

Biblical Personalism: Further Thoughts on Scholasticism and Scripture

By [John Frame](#)

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I am in the midst of some discussions about the role of Scholastic methods in Reformed theology, centered around James Dolezal's *All That Is In God*. My first response to Dolezal is available here. I continue to stand by my argument of that article.¹ But the ensuing discussion has suggested to me that the discussion needs to go deeper. There are facts about Greek philosophy and its relation to theology that I have taken for granted for many years, of which many younger theologians seem unaware. Some, therefore, will find the present article to be superfluous, but others may find it to be informative.

Mostly it is a condensation of arguments in my *History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, and, behind that, the work of Cornelius Van Til. In the recent discussion, one Facebook antagonist chided me for my lack of historical knowledge. HWPT is 867 pages. I hope the Facebook writer didn't bet any money on that proposition. But of course the issue before us is not *quantity* of historical knowledge, but the *use* of historical knowledge in resolving theological issues. I will maintain again that in Reformed theology our rule is *sola Scriptura*. That is to say, although historical theology may bring vital information to us, all the views of human theologians and philosophers must be tested by the word of God.

Scripture tells us quite a bit about how we should make use of unbelieving thought. Rom. 1:18-32 is a key text. In that passage, Paul tells us that God's nature and attributes have been "clearly seen" (verse 20) by all human beings, including the pagans whom he discusses later in the chapter. So we can expect that non-Christian thinkers have gained some true insights from their exposure to God's revelation in creation. But Paul also says that these pagans "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (verse 18). So when we study pagan philosophy we encounter a paradoxical mixture of truth and falsity: truth from divine revelation, falsity from sinful suppression. We must be aware of both elements of pagan thought, and of their interactions.

¹ With the exception of my comment about Ryan Lister. I said that Ryan was one of Dolezal's targets. My mistake. The writer Dolezal singled out was Ryan's brother Rob. I apologize for my error. It has been corrected in the published version of the article.

Parmenides

Western philosophy is generally thought to have begun with the Greeks around 600 BC. The earliest Greek philosophers sought to understand the world in general. But to do that, they put aside their traditional religions and myths and sought to understand the world by reason alone, that is, as Van Til put it, “autonomously.” Parmenides believed that our normal ways of understanding the world were deeply flawed, because they were not sufficiently rational. To most of us it appears that the world is changing. But, Parmenides said, change is rationally impossible. If the world is changing, then things become what they are not. But “nonbeing,” he thought, was not a rationally coherent concept. When we try to define nonbeing, the definition turns it into a form of being. So nonbeing is rationally meaningless, and so change is rationally meaningless. Similarly, Parmenides said, plurality is an irrational notion; for a plurality appears to be a collection of at least two objects, one of which is *not* the other. But Parmenides has shown, he thinks, that plurality is impossible. So Parmenides believes that despite appearances, the world is really changeless, without any pluralities, without generation, without destruction. He understood, I think, that we could not really live in the world while conceiving of it in this way. But he stuck by the authority of his own reason.

Parmenides does not argue that simplicity and changelessness are attributes of God, as scholastic theologians later argued. Rather, he believes that simplicity and changelessness characterize *all* reality, and we would know that, if we were willing to use our autonomous reason as consistently as Parmenides did. To Parmenides there is no creator/creature distinction. If there is God, then we are all God.

And if there is a God, that God is an impersonal Being. It is an “it,” not a “he.” Indeed, since we all are divine, we are all impersonal, and we can know that by the consistent use of our autonomous reason.

The Sophists

But not all the Greeks were willing to follow Parmenides. In fact, some Greeks gave up on reason entirely. If Parmenides was a textbook rationalist, the Sophists, such as Protagoras, were textbook irrationalists. They did not call themselves that. They thought they were, like all Greek thinkers, living according to reason. But what shall we make of their assertion that there is no such thing as universal truth? The Sophists said, very much like recent postmodernists, that what is true for you may be false for me and vice versa. How do you reason with somebody like that? But they claimed to be following their autonomous reason just as surely as Parmenides did.

