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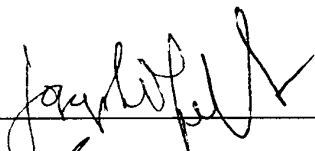
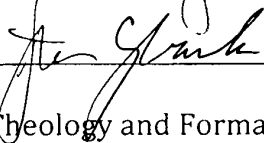
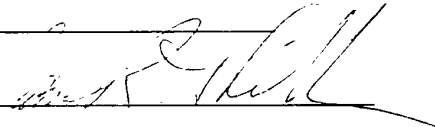
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CRITICAL REALISM IN CONVERSATION WITH POSTMODERN THEOLOGY, SCIENCE,
AND HERMENEUTICS

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

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INTRODUCTION

Tracing the Lines of Argument: Foundationalism and Beyond

Is there a reality somewhere out there to be known? If so, how well can I know it? If not, am I bound for the slippery slope of relativism? These are baseline metaphysical questions that deserve to be waded through rather than around. In centuries past, the answer has been a simplistic, “yes there is a reality, yes I can measure it accurately, and yes, if the proposition of reality is denied, you enter into the muddled mess of relativism.” But it seems the simple days of naïve realism with its Cartesian certainty criterion, are gone. It is quite difficult for the general populace, never mind professional philosophers and theologians, to believe that any of us can separate ourselves from our cultural perspective in order to gain a god’s-eye view of the real. We all bring baggage on the journey of interpretation. One problem for the theologian throughout the age of modernism was that, as they peddled their product from city to city, they failed to realize just how much interpretative baggage that they indeed carried. Gradually, this problem was realized, and that realization provoked a response. In the present day it seems as if the cities of modernity have been razed and the citizens, theologians included, have been exiled to far off Babylon¹ to be culturally assimilated. But, after some time, to the amazement of all, Babylon releases her modernistic captives. The question is, whether or not to return home and rebuild on the old foundations.

¹ Perhaps it would be fun to imagine this Babylon being located somewhere in France.

In this thesis I intend to analyze the philosophical claims of critical realism and their usefulness for Christian theology. In doing so, I believe that our modernistic captives can find a helpful guide for negotiating the challenges of doing theology in a postmodern context. In chapter 1, I will juxtapose critical realism and postmodern theology by pointing out their key similarities and differences. Ultimately, I argue for the adoption of the critical realist framework and offer five reasons for doing so. In chapter 2, I will consider the merits of a critical realist philosophy of science. One of the more important points I will attempt to make is that critical realism is compatible with the effort to uphold the doctrines of classical Christianity as well as take seriously the findings of mainstream science. Lastly, in chapter 3, I will consider hermeneutics from a critical realist perspective. Therein I will suggest that behind many doctrinal disputes stands the issue of interpretation; this is an issue that tends to be overlooked by evangelicals. Also I will give a brief historical overview of literary theory and its effect on reading the Bible. Lastly, I will specifically consider the contours of a critical realist hermeneutic. Again, it will be my contention throughout this thesis that critical realism offers the best philosophical system for the Christian seeking to articulate his or her faith. Further, I contend that the Christian, undergirded by a critical realist philosophy, will be positioned to enter into profitable, irenic dialogue within two important spheres: postmodern theology and the sciences.²

² Here I consider conversations about hermeneutics to be a part of what would be discussed when engaging both postmodern Christianity and science. Therefore, my chapter,

It should be noted that I am writing from an evangelical Christian standpoint. It should be sufficient for me to explain that I see evangelicalism as distinct from fundamentalism and postliberalism, but able to incorporate ideas from both camps. Also, I certainly would erect a large enough tent to include many, if not all, postmodern theologians. A postmodern philosophical bent would not cause me to exclude anyone from evangelicalism. With that said, it seems appropriate for me to comment briefly on the tone I wish to set in this paper. I believe it is fitting to address this since I will be making critical remarks, but, as noted, many of these remarks will be directed at ideas held by other thinkers with whom I share living space under the same evangelical tent. There are enough stones flying through the air; I do not wish to launch another. I am not seeking to compose a polemic for critical realism, especially as I engage postmodern theology. In fact, I have been challenged to think deeply by the many postmodern authors I have engaged in preparation for writing these chapters. I find their emphasis on our situatedness within socio-cultural and linguistic structures to be helpful and timely. Many of their insights are creative and fresh. I desire to pay homage to the deconstructive notion that none come to the table of interpretation as objective onlookers. Perhaps an archaeological tour of Christian thought inspired by Michel Foucault would be enlightening. Nevertheless, after we step off of that tour bus, I propose we return to reality.

“Critical Realism and Reading the Bible” will be an extension of what is laid out in chapters 1 and 2.

My hope is that through the dialectic of various contending propositions, the richness and depth of critical realism will become apparent.

Now, I wish to make one final prolegomenous note. It will be helpful, before moving ahead, to describe the epistemological undergirding of both the critical realist and postmodern thinkers. To do this, I will utilize the vocabulary employed by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen in his, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*.³ The terms *antifoundationalism*, *postfoundationalism*, and *foundationalism* will be used as a broad framework for categorizing varying epistemic positions. First, foundationalism refers to the notion that all belief can be justified by an appeal to self-evident or indubitable belief.⁴ These beliefs form the foundation upon which subsequent belief may be built. Implied within foundationalism is an inflexibility or infallibility of certain types of knowledge. To the foundationalist, the facts that make up the bedrock of knowledge are “treated as a privileged class of aristocratic beliefs that serve as the terminating points in the argumentative chains of justification for our views.”⁵ That is, foundational beliefs are anchored to the bottom of rational inquiry in a self-evident or incorrigible manner. Subsequent belief is constructed from that bottom position of certainty. The foundationalist’s advice to our returned modern exiles would certainly be to rebuild upon the sure foundations of the past.

³ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

If foundationalism forms one end of the spectrum, its polar opposite would be antifoundationalism. The antifoundationalist contends that the epistemological foundations of knowledge are a fiction. There is no such thing as foundational knowledge. Rather, an apt metaphor is that knowledge is formed in a groundless, interrelated web of belief.⁶ Justification for any belief is found in the strength of the surrounding and supporting beliefs within the web, which ultimately are interrelated and interconnected.⁷ Presumably, an antifoundationalist notion is common to postmodern theologians and philosophers alike. However, this statement needs further qualification and will receive as much in chapter 1. It is sufficient for our introduction to note that the antifoundationalist would react strongly against modern, generic notions of rationality while stressing that it is context and community that form the borders of rational endeavors. In its extreme forms, antifoundationalism becomes a thorough relativism that undermines the prospect of intercommunal, intercultural, or interdisciplinary rational dialogue. Ironically, van Huyssteen points out that at the heart of antifoundationalism is often found a simple fideism.⁸ This is ironic because this fideism can actually become a “foundationalism-in-disguise.”⁹ That is, a set of beliefs containing an individual’s

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ This is also known as the Coherentist Theory of Epistemic Justification. Coherentism is a common epistemic position amongst postmoderns.

⁸ van Huyssteen, 3.

⁹ Ibid.

rationale for faith in God can itself subtly become a foundation for belief.¹⁰ It is the uncritical commitment to that set of beliefs, inherent in a fideistic stance towards knowledge that allows for the subtle emergence of a foundation for belief. Nevertheless, ostensibly, the antifoundationalist would suggest that foundationalism has met its demise and should be left behind. To our returned exiles, the antifoundationalist would advise not only to be certain the old foundations are destroyed but also to creatively imagine a whole new building project with no foundations at all.

Lastly, occupying the middle ground is the postfoundationalist position. Postfoundationalism is not coy about acknowledging that one's socio-cultural context, interpretative experiences, and traditions hold great formative power over one's epistemic and non-epistemic values.¹¹ Yet, postfoundationalism points beyond the confines of any singular rational community towards a possible and plausible intercommunal conversation. Surely, there will be strong cognitive commitments within one's rational community, but the postfoundationalist holds that there are enough "...shared resources of human rationality..." to encourage practitioners to reach beyond the "...walls of [their] epistemic communities..." in order to grasp the possibility of a "...cross-contextual, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary conversation."¹² For the Christian theologian, there is a certain sense of liberty inherent in a postfoundational

¹⁰ Of course, this assertion cuts both ways. The atheist holding to an antifoundationalist epistemology can unwittingly slip and allow that set of rational beliefs that yield their dis-belief in any form of theism to become the foundation for their atheism.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² *Ibid.*

epistemology. This is primarily because a space is cleared once more to ask ultimate questions about reality. In other words, metaphysical inquiry is once again legitimated as the nature of reality is seen as the ground upon which interdisciplinary conversation can take place. Further, critical realism provides the vocabulary for an articulation of a metaphysical realism that is not simplistic or trite, but rather takes into account the realities of socially and linguistically constructed knowledge. Postfoundationalism, then, could be seen as a road with the ditch of antifoundational relativism to one side and foundational certainty to the other. Critical realism stands ready to walk this postfoundational road, maintaining an insistence that there is a reality to be known while at the same time insisting that knowing it in full is impossible. Now, what advice would the postfoundationalist give to our returned exiles? It seems that they would advise a cautious, scrupulous rebuilding project. That is, a project that carefully uses the old foundations but does not trust them to bear the full weight of the new superstructure.

With this introductory material I have sought to trace around the edges of a range of epistemic positions. Next, we will consider critical realism and postmodern theology. As mentioned above, critical realism is compatible with a postfoundational epistemology. Is it then appropriate to simply state that all forms of postmodernism adhere to an antifoundationalist epistemology, thereby creating a binary pair? It is not surprising to find that this discussion is not that simple. Nevertheless, the stage is set. There is much to be sorted through; to that task I now turn.

CHAPTER 1

Critical Realism and Postmodern Theology

Thus far, we have been made aware of three key epistemological terms: antifoundationalism, postfoundationalism, and foundationalism.

Foundationalism represents the Enlightenment project and the quest for certainty of knowledge. Antifoundationalism and postfoundationalism are, to varying degrees, both critical of the claims of foundationalism. As indicated, the tenets of critical realism are comfortable with the label of postfoundationalism,

but how should one categorize the claims of postmodern theology? Should they be conflated with the radical, antifoundationalist assertions of some postmodern philosophers who propose the incredulity of all meta-narratives, thus a strict relativism? I suggest this goes too far; consider two examples. First, Stanley Hauerwas, who advocates for a constructivist Christian ethic,¹³ and is certainly critical of modernism, is also equally critical of antifoundational postmodernism. In his article *The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism*, Hauerwas quips that there are many who have grouped him with the “...nihilistic, relativistic, barbarian hordes who threaten all we hold dear—matters such as objectivity and the family.” He goes on to explain that just because postmodernism levels a strong critique against his primary foe, modernism, it does not follow that postmodernism becomes uncritically accepted as a comrade.¹⁴ In other words, the enemy of his enemy is not necessarily his friend.

A second appropriate example comes in the form of Calvin College professor of philosophy, James K.A. Smith and his book *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*¹⁵ as well as his forthcoming *Who's Afraid of Relativism*.¹⁶ These intriguing titles may leave the casual observer wondering just what sorts of claims are being made. However, immediately, we have in the series preface of *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, the conflation of the terms *postfoundationalist*

¹³ See Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981).

¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism,” in Graham Ward, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 145.

¹⁵ James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

¹⁶ I am aware of this forthcoming book by way of personal communication with Smith. I assume it will be published with Baker.

epistemologies and postmodern theory.¹⁷ Radical claims of the sort that I am describing as antifoundationalist are most assuredly not being made. I believe, given the evidence from Hauerwas and Smith, we are in a position to make the basic claim that postmodern theology does *not* seek a radical antifoundational agenda, degenerating into nihilistic relativism. But then, one may ask, is there any significant difference between the critical realist and the postmodern theologian? It seems they are both making a postfoundational claim of some sort.

Sorting this issue out is a large part of what I intend to undertake in this chapter. I will proceed by first explicating what postmodern theology is claiming. After that, I will introduce and describe critical realism along with the concept of *emergence*. Lastly, I will suggest reasons why critical realism provides a clearer way forward for the Christian theologian in light of its ability to engage the sciences, provide a framework for a viable hermeneutic, foster interdisciplinary dialogue, absorb many of the ideas of postmodern theology, and retain the paradigm of realism.

