



The Bavinck Review

Volume 6 ✠ 2015

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The Bavinck Review

Volume 6



2015

The Bavinck Institute
Calvin Theological Seminary
3233 Burton St. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4387

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ISSN 2154-6320

The Bavinck Review

The Bavinck Review is a peer-reviewed electronic journal published annually in the spring by The Bavinck Institute at Calvin Theological Seminary.

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Members of the Bavinck Society receive a complimentary subscription to the *Review*. Back issues are made freely available on the Bavinck Institute website six months after publication.

The views expressed in *TBR* are the personal views of the respective authors. These views do not necessarily represent the position of the editorial committee, The Bavinck Institute, or the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary.

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TBR has applied for indexing in the ATLA Religion Database, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr., Chicago, IL 60606; E-mail: atla@atla.com; WWW: <http://www.atla.com>.

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Editorial

This issue of *The Bavinck Review* is being sent to your electronic mailboxes more than just a few months behind schedule for which we apologize. Things have been busy in the “offices” of the Bavinck Institute this year, and getting our journal out on time was a bigger challenge than we expected. More about our busyness later; first a few words about the content of this issue.

Bavinck was above all a first-rate dogmatician. The four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* remains his major accomplishment and contribution to the world-wide church. Nonetheless, once the second edition of the *Dogmatics* was in print, he turned his attention more and more to philosophy, psychology, pedagogy and education, and even to politics, serving as a Senator in the First Chamber of the Dutch Parliament from 1911 until his death in 1921. Our lead article, which is the first installment of a two-part examination of Bavinck’s epistemology, including the topics of sensation, perception, judgment, and mind, brings us beyond Bavinck the theologian and into his psychology and philosophy. As the title suggests, Arvin Vos’s article also adds to earlier scholarly treatments of important parallels between Bavinck and Thomas Aquinas. Vos brings to this comparison a rich background of work in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, notably his valuable revisionist work, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Eerdmans, 1985).

In the foreword to the first edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck allowed that some readers might find surprises in his work: “Frequently, this study will set forth newly discovered relationships that initially may seem not to exist.”¹ Surprises may even have been in store for Bavinck himself. Could he ever have imagined that an art historian in the twenty-first century would link his understanding of justification and eschatological hope to the artistic vision of a fellow Dutchman and contemporary, the abstract modernist painter Piet Mondrian? Yet that is exactly what Joseph Maschek, Professor of Art History at Hofstra University, has done for us. Maschek proposes that neo-Calvinism is a

1. “Foreword’ to the First Edition (Volume I) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 no. 1 (2010): 10.

more likely spiritual resource for Mondrian than the theosophy that captivated many other modernists of his day. We welcome Professor Maschek to the pages of *The Bavinck Review* and to the growing circle of Bavinck scholars. This is therefore also the opportunity for me to encourage other scholars, especially younger ones, to expand the range of surprises by exploring Bavinck's relevance for the arts more broadly as, for example, Robert Covolo has done recently with fashion. I am writing this editorial in the Thanksgiving season and so I encourage you to think of this as an expression of gratitude that would surprise Bavinck.

This issue contains not one but three translations: one of a meditation by Abraham Kuyper and two pieces from Herman Bavinck. Kuyper's work is ably translated and helpfully annotated by Harry Van Dyke. Kuyper's reflections on the natural knowledge of God (and, derivatively, natural theology) provide one more nail in the coffin of the contention that the Reformed tradition is hostile to natural theology. According to Kuyper, and here he reflects the entire Reformed tradition, our lived experience in God's creation "contributes to our sense of God." His description of this is valuable because it takes us away from a domesticated understanding that general revelation means beautiful sunsets, snow-capped mountains, the wonder of a DNA molecule, and the joy of human love, all giving rise to a romantic understanding of God's "awesomeness." Listen to Kuyper's countervailing description:

Natural theology has often been portrayed as a process whereby man calmly contemplates nature, observing its order, regularity and beauty, and from there ascends to a recognition of God's great power. Nothing is further from the truth. For ordinary man, such calm contemplation is an exception. Our constant contact with nature directly affects our life, our body, our struggle for survival. Not abstract reflection but restless, painful experience has acquainted us with the power of nature. . . .

What impresses us is not the sea viewed from the shore, the ice observed in the skating rink, the thunder storm watched from a distance, the starry heavens and the flower beds that delight the eye. No, what impresses is the sea as it looks to the survivor of a shipwreck, icebergs at the pole, lightning rods that strike, the course of the stars to a traveler through the desert, the healing herbs gathered by the sufferer from a disease—every part of nature that we come into contact with when our life or well-being is at stake. (78–79 below)

Kuyper goes on to challenge Christians to not forsake the pursuit of knowledge in the natural sciences but also not to separate this pursuit from faith in the Christ, two pieces of advice still valuable today. His section on moral order provides us with a helpful segue to the two pieces from Herman Bavinck.

Bavinck's essay on the conscience also directs us away from dogmatics, strictly speaking, and into an arena of that brings together Bavinck's interests in psychology and ethics. However, when we stop to notice that Bavinck published this essay in 1881, one year before he began his

teaching at Kampen, we realize that it is a mistake to divide Bavinck's professional life into periods of during and after dogmatics. Bavinck's interests were always broad and wide ranging; in fact, he taught Reformed ethics from the beginning of his teaching career at Kampen. And that brings me to the third translation and back to the theme of busyness at the Bavinck Institute.

Readers of this journal were introduced in our first issue to Dirk Van Keulen's discovery in the Bavinck archives at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, of a large hand-written manuscript, *Reformed Ethics*. A small group of Bavinck scholars at the time agreed that this work should be published and translated. After Dirk Van Keulen prepared an electronic, transcribed version of the first half of the manuscript (560 pages), your editor began translating and annotating the work in 2012. I came to the realization in the winter of 2013/14 that at the pace I was going, it was going to take a lot longer than I had initially envisioned. With the help of a gift from the Dutch Reformed Translation Society and a number of generous benefactors, I was able to hire out the translation work, a section at a time. In addition, thanks to a grant from the Heritage Fund of Calvin Theological Society, an editorial team consisting of myself, Dirk Van Keulen, Nelson Kloosterman, and Ph.D. students Jessica Driesenga and Antoine Theron, spent the week of August 3–7, 2015 carefully editing already translated sections, establishing editorial protocol for the work as a whole. *Deo volente*, we will repeat this communal editorial work in the summers of 2016, 2017, and 2018. Readers of this journal who are also members of the Bavinck Society already know that the American members of the editorial team got a large surprise this summer when we learned that the Bavinck manuscript was over 1100 pages instead of the 560 total that we were working with. This also means that instead of a one-volume work, we are now projecting a three-volume work along the following lines:

- I. *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*
- II. *The Duties of the Christian Life (Ten Commandments)*
- III. *The Life of the Redeemed in the World (Marriage and Family)*

We are profoundly grateful to the Baker Publishing Group for its willingness to take on the enlarged project. It is our goal to have the translated and edited Volume I in the hands of the publisher January 2017.

A final word of thanks to long-time friends Harry Van Dyke and Nelson Kloosterman for the gift of their translations that enrich this volume.

—John Bolt

Knowledge according to Bavinck and Aquinas

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In an article titled, “Herman Bavinck’s Thomistic Epistemology: the Argument and sources of his *Principia* of science,” David Sytsma has convincingly documented Bavinck’s debt to Thomas Aquinas and the Reformed Scholastics.¹ Sytsma succeeds in demonstrating how Bavinck followed Aquinas both in conceiving theology as a science founded on principles and in formulating a realist epistemology that was a *via media* between the prevailing rationalist and empiricist trends of the time. As Sytsma shows, Bavinck’s account of the way we come to know is “largely a reproduction of Aquinas’s account of sensible representation” (27) and of “Aquinas’s account of intellectual knowledge” (30).

In this article I will first discuss Bavinck’s accounts of the intellect or mind, focusing on the details of his realist view. He finds in Aquinas significant resources to counter both empiricism, rationalism, idealism, and Kant’s thought. In a later follow-up discussion I will compare his view with Aquinas’s position. It will become apparent that there is a significant difference in their accounts of a realist theory of knowledge. This difference has its source in Bavinck’s failure to break completely with a fundamental assumption of the rationalist and empiricist views of which he himself is critical; namely, their account of the subject-object relation and the corresponding conception of objectivity implicit in their accounts of human knowledge. The result is an ambiguity in the realist view that Bavinck is defending, an ambiguity shared with Augustine. By contrast, I will argue that Aquinas provides an alternative account of knowing that incorporates an account of judgment which provides a more adequate conception of objectivity; this element is lacking in Bavinck. The result is a realist account of knowledge that is free of the ambiguity found in Bavinck’s view and makes possible a more radical critique of empiricism

1. In John Bolt, ed., *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2011), 1–56.

and rationalism. First, however, I must give an account of Bavinck's realist theory of knowledge.

1. Bavinck's account of Knowing in *Reformed Dogmatics*

According to Bavinck theology is a science, a body of knowledge founded on principles; it is constituted by reflection on faith. The principles of theology are God as essential foundation, the self-revelation of God as found in Scripture as the external cognitive foundation, and the testimony of the Holy Spirit or faith as the internal principle of knowing.² In addition, there are principles of thought: the created world is the external foundation of knowledge, the light of reason, i.e. the intellect, is the internal foundation, and the divine Logos of God is the essential foundation of thought (213). For Bavinck realism is a *via media*, a mediating alternative to rationalism, which tends to move from a subjective to an absolute and objective rationalism, and empiricism, which tends toward materialism. While both traditions recognize that both the senses and the mind make a contribution to knowledge, their account of the role of each differs radically, and neither is adequate.

First, then, the critique of rationalism. "Science," Bavinck writes, "consists in a logical relationship between subject and object" (214). Rationalism and empiricism are two fundamentally different ways of describing this relationship. According to rationalists, "the origin of knowledge is to be found in the subject" (215). Beginning with Socrates and Plato, and continuing with Augustine, Descartes, Spinoza, and the idealist tradition as found in Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, these philosophers have recognized "an essential difference between the representations in us and the things outside of us.... Matter cannot operate on the mind. Mental phenomena, which is what these representations are, can be explained only in terms of the mind." But if a thing and its representation are two different realities, then "we must despair of knowledge of the thing." We cannot get outside of our representational world, and so we "always remain inside the circle of our representations and never come into contact with the thing itself" (216). For Bavinck the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, as it is found in many modern philosophers, reinforces this rationalist/idealist account of knowledge.

2. Herman, Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. John Vriend and edited by John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 213; hereafter *RD*; referenced in text throughout this section.

Empiricism, which is diametrically opposed to rationalism, also has its representatives in all ages, ranging from the Atomists in ancient Greece, to nominalists in the Middle Ages, and to Francis Bacon, Locke, Hume, and the French Encyclopedists in modern times. The starting point of these philosophers is that “sense perception alone is the source of our knowledge.” For Bavinck “empiricism totally subjects the human consciousness to the world outside us.” There are no innate ideas; “the scientific investigator must set aside all preconceived opinions” for the human mind “is and must be a *tabula rasa* on which nothing has as yet been written, an entity completely devoid of presuppositions” (219). No science of the supersensible is held to be possible, and so only the exact sciences can reach the status of being knowledge. Eventually it is recognized that consciousness and mind are also experienced and so also in the world, which results in a materialist account of mind; in short, “empiricism ends in materialism” (220).

Opposed to both rationalism and empiricism is realism. For Bavinck the starting point of realism is “ordinary daily experience, the universal and natural certainty of human beings concerning the objectivity and truth of their knowledge.” This natural certainty is a key point in Bavinck’s position: philosophy does not create our understanding but “only finds it and then attempts to explain it.” In addition, Bavinck makes the significant point that every theory of knowledge must be able to account for the knower’s own existence; if it fails that task, it is inadequate. “Any solution that does not explain the cognitive faculty but instead destroys it and, failing to understand cognition, turns it into an illusion, is judged by that fact” (223).

“One must first live, and then philosophize. Natural certainty is the indispensable foundation of science.” Against those contemporaries who oppose science to the knowledge of ordinary, daily experience, Bavinck affirms that science is “a purification, expansion, and completion of ordinary knowledge.” The certainty of daily experience is not to be doubted: “Prior to all reflection and reasoning, everyone is in fact fully assured of the real existence of the world” (223). In this way Bavinck responds to those who affirm that only science, and not everyday experience, provides us with an account of the real.

This natural certainty rooted in daily experience is a fundamental feature of Bavinck’s position, and so we will do well to examine it closely.

This certainty [of the real existence of the world] is not born out of a syllogism, nor is it supported by proof; it is immediate, originating spontaneously within us along with perception itself. Every human, even the least knowledgeable, a child already and an animal also, accepts in advance, without any reasoning, the existence of an external world.

In this way Bavinck responds to the challenge of the Cartesian *cogito*. There is no need to prove the existence of the external world, for our natural certainty has answered this question. On what basis does Bavinck counter the Cartesian position? He asserts that “[i]n the mental representation itself...there must be an element that points directly back to reality.” This is the factor that idealism overlooks. The idealist does not take “the representation as it presents itself but denies its representative character.” Since in terms of content the representation is no different than an image from a dream, the idealist “makes all kinds of futile attempts to move by reasonings and proofs from the subject to the object” (223). By contrast, realism “holds fast to the existence of the world because that world is, in an ideal sense, given in the representation itself. It does not deny the distinction that exists between the representation and the thing, but at the same time maintains the inseparable connection between the two because it takes the representation as it presents itself” (224). How the representation “presents itself” is not explained by Bavinck, only the natural certainty is reaffirmed. “[T]his certainty is not a conclusion drawn from a process of reasoning but is immediately present in us and given along with the perception itself” (224). In sum, this natural certainty is prior to reasoning and also claimed to be given with the perception. Note that it is not a consequence of some kind of rational consideration; instead it is pre-rational, immediate and so unquestionable. This is an important issue we will need to return to later.

We are naturally certain about the content of our senses as well as the reality of the external world. This certainty is prior to scientific, demonstrative certainty. In addition, “we also possess universal necessary truths of which we are certain a priori—not by perception and reasoning.” According to Bavinck, this led most philosophers to accept “a metaphysical, intuitive, immediate certainty besides a scientific or mediate certainty.” He prefers to call this “the certainty of faith, of self-evidence” (224). In this context he notes that Aristotle was the first to recognize that knowledge is built on “indemonstrable self-evident truths.”

Reformed theologians accepted the empiricist thesis that “there is nothing in the intellect which is not first in the senses” and the view that prior to perceiving the mind is a blank tablet on which nothing is written. In short, they rejected the rationalist claim that there are innate ideas. However, in asserting that the mind is a *tabula rasa* Thomas and the others did not deny “that understanding itself is innate in human beings” (225).³

3. Bavinck writes: “Thomas expresses himself still more correctly: ‘The forms of other intelligible things are not innate in it [the mind] but each essence is, so that it does

While present in human beings, the human intellect “is bound to the body and thus to the cosmos and therefore cannot become active except by and on the basis of the senses” (225). At first, Bavinck notes, “the intellect is pure potentiality, a blank page (*tabula rasa*) without any content, and is only activated, aroused to actuality, by the sensible world; it impinges upon the human mind, arouses it, urges it to action.” Once activated, however, the intellect “immediately and spontaneously works in its own way and according to its own nature.” The way in which this working is described is critical to understand the realist position for which Bavinck is arguing:

And the nature of the intellect is that it has the power (*vis*), ability (*facultas*), inclination (*inclinatio*), and fitness (*aptitudo*), to form certain basic concepts and principles. It does this by means of perception that is immediate, automatic, involuntary, and without any strain, previous effort, or exercise of reasoning power (*sine ratiocinatione*). Since these concepts that are certain are a priori and precede all reasoning and proof, they deserve to be called eternal truths (*veritates aeternae*). Thus the moment the intellect itself proceeds to act, it automatically knows itself bound to the laws of thought. (225)

Bavinck recognizes the problematic nature of this claim that the intellect forms these basic concepts immediately, automatically, involuntarily, and effortlessly. He adds that what he has said “does not mean that every human can give a clear account to himself and to others of these basic concepts and principles” (226). Indeed, not! However, he is right to add that “every human, even the most simple, applies these basic concepts and principles in life without any scientific reflection, unconsciously, and with the utmost certainty.” Not surprisingly, these have been called “naturally known first principles.”

The key question is this: what is the relationship between the senses and the intellect? What role does each play in the acquisition of knowledge? In what way is the mind activated by the senses? First of all, it must be recognized that each of the senses yields its own unique type of data. “Each of the senses by itself therefore perceives, not the entire object, but only certain properties pertaining to that object.” It follows, then, that “the perceptual image arising in our consciousness is composed of

not have to acquire this essence from sense images” (225). In the English translation the Latin is quoted from Aquinas’s *qu. de mente*, art. 8, ad 1. In fact, this text says something different: “the forms of intelligible things are not innate in it [the mind], but its own essence is innate to itself [*essentia sua sibi innata est*], so that it does not have to acquire it from phantasms.” This reading fits much better with the point that Bavinck is making: that understanding itself, as noted above, is innate in human beings; it also adds a point which will be examined later: that understanding has its own nature or essence, which unlike the natures or essences of things is not acquired but innately present to itself. What this means will need to be examined closely.

numerous different impressions, which, having been received by the different senses, are transmitted along the neural paths in our brain, are inexplicably converted there into perceptions and united into a whole” (227). That there is this process in which discrete sensations are formed into a composite whole can be seen already in the way animals respond to their environment. Bavinck continues:

Accordingly, the human mind is already active in the most simple perceptions. The mind is not a blank page on which the external world merely writes what it pleases, nor a mirror in which objects are simply reflected. But every perceptual image is formed in the consciousness itself from factors that are brought from the object to the mind by the different senses. (227)

So far as it goes, this is a good description of the role of the senses; unfortunately, this is the limit of Bavinck’s analysis. Having said that the human mind is already active in the most simple perceptions, and that it is not a blank page nor a mirror in which objects are merely reflected, he concludes that every perceptual image is “formed in the consciousness itself from factors that are brought from the object to the mind by the different senses.” We are not told what factors shape and influence the formation of the perceptual image. In short, he is silent on the active role of the mind itself.

Another issue which Bavinck raises concerns the connection between “the perceptual image in our consciousness and reality, the object outside us.” Following Aristotle’s affirmation that the soul “consists of all that is thought, not actually but potentially,” Bavinck asserts that objects acquire “an ideal existence in the soul by way of perception and thought” (227). He cites with approval the scholastic dictum that things are in the knower according to the mode of the knower, not the known.⁴ “So on the one hand there is an essential difference between the thing and its representation, because the thing exists outside of us and has real existence there, while the second exists in us and merely has ideal existence.” Still this difference does not preclude there also being a correspondence between the two. In fact, Bavinck asserts the correspondence very forcefully: “On the other hand, there is complete correspondence; the representation is an image, a faithful ideal reproduction of the object outside of us” (227).

In making this claim Bavinck recognizes that he is going against the stream of contemporary philosophical opinion. “Modern philosophy...noting the activity of human consciousness in the forms of perceptual images, has created an ever-growing gap between a thing and its representation” (227–28). This view was supported by some modern

4. See Aquinas, *ST* 1.14.1 ad 3.

philosophers who conceived of the physical world as being constituted by mechanical movements of atoms. These movements were held to give rise to what were called “primary properties” such as weight, density and hardness. By contrast other qualities such as light, sound, color, flavor, warmth, and coldness were held to be qualitative or secondary properties existing only in the mind (216). Against this position Bavinck declares:

...the primary quantitative properties, indeed the bodies themselves, are just as much perceived phenomena as the qualitative phenomena of tone and color and so forth. There is no reason to accept the witness of one of the senses, the sense of touch, and to reject that of the other four and therefore to make an exception solely for the properties of extension, hardness, etc. We have to make a choice: either the perceptions we gain by way of the senses are all subjective, or they all correspond to an objective reality. (218)⁵

As already noted, Bavinck’s conclusion is that all perceptions are objective. The representation of a thing “is a psychic mental act, which can never be explained in terms of the physical phenomena...” (228). “[N]either the image projected on the retina of the eye, nor the modifications in the brain cells resulting from neural vibrations, are the cause of the perceptions and representations in our consciousness.” The physical phenomena can be traced and measured, but all the psychometric research has not “brought us a step closer” to an explanation of how perceptions and representations arise.⁶

Admittedly, sometimes we see without noticing and hear without understanding, and in these cases the neural vibrations and modifications in brain cells occur in “a purely mechanical fashion,” but “they are in actual perception always accompanied...by a psychic act” (228). Again, “it is not the case that the neural vibrations are first transmitted in our

5. Rightly Bavinck argues that all the senses should be treated in the same way: “It would be extremely odd if, observing, say, a flaming fire, we held the form, the size, and the movement of the flames to be objective properties but considered the orange-reddish color and the crackling of the flames to be purely subjective perceptions. Of the two qualities so closely connected in visual perception, viz., color and form, the former would be merely a sign, but the latter a reliable image of reality! The consequence of this view would be that the most important of our senses, that of sight and that of hearing, would always give a false impression of reality and actually always deceive us” (218). This is an excellent argument, laying out the inconsistency involved in interpreting the distinction between the primary and secondary properties as being between appearance and reality.

6. Bavinck makes the interesting point that since psychic mental acts are different in kind from neural vibrations, these representations cannot be produced in our consciousness without our being conscious of it. Again, the representations cannot be “conscious creations of our mind prompted by the modifications in our brain cells, for the simple reason that no one knows by perception anything at all of this entire process of neural vibrations since a person gets to know of this process only by intentional physiological research” (228).

brains and that the consciousness is only subsequently aroused and from those modifications in the brain cells then forms the representation. Rather the very perception by the sense is an act of consciousness.” So we see by means of our senses, and “the object of perception is not any phenomenon within myself but the thing outside myself.” Seeing the object and forming the representation are psychic acts, and based on this Bavinck asserts that there is “no reason to doubt that in the representations we have a faithful, ideal reproduction of the objects outside ourselves” (228). Although many philosophers have had their doubts about the reliability of the senses, Bavinck does not consider their arguments. Bavinck rests his case with the argument given. It is clear that Bavinck rejects completely the view that what we know is our own impressions and not the object outside us. “The representations,” he concludes, “are faithful interpretations of the world of reality outside us” (229).

To sum up, for Bavinck, representations result from a conscious psychic act which uses one or more of the senses to generate their content. What we know are things through these representations and not, as many moderns would have it, our own impressions and things only indirectly. Make this latter move and the result, Bavinck rightly asserts, is that “the objective world disappears ever farther from our view” (228).

This somewhat extended account of sensation has been necessary in order to establish the context for Bavinck’s account of understanding. Representations are only the first step toward knowledge, for “[s]cientific knowledge is not produced by the senses but by the intellect” (229). The two questions here are, first, *what* does the intellect add to representations? And second, *how* does it do it?

A preliminary indication is found in the fact that it was “not pure observation but serious reflection” that gave the discoveries of Copernicus and Newton their significance. “The observation of phenomena is necessary and good, but it is not the only or the highest activity of the mind,” for “the object of science is not the particular but the universal, the logical, the idea.... Science...is knowledge not of the appearance but of the essence of things” (229). Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas are cited by Bavinck as making this distinction. He quotes with approval Thomas’s statement that “Science is not concerned with individual cases; the intellect concerns itself with universal matters” (*ST* 1.1.2).

The object of science is the universal and necessary, so science can only be produced by the intellect. For whereas sense perception views things so far as it concerns their exterior accidents, it is the peculiar capacity of the intellect to penetrate to the interior or essence of a thing. Its true object is the quiddity, the real nature, of a material thing. (229–30; quoting Thomas *ST* 1.85.5 ad 3)

Bavinck agrees with Aquinas that the intellect goes beyond the senses in penetrating to the essence of things, for intellect grasps essences, whereas the sense representations provide us only with external accidents.

And how does the intellect reach the interior of things, reach to their essence? The answer to this question is fundamental for every philosopher's theory of knowledge. For Plato the representations from the senses enable the mind to recall and to rise to the world of ideas. For Augustine, though knowledge begins with the senses, through them the intellect is roused to see the truth in God. For Descartes the mind generates clear and distinct ideas apart from any input from the senses. For Hume ideas are faint copies of impressions which seem to arise automatically so that for every impression there is an idea, and where there is no impression corresponding to the idea, he famously said, one must consign that idea "to the flames." Unlike Hume, Bavinck holds that mind is active, and can go beyond the senses. Unlike Descartes, Bavinck believes that the senses have a significant role in the acquisition of knowledge. His view is a *via media*.

We have come to the heart of Bavinck's position, the point at which he explains how active mind operates:

The case is that as the active intellect, i.e., as the capacity for abstraction, as we would say, the intellect isolates from sense perceptions that which is universal; it leaves out the particulars, shines like a light over them, makes them intelligible, makes that which is universal in them knowable, and as the cognitive capacity of the intellect assimilates that universal component and makes it a possession of the mind. (230)

Several points in this passage require comment. First, note that *active intellect* is described as "the capacity for abstraction." It is not described as the capacity to wonder, or to puzzle, as Aristotle did. Inquiring, seeking to understand, is much more complex than just abstracting the form from the particular thing, though this is one element in understanding. Often we arrange our experience by isolating insofar as possible what aspect interests us. Using Bavinck's terms we arrange our sense perceptions in order to isolate what is significant. By identifying the activity of mind only with the act of abstracting, Bavinck has omitted a significant element in our experience of understanding.

Second, there is the description of abstraction. What happens when we abstract? For Bavinck, abstraction is a process of isolating the universal element in things, separating it from what is particular. "The intellect isolates from sense perceptions that which is universal." Implicit in this statement is the acknowledgment that all sense perceptions are particular; the act itself is individual as is the object which is sensed. Experience may be complex, as noted above, in that several senses are

involved at the same time, and there is usually a sequence of data. Nevertheless, the senses always have a particular thing as their object. We cannot see house in general or hear a bassoon in general, and similarly with the other senses. We see *a* horse, hear *a* bassoon, etc. Sense representations are always of particular things or events. But we think *horse*, and as thought *horse* is universal. How does the mind arrive at this universal? According to Bavinck, the mind isolates the universal from the particulars; abstraction is a process of isolating “from sense perceptions that which is universal.” In some way the universal must be posited in the thing, otherwise there is nothing that could be abstracted and be universal.

Third, there is the further attempt to clarify the nature of abstraction when Bavinck says that the active mind “leaves out the particulars.” Clearly, in abstraction something is left out, or discarded. When I think *horse* or *bassoon* all the individuating elements, such as its location, color, etc., are left out. There is something left out, but it seems puzzling to say that the particulars are left out. It would seem rather that some aspects of the individual being observed are left out, but other aspects are retained and become the content of our knowing. To say that in abstracting the mind “leaves out the particulars” is not adequate, for the selectivity of intelligence is not accounted for.

Fourth, active mind is said to “shine like a light over them [the particulars], makes them intelligible, makes that which is universal in them knowable.” In what way does active mind “shine like a light?” Ever since Plato sight has been the favorite source for images to describe understanding. But whether speaking of seeing the forms, as Plato did, or saying, “Now I see it,” as we often do when understanding something, or saying with Bavinck that “mind shines like a light over particulars to make the universal in them known”—all of these expressions require explanation. What does the light metaphor mean; to what is it referring in all of these cases? Bavinck does not tell us. Still, it is clear that Bavinck is not a Platonist for whom the engagement with the singular only provides the occasion for recalling the form; rather, for Bavinck, the mind in some way extracts the form from the singular—a clear indication of his Thomistic orientation. Even so, to say, as Bavinck does, that active mind “makes that which is universal in them [the particulars] knowable” is merely to note the result and not explain the process. The problem with Bavinck’s account is that it does not give a criterion for what is abstracted, a reason why some aspects presented by the senses are abstracted and others not. Yet in our experience, we know that what we abstract depends very much on what question we ask. Ask both a physicist and an artist about light, and one will almost certainly start talking about electromagnetic wave-

length and the other about color, hue, etc. This is a hint that we will need to follow up on in due course.

Fifth, Bavinck writes that “the cognitive capacity of the intellect assimilates that universal component...” Here it appears that a separate operation is being identified, but no detail is given. A plausible construction might go something like this: the result of understanding is that some content comes to exist in our mind. Or to put the point differently, when we make a discovery we are aware of having grasped some content. What makes this content a “universal component” is not explained.

Sixth and finally, the assimilated universal is said to become “a possession of the mind.” Here Bavinck seems to be noting the fact that we gradually build up a body of knowledge and are able to do this because what we learn remains with us, becomes a habitual possession. Once we have learned something, the multiplication table for example, it becomes automatic for us. And more generally, we speak of a person having a mathematical or philosophical mind, and so forth. It is an aspect that is also worthy of further elaboration.

There is one more puzzle which must be solved for someone holding Bavinck’s position: the classic problem of universals. The rigor in Bavinck’s thought is evidenced by the fact that he is aware of this issue. He formulates the question this way:

But in the case of the concepts that the intellect forms from mental representations, one again faces—but now with even greater urgency—the question raised earlier in the case of the images of perception: What is the relation between these intellectual concepts and the world of reality? (230)

Before turning to Bavinck’s treatment of the problem of universals, it will be good to sketch the nature of the problem and how it arises. The question can be posed this way: what existence do universals have in things? In general, this is the formulation that rationalists would prefer. Alternatively, empiricists would no doubt prefer to formulate the question this way: do universals exist in things? All agree that what is in the mind is universal and what is found in the thing is particular. If this is the case, where does the universal aspect of knowledge come from? Rationalists insist that in some way it must exist in the thing; empiricists insist in various ways that the universal must be a purely mental construct, and not found in reality. The perennial nature of the problem can be seen from the fact that it appears in every period of philosophy from ancient to contemporary discussions. (Even post-modernism is just another reaction to the rationalist trends in modern philosophy, especially idealism, a new variation on the theme that the mind, as Bavinck noted, is not able to reach reality in its particularity.) If the problem is perennial, then there must be a common element that is the source of the problem, and that

common element, I would suggest, is the tendency to think of knowing as being essentially like seeing.

If one conceives knowing as being like seeing, then the subject-object relationship is necessarily conceived of as a kind of confrontation; knowing will be understood to be the situation where a knower stands over against—is confronted by—the object; and objectivity consists in grasping just what is there, or more precisely to grasp the thing in itself. In different ways both the rationalist and the empiricist positions assume this view, and the difficulties in each can be seen to follow from it. First, the rationalist holds that knowledge is of the universal, and since knowing is like seeing, and since in seeing it is not possible to see something that is not in the object, therefore the universal must be in the object. Now just how it exists in the object is somewhat obscure, since sensible representations are always particular and of particulars, but it must be there nevertheless or one ends with a gap between knowing and being as Bavinck notes. The empiricist agrees with the assumption that knowing is a confrontation with the object, and so in knowing, just as in seeing, there is a particular object which is grasped. The empiricist is most impressed by the particularity of the sensible representations and would not only agree with the rationalist that the universal aspect is somewhat obscure, but insist that it is not found in things at all. There is nothing universal to be abstracted. The universals that rationalists claim to find in things are nothing but constructions of the mind about which we cannot be sure that they have a basis in reality. We can never know the correspondence of ideas to things. As Bavinck describes this view, forms (or universals) are “signs, symbols, diagrams of the outside world, formed freely in our mind in response to the modifications effected from without in our brain cells by the senses and the nerves.” If one accepts this account, then “the objective world disappears ever farther from our view; it dissolves, in fact, into illusion” (228). Little wonder that Bavinck wants to get beyond this view.

The fact remains, as we have already noted above, that Bavinck thinks of objectivity as a kind of seeing, and so it is incumbent upon him to explain how he can resolve the problem of universals. What is the relation between intellectual concepts and reality? Antithenes is cited as saying “I indeed see a horse, but I do not see horsenesss” (230). Bavinck agrees, but he is not satisfied with nominalism or any of its variants for he says that “if nominalism is correct, then we can forget about science altogether.” Again,

If we can sum up the corresponding features of a group of things in a concept or word, then either this is done groundlessly and these concepts and words do not

represent reality, or things do resemble each other in reality and have common characteristics. (231)

If things resemble each other in reality, then “concepts are not ‘empty things of thought’ but the sum of the essential properties of things, and therefore not names (*nomina*) but realities (*res*).” This is the position which Bavinck defends. However, his commitment to understanding knowing as a confrontation with the object, as essentially a kind of seeing, causes difficulty, as we can see when we examine the details of this account.

According to Bavinck, Plato’s way of assuming the reality of universal concepts in an ontological sense prior to the thing itself (*ante rem*), was wrong, but Aristotle was right in asserting a universal in the thing itself (*in re*) and also in the mind (*in mente hominis post rem*).

