

MODERNITY, “RADICAL ORTHODOXY,” AND
CORNELIUS VAN TIL: A JOURNEY OF REDISCOVERY OF
PARTICIPATORY THEISM

Albert R. Haig

James Cook University, Queensland

INTRODUCTION

There is a long history amongst some Protestant writers, which continues to the present day, of criticism of the early church fathers as being overly influenced by Platonism, and, therefore, by an insidious “paganism.” The scholar Wouter Hanegraaff has meticulously documented how this particular meme of the “Hellenization of Christianity” originated with certain Roman Catholic scholars who were reacting against the excesses of Renaissance thinkers like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. It was then taken over with great enthusiasm by a whole series of seventeenth century Protestant historians (in particular, Jacob Thomasiaus and Ehregott Daniel Colberg), who found that it could be developed into an extremely effective apologetic weapon against Catholicism. However, this particular weapon turned out to be almost as dangerous for its Protestant handlers, as it did for its Catholic ones; it could very effectively be turned against orthodoxy in general, and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. Thus, in the seventeenth century, Jacques Souverain developed an influential argument that “the Roman Catholic concept of the Trinity was in fact the product of ‘gross platonism’ introduced by the Fathers of the second and third centuries.”¹

Whatever we are to make of this “Hellenization of Christianity” discourse (a matter to which it will be necessary to return later), it is important to keep in mind that, as the Sermon on the Mount famously notes, it is very easy to see the speck in the eye of someone else, whilst being blissfully unaware of

1 The quotation is from Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 99–100. The rest of this paragraph is derived from the first two sections of Hanegraaff’s superb study.

the log in one's own. In this case, that means reacting against the perceived faults of Christians of earlier times in having being negatively influenced by their particular surrounding culture, while at the same time utterly failing to have insight into the detrimental influence that modernity and contemporary Western culture might have had on our own theological constructs. This is the question that will be addressed in this article. The focus will be an analysis of the theology of Cornelius Van Til, an influential conservative Presbyterian theologian who taught at Princeton and Westminster Theological Seminaries (for 43 years at the latter). His thought emerged particularly from the Dutch Reformed tradition (he was born in the Netherlands) and the fideism of Abraham Kuyper (who was Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901–1905). What makes his thought so useful for present purposes, is that his theology represents, working from strictly orthodox Calvinist foundations, a profoundly serious attempt to get to grips with modernity, and to provide it with a deep apologetic response. As will be seen, in the process of this analysis various inferences will emerge which have much wider applicability to Evangelical thought.

The perspective I will develop here finds much in common with Van Til's epistemology, but nonetheless rejects his metaphysics; indeed it will be argued here that, contrary to what Van Til and his followers maintained, his metaphysics and his epistemology are actually ultimately mutually exclusive. Three key areas of agreement with Van Til emerge: (a) the rejection of the idea that any discipline of study can be rightly undertaken except from an explicitly theological perspective; (b) the belief that all human knowledge is *analogical*; and (c) the critique of *rationalism* (the belief that autonomous human discursive reason, apart from any transcendent source of truth, can provide an objective description of the world which is conceptually precise).² However, it will also be argued here that these valid insights in Van Til's thought are not properly grounded, but rather are undercut, by his Calvinist ontology. Van Til surrenders to modern rationalism, and undermines a consistent Christian apologetic and worldview, by severing ontologically the creation from its Creator. In this article it will be argued

2 The term "rationalism" is being employed here in a broad sense, not in its narrow sense (such as when it is employed to denote a particular school of early modern continental philosophy, represented by Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz). As used here, "rationalism" encompasses the entire spectrum of Western philosophy since Descartes, both before and after the Kantian "Copernican revolution"; and hence includes empiricism, which is often contrasted with rationalism in the narrow sense. The differences between empiricism and rationalism (in the narrow sense) are insignificant from the point of view of the present analysis.

that the only adequate answer to rationalism and its ultimate endpoint, nihilism, is a return to the kind of participatory theism advocated by the church fathers.