Central Tenets of Postmodern Theology

Postmodernism writ large is certainly no monolith, and the same goes for postmodern theology. There are various schools of thought, developing specialized, nuanced vocabulary, available for all interested parties. Indeed, Terrence Tilley, professor of Catholic theology at Fordham University, identifies

¹⁷ Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 9.

ten available postmodern theologies dividing them into four categories: constructive postmodernisms, postmodern dissolutions, postliberal theology, and theologies of communal praxis.¹⁸ Further, Wheaton College professor and systematic theologian Kevin Vanhoozer identifies eight different postmodern theologies: radical orthodoxy, postliberal theology, postconservative theology, deconstructive a/theology, reconstructive theology, postmetaphysical theology, feminist theology, and Anglo-American postmodernity: a theology of communal praxis.¹⁹ These typologies are sufficient to illustrate that postmodernism is influential, extant, and varied. For our purposes, I will be tracking broadly with postmodern theology seeking to highlight core claims rather than delving into the various schools of thought available.²⁰

As mentioned, postmodern theology (and critical realism) engages in a sharp critique of foundationalist epistemology. In their book, *Beyond Foundationalism*, Stanley Grenz and John Franke describe the demise of foundationalism as being “the transition from a realist to a constructionist view of truth and the world.”²¹ They place an emphasis on noting that language cannot be purely referential, hence an objective conception of the “real” is

¹⁸ Terrence W. Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

¹⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁰ Another helpful voice for one seeking to survey the landscape of postmodern theology with an eye toward evangelicalism is Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). His broad categories of *conservative Evangelicalism* and *postconservative Evangelicalism* seem to be a great entry point into the conversation.

²¹ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 23.

impossible.²² If language cannot reference the real, then modernistic explanatory “metanarratives” stand open to critique as well. Grenz and Franke relay that the “loss of metanarrative” does not mean that narrative has no function in postmodernity, but rather it is now the “local” narrative that provides meaning for particular people in particular socio-cultural contexts.²³

Above all, however, postmodernism levels a critique of the epistemological enterprise of foundationalism. Again, the foundationalist believes that all belief can ultimately be traced back to a self-evident or incorrigible belief. Those beliefs, then, constitute the sure foundation upon which all subsequent belief can safely be built. Foundationalism infiltrated theology in the 19th and 20th centuries by setting up a dualism, characteristic of modernism, between “left” and “right.” That is, the liberal left began to construct their theology on the sure foundation of incontrovertible religious experience while the conservative right looked to an error-free Bible for their indubitable foundation.²⁴ So, what was the problem with all of this?

Grenz and Franke do not give a direct answer to this question. Philosopher Alvin Plantinga, however, does. In the chapter from his book *Warranted Christian Belief* titled “Justification and the Classical Picture”, we find two fatal objections to foundationalism.²⁵ First, “...foundationalism appears to be self-referentially incoherent: it lays down a standard for justified belief that it

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 23-24.

²⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67-107.

doesn't itself meet."²⁶ In other words, the question to ask is whether or not foundationalism itself, as an epistemological theory, can be taken to be properly basic. To attain that status, the theory must be self-evident, incorrigible, or "Lockeanly evident to the senses."²⁷ It seems quite obvious that foundationalism fits none of the criteria for proper basicity. Now, foundationalism could still become a justified belief based on the evidential basis of other beliefs within an individual's noetic structure. This means that there would then be good inductive, deductive, or abductive arguments for foundationalism.²⁸ From here, Plantinga simply states that he is unaware of any such arguments.²⁹ Such arguments could possibly arise, but their emergence seems improbable. On this heading, foundationalism is bound to crash. If one were to hold that it is true, it would seem that they are unjustified in doing so as they would be flouting their epistemic duty as defined by foundationalism. If one decides to hold that belief in spite of their epistemic duty as defined by foundationalism, they are again, clearly, in an inconsistent position.³⁰

In illustrating the second fatal flaw of foundationalism, Plantinga follows Thomas Reid and argues that if the foundational picture is accepted, then most of what people claim to believe is unjustified belief.³¹ Most people daily accept that there are other persons existing around them and that they are not a brain in a vat being manipulated by a mad scientist. They also accept that there is an

²⁶ Ibid., 93.

²⁷ Ibid., 94.

²⁸ Ibid., 95.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 97-99.

external world beyond their sense experience. Similarly, locations beyond immediate perception are thought to exist—I cannot see Chicago from Marion, IN, but I believe it is there, hugging Lake Michigan, covered by a bit of snow at this moment. People also believe things with regularity based on their memory of interacting with particular external objects. Now, according to the foundationalist, none of these beliefs are properly basic, so they must be believed on the basis of evidence introduced via inductive, deductive, or abductive arguments.³² In the end, good arguments—even inductive, deductive, or abductive arguments—for the aforementioned beliefs are hard to find. Yet, many people daily operate as if these things were true. Indeed, seeking justification for beliefs such as these is an exercise in futility. It seems that the foundationalist criteria for justification—from Descartes through Hume—is too stringent even for itself, thereby creating a scenario where many beliefs held by many (or most) people are unjustified.

At the very least, Plantinga has given the foundationalist and her contemporary offspring something to think about. Indeed, if Plantinga’s critique is not satisfying, there are many more lining up at the door, not least of which would be Alasdair MacIntyre³³ and Charles Taylor³⁴. So, let us for our purposes

³² Ibid., 98.

³³ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 1-5. Here, MacIntyre speaks of the troubled state of modernistic ethical theory.

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Christian Smith, in his *What is a Person*, describes Taylor’s phenomenological epistemology as “antinaturalistic.” This would certainly set Taylor off in a direction contrary to the foundationalism I have been describing.

conclude that the Enlightenment project's quest for certainty through foundationalism is sufficiently flawed. Where to from here? The postmodern theologian desires to move beyond a foundationalist epistemology. What theory of knowledge is to replace foundationalism? For an answer we turn back to the suggestion made by Grenz and Franke. They advocate for the related philosophical positions of *coherentism* and *pragmatism*.

To be more precise, coherentism is an epistemological position while pragmatism refers to a whole system of philosophy, but pragmatism is comfortable with the claims of coherentism, thus able to absorb much, if not all, of its epistemic assertions. The coherentist often employs the metaphor of a groundless web of belief to describe how a belief gains justification. If a particular belief coheres with other beliefs surrounding it, then it is acceptable. What both the coherentist and pragmatist are uncomfortable with is philosophical realism. And it is here that we come to a fork in the road. We are expanding from the realm of epistemology to now consider metaphysical assumptions.

Of course, the critical realist will insist on realism; the postmodern theologian will resist realism. There are many implications here, not least of which are the consequent conceptions of truth. The postmodern theologian will find herself abandoning correspondence theories of truth, considering them to be a byproduct of a naïve realism, all of which supports a foundationalist epistemology. Truth for the postmodern, is found in the interconnectedness of

beliefs. Truth is seen as a derivative of one's entire belief system. Therefore, what is true is a product of a particular interpretative community articulating clearly their "local narrative" in a manner that is consistent and coherent with other accepted beliefs. American pragmatist Charles Sanders Pierce offers a clarifying word when he says, "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real."³⁵ Here we see Pierce conflating the current, most well articulated statement or proposition made by "all who investigate" a particular matter, as being equal to the real. William James, another pragmatist philosopher, goes further saying, "Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes, just as health, wealth, strength, etc. are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is *made*, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience."³⁶ For James, experience is elevated to the position of arbitrator of truth. The emphasis for the postmodern theologian is not on the articulation of an objective reality that is accessible and able to be known to some degree, but rather on the inability to speak with authority about the real.

The next move made by the postmodern theologian beyond a coherentist epistemology is to extend beyond the confines of metaphysical realism. Grenz

³⁵ Charles Sanders Pierce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," Philip Paul Wiener, *Values in a Universe of Chance: Selected Writings of Charles S. Pierce* (Stanford: Stanford U.P, 1958), 133.

³⁶ William James, *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, and co, 1928), 218.

and Franke employ the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein as an aid toward that end.³⁷ The essence of their argument here is that truth and meaning are not directly related to an external world of static facts, sitting in wait of the one who would apprehend and know them. Rather, truth and meaning are a function of language. Language is always situated in one context or another and it is the manner of usage within those particular situations that constitute meaning and truth. Thus, to return to Wittgenstein, one must play the “language game” to determine truth. This involves the acknowledgement that language is a social construct, and that sentences can have as many meanings as there are contexts in which they may be uttered. Propositions can only be deemed “true” within the bounds of their communal context of origin. If this claim is accepted, then the idea of metaphysical realism, stating that there exists a reality outside of the knowing subject that is unilaterally imposing itself on the subject, becomes a difficult premise to accept.

What has been stated thus far is that the postmodern theologian has replaced the idea of an authoritative metanarrative with that of relativistic local narratives. Also, the Enlightenment brand of foundationalist epistemology has been thoroughly critiqued and found wanting. Foundationalism is then replaced with a coherentist epistemological outlook supported by insights from pragmatist philosophers. And, lastly, the postmodern theologian advocates for the “turn to linguistics” as articulated by Wittgenstein. This move results in the bypassing of metaphysical realism since meaning and truth are ultimately

³⁷ Grenz and Franke, 42.

situated within dynamic linguistic contexts. Attached to the move beyond metaphysics is the disposing of the correspondence theory of truth, which claims that reality is capable of matching our experience of it in something close to a one to one ratio. As far as my lights go, these are the basic tenets of postmodern theology. When considering these claims, the critical realist will find much with which to agree, yet will disagree at critical junctures. Indeed, one of the attractive strengths, in my view, of the critical realist position is its ability to critique, absorb, and extend the ideas and insights of the postmodern theologian. I turn my attention now to describing the central tenets of critical realism. Following that, I will highlight some reasons why I believe it should be preferred to the postmodern theological agenda.

Central Tenets of Critical Realism

In this section I will situate critical realism in the broad context of other understandings about the real. This discourse will naturally lead to a discussion of the critical realist understanding of truth, which contrasts with the postmodern understanding of truth as outlined above. After that, in order to describe more clearly the nature of reality, I will engage with the idea of *emergence*.

Critical realism can be thought of as a position between two extremes.³⁸ On one hand is the naïve realist who believes that nothing stands between himself and observed phenomena. There is no need for a hermeneutical process

³⁸ The conception of critical realism as a mediate position is dependent on N.T. Wright's explanation of critical realism in, N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 31-37. I loosely follow him here.

of interpretation since, after all, my instruments of measurement are precise and valid. The naïve realist believes that he is capable of describing reality as it is—the raw, unmediated picture of the real can be known. With that said, anything that cannot be adequately measured, according to this position, cannot be spoken of coherently. That is, those objects or ideas that cannot be empirically tested end up being considered nonsense. The 20th century project of logical positivism is an example of this way of thinking. As one follows this line of thought it becomes easy to see the door to metaphysical enquiry closing, shutting out with it any conception of ethical realism. Perhaps the biggest problem for the naïve realist is the insistence on a hard-line empirical verification process for some things, but not for others.³⁹

History is a prime example. Historical “facts” are to be verified with the same supposed rigor as scientific inquiry. What the naïve realist fails to notice is that the level of certainty with which science claims to operate is highly suspect. As it turns out, the verification procedure for historical and empirical data are quite similar. So, what we are left with is a brand of naïve, common-sense realism friendly to the reductionistic tendencies of the natural sciences, narrowed in scope such that all that is real are physical objects containing the properties we perceive them to have.

On the other hand, critical realism takes a moderating position against an extreme form of phenomenalism. The phenomenalist’s claim is that she cannot

³⁹ Certainly, the naïve realist falls prey to Plantinga’s critique of foundationalist epistemology as outlined above. The evidential criteria for knowledge is too stringent, even for the theory itself.

be sure of anything beyond received sense data. She is not comfortable taking the next step, like the naïve realist, and stating with confidence that an external reality in fact exists. Remaining in this perpetual state of doubt about reality can lead her towards a solipsism—the view that hers is the only mind in existence and everything else is but a figment of her imagination. It seems to me that both of the aforementioned positions are relatively useless. We need something that better matches the way we really think and live. I believe critical realism provides that for us.

