

BIBLICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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Epistemology is that department of philosophy which critically examines the criteria and the validity of human knowledge. The word *epistemology* is from two Greek words: *episteme*, knowledge in the sense of science, and *logia*, knowledge in the sense of arranging that which is known in order. Literally translated, the word *epistemology* means the *knowledge of knowing*.

By its very nature, epistemology begs a question, a question that may seem like an oxymoron:¹ “How do human beings know that they can first make such a critical examination and then derive from that examination valid knowledge about whether they have valid knowledge?”

If the human being were the cause of his own cognitive and rational faculty, or even if he were the cause of the will to inquire into and to assess this subject, then, of course, all he could do is beg the previous question. There would be no basis to determine the criteria. The inescapable oxymoron would preclude the discussion. He might have endless quandaries, but he could not actually know.

However, even to ask questions like, “What is knowledge?” or “What causes human knowledge?” involves extensive prior assessments and conclusions on the part of the one asking. The only reason why anyone can identify and consider this subject is because he first recognizes himself as a self-conscious, self-contemplating, rational being. But, merely because he has the capacity to contemplate himself does not resolve the matter. Necessary to his rationality is the principle that for effect there must be an adequate cause. He recognizes himself as an effect. More correctly, he perceives that all of the faculties which comprise his being are effects, effects which testify to the existence of certain essential attributes of the Cause of the human being. In order to be an adequate cause, the Cause must be self-conscious, self-contemplating, volitional, personal, intellectual, and moral.

Striving for Consistency

Man’s awareness of the adequate Cause of himself gives rise to the criterion for determining the validity of his knowledge. This criterion is rigid: it is that man’s rational faculty can tolerate no inconsistency (no contradiction) either with regard to the principle of causality itself or with respect to man’s necessary and adequate Cause. That which is either contradictory or uncertain is not valid and is therefore not actual knowledge.

Man does recognize that his self-conscious, cognitive, and rational faculty is an effect which he himself did not cause. For, by its very nature, his rational faculty testifies to its adequate, intelligent, self-conscious, and moral Cause. And, man’s will, even to inquire into the

subject of Epistemology, arises from the faculty of the will that is in him. This faculty also is an effect. Man did not will to have a will. Yet, the will is essential to man's existence. Neither is man a rational being because he has either chosen or caused himself to be so. He might choose to suppress what he knows (or rationally discerns) and thus to act irrationally, but this would be a deliberate and contradictory act of his will. If he were to do this, he would violate his conscience. This is because he would be knowingly contradicting and abusing his rational mind. Apart from man's rational mind and individual will, there could be no conscience. The conscience is an effect which testifies to an accountability to moral perfection. Man knows that he himself is not the morally Perfect One to Whom he must give an account. Thus, man knows that He is not the cause of his conscience: he does not possess a conscience because he chooses to possess one, and his conscience does not operate when or because he wills it to operate. Man's will, as with all of the faculties of his being, is contingent. It is caused. It is not absolute. It is not necessarily determinative of any of man's present or future conditions. Man knows that neither his existence nor his condition are necessarily the product of his own mind and will. Without contradiction, man retains the idea of a perfect (including *morally* perfect) and absolute being. Yet, by none of his external senses has he encountered such perfection. Therefore, the only way that this could be in him without contradiction is because a perfect Cause placed it in him.

The Substance of Knowing

Knowing involves at least two perceivable entities: a *knower* (to coin a word) and a thing that is known. To say this is more than simply to state the obvious: the implications of this statement may not be obvious. But, they are the essence of this subject. Without the conscious and distinct individuality of a *knower*, nothing is knowable. Apart from a human being's caused self-consciousness, his cognitive and rational faculty, his will, and his conscience (conscience here primarily referring to his individual moral accountability for acts of his will), there would be no means whereby he could recognize himself as a distinct effect and a singular entity. He would have no means of knowing himself in the way of distinguishing himself from other individuals and things, or, more correctly, from all things. In other words, he could not be a *knower*. He could neither recognize himself as a distinct individual capable of acquiring knowledge (i.e., knowledge that he can give an account of possessing), nor could he identify himself as an entity that can be known (not only to himself, but to other contingent and rational beings, and ultimately to the Cause of his individual existence). Hence, without this, there could be no inquiry into epistemology. This knowledge/recognition of one's caused and self-conscious self is inextricable from all human inquiry into the human condition. It is necessary to scientific inquiry, and it is the basis of integrity in science.