The universality we express in a concept does not exist as such, as a universal, apart from us. In every specimen of a genus, particularly individualized and specialized,...it [the universality] has its basis in things, and it is abstracted from it and expressed in a concept by the activity of the intellect. (231)

This formulation is excellent as far as it goes, for it allows that the same content which is found in our concepts exists individuated in things. Moreover, the reality which it has in the mind is a result of the activity of the mind or intellect. Still, one senses that the matter is not entirely resolved for Bavinck. The implication of this view is that when we entertain concepts we are “not distancing ourselves from reality, but we increasingly approximate it.” At the same time he admits that one may have the opposite impression:

It may seem that in the process of forming concepts and judgments and conclusions we are increasingly moving away from the solid ground beneath the edifice of our knowledge and are soaring into the stratosphere. It seems strange, even amazing, that, converting mental representations into concepts and processing these again in accordance with the laws of thought, we should obtain results that correspond to reality. Still, one who abandons this conviction is lost. (231)

The forming of concepts and judgments (propositions) is a “moving away” from what is given by sense, for it is the acquisition of a content by the mind. As such it is different from the given of sense. Such content comprises the realm of theory, a possible understanding, and as such the theoretical is always questionable. We want to know whether the thing really is the way we have conceived it. So there is good reason for Bavinck’s expression of doubt. How do we know that what is found in the mind corresponds to reality? To state the issue in a different way, since truth is a correspondence of the mind with the real, the question is how we can know truth. As Bavinck affirms, the conviction that our concepts correspond to reality is fundamental. What grounds this conviction? For Bavinck there is no clear answer to this question. As already noted above,

he appeals to a “universal and natural certainty” (223). So long as one thinks of knowledge as a confrontation with the object, an intellectual kind of seeing, there is no clear answer to this question, and the chasm between the subject and the object remains. That there is a correspondence between the mind and reality is given through a pre-rational conviction; it is not the result of a rational consideration. We are convinced that we possess the truth, but there is no account of the process by which we acquire the certitude of truth. Consequently, for Bavinck the realist view of knowledge appears vulnerable, subject to doubt.⁷

It is not surprising, then, that Bavinck feels the need to ground his position in something more solid than the defense he has made of realism. The conviction that our thoughts correspond to reality

can, therefore, rest only in the belief that it is the same Logos who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence between the two. Only in this way is science possible, i.e., knowledge not only of the changing appearances but of the universal, the logical connections inherent in things. (231)

Concerned with the tendencies toward idealism he has mentioned before, Bavinck remarks that things themselves never enter into us. “Being itself therefore can never be approached by us; it is a fact that has to be assumed and constitutes the basis of thought” (231). And so Bavinck’s appeals to the doctrine of the Logos to support the realism to which he is committed. It is striking that he states that apart from this conviction “being itself cannot be approached by us.” We must assume the realist conviction, and as Christians we may because of the Logos. For Bavinck, faith provides the foundation for his realist position. This theological claim about the complementarity of mind and reality agrees completely with the Augustinian tradition. Like Augustine Bavinck stops at this point, whereas Thomas, as we will see in due course, pushes the analysis of knowledge further, explicating how mind operates in order to reach a knowledge of truth.

Not surprisingly, at this point Bavinck introduces Plato’s “beautiful and striking image” of the sun.

Just as the sun objectively illumines the object and subjectively the human eye, so God, or the idea of the good is the light by which the truth or essence of things

7. A similar difficulty with parallel consequences is found in Hume’s account of the origin of ideas. Hume declares that for every impression there is a corresponding idea, but no account is given of the way in which ideas are acquired, that is there is no role for mind explained. Consequently, what is generated through a non-rational process, in other words, what is generated through an automatic process has no rational basis, and consequently ideas can have no basis other than in habit.

becomes visible and by which at the same time our mind is able to see and recognize that truth. (231–32)

Bavinck also notes that Augustine adopted this image and that Aquinas speaks in the same way and uses the same metaphor.

Says Thomas: just as we look into the natural world, not by being in the sun ourselves, but by the light of the sun that shines on us, so neither do we see things in the divine being but by the light, that, originating in God, shines in our own intellect. Reason is thus that divine light; it is not itself the divine logos, but it participates in it. To be (*esse*), to live (*vivere*), and to understand (*intelligere*) is the prerogative of God in respect of his being (*per essentiam*), ours in respect of participation (*per participationem*). (232)

Based on the image of the sun, one can also speak of “the natural light of reason,” which Bavinck adds, is identical with “the active intellect,” and also “the faculty of abstraction...which shines its light on objects and brings to light the intelligible components of these objects” (232). If we had not raised the issue before, this statement would be enough to re-ignite the realist-nominalist debate!

Here one final aspect of Bavinck’s position should be noted. He adds that the natural light of reason (active mind) is “also identical with the fund of general concepts, which our mind acquired by that same faculty of abstraction” (232). For, as Bavinck has said earlier, “we...possess universal necessary truths of which we are certain a priori—not by perception and reasoning” (224). Recall that Bavinck spoke of philosophers accepting a metaphysical, intuitive, immediate certainty besides a scientific or mediate certainty, and he described this as “the certainty of faith, of self-evidence” (224).⁸ As already noted, this certain knowledge is what Bavinck describes elsewhere as “knowledge of eternal principles, of common notions” (225).⁹ This constitutes the “core” of a realist theory of knowledge. On the one hand the intellect is dependent on the senses, but it is also active so that it spontaneously “works in its own way and according to its own nature” (225). Its nature is that it has the power to form “certain basic concepts and principles,” which, because they “are a priori and precede all reasoning and proof, they deserve to be called eternal truths” (225).

8. Those familiar with philosophical debates of the last half century will recognize that here we are approaching the issue debated under the name of “foundationalism.”

9. Sytsma, 37, has very helpfully documented how Bavinck has adopted Jerome Zanchi’s account of the acts of the intellect, including its possession of “spontaneously arising, nondiscursive concepts” that are “eternal principles, eternal truths and common notions.” He also provides a translation of Zanchi’s discussion, “On the Acts of the Intellect,” 50–56.

To conclude, our goal in this account of Bavinck's thought in *Reformed Dogmatics* has been to sketch his account of a *via media* through which he believes he is able to avoid the errors of both modern rationalism and idealism on the one hand, and empiricism and materialism on the other. He also sees himself as continuing a classical Christian tradition starting with Augustine, running through Thomas, and into Reformed Scholasticism. This discussion is Bavinck's most extensive account of his realist view of knowledge, but he also takes up the topic in two other works: *Foundations of Psychology* and *The Philosophy of Revelation*.

2. Knowledge in *Foundations of Psychology*

Foundations of Psychology, a relatively short work first published about the time the second volume of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* appeared, has a chapter devoted to "the knowing faculty."¹⁰ In Bavinck's time psychology was being developed in a scientific context—which meant in practice in the context of the natural sciences, especially physics. In this work Bavinck is presenting an alternative to the resulting materialist accounts of sensation and mind. Here I will examine only his discussion of mind. In this work there is more detail about the experience of the working of the mind but no advance in a systematic account of the mind's operations. The position which Bavinck developed in *Reformed Dogmatics* is recast to meet the current debates including the Kantian tradition, but the basics of his own view remain the same.

Again, as in *Reformed Dogmatics*, before presenting his own view in *Foundations of Psychology*, Bavinck rejects both the empiricist and rationalist accounts of innate knowledge. Empiricism cannot account for the "universal, necessary, or unchangeable character" of our knowledge (67). The result is that for the empiricist, truth is "only customary" and makes impossible "any theology, metaphysics, rational psychology or normative ethics because there are no universal truths" (68). In addition, because knowledge has its origin in sensation and everything can be explained as "empirical, sensual and mechanical," the "final conclusion is materialism" (69).

Opposed to this empiricism is rationalism. The first difficulty that Bavinck sees with rationalism is that it is unable to do justice to the role of

10. *Beginselen der psychologie*, 1st ed. (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1897); English translation of the 2nd ed. (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1923) by Jack Vanden Born, "Herman Bavinck's *Foundations of Psychology*" (MA thesis, Calvin College, 1981); hereafter referenced in text.

the senses in acquiring knowledge. "The use of the senses is the only way in which we can come to knowledge and science," for a person who is lacking a sense will not experience the data corresponding to that sense. "A blind person cannot judge colors and a deaf person cannot rate tones" (69–70). Even in grasping "eternal, immutable truths we employ forms and images that are borrowed from the visible world." Again, rationalism assumes a false dualism of spirit and matter that conflicts with our experience of being both sensory and rational "in the unity of personhood." Another problem is that rationalists have failed to explain the origin of ideas. Neither Plato's theory of recollection nor Malebranche's occasionalism nor Leibniz's pre-established harmony are adequate accounts. Finally, "Rationalism ends with the negation of matter" (71).

Better in Bavinck's view, but still not adequate, is Kant's attempt to reconcile the empiricist and rationalist positions by showing what in our knowledge comes from reason and what comes from sense perception. According to this account there are three distinct functions in our knowing faculty: "*sense perceptions* are subject to the forms of space and time; *understanding* contains the categories of quality, quantity, relations, and modality; and *reason*...carries the idea of the unconditional, i.e., the psychological, cosmological and theological idea" (71). Although Kant avoids the already noted errors of the rationalists, Bavinck asserts that Kant errs because he ascribes "only a subjective, phenomenal significance to the a priori elements" (72). In other words, whatever originates in thinking holds only for "experienced phenomena and not with respect to the things themselves." Understanding is limited to knowledge of the world of sense. Finally, theoretical reason cannot prove "the existence of a reality corresponding to the psychological, cosmological and theological idea" (72).

Bavinck's brief sketch and critique of Kant is insightful. He notes that the opposition of subject and object as it is found in Kant's account of understanding "in effect put Kant in the empiricist camp" (72), because understanding is limited to the world of sense. Still, at the same time Kant's view was an idealism, because "the a priori elements of our knowledge were grounded in the subject and...the agreement of the a priori elements with being-forms was incapable of demonstration" (72–73). Thus Bavinck concludes that "Kant's reconciliation really went nowhere and he only succeeded in producing confusion." Here one wishes that Bavinck had pushed his analysis further. Had he asked why the assumptions found in Kant's view concerning the subject-object relation led to his thought having simultaneously empiricist and rationalist features, he might have been able to give a more penetrating critique of Kant's position. As it is, Bavinck identifies the "opposition of subject and

object” as the source of the problems with Kant’s account of understanding, and, implicitly at least, links the idealist elements that result from Kant’s conception of reason to the same source.

Unfortunately, Bavinck does not probe Kant’s view of the subject-object relation; rather he only notes its effects. Also, he does not develop an alternative account of objectivity. As we shall see, it is precisely at this point that significant questions arise. Although Kant was critical of both empiricism and rationalism, did he break with the conception of the subject-object relationship found in both positions? If not, what conception of objectivity does he share with empiricists and rationalists? And most importantly, what would an alternative view look like? How would it resolve the problems found in both the empiricist and rationalist positions? These questions cannot be answered here, but Bavinck needs to supply an answer if he is going to go beyond the views he has criticized. As has already become evident from his account of knowing in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck intends to set forth a realist view of knowledge, a view that is free of the problems found in empiricism, rationalism, and Kant’s view. For Bavinck part of the solution is to give an adequate account of the contributions of both the senses and the mind to knowing.

Bavinck affirms that there are two elements in knowledge, an a priori element that is composed of “universal, necessary, and unchangeable truths...[that] stand firm prior to experience” and are “the indispensable condition for everything that exists” (73), and an a posteriori element that has its source in sense perception. The a priori truths have “only a formal character” and do not establish the existence of the world, but “if the world exists it must be subject to these truths” (73). They are axioms out of which science arises, the “metaphysical presuppositions of things, substances, quality, causes, truth and falsehood, good and evil,” and are “the presuppositions on which all human knowledge is built” (73).

Becoming conscious of these a priori truths is a long process; we become conscious of them only gradually in the context of our experience. But they are not merely subjective, as Kant asserted, rather these “truths are the forms of being in which the things outside of us exist” (73).

Universals are not after the fact (*post rem*) as empiricism maintains, neither are they before the fact (*ante rem*) as rationalism dreams, but they are in the fact (*in re*) in both subject and object. (73–74).

Because these a priori truths are the condition of existing, “the human spirit can derive the truths” (74). Humans can attain these a priori truths, because “[m]an is connected to both God’s revelation in nature and the Scriptures.” Emphatically Bavinck asserts that these truths are not innate, drawn out of oneself apart from perceptions. Also, sense is not just the occasion for discovering truth. “Truths are not forms for thinking

with only subjective necessity; they are forms for being in which all things exist” (74). The opposition to Kant’s view is obvious.

In articulating his realist view, Bavinck identifies truth with being. What is not explored by Bavinck is how truth or universals—in this passage he seems to use these terms synonymously—existing in the thing and truth as it exists in the mind differ. One might suppose that truth can be said to be in the thing because it is a source of truth, whereas in the mind truth is found properly speaking, but Bavinck does not note this fact. To draw attention to it would imply that there is a difference between subject and object which must be explained, a gap to be overcome. The Kantian framework Bavinck is employing in this context makes it possible to ignore this fact. Summing up, Bavinck holds that the a priori truths are prior to experience and so must be rooted in the mind; however, they are not merely subjective but are the forms of all existing things. God’s revelation guarantees that a priori truths are not merely subjective. Here the problem of the subject-object relation is concealed but not resolved.

Turning to sense, the a posteriori element in knowing, Bavinck asserts that a person does not receive truths passively but is active in their discovery. Humans derive “universal truths from particular events” (75). “In the visible, the invisible is discovered; in the temporary the eternal is found; in the actual the logical is uncovered.” Multiple experiences of the same thing are not required, because “sometimes a single perception is sufficient to have truth come to conceptualization” (75). For Bavinck, the process is as follows: perception comes first, and with it comes “the intuition which discovers the law, the idea or the logical in the perceived event.” So it is that humans are able to “climb from lower to higher levels of knowledge.” Working together here are the two aspects of our “unique psychic organization”: a higher knowing capacity which includes understanding and reason and a lower knowing capacity which includes sensation and “the objective necessity presented by the perceived event” (75). This working together is not by chance:

That subject and object so meet and agree with each other is grounded in the fact that both originate with the same God—a God who created the reality outside of us, who created the laws of thinking in us, and who placed these in an organic relation to each other. (75)

One Logos created both man and the world and put them in relation to each other. As we have seen in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, for Bavinck the guarantee of the objectivity of our knowledge is found in the fact that both are created by God. God creates both the knowing powers and the objects

corresponding to each. And this fact guarantees that the powers function properly and are suited to the environment in which they are found.¹¹

As already noted, for Bavinck, understanding and reason constitute the higher knowing power. Examining how Bavinck describes these aspects of mind and their interrelations will complete this account of mind.

Some psychologies of the day did not distinguish “representation from conception, observation from understanding, and perception from thinking” (93). According to these psychologists, repeated sensations having common elements gradually form a general representation. As Bavinck notes, this account substitutes representation for the “abstracting ability, as contained in older psychologies.” He rejects the new view completely. Forming a concept is “possible only through thinking” (94). Again, “associating and producing representations is not sufficient for this task [conceptualization]” (94). The difference between representation and conceptualization is illustrated by Bavinck using the example of having an image of a triangle as opposed to formulating the definition of a triangle.¹²

So, how does the classic “abstracting ability” differ from the modern account of forming a general representation? In other words, what is involved in thinking? Bavinck describes it in different ways: “Thinking is a searching through the world of phenomena for the thoughts on which representations rest and for the laws that govern representations” (98). Knowing, he remarks, begins with the lower knowing ability and through it representations are formed. Then “through the higher knowing ability man is capable of tracking down the invisible in the visible, the enduring in the changeable, the general in the particular, the logical in the actual, the idea, the thought, and he is able to retain these as conceptualizations” (94). A key point is that in the working of representations into conceptual-

11. When Bavinck was writing, studies were being done of the physiological elements surrounding sensation. While sensation is dependent on physiological and physical conditions, Bavinck asserts that it is a psychic event whose relation to stimulation is a mystery. See 76ff.

Attention is the activity that isolates a sensation “making it stand out in consciousness” (78). In other words, “[t]hrough attention sensation is shifted to perception.” If a sensation is related to its cause, the result is a representation. Habits, impressions, notions, impressions, perceptions, and representations “comprise the basic capital of our knowing faculty” (79). In the same context there is an interesting discussion of the imagination—its dependence on representations and its freedom and the limits of that freedom. Also its significant role in thinking and action (91–93).

12. Bavinck also notes that concepts and thoughts are prior to words: “Words are signs for thought to those with whom we speak. Words awaken thoughts.... But within ourselves concepts and thoughts are prior” (94).

izations—“by means of comparing, separating, and connecting, by means of combining conceptualizations into judgments and judgments into conclusions”—one does not “leave the actuality of the world...but...approaches the world and continually digs more deeply into its nature” (98). Note that here the formation of conceptualizations and the making of judgments into conclusions are lumped together as part of a single process; there is no attempt made to distinguish them or relate them to one another.

What is the process by which the higher knowing power produces and retains conceptualizations? Bavinck describes the actions of the two elements of higher knowing:

...reason points to discursive thinking, which involves conceptualizations, judgments and conclusions. Understanding is the possession of knowledge given by truth. Human beings come to a knowledge of truth through reasoning.... Thus reason is to understanding as motion is to rest, as obtaining is to possession. (95)

According to Bavinck, the division between reasoning and understanding has long been noted. For example, I would add, it is found in Aquinas.¹³

Now reasoning, according to Bavinck, is characteristic of “sensual, earthy, incomplete being” (95). Reasoning seems to be focused on demonstrating. Reasoning, faith, and observation are three possible ways to knowledge, to understanding. Faith and observation are the primary sources of our knowledge in all areas of life. But “reasoning is the normal process of acquiring further knowledge in the sciences” (96). Reasoning is necessary because we are sensory beings.

If we are to learn to know the invisible, there is no other way than to stride along from the familiar to the unfamiliar and to climb from the visible to the invisible. (96)

What it means “to stride along” or “to climb” in this context is not explained. Reason, we are told, is characteristic of human beings. Neither angels nor animals have reason, but humans are required to use reason to grasp truth. In short, “Reason is impersonal, the same in everyone and prescribes the same rule and law for everyone” (96). By contrast, under-

13. In fact Bavinck appropriates this point from Aquinas’s *ST* 1.79.8 resp.: “Homines autem ad intelligibilem veritatem cognoscendam perveniunt, procedendo de uno ad aliud, ut ibidem dicitur, et ideo rationales dicuntur. Patet ergo quod ratiocinari comparatur ad intelligere sicut moveri ad quiescere, vel acquirere ad habere, quorum unum est perfecti, aliud autem imperfecti.” (But man arrives at the knowledge of intelligible truth by advancing from one thing to another; and therefore he is called rational. Reasoning, therefore, is compared to understanding, as movement is to rest, or acquisition to possession; of which one belongs to the perfect, the other to the imperfect.) Text and translation from *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

standing varies from person to person, for some persons understand more quickly and others more slowly.

Bavinck notes that starting with Descartes the distinction between reason and understanding was modified. Rationalist philosophers such as Descartes used *ratio* for all intellectual ability, and it contrasted with revelation and faith. Reason became “the organ for truths beyond the senses, i.e., for ideas.” For Kant, then, understanding “only places representations under rules and into coherence by means of the categories. But reason directs itself to the ideal and absolute” (97).

For Bavinck, there are two meanings for *understanding*. First, it identifies an ability; secondly, it refers to a collection of insights and knowledge. So it is that reason is “both lower and higher than understanding.” Reason precedes understanding as a means to knowledge. But reason requires a set of principles in order to produce knowledge. “These principles are the foundation and beginning point of reasoning and are given, not mediately through reasoning, but immediately through insight, i.e., by understanding” (97). On the other hand, it is reason that enables humans to know things beyond the senses. So it is that finally “reason stands above understanding” (98).

To sum up, human beings can know “visible and perceivable things immediately” because we are sensory beings. Reason allows a person to rise from the familiar to the unfamiliar and “raise himself outside all creation.” Understanding is limited to the phenomenal world, but through reason one can acquire knowledge of invisible and eternal things. “Reason stands above understanding as an active ability but it is in a lower position when it provides knowledge to the understanding.” Ultimately, the conviction that through reason and understanding we penetrate more deeply into the nature of the world is grounded in “the faith that one Logos created both subject and object” (98). As we have seen before, for Bavinck the final word is an appeal to Christian teaching that God created all things and that they are well ordered. This is his answer to empiricists, rationalists, and Kantians. This is the solution to the problem of objectivity. His realist epistemology is grounded in revelation.

In *Foundations of Psychology* no mention is made of Aquinas, and there are only brief allusions to the classical tradition. Nevertheless, the influence of classical thought is evident, for example, in the insistence on a significant role for the senses, in the distinction between reason and understanding, in how reasoning begins from understanding and ends with understanding. Nevertheless, there are also elements that have a strongly Kantian flavor as when Bavinck limits understanding to the empirical and attributes to reason the capacity to know things beyond the senses. The account of the various operations of the lower and the higher

knowing powers shows Bavinck's detailed grasp of our experiences of understanding. New here is the more detailed account and critique of Kant's thought, but even so there is no further reflection in this work on the subject-object relationship, and so it is not surprising that the same appeal to the Logos to ground objectivity is made.

3. The Account of Knowledge in *The Philosophy of Revelation*

The third context in which Bavinck presents an extended discussion of the nature of understanding is in his Stone Lectures.¹⁴ His primary opponent in this context is idealism in its various manifestations.

According to Bavinck, idealism "break[s] down the bridge between thinking and being," and alternatively is described as severing the connection "between subject and object." Again, for idealists, "thinking lost its hold on being." As evidence that idealists themselves recognized the problem, he notes that they made an appeal to the absolute in order to "restore the reality of the objective world" (76). Only so could thought "issue in knowledge of the truth."

Critical of this solution, Bavinck asserts that in addition to the "absolute sense of dependence" which Schleiermacher posited, there is at the same time the "independence and freedom of man." As evidence Bavinck points to our consciousness of various actions:

For no matter whether learned or unlearned, all of us without distinction are conscious that we ourselves perceive, we ourselves think, we ourselves reason, we ourselves draw conclusions, and in the same manner that we ourselves deliberate, will, and act. (77)

That we perform such actions makes possible our "religion and morality, responsibility and accountability, science, and art, all the labor and culture of humanity" (77). Specifically, with regard to religion, the testimony of self-consciousness leads "to belief in and service of a personal God." Because the idea of God is universal and spontaneous, some have claimed that the idea of God is innate. Bavinck rejects this view: "in the strict sense of the term innate ideas do not exist" (78). He dismisses such a view as hinting of rationalism and of mysticism. What is innate according to Bavinck is the human mind "with all of its peculiar nature and organization, its intellect and reason, heart and conscience, desire and will, and with the ineradicable consciousness of its dependence

14. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); hereafter referenced in text.

and freedom” (78–79). When the human mind develops naturally “in accordance with the nature implanted in him, not in detachment from the world and social organism, but in the environment in which a place was assigned to him at birth,” then a person “attains as freely and as inevitably to the knowledge and service of a personal God as he believes in his own existence and that of the world” (79).

So the idea of God is neither innate nor invented, but rather, Bavinck asserts, it is “given” to human beings. “By nature, in virtue of his nature, every man believes in God” (79).¹⁵ The basis on which Bavinck makes this claim is that “God, the creator of all nature, has not left himself without witness, but through all nature, both that of man himself and that of the outside world, speaks to him” (79). So revelation alone, and not evolution, accounts for the worship of God. And, Bavinck adds, this revelation is important not just for religion but also for philosophy, specifically epistemology.

The view articulated above, that the human mind develops in its assigned environment as determined by the creator, is now applied to the question of knowing.

All cognition, consists in a peculiar relation of subject and object, and is built on the agreement of these two. The reliability of perception and thought is not assured unless the forms of thought and the forms of being correspond, in virtue of their origin in the same creative wisdom. (79)

According to Bavinck philosophers have been aware of the need for this correspondence of thought and being but have failed to describe the relationship accurately. Hegel identified thought with being and thus turned logic into metaphysics; and Kant so separated thought from being that logic had only “a formalistic character.” The key is to recognize that “the forms of being, the laws of thought, and . . . the forms of conduct, have their common source in the divine wisdom.” Viewed this way, “the three departments of philosophy, physics, logic, and ethics, form a harmonious whole” (80).

For Bavinck this theistic foundation provides a basis “for belief in the progress in science and the realization of the ideal of truth.” While one may hope for progress in reaching the truth, it is also the case that “truth is not but *becomes*” (80). Again, truth is not

“cut and dried” ready . . . simply to be taken into our consciousness. On the contrary . . . man has to conquer the truth in the sweat of his brow, with the exertion of all his strength, foot by foot and piece by piece. (80–81)

15. Here it would seem that Bavinck is not claiming that everyone believes in the God in the sense that a Christian believes, but rather in the sense that there is a divine being, that the question of God cannot be ignored.

Bavinck uses various images to describe how knowledge is gained only through sustained effort. All knowledge has “grown up in the practice of life.” It arises from necessity and has “a practical, economic value.” Again, it is not “a mere copy, a portrait of reality.” Science is something more:

Science aims at something higher: it seeks not the idea, but the living; not the transitory, but the eternal; not the reality but the truth. Only it does not find the truth apart from the reality. (81)

So Bavinck emphasizes the fact that all knowing must be grounded on experience:

Whoever wants to know nature must open his eyes.... We do not create the truth, and we do not spin it out of our brain; but, in order to find it, we must go back to the facts, to reality, to the sources. (81)

If on the one hand truth is tied to the empirical, to what is found in experience, it also goes beyond experience, beyond “the phenomena.” Bavinck emphasizes both aspects:

[T]he truth is bound to reality, and finds its criterion in correspondence with reality. But the truth transcends empirical reality, because and in the same degree that scientific investigation descends more deeply and penetrates more fully into its essence. (81)

Truth is “discovered and received by consciousness alone” (81–82). Bavinck goes on to indicate that truth is found only in the mind: “truth comes into being only by being made the object of our knowledge and an element of our consciousness” (82). From this point of view, “reality is an instrument to enable us to find the truth; reality is intended to become truth in our consciousness and in our experience” (82). Truth is not a mere copy of reality, but “in the truth reality rises to a higher mode of existence.” The standard for truth is not “its usefulness for life, for it has “an independent value of its own.” Through truth the content and quality of life are determined:

Truth is worth more than reality; it belongs to that higher order of things in which physis, and gnosis, and ethos are reconciled, and in which a true philosophy gives full satisfaction both to the demands of the intellect and the needs of the heart. (82)

Bavinck’s account of knowledge and the way truth is attained is insightful in many respects. He highlights the need to ground knowledge in reality and that this is accomplished by being faithful to experience. Also, affirmed is the fact that truth is a new order, a higher way of existing, which is found in the mind, in consciousness. Gaining such knowledge is anything but easy; indeed it requires all our strength. Clearly the same program that was announced in the *Prolegomena* of the *Reformed Dogmatics* is still being worked out here. Neither empiricism nor rationalism is adequate. Also, Idealists fail to close the gap between knowing and being. Bavinck has given us a lively description of the

outcome of knowing and described the difficulty of gaining knowledge, located it in consciousness, and rejected pragmatism and similar views in the process. As we have seen before, his solution to the subject-object relation is to affirm that perception and thought are reliable because they have their “origin in the same creative wisdom” (79). This affirmation of their common source in the Creator is the final word grounding Bavinck’s account of knowledge.

4. Concluding Comment

Comparing Bavinck’s three discussions of the nature of knowledge, we find that the analysis in *Reformed Dogmatics* is the most detailed. This is not surprising. Two reasons come to mind. First, the discussion in the *Reformed Dogmatics* is the earliest discussion, and Bavinck is clearly working out the details of his view, interacting with historical sources in significant depth. Second, one would expect the most careful and detailed account in this work because this is his major exposition of Reformed theology, and a detailed and precise working out of the principles of his theological program is his goal. By contrast, when one reads the discussion of mind and knowledge in *The Foundations of Psychology* one gets the sense that Bavinck is applying the ideas that he had worked out earlier to the context of the developing field of psychology, although there is also some new dialogue with Kant’s thought. While there is significant additional detail with regard to the senses, with regard to the mind, its operations, and the nature of knowledge, Bavinck is repeating what he developed in his dogmatics. Finally, in *The Philosophy of Revelation* one again finds some development, but more in terms of meeting both Kantian and Idealist views, not in articulating his own view in greater nuance or depth.

In essence, Bavinck’s consistent goal is to develop a realist theory of knowledge, and by this he means a view in which the dichotomy between the subject and the object is overcome in such a way that both the contributions of the senses and of the mind to knowing are properly acknowledged, that the distinction between knowledge and reality is not blurred, and knowledge is grounded on a firm foundation. Truth, for Bavinck, consists in a correspondence to reality, and he energetically opposes all forms of empiricism, which he holds fail to account for the fact that science aims to go beyond the transitory to the universal and eternal. On the other hand, the idealist understanding of the nature of the mind’s representations is incapable of doing justice to the object, and so, as we saw, must appeal to the Absolute to connect the subject with the world. Similarly, we noted how he sees the Kantian project falling short in that

understanding is limited to empirical reality and reason cannot reach the real. Against all these views, Bavinck holds that theism provides a basis for explaining the progress in science and a way to truth. The key, already enunciated in *Reformed Dogmatics*, is that both the world and the human mind are created by God, and he has put them in relation, and it is on this basis that we can be assured that we possess truth.

But the question must be asked: does this solve the subject-object problem? Does this resolve the difficulty which is the source of the problems in empiricism, rationalism, Kant's view, and idealism? Before replying, a brief review of the strengths and weaknesses of each view will be useful. The strength of the empiricist position is that it takes the contribution of the senses seriously. Empiricism may usefully be characterized as the view that it is in sense experience that the subject really reaches the object. The goal is to reach the sense datum. Everything else is questionable. An immediate difficulty with the position is that there is no way of identifying the sense datum except by naming it, and at this point the ambiguities of thought have entered. For the empiricist, true objectivity is lost. Rationalism and idealism affirm the other factor in knowing, the contribution of mind. Only mind through its ideas grasps the reality of things; the senses reach no further than appearances. The attractiveness of this view is that it recognizes that knowledge involves more than sensation. The problem is that the mind produces many ideas and diverse conceptual systems, and the idealist finds no way of bringing this conceptual process to a conclusion except by appealing to the Absolute, the ultimate perspective from which everything will find its proper place. In other words, only in the Absolute are subject and object united. The Kantian solution is more complex. Where understanding and the senses cooperate, one finds knowledge, but as the categories of understanding are generated by the mind, knowledge is only of things as they relate to us and not of the thing in itself. For understanding the thing in itself cannot be reached, hence genuine objectivity is impossible. Reason goes beyond understanding, but reason posits an idea which it is unable to reach.

In response to these views, all of which in one way or another fail to resolve the subject-object problem, Bavinck affirms that both sense and understanding have a role in knowledge, complementary roles. Sense makes a contribution to even the most abstract concepts, but mind uses these materials to grasp what sense cannot reach—the essential, the universal, the eternal. According to Bavinck, realism asserts that the world exists independently of mind, but that is an ideal sense; through representations, it is known. Realism claims that there is an inseparable connection between thought and reality because “it takes the representation as it presents itself.... This certainty is ... immediately present in us

and given along with the perception itself" (*RD*, 224). In addition, there is "a metaphysical, intuitive, immediate certainty" as well as "a scientific or mediate certainty." This certainty is the key to Bavinck's position. In response to other views he argues that they have overlooked the immediate certainty found in perception and thought. In other words, knowledge of truth is not through rational judgment but by an immediate certainty.

Is this adequate? I think not. This certainty is pre-rational and so not open to evaluation. The problem is that all of our concepts are questionable. Ideas are produced by the mind, and as such they are only a possible grasp of things. Our experience is that one idea is often abandoned in favor of another, one theory replaced by another. Little wonder that Bavinck says with regard to the activity of mind that it may seem that we are "moving away from the solid ground beneath the edifice of our knowledge" (*RD*, 231). All our ideas and conceptual frameworks are no more than possible accounts of reality; they are merely theoretical, as we say, in need of justification or verification. But to claim that they are "immediately certain" cuts off the possibility of verification. Bavinck's is a dogmatic realism. And so he must appeal to the doctrine of the Logos to guarantee the "organic connection and correspondence" between the mind and reality. "God...is the light by which the truth or essence of things becomes visible and by which at the same time our mind is able to see and recognize that truth" (*RD*, 232). This is Bavinck's way of overcoming the subject-object problem.

Bavinck, then, is a realist for he argues that through sense and understanding, the mind, we know things. Also, he describes the operations of the mind in penetrating detail. He holds that in the act of understanding, the formation of concepts, there is not just the dependence of mind on the materials from the senses, but the ideas derived through understanding have an immediate certainty. This last claim glosses over the fact that our ideas are merely a possible or potential grasp of things. To become more than mere ideas, they must be confirmed, be verified. In the next article I will argue that Thomas Aquinas gives a more complete account of knowing, an account that overcomes the subject-object problem by giving an alternative account of objectivity—that knowledge of truth is attained only in the second act of intellect; namely, judgment.

A Christian Mondrian

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Just as Paul simultaneously compares the church to a body and a building and speaks of a growing temple (Eph. 2:21), and Peter calls believers living stones (1 Pet. 2:5), so also the world is both a history and a work of art. —Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*

Introduction

As an art historian I am concerned about a tendency to accuse Mondrian's and all kindred forms of "pure" or so-called "absolute" modernist abstract art of being "utopically" farfetched. Yes, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was, and still is, in a sense utopian, though we should be grateful for it: his classic "De Stijl" paintings ought to make us constructively ashamed of the way the world is. In this essay perhaps the basic Christianity of the painter may show through on a deeper level than the orientalizing fad of Theosophy, in parallel with the other founders of abstract painting.¹

There is no doubt that as a young painter Mondrian developed and expressed a fondness for the fashionable Theosophical vocabulary of his time. It is unclear, however, how much it determined the painter's practice of faith or influenced his best efforts as an artist. There is room to question whether the Theosophical side of Mondrian has been exaggerated and whether his mature writing might have a closer kinship with the Dutch Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper and especially Herman Bavinck. After an introductory orientation concerned with Theosophy, abstract art, and Mondrian's earlier life, I will consider justification as a theological notion in the Protestant tradition and its link to Mondrian's artistic passion for equilibrium as a form of aesthetic justification. Mondrian will thus be portrayed as the single Protestant among the founders of abstract painting. Yet in his project Mondrian wants to go

1. Despite the Neolithic origins of conceptualized abstraction, even aestheticians often assume that abstract or non-objective art is an exception, that art is essentially representational. After a hundred years of modern abstract painting, it is time to insist that that is no better than assuming that instrumental music is not true music.

beyond justification to projecting the Kingdom of God and God's justice. I follow this up by considering parallels between Mondrian's eschatological vision and that of Herman Bavinck, even though the latter's language is not exactly the same as Mondrian's phraseology; the comparison is not direct but analogical. The Calvinist Bavinck regards God's eternal counsel and decree along with its working out in history as a work of art. This is my case for restoring to Mondrian the Christian Reformed foundation of his faith.

