Knowledge and the Fall in American Neo-Calvinism:  
Towards a Van Til–Plantinga Synthesis

# 1. Introduction

The Neo-Calvinist approach to faith and reason was conceived in 19th century Netherlands by influential thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, and developed by their successors, including Herman Dooyeweerd and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven. Its primary characteristic has been to understand Christianity as a comprehensive world-and-life view, bearing upon all areas of thought and practice. The movement has spread beyond its Dutch origin and has influenced some Reformed theologians and philosophers in the United States (Bartholomew 2017, chapter 9).

One early example is Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), professor of apologetics at Princeton Theological Seminary and subsequently at Westminster Theological Seminary. Born in the Netherlands, he emigrated to the United States as a child and went on to receive his philosophical training in the British idealist tradition. However, from early on he sought to formulate a distinctly Reformed alternative approach. He was also influenced by his education at the “old,” conservative Princeton Seminary, which emphasized the evidential support for Christianity, and by Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, who conceived of an apologetic encounter with other worldviews in terms of *antithesis*. Van Til sought to synthesize the two—the provability of Christianity and the fragility of common ground with other worldviews[[1]](#footnote-2)—under the aegis of Reformed theology with the help of categories drawn from British idealism. The result was an approach to Christian apologetics which has come to be known as “presuppositionalism” (Bahnsen 1998, 7–9, 596–600; Bosserman 2014, part 1).

Another prominent American philosopher influenced by Neo-Calvinism is Alvin Plantinga (1932–). Born to Dutch immigrants of Reformed faith, he pursued training in philosophy early in his life. In contrast to Van Til, he was educated primarily in the analytic tradition. Both, however, studied under influential Dutch Reformed philosopher William Harry Jellema at Calvin College (Plantinga 1985, 3–22; Bahnsen 1998, 8). Plantinga’s philosophical works cover several areas, including modal metaphysics, the problem of evil, and the philosophy of science (1974; 1977; 2011). He has argued at length for an “Augustinian” approach to Christian philosophy where one should feel free to use one’s faith as a starting point for one’s philosophical explorations (1992). One of Plantinga’s most important contributions is in the theory of knowledge: his proposal of a so-called “reformed epistemology,” an account centered on the notion of proper cognitive function and controversially making place for the proper basicality of both theistic and specifically Christian belief. He has applied his epistemological approach to apologetic challenges including those of higher biblical criticism, religious pluralism, and science (2000, chapters 12–13; 2011, chapter 6).

The following is an attempt at reformulating Van Til’s conception of the (mitigated) epistemological antithesis between Christianity and other worldviews, a major driving force behind his approach to apologetics, in the categories of Plantinga’s reformed epistemology. This synthesis, if achieved, indicates a fundamental unity between these two representatives of American Neo-Calvinist philosophy and outlines a way forward for those who sympathize with Van Til but lack an explication of his thought in terms of contemporary analytic epistemology.

## 1.1 Van Til on the Antithesis

Much of what Van Til had to say about knowledge would today be classified as metaphysics rather than epistemology (cf. Baird 2015). John Frame helpfully distinguishes between Van Til’s *metaphysics of knowledge*, which is his theological treatment of God, creation, providence, revelation, and man following Bavinck and Vos; and his *ethics of knowledge*, which treats the way believers and unbelievers ought to think and do think (Frame 1995, 83). The latter includes the dialectic between *antithesis* and common grace, through which Van Til seeks to give an account of the epistemological situation of believers and, more importantly, unbelievers. Van Til’s view can be summarized in the following points.

*1. Antithetical principles and consequent interpretation*. Van Til envisions two “principles” grounding Christian and unbelieving epistemologies: on the one hand, God’s self-attesting revelation; on the other, human autonomy. The first secures intelligibility and knowledge by recognizing the Triune God as the source of being and His revelation as the source of knowledge; the second precludes intelligibility and knowledge by rejecting God and His revelation (Frame 1995, 90–93; Bahnsen 1998, 272–311; Shannon 2020, 292).[[2]](#footnote-3) Further, both the believer and the unbeliever interpret the facts and experiences they encounter in light of their fundamental principles or presuppositions. The content of unbelievers’ putative knowledge is thereby distorted, rendering their claim to knowledge false. Ultimately, agreement between Christian and non-Christian is merely “formal” or verbal (Frame 1995, 89).

*2. Partial practical realization of the antithesis*. Given a consistent application of the antithesis as just described, “it would almost seem as if no unbeliever can utter a true sentence” (Frame 1995, 85). However, that is not what Van Til advocated.[[3]](#footnote-4) As Frame explains:

In these formulations, the antithesis is essentially between two “principles,” “systems,” “allegiances,” or “norms.” Individual unbelievers are opposed to Christianity only “insofar as” they are true to their “principle.” (1995, 91; cf. Bahnsen 1998, 275)

As essential as the absolute antithesis was for Van Til, he saw equally clearly that it had to be qualified in practice. While both he and Bahnsen acknowledged the difficulty of a precise description, the key distinction they drew was between knowledge in the *epistemological* and in the *psychological* sense (Bahnsen 1998, 405–416).[[4]](#footnote-5) For Van Til, epistemology involved the consistent outplaying of the consequences of one’s presuppositions, which ultimately meant precluding knowledge on any worldview other than Christianity. However, he recognized that the psychological (i.e. conscious) state of unbelievers regularly involves awareness of truths about the world that *would not be* possible given their presuppositions but *is in fact* possible given the truth of Christianity. This is explained by non-Christians not being fully (psychologically) consistent with their professed (epistemological) principles.[[5]](#footnote-6)

