

Derrida, Van Til and the Metaphysics of Postmodernism

An Essay

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Perhaps the most prevalent philosophical movement in the west today is what has been termed “Postmodernism.” Since its rise to the center stage of philosophical discourse in the west over the past thirty years, many essays, books and critiques have been written in an effort to define and analyze postmodern thought. This task has proven to be very daunting. Because postmodernism is trans-disciplinary¹, and lacks a core “logos” that defines itself singularly², postmodern thought expresses itself in many different forms, given its broad base of intellectual interests. However, in spite of the inherent slipperiness of the term “postmodernism,” there have been successful efforts to locate core beliefs that seem to drive postmodernism in its various interests and some of postmodernism’s leading thinkers.

Postmodernism has steadily risen on the radar screens of Christian thinkers and has begun to garner increasing attention. In the past fifteen years several books and articles have been written in order to offer a thoughtful Christian critique. Whether these have been successful or not is debatable. However, one thing is evident; postmodernism has been seen as a threat to the church and an enemy of Christianity. Like all secular thought, this is of course true. Anytime mankind steps outside the Lordship of Christ and begins to reason apart from God’s special revelation, idols of the mind begin to form and shape the way individuals, communities and cultures think about and approach reality. However, this does not mean that our critiques of certain secular ideas are always well thought out. Rather, often times our critiques are knee-jerk reactions, and therefore lack a sympathetic read that could even prove to be enlightening for the church. On any account, many attempts to analyze and critique postmodernism from a Christian perspective have been attempted. However, the degree in which the critiques of postmodernism have been challenging to postmodern thinkers has been little to none. Why is this the case? Is it because we are Christians and they are not, and therefore we will always speak past each other? Perhaps, but could it also be that our understanding of postmodern thought is wanting and

¹ For example, postmodern thought has been applied to philosophy, theology, art, ethics, politics, social theory, psychology, literature, and so forth.

² If there is a single motif that binds various expressions of postmodernism together it is its denial of a “logos”, fixed objective referents, and singular metaphysical foundations.

therefore our counter arguments prove to be ignorant and inadmissible? From the secular thinkers point-of-view this is often the case.

Regardless of which reason for this lack of constructive dialogue is true, we as Christians must continue to do the best we can to talk to pagans and reason with them. This paper is an attempt to do just that. We will analyze an aspect of postmodern thought that has generally been left unaddressed by the evangelical Christian community, and in so doing, attempt to uncover areas of interests in which a Christian critique can be offered. This aspect upon which we will concentrate revolves around questions concerning ontology and the nature of "Being". We will begin by examining one of postmodernism's leading thinkers, Jacques Derrida. Through our analysis we will come to see that Derrida's work must be understood in the context of a critique of modern western metaphysics and ontology, and namely, that espoused by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Given this ontological critique, which Derrida claims pervades all of western philosophy, Derrida asserts a sort of post-metaphysical, post-foundational, perspective of reality that is not so much a new philosophy, but rather one that no longer naively accepts the arbitrary metaphysical claims of western thought. These ideas will be discussed at length latter on in this paper. What is important to note at this point is that for Derrida, the modern project fell apart because it was naively built upon metaphysical and ontological assumptions that are inherently problematic. It is in this that Derrida is a post-modernist. He is not attempting to construct a new, relativistic philosophy of life (as has often been charged of him) as much as he is attempting to show the futility of that which has supported the weight of modern western philosophy, namely, a certain metaphysic.

As we will see, it is because Derridean postmodernism is fundamentally a critique of a certain kind of metaphysic, that the issue of metaphysics and ontology should be the point of contact in our dialogue with postmodernism. It is here that we will turn to the reformed theologian and apologist Cornelius Van Til. As will be seen Van Til is unique in that he anticipates Derrida's critique of western metaphysics with very similar critiques of his own. Like Derrida, Van Til was quick to point out the inherent irrationality of western philosophy. For Van Til, any attempt to ground knowledge in reason, sense experience, a Geist, "being", or any other abstract principle makes knowledge and meaning impossible. So in this regard, we will see that both Derrida and Van Til reveal surprising similarities in their critiques of the modern project. However, their responses to this critique are quite different.

If the western notions of ontology and being are false then knowledge and meaning must be grounded in something. For Derrida, this "something" is not an objective "being" but rather is result of representational sign making and re-making. For Van Til, this "something" is different than Derrida's proposal. Van Til asserts that all meaning and knowledge are not grounded in abstract principles but rather in God Himself. Unlike other modern thinkers, Van Til asserts that any

attempt to make impersonal principles that which makes knowledge possible, is not only fundamentally irrational, but idolatrous. As will be seen, Van Til proposes a certain ontology of creation that is grounded in the Triune God that not only avoids the pitfalls of modern metaphysics as pointed out by Derrida and others, but offers a thoroughly Christian critique of postmodernism at the fundamental point of the debate, namely, ontology.

Before we begin our analysis of both Derrida and Van Til, a disclaimer is needed. I am neither an expert on Derrida or Van Til. This study is rather the result of careful reflection of both thinkers, as I understand them. The over all goal in what is attempted here is to define the postmodern dilemma as not so much an epistemological crisis, but rather an ontological one as it is revealed in the thought of Derrida. By placing the debate around the issue of ontology, I believe the church has much to say to those secular thinkers who have recognized and admitted the inherent bankruptcy that western philosophy has produced. To those prophets of demise, whom we call postmodernists, I give them Cornelius Van Til. Likewise, Van Til's contribution in this area will also prove to be critical of all Christian apologetic methods which seek to ground knowledge in idolatrous impersonal principles.