Mainly since the appearance of Sixten Ringbom's *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (1970) there has been such a distinct tendency to dispose of the question of spiritual significance in early abstraction by charging as much as possible to Theosophy that even what should have been taken as obvious signs of Russian Orthodoxy in Kandinsky's writings are ignored; similarly, there are attempts to stretch such neutral spirituality to cover as much as possible of Malevich, a baptized Catholic who had enough trouble with the Stalinists defending pure form, let alone faith. Now, however, appeal to Theosophy seems the only permissible secularist way to account for anything spiritual in the work of Mondrian beyond the forgivable caricature that the extreme "purity" of his classic paintings looks compatible with a Calvinist background. Yet we shall see that there are reasons for considering Mondrian to be the Protestant founder of abstraction.

Like the other founders of abstract painting before World War I, Mondrian was indeed interested in Theosophy, but the question is whether that was a substitute or a supplement for Christianity. The point must be to see what more confessional religious systems were taken for granted by artists drawn to this turn-of-the-century *symboliste*, orientализing, syncretist tendency as a supposedly neutral cultural alternative to creedal Judeo-Christian religion. There are certainly statements by Mondrian that accord with Theosophical rhetoric, but even on that score a distinction might be made between Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Beginning in 1907, Rudolf Steiner, a Catholic interested in Goethe and science but troubled by Theosophy's hostility toward fundamental Jewish and Christian principles, began to formulate his own schismatic movement, founded in 1912, called "Anthroposophy" to indicate that it did not pretend to divine wisdom. Hence it seems significant that Mondrian always held onto the publication of Steiner's addresses to the Netherlands Theosophical Society in 1908.² Nevertheless, I am not concerned with

2. Carel Blotkamp, *The Art of Destruction* (London: Reaktion, 1994), 42. Charles Pickstone has suggested in "Mondrian, Don Cupitt, and the Cheshire Cat," *Theology* 89,

Anthroposophy but rather with Mondrian's mother tongue of Dutch Calvinism.

Theosophy and Anthroposophy had a role in broadening Mondrian's scope, yet as he entered his classic phase there are signs of turning away. A definite detachment is evident in a letter of 5 September 1920, written to Theo van Doesburg about the Belgian painter-sculptor Georges Vantongerloo's technical approach to color: "He approaches it just like an ordinary Theosophist."³ Whatever discontent lodges in this statement, Mondrian was then prepared to adduce a specifically Christian figure. In "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence" (1920) he speaks of the conservatism of inherited wealth as not the only hindrance to "the new spirit": "Today, however, the new spirit has nothing to gain from a total upheaval of our society: as long as men themselves are not 'new,' there is no place for 'the new'" (144). This is a clear allusion to St. Paul's popular trope of "putting on the new man," which originally had the dualistic meaning of spirit as positive over and against body or the world as negatively natural (Col. 3:9–10; Eph. 4:21–24; Gal. 3:27).⁴ True,

no. 729 (May 1986), 187–94, that the attraction of Theosophy was that it "neatly filled the gap left by the failure of orthodox Christianity to appear intellectually respectable, promising admittance into occult secrets and an escape from the scientific materialism which was associated with what was seen as the vulgarity of commercial bourgeois culture"; also, it seemed a way around "the dilemma of educated and scientific people who, alienated from Christianity and unversed in theology, could so easily fall into the maw of gnosticism dressed up in scientific clothes" (189). For Mondrian, the Theosophical writings would have been "a sort of parody of Calvinistic spirituality: disciplined, logical, austere, and unsentimental, truthful to the materials used and without illusions; but in their purity they are entirely unsacramental" (190). As for the dualism "which leaves matter lifeless and the spiritual vague and intangible" (191), it seems, in his writing, that Mondrian is able to escape dualism by a dialectic of surmounting one opposition in the name of yet another more enveloping one. Is this something learned or confirmed by his reading Gerald Bolland (see p. 46, n. 14 below)?

Robert P. Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," in Kathleen J. Regier, ed., *The Spiritual Image in Modern Art* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), 163–84, hopes not to confine the Theosophical Mondrian to the literary *Symbolisme* of the 1890s; but showing that the painter was interested in Theosophy earlier than had been thought only highlights having nothing to say about any work after *Evolution* (1910). Fortunately, Welsh gives in a footnote an anti-Theosophical remark as the painter was approaching his classic phase: in a note in *De Stijl* 1 (1917) "Mondrian rejects the imitation of [N.B.] astral colours' as incompatible with his approach to painting which he then described as 'abstract-real'" (183, n. 33).

3. Piet Mondrian, *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: Hall, 1986), 133; hereafter referenced in text. Importantly, Vantongerloo failed to distinguish "between the manner of nature and the manner of art."

4. Even the statement about wealth is reminiscent of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, where, after reminding us that by "grace, . . . our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . though

an essay of 1922, “The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today (Architecture Understood as Our Total Non-Natural Environment),” produced statements on faith and religion as such in which both Theosophy and Anthroposophy seem personally superseded, for one thing, by a general religion-of-art idea which may have served to loosen the hold of Theosophy and Anthroposophy. For example: “Art advances where religion once led. Religion’s basic content was to *transform the natural*; in practice, however, religion always sought to harmonize man *with nature*, that is, with *untransformed nature*.” Here “untransformed nature” seems open to the meaning of *unredeemed* nature. Continuing: “Likewise, in general, Theosophy and Anthroposophy—although they already knew the *basic symbol of equivalence*—could never *achieve the experience of equivalent relationship, achieve real, fully human harmony*” (169).

A preliminary word about this key Mondrian term “equivalence.” In our philistine age many students are given the impression that the perpendicularity in Mondrian is simplistically “about” an active vertical male and a passive horizontal female in sex. This adolescent notion is based on a few very brief notations made in notebooks before the classic period began and only one or two brief comments in Mondrian’s essays with countless other binaries mentioned in “equilibrated relationships”; curiously, the great Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, whom we will compare here with Mondrian, runs into a similar problem with religious emotion.⁵ All the more unfortunately, what is lost in the popular carica-

he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich,” says: “I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, ‘He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.’” (2 Cor. 9: 13–15 RSV).

5. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–08); hereafter *RD*. Bavinck had a certain anti-aesthetic attitude in reaction to a subjectivist position inherited from Romanticism and allied in particular with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834); but then, so did Mondrian when that was what was meant by art. Obviously equating art with sensuality will not capture Mondrian’s artistic essence (even when Mondrian very occasionally refers to the erotic): “One...naturally, slips into the error of confusing and equating religious feeling with sensual and aesthetic feeling,” Bavinck writes. “Known to us all from history is the kinship between religious and sensual...love and the passage from one to the other. But equally dangerous is the confusion of religious and aesthetic feeling, of religion and art. The two are essentially distinct.” Bavinck follows this, however, by matters on which Mondrian did in fact speculate (see *RD*, 1:267). The sexual motif of vertical=male, horizontal=female occurs in the architect Adolf Loos’s notorious essay “Ornament and Crime” (1909; Fr. trans. 1913) precisely as *infantilistic*.

ture is an important meaning: not that dialectical “equilibrations” do not naturally obtain between the sexes, or that this *natural* condition is dispensable; but that the natural is only the beginning of something else; namely, the *spiritual*, which is rightly accessed *through* the natural. The vertical male and horizontal female sounds like hand-me-down Theosophy compared with what this painter is saying in regard to how sensuality in dialectical equilibration may of course be *natural* enough; nevertheless, the existence of the cultural or the spiritual is the anti-naturalistic point. What could be more basically Christian, then, in view of what Mondrian writes again and again about decidedly *not* being “natural” than Paul’s words: “But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural and then the spiritual” (1 Cor. 15:46 NAB). This is a recurrent principle for Mondrian.

Notions of the young Mondrian bolting out of the established Dutch Reformed Church and taking up Theosophy have created the impression that Mondrian intended to leave his father’s Calvinist faith behind in order to become a more avant-garde Theosophist. This story is sufficiently incomplete to amount to falsehood. Carel Blotkamp reports testimony of Mondrian’s lifelong friend Albert van den Briel to the effect that the painter began to read Theosophy at the turn of the century “when after a fierce religious crisis he turned his back on the Calvinist faith of his parents.”⁶ All I can say to this is that our friends may misinterpret our motives, since it is a fact that Mondrian (at the time, “Mondriaan”) signed up, after leaving the rather slack established Dutch Reformed Church, for an all the more theologically serious secessionist Reformed group, as we shall see. Blotkamp does also call attention to Mondrian’s exposure to certain Catholic opinions,⁷ which would at least have prepared him for the breadth of knowledge (Catholic and Lutheran as well as Calvinist) of the best new Reformed theology in the Neo-Calvinist reformist group where he seems to have been at home, some of the possible repercussions of which we can entertain here. For in actual fact, the great early abstract

6. Blotkamp, *Art*, 34. The Theosophical/Anthroposophical element in Mondrian has doubtless been exaggerated. However much it determined the mature painter’s early “spirituality,” what is at stake is the source and staying-power of a default religious attitude determining his best efforts as an artist. (Although it is tempting to associate him with the townhouse of the New York Theosophical Society, which was founded by Madame Blavatsky herself and located close to his two New York studios, the Society had not yet moved there.) Retaining a sentimental fondness for the fashionable Theosophical vocabulary of his time as a young painter will hardly matter if Mondrian’s mature intellectual phraseology declares the experience of an up-to-date Calvinist.

7. Including, early on, his Catholic friend Jan Troop as well as an ex-priest, Mathieu H.J. Schoenmakers; later (in 1922, 1930), two of Mondrian’s three brothers became Catholics. Blotkamp, *Art*, 47, 110–11, 222–23.

painter Mondrian was more of a son of the Reformed Church—albeit not in its state-established version, thus arguing all the more for his early religious commitment—than has been thought.

As a spectator, since youth, of Mondrian, and afterward as a scholar, I have always carried around the notion that the master's classic abstract "Neo-plastic" compositions of the 1920s (especially) are "about"—in that they convey insight into the workings of—a sense of justification. Reading though the master's many published texts with this in mind, however, something struck me halfway through. The texts began to tell me something else. Besides the usual evidence of, for me, justificatory "equilibration," the artist was going on about how he wished that the ideal justifications within his painting could somehow be made to solve human problems in the social world outside the work: obviously not by some arbitrary "objective" imposition of a schema but through the stresses and strains of human dialectics. This world-improvement campaign seemed irrelevant until I could see it as an extension of justification just as Mondrian had been saying all along. I now see that even what once seemed like an afterthought, the social vision of Mondrian, is by no means superfluous to his aesthetic of equilibration. That is easy to say; but if my longstanding notion of the individual painting as a matter of justification makes sense in conjunction with justification as a major Protestant theological preoccupation, then so may an extrapolation from there to what it took Mondrian longer to tell me as akin to the idea of an Isaiahan Kingdom of God and His Justice.

Here, after considering justification as such and a wider purview of the Kingdom, it will be possible to refer to Herman Bavinck's masterwork, the *Reformed Dogmatics*,⁸ and then to one of the masterworks of Piet Mondrian in the 1920s as well.

Importance of Justification

Let us consider the notion of the justification, by which sin since Adam is forgiven, as a question of divine accountancy with the scales of justice possibly in mind. We speak, after all, of a sin's *remission*, meaning that something is remitted like the payment for a debt. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536ff.) Calvin's sense of justification, which is qualitatively final, consists of a remission of sins by virtue of a subtraction or debit thanks to the addition or credit of the righteousness of Christ

8. *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1906–11) is the edition upon which the recent English translation is based.

(III.xi.xx). A negation of evil subtracted is accounted for by a surplus of good, restoring a balance. Citing Isaiah, Calvin says that “sin makes a division between man and God” (III.xi.xxi), which is a deficit that only grace can overcome.⁹ If we consider that dimensions are quantities, and proportions are qualitative relations; and if we consider the aesthetic importance of proportions—as qualitative relations of quantities—then in a classic abstraction by Mondrian the sizes of the rectangular areas (and qualitative differences of color) as well as the proportional distances between them will seem, when perfectly attuned, “justified” in a sense analogous to the theological sense of righteousness attained.

The justification of man and the world is, of course, only necessary because of the Fall of Man. Mondrian had recourse to a terminology of moral justification before publishing at all, in a notebook entry of c. 1913–1914, speaking of rendering a thing differently “from its visual appearance,” which, he says, “is something the artist is responsible for and that is justified when [it] results from an inner feeling of necessity.”¹⁰ From the origins of the Dutch movement *De Stijl* in 1917, he constantly identifies his sense of the asymmetric balance that embodies justification in design as an “equilibrated” relationship or “equilibrated plastic” relationship. Twice in a late text, the book-length “The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships” (1931), Mondrian alludes to Adam and Eve. At first mankind lives in a perfect state, practically simply breathing “without care, without even working”; and “[t]he constant, contrasting, cadenced opposition of this breathing rhythm being equilibrated, he lives in perfect equilibrium.” In the beginning Adam is “not conscious of life,” and then: “To acquire experience and knowledge, man needs total opposition. As shown by the creation of Eve in the Paradise story, primitive man’s nature requires not only outside opposition—contrary but harmonious—but also *the upsetting of his equilibrated state*, which was originally *particular equilibrium*” (*The New Art*, 256).

The sense of justification entailed in Mondrian concerns how his classic works have always appeared so amazingly perfected, so self-evidently *rendered asymmetrically perfect*, in what the French in the eighteenth century called a pictorial “economy,” that I might account for my own first appreciation of them. I have never forgotten looking at the examples in the Museum of Modern Art at the age of about thirteen or

9. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, 7th American ed., 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 1:818.

10. Mondrian, *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks*, ed. R. P. Welsh and J.M. Joosten, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1969), 1:59; quoted in Martin S. James, “Piet Mondrian: Art and Theory to 1917,” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 11–19; here p. 17.

fourteen and overhearing a docent highlighting the relational character of the patches of primary color. He must have pointed to the red and yellow, because sixty years later I remember him saying, "How much blue does the eye need?" Immediately I recognized that that was just what I was already discerning. I also already knew that this was a matter of active asymmetric balance; that is, of in some sense *justification*. More than anything circumstantial, however, it has seemed to me since then that Mondrian's definitive abstractions deal with active, inescapable, asymmetrical balances that raise the question of aesthetic justification.

Justification, of course, was the first rallying cry of the Reformation as soon as Luther posited that salvation requires "faith alone." Theologically, justification betokens atonement. Mondrian's classic paintings ostensibly propose situations of reciprocal balance with larger and smaller areas of primary color, closer and farther apart along an asymmetric perpendicular grille-work, often with wider and narrower black bands. In their composition—sometimes even in the relational arrangement of primary-colored rectangles of various sizes on the studio wall¹¹—they evoke situations of compensation as proportional "toppings-up." In his writings reciprocity and reciprocality are everywhere applied in a constant refrain of equivalent plastic relationships. Thus we seek here to apply a concept of justification to Mondrian, the Protestant among the founders of abstraction, in analogy with the ostensible balancing of the asymmetries of the primary colors in his most definitive paintings of the 1920s and with an aesthetic of asymmetrical balance shadowing the theological idea. If this seems a single-minded view of the works in question, it is nevertheless a comprehensive one.

The real lesson has theological overtones that are inevitably Christian in the way they come down from the Reformation in the central current of disputes about justification. In this we should bear in mind that on the most ordinary level craftsmen know the pleasure of justification as a setting right, a sense of getting things "squared away" as when the carpenter justifies adjacent edges by eliminating a discrepancy or as the printer justifies his type in respect to the limits of the page—one imagines, with a nice feeling of eliminating one more imperfection in the way things are. Mondrian is more dialectically complex than the craftsman because he has to set up a likelihood of disunity with only a few categorically different elements—primary colors presented in differently proportioned rectangles defined by only perpendicular black lines—in order to make

11. This has its precedents in early modernist picture-hanging; see Joseph Masheck, "Pictures of Art," *Artforum* 17 (May 1979), 26–37.

something of them by rectifying or justifying their situation. Yet that is still the source of a marvelous sense, in consequence, that because equilibrium has been earned and established after all, some idealistic things actually do prove to be worth the effort. It is as if the painting got to say, “*Now* who’s being ‘realistic’!” As a matter of fact, Mondrian did like to say that his Calvinistically pure abstract art *really was* “realistic” unlike the phony realism that settles spiritually for so much less, especially when it puts on a pretty face.

It does seem somehow Protestant to think of the this-worldly aspect of justification in craftsmanship, in carpentry, or in printing as a bringing of adjacent forms into material alignment with one another. Before becoming a Catholic, John Henry Newman made a similar observation himself in explaining justification: “In the abstract it is a counting righteous, in the concrete a making righteous.”¹² As for the real world, where works are obliged to live up to faith, Newman offers:

Serious men, dealing with realities, not with abstract conceptions, entering into the field of practical truth not the lists of controversy, not refuting an opponent, but teaching the poor, have ever found it impossible to confine justification to a mere declaring of what is also by the same grace effected. They have taken it to mean what they saw, felt, handled, as existing in fact in themselves and others. When they speak of justification, it is of a wonderful grace of God, not in the heavens, but nigh to them.... (Newman, 109)

At a point in the New Testament that quotes the Old Testament—a point that everybody aware of the Reformation is on the lookout for—the RSV shows a proliferation of the verb “to reckon,” which strikes me as carrying decided connotations of bookkeeping or accountancy. This is in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans from which it is enough to give only the first and most momentous of the no fewer than eleven examples and which also introduces a synonymy with the verb “to justify”:

What, then, shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. (Rom. 4:1–4; cf. Gen. 15:6 and other NT examples)

In Luther’s German the equivalent recurrent verb to this use of “justified” is *gerecht*, i.e., “set right,” and the equivalent of “reckoned... as righteousness” is *zur Gerechtigkeit gerechtet*, which seems forceful, something like “rightly set aright” or “rectified to rectitude.” What is more in the Dutch *Statenvertaling* (1637), which in Mondrian’s experience would have been

12. John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification* (1838; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 70.

as familiar as the Authorized Version, the same is consistently true through the whole chapter with the obviously parallel meanings of “justification” as *rechtvaardigmaking*, “justified” as *gerechtvaardigd*, and “righteousness” as *rechtvaardigheid*. Looking so closely at this Protestant hot spot may show us something important to Mondrian’s apperceptive outlook, so to speak; that is, what comes as *unreckoned* cultural presumption.

Without referencing Protestant theological justification, the philosopher of art Hendrik Matthes has raised the question of justice in elucidating what Mondrian meant by an “exact plastic of mere relationship.” He speaks of Mondrian’s “Neo-Plastic prophetic vocation” to herald “the realization of universal harmony” by means of a new plastic art realizing that more general possibility—inspiring, in life as well in his precisely balanced formal structures. “According to Mondrian,” he writes, “the spiritual cannot be properly expressed in material forms, but reveals itself only in equilibrated relationships freed of all form and meaning.” Addressing the projection by which Mondrian himself likened achieved Neo-Plastic equilibrium to a good society, Matthes quotes his writing as early as 1918–19 in the journal *De Stijl*, house organ of the De Stijl movement, that “equilibrated relationship in society signifies what is just” with “the idea of justice” assumed.¹³ The question is how this relates to modern Reformed theology.

Concepts of justice and justification play a steady part in Mondrian’s unfolding view of art. While justification concerns the vindication of the individual soul before the judgement seat, the ransom-like justificatory sacrifice of Christ underwrites intra-human justifications. From “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917) onwards, Mondrian’s term “equilibrated relationship” plays this role in painting, between reciprocal parts, and beyond painting as well, in justifications of self and other.¹⁴ For example, in the “Dialogue on the New Plastic” (1919), Mondrian writes: “If... we see that equilibrated relationships in society signify what is *just*, then one realizes that in art too the demands of life press forward when the spirit of the times is ripe” (78). Later, in “Pure Abstract Art” (1929), he writes:

13. Hendrik Matthes, “Mondrian’s ‘Exact Plastic of Mere Relationship,’” *Kunst & Museumjournaal* 6 (1994–95), 71–83; here, 71.

14. The actual term “equilibrated relationship” is apparently derived from the Leiden University neo-Hegelian philosopher Gerardus Bolland’s *Pure Reason: A Book for the Friends of Wisdom* (1904); early on, Bolland might have attracted Mondrian by his gnostical and/or Theosophical ideas about early Christianity. If so, the term was a saving grace.

The concept of equivalent relationships is characteristic of our spiritual outlook today. Traditional moral feelings and concepts have become unrealistic due to the changed conditions of life. Fundamentally, the old morality already contained them: brotherhood, friendship, etc. It is the idea of justice. In the economic sphere, this is realized through equivalent exchange (pure trade). (224)

This seems somewhat corrected in “The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships” (1931):

From the viewpoint of the new morality, which demands justice, none of [the basic] human qualities can exist unless they are reciprocal. Given the inequality among men, the new morality cannot therefore demand these qualities before a certain degree of mutual equality is reached. For the time being, it can demand only the establishment of pure relationships and the proper education to create the equality that logically leads to the realization of these qualities. Today’s mentality is not capable of realizing them, but it is capable of *observing the logic of justice*. (273)

Some notion of justification as an evened-off fit and more—here imputed to Mondrian in painting—can be gained from Herbert Arthur Hodges, an Anglican who appreciates Catholic and Calvinist views on the subject; especially for his sense that once evenness and balance is restored (to the relation between man and God), something better than the merely equitable can be expected. “[T]he gift of justification,” writes Hodges, “[is not] confined to the cancelling of the charge-sheet and the release of the prisoner. Justification is far more than mere acquittal and remission of penalty.”¹⁵ He continues: “Man cannot win favour by being righteous, he can only obtain favour by being accounted righteous...to be justified must mean primarily to be reckoned as righteous...”; with the Reformation, however, “on the Protestant side we find a determined attempt to tie down ‘justification’ to ‘acquittal’ [as if to say *mere* symmetry] and to deny that it means anything else at all.”¹⁶ On the Catholic side (in caricature, “good works” instead of “faith”), Hodges commends the Council of Trent’s decree on justification (Session 6, ch. 7) as proclaiming something more than the neutrality of returning as it were to a zero-degree of blame or error. The decree insists that when sin is forgiven: justification “is not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just, and of an enemy a friend...”¹⁷ One could say that the very *composition* of a person’s human relations is

15. *The Pattern of Atonement* (London: SCM, 1955), 67.

16. Hodges, 72–73.

17. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, trans. J. Waterworth (London: Burns & Oates, 1848), 34.

improved, thanks to a general “‘infusion’ of righteousness.”¹⁸ Perhaps this is why it seems so difficult to extrapolate gracefully from Mondrian’s wonderful intuitions in the single painting to the wider bringing about of the Kingdom. The Neo-Calvinist Herman Bavinck, soon to be surveyed here, had likewise respected the Catholic position but stuck to his guns with a “forensic” notion of justification, which may, however, be more than mere symmetry by taking circumstances into account.¹⁹

Projecting the Kingdom

As mentioned above, canvassing the writings of Piet Mondrian with a view to justification has turned out to highlight something beyond justification; namely, the project by which the painter hoped and expected his aesthetic in painting somehow to inspire a better society so that, if the artist’s approach to composition bears any comparison with soteriological justification, the social direction beyond may be likened to the utmost utopia of the eschatological Kingdom of God and His Justice. With such an expanded horizon, let us consider Mondrian’s published writings with a view to possible parallels with Herman Bavinck, given that Mondrian’s idea of extrapolating from a justified state in the single painting to society at large in the Kingdom of God has a likely analogue in the Bavinck of whom Brian Mattson writes: “One begins to see clearly what Bavinck has in mind when he maintains that the *imago Dei* can only be fully treated by including *human destiny*—that is, eschatology.” A restoration of Adam in paradise is not enough for “a complete picture of the image of God”—which entails humanity.²⁰ The Kingdom of God may not prove so separable from the realm of singular justifications after all.

We cannot read Mondrian’s essays without noting everywhere his aesthetic of “equilibration” as a subject of aesthetic and quasi-moral approbation. In his first published essay, “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917), the painter writes:

With the advancing culture of the spirit, all the arts, regardless of differences in their expressive means, in one way or another become more and more the *plastic creation of determinate, equilibrated relationship*: equilibrated relationship most purely

18. Hodges, 74.

19. Cf. Bavinck in his Stone Lectures: “Finally, we may acknowledge that dogmatics, especially in the doctrine of the *ordo salutis*, must become more psychological, and must reckon more fully with religious experience.” *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans & Green, 1909), 209.

20. Brian C. Mattson, *Restored to Our Dignity: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 219.

expresses the universal, the harmony, the unity that are proper to the spirit. (*The New Art*, 29)

This is Mondrian's constant conceptual refrain. From the start, it never suggests mere compromise but always a dialectical engagement. Although acknowledged even earlier, the principle attains to definitive stature in the classic format of an asymmetric black lattice partly occupied by the primary colors plus white, or more than one white. Mondrian's determinate relational equivalents effect a sense of justification in "pure" painting:

The abstract plastic of relationship expresses this prime relationship *determinately*—by the duality of position, the perpendicular. This relationship of position is the most equilibrated because it expresses the relationship of extreme opposition in complete harmony and includes all other relationships.

If we see these two extremes as manifestations of the inward and the outward, we find that in the new plastic the bond between spirit and life is unbroken—we see the new plastic not as the denying of the fullness of life but as the *reconciliation* of the matter-mind duality. (30)

In view of the painter's Calvinism, one might already wish to take the term "determinately" predestinationally. At least we can say the perpendicularity on which so much of Mondrian's art depends cannot be other than calculated:

Although composition has always been fundamental to painting, all modern painting has been distinguished by a *new way* of being concerned with it. In modern art, especially in Cubism, composition comes to the forefront and finally, in consequence, abstract-real painting expresses *composition itself*. While in the art of the past, composition becomes real only if we abstract the representation, in abstract-real painting composition is directly visible because it has truly *abstract* plastic means. (39)

Already, however, much as conventional composition was the basis of the new "real-abstract" painting, traditional religion may prove to have been historically entailed in Mondrian's (thus more truly religious?) modernist utopianism based on Isaiah's view of the Kingdom of God and God's justice as its footing. This may be true even as art was purported to be on the verge of displacing religion. Art expresses the consciousness of an age, and religious art expresses consciousness of the universal while profane art celebrates the individual in ordinary daily life.²¹ Truly religious art transcends the commonplace and provides an entry point into the universal.²²

21. "Subjectivization of the universal—the work of art—can express the consciousness of an age either in its relationship *to the universal*, or its relationship *to daily life*, to the *individual*. In the first case, art is truly *religious*, in the second, *profane*." Mondrian, *The New Art*, 42.

22. "A high degree of the universal in the consciousness of an age, even if it is

Mondrian appeals here to religiosity as something more than a matter of vague spirituality. When we come to such claims as these, we do seem to have a believer on our hands: "*In abstract-real plastic man has an opposition to the natural through which he can know nature and thus gains knowledge of the spirit. In this way art becomes truly religious*" (50). Similarly:

Modern man...is capable of seeing the inward in equilibrium with the outward, and conversely; through relationship he knows both opposites. Precisely in this way, truly modern man sees things *as a whole* and accepts life *in its wholeness*: nature and spirit, world and faith, art and religion—man and God, as *unity*. (51)

It does seem important to pay attention to points in the artist's writing wherever emphasis on reciprocal relationships admits of a reading in accord with a juridical justification, a sense of exchange, in analogy with humanity's atonement as compensated by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In such passages something is elucidated in respect to the objective relations of non-objective forms that no one in Calvin's time could have conceived as a matter of art. Had it been, he might have applauded.

Mondrian's sense of taking faith out into the real world, and of hoping somehow to assist in bringing about the Kingdom of God, proves consonant with the Dutch Calvinist theology of his own day. Even early, an insistence on considering his abstract art "realist" was part and parcel of a campaign to somehow bring out into the world a practical sense of reciprocal justification that becomes diagrammatically ostensible in the paintings. For example: "What made free painting possible was the unique vitality of modern life, which was strong enough to break with *form*. Since pure *destruction* is impossible, modern life had to *construct* the new: a pure equilibrated plastic expression of relationship," which was possible because of what is sometimes called common grace in Calvinism:

Free painting was able to develop because our time brought recognition that every expression *manifesting life—including art—is good and justified; that all expressions of real life are completely justified, even in their imperfection*. Rightly so, for mankind spontaneously takes the *right way*, the way of progress. (62)

Because social reconstruction—in faith, the bringing about of the "Kingdom of God"—is the true horizon of Mondrian's vision of world-improvement by abstract art, it is significant that both pietistic religion and secular socialism are taken as inadequate to the spiritual requirements of

spontaneous intuition, can elevate its art above the commonplace; but *truly religious art* already transcends it by its very nature.... Such an art, like religion, is united with life at the same time as it transcends (ordinary) life.... Art—although an end in itself, like religion—is the means through which we can know the universal and contemplate it in plastic form." Mondrian, *The New Art*, 42.

humanity. The exclusive inwardness of the former is inadequate because it is sterile; the latter fails to do justice to the need for cultivation and development.²³

In “The New Plastic in Painting,” the term “plastic,” of course, refers to “Neo-Plasticism,” Mondrian’s revisionist sense of the plastic arts (i.e., those in which material holds the forms with which an artist invests it). By the end of this essay a Calvinist sense of what is primarily determined and an emphasis on clarity as lack of obscurity seem almost as religious as aesthetic:

Determinateness, clarity are necessities both in life and in art. *Philosophically*, we find the determinate in knowledge—although only the highest knowledge expresses the universal purely. *Aesthetically*, we find determinateness through pure plastic vision. . . . *Religiously*, clarity is faith, in the sense of direct contemplation. (72 n. x)

The universal is only accessible *indirectly* as veiled aesthetic vision opens the possibility for and gives way to clearer faith-knowledge.²⁴ There is even a moral dimension to this clarity:

Faith as a humanized, individual vision of God (its common and corrupt form) is *unclear, vague*, and largely misleading. In outward life, evil arises from the unclear: good manifests itself as *clarity*. (72 n. x)

The “Dialogue on the New Plastic” (1919) is an exchange between a painter and a singer; the painter equates strong primary color with rectilinear lines in oppositions that bring out significantly reciprocal (or “justificatory”) contrasts in an art no longer subject to nature. “*Relationship* is what I have always sought,” Mondrian the painter writes, “and that is what all painting seeks to express” (*The New Art*, 76). Such relations deserve to be extrapolated from painting to the outside world, as *De Stijl* artists were hoping to do. Mondrian expects social life at large, including religion, to follow his *De Stijl* principle of equivalent plastic relationships.²⁵

23. “One cannot cultivate the inward exclusively. Whoever tries this discovers its sterility—as we see in much of our so-called religious and social life. True social life involves outward culture in the first place but also contains culture of the inward. This means that the outward must be *constantly in process of cultivation*, that is to say, life does not tend to the outward *for the sake of the material* but only as a *means for its development*. Thus true socialism signifies *equilibrium* between inward and outward culture.” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 66.

24. “As such, faith is identical with the highest knowledge: a knowledge of the universal and a transcendence of aesthetic vision, which can only contemplate the universal through a more veiled manifestation: it is contemplation of the universal in all things.” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 72 n. x.

25. “If, for instance, we see that equilibrated relationships in society signify what is *just*, then one realizes that in art too the demands of life press forward when the spirit of the time is ripe. . . . All expressions of life—religion, social life, etc.—always have a common

Art is essentially a conscious but social activity. Primitive artists are “purely spiritual” insofar as they “express spirituality through objective plastic, through *composition*, through *tension of form*, and through *relative purity of color*”; otherwise, their “*subject matter*...remains religious art.” When the artist is asked, “Could profane art then be just as *spiritual*?” the answer is, “All true art is *spiritual*, no matter what subject matter it represents. It reveals the spiritual, the universal, as I have said, by its *mode of plastic expression*” (80). Reminded that what he prefers as real in older art “was created in a religious age: an age of religious *form*,” the singer asks, “Then is their art as antiquated as the religion of that time?” only to be told, “The art, like the religion, is not outdated for all, but only for those who are conscious of a new era.” This is admittedly a difficult point because it will not do to associate disbelief with Neo-Calvinism (as with modernism in Catholicism). On the other hand, if Theosophy is referenced here, even it seems to acknowledge the painter’s pre-Theosophical religiosity. In fact, often when Mondrian purports to advance a secularist modernity he seems conscious of his own religious footing. Were “[t]he Primitives right for their time,” the singer asks, “just as you think your ideas are right for the future?” The reply:

[J]ust as the spirit of the age, and therefore religion, became more *abstract*, so subject matter had to disappear.... I repeat: when the spiritual was dominant as *religion*, the spiritual had to come to the fore in that way; later, in a more *secular* age, the worldly had to dominate expression. (81)

The upshot is that while Mondrian’s attempt to initiate a utopian society can be considered secular, its values should derive from once common religious values spilled over as it were into the secular realm (as is sometimes said of Calvinism). After an exchange about subject matter in the old and the new art, our painter says:

[A]s the spiritual began to merge with the secular, it became more and more apparent that the spiritual did not reside in *religious* subject matter *exclusively*; otherwise, with the decline of religious subjects, all spirituality would have gone out of art. (81)

This dialogue was followed up with a three-way conversation between an “abstract-real painter,” a naturalistic painter, and a layman: “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Dialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City)” (1919–20). Here the abstract-real painter sees the play of reciprocities of neo-plastic painting as a virtual blueprint for a more harmonious society:

basis. We should go into that further; there is much to say.” Mondrian, The New Art, 78.