Philosopher Nancey Murphy has spoken of critical realists as “chastened moderns” and that seems to be a proper descriptor.⁴⁰ Her statement captures the conviction of the modern era—that there indeed is a reality that can be known. Critical realists agree that knowledge of the real is possible. The “chastened” notion helps to capture the idea that critical realism makes no pretense concerning the ability to describe reality in full. Unlike the naïve realist, the critical realist acknowledges that knowledge of the real is never unmediated. Interpretation is always required. Theologian N.T. Wright is instructive when he describes critical realism as a “...process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation*

⁴⁰ Nancey Murphy, “Scientific Realism and Postmodern Philosophy,” *British Journal for Philosophy of Science* 41 (1990): 291-303.

between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical').⁴¹ The knowing subject remains open to his or her observations of various objects being challenged, yet is confident that some aspect of the real will survive the critical process, thus allowing some measure of true speech about reality. It seems then, that critical realism is a modification of the Lockean doctrine of *indirect realism*⁴² as well as a resistance of Berkeley's idealism. The critical realist certainly sees no reason to posit any form of idealism, but also resists the Lockean quest for an absolute foundation of knowledge.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to emphasize that I am not suggesting some sort of return to an empirically based, chastened positivism as the way of knowing reality. On the contrary, reality is a complex, multidimensional, layered concept.⁴³ In fact, it is this notion that highlights the strong antireductionistic element of critical realism. Much of reality exists beyond our perception of it. Thus, the implication that empirical investigation can tell the whole story is not what critical realism is suggesting. There are at least three ways in which the critical realist resists this slide back towards empiricism. First, the subject's limited point of view is acknowledged. Observers cannot acquire a god's-eye

⁴¹ Wright, 35. Emphasis his

⁴² Or *representationalism*. Philosopher James K.A. Smith shared with me via email that his contention with critical realism largely stems from his view that representationalism is flawed. Thus, the paradigm for thinking of the real/anti-real debate is also flawed. Space precludes, but this would be an interesting thread to follow in further research. At this juncture, I would simply assert that the critical realist is not engaging in exactly the same project as Locke and his indirect realism. Discovering a firm empirical foundation for knowledge of the real is not the goal of the critical realist.

⁴³ Christian Smith. *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 92-93.

view of their object.⁴⁴ However, secondly, interpretation of sense data is inevitable. This interpretative process extends beyond the fact that two persons may be observing the same object from different physical locations—perhaps they are both admiring the same mountain from opposite sides—to include the idea that all observers bring with them varying assumptions, presuppositions, beliefs, memories, *etc.*⁴⁵ Simply, all subjects bring their worldview, with all attached assumptions, to the table of interpretation. These held presuppositions effect the interpretation of sense data. Thirdly, to extend the second point above, all observers are situated within particular human communities—networks of family members, friends, colleagues, *et al.*⁴⁶ These communities will influence and guide, to varying degrees, the outcome of observations and the meaning ascribed throughout the process. These three points taken together mean that there is no such thing as a neutral nor detached observer; therefore, the critical realist is positioned to assert that humans can acquire a truthful, though fallible knowledge of the real.⁴⁷

Now, the reader may be wondering what is the significant difference thus far between the postmodern theologian and the critical realist. Certainly, the critical realist will insist on realism, which goes against the grain of the postmodern's desire to move beyond metaphysical reality and place truth and meaning within language and interpretative communities. But, the critical

⁴⁴ Wright, 36.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

realist, as noted above, is quite comfortable with the rhetoric of mediated, situated knowledge. Surely, all human knowledge is pushed through an interpretative grid that includes point-of-view, worldview considerations, and the influence of the community.⁴⁸ Yet, the stubborn insistence on reality remains with the critical realist, and with that comes the assertion that truth, rather than being the opinion of the community or being “made”, is the proposition which best describes reality as it is. What this assertion means is that the measuring stick for truth is how well it corresponds to reality. Truth is not relegated to the confines of linguistic communities of inquiry. Rather, the critical realist insists that reality exists at many ontological levels yet is cohesive and unified.

The above statement, then, that truth is the proposition that best describes the way something really is, is not a simplistic statement advocating for the classical correspondence theory of truth. No, classical correspondence is what the naïve realist would argue. Rather, as suggested by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith, the relationship between a truth statement and reality is *transpositionally correspondent*.⁴⁹ This notion moves us away from the postmodern practice of locating truth within socio-linguistic communities, and back towards truth as lining up with reality. Here it must be explained that transpositional truth “...is understood not as mirroring but as transposing or

⁴⁸ Here is a prime example of what I mean when I say that critical realism is able to absorb many of the ideas of postmodern theology. In fact, Kevin Vanhoozer has gone so far as to state that no contribution of postmodern theology is beyond the pale of a critical realist approach to doing theology.

⁴⁹ C. Smith, *What is a Person?*, 211.

recoding from nonlinguistic reality to the humanly personal and linguistically conceptual.”⁵⁰ So, what we have is the claim that language can be connected, to some degree, with reality by means of critical methodologies⁵¹ designed to describe the way things really are.

This last statement anticipates an objection by the postmodern theologian seeking to relegate truth to language and the interpretative community. They might point out to the critical realist positing the transpositional correspondence theory of truth that the very words they are using to describe this idea come forth by virtue of his or her engagement with various interpretative communities and find meaning only within the language used to express his or her claims. In short, the critical realist would find this objection to be simply uninteresting. Of course culturally specific language will be used to express transpositional truth within local communal contexts. Human knowledge must be apprehended and understood in some manner. This contention is not to say that the totality of reality can ever be fully understood. Reality is much bigger than what we can measure or comprehend. Also, human knowledge, it must be remembered, is specific to humans.⁵² We do not come to know things in the same way as other sentient creatures. Humans, possessing the tools of language and capacities for experimentation, naturally will construct

⁵⁰ Ibid., 211-212.

⁵¹ What I mean here by *critical methodologies* is broad—anything from empirical investigation by means of the scientific method to the employment of the cadre of literary critical strategies that make up the descriptive enterprise of Biblical theology.

⁵² Ibid., 180.

statements and symbols, employing them in their effort to describe the world as it really is.

At this juncture, the gravitational pull of the Enlightenment's expectation of gaining a certainty of knowledge is still strong and seems to pull the postmodern theologian into its orbit. What I mean is that the postmodern seems to assume that any quest to articulate the real automatically assumes an agenda akin to that of the Enlightenment project. In the case of the critical realist, this contention is simply false. Humans come to know reality in specifically human ways, but never can the real be fully comprehended. Nevertheless, just because we cannot know reality with mathematical exactitude does not mean that we cannot meaningfully speak about it. To argue then that one cannot attain knowledge of the real because of the limitations of language and the lack of an authoritative interpretative community (an authoritative metanarrative) simply misses the point being made by the claim that truth is transpositionally correspondent. Again, human knowledge is specific to and for humans. In order to explore that knowledge, we construct meaningful statements and paradigms about it, never asserting that these statements and paradigms are in their final form. Thus, I say that to assert that the words used to describe reality, as we perceive it, are in and of themselves socially constructed, and as a consequence we cannot speak meaningfully about the real is, in the end, not a compelling objection.⁵³

⁵³ Ibid., 217.

Another central tenet of critical realism is the idea of emergence.⁵⁴ Foundational questions about the real will continually arise—What is its nature? How is it constructed? Are there any inherent observable patterns of reality? Emergence helps us to engage and make sense of these types of questions concerning reality, and it does so in a compelling manner. By definition, “emergence refers to the process of constituting a new entity with its own particular characteristics through the interactive combination of other, different entities that are necessary to create the new entity but that do not contain the characteristics present in the new entity.”⁵⁵ Emergence, therefore, always involves the following four aspects.⁵⁶ First, at least two entities interact with each other at a “lower ontic level.” Second, this interaction produces a new entity which now possesses causal capacities able to operate at the new “higher ontic level.” Third, the higher ontic level entity is fully dependent upon the interaction that occurred (or continuously is occurring) at the lower level. Fourth, the higher-level entity, however, possesses causal capacities that do not exist at the lower level and is therefore irreducible to the mere sum of its parts. These four aspects constitute emergent reality.

What becomes apparent is that for the critical realist reality is multi-layered. More precisely, reality exists on varying ontological planes or levels. Each ontic plane possesses its own unique set of causal capacities. While being

⁵⁴ Ibid., 25-42. Here, I follow C. Smith and his lucid description of emergence. See p. 25 n. 1 for a brief bibliography of recent literature on emergence. Also note the terms *ontological* and *ontic* are used synonymously.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 25-26.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 26.

fully dependent for existence on interactions occurring at lower ontic levels, the higher-level entity possess a different capacity for causation. By acknowledging the existence of different ontic levels of reality, each in possession of their own causal capacities, we can account for the many systems of human inquiry. For instance, “the different scientific disciplines of physics, chemistry, biology, meteorology, physiology, psychology, sociology, astronomy, and so on...[take into account]...different dynamics and mechanisms [that] operate to cause to happen what actually does happen at that level.”⁵⁷ These various disciplines seek to describe reality as it is at the particular ontological level that they are best suited to engage.

If we were to stop here, one may consider reality to be somewhat fragmented, but the critical realist employing the insights of emergence goes on to emphasize that while reality is multi-layered, it is also interdependent and interconnected. The aforementioned scientific disciplines are all interconnected.⁵⁸ Indeed, any biologist will acknowledge the insight gained into their discipline via the chemist. And it is here that we begin to see clearly emergence as being a foil for reductionism.

To illustrate both the interconnectedness of distinct ontic levels and the anti-reductionistic tendencies of emergence, consider the human hand.⁵⁹

Understand that the hand is a complex example, primarily because it is made up

⁵⁷ Ibid., 35

⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁹ There are certainly less complex examples of emergence than the human hand. See *ibid.*, 26-27 where C. Smith illustrates emergence by examining water. Three lower level entities—two hydrogen molecules, one oxygen molecule—interact to form a new higher level entity that possesses altogether different causal capacities than any of the lower level entities.

of millions, if not billions of lower level entities,⁶⁰ each existing at their respective ontological levels. Nevertheless, as we push through the example, I believe it serves the purpose of showing the interconnectedness and antireductionistic tendencies of emergent realism. Now, let us reduce the hand to its component parts, then consider if one can properly describe the full range of causal capacities the hand possesses by only considering what materials make up a hand. First, in reducing the hand, we must sever it from the body. Clearly, with this action we have lost the significant capacities of the hand, but for the sake of example, let us continue. We could then explain that the hand has four phalanges and one opposable thumb, skin, bone, muscle, tendon, and other materials. We could describe the components of the vascular and nervous systems present in the hand as well. In fact, we could divide and subdivide the human hand all the way down to the atomic level and learn a great deal about the function of each component part. Yet, does knowledge such as this give us the ability to describe exhaustively the causal capacity of a fully functional human hand? The answer must be no.

Now, imagine we have reconstructed the hand, including reattaching it to the rest of the body. The hand is now able to function at an ontic level unlike any of its component parts and its causal capacities are numerous. A properly functioning human hand may be used for gripping, grabbing, pinching, shaking, punching, etc. It is capable of transmitting whole language systems via sign

⁶⁰ Consider the amount of lower level entities at the cellular level interacting to compose the human hand.

language as well as communicating other informal symbols that are loaded with meaning capable of effecting other persons or material objects.⁶¹ Particular hand gestures in particular environments can be quite meaningful. A clenched fist raised above the head at the 1960 Mexico City Olympic Games proved to have extensive causal capacity. It seems clear; the human hand is more than the sum of its parts. Something new has come into being that prior to its emergence did not exist. To reduce an emergent entity and then believe that to be the best avenue for understanding it is wrongheaded.⁶² In fact, emergent entities are often most fully understood within the context of the ontological level that they exist.

Much more could be stated concerning emergence, however space precludes. In summary, emergence occurs when two or more lower level entities interact to form a new higher level entity. The new entity depends upon the lower level entities for its existence but possesses causal capacities that could not exist otherwise within lower level entities. Reality is stratified, yet unified through the process of emergence. Emergence, then, is ardently anti-

⁶¹ The “peace sign” or the “o.k.” symbol come to mind here. Also, consider the complex hand sign systems used in various sports like baseball or football.

⁶² This is not to say that everything in existence is unable to be explained by understanding what it is made of. See *ibid.*, 36-39 where C. Smith explains that a bag of chicken feed does not possess significant properties over and above its component parts. Acknowledging that some real entities do not possess significant causal power even after they interact with one another may guard against the critic who seeks to conflate emergence with some strict form of *holism*. That is, it does not seem that the bringing together of the component parts in a bag of chicken feed adds any significant properties to the new mixture. If the chicken farmer fed his/her chickens all the ingredients in chicken feed but from different feeding troughs, it seems the desired results of growth, health, and/or egg production would be the same. Sometimes answering *what is this?* is satisfied by answering *what is this made of?* Often, however, it is not. Sometimes what we really want to know is *what is this capable of?* The reductionist short-circuits the process of inquiry by insisting that *what is this?* can always be satisfied by answering *what is this made of?* Not everything is as simple as a bag of chicken feed.

reductionist. Knowing what a particular entity is composed of does not always enlighten us as to the capabilities of that entity. Gaining an understanding of emergence is an asset for the critical realist as she seeks to explain, as accurately as is possible, the nature of the real.

Why Critical Realism?

At this juncture, it is appropriate to consider the merits of critical realism over and against the assumptions of the postmodern theologian. First, I believe that critical realism constructs for the Christian theologian a platform for profitable dialogue with (social and empirical) scientists. Second, I contend that critical realist presuppositions allow for a robust, flexible biblical hermeneutic to be developed. Both of these reasons are the center points of the next two chapters, so I will refrain from further comment now.

