

Old Amsterdam

2.1 OLD AMSTERDAM PERSPECTIVE

The once committed advocate of Modern Liberal Theology, Abraham Kuyper founded the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880, after having converted to the orthodox Reformed faith that was the historic status quo in Holland.¹ Controversy swelled as the national church increasingly capitulated to the influence of modern thought leading some Dutchmen to secede in pursuit of traditional expressions of the Reformed faith. Others, including Kuyper, insisted on reasserting Reformed principles in the political sphere that would both protect the purity of Reformed practice and worship from the state, and ensure religious freedom to the adherents of other schools of thought.² Having both held and observed the conflicting interpretations of life and politics developed by the adherents of different belief systems, Kuyper naturally took an interest in Kant's critical investigation of the human subject, and his attempt to identify the difference between knowledge, belief, and mere opinion. Unlike the Princeton theologians who had little to no affection for Kant, Kuyper held that "However much Kant and his contemporaries and followers intended to injure the Christian religion," they must be praised for "investigating the human subject" and its proper orientation to the manifold of objects.³ Kuyper and his associates Herman

1. Hendrik de Vries, "Biographical Note," iv.

2. Meuther, *Van Til*, 21–28.

3. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 300; cf. 49.

Bavinck and Valentine Hepp took very seriously the task of theological prolegomena, whereby one explains how and on what basis man is able to obtain legitimate theological knowledge. Already, we have alluded to the fact that the Amsterdam school generally rejected natural theology and apologetics in favor of a fideistic stance. And yet, in subordinating reason to revelation, the Amsterdam theologians did not capitulate to agnosticism, mysticism, or to a careless indifferentism toward systematic theology as William Brenton Green supposed a fideist must.⁴ Instead, they went on to develop a full-orbed Christian worldview abounding with impressive insights on how biblical presuppositions must shape one's understanding of the natural sciences, law, politics, art, and culture.⁵

In order to appreciate Amsterdam's counterintuitive combination of a faith-based starting point and a subsequent rigorous and systematic development of the sciences,⁶ a word must be said about post-Kantian developments in philosophy. Above we saw that Kant's philosophy seemed to leave nature and freedom, as well as science and ethics, at odds with one another. Empirically, man must conceive of himself as a causally determined phenomenon, confined to a natural universe where metaphysical and theological claims can never be elevated to the status of knowledge. But practically, man must conceive of himself as utterly autonomous and under the deepest compulsion to believe in God as the transcendent Judge Who finally rewards righteous conduct with eternal blessing. Hence, many perceived that unless philosophy is to succumb to the irrationalist conclusion that reason is inherently at odds with itself, either scientific or practical reason must be subordinated to the other.⁷ Those who granted primacy to the objective deterministic realm held that although a distinction appears to exist between man and nature as we know it, we must look to the latter if we are to discover the principles which bind them together. But others, such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte granted priority to ethics, and held that man must live *as if* a universal "subject" or "ego" is the ultimate ground of reality. Fichte frankly acknowledged that the transcendental subject cannot be proven to exist via

4. Green, "Function of Reason," 481–86.

5. Even an evidentialist like B. B. Warfield revered Kuyper and his school for their commitment to reforming every discipline in light of Christ. Warfield, Introductory Note to *Encyclopedia*, in *Shorter Writings*, 1:447.

6. Following Dutch-German practice, we use "science" (*wissenschaft/wetenschap*) to refer to every legitimate field of inquiry, and not simply the hard, measurable sciences as in the English use of the term. See Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 16–28.

7. Frederick Beiser explains, "the main problem for philosophers after Kant, then, was to find some means of uniting Kant's disastrous dichotomies." Beiser, "Hegel and the Problem of Metaphysics," 11.

deductive or inductive reasoning. Such would implicitly involve granting primacy to logical categories and the principles of science. As with man's sense of morality, the transcendental subject may only be felt and intuited when in the midst of self-reflection one senses that the active "self" that beholds the objective and individual "self" is distinct from and prior to the latter. Although men who are ethically inclined will sense that positing the primacy of the transcendental subject over the objective realm is essential to preserving human freedom, nothing can detract from the radical decision that men must make between subjecting nature to freedom, or freedom to nature. Once one has decided in favor of the former, Fichte believes that he will embrace the speculative conclusion that the transcendental ego has spontaneously produced finite egos (humanity) and non-egos (nature), in order that it may forever pursue its own ethical freedom from the latter through the former. In other words, man's mission is to forever harness his natural desires and overcome the obstacles and challenges posed by the external world in order that the self-directing freedom of the transcendental subject may be realized in ever increasing measure.⁸ Fichte went on to envelop the natural sciences, politics, and religion into his ethical doctrine of the transcendental subject.

2.1.1 Theological Encyclopedia

Kuyper's indebtedness to Fichte in his *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* is at times expressly acknowledged. To begin, the project of "encyclopedia" is not merely one of cataloguing distinct objects of knowledge, but of ascertaining (1) how the various objects relate to one another; (2) how man's mental faculties complement one another, and are fine-tuned to their object; and (3) the nature of the "knowledge" that results from the organic relationship between (1) and (2).⁹ Kant paved the way for encyclopedia in the above sense, but "the victory of the organic idea" over an atomistic science "was first manifested in the writings of Fichte."¹⁰ Expectedly then, Fichte furnishes us with a valuable list of insights. He was correct over against the naturalists in holding that the subjective life of man—"the image of God" (Gen 1:26)—furnishes a higher, more ultimate perspective on reality than the objective world.¹¹ Likewise, the spiritual sciences themselves ought to

8. Copleston, *History*, 7:61.

9. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 66.