The causes for this are metaphysical: they are creatures made in the image of God and live in a world created by and revelatory of God (Bosserman 2014, 117). Additionally—though controversially in Dutch Reformed theology—Van Til affirmed the doctrine of common grace, according to which God benevolently restrains the practical outworking of human depravity. Thus, the doctrines of creation, revelation, and common grace make room for “relative” good, including epistemic good, in unbelievers (Van Til 1974, 27).[[6]](#footnote-7)

The mitigated nature of the antithesis can be nuanced by three considerations.[[7]](#footnote-8) *First*, the *sensus divinitatis* (lit. the sense of the divine) is clearly present to unbelievers as some kind of immediate awareness or knowledge of God, yet it is neither acknowledged nor integrated into their epistemological framework (Bahnsen 1998, 179–182). *Second*, the realization of the antithesis is somewhat proportional to one’s “epistemological self-consciousness”—that is, the degree to which one has reflected on the epistemological consequences of one’s presuppositional commitments (Frame 1995, 96–97). *Third*, due to “unbelievers [being] more self-conscious epistemologically in the dimension of religion than in the dimension of mathematics” (Van Til 1972/2015, 99), approximately correct knowledge is more common in them on mundane topics as opposed to more religiously relevant matters (cf. Bahnsen 1998, 275).

In summary, Baird describes Van Til’s teaching on the “noetic antithesis” as follows:

Van Til taught that non-Christians have what we might call *false* knowledge. Because God’s common grace restrains the darkness of sin from completely enveloping the thoughts of unbelievers, they frequently assent to truth and reach verisimilitude in their explanations of reality. But because common grace does not finally set unbelievers free from the power of sin over their minds, they simultaneously suppress the truth and provide ultimately misguided theories of reality which are hostile to the triune God of the Bible. Unbelievers are not completely unreasonable, though they are wholly incapable of achieving an understanding of reality that is in tune with God’s revelation and complies with his covenantal demands. (2015, 95, emphasis original)

## 1.2. Plantinga’s epistemology

In contrast to Van Til’s “big picture” approach characteristic both of much theology and idealistic philosophy, Plantinga developed his epistemological views through the process common in analytic philosophy: meticulous analysis of terms, thought experiments, arguments from intuition, and the like. However, his autobiographical and meta-philosophical reflections clarify that he pursued his project with the goal of formulating a sound Christian, even Reformed, epistemology (Plantinga 1985, 55–64; 1992).[[8]](#footnote-9) Laid out in a trilogy of monographs (1993a, 1993b, 2000), Plantinga’s conception of knowledge is centered on the notion of *proper function*.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Plantinga argues that proper function is a common concept ascribed to systems (biological or otherwise) to describe in some normative or teleological fashion the way they are supposed to behave. This is betrayed by the ubiquitous complaint that an organ or faculty *malfunctions*. For Plantinga, thinking about proper function necessarily involves a *design plan*: roughly, a description of the system’s intended or desired behavior; which in turn presupposes an environment for which the given system is designed.[[10]](#footnote-11)

The notion of proper function can then be applied to human cognitive faculties. Plantinga considers what conditions need to be met for beliefs produced by one’s cognitive faculties to count as knowledge. *First*, the design plan describing the proper function of these faculties must be aimed at truth and not some other benefit such as survival. *Second*, the design plan must be good or successful such that the faculties generally achieve their aim of producing true beliefs. *Finally*, these faculties must function in an environment similar to the one involved in the design plan.[[11]](#footnote-12) (For example, some human faculties do not function well in space or underwater.) Based on these considerations and on his definition of knowledge as warranted true belief, Plantinga concludes that

a belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. (2000, 156)

Importantly, Plantinga’s conditions for warrant so far are *externalist*—the knower need not be aware of the conditions being met to have knowledge. Plantinga however adds that properly basic beliefs are in principle defeasible, as other beliefs might contradict or undermine the warrant for those beliefs which one has held as properly basic. As pointed out by Michael Sudduth, the introduction of defeaters implies that “Plantinga holds to a negative *internalist* condition that is necessary for proper function and warrant” (1999, 171, emphasis mine)—the no-defeater condition,[[12]](#footnote-13) which can be defined as:

[ND] Given any person S, S’s belief B (held to some degree n) is warranted only if S does not have an undefeated defeater for B. (Sudduth 1999, 171)

Plantinga then applies his general epistemology to religious matters. He argues that if theism is true, then people likely possess the cognitive faculty *sensus divinitatis*, by which belief in the existence of God is produced in a properly basic way.[[13]](#footnote-14) Similarly, if Christianity is true, then the internal witness of the Holy Spirit produces belief in Christians in “the great things of the gospel” in a properly basic way, not dependent on evidence (Plantinga 2000, part III).

Plantinga’s most significant application of the no-defeater condition is in his “evolutionary argument against naturalism,” where he argues that belief in unguided evolution (and naturalism) implies the unreliability of one’s cognitive faculties, and therefore serves as an undercutting defeater[[14]](#footnote-15) for all of one’s beliefs (Plantinga 2011, chapter 10). He also considers in detail, and attempts to deflect, putative defeaters against Christianity (Plantinga 2000, part IV).