Be that as it may, there are three other reasons that I see as compelling, to one degree or another, in accepting the central tenets of critical realism over those of postmodernism. First, I believe that many ideas of the postmodern can be absorbed into the paradigm of critical realism. One example is the rhetoric associated with coherence. A coherentist epistemology speaks of belief being justified by the degree to which it “fits” with other attendant, supporting beliefs. There is no reason whatsoever that the critical realist could not talk in the same terms. Certainly, there are going to be many hypotheses or propositions that

gain credence by virtue of the way that they dovetail with other held beliefs. At the same time, the critical realist measures the veracity of all belief by its transpositional correspondence to what is known about reality. This consideration does make room for value judgments concerning different attempts at describing the way things really are. Some propositions will be better than others. In determining this, it seems perfectly acceptable to consider proposition *A* in light of the accepted propositions *B*, *C*, and *D*. Of course, the difference on this point between the critical realist and the postmodern is that the measure for truth is not in how well proposition *A* fits with *B*, *C*, and *D*, but rather in how well *A* transpositionally corresponds to reality.

Another postmodern idea that can be absorbed by the critical realist is that all things are in flux. The postmodern often reminds us that nothing is stable and that change is inevitable. The critical realist, given emergence, should be comfortable with this notion, in a qualified sense. That is, reality while being unified and interconnected is also dynamic and changing. New ontological levels of reality are emerging all the time. In that sense, the real is in flux.

Secondly, the discipline of theology does include an aspect of cognition. These cognitive aspects include presuppositions about the universe, and the nature of reality and morality.⁶³ It is here, within the cognitive element, that interdisciplinary dialogue can occur. If it can be accepted that, for example, scientific disciplines and theology are seeking to make meaningful statements about a unified, stratified reality, then a starting point for dialogue has been

⁶³ van Huyssteen, 13.

established. Perhaps then the “...epistemological overlap between scientific and theological rationality...” can be acknowledged.⁶⁴ Also, the view that scientific ways of knowing are wholly different from those of theology can begin to be broken down. “Theology as well as the various sciences all grapple with what we view as different but very real aspects of our experience.”⁶⁵

Third and last, critical realism retains the realist paradigm for interpreting the world as well as the idea of transpositional correspondence. The reason that I find this tandem to be compelling is that it has great explanatory power. To explain the idea that there is one reality that all attempt to describe it from their varying perspectives is, in my view, not a difficult concept to grasp. Further, the concept of a fallibilist knowledge of the real is not a large leap either. That is, explaining to someone that despite the existence of one unified reality beyond our sense perception, access to that reality is never full or complete. Again, I contend that there is great explanatory power inherent in these ideas evidenced by the fact that most people live their lives as if there is a reality to engage, whether they have reflected deeply on the topic or not.

In this chapter I have sought to explain the central tenets of both postmodern theology and critical realism. In doing so we have found a key contrast between the postmodern’s desire to move beyond realism and correspondence theories of truth while the critical realist insists on retaining realism and a transpositional correspondence theory of truth. Also, I have

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14.

briefly discussed five reasons that I believe critical realism to be a stronger option than that of postmodernism for the Christian theologian. Two of those five reasons are that 1) critical realism provides opportunity for fruitful dialogue with the scientific community and 2) critical realism allows for the development of a viable, robust Biblical hermeneutic. These topics will be unpacked in greater detail below. It is to the dialogue between faith and science that we now turn.

CHAPTER 2

The Critical Realist Theologian and Science

Thus far, I have argued that critical realism provides a better foundation for theological inquiry than the presuppositions associated with postmodern theology. I have presented five reasons why I think this is so. One of those reasons is that the critical realist is positioned to enter into significant interdisciplinary dialogue. In observing the grand mountain that is reality, we may be assessing it from different perspectives, using different methods, but we are all looking at the same mountain. With that as a presupposition, I contend that the critical realist theologian stands ready to dialogue with the scientific community. In this chapter, I will explore the trajectory of that dialogue. In doing so, I will outline the history of evangelicalism and science, showing how a

critical realist perspective is able to integrate scientific insight without insisting on wholesale abandonment of classical Christian doctrine. To support this claim, I turn to Alvin Plantinga once more, employing his argument wherein he finds no contradiction in affirming that God regularly intervenes in the physical universe. Lastly, I will return to critical realism by highlighting some significant contributions it makes in facilitating dialogue between the theologian and scientist. First, I must define the terminology that will be used in this discussion.

It is important to recall that I am working from a Christian evangelical stance. This is because the discussion of religion and science can be too broadly conceived if one does not define the particular assumptions of the particular religious system. All religions do not make the same claims.⁶⁶ Evangelicalism and science have a complex past. It would be a form of scholarly negligence to reduce this complexity to a few sweeping generalizations. Therefore, I will follow the four-fold criteria coined by historian D.W. Bebbington in determining what is an evangelical: (1) one who places emphasis on a conversion experience, (2) one who emphasizes evangelism—the spreading of the gospel, (3) one holding a high view of the Bible as God’s revelation to humanity, and (4) one who emphasizes Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.⁶⁷ These four convictions sprang

⁶⁶ Here it is good to acknowledge that the work of Ian Barbour is foundational in the conversation between religion and science. However, it is significant to note for the purposes set out in this chapter that Barbour ultimately advocates for a form of process theology. Most theologians would agree that the claims of process theology augment the picture of classical Christianity in many significant ways such that it is often labeled as a panentheism. I am arguing, however, that classical Christian doctrine is compatible with scientific insight. I see no need to adopt process theology in order to make the religion/science conversation intelligible.

⁶⁷ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730's to the 1980's* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-3.

from the fertile ground that was the English Reformation and have expanded to encompass many Protestant traditions.⁶⁸ Yet, even the last statement is a slight misnomer as evangelicalism is quite transdenominational or even transtraditional. One could speak of a “Presbyterian evangelical,” an “Anglican evangelical,” a “Methodist evangelical,” or even a “Catholic evangelical.”⁶⁹ Thus, it is this broad conception of evangelicalism that I mean to utilize in this chapter.

As far as the term *Christian* goes, what I mean to express are the central beliefs of classical Christianity as found in both the Nicene and Apostle’s creeds. This marks a broad enough landscape to encompass Protestant and Catholic Christians, I believe, quite comfortably. Also, it is vital to understand that the creedal expressions of classical Christianity are silent as to the specifics of creation. In other words, they acknowledge God as “maker of heaven and earth” or “maker of all things visible and invisible,” but say nothing as to the specifics of how this creation process obtained. So, given classical Christianity, one could *speculate* across the spectrum of creationist theories all the way to views on theistic evolution. However, to insist that classical Christianity somehow asserts a specific position on the origin of humankind or the universe is to be in error. Taking the position of classical Christianity as a starting point is to take a flexible, non-dogmatic stance from which dialogue can begin.

⁶⁸ Mark A. Noll, “Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism,” in Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 262. As a general chronology one could think of Evangelicals as coming on the scene around the 1730’s during the First Great Awakening. Of course, they are still with us today.

⁶⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Science & Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 41.

Just as broad is what I mean to express when I use the term *science*. I am not limiting the term to the “hard” or “soft” sciences. What I mean is that science is the enterprise of human inquiry that gathers knowledge of the world derived from testable empirical hypotheses.⁷⁰

Another term or concept needing clarification is that of the model of interaction engendered in the dialogue between the critical realist theologian and the scientist. Alister McGrath, the well-known scientist and theologian now heading the Center for Theology, Religion, and Culture at King’s College in London, describes two broad historical models concerning the interaction of religion and science.⁷¹ First is the *confrontational model*. This model tends to paint a picture of warfare between theology and science as if each were engaged in a battle of epic proportions, fighting for every inch of territory. This is often rightly linked with American fundamentalism, a particular stream of North American Protestant Christianity. The critical realist theologian, however, better fits McGrath’s *nonconfrontational model*.

On this model the idea adopted is that all truth is God’s truth. Liberal Protestants as well as particular Roman Catholic scholars have especially embraced the nonconfrontational model. These Catholic scholars formed the method of biblical criticism that would become known as *modernism* or *radical higher criticism*.⁷² Modernism, in this sense, is best thought of as a method of interpretation that sought to incorporate Enlightenment thought into the church,

⁷⁰ Noll in Ferngren, 264.

⁷¹ McGrath, 44-50.

⁷² Ibid., 31-38.

which at the end of the 19th century had not been done.⁷³ The modernist agenda was quite radical—more so than the liberal Protestant—and found special importance in the theory of Darwinian evolution. They found little “...difficulty in eliminating those aspects of Christian thought which they found inconvenient.”⁷⁴ Liberal Protestants, incorporating some of the critical methodology of the Catholic moderns, have likewise found little or no conflict with science. A central assumption of theirs since the days of their founding thinker F.D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) has been to transform the archaic words of the Bible into a message that is culturally palatable and relevant to the times. What is clear is that modern critics and liberal Protestants have significantly adjusted doctrine in light of scientific discovery.

The theological programs of the liberal Protestant and the modern biblical critic have a nonconfrontational relationship with scientific discovery. Can the evangelical critical realist theologian holding to a classical expression of Christian doctrine do the same? Is the abandonment or radical adjustment of certain long-held doctrines of the church inevitable? In short, the answer is no. I see no fatal conflict in the assumptions of the critical realist evangelical theologian and the scientific enterprise. Yet, to answer in such a concise manner would be reductive, over-simplifying the complexity of the question. Therefore, at this point what is needed is an understanding of the historical context in which evangelicalism and scientific inquiry both grew. Specifically, we must

⁷³ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 37.

consider the past relationship between evangelicalism and science. To that I now turn.

Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, and Science

In this section I intend to show that the overall attitude within evangelicalism towards science has been one of deep concord and affirmation. A closer look at the historical record on this topic will be instructive. Indeed, it was not until the 1920's that the North American brand of fundamentalism arose. This form of theology was unashamedly confrontational in its model of engagement with mainstream science, particularly those sciences employing the assumptions of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Now, this is not to say that there were no dissenting voices amongst evangelicals prior to the 1920's. What is noteworthy, however, is that those dissenting voices were marginal. Fundamentalism moved into the fore with its critique of mainstream science in a way that, prior to, had not been done.

18th and 19th Century Historical Context. It is important to keep in mind that since the time of Descartes, the world had been undergoing a shift from the teleological assumptions of Aristotelian physics to what would ultimately become the mechanical model of Newtonian physics.⁷⁵ Therefore, by the 18th century, as evangelicalism emerged, scientific inquiry and discovery was nothing new. The 18th century theological approaches of John Wesley and George Whitefield bear this out as they emphasized the empirical experience of

⁷⁵ Peter Millican, "1.3 Science from Aristotle to Galileo," lecture, General Philosophy, Oxford University, March 10, 2011, downloaded from I-Tunes U.

Christianity in what they called “experimental” Christianity.⁷⁶ It is also not surprising to find, by the end of the 18th century, many evangelicals appealing to apologetical natural theology in defending their faith.⁷⁷ Examples of this relatively serene interaction between evangelicalism and science abound.⁷⁸

It was in the 18th century that the disciplines of geology and paleontology became distinct entities of scientific inquiry, forging into the uncharted waters of earth history.⁷⁹ Prehuman earth history, formerly considered to be a single, uniform epoch, now appeared to be characterized by the succession of distinctive flora and fauna increasingly resembling our present world.⁸⁰ “This new vista of earth history equaled the Copernican revolution in its intellectual implications, reducing the relative significance of the human world in time just as early modern astronomy had diminished it in space.”⁸¹ So, it is surely accurate to view these findings as significant within scientific and theological communities. Indeed, at this time there were no fewer than 140 estimates of the earth’s age advocated for by scientists and clergymen alike, ranging from 3,616 to 6,484 years B.C.⁸² Hearing scientists beginning to speak in terms of “millions and millions” of years of earth history was a new development. This did prompt spirited debate as well as ingenious reconciliation schemes that sought to offer

⁷⁶ Noll in Ferngren, 265.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Really, one could argue that Christianity in general, not just evangelicals, had an amiable relationship with science for most of the 18th and 19th centuries.

⁷⁹ Peter M. Hess, “Natural History,” in Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 196.

⁸⁰ Nicholas A. Rupke, “Geology and Paleontology,” in Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 180.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 181-181.

exegetical alternatives for biblical interpreters seeking to incorporate the insights of the new geology.⁸³ Nonetheless, “By and large, mainstream Christian geologists and paleontologists succeeded in coming to terms with the new geology...Flood geology, with its tenets of a young earth and...cataclysmic deluge, became regarded as incorrect and antiquated.”⁸⁴ Curiously, 20th and 21st century American fundamentalism has effectively excavated the old fossils of this long dead ideology. The new geological insights of the 19th century certainly sparked conversation amongst theologians and scientists, but the point not to be missed is that the nature of that conversation was by in large collegial.