We will begin with a brief analysis of Derrida's thought and along the way, highlight those aspects that pertain to our subject. As has been stated implicitly in the introduction, there is perhaps much misunderstanding of Derrida when it comes to his interpreters. This is not only true of Christian readings of Derrida, but secular readings as well. The most popular misunderstanding of Derrida is that he attempts to destroy any notion of objective truth. However, this reading of Derrida is repudiated by himself on numerous occasions. Despite the claims of some of his most avid supporters and critiques, Derrida claims he is not attempting to dispel all claims or beliefs in Truth.³ Rather, he is attempting to point out that the modern metaphysical assumptions that have served as objective referents for language are inherently problematic. In other words he is trying to demonstrate and reveal that the act of representation in language is a lot more complicated than is popularly conceived. Instead of trying to deny the possibility of objective reality, Derrida wants to point out the deep complications that arise when one considers how words relate to the world outside of us. Against this prevalent misunderstanding, Derrida explains:

Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the 'other' of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call "post-structuralism" amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words-and other stupidities of that sort. Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex

³ Though Derrida rejects this analysis of his thought, I do believe that, as we will see, this charge is warranted. In fact, I find it difficult to read him any other way.

and problematic than traditional problems supposed. It even asks whether our term “reference” is entirely adequate for designating the “other”. The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a referent in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term. But to distance oneself from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumption about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language.⁴

Why is there such a distance then between interpreters of Derrida, and what Derrida himself claims to be the aim of his philosophy? Like anything else, Derrida has to be understood in context. Therefore, in order to understand Derrida’s aim, we must first consider what it is Derrida’s ideas are aimed *against*. For our purposes we will examine two influential schools of thought that were pivotal in shaping Derrida’s thought. The two schools of thought were phenomenology and logocentrism.

Derrida’s first significant work was a book length introduction to Edmund Husserl’s *The Origin of Geometry*. In this work, Husserl asserts that geometric axioms are presented to us in phenomena and therefore, apprehended by the mind. Derrida however, takes issue with this assertion as does he with the heart of Husserl’s thought –phenomenology. Phenomenology was a philosophical movement in the early twentieth century of which Husserl was a leading exponent. According to Husserl, phenomenology is the study of how knowledge of phenomena (the thing-in-itself) is ascertained. According to Husserl, when an object is presented to us, we “intend” it. Simply put, “intentionality for Husserl refers to the manner that we, as subjects, relate to objects of our consciousness.”⁵ According to Husserl, when we intend objects as they are presented to our consciousness, we must resist the need to interpret, analyze and compartmentalize our observations. Rather, when objects are “given” to our consciousness they are present in our consciousness. The goal then of knowledge is to have adequate knowledge of how things really are apart from interpretation. What is meant by adequate here is ability to draw a connecting link between objects and representation. In other words, a fully adequate idea is one that totally encapsulates the object itself. It is within this phenomenological ideal that knowledge of objective reality becomes possible. However, Husserl rejects the idea that our knowledge of objects can be totally adequate because it is impossible to intend every perspective of an object simultaneously.⁶

In Many ways, Husserl’s project is very similar to the empiricism of John Locke. Husserl’s task is to ground knowledge objectively, outside the subject, so that objectivity is possible. According to Husserl the “thing-in-itself” is present to us and this presence is what constitutes the content of our consciousness.

⁴ Millard Erickson, *Truth or Consequence: The Perils and Promise of Postmodernism* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2001), p.114. As quoted from Derrida, in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). pp.123-124.

⁵ Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies* (Illinois: InterVarsity, 2002), p.34

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.36.

However, the objects themselves are intended most adequately when done so apart from interpretation. In other words, Husserl seeks to ground knowledge in phenomena and not in preconceived theory⁷.

The second school in which Derrida's thought takes shape is logocentrism. Logocentrism is the philosophical notion that "understanding, meaning, can be given a fixed reference point by grounding it in a *logos*, some fixed principle or characteristic of reality: in other words, in a presence."⁸ Among the leading exponents of logocentrism was Ludwig Wittgenstein.⁹ According to Wittgenstein, words have meaning because they correspond to an objective organized pattern outside of language. In a broader sense, this organized, objective 'logos' which serves as the referent for all language and signification has taken many forms through the history of philosophy such as, God, Man, consciousness, reason, Geist, etc. As John Ellis points out, "Logocentrism is not a fixation on words, but instead a belief that there is an order of meaning existing independently of the structure of any given language that is a foundation for all else.... Logocentrism here turns out to be much the same as the more familiar essentialism, the belief that words simply label real categories of meaning existing independently of a language."¹⁰ Much like Husserl's assertion that knowledge is grounded in the "presence" of phenomena, Logocentrism is "related to a metaphysics of presence, in which the symbol is present to the person using it, the person hearing it, and that which it represents."¹¹

It is within this philosophical context that Derrida is to be read and understood. In response to these philosophical schools Derrida seeks to point out that phenomenology, logocentrism and all of western thought since the time of Plato have naively presupposed a *logos* that grounds all knowledge. Therefore, the thrust of Derrida's thought is to challenge the idea of an impersonal, abstract, indefinable *being* that grounds knowledge, meaning and language. Derrida asserts that the history of western thought has presupposed a kind of empirical dogmatism in which naïve metaphysical assumptions have served as the foundation of meaning. It is precisely at this point, in regards to the metaphysical and ontological notions of western philosophy, that Derrida's philosophy has to be understood.