Pure plastic vision must construct a new society, just as it has constructed a new plastic in art—a society where equivalent duality prevails between the material and the spiritual, a society of equilibrated relationship. (99)

Beyond the justifications of art, for the world to come the abstract-real painter hopes first to see “joy and suffering...*opposed in equivalence*,” and only then, after “*repose*,...[a] deepened beauty enabl[ing] us to experience the feeling of freedom, which is joy” (118). As the new society will integrate material and spiritual human needs, effecting it will require sacrifice:

We must begin by sacrificing ourselves for an ideal, because at present the new society is no more than that. *In everything we do we do must begin by creating an image of what society must one day make a reality. (119)*

So the new painting makes the image of utopian life imaginable.

In “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence” (1920), it might again seem that the tragic is derided in favor of a more affirmative, optimistic modernity. But what is bad is the *un-equilibrated* tragic, i.e., tragic affect (ultimately Romantic) that does not participate in a dialectic of equilibration. Consider that the general population thinks profound art must be dour:

The old conception, which desires the tragic, predominates in the masses. Because of this we have art as we know it, our theaters, cinemas, and concerts such as they are. Tragic plastic is a negative force by which the old conception imprisons us. It serves in moralizing, preaching, and teaching.... Let us not forget that our society wants *the useful along with the beautiful!* (137)

The “tragic” in contention with the modern: now there is something to *equilibrate*.²⁶ Stimulated by the Futurists’ embrace of the future, in

26. Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (1989; repr. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2004), 76, says that Mondrian

gave an idiosyncratic but fascinating value to the word *tragic*. He used it as Buddhism uses the term *dukkha*, pain or suffering, to refer to the obviously painful things in life and to all transient experience, however joyful. Nature and man’s life insofar as they are untouched by the universal are tragic.

Lipsey quotes a footnote in “The New Plastic in Painting”:

The sensitivity of artistic temperament is necessary in order to perceive the plastic expression of the tragic; one must be an artist to express it.

The artist sees the tragic to such a degree that he is compelled to express the nontragic. In this way he finally found a resolution in the plastic expression of pure relationships. (*The New Art*, 53 n. b)

Six months before the painter died in New York, several of the new, more existentialist “abstract expressionist” painters (Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and, helping to draft it but without signing, Barnett Newman) published a famous statement in the *New York Times* (13 June 1943): “We assert that only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.” What then did Mondrian contrarily mean? His was possibly a Christian

“The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists’ *Bruiteurs*” (1921), we are not surprised to hear optimistic Futurism praised for its certainty. Here we even find a reaction against original Calvinist strictness in that Calvin wanted only psalms sung in the liturgy: “most people do not understand that the ‘spiritual’ is better expressed by some ordinary dance music than in all the psalms put together” (151). But “The new art springs from an aesthetic conception quite different from the old; the absolute difference between them lies above all in the new art’s clearer and more advanced consciousness.” Old art was too much about subjective romantic self-absorption:

The new spirit, on the other hand, is distinguished by “certainty.” Instead of a question, it brings a “solution...” The tragic ceases to dominate. The old painting was of “the soul” and therefore tragic, whereas the new painting is of the “spirit” and therefore beyond domination by the tragic...” (152)

Again, with the anti-Calvinist jeer of psalmody to the exclusion of hymnody: once art’s “animality” has been destroyed, man will prefer mechanical to animal sounds:

Rhythm produced mechanically by matter alone will echo his individuality less than the rhythm produced by the human voice: *with regard to its timbre*, the rhythm of a pile driver will affect him more deeply than any chanting of the psalms. (153)

In “The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today” (1922), faith as such is on Mondrian’s mind, even under supersession by a new function for art:

Whereas “faith” requires a superhuman abstraction to produce the experience of harmony in life, and science can produce harmony only intellectually, art enables us to experience harmony *with our whole being*. It can so infuse us with beauty that we become *one* with it. We then *realize* beauty in *everything*....

How? By equilibrated plastic relationships. Applying the standard of Neo-Plastic painting will allow “*the external environment [to] be brought into equivalent relationship with man*” (168). For now, conditions are not right for this to be realized; art’s achievement here will be limited to art. Why? Up to the present religion had only adjusted people to raw nature,

theological statement. Consider Victor Strandberg, “A Hell for Our Time,” *The Christian Century* 85, no. 36 (1968): 1105, quoted by Donald G. Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 239:

World history finally ends not in tragedy but in a restored paradise that goes through tragedy—the direction of the cross. The essence of tragedy is “a sense of injustice, permanent and unresolvable, never to be remedied.”

Not what Nietzsche meant; but that is possibly not the point.

and even though Theosophy and Steiner's Anthroposophy understand the idea of equivalence and harmony, they cannot achieve it.²⁷

The same problem was all the more firmly in Mondrian's mind in the next year. As the great paintings of the 1920s came into being, their author seems to have committed less thought to print. A brief text, "The Neo-Plastic Architecture of the Future" (1925), makes clear that what Mondrian has been doing in painting since the turn of the decade goes beyond conventional composition:

Neo-Plasticism, which grew out of Cubist and Futurist ideas, is based, in painting, on the great law it has revealed: that of *pure equilibrated relationship*. . . .

It is important, however, to point out that by "equilibrium" Neo-Plasticism means something altogether different from the equilibrium of traditional aesthetic. Neo-Plastic harmony arises from *constant oppositions*. The harmony of Neo-Plasticism is therefore not traditional harmony, but *universal* harmony, which to the eyes of the past appears rather as discord. (197)

As for the outside world, "Home—Street—City" (1926) is a progress report towards utopia with the artist wishing he could experience more social fraternity than he does, consoling himself with art in the meantime. Pure utilitarianism left to the engineers (as under Soviet Productivism) is denied; but in "Pure Abstract Art" (1929), Mondrian hopes for great general application of the principle of (can we say) justification and dares to take on the opposite of all justification—*inequality*:

Pure abstract art becomes completely emancipated, free of naturalistic appearances. It is no longer natural harmony but creates equivalent relationships. The realization of equivalent relationships is of the highest importance for life. Only in this way can social and economic freedom, peace, and happiness be achieved. . . .

Inequivalent relationships, on the other hand, the domination of one over another or over others, have always led to injustices. Inequivalent moral and material relationships are the cause of all past and present suffering. (224)

The short book on "The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships" (1931), summarizes much about "equivalent relationships" as a matter of establishing a condition of justification at large. Mondrian speaks of an "old morality" that is individual and particular and contrasts with a "new morality" that is *social* and concerned with *universal international justice*.²⁸ He is convinced that such a new life is arising

27. See the excerpt from Mondrian's 1922 essay at p. 40 above.

28. "The new morality is that of *social life* in contrast to the morality of the past, which strove toward the same goal but in reality fostered only particular life, individual or collective. While the morality of the past was sustained by church and state, the new morality is sustained by society. Its content, conceived abstractly, is *universal international justice*. For while the old morality, despite its essential content, in reality sustained the different particular forms—each at the expense of the others—the new morality is capable of realizing the equivalent relationship of the civilized world." Mondrian, *The New Art*, 274.

because the old culture and its morality is so inadequate to meet the needs of the day; in fact the exigencies of the time are destroying it and making it impossible to express spiritual qualities such as kindness, friendship, and charity. Overwhelmed with the concern to meet basic material needs people lack the strength to work for what they know they need and want.²⁹

From the great later aesthetic essay, "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art" (1936), certain points pertinent to the above take their places in the unfolding of the justification idea and its social repercussions. Dissatisfied with the public reception of a Neo-Plasticism that might make for an harmonious society, Mondrian wondered if it is "to attempt the impossible." After all, the efforts by artists to enlighten humanity would require "a content which is collectively understandable." The search, he judges, "is false; the content will always be individual. Religion, too, has been debased by that search" (291). Nevertheless, "We live in a difficult but interesting epoch. After a secular culture, a turning point has arrived; this shows itself in all the branches of human activity" (292).

Reviewing Mondrian's texts, it is curious to see him seconding Calvin's disapproval of the Orthodox icon (where one had expected an exception because of the highly conceptual form of the representation). On the icon:

To have emotion aroused by pure plastic expression one must abstract from figuration and so become "neutral." But with the exception of some artistic expressions (such as Byzantine art³⁰) there has not been the desire to employ neutral plastic means, which would have been much more logical than to become neutral oneself in contemplating a work of art. (295)

This is in line with Calvin's negativity in the *Institutes*, where the icons actually come in for special censure (I.xi.14–16). Mondrian's iconoclasm is also so dialectical, however, that one wishes Calvin could have known it:

29. "That a new life is arising is confirmed by the fact that life today shows this often terrifying opposition to the old culture and its morality. Because man still retains much of the crude and the animal in him, excesses and even crimes occur. Instead of trying to justify them, let us emphasize the establishment of pure relationships and purified forms, which will keep these vestiges of man's primitive state to a minimum, so that the new life can develop without terrible upheavals. But the exigencies of present-day life and the different situations it creates also increasingly destroy the morality of the past. Spiritual qualities such as kindness, disinterested love, friendship, charity, etc., become increasingly difficult to practice in life today. The individual, increasingly concerned with material cares, has no strength to spare; but it is no longer defensible for one man to profit at another's expense simply because of their inequality." Mondrian, *The New Art*, 274.

30. Mondrian adds this note here: "It should be noted that despite their profound expression of forms, lacking dynamic rhythm, such works remain more or less ornamental."

In removing completely from the work all objects, “the world is not separated from the spirit,” but is on the contrary *put into a balanced opposition* with the spirit, since the one and the other are purified. This creates a perfect unity between the two opposites. (297)

It is, by the way, also plausible to think of Mondrian following a Calvinist principle of avoiding representation of even plain crosses.³¹

In his last years in London and New York, 1938–44, two or three short manuscripts and some stray notes show Mondrian thinking about religion in a very general manner, hoping to displace the religion of the churches. In them he several times expresses the notion that his Neo-Plasticism of equilibrated relationships system might be considered something like a religion without dogma. The whole struggle, however, would seem to have unremarked congruency with the last generation of Calvinist thought in Holland.

Theological Parallels

The Calvinism in which Mondrian was raised obviously had views about justification distinct from the Lutheran and Catholic conceptions. Once we understand that Mondrian started out a more active Calvinist than has

31. Viewers who find Latin crosses in Mondrian’s paintings of the 1930s with perpendicular parallels should bear in mind the painter’s negative, equally Calvinist, comments on even the plain Christian cross as a motif. In 1917 the cross is a symbolic obstacle as well as (fetishistically?) “too absolute”:

Ancient wisdom represented the fundamental inward-outward relationship by the cross. Neither this *symbol*, however, nor any other symbol, can be the plastic means for abstract-real painting: the symbol constitutes a new limitation, on the one hand, and is too absolute, on the other. (*The New Art*, 45–46)

In 1919–20 the Christian cross is not to be singled out any more than “the arms of the windmill” or other occasions of perpendicularity; as “rather literary,” it is subject to being “constantly destroyed in the New Plastic” (*The New Art*, 99). In 1923, in “No Axiom But the Plastic Principle,” Calvin himself would have seconded Mondrian’s argument that even truth is no defense against symbolic contamination: “In the symbolic, the purely plastic becomes impure because the symbolic manifests itself not as art but as truth—therefore impure, untrue, because the element of form becomes ‘a form’ (a cross, for example)” (*The New Art*, 178). In the *Institutes*, Calvin thinks people would learn more about Christ’s reconciliation of mankind by reading the Gospels than from (in the Catholic manner) “a thousand crosses of wood or stone” (I.xi §7; 1:122).

The belletrist Michel Butor defends seeing Mondrian’s forms as Christian crosses, especially in canvases from 1935–39, as something “tragic”: Butor, “Mondrian: The Square and Its Inhabitant” (1965), trans. William Brown, in his *Inventory: Essays*, ed. and trans. Richard Howard (London: Cape, 1970), 235–52, esp. 246–47. He seeks chivalrously to supply such works with Christian significance without appreciating that the reason Mondrian eschews the tragic is ultimately that the Resurrection initiates the beginning of a new world beyond tragedy (cf. pp. 53ff. above).

been supposed, there is every reason to believe that he may well have been aware of the new Dutch Calvinist theology.

For what has become clear is that when the artist moved to Amsterdam in November 1892 he was part of a new church just then forming, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, which was a union of two groups that had broken away from the National Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*): the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*, formed after a Secession in 1834, and the break-away led by famous activist preacher Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), the so-called *Doleantie* (Grievors). Both groups had found the National Church theologically lax. Kuyper is also famous for founding the Free University of Amsterdam and a political party, the Anti-Revolutionaries, which enabled him to become the Netherlands' prime minister.

It happens that on moving to Amsterdam in 1892, the twenty-year-old Mondrian had already started confirmation classes in the new separatist Reformed church, and in July 1893 he was listed as confirmed. True, he did join the Theosophical Society in 1909; but when in 1915, four years after he moved to Paris, his church membership was de-registered, this was an administrative and in no way punitive cancelation and implied no shunning on Mondrian's part.³²

Readers of the *Bavinck Review*, but not art folk, know that Kuyper had grown up in the Dutch Reformed Church and had learned about modern culture at the University of Leiden. Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), in the next generation of clergy, closer to Mondrian in age, was son of a pious minister in the new secessionist church. He went to its seminary and then decided to take on the modern and scientific culture of the late nineteenth century, also at Leiden. On finishing his doctorate in 1880, he reflected more circumspectly that though his secular studies “benefited” him, they were also a “spiritual impoverishment” (*RD*, 1:13). Whereas Kuyper was a celebrity, Bavinck—who collaborated with Kuyper on liturgical and devotional texts, despite episodes of strife—was more like the introspective Mondrian.

Mondrian's early approaches to nature, condensing and crystallizing it, at first through Cubism and then in pure abstraction, were akin to Goethe's *Naturphilosophie* and Schelling's sense of nature's equilibrium. Yes, such thinking was germane to the formulation of Theosophy as such. But it was notably also of concern to the Calvinist theologian Bavinck as he wrestled, more creatively than Kuyper, with the problem of Darwinism

32. J.M. de Jong, “Piet Mondriaan en de gereformeerde kerk van Amsterdam,” *Jong Holland* 5, no. 3 (1989), 20–23; thanks to Dirk Jongkind, Fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge, for translating.

in order to account for the Fall and eventual redemption of the whole natural world. Much of Bavinck's theology assents to a Trinitarian sense of creativity, in particular, a "trinitarian idea that grace restores nature" (*RD*, 1:18)—i.e., restores with a sense of justification. Likewise a Calvinist common grace, emphasized by Bavinck, is evident in the way, for him, "Christianity...creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new" (1:19). There has been some speculation on bringing the popular Kuyper into the orbit of Mondrian,³³ but in turning to the more cerebral young theologian, however, one may see a certain high-serious brilliance that would have attracted Mondrian's own genius to Bavinck.

The elder churchman certainly seems a more nineteenth-century figure. True, Kuyper does make some interesting remarks on aesthetics in his *Encyclopaedie der heilige Godgeleerdheid* (1893–94) concerning *relations* including parts and wholes such as interested Bavinck as well as Mondrian. Kuyper saw relations as means of negotiating between a subject and the outside world.³⁴ Some might even have the consistency of an image:

The artist creates harmonies of tints, which presently are seen to be real in flowers that are unknown to him. And more striking than this, by our abstract thinking we constantly form conclusions, which presently are seen to agree entirely with actual relations. (83)

33. Notably, James D. Bratt, "From Neo-Calvinism to *Broadway Boogie Woogie*: Abraham Kuyper as the Jilted Stepfather of Piet Mondrian," *The Kuyper Center Review* 3 (2013), 117–29. Bratt brings out the friendship and collaboration of Kuyper and Mondrian's father (as an art student in Amsterdam Mondrian stayed with Kuyper's publisher). I have delayed mention of Bratt's admirable essay partly because my view, as a lifelong student of abstract art—whereby no statement by Kuyper or anyone else on "beauty" in painting that does not encompass abstraction can possibly be aesthetically significant—was long in the making before it appeared; but also because I believe that Kuyper is simply not the answer to the question of Mondrian's religious spirit. Bratt as much as admits this in recapitulating this very section of his article in *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) by having Kuyper the only game in town so that when Mondrian "perfected the abstract style that produced some of Modernism's canonical works. He did so under the inspiration of Theosophy, not Calvinism" (244). As circumstantially placed as Kuyper was (yet also a possible oedipal object: witness Bratt's very subtitle), the young painter must also have been saddled by his obvious aesthetic limitations. Hence, even if Kuyper made Bavinck possible, only the very poetics of the latter's theological phraseology proved suitable for Mondrian's modernist abstract art.

My own principal earlier text on Mondrian is Joseph Masheck, "Mondrian the New Yorker," *Artforum* 13 (October 1974): 58–65, repr. in my *Historical Present: Essays of the 1970s* (U.M.I. Research Press, 1984), 77–88.

34. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), 67–83, 87, 93; hereafter referenced in text.

Nevertheless, for him contemporary impressionist painting was obliged to satisfy a naturalistic criterion. That life is hardly ideal, and our human stature is “marred by want and sin,” evoking a wayward yet recognizable sense of naturalistic consistency:

This produces a result like what occurs in the case of many paintings of the latest French school [he means Impressionism, but he is already behind in Postimpressionist times], which, at first sight, one sees, indeed, bubbles and daubs of paint, and even tints and lines, but not the image; and only after repeated attempts a view is finally obtained, so that those daubs and bubbles disappear, the tints and lines become active, and the image stands out before us. (479)

So also the human stature can thus be thought of as restored (or saved), as biblical miracles “restore” God’s handiwork as intimations of Parousia—or the Second Coming (501). Interestingly, Theosophists *do not* comprehend this, Kuyper thinks: they “do not comprehend sin” and “regeneration, which annuls and conquers sin” (346).

Let us then look instead at that theologian of the same church, who succeeded Kuyper in the chair of theology at the Free University: Bavinck. Both Kuyper and Bavinck came to America and delivered Stone Lectures in 1898 and 1908–09 respectively at the Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. Kuyper’s lecture on “Calvinism and Art” was an old-time Calvinist crowd-pleaser against “sacerdotalism” (read Catholicism) including the unhealthy riches of the Catholic Church.³⁵ Getting rid of “church rule” was a curious theme for Kuyper as an obviously successful politician who played on discontent with the Dutch national church as insufficiently religious. Here, for being at odds with the Catholic Church in Italy, Garibaldi and Vittorio Emanuele became honorary Calvinists. Kuyper had an inferiority complex about Calvinist support of fine art except for the triumph of the common man (beneficiary of common grace, though that seems not so much Kuyper’s cup of tea as Bavinck’s) in Dutch realism. Considering what Kuyper thought he knew of Impressionism, it is curious that the closest he came to a modern enthusiasm in his lecture was Rembrandt, about whom there was actually a conservative, anti-modern cult at the turn of the century.

Ten years later Bavinck was much more artistically discerning as well as sophisticated in facing up to contemporary unbelief. His overall Princeton theme was the “Philosophy of Revelation.” In the “Revelation and Culture” lecture, art was not a special theme. His *bête noire* was “ethical culture” as a substitute religion, and he seems apprised of

35. Kuyper, “Calvinism and Art,” in his *Calvinism: Being the Six Stone Lectures Given at Princeton Theological Seminary, U.S.A.* (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1932), 216–57.

contemporary Catholic (sometimes heretical) “Modernism” as well as revisionist Protestant and secularist-humanitarian views of Jesus.³⁶ Not that these tendencies pleased him, but he was aware of being in a transitional time in which it was not possible to say whether modern culture was “at strife” with Christianity or religion in general. Believing in nothing supernatural, however, struck him as simply not being religious, and he showed a sympathy with originally monastic asceticism that would have appealed to Mondrian, the eremitic bachelor.

I am drawn to Bavinck by not having wished to take an easy route to the constitutionally liberal Kuyper, who had a solid reputation for bringing young people into the fold with his wildly successful, alternative Anti-Revolutionary party with its anti-pluralist “pillarisation” policy of keeping Protestant, Catholic, and secular elements of society separate. Rather I am also led to go for the one who was a brilliant theologian above all else. My assumption is that a Mondrian who dropped out of one Calvinist church in order to take—and pass—a confirmation course in another was not necessarily a constitutional liberal and may well have been interested in the most serious Reformed theologian available. He would have been interested in Bavinck’s way of comparing Catholic and Lutheran theologies against one another with amazing arrays of Scriptural citations. I would assume that the painter was as serious in investigating his own theology as he was politically, later on, in writing to a scholar of the Russian anarchist Bakunin (Arthur Lehning, 1899–2000)—much as the New York abstract painter Barnett Newman later took an interest in Kropotkin. And yes, rather than gloss over his own heretical proclivities, I assume Mondrian would even have liked to read the Bavinck, who put a certain limit on Theosophy, as had Kuyper; but Bavinck called a spade a spade by characterizing the Theosophical founders Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant as apostate Christians drawn to Buddhism (*RD*, 1:200).

With Mondrian’s thinking in mind, let us inquire into the themes of individual justification and the more social atonement leading to the Kingdom of God in Bavinck’s *Dogmatics*. In Bavinck’s view, Calvin “gained a double advantage” by separating faith and repentance in justification, which the Lutherans had conflated:

In the first place, faith could now be much more closely related to justification, and justification could now be viewed in a purely juridical sense as an act of acquittal by God. Lutheran theology on this point...is far from clear, but Reformed theology owed to Calvin its clear insight into the religious character of justification.... (3:527)

36. “Revelation and Culture,” in Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 242–69.

Bavinck gives a sense of *ex post facto* asymmetrical reciprocity to the principle of justification: "Before the elect receive faith they have already been justified. Indeed, they received this faith precisely because they have already been justified beforehand," thanks, according to Scripture, to "the decree of election when they were given to Christ and Christ was given to them, when their sin was imputed to Christ and his righteousness was imputed to them" (3:583). Needless to say, the asymmetrical reciprocity derives from the fact that Christ is the Son of God.

The direct connection of justification with justice as such is clearly brought out. God weighs human culpability against his mercy with the handicap of grace. Though there is a justifiable wrath of God against human ungodliness and wickedness, the Gospel displays a righteousness that is apart from the law and given in Christ.³⁷ Bavinck then adduces much Scriptural evidence for according justification this forensic sense such as Luke's statement that "tax collectors 'justify' (i.e., acknowledge the justice of) God" (4:206).

We must acknowledge here that in painting, all of Mondrian's interminable compositional adjustments, each relative to the others, advance much more an effect of successive resolution than if everything had been equal to start. For insofar as compositional justification is "compositional," it is also re-constitutive. As for the term itself, some Reformed believers have "stated that the word 'justification' could have a broader sense," though others "held to the more narrow meaning of justification"; nevertheless for Bavinck,

the word as such allows us to understand by it the entire work of redemption. Just as the work of re-creation (*herscheping*) can in its totality be called a rebirth (*wed-ergeboorte*), so it is also from beginning to end a justification, a restoration of the *state* and the *condition* of the fallen world and humankind in relation to God and to itself. (4:208)

If sometimes Scripture implies an ethical sense, "when the reference is to the justification of sinners before God, it always still has a juridical meaning" (4:209).

37. "In Christ he loved the world and reconciled it to himself, not counting their sins against them.... Although his wrath was revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of humans, yet in the gospel God brought to light a righteousness apart from the law.... This righteousness, therefore, is not opposed to his grace, but includes it as it were and paves the way for it. It brings out that God, though according to the law he had to condemn us, yet in Christ has had different thoughts about us, generally forgives all our sins without charging us with anything.... Justification, therefore, is not a an ethical but a juridical (forensic) act; nor can it be anything other than that because all evidence of favor presupposes favor, and every benefit of grace presupposes grace." Bavinck, *RD*, 4:206.

This twofold advantage over Luther's view that Bavinck finds in Calvin has ramifications to which we might trace Mondrian's emphasis on the ultimately utopian societal impact of his never merely aesthetic "equivalent plastic relationships." For, as Bavinck writes, "Faith and justification...are not the sum and substance of the order of salvation. Luther tended to favor stopping there, to view Christian liberty especially as a deliverance from the law...." And "since repentance was included in the Christian life, Calvin could do justice also to its active side," preparing the believer, in effect, to go out and *bring about the Kingdom*. He continues:

[F]aith cannot stop at the forgiveness of sins but reaches out to the perfection that is in Christ, seeks to confirm itself from works as from its own fruits, girds itself with courage and power not only to live in communion with Christ but also to fight under him as king against sin, the world, and the flesh, and to make all things serviceable to the honor of God's name. (3:527–28)

At the end of his mammoth *Dogmatics* Bavinck links personal justification with the comprehensiveness of the Kingdom to come. For after the Second Coming and the Last Judgment comes a Renewal of Creation. This last should even satisfy secular hopes for an optimistic conclusion, managing to extend to Darwin's sense of "a still higher destiny in the distant future" *as well as* the "extravagant...expectations of the Socialists [obviously not Christian Socialists], these millennialists of unbelief, who think that in the future state of their dreams all sin and struggle will have vanished, and a carefree life of contentment will be the privilege of everyone" (4:646).

The Last Judgment is relational for Bavinck in that different souls are entitled to different magnitudes of heavenly glory in respect (recompense?) for circumstantially different conditions on earth. Such is the case when Bavinck speaks of relative glories among the elect. But it there is also a sense of relative relation even between offenses as in:

All sin is absolutely opposed to the justice of God, but in punishing it God nevertheless takes account of the relative difference existing between sins. There is infinite diversity also on the other side of the grave. (4:714)

Relativities also hold within a final comprehensive unity; for eventually all believers—and worthy fellow travelers—"enter into" a "fellowship" that,

though in principle it already exists on earth, will nevertheless be incomparably richer and more glorious when all dividing walls of descent and language, of time and space, have been leveled, all sin and error have been banished, and all the elect have been assembled in the new Jerusalem. (4:723)

Ultimately, then, "[t]he organism of creation is restored," and "[t]he great diversity that exists among people in all sorts of ways is not destroyed in eternity but is cleansed from all that is sinful and made

serviceable to fellowship with God and each other” (4:727). Now, if the world as we know it is to be redeemed, and in it we are to be ourselves, what shall we actually do in it?

The service of God, mutual communion, and inhabiting the new heaven and the new earth undoubtedly offer abundant opportunity for the exercise of these offices, even though the form and manner of this exercise are unknown to us. That activity, however, coincides with resting and enjoying. The difference between day and night, between the Sabbath and the workdays, has been suspended. Time is charged with the eternity of God. Space is full of his presence. Eternal becoming is wedded to immutable being. (4:729)

Nothing is more Mondrianesque in this scenario than the sense of how a beautifully balanced asymmetric abstraction could exemplify the prospect of a world of social reciprocity, even if he does not speak of heaven. And yet, in eschatological terms, whoever thinks that redemption is “pie in the sky” is completely wrong; for the New Jerusalem is quite as *material* as the present world:

[T]he New Testament teaches the incarnation of the Word and the physical resurrection of Christ; it further expects his physical return at the end of time and immediately thereafter has in view the physical resurrection of all human beings, especially that of believers.

And note where this leaves the Theosophist: “All this spells the collapse of spiritualism, which if it remains true to its principle—as in Origin—has nothing left after the day of judgment other than spirits in an uncreated heaven” (4:718).

Mondrian’s equivalent of Bavinck’s utopian vision is a society governed by the principle of the “equilibrated plastic relations” that one can appreciate, before the fact, in his high Neo-Plastic painting compositions. From the beginning of *Reformed Dogmatics*, the Kingdom as such is contemplated as a goal to which art can only help us part way: “Religion is life, reality; art is ideal, appearance,” writes Bavinck.

Art cannot close the gap between the ideal and reality. Indeed, for a moment it lifts us above reality and induces us to live in the realm of ideals. But this happens only in the imagination. Reality itself does not change on account of it. Though art gives us distant glimpses of the realm of glory, it does not induct us into that realm and make us citizens of it. (1:267)

I think Mondrian would have argued that his new form of painting went farther as to a point of being able to say, “We have our citizenship in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). And I also think Bavinck might have accepted this. Certainly he would have thought abstract art—where formal relationships, including Mondrianesque equilibrated plastic relationships are utterly ostensible—might provide a less distant glimpse of such sheer justification than most ordinary representational art manages to do.

A Mondrian who opened the *Reformed Dogmatics* or who heard a preacher influenced by it—especially a Mondrian who had already produced such poetic-symbolistic images as *Evolution* (1910–11; Gemeentemuseum, Hague), the candidate Theosophical favorite—would have been drawn in Bavinck’s way to its extended treatment of the basic idea that a humanity made in the image and likeness of God bridges the gap between the single soul and society. This means, among other things, that the posited image and likeness of God is surrounded by a “paradise” that seems essentially collective, which Bavinck compares to “the Kabbalah’s idea that God, who is infinite in himself, manifests himself in the sefiroth, or attributes, and that these make up the Adam Cadmon [human being]” (2:561).

In pointing to the New Jerusalem of the world to come, one might say Bavinck offers a telling figure of pictorial representation versus *abstract* painting. First, Theosophy is blamed for positing some intermediate form of corporeality, fudging the opposition between matter and spirit; for “[a]n ‘immaterial corporality’ is a contradiction that was inauspiciously taken from Theosophy into Christian theology and seeks in vain to reconcile the false dualism of spirit and matter..., of thesis and antithesis” (4:620). Relatedly, worldly detail has no place in prophecy. “The error of the old exegesis was not spiritualization as such but the fact that it sought to assign a spiritual meaning to all the illustrative details,” so that “[t]he realistic interpretation... becomes self-contradictory,” as Mondrian would have loved to read (4:659). After all, Mondrian liked to term his abstract painting—for once *truly*—“realistic.” He would have liked Bavinck’s discussion of essentially symbolic ideas in Ezekiel’s vision of the future (4:660), and the way, when it comes to the problem of the last days in the Book of Revelation, the fate of Satan as scourge of humanity completely departs from realism in a narrative that is “not in chronological sequence” but rather “in a logical and spiritual sense” (4:684).

In the same passage in which he “spells the collapse of spiritualism,” Bavinck writes,

Whereas Jesus came the first time to establish...[the] kingdom of God...in a spiritual sense, he returns at the end of history to give visible shape to it. Reformation proceeds from the inside to the outside. The rebirth of humans is completed in the rebirth of creation. The kingdom of God is fully realized only when it is visibly extended over the earth as well. (4:718)

In light of Bavinck, Mondrian’s worthily utopian view of the Kingdom as a projection of the Neo-Plastic culture of equivalent relationships, in one or another diagrammatic form, seems hardly farfetched as a Christian destination. Bavinck again, on the New Jerusalem:

But although these are ideas interpreted...by images, they are not illusions or fabrications, but this-worldly depictions of otherworldly realities. All that is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable in the whole of creation, in heaven and earth, is gathered up in the future city of God—renewed, re-created, boosted to its highest glory. (4:719–20)

This would be an obvious point of departure for projective-utopian thinking on the ultimate relation of artistic representation to a changed world outside such as we find in Mondrian's own more utopian prophecies. In Bavinck's eyes:

More glorious than this beautiful earth, more glorious than the earthly Jerusalem, more glorious even than paradise will be the glory of the new Jerusalem, whose architect and builder is God himself. The state of glory (*status gloriae*) will be no mere restoration (*restoratie*) of the state of nature (*status naturae*), but a reformation that, thanks to the power of Christ, transforms all matter (ὕλη, *hylē*) into form (εἶδος, *eidos*), all potency into actuality (*potentia, actus*), and presents the entire creation before the face of God, brilliant in unfading splendor.... Substantially, nothing is lost.... But in the new heaven and new earth, the world is as much as restored.... (4:720)

—or shall one say, finally *justified*.

Analogy and the Calvinist Logic

Analogy, which one tends to think a medieval mode of thought, gained new prominence in the early twentieth century thanks to the analytical tendency of formalization. It is no accident that after the analytical phase of Cubism, in which he participated, Mondrian's abstract painting should find significant analogies with other fields since in the early twentieth century formalism became a very basis of abstract thought. So the classical abstraction of Mondrian participates in a general early modern formalism which affected philosophy itself, including symbolic logic, not to mention music and language; and indeed, in 1917, in "The New Plastic," Mondrian looked to logic as a modernist guide:

Likewise, the new spirit comes strongly to the fore in *logic, just as in science and religion*. The imparting of veiled wisdom has long yielded to the wisdom of pure reason, and knowledge shows increasing exactness. The old religion with its mysteries and dogmas is increasingly thrust aside* by a clear relationship to the universal. This is made possible through purer knowledge of the universal—insofar as it can be known. (*The New Art*, 43–44)

In a note at the asterisk, Mondrian defensively parallels Kandinsky's theosophizing: "In *On the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky points out that Theosophy (*in its true meaning and not as it commonly appears*) is another expression of the same spiritual movement we now see in painting" (44 n. u; emphasis added).