Another example of an earlier era of relative peace and harmony between evangelicals and scientists comes out of an examination of the history of evolutionary theory. Surprising as this sounds to those who have witnessed the battles for and against teaching evolutionary theory in American public schools, 18th and 19th century evolutionary science was not so polarizing. This is not to say that there was no passionate debate between theologians and scientists. Any conception of this era described as less than a time of protean theorizing and dynamic scientific inquiry is reductionistic to some degree. The complexity of the era must be acknowledged.

⁸³ Ibid., 184-185. The “day-age theory” and the “gap theory” emerged as popular exegetical moves that sought to incorporate theological convictions with science by effectively separating the history of the earth from the history of humankind. The Bible dealt with humanity while science postulated about the age of the earth.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 192.

The 18th century marks the beginning of the scientific communities' challenge to the 17th century notion of *simple creationism*.⁸⁵ Simple creationism argued that a wise and benevolent God had created the world and was guiding the development of species and their environments ever upward towards higher moral planes of existence. The jewel in the crown of this process was humankind. This view was clearly teleological and was completely comfortable with metaphysical assertions about reality, including descriptive ethics. That is, the world and its creatures are heading somewhere, and God is guiding them toward that end. This is simple creationism. Science began to challenge this picture in the 18th century, but this challenge by no means came in the form of an immediate assault.

A key building block for early evolutionists was formed from the new insights of geology. The earth had been shown to be much older than anyone had previously thought; a literal reading of the Genesis creation account became difficult to reconcile with science.⁸⁶ Prior to these geological insights, materialist thinkers such as Georges Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Denis Diderot began to suggest that life may possibly be spontaneously generated on earth and that species may adapt to their environments through time.⁸⁷ By the end of the 18th century, Jean Baptiste Lamarck had developed his theory of the adaptation of species to their environments "...by supposing that individual animals modified

⁸⁵ Peter J. Bowler, "Evolution," in Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 220.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

their behavior in response to environmental change, and any resulting changes in their bodily structure were inherited.”⁸⁸ These materialistic theories may appear to threaten the very essence of the classical Christian faith, but the response of the Christian community was not excessively reactionary. William Paley (1743-1805), a British philosopher and apologist, simply found Lamarck’s findings as further indication that a benevolent God was guiding the adaptation process, all by design.⁸⁹ For Paley and many others, God was still guiding the process; thus, the tenets of simple creationism could remain.

There did emerge in the 18th century, however, a radical materialist group amongst certain British anatomists. They sought to attack the notion of a “static, designed universe that sustained the social structure.”⁹⁰ In this radical sense, “Evolutionism became firmly linked to materialism, atheism, and radical politics.”⁹¹ In response to this, Richard Owen, a British anatomist himself, propagated an argument similar to Paley’s. In short, he put forth the idea that comparative anatomy within animal groups would reveal an underlying unified structure in the composition of the creatures.⁹² Owen saw this as evidence for the Creator’s design process. It becomes clear that through the 18th century and into the 19th, evangelicals felt little threat from the discoveries of science so long as there remained room for asserting that God, in some manner, was guiding the process.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

Be that as it may, the largest threat to simple creationism has yet to be mentioned. In 1859, Charles Darwin published his book, *Origin of Species*. Darwin's key contribution to the conversation was his theory of natural selection, or as Herbert Spencer termed it, "survival of the fittest."⁹³ In effect, the radical expression of natural selection theory stood contra to the notion of simple creationism as there no longer remained any room for asserting the design thesis. Nature was not necessarily moving towards higher levels of organization; there was no single goal or end on the horizon.⁹⁴ Yet, the design thesis was stubborn. Many evangelicals and other Christians came to accept evolutionary theory along with the theological addition that God was still guiding the process. While this did represent somewhat of a compromise by the theological camp, most people, no matter the level of religious conviction, did not desire a view of the universe that was aimlessly heading in random directions.⁹⁵ Therefore, we can begin to see that evolutionary theory and evangelicalism were not diametrically opposed from the start. The 18th and 19th centuries were predominantly marked by dialogue and debate between Christian and scientific communities, not segregation and alienation. Indeed, "It took many decades for the full implications of Darwin's thinking to become apparent..."⁹⁶ The backdrop for this story is early 20th century America.

⁹³ Ibid., 223.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 224.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

20th Century—The Rise of Fundamentalism in America. Evangelicals and science have a storied past. Prior to and after Darwin’s theory of evolution most evangelical scientists have considered their research as supporting God’s design in the universe.⁹⁷ I have attempted to show that evangelicalism and science share a complex history of inquiry that is by and large *not* marked by continuous conflict. Instead, the historical record shows, I believe, many examples of a close alliance between science and religion. To the contrary, the confrontational model paints a picture of warfare between theology and science as if the two enterprises have a history of constant conflict punctuated by larger explosions, always clashing on some level. And it is this model of interaction between theology and science that came to dominate the relationship in the 20th century.

There are many reasons to see the confrontational model as deficient. First, confrontationalists ignore the vast number of instances wherein science and religion worked, not in conflict, but as either, “...independent, mutually encouraging, or even symbiotic” enterprises.⁹⁸ Second, especially when employed by scientists hostile to religion, the confrontational thesis truncates history, allowing it only to convey the perspective that progress is inevitable and will win out in the end.⁹⁹ Third, science and religion are treated as monoliths.¹⁰⁰ Seldom if ever have the entire scientific or theological communities responded with uniformity to particular problems or challenges. Yet, confrontationalists

⁹⁷ Noll in Ferngren, 271. See pp. 269-271 for a larger list of significant British and American evangelical scientists of the 18th and 19th centuries.

⁹⁸ Colin A. Russell, “The Conflict of Science and Religion,” in Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Sometimes this is referred to as “Whiggish historiography.”

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

paint a dualistic picture of strife between religion and science. This is reductionist history, and it distorts reality showing little appreciation for nuance or “gray areas.” Last, confrontationalists tend to elevate “...minor squabbles, or even differences of opinion...” to the status of grand conflicts.¹⁰¹ The Huxley-Wilberforce debate is a prime example. This so called “debate” was actually an informal conversation between the two men following the reading of a paper at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. No written record of their discourse is known to exist; however, both gentlemen have often been quoted (or misquoted) often times igniting conflict. Despite all of this, the confrontational model persists, and it is out of this paradigm of engagement that American fundamentalism arose and is sustained.

Fundamentalism in America is marked by a confrontationalist interaction with mainstream science, a literalist biblical hermeneutic, and a Bible-based science developed to replace the “flawed” mainstream science of the contemporary age. This Bible-based science is often referred to as *creation science* or *creationism*.¹⁰² In the late 19th century, debates over Darwinian theory remained primarily relegated to academic circles where many evangelicals had accepted a form of organic evolution.¹⁰³ Yet, the populace had not followed suite. In that era (late 19th century) most Americans would have advocated for some form of special creation in articulating their understanding of how the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Creationism or creation science often includes the tenets of six literal days of creation as depicted in the book of Genesis as well as *flood geology* which seeks to explore the geological implications of a world-wide flood.

¹⁰³ Ronald L. Numbers, “Creationism since 1859,” in Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 279.

universe and humankind had obtained.¹⁰⁴ This contrast between the intelligentsia and the populace would increasingly spill over into the public square. Perhaps no event did as much to shed light on the creation-evolution controversy as the 1925 Scopes Trial.

William Jennings Bryan, the thrice-defeated Democratic nominee for President of the United States and Presbyterian layman, became aware of an effort to ban the teaching of evolution in Kentucky's public schools.¹⁰⁵ The year was 1922. A similar effort actually became law by the end of the decade in three states—Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi.¹⁰⁶ It is important to understand that Bryan is representative of a larger para-church movement that sought to keep evolution out of schools. Indeed, one of the assumptions of this movement was that Darwinian evolutionary theory was intellectually untenable and was in the midst of being discarded by scientists.¹⁰⁷ In actuality, at this time a small minority of scientists were questioning the viability of evolutionary theory, but their publications led creationists to the sweeping conclusion that the academy had practically jettisoned the theory.¹⁰⁸ Further, Bryan, being known for his populist agenda as well as a man of staunch faith, was a "perfect fit" for carrying the torch of antievolutionism.

The Scopes Trial itself, held in Dayton, Tennessee, was more of an exhibition than a legal proceeding. The 24-year-old general science teacher and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 279.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 280.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

football coach John T. Scopes was on trial for allegedly teaching evolutionary theory in a public school.¹⁰⁹ There were many factors at work in the proceedings. These included the desire for Dayton to “put itself on the map,” the desire of the defense to strike down the antievolution law rather than actually defend Scopes, and the desire of the public and the media to enjoy the event of seeing Bryan debate the also famous Clarence Darrow of the defense. The immediate result was a victory for the prosecution (Bryan), but most neutral observers viewed the trial as a draw.¹¹⁰ Through time, however, the Scopes Trial has worked as a polarizing force in America spurring antievolutionary proponents onward as well as hardening the resolve of supporters of evolutionary theory. Most certainly, the dichotomy between theology and science—specifically evolutionary theory—which was on display for a national audience at the Scopes trial, is still present in American culture to this day.

Much more could be brought to light concerning evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and science. Their histories are complex and interesting. What is noteworthy for our purposes is the different models of engagement employed by the evangelical and the fundamentalist. The evangelical maintains that science and religion can adopt a nonconfrontational model of engagement while the fundamentalist emphasizes only the conflict. But is the evangelical theologian realistic in his or her expectation that the two spheres of theology and science could ever learn to share a plot of epistemological real estate? Alvin

¹⁰⁹ Edward J. Larson, “The Scopes Trial,” in Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 290.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

Plantinga believes this is entirely possible. Next, we will consider Plantinga's thesis that there is no science/religion conflict inherent in the proposition that God regularly interacts with the physical world. This is part of a larger work wherein Plantinga, considering the relationship between classical Christianity and science, claims that what appears on the surface to be discord is not the case. Classical Christianity and science actually have a relationship of deep and resounding harmony.

Plantinga on God's Interaction in the World

In a recent lecture delivered at Taylor University, Plantinga put forth the idea that according to classical Christianity, God regularly and dependably acts in the physical world.¹¹¹ This sort of action could be thought of as those sorts of physical occurrences such as the rotation and revolution of the Earth, the growing of a seed, the rain and rock cycles, etc. Classical Christianity has long held that all of these actions are due to God's sustaining or conserving of the universe. So, in a sense one might say that the sun rises or the seed grows due to God's action in the world. This sort of statement is relatively benign within most Christian circles. However, when one begins to posit God's *special* action in the universe, the battle lines are quickly drawn. Special action includes God's

¹¹¹ Alvin Plantinga, "Divine Action in the World," lecture, Taylor University, March 2, 2011. This section follows this lecture.

response to prayer, healings, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, the process of sanctification, etc. These are miraculous acts.

Many liberal theologians have viewed special interaction as *interference*, connoting an unwelcome act of God. In other words, any act beyond the creation and conservation of the world that is attributed to God would run contrary somehow to the findings of science. This is termed *anti-interventionism*.

Plantinga, here, is explaining the assumptions of one like the liberal Protestant who adheres to a nonconfrontational model between faith and science, but allows science to eschew biblical doctrine when doctrine and science clash. The tension is evident. Classical Christian doctrine assumes that God often transcends the boundaries of creation and conservation, becomes immanent in the world, and performs special acts. The Liberal Protestant relegates God to creation and conservation.

Plantinga then moves to explain that the anti-interventionists assume the “Old Picture” (OP) of physics. That is, the world is a complex machine, operating by certain fixed laws, all within a closed system. Action in the universe is determined by whatever happens at any particular time, together with the laws of physics coming to bear on that action, resulting in whatever happens at any other time. What is missing from the equation is a justification by the OP for accepting that the universe is indeed a closed system. Why should one accept this? There seems to be no scientific—i.e. measurable or testable—manner in which to assert that the universe is a closed system. Therefore, God’s special action is not in conflict with science on the OP.

Now, if there is an Old Picture, there must be a New Picture. The New Picture takes into account the theories of quantum mechanics. In quantum theory, laws are considered probabilistic, rather than deterministic. So, it is probable that I will sink if I attempt to walk on water, but it is not wholly determined. Nonetheless, many theologians and scientists, schooled in quantum theory, still find it difficult to accept any sort of special divine action.¹¹² Their largest objection to God's special intervention is that he would be at best inconsistent and at worst contradictory. In other words, how can God, the creator and upholder of natural law, simultaneously break the very law he is upholding via special action? What kind of God would this be? Would caprice mark his character rather than benevolence?