John Caputo claims that Derrida is not attempting to destroy objective truth but rather is attempting to show that meaning, truth and knowledge are not grounded in certain ultimate metaphysical principles such as a *logos*, a *being*, reason, or any other abstract principle. Caputo writes, "Rather than on a firm foundation or perfectly enclosed system he [Derrida] is trying to pull the plug on

⁷ Yes, it does appear to be outlandishly naïve, doesn't it?

⁸ Erickson, p.115.

⁹ This of course is referring to the early Wittgenstein. Logocentrism was denounced by Wittgenstein later on in his career.

¹⁰ Erickson, p.116. As quoted from; John Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1989). p.35.

¹¹ Erickson, p.117.

any leak-proof system of acknowledging a still lower un-principle, an unsettling, displacing 'necessity' we are under to labor always under a play of traces, having to cope with an irrepressible iterability that can never be contained or decisively regulated."¹² In like manner Christopher Norris describes Derrida's project as an attempt to, "interrogate those various or naïve pre-critical ideas of reference that envisage a straightforward matching-up between language and the world 'outside'. Deconstruction must work to problematize such habits of thought by showing how strictly impossible it is to draw a firm line between reality and representation."¹³

For Derrida, the metaphysical and ontological notions that have served as the foundation for knowledge throughout the history of western philosophy are arbitrary and superstitious. Because Derrida has been so critical of metaphysics, or what he calls a "pre-critical positivist ontology"¹⁴, many critics have asserted that Derrida is proposing what has been termed a creative antirealism, a nihilism, or a transcendental solipsism. This is a view that Derrida himself rejects. Derrida is not against the idea of an objective structure to reality but rather is against the kind of metaphysics assumed throughout western philosophy.¹⁵ In Derrida's view, "the characterization of the deconstructionist as a skeptic-relativist-nihilist is false and feeble: it supposes a bad and feeble reading of numerous texts, first of all mine."¹⁶ It is in this sense that Derrida is to be understood as a "postmodernist." He is critical of and reacting against modern metaphysical concepts that have been believed to ground knowledge meaning and language.

If Husserl's *presence* and the early Wittgenstein's *logos* are not that which grounds meaning and language, then what does? Derrida's answer to this question is what he is known most for. According to Derrida, words do not derive their meaning from a *logos* or the *presence* of objects in our consciousness. Rather, words find their meaning in other words which in turn derive their meaning from other words. According to Paul Strathern, Derrida's philosophy is an argument that,

Previously philosophy had been mistaken in searching for essential truth that was somehow contained in the essence of things. On the contrary, it should have concentrated on the language it uses. This does not have any essential equivalence with the objects or even the concepts it names and describes. That is not how language achieves meaning. All we find in language is a system of differences, and meaning simply arises from these differences. Yet such differences are multifarious and subtle. There is no way in which the many shades of differences found in language can be reduced to a simple bedrock of logic that establishes identity.¹⁷

¹² John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997). p.102.

¹³ Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987). p.142.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.143.

¹⁵ According to Derrida, even if such a system exists, we would not have access to it.

¹⁶ Caputo, p. 146.

¹⁷ Paul Strathern, *Derrida in 90 Minutes*. (Illinois: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2000). p.30.

In Derrida's view, we do not apprehend the essence of objects in consciousness but rather attach signs or signifiers to our experiences that in and of themselves are intelligible to us through previous knowledge of signs. In other words, signs do not have meaning because they refer to something outside of us, rather words have meaning within a rather arbitrary process of sign making and re-making.

Because Derrida rejects the notion of a *logos* that grounds the meaning of words, he necessarily sees a distance between the intended object of knowledge and its representation embodied in language. This distance is defined by the fact that though a meta-structure to reality is possible, it is beyond our finite abilities to apprehend it, and therefore it plays little to no role in the formation of signs and their meaning. Because of this necessary distance, words are not grounded in a *logos* or a *presence* but in other signs. For Derrida this can only mean that because meaning is not grounded in a *presence* or a *logos*, language therefore arises out of the inherent 'absence of being'.¹⁸ Therefore, it is because of this 'absence of being', or, necessary distance between the subject and the object, that language finds its identity.

Within this inter-linguistic world of meaning that operates apart from metaphysical or ontological foundations, words have no fixed meaning or referent.¹⁹ Rather, words have their meaning within their immediate "difference" to other signs and their ability to simultaneously "defer" meaning to other signs.²⁰ Therefore, instead of having an objective reference point, words gain their meaning from a constant process of negotiation with other signs. Meaning as such has no outside foundation and is constantly in flux. Because signs refer to other signs and meaning is decided instantly by the interpreting subject, meaning is constantly changing, thus doing constant violence²¹ to the text. Therefore, interpretation is said, by postmodernists like Derrida, to consist of a continuous inescapable cycle of subjects doing violence to both words and objects as they continually re-make and redefine them according to their own personal image. Within this concept of violence is the belief that the identity of all 'things', objects

¹⁸ This is often explained by Derrida's critics as the logic of nihilism, that is, the idea that all "things" come from "nothing". Because meaning does not derive from anything that "is", it arises out of pure absence, space, expectation, etc. It is therefore the vacuous substance of "nothing" that makes sign making (language) meaningful.

