

# **“Bavinck’s bug” or “Van Tilian” hypochondria?**

**An analysis of Prof. Oliphint’s assertion  
that cognitive realism and Reformed theology are incompatible**

By Laurence O'Donnell

## I. Introduction

The following is an analysis of two essays by Prof. K. Scott Oliphint wherein he levels criticisms against Herman Bavinck's (1854–1921) formulation of realism as the cognitive foundation for non-theological knowledge (hereafter: philosophy).<sup>1</sup> The form of the reply, a loosely-interpreted scholastic *quaestio*, reflects Bavinck's own presentation of the topic.<sup>2</sup>

### A. The question stated

The question Oliphint raises is not regarding the *principium essendi* of theology or philosophy; for he admits that he and Bavinck hold the same view on this point: the triune Lord is the *principium essendi* of all that exists.

The question is not regarding the *principium cognoscendi* of theology; for Oliphint admits that he and Bavinck hold the same view on this point: Holy Scripture is the cognitive *principium unicum* of theology.<sup>3</sup>

Rather, the question regards the *principium cognoscendi* of philosophy. It has two parts: (1) whether Bavinck's affirmation of cognitive realism in philosophy is compatible with his affirmation that Holy Scripture is the cognitive *principium unicum* of theology, and (2) whether Bavinck's formulation of the Logos as the external and internal cognitive foundation of philosophy is compatible with his affirmation of cognitive realism. Oliphint denies both; we affirm both.

1. Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle: Frame and Bavinck," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 201–32; Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism, The Logos Principle, and *Sola Scriptura*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72, no. 2 (2010): 359–90.

2. David S. Sytsma notes that, formally, Bavinck's assertion of realism vis-à-vis rationalism and empiricism can be read along the lines of a scholastic *quaestio*. "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology: The Argument and Sources of his Principia of Science," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology*, ed. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2011), 19.

3. Cf. Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 361; with Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," 207–08.

## B. The state of the question

### 1. Past and present scholarship

Even though it is our intent to analyze this question systematically rather than historically, it is important nevertheless to place the question in its historical context; for Oliphint's formulation of the question—which itself is an instance of the perennial question of the proper relation between theology and philosophy—is rooted in the anti-scholastic intellectual milieu that arose in the early twentieth century at the Free University in Amsterdam and was imported into North America via several streams, one of which being the apologetics of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) of whom Oliphint is an ardent disciple.<sup>4</sup> John M. Frame, another disciple of Van Til, has debated the same issue with Richard A. Muller and David F. Wells.<sup>5</sup> More recently J. V. Fesko and Guy M. Richard have argued that Van Til's rejection of natural theology—which position is a correlate of his rejections of scholasticism and realism—is out of accord with the Westminster Standards, with the views of prominent Westminster divines, and with the catholic tradition appropriated by Reformed doctors throughout the early and high periods of Protestant doctrinal fluorescence.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, T. David Gordon and John

4. On Oliphint's esteem of Van Til, see Oliphint, "Desert Bloom in Amarillo," *New Horizons* (July 2010), [http://opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=666](http://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=666); Oliphint, "Forward," in Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), xi–xiii; and Oliphint, "The Consistency of Van Til's Methodology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (1990): 49.

5. Whether *sola Scriptura* can rightly serve as the *principium cognoscendi* of non-theological knowledge is the underlying issue in the debate between Frame and Muller. See Frame, "Muller on Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 1 (Spr 1994): 133–51; Muller, "The Study of Theology Revisited: A Response to John Frame," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 409–17. The same underlying issue was subsequently debated in Frame, "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 269–91; Muller, "Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship: Toward Dialogue with John Frame," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 301–10; and Wells, "On Being Framed," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 293–300.

6. "Natural Theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, vol. 3, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2009), 223–66.