In summary, Plantinga’s epistemology consists of the following elements:

* *General epistemology*: knowledge is warranted true belief, where a belief has warrant if it is produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties reliably aimed at truth in an appropriate environment. A belief is warranted only if there are no undefeated defeaters for it.
* *Religious epistemology*: if theism is true, theistic belief is probably properly basic; if Christianity is true, the same is true for Christian belief. There are no undefeated defeaters for theism and Christianity; there probably is an undefeated defeater for naturalism and evolution.

# 2. A proposed synthesis

## 2.1. No non-Christian knowledge in principle

Van Til held that a consistent non-Christian worldview precludes intelligibility, reason, and knowledge. Consequently, when the unbeliever experiences and uses these, he is inconsistent with his professed worldview and—in some implicit sense—presupposes the truth of Christianity. Further, the absurd consequences of the unbelieving worldview and the inconsistency of the unbeliever in rejecting these can be clarified by reflecting on the consequences of one’s epistemological presuppositions (Bahnsen 1998, 107–119, 482–496). Finally, the consistency of intelligibility, reason, and knowledge with Christianity and their inconsistency with non-Christianity is the foundation of Van Til’s transcendental argument:

It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or in affirmation, unless it were for God’s existence. Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have, in order to be what it is. (Van Til 1969, 11; cf. Anderson 2005, 57–60)

While a Van Tilian transcendental argument may alternatively proceed from mental or intellectual phenomena other than knowledge,[[15]](#footnote-16) its epistemological aspect accords well with Plantinga’s proper functionalism. Plantinga affirms both that proper functionalism is the correct epistemological theory and that only theism allows for a reliably truth-directed design plan for our cognitive faculties. As Craig notes, this implies a theistic transcendental argument from the necessity of theism for knowledge (2000, 234), and entails that, just as for Van Til, the unbeliever in some sense presupposes God:[[16]](#footnote-17)

The nontheist who thinks that he is warranted in his non-belief thus unwittingly presupposes the existence of God in his very denial of God, for warrant involves proper functioning, and proper functioning entails theism. Moreover, when the theist attempts to argue for the existence of God, he presupposes God’s existence in that he assumes that his premises are warranted. This is not a vicious sort of circularity, but rather the inherent nature of a transcendental argument. (Craig 2000, 234)

Consequently, Plantinga contends that when the non-theist reflects upon the epistemological consequences of his metaphysical commitments, he will lose confidence in the reliable truth-directedness of his cognitive faculties, thereby acquiring an undercutting defeater for all his beliefs.[[17]](#footnote-18) As mentioned above, he applied this contention in his evolutionary argument against naturalism (Plantinga 2000, 227–239; 2011, chapter 10). The argument insists that human cognitive faculties are not truth-directed given naturalism and evolution; therefore if one believes in these two theories, one will have to conclude that one’s cognitive faculties are unreliable, thereby obtaining a defeater for all of one’s beliefs. His conclusion rings eerily Van Tilian:[[18]](#footnote-19)

So rejection of theistic belief doesn’t automatically produce skepticism: many who don’t believe in God know much. But that is only because they don’t accurately think through the consequences of this rejection. Once they do, they will lose their knowledge; here, therefore, is another of those cases where, by learning more, one comes to know less. (Plantinga 2000, 240)

One point of contrast, however, remains. While Van Til was adamant that *Christian* theism alone can secure the preconditions of knowledge, Plantinga judged several religions to be epistemologically viable: “Judaism, Islam, some forms of Hinduism, some forms of Buddhism, some forms of American Indian religion… [p]erhaps these religions are like Christianity in that they are subject to no *de jure* objections that are independent of *de facto* objections” (2000, 350). While this difference is real, it is not essential to Plantinga’s epistemology. Proper functionalist Tyler McNabb, along with Erik Baldwin, has argued that several religions are susceptible to rationality defeaters like the one in the evolutionary argument against naturalism (McNabb 2018, 34–37; cf. Baldwin & McNabb 2018).

The Plantingian view that false metaphysical views lead to skepticism by raising undercutting defeaters for all beliefs upon reflection closely mirrors Van Til’s insistence that the epistemologically self-conscious unbeliever cannot know anything (cf. Anderson 2005, 71: n. 60). Both assertions naturally support a transcendental argument.[[19]](#footnote-20) Indeed, McNabb recently presented an explicitly transcendental argument for Judeo-Christian theism based on proper function (2018, 37–38). Granted, the Van Tilian might want to extend it by arguing the skeptical consequences of rejecting various aspects of the Van Tilian “metaphysics of knowledge,”[[20]](#footnote-21) but in general, the proper functionalist framework is fully amiable to his project.

## 2.2. Universal knowledge of God

Based on the Reformed interpretation of Romans 1:18–21, Van Til maintained that everyone, whether Christian or non-Christian, knows God in virtue of having been created in the image of God and in virtue of constantly encountering God’s creation without and within. This knowledge, which Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis* (henceforth: SD), is immediate and clear (Van Til 1974, 93; Turner 1981; Bahnsen 1995, 1–4; Baird 2015, 86–87). Plantinga similarly argued (also inspired by Calvin[[21]](#footnote-22)) for a capacity of knowing God naturally and immediately: a cognitive faculty also named SD. For Plantinga, the SD produces theistic beliefs in some specific circumstances, such as when one encounters the vastness and beauty of nature or when one is afflicted with guilt (2000, 170–184).