The position defended here arrives at somewhat similar conclusions to the contemporary theological movement known as “radical orthodoxy,” although in contrast to radical orthodoxy, the theological stance of this author is broadly Anabaptist, mystical and Pietist, with influences like Caspar Schwenckfeld, Jakob Böhme, and Gottfried Arnold.³

VAN TIL ON ANALOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Van Til argued that all human descriptions of God, and indeed, of anything in the world at all, must be *analogous*, and not *univocal*. What Van Til means by “analogy,” however, requires some explanation. According to Van Til *all* human description is analogical in character. We *never* achieve univocal description, even of ordinary, mundane things like tables and chairs, let alone of spiritual realities.⁴ By univocal description, Van Til has in mind an exact, precise application to reality of a concept in a description, which lies wholly within our cognitive grasp, very much along the lines of what Descartes called a “clear and distinct idea.”⁵ According to Van Til, all of our descriptions of the world are to some extent “approximate,” and we can never pin down in language precisely in what respect the approximation consists. There are “two levels of knowledge,” God’s knowledge, which is perfect, and human knowledge, which is “derivative and reinterpreted,” so that “man’s knowledge is analogical of God’s knowledge.”⁶

3 On “radical orthodoxy,” see John Milbank, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–20. Milbank writes, “[t]he central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is ‘participation’ as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God. The latter can only lead to nihilism (though in different guises). Participation, however, refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity ... every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing” (3). In addition to radical orthodoxy, the present work also finds some common ground with the French Neoplatonic revival. See Wayne J. Hankey, “French Neoplatonism in the 20th century,” *Animus* 4 (1999): 135–67.

4 Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 31, 177–78, 183.

5 René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, ed. D. Weissman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 25, 100.

6 Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 33.

This accounts for why it is so difficult for Van Til to explain precisely what he has in mind, and why he has sometimes been accused of being circular.⁷ If what Van Til says is true, then whatever definition or explanation is given of analogy, *must itself be analogical*. There is no univocal language available to us that we can employ to describe analogy, any more than anything else. Van Til's critics are mistaken, however, to think that this represents a valid objection to his theory. The issue here is not circularity, but rather, the distinction between object language and metalanguage. In discussing analogical description, it becomes our object language. However, if Van Til is correct, then the metalanguage which we use to describe this object language must also be analogical, since there is no other alternative form of language that is available to us. This does not invalidate the metalinguistic description.⁸ Any theoretical account of univocal description must itself employ what the theory claims is univocal language in the expression of that theory, and nobody believes that this involves a fatal circularity. Neither, therefore, does it involve Van Til in circularity to claim that analogical language must be explicated by means of analogy.

Of course, we still will not have a precise understanding of what analogical description means; but that is just the point—we can never have that kind of precise understanding of anything. If knowing the meaning of a word we are using means having a precise, exact and comprehensive conception of what it means, then, according to Van Til, we just never know the meaning of anything we say. But such an exact and precise conception, or Cartesian “clear and distinct idea,” is not necessary for us—we can function perfectly adequately with the kind of approximate, fuzzy, inexact analogical knowledge that we possess. There are parallels here between Van Til's perspective and that of the later Wittgenstein: the underlying conceptual structure of human language is seen as *transcendental*; it provides us with our ability to possess knowledge, but can never itself be the object of

7 For example, Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley claim that “presuppositionalist orthodoxy makes circularity the hallmark of truth.” R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 318.

8 Kent Bach writes: “Although for formal purposes the distinction between metalanguage and object language must be maintained, in practice *one can use a language to talk about expressions in the very same language*. One can, in Carnap's terms, shift from the *material mode* to the *formal mode*, e.g. from ‘Every veterinarian is an animal doctor’ to ‘“Veterinarian” means “animal doctor.”’” Kent Bach, “Metalanguage,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 560–61 (emphasis added in first sentence).

that knowledge.⁹ Van Til is right, therefore, when he says, “we may speak of our method as being transcendental.”¹⁰

ORIGINS OF MODERN RATIONALISM

Van Til’s argument that all human knowledge is analogical is based upon the biblical doctrines of the incomprehensibility of God, and the finiteness of autonomous human reason.¹¹ We could sum his argument up by saying this: *no-one can have a “God’s-eye view” of the world except God*. The idea that humans, independently of God, can have an objective view of reality is deluded. In fact, it is idolatry, since it makes humans into God, by claiming for them a view of reality that belongs to God alone. It is the sin of Adam and Eve, who, in seeking to be like God, sought to know good and evil (Gen 3:5), and to be the judges of what is true and what is false *independently of God*. All human cognition is conditioned, contextualized and distorted by alienation from divine revelation. It is subjective and relative, and not objective or absolute.

Nonetheless, ever since Descartes a fundamental error of modernity has been that humans can attain objective, absolute knowledge independently of any transcendent revelation. This idea of an absolute and non-perspectival view of reality (famously dubbed the “view from nowhere”),¹² is an integral component of the mythology of modernity. In this article I will briefly discuss three interrelated intellectual foundations for modern rationalism.¹³

9 Wittgenstein writes: “In giving explanations I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shows that I can adduce only exterior facts about language.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe 3rd ed., (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 42e (remark 120).