Plantinga gives the following answer

What exactly is wrong with the idea that God should intervene—arbitrary inconsistency? But is this really true? There would be arbitrariness and inconsistency only if there were no special reason for acting contrary to the usual regularities. Raising Jesus from the dead. In other cases too, however, he might have reasons for 'dealing in two different manners' with his cosmos; how could we be even reasonably sure that he doesn't? Perhaps he aims to establish basic regularities, thus making science and free intelligent action possible for his creatures. But perhaps he also has good reason for sometimes acting contrary to those regularities: to mark special occasions, for example,

¹¹² The "theologians and scientists" noted here by Plantinga are consist of the highly reputable and earnest scholars comprising the "Divine Action Project"—a 15 year series of conferences and publications that began in 1988.

or to make clear his love or his power, or to authorize what someone says, or to guide history in a certain direction. Why should any of this be in any way incompatible with his unsurpassable greatness?

In essence, Plantinga is saying that an accusation of God being arbitrary in his special divine action is actually a demand to know God's reason for acting in the first place. Yet, not being allowed to know God's reasoning process does not disqualify God from having good reasons to act. Furthermore, Plantinga points out that an objection such as the one raised by the New Picture scientists and theologians is clearly a philosophical or theological objection, not a scientific objection. Thus, he concludes that there is no scientific objection under the Old or the New Picture inhibiting God's special action in the world.

What we have seen thus far in this chapter is first, that scientists and evangelicals holding to the classical expressions of Christian doctrine have a long but complex nonconfrontational history. This may not seem to be the case in light of the confrontational motivation of fundamentalism. However, I have aimed to show that fundamentalists and scientific confrontationalists alike have manufactured the need to set theology and science off against one another. One part of the way this has been achieved is to turn the truth of the relationship between religion and science (particularly between evangelicals and science) into a fiction by marring the historical account such that all that remains is a story of warfare. After that, I brought to light Plantinga's argument wherein he finds no contradiction with the claims of science and the special divine action of God in the world. This argument is important for our purposes as it provides an

avenue for upholding the doctrinal claims of classical Christianity contra the adjusted doctrine of liberal Protestantism and modern biblical criticism. In other words, being able to coherently demonstrate God's regular interaction with the natural, physical world as being logically possible allows the evangelical critical realist to resist the need to radically adjust classical Christian doctrine as well as resist the option of taking the fundamentalist's confrontational stance. It is a safeguard for *both* theology and science. Finally, we must turn our attention back to critical realism, noting more of what it has to offer.

What Does Critical Realism Bring to the Discussion?

I have been arguing all along that the evangelical theologian seeking to maintain the expression of classical Christianity is aided by subscribing to critical realism. In what follows, I will offer three reasons to support this claim.

First, critical realism brings with it a postfoundational critique of foundationalism. In other words, the foundationalist tendencies within science and theology must be acknowledged. By doing so, an epistemological space is cleared where dialogue can ensue. If this is not achieved the old confrontational paradigm will rule the day. Moving to a postfoundational epistemological stance may seem a simple point to make, but I believe it is easier said than done. The strict scientific materialist and the literalist fundamentalist have more in common than they might care to admit. Both see their disciplines as engaged in conflict.¹¹³ Both seek a secure, indubitable foundation for their specific type of

¹¹³ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, "Postfoundationalism in Theology and Science: Beyond

knowledge.¹¹⁴ Both claim that a choice must be made between the claims of science and theology.¹¹⁵ In a postfoundational setting, none of these attributes need be the case.

Old habits die hard, and surely moving to a postfoundational epistemology will involve the loss of certain epistemic habits. If this can be achieved, there are many attendant implications. One such implication is that the opposition between scientific rationality and other forms of rationality would completely breakdown.¹¹⁶ With this breakdown comes the breakdown of another perpetuator of the confrontational model—the fact-value dichotomy. Science has long considered itself as trading in objective reality thus having the ability to make value-free statements. In the postfoundational context, this is no longer possible. With each theory choice, deliberation, and evaluation, scientists “place certain kinds of value judgments at the heart of the scientific method itself.”¹¹⁷ Furthermore, it could be argued that “decisions by individual scientists to work on one problem rather than another already imply value judgments about the superiority of knowledge to ignorance, intelligibility to unintelligibility, and truth to error.”¹¹⁸

The postfoundationalist epistemology of critical realism forces both the theologian and scientist to consider their foundationalist tendencies. It also

Conflict and Consonance,” in Niels Henrik Gregersen and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, eds. *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 16.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

breaks down the fact-value dichotomy asserting that there are no value-free judgments as we are all situated in certain cultural-linguistic contexts doing our best to interpret reality as we encounter it.

Second, building off of the first point, critical realism insists that reality is structured, layered, interconnected, and unified. Therefore, both theology and science are seeking to describe an ontological state of reality using their particular method of inquiry. Nevertheless, they are both describing a portion of the same unified reality. If both the theologian and scientist can accept this, I believe the possibilities for profitable, and perhaps groundbreaking work can begin. I do acknowledge, however, the possibility that both may explore the same topic and come out with contradictory conclusions. In short, so what! If the conviction that we are truly examining the same reality is held firm, then may the dialectical process begin. Perhaps new methods will be developed for considering contradictory conclusions drawn by the scientist and theologian. Keeping the tenets of critical realism close at hand will help to remind all parties, once again, that there are no value-free facts and that emergent reality is stratified yet unified.

Third and last, real emergent human persons, to the critical realist, are more than material entities. They possess causal powers beyond the sum of their empirical parts. This notion, if accepted by the scientist, will most certainly redefine the boundaries of scientific realism beyond the empirical to the metaphysical. Discussions of the immortal soul as well as descriptive ethics may become central topics on the interdisciplinary research agenda rather than be

relegated to theology and philosophy only. Of course, to make it this far nothing less than a paradigm shift will do. The scientist especially, as one working in a theory laden context, should be aware that even the most sacred of assumptions, including the neo-Darwinian evolutionary synthesis, may be questioned on some level. The idea that real emergent human persons composed of more than the sum of their material components and in possession of causal powers enabling them to effect reality, even as it exists within their own self, is a deep and rich concept. Critical realism brings this into the foreground.

In this chapter I have argued that critical realism provides the best ground for dialogue between the scientist and the evangelical seeking to uphold classical Christianity. I have asserted that critical realism upholds the long-standing tradition of theology and science engaged in a nonconfrontational dialogue. Plantinga's proposition that God's regular, special interaction in the world does not conflict with scientific inquiry was employed to bolster my claim that critical realism affords the evangelical theologian the possibility of a nonconfrontational space for dialogue with the scientific community. Also, Plantinga's thesis helps to show that the evangelical theologian upholding classical Christianity need not retreat to the supposed safe house of fundamentalism or acquiesce on the alteration of doctrinal matters along with the liberal Protestant. Lastly, I have suggested three ways in which critical realism adds to the ongoing discussion between faith and science. First, a postfoundational epistemology is acknowledged. Second, both the theologian and scientist seek to describe the same reality. And third, real emergent human

persons are more than the sum of their material parts; thereby, metaphysical inquiry is no longer divorced from the scientific agenda.

Despite the topics that have been covered thus far, many questions remain for the critical realist theologian. Particularly, those questions may have to do with interpretative methodology and sacred texts. In other words, how does a critical realist responsibly read the Bible without falling victim to either the fundamentalist's excessive literalism on the one hand or the liberal's radical editing of the text on the other? Questions such as these drive our inquiry forward.

CHAPTER 3

Critical Realism and Reading the Bible

It is not an overstatement for me to communicate that at the moment I am typing these words a battle is raging. It began on the battlefield of the blogosphere then spilled over into the formal news media. It revolves around the release of the book entitled *Love Wins* by the popular Grand Rapids pastor Rob Bell. Of course, I should qualify this claim. The intensity of this battle varies from person to person. Some have declared Bell's work as noxious heterodoxy, bidding him a fond farewell from the rank and file of evangelicalism.¹¹⁹ Others have embraced it wholeheartedly, and still others have found both positives and negatives worthy of engagement. My purposes here are certainly not to address the doctrinal issues brought to the fore by *Love Wins*. Rather, in this chapter I intend to explore the framework of a critical realist hermeneutic. I will begin by making a suggestion that I believe reveals what is at the root of the *Love Wins* contention and many others like it that occur regularly outside the eye of the media. It is my hope that this suggestion will serve as a launch point for asking the inevitably difficult questions that ultimately lead to the realm of

¹¹⁹ Here I am alluding to Pastor John Piper's Twitter post that read, "Goodbye Rob Bell." This was accompanied by a link to a scathing review of Bell's book.

interpretative theory. Following that suggestion I will attempt a brief survey of literary theory with an eye towards biblical interpretation. Lastly, I will suggest how the tenets of critical realism are employed with respect to hermeneutics thereby allowing a form of interpretative realism to remain plausible, resisting the antifoundational extremity of an interpretative anti-realism. This endeavor will serve the overall claim that critical realism provides a framework for reading the Bible that meets the interpretative challenges of the postmodern age. I begin by employing the controversy swarming around Bell's book as an illustration of what may be the actual root of the problem.

Hermeneutics as the Root of the Problem (or Solution)

Those who have been quick to rise up against the claims found in *Love Wins* have centered their criticism, according to what I have read, on particular doctrinal positions Bell has taken or implied. And, this may be well and good. Yet, I do not believe that these critiques will sway many. Bell supporters will remain. Bell scorers will also remain. Perhaps, both camps will only entrench themselves deeper. Now, one may wonder why a spirited round of sophisticated doctrinal debate may, in the end, only serve to harden the battle lines? I suggest this is because these discussions do not address the root of the contention. Lurking below the disagreement on doctrines concerning heaven and hell or perseverance or justification lays the complex world of hermeneutics. This is the realm of theological prolegomena, presuppositions, and method. And make no mistake, it can be daunting for the theologian as well as the layperson. Nevertheless, concerning the topic of method in theology, N.T. Wright remarks,

“...if we do not explore presuppositional matters, we can expect endless and fruitless debate. Those who are eager to get on with what they see as the real business are welcome to...but they must not mind if by doing so they run into puzzles at a later stage.”¹²⁰ Interpretative questions, it seems, will remain as the “elephant in the room” until they are addressed. Therefore, I have become intrigued as I have followed the *Love Wins* discussion from the sidelines. This is not because I desire to articulate a particular doctrinal stance, but because I have not perceived any involved party to be asking questions directly related to hermeneutics.¹²¹ This is unfortunate as questions aimed at interpretative method could bring clarity to the dialogue. A lot of time could be saved and issues could be addressed directly.

In light of my claim that hermeneutic assumptions constitute the bedrock of doctrinal disputes, I suggest that asking the following types of questions may lead to the consideration of issues prior to doctrine dealing with interpretation: How is it that Christians, all reading the Bible, can come to varying conclusions on certain topics? Is this appropriate or even logically possible? Further, how can one judge as to whose reading of the Bible should stand and whose should

¹²⁰ Wright, 31.

¹²¹ The lone exception that I have found may be the McLaren-Mohler exchange that has been playing out in March of 2011. McLaren devotes approximately 25% of his essay to discussing interpretative issues while Mohler give 34% of his article over to the topic. The problem with both is that neither addresses the topic with the level of sophistication necessary to bring clarity to the issues. Perhaps this is not a valid criticism since these are basically blog posts. Yet, as long as the hard work of interpretation remains undone, I agree with N.T. Wright—no one should be surprised to run continually into puzzlement.

McLaren’s Article: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-d-mclaren/will-love-wins-win-were-e_b_839164.html

Mohler’s Article: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/03/23/a-theological-conversation-worth-having-a-response-to-brian-mclaren/>

be thrown out? Is there one meaning embedded in the biblical text and can we recover it? I find these questions to be fair yet difficult—of the type that have indubitably vexed the theologian and layperson for millennia. Indeed, they are the sort of questions that point to issues that are prior to the acts of reading and applying the Bible.

Now before proceeding, I believe it is important to acknowledge the following basic assumption: the descriptive task of evangelical biblical theology, upon which subsequent systematic, practical, and historic theologies are constructed, presupposes a hermeneutical methodology that cedes to the interpreter the “rational capital” needed to create doctrinal propositions.¹²² In other words, those engaging in evangelical biblical theology are doing so by means of certain hermeneutical assumptions (among other base assumptions) that allow or disallow for particular conclusions to be drawn from the biblical text. Furthermore, it is not the concern of the evangelical engaging in biblical theology to seek to validate the presuppositions of their discipline.¹²³ This does not mean that those scholars engaging in biblical theology are unaware of the issues surrounding hermeneutics, but it could mean that biblical theologians may not be optimally situated to engage hermeneutical issues as they often lead into the realm of philosophy. Yet, I believe this is a realm into which we must go.