Plato

Plato, one of the greatest of the Greek thinkers, tried to bring together the two extremes. In his view, Parmenides was right about one aspect of the world, the Sophists right about another. Plato divided the world into form and matter. Matter is the stuff of which our experienced world is made. Form is that rational structure that determines what things are. But these two factors constitute different worlds. The world of matter, or ordinary experience, is a world of confusion, error, ignorance. In this world there is constant change; nothing can be understood or defined. To live in this world is like living in a cave, when one views objects in very dim light or in no light at all. This dark world is irrational, unknowable.

But the world of form is entirely opposite. The forms are changeless and totally knowable, like Parmenides' Being. They serve as criteria for the realities in the darker world. The perfect triangle in the world of forms serves as the criterion by which we should assess the imperfect triangles of the darker world. Same for perfect manhood, perfect virtue, perfect wisdom, and, the highest of all, perfect Goodness.

Later philosophers, however, thought that Plato needed some way of connecting the two realms to one another. How did the realm of forms produce the realm of matter? (Plato treated that question, but answered in by a rare lapse into mythology.) How can the forms govern change, themselves being changeless? How can the forms account for evil, when they themselves are nothing but good?

The later Platonist Plotinus thought these issues can be dealt with by means of a continuum. The highest point of the continuum (like Plato's Good) was Plotinus's One. But unlike Plato's Good, the One is ineffable. It cannot be described, or even intelligibly spoken of. So the questions addressed to Plato are resolved in mystery. And the continuum, like Parmenides' Being, erases all distinction between creator and creature, so that we all participate equally in the ineffable mystery.

Aristotle

Plato's pupil Aristotle also distinguished form and matter, but he denied that the two realities occupy separate worlds. Rather, to him, form and matter are aspects of everything we experience in this world. Everything has matter, the stuff of which it is made, and everything has form, the qualities that make it what it is. But Aristotle did not entirely neglect the transcendent. His investigation of causality led him to a First Cause, a cause behind other causes, which he called the Prime Mover. Like Parmenides' Being, Aristotle's Prime Mover later had a large influence on Christian theology. But the Prime Mover was very different from the God of the Bible. Since it was First Cause, it could not be influenced by anything outside itself. In Aristotle's view, this implied that the Mover could not know the world, or love the world. He could know and love only himself (actually, he could

know only his own thoughts—“thought thinking thought”—which reduces his thinking to tautology). This being, of course, is certainly one that we must call “impersonal,” an “it” rather than a “he,” although Aristotle did for some reason attach religious predicates to this being. And that being could have no personal relationships with human beings.

Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas was a great Christian thinker, perhaps the greatest in terms of his sheer intellectual depth and accomplishment. But he set himself the task of combining his biblical faith with the chief philosophical movements of his past: Platonism and Neoplatonism (Plotinus) and Aristotle. In addressing the relationship between “sacred doctrine” and philosophy, he said that both of these were legitimate means of knowing, even of knowing God, but that in philosophy reason plays a leading role, and in sacred doctrine faith and revelation. He did qualify this distinction by saying that if a conclusion of reason contradicted a truth of faith, the truth of faith would have to prevail. For example, Aristotle believed that the world existed eternally, but Aquinas could not accept that view given Gen. 1:1 and other passages on the doctrine of creation. But I know of no place in Aquinas’s massive literary output in which he grants the truth of Rom. 1:18 that nonbelievers “suppress” the truth.

These distinctions gave Aquinas a rationale for bringing a great deal of Greek philosophy into his Christian system, even into his theology. He made considerable use of Aristotle’s first-cause argument for the existence of God. Once he had proved the existence of God, he proceeded to discourse on the simplicity of God. Since God is the first cause, he cannot be made of parts, since then he would be influenced (“caused”) by something, namely the parts. So God is identical with his attributes, and they are identical with each other. His *esse* (“that he is”) is identical to his existence (“what he is”). And so on. The notion of God that emerges is similar to that of Aristotle, who also emphasized that God could not be influenced by anything within or outside himself. And it is like Parmenides, for whom any change or complexity is irrational.

Biblical Personalism

Aquinas defined what we call the “scholastic” tradition in Christian theology. Although Protestants often criticized Aquinas and other scholastics in detail, they were often under the influence of this tradition. Post-reformation Protestant theology is often described as a variety of scholasticism. It should also be admitted that the Protestant confessions generally affirm God’s simplicity and unchangeability, but without the philosophical explanations, arguments, and elaborations noted above.

It is plain to me, however, that Protestant theology on the whole operates according to a principle very different from the rational autonomy of the Greeks and the two-disciplines view of Aquinas. That principle is *sola Scriptura*, the principle that only Scripture has ultimate authority. That doesn't mean that there is no truth in pagan philosophy. It means only that such truth claims must be tested by the higher authority of God's word. This authority binds all spheres of life, philosophical, theological, scientific, psychological, economic, and whatever other spheres there be.

When we ask about the world view, the metaphysics, of Scripture itself, a picture emerges that is very different from that of the Greek philosophers, though similar in some details. Certainly God is the first cause; the Bible's affirmation of creation establishes that. But he is cause of all, not as an impersonal principle, but as a personal (actually tri-personal) being who utters commands to things and persons and they obey. I believe too that God is simple. But that is not because plurality is an irrational notion as Parmenides thought. It is because God is a personal being who is Lord of himself and of everything he makes; and whatever he does, he does as a whole, with no inner conflict.

The most prevalent biblical description of God in the Bible is *LORD*. Hebrew and Greek words designating his lordship are found over 7000 times in the Scriptures. Lord is a *personal* name. God's relations to the world and to himself are the sorts of relations persons have. He is not an impersonal object. In biblical metaphysics, the personal is prior to the impersonal. That is true also of human knowledge. God's word governs all our thought and behavior. There is no place for autonomous reasoning.

So the main content of Scripture is not that God is simple or changeless (though I think these concepts can be derived from Scripture), but that God has dealt with his creation through history, particularly with human beings, in a thrilling historical drama. His relations with us are not merely causal, but are relations of knowledge, wrath, and mercy. The central message of Scripture is that God came to earth to live among us as a man and to die the death we deserved. As a philosopher, I can argue that this narrative presupposes that God is above time, simple, eternal and unchangeable. But the main biblical narrative is one of divine-human personal interaction.

If someone says that this interaction implies that God is changeable, so we must regard the narrative as figurative or anthropomorphic, I cry foul. The narrative is true, indeed the highest truth, the truth by which all other truth should be measured. Paul said,

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Tim. 1:15)

Doubtless there are parts of the biblical narrative that are figurative rather than literal, as when John says that Jesus is the lamb of God. But to claim that the whole narrative is figurative, in contrast to philosophical propositions about changelessness and simplicity that are literal, seems to me to be entirely wrongheaded. It comes dangerously close to Parmenides, who thought that our whole changing world is an illusion and that the real world is changeless. And of course Parmenides also dismissed any thought of distinction between a personal creator and the world he made. The notion that the changing world is something other than the domain of God assumes a Platonic metaphysic. And when someone says that God cannot “experience” changing reality, that is Aristotle talking, not the Bible.

If someone asks how this lordship narrative can be consistent with divine unchangeability and simplicity, I would direct him to my discussions in *Doctrine of God*. I think these concepts can be shown consistent. But if my arguments are insufficient, the answer is not to deny the lordship narrative or to regard it in toto as a figure. Rather the answer is to take the lordship narrative as our ultimate presupposition and to find an interpretation of unchangeability and simplicity that is consistent with it.

The Bible’s personalistic worldview opens up to us a great and wonderful cosmic drama. God is not impersonal, and his personality is not a concession to our anthropomorphic language. God really is Father, Lord, and Savior. He really speaks to us, authoritatively and personally, in Scripture. The Son of God really was born of a virgin, worked miracles in time and space, died for our sins and rose for our justification.

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