10 Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 35.

11 Van Til, being a strident Calvinist, also refers a great deal to the “noetic effects of sin” (e.g. *Systematic Theology*, 56). However, since he explicitly admits that humans must have reasoned analogously even *prior* to the fall—“In Paradise man’s knowledge was self-consciously analogical” (63)—it seems that sin has not materially affected the situation vis-à-vis the necessity of all human knowledge being analogical. Van Til comments that if “even in paradise” human knowledge was analogical, then “how much the more” must fallen human knowledge be analogical (151). However, his descriptions of analogical knowledge before and after the fall do not reveal any material difference between these two conditions. So it seems that the “noetic effects of sin” play mainly a rhetorical role in Van Til’s writings in relation to analogy, to demonstrate his orthodox Calvinist credentials. The real issue is human beings’ status as finite creatures, not their sinfulness.

12 Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

13 Similar ground has been trodden in the past by many writers, including Étienne Gilson, Hans Blumenberg, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-François Courtine. Of particular influence on the present author, however, have been the writings of René Guénon.

Although traces can be found latent in earlier thought (most notably in Aristotle),¹⁴ these three foundational principles first originated clearly together in the thought of the medieval philosophers Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. They established the groundwork that made possible the emergence of modern philosophy in the writings of René Descartes. The three foundation stones of rationalism to be discussed are: (a) the thin conception of Being; (b) nominalism; and (c) the idea of univocal description. The combined effect of these influences was to sever the connection between the created order and its Creator, and ultimately to dispense with the Creator altogether. I will then discuss how Van Til himself unwittingly buys into the modern error in his ontology, and how his insights concerning analogical knowledge can actually only find coherent grounding in a direction which he emphatically rejects: the Platonic doctrine of participation.

THE THIN CONCEPTION OF BEING

Traditionally, the being or existence of entities within the created realm was regarded as related to and dependent upon the existence of a transcendent *archē* or first principle of reality. Duns Scotus, however, attacked this traditional view by arguing for the “univocity of being.”¹⁵ On this view, the being of God is of exactly the same kind as the being of any other entity. William of Ockham followed his lead.¹⁶

This led to the idea that Being is essentially a “thin” concept, and that there is basically nothing to say about it. Thus, for example, in laying the groundwork for modern philosophy, Descartes bypasses the question of Being altogether. As Heidegger notes, what substance *is* is left unexplained by Descartes; substances are characterized only in terms of properties that

14 Jacobi, the great “gadfly” of German Romanticism, quoted Frie as saying: “It was Aristotle who first separated the forms of reflection from the remaining *material cognition* completely; he isolated the faculty of reflection in order to experiment with it. And at once the error arose of seeking the law of truth only in the clarity of the cognition of the understanding.” Quoted in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 542 n. 3.

15 J. Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, trans. Allan Wolter (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 4, 20.

16 As Tage Lindborn writes, “Ockham delivered a telling blow against the conception of creation as a total unity, a macrocosm, by proclaiming that existence is a *multiversum*: that everything is individual, discrete, atomic, and separate from all else. Even God is not exempt from all of this; even he is *una res*, a thing among other things; and this means that God is separated from his creation.” Tage Lindbom, *The Myth of Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 20.

differentiate them from each other, not in terms of what they have in common (existence).¹⁷ Descartes leaves Being unexplained because, following Ockham, he does not see anything to explain. Being is perhaps the most impenetrable of concepts; modernity, which prides itself on a supposed exactitude, cannot cope with incomprehensibility, and so dispenses with the mystery by asserting that there is nothing to know. The modern assertion of the thin conception of Being was put most bluntly by Kant, in his famous dictum that “Being is not a Real predicate.”¹⁸

The thin conception of Being, which asserts that the question of Being is trivial and that there are just things which exist, without that existence involving anything more substantial in terms of their relation to each other, is the first foundation stone of modernity. It severed the created order from God in terms of its *existence*. Speaking of existence was now possible without needing to speak about God.

NOMINALISM WITH RESPECT TO THE TRANSCENDENT

The second foundation stone of modernity is nominalism. This theory, which is particularly associated with Ockham, asserts that objects which possess the same property, and which are described by the same predicate, have nothing ontologically in common with each other. The property name or predicate is merely a label or name for an otherwise disparate collection of objects, and does not refer to something real which all the objects instantiate.