¹²² See Larry R. Helyer, *The Witness of Jesus, Paul, and John: An Exploration in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) 19-31 for a discussion of the structure of traditional evangelical theology and the place that biblical theology takes therein.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 22.

It seems, then, that the evangelical systematic theologian, given the nature of his or her training, is better equipped for the task of considering questions of method. More specifically, the nature of the systematic theologian's training is synchronic, seeking to correlate logically the data generated by the exegesis of the biblical theologian with "reason, tradition (historical theology), and experience, as well as the empirical and social sciences and liberal arts."¹²⁴ That is not to mention the apologetic task of systematic theology which would naturally lead to engaging the presuppositions of one's own thought as well as the thought of one's interlocutors. Solid exegesis produced by the enterprise of evangelical biblical theology is vital. Just as vital, yet perhaps less appreciated, is the task of articulating the methodology that undergirds the exegetical process. This task falls to the systematic theologian.

So far, the division of labor between the biblical and systematic theologian that I have described seems meet and proper. Yet the tendency amongst evangelical theologians has been to marginalize questions of method.¹²⁵ That is, the task of theological hermeneutics, taken up by the systematic theologian, has not been emphasized by evangelicals nearly to the degree that it has amongst their mainline counterparts.¹²⁶ This is not because evangelicals lack a methodological approach, but rather it is a matter of an uncritical incorporation of methodological presuppositions. Often these presuppositions import a modernistic, foundationalist epistemology that tends to reduce the

¹²⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹²⁵ See Grenz and Franke, 13-15 for a discussion on method in evangelical theology.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Bible to a book of propositions that simply need organized rather than taking the Bible as a living testimony of God's revelation of himself, needing careful, contextual interpretation. Again, the evangelical biblical theologian is not without a method. It is just that the modernistic undergirding, particularly the epistemological assumptions, are flawed. And, inasmuch as the critical realist takes a stand against reductionistic metaphysics, he or she also stands against a reductionistic epistemology. A foundationalist epistemology in tandem with a naïve realism is, according to critical realism, reductionistic.

Given these comments on method and theology, I can now reaffirm my point. Why is it that doctrinal disputes within evangelicalism, like the current dispute surrounding Bell's book, tend to flare up, bringing more confusion than clarity? I say it is because there exists underlying hermeneutical presuppositions that are often uncritically assumed by evangelical biblical theologians. Hermeneutics is the root of the solution. Biblical theologians, at certain junctures, are obliged to defend their interpretation of the text against criticism, or they are compelled to critique another position. This practice of defense/criticism is certainly a proper activity for the biblical theologian; within that dialectic good interpretations are sharpened and extended while bad interpretations are abandoned. However, more often than not—especially amongst evangelicals—the method that underlies the exegetical interpretation of a text is not discussed. And, therein lies the problem, as I believe that it is only at the level of interpretative methodology that certain questions about resultant readings of particular biblical texts can be fully understood.

What is needed, then, is the ability to navigate the turbulent waters of hermeneutics. More specifically what is needed is a critical realist evangelical biblical theologian equipped—perhaps through the work of the systematic theologian—to articulate the nuanced rhetoric of literary realism. This exegete is then positioned to engage in fruitful, rather than fruitless dialogue with critics. As we continue towards analyzing a critical realist hermeneutic, I next offer a brief survey of literary theory and its impact on biblical hermeneutics.

Literary Theory and the Bible

Contemporary literary theory is an eclectic mix of various schools of literary criticism. Since the 1888 death of Matthew Arnold, the English Victorian-age critic, there has been no central voice to speak on behalf of the discipline, nor one particular school dominating the theoretical landscape.¹²⁷ Also, it is important to note that the current playing field of literary theory has been greatly impacted by the fragmentary tendencies of poststructuralism.¹²⁸ The interpretation of the biblical text has followed the same general pattern. When considering the interpretation of the New Testament, for example, there have been two major eras. The first was a shift during the Enlightenment to a “...single preoccupation with historical method...” while the second is the methodological pluralism that characterizes the late twentieth and now twenty-

¹²⁷ Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007),

¹²⁸ *Poststructuralism* includes the deconstructionism of Derrida, which is aimed at disassembling the binary relationships of Western philosophy, amongst other long-held assumptions. See *ibid.*, 116-128.

first centuries.¹²⁹ In other words, there was an era where one method was dominant, but that era has given way to a plurality of methodologies. In what follows I will attempt to trace some of the key paradigms for interpreting the Bible from the premodern to the postmodern eras.

In the premodern era, revelation and tradition ruled the day. In other words, interpretative enigmas were solved by appealing to the church's accepted reading of the biblical text. Religious leaders held absolute views of reality and truth based on the inherent authority of text and tradition (including creedal confessions). This did not mean that there was a shortage of creativity when it came to the premodern engagement of the biblical text. For instance, the early Church Fathers borrowed from their Greek counterparts the method of allegory.¹³⁰ This method was often overdone as too much symbolic meaning was attributed to the text, yet the Fathers maintained that reality stood behind the text as it was a faithful record of God's action in history.¹³¹

The watershed moment in the premodern era was the Reformation. Particularly, for our purposes, the method of reading Scripture employed by Martin Luther is instructive. Luther held that there is both an *outer* and *inner* clarity of Scripture.¹³² "The 'outer clarity' means the New Testament teaching about Jesus Christ is clear enough for anyone to understand, and the subjective

¹²⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, "New Testament Interpretation in Historical Perspective," in Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

¹³⁰ Laurence W. Wood, *Theology as History and Hermeneutics* (Lexington: Emeth Press, 2004) 106.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

illumination of the Holy Spirit provides an ‘inner clarity’ of its truthfulness.”¹³³ Subsequently, a movement emerged known as High Lutheran Orthodoxy. High Lutheran Orthodoxy emphasized Luther’s concept of outer clarity thereby setting up an intellectualist gauntlet to be overcome before one could arrive at a right understanding of the Bible.¹³⁴ In turn, a counter-movement developed known as Pietism. Pietists resisted the Lutheran Orthodox emphasis on the outer clarity of Scripture by seeking to establish and elevate the inner clarity and the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation.¹³⁵

Reformation thought, and the dialectic of Lutheran Orthodoxy and Pietism effectively functioned as the impetus for transitioning to a new paradigm—modernity. Vanhoozer refers to modernity as the “Age of the Author” because there was much interest in unearthing the intentions of the authors of texts.¹³⁶ The high point of modernity is found in 18th century Enlightenment thought, yet the morning star of the period is often considered to be the French-born philosopher Rene Descartes (1598-1650). Descartes began questioning the authoritarian assumptions of the premodern era. He set the stage for autonomous reason to usurp traditionalist (i.e. premodern) readings of the text. In his 1637 essay entitled *Discourse on Method*, Descartes began the development of what would later become known as modern foundationalism.¹³⁷

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Vanhoozer, 25.

¹³⁷ Wood, 1.

He sought a rational foundation for belief in God free from revelation and traditionalism.

In the wake of Descartes and in the midst of the shifting intellectual landscape that was the advent of modernity, the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was born. Schleiermacher would become known as the father of modern theology and is noted as giving the quintessential account of modernistic, author-centered hermeneutics.¹³⁸ His thesis was quite bold as he ultimately claimed that the interpreter could connect with the consciousness of the author; thus, the interpreter was able to understand the meaning of a text better than the text's author.¹³⁹ Schleiermacher thought this was possible due to the ability of human beings to understand common experiences by means of empathy.¹⁴⁰ This psychological interpretative method "...means that one must re-enact the selfhood of the author to gain an understanding of the text."¹⁴¹ Ironically, the psychological hermeneutic of Schleiermacher derived via the *subjective*, psychological connection between interpreter and author was considered to be the route to gaining an *objective* understanding of the meaning of a text. The author's reporting of objective history began to be superseded in the modern period by the "objective" data generated by Schleiermacher's psychological hermeneutic.¹⁴² The *sola scriptura*

¹³⁸ Vanhoozer, 25

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Wood, 109.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

principle of the Reformation had been rejected as religious experience was taken as being prior to Scripture.¹⁴³

Building on the thought of Schleiermacher, philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) extended the modernist predilection toward the central challenge of theology as being the demonstration of a cogent epistemology.¹⁴⁴ If textual understanding for Schleiermacher came through the psychological connection of author and interpreter, historical understanding for Dilthey was ascertained in a similar fashion. Dilthey drew a distinction between “...the epistemology of the natural sciences and the epistemology of the human sciences.”¹⁴⁵ In short, attempting to gain knowledge of the natural world, which is the undertaking of the natural sciences, will never yield true knowledge as human perception of the natural world is always veiled. However, humans are capable of gaining true knowledge of human action and of the human mind.¹⁴⁶ Further, history is created by the human mind, and since the human mind can be known, then history, in this qualified sense, can be known. So, historical understanding on Dilthey’s method becomes an internal, subjective matter just as textual understanding does for Schleiermacher.

There are certainly more modern interpreters that could be considered, but what becomes clear in this period is that history is no longer a reliable witness of the events of the past. Modern philosophy had produced a situation

¹⁴³ Wood, 108.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 110.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

in which fact was divorced from value, subject separated from object. This was epitomized in the existential theology of Rudolph Bultmann whereby he separated the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith.¹⁴⁷ We also see signs of the binary nature of modern thought when we contrast the waxing of a scientific epistemology that considers the scientific method to be the best avenue for knowing with the waning of metaphysical realism and ideas like the eternal soul and an omnipotent, omniscient God. Yet, one major shift in human thought remains. Postmodernism would call Enlightenment thought into question on many fronts.

There are many attempts made at describing when the shift to a postmodern outlook took place. Some say the death of Nietzsche marks the end of the modern era. Others note the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the attendant failure of Marxism as the proper time. Still others mark a specific meeting of particular architects, noting the date and time, as the proper harbinger of the new age. No matter when one marks the advent of postmodernism, there is little doubt that a shift in thinking has occurred. For our purposes noting the expansion of literary theory and hermeneutics will be useful as we consider postmodernism.

In the 19th century, hermeneutics leapt from the science of interpreting texts to the art of interpreting life.¹⁴⁸ That is, thinkers began to note the subjective, interpretative elements of all human inquiry. Thus when Jacques

¹⁴⁷ Laurence W. Wood, *God and History: The Dialectical Tension of Faith and History in Modern Thought* (Lexington: Emeth, 2005), 205-230.

¹⁴⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 20.

Derrida uttered his famous saying, “*There is nothing outside of the text,*” a hermeneutics of life was implied.¹⁴⁹ This can be seen in the development of literary theory (or just *theory*) as well. As noted, the contemporary landscape of theory is highly populated with some methods standing in stark contrast to others. Furthermore, theorists today are not only critiquing texts, but rather it is open season for the critique of *everything*.

Jonathan Culler, long-time professor of English at Cornell University, makes use of the American pragmatist Richard Rorty’s insights when explaining the development of theory. Culler aims to show that beginning in the 19th century a distinct genre of writing that would become known as *theory* began to develop.¹⁵⁰ This genre is thoroughly interdisciplinary including “works of anthropology, art history, film studies, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, science studies, social and intellectual history and sociology.”¹⁵¹ “Theory in this sense is not a set of methods for literary study but an unbounded group of writings about everything under the sun, from the most technical problems of academic philosophy to the changing ways in which people have talked and thought about the human body.”¹⁵² Understanding

¹⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, John Hopkins, 1997), 158.

¹⁵⁰ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Brief Insight* (New York: Sterling, 1997), 3-5.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4. To this list it seems appropriate to add the discipline of theology. In a sense, when theologians seek to develop a *theology of work, or language, or culture, etc.* they are engaging in a project that is similar to the critical enterprise of the theorist. Yet, there are certainly significant differences as well. Theologians would likely have a tendency to not only deconstruct, but to construct where the theorist may leave off after the deconstructive work is done.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

theory in this way allows one to see how the work of particular thinkers may grow and be used beyond the discipline for which it was written.

Take the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) as an example. Through his development of the idea that we play “language games” as the principles of interpretation vary depending on factors like culture, gender, socio-economics, etc., the later Wittgenstein, “...became a *critic* of modern perspectives...and may be viewed as a forerunner of postmodern anxiety.”¹⁵³ The general lesson here is that the contemporary, postmodern realm of theory is not geared to provide “harmonious solutions” to our interpretative questions.¹⁵⁴ Once one theoretical option is articulated six more may possibly step in to deride the original. Welcome to the postmodern conundrum.

Now, the question becomes, what impact has the postmodern turn had on biblical interpretation. From the standpoint of literary critical methodology—the tools of inquiry for the literary theorist—the options are manifold.¹⁵⁵ Just a casual glance at the table of contents of any textbook concerned with literary theory or criticism will reveal many standard theoretical options like Russian formalism, new criticism, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminist theory, Marxism, queer theory, and more. Evangelical biblical interpreters have worked to deflect negative, degenerate attacks produced by some critical methods, but have also found welcome insights via others.

