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Epistemological Perspectives and Evangelical Apologetics

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I have sensed that in recent years the debate within evangelicalism over apologetic method has degenerated into a series of partisan shouting-matches. The different parties ("presuppositionalists," "evidentialists," Van Tillians," "Montgomeryites," Gerstnerites," etc.) seem more and more to be talking past one another. In such a situation, there ought to be some value in all of us backing away *a* bit from our particular partisan commitments and in asking why it is that we tend to misunderstand one another in this area. People with a common commitment to the Christ of Scripture ought to be able to achieve greater unity than we have now (and not only in the area of apologetics). The prospect for meta-apologetic discussion, then, should be considered promising. In this paper, I shall seek to make some contribution toward clarifying our differences, first, by viewing them in historical perspective, and, second, by a fresh evaluation of that historical development in the light of Scripture.

I. Historical Roots of the Issue

I would like to distinguish three general types of epistemology appearing through the history of philosophy. It *is* not important to my argument that this enumeration be the best possible classification, or the only possible classification, or an exhaustive classification. It is sufficient for us to recognize that these three tendencies have existed and have exerted influence upon Christian and non-Christian thinking alike. The first tendency is*rationalism* or a_ *priorism,* which I shall define as the view that human knowledge presupposes certain principles known independently of sense-experience, principles by which, indeed, our knowledge of sense-experience is governed. The second tendency is *empiricism,* the view that human knowledge is based upon the data of sense-experience. Thirdly, there is *subjectivism,* the view that there is no "objective" truth, but only truth "for" the knowing subject, verified by criteria internal to the subject.

No philosopher has succeeded in being a consistent rationalist, empiricist or subjectivist. A few, at least, have tried: Parmenides comes close to being a consistent rationalist, John Stuart Mill a consistent empiricist, Protagoras and the other sophists consistent subjectivists. But the failures of such attempts have become well-known in the philosophical literature. The greatest philosophers, like Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and Kant, have not even tried to achieve epistemological

purity in terms of our categories. Rather, they have sought to do justice to divergent epistemological concerns. But that too has proven to be a difficult task. The nature of the difficulty can be summarized with the observation that rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism as defined above are simply inconsistent with one another. They cannot all be affirmed simultaneously.

Still, it is not too surprising that philosophers have tried to combine these inconsistent views. For each seems to arise out of legitimate concerns. The rationalist notes that without criteria of truth and falsity, no conclusions whatever can be drawn from sense-experience or from subjective states. Sense-experience is always problematic: How do I know whether a stick in the water is really bent or whether it only appears that way? The visual image, taken by itself, can be interpreted in either way. All sense-experiences, it would seem, can be interpreted in various ways; and if the criteria for *proper* interpretation are drawn from sense-experience, then they would also be problematic and incapable of yielding a conclusion. Thus, the rationalist argues, the criteria which determine the true interpretation of sense-experience must come from some source other than sense-experience. The rationalist takes a similar view of subjective states. Our feelings, desires, decisions do not in themselves tell us what is true; rather they are, like sense-experience, problematic data which must be interpreted and evaluated by the application of *a priori* criteria. But what if the subjectivist tries to argue that no such objective truth is possible? The rationalist replies that to deny objective truth is inevitably self-defeating. If there is no objective truth, then the subjectivist has no right even to assert the truth of his own subjectivism. And if the subjectivist is willing to give up even that right, then he is simply declining to engage in rational discourse. His is not an epistemology, but an anti-epistemology. Since he has no truth to assert, he has nothing to say to us.

The rationalist recognizes, of course, that appeals *to* sense-experience and to subjective states are often plausible. *I* know that a certain apple will fall to the ground if I drop it. How do I know this? It is plausible to say that I know this on the basis of past experience: other apples have always fallen when dropped. But the rationalist asks: how do I know that the future will resemble the past? Is it because such resemblance has always occurred in the past? But that merely shifts the problem to another level. How do I know that such resemblances between past and future will continue into the future? Clearly I cannot derive such a principle from past or present experience. If it is true, says the rationalist, it must be derived from some source other than sense-experience. Similar arguments can be raised in regard to subjective states. Someone says, e.g., that war is wrong because he subjectively perceives it to be wrong. The rationalist replies that if this judgment is a *rational* judgment it must be based on something more than a mere feeling, since feelings often mislead us.