The present essay is obviously an overarching matter of analogy, a form of reasoning approved on an analytical basis by the philosophically inclined physicist Ernst Mach in 1902: “I have...defined analogy as the relation between two systems of concepts, in which we become clearly conscious both that corresponding elements are different and that corresponding connections between elements are the same.”³⁸ Such analogies can be more than idle affinities, offering insight as homology or abstract rapport; relations such as equilibrium can be found, not as stylistic accoutrements but as centers of stylistic gravity in the working procedures of a theologian and a painter. Mach proceeds:

It seems that in mathematics, where things are indeed simplest, was the first field in which analogy first clearly revealed its clarifying, simplifying, and heuristic role. At any rate, Aristotle insofar as he speaks of it, relates analogy to quantitative relations of proportionality.³⁹

This points to an important commentary by Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle which not only illuminates why Mondrian’s classic abstractions are not grid paintings but may also serve to close the gap between Calvinist theological justification and what Mondrian meant by the essential, willfully asymmetric “equilibrated relationships” of his classic compositions; for the painter’s insistence on something more than an affectation of mathematical “equilibration” also has a counterpart in the Scholastic theology of justification.

Were Mondrian’s mature compositions based on a grid, as some presume, we might speak of a simple commutative (or associative) *equality* of their constituent units. In actual fact, they offer asymmetric mutualities composed of singular rectilinear but non-repetitive elements in what the painter refers to repeatedly in his writings as “equilibrated” relationships. Having nothing to do with the commutative interchangeability of units in a grid, these ensembles of forms evoke instead a distributive proportionality. I borrow these terms from Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of justice in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Book V, where the sense of balance in justice is quantitative as regarding too much or too little of something; for, “to suffer injustice is to have less than the

38. “Similarity and Analogy as a Leading Feature of Enquiry” (1902), in his *Knowledge and Error: Sketches in the Phenomenology of Enquiry* (1905), 5th ed. (1926), trans. Paul Foulkes, eds. Erwin H. Hiebert and Thomas J. McCormack (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976), 162–70; here, 163. In light of the greatest Anglophone aesthetic formalist, Roger Fry, I have attempted to study the philosophy implicit in Cézanne (finally solving, secondarily, the philosophical source of his famous theme of the “Cylinder, the sphere, and the cone”): Joseph Masheck, *C’s Aesthetics: Philosophy in the Painting* (Philadelphia: Slought Foundation and the Bryn Mawr College Center for Visual Culture, 2004).

39. *Knowledge and Error*, 163.

mean of justice requires,” while “to do injustice is to have more than the measure of justice. Now, the mean of justice, called the just thing, is related to exchanges and distributions as the healthful is to medicine or the well conditioned to gymnastics,” where “what is too much or too little is evil...” (§1103).⁴⁰ In his fourth lecture, “Distributive and Commutative Justice,” Thomas explains the commutative and the distributive: “the mean of distributive [justice] should be taken according to a certain relationship of proportions” (§932), while “the equal in commutative justice is not observed according to that proportionality, viz., geometrical, which was observed in distributive justice, but according to arithmetic proportionality which is observed according to the equality of quantity, and not according to the equality of proportion, as in geometry” (§950). This aspect of Mondrian, whereby the qualitative aspect of proportion over and against what could have been a repetitive grid makes such compositions *more than constructivist*.⁴¹

When as a youth I had my “How much blue does the eye need” encounter with Mondrian in the Museum of Modern Art, I was first becoming aware of this quantitative and proportional aspect; but even the same kind of thinking extends to relative position in the painted field. Let us look at one of the most logically beautiful of all Mondrian’s works: *Tableau 2* (1922) in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (see fig. 1 below). For it was while active in the De Stijl group in the 1920s that Mondrian’s rectilinear compositions attain to such an active equilibrium as is evident in this work. Here we see the relative weights of the color patches in a remarkable asymmetric balance that also concerns position within the geometric structure. For the three primaries manage to touch all four sides despite one entire corner’s being given over to a comparably solid rectangle of black; and the black patch, in turn, together with two discernibly different whites, comprises something like a rival triad of non-colors. Slim partitioning bands either do *or decidedly do not* touch—or exceed—the edge, while the halving of the open zone at the top, split between white and yellow, is akin to the halving at the left between white and blue; which also makes for a whole corner devoted to white as counterpart to the two-sided corner devoted to black. However trying to

40. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. C.I. Litzinger (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), 2 vols.; on-line at <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/Ethics5.htm> (accessed 27 November 2015). I owe the suggestion of Aquinas’s commentary to Peter McNamara, Fellow of St Edmund’s College, Cambridge.

41. I.e., analogous to the way Malevich’s suprematism manages to be *anything but* “geometric art.” Cf. my “El Lissizky: On the Side of Faith,” *Art and Christianity*, no. 71 (Autumn 2012), 2–6.

describe, this testifies to an astute play of visual intelligence, striking all at once in the painting like a strong, pure chord. The practically magnetic interdependence of parts is a pure form of that “relational composition” that long served painting as an armature for standard pictorial representation only now purged of descriptive reference—in a purgation of conventional pictorialism that is a leitmotif of the painter’s writing.

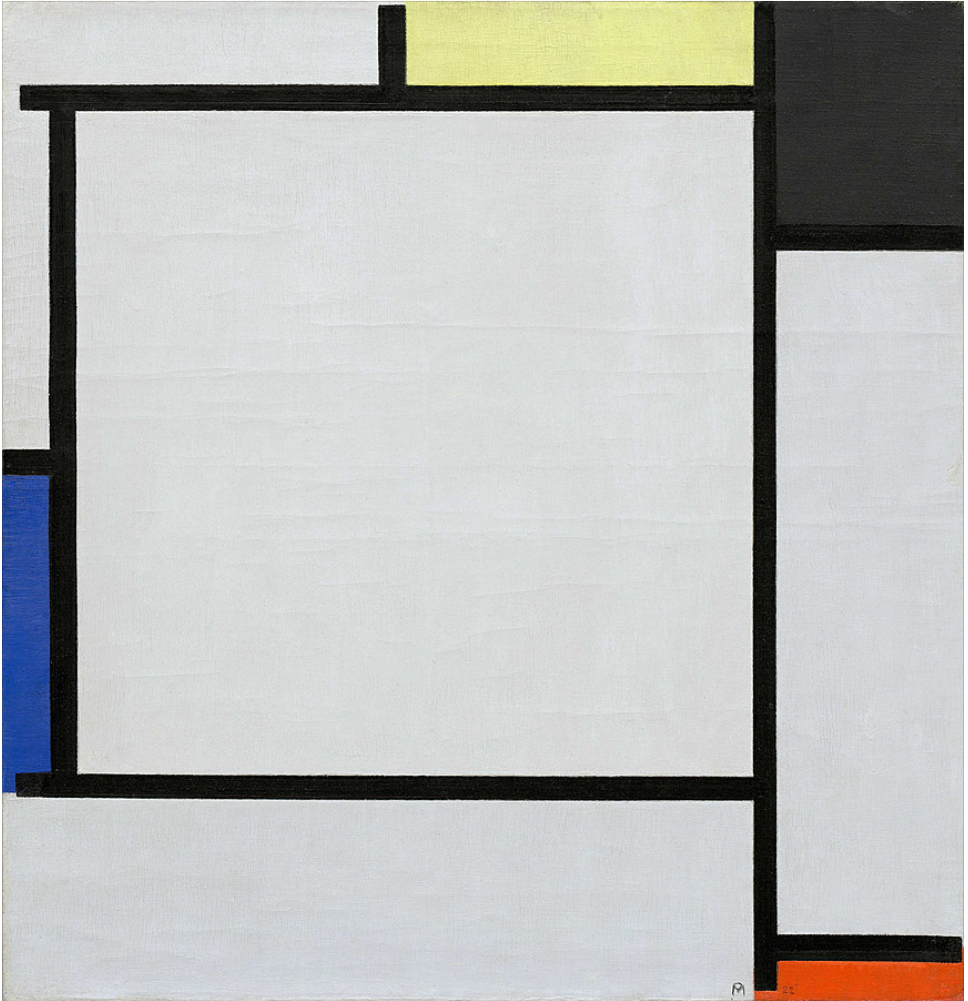


Figure 1: Piet Mondrian, *Tableau 2* (1922)
© 2015 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

Can we pair with this sense of parts so actively participating in an harmonic whole in Mondrian's *Tableau 2* something as comprehensively harmonic in Bavinck's theology? In 1919–20 ("Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue...") the painter's preoccupation with the internal relations of the work has first to be established:

Yes, all things are a *part* of the whole: each part obtains its visual value from the whole and the whole from its parts. Everything is expressed through *relationship*. Color can exist only through *other* colors, dimensions through *other* dimensions, positions through other *positions* that oppose them. That is why I regard relationship as *the principal thing*. (*The New Art*, 86)

Now there is a beautiful passage in the *Reformed Dogmatics* that could almost have inspired the then only implicit social ideal of relationality in just such a Mondrian masterpiece: "the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively one after the other and contemporaneously side by side" (2:577).

Additionally, classical Calvinist theology addressed the problem of the logical order of God's decrees. With predestination in mind, the question was whether God's determination of the election or reprobation (sinfulness) of any individual soul was supralapsarian (or antelapsarian), meaning that it was determined *before* the Fall of Man, or infralapsarian (or postlapsarian), meaning *after* the Fall. Owing to its many entailments—such as the foreknowledge imputed to God by his omniscience, as well as his being bound by the integrity of what are apparently the laws of his own creation—establishing the logical order would be difficult to negotiate even apart from the fact that the sequence in question should have been simultaneous at the moment of creation.

To what was important in this question in Dutch Reformed Calvinism before Bavinck (even in Kuyper's first modern schism), Bavinck offered no mere compromise but another view, one more in accord, it seems difficult not to think, with Mondrian's way of thinking. Instead of a linear chain of causes each restricting the next, he proposed to think of a field of forces allowing of what Mondrian would consider an active "equilibration." Bavinck writes:

[N]either the supralapsarian nor the infralapsarian view of predestination is capable of incorporating within its perspective the fullness and riches of the truth of Scripture and of satisfying our theological thinking. The truth inherent in supralapsarianism is that all the decrees together form a unity; that there is an ultimate goal to which all things are subordinated and serviceable.... But the truth inherent in infralapsarianism is that the decrees, though they form a unity, are nevertheless differentiated with a view to their objects; that in these decrees one can discern not only a teleological but also a causal order.... (2:391)

Perhaps we may similarly consider, as much possible at once, the mutually impinging relations between one already categorical primary color and others of the trinity red, yellow, blue, across a Mondrian canvas of the classic period (not to mention relations between lines of different widths and the areas between them) as finally simultaneously and mutually co-present.

And if, as Bavinck notes, “[g]enerally speaking, the formulation of the ultimate goal of all things as God’s will to reveal his justice in the case of the reprobate and his mercy in the case of the elect, is overly simple and austere,” soon after, Bavinck makes a statement that all the more plausibly resembles Mondrian’s dialectic of “equilibrated relationships” in painting and social life. He remarks that our human perspective is finite and limited and results in conflicts between “proponents of a causal and the proponents of a teleological world-and-life view.” But this is not so for God:

His counsel is one single conception, one in which all the particular decrees are arranged in the same interconnected pattern in which, a posteriori, the facts of history in part appear to us to be arranged now and will one day appear to be fully arranged. This interconnected pattern is so enormously rich and complex that it cannot be reproduced in a single word such as “infralapsarian” or “supralapsarian.” It is both causally and teleologically connected.... *The whole picture is marked by immensely varied omnilateral interaction.* (2:392; emphasis added)

Finally, in the same passage, Bavinck sums up in such a way as to suggest all the more adequately a classic Mondrian composition:

In short, the counsel of God and the cosmic history that corresponds to it *must not be pictured exclusively—as infra- and supralapsarianism did—as a single straight line* describing relations only of before and after, cause and effect, means and end; instead, it should also be viewed *as a systemic whole* in which things occur side by side in coordinate relations and cooperate in the furthering of what always was, is, and will be the deepest ground of all existence: the glorification of God. (2:392; emphasis added)

Perhaps we will not be surprised that Bavinck considers God’s eternal counsel and its working out in cosmic history as a work of art:

Just as in any organism all the parts are interconnected and reciprocally determine each other, so the world as a whole is a masterpiece of divine art, in which all the parts are organically interconnected. And of that world, in all its dimensions, the counsel of God is the eternal design. (2:392)

We have forgotten that a generation or two ago, in the course of treating the significance of Theosophy for Kandinsky, Ringbom also called attention to that painter’s more fundamental and perhaps more lasting Christian loyalties, in that case to Orthodoxy.⁴² Now it seems time to

42. Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of*

restore to Mondrian the Christian Reformed foundation of his faith as well.

Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting, Acta Academicae Aboensis, Ser. A, *Humaniora* 38, no. 2 (1970), 176–80.

The Natural Knowledge of God¹

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I. Three Positions

Of what value is the knowledge of divine things that is available to man in the absence of Holy Scripture and without internal illumination by the Holy Spirit? Through the ages, the Church has given three different answers to this question.

Modernists deem a *supernatural* knowledge of God unnecessary. They deny it, combat it, and recommend the *natural* knowledge of God as the only true one. They do not hold that the Bible or internal illumination is of no value, but they include both Bible and illumination among the class of *natural* givens and deny that either of them have any *supernatural* character.

The Christian Church counters by emphasizing that the supernatural knowledge of God is of vital importance. The more it is assailed, the more she is inclined to proclaim that it can be attained *only* supernaturally. She does not deny that nature declares the glory of God, that history testifies to His providence, and that God speaks into man's conscience. However, she mentions these sources of knowledge of God only "for the sake of completeness."

Guido de Brès was not so one-sided. He wrote that we know God by *two* means: "First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says (Rom. 1:20); which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse." And then: "Second, He

1. A translation of Part iii in A. Kuyper, *Uit het Woord* III (Amsterdam, 1879); repr. as *Het heil in ons* (Kampen: Kok, 1910), pp. 165–225. This study appeared in thirteen installments in the Sunday supplement of *De Standaard*, from Aug. 2 to Nov. 15, 1874. The first four installments are here heavily abridged, the remaining ones only minimally. Also omitted are the Bible texts that served as epigraphs for each installment.

makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word....”²

In the same vein Calvin wrote:

We take to be beyond dispute that there is a sense of the Divine in the human mind, indeed by *natural instinct*, and that God has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his presence, the remembrance of which He constantly renews with fresh drops, in order that no one can take refuge under the pretext of ignorance and that all should grasp that there is a God and that He is their Maker.³

Further:

God has not only implanted in men’s minds a seed of religion, but He also, lest anyone be excluded from happiness, so reveals Himself in the order of the universe and so clearly discloses Himself every day that men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see Him.⁴

The same was taught by Voetius, Vitringa, à Brakel, à Marck. It is the calling of the Reformed Churches to hold on to this teaching. They defended it against Rome, against Socinians, against Arminians.

But alas, subsequent neglect of this doctrine has destroyed the bridge that our fathers laid between Church and world. This has resulted in enmity between faith and science, an untenable separation between education in the school and education in the home, sectarianism among believers, and an inability to win back modernists who have wandered from the faith.

II. What the Church Once Confessed about this Doctrine

The natural knowledge of God is the point of departure where all the paths of piety begin. The question is: Is man since the Fall a rock or a block of stone, impervious to every sense of God and the divine? Or is his nature open to a certain revelation of God’s power in the deepest core of his being?

To know God is a demand of human nature. What sin corrupts is still our human nature. Amid our total depravity there is a natural knowledge of God, a knowledge that can be suppressed but never extinguished. Remnants of it, however small, are never absent. The sinner hates God, but he cannot escape Him.

2. Belgic Confession, art. 2.

3. *Institutes* 1.3.1.

4. *Institutes* 1.5.1.

III. Infused Knowledge of God

Knowledge of God is implanted, infused into man. It is inseparable from his nature. He cannot shake it off.

Atheists do not exist. True, some people have grown insensitive to any imprint of God's majesty. Others try to explain it away. With still others it leads to idolatry, spiritism, even deification of man. But atheists in the sense of people who are without an internal impression of God's majesty—such people do not exist.

Were it not for sin, the natural knowledge of God would have led man to true knowledge of God. Hence the absolute necessity that man be born again. Socrates, Plato—Confucius and Buddha, if you will—these noble sages beheld the radiance of God's majesty, but they never tasted the bliss of communion with His merciful love.

IV. Not Indwelling but Reflecting

The infused knowledge of God is not something that man possesses. It radiates from God from moment to moment as the steady impression on man's heart of God's omnipresent power. God has made of man's heart a mirror. That mirror may be split and broken but it still reflects God's radiance, though not His true image. The human heart, though fallen, remains open to knowledge of God. Our philosophers may talk proudly of our *capacity* for knowing God, but the Church speaks of the majestic impression of the Lord that bears down on all men.

V. Nature

Thus, *the natural knowledge of God*⁵ is not acquired through training or study. It is infused into all men. That is why all people share in it. It is inseparable from human nature and belongs to man as a human being.

Furthermore, the natural knowledge of God exists thanks to the uninterrupted radiation of God's majesty throughout creation, hence also in man who is sensitive to this radiation and is given a sense of that majesty. That is why it is called a *sensus divinitatis*, a sense of the Divine, a *semen religionis*, a seed of the relationship that ties us to God, and a *theologia innata*, a knowledge of God that is grounded in our relation to God as creatures.

5. Kuyper's term throughout is "natuurlijke Godskennis," often translated as "natural theology."

Moreover, not even sin has destroyed this natural knowledge of God. “Thou hath beset me behind and before” remains true, even if I make my bed in hell.⁶ In fact, so little has this awareness of God’s omnipresent power been taken away from us that neither the Devil and his fallen angels nor the lost in the state of utter doom can be imagined as not sensing the majesty of the Lord.

In sum, the natural knowledge of God is created into us and therefore part of our nature. It does not radiate from us but is radiating into us. And as a result of sin it bears down on us, being far from destroyed.

Meanwhile, the natural knowledge of God does not remain submerged in our unconscious. It is proper to man to try and account for this sense of the Divine. In sensing God’s omnipresent power man is entirely passive, as passive as our lungs during breathing, our eyes when touched by light, or our ears at the tremor of sound waves. He can neither block nor invite this divine power as it radiates onto him, touches him, and causes his heart to tremble. He can neither prevent God’s power from being everywhere nor his own being from being touched by it.

Man does not become active until he tries to account for those feelings and wonders what is causing his heart to tremble—in a word, when he tries to become conscious of the sense of the Divine that has risen in him.

Without further information, of course, it would never occur to man that this awareness results from the majesty *of the Lord*. At most he knows that an invisible force along secret paths has access to the inner recesses of his conscience. All the rest remains guesswork for him: guessing whether that force comes from nature or from somewhere *higher* than nature; guessing whether that force is a *personal* being or just another “force of nature”; and, supposing it is a God that works this in him, guessing whether that God is merely *one* of the Gods or always the same God and therefore the *only* God.

But this natural knowledge of God does not stand on its own. It is not left to itself but given content and explained by what a person observes in and around him. Besides that sense of God’s power in his heart, there is also nature, the human world, history, tradition, and the personal life of each and every individual human being. All this has to be taken into account and related to the innate knowledge of God if a person is to see what that power is which constantly affects him internally, and if he is to acquire *conscious* knowledge of the all-powerful God. Accordingly, our

6. Cf. Ps. 139: 5, 8.

church makes a sharp distinction between *infused* knowledge of God and *acquired* knowledge of God. Only the latter is conscious.

However, one should not conclude from this that the knowledge we gain from nature and history, tradition and life experience, is separate from and merely supplementary to natural knowledge of God, without any inner connection to it, hence contingent and to a certain extent dispensable. Such a view would ignore the essence of human nature.

Man belongs to nature and nature belongs to him. In addition, man was made to live in intimate communion with his fellow-man and therefore he cannot thrive apart from *human society*. The generation that lives today stands in a living relationship with the generations of former centuries, hence forms a part of *history* and has a claim on the benefits of *tradition*. Finally, every human being has his own life, his own experiences, and is simply unthinkable without an *internal history* of his own formation and development.

Man belongs to *nature*. Not in the sense that he was created as an afterthought, once nature was made and furnished. Rather, everything created prior to man was aimed at man, fitted for man, and given its reason to exist for the sake of man. Just as a pedestal has for its object the statue that will soon be placed on it, as a prepared meal awaits the guests who are about to sit down to it, and as a bassinet and a diaper basket await the child that is yet unborn, or, if you will, as a keyboard and a palette await the artist who will work his magic in the world of tones or colors, so the meaning of nature is not understood until the creation of man, who enjoys it, admires it, and rules over it.

Man carries within his own body the fluids and vapors, the organic and inorganic materials that are taken from nature, and so far as his body is concerned he is subject to the laws of nature. In his body he is related not just to inorganic but even more to organic nature. The whole composition of his body is the consummation of what the animal world already possessed before him. His eye is made for sight, his blood for breath, his ear for sound. The earth bears, feeds and clothes him. Nature provides virtually nothing that is not profitable to man, that man cannot use to his advantage to provide comfort, pleasure, affluence, if only to display his resourcefulness.

Thus the relation between man and nature is rooted in man's very being. It is intimate, multi-faceted, not self-invented but given with his creation.

No wonder, therefore, that the two things that belong to man as part of his being—on the one hand his indestructible sense of the Divine, on the other his belonging to nature—also relate to each other.

Nature is a tremendous force that man struggles against in his quest for self-preservation. It surrounds him like a flood that wants to engulf him. He has to fend for his very life against the stronger animal, the poisonous plant, the threatening plague, the destructive force of the elements, heat and cold, drought and rainstorms. Poor soil here and toxic soil there force him to be on guard, to look for shelter, to put up resistance. Most everywhere on earth he has to wrestle with the soil to earn his morsel of bread, and he has to fight stubborn nature for a piece of cloth to cover his nakedness. Despite this titanic struggle, nature's resistance all too often ends in man's defeat and death. The storm scoffs at the mariners' efforts. Lightning kills the shepherd in the midst of his flock. The plague returns despite your hygiene. And even if you are not the victim of such extraordinary events, still the seed of death insinuates itself into your members and nature triumphs over you when at last it sends you, exhausted as you are by the struggle, to the grave.

Today, people are less impressed by the power of nature and feel it less in the urban centers than in the countryside, and less in our temperate zones than at the pole and the equator. This is so, not because the forces of nature are so much less today, but because past struggles have armed and equipped us better against nature's onslaughts. At bottom, what else is a big city but a giant fortress to which men retreat in order to escape the tyranny, whims and vagaries—nay, the relentless persecution—of the forces of nature?

Yet nature still remains, also for us, a force that inspires awe. Our ceaseless exertions to break its direct impact show how much power it really has and how much it can fill us with dread. It is almost as if all man's labor and toil come down to a coordinated attempt by all available human strength to stem the destructive effects of the forces of nature.

Once nature is viewed in this way, we can begin to understand what it contributes to our sense of God. Natural theology has often been portrayed as a process whereby man calmly contemplates nature, observing its order, regularity and beauty, and from there ascends to a recognition of God's great power. Nothing is further from the truth. For ordinary man, such calm contemplation is an exception. Our constant contact with nature directly affects our life, our body, our struggle for survival. Not abstract reflection but restless, painful experience has acquainted us with the power of nature.

Man has been compelled to study the dynamics of nature from pressing needs, not calm observation, at first even from fear, not wonder. Just as one spies on his enemy and traces his movements, so every member of the human race—I am not talking about philosophers and scientists—has closely watched nature in his surroundings and in his own

body and has been intent on curbing its power. That is what has made our impression of the power of nature so deep, so permanent, so awe-inspiring. What impresses is not the sea viewed from the shore, the ice observed in the skating rink, the thunder storm watched from a distance, the starry heavens and the flower beds that delight the eye. No, what impresses is the sea as it looks to the survivor of a shipwreck, icebergs at the pole, lightning rods that strike, the course of the stars to a traveler through the desert, the healing herbs gathered by the sufferer from a disease—every part of nature that we come into contact with when our life or well-being is at stake.

In the struggle for life itself, man has come to understand that nature does not just consist of bits and pieces but is one single mighty power. Nature is not dead matter but a living organism. Nature does not play cruel games but harbors order, law and regularity. Nature does not just create interesting phenomena but confronts us with overwhelming force.

Thus, two forces bear down on man. The one comes to him along secret paths and touches his soul inwardly. The other comes to him from outside and touches his body outwardly. Our peace is disturbed in two ways: by the tremor of the sense of the Divine within us, and by the movement of nature in our bodies and our surroundings.

Now then, is there a connection between these two forces? Without hesitation man has said yes. They are two actions of one and the same force. The one causes the inner strings to vibrate; the other takes the forces of nature and by turns lays them down at his feet or turns them against him. That is how man has come to realize that nature and the force operative within it are two. That is how man began to see that this force does not reside *in* nature, but *behind* it, as it causes nature to seethe and ferment. Learn from the apostle Paul that what strikes us in nature is not first of all its order or beauty, but its *power*. What does he say is clearly seen and understood from the creation of the world? Read about it in Romans 1:20; it is two things: his “eternal power,” and then his “divinity.”

VI. Study of Nature and Admiration of Nature

Thus far we have emphasized that if you are looking for support of your internal sense of the Divine and awareness of God, then look at our *struggle with nature*, not at our *intellectual contemplation* of it. Neglect this advice, and before you realize it natural science will throw you off balance.

The pursuit of natural science cannot be forbidden. The struggle for life that humanity has joined with nature forces him to spy on it as

accurately as possible in all its passages and inner recesses. Knowledge is power. If man is to have power over nature he has to know it. This knowledge has to be the fruit of relentless research. And this research, if it is to yield knowledge, must be free. Not curiosity but inescapable necessity drives man to engage in natural science.

Science has brought many benefits. It has accelerated communication, improved our homes, lightened our toil, multiplied our power, promoted physical comforts, facilitated the production, preparation and distribution of our food.

We gladly accept these benefits. Believers do too. Everybody can see that they represent great gains in the struggle to alleviate suffering or ease pain or make life more pleasant. Those are gains we will not turn down.

Nevertheless there are believers who sometimes regret and deplore the successes of science. If it were up to them, they would restrict science within very narrow boundaries. They fear its success will harm their faith.

The blame for this no doubt lies in part with our natural scientists. Instead of sticking to their field they are repeatedly tempted to pass judgment on things that lie entirely outside their sphere.

That they observe nature, imitate how it works, analyze its components and reassemble them, spy on how its phenomena arise and try to trace the connections between its component parts—that is their right. But they exceed their right as soon as they use their results in order to try and erect a system that can encompass all of life.

“Creation” is not a word the scientist can grasp, for his investigations can never go beyond that point in time when creation was not already an accomplished fact.

The scientist can neither deny nor affirm whether nature owes its existence to God or is eternally self-existent. Insofar as he acts purely as a scientist, he knows nothing about that. His sense of God, his religious faith, may make it an irrefutable fact for him that all nature speaks of God, but he does not owe this certainty to his science but to operations in his spirit that have nothing to do with the investigation of matter and its forces. Altogether outside the domain of science, likewise, is the question whether the behavior he observes in nature is borne by a divine power, governed by a divine wisdom, guided by a divine love. No handbook of physics or chemistry is allowed to contribute a single thought to this question.

The natural scientist is not competent to pronounce on a person’s soul and its moral demands, on immortality and eternal life, on sin and guilt, on the redemption that is in Christ—not even on the question whether there is a God who works miracles and has his messengers perform miracles. The scientist has to account for the things *that are*

seen. Of the things that are *not seen* the scientist as such knows nothing. A scientist as such has no spiritual life; he is a person who is gifted with senses to observe nature and with a mind to conceive of the connection between its actions. That is all.

We do not deny that a scientist can at the same time be a believer in Christ and can derive support for his faith from nature. Newton and Agassiz are proof of this. We assert only this: if a scientist joins Newton and Agassiz and finds his God in nature, he does not owe this to his science but to wholly other factors that have worked on his person.

This is what our scientists most often lose sight of. They arrogate to themselves what does not belong to them. They design systems about things that lie outside their ken. Especially men of the second rank have a predilection to turn their laboratories, often with fanatical zeal, into arsenals for attacking the faith once delivered.

To name an example, by no means the worst. With great confidence they proclaim: matter cannot arise from nothing, so must be eternal; therefore there can be no question of creation; the whole notion of the Christian world regarding this question rests on ignorance and prejudice and should be jettisoned as an antiquated error.

Science is in no way warranted to make statements of this sort. Here it states more than it can account for.

To the natural scientist, the idea that matter is *eternal* is preposterous. He knows nothing about things eternal. Nature does not teach him the concept, and so little does his intellect teach him this concept that the strict demands of logic actually preclude it. Our mind requires above all that everything has a *beginning*. "Eternal" is the denial of a beginning, hence may be believed despite our intellect but can never be *required* by our intellect.

The same goes for Darwin's theory. The scientist is perfectly competent to point to the close affinity between the animal and the human body. He is competent to demonstrate that what are often called new species are merely alterations of already existing phenomena. He is even competent to venture to take as a guideline for his research the assumption that there is an unbroken transition between matter and plant, plant and animal, the animal and the human body. But further he cannot go. He is not competent to claim that it is not true that God, after forming man from the dust, breathed the breath of life into his nostrils. For him to claim that our human mind germinated from animal instinct and that this instinct germinated from the sense of touch is to confuse dissimilar things and to hold forth about colors like a blind man. Doing this, the scientist is starting to theologize and in spite of himself is turning profane.

The fact that reputable scientists are beginning to realize this themselves became apparent just recently at the opening of the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. On this occasion the famous professor Tyndall gave an address which demonstrates that one can continue to sin against an evil that one is combating, but also that men are opening their eyes to the evil.⁷

We have long felt that our government ought to guard against certain teachers in our secondary and primary schools, insufferable pedants, half-baked scientists who, instead of teaching their subject, indulge in statements about things of the spirit—although I readily admit that government action on this score can only be expected after the public has been re-educated.

But what must never happen is that Christ-believers, out of revenge for these sins of the scientists, fall out of sympathy with science itself. Just as no one has the right to combat Christianity because of the sins of its confessors, so we must not blame science for what its practitioners do wrong.

Neither an appeal to the creation story nor an appeal to the miracles and prophecies in Scripture should ever induce us to restrict the freedom of scientific research. They are two spheres that do not touch each other. Nature just is the way it is, and no one can change that by complaining about it in a mood of anti-intellectualism. That God is Creator, that He created everything, is an irrefutable truth for the believer; but to what processes matter was subjected during that event—how the creating Word of the Almighty gave being to matter and how He worked on matter once it was there—that remains undecided.

We are not in a position to assess the deeper questions with which nature confronts us until we approach it not as scientists but as humans.

When a scientist gets ready to observe nature he is equipped only with his senses, his intellect, his telescope, his weigh-scales, and so on; but when a human being approaches nature he carries with him an entirely different set of instruments, namely his inner sense of God, his sense of admiration and awe, his memory, his emotional experiences, his premonition that he is in the presence of the eternal.

Our church has never claimed that scientists discover God in nature and can read his handwriting in it. They say this about *humans*. When the Belgic Confession states that nature is like “a most elegant book, wherein

7. John Tyndall (1820–93), an Anglo-Irish physicist, was a confirmed naturalist and evolutionist. In section xi below, Kuyper summarizes the famous “Belfast Address” of 1874 in which Tyndall conceded that there is an “insoluble mystery” that science can only respect as very real.

all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things . . . ,” then it has in view not the scientist but the believer—the *sinner*, if you will. It speaks of seeing “invisible things,” whereas the calling of the scientist is precisely to read in the book of nature not the invisible but solely the visible, observable things. With a protractor and a measuring tape you will make as much progress in seeing the invisible things as when a blind person first reads braille.

Thus, when we point to nature as one of the means whereby God wants to enrich our innate sense of the Divine, we are focusing on man *qua* man, on man who brings with him his heart, his sense of God, his feelings of guilt, his sense of wonder and awe.

It is not as though one first has to become a Christian before one receives those impressions from nature. The only condition required is that one lets his human attributes do their work and not silence the voice of his inner self but remain open to the impressions that nature makes on a person.

If that is done, the Church of Christ assures every human being, also the scientist insofar as he wants to act as a human being, that nature affects, moves, and reinforces his inner sense of the Divine; that he would sinfully have to force himself *not* to hear the voice that speaks to him from the whole of nature and its multifaceted phenomena; that, try as he might, he can never wrestle free from the power and majesty, from the wisdom and order, that are impressed upon him by the creation; and that, provided he connect his inner sense of the Divine with these impressions, he too can read on the face of nature the invisible things that speak to him of God.

But no less does the Church of Christ admonish her members not to turn their backs on nature from a mistaken love of God, as though one has to flee from nature in order to be able to serve God. She warns them that such an arbitrary separation can only end in divorcing piety and life, robbing religion of reality, and depriving life of nobility and dignity. She will urge them to return to the old paths where men honored in the visible creation what has come forth out of the invisible things.⁸

Calvin expressed this in a picturesque way with the metaphor of a pair of glasses. He compared Holy Scripture to spectacles: without them you can pore over creation yet be unable to read what is written in its letters. But once your eyes are sharpened and enhanced by the instrument of Scripture, its letters escape the confusion that first prevented you from

8. Cf. Heb. 11:3.

reading them: you distinguish them, you spell the words, you grasp their meaning.⁹

Notice that Calvin does not call Scripture our *eyes*, but the glasses that come to the aid of our weak eyes. Those eyes are real; even though they have not yet led you to Scripture and are still weak, incapable of reading correctly, still they receive impressions, they discern that something is written there. And that is what our church understands by the natural knowledge of God.

From the beginning of creation, hence before Scripture was, before special revelation came, the invisible things of God, says Paul, were seen and understood from the creatures, i.e., from nature.¹⁰

Just don't trip over the word *nature*.

We are apt to take "nature" as referring to fields and forests, oceans and firmament, light waves and atmospheric waves. But here it means all things visible, all things that can be observed by your senses, hence also your body, your clothing, your house, your food and drink, along with illness and death that come with life.

That is why we emphasize this so much. The nourishment that the sense of the Divine receives from nature is not tied to a walk in beautiful meadows, but presents itself at every moment in the rich fullness of life, whenever you enjoy what is visible or wrestle with that which can be seen.

VII. The Moral World-Order

The natural knowledge of God has been enervated, eviscerated, and dishonored by classifying it among the things that can be *proved*, hence that fall outside *faith*. It was treated as a kind of philosophical forecourt through which one entered into the sanctuary of faith but which itself lay outside faith. It was used to show how far one could get in the knowledge of things divine *without revelation*, and accordingly it was hastily discarded as soon as revelation came into view. Who would be interested in knowing how we could live if there were no atmosphere? The atmosphere is real; it is what we inhale; what more do you want? Similarly, who in the world cares to know along what tortuous paths we might arrive at knowledge of God if there were no revelation? Revelation is real; we live by it; a hypothetical possibility does not interest us.

In this way the natural knowledge of God could not but end up being held in contempt. It seemed of lower, of very low status, lying outside the

9. *Institutes* 1.6.1.

10. Cf. Rom. 1:20.

area of faith, a gratuitous luxury, a kind of knowledge that scholars could indulge in but not one that suited the taste of simple believers.

For this reason we must, before going any further, wipe out, root and branch, the erroneous view that the natural knowledge of God is not as indispensable for faith as the revelation in Christ. We must remove the false idea that the natural knowledge of God is even conceivable apart from faith. We must abandon the assumption that Revelation can ever compensate for what we would miss if the natural knowledge of God were absent. We must put a stop to the misconception that the natural knowledge of God ends where Revelation begins.

All Scripture rests on the natural knowledge of God. Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs operate almost exclusively in its domain. The oracles of the Prophets about the nations are unintelligible without it; it alone justifies that the life of the people of Israel is included in Scripture. Every word in the Sermon on the Mount makes it shine. The beautiful prologue of the Gospel of John gives it the highest consecration. Paul's performance in Athens, Philippi, Corinth puts a seal on it from city to city. His letters to the Romans, the Ephesians, and the Colossians proclaim it equally. The final judgments described by the seer on Patmos determine its enduring significance for the glory that is coming.

The natural knowledge of God, far from lying outside the area of faith, is an absurdity outside of faith. It does not concern things visible. It focuses exclusively on things invisible. Nature's dimensions, shapes and colors are of no use to it. It is concerned only with an invisible something, with something that hides behind and within nature, that speaks to it from nature and affects it through nature.

Accordingly it is invariably of a serious moral character. It is not a form of arid scholarly knowledge that draws up syllogisms in order to satisfy the mind; nor a piece of philosophy that would allow shallow and untrained minds to be judges about the deepest questions of life; nor yet a set of speculations that stand outside reality and life's struggles and leave the heart cold. On the contrary, the natural knowledge of God is an article of faith for the Church of Christ. It touches the conscience of the unbelieving world, awakens it from its unbelieving slumber, and looks in all living things for points of contact with the kingdom of God.

The immediate sense of the Divine, as we saw, is the center from which the natural knowledge of God proceeds, the organ through which it operates, the indispensable condition which it presupposes. But that sense of the Divine does not remain by itself, in isolation. It comes into contact with nature and hears an echo of its own word in the life of nature. It becomes aware of something in nature that is in tune with the sense in our heart of God's omnipresent power. It is one voice in the heart

and in nature, different in sound yet vibrating from the same depths. It is not we who connect that sense with nature, but that connection already exists; we merely discover it, and that discovery confirms and clarifies our inner sense of the Divine.

Meanwhile, the light ray emitted by nature is not the only one that falls on the focal point of the human heart. Next to visible nature we are also surrounded by a human world of which we are a part, to which we belong and the life of which resonates when we become conscious of our own human existence.

What is visible in the human world does not count here. In terms of the body, man too still belongs to nature. Here we are looking only at the invisible dimension of human life—at the affects and impulses of the heart, the world of thought, those awesome factors of duty and calling, enthusiasm and passion, hatred and love, selfishness and dedication, respect and admiration, in short the whole of that immense phalanx of invisible forces that set the undulating surface of the human heart in motion, that cause it to flare up and push on, and that form the actual content of what we understand by the rich full life of man in its higher sense.

“The knowledge of God from the moral order” is what our fathers called the nourishment that the sense of the Divine receives from that mysterious world. The natural knowledge of God proceeds from the sense of the Divine that is fed first of all by our contact with nature, but secondly also by our contact with the world of man. The latter knowledge is of a higher order, hence was called the *moral* knowledge of God.

What are we to understand by this? The apostle, referring to the Gentiles, speaks of “their thoughts meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another” (Rom. 2:15). To say it in today’s language: there is a public opinion which acts as a judge of our actions also in the moral domain. In what immediately precedes these words Paul writes about the Gentiles that they are “a law unto themselves, which show the work of the law written in their hearts” (Rom. 2:14–15). Surely this is not meant in the sense of Jeremiah 31:33. There Israel is promised a future that far exceeds the blessed state enjoyed by the people of God in distinction from the Gentiles, a future state marked by having the law written on the tablets of their hearts: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts.” Now since it will occur to no one that Paul means to say that the Gentiles already possess that which was promised to Israel as something in a very remote future, then it goes without saying that his statement that the Gentiles “show the work of the law written in their hearts” must be taken in quite a different sense.

What is that sense?

Among all nations is found an idea of justice, of duty, of the difference between good and evil. No people so dull, no tribe so brutalized, no band so savage has ever been discovered where those ideas are not found. Those ideas are usually very different from ours, often quite bizarre, even absurd, at times the very opposite of what obtains among us, calling just what we call unjust, duty what we abhor, good what we deem evil. But however confused and bewildered their customs may be, the idea that there is justice and that all will be judged in accordance with it, that there are duties and that all are bound to them, that there is a difference between good and evil and that all should behave accordingly—these ideas are never lacking, are found everywhere, are held among all peoples.

Paul does not say whether these ideas are good. He says only that they have ideas about justice and duties, and that they judge each other and themselves in accordance with these ideas, whatever they may be.

This fact is exceedingly significant.

Whoever talks of justice acknowledges a power which stands above him, to which he must yield, and which he cannot ignore without moral harm. Where does that justice come from? He did not establish it, nor was it established by others. Those who described justice did not fancy that they were inventing it; instead they tried to find the purest expression of what they acknowledged to be the justice that was there and that existed all on its own.

Whoever speaks of absolute Justice senses immediately that not only he but every human being is subject to it. A king may be above the law, but not above justice; it is a power also over him. What is unjust remains unjust also for a king, even though there is no power in the world that can punish the transgressor.

The same holds for duties. Exactly what is my duty and what is yours can be open to debate; but that we have duties is known to all. In other words, there is a power that stands above us and binds us, that commands us and tells us to obey. We do not determine that duty ourselves, else it would cease to be a duty. That duty is not grounded in other people's will, for they in their turn are bound to duties. Duty is not an idea invented by our ancestors. As far back as memory goes, man has felt morally bound to obligations he is under. Thus, duty is a power that governs not just a few among us but all of humanity.

We can repeat the same about the difference between good and evil. Just where the distinction has to fall is far from certain. But no one will dispute *that* there is a difference and that we are the more secure the closer our insights approximate the true, absolute difference. Time and again we face choices. We sense at once that the alternatives are not equal. No one can tell us that the concept of choice is just imaginary.

There is a difference between doing something or not doing it. There is good in the one, evil in the other. The boundary lines are seldom sharp. Often we ask ourselves: what would be best and what would be bad in this particular case? But we know instantly *that* there is a difference. And as we search for that, what else are we groping for but the power outside of us, which knows the true difference since it is the author of it. And what else does that reveal but the awareness of a moral power which is decisive at the highest level, to which we have to conform, and which can have its ultimate ground neither in our heart nor in the will of other people.

Here again, therefore, we encounter powers, moral powers to be sure, but still *powers*. These powers do not stand outside our life, nor are they the object of philosophical reflection every now and then. They are powers that we come into direct contact with from hour to hour, powers that govern our lives, guide our judgments and determine our standards for other people's lives. They are powers that follow us in the market place and the stock exchange, but also in our living rooms and inner chambers. They are powers that are never absent, that we meet at every station on our journey, that board our steamers with us, that reappear in our colonies overseas; powers that are as inseparable from our existence as the body that we bear and the nature that surrounds us; powers that sought us out when we were children, that confronted us during our youth, that accompanied us as adults, and that call us to account even on our deathbed.

Those powers inhabit the human world. From there they creep into our hearts. Whether they reside within man's world or behind it we do not know; but we do know that the human world is the area from which they come to us. The mere presence of other people reminds us of our obligations. The mere glance of other people can call up shame and self-reproach in us. Public opinion can level a judgment in which those powers crash over us. Higher commandments may be able to shield us against such judgments, as we hope to point out below. But enough said for now if our readers will but admit that it is public opinion, the voices of men, their thoughts accusing or excusing one another, from which those moral powers of duty and justice impinge upon us, demanding unconditional submission.

VIII. Tradition

The natural knowledge of God, so the Christian Church confesses, is nourished by nature and by the moral power that is manifest in the world of man. But it is also fed by tradition.

Don't let the word deceive you. The Reformers rejected the authority that Rome extended to Tradition for knowledge of Jesus and his Apostles, because the scriptures of the New Testament suffice for that and render every contradictory tradition useless or even dangerous.

Similarly Jesus himself disavowed the authority that the sect of the Pharisees extended to tradition about Moses and the Council of Elders, because the scriptures of the Old Testament sufficed for that and rendered every contradictory tradition useless or even dangerous. "It has been said of old . . . but I say unto you!"¹¹

Special revelation is inscripturated tradition. Over against inscripturated tradition oral tradition has no authority, even though we recognize that it derives from true elements.

But the case is different with respect to the revelation in Paradise. No books were made by people who were in paradise or who spoke to Adam and Eve. In any event, none of the Bible books is older than Moses. Genealogies, fragments of poetry and prose may have been inserted in the Mosaic narrative, but we have no authentic recording of the revelation in Paradise.

This circumstance agrees entirely with the nature of Holy Writ. Its pages are a record, in stories, proverbs and prophecies, not of general revelation intended for all, but exclusively of special revelation. Yet Scripture itself points out that apart from it there is still another revelation, dating from the most ancient days, from the cradle of mankind itself; dispersed among all nations, among the whole human race; increasingly more distorted and less recognizable—in itself proof that we cannot do without special revelation.

When we consult the ancient traditions that present the course of things before and during the period of the patriarchs, we find among the oldest humans, without exception, knowledge of the true God. In the generations that followed, this knowledge came to light in surprising ways, and as history unfolded further the traces of this knowledge were still, though weakly, visible. In the family of Abram, people knew the Lord of heaven and earth; worship of teraphim had already crept in, yet the God whom they worshiped above all was our God, the God who revealed himself to Abram. Melchizedek dwelt in Canaan yet was "priest of the Most High" who blessed Abraham with a divine blessing and who is praised in the Letter to the Hebrews (following Ps. 110) as a servant of the true God, foreshadowing Christ.¹² Rebekah and Bethuel, Laban, Leah, and

11. Cf. Matt. 5:21ff.

12. Cf. Gen. 14:18–20; Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:1–4.

Rachel knew whom Eleazar, Isaac, and Jacob meant when they spoke to them of Almighty God. Abimelech and his army commander Phichol were, no less than the Pharaoh of Egypt, familiar with belief in the living God. Jonah in Nineveh and Daniel in Babylon met with traces of the knowledge of God to which they attached their testimony of the Lord of heaven and earth. The wise men from the East brought to Bethlehem's stall a weak thread which the cult of the Magi still attached to Israel's hope and expectation. In Athens, Paul came across an altar to the Unknown God and pronounced that the Gentiles too were offspring of God. "He was in the world," John writes, "but the world knew him not."¹³

We should look especially at the beautiful Book of Job. It never mentions the special revelation given to Israel. It knows nothing about tabernacle, temple, altars and priests. Job himself administers the altar to atone for his friends. We hear virtually nothing of JHWH. There is no evidence of attachment to the land of Canaan. In short, the environment where this book takes you is not Israelite but universally human. Job lived in the land of Uz. His neighbors were the Chaldeans. That he stood outside any connection with Israel is expressly mentioned. The region of Hauran still boasts a "Monastery of Job" that claims to immortalize Job's dwelling place. In any case, Job's homeland was closer to the Euphrates than to the Jordan. Thus the tone that is struck in this book, the expressions it uses, the way it gives voice to faith, the knowledge of God it assumes—they are altogether different from what the other books of the Bible offer us. The nearest to Job are Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Keeping this in mind, the reader is struck by the fact that these scriptures on almost every page hark back to the oldest age of human life, that their words resonate with a sacred memory, and that their favorite illustrations are taken from the wonders of creation. That most sublime chapter 8 in Proverbs and the magnificent chapters 40 and following in Job lose themselves in the beginning of things, when the mountains were laid and the foundations of the earth were set. The human race originally possessed insight into God's virtues and powers which fallen man took with him from Paradise and which highlighted the majesty of God the Creator. Worship of that exalted God was common among mankind, until it gradually darkened—more quickly among some tribes than among others, while here and there the Paradise tradition was preserved quite well, sometimes in a purer form than one might have thought.

This conforms to what we know about the oldest religions. Studies of the region broadly circling the probable location of Paradise have shown

13. John 1:10.

that the strongest memory of one original God is found precisely among peoples along the Indus, Tigris, and Euphrates, the cradle of the human race. The older a tribe, the more certain it is that it will show traces of the one true God, the service of whom over time lapsed into worship of many gods. We do not find among these tribes an ascent from polytheism to monotheism, but inversely, we see in them clear evidence that monotheism lies back of their history and that they descended from worship of one God to multiple gods. It is worth noting that the story of the Flood is found in the traditions of almost every one of these tribes. The similarity between the most ancient sagas and the historical narrative from Adam to Moses will become ever clearer as research continues.

The Paradise tradition existed in Ur of the Chaldees and was preserved by the patriarch Abraham as a foundation upon which, through special revelation, the religion of Israel would be erected. That Paradise tradition was known to the magicians of Egypt and to Jethro the priest in the Midian desert, and from that quarter it again penetrated with fresh vigor into the religious life of the nation of Israel. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the Paradise tradition was recorded in summary form at the opening of Holy Writ; it was developed in the inspired didactic poetry of the age of Solomon; it offered the canvas upon which the prophets of the Lord painted the future of the nations; it was taken up in the prologue of John in the doctrine of the eternal Word; and it was the point of departure for Paul for his special mission to the Gentiles entrusted to him on the road to Damascus.

The great mystery that Paul repeatedly talks about—the hidden truth that was not uncovered in former ages but is now revealed to the holy apostles and prophets, namely that the Gentiles too are fellow-heirs and partakers of the same body¹⁴—that mystery consists in the fact that the special revelation of Israel and the general revelation of Paradise are, for all peoples, two streams from the same well-spring which for a time ran along separate channels but were destined in Christ to merge again.

Why that mystery was so important is obvious. It revealed that God, by setting apart a people for himself, had not despaired of the redemption of his creation; that the nations in their apostasy had been serving the counsel of God; and that the great work He brought about in Israel remained fenced in only for so long as was necessary to bring to maturity Israel's blessing to the world—to all God's peoples and nations.

The Paradise tradition was also the root from which the idol worship of our Germanic forefathers sprouted. This factor made it possible for the

14. Cf. Eph. 3:1–12.

missionaries who brought us the gospel to link up with many elements in their religious consciousness. The forms were exchanged. The false forms were replaced again by the true ones, the originals substituted for the falsified elements; but the deepest groundwork remained. And that is how throughout the centuries the same power was operative among the masses that were baptized yet never converted to Christ. That power, however perverted and degenerated, kept alive the common notions about God the Creator. The older an idea, the more ineradicable it is. In our own day much effort and expense has been spent on rooting out the basic ideas of Christianity among the masses; yet these ideas were only eight or nine centuries old, in some areas even less.¹⁵ But it will take greater efforts to eradicate the notions of a God the Creator, a last judgment, and a life after death, since these notions do not date from eight or nine but from scores of centuries. They are as it were woven into life itself; they peek out from the language we speak and in an unguarded moment betray their presence even among the philosophers whose wisdom consists in denying the existence of God.

This gem, too, the Christian Church must preserve, honor, and put to use.

The Church must preserve it by never creating the impression as though she would withdraw herself into isolation, like ancient Israel, and were ignorant of the connection between her confession and the original revelation. She is to preserve it by always placing her confession in the light of the great mystery that mankind's universal awareness of worship and adoration constitutes the foundation upon which also rests the revelation of the Son of God.

The Christian Church is to honor this golden thread that runs from Paradise to Bethlehem's manger and since then has been woven into the Christian religion. She is to honor it by never resting until she has made the splendor of Golgotha fall upon human life in all its manifestations and has given a practical demonstration of how the spirit of Christ is the only and infallible power to lift all those dead and dry elements in human life out of their slump.

But above all the Church must put to use the nourishment that our sense of God receives from it.

The Church must use it among the believers: to find in their ordinary thought-world the points of contact that relate their beliefs to everyday

15. Two of the foremost pioneer missionaries, Willibrord (658–739) and Boniface (680–754), came over from England and were active in the Low Countries during the seventh and eighth centuries.

life; to keep them from merely parroting phrases; to pervade our consciousness with the truth that she is to preach.

The Church must use it among those who have rejected Scripture yet retain some general religious terms: to tell them in the name of God that they do not owe that remnant of knowledge of God to their own intellect but have received it from that stream of tradition that has irrigated all peoples and all nations with her precious drops.

The Church must use it also among worldly and hostile people: to remind their conscience of traces in their language and common expressions, in their domestic and social customs, of something else besides their own wisdom.

The Church must use it, finally, also in missions among the heathens: by digging up and pointing out those things which, however perverted and degenerated, bear witness, behind their forms and inanities, to a better origin and which can be brought to light again through the spirit of Christ.

The sense of God takes us no further, therefore, than the acknowledgment that there is a power which touches our inner life. Nature merely confirms the sense that this power is not imaginary but real. The world of man hints that this power rules our morality. But neither that sense, nor that nature, nor yet that morality would lead us to the knowledge that this mysterious power is a person, a Deity. *That* knowledge is solely the fruit of the original revelation. And however much that revelation has been falsified and darkened in the most diverse forms of idolatry, still this is the revelation that calls up in the soul the idea of a personal God.

Christianity purifies, refines, ennobles, and perfects that idea, but it does not call it up. No nation has ever been converted to Christianity where this idea had not survived. Precisely the presence of that idea offered the indispensable point of contact whereby conversion to the Christian religion became possible.

IX. Ultimate Failure

Thus far we have looked successively at three spheres of life that can reinforce our sense of God: nature, morality, and tradition. They nourish the sense of God but do not coincide with it.

The sense of God belongs to our very existence. It is present in our innermost being even before we begin to distinguish between what is there and what surrounds us. Human beings are inconceivable without that sense. We exist, we live, and then one of two things: either we sense the ground of our existence *in our own person*, or we do not find it there and hence know that the ground of our existence *lies outside ourselves*.

The first condition is not unthinkable. Sin in fact consists in nothing but attempting to look for the ground of one's existence in oneself, trying to exist in and by oneself, to depend upon no one, to be sufficient unto oneself, to be like God. All egoism and pride stem directly from that attempt. Most people may not have the mental energy to continue in that sinful attempt to the very end; they shrink back from the arrogant presumption to which it leads. Still, it is an inconsistency that changes nothing about the nature of the sin and can never serve as an excuse. If I look for the ground of my existence in myself I can only end up exalting myself above everything else. Then I cannot rest until I have subjected everything to myself and worship myself as a God whom all must serve and to whom all things belong. Then ambition, egoism, presumption, tyranny cannot be banned or exorcized and must dictate my conduct, until at last I leave that imagined world and return to the real world. Then I discover that I can change very little about the power of nature, that nature exists and works without my approval whether I like it or not, and that I am forced to acknowledge the existence of a much greater power outside myself. I then finish by admitting nature's superiority. I discard my personal claim to supremacy and put matter above spirit. At first this makes me seek happiness in pleasures. Next, I embrace a materialist worldview and deduce my thinking, my feeling, even my morality, from the properties of physical stuff. Finally, I am content with a system like Darwin's, which traces the origin of man to the animal, just as it traces the animal to the plant and the plant to matter.

There is no defense against this except in *the sense of God*, that is, in not suppressing the feeling, however mysterious and undefined, which we experience of God's omnipresent power at the deepest level of our being.

Suppressing this feeling comes easiest in the ordinary routine of life, hardest in moments of grave difficulty. During our daily routine we live on the surface and do not reckon with the deepest ground of our being. During grave difficulties the ground of our being is shaking and heightens our sense of God's omnipresence.

Suppressing this feeling requires will-power and resolve; only the very strong of mind succeed in guarding against its occurrence. Most people, for all their denial of God, immediately betray themselves during unguarded moments of profound grief, violent anger, or overwhelming joy. The effort they make to dismiss God and seek a ground for their existence outside themselves testifies that they are driven by an inner awareness.

With this sense of God people step out into the world and there find things visible and invisible. The visible world we call nature. Its power in part far exceeds the power of man, yet in part is also in many ways subject

to man. Thus man cannot regard nature's power as supreme; instead he finds that nature too is dependent and is guided by a will exterior to itself. In this way he connects the power revealed in his heart with the power revealed in nature and cannot shake off the impression that it is one and the same power that reveals itself in his soul through the sense of the Divine and externally in nature, a power above himself and above nature.

But man also comes into contact with a whole world of invisible things, things that have nothing in common with nature. Love and duty, hatred and egoism, anger and vengeance are real forces in life. It's no use denying this. Those forces exist; they are actively at work; they exert incalculable influence. The important thing is that man knows how to find his way in that invisible world. For that, he needs to be able to distinguish—to know the difference between two wholly different spheres of life which one cannot confuse without getting lost. It is the difference between the *moral* life and the life of the *soul*.

This difference is undeniable. Everyone will agree out of hand that right and duty, crime and transgression, respect for property, habits of chastity and decency, a sense of order and subordination all belong to the area of morality. They can be incorporated in laws and punished when flouted, if not by the state then at least in narrower circles. They concern exclusively our relations to our fellow-man.

But we sense just as surely that we enter an entirely different realm—a completely different order of things, a wholly other sphere of ideas—when we are dealing with qualities of the heart, qualities that we express in words like admiration, respect, trust, meekness, gratitude, dedication, self-sacrifice, humility, devotion to prayer.

These feelings, sensations, and longings do not stem from our social intercourse, so do not belong to the area of morality and cannot be covered by laws or compelled by force. They require quite a different state of mind. They are so strictly separate from moral qualities that it sometimes seems the two are mutually exclusive.

It is often seen that many people who are strict about duties, unbending on rights, chaste without blemish, praiseworthy in conduct, are nevertheless completely incapable of tender feelings like meekness and admiration and who are indifferent to any need for prayer.

The converse is also seen. Many people who are lax about duties and far from keen about rights can sometimes show strong feelings of respect and enthusiasm, of admiration and devotion.

In short, one can say that moral qualities relate to man in his interaction with his fellow-man, whereas the qualities of mind and heart relate to man in his relation to the infinite.

Among artists one often meets with a spirit of generosity and openness that is entirely in keeping with the enthusiasm, wonder, and ecstasy in which they live, whereas the ordinary forms of life, like rights and duties, soberness and chastity, are seldom esteemed in an artist's life.

Among the Anabaptists were found a highly developed enthusiasm, uncommon zeal for their ideals, boundless fervor, yet mixed with vile lust and malicious cruelty.

Stoic natures are usually formal, aloof, withdrawn, and stand-offish, yet in equal measure scrupulous, orderly, and honest. At the same time you can join a company of people who welcome you warmly, who open their hearts to you and carry you along in their enthusiasm, yet whose loose living is a riddle to you.

The Pharisees were impeccable in their outward conduct, yet Jesus told them that publicans and harlots would enter the kingdom of heaven before they would.

To this day one can find two currents in human life. To be proper, civil, law-abiding is the ideal of the first current. To glow with enthusiasm, to sink away in adoration and worship, to live by faith, is the highest goal of the other one.

It is already evident in children. Two children from the same parents, differing very little in age, can differ greatly in character: one is docile, complaisant, punctual, orderly, but without enthusiasm, never passionate, always cool; the other lives for higher things, is warm and inspired, but by repeatedly getting out of hand causes his parents much grief.

Enough said to show that the distinction we pointed out is not made by us but is a fact of life confirmed by history, our environment, and our home life. And once we penetrate to the deepest ground of this contrast we recognize that the qualities of mind and heart are all connected with our immediate relation to God.

We do know that these qualities, too, can be misused by sin, diverted from their object, and even turned against God. We see this all too often in the artist. Our age is rife with fanatics who worship not God but their ideal. Idol worship is there to demonstrate that these movements of mind and heart can lead a man astray if he does not focus his worship on its true object.

Nevertheless it remains true that when man was created, mind and heart came before morality.

When the first man was all by himself on earth morality was of no concern to him. He could not steal, because everything was his; he could not kill, because no one was with him; he could not commit adultery, because no marriage had yet been solemnized; he could not bear false witness against his neighbor, because there was no one to hear it; he could

not covet his neighbor's goods, because he had no neighbors. Immediately after creation a moral life was impossible. The germs for it were there, but they could not yet sprout.

What could sprout was the life of mind and heart, the sense of devotion and dependence, admiration and adoration, love and dedication, humility and trust. And these spiritual forces could not be focused on any other object than on the living God, simply because no other ideal existed as yet, and no idol had yet been found.

It is noteworthy that sin did not originate in a moral transgression but in distrust. For many people, a more natural explanation of the origin of sin would be if it had started with adultery or murder, a ghastly crime or a patent breach of morality. Then one could see that the punishment was in proportion to the sin. But eating from a forbidden fruit?

The Heidelberg Catechism sensed this and therefore spoke of *apostasy*, of a falling away, prior to being *disobedient*, in line with the Mosaic narrative which first points to the sin of the heart and then points to the eating of the forbidden fruit as the consequence of an evil that was already there.¹⁶

Thus morality and religion are connected but they do not coincide. First and foremost is our personal relationship with the living God, which must never be reduced to moral living. Theologians and preachers who devote their energies to nurturing moral living and who accept a personal relationship with the Lord only up to a point, referring to it "mysticism" and "enthusiasm," disregard their calling, and the Church is fully justified in opposing this inversion of the proper connection.

In the political domain, where laws rule, the chief concern is the external life of people. But in the Church no other criterion should count than the mystical life, a person's internal state, the personal relation to God.

Of course we do not mean to imply that anything, however small, should be allowed to make light of the demands of moral living. Faith that is not evident in works carries its own judgment. We mean that morality has value only as an expression of a person's religion and is connected to it by profound *thankfulness*—a word of deep meaning that is disregarded and falsified when reduced to moral living. Thankfulness is a quality of mind and heart which, to be sure, has the same effect as moral living but derives its strength from a totally different source, draws from a wholly different spring.

16. Cf. H.C., Q&A 7: "Whence, then, comes this depraved nature of man? From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise...."

Accordingly, the sense of God is nourished by the visible things through nature and by the rules of morality through human society. But it also means that *for the soul* the sense of God is fed only by tradition, art, and life experiences. Yet tradition is what God has revealed to others, not what one has come to understand in one's personal relationship with God. And that is why the natural knowledge of God ultimately falls short. It can go no further. The relation with God is broken. It is not restored until He heals it.

That's where *special* revelation comes in.

X. The Demands of the Heart

Morality and religion are not the same. You can reside in someone's house for a long time as a boarder or live-in maid and strictly conform to the family's habits, rules, and customs without ever winning over their hearts or they yours, without ever developing warm attachment or a personal relationship of trust. It is the same in the great household of human society. You may seek to serve God, even from a sense of duty, in the environment in which God has placed you by scrupulously inquiring after his ordinances, leaving your rights and goods and pleasures in His hands, and carefully observing every demand of moral living without ever having a relationship of trust develop between you and your God, without God ever winning your heart or you acquiring a heart for Him, without opening yourself to a more intimate relationship—in short, you fulfilled your duties from fear, or for reward, or out of pride, but you had no love, no affection of the soul, no tenderness of heart. So you remained a servant in the house of your Lord, but you never became a child in your Father's house. You remained far from God in your interests, aloof in your life-style, rebelliousness seemingly overcome yet merely covered by the icy coolness of your inner life. You strove to live a moral life, but you never attained to a religion of the heart.

Do not misunderstand. Often it is said that this lower level of moral living holds for slaves of the law who fancy they have done their duty merely by keeping the outward commandments without ever concerning themselves about the deeper meaning of those commandments, whereas it does not hold for more noble spirits who barely ask after outward commandments but who let themselves be ruled by the loftier principles of self-sacrifice, self-control, and self-improvement.

This distinction we reject.

To be sure, we allow that the latter type speaks of a stronger spiritual development; but whether a harmful plant stays a dwarf among the burning nettles or grows into a gigantic thistle does not change anything

about its nature. Similarly, whether someone strives after greatness by observing a small number of specific commandments or alternatively by adhering faithfully to a moral principle that prescribes its commandments in continually new forms, this makes no difference as to the nature of his sense of duty. The former is like a stranger who scrupulously studies a city plan to see how the streets and canals run; the latter is like the local resident who without ever consulting his map simply relies on his general knowledge of the layout of the city to decide where to go. At bottom, however, both are doing the same thing. Inevitably, self-complacency, a high opinion of one's moral excellence, even if that prideful opinion expresses itself in humble forms, is the trade-mark of this commerce in moral concepts. That someone might cultivate a morality of this kind while setting aside all religious faith and excising every religious principle is quite conceivable. It involves drill, training in the harness, learning the techniques, practicing civilized behavior, acquiring a high level of outward propriety—but moral strength is not cultivated, inner motivation for moral living is not developed.

Moral living needs roots, which a person does not find in himself but in religious faith. From this it follows that true piety cannot but lead to moral living, but also that faith cannot, as if by magic, reform and restore a person's morality. For a long, very long time, mostly till the hour of our death, there will be two forces moving within us: on the one hand, faith that seeks only God; on the other, morality that follows rule upon rule. The moments that faith and morality coincide perfectly, that we think only of faith while moral conduct is there, shining like sparkling stars—that is, without our being aware of it—those moments are rare; they do not occur very often and are less the fruit of personal effort than of miraculous guidance by God. Happy the man who does not crush the little flowers in his life after they have just opened by priding himself on them!

Next to it is the life of the soul, the life that enjoys a personal relationship with the Holy God. That life is indifferent to the question whether anything else exists. The inner life of the soul can dwell at ease, can thrive and blossom, if it but knows that God is real, knows where He can be found, and knows the paths that lead to Him—if it can enter his presence, speak to Him, listen to His word, catch His eye, rest at His bosom.

This life is not a duty but a loving friendship, a tender communion, an intimate trust. It does not ask for rules and ordinances. It just cannot stand separation, being alone. It dies, or at least it languishes, if it has lost sight of God. For that life, to be forsaken is death, to be rejected is a deep sorrow that consumes it. To be near unto God is the only condition it cannot give up. But if that condition is met, this life has the strength to

endure anything. It is of a marvelous kind, always withdrawing and sheltering in mystery. It can sing, it can be jubilant, it can pray, it can weep—but it cannot express its experience in plain words.

This life lives by longings and stirrings which the world considers useless trivia. Adoration is its vital breath, quiet veneration a touch of God, reverence its inner delight. Meekness and self-abnegating humility are the springs that elevate it. It relies on neither words nor deeds but swells and sparkles in deeper soil, soon inspiring both word and deed. It loves, but it cannot analyze for you what love is. The infinite is its element; the eternal its high road, its world wherever God is; it is a conversation in heaven.¹⁷

This deepest life of a man's nature is the only thing that makes him human in a higher sense. He can arrange his relation to nature without overcoming animal drives. In the domain of morality he can likewise regulate his relation to his fellow-men without penetrating to the eternal ground of his existence. Only through his personal relationship to God does the world of infinite things open up to him: his eternal destiny, the highest degree of bliss for which his life as a human being is intended.

A sinner's natural knowledge of God can go no further than to admit that he has to have such a personal relationship with God if he is to be open to the eternal, imperishable powers of human existence. But he is unable to call forth this personal communion, to push on to that hidden fellowship. This leaves him with three options. In his stubbornness he can turn against the heaven that is closed to him and devote his heart to the visible world. Or in his pride he can block off the moral life and cut out all religion. Or in presumption he can delude himself into believing that he can supply the deficiency himself and so lapse into idolatry.

The first is done by sensual men who lose themselves in gratifying their sensual penchants in selfishness, wantonness, lust, and self-indulgence.

The second is done by men and women who put the highest premium on their reputation for being decent law-abiding citizens and who, without a clue in the world as to what they might still be lacking, turn their backs on religion or else turn hostile toward it.

The third is done by people who have a natural element of enthusiasm and fervor and who will not and cannot admit that they will never be able to satisfy their inner needs.