To say that any consideration of epistemology requires "at least two entities" (as above) is to use deliberate and careful wording; for, as has been demonstrated here, three distinct entities are necessary in the case of human knowledge. The adequate Cause of man's self-conscious/rational faculty is the third, or, actually, the first of the three necessary entities. The necessary Cause is inextricable from both the rational equation of human knowledge and the criteria for examining it.

Epistemology and the Gospel

Three concepts are necessary to biblical epistemology and therefore necessary to all biblical apologetics: (1) that the natural man possesses valid and actual knowledge; (2) that he does reason *a posteriori* (from effect back to adequate cause) to arrive at valid conclusions about his own self-conscious and cognitive faculty; and (3) that, by the same means, he does perceive actual knowledge about God. Not that man possesses these because of any autonomous virtue or innate powers that are of himself: on the contrary, man is entirely a caused and therefore a contingent being. (God is the source and the sustainer: “In [and/or *by*] Him we live and move and have our being” [Acts 17:28].) As the Scriptures make clear, God has both shown these things to man and caused him to know them by the appointed means. Man understands these things to such an extent that lie is without excuse (an apologetic), Romans 1:20.

All three of these concepts impinge upon how the Gospel is proclaimed to and received by rational men. The Holy Scriptures address the subject of epistemology in a very straightforward and lucid manner, declaring what the natural man has been enabled (or caused) to know and how he has been caused to know that which he knows. The Scriptures are not only congruent with what has been set forth in this brief treatise, they succinctly declare these three concepts in propositional form. Let us first consider Romans 1:18-21:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of man, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is clearly known among them, because God has made it clearly known to them. For the invisible things of Him, being (rationally) understood by means of the things that are made, are perceived, both his eternal power and divine nature, so that they are without excuse. Because, having known Clod, they did not glorify Him as God, neither were they thankful, but became vain in their reasonings and their foolish heart was darkened.

In the most direct manner, the Apostle Paul addresses all men’s consciences (2 Cor. 4:2) through their cognitive/rational faculty. It would be an obvious contradiction to say that men “suppress” what they do not know. If they did not possess actual knowledge about God by this means, there would be nothing to suppress. They suppress it in unrighteousness. That is, they suppress it in violation of the law of their conscience. Let it be emphasized: what the natural man does perceive (clearly understand) concerning God he perceives rationally (*a posteriori*) because, as the Apostle affirms, he understands these things by means of the things that are made.²

The Divine Source

It is none other than God Himself Who has shown these things to the natural man and caused him to understand them rationally by means of the things that are made.

Whether partial knowledge and knowledge derived through means constitute actual

knowledge is not a question because the matter is demonstrably evident and indisputable: the Cause of man is the Author of the rational faculty, the means, and the perception of the partial knowledge derived through the means. Such questions only arise through a presumption that man is an autonomous entity. On the very face of it, that presumption is irrational. So, it should be noted that man's proximate and partial knowledge of the One Who caused him is nevertheless actual knowledge. Those who deny these things have no rational defense (apologetic) for their positions (cf. Rom. 1:18-22).³ And, refusal to acknowledge what is known by this means is sufficient to warrant just condemnation.

Apart from the rational perception of one's self as an effect which must have—and therefore does have—an adequate Cause, there would be no criterion for proximate judgment and perception concerning man's mental and intellectual faculties, Yet, David the Psalmist, by assessment of the faculties of his life and being, could declare, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Ps. 139:14).

One portion of the just judgment which is pronounced upon these who flagrantly violate their conscience by willfully suppressing what they do know concerning the One Who causes them is a very present and discernible judgment. God gives them over to a perverse mind. This form of retribution for abuse of the rational mind and conscience is expressed by the Apostle in Romans 1:28:

And even as it did not meet their approval to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to an unapproving mind (KJV—reprobate mind) to do those things which are not to be approved of.