There are two potential points of contrast between the two models, as pointed out by Oliphint (2020a, 133): whether the SDis itself knowledge (as Van Til held) or rather a capacity for knowledge; and whether it malfunctions in non-Christians as a result of the Fall.[[22]](#footnote-23) I shall argue that the latter charge is more substantial than the former; both can nevertheless be resolved by clarifying the apparent conflicts and slightly amending Plantinga’s model.

Whether the SD is knowledge or a capacity for knowledge (or a cognitive faculty producing knowledge in some circumstances) is arguably a merely semantic question. Consider that even on the view of SD as knowledge, presumably there is some cognitive process or faculty (surely providential, or perhaps even more divinely involved) by which general revelation is apprehended and knowledge is gained (cf. Oliphint 2001, 164). And on the view of SD as capacity for knowledge, one could simply change the naming conventions and assign the name SD to the knowledge produced by the capacity. So far there is no substantial contrast.

The real difference unfolds as Oliphint develops his critique: he takes the Van Tilian position to be that the SD as knowledge is implanted by God through general revelation and *always possessed by every human* (2020a, 134–135; cf. 2001, 165–166). While Oliphint regards this as a point of contrast, it seems compatible with Plantinga’s model. Oliphint’s worry that conceiving of SD as a cognitive faculty allows for it to lie “dormant or empty until properly stimulated by experience” (2020a, 134) is significantly qualified by two considerations. *First*, his own acknowledgment that “the perception of nature … is the primary … means by which the knowledge of God is implanted” (2020b, 183; cf. 2001, 165) implies that allowing for preeminently apt occasions or situations for apprehending general revelation is not, in itself, inconsistent with the SD’s ubiquity. *Second*, Plantinga’s affirmation that “[w]ere it not for sin and its effects, God’s presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects, and the past” (2000, 214) again displays the *prima facie* compatibility of the SD’s ubiquitous clarity and its being conceived of as a faculty primarily producing beliefs in specific circumstances. The Van Tilian may nevertheless wish to radically broaden the list of circumstances through which general revelation is communicated to include encounter with any created reality, including one’s own conscious life (cf. Van Til 1967a, 108; Baird 2015, 87). Ultimately though, both Oliphint and Plantinga seem to agree that—apart from the Fall—knowledge of God is apprehended immediately, clearly, and universally through general revelation.[[23]](#footnote-24)

When it comes to the effects of the Fall and sin on the SD, however, Van Til and Plantinga appear to be in genuine conflict. Bahnsen writes that “[n]ot even sin in its most devastating expressions can remove this knowledge, for Van Til says, ‘sin would not be sin except for this ineradicable knowledge of God.’” (1995, 5). For Van Til, the SD is necessarily present given God’s natural revelation and humans’ having been created in the image of God. Plantinga, on the other hand, understands sin to have wreaked havoc on the SD. After the Fall and without regeneration (cf. Plantinga 2000, 280), it is malfunctioning: it produces warranted theistic belief less often, less clearly, perhaps with a lower degree of warrant and perhaps not for everyone (2000, 214–215).

The apparent conflict can be alleviated by contrasting the two thinkers’ conceptions of the knowledge of God.[[24]](#footnote-25) For Plantinga, the knowledge of God produced by the SD is a set of beliefs, which fallen humans are predisposed to suppress (2000, 210, cf. 215–216). Van Til, on the other hand, talked about the SD in both propositional and non-propositional terms (cf. Frame 1995, 97–98).[[25]](#footnote-26) Examples of the former include his identification of the unbeliever’s “remnant of the knowledge of God” with a “remnant of a truly theistic interpretation of experience” (1974, 39)—interpretation being the quintessentially epistemological, and thus propositional, concept for Van Til—and his claim that it involves “a certain thought-content” (1974, 196). Examples of non-propositional aspects to the SD include his talking about it as God “impress[ing] his presence on man’s attention” (1974, 27), as being “beneath the threshold of [natural man’s] working consciousness” (1967a, 98), and as “awareness of the presence of God” (quoted in Baird 2015, 87: n. 55),

We might then suggest the following synthesis. SD understood as the process or faculty responsible for forming our beliefs about God does indeed malfunction as Plantinga claims and as Van Til conceives of the epistemological procedures of unbelievers (cf. Oliphint 2001, 166). However, “beneath” such beliefs there is a non-propositional awareness of God, comparable to Russell’s notion of knowledge by acquaintance (Oliphint 2001, 164: n. 19) and Alston’s related concept of divine perception (Alston 1993, 37–38). Being a metaphysical and psychological rather than epistemological phenomenon in Van Til’s sense, it is unaffected by the Fall, though suppressed to some degree in the unbeliever’s consciousness (Bahnsen 1995, 6–10).[[26]](#footnote-27) Plantinga says little about such a notion, though he accepts William Alston’s thesis that it is possible to perceive God (whether literally or somewhat analogically) and thereby be aware of His presence and character (Plantinga 2000, 180–182, 286–289). The Van Tilian can, then, agree with Plantinga’s contentions with respect to the SD, but he will want to emphasize as an additional claim the universality of such non-propositional awareness or perception of God.

