymann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Helmut Thielicke. Among twentieth century representatives of the Dutch Reformed tradition, Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til, Gordon Spykman, and G. C. Berkouwer have each been outspoken proponents of this viewpoint, the latter of whom was indelibly shaped by Barthian modes of thought. (pp. 4, 5)

Grabill returns to this in his Conclusion:

The preceding chapters have shown that the Reformed wing of the magisterial Reformation inherited the natural-law tradition as a noncontroversial legacy of late medieval scholasticism, even though twentieth-century representatives of the Reformed tradition — Karl Barth, G. C. Berkouwer, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Cornelius Van Til — have typically rejected that tradition because it allegedly glossed over the noetic effects of sin on the natural human faculties and because it was ostensibly based on a dualistic nature-grace dichotomy. Both of these criticisms — which are reiterated many times over in the scholarship of those representatives — are sharpened to a fine point in Barth's angry response to Brunner in the 1934 debate. (p. 175)

Williams also takes up the Brunner-Barth debate:

In this exchange, Barth clearly showed that he viewed any epistemological issues that arose between him and Brunner as fundamentally soteriological in nature. He accused Brunner of failing to understand what he (Barth) really maintained on the question of natural theology. Behind Brunner's talk of human capacity for 'word' or for 'revelation', and behind his distinction between a formal and a material *imago Dei* constitutive of humanity, there is a fateful creeping Pelagianism. ... Barth fears that for all Brunner's vaunted celebration of grace, there is a 'new' doctrine of the Holy Spirit about to break forth in Brunner's work, one that lamentably requires that the Holy Spirit have a point of contact in humans for his divine activity. (Williams, p. 70)

If there is no point of contact, no human capacity for word or revelation, can this Barthian revelation be anything like the revelation that Locke defended and which Williams has made his piece with? There

may be a second issue with Buddeus, in that he seems to suggest two levels of religion, one based on natural theology, and then a second step to get up to revealed theology. But Barth's response is not directed against this, but against any cognitive human capacity even to accept revelation. For Barth, revelation turned into a mysterious encounter. The Biblical text was not the word of God, i.e this revelation, but only the place where this encounter took place. To illustrate, at a press conference for Barth, Carl F. H. Henry introduced himself as the editor of *Christianity Today*, and asked whether the resurrection was an event that would fall under the scope of the press to report on. Karl Barth avoided a direct answer, instead retorting "Do you represent Christianity today or Christianity yesterday?" Effectively, Barth recognized that his new, non factual idea of revelation had taken him past a divide from the former Christianity to something novel. But since for Barth, Christianity is existential encounter, and not actual fact, we can see why he had issues with Pietism of any type, for Pietism is a search for ways to make Christianity real; a response to the perception of a fake Christianity all around.

Williams ignores this problem completely in his discussion of Barth. Nor does he recognize the other problems with Barth's historical analysis that have been raised here. In a later chapter, though, Williams does take on the problem of the relation of the doctrine of reconciliation to the possibility of a factual history of the events on which Christianity is based.

Skipping over Nietzsche, we come to Williams's contemporary authors. He considers a certain Colin Gunton, whom I had not heard of before. Gunton has his own genealogy of error. In particular he faults William of Ockham, whom he misinterprets. Gunton thinks that without universals, unity can only be forged by reason, leaving particularity without proper grounding and significance. Behind bad Ockham is bad Augustine and behind him is bad Plato. Gunton wants a cosmology that is based on Irenaeus' trinitarianism, that is manifested in creation. "Trinity and cosmos are integrated as profoundly as can be." (p. 129) Somehow the world is correlative with the divine nature. What Gunton is able produce though, are abstract ideas, and these do not generate the particular nature of actual particulars. Gunton does not tell us why his version is better than the Thomist divine-cosmos synthesis. In fact he does not bring up Thomism. He just takes us back to a divinity-cosmos synthesis as a solution. "Truth to tell," Williams comments, "Gunton was not a reliable commentator on the history of thought." (p. 132) Williams goes on to discuss problems that critics have with Gunton's interpretation of Augustine and of medieval writers.

In his final chapter Williams gets to what he believes theology has to say, which is to bring forgiveness and reconciliation to the forefront in accordance with the necessary priority of the moral dimension: that is through a narrative of reconciliation in history. The question now is whether science will let us have this. He has to argue that "the conviction that Jesus was a man in history who died on the cross and rose bodily from the grave does not depend on a corresponding literalness of the Genesis account of the fall." (p. 153) He goes on "The supposition that a plausible account of the reconciling work of Christ can be offered without commitment to an historical fall may be tested only in the course of attempting the account." (p. 155) But if science will not leave Genesis alone, neither does criticism leave the gospels alone. Williams is here the representative of a type of theology that wants to fight only at the last ditch, but he has give no reason to think that he will fare any better here, than at the points he has given up. For all he has said about the priority of the moral over reason, he ends with the problem of whether reason will allow him his theology of the moral. Has he really learned his own lesson?