¹⁵³ Donald K. McKim, “Biblical Interpretations in Europe in the Twentieth Century,” in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007) 68-69. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁴ Culler, 163.

¹⁵⁵ See Bressler, pp. 6-7 for a concise explanation of the relationship between literary criticism and literary theory.

Nevertheless, the climate produced by the iconoclasm of postmodern theory affords the evangelical biblical interpreter a unique opportunity. In many ways, the interpretative slate has been wiped clean. The possibility of garnering helpful insight from the premodern and modern eras to aid in faithfully reading the Bible is a reality. Only, as we make this interpretative exodus into the postmodern age, and we gather the interpretative “Egyptian gold” of bygone eras, we must be sure that it is faithfully put to use once we arrive.

Critical Realism and Hermeneutics

I return in this last section to consider critical realism more directly. Here I employ as guides the writings of both Kevin Vanhoozer and N.T. Wright. Both assume the central tenets of critical realism. Vanhoozer is a systematic theologian whose seminal work, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* will be consulted. Wright is probably best described as a historical theologian although his work is quite sweeping. His ability to converse with biblical theology and systematics is both impressive and needed in the evangelical community. His multi-volume *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series is still in process. In the first installment of that series, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright devotes the second section to questions of theological method. The choice to consult Vanhoozer and Wright underscores my previous call for an evangelical critical realist approach to biblical theology that is sensitive to the contention surrounding literary realism.

Indeed, the claim that there is a mind-independent or text-independent reality in existence is perhaps the most significant dividing line in hermeneutics.

Those advocating for that position may occupy a range subsequent positions. To one extreme are what Vanhoozer calls the “cognitive zealots.”¹⁵⁶ They typically believe that there is one correct interpretation of a given text and that interpretation is found by committing to the hard interpretative work necessary to do the job. The underlying epistemology, which is rarely acknowledged, is a form of foundationalism. *New Criticism*, which developed in the first two-thirds of the 20th century, is a good example of this position. Proponents of this literary theory put forth the notion that, by following the proper formula of analysis, the correct meaning of a text can be determined. New Critics, as adherents are called, find this procedure attractive, viewing the methodology as a universal key for unlocking objective meaning, using (for the most part) the text itself, so long as the proper procedures are followed.¹⁵⁷

On the other end of the spectrum reside the “Cognitive Atheists.”¹⁵⁸ This is a position of extreme skepticism where it is believed that there is simply not enough evidence to determine a correct interpretation. Whereas the New Critic finds meaning embedded within the text, the poststructuralist, relying on deconstruction theory, believes that the text is actually running an interference pattern thus misconstruing attempts at meaning.¹⁵⁹ The result is an antifoundationalist form of interpretative nihilism.

¹⁵⁶ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 294.

¹⁵⁷ Bressler, 55.

¹⁵⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 294.

¹⁵⁹ Bressler, 117.

Between these two poles stand the “Critical Believers.”¹⁶⁰ One particular stance taken by the Critical Believer Vanhoozer calls *Hermeneutic Inclusivism*.¹⁶¹ For them, the text presents itself to the reader as having a finite number of correct readings. “There are textual constraints as well as textual openings for the reader.”¹⁶² This is a text-based approach to determining meaning that is capable of ruling out many interpretations but also capable of approving a plurality of methods that arrive at different meanings. This is where critical realism fits in.¹⁶³ Is it possible to believe in a single correct interpretation of a text without claiming to have absolute knowledge of it? The critical realist says yes. Recall the epistemological stance of critical realism is postfoundational. Of course, this does not mean that the critical realist joins in the antifoundational beliefs of the interpretative non-realist. Just because one cannot have complete knowledge of something does not necessitate that one retreat to the belief that no knowledge is possible. Ironically, the one who retreats to the antifoundational position, it seems, still is influenced by the desire to have absolute knowledge. Since they cannot have all of it, they will have none of it.

What we are claiming thus far is that the critical realist finds it rational to believe in determinate meaning in the face of interpretative disagreement.¹⁶⁴ The notion of determinate meaning, however, is not taken for granted by Vanhoozer. Perhaps the greatest challenge to the idea that a text has a

¹⁶⁰ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 294.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 294-295.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 292-303. The pages cited here are where Vanhoozer answers to the affirmative that determinate meaning can be appealed to in the face of interpretative disagreement.

determinate meaning comes by way of the interpretative anti-realism of Stanley Fish.¹⁶⁵

Fish locates meaning and truth in the interpretative community. In other words, those communities reading texts are doing so within a context that is temporal, social, cultural, economic, *et al.* The “correct” interpretation for Fish is then the one that a particular interpretative community, at that moment in time, adheres to. He states that, “To someone who believes in determinate meaning, disagreement can only be a theological error.”¹⁶⁶ Fish goes on to comment parenthetically that “original sin would seem to be the only relevant model” for accounting for how and why interpretations conflict.¹⁶⁷ He does not seek to discredit a model of determinate meaning that accepts original sin. Vanhoozer realizes this and employs Plantinga’s work to counter Fish¹⁶⁸

Briefly, Vanhoozer, following Plantinga, argues that there is a difference between the *normative* conditions under which a community of readers determines meaning and the *proper* conditions under which meaning is ascertained. Now for Fish, authority is determined by the “normal” procedures and “normal” conditions of the community. Yet, “normal” does not equal “proper.” The cognitive effects of original sin skew the interpretative process of properly determining meaning. Therefore, a determinate meaning can be said to

¹⁶⁵ See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) for his argument which I will only briefly summarize in what follows.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 298-299. The following paragraph is a summary of the argument of these pages.

exist, but apprehending that meaning will always be inhibited by the sin problem. That is, there is an interpretative reality, but it cannot be accessed in full; critical realism is comfortable with this claim.

At this point, I turn to incorporate some insight from Wright. Part of the critique of the modern world by postmodernism is the assertion that there is no such thing as an authoritative framing story available to anyone. This, of course, is in line with Fish's view. This assumes an anti-realism that relegates truth and meaning to the local narrative. But what happens when local narratives that are mutually exclusive collide? This is a common question when considering world religions, but what about applying it to international politics. Who is to say that one nation-state's foreign or domestic policies are better than any other? I submit that it is difficult to make a value judgment that is consistent with one's convictions if they locate truth and meaning within the local interpretative community. Yet, Wright makes much of local communities telling their stories and those stories having a normative function. Is this able to be incorporated with Vanhoozer's critique of Fish and critical realism? I believe it is.

First, Wright always assumes reality. He takes it as the given measuring stick for each local community. For the Christian this assumption of reality means nothing less than the acknowledgement that God's self-revelation has produced a narrative which he or she is to both learn and live. Further, Wright acknowledges that a critical realist epistemology is from the outset a contextualized epistemology. Story-telling humans tell their stories within a

story-laden world.¹⁶⁹ These stories, contra Fish but in agreement with Vanhoozer, all make claims about reality. Critical reflection upon the stories we tell, coupled with the humble belief that our claims about reality may be mistaken, will yield a further narrative—“alternative ways of speaking truly about the world” will emerge.¹⁷⁰

The sun is barley rising on this discussion of critical realism and hermeneutics. For example, we did not broach the subject of speech-act theory that looms large in Vanhoozer’s work. Also, we did not explore further the idea of *Hermeneutical Inclusivism* which would ultimately lead to an analysis of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval. Both would take us too far afield.

Yet, in closing I wish to make one last point. That is, ultimately the critical realist seeks to emphasize ontology (or metaphysics) over epistemology. This makes way for the sort of realist claims that anchor a critical realist hermeneutic. But, without the articulation of a nuanced epistemology, an undertaking that I believe needs to be taken seriously by evangelical theologians,¹⁷¹ the case for ontology cannot be made. This proves difficult since, even if most evangelical theologians accept the demise of foundationalist epistemologies, the step into the postfoundational era has not been a uniform one. In other words, there may be broad based agreement on postfoundational epistemology, but does that then

¹⁶⁹ Wright, 44.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ What I mean by “take seriously” is that there is a need for creative explanation of the chastened and nuanced epistemology held by the critical realist for the laity of the church.

mean that a coherentist framework is the only option? Further, what of the metaphysical landscape? Postmodern evangelicals desire to move beyond metaphysics while critical realists seek to describe reality with a great degree of clarity. Wright captures the spirit of our current era within some of his own concluding remarks: “If someone asks what knock-down arguments I can produce for showing that this theory [critical realist epistemology] about how humans know things is in fact true, it would obviously be self-contradictory to reply in essentially empiricist terms. The only appropriate argument is the regular one about puddings and eating.”¹⁷² So, I say let us taste and see that it is good.

Coda

In this chapter I have attempted to capture the essentials of a critical realist hermeneutic. It has already been established in my argument that one of the advantages of adopting critical realism is that it creates the possibility of a hermeneutic that is postfoundational in its epistemology and fully open to a metaphysic that points beyond the empirical world. Another way of stating this claim is that the subject/object distinction of modern theology is cautiously repaired by critical realism. I began this chapter by suggesting that at the root of many doctrinal disputes, such as the current one swirling around Bell’s book *Love Wins*, is really the question of hermeneutics. Also, I explained the key assumption that underlying biblical theology is an interpretative methodology

¹⁷² Ibid., 45. Clearly, one can see with Wright’s words the ease with which one can speak with the terminology of coherentism, but all the while not let go of metaphysics, nor desire to somehow go beyond metaphysics as the postmodern theologian does.

that, within evangelicalism, sometimes assumes the flawed propositions of foundationalism. I went on to assert that what is needed is a critical realist evangelical biblical theologian equipped—perhaps through the work of the systematic theologian—to articulate the nuanced rhetoric of literary (or interpretative) realism.

After that, I gave a brief summary of literary theory and biblical interpretation noting that the premodern era was characterized by an appeal to the dual authorities of text and tradition. The modern era was characterized by the quest for a rational foundation for belief. The result was the grounding of theology in the existential self as the self was thought to be all that could be known. The knowing subject was thereby divorced from the object of observation rendering history a useless witness to the revelation of God found in the Bible. The postmodern era, with the turn toward hermeneutics and literary theory, was explained as a time of critique of modernism bringing both challenges and welcome insight to theology.

Lastly, following Vanhoozer and Wright, I attempted to show how critical realism is able to negotiate the questions presented by postmodernism without falling into the trap of a thoroughgoing relativism. This was done by illustrating how Vanhoozer and Wright can both respond to Fish by employing a nuanced postfoundational epistemology, which clears the way for their insistence upon interpretative realism.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have been exploring the usefulness of critical realism for the evangelical theologian who is concerned with the content of classical Christianity. My claim has been that critical realism provides a cogent philosophical system for entering into profitable dialogue with postmodern theology and the sciences. I am in agreement with Wright who says, “such a model...has a lot of mileage.”¹⁷³

One heading on which many of those miles could be logged is that of theological method. Evangelicals are being, and will continue to be well served by wrestling with questions directed at method raised by critical realism. Further research should most certainly include projects in which biblical

¹⁷³ Wright, 45.

theologians and systematic theologians consider the philosophical assumptions underneath their work. This would particularly include engaging interpretative theory. As mentioned, the thought of Paul Ricoeur is significant in this area. His, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* is comprised of four lectures given at Texas Christian University in which the central problem at stake is that of language *as a work*.¹⁷⁴ I suggest Ricoeur as both a significant and recent voice in hermeneutics and also as a wonderful vehicle to go further and deeper into the discussion.

I also wish to suggest, as a matter of both further research and practical application, that the essence of a postfoundational epistemology and the implications of such a position need packaged both for the layperson in the church and the theologian who may find such conjectures ostensibly insipid, or worse, hostile. I explained early on that the postmodern theologian and the critical realist both reject foundationalism. Indeed, today it is difficult to find anyone defending a foundationalist epistemology. Also, a postfoundational epistemology acts as a critical element in the amalgam that is the antidote to a scientific or materialistic metaphysic. The avenues for research are manifold, but all need to involve knowledge and truth as being mediated and transpositional. Then, the implications for adopting such views should be explored. Practically, for church laity, this would involve discussions of how to deal with conflicting doctrinal positions in an irenic manner. Grasping the claim

¹⁷⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

that *the absence of an absolute level of knowledge does not preclude the gaining of a significant level of knowledge* would be at the heart of such an endeavor. The challenge, of course, is in making epistemology both understandable and attractive to the layperson.

Along a different horizon, the evangelical critical realist theologian is positioned to have significant dialogue with his or her counterparts in the sciences. A danger, or at least an apprehension, inherent in this dialogue has centered on the question of what to do when scientific claims and doctrinal claims seemingly clash. Should science dictate the terms of reformulating doctