

# “Bavinck’s bug” or “Van Tilian” hypochondria? An analysis of Prof. Oliphint’s assertion that cognitive realism and Reformed theology are in- compatible

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## 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 phi-

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Oliphint, “Bavinck’s Realism,” 361; with Oliphint, “The Prolegomena Principle,” 207–08.

losophy 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.

### 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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, "Foreword," 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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 (Spring 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 Biblicalism: 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.

high periods of Protestant doctrinal fluorescence.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, T. David Gordon and John 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 philo-

<sup>6</sup> "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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> "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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

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

sophical epistemology from another angle: the moral epistemology undergirding Bavinck’s use of natural law theory.<sup>11</sup> Both of 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> Noting the true origin and context of

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<sup>11</sup> “Unleavened Morality? Herman Bavinck on Natural Law,” in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck*, 57–100.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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*,

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 cosconomic idea* (1935–36), which are proposals for a non-scholastic rebirth of Reformed philosophy, and Dooyeweerd’s diatribe against scholasticism,

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.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

*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 World War II.<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 American Association of Christian Schools,

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<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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 note Van Raalte's comment: "Very likely Dooyeweerd's approach to the history of philosophy influenced Van Til." "Un-leavened Morality?" 59n6.

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

<sup>19</sup> "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.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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).

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 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.

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<sup>23</sup> "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 8–9.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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 restated more clearly as follows:

<sup>26</sup> "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 Scriptura* 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)?"<sup>27</sup> Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 360.

<sup>27</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 362.

<sup>28</sup> "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.

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 *principum 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:

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.

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<sup>29</sup> "The Prolegomena Principle," 205.

<sup>30</sup> 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—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.

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 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

<sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Oliphint, “Bavinck's Realism,” 387; with Oliphint, “The Prolegomena Principle,” 225–26.

<sup>33</sup> “Bavinck's Realism,” 387.

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 theologians maintained that "in the case of true or Christian natural theology, Scripture cannot be the *principium cognoscendi*." Rather, as seen for instance in Johann Heinrich Alsted's (1588–1638) and Samuel Maresius's (1599–1673) treatises on natural theology, "nature" in the sense of "reason, universal experience, and the Book of Nature (*Liber Naturae*)" is the cognitive principle of natural theology and Holy Scripture that of supernatural theology.<sup>36</sup>

### IV. *Respondeo*

The assumption undergirding Oliphint's "Bavinck's bug" criticism is that the Reformed principle of *sola Scriptura* is a necessary and sufficient condition of the cognitive foundation not only for theology but also for philosophy. Hence he infers, "[W]e should not allow a methodological separation such that method in theology, specifically, differs, at root, from method, more generally, in science. Where the foundations of method are

<sup>34</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 387n78; cf. ibid., 362–63; Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," 209, 226n65.

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

<sup>36</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1., *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 436 and 436n123; cf. 280. The references are to Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Praecognitorum theologicorum* I.i.x, *Theologia Naturalis* I.i, and Maresius, *Collegium Theologicum* I.xxiii. See also Muller's explication of Reformed natural theology in *Prolegomena*, ch. 6.

concerned, what is true for one discipline should be true for them all.”<sup>37</sup> This assumption is a category mistake insofar as theology and philosophy are distinct sciences that operate in different genres and proceed upon different *principia*.<sup>38</sup>

If Oliphint’s criticism is pressed to its logical conclusion, then not only are Scripture and universal human experience contradicted but also an endless slew of absurdities follow in philosophy and the special sciences such as that a theory of numbers and the entire science of mathematics must be deduced from the Bible, that the laws of logic must be deduced from the Bible, that a medical student must study the Bible instead of *Grey's Anatomy*, that a gentleman’s choice between boxer shorts or briefs must be determined by Holy Scripture alone, that whether one’s toilet paper should hang over the top or under the bottom of the roll must be determined by Holy Scripture alone. For logically speaking if *sola Scriptura* is truly the *principium unicum* for *all* knowledge theological or otherwise, then humans are obliged to deduce *all* knowledge of themselves and of the external world from that alleged *principium* via the method appropriate to that foundation: exegesis of the Bible. Yet this supposition is absurd.

### *1. Ambiguous terms*

Whereas Oliphint caricatures Bavinck’s formulations as “confusing,”<sup>39</sup> Bavinck defines his terms unequivocally and uses them clearly and in accord with their standard use in the Reformed tradition. After surveying the classical meaning and purpose of the technical term *principium*—“that whence something either is or becomes or is known”—as it derives from Aristotle’s use of *arche* in *Metaphysics* V.1 and was appropriated by the fathers, the medieval theologians, and the Reformed orthodox, Bavinck then defines the three *principia* of Reformed theology: God is the *principium essendi*; God’s self-revelation is the *principium cognoscendi externum*; the Holy Spirit’s illumination is the *principium cognoscendi internum*.<sup>40</sup> Next, he defines the three

<sup>37</sup> “The Prolegomena Principle,” 204.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Muller, *Prolegomena* 6.2.B (pp. 287–88).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Oliphint, “The Prolegomena Principle,” 207; with Oliphint, “Bavinck’s Realism,” 360.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:210–14 (#62–63); with Muller, *Prolegomena* 9.3 (pp. 431–45).

*principia* of philosophy as parallel with, though distinct from, theology’s *principia*: God (specifically, God as Logos) is the *principium essendi*; the created world is the *principium cognoscendi externum*; the light of reason, which shines forth from the Logos and enlightens the mind in order that it can recognizes the Logos in created things—is the *principium cognoscendi internum*.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Bavinck’s formulation is not confusing; rather, what is confusing is that neither Oliphint nor Van Til define *principium*. They appropriate the *principia* terminology from Bavinck but then use it in an idiosyncratic manner such as conflating *principium unicum* with “method.”

## 2. Misguided interpretations

Whereas Oliphint criticizes Bavinck for asserting not only that the human intellect operates “abstractly” (i.e., autonomously) but also that God is merely the *principium essendi* of knowledge and *not* the *principium cognoscendi*,<sup>42</sup> Bavinck asserts the opposite on both accounts. Regarding the former, he explicitly rejects rationalistic (i.e., “abstract” or Socinian) natural theology: “A religion and a natural theology [in general], as rationalism conceives it, does not exist. For the religion and the natural theology we know was not acquired by us apart from special revelation but became our own from and in the light of Holy Scripture.”<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, following the Reformed orthodox tradition Bavinck maintains that “the origin of common notions is Christ,” not rationalistic autonomy.<sup>44</sup> He also explicitly repudiates the deistic assumption in Oliphint’s criticism, namely, that God gives humanity its intellect and then sits idly by while human exercise their intellects autonomously; for he insists:

The world itself rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation, the secret of all that exists in all its forms... In every moment of time beats the pulse of eternity; every point in space is filled with the omnipresence of God; the finite is supported by the

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<sup>41</sup> *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Oliphint, “The Prolegomena Principle,” 227; with Oliphint, “Bavinck’s Realism,” 388.

<sup>43</sup> *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:209; cf. pp. 104–08, “The Impact of Philosophy” (#32–33).

<sup>44</sup> Sytsma, “Herman Bavinck’s Thomistic Epistemology,” 43–45; quote at p. 43.

infinite, all becoming is rooted in being. . . The foundations of creation and redemption are the same. The Logos who became flesh is the same by whom all things were made. . . Notwithstanding the separation wrought by sin, there is a progressive approach of God to his creatures. The transcendence does not cease to exist, but becomes an ever deeper immanence. . . General revelation leads to special, special revelation points back to general. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and unintelligible. Together they proclaim the manifold wisdom which God has displayed in creation and redemption.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, immediately after defining the *principium cognoscendi internum* of philosophy as the light of reason, Bavinck concludes, “So, in the final analysis *it is God alone who* from his divine consciousness and by way of his creatures *conveys the knowledge of truth to our mind—the Father who by the Son and in the Spirit reveals himself to us.*”<sup>46</sup> Hence the conclusion that Oliphint derives from this passage—that Bavinck affirms rationalistic autonomy—is directly contrary to Bavinck’s own explicit affirmation that the Holy Trinity is involved at every point in the cognitive process.

### *3. Conflation of theology and philosophy*

Whereas Oliphint everywhere conflates theological and philosophical *principia* based on the assumption (appropriated from Van Til) that Holy Scripture is the cognitive *principium unicum* of theology and philosophy, Bavinck distinguishes the *principia* of theological science and non-theological science.<sup>47</sup> Without such a distinction there remains no grounds for distinguishing the nature and purpose of theology from all other sciences, and all human knowledge in every field of inquiry becomes a sub-discipline of theology.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–1909*, Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 27–28; cf. Van Raalte, “Unleavened Morality?,” 88–89.

<sup>46</sup> *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233 (emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup> See “Scientific Foundations” and “Religious Foundations” in Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, chs. 7–8.