10. *Ibid.*, 12.

11. Kuper declares that although the "idealism of Fichte in its own oneness may have outrun itself, you nevertheless cease to be man when the reality of spiritual

be geared toward the collective human subject/ego, as embodied first in Adam and second in Christ.¹² Last, “The line from Kant to Fichte” must be accredited with birthing the insight that every science begins with a faith-based certainty (Heb 11:1) that perceptions and intuitions are reliable.¹³ Nevertheless, Fichte’s ethical idealism is deficient in its failure to recognize: (1) that the human subject has been fractured into two groups: the fallen and the regenerate; and (2) that divine revelation represents a third object of knowledge—alongside of man and nature—that furnishes the only absolute perspective on reality.¹⁴

Were it not for the Fall, Kuyper is willing to concede that something very close to Fichte’s subjectivism would have served as the natural and legitimate mode of reasoning. Originally, Adam was created with an innate trust that nature, man himself, and divine revelation were each distinct and legitimate objects of knowledge. Nature supplies man with innumerable perceptions of basic essences—of plants, animals, colors, emotions, societies, etc.¹⁵ Man understands his intellect to be a “micro-cosmos,” after the image of God’s mind, that is prepared not only to receive external impressions, but to actively interrelate and organize them with the use of reason, the very divine Logos within him.¹⁶ As God’s vicegerent over the creation, man is able to actively investigate and even to manipulate nature, his body, his soul, and social life in pursuit of his divinely disclosed ends.¹⁷ Knowledge of God, on the other hand differs from that of other realities in the twofold respect that it is both utterly dependent on God’s revelation, and necessarily indirect. First, God is not a passive object of study, but the person Who actively creates our capacity to know Him. In this case, natural revelation could not enhance man’s ability to know God in the least had God not first implanted the supposition in man that creation facilitates our knowledge of the divine nature.¹⁸ Once God has revealed Himself, man lacks any standard by which to judge God’s claims, or any means to transcend his finitude in order to pursue new avenues of theological

things is not more certain to you than what by investigation you know of plants and animals.” Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 25; cf. 21, 48–49.

12. Ibid., 26–27, 64, 113.

13. Ibid., 41.

14. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 69; Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 29–52.

15. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 22–3

16. Ibid., 19; cf. 107.

17. Ibid., 80–1.

18. Ibid., 97–8.

knowledge.¹⁹ Second, any predicate that man might assign to God must first be found in a finite creation that cannot be directly identified with God. Only God possesses “archetypal” and immediate knowledge of Himself, while man’s theological knowledge is necessarily “ectypal” and indirect.²⁰ Hence, the proper object of the theological science is not God in Himself, but God’s free (though still certainly truthful) disclosure of Himself in revelation.²¹ Kuyper supposes that, originally, God would have incrementally communicated various truths about his nature and will directly unto the human subject. In a manner comparable to that envisaged by Fichte, man in his innocence would have developed a flawless encyclopedia by internal guidance alone.²² His limited perspective would have naturally blossomed into an “organic knowledge of the whole cosmos,”²³ that inter-related five basic objects: God, man (psychic, somatic, social), and nature (see fig. 4).

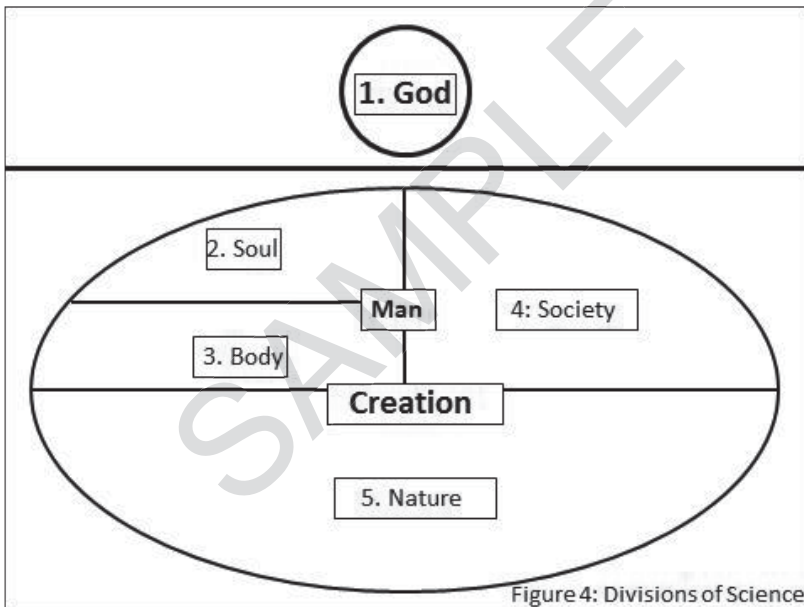


Figure 4: Divisions of Science

19. Ibid., 96–100.

20. Ibid., 81, 96–117.

21. Kuyper stressed that the biblical authors did not base their insights on a theological examination of prior revelation, but were directly granted inspired interpretations that could only be supernaturally mediated. Ibid., 116, 192. Van Til and Geerhardus Vos differ with Kuyper on this point, in holding that inspiration need not be opposed to active theological reflection, with the result that the biblical authors (e.g., Paul) may well be identified as theologians. Gaffin, “Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul,” 228–44.