A strong case, then, can be made for rationalism. But strong cases can also be made for empiricism and subjectivism. The empiricist stresses the need for publicly observable facts as a basis for knowledge. He recognizes that sense-

experience is problematic, but he points out that claims to a priori truth are also problematic. Philosophers have contradicted one another on the question of what can be known *a priori;* Parmenides claimed to know *a_ priori* that all motion was illusory; Plato denied this claim. Descartes claimed an a priori knowledge of his own existence as a thinking substance; Hume deiied that claim. Surely, then, says the empiricist, claims to *a_ priori* knowledge are fallible: some of the historic claims must be wrong. How do we judge the truth of such claims? Certainly, says the empiricist, we cannot simply take someone's word for it. There must be checking procedures available to all, not just to the individual making the claim. To speak of publicly available checking procedures is to speak about sense-experience. But is sense-experience a truly*public* point of reference? Or is it, perhaps, something that varies greatly from person to person, a merely subjective phenomenon? The empiricist response to subjectivism parallels that of rationalism: if sense-experience is not a univerally shared access to reality then there is no such access, and knowledge is impossible. Thus the empiricist argues that sense-experience is the ultimate test of alleged a priori principles and of all subjective convictions. For the consistent empiricist like Mill, such argumentation virtually eliminates *a priori* principles altogether.

The empiricist can also argue against the rationalist that even if one can become assured of an *a_ priori* principle—say, the law of non-contradiction or the existence of the self—such a principle is quite useless without sense experience. Nothing can be deduced from the law of non-contradiction alone. Logic becomes useful only when applied to non-trivial premises of arguments. But no one would argue that all premises of all valid arguments are known *a priori* or are deducible from premises known *a priori.* But if some premises are known *a posteriori,* then it would seem that logic yields truth only in >dependence upon *a_ posteriori*knowledge, most likely sense-experience.

What about subjectivism? Is it possible to make a case for that too, after the apparently devastating attacks on it by the rationalists and empiricists? Certainly. If one accepts the rationalist argument for the fallibility of sense-experience and the empiricist argument for the fallibility of claims to *a_ priori* knowledge, then subjectivism seems unavoidable. Further, do not all claims to *a_ priori* knowledge and empirical fact boil down to subjective judgments? Take the law of non-contradiction, for example. Why should I affirm it? Is it not because I *am personally convinced* of its truth? No, reply the rationalist and the empiricist: whether you are subjectively persuaded is irrelevant; you should not affirm a principle unless it is objectively true. But, the subjectivist replies, I must be *persuaded* of that objective truth. The others insist: You must be persuaded *on principle.* The subjectivist reiterates: Yes, but I must also be *persuaded* that the principle is true. Any principle you propose, I must investigate and evaluate. I accept only those principles which I consider worthy of acceptance. Therefore any appeal to principle would seem to depend on a subjective act by which that principle is adopted. We saw earlier that subjectivism can be made to seem impossible. But it can also be made to seem inescapable.

Now Christian apologetics reflects the epistemological tendencies I have described. Gordon Clark is the clearest example among evangelical apologists of the rationalist tendency, but many have used the traditional rationalist arguments in refutation of scepticism and in defense of the objectivity of truth. Empiricism is evident in the work of John W. Montgomery and others. Subjectivism is relatively absent from evangelical apologetics, because of the evangelical emphasis on the truth/falsehood antithesis. But Edward J. Carnell's book *The Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life* does present what might be calleda Christian subjectivism. In that book, Carnell appeals to feelings and intuitions which he considers universally human, without much (if any) reference to the objective grounding of these feelings or intuitions via *a_priori* principles and/or empirical fact. Such objective grounding is, of course, presented in Carnell's other books, but if one had only this one book, he might be led to think that Carnell was an epistemological subjectivist. And that fact suggests what may be a significant observation: there may be a kind of subjectivism which is *compatible* with other epistemological principles, about which more at a later point.