Not all modern philosophers have followed Ockham in adopting a general nominalism. What has become widespread, however, is nominalism *with respect to the transcendent*. That is, moderns generally deny that objects in the created realm all participate in a single eternal transcendent “Form of the Good,” God. This view was held virtually unanimously by the early church fathers, who formalized the doctrines of the Trinity and the hypostatic union, and employed participatory metaphysics everywhere in

17 Heidegger writes: “Thus the ontological grounds for defining the ‘world’ as *res extensa* have been made plain: they lie in the idea of substantiality, which not only remains unclarified in the meaning of its Being, but gets passed off as something incapable of clarification, and gets represented indirectly by way of whatever substantial property belongs most pre-eminently to the particular substance.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: HarperCollins, 1962), 127 (H 94).

18 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 567.

doing so.¹⁹ The denial of this position by the medieval nominalists resulted in a severing of the connection between God and the created order in terms of form and property. It was now possible to speak of the form and property of created entities without speaking of God.

Descartes was, in fact, a thoroughgoing nominalist, but what is important here is that his theory is nominalistic in terms of how it relates the natural world (the *res extensa*) to God. God is conceived by Descartes as a *res cogitans*, and there is no ontological link between extension and thought. They are just absolutely distinct attributes, like chalk and cheese. The fundamental attribute of the physical world, extension, can be understood perfectly well on its own terms without any understanding or characterization of the divine. For Descartes, the only link between God (or for that matter other minds,²⁰ for God is not the only *res cogitans*) and the physical realm, is by means of *causation*.²¹

The same kind of nominalism with respect to the transcendent is clearly seen in Kant, when he asserts that the transcendent realm (the noumenal world of “things in themselves”), is unknowable, and that form pertains purely to the phenomenal world.²² But Kant is more consistent than Descartes, because he confines causation to the phenomenal world as well; this, however, requires dispensing with God’s capability to interact with the world, and a complete rejection of the possibility of the supernatural.

19 As John Rist writes: “There is a widespread belief that Patristic Christianity was deeply imbued with Platonism. If that means that the Fathers thought at least in part in the categories of Platonism more than in those of other schools, that they often accepted something like Plato’s theory of Forms, talked about participation (though often of the created in the uncreated as much as of particular Forms) or of the Platonic Form of the Good, the belief is largely correct. If it means that they had a conscious theory that Platonism forms a halfway house to Christianity, and that it can be fitted in, modified, reformed, and above all completed so as to become Christianity, that view . . . is really due to Augustine.” John Rist, “Plotinus and Christian Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 408.

20 As an aside, this is another characteristic feature of modernity: to regard the spirit and the mind/consciousness as being one and the same entity, and to treat these two words as synonymous (besides Descartes, classic modern examples of this include Berkeley and Hegel, the latter of whom, for example, speaks of a “phenomenology of spirit,” when he really means a phenomenology of consciousness).

21 This was ultimately unsatisfactory, since causation between substances must have some ontological grounding. The attempt to resolve this problem in Cartesian thought led first to the occasionalism of Malebranche, and from there it was a small step via the Eleatic Principle to the pantheism of Spinoza. Another attempt to evade the problem was the denial of causal interaction between substances found in Leibniz.

22 Kant’s idealism was an idealism regarding form. See Paul Redding, *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

Van Til correctly notes that at the core of rationalism is the idea of univocal description; but he fails to recognise a crucial corollary that must follow from this insight, that therefore rationalism must be essentially a modern phenomenon.²³ When Thomas Aquinas asserted that “no words apply literally to God,”²⁴ he was not proposing a novel doctrine, but merely restating the consensus of Christian theology since the earliest days of Christianity (and also the position of Plato²⁵ and Neoplatonism²⁶). The claim that all descriptions, including those of God, must be univocal, was put forward by Scotus.²⁷ It then manifested itself again in the Cartesian claim to be able to form “clear and distinct ideas.”

In addition to the historical fact that the idea of generalised univocal description originates around the turn of the fourteenth century, the fact that rationalism is a modern phenomenon can also be clearly demonstrated from the fact that the idea of univocal description is inextricably bound up with both of the preceding foundations of modernity (the thin conception of Being, and nominalism). Since God is incomprehensible, then any created entity which participates in God must thereby incorporate a degree of incomprehensibility also. Thus the ontological bonding between ordinary created things and God must be severed, if univocal conceptualization is to be possible.