22. Ibid., 20–28, 111.

23. Ibid., 20.

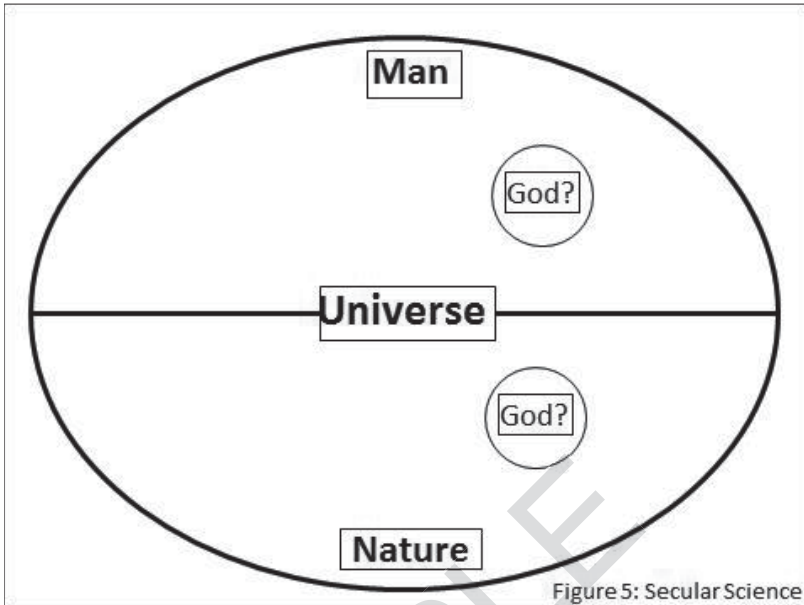


Figure 5: Secular Science

Adam's distrust of God's word in eating from the Tree of Good and Evil disrupted fatally the objective and subjective harmony of the created universe. As the covenantal representative of the collective human ego, Adam's faithless disposition toward God passed to every subsequent person in such a way that fallen men suppose their fallenness to be perfectly normal.²⁴ By the same right, the objects of a fallen science are not only incomplete, excluding God, but broken and disorderly because of the unremitting wrath of God. Whereas the original human subject could trust himself, the myriad of baseless opinions entertained by fallen humanity, not to mention the ethical strife between individuals and societies has led many to skepticism that consensus, much less objective truth is attainable.²⁵ And yet, common grace has enabled humanity at large to retain its capacity for logical reasoning,²⁶ and even a muddled sense of deity.²⁷ Because men are still rational and religious, but lack a disposition of faith in God's revelation, secular thinkers and societies are prone to either (1) acknowledging God as a truly transcendent but frightening and unpredictable force (Acts 17:23);²⁸ or (2) reducing God

24. Ibid., 83.

25. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 28.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 16. Cf. Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 1–28; Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith*, 31–50.

28. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 110.

to a member, or to the whole, of the objective or subjective spheres. The latter disposition lies at the base of polytheism, pantheism, natural theologies which make God into a moral enforcer of *self-existent* ethical axioms (Kant, Fichte), and natural theologies which allow for a divine organizer of an otherwise unruly, and equally eternal cosmos (Plato, Aristotle).²⁹ In every case, God is reduced to a finite being who is subordinate to the basic principles of ethics and nature (see fig. 5), and beset by an equally original and pervasive principle of disorder.

The gospel contains the basic message of God's program for overcoming the disharmony and confusion that has infected creation. Because human reason has been hopelessly impaired by man's lack of immediate communion with God, man must be confronted with an objective portrait of the true ideal of human thought and life from without. Thus, reconciliation with God cannot possibly be accomplished apart from the Incarnation of the Son of God, the divine "Logos."³⁰ Christ's perfect submission to the Father, even unto death, is the embodiment of true wisdom (1 Cor 1:30) which perfectly heeds God's direction. Christ's example is a corrective to fallen reasoning, not because fallen men lack any sense of logic, but because they are given to grossly mistaken premises about themselves and their own authority.³¹ But, Christ's work was not merely a matter of revelation. He also had to serve as a substitute for the first Adam (i.e., all of humanity), offering God perfect obedience and bearing the requisite penalty for mankind, in order to satiate the divinely wrath and confusion poured out on creation. But, only those members of the fallen race who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into the body of Christ, the new collective "ego," enjoy reconciliation with the Father and a renewed perspective on reality.³²

The saving work of God simultaneously "breaks humanity in two and repeals the unity of the human consciousness."³³ The two types of men—the fallen and the regenerate—may agree on basic matters (e.g., measurement and counting), but their interpretations of the facts diverge indefinitely. Believers submit to Christ's revelation contained in Scripture and interpret all of creation as if it were in an abnormal state. Unbelievers suppose that disorder and death are necessary moments of evolutionary development.³⁴

29. Ibid., 48–49, 82, 112.

30. Ibid., 111–17.

31. Ibid., 115.

32. Bavinck calls explicit attention to the Trinitarian mode of salvation presented here—"It is the Father who, through the Son as Logos, imparts himself to his creatures in the Spirit." Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 1:214.

33. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 50

34. Hepp, *Calvinism and the Philosophy of Nature*, 202; Bavinck, *Dogmatics*,

Believers demand that civil magistrates submit to God's law. Unbelievers elevate tyrannical leaders and popular consensus to the status of a divine rule.³⁵ Nothing in the way of reasoned argumentation or empirical evidence can heal this rift, for it is with regard to the very same matters of fact that such conflicting interpretations arise.³⁶

2.1.2 Divine Mystery

If Abraham Kuyper was the pioneer of Christian Encyclopedia, Herman Bavinck was the genius to consolidate and apply his theological insights in the construction of a well-rounded and complete *Reformed Dogmatics*. As with Charles Hodge before him, Bavinck's fidelity to Scripture led him to acknowledge that several Christian doctrines represent incomprehensible truths. Bavinck generally supplies the same list of theological paradoxes mentioned with respect to Princeton—"The incarnation, the mystical union, the sacraments, etc."³⁷ Yet, with their distinctive beliefs about the place of theology among the sciences, the Amsterdam school was uniquely prepared to declare that, "Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics."³⁸ Catholic theologians who begin with "natural" reason are able to make room for theological mystery only by positing a higher, supernatural order of truth that can be anticipated by human reason, but finally lies beyond its fringes. The Princeton theologians took up a similar strategy. Bavinck, on the other hand, argues that every science deals with matters that reside beyond our full comprehension. The offense of divine mystery is due, not to its otherworldly quality (after all, the theologian only deals with this-worldly revelation), but to man's fallen distrust of God.³⁹

In laying down incomprehensible doctrines, God does not and cannot violate His own eternal Logos by requiring men to believe genuine contradictions. Acquaintance, knowledge, and comprehension are different matters, pertaining, respectively, to "that," "what," and "how" a thing happens

2:511–29.

35. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 86; Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 78–109.

36. David Lee Ratzsch observes that for Kuyper, "What causes the split is that believers and unbelievers differ in the data of their consciousness," the one being disposed to trust in the revelation of God, and the other not. Ratzsch "Abraham Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," 288, 300.

37. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 1:620.

38. *Ibid.*, 2:29.

39. *Ibid.*, 1:616–21.

to be.⁴⁰ With regard to “incomprehensible” doctrines men must have a valid foundation for believing *that* they are (e.g., experience, intuition, revelation, etc.), and be able to form an intelligible idea of *what* they are and imply, although they cannot conceive of *how* they exist as they do. Complex objects are comprehensible because their manner of being can be analyzed into more simple members and processes. The basic parts on the other hand are incomprehensible insofar as their essence cannot be analyzed further.⁴¹ Theological mysteries offend us, and even appear to violate the law of contradiction, because secular men refuse to acknowledge theology as a distinct science with its own special ground of knowledge in revelation. As a result, they demand that the Christian theologian explain the irreducible facts of theology—the Trinity, the Incarnation, etc.—in terms supplied by the objective and subjective spheres of human existence. However, the regenerate man is perfectly comfortable, and in fact joyful, to declare that the nature and activity of a truly transcendent Creator God must be distinct from the elements and processes of nature and human existence.⁴²

With the above account in mind, we may note that in identifying mystery as the life of dogmatics, Bavinck is not simply calling attention to the wonder that it excites within believers, but to the fact that our knowledge and communion with God is mysterious. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bavinck's discussion of divine incomprehensibility. Due to the ineradicable sense of deity in man, philosophers have long grappled with the intuition that beneath all things there resides an “unknowable abyss” upon which the known universe surfs. Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus have in various manners and degrees identified this “unknown” as a static “one” over against the “many” moments/object of time, as an “All” in contrast to every finite fact and particular idea.⁴³ Beginning with the same sense of an unknowable “one,” the Christian theologian nevertheless parts ways with the secular philosopher when he trusts the biblical revelation that the all-encompassing Absolute is also a person. Expectedly, secular philosophers such as Fichte denounce as self-contradictory the notion that a limitless Absolute could be a definite person, since definition implies limitation. Ludwig Feuerbach held that any concrete description of God must be a mere projection of human categories, a god made in the image of man.⁴⁴ However, in addition

40. Ibid., 1:619.

41. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 16–19, 23.

42. Bavinck cites Tertullian with approval, “It is believable because it is absurd . . . certain because it is impossible.” Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 1:620.

43. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 2:30

44. Ibid., 2:43, 46. Cf. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 48–49.

to retorting that an impersonal God is still, as such, meagerly defined, the Christian theologian frankly takes his stand on the mystery of revelation as pre-eminently displayed in the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, flesh does not take on deity, nor do human categories envelop the divine Being, but the Creator God declares that He has somehow vested finite reality with the capacity to reflect His nature.⁴⁵ Hence, God, the mysterious “one” discloses something of His nature in the paradox of revelation, and through that paradox He actively sustains a believer’s ongoing relationship to Himself.

2.1.3 Supportive Apologetics

The Amsterdam school retained a small place for apologetics. Kuyper grants the systematic theologian the polemical task of refuting heretical doctrines from Scripture. On another level, the Christian philosopher must labor to demonstrate that Christianity fosters a degree of coherence between all of the sciences that is at best unsuccessfully mimicked by pagan theologies and secular philosophies.⁴⁶ Negatively, Kuyper, Bavinck, and the later Valentine Hepp denounced the modern trend toward materialism as inadequate for making sense of the human person, or for supplying particularly enlightening conception of nature.⁴⁷ With respect to Schelling and Hegel’s pantheistic cosmogonies, Bavinck evaluates that they are “obscure,” “unprovable,” and subject to “open contradiction.”⁴⁸ Likewise, in maintaining that physical objects can explain metaphysical realities (laws, forces, etc.) materialists land themselves “in an antinomy that has not yet been resolved by anybody.”⁴⁹ Positively, Bavinck even grants that historical evidences, fulfilled prophecy,⁵⁰ and even the classical arguments for God “though weak as proofs,” are nevertheless “strong as testimonies” to those who have experienced regenera-

45. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 2:49; cf. 1:344, 380. In contrast to Kant, Bavinck and Kuyper believe on the basis of revelation that it is possible to enjoy substantial knowledge of the noumenal realm. MacLeod, “Amsterdam, Old Princeton, and Cornelius Van Til,” 265.

46. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 121–24; 271. It is precisely this purely negative apologetic, without any positive demonstration of the faith that leads Warfield to criticize Kuyper’s position as demanding that Christianity remains for the Amsterdam Theologians nothing more than a “great assumption.” Warfield, Introduction to

Beattie’s *Apologetic*, *Shorter Writings*, 2:96.

47. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 1:219–22; Hepp, *Calvinism and the Philosophy of Nature*, 97–182.

48. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 2:413.

49. *Ibid.*, 2:414–15.

50. Bavinck makes note of the fact that Jesus Himself on occasion calls us to believe on the basis of His works (John 10:38). Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith*, 57–60.

tion.⁵¹ And yet, Kuyper ultimately cautions his readers against supposing that the grand coherence of Christianity as set over against the deficiencies of non-Christian thought can be taken as a definitive proof for the former. The unbeliever could well contend that human thought was never intended to rise above a fragmented perspective on the universe. Or, better yet, he could simply set his hopes on the future discovery of a coherent naturalistic account of things. In either case, the relative incoherence of secular world-views does not imply that they need to be reworked according to Christian presuppositions, any more than “the coincidences of the facts, that one of your children is lost and that I have found a lost child” implies “that the child I have found is your child.”⁵²

2.2 VAN TIL'S CRITIQUE OF AMSTERDAM

Van Til often levels his cases against Amsterdam and Old Princeton together.⁵³ Such a procedure not only helps call attention to their differing interpretation of Calvin, but to their ironic agreement in embracing non-Christian versions of rationalism and irrationalism. We have already taken note of how the common sense underlying Princeton's classical apologetic method actually gave substantial footing to irrationalism. In the present context, we begin by taking note of how a fideistic trust in Christian presuppositions involves a lack of appreciation for how Christianity *differs* from non-Christian system of thought. This point precipitates Van Til's second critique that Amsterdam's irrationalism comes alongside of an equally basic rationalism that allows for “self-evident” truths in certain areas. Again, the self-defeating tendency to correlate rationalism and irrationalism is germane to the secular systems of Greek, Scholastic, and Modern philosophy. Third, Van Til contends that the Amsterdam's aversion to apologetics could have been corrected by embracing the Triune God as the solution to the basic philosophical problem of relating unity to diversity.

2.2.1 Amsterdam Apologetic Inconsistent with Antithesis

On the face of it, Kuyper's doctrine of antithesis would seem to undergird his depreciation of apologetics. If the Christian views non-Christian

51. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 2:91.

52. *Ibid.*, 161.

53. DF4, 345–83; IST, 31–61.

attempts to construct a coherent worldview as fundamentally misguided,⁵⁴ and vice versa, then it would seem that there is no common ground between the two that would allow either camp to convince the other of their position. However, Van Til contends that those who “withdraw from all intellectual argument . . . have virtually admitted the validity of the argument against Christianity.”⁵⁵ This is not simply because in withdrawing from offensive apologetics, fideists allow unbelievers to presume that their case against Christianity is valid. Instead, it is because one of the primary ways in which the Christian Faith differs from its secular competitors is in its exclusive capacity for objective demonstration. If Christian and non-Christian systems of thought were equally indemonstrable they would actually be the same, that is, *not in antithesis* in one of the most important respects. Yet, Scripture supplies a doctrine of antithesis that secures the possibility of an objective proof of Christianity. First, the Bible presents man as morally culpable for failing to serve God because knowledge of His existence and His ethical demands is inescapable. Man’s problem is that he suppresses his knowledge of the truth (Rom 1:18ff).⁵⁶ Second, the Scriptures present non-believing worldviews as self-defeating (Prov 8:36; Jer 2:13, 19; Matt 16:25; 1 Cor 1:20–25). In this case, the apologist does not need any neutral point of contact to begin his apologetic. Instead, he may reason from the impossibility of non-Christian systems to the validity of Christianity.

2.2.2 Fideism Characteristic of Non-Christian Irrationalism and Rationalism

Van Til’s second critique is based on the observation that Amsterdam theologians succumbed to rationalist and irrationalist tendencies that are common to secular thought. In this respect, the Amsterdam school flirts with the basic contradiction that has hampered secular philosophical programs throughout the ages.⁵⁷ Philosophers have oscillated between a view of reality as a unified system, and a view of reality as open-ended and receptive to a multitude of unforeseen facts, moments, and events. At base, the conflict

54. “As soon as the thinker of palingenesis (regeneration) has come to that point in the road where the thinker of naturalism parts company with him, the latter’s science is no longer anything to the former but ‘science falsely so called.’ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 61.

55. CTEV, 34.

56. For Van Til’s understanding of several key texts concerning the ubiquity of divine revelation see his pamphlet, PA.

57. For Van Til’s concept of contradiction, see 6.3.

is between a view of the universe as “one” or “many.” Yet, the question spans into virtually every realm of philosophy, appearing in the dichotomies between eternity and time, idealism and realism, determinism and freedom, etc. Several philosophers have decidedly embraced one principle over the other, but most have felt the need to do justice to both unity and diversity. On the one hand, human thought must refer to self-evident, immutable ideas if it is to be true and reliable. On the other hand, human reasoning must acknowledge that reality is marked by a principle of novelty and unpredictability that resists rational penetration.

Although it may initially seem impractical, the “one and many” question has vast implications. The epistemological problem regarding whether our sense perceptions correspond to external reality, is ultimately one of how we may be certain that our rational categories (the one) do justice to the spatio-temporal objects (the many) they supposedly represent.⁵⁸ A similar, metaphysical question is whether the future must be consistent with the past, such that there is a discernible unity of development (the one) that binds together the diverse moments of time (the many).⁵⁹ When one ponders whether moral absolutes exist, he is asking whether there are unchangeable ethical standards (the one), which are equally authoritative in all situations (the many). Identification of the proper social dynamic between governments, religious bodies, families, and their individual members rests upon our ability to determine whether the needs of the group (the one) sufficiently represent the needs of each individual (the many), or whether one takes precedence over the other.⁶⁰ In the event that the “one” does not perfectly overlap with the “many,” how do we know that they can overlap at all? If, for example, we concede that our ideas (the one) cannot perfectly represent concrete objects (the many) as they really are, then it would seem that our ideas might consistently miss something detrimental or, worse yet, might lack correspondence with reality altogether.⁶¹ Likewise, if we allow that moral laws only apply to some, or even to most situations, how can we determine when or if they ever apply? On the other hand, if the “one” does exhaustively represent the “many,” has not the “many” been swallowed

58. This Van Til designates the “Subject-Object” relation. SCE, 217.

59. Ibid., 217.

60. Although Van Til does not expound on the dynamic between the “one and many” in social spheres he applauded the efforts of R. J. Rushdoony in this area. Van Til, “Response to Rushdoony,” 339–48. Cf. Rushdoony, *One and Many*.

61. If even the slightest bit of reality evades the comprehension of reason, “There would be an area of reality totally unknown to anyone. And yet this area might have some influence upon the reality that we seem to have knowledge of. Hence, we would not even have knowledge of that which we thought we had knowledge.” SCE, 40.

up entirely, so that the “many” is an illusion? If, for example, the past, the present, and the future are not only similar, but exactly the same, have we not done away with time altogether?⁶² Or, if the ends of the state are taken to exhaust the ends of each individual citizen, have not the citizens lost their individuality entirely? Can citizens have any individual rights or freedoms to pursue their own course? Furthermore, if eternity or time reigns supreme, how did the illusion of the opposing concept even arise?⁶³

In considering the three basic answers to the “one and many” problem, Van Til held that Plato had early on “exhausted the possibilities of all anti-theistic thought, whether ancient or modern” (cf. Eccl 1:9; 2:11–12).⁶⁴ First, Plato considered and rejected the view that the “many” spatio-temporal facts might be able to furnish sure and dependable knowledge. Perhaps, he thought, the lone dependable feature of reality is the fact that it is constantly fluctuating, and passing into its opposite. But, a universe which is constantly and unpredictably changing may very well pass into non-existence altogether, in which case every feature of the universe, including change itself would be lost. Second, Plato looked to the “one” for a dependable foundation for knowledge. The world of ideal forms seemed to represent an immutable and harmonious system in which every form—“man,” “god,” “existence,” etc.—could be viewed as subordinate to the one ultimate form of the “good.” But upon reflection, one can also form ideas of “falsehood,” “change,” “evil,” etc. that cannot be incorporated into a system of ideas that are chiefly characterized by “goodness.” Thus, there would seem to be conflict in the ideal realm just as well as the real.⁶⁵ Third, Plato concluded that only those forms which can be harmonized with the “good” are truly ideal, while characteristics like evil, change, and falsehood must be associated with temporal material. Plato was never able to explain how two things as distinct as the real and the ideal could merge or overlap in the universe as we know it. Somehow the universe is conducive to man’s knowledge of eternal truths, even though the ultimate nature of reality is beyond all searching out. Although Aristotle would insist on a tighter union between the real

62. NM, 12.

63. Van Til believes that the unanswerable question for all those who grant priority to eternal unity along the lines of Parmenides and Plotinus is, “*Cur Deus Homo?*” or why did the eternal rational principles ever give rise to the illusive temporal universe of which man believes himself to be a part?” SCE, 28, 35.

64. SCE, 38; CTE, 21. For a similar evaluation see Dooyeweerd, *Twilight of Western Thought*, 35ff.

65. “The question was, by what right did the idea of Good rule over all the others? . . . [S]ince it was of the very nature of all ideas to be unchangeable and to oppose their opposites, it would certainly be intolerable to contemplate the Idea of the Good as bringing forth the Idea of the Bad.” SCE, 37.

and the ideal where neither can exist apart from the other, he too regarded their union to be fundamentally mysterious.⁶⁶ It is not surprising then, that later Greek thinkers (Stoics, Epicureans, etc.) turned their interest to practical matters since the metaphysical difficulty of relating the “one and many,” pure rationalism and pure irrationalism proved impossible.