Bolt have argued, albeit implicitly, against Van Til's position,<sup>7</sup> and Donald Macleod has attempted to forge a middle way of sorts between the opposing views.<sup>8</sup> In this light Oliphint's "Bavinck's bug" critique is simply the most recent restatement of Van Til's position.<sup>9</sup>

There are no extant studies aimed directly at responding to Oliphint's criticisms. However, David Sytsma has recently published a trenchant historical-theological essay on the argument and sources of Bavinck's epistemology. In his summary of scholarship regarding Bavinck's formulation of the *principia* of science, he notes Van Til's criticisms but does not attempt a response other than stating that Van Til's repudiation of Bavinck's affirmation of "common notions" is "a significant departure from both catholic and Reformed tradition."<sup>10</sup> As will become evident below, Sytsma provides a more historically contextualized, more accurate, and more compelling reading of Bavinck's formulations than does Oliphint (or Van Til). Theodore G. Van Raalte's essay in the same volume analyzes Bavinck's philosophical epistemology from another angle: the moral epistemology undergirding Bavinck's use of natural law theory.<sup>11</sup> Both of

7. Gordon, "How My Mind Has Changed: The Insufficiency of Scripture," *Modern Reformation* 11, no. 1 (2002): 18–23; Bolt, "Sola Scriptura as an Evangelical Theological Method?," in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2008), 154–65. Oliphint interprets Bolt's essay as a challenge to the "Van Tilian" position on *sola Scriptura*, especially as that position has been as expounded by Frame, and he polemicizes against Bolt's thesis accordingly: cf. Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," 212–13, 228–30; with Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 364–65, 389–90.

8. "Bavinck's Prolegomena: Fresh Light on Amsterdam, Old Princeton, and Cornelius Van Til," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006): 261–82. Insofar as Macleod omits Van Til's criticisms of Bavinck's thought, his interpretation of the two positions is unconvincing. Nevertheless, he does highlight the significant continuity that attains between the two positions.

9. The recent essay by Dan Strange, who appropriates John Frame's formulation of *sola Scriptura* and applies it to politics in the United Kingdom, can be included among recent "Van Tilian" formulations: "Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology," *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (2011): 238–60.

10. "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 43; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 2–4, 18.

11. "Unleavened Morality? Herman Bavinck on Natural Law," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck*, 57–100.

these studies provide grist for the reply to objections below.

## 2. *The historical context of Oliphint's "Van Tilian" criticism*

Oliphint levels his criticism against Bavinck's thought explicitly upon the basis of Van Til's earlier criticism.<sup>12</sup> According to Van Til, Bavinck's epistemological formulations are beholden to "scholasticism," which term Van Til defines as a wrongheaded attempt to synthesize the antipodes of pagan (Greek) philosophy and Christian theology. The crux of Van Til's critique is his assertion that Holy Scripture is the cognitive *principium unicum* of theology and philosophy. Upon this premise he concludes that cognitive realism is incompatible with a truly Christian view of philosophy insofar as realism posits reason (i.e., perception of the extra-mental world via sense experience) as its cognitive foundation rather than Holy Scripture. In Van Til's view this formulation entails rationalistic autonomy.

What Oliphint overlooks in his appropriation of Van Til's criticism is that the criticism is in fact an appropriation of Herman Dooyeweerd's (1894–1977) definition of "scholasticism" and corresponding criticisms of Bavinck's "scholastic" epistemology.<sup>13</sup>

12. Cf. Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," 206; with Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 360. The passage Oliphint cites is Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 94–95. Van Til levels several more criticisms against Bavinck's thought, all of which relate to the underlying issue of the validity of Reformed scholasticism especially with respect to philosophical epistemology. All of Oliphint's criticism are recapitulations of Van Til's criticisms. For a catalog and analysis of the latter, see Brian G. Mattson, "Van Til on Bavinck: An Assessment," *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 1 (2008): 111–27; Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 2–4; Laurence O'Donnell, "Kees Van Til als Nederlandse-Amerikaanse, Neo-Calvinistisch-Presbyteriaan apologeticus: An Analysis of Cornelius Van Til's Presupposition of Reformed Dogmatics with special reference to Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*" (ThM thesis, Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Theological Seminary, 2011), [http://j.mp/ODonnell\\_ThM\\_Thesis](http://j.mp/ODonnell_ThM_Thesis), chs. 5–7.

13. See O'Donnell, "Kees Van Til," ch. 6; regarding the influence of the Free University philosophers upon Van Til, cf. John Bolt, "Een gemiste en een nieuwe kans: Herman Bavinck over openbaring en religie," in *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck*, ed. George Harinck and Gerrit Neven, Ad Chartas-reeks 9 (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2006), 153; and Bolt, "Editor's Preface," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck*, vi–vii; with the literature cited in Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 3n7.

Noting the true origin and context of this criticism illuminates its connection to a larger question that was being debated at the Free University in Amsterdam: the validity of Reformed scholasticism, especially its affirmation of an eclectic, modified Aristotelian-Thomistic cognitive realism.<sup>14</sup> At the risk of overgeneralization one way this debate can be summarized is as a dispute between Bavinck's successor in the chair of dogmatics and fellow advocate of Reformed scholasticism, Valentijn Hepp (1879–1950), and two philosophy professors at the same school—Dooyeweerd and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892–1978)—both of whom were overtly antagonistic toward Reformed scholastic modes of thought. For instance, Dooyeweerd concludes his lengthy analysis of the anti-Christian “scholasticism” he sees in Abraham Kuyper's (1837–1920), Jan Woltjer's (1849–1917), and Bavinck's proclivities for philosophical realism with the following ultimatum: “an urgent and necessary process is laid upon us by virtue of our reformational calling to come to a critical choice between the principles of the Reformation and the traditional philosophical ideas that sprung from an entirely different root.”<sup>15</sup> By “traditional philosophical ideas” he means Reformed scholasticism's appropriation of philosophical concepts from the catholic tradition such as body-soul dualism, the Logos theory, the *analogia entis*, the *universalia in re* and *ante rem in mente divina*, and cognitive realism.

The fruits of this project appear in such works as Vollenhoven's Calvinism and the reformation of philosophy (1933) and Dooyeweerd's Philosophy of the cosmonomic

14. On the nature of the general philosophical orientation of Reformed scholasticism, see Richard A. Muller, “Reformation, Orthodoxy, ‘Christian Aristotelianism,’ and the Eclecticism of Early Modern Philosophy,” *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 81 (January 1, 2001): 306–25; cf. Sytsma, “Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology,” 47.

15. Herman Dooyeweerd “Kuyper's Philosophy of Science,” trans. D. F. M. Strauss, in *On Kuyper: A Collection of Readings on the Life, Work & Legacy of Abraham Kuyper*, eds. Steve Bishop and John H. Kok (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2013), 178; cf. Dooyeweerd, “Kuyper's wetenschapsleer,” *Philosophia Reformata* 4 (1939): 232.

idea (1935–36), which are proposals for a non-scholastic rebirth of Reformed philosophy, and Dooyeweerd's diatribe against scholasticism, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy* (1949). Such strong stances against classical Reformed thought brought forth equally strong reactions against such "amateurish tinkering," as Hepp saw it, with sardonic titles such as Hepp's Threatening deformation<sup>16</sup> (1936) and Hendrik Steen's Deformed philosophy (1937). Bitter division ensued. Tensions remained unresolved through WWII.<sup>17</sup>

Van Til was not only aware of the controversy surrounding this project but also explicitly sided with the Free University philosophers regarding their vision to replace Reformed scholasticism's allegedly pagan philosophical corruptions with a truly Reformed philosophy. His programmatic claims regarding the need to purify the "scholastic" elements left over in the philosophical formulations of his theological forefathers, the so-called old Amsterdam and old Princeton theologians, hearken back to this Free University dispute and indicate that he saw his own life's work in Reformed apologetics as participating in an American version of this anti-scholastic rebirth movement.<sup>18</sup> "It is thus that Kuyper's vision," proclaims Van Til in a 1968 address to the

16. Given the Free University debate over "Reformed principles" and Dooyeweerd's claim to purify Kuyper's Calvinism it could be that Hepp's title, *Dreigende deformatie*, hearkens backhandedly to "Deformatiën der Theologie," in Kuyper's *Encyclopaedie der heilige godgeleerdheid*, vol. 2., §29.

17. See "Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd," in Arie Theodorus van Deursen, *The Distinctive Character of the Free University in Amsterdam, 1880–2005: A Commemorative History*, trans. Herbert Donald Morton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 169–76; the "amateurish tinkering" characterization is from van Deursen's summary, p. 175; J. Glenn Friesen, "The Investigation of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven by the Curators of the Free University" (self-published essay, 2005), <http://j.mp/FriesenVU>; "The Academic Context" and "Vollenhoven's Program," in Anthony Tol, *Philosophy in the Making: D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and the Emergence of Reformed Philosophy* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2010), 42–74. On Van Til's relationship with Klaas Schilder (1890–1952), another important figure in the Dutch anti-scholastic renewal movement, see George Harinck, "'How Can an Elephant Understand a Whale and Vice Versa?' The Dutch Origins of Cornelius Van Til's Appraisal of Karl Barth," in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, ed. by Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 13–41.

18. See Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, chs. 3–5; Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, chs. 2, 11–13. On Dooyeweerd's influence upon Van Til's thought, see O'Donnell, "Kees Van Til," ch. 6. Also

American Association of Christian Schools,

expanded and clarified by Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd may help us in our task in undertaking the cultural mandate for ourselves today. Would that more of those who have seen something of Kuyper's vision as he set it forth in the chapel at Princeton Seminary, might be willing to follow through with Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd.<sup>19</sup>

Placing Oliphint's "Bavinck's bug" criticism in light of this background yields three salient contextual markers for our analysis. First, the criticism is rooted in a twofold philosophical commitment that arose in twentieth-century Dutch neo-Calvinism: a rejection of the Reformed scholastic philosophical tradition—along with its medieval precursor, especially the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas<sup>20</sup>—and a corresponding affirmation of some sort of "truly Reformed" or "purely biblical" philosophical alternative.<sup>21</sup> This desire for anti-scholastic philosophical rebirth runs contrary to Bavinck's appropriation of the patristic, medieval, and Reformed scholastic affirmation of philosophical eclecticism.<sup>22</sup> As Sytsma notes:

[D]espite Bavinck's various criticisms of Roman Catholic and Thomistic doctrine on the relation of nature and grace, his largely positive evaluation of the integration of Greek philosophy in the early church and the goal of scientific

note Van Raalte's comment: "Very likely Dooyeweerd's approach to the history of philosophy influenced Van Til." "Unleavened Morality?," 59n6.

19. "The Christian Philosophy of Life," an unpublished address "to the mid-Atlantic chapter of the AACS, Philadelphia, March 29, 1968" (Eric D. Bristley, *A Guide to the Writings of Cornelius Van Til 1895–1987* (Chicago: Olive Tree Communications, 1995), s.v. 1968.I); included as "Appendix 2" in William White Jr., *Van Til, Defender of the Faith: An Authorized Biography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979); quote at p. 233.

20. Van Til's interpretation of Aquinas's "scholasticism" (which largely follows Dooyeweerd's) has been challenged regarding its accuracy. See "Nature and Grace" in Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1985), ch. 6; Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), ch. 1.

21. On the development of a so-called purely Reformed philosophy, see Bolt, "Editor's Preface." For a contemporary Dooyeweerdian definition of "Christian philosophy"—a definition that provides less of an antithetical interpretation regarding Dooyeweerd's intent to formulate a specifically Christian philosophy than the generalized pure-vs.-impure motif we present here—see Gerrit Glas, "What is Christian Philosophy?," trans. John Kok, *Pro Rege* 40, no. 1 (September 2011): 1–17.

22. See "Dogma and Greek Philosophy," in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 607–09 (#157).



theology underlying the rise of scholasticism contrasts not only with the negative evaluation of Harnack, but also those in the Dutch Reformed tradition such as Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til, G. C. Berkouwer and others who followed in their path.<sup>23</sup>

Second, the past and present disputes regarding Van Til's rejection of Reformed scholasticism (and his corresponding rejection of realism) are largely intramural in scope and have had limited impact in mainstream philosophical scholarship.<sup>24</sup>

Third, Oliphint's criticism is not novel. It is a recapitulation of Van Til's criticism, which itself is a recapitulation of Dooyeweerd's criticism. This is not to say that one may draw a straight line from Dooyeweerd through Van Til to Oliphint; for significant differences appear in the ways that Dooyeweerd and Oliphint develop their formulations of a purely Christian alternative to Bavinck's impure Reformed scholasticism. For instance, whereas Dooyeweerd rejects neo-Calvinist formulations of the Logos principle as a scholastic devolution from truly Christian principles, Oliphint asserts a so-called *sola Scriptura* form of the Logos principle as an corrective to Bavinck's allegedly derelict Thomistic formulation.<sup>25</sup> But the underlying goal of their criticisms is the same: to purge Bavinck's Reformed scholasticism of its allegedly un-Christian impurities.

We will proceed through the *quaestio* as follows: first, we will state Oliphint's objections; second, contrary views in general (*sed contra*) and in particular (*respondeo*); third, our replies to Oliphint's objections.

23. "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 8–9.

24. E.g., Gerrit Glas remarks that Dooyeweerdian Reformational philosophy is "underestimated, qua content and impact, in philosophical circles still today," despite the fact that it has attained relative prominence within several Dutch universities. "What is Christian Philosophy?," 7.

25. See Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's wetenschapsleer," 208–19; Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 375–88; cf. Bolt, "Editor's Preface," pp. vi–vii, n. 4.

## II. Objections

### A. "Bavinck's bug"

Oliphint avers:

[T]here is in Herman Bavinck's otherwise most useful analysis of epistemology and theological prolegomena a viral infection—call it Bavinck's bug—that, if it spreads, will serve to undermine the basic foundation of his own Reformed theology.<sup>26</sup>

He provides slightly more clarity on the nature of "Bavinck bug" in two parallel statements. First:

Could it be that the clear affirmations of a revelational epistemology are more explicit [in Bavinck's thought] when discussing dogmatics, and less explicit when discussing epistemology more generally? It would appear so.<sup>27</sup>

Second:

With respect to knowledge generally, or knowledge that obtains in other theoretical fields, such as science, Bavinck seems to waver on his revelational commitment. To be clear, it is not the case that he sets up a dichotomy between what he says concerning dogmatics and what he says concerning science. But it is, without question, the case that his analysis of scientific foundations, generally speaking, could easily (and perhaps [more] consistently . . . ) be interpreted as an argument for a generic, universally recognized epistemological foundation.<sup>28</sup>

In light of these statements the rationale undergirding Oliphint's criticism can be

26. "The Prolegomena Principle," 201; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 202, 211, 228. The formal sharpness of Oliphint's criticism is lessened a bit in his second rendition of the article, but the underlying criticism remains the same: either Bavinck must affirm *sola Scripture* as the cognitive foundation of non-theological knowledge, or he must affirm a Christian-pagan compromise. "What, then, is Bavinck's epistemology? Is it, in fact, consistent with the theology that he himself explicates? Is it the case, we could ask, as both Vos and Van Til seem to indicate, that Bavinck's realism is itself grounded in "common sense" principles (Vos) or in some principle or principles that differ from the one *principium* of the existence of the God of Scripture (Van Til)?" Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 360.

27. "Bavinck's Realism," 362.

28. "Bavinck's Realism," 362. "Generic" and "universally recognized" are used here as derogatory terms that mean "autonomous" or "non-Christian" or "anti-theistic." In other words, Oliphint thinks Bavinck's epistemology devolves into a form of Pelagian natural theology that allows pagans the same epistemic soundness as Christians regarding the interpretation of general revelation.

restated more clearly as follows:

1. God is the sole source (*principium essendi*) for all human knowledge.
2. Holy Scripture is the sole cognitive foundation (*principium cognoscendi*) for all human knowledge, theological or otherwise.
3. Bavinck asserts that sense experience of the external world is the *principium cognoscendi* of philosophical sciences.
4. Ergo, Bavinck's philosophical *principium cognoscendi* is incompatible with his theological *principium cognoscendi*; enter "Bavinck's bug."

The definition of the basic principles of Christian epistemology according to which he levels this allegation are as follows:

- (1) that God's revelation provides the foundation for *all* our knowing and living and that (2) because God's revelation is the *principium* for all knowledge, it cannot be the case that some other methodological process can be affirmed as a ground for knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the crux of Oliphint's criticism is that a dialectical relationship attains between Bavinck's purely biblical theological epistemology and his impure, unbiblical philosophical epistemology. All of Oliphint's subsequent criticisms derive from this overarching objection.

### ***1. Scottish Common Sense Realism***

Oliphint cites a passing statement in Geerhardus Vos' review of the first edition of Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* and, through a long series of inferences, concludes that Bavinck's philosophical epistemology is incompatible with his theological epistemology.<sup>30</sup> His rationale may be summarized as follows:

29. "The Prolegomena Principle," 205.

30. Cf. Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," 205–07, 221–25, 227; with Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 359–60, 372–75, 388. The portion of Vos' review cited by Oliphint is "Gereformeerde Dogmatiek

1. Vos identifies Bavinck's philosophical epistemology with that of James McCosh (i.e., Scottish Common Sense Realism).
2. McCosh's epistemology is the same as Thomas Reid's.
3. Thomas Reid asserts that, although the human mind receives its being from God, it nevertheless serves as its own cognitive principle of knowledge; that is, the human mind functions autonomously in its acquisition of knowledge. Hence for Reid God is the essential principle of knowledge but not the cognitive principle of knowledge.
4. Since Bavinck holds the same view as McCosh, and since McCosh holds the same view as Reid, then Bavinck must hold the same view as Reid: God is merely the essential principle of knowledge, not the cognitive principle.
5. Ergo, Bavinck's philosophical epistemology contradicts his theological epistemology; for in the latter God's revelation provides *both* the essential and cognitive principle of knowledge.

## **2. Universals**

Oliphint asserts that Bavinck's Thomistic, moderate-realist theory of universals—the essence of which is the assertion that universals exist *in re* and *in mente hominis post rem*—is ultimately a non-Christian formulation.<sup>31</sup>

## **B. The Logos principle**

Oliphint avers that Bavinck's formulation of Christian realism "is insufficient as an

—Vol. One" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 478.

31. Cf. Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," 213–28; with Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 363–89. Dooyeweerd levels a similar criticism against Bavinck's formulation regarding "*universalia ante rem in mente divina* and *universalia in re*." Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's wetenschapsleer," 213.

application of the Logos principle in epistemology.”<sup>32</sup> His rationale is as follows. First, he defines the “Logos principle”:

The Logos principle is not, as is most often thought, a general capacity of reason, or the ability to receive the basic, common sense, principles of the world, at least not directly. Rather, the Logos principle *just is* the knowledge of God, through the Logos, that all men, by virtue of their being created, necessarily and for eternity, *have*. We do not merely have the capacity by virtue of our reason, to know God; we know him by virtue of his activity through the Logos.<sup>33</sup>

Second, he interprets Bavinck’s formulation of the Logos’ relation to epistemology to be that of merely imparting to humanity the capacity for reason, conscience, and the *sensus divinitatus*.<sup>34</sup>

### *III. Sed contra*

Whereas Oliphint asserts that *sola Scriptura* must be the sole cognitive principle of theology and philosophy, Aristotle demonstrates in *Posterior Analytics* (32.88b10) that “[i]t is ridiculous to say that the principles are the same [for all sciences].” Thomas Aquinas, commenting on this passage, asserts that “it is impossible and ridiculous to hold that the principles of one science are the same as those of another science” for “it would follow from this that all things in the sciences were the same and, consequently, that all the sciences were one science.” He also recalls Aristotle’s corresponding demonstration regarding the impossibility “to demonstrate by passing from one genus to another.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, according to Professor Muller the Reformed orthodox

32. Cf. Oliphint, “Bavinck’s Realism,” 387; with Oliphint, “The Prolegomena Principle,” 225–26.

33. “Bavinck’s Realism,” 387.

34. “Bavinck’s Realism,” 387n78; cf. *ibid.*, 362–63; Oliphint, “The Prolegomena Principle,” 209, 226n65.

35. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, trans. Richard Berquist (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 2007) I.43.c; cf. I.15.