-
- 23 Van Til regards rationalism as characterizing the entire history of Western philosophy since Plato, and sees no special significance in modernity. See for example, Val Til, *Systematic Theology*, 76–78, 202. He writes “the distinction between the ‘ancient’ mind and the ‘modern’ mind is not fundamental” (202).
- 24 Thomas Aquinas, “One Way of Understanding God-Talk,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 159.
- 25 For example, “so far as it lies in words to be incontrovertible and immovable, they must in no wise fall short of this If then ... we should not prove able to render an account everywhere and in all respects consistent and accurate, let no one be surprised.” Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. and ed. R. D. Archer-Hind (London: Macmillan, 1888), 89–91, emphasis added. Another example: “All that is said by any of us can only be imitation and representation Wherefore if at the moment of speaking I cannot suitably express my meaning, you must excuse me” Plato, “Critias,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett 4th ed., vol. 3, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 789–90.
- 26 Examples abound: “Our enquiry forces us to use terms not strictly applicable”; “Once more, we must be patient with language; we are forced for reasons of exposition to apply to the Supreme terms which strictly are ruled out; everywhere we must read ‘So to speak.’”; “Observe that such words as ‘always, never, sometimes’ [in relation to Eternity] must be taken as mere conveniences of exposition”; and “the word weakness ... is applied to the Soul merely by analogy (*analogia*)”. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, abridged, trans. Stephen MacKenna, ed. John Dillon (London: Penguin, 1991), 525, 526, 219, 68.
- 27 Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, 82–95.

The fundamental problem in Van Til's thought is that he confuses two quite different accounts of the analogical relation, treating them as if they were the same, when they are not. The mistake arises from his application of the ectype/archetype distinction both *metaphysically* and *epistemologically*. Van Til erroneously believes that these two applications are equivalent. In the earlier section of this article, "Van Til on Analogical Knowledge," what was actually being described was just his epistemological account of analogy, an account which is essentially correct. It is now necessary to describe, and critique, his metaphysical account of analogy, and then explain why it is incompatible with the epistemological account.

Van Til's metaphysical account of analogy is grounded in his nominalism with respect to the transcendent. Van Til is an exponent of nominalist theism, because he regards the created realm as entirely ontologically distinct from God.²⁸ Thus, when we use a predicate of God (say "is good"), we refer to a property which ontologically is entirely distinct from when we use the same predicate in ordinary cases ("Bob Smith is good"). But this raises an obvious problem: what, then, justifies our using the same word in both cases? Van Til's doctrine of the archetypal/ectypal relation is intended to overcome this problem; but it actually represents just a reworking of the classical nominalist strategy of invoking resemblance as a primitive (as in Locke).²⁹ Van Til has introduced a special type of resemblance that is vertically oriented between the creature and the Creator. Van Til's archetype/ectype relation, is, like Lockean resemblance, mysteriously primitive; but fatally so, since in the case of Van Til, we can never have epistemological access to one side of the resemblance relation (the archetype, God), a problem that does not arise for Locke. This is a fundamental weakness in Van Til's metaphysics; we are supposed to understand God as being revealed in creation by means of the ectype, but we know that the ectype is ontologically absolutely distinct from the archetype, and we also cannot have any epistemological access to the archetype to facilitate our

28 Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 72. See also John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1995), 53.

29 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged, ed. Andrew S. Pringle-Pattison (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 231–32.

understanding of the nature of the resemblance in question. Despite Van Til's best intentions, this entails that God would be unknowable.³⁰

According to this metaphysical account of analogy, the analogical relation is fundamentally a vertical metaphysical one, between a lower tier of reality (the creation, the ectype) and an upper tier of reality (the Creator, the archetype). Hence analogy is a *reality/reality relation*. However, if the analogical relation is between created ectype and divine archetype, then it follows necessarily that only the archetype, God, would need to be described analogically. The ectype should be able to be described univocally. But Van Til resists this conclusion: he argues that *all* human description must be analogical, whether of the creature *or* the Creator.

The reason for this is that Van Til also applies the ectype/archetype relation *epistemologically*, arguing that human concepts and knowledge as a whole are only analogical to God's knowledge. Thus human *knowledge* is the ectype, and divine *knowledge* the archetype. However, since God knows reality perfectly and exhaustively, this means that reality as a whole is the archetype also. From this it follows that any description of anything at all, even in the created realm, must be analogical. But Van Til fails to realize that this application of the ectype/archetype distinction to *knowledge*, rather than to metaphysical *reality*, generates a *different theory of analogy*. Because the epistemological ectype/archetype distinction holds the ectype to be human knowledge, and the archetype to be reality as it truly is, the theory emerges as fundamentally a *concept/reality* theory of analogy. It holds that human concepts apply only analogously to reality (and that includes both created reality and the Creator). The fundamental incoherence in Van Til's thinking is that he confounds a metaphysical, reality/reality doctrine of the analogical relation, with an epistemological, concept/reality doctrine, and he fails to realize that the two are not the same.