The story of modern philosophy as we have considered it in the previous chapter led to similar conclusions as that of the Greeks. Kant's argument that the natural realm must be characterized by immutable forms and categories even though it rests upon a sea of pure freedom, is in many respects the same as Plato's marriage of eternal forms with temporal material (see fig. 6 and fig. 7). Both allow man to reason like a rationalist, as if he were able to comprehend ideal essences and logical relations, without any regard for the evasive and indefinable “something” that underlies them. On the other hand, both make a concession to irrationalism in their admission that if either the “one” or the “many” has priority over the other, we have no idea how, and if the two are harmonized by some third principle we have no idea what it might be. Most importantly for our purposes, both the Greeks and the Moderns manifest a resolve to press forward in offering what are at best “probable” solutions to practical difficulties, even though their ultimate metaphysical portraits of reality cannot, by their own admission, be definitively proven.⁶⁷ Hence, a self-assured sort of fideism is, in many respects, *the* conclusion of Western philosophy.

66. In identifying the union of essence and existence as *the* fundamental “paradox” of reality, Etienne Gilson accurately conveys the conviction of Aquinas and Aristotle. Gilson, “The Spirit of Thomism,” 646.

67. Van Til regards the turn toward practical philosophy as a tacit admission that the basic questions of existence cannot be answered. CC, 22, 33–34. Bertrand Russell's qualification of his own philosophy is a prime example—“I do not pretend that the above theory can be proved. What I contend is that, like the theories of physics, it cannot be disproved, and gives an answer to many problems which older theorists have found puzzling. I do not think that any prudent person will claim more than this for any theory.” Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, 27.

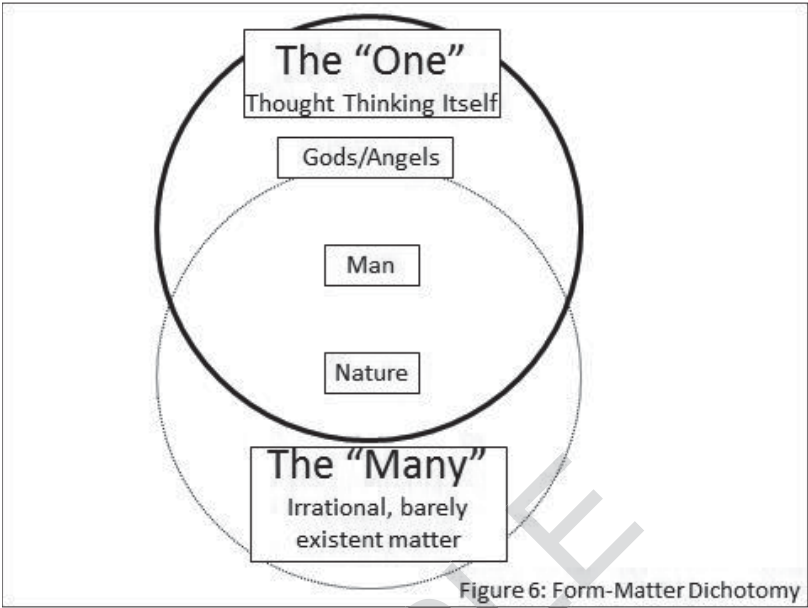


Figure 6: Form-Matter Dichotomy

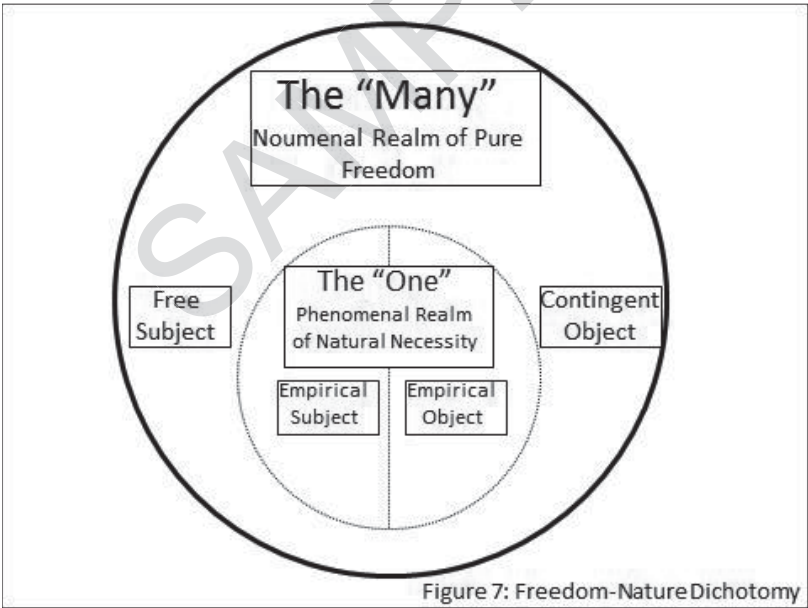


Figure 7: Freedom-Nature Dichotomy

Given his evaluation of secular philosophy, ancient and modern, as at once rationalist and irrationalist, it is not surprising that Van Til would critique the Amsterdam school for imbibing too much Aristotle, and too much Kant. First, Amsterdam's rationalism is evident in Kuyper's contention that