## 2.3. Knowledge of the world

Van Til affirmed that what today would be called non-Christians’ ‘cognitive faculties’ have been left largely intact by sin:

In particular sin did not destroy any of the powers that God gave man at the beginning when he endowed him with his image. To be sure, here too there have been weakening results. But man still has eyes with which to observe and logical ability with which to order and arrange the things that he observes. … Why waste words on the idea that non-Christians do not have good powers of perception, good powers of reasoning etc. Non-Christians have all these. (Van Til, quoted in Bahnsen 1998, 419–420)

On this point, he is in complete agreement with Plantinga, who has prominently argued that humans are cognitively endowed with properly functioning, reliably truth-aimed faculties by which they can gain knowledge—even though at least paradigm versions of non-Christianity would preclude that.

Moreover, Van Til and Plantinga agree that sin has impacted human knowledge on a *prima facie* level—that is, the items of human knowledge. Thus Plantinga:

But if we don’t know that there is such a person as God, we don’t know the first thing (the most important thing) about ourselves, each other, and our world. That is because… the most important truths about us and them is that we have been created by the Lord and utterly depend upon him for our continued existence. We don’t know what our happiness consists in, and we don’t know how to achieve it. We don’t know that we have been created in the image of God, and we don’t grasp the significance of such characteristically human phenomena as love, humor, adventure, science, art, music, philosophy, history, and so on. (2000, 217)

So, for Plantinga, the effect of sin in this regard is a partial lack of knowledge: fallen people (absent regeneration) do not know the most important—worldview-level—facts about their life and experience. While Van Til would likely agree (with the qualification that this ignorance is more a case of suppression), he develops his argument in a more fundamental direction.

For Van Til, knowledge inevitably involves *interpretation*—assigning meaning and context to facts of experience. Yet this interpretation does not proceed from shared ‘brute facts,’ as all facts come pre-interpreted by God, who in his providential decree simultaneously gives them their existence and purpose. This is integral to Van Til’s argument for a complete antithesis, which precludes an epistemologically integrated yet common ground of correctly interpreted knowledge between Christians and non-Christians (Van Til, quoted in Bahnsen 1998, 420–424; cf. Shannon 2020, 292–294).[[27]](#footnote-28) “Van Til maintained that every description is an explanation of a fact—the description of a fact is not a neutral category that exists irrespective of God” (Dennison 1993/2015, 46). As Notaro illustrates:

For example, as any scientist knows, apples come from trees and are normally good for eating. But where do apple trees come from? Ultimately the secular scientist will say that trees are a product of evolution, that is, chance. In other words, apple trees are not designed by God. Thus, for the nonbeliever, apples are Creator-denying apples: to really understand apples is to deny the biblical concept of God; apples *prove* that the God of the Scripture does not exist, and each apple is an evidence *against* such a God. Ultimately, the nonexistence of God becomes part of the *definition* of apples. (1980, 38–39; cf. Oliphint 2001, 179: n. 56)

Thus, Van Til concludes that “when two people, the one a Christian and the other not a Christian, *talk things out* with one another, they will appear to differ at every point” (1967a, 288, emphasis original). The cause for the difference is that the concepts involved, when given full explication, are understood antithetically: by way of something like semantic entailment or semantic presupposition, fundamental elements of the Christian worldview are either affirmed or denied. Surely, this aspect of the antithesis is absolute in principle only, yet the Van Tilian expects it to manifest in practice—in some mitigated form like conceptual or semantic inaccuracy.

How this notion of inaccuracy is to be parsed in Plantingian terms is unclear. Oliphint suggests that, the unbeliever being able to produce beliefs which are true only to a superficial level of comprehension,[[28]](#footnote-29) one ought to talk about postlapsarian cognitive faculties as functioning “adequately,” but not “properly” (Oliphint 2007, 217). Granting his insight in general, his terminological suggestion—expressing the idea of moderate cognitive malfunction—needs further parsing. One possibility is to maintain the non-Christian’s beliefs will often be only *approximately* true—perhaps with a measure of inaccuracy proportional to the realization of the antithesis in the given case, and with proportionally decreased warrant, which is nevertheless often sufficient for knowledge.[[29]](#footnote-30)

## 2.4. Use of evidence in apologetics

Though acknowledging the worth of historical apologetics, Van Til added that he “would not talk endlessly about facts and more facts without ever challenging the non-believer’s philosophy of fact” (1967a, 199). While reformed epistemology supports an epistemological transcendental argument fairly directly, I shall argue that it also helps to interpret Van Til’s moderate endorsement of Christian evidences.

Since non-Christians may have—inconsistently with their professed presuppositions—warranted (approximately) true belief in facts, methods, and principles which furnish both *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments for various aspects of Christianity, this knowledge could allow for a distinctively Van Tilian use of evidence. Just as Bahnsen, Van Til’s premier disciple, urged the use of the transcendental argument to “push the antithesis” (cf. Bahnsen & DeMar 2007), to force the unbeliever to reckon with the epistemological consequences of his presuppositions, the same may be achieved with some more traditional evidential arguments. If the non-Christian recognizes that some items of his knowledge lend inferential support to Christianity, he is motivated (due to total depravity) to abandon them, moving in a more consistently autonomous, and thereby skeptical, position—which is an important goal of apologetics as conceived by Van Til.[[30]](#footnote-31)