The context of this latter Scripture reference declares that a person's deliberate suppression, denial, abuse, and hence his injury to his own rational mind and conscience is that which gives rise to the perversion of affections and the corruption of the natural use of the body. Man is accountable for his rational deductions concerning both the cause and the purpose of the elements of his mind and body.

Through His psalmist (Ps. 94), the Lord castigates those who refuse to acknowledge—or refuse to be consistent with—what they do know concerning their Creator. This Psalm speaks directly concerning things that God has caused men to know by means of *a posteriori* reasoning. The Lord is not only referred to in Psalm 94 as the necessary cause of man's external senses, but also as the necessary cause of man's internal faculty of moral accountability and justice and the necessary cause of the rational and cognitive faculty itself. All of this is set forth in Psalm 94:8-10:

Understand, you stupid⁴ among the people: and fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see? He who disciplines the nations, shall He not correct? He who teaches man knowledge, *shall He not know?*

What is hearing? What is sound? Where and how does man actually accomplish hearing and seeing? Compression waves in air at various intervals are not sound. They are just waves.

They may be interpreted and recognized as sound, but that interpretation is not done in the ear. Light entering the lens of the eye is not sight. Sight is something that can take place as a result of electrical and chemical reactions in the dark recesses of the brain. In dreams there is both sight and sound irrespective of eyes and ears. So, the term *external senses* is barely an acceptable manner of speaking. The idea of sound itself exists not in the mechanics of the ear, nor in the silence of electrochemical impulses proceeding from the cochlea through the myriads of neurons in the brain. Both sound and hearing are the result of the aggregate of man's rational perceptions of cause and effect. The same is true of sight. Such rational assessments and apprehensions (or reason in this sense) are a means for acquisition of knowledge in humans. Both because of comparison of memories and because of established prejudices, people often hear and see only what they intend and expect to hear and see.

Man is no more the author of the ideas of hearing and seeing than he is the author of *his* senses of justice and just retribution. He is neither the author of the will to acquire knowledge nor of his faculty of cognition.⁵ Man knows that he has an ear because he rationally perceives not just the result and function of the ear, but both the purpose of the ear and the purpose of hearing itself. Which precedes the other? Is it the idea and the purpose of hearing or is it the mechanical and electrochemical apparatus which facilitates the synthesis of certain sounds that can be discerned? Obviously, precedence goes to the former. In the same way, a man perceives his conscience and the One Who is the moral and just Cause of his conscience. He perceives the purpose of both his self-conscious rational mind and his conscience.

When the Apostle Paul confronted the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17), the course of his argument proceeded in the same way. According to Paul, the Athenians whom he addressed should not have likened the Deity to gold, silver, and stone, to inanimate objects and images of man's contrivance; that is, to their own objects that were the product of and subject to their own wills and notions. The reason why they should not have done this is because they knew better. They contradicted their own rational minds and consciences. They know and they had also acknowledged by their own writings that the only adequate cause of their rational minds and their self-conscious, personal existence is the ultimate, living, personal, and self-conscious Being. "We are His offspring." Therefore, of themselves, human creatures have no adequate way of representing His person (Exodus 20:4-6).

For this reason the Greek philosophers were to recognize that the One Who had caused their personal faculties must enter into moral judgment against them and condemn them. They had abused and violated what God had shown them. They had substituted their own contrivances for the actual God, the knowledge of Whom they had suppressed, and they had deliberately violated their consciences. This is the reason for the Apostle's call for repentance.

One can and should ask any man if it is possible for the perfect moral Cause, the Cause of his conscience, to reach down, as it were, and to put His stamp of approval on imperfect thoughts, deeds, and acts. In other words, can God *call* such imperfections perfect? Can He accept them to Himself, even though they are imperfect? Of course not! For then God would lie, contradict, and corrupt Himself. This inescapable rational deduction is the basis on which the natural man is both condemned by his conscience and knowingly and necessarily excluded from fellowship with God. The natural man has nothing acceptable to God. He knows that he

has no way to give an honest account of himself to his Maker. As the Apostle's language affirms in Romans chapter one, there may be many liars and suppressors of the knowledge of God, but there are no atheists. Two deductions are valid: (1) that God cannot contradict Himself; and (2) that God must condemn all imperfection. For these reasons, the natural man suppresses his knowledge of God. (Actual epistemology is not repressed. but suppressed.)

Knowing Through Effected Revelation

What is the relationship between man's actual epistemology and the written word of the Gospel in the Bible? There is a connection between man's rational perception of God and the written revelation of God. The connection is this: the Bible also is an effect. It is an effect which both testifies to and also declares its own adequate Cause.

Holy Scripture was delivered to man in conjunction with particular verifications of its Source. Christ and all of the prophets and apostles not only consistently appealed to the consciences of men, but also furnished *signs*, Hebrew **אֵימָנוּת**, Greek **σημεία** (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:22; Jn. 20:30-31; 2 Cor. 12:12, *et al.*). These signs were miraculous, efficacious, and precise fulfillments of their words. The signs of Christ, His prophets, and His apostles were given to demonstrate to the ones who witnessed them the necessary cause, source of power, and hence the authority of the words that these individuals both uttered in the Lord's Name and committed to writing by divine inspiration. Those bearing witness either to these signs or to the precise fulfillment of the prophecies that were given in conjunction with the signs, if they were to refuse to acknowledge the adequate and necessary cause of these miraculous fulfillments, would thereby willfully make themselves liable to the utmost condemnation. For this reason, unbelief is synonymous with disobedience in the original language of the Bible (*unbelief* and *disobedience* being used interchangeably). This is because unbelief in this sense is simply calling God a liar, in spite of conclusive evidence to the contrary. The precise prophecies that are referred to have subsequently been fulfilled in their proper sequence, except for those prophecies which are yet to be fulfilled in the same way and for the same intent. Christ declared that His works, His signs, and His fulfillments of the words of the prophets all prove (*a posteriori*) His actual identity. "Search the Scriptures." Moses, a prophet and a judge who was at first rejected, spoke of the necessary condemnation to come upon those who would reject Christ as their ultimate Prophet and Judge (Deut. 18:1-5).

It is perfectly consistent that God, in fulfillment of these specific prophecies and signs, should be born of a virgin and thus become "God with us" (Isa. 7:14). For it was prophesied and promised that He would manifest Himself as a Man and place Himself under all of the obligations that had been placed by God on the consciences of men (Isa. 53). Unlike images and projections of a contrived deity, devised by the finite and futile imaginations of men, this One is the personal, living, and actual image and revelation of God (Heb. 1:1 -3). God became incarnate, not that He ceased to be God, but that He simply took unto Himself a true body and a rational soul. This involves no contradiction on the part of the One Who caused man. It is also without contradiction that this Man should perfectly accomplish both all that had been prophesied of Him and all that was ever required to satisfy the demands of God upon the conscience.

In fulfillment of these prophecies, Christ took the condemnation of the sins of His people upon Himself and died in their place to satisfy all of the demands of God's perfect justice on their behalf. And, demonstrating that His perfect works and His perfect sacrifice were accepted on behalf of all those for whom He died, He rose from the dead (Romans 4:25, not *for*, but literally "*on account of* our justification"). His resurrection declares that the transaction is accomplished and the salvation of all those for whom He died is thereby rendered a certainty (in. 6:37). This was also a precise fulfillment of prophecy (Ps. 16:10; Isa. 53:9-12). Christ has the right, because He has satisfied all of the requirements of perfect works (vis. all of the obligations placed upon the conscience of man) now to give to those for whom He died all the blessings which were promised through His prophets. All of these blessings were promised upon condition of complete obedience (or perfect righteousness). Christ is declared to be "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer. 23:6). Because of this, He now has the right to give all these promised blessings to those who believe in Him (2 Cor. 1:20).