There is nothing new under the sun. Forms may change, but man's fundamental traits remain the same. In former times the sensual trait was

17. Cf. Phil. 3:20 (KJV).

strongest in people between 18 and 30 years of age and people of sanguine temperament; people in Babel and Athens lived the way they live today in Berlin and Paris. Similarly, the Stoic of an earlier age is back in the self-righteous man who has a reputation to lose, who will do anything to polish his image, and who considers his highest goal in life attained if he succeeds in being known in his circles as a man of impeccable conduct, friendly disposition, proper manners, and an educated mind. This style is especially evident in adult males and those with a hot temper.

But just as in the past, so today there is a part of mankind that looks for diversion in idolatry. This phenomenon is found especially among the very young and the very old, and most strongly among those of a fanatical nature. What used to be worshiped as Lady Fortune is now worshiped as luck, speculation or chance. Minerva has been resurrected in the fetish for genius. Venus is the worship of beauty. Mercury is the idolization of material prosperity. Men talk of Ideals, Public Opinion, the Spirit of the Times, and similar powers as of a ruling spirit whose influence equals that of the ancient gods.

The leading motive in this is always to satisfy the demands of the inner life of the soul by means of one's own invention. The ancients held the oracles of Delphi and Egypt in high esteem because they sought communion with the world of infinite things. Hence the holiness they ascribed to priests as organs of the Deity, as vicars of the Unknown Being who were authorized to speak on his behalf. Hence they thought they had recovered what they had lost when they cut themselves off from the life of God. In the same way we see again today how a portion of mankind, numbering already in the millions, resort to mesmerism and spiritism to establish communion with the invisible.

Thus the sinner finds himself in the following situation: he is made to feel so uneasy by God himself that he senses the need for communion with Him; but he either suppresses this need in sinful pride or presumptuously thinks himself capable of satisfying this need on his own.

He cannot understand God, because he is separated from God as a result of sin. Nor can he speak to God, because he does not know who God is, where He can be found, and how He must be approached. Thus, left to himself, he can only become proud or presumptuous—unless he is willing to shatter and break his own soul.

That requires grace, if for no other reason than to be able to realize one's guilt and admit one's impotence.

We do not deny that tradition contributes to this. But that this tradition survived and reached us and did not repel our soul but attracted it is itself unthinkable without grace.

Yet that grace could have no other result than to cast the sinner into the arms of despair.

Only one fact can save him from that—if he hears that God on his part has broken the deadly silence and has *spoken*, first through his prophets, now through his Son.

The fact that God has spoken is the first ray of light in the night of the soul—the soul that lacks a relationship with God yet cannot do without it.

XI. Tyndall's Address

No sinner can ascend to God. Nevertheless, the Christian Church is justified when she insists that the sinner too must turn to God. The harmony between these statements, as Schweizer¹⁸ puts it, lies in the bankruptcy of natural theology and the indispensability of a special revelation.

To explain this well-known train of ideas, we referred above to an address delivered in Belfast in 1873¹⁹ before the British Association for the Advancement of Science. It was given by the English physicist Professor John Tyndall [1820–93], who spoke on the subject of “materialism in Britain.” Allow me to comment briefly on this address.

The address consists of two parts. The first part deals exclusively with nature as it appears in the observation of the scientist, that is, of the knower. This part leaves aside all religious views, reckons only with observed facts, is exceedingly biased against the Christian Church, in many ways derogates from the respect owed to Holy Scripture, and constructs a system of assumptions that sink away in its soft subsoil. Naturally Professor Tyndall has no warrant to do this, and on this point ordinary believers among our readers have the perfect right to pit their personal authority against that of the celebrated scholar. When a scholar of the stature of Tyndall tells us about what he observes in nature, how and under what conditions he observes it, and in what way he thinks the phenomena are connected, then we listen with respect and defer to our superior. But when he ventures upon a domain that is not his, presumes to assess the significance of the Christian Church and allows himself to contradict what we are told in God's Word, then his words are to us as not spoken and we go our own way.

18. Alexander Schweizer (1808–88), a Reformed theologian in the University of Zurich.

19. The actual date of the speech was Aug. 19, 1874, some two months before Kuyper wrote this. The address ignited a storm of controversy because it banished religion and theology from the study of the natural world and assigned them to “the region of poetry and emotion.”

Professor Tyndall himself grants us that right by adding a second part to his speech in which he admits that apart from the natural domain there is also a *spiritual* domain, a domain which the natural scientist cannot presume to give an opinion about and which reveals needs that he cannot possibly satisfy.

Two things follow from this. First, Professor Tyndall himself invites us to dismiss the dogmatics he tries to erect upon scientific data as being of no value whatsoever. Secondly, his address puts an end to the era in which scientists, professional or amateur, set themselves up as the teachers of mankind.

Thus far it has been customary to invoke only the pagans of antiquity for evidence of the natural knowledge of God. That invocation, repeated *ad nauseum*, has lost its force. It is more gripping and compelling when we can derive the evidence not from the idol worshipers of centuries gone by but from a scientist of our own time, from a scholar like Professor Tyndall. As a matter of fact, the three constituent parts of evidence, as we shall see below, are fully present in his address. So long as the *natural scientist* stays in his own field, his walk is steady. When he wants to speak as a *human being*, nature leaves him in the lurch. Every attempt he makes at deducing an intellectual universe for himself from the phenomena of nature fails utterly.

The difference between Professor Tyndall and his predecessors is that while the pedantry of scientists thus far robbed morality and religion of any independent reality and so clashed with Christian theology and tried to supplant it, Professor Tyndall claims absolute freedom for the investigation of nature by transferring the separation of Church and State onto this domain as well and realizing that a scientist crosses over into another world and becomes something else the moment he lays aside his instruments and listens to the tones of his heart.

XII. Fruits of the Natural Knowledge of God

We have seen that the natural knowledge of the living God, which even today presents itself to man apart from the drastic means of special revelation, is far from negligible. A great deal can still be known of God, so much so, in fact, that guidelines for human living, even in the absence of God's Word, need not be lacking.

And yet it is undeniable that thus far in the absence of special revelation not one nation, not a single individual has risen to a heart-refreshing knowledge of the high God.

Our fathers have always confessed, and we confess it with them, that as a result of sin our mental cognition has been so weakened and falsified

that if we rely solely on the light of nature, reason, and tradition, we only increase our alienation from God and find no assurance.

Outside of Christ we seek and grope, we toil and slave, we guess and surmise, we imagine and persuade ourselves, but without ever finding any certainty. We walk around in circles without making any progress. We never have peace; we never find comfort in life and in death.

No one can deny that originally there was much beauty and truth in the religious notions of the pagan world. They still show traces of genuine tradition, an afterglow of the splendor that once shone in Paradise. But the fate of all those religions is that they bleed to death instead of flourishing robustly. The elements of truth which they originally contained is choked; fancies and falsehoods gain the upper hand; the tie to conscience loosens; before long the boundary between sin and holiness is wiped out; and the tender shoots that try to blossom forth degenerate into wild thistles from which crafty priests and power-hungry princes prepare the magic potion that delivers into their hands a passive, supine people.

To be sure, we must recognize that among the most vibrant nations people's conscience rose in protest against this shameful chicanery. These people tried to plant the better element back into its proper soil, and aimed at a sweeping reform of religion and morality. Yet these attempts too, however well intentioned, came to nought. What Buddha did for Asia and Plato for the West²⁰ unquestionably deserves great appreciation. The Reformers understood that it would not do to dismiss these outstanding men. On the contrary, in these superior geniuses they acknowledged the sparks of higher light that broke with many inane superstitions. They honored their life's work as powerful evidence that pagan nations too were not withdrawn from divine guidance. They did not hesitate to declare that the sublime ideas taught by these men sometimes seemed a prelude to the message of compassion that Christ brought into our lost world. And yet, how effective was their message? Did it not become evident time and time again that it lacked the power to lead men to God, to heal men's hearts, to comfort their souls and make a difference in their personal lives and the life of society? Plato's followers squandered the golden jewel he had offered them. And one need only compare India with Britain to sense the immense distance between what Buddha made of his Hindu peoples and Christ of his baptized nations.

The same response can be seen all around us. The revelation of God in the human heart is today what it was in Moses's days. Nature has not changed; the lessons of history have become infinitely more plentiful; the

20. Orig.: "for Europe."

moral world-order is more transparent than ever. The field of the natural knowledge of God has expanded rather than shrunk. And now look at how those people are doing who today have closed themselves off from the Word-revelation!

At first it looks as if they will actually succeed in building a beautiful temple of worship. They still have some things they believe in. Their words speak to the soul. Their eyes glow with enthusiasm. Their lips betray nobility of mind. But how short it lasts! How quickly the walls they began to erect come tumbling down! How difficult they find it to preserve their lofty standpoint for even a short while! And then all the results of their striving and pondering begin to flow downstream like loosened ice floes. System after system arises. None enjoys currency for more than a dozen years. Then their enthusiasm changes into a false glow. Their voice lowers. Their conduct loses dignity. Rapidly they retreat. One or two expressions of sincere piety can no longer hide their inner emptiness. All their knowledge totters. They sink away without hope. The onlookers disperse, the masses turn their backs on religion, a smaller group withdraws into the chilly chambers of philosophy, and at most a diminishing crowd of churchmen and churchgoers, doomed to tantalizing toil, cling to religious rituals even as they experience their best moments when looking back with nostalgia at the childlike faith they left behind.

Personal experience can lead to a similar outcome. It was very touching recently to read the humble confession in the testament of François Guizot that he had reaped bitter disappointment after he wandered away from God's Word. The testimony of such a man is valuable. Praised by friend and foe alike as an outstanding genius, a brilliant scholar, a prudent statesman, a noble character—a celebrated author like few others, an ornament of French literature, a powerful figure who for half a century served his country in the highest offices of state, who controlled the fate of France and thus of Europe—such a man is too rare not to take into account the experience of his heart. From his deathbed he calls out to the nations that he too once thought he could find true wisdom and real strength apart from God's Word and his grace in Christ but that his wisdom turned out to be foolishness and that only then were quiet strength, tranquil peace, and robust energy restored to him when he returned to his old Bible and found mercy and grace at the foot of the cross of Golgotha.²¹

21. François Guizot (1787–1874) dictated his testament nine months before his death. Its opening line reads: "I die in the bosom of the Reformed Christian Church of France in which I was born and in which I congratulate myself to have been born." Kuyper may have read about Guizot's testament in an obituary in the *Revue des deux mondes*.

That wonderful confession is echoed by everyone who wandered away and came back. There is scarcely anyone today who has found his salvation in Christ and has not known the days when he looked at God's Word with suspicion and listened to the Tempter's voice! Just try to satisfy your thirst for knowledge and succeed at moral living without that Word! At first it seems an alternative that works, that makes the pulse of your soul beat faster. But how quickly it becomes apparent that it is all self-delusion, the fruit of over-excitement, a deceptive illusion! And do you not thank your God for that unspeakably tender and blissful awareness that filled your soul when at last you surrendered and once more felt the love of your Savior?

What is the cause of this?

Is it caused by the fact that God does not manifest himself? Or is it caused by the fact that our eyesight is too weak to notice what may be known of God?

Nothing exposes the wretchedness of sin more shamefully than that dullness of our spirit, that blindness of our mind's eye, that insensitivity of our cognitive faculty that keeps us from noticing and grasping what may be known of God in his works.

It is not caused by what *we* call weak faculties and blunted senses, for such blindness is often most severe precisely among the more educated of our generation, among the most learned scholars and most talented men. Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus said, and daily life confirms time and time again how exceedingly difficult it is to restore spiritual sight among the rich in spirit.

It is sin that draws this veil over our soul, that first blindfolds us and then pushes us to the edge where yawns the abyss and where nothing and no one can stop us anymore.

But you ask: to what end have we been given this false stimulus of the natural knowledge of God? Does that half light not draw our eye away from the full light of the Word? Would many wandering souls not quickly turn to Christ if that manifestation of God in his works did not divert their attention?

This objection may speak to our heart, but it is not inspired by faith. It is prompted by sin. It turns things around and tries to come up with an excuse. God reveals himself in his works "*so that they are without excuse.*"²²

Can we come to Christ when we do not know the depth of sin? Does the darkening of our understanding not reveal our sin most painfully? Did

22. Rom. 1:20.

sin not originate with the wish to gain knowledge by ourselves? Did the Tempter not say: “*You will be like God, knowing good and evil*”?²³ And is there anything greater to wound our pride, to unmask our pretense of self-sufficiency, to humble us and break down our ego, than the overwhelming awareness that, for all the light that shines on all sides and falls through our windows, we never quite see properly, never quite see correctly, and are *always* mistaken?

Now then, you would never reap that precious fruit of self-abasement and humility if God did not manifest himself so clearly in his works. Otherwise the sinner would blame God, saying: How shall I see Him if He conceals Himself? Men would be at peace with sin, not just the hardened sinner who has locked himself up in his pride, but in general every sinner at the first and the last sin—at peace with a life apart from God.

The second fruit of the natural knowledge of God is that it proves *the necessity and indispensability of a special revelation*. It shows that we have to get beyond it, yet are unable to do so without outside help. It makes seekers after God say the prayer, “Lord, uncover my eyes, that I may see you; show me your light, that my eyes may look into your glory!”

The third fruit of the natural knowledge of God is that it provides God’s special revelation with the terrain where it can do its miracles. Mentally remove the natural knowledge of God from the outcasts of Paradise, from Noah and the patriarchs, and special revelation is unthinkable. It always presumes the many things that are already known of God from his works, links up with them, elaborates on them, and always moves on the leveled terrain that is available already in the revelation in God’s works. This may come out most clearly in Job and the Proverbs, but it is invariably found also in David and all the prophets. Only among the Pharisees had it become unknowable.

A fourth fruit is that it positively prepares for the capability to receive special revelation. Paul turns to the heathens, not to have them first pass through the school of Israel, but to sow the seed of the Word into the soil prepared by the natural knowledge of God. The biggest question that divided the first Christians—whether or not the Gentiles had to be circumcised—touched on this solemn truth. That the *Word*, according to the prologue of John, was in the world was upheld by Paul’s ministry as one of the deepest mysteries.

Finally, when special revelation comes on the scene the natural knowledge of God is not over and done with, but precisely then it shows its full value. A Christian is not a hermit who stands outside the world.

23. Gen. 3:5.

The Church is not a monastery that closes itself off from humanity and things human. Special revelation opens our eyes and offers much more for us to see; but what we then see is the same truth of the same living God who revealed himself also in his works.

XIII. *Articuli puri et mixti*²⁴

Traditionally, the articles of faith were divided between *articuli puri et mixti*, literally: pure and mixed articles. The distinction was between articles of faith that were evident purely from Revelation and others that could in part be derived from nature and experience. The “pure” articles dealt with the Trinity and the deity of Christ, atonement through his blood, the person of the Holy Spirit, and similar heads of doctrine; nature, after all, taught us nothing about these mysteries: we learned of them exclusively through the preaching of the Word. The “mixed” articles included doctrines like creation, sin, and man’s destiny for a higher life. Not that the mixed articles were second-rate, of lesser importance, less needful unto salvation; but because reason too arrives at an idea of “creation,” experience affords a glance into “sin,” and nature and human nature themselves foretell a higher life.

The latter were called “mixed” not because the mixture was wrong and reprehensible but to indicate that these articles of faith, dealing more directly with the knowledge of man, simply had to have a point of contact with the sinner who after his fall remained “man” after all.

They were called “mixed” because even nations that were deprived of the light of special revelation entertained notions of a creation, albeit most defective, and hope of a better life, albeit hesitant and deficient.

They were called “mixed” in particular because even for the Christian, after his conversion and enlightenment, these articles of faith are not just based on God’s Word but also on experience illumined by the Spirit. The Christian learns to know the depth of sin not only from God’s Word but equally from his experience of life, from the depths of his heart, from the unveiling of other people’s secrets. And so also, the inadequacy and vanity of this earthly life and Scripture’s answer that “*here we do not have a continuing city, but seek one to come,*”²⁵ is daily confirmed in the life of every Christian for whom his Christianity is not a veneer for the sake of

24. In this section Kuyper particularly addresses his theological opponents, the ethical-irenic school of theology.

25. Heb. 13:14.

his social position but a firm acceptance of *the Cross* as the symbol and prophecy of his life.

This whole distinction of traditional theology, therefore, was rich in content, and we may well ask whether some of today's "new" insights were not already present in the thinking of our old theologians and familiar to our fathers.

For example, what is meant by our ethical-irenic theologians, judged from their best side, that is different from what our former theologians meant by the designation "mixed articles of faith"? These theologians rightly emphasize that the redemptive truth of the Christian religion does not come to the sinner in an external and mechanical manner but that it is designed and suited to his nature and essence in such a way that it turns out to belong to them, finds a point of support in them, and however much of absolutely divine origin, nevertheless works in real "human" forms.

Our fathers confessed the natural knowledge of God, prevenient grace, the covenant, the relation between Israel and the nations and the foreordination of God, the harmony between the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Very well, if we relate this to the distinction between pure and mixed articles, we fail to see what else would need to be added to faithfully sum up the confession of the Apostle when he said: "*that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural*"²⁶ and to confess that these two are brought into relation with each other through faith.

New wine is put into new bottles, but if you confess with us that the draught that refreshes our soul comes from the same Vine from which our fathers drank, then you should think twice before deliberately breaking the old cup and buying a new one and so breaking the line of communion that connects our faith to that of our fathers.

We think there is a more excellent way.

Placing ourselves where our fathers so admirably took up position, or better, where they were placed so gloriously by the King of the Church, we are to become conscious of our calling and carry on their work, always prepared to purify it if necessary.

We can start by giving back to the Church the treasures which the fathers already possessed as the prize of sixteen centuries of struggle. That will not be a luxury. At least, the Church of today is incomparably poorer in knowledge than the Church of two centuries ago. From a period of higher development we have gone back to a nomadic period. Compared to

26. 1 Cor. 15:46.

former days, we have almost everywhere regressed in knowledge of the Scriptures, knowledge of the truths of salvation, and insight into the structural features of the temple of glory. Only here and there do we see small traces of progress. That must come to an end, and to achieve this there is no other way than to begin by accepting our *heritage* and then—mark this well—not to bury this talent in the ground but to take it to the marketplace of life and gain another talent with it.

The latter is also urgently needed with respect to the doctrine of the *articuli puri et mixti*. In the face of modernism's revival of the Ebionite²⁷ and Samosatine²⁸ heresies, we must emphatically insist, more than ever, that belief in the person of the Mediator is part and parcel of the pure and mixed articles of faith. At the risk of being suspected, like Calvin and all major Reformed theologians, of Nestorianism,²⁹ we must underscore in the very person of the Mediator the oneness that unites the redeemed creature with the Triune God by virtue of a counsel of God which was decided, not until *after* the fall, but grounded in the divine will *from before the foundation of the world*.³⁰

On the other hand as well, we must guard against attempts *to explain the divine nature of Christ from his human nature*. Today the Lord is teaching us by means of the spirits of apostasy and seduction—spirits that were still partly bound in the days of our fathers—that every creed complicit in this attempt, however covert and subtle, will entail the absolute loss of our Christian faith. Nothing can be explained in the plan of salvation—not one step, however small—from human nature as it has become on account of sin (and outside of Christ there is no other human nature).

Human nature and world history provide hints of nearly every truth of salvation, causing men to pause and leaving the sinner without excuse. But the true understanding of how the mystery of salvation relates to the nature of man, already before creation, in the counsel of God, cannot be derived from nature but can be understood only in the light of grace.

No less significant are the consequences that flow from this standpoint, which was already arrived at by our fathers, for the relation of

27. Second-century sect that accepted Jesus as the Messiah but denied his divinity.

28. Third-century sect that believed Jesus was born a mere man but at his baptism was adopted to become equal to God.

29. Fifth-century heresy which taught that Christ had two natures which were only loosely linked. The doctrine was condemned at the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).

30. Cf. Eph. 1:4, 11.

religion and life, faith and science, Church and State. A brief word about each may suffice.

If there is no connection in the counsel of God between the truth of salvation and our human nature, so that the gospel and our life touch each other only as two forces that are entirely alien to each other, then a separation must show up among Christians between religion and life. Any attempt to connect the two will be in vain. To be religious, Christians will have to withdraw from life. In order to live, they will have to put religion on hold for a while. They will then live in two worlds: on the one hand the world of grace, to which belong the Bible, the creeds, spiritual exercises and prayer; on the other, the natural world, to which belong family, body, vocation, and social interaction. The faith of Christians will then turn into a barren abstraction, since it lacks practical application. Their life will not be hallowed, because it is not illumined by higher light.

The Reformed Church protested against this by thrusting discipline into the forefront. Discipline was her translation into practice of what she taught in the *articuli mixti*. Religion and life were not to be affairs alongside each other: they were to interpenetrate.

The same is true of the age-old dilemma between faith and science. To keep the two separate seems the most plausible, and unless we decide, in order to get at the root of things, to go behind the Fall and behind the Creation and trace them to the counsel of God, we have no other solution than to define science as a belief in visible things and faith as a knowledge of invisible things. If, however, we are not content with this separation—if we refuse to limit science to observing and connecting what the senses see and hear, if we cannot concede that this division of the human person is permissible, and if we remain convinced that *reason*, provided it is set free from the bonds of sin, is the organ of a human consciousness that comprehends not only the temporal but also the eternal—then of course we have solved the dilemma between faith and science and recognize faith, in regard to both visible and invisible things, as the soil from which the plant of science and knowledge draws its vital sap.

Finally we mentioned the relation between Church and State. If nature and grace are simply juxtaposed as originally alien powers, then either the Church must control the State (as a power of nature), or the State must control the Church (as an institution of grace). Rome wanted the former, secularists the latter. Calvin, however, contends that even in countries and among peoples where the gospel is still unknown, the government acts as a servant of God: it is kept by the natural knowledge of God from eradicating religion, and by virtue of the natural knowledge

of God it makes its laws and its justice, albeit in a weakened manner, conform to the laws and justice of God.³¹

This is the only correct standpoint. The State must accept concrete reality as it presents itself and so cannot deny that its citizenry, taken as a whole, confesses a belief in God. This belief implies that God stands above the State. Accordingly, the State has to choose. If it deems this belief false it must eradicate it, for it undermines its authority by acknowledging a sovereignty that stands above it. If on the other hand it judges that this higher sovereignty of God really exists, then it too must defer to that sovereignty.

In the first case we have an *atheistic* State. Here the State first pretends that religion is of no concern to it, that it is neutral with respect to religion. This State nevertheless ends by making laws and taking measures that gradually push back religion, insisting that State sovereignty be recognized everywhere as the sole authority.

In the second case we have a *Christian* State. Here the State acknowledges God as standing above it. This State binds its officials to God by means of an oath and it refers to its own authority as real only *by the grace of God*. It will commend the people's representatives to God's keeping and invoke the blessing of the Almighty on the nation. But the very respect which the State then owes God compels it to admit that it is powerless to foster religion. The State will recognize that God has created another institution for that purpose, the Church of Christ. The State must therefore leave it to the Church to propagate the worship of God. It will honor the Church, guarantee her freedom of movement, and—provided she does not interfere in what does not belong to her domain—support her with its sovereign authority.

This would guarantee a proper separation of Church and State, or as Calvin puts it: "These two governments, which are of a completely different nature, must not be carelessly mingled."³² And yet, both find their higher unity in the service of the one God, sovereign of both, King of kings.

The State of The Netherlands did not abandon this standpoint when our Constitution was revised in 1848. At least not entirely.³³

31. This reference to Calvin could not be traced.

32. *Institutes* 4.20.1.

33. This closing comment calls to mind the fact that some months earlier Kuyper had exchanged the pastorate for a seat in parliament, where he engaged vigorously in the debates, arguing among other things that the new provision in the Constitution of the freedom and equality of all religions did not necessarily imply that the Netherlands was no longer a Christian nation.

Conscience¹

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As we plan in the following essay to discuss the conscience, we are not disguising the difficulty of this subject.

We all know from experience what we mean by conscience; each of us knows those thoughts within ourselves that accuse us or excuse us. And yet, although in the practice of living nobody hardly ever mistakes the significance of the conscience, nevertheless the doctrine of the conscience is far from established, and it is difficult to define scientifically what we should understand conscience to be. The questions regarding what conscience is—whether it is a distinct capacity in a person or identifies merely an activity of one of our capacities, whether it possesses a unique content, whether and in what place it belongs in the moral life and in ethics—these and so many other questions are frequently answered in various ways. There is so little agreement in using the term *conscience* that in the second edition of his *Theologische Ethik*, the learned and profound Rothe thought that he was required to remove that term from science and replace it with other more specific terms.²

There certainly will not be many who join Rothe in this conclusion, surrendering this familiar term, choosing another that would be foreign to our experience and thus make even greater the distance [28] between science and ordinary life. It simply comes down to making careful distinctions.

To begin with the term itself, the etymological meaning, which is not decisive but nonetheless can shed much light, is clear and in many languages is identical. The prefix *con* as in the word concatenate means “with.” The basic meaning of the Dutch (German), Greek (*suneidēsis*), Latin (French, English) is the same, and points to a “knowing with,”

1. Appeared originally as “Het Geweten,” in *De Vrije Kerk* 7 (1881): 27–37, 49–58; included in *Kennis en Leven* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 13–27. Pagination from *De Vrije Kerk* is provided in brackets.

2. Richard Rothe, *Theologische Ethik*, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Wittenberg: Zimmerman, 1867–71), II § 177.

indeed, “along with” someone. The question becomes: With whom? Whether with God, as people have often suggested, though the word does not indicate this; or with another person who was an eye- and ear-witness along with us; or with oneself, so that a person knows and apprehends something through one’s own experience. In itself, the term *conscience* does not yet possess any ethical significance. It merely points to a shared knowing. Only when the linguistic usage began applying that term to the shared knowing with ourselves with regard to our moral situation, and thereby incorporated in that term an evaluating of oneself, did the term *conscience* receive that moral meaning that we ascribe to it in the present day. In French, the term “conscience” has the still broader meaning of consciousness, and the phrase “conscience morale” refers specifically to what among us is called conscience. The ethical meaning of the term is thus an acquired one that has a history. With short strokes we wish to sketch that history.³

Among the Greeks, neither *suneidos* nor *suneidēsis* appear in the ancient literature. We should not forget, however, that one should not conclude from this fact that the matter itself was unknown. Even though the term is absent, there [29] are sufficient traces that indicate that moral awareness was not lacking among the Greeks. Already with Homer we find repeated mention of fearing and worshipping the gods, who avenged and punished evil that people committed. The Erinyes [the Furies] are “the personification of the feeling of grievous injury and painful indignity, aroused by the intentional transgression of sacred rights.”

It is nevertheless remarkable that the term *conscience*, which was certainly native to linguistic usage far longer than we can demonstrate, was not incorporated into scientific language and discussion. We look in vain for this term even with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Perhaps this fact can be explained on the basis that Greek Ethics was indissolubly connected with the state, so that norms and standards were to be found within that objective authority rather than in the subjective and individual conscience. Moreover, the three philosophers mentioned above viewed morality intellectually and derived its standard from rational understanding, which evaluated good and evil. Only when the life of the state lost its prominence in Greece, and individualism increased, was the term *conscience* increasingly incorporated in the science of the moral life. Along this line, we encounter the term first in the later philosophical literature, with Dionysius Halicarnasus (± 30 BC), Diodorus Siculus

3. Cf. Kähler, *Das Gewissen: Die Entwicklung seiner Namen und seines Begriffs*, 1 Hälfte, *Altertum und neues Testament* (Halle, 1878).

(under Augustus), Plutarch (AD 50–120), and especially among the Hellenists.

Whereas among the Greeks, the conscience derived its content especially from the awareness of the limits assigned to people by the gods (*hubris*), among the Romans conscience was determined especially by their innate sense of dignity, virtue, and honor. Among the Romans, then, conscience had an entirely different character, and manifested itself as an authority that was respected and feared. The serious [30] and sober character of the Roman, the sense of justice and equity unique to the Roman, were points of contact for the lofty significance and seriousness of the conscience.

Among the Romans, then, the term *conscience* was ordinary and customary. Cicero speaks of the *magna vis conscientiae* (the power of conscience), and of its *grave pondus* (heavy weight); he viewed it as innate to all people and by nature private and believes that if conscience were to be lost, everything would disintegrate (*de nat. deor.* 3:35, *de legib.* 14).

The familiar proverb, *conscientia mille testes* (conscience is a thousand witnesses), proves how, among the Roman people, the conscience was viewed as a moral authority for living. Among them, the moral possessed an independent character and domain, and it did not function for them, as it did among the Greeks, in the category of aesthetics. The adage of Horatio is well-known: *hic murus aheneus esto, nil conscire sibi, nulla pallescere culpa* (Let that be your wall of bronze, to be free of guilt, with no wrongs to cause you pallor) (*Epist* I, 1.60). For Seneca, the conscience possessed an even greater significance (*Epist* 41.43, 97), whereas the gripping paintings of the bad conscience by Juvenalis (*Sat.* 13:1) and Persius (*Sat.* 3:35) are generally known.

Moving now to the Old Testament, we are struck immediately by the fact that the Israelite possesses no distinct word for referring to what we call *conscience*. In Ecclesiastes 10:20, the Hebrew word *madda* was incorrectly translated in the Septuagint as *conscience* [*suneidēsis*]. Although the term may well be absent in the Old Testament, the subject itself is nevertheless present. Already on one of the first pages of Holy Scripture, in the narrative of the fall (Gen. 3), conscience appears and its origin is explained. Before the fall, human beings had no conscience, at least not in the sense in which we are discussing it. Awareness of self and awareness of God [31] coincided at that point. No voice arose within the person at that point, which, as it were, stood over against the person and could accuse the person. The possibility of conscience thus coincides with the possibility of sin. Sin is the basis of the existence and operation of the conscience. For conscience is an awareness of having acted, not uprightly,

but wrongly, and is thus first and foremost negative, presupposing sin. Immediately after transgressing God's command, conscience manifested itself in the fact that the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened, and out of shame and fear they attempted to hide before God. Conscience is thus a "Symptom der Erkrankung" ["symptom of the disease"], the shattering of our awareness of God and our awareness of self; it is the knowledge of our fallen moral condition.⁴

In that sense, conscience appears more often in the Old Testament. The moral evaluation of our condition and of our actions, which we refer to as the conscience, is described by the Hebrew as *the heart*. By this it means that domain within the person where awareness of self occurs, where the person reflects about him- or herself. Thus, for the Israelite the heart is the core and the essence of our personality, the center of life, the seat of a person's entire spiritual life, and it therefore includes more than what we understand by conscience. The moral evaluation of our actions is one of the operations of the heart. The word *heart* has a broader meaning in Joshua 14:7, for example, where Luther translates it as "Gewissen," but where it means something close to "as far as I know." We see clearly that *heart* often refers to nothing other than *conscience*, however, in passages like 1 Kings 2:44 [32] where [Solomon] says to Samuel: you know the evil that *your heart* knows that you have done to David; in 1 Samuel 24:6, 2 Samuel 24:10 (cf. 1 Sam. 25:31), where David's heart struck him regarding the evil he had done. So then, the heart is the knower and the evaluator of the evil that we have committed (1 Kings 8:38, 47; Eccles. 7:22; cf. Gen. 42:21). The law of the Lord is written on the tablets of the heart (Jer. 17:1; 31:33; cf. 20:9). Especially important is Job 27:4–6, where Job confesses his innocence and verse 6b declares: "my heart does not reproach me for any of my days [my entire life]." In addition, in this connection all those passages come to mind where Israel's godly ones confess their innocence or expose the depth of their awareness of guilt (Pss. 17:1, 3; 18:[20–24]; cf. also Pss. 6; 38; 32:4; 5; 51; Job 15:20; Prov. 28:1; Deut. 28; 29).

Still more broad and important than in the Old Testament is the place that conscience occupies in the books of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is a phenomenon that is remarkable and, for those who see in Jesus nothing more than a moral teacher, inexplicable that in the four Gospels, the word *conscience* does not appear, and Jesus never appeals to the conscience or talks about it. The only place in the Gospels where the conscience is mentioned is John 8:9—a passage that, suspicious to the

4. See Schenkel, "Gewissen," in Herzog, *Real-encyklopädie für protestantische theologie und kirche* (Stuttgart: Besser, 1856), 5:129–42 and A.F.C. Vilmar, *Theologische Moral* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1871), 65–115.

critics, contains little of importance and merely one comment of the writer. Nonetheless, from that it does not follow that Jesus is denying the conscience with regard to its significance and value, for he always maintains and presupposes the moral awareness of people and the capacity for repentance. But we do indeed see that Jesus, who himself always performed his Father's will, who himself never experienced the condemning and accusing voice of conscience in his innermost being, did not assign to conscience that place [33] that is assigned to it by many today in the domain of the moral life.