<sup>48</sup> “Unlike Bavinck’s clear distinction between revealed and rational *principia*, Cornelis Van Til emphasized the noetic effects of the fall to such an extent that he

Additionally, whereas Oliphint’s position removes all foundational cognitive distinctions between theology and philosophy and hence universalizes the jurisdiction of theology’s *principia*, Bavinck limits the jurisdiction of theology to its own domain. Contra Schleiermacher, who in his prolegomena makes theology subservient to philosophy, Bavinck argues that Christian theologians do not “treat topics that actually lie outside the territory of dogmatics, belong to other sciences, and can only come up as ‘borrowed propositions’ [Lehnsätze] in the introduction of dogmatics.”<sup>49</sup> In other words since the scope of theology is bounded by its unique *principia*, theologians are limited to drawing theological conclusions from theology’s unique cognitive foundation (Holy Scripture), operating with the unique mode of certainty that theology employs (faith), aiming its operations toward theology’s unique end (eternal union with God), and refraining from either imposing its unique foundation, method, mode, and end on other sciences or allowing other sciences (such as philosophy in Schleiermacher’s case) to impose their foundations, methods, modes, and ends on theology.

#### 4. *Contradiction of Scripture, Reformed confessions, and experience*

Oliphint’s conflation not only reduces all sciences to theology but also contradicts the affirmations of natural revelation in Holy Scripture, the Reformed confessions, and universal human experience. Regarding Scripture, Paul asserts that all people know God’s eternal power and divine nature by means of created things (Rom. 1:18–20) and that during the time of Israel’s theocracy the Gentiles knew God apart from the law, that is, apart from Holy Scripture (Rom. 2:14–16). But if Scripture itself avers that all people know God through nature and that Gentiles know God’s law without Holy Scripture, it cannot be that *sola Scriptura* is the sole cognitive foundation of these two extra-biblical, natural forms of knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

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apparently collapsed such a distinction by requiring that the truth of general human knowledge be based on the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*.” Sytsma, “Herman Bavinck’s Thomistic Epistemology,” 18.

<sup>49</sup> *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:208–10; quote at p. 210 (emended); cf. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 7th ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1998), 1:181–82.

<sup>50</sup> See the standard Reformed arguments for affirming the necessity of natural theology based upon these Romans passages (and other biblical passages) as found, e.g., in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1.3 (pp. 1:6–9); Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service in which Divine Truths concerning the*

Regarding the Reformed confessions, the Westminster Confession of Faith (I.1, 6; XX.4; XXI.1) and the Westminster Larger Catechism (qq. 2, 60, 121, 151) distinguish between matters that are known on the basis of Holy Scripture from those that are known by the “light of nature.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the Belgic Confession (art. 2) affirms a Christian realist position with respect to the “beautiful book” of nature in which all humans perceive God’s self-revelation.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the material content of the doctrine of common notions is found in the Canons of Dort (III/IV, a. 4).<sup>53</sup> Such distinctions regarding the light of nature, especially those of the Westminster Standards, are commonplace in the Reformed confessional tradition.<sup>54</sup>

*Covenant of Grace are Expounded, Defended against Opposing Parties, and their Practice Advocated as well as The Administration of this Covenant in the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), ch. 1; James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity: Or, the Sum and Substance of Christian Religion*, ed. Michael Nevarr (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007), 1st head (esp. pp. 3–4). Cf. Muller, *Prolegomena*, ch. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Regarding the circumscription of the scope of Scripture in ch. I of the Westminster Confession, see Gordon, “How My Mind Has Changed: The Insufficiency of Scripture.” One eminent, classical interpreter of the Larger Catechism defines “light of nature” as follows: “From the light of nature in man, by which we understand that reason which he is endowed with, whereby he is distinguished from, and rendered superior to, all other creatures in this lower world, whereby he is able to observe the connexion of things, and their dependence on one another, and infer those consequences which may be deduced from thence. These reasoning powers, indeed, are very much sullied, depraved, and weakened, by our apostacy from God, but not wholly obliterated; so that there are some remains thereof, which are common to all nations, whereby, without the help of special revelation it may be known that there is a God.” Thomas Ridgeley, *A Body of Divinity: wherein the doctrines of the Christian religion are explained and defended. Being the substance of several lectures on the Assembly's Larger Catechism*, ed. John M. Wilson, rev. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 10. Regarding Van Til’s epistemological views vis-à-vis the Westminster Standards’s teaching on the “light of nature,” see Fesko and Richard, “Natural Theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith.”

<sup>52</sup> See Bavinck’s notes on the Belgic Confession, art. 2, and the Reformed tradition’s affirmation of natural theology in *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:87–88, 233.

