

Knowledge according to Bavinck and Aquinas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Knowledge in *Foundations of Psychology*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Concluding Comment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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