For the New Testament teaching about the conscience, especially Paul comes to our attention. Just as in the Old Testament so too with Paul, the *heart* is the seat of original knowledge of God (Rom. 1:21). Especially important is Romans 2:15, where Paul says of the Gentiles that by their actions they show that the work of the law has been written in their hearts. For in doing by nature the things that belong to the law, they prove that the work commanded by the positive law is written also in their hearts as a work commanded by God, as a moral obligation. With those actions, which prove the existence of a law in their heart, their moral awareness, their conscience, agrees, both their own personal conscience as well as the public conscience that comes to expression in the shared mutually accusing or excusing thoughts. According to Paul, then, the conscience is not the law itself; nor does the conscience contain this law, for the law was written in the heart. But together with the actions the conscience testifies in the heart concerning the existence of that law, a testimony that at the same time pronounces a verdict in the thoughts as to whether the law has been violated.⁵

With Paul and with the other New Testament writers, however, the word *suneidēsis* possesses not only that [34] narrow meaning which we use to refer to the conscience that speaks, but also the broader meaning of awareness, knowledge. This is what we find in 2 Corinthians 4:2, 5:11, 1 Corinthians 8:7, Hebrews 10:2, and 1 Peter 2:19; in the last three of these passages, the word appears with an object, something to which and by which it is bound. This is perhaps also the meaning we find in Romans 13:5. In Romans 2:15, 9:1, 2 Corinthians 1:12, Hebrews 13:18, Acts 23:1,

5. On this passage cf. the commentaries of Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, Friedrich Adolph Philippi, Johann Peter Lange, and others. See also Weiss, *Biblische Theologie des N. Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1880) §§ 253–54; Vilmar, *Theologische Moral* §§ 55, 77–79, 95. I would also draw attention to the unique explanation of Gottlieb Christoph Adolf von Harless, *Christliche Ethik*, 7th ed. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1875) §§ 69–70, who understands “the work of the law” to refer not to “that doing, through which God’s Law is fulfilled” but to the judging and directing feature of the law.

24:16, [and] 2 Timothy 1:3, [conscience] involves not merely a certain awareness, but at the same time it testifies regarding our actions.

Despite the great value attributed to the witness of the conscience in these passages, the conscience is not infallible and immutable. The will of God remains the same, of course, but the conscience whereby the subject is bound to that will does change in its witness and judgment, according to the knowledge and development of an individual or of a people. Thus in 1 Corinthians 8:7 Paul speaks of a knowledge of the idols that is “with a conscience that feels that the idol is something and has a power to defile the food.” Thus, some Jewish Christians felt compelled by their conscience to observe the Mosaic law. The conscience can be bad, defiled, offended, and must then be cleansed by the blood of Christ (Heb. 9:14; 10:2, 22). And even among those who are already Christian, the conscience often continues to be bound to something that in itself is not prohibited, and it sometimes continues to operate in an undeveloped, weakened condition.⁶ We find instruction concerning this in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, along with Romans 14, where Paul teaches that each person’s conscience is binding for that person, but not for others. The apostle [35] thereby acknowledges the individuality of the conscience, although he holds before the stronger brother the requirement that he not give offense to the weaker brother, for whom in fact Christ also died. For each person, strong or weak, the rule was that everything not proceeding from faith (from the firm conviction that what we are doing is good) is sin. The truth of the opposite, naturally, does not follow at all.

That conscience is good and pure that is washed in the blood of Christ, that is sanctified through faith, and in which the Holy Spirit himself bears witness (1 Tim. 1:19; 1 Pet. 2:19; Rom. 9:1). So only that Christian conscience is good that feels bound solely and entirely and closely to the divine will known to us from revelation. A distinction exists, then, between the conscience of the converted and that of the unconverted. The conscience of the former can still be weak and stained and unclean. But it is nonetheless initially cleansed, and has become conscious of faith. The working of the conscience always remains the same. It is always condemning in nature, it consists of the awareness of having acted wrongly. John the apostle teaches us (1 John 3:19–24) that the heart (in the Old Testament sense of conscience) can do nothing but condemn; in itself it knows no forgiveness; but the Christian conscience consists in this, that it does not merely condemn us, but also points us to the

6. Cf. Heinrich Friedrich Theodor Ludwig Ernesti, *Die Ethik des Apostels Paulus*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1880) § 23.

forgiveness of sins in Christ. Brothers, if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows all things.

Thus both Old and New Testaments contain varying declarations that are extremely important for a doctrine of the conscience, which can invite a construction of that doctrine. Nevertheless, it took a long time before the conscience was discussed separately in the Christian church. [36] Only a few comments appear here and there among the church fathers, made by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, but especially by Chrysostom in his Homilies.⁷ In the Middle Ages, the conscience was discussed often in the areas of casuistry and Scholasticism but without people understanding the correct concept and the true significance of the conscience. The Reformation was accompanied by a favorable change in this regard.

As an act of morality and faith, the Reformation had a powerful influence on moral life. All the Reformers defended the moral consciousness of human beings. Especially the Reformed emphasized the conscience. Among them the matter arose as part of their natural theology, in connection with their discussion of the “small remnants” of the image of God, in the subject of Casuistics (*casus conscientiae*), which developed in Protestant soil as well, and in the subject of Ethics, which was treated separately for the first time by the Reformed theologian Danaeus (1577).

In more recent times, the conscience was discussed especially by Kant, who formulated as strongly as possible the autonomy of the moral person, ascribed a formal infallibility to the conscience, and understood a declaration of God to be absolutely binding. The frequent treatment devoted to the conscience since that time is closely connected with the powerful reversal that has occurred in the life and consciousness of the nations since the previous century. Being averse to all philosophical, metaphysical, and theological questions, people nowadays focus their attention almost exclusively on anthropological questions. The doctrine of the conscience has now found a home in the field of anthropology. Perhaps later, we will have an opportunity to show in more detail both the bright side and the dark side of this newer [37] perspective.

The problem of the conscience is made especially problematic today by those devoted to the teaching of evolution. Whereas these people view the conscience as something that is absolutely not original in the human being, but has developed along a completely natural path, others see in it the human being’s religious-moral organ par excellence, the origin and the principle of all moral and religious life. Thus, the opinions diverge

7. Johann Kaspar Suicer, *Thesaurus ecclesiasticus* s.v. *suneidos*. [Presumably, this reference is to the 3rd ed. (Utrecht, 1746); 1st ed. (Amsterdam: Wetstenium, 1682); 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Wetstenios, 1728).—Ed.]

significantly, and the literature dealing with the conscience has grown to be virtually boundless.⁸

At a later time we hope to ascertain what the conscience is, what role it should occupy in the moral life according to the teaching of Scripture and that of experience.

In our previous article, we said that the doctrine of the conscience nowadays had to take into consideration the perspectives about human beings in general, and very particularly about their moral consciousness, that are placed at the center by the advocates of the Darwinian paradigm. After all, Darwinism, since it teaches that human beings have descended from the animals, cannot be satisfied without arguing and demonstrating the relevance, with respect to the spiritual essence of human beings, that such a spiritual being must and can be explained on the basis of the variation of material substance. In opposition to those who see precisely in the spiritual essence, especially in the conscience, what is peculiar to human beings, what distinguishes the human being from all other beings, for the Darwinians it comes down to applying the idea of development, i.e., of evolution, also to the spiritual life of human beings, and to justifying this application scientifically. This has already been attempted by various defenders of Darwin's paradigm, especially by both British philosophers Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer. According to them, the conscience cannot be anything specifically human, nor a special capacity, nor an individual phenomenon; for then the conscience remains unexplained and evolution would not apply here. According to Darwinism, it must be a phenomenon that is present in human beings, while not belonging only to them, but composed from various component parts, able to be explained in its component factors, while analogies of those different factors must be able to be identified in animals.

[50] In this way, some attempt to explain the conscience in the basis of the feeling of pleasure and pain, of what is pleasant and unpleasant, whereby the ethical is deduced from the aesthetic, the good from the beautiful. Others think that the conscience has been composed and gradually formed through living under an authority in a society, which forced certain actions and laid those upon an individual as norms. It arose from fear of punishment and various other emotions, like vanity, sympathy, etc., which motivated a person to do these or those deeds, and gradually by means of custom such deeds were viewed as good, and other deeds conflicting with them were viewed as evil. According to Darwin

8. For the literature, see Schenkel, "Gewissen," in Herzog, *Real-encyklopädie*; Doedes, *De leer van God* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1871), 85–96; and especially the abundant list in the recently published third edition of Ernesti, *Die Ethik des Apostels Paulus* §§ 22–23.

himself, moral awareness is to be explained on the basis of the influence that the social instincts, which originated within us by living in a society, gradually acquired over the egoistic inclinations, which strove only for the gratification of the individual at the cost, if necessary, of the group.

No matter how it is presented, however, in all these explanations, the conscience nonetheless remains a product of circumstances. Had these been different, then the conscience itself would have acquired a different content. All duties are accidental. Insisting that this is good and that is evil are not rational and necessary claims but result from situations and circumstances that in turn were inherently accidental, or, if you will, necessarily had to be this way because the laws of nature command it, for at this point, accident and fate lie right next to each other and make little difference. In its entirety, morality is and remains, in one word, conventional.

Now it is true and must immediately be granted that in the empirical conscience as we know it from daily experience and observation, there is much that is accidental; it includes many elements that do not automatically [51] belong to the conscience but by means of different circumstances, nurture, status, occupation, etc., have come to be included and have, as it were, grown to be intertwined with conscience. The content of our conscience is derived largely from outside, and thus differs enormously among different peoples. Everyone knows examples of that. What is valued by one nation as being most highly moral and praiseworthy is disapproved by another as deeply immoral, so that Pascal said, “Vérité en deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au delà” (Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error beyond). In Babylon, prostitution—not in daily life but on the occasion of some religious festivals and thus consecrated by means of religion—was viewed as a highly praiseworthy deed. The Jews considered lighting a fire on the Sabbath to be impermissible and forbidden by their conscience. Even among those who adhere to the same religion and agree in matters of morality, wide differences can nonetheless be observed. The one person takes a walk on Sunday without feeling any remorse; the other person would not be able to do this without self-incrimination. All of these are examples that could be multiplied by people from the immediate vicinity. The conscience of one person is narrow and is often still bound to an “idol”; that of another person is broad, since for him, as people often say, virtually anything goes.

Thus we cannot deny that many accidental elements are incorporated in the conscience and that its content is largely formed from the outside. Largely, but does that mean totally? Does the conscience possess absolutely no content, not even questions, in common? Is it entirely blank, merely a “tabula rasa” on which can be written whatever one’s birth,

nurture, and environment want to write? Many answer these questions negatively and say that the conscience does possess some kind of universal content, like, for example, “*Suum cuique*” [“To each his own”]. Among the widespread differences one can nonetheless observe some similarity among differing [52] peoples. Paul says that the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things that are of the law and thus are themselves a law. And it is clear that we cannot make the conscience over into something we want, but often it resists something that we would be willing to adopt. As the ethical organ of human beings it has an affinity for the ethical, like our eye is designed to see the light. Nevertheless it is very difficult to identify which duties are specifically necessary pronouncements of the conscience, entailed innately and not received from the outside. It even seems to me that wanting to go back to that, and after settling all the differences, wanting to maintain a conscience with a certain chief rule or a pair of duties as its content, is already very unhistorical, recalling the evil time of Rousseau’s “*retournons à la nature*” [“back to nature”], and would finally show itself to be an impossibility. We always know the conscience only concretely, as it is historically formed within the family, state, and society, through religion, art, and science by all the moral authorities of a people.

But regardless of the situation, this is incontrovertible and is evident always and everywhere; namely, that the conscience exists. No one has sunk down so deeply on the path of sin but that conscience allows its voice still to be heard. No person is absolutely without conscience, but only Satan and his angels are. *What* is good and *what* is evil may be dominated by the greatest possible difference. *That* good and evil exist, that both are not the same, as the Materialists today want to have us believe, is a knowledge innate to every person. The awareness of duty, of something requiring unconditional obedience, is implanted within every human being. Experience teaches us only *that* there is something; but *why* that something exists, whether it be good or evil, beautiful or ugly, true or false, that is [53] what experience does not teach us. And even with that we are not satisfied, we not only observe, we also criticize and repeatedly pronounce our judgment. We cannot avoid doing this, we must always evaluate, whether to approve or disapprove, to esteem something as lofty or lowly. Nothing exists in connection with which a person considers observation alone to be sufficient, not asking about the reasonableness and necessity thereof. The Positivism of A. Comte does indeed teach that science must let go of all those value judgments and must be satisfied simply with the observation of facts. The person includes his or her reason and conscience in science and investigates the why and the how.

Thus a person does not receive the categories of good and evil, and thereby also of true and false, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust, from the outside, but possesses them a priori and brings them along in advance. This is the same situation as with the categories of logic. In thought itself, the laws of thought are gradually manifested. The more we think, the better we learn how and why we must think precisely this way and not otherwise. In this way as well, the awareness of good and evil gradually becomes apparent in the doing of good and evil. If humanity had not fallen, then it would have learned to know wrong thinking and wrong action not by experience, but at most as a prohibition, as a limit upon good thinking and good acting. Then, by means of always doing the good according to the inner impulse of their nature, they would always have entered more deeply into the knowledge of the essence of that good, that is, of God himself, as well. But now they learn to know the evil by their own painful experience. The evil rose to human awareness when people had done evil. And since they now do neither only good nor only evil, but always both are involved in all their [54] deeds and words, and intermingled, as it were, they learned in this manner to know neither the one nor the other purely, and they apply the category of good and evil impurely at best and always in accordance with the standard given them by the society.

Thus the conscience becomes manifest after the deed. Every consciousness presupposes a being such that moral consciousness also presupposes a being, a moral situation. If that situation happens to be normal, which means as it was supposed to be according to the given moral notions, then the conscience is silent, and it provides us with tranquility, a consciousness of having acted well and thus, as a consequence, a pleasant, gratifying feeling. If that situation does not correspond with the standard of the conscience, however, then it avenges itself, accuses us, punishes us with remorse and awareness of guilt.

This is how the conscience manifests itself and pronounces its judgment independent from our will, without our help, often even in opposition to all our attempts to silence its voice. Though that occasionally succeeds, conscience nonetheless repeatedly raises its voice; often so strongly and vigorously that it drives the criminal to realize the significance of his secret crime and, like Judas, makes him seek deliverance and comfort in suicide. Shakespeare in particular, the poet of the conscience, portrays for us with poignant accuracy the power of the conscience, for example, in *Macbeth* and *Richard III*.

But if it is true that the conscience manifests itself in the awareness of good and evil and in the accusing or excusing of our actions, what then is that conscience itself in its nature and essence? Where is its seat with the

human person? What is its secret power with which it applies the category of good and evil to all our actions and words, to our entire situation? Is it a separate capacity within us, or should it be assigned to one of the three capacities of the human soul: thinking, feeling, or willing? [55] We think not. The conscience does not stand alongside our thought, feeling, or will, and even less is it included within one of these three. It stands above those capacities, has authority over them, and supplies each with its standard.

Thought, will, and feeling are only partially within our power, within the power of our personality. But the conscience does not allow itself to be dominated, and, occasionally given to slumber, it awakens with all the more power. That occurs because the conscience is the law of our own personality. Each thing has its own law; all life is bound to laws that manifest themselves gradually in life. The conscience is the law of personal life to the degree that this is in conflict with its own essence and idea. And that this life can deviate from its own law is precisely the mark identifying it as a personal, a free, life. The conscience is thus the rift between the ideal person and the empirical person, between what one must be and what one is, between ideal and reality. In this way, the conscience is not a voice coming within us and to us from the outside, one that is foreign to our own being, for then the power of the conscience would be inexplicable. No, it is the law of our own personality, which accuses us, and does so with regard to not simply some actions or words or thoughts, but often our entire selves, our entire personality, the entire empirical I. It is the person's own being that reacts and protests against the person as he or she really is. The human person is an amazing being! With awareness, spiteful, sinning and thinking with premeditation, manifesting therein the person's greatest freedom, one learns thereby to know best one's deep dependence. Sin is capriciousness, irrationality, and thereby it leads not to the freedom of the will but to its slavish bondage. Those who sin misuse their will and come to the discovery that they cannot do what they want, that they [56] are bound to the law of their own personal, moral being, and that as a personality they can indeed transgress that law but never with impunity, never without remorse and recrimination.

Thus it appears that the conscience stands above us and over against us and maintains an order that applies unconditionally, one that we can never assault with impunity. In the conscience we learn that we are not *nostris juris* (a law unto ourselves) but are dependent on a higher authority. In this way it is not an awareness that is merely moral but also religious. The conscience is mine, my property, it is the most individual feature, indeed, it is the person within the person. And yet the conscience is not my fabrication. Within me it is independent of my will. It is not a

product but much more a factor of my consciousness. It is the law of my own being that accuses me in the conscience and nonetheless stands far above me and goes beyond my personality. Thus it cannot be explained from within myself but points to an authority above me that has been given to me as a law of my personality. It is something absolute, something unconditional and valid above everything, something divine that manifests itself to me therein. God himself is the last factor of the conscience. This law of the personality points back to him as the Legislator. In this way it is indeed a voice of God that comes to us in the conscience. According to that divine side, according to its inner essence, in itself, not as it manifests itself empirically within us, the conscience is infallible and cannot err. At its deepest core the conscience is a knowledge shared not only with our selves but also with God; an awareness that we live outside of him, that by transgressing the law of our own personality we have thereby simultaneously broken *his* holy law.

Because the conscience has received from God the authority that it has over us, and it is his law that addresses us in our conscience, [57] which is independent of the will and power of all people, even from our own power and will, therefore the freedom of the conscience is a demand that cannot be refused. God alone, no human being, no matter who that might be, is judge of the conscience. To subject it to the judgment of the state, of the church, or of science is tyranny, a presumption of law that belongs simply and only to God and a violation of what in human personality is the most noble, tender, and sacred.

Nevertheless, the question can be raised whether that freedom must apply without limit. Is it not possible, and does not experience teach us, that misuse can be made of an appeal to the conscience, and something can be passed off as a conscientious objection that, according to virtually everyone's judgment, has nothing to do with that? This question is certainly difficult and not to be answered with a universal rule. Exceptional cases require exceptional rules. Consideration must always be given, however, that it is better to spare ten pretended conscientious objections than to mock one real conscientious objection. To invade the rights of the conscience is to violate the majesty of the divine law. Among the Reformed, compelling the conscience is folly, because it does not depend on us to believe whatever we wish, and it is the greatest cruelty—to use the words of Pictet—to obligate someone to condemn himself, because no one is saved by a religion that he considers to be false.

But it is a duty for each one, in order to form his or her conscience, to purify one's conscience and to rid it of untrue elements. The conscience is of incalculable gravity, it is an invincible power in the individual and in an entire people. But it is not supreme. It knows no deliverance but only guilt

and recrimination and remorse. In this way it points indirectly to something else that can satisfy, [58] form, and lead it. The supreme norm for our life is the divine law that may echo in our conscience as a voice that is dull and unclear and as though from a distance. Something can be a sin before God that nonetheless is not against our conscience. Therefore the subjective rule of our life must be brought increasingly into agreement with the objective one made known to us in God's revelation. With increasing measure, Christ must become the content of our conscience. He makes our conscience first genuinely free, independent of all external authority, and makes the law of our own personality correspond with God's holy will. To be good, a deed must be in agreement not only with our conscience but also with the law of God; and the opposite is just as true. Between the conscience and the law of God there is a close connection. The moral, i.e., the universal-human, law of the Ten Commandments is, after all, nothing other than the natural law, which was implanted in Adam. And although the conscience has often become deformed through sin, nevertheless it remained the norm of good and evil and carries within itself the unconditional validity of the good, and thus, as it is gradually purified by Christ, incorporating the law of God, it can assimilate itself. Therein that law of God proves itself to our heart always more as genuinely divine, that it agrees with the depth of our being; therein lies the persistent proof for the truth of Christianity, that it satisfies the deepest needs and pronouncements of our conscience, and Christ fulfills to the fullest within us the law of our own personality. Because they understood that, our Reformed theologians treated the *Theologia Revelata* before the *Theologia Naturalis*. Nature and Scripture are not hostile toward each other but belong together, and the one without the other is unfinished and incomplete.

Pearls and Leaven

Bavinck on Religion

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In the *Reformed Dogmatics* (1:236) Bavinck devotes no more than a single paragraph to the word “religion”; namely, its possible etymology and meaning. To be sure, he then goes on to explain in some detail the various ways in which Scripture speaks of the *objective* side of religion—essentially the ordinances of God—and the corresponding *subjective* side: the fear of the Lord.

The following passage, taken from § 7 of Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics* manuscript, which is now being translated and prepared for eventual publication by Baker Publishing Group, does not present a novel or different perspective from the one given in the *Dogmatics* but a complementary one. In particular it elaborates on the difference between Cicero’s claim that religion is derived from *relegere* and Lactantius’s assertion that it comes from *religare*. The point at stake here is whether religion is primarily about divine worship or about the social cohesiveness of a people committed to a common cause. In spite of the fact that Lactantius Christianized the notion of religion, Bavinck takes the side of Cicero, a decision that seems to be confirmed by other linguists (see n. 5 below). Perhaps surprisingly, Bavinck also rejects the idea that religion is “communion with God.”

That Bavinck chooses to link religion to piety and worship is significant in view of a tendency among many neo-Calvinists after Kuyper and Bavinck to broaden the notion as in “all of life is religion.”¹ Readers will find Bavinck’s comments about the relation between “objective” scriptural religion and our human subjective experience of religion to provide wise guidance for today.

1. E.g., see Henry Vander Goot, ed., *Life is Religion: Essays in Honor of H. Evan Runner* (St. Catharines, Ont.: Paideia, 1981).

Excerpt from *Reformed Ethics* § 7*

According to Cicero, “religion” is derived from *relegere*² (to go through or over again in reading, speech, or thought) and points to “everything that formed a part of divine worship” which was “heedfully repeated and, as it were, ‘regathered’ (*relegerent*)” [for guiding the practice of devout and observant religious people.]³ As we saw⁴ Lactantius, however, disputed this and sought the etymology for “religion” in *religare* (to bind together).⁵ Arguments in favor of Cicero’s view include appeals to passages in Cicero that link religion with the notion of obligation⁶ and the fact that words ending in “-io” are derived from third conjugation verbs (cf. *optio* from *opere*). Lactantius’s view, however, is defended by Fleck,⁷ Hahn, and Lange.⁸

* The following excerpt was initially translated by Antoine Theron and edited by John Bolt. It was subsequently carefully scrutinized during the week of 3–7 August 2015 by the team of John Bolt, Jessica Driesenga, Nelson Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, and Dirk Van Keulen. For further information about the manuscript, see Dirk Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics: Some Remarks about Unpublished Manuscripts in the Libraries of Amsterdam and Kampen,” *Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 25–56.

2. Ed. note: For the sake of clarity, in what follows Bavinck’s original has been reconstructed and amplified by the editor. This section was difficult to reconstruct because Bavinck earlier seemed to side with Lactantius’s link of religion to *religare* (to bind together). Furthermore, the manuscript at this point mistakenly inserts *religare* instead of *relegere* as the word used by Cicero.

3. Ed note: The citation from Cicero is found in *De natura deorum* II.28.

4. Ed. note: This is a reference to an earlier section in this chapter. The Lactantius reference is to *Institutiones divinae* IV.28.

5. Ed. note: Etymological battles over the word “religion” go back to the early days of the Christian church among Greek and Roman writers as well as Christian thinkers. For a helpful, brief survey of this discussion, see Sarah F. Hoyt, “The Etymology of Religion,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 32/2 (1912): 126–29. Hoyt concludes (p. 128): “If all points are carefully considered, Cicero’s view would seem to be preferable, so that religion is not derived from *religare*, but from *relegere*.”

6. Ed. note: Hoyt, “The Etymology of Religion,” 128; the passages are *Oratio de Domo*, 105, 106, 124; the idea here is that religion involves conscientious observance and keeping of God’s commands and ordinances. That is why they need to be re-read, and re-read; in other words, *liturgy* is essential to good religion.

7. Ed. note: Bavinck does not specify here but is likely referring to Ferdinand Florens Fleck, *System der christlichen Dogmatik mit besonderer Beziehung auf die religiösen und speculative Zustände des Zeitalters* (Leipzig: Friedrich Fleischer, 1846).

8. Johann Peter Lange, *Christliche Dogmatik*, first part, 189 (according to Friedrich Adolph Philippi, *Kirchliche Glaubenslehre*, 1:6–7); Julius Köstlin, “Religion” *PRE*¹ XII, 647ff.

It is a peculiar fact that the Germans including the early Reformed always spoke of Lutheran or Reformed “religion.” Schleiermacher uses the term piety (*Frömmigkeit*) from the word *vrum* which, according to W. J. S. Müller⁹ (*Studien und Kritiken*, 1835), was the Gothic word for *primus* or first and also meant virtuous, useful, alert, valiant (in the liturgical form for baptism.) It was related to the word *uram* that meant “forward.” The word expresses only subjective religiosity; the Pharisees were also pious. The terms “devotion” and “godliness” are too ethical, too practical, too specific to embrace everything that we include in the term “religion” (*godsdiens*t). The term “faith” (*geloof*), which is etymologically related to the terms “believe” (*geloven*), “promise” (*belofte*), “vow” (*geloofte*), “betroth” (*verloven*), “allow” (*veroorloven*), and “love” (*lieven*) is also too specific for this purpose. The root of “faith” expresses a loving surrender and dedication to somebody. By contrast, religion (*godsdiens*t) is too external, and the term service (*dienst*), morphologically a masculine term, is too harsh, insufficiently tender and affectionate. Des Amorie [van der Hoeven] Jr. suggests the word “Godward life” (*Gode-leven*).¹⁰

So then what is religion (*godsdiens*t)? It is of foremost importance that we acknowledge Christianity as the only source for determining the essence of religion. To want to determine the essence of religion by trying to find what all religions have in common yields only an abstraction without substance. What is true and good in other religions can be determined and measured only by the true Christian religion.¹¹ One also has to distinguish between religion in an objective and a subjective sense. Once we understand both we may be able to grasp what they have in common.

(a) What is objective religion (*religio objectiva*)? God himself shows us in the first table of the law. It consists of the service of God (*cultus Dei*) that is described for us in Holy Scripture: the worship of God alone, going to church, observing the Sabbath, using the sacraments, communal prayer. Holy Scripture very fittingly describes it as walking in the Lord’s laws, duties, statutes, ways. Objective religion thus corresponds with what God has revealed concerning himself and how he expects us to serve him; it corresponds with the Torah and with the Holy Scripture itself. Francken therefore says that religion (*godsdiens*t) is the content of Holy Scripture.¹²

9. Köstlin, 649.

10. Abraham des Amorie van der Hoeven Jr., *De godsdiens*t: het wezen van den mensch, 2nd ed. (Leeuwarden: Suringar, 1857) 5–6.

11. Philippi, 1:2–3.

12. Ægidius Francken, *Stellige God-geleertheyd, dat is De Waarheden van de Hervormde Leer Eenvoudig ter nedergesteld, en met de Oeffening der waare*

Philippi describes objective religion as the Christ-effected restoration of the communion of God with humanity.¹³ This raises the question whether religion (*godsdiens*) is communion with God, which will be addressed presently.

(b) What is subjective religion (*religio subjectiva*)? The New Testament usually indicates subjective religion by the words “faith” (πίστις) or “believing” (πιστεύειν). This faith resides in the heart (Rom. 10:10). It is with the heart that one believes unto righteousness; it is the center, the core, the innermost point of our being, our *I*. And because faith resides in the *I*, it is an act of the whole human person, of mind, will, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:4–5; Matt. 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). How is this faith worked in us? The Holy Spirit works it in us, but through the preaching of the Word, which aims at the mind and the will. It is thus mediated through mind and will: these are the two portals, points of entry to our innermost being, to our *I*, by which the Holy Spirit carries the seed of the Word into us and there causes faith to arise (Rom. 10:14–15). And just as faith, subjective religion, is mediated by the mind and the will, it proceeds from the *I* to again work on the mind and the will. The Reformed therefore did not make the mistake of having knowing (*cognoscere*) and serving (*colere*) coexist independently in the definition of religion (*godsdiens*). Religion (*godsdiens*) is mediated by both and manifests itself in both. Faith truly is knowing and trusting; it does not exist without both.

And the Reformed definition is far better than Schleiermacher’s. Feeling is passive and receptive. Faith is reflected in feeling, and one who believes will experience to some extent feelings of contentedness and bliss. But faith is not identical to feeling. Rather, feeling is a fruit and reflection of faith. To be sure, Schleiermacher explained feeling as immediate self-consciousness. This is impossible, however; it cannot be both at once, it has to be either feeling or self-consciousness. The one can absolutely not include the other.¹⁴ Faith, then, is the unity of knowing and ability (*kennen en kunnen*), of knowledge and deed. Its only object is God; it knows God, engages God, and deals with God.

(c) What is the relation between objective religion and subjective religion? Polanus wrote, “Religion or piety is the internal cause of the service of God: the one is the cause, the other the effect.”¹⁵ To some extent

Godsaligheyd aangedrongen, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Dordrecht, 1743), 56.

13. Philippi, 1:47.

14. Philippi, 1:52v., 61v., 71; Lange, 133ff.

15. Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianæ*, 580A.

this is true. Subjective religion impels us and enables us to serve God according to his will. But objective religion is not the product, effect, and creation of subjective religion. Self-imagined or self-made objective religion is not service of God but idolatry or self-willed worship (ἐθελοθρησκεία; see e.g. Matt. 15:9, Mark 7:7, Col. 2:23). No, objective religion is already there, contained and described in Holy Scripture. Only God can decide what objective religion is and how he wants to be served. Subjective religion begins by abandoning all self-willed religion (*godsdienst*) and ceasing to be active, and instead it becomes passive and enters into the service of God according to his will. This is why Holy Scripture speaks of walking in the ways and laws of the Lord and not walking according to our own imagination. This is not compulsion because subjective religion makes us willing to walk in the ways of the Lord. And objective religion, too, is no forced system, no pressing or constricting mold for subjective religion. Quite the contrary; while objective religion is the pure and true and adequate form of the subjective, subjective religion is the perfectly fitting content of objective religion. Both are intended to permeate each other with increasing intimacy. To some extent it is still the case that objective religion stands over us like a law: as a rule for our lives to protect us from straying it had to be objectively revealed. But as subjective religion grows within us, and as faith becomes stronger and more spontaneous, objective religion increasingly becomes our own being. The two may for the moment remain partially in conflict, but they are directed to each other and inclined toward each other. One day they will fully correspond. In heaven they will both be *one*.

To conclude: religion should not be defined as communion (*gemeenschap*) with God. This is currently a common definition, for example, of Oosterzee.¹⁶ Notice, however: (a) Communion is reciprocal. There is communion between a husband and wife but not between a father and child among whom an intimate relationship of piety (*pietas*) exists. If there were religious communion between God and us, God, too, would have religion. This is not the case: religion is something human, the most human thing about our humanity,¹⁷ and therefore to speak of “human religion” is really a pleonasm, a redundancy. (b) The definition “religion is communion between God and human beings” excludes all objective religion and makes it seem as if objective religion is a matter of

16. Ed. note: Johannes Jacob van Oosterzee (1817–1882) was a professor of biblical and practical theology at the University of Utrecht. Though Bavinck does not refer to a specific title, he likely has in mind *Christelijke dogmatiek: Een handboek voor academisch onderwijs en eigen oefening*, 2 vols. (Utrecht: Kemink, 1876).

17. According to Des Amorie van der Hoeven Jr.

indifference and inferior. But such a notion is contradicted by Holy Scripture, which in the second commandment identifies the sin of idolatry, and in the land of Israel specified that it should be punished with death. This idea, however, reflected in the subjectivism of Schleiermacher and of the entire present age. (c) Because of the reasons listed in (a) and (b), the definition “religion is communion between God and human beings” is incomplete and inaccurate. Religion is not, as Klee thought, the reciprocal rapport (*Wechselrapport*) between God and a human being,¹⁸ even less is it an activity or consciousness in us. It is not the relationship itself nor the communion between God and people as such but the “certainty of the human subjects that they exist and live in this relationship and engagement,” a human way of life by virtue of and through the peculiar relationship between God and us.¹⁹ Human beings stand in a special and unique relationship to God, essentially distinct from that of angels and animals and every creature and thus are disintuiguated from all other creatures. Because of the unique relationship to God in which we stand (come to stand by faith), this relationship is distinctively expressed in all of human life. And because God in a special way places himself in a relationship to human beings, they too place themselves [49] in a unique relationship to God.

Thus we obtain the following definition: Formally, religion (*godsdi-entst*) is the distinctive relationship of human beings to God, expressing itself in all of life, based on the distinctive relationship of God to human beings. Materially, religion (*godsdi-entst*) is the child-like relationship to God that arises in a human being, based on the reconciled relation in which God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, places himself to the believer. This makes God the object of believers’ knowledge and action and leads them to walk in the ways of the Lord according to God’s will and for his glory. Religion (*godsdi-entst*) is serving God in childlike fear, in faith, with all one’s powers in the entirety of life according to his will and for his glory. Piety (*pietas*) and religion (*religio*) are therefore not identical. As Calvin correctly distinguishes, religion (*religio*) arises from piety (*pietas*). Religion (*religio*) is thus our human way of life with respect to God determined by piety (*pietas*, the child-like relation to God). Religion (*religio*) is not communion with God and the spiritual life as such, but the piety (*pietas*) that directs the mind, will, feeling, all powers

18. Ed. note: Bavinck does not indicate the source but he is referring to Heinrich Klee, *Encyclopädie der Theologie* (Mainz: Florian Kupsterberg, 1832), p. 8 § 7: “Religion is der Wechsel-Rapoort Gottes und der (intelligenten, hier näher: menschlichen) Creatur....”

19. Köstlin, 641–42.

and all actions and daily walk is religion (*godsdiens*). Religion (*godsdiens*) is decidedly a matter of the mind, of the will, of all the powers, flowing forth from a heart in right relationship to God. Religion (*godsdiens*) is thus the relationship of the *whole* person with heart, soul, etc. to God, governed by the standard of God's will.

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