¹⁹ Many have drawn comparison between Derrida's philosophy of language and Kant's transcendental idealism. Like Kant, Derrida asserts that though there is a world outside of us, we are only privileged to the world of sign making and remaking-language. However, unlike Kant, who saw a true presence in phenomenal perception in that scientific analysis could be done with phenomena, Derrida asserts that the inter-linguistic world in which we operate has no fixed referent but rather is a free play of signs whose meanings are constantly negotiated and changed.

²⁰ Hence Derrida's term *Difference*, in which he uses to describe the how words have meaning.

²¹ The notion of violence is central in postmodern thought. According to postmodernists, violence is done at the moment of interpretation because the thing-in-itself is never known, but only that which has been remade according to our liking.

and texts are at our mercy. It is this constant play of signs perceived, and the violence done in the re-making of signs, that constitute conscious reality. This sentiment is expressed in John Milbank's assessment that at the heart of the postmodern project is the belief that, "We make signs and yet signs make us and we can never step outside the network of sign making."²²

This reality of meaning, this inter-linguistic freeplay of signs is what Derrida calls deconstruction. Contrary to popular belief, deconstruction is not so much a method as it is something that always takes place in language, meaning, ideologies, etc. For Derrida, deconstruction is a basic element in all of language. It is the revealing of the process of meaning, knowledge and thought crumbling under its foundationless-ness. According to Derrida, all language should be allowed to deconstruct so that its usages and meanings cannot be used to empower its users of others.²³

Having given a very brief and sparse introduction to Derrida, we shall soon turn to Cornelius Van Til. However, before we do so we should highlight some preliminary conclusions concerning Derrida so that we will have a clearer understanding as to how Van Til's thought applies. First of all, Derrida's thought has to be understood as a reaction against a certain kind of metaphysical foundationalism which was claimed to ground knowledge, meaning and language. Secondly, Derrida is not denying the existence of objective truth but rather is asserting that the western notions of ontology are inadequate explanations for the origin of knowledge, meaning and language. Thirdly, because Derrida rejects this notion of a *logos*, he asserts that knowledge, meaning and language are not ascertained through the *presence* of objects in our consciousness. Lastly, Derrida asserts that meaning is not grounded in metaphysics or an ontological foundation at all, but rather is inter-linguistic, where words and signs constantly change and negotiate meaning. This is perhaps the most important feature of Derrida's thought for our discussion. According to Derrida, the postmodern turn hinges on the realization that western philosophy presupposed an ontology that could not adequately provide a basis for knowledge and meaning. Language and meaning, then, function independently from the mute world around us. It is because of this metaphysical denouncement that Derrida's inter-linguistic idealism²⁴ reigns as the prevailing idol of contemporary western thought.

²² John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997). p.2. As quoted from; R.R Reno, *The Ruins of the Church*, (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002). p. 65.

²³ This of course reveals the political and moral aspects of Deconstruction. According to Derrida, the meaning of signs is decided by those who use it, usually in order to control the "other". In the name of justice then, language needs to be deconstructed in order to show that no one's ideas can be grounded in Truth, but rather are grounded in subjective motivations. It is for this reason that Derrida says that all can be deconstructed except deconstruction itself and justice.

²⁴ This is a term that I myself came up with to define Derrida's philosophy. However, since then I have learned that others have labeled Derrida as a "linguistic idealist".

As defined by Derrida, postmodernism is, if any one thing, a revolt against the western metaphysical idea that there is a *being*, or *logos* that grounds knowledge, meaning and language. As we have seen in Derrida, the postmodern project is not so much a constructive philosophy of nihilism as much as it is “pulling away of the veil” which for centuries has hidden naïve ontological presuppositions grounding the relationship between the world and the mind. Postmodernism then can be seen as the final death blow to this long endangered concept that has captivated center stage in various forms throughout the history of western philosophy.

Given this definition of the postmodern project, how then should the church respond? Should we, with Derrida, triumphantly announce the death of western metaphysics, or should we resist this idea, and work to show that the modern vision of epistemology and ontology should be maintained. More often than not, the later has been the choice among most Christian thinkers and apologists. In these cases, efforts have been aimed at proving the existence of certain abstract principles, which in turn ground knowledge objectively. Among these principles are the law of non-contradiction, causality, the general reliability of sense experience, reason, etc. For many Christian apologists, these principles must be maintained in order to keep knowledge from collapsing into a quagmire of relativism. However, one of the problems of this approach is that it achieves nothing more than reasserting the same modernistic notions that postmodernism rejects. Therefore, no constructive gains are made in dialogue.

What then should be our approach? It is my contention that postmodernism has done the church a great service in illuminating the inherent bankruptcy of secular thought in general. Though it might appear tempting to reassert modernistic foundations in the face of postmodernism, we must not forget the great harm modernistic thought has done to the church for centuries.²⁵ As Christians we should maintain that though God gives common grace to the pagan, there can be no cogent philosophy of life that does not swear allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Because western thought has often operated under the misconception of autonomy, we should not be surprised that any attempt to interpret reality in an absolute sense is false and internally inconsistent. In many ways, Derrida has shown that any thought system built upon abstract impersonal principles ultimately deconstructs itself. However, this does not mean that Derrida is correct in his counter philosophy. I propose that our response to Derrida and postmodernism should be two-fold. One, we should embrace Derrida's philosophy as a solid critique of previous attempts in the history of philosophy to recognize, interpret, define and speak of reality by

²⁵ The most obvious of these is the destruction theological liberalism has reeked on the church in the west since the inception of the modern project. In many ways, the same philosophical notion which were said to ground absolute knowledge such as reason, empiricism, being, logos, Geist, idealism, etc., have been the same principles that demanded a radical reinterpretation of the faith, a resulting faith that is far from orthodoxy.

assuming absolute notions such as a *logos*, *being*, reason, sensory data, etc.²⁶ And secondly, we must address the central issue that Derrida raises, namely that of ontology. Because Derrida defines the postmodern turn as an ontological turn, we must ourselves re-examine the Christian notion of ontology in order to offer something that is both distinctly Christian, and avoids the axe which Derrida has wielded against modernity. For Derrida, meaning is inter-lingual and has no outside referent because that which is outside of us is meaningless in-itself. This is the entire thrust of Derrida's thought. Therefore, our task is to combat modernity and postmodernism with a re-examined ontology and metaphysic.

It is here that we shall now turn to Cornelius Van Til. Though much of postmodernism postdates the bulk of Van Til's intellectual enterprise, much of Van Til's thought is directly applicable to some concerns that postmodernism has raised. Much like Derrida, Van Til was quick to point out the inherent contradiction of modern thought. According to Van Til, any attempt to ground knowledge in abstract, impersonal principles such as reason, sense data, logic, a *logos*, a "one", or any other unifying metaphysical principle, would inevitably collapse or "deconstruct" under the weight of its own contradictions. The clearest example of this critique is not only found in Van Til's analysis of western philosophers from Plato through the modern period, but in the traditional problem of the one and many. According to Van Til, the history of western thought can be summarized as an attempt to give a holistic explanation of "things" in relation to the particulars of reality and their universal characteristics. This is certainly true of Plato and Aristotle, but Van Til maintains that this theme runs through the whole of western philosophy. From nominalism, to Cartesian dualism, from Spinoza's pantheism, to Kant's transcendental idealism, from Nietzsche's will-to-power, to Husserl's *presence*, every attempt to assert a philosophy of "things" is an attempt to explain both the universality and particularity of our world and how it relates to the content of our consciousness. In other words, it is an attempt to ground absolute knowledge of the world in finite impersonal "things". For Van Til, these attempts are inherently flawed because they attempt to reason autonomously, not only independent of bias, which is itself impossible, but also independent of God. For this reason, philosophies that attempt to uncover a *logos*, a *being*, an organizing metaphysical principle that in turn grounds knowledge and provides an absolute foundation for knowledge is doomed from the outset. Through his analysis of western thought, Van Til shows how philosophy after philosophy deconstructs itself into irrationalism.

²⁶ It should be stated here that for our purposes here, reason, logic, the law of non-contradiction, sensory data, and causality are in the same category of a *logos*, a *being*, and a *presence*, because they all share common elements: they are impersonal and abstract in nature, and are claimed to be, by modernists, part of our fundamental apparatus for knowledge. Therefore, the affirmation that knowledge is grounded or contingent upon any abstract, impersonal principles places these principles under the rubric of modernistic epistemological foundations. Though logic *per se* is in some senses different than a concept of *being*, nevertheless, they both serve the same function; to ground knowledge in an impersonal source, or foundation. And as will be seen, the status of 'foundation' that is given to these principles is rejected by both Derrida and Van Til.

Like Derrida, Van Til recognized the ensuing nihilism that arises from grounding knowledge in arbitrary, impersonal metaphysical principles. On this point, Van Tillian scholar, John Frame elaborates Van Til's thought. Frame writes that according to Van Til, "there is no difference between "being in general" and "ultimate matter." Both concepts are empty, uninformative, and unintelligible. And if the real essence of everything, the real truth about the world, is to be found in either of these concepts, then the world is completely devoid of intelligible meaning.²⁷" According to Van Til, abstract principles that attempt to serve as the foundation for knowledge lead to nihilism, because they are essentially "idols, and thus self-destructive."²⁸ For Van Til, such notions are idols because they are fashioned in man's own image, and serve to ground knowledge apart from God. For man to attempt to reason autonomously and assert a foundation of knowledge in impersonal principles (such as those already mentioned throughout our discussion) is idolatrous and stands in direct opposition to God. For Van Til, this is true of empiricism, rationalism, nominalism, realism, idealism, existentialism, phenomenology, Logocentrism, and all other attempts throughout the history of western philosophy. Like Derrida, Van Til recognizes that all such attempts prove themselves to be nihilistic and meaningless through their own self-deconstruction.

If Van Til is in surprising agreement with Derrida's critique of modernity,²⁹ would Van Til then agree with Derrida, that knowledge, meaning and language are grounded in language itself? To this Van Til would reply with an emphatic no. According Van Til, the grounding of knowledge outside of us is not the problem. It's the kind of metaphysics that western philosophy has used as an epistemological foundation that results in nihilism. According to Van Til, knowledge cannot be grounded in anything impersonal, whether it is sense data, reason, the law of non-contradiction, or language. Rather, knowledge, meaning and language can only be grounded in a personal, infinite, omniscient "being".³⁰ So for Van Til, epistemology is grounded in a metaphysic that is itself grounded in the Doctrine of God. Though this may seem at first glance as redundant of previous Christian epistemological claims, there are some features to Van Til's thought concerning God and His relationship to the world that are equally unique as they are impressive. It is precisely Van Til's understanding of God and his relationship to the world, that makes both his epistemology and metaphysics