<sup>53</sup> Sytsma, “Herman Bavinck’s Thomistic Epistemology,” 41–42; see also Van Raalte, “Unleavened Morality?,” 73–76.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Anglican Catechism* (1553); *The Thirty-Nine Articles* (1562/63) XVIII; *The Stafford's Book* (1599) s.v. *De persona Christi*; *The Cambridge Platform* (1648) XIV.3; *The Geneva Theses* (1649) IV.2; *The Savoy Declaration* (1658) I.i, vi, X.iv, XX.ii., XXII.1, which

Hence the "Van Tilian" supposition that *sola Scriptura* is the sole necessary and sufficient cognitive principle of all knowledge and hence that realism contradicts *sola Scriptura* is out of accord with Reformed confessional orthodoxy insofar as these confessions recognize the light of nature as a necessary and sufficient cognitive foundation for true natural knowledge despite its insufficiency to serve as a cognitive foundation for saving faith.

Regarding universal human experience, no one opens the Bible in order to decide whether to wear blue or brown socks. To do so would be to violate the nature and scope of Holy Scripture: the Bible is not a divine revelation of binding rules of haberdashery but of the power of God in Jesus Christ *unto salvation* (Rom. 1:16). Likewise, no one opens the Bible in order to determine whether a highway should be paved with asphalt or concrete, whether a lumberman should use an axe or a chain saw, whether a red or white wine will pair better with fish, and so forth ad infinitum. Again, Holy Scripture *cannot* answer these questions insofar as they pertain to non-theological sciences—civil engineering, forestry, culinary arts, respectively—each of which proceed upon different principles than theology, have different objects of study than theology, are bounded by different scopes than theology, and employ different methods than those employed by theology. Just as it would be absurd in the science of forestry for a forester to infer that Christ has only one nature based upon the lifespan of conifers, so also it would be absurd in theology for a theologian to infer that conifers are not truly gymnosperms based upon the two natures of Christ. Therefore, to conflate theology's unique cognitive principle with the common cognitive principle of all non-theological sciences is to patently contradict universal human experience regarding the starting point for knowledge in non-theological sciences: human sense perception of the external world.

### 5. False dichotomy

Oliphint's criticism assumes that merely distinguishing the *principia* of theology and philosophy somehow entails rationalistic autonomy. It then infers the following ultimatum regarding the cognitive principle of philosophy: either supernatural revelation or realism, *sola Scriptura* or scholasticism, theonomy or autonomy. However, the assumption behind this inference

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places recapitulate the Westminster Standards; *The Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) XX; *The London Baptist Confession* (1677) I.1, 6, etc., which also recapitulates Westminster; likewise, *The Baptist Catechism* (1693) q. 3.

finds no warrant in Bavinck's thought or in the Reformed scholastic tradition from which he drew his principles. Bavinck nowhere pits natural revelation over against supernatural revelation in the manner assumed by Oliphint. Both in Bavinck's thought and in the Reformed tradition reason is not a cognitive principle that asserts itself over against supernatural revelation but a human faculty—a tool for understanding both natural and supernatural revelation—that itself is a gift, a *revelation*, of the Logos.<sup>55</sup>

The unsoundness of this ultimatum paradigm and its underlying assumption can be seen more clearly when contrasted with concrete examples from the Reformed tradition of the relation between philosophy and theology. Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) stands in a long line of Protestant doctors who lectured on Aristotle's moral philosophy in Protestant universities including Calvin's Genevan Academy.<sup>56</sup> If Oliphint's position is valid and sound, then the very act of presenting such lectures is a violation of *sola Scriptura*; for Holy Scripture, not Aristotle, must be the sole cognitive foundation for ethics. What this position overlooks, however, is that when Reformed theologians such as Vermigli delivered these lectures, they did so on the basis of several distinctions, the chief of which being the following: “All our knowledge is either revealed or acquired. In the first instance it is theology, in the other philosophy.”<sup>57</sup> For these Reformed thinkers Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, is not moral theology but moral philosophy, a science that is no more repugnant to theology than is “astrology or the nautical or military arts, or else fishing and hunting, and also knowledge of human law that everyone understands as necessary for public administration.”<sup>58</sup> For Vermigli, this distinction does not entail a lessening of Holy Scripture's role as the *norma normans* of philosophy. Rather, he asserts that

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Muller, *Prolegomena*, 283, 433.

<sup>56</sup> “The practice of commenting on Aristotle to complement biblical lectures was common in Reformed seminaries in the sixteenth century.” Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Peter Martyr Library, Volume Nine: Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Emidio Campi and Joseph C. McLelland, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies 73 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2006),x. In addition to Vermigli, John Sturm, Martin Bucer, Girolamo Zanchi, and Konrad Gesner lectured on Aristotle's works (*ibid.*, x–xi). See also Donald Sinnema, “The Discipline of Ethics in Early Reformed Orthodoxy,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28, no. 1 (April 1, 1993): 10–44.