Furthermore, Van Til's epistemological ectype/archetype, or concept/reality doctrine of analogy, is essentially the theory of the Platonic tradition.

30 Van Til's complete denial that any knowledge of God is possible apart from scriptural revelation makes the problem still more acute (*Systematic Theology*, 314–18). Like Barth (but in an even more expansive sense) Van Til emphatically says "Nein!" to the possibility of natural theology. The problem which flows from this, which Van Til does not acknowledge, is that scripture is written in ordinary human languages, languages which are shared by believer and unbeliever alike. Human language must therefore be conceptually adequate to serve as a vehicle for divine revelation. It is hard to see how this could be true given Van Til's position, which cannot provide any satisfactory account of how this unique vertical concept of analogy/resemblance could either be already present in ordinary human language, or be constructed out of it.

As speech is the echo of the thought in the Soul, so thought in the Soul is an echo from elsewhere: that is to say, as the uttered thought is an image of the soul-thought, so the soul-thought images a thought above itself and is the interpreter of a higher sphere.³¹

What Plotinus is saying here is that human thought and discursive reasoning are only, to use Van Til's phrase, "derivative and reinterpretative"³² echoes or images of ultimate reality, and that human knowledge (or at least, discursive knowledge) is therefore only *analogous*. Plotinus, like Van Til, has a *concept/reality* theory of analogy. Van Til's epistemological application of the ectype/archetype distinction has just brought him full circle back to the traditional ancient doctrine of analogy.

If Van Til is expressing two different theories of analogy, then are they perhaps complementary and compatible with each other? No, they are in fact mutually exclusive, because the only adequate underlying metaphysical groundings for the two theories are contradictory. A concept/reality theory of analogy, which holds that all human description is analogical, cannot be rightly grounded in an ontology like Van Til's. This is because he completely severs the created realm from the Creator ontologically; yet it is precisely this severance which must express itself as rationalism, since it implies that created entities in their essential nature can be understood on their own terms, without reference to their Creator. This provides the foundation for a naturalistic science. It also entails that the Creator is unknowable, as discussed above. Instead of an analogical knowledge with respect to both creation and Creator, Van Til's ontology, by implication, leaves us with univocity with regard to the former and equivocity for the latter. The proper ontological grounding for a concept/reality theory of analogy is the Platonic doctrine of participation. Because every created entity participates in God, it is fundamentally related to God in its essence, and therefore must incorporate something of the divine incomprehensibility. Thus no created entity can be precisely conceptualized by humans. Furthermore, because language itself participates in the forms, there is no "divorce between words and things."³³ Only this view provides an adequate account of how analogical description is ontologically grounded in human finiteness.

31 Plotinus, *Enneads*, 19.

32 Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 33.

33 The quotation is from Michel de Certeau, cited in John Montag, "Revelation: The False Legacy of Suárez," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 50.

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi was a vehement critic of Kant and German Idealism. He was also one of the most prophetic thinkers of modern times. He saw clearly where rationalism would end, and he introduced the term *nihilism* to describe it.³⁴ Ultimately, argued Jacobi, autonomous human reason acting alone could establish nothing except for “knowledge of the nothing”; vacuous “logical phantoms,” empty of meaning, such as “A=A.” His work caused a sensation in Germany, where he was accused of being an irrationalist, a charge which he denied. A century later, however, Jacobi’s prediction was confirmed by Nietzsche, who gloated that: “I will describe what happens next, what must necessarily happen: *the triumph of Nihilism*.”³⁵ Why must rationalism lead to nihilism?