²⁷ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1995). p.74. In the immediate context of this passage, Frame is discussing the problem of the one and many. Though Van Til is specifically addressing the principles of unity and particularity, the exact same could be said of more defined metaphysical principles (such as those defined in Derrida's critique) that serve the same purpose, that is, to ground knowledge objectively.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ By this I mean of course modern metaphysical foundationalism

³⁰ I will not take a lot of time to elaborate on how VanTil arrives at this conclusion. Suffice it to say that, for VanTil, this is a conclusion that is first of all attested to through special revelation as well through general revelation. In general revelation, this conclusion is derived from the transcendental argument.

unique from the “modern idols” mentioned above, as well as evasive of the axe of Derrida’s critiques. In order to unpack this complex aspect of Van Til’s thought and how it stands against both modern metaphysical foundationalism and postmodernism, we will need to examine two central aspects. The first aspect will concern the issue of metaphysics and how God is said to be revealed in nature. The second aspect will be to examine how then this metaphysical or ontological foundation serves as a proper epistemological foundation.³¹

Concerning the issue of metaphysics, Van Til asserts that creation reveals God to humanity. As Frame points out, Van Til’s metaphysics should be understood in relation to his strong doctrine of general revelation.³² According to Van Til, the natural world does *not* only reveal things *about* God, but rather reveals God. The importance of this notion cannot be overstated. According to Van Til, “All created reality is revelatory of the nature and will of God.”³³ For Van Til, this is far from saying that creation reveals truth about God or knowledge about God. Our knowledge of God is not based upon natural theology but rather natural revelation. According to Van Til, the world around us is infused with the personality of God. He writes, “Man’s surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God.”³⁴ Ontologically speaking, Van Til asserts that the natural world is not simply material, static and mute of meaning, but rather all things embody a certain active God-revealing quality.³⁵ Therefore, the metaphysical make-up of the world is inherently revelatory, always speaking, always revealing meaning. Van Til does much to elaborate on this point through his understanding of Romans 1:18-20.³⁶ Van Til writes that, “We do not do this passage justice by merely saying that all men or most men believe in a God or believe that God probably exists. Paul

³¹ I use the term “epistemological foundation” here for the lack of a better term. As will be seen, Van Til is *not* a foundationalist in the traditional sense and therefore should not be mistakenly characterized in this manner.

³² *Ibid.*, p.116.

³³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian apologetics*, p.33. As quoted in Frame’s CVTAHT, p.116.

³⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology* Vol. II (New Jersey: P&R Press, 1977). p.78.

³⁵ A word should be said thus far concerning this statement. Van Til was in no sense a pantheist or a panentheist. Rather, Van Til is simply asserting that the being of God is present in all his acts, creation being one of them. This doesn’t mean that the “being” of God is in anyway contingent on his acts, in fact, Van Til goes to great lengths to establish God’s aseity as well as the creator/creation distinction. On this point Frame writes, “On the first page of his (Van Til’s) Introduction to systematic theology, he says, “Fundamental to everything orthodox is the presupposition of the antecedent self-existence of God and of his infallible revelation of himself to man in the bible.” “Self-existence,” sometimes called aseity, refers to the fact “that God is in no sense correlative to or dependent upon anything besides his own being. God is the source of his own being, or is sufficient unto himself.” Quote found on page 53-54 in Frame’s CVT and taken from VanTil’s *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p.1.

³⁶ “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them. For since the creation of the His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through that what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

says that the revelation of the only existing God is so clearly imprinted upon man himself and upon his environment that no matter how hard he tries he cannot suppress this fact.”³⁷ For Van Til, God is revealed in not only the created order of all things, but is inherent in the very constitution of mankind’s make-up. Van Til does not distinguish between man and creation as to its revelatory character. In both cases, the Person of God is revealed in both. As humans, we are surrounded by the handiwork of God in which His very being is revealed. Therefore, things have an active revelatory character as opposed to a mute static nature, one that lies meaningless until language is attached to it.

For Van Til, all “things” consist of being related to God’s nature. Therefore, any arbitrary notion of ‘substance’, ‘essence’, ‘logos’, or ‘being in general’ as the ontological foundation of “things” is false. As we have seen, if any of these were the ontological foundation of reality than nihilism would ensue. Rather, ontologically speaking, the being of God is revealed in all things; therefore all things are inherently meaningful including mankind’s own constitution and therefore are actively revelatory in revealing God’s being. So for Van Til, the history of philosophy has gone wrong in asserting a metaphysical understanding of reality that is impersonal, abstract, and inherently meaningless.

The significance of Van Til’s ontology will become more evident as we look at how it grounds epistemology. As has been stated above, Van Til’s epistemology is grounded in a metaphysic that is in-turn grounded in the infinite personal God. For Van Til, it is precisely because all things are shot through with the personality of God, and man’s constitution is itself revelatory of God, that knowledge is possible. According to Van Til, the revelation of God in creation and in man is in fact the foundation in which all other knowledge is obtained.³⁸ According to Van Til, this knowledge of God that is revealed in all things is non-inferential and non-discursive. That is to say, that the knowledge of God is not derived or inferred from nature, but rather is immediately apprehended.

This is a unique feature of Van Til’s epistemology, which distances him from what is termed natural theology.³⁹ According to Van Til, the knowledge of God is not inferred, induced, deduced, or derived from any sort of evidence, fact or observation. Rather, the knowledge of God is immediately apprehended at the moment of consciousness. In Husserlean terms, the knowledge of God is immediately “present”, and “given.” Unlike others, who call themselves classical

³⁷ Cornelius VanTil, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (New Jersey: P&R Press, 1971). p.93

³⁸ Greg Bahnsen, *VanTil’s Apologetics* (New Jersey: P&R Press, 1999). p.181.

³⁹ R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: a Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Michigan: Zondervan Press, 1984). Pp.64-66. This is a point of contention between traditional apologists and presuppositionalists. The traditionalists assert that the knowledge of God is mediated and inferred. Therefore, knowledge is contingent upon something *else* besides God’s revelation, namely, the principles of causality, the general reliability of sense experience, and the law of non-contradiction.

apologists, Van Til maintains that our knowledge of God does not come from an argument from facts and evidences. Based on Romans 1 this cannot be the case because, as Bahnsen points out, there are some who do not have the cognitive abilities to reason in this manner⁴⁰. Yet, according to Paul, they still know God. Because the knowledge of God is immediately present to us through that which is made (both nature and self), Paul can say with confidence that in knowing God's acts (both nature and self) we truly "know him." Concerning Van Til's point on this, Bahnsen writes,

Careful reading shows that Romans 1-2 does not teach men can develop a "natural theology: from the uninterpreted raw data of the natural realm, if they will rationally reflect upon it and formulate appropriate chains of argument, leading to the conclusion that God very probably exists. Rather, Van Til maintained that Romans 1 teaches a "natural revelation" whereby the created order is a medium of constant, inescapable, clear, pre-interpreted information about God, with the effect that all men, at the outset of their reasoning, process an actual knowledge of God and his Character.⁴¹

So, Van Til does not ground knowledge in any abstract principle but rather in God who is revealed to all men in an immediate, non-inferential manner. In other words, rather than asserting that knowledge is grounded in reason, sensory experience and causality, Van Til asserts that reason, sensory experience and causality are in themselves grounded in God. Because the personality of God is infused in all creation, including man's constitution, all things are inherently meaningful and actively revelatory of God. This is why Van Til argues that reason, sensory perception, logic and so forth, are not the *basic* presuppositions of knowledge because these things are only known because God Himself is first presupposed.

Not only does this understanding of metaphysics and epistemology distance Van Til from some of his Christian counterparts, but it also distances himself from Derrida's critique of modern metaphysical foundationalism. It does this in at least two ways. One, for Van Til, ontology and metaphysics are not grounded in impersonal, arbitrary principles like those seen throughout the history of western philosophy. Rather, the ontological identity of all things is grounded in God as he is revealed in His acts. In other words, knowledge is grounded in a personal being who is active (not passive or static) in revealing his being to us *and* through us. In this manner, all things are inherently meaningful because they reveal the personality of the infinite omniscient God. This is significant. According to Van Til, our *finiteness* (a major theme in Derrida's critique) is overcome in regards to our ability to 'know' anything outside of us because the revelation of the *infinite* God penetrates us through the natural world, our own constitution, and through

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.182.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.185.

special revelation.⁴² Therefore, knowledge is not grounded in a finite *logos*, or finite language, but an infinite personal being.

Secondly, our epistemology is grounded in the knowledge of God that is known immediately at the point of consciousness. In this sense, Van Til can be called a non-foundationalist. Because the knowledge of God is not derivative, induced or deduced, but rather *is* that which constitutes our very consciousness, the knowledge of God does not serve as a properly basic belief in which all other beliefs are built. The foundation of our knowledge is non-inferential and non-discursive, therefore, our knowledge of God is not contingent upon other beliefs or proper principles of knowledge.⁴³ In other words, the knowledge of God, according to Van Til, is not a simple proposition in which other propositions are justified. Rather, the knowledge of God *is* the necessary-transcendental precondition for all other knowledge.⁴⁴

Given what we have seen concerning Van Til's metaphysic and epistemology, there are some preliminary implications that can be drawn in regards to the nature of language that stand hard against Derrida's assertions and open the door for a rethought Christian understanding of language.⁴⁵ Thus far, we have seen that Van Til asserts a unique metaphysic in response to that of a *logos*, a *being*, etc., and that ontologically speaking, all things communicate meaning actively because they reveal God. It is based upon these two principles that nihilism is impossible. According to Van Til, it is because all things reveal God, that all of our acts as humans are inherently meaningful. On this point Van Til writes, "Man's surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God. But when we have said that the surroundings of man are really completely personalized, we have also established the fact of the representational principle. All of man's acts must be representation of the acts of God."⁴⁶ In other words, our actions are inherently

⁴² Here we see the thrust of Tri-perspectival epistemology. Knowledge is contingent on God's revelation in His word, His world, and in humanity. Therefore our immediate knowledge of God is simultaneous with our knowledge of the world and our selves. This is expressed in Van Til's own words, "The cosmos-consciousness, the self-consciousness, and the God-consciousness would naturally be simultaneous." *IST* p.69. As quoted from Matt Gross in; *God's revelation and the Triad of triads: An Essay on Cornelius VanTil's Nine-fold View of Revelation*. p.8.