<sup>57</sup> *Commentary*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Commentary*, 15.

the Christian religion is inflamed by knowledge of pagan ethics, for we understand through comparison how far those things taught in scripture surpass philosophy. For it is a common saying that when opposites are compared with one another they become clearer. . . Therefore, whoever knows both faculties will more easily avoid the mistake of the one, namely, of human philosophy, especially when properly demonstrated.<sup>59</sup>

Accordingly, all throughout his commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, Vermigli concludes each section by both correcting Aristotle's errors according to Holy Scripture and stating where Aristotle's views are in accord with Scripture.<sup>60</sup> Vermigli's commentary, then, presents us with a concrete example that does not fall prey to the horns of Oliphint's false dichotomy. Vermigli distinguishes the cognitive foundations, scopes, and aims of theology and philosophy while simultaneously maintaining the role of Holy Scripture as *norma normans* for philosophy.

The preface to Edward Reynolds's (1599–1676) *Treatise on the Passions and Faculties of the Soul* (1640) provides another example, one from a Westminster Divine writing close to the time of the Westminster Assembly, of how distinguishing the foundations of philosophy and theology does not entail rationalism. So does Francis Turretin's (1623–1687) discussion of philosophy's relation to theology.<sup>61</sup> More examples could be adduced here.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, these few are sufficient to show that Bavinck's distinguishing the *principia* of theology and philosophy stands in a long line of Reformed orthodox thought that draws this distinction without the Socinian entailment assumed but nowhere proven in "Bavinck's bug."

## 6. No universal moral epistemology

If held consistently the consequences of Oliphint's position are dire with respect to moral epistemology. For example, the fact that the Bible is neither universally available nor univocally understood leads to the problem

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<sup>59</sup> *Commentary*, 16.

<sup>60</sup> E.g., see *Commentary*, 35–36; cf. *ibid.*, xi, xviii, 5.

<sup>61</sup> *Institutes* I.3–4, 8–13.

<sup>62</sup> E.g., see Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. by. Ernst Bizer, trans by. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), ch. 1 (esp. sections 12–16).

of a non-universal morality:

1. Holy Scripture is the sole, universal cognitive foundation for morality.
2. But not all people have read the Bible, and even fewer have understood the Bible's meaning correctly.
3. Ergo only very few actual human beings—Christians who have read the Bible and have understood it correctly—obtain epistemic access to the moral order.

But if this rationale is sound, then it follows that the majority of the world's population (i.e., anyone who is a non-Christian or any Christian who fails to read the Bible correctly) is excluded by definition from having cognitive access to the moral order. Yet such a position is contrary to the same Romans passages mentioned above and to universal human experience of right and wrong. For example, murder, theft, and rape are just as morally impermissible in Muslim, Buddhist, and secular humanist cultures as in Christian ones.

### 7. Bipolar Bavinck

Oliphint asserts that, despite the dialectic in Bavinck's thought between *sola Scriptura* and cognitive realism, “[h]e has the remedy to his problems within his own system.”<sup>63</sup> In other words Oliphint claims to know Bavinck's thought better than Bavinck does himself, and in the name of maintaining consistency with *sola Scriptura*, he recommends a restructuring of the fundamental principles in Bavinck's philosophical epistemology: the elimination of cognitive realism. However, neither Bavinck himself nor the Reformed tradition within which he operated saw a contradiction in the distinction between affirming *sola Scriptura* as the cognitive foundation of theology and affirming human sense perception (of the self and the external world) as the cognitive foundation of philosophy.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, to object to this distinction on the ground that it introduces an inconsistency with re-

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Oliphint, “The Prolegomena Principle,” 228; with Oliphint, “Bavinck’s Realism,” 389.

<sup>64</sup> Sytsma remarks that “the ‘special view of the intellect’ on the part of the Reformed is ultimately grounded in the doctrine of the divine ideas in the Logos, which in Bavinck’s opinion, when purged of any subordinationism or emanationalism, is both a Scriptural and Greek doctrine.” “Herman Bavinck’s Thomistic Epistemology,” 45.

spect to *sola Scriptura* is to impose upon Bavinck’s thought a norm that is foreign to it and to the Reformed tradition. Furthermore, insofar as this foreign norm is assumed rather than proved, conclusions based upon it are instances of question begging. For these reasons Oliphint’s assertion that, although Bavinck’s realism contradicts his theology, the former may be fixed by the latter, is both subjective and unsound. Such attempts to interpret Bavinck’s thought in terms of a “multiple Bavincks” thesis are fundamentally misguided.<sup>65</sup>

## V. Reply to objections

### A. “Bavinck’s bug”

Despite claiming that this “viral infection” threatens the health of Bavinck’s entire dogmatic enterprise, Oliphint strains to provide a clear definition of this systemic “bug.” In both articles his attempts to state Bavinck’s errors are prefaced with so many qualifying caveats (i.e., “it seems,” “it could be,” “perhaps,” etc.) that one is left with the impression that the allegations lack soundness on purely formal grounds. An unqualified assertion is nowhere to be found. In the most odd instance of these caveats Oliphint admits that he cannot prove whether Bavinck’s bug exists: “While it cannot perhaps be definitively shown that Bavinck held that issues of prolegomena required a radically different method from that of theology, there is little question that Bavinck affirmed such a thing.”<sup>66</sup>

The non sequitur here strongly suggests that the “Bavinck’s bug” allegation is an instance of *petitio principii*. Oliphint nowhere proves that Van Til’s criticism—which is the foundation of his own criticism—is correct. He assumes the existence of the “bug” before analyzing Bavinck’s formulations on their own terms.

Likewise, Oliphint’s definition of the basic cognitive principles of Christian epistemology is full of ambiguity. For example, it is not clear whether he uses *principium* in the sense of *principium essendi* or *principium cognoscendi*. Nor is it clear whether he uses “foundation” as a synonym for *princip-*

<sup>65</sup> See James Eglinton, “How Many Herman Bavincks? *De Gemeene Genade* and the ‘Two Bavincks’ Hypothesis,” in *The Kuyper Center Review, Volume 2: Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 279–301; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 17 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), ch. 2.

<sup>66</sup> “The Prolegomena Principle,” 204.

ium. Additionally, the relationship between *principium* and “methodological process” is undefined and hence invites criticism on the ground that an argument’s first principles are not the same thing as an argument’s method.<sup>67</sup>

### *1. Scottish Common Sense Realism*

The string of inferences beginning with Geerhardus Vos’ statement is unsound for several reasons. First and foremost, the conclusion is assumed in the unstated first premise. Oliphint never demonstrates *why* realism is incompatible with revelation or *how sola Scriptura* is the cognitive principle of non-theological science; rather, he merely presupposes that these are valid and sound assertions. At most Oliphint demonstrates only *that* Bavinck distinguishes theological and philosophical epistemology not *how* such a distinction entails rationalistic autonomy.

In the second place, Oliphint infers too much from Vos’ review. In the same paragraph to which Oliphint refers Vos himself neither asserts nor implies that Bavinck’s distinction regarding the *principium cognoscendi* of theology (i.e., Holy Scripture) and science (i.e., Christian realism) is self-contradictory; if anything his silence on the matter implies that the two distinct cognitive principles are harmoniously related.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, rather than interpreting Bavinck’s view of revelation as too narrow (as does Oliphint), Vos criticizes Bavinck for making his definition of “revelation” *too broad* insofar as his assertion that “revelation” coincides with all of God’s acts both in nature and grace conflates the older distinction between God’s creative and redemptive acts.<sup>69</sup> Finally, Oliphint oddly turns Vos’s passing, neutral comment about McCosh which was meant merely to introduce one aspect of the unknown Dutch author’s thought by means of an apples-to-apples comparison with a known Princetonian’s thought into a pejorative criticism. In all these ways what Oliphint concludes from Vos’s review contradicts Vos’s own interpretations of Bavinck’s thought.

In the third place, Oliphint cites no evidence from Bavinck’s writings to demonstrate either that Bavinck’s realism is the same as McCosh’s or

<sup>67</sup> Oliphint levels this same criticism against Bolt. Yet, his own formulation lacks the clarity that he finds lacking in Bolt’s. See Oliphint, “Bavinck’s Realism,” 364n21.

<sup>68</sup> Vos, *Redemptive History*, 478.

<sup>69</sup> Vos, *Redemptive History*, 479.

that it is the same as Reid's. Rather, he merely raises questions regarding the relationship between Bavinck's thought and the formulations of these philosophers.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, he draws the conclusion that Bavinck's epistemology is the same as McCosh's and Reid's as if he has demonstrated the connection. Insofar as this "conclusion" lacks proper grounds, the string of inferences underlying it is not a sound argument but an assumption.