An account derived from the later Wittgenstein might go as follows: in thinking, we employ language, a language which is a public phenomenon and which we learned as infants.³⁶ From ordinary language terms we abstract technical terms. The problem is, that we can never grasp or hold before our eyes the full precise Husserlian “horizon” or meaning of the terms we employ. We have instinctively learned, by being corrected by others, how to use ordinary language terms appropriately in most cases without having to think consciously about their application at all. If forced to think consciously of the meaning of a term, we can bring to mind various stereotypical instances and so forth, which are helpful cues for our usage, and perhaps give a “rough and ready” idea of the meaning, but we cannot hold in mind the complete and exact meaning of any concept. Indeed, to do so would require bringing our entire language before our view, because “[t]he sign (the sentence) gets its signification from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs. Roughly: understanding a sentence means understanding a language.”³⁷ Furthermore, bringing the entire language into view in this way would be impossible anyway, as it would

34 Jacobi, *Philosophical Writings*, 519, 583.

35 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*, vol. 1, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 14, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 1.

36 Other accounts are possible starting from different philosophical perspectives. For an account of how Heidegger’s phenomenology approached nihilism, see Laurence P. Hemming, “Nihilism: Heidegger and the Grounds of Redemption,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 91–108.

37 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 5.

require some medium of thought other than language to be so analysed. As noted earlier, the conceptual structure of language is *transcendental*.

When it comes to the meaning of ordinary language terms, and how they should be employed, we have a solid standard which enables us to determine whether we are correct or not in how we use them: namely, other people. If we are in doubt about a particular English expression, we may find another competent English speaker, and ask them. However, with abstract, technical terms, we have no such recourse. It is argued, in different ways, by both Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein, that abstract, technical terms are conceptually dependent upon ordinary language terms, which are taken and “refined” or allegedly “made precise” by making various modifications to their usage. Thus Wittgenstein comments: “When philosophers use a word and enquire about its meaning we must always ask: is this word actually used thus in the language which created it?”³⁸ The question is, then, what gives these technical, abstract terms, their conceptual stability?

Modernists like Descartes would reply that they are conceptually stable because we have a “clear and distinct idea” of what they mean. However, this has been called into question by much modern philosophy, from Heidegger to the later Wittgenstein to Derrida, and with good reason. A detailed argument along these lines lies outside the scope of the present work, but an important piece of evidence is the inability of different philosophers to reach any significant degree of agreement with each other in terms of their conclusions, despite high intelligence, knowledge and application. This suggests that the project of philosophy is somehow inherently misconceived; and the explanation offered here is that the misconception arises because the abstract terms employed in philosophy just cannot be conceptually stable, because they have nothing to stabilize them. A philosopher might think that she has a clear and distinct idea of something, but in reality the concept concerned is vague and largely undefined and has been made precise only at certain arbitrary points, which govern how the system of philosophy subsequently develops. A system of philosophy, therefore, always represents the subjective whims and character of the philosopher. This must ultimately lead, at a cultural level, to a nihilistic conclusion.

This brings us to the use of abstract concepts in theology. A couple of comments are in order. Firstly, theological concepts can only have any stability (other than as Wittgensteinian “nonsense” within a form of life) if they are grounded in the transcendent in some manner. Secondly, it is likely

38 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, ed. Anthony Kenny, 2nd ed., (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 59.

a mistake to take theological systems too seriously. This comment is not intended to denigrate the value of theology, nor should it be construed as anti-metaphysical in any way, but only serves to warn against theological dogmatism.³⁹ Because all theological constructs are “approximations,” it may be that two apparently mutually contradictory systems of theology are actually both perfectly legitimate as analogies. If someone says “ $x=9$,” and also “ $x=10$,” then, if we interpret these statements strictly literally, there is a contradiction. But if we treat these statements both as approximations, then they both may be perfectly valid, dependent on context. Suppose that, in reality, $x=9.63724$. An approximation that rounds down to the integer below (in this case 9), is demanded by convention in some contexts (for example, in answering the question, “how old are you?”), whereas in other contexts rounding to the nearest integer (in this case 10), is appropriate. So either answer above could be perfectly valid if the statements are treated as approximations. Thus, it may be that apparently contradictory theological systems are both perfectly valid and valuable as analogies. Each might capture something that the other does not. This does not require us, either, to accept that all theologies are equally valid: someone who said, for example, that $x=56$ would clearly just be wrong.