⁴³ In VanTil's view, the knowledge of God is not a properly basic belief as defined by Plantinga for at least two reasons. One, properly basic beliefs, according to Plantinga, are defeasible. This according to VanTil cannot be said of our Knowledge of God. Secondly, properly basic beliefs require that our epistemic faculties are functioning properly. In this sense, there are necessary rules of knowing that have to be in place before properly basic beliefs can be justified. According to VanTil, the knowledge of God must be known before any functions of the mind can be consciously distinguished.

⁴⁴ This is really the trust of VanTil's transcendental argument. According to VanTil, all knowledge presupposes the knowledge of God. Therefore, it is impossible to reason from abstract principles to God. Rather, the ability to even recognize relations in things and therefore identify principles is proof itself that the knowledge of God is known.

⁴⁵ I do not intend to develop here a comprehensive philosophy of language from a Van Tillian perspective. I simply want to highlight some immediate features.

⁴⁶ Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p.78.

meaningful as well because they are reinterpretations and representations of God's act. This is also true of language. Words as signs are inherently meaningful because that which constitutes them are our experiences as meaningful human beings living in a meaningful world with other meaningful human beings. In other words because God is continuously revealing himself in all things, including ourselves, our representation of things in signs is inherently packed full of meaning.

For Derrida this is not possible because metaphysically speaking, there is nothing 'outside' of us that is inherently meaningful. However, for Van Til, this is not only possible, but the contrary is impossible due to the revelatory ontology of all nature and the self. The "center" therefore, is outside of language and is grounded in the infinite personal God.⁴⁷ Along these lines Van Til writes that, "Being from the outset covenantal, the natural revelation of God to man was meant to serve as the playground for the process of differentiation⁴⁸ that was to take place in the course of time."⁴⁹ Unlike Derrida, Van Til is able to say that creation, not language, is the playground of meaning, because God is immediately present in all creation and therefore in all the contents of our consciousness.

Furthermore, what is also implicit in this divine/ontological foundation of language is that, from a divine perspective, nature and human beings as revelation of God can be said to be, in some sense, signs themselves. If creation and humanity is understood as the divine self expression, than to some degree all things can be seen as a divine language in which all 'things' find their individual ontological identity in signs 'representing' the infinite being of the only personal God (rather than in finite substance or language itself). In this manner, creation and humanity can be seen as a 'series of signs' representing and revealing God much the same way words for us function as signs representing and revealing our minds. The difference being that, our signs are always representational of God's signs, whereas God's signs are representational of Himself.

If this ontology of nature, the human self and language as divine self revelation is accepted, then this takes the epistemological dilemma posed by

⁴⁷ I cannot say strong enough that this in anyway solves the hermeneutical problem. That is an issue that has to be treated separately at length with Van Til's analysis of the Trinity and the noetic effects of sin. All I have tries to do here is show that, according to Van Til, language as a representational function is inherently meaningful because it represents meaningful "stuff".

⁴⁸ A word must be said here. According to Van Til, this "principle of differentiation" refers specifically to the separating of the redeemed and the reprobate throughout the history of redemption. However, the same could be true in regard to the act of sign making because, as Van Til points out, all acts of consciousness, interpretation, and representation have a moral elements. Therefore, the separating of the redeemed and the reprobate inevitably embodies the practice of sign making.

⁴⁹ Cornelius VanTil. Nature and Scripture. In *The infallible Word*, edited by Ned B. Stonhouse and Paul Wooley. Quote taken from Frame's CVT p.117.

Derrida and turns it on its head. Instead of asking the question, 'how is meaning possible?', the question becomes how is meaning not possible? So even if Milbank's analysis of Derrida and postmodernism is fundamentally correct in asserting that essentially "we make signs and signs make us and we can never step outside the network of sign making", the question of meaning as inter-lingual or grounded 'outside or us' is reoriented dramatically if all 'things' can be seen as signs representing and actively expressing the Triune God.⁵⁰

And finally if Van Til's assessment of metaphysics and epistemology is accepted then a shift takes place in regards to the issues of violence in interpretation. If this is the case, and all things are in this sense "signs of God's", then we cannot only see that all signs are meaningful but that there is no hierarchy as to who or what commits violence in interpretation. For if all things as 'sign' are actively revelatory than they do as much 'violence' to us as we do to them when we are confronted by them in perception. In this sense we can say that God through our own constitution and through the world is constantly penetrating us, changing us, and re-making us. Thus, perception as well as representation is both an act of violence done to the object of knowledge (or the text), and to us as well. In other words, interpretation does not only consist of us doing violence to the thing perceived and therefore changing its identity, but all things as 'divine sign' actively penetrate us and do violence to not only our understanding of them, but of everything.

Given the present philosophical situation that the west is in today, Cornelius Van Til stands as a prophetic voice against those who have proudly proclaimed the death of metaphysics. Much like Derrida, Van Til saw the inherent self-destruction of autonomous thought. However, unlike Derrida, Van Til saw that knowledge did have a proper foundation beyond language, and that foundation is God Himself. In the midst of this ontological crisis, Van Til helps us see that nihilism is not the only alternative to metaphysical affirmation, but knowledge, meaning, and language find their identity in the same place that all things do. Van Til has said nothing new to us. He simply stands in the midst of all secular thinkers, whether modern or postmodern, and reminds them that it is in God and God alone that we "live, move and have our being."⁵¹

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⁵⁰ In other words, if signs are inherently meaningful because they are representational of God's signs, than Derrida's analysis of language as inter-linguistic can still stand.

⁵¹ Acts 17:28

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