## 2. *Universals*

Regarding Oliphint's allegation that Bavinck's Aristotelian-Thomistic theory of universals is non-Christian, here again we are confronted by confusing caveats. Oliphint admits that Bavinck affirms that all "knowledge must be grounded in revelation" and that in his view the *principia* of science "are themselves rooted in the Triune God." Despite this admission, Oliphint insists that "it is not clear that this 'rooting' takes the *principium cognoscendi* as seriously as it should."<sup>71</sup>

What Oliphint means by this last phrase is not entirely clear. He immediately cites passages from Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* wherein Bavinck affirms basic elements of Aristotelian epistemology that have been refracted through Thomistic and Reformed scholasticism such as the pure potency of the intellect, the necessity of the external world as a stimulus for the mind's *tabula rasa*, the existence of *veritates aeternae*, the conceptualist formulation of universals that posits their existence *in re* and *in mente hominis post rem*, and the assertion that sense perception is the starting point for human knowledge. Oliphint finds all of these affirmations to be problematic; for he

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<sup>70</sup> E.g., Oliphint asserts, "If it is indeed the case that Bavinck's epistemology is a realism, which itself is in the neighborhood of Reid's approach, then there are serious questions that need to be asked." The corresponding footnote claims that this assumption—the very thing that requires grounding in order to form a valid assertion—in fact does *not* need to be treated: "The relationship of Aquinas's views, affirmed by Bavinck, and Reidianism need not detain us here." Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," p. 222 & n. 55, respectively. Likewise, Oliphint raises the question of whether Bavinck's formulation of the Logos principle falls prey to Arthur Holmes' criticism of realism (Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 376n55); yet, he then *asserts* that Bavinck's use of the Logos principle needs to be clarified on this very point without providing any proof that Bavinck's formulation of this point is indeed unclear (*ibid.*, 376).

<sup>71</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 363.

immediately asks: "is this, indeed, in the end, a revelational epistemology?"<sup>72</sup> In other words, "[I]s it the case that a realistic approach to universals, guided by Aquinas, can move us in the direction of a Christian epistemology?"<sup>73</sup> After pursuing lengthy excurses on Aquinas' theory of universals, Aquinas' theory of participation, Scottish Common Sense Realism, and the biblical Logos principle,<sup>74</sup> Oliphint answers this question in the negative, albeit not without much ambiguity:

The confusion in Bavinck may be this: it seems in the majority of cases, Bavinck attributes to the Logos, not specifically the *principium cognoscendi*, but the *principium essendi*, in much the same way as Thomas Reid did. That is, if what we say about the Logos is that he is the originator of the intellect, and of reason, or that (as Reid says), our "first principles" of reasoning "are the gift of heaven," all we have said thus far is that God, or the Logos, is the *principium essendi* of knowledge. He is the one who is the cause of the knowledge that we have. . . . What we need for an epistemological principle is not simply a *causal* principle (though that is necessary), but rather a principle of *knowledge*.<sup>75</sup>

Oliphint's conclusion is ambiguous for two reasons. First, by employing probability qualifiers (i.e., "may be this," "it seems"), he presents his conclusion as more of a hypothesis than an actual conclusion. Second, he significantly weakens—if not contradicts—his own characterization of "Bavinck's bug" as an affirmation of "*a radically different method* from that of theology"<sup>76</sup> by admitting that the "bug" is a matter of degree rather than a matter of principle:

<sup>72</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 364.

<sup>73</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 365. Note the ambiguous terms here: "revelational epistemology" is equated with "Christian epistemology." Also note the *petitio principii* again: whether there is such a thing as "Christian epistemology" for non-theological knowledge and whether Bavinck intended to formulate such a "Christian epistemology" are assumed in the affirmative without any evidence to warrant these assumptions.

<sup>74</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 365–88.

<sup>75</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 388–89.

<sup>76</sup> "The Prolegomena Principle," 204 (emphasis added).

In conclusion, we should reiterate here that Bavinck has said much that moves, without question, in the direction we have moved above. He has the remedy to his problems within his own system. However, to be consistent, an epistemology of realism, we should see, is not able to be sustained if what is hoped for is some kind of universal *principia* in which all must participate.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, though Oliphint rejects that universals exist *in re* and *in mente hominis post rem*, he provides no alternative explanation as to whether perceptions in the human mind accurately reflect the external world, and, if so, how the mind-world relation is to be formulated. Since Oliphint rejects Bavinck's Thomistic realism, and since it thus would be inconsistent for him to sneak realism in through the back door, then the question arises as to whether he intends to wed his allegedly non-realist Logos principle to rationalism, empiricism, idealism, nominalism, or another form of cognitive anti-realism.

The following reply is sufficient for the portion of this objection regarding whether Bavinck asserts that God is merely the essential but not the cognitive principle of knowing.