One final note of caution. The statements set out above describing this theory of analogy (such as the numerical approximation example), should themselves all be taken as analogical also. They represent an attempt to explain analogously why univocal reasoning is impossible. For example, the phrase “the conceptual structure of language” should be taken analogously, as an “approximation” to something which ultimately cannot be conceptualized, and not as a precise rationalistic concept. This is particularly important in relation to the question of *semantic holism*,⁴⁰ since the above outline might suggest that I am an adherent of that doctrine. I do maintain that semantic holism is true on an analogical basis, that it is a much better approximation to the underlying incomprehensible reality than any of the alternatives. However, if semantic holism is taken univocally, as a precise rationalistic doctrine, then I reject it; and indeed, it could not be formulated univocally without rejecting the central argument of this article. I deny that we can ever have a precise theoretical

39 This argument in turn might be developed in the direction of Pietism.

40 Ernest LePore defines semantic holism as the view that “the meaning of a symbol is relative to the entire system of representations containing it.” Ernest LePore, “Semantic Holism,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 829.

conception of what terms like “meaning” and “concept” mean that accurately describes the underlying reality.⁴¹

CONCLUSION: THE ORIGIN OF THE TRUTH IN PLATO

We turn full circle now, to address a final possible objection to the theory outlined here. I have argued that much modern Protestant Evangelical theology, represented here by Van Til, is in fact unwittingly heavily influenced by modernist philosophical assumptions, and so is far from a purely biblical version of Christianity. It is a syncretistic combination of traditional Christian belief and the modern worldview, a combination which is inherently unstable since the assumptions of modernity ultimately lead inexorably to nihilism. With radical orthodoxy, I have advocated a return to grounded Christian theology in Platonism, and more specifically in the tradition which Hanegraaff calls “Platonic Orientalism,” represented in most developed form by Neoplatonism. But this brings us back to the opening “Hellenization of Christianity” objection. How could a pagan philosopher have arrived at valid truth about God and creation, especially if what has been said about philosophy is true?

I see no answer to this question other than the obvious one; namely, an explicit revival of the Renaissance tradition of a *prisca theologia*, or “perennial philosophy,” which was in fact precisely the justification used in the Renaissance for appropriating Platonist frameworks for theologizing.⁴² Unfortunately, the idea of a *prisca theologia* came into massive discredit after the Renaissance because the claimed historical basis for it fell apart completely under the withering interrogation of the modern historical-critical method.⁴³ The whole fabric of the *prisca theologia* narrative was left

41 It is also worth noting that it is easiest to make sense of Van Til’s thesis that anyone who claims to know anything on the basis of autonomous reason, is in effect claiming to know everything (a thesis that has puzzled his critics—see Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 239), if one interprets it as an expression of an underlying semantic holism on his part.

42 Of course the idea of a *prisca theologia* expressed in Platonism goes back to the church fathers. See, for example, book VIII, chapter 11, of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* (entitled in English, as translated by Marcus Dods, “How Plato has been able to approach so nearly to Christian knowledge”).

43 Thus, it was discovered that Dionysius the Areopagite did not write the work attributed to him; the *Corpus Hermeticum* dates from the early Christian era, not centuries earlier; Plato could not possibly have read Moses (as was commonly claimed); most of the writings which Renaissance Platonists attributed to Zoroaster actually had nothing to do with him and were much later texts, and so forth. See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

in tattered shreds, and appeared to be a mere fantasy, in time becoming synonymous with superstition and ignorance.

Obviously, there is no use trying to resurrect the specific *prisca theologia* that was popular in the Renaissance; that indeed would be flogging a dead horse. But perhaps, though the specific historical narrative was fanciful, the basic idea was sound, and a more historically informed reformulation of the narrative is possible. There are some shreds of light that have emerged in modern scholarship that suggest that such a project might not be without support. For example, the similarities between early Indian thought and Neoplatonism are so significant that, since no convincing evidence of any intellectual interaction that could explain the similarities exists, scholars have struggled to find an explanation.⁴⁴ It has been argued that broadly similar ideas are also present in early Chinese thought.⁴⁵ The universality of this doctrine might also be illustrated by appealing to the fact that it is mirrored in the subject-predicate structure of all human language. It is also, arguably, seen throughout the Bible, such as in Gen 1 when God creates by speaking the Word (the forming principle) that shapes an earth which is *tōhū wābōhū*, “without form and void.” A New Testament example might be that various scholars, from Albert Schweitzer through to E. P. Sanders, have found at the centre of Paul’s theology a concept of “mystical participation.”⁴⁶ A rebirth of the *prisca theologia* narrative, then, might be worth considering not just on its own terms, but also because it would serve as a rationale for Christian theologians to draw on the insights of Platonism, and other ancient religious traditions.

44 Albert M. Wolters, “A Survey of Modern Scholarly Opinion on Plotinus and Indian Thought,” in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 293–308.

45 René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, ed. Samuel D. Fohr, 2nd ed., trans. Henry D. Fohr, (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 16–17, 21.

46 E. P. Sanders. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 434–74.