The Van Tilian might object that unbelievers will not recognize any data as supportive of Christianity, but rather misinterpret them: “Granted he allows that Christ actually arose from the grave, he [the pragmatist philosopher] will say that this proves nothing more than that something very unusual took place in the case of that man Jesus” (Van Til 1967a, 8). However, even such a wrong interpretation is a concession for an unbeliever seeking to maintain a rational naturalistic view of the world. More broadly, some facts evidence the Christian God so clearly that misinterpreting them requires concession to absurdity, thereby precluding less absurd, less consistent forms of autonomy. Thus, these are a suitable means of “pushing the antithesis.” Ultimately, however, consistently rational discovery and assessment of these evidences is dependent on a worldview which offers, not undermines, a reliable “philosophy of fact.” Thus, whenever the unbeliever mistreats the evidence to avoid its Christian-theistic implications, the move from evidences to presuppositions is natural and apologetically useful (cf. Bahnsen 1998, 644–645).

An objection against further uses of evidence is that “Van Til always thought that the unbeliever’s response was in general predictable. He insisted, for example, that the unbeliever will necessarily reject the evidences for the Resurrection” (Frame 1995, 92). However, in his analysis of the “modest unreliability thesis,”[[31]](#footnote-32) Michael Sudduth argues for apologetic uses of arguments consistent with denying unregenerate inferential knowledge of Christianity, some of which seem consistent with Van Til.[[32]](#footnote-33) (Indeed, to reject all such suggestions is to reject the usefulness not just of evidential arguments, but of the transcendental argument also.) One is “to reduce the warrant of certain objections against theism,” (Sudduth 2009, 141) an application of natural revelation to unbelievers “to render them without excuse” (Van Til 1967b, 6), while another is to

view theistic arguments, not as the source of inferential knowledge of God, but as part of the circumstances involved in the spontaneous recognition of God, as a way of triggering or revivifying the intuitive, natural knowledge of God. (Sudduth 2009, 142)

Is this positive use of arguments and evidences consonant with Van Tilian principles in any more than an occasionalistic sense? Bahnsen pointed out that “Van Til never actually said that we can always predict the unbeliever’s response,” but rather thought that “the unbeliever always has every right to turn our presuppositions against our arguments, if he chose to do so” (1998, 547: n. 57, emphasis removed). To the suggestion that this left some room for the use traditional arguments, Bahnsen replied that “[a]pologetics cannot be satisfied with taking advantage of an unbeliever’s philosophical naivete or personal inconsistencies… in reasoning and debate” (1998, 547: n. 57). However, the Christian need not grant the unbeliever’s presuppositions when presenting his evidences. Though a consistent unbeliever would then reject these evidences based on the presuppositional conflict, sometimes his “philosophical naivete” and “personal inconsistencies” wrought by God’s common grace can manifest in warranted assent to the premises of the apologist’s sound evidential arguments. Retaining Christian presuppositions and recognizing the providential nature of the unbeliever’s inconsistency may salvage the deployment of these arguments from Bahnsen’s condemnation. Ultimately then, there might be a use for Christian evidences consistent with Van Til and Plantinga that is theologically warranted, not directly transcendental, apologetically positive, and epistemologically circular in an unobjectionable way (cf. Alston 1986, 10–19; Bergmann 2004; Frame 2015, 10–15).[[33]](#footnote-34)

# 3. Conclusion

The burden of this paper has been to outline a synthesis of Cornelius Van Til’s thought on the antithesis between the Christian worldview and its denial on the one hand, and Alvin Plantinga’s reformed epistemology on the other. The synthesis may be summarized in the following points:

*1. No non-Christian knowledge in principle*. The non-Christian’s metaphysical commitments, when queried consistently for their epistemological implications, render knowledge impossible. The non-Christian has no reason to trust that his cognitive faculties are reliably aimed at producing true beliefs. This is not recognized automatically—but when it is, it raises an undercutting defeater for all of the non-Christian’s beliefs, thereby driving him into skepticism. *Contra* Plantinga, the Van Tilian will want to argue this consequence not just on naturalism, but on all non-Christian worldviews.

*2. Universal knowledge of God*. The *sensus divinitatis*, whether referring to the knowledge of God or the cognitive faculty responsible for producing it, secures clear and ubiquitous knowledge in every human being. This knowledge is conveyed through natural revelation and apprehended by man. While acknowledgingPlantinga’s claim that the unbeliever’s theistic belief-producing faculty malfunctions, the Van Tilian will want to maintain that the *sensus divinitatis* understood as non-propositional awareness of God is unaffected by the Fall, being solely a function of divine revelation and human constitution.

*3. Knowledge of the world*. Created by God and active in God’s world, human cognitive faculties are designed to function reliably to produce true beliefs. This results in knowledge of the world that is *prima facie* warranted, though ultimately defeated for the epistemologically reflective non-Christian. Sin has introduced cognitive malfunction such that absent regeneration, people fail to acknowledge important theological facts about the world. *Contra* Plantinga, the Van Tilian will want to maintain that the effects of sin are more pervasive, such that non-Christians’ beliefs are often only approximately true.

*4. Use of evidence in apologetics*. The non-Christian’s *prima facie* warranted approximate knowledge (about the cosmos, history, etc.) may be such that it implies truths inconsistent with his worldview. The Christian apologist can point out these connections such that the non-Christian will either react with a more consistent and therefore skeptical rejection of Christianity, or—by divine cooperation—with an admission of Christian truth. Both outcomes are consistent with Van Tilian principles.

One last question remains to be addressed. Is adopting the present synthesis, or something like it, desirable for Van Tilians? In response, recall that Cornelius Van Til tended to employ the terms of early 20th century British absolute idealism to formulate his apologetic. When challenged on this strategy, he gave the following justification:

After we answer, in preliminary fashion, the question as to *what* we believe as Reformed Christians, we face the problem how to get people interested in our faith. Men in general do not use or even know our theological terms. But, to the extent that they are educated, they have had some training in secular philosophy. They have a non-Christian familiarity with the categories of God, man and the universe. If we are to speak to them and win them, it is necessary to learn their language. There is no possibility of avoiding this. We can make no contact with men unless we speak to them in their language. (Van Til 1967a, 23)

I submit that Van Til’s philosophical language is unfamiliar to many today, including most analytic philosophers. My contention has been that many of his insights can be expressed in the categories of contemporary analytic epistemology, specifically those of Alvin Plantinga’s reformed epistemology. If this compatibility can be established, then advocates of Van Til’s thought ought to pursue this avenue of reformulation in order to remedy the inaccessibility of their teacher. On the other hand, those sympathetic to the work of Alvin Plantinga might want to consider with greater openness Van Til’s theological arguments for making claims that are more ambitious than, though largely compatible with, Plantinga’s.