### B. *The Logos principle*

Whereas Oliphint criticizes Bavinck's formulation of the Logos principle for giving humanity merely the capacity for reason rather than actual knowledge of God, Bavinck does not assert that the Logos provides merely the capacity without the actuality of knowledge. This is obvious in the very passage to which Oliphint refers:

All life and all knowledge is based on a kind of agreement between subject and object. Human beings are so richly endowed because they are linked with the objective world by a great many extremely diverse connections. They are related to the whole world. Physically, vegetatively, sensorily, intellectually, ethically, and religiously there is correspondence between them and the world; they are microcosms.

[. . .] *God not only forged these connections between human beings and the world; from moment to moment he also consistently maintains them and causes them to function.* It is the one

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<sup>77</sup> "Bavinck's Realism," 389; cf. Oliphint, "The Prolegomena Principle," 207.

selfsame Logos who made all things in and outside of human beings. He is before all things, and they still continue jointly to exist through him (John 1:3; Col. 1:15–17). In addition, Scripture makes known to us the Spirit of God as the source and agent of all life in humanity and the world (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6; 104:30; 139:7; Job 26:13; 33:4), especially of the intellectual, ethical, and religious life (Job 32:8; Isa. 11:2).<sup>78</sup>

Bavinck's language of divine agency in relation to the human act of knowing is directly in line with the Thomistic tradition on this point. For example, Aquinas asserts "that for the knowledge of any truth whatsoever man needs Divine help, that the intellect may be moved by God to its act." Likewise: "We always need God's help for every thought, inasmuch as He moves the understanding to act." Again: "Every truth by whomsoever spoken is from the Holy Spirit as bestowing the natural light, and moving us to understand and speak the truth."<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, based upon the same Romans 1 passage to which Oliphint refers, Bavinck explicitly asserts that all humans have actual knowledge of God for which they are culpable rather than a mere capacity for knowledge:

Pagans fell into idolatry and unrighteousness because they did not acknowledge God (Rom. 1:18ff.). But that knowledge of God penetrates the heart and arouses there an assortment of affections, of fear and hope, sadness and joy, guilt feelings and forgiveness, misery and redemption, as these are pictured to us throughout Scripture but especially in the Psalms.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, in addition to misinterpreting Bavinck's formulation on divine agency with respect to philosophical knowledge, Oliphint's criticism both omits an analysis of the cornerstones of Bavinck's formulation of cognitive realism—the *intellectus agens*, *veritates aeternae*, and divine

<sup>78</sup> Reformed Dogmatics, 1:586 (emphasis added).

<sup>79</sup> *Summa theologiae*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcon (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012) 1–2.109.1c, ad 3, and ad 2 respectively; cf. ad 2 with Aquinas, *Lectura super Johannem*, ch. 1, lect. 3, sect. 103; and with Aquinas, *De veritate* I.8 sed contra.

<sup>80</sup> Reformed Dogmatics, 1:268; cf. 1:315, 1:341, 2:30, 2:56, 2:69, 2:76, 2:433, et passim.

illumination<sup>81</sup>—and sidesteps the crux of the matter: whether the knowledge imparted to humans by the Logos is mediate or immediate. If mediate, then what is the medium? If the medium is created things—and if realism is disallowed as a valid epistemological option—then in Oliphint's view what is the nature of the cognitive process by which human minds obtain knowledge from the Logos via created things? If immediate—if the Logos's revelation does not employ the external world as its medium and if there is no adequation between mind and thing—then how would Oliphint's position avoid rationalism, idealism, or pantheism?

## VI. Conclusion

"Bavinck's bug" does not exist. It is a mythical creature that lives exclusively in "Van Tilian" folklore. Its sole strength lies in the ability of its small community of supporters to perpetuate a false dilemma based upon a category mistake: the assumption that either one must affirm Holy Scripture as the sole necessary and sufficient cognitive principle of theology *and* philosophy or one must affirm rational autonomy as the sole cognitive foundation of one's philosophy. This idiosyncratic position arose under the influence of twentieth-century theological and philosophical developments at the Free University in Amsterdam. Ironically, this view is incompatible with Holy Scripture itself, despite its intention to defend the necessity of Scripture vis-à-vis philosophy. Furthermore, this position is out of accord with the Reformed confessions, the formulations of classic Reformed orthodox theologians, and universal human experience. The resulting reductionism of this position—when pressed to its logical conclusion—entails endless absurdities regarding the cognitive process in non-theological sciences. Finally, this view omits a positive statement regarding the crux of the entire matter—the nature of the relation between human perception, the external world, and the Logos. The only "viral infection" that needs purging, then, is Oliphint's recapitulation of Van Til's anti-scholastic hypochondria.

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<sup>81</sup> See Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 22–45.

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