man can comprehend logical relations and universal categories, although the individual facts that embody them are strictly unknowable.⁶⁸ He also contends that the results of “counting” and “measuring” are self-evident to believers and unbelievers alike, even though they build radically different systems around them.⁶⁹ On occasion, Kuyper even speaks of the divine Logos as if it were identical with the human intellect, recalling Plato’s association of reason with eternity and God, and flesh with time and chance.⁷⁰ And Bavinck explicitly argues for a “moderate realism,” after the manner of Aristotle, as a viable alternative to rationalism and empiricism.⁷¹ Second, Amsterdam’s irrationalism is evident from the tendency to treat the factual element in the universe as resistant to rational definition. Still more, Bavinck’s approval of the idea that whatever binds together the “one and many” must itself reside beyond all, or nearly all positive definition, is to make the irrational just as basic to reality as the rational. Van Til decries Bavinck’s contention that the philosophical idea of a universal unknown “became the starting point and fundamental idea of Christianity.”⁷² Third, given their combination of eternal, self-evident truths with an unpredictable and ultimately indescribable system of reality, it follows that Amsterdam would reject any attempt to definitively prove the Christian Faith. The Christian and the non-Christian reside in a similar position. They both have equal access to neutral tools of reasoning (logic, mathematics, perception, intuition, etc.) with which to construct a view of reality that is practical and useful. But, both are ultimately incapable of vindicating their interpretation of things because reason itself is beset by an equally pervasive “unknown” that will admit of any number of interpretations. Amsterdam’s relative depreciation of the theistic proofs as merely supportive of the Christian system is not significantly different from Princeton’s insistence that they prove Christianity with high probability.⁷³ Both schools deny that the Christian worldview represents the only intelligible interpretation of reality, and each, in their own methodologies, succumbs to a rationalist-irrationalist scheme that has so frustrated secular thought.

68. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 16–19, 23. Commenting on this tendency in Kuyper, Van Til states, “All this is still Platonic. It is more than that: it is Kantian.” CG, 36–37.

69. Van Til, on the other hand, denied that there is any realm of neutrality. *Ibid.*, 34–63.

70. *Ibid.* 107.

71. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, 1:207–33.

72. *Ibid.*, 2:36.

73. In keeping with the rationalist trend, Van Til discerns a growing appreciation for the theistic proofs from Kuyper, to Bavinck, to Hepp. IST, 48–61; CG, 58–64.

2.2.3 Failure to Exploit the Apologetic Import of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The Amsterdam school should have been keenly aware of the radical difference between the mystery involved in the Christian doctrine of the Triune God, and the mystery of the universe as conceived of by Plato.⁷⁴ The paradoxical harmony between the “one and many” postulated by the Greeks is admitted to be incomprehensible to man, and to any authority with whom he has personal contact. In contrast, the paradox of unity and diversity within the Godhead is paradoxical to man, and yet perfectly comprehensible to the Triune Creator with whom believers enjoy personal relationship. In one respect, Greek thinkers were correct that man does not know God, for indeed sinners actively suppress their knowledge of the truth (Acts 17: 23; 1 Cor 1:20; Gal 4:8; Eph 4:18; 1 Thess 4:5; 2 Thess 1:8). On the other hand, all men retain an inextricable and robust awareness of their Creator as a longsuffering, righteous, and holy person as they attempt to erase their consciousness of him (Ps 19:1–4; Acts 14:16–17; 17:26–29; Rom 1:18–23).⁷⁵ The human tension between relative ignorance and relative knowledge of the truth (created and divine) is not due to the fact that the universe is partly rational and partly irrational. Quite the contrary, the doctrine of the Trinity ought to inform us that both the consistency and the novelty of the universe reflect the ontological harmony of their Creator. The only reason man first thinks himself consigned to a probabilistic, and then to a fideistic interpretation of reality is because he has misconstrued the universe as something less than the creation of the Triune God from the outset. Had Amsterdam taken this point seriously, they would have held that Christianity is certainly true, and demonstrably so, on the basis that the alternative position renders everything uncertain and deprives man of *the right* (though certainly not of the careless resolution) to suppose that predication of any kind is possible.⁷⁶

2.3 Van Til's Appropriation of Amsterdam

As a conclusion to our study and critique of Amsterdam's theology and apologetics, it is necessary to identify those elements that Van Til warmly embraced. First, Van Til forever defended the notion of an antithesis between Christian and non-Christian worldviews that was resultant from

74. SCE, 31–32; CG, 29, 46.

75. Bahnsen's dealing with these two complementary biblical themes is particularly informative. Bahnsen, “Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens,” 235–76.

76. For Van Til's positive argument for Trinitarian Theism see 4.2–4.

their opposing epistemological presuppositions. Second, Van Til largely embraced and defended Kuyper's doctrine that believers and unbelievers are able to communicate and even work together because of common grace, whereby God restrains unbelievers from thinking and living in strict accordance with their presuppositions. And third, Van Til acknowledges his debt to the Amsterdam school for the insight that God, nature, and man represent the three fundamental objects of a Christian science. Such a view undergirds the notion that the theological science must rest on the Trinitarian economy between the Father Who serves as the essential foundation, the Son Who penetrates the natural world as the objective foundation, and the Spirit Who penetrates the heart of man as the subjective foundation for theological knowledge.⁷⁷

77. IST, 44, 62–109.