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1. In fact, Van Til advocated for a more thoroughgoing understanding of the antithesis than Kuyper (Bahnsen 1998, 599). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. According to Van Til, the fundamental reason why the autonomous worldview undermines rationality and knowledge is that it lacks a sound account of the interrelation between “unity” and “diversity” (universals and particulars), which only the doctrines of the Trinity and creation can provide (Anderson 2005, 61–64; Bosserman 2014, chapter 4; cf. Tipton 2004, chapter 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Frame argues that Van Til was ultimately inconsistent in affirming both “extreme antithetical” and more nuanced characterizations of the antithesis (1995). Bahnsen defends Van Til against Frame (1998, 412–414: n. 13–14). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Other similar distinctions include “in principle” and “in practice”; “relative” and “absolute” or “ultimate” points of view; and qualifications such as “insofar as” and “to the extent that” (Bahnsen 1998, 413–415). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. It should be noted that Van Til admitted to the difficulty of articulating this inconsistency in a theologically and empirically coherent fashion (1974, 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For a detailed study of Van Til’s theology of common grace in relation to biblical theology and compared to other Neo-Calvinists, see Dennison 1993/2015. While Van Til held the “ethical” and “epistemological” antithesis to be total, those pertain to principles; the doctrines mentioned above mitigate the practical, “psychological” effects of the Fall, which do have ramifications for knowledge (Bahnsen 1998, 405–410, 442; Dennison 1993/2015, 51–54), and thus can be said to have *epistemological* relevance in the contemporary analytic sense of the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. While it is not directly related to subsequent discussions, it should be mentioned that for Van Til, there is a redemptive-historical and eschatological aspect to the manifestation of the antithesis, such that it becomes clearer and more consistent in both believers and unbelievers with the progression of history (Dennison 1993/2015, 47–52). “Neither the “absolutely evil” nor the “absolutely good” are epistemologically as self-conscious as they will be in the future” (Van Til 1972/2015, 109). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Note that Plantinga explicitly endorses the notion of antithesis as developed by Augustine and Kuyper (1992, 295). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. The following summary is based on Plantinga (2000, 153–156). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Note that despite using teleological concepts and the term ‘design,’ Plantinga does not intend to commit himself to a conscious designer at the outset (2000, 154). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. For discussion of maxi- and minienvironments see Plantinga (2000, 156–161). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. To paint a complete picture of Plantinga’s theory of defeaters, it would be necessary to discuss defeater-defeaters (cf. Sudduth 1999, 172–175) and defeater-deflectors (Plantinga & Tooley 2009, 46–47). However, recognizing the no-defeater condition is sufficient for the present purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. In much recent discussion it is this proposition in isolation (that belief in God can be properly basic, or warranted without argument), that is referred to as “reformed epistemology” (Moon 2016, 879). As Moon has argued, this thesis is consistent with several epistemological theories (2016, 885–886). However, the present paper focuses on Plantinga’s epistemology as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. For the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters see Plantinga (2000, 359). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Bahnsen lists “predication, reason, explanation, interpretation, learning, certainty, universals, possibility, cause, substance, being, and purpose, unity, and system in experience or in a conception of a universe, logic, individuating of facts, unchanging natures or laws in a chance universe, uniformity, science, connecting logic and facts or predication to reality, avoiding contradictions, avoiding the irrationalism or skepticism that arises from the tension between knowing discursively and knowing systematically, etc.” (1998, 513–514) The most prominent among these is predication (cf. Collett 2009; Bosserman 2014, 90–97). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. An approximate description of this—call it *externalist epistemic*—notion of presupposition is as follows: *p* presupposesee *q* *iff* belief that *p* could not be warranted if *q* were false. Cling calls a very similar sense of presupposition “justificatory” (1989, 58–60). Note that an instance-relative definition could also be formulated for individual acts of believing, accommodating the idea that additional conditions must be presupposed given various circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. This point should insulate Plantinga’s reformed epistemology from the Van Tilian and Kuyperian worry concerning various sorts of epistemological realism (arguably exhibited by Warfield, Bavinck, Plantinga, and, archetypally, Thomas Reid) that they illegitimately endorse the neutrality and autonomy of human reason (cf. Oliphint 2007, 213–214; 2010; 2015; Sutanto 2014; Riddlebarger 2015, chapter 7; Bartholomew 2017, 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. The congruity between Plantinga’s argument and Van Til’s transcendental critique has been pointed out by students of both (Craig 2000, 234–235; Oliphint 2001, 157: n. 8, cf. 180–182; Anderson 2005, 68–70). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Transcendental arguments are often categorized as *ambitious* or *modest*. An ambitious transcendental argument seeks to establish that some necessary precondition is *true*, while a modest version merely insists that one *must accept* that precondition on the pain of unintelligibility or skepticism (Brueckner 1996). It is hard to see how an *epistemological* transcendental argument could show more than that something is needed for knowledge to be possible, thereby falling into the “modest” category. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Cf. Anderson’s argument for an omniscient designer and for a cognitive environment where special revelation is available (2005, 64–65, 74–75). Cf. also Bosserman’s ‘vindication’ of various Christian doctrines in the spirit of Van Til (2014, part IV). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Whether Plantinga’s interpretation of Calvin is correct and true to the Reformed tradition has been disputed. For a critique, see Sudduth (2002); for Plantinga’s reply, see (2002, 132–135). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. An anonymous reviewer pointed out a further arguable distinctive of Van Til’s view: that the SD plays a unique role in the justification and/or production of *all* (other) *beliefs*: “For man self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness” (Van Til 1967a, 107); “The [theistic position] cannot think of the human mind as functional at all except when in contact with God” (Van Til 1969, viii; cf. Bahnsen 1998, 181; Bosserman 2014, 216; Baird 2015, 87). To the extent that this notion is *not* captured by the contention that non-Christian knowledge is impossible in principle and often inaccurate in practice (Section 2.1), it seems to make a *metaphysical* claim about the preconditions of human consciousness or cognition function. Such metaphysical questions are, however, beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Oliphint adds that this knowledge is *implanted* by God in some direct sense, thereby rendering the SD closer to Plantinga’s model of specifically Christian belief, which includes the necessity of the Holy Spirit’s instigation (2001, 165–166). On the other hand, Bahnsen writes that “Van Til maintained… that all men have a knowledge of God that is justified by direct apprehension of His handiwork in the world and within themselves” (1998, 184). Van Til himself maintained that innate knowledge of God “is correlative to” revelation in nature (quoted in Bahnsen 1998, 190–191)—however, this phrase may not be sufficiently clear to settle the dispute. Terminologically, ‘apprehend’ is compatible with either interpretation. An anonymous reviewer suggested that Oliphint’s and Bahnsen’s statements may be compatible since (i) common grace is required for unbelievers to apprehend general revelation, and (ii) common grace is a work of the Spirit. However, Van Til denies (i): “I do deny that this natural knowledge of God and of morality is the result of common grace” (1972/2015, 182). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Thanks to [name redacted for anonymous review] and two anonymous reviewers for pointing me in this direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. This probably explains the disagreement in the secondary literature with Bahnsen claiming the SD to be propositional (1998, 179–182), while Sutanto (2017, 223–224: n. 60) and perhaps Shannon (2020, 294–295) claim the opposite. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. For presuppositionalist epistemological models of the closely related notion of self-deception see Bahnsen (1995, 12–32) and Oliphint’s appropriation of Audi and McLaughin (Oliphint 2001, 177–178). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. It is in this sense that Van Til likens the unbeliever’s cognitive equipment to a maladjusted buzz-saw that is “sharp and shining” but cuts wrongly due to its improper setting (1967a, 74). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. “The belief, we could say, has a rational aspect to it since it does, in fact, correspond to something in creation. But that rational aspect is swallowed up in irrationality since the belief excludes the most essential component of the fact believed, i.e., that it is created and sustained by the Triune God” (Oliphint 2007, 216). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. The possibility and conditions of knowing approximately true propositions beckons a full epistemological treatment; surprisingly, it has been discussed only sporadically in the literature (e.g. Decock et al. 2014; Cevolani & Schurz 2017; Schoenfield 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. One recent example is the defense of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (required by some versions of the cosmological argument) by Koons and Pruss (2021) based on the skeptical ramifications of rejecting the principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. The modest unreliability thesis, in contrast to the strong unreliability thesis, leaves open the possibility of some natural cognitive process reliably producing true theistic beliefs in unbelievers, but rules out any such beliefs produced *inferentially* (Sudduth 2009, 128–139). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. The following is a summary of Sudduth’s first and third uses. The second concerns “theistic arguments being epistemologically efficacious for the unregenerate, just not strongly so” (2009, 141). However, Van Til’s understanding of the noetic effects of sin might be too strong to allow for this. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. One might argue that this use of evidences is objectionably probabilistic and thus incompatible with Van Til’s insistence on the certainty of the Christian argument (cf. Van Til 1972/2015, 77–79). In response, it should be noted that the empirical and rational notions employed by the suggested arguments—on a Van Tilian view, given their non-neutrality—presuppose Christian theism in both a justificatory and a semantic sense. Affirming them, therefore, entails (implicitly) affirming Christian theism, the rejection of which leads the objector into the transcendental dialectic where Van Til saw Christianity as triumphing with certainty. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)