Other evangelicals also combine motifs from various epistemological options. Norman Geisler preserves in large measure the balance between rationalism and empiricism characteristic of the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition. Cornelius Van Til, in my view, should not be grouped with Gordon Clark as a "presuppositionalist" as is often done. Van Til, rather, presents us with a complex epistemology involving motifs from all three tendencies and more. My own construction, to which we shall next turn, is indebted to Van Til, though I take full responsibility for the formulation.

II. Some Biblical Considerations

It is interesting to note that the three epistemological tendencies discussed above correlate roughly with the three sources of divine revelation affirmed in Scripture and Christian theology: Scripture, nature and human personhood (the image of God). I say the correlation is "rough;" I must add a few refinements. The precise biblical correlate of the "a priori principle" is *divine* law. Just as in secular rationalism the *a_priori* principle supplies the criterion for truth and falsity, thus controlling the interpretation of sense-experience and subjective states, so in Christianity, God's law, (or equivalently, God's word) serves as the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, right and wrong. It is God's word which governs the Christian's interpretation of experience and of himself. Scripture epitomizes God's law-word; it is the covenant constitution of the people of God, the only written human language which is also divine language. But the law of God is also available through other sources. Romans 1:18-32 makes clear that even Gentiles who have no access to the written law nevertheless know what God requires of them and the penalty for disobedience. In Romans 1, the source of this knowledge seems to be the creation in general (verses 18-20); in Romans 2:15

and elsewhere, the source may be human conscience. To my knowledge, Scripture does not trace the mechanism by which this knowledge from nature and the human self reaches us. That mechanism would be of interest for a number of reasons; one is the problem of understanding how the facts of nature could yield moral knowledge contrary to Hume's strictures against deriving "ought" from "is." Whatever the mechanism, however, God gets his message through.

So although only Scripture *is* the law of God written, the law of God can be found everywhere. And equally comprehensive is the second form of revelation—"natural" or "general" revelation, the category which correlates naturally with the philosophical notion of "empirical fact." Nature includes everything in creation. It includes even the Bible as a created book; and it contains us, us human beings in the image of God.

"Nature" and "law," then, are inseparable. The logical distinction between them is that nature is the environment in which we are called to live obediently to the law. The law calls us to replenish and subdue the earth (Genesis l:27ff). The word of God thus governs all of our activity in this world. But what does the word of God require of us concretely? How, specifically, do we go about "subduing" the earth? To find out, we must study not only God's command, but the earth itself as well. The nature of the earth will determine to some extent how it is to be subdued. Subduing a lion is one thing; subduing *a* river quite another. In an odd sense, we must study the world in order properly to exegete God's word. Else we shall not know the *concrete* meaning of the word. And if we don't know its concrete meaning, then we don't know it"*s meaning at all. Thus do general and special revelation work together in the believer's life. The word directs us to the world; and in the world we find more of the meaning of the word.

Then comes the third member of the triad, human nature, which correlates with philosophical "subjectivity." Self-knowledge has always been philosophically difficult. As Hume and Wittgenstein especially have pointed out, the self is not one of the things we see as we look on the world. Yet it is through ourselves that we come to know everything else. All we know, we know through our own senses, reason, feelings, through what we are. And it is thus in knowing other things that we come to know the self. The self seems to be everywhere and nowhere. We know it, but only as we know other things. Hence the strange opening pages of Calvin's *Institutes* where he notes that we know God in knowing ourselves and vice-versa and adds (casting some doubt on the purity of his presuppositionalism) that he does not know which "comes first." From a biblical standpoint, however, this is not so strange after all. Scripture tells us over and over that God-knowledge and self-knowledge are inseparable. What we *are* is "image of God." Knowing ourselves is knowing our resemblance to God, and indeed the defacement of that resemblance. The self is by its very nature a reflection of something else—a reflection of its ultimate environment. On the other hand, knowing God always involves attention to ourselves. "Knowledge of

God" is an ethical concept in Scripture. Knowing God, in the most profound sense, involves obedience. Obedience is the fruit of hte knowledge of God, and it is, also the way to deeper knowledge of him (Romans 12:If, Ephesians 5:8-10, Philippians 1:10, Hebrews 5:11-14).