Without the perception of both the Source and the means of man's knowledge, there is no way to address the rational soul of man concerning God and the Gospel and no way to commend one's self to every man's conscience in the fear of God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:2). But, when a person is able to reason in all good conscience, according to the means prescribed in the Scriptures, that one is prepared to give a rational defense (an *apologetic*) of the hope that he *has* in Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Pet. 3:15). These things God's servants are commanded to do.

Epilogue

God is the necessary and absolute cause of all contingent existence. There is but one created reality. That reality proceeds from the necessarily existent One, and it includes both the rational minds and of men to inquire into and know that reality. It is only because man's rational mind is of the same source and integral in that one created reality that "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). The heavens do not simply declare it to man, but they declare it by and in conjunction with man's created rational faculty. This is the only reason why man perceives the glory of God in the heavens. He rationally perceives these things to be an appointed means whereby he can daily perceive and thereby acquire and appreciate more knowledge about his Creator. Without this, or independent of this, neither the heavens nor any other created thing could declare anything to man. As is explained below, words are not a source, but a product of human knowledge.

Only because man was created to perceive himself as a created, rational, self-conscious being could he appreciate the Psalmist's words, Psalm 19:1-3:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse of the heavens shows the work of His hands. Day unto day utters speech and night unto night reveals knowledge, without speaking, without words, without voices being heard.

The language of knowing in the mind of man is without the spoken words of language, it is the silent, universal language of rational perceptions and synthesis of ideas. It is what man

knows and appreciates irrespective of any particular language or any utterance of spoken words. Spoken words are only names for (or labels assigned to) rational observations, assessments, and conclusions. Written words are but symbols used to represent spoken words. While such labels may be employed as aids to organize rational thoughts and ideas, they themselves are not rational thoughts. They are only labels.

The wordless language of knowing is that process of synthesis and recognition which involves not only man's reasoning from the effects to their adequate cause, but man's assessment and appreciation of interrelationship, order, design, and purpose in the things that he perceives.

These verses refer to progressive and appreciative acquisition of knowledge and wisdom, through that rational apprehension which glorifies the Creator. When man's conscience has been cleansed from guilt (Ps. 19:12), so that he has no condemnation (Ps. 32:1-2; Rom. 8:12), then he no longer suppresses his knowledge of the Creator. He is liberated from that which shackled his thoughts, freed to see himself as a peculiar creature, simultaneously conscious of both the creation and the Creator/Sustainer. He recognizes that he was caused and intended rationally to apprehend and to appreciate these things in this way.

The translations of the Scripture passages cited in this paper are by Edward Crawford. They are translated directly from the original languages.

¹ The actual meaning of the Greek word *oximoron* demonstrates the kind of self-contradictory figure of speech that this word denotes: *oxy* means keen, sharp, or smart, and *moron* means fool. A smart fool is a contradiction in terms.

² In the original, this is clearly expressed by the Greek dative of means.

³ Hence, Presuppositionalism, as epitomized by Cornelius Van Til, is manifestly false, for it begins by denying the principle of causality and the law of the conscience that is based on that *a posteriori* principle, and then it proceeds to deny the Scripture outright by denying that men know God by means of the things that are made. Van Til said that men know God by virtue of their creation, but his subtle contradiction was that he categorically denied the stated means whereby men know God by virtue of their creation. He contradicted Scripture in order to substitute his own contrived means. (cf. *The Defense of the Faith* by C. Van Til. See his propositional statement, page 180, that subtly but categorically denies the biblical, rational, and actual means whereby men know God). "Presuppositional Apologetic" is an oxymoron.

⁴ The Hebrew word בֶּעָר (stupid, boor) refers to one who is not just an oaf, but rather to one who is willfully stupid.

⁵ "I am a contingent, rational being. I know that I am not necessarily existent. My nonexistence would involve no contradiction. I know that for every effect there must be an adequate cause. I know that, because I am not the cause, I am caused to exist. I know that, because I do exist, the adequate cause of my existence is necessarily existent. Necessary existence is absolute existence." See Epilogue.