In Christianity, then, law, object and subject are distinguishable, but not discovered separately. In every act of knowledge, we simultaneously come to know God's law, his world, and ourselves. These are not three separable "parts" of our experience, but three "aspects" of every experience, or (perhaps better) three "perspectives" on experience. Thus I speak of "normative," "situational" and "existential" perspectives on experience. The normative perspective views our experience as *a* means of determining what God_requires of us. It focusses especially on Scripture as the one written word of God, but also on creation and the self as means of understanding and applying the norms of Scripture. The situational perspective views our experience as an organic collection of facts to be known and understood. The existential perspective views our experience as a means to self-knowledge and personal growth.

The resulting epistemology is complex, but illuminating. It is neither rationalist, empiricist, nor subjectivist in the senses defined earlier, but it appreciates the concerns which have generated these three positions. It recognizes, with the rationalist, that sense experience and subjective impressions are fallible; but it also agrees with the empiricist and the subjectivist that the same fallibility attaches to the reasoning process and to all claims of *a_ priori* truth. Scripture alone is infallible. The search for some infallible element in human thinking as such is idolatrous. Similarly idolatrous, in my view, is the attempt to give any one perspective a "priority" over the others, i.e. to claim that one perspective rather than the others furnishes the "ultimate" ground for belief in something. Only God's word furnishes such an ultimate ground, and God's word is available to us in all three perspectives. Why, for instance, do we believe that 2+2=4? Is it because mathematical relations of this sort are presupposed by the very nature of thought itself (rationalism)? Is it because past experience has gotten me into the habit of expecting 2+2 to result in 4 (empiricism)? Or is it because that sum seems psychologically inescapable (subjectivism)? I find all three explanations persuasive, and I see no particular need to choose between them. I think I recognize all three sorts of mental processes taking place. But which is ultimate? On which of them do the others depend? Are my views about "the nature of thought itself" dictated by habits of mind developed through experience, or do those views dictate what my mental habits ought to be? (The same sort of question can be asked about any two of the three perspectives.) The answer is again that I see no need to choose. I see no reason to assume that any of the three perspectives is "prior" to the others; there is dependence, but mutual dependence. It is a system of "checks and balances."

Such checks and balances tend to be lacking in non-Christian thought. Without the Christian God to coordinate the law, the world and the self,, there is little

reason to suppose that the three will cohere. Thus, one must simply choose the one he considers most trustworthy and give it “primacy” over the others.

Now the difficulties traditionally noted in rationalism, empiricism and subjectivism result, *I* would say, precisely from the attempts made in these epistemologies to absolutize one perspective over against the others. The rationalist errs precisely in his claim to an infallible knowledge of *a_priori* truths, not subject to any empirical or subjective tests. His method fails to yield such infallible knowledge, and the truths for which it claims infallibility are too few to establish a comprehensive framework for human knowledge. The empiricist and the subjectivist, on the contrary, fail to see the need of law, the need of principles by which to sort out and evaluate empirical and subjective data.

To say as I have that none of the perspectives is infallible and that none is ultimate has relativistic overtones. Indeed, my position would be relativistic if it were not for my presupposition, derived from Scripture, that each perspective brings us into contact with God’s truth. And that truth *is* infallible, absolute and ultimate. Therefore, though our thinking is fallible at every point, it is not *so* fallible that any of us has an excuse for failing to know God (Romans 1:20) or for failing to live obediently before him.

III. Some Apologetic Implications

Earlier I distinguished three types of evangelical apologetics influenced by rationalistic, empiricist and subjectivist epistemological tendencies respectively. We may now describe these as normative, situational and existential types of apologetics. Our earlier discussion would lead us to believe that all three types have biblical warrant if they are qualified in the ways demanded by a biblical epistemology. And so they do. All three general types of apologetic are not only warranted in Scripture by inference from a biblical epistemology; they are each found in Scripture explicitly.

Normative apologetics is found in the explicit appeals by the prophets, Jesus and the apostles to the law of God in Scripture, but not only there. It is implicit in the way Scripture responds to doubting questions with rebuke (Job 38-42, Ezekiel 18:25, Matthew 20:1-15, Romans 3:3ff, 6:lf, 6:15, 7:7, etc). The force of such passages is that *we have no right* to doubt God’s truth, love, faithfulness; that such doubt is simply contrary to his law, a law of which we may not claim ignorance. Even those ignorant of Scripture are aware of that law (Romans 1). One might even say that all biblical apologetics is normative;for even when the immediate appeal is not to law but to empirical fact or subjective awareness, the law is never absent. Scripture never leaves it an open question as to how the empirical or subjective data are to be interpreted and responded to. Such data do not lead merely to probable or optional conclusions; they lead to certainty, because indeed they are law-laden. Thus Paul in Acts 17, 12 though speaking to

people without knowledge of Scripture, and though basing his apologetic on the facts of nature and history, puts his conclusion in the form of a *demand* for repentence (verse 30).

Just as certainly, Scripture contains situational apologetics. That should be the most obvious of the three. Continually Scripture refers to the mighty acts of God in nature and redemptive history, pre-eminently the resurrection of Christ, to validate the truth of the proclamation. Since the gospel itself is a proclamation of historical fact, one might say that all biblical apologetics is situational (not forgetting what we also said earlier, that all biblical apologetics is normative). The two do not exclude one another; they are "perspectives" on one another.

And there is biblical precedent for existential apologetics. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were surely impressed by the force of divine law as Jesus expounded the Scriptures to them, and by the correlation of this law with the events of Jesus' life (here we find both "normative" and "situational" perspectives); but it was also significant, and epistemologically significant, that when Jesus taught, their hearts burned within them (Luke 24:32). The point of an apologetic is never merely to convince the mind, but to influence the unbeliever's whole outlook, so that he not only accepts the truth, but loves it, treasures it, seeks earnestly to act upon it. Only then can we say that people are truly "persuaded," truly converted. Thus the Psalms, the sermons of Jesus, the letters of Paul are not academic treatises, not collections of definitions and syllogisms, but appeals to the "whole person," filled with poetry, figures of speech, expression of emotions, pleadings, weepings. The gospel is law, it is historical fact, but it is also something that people can live with, joyfully. The gospel speaks to our anxieties, our fears, our sorrows, our lusts, to the whole range of human subjectivity. Can we say that all biblical apologetics is existential, as we said earlier that it was all normative and all situational? Yes. For Scripture *always* addresses the full range of human subjectivity; it *always* seeks comprehensive inner change, "heart-change". Thus, although the existential approach is sometimes more, sometimes less prominent in biblical apologetics, it is a "perspective" on all biblical apologetics.

Thus, all three methods are biblically legitimate, as long as neither seeks to claim ultimate priority or to exclude another as a complementary "perspective." In the current debate over apologetics, we must recognize the claim *of* the presuppositionalists that knowledge is impossible without law and that the ultimate law is the Scripture. We must also grant the claim of the evidentialists that the truth is found through the publicly observable events of nature and history. And we must grant the point made by many that no one will think rightly unless he is psychologically qualified to do so (there is much to be said here about the noetic effects of sin and the illumination of the Holy Spirit). Any of these approaches may be prominent in any particular apologetic encounter; but none will be successful unless the other approaches are also present implicitly. If we seek, to present God's requirements without relating them in any way to the

individual's experience and consciousness, our apologetic is unintelligible. If we seek to examine the events of nature and history without organizing and interpreting these facts in a divinely acceptable way, and without addressing the unbeliever's capacity for doing such, we achieve nothing. And if we seek to address an individual's subjectivity without giving him a legal and historical basis for inner change, then we are being manipulative and are not presenting the gospel at all.

Yet these strictures leave a wide scope for creativity, for using different methods, different starting points, depending on the area to be discussed, *the* gifts of the apologist and the felt needs of the non-Christian.Scripture itself is wonderfully rich in the methods it uses to lead us to repentance and faith. It is a shame, indeed, that modern apologetics has fallen so largely into stereotyped patterns. I am hoping that the multi-perspectival approach suggested in this paper may unleash our creative energies to show the world that indeed every fact of experience, every valid principle of reason, every burden of the human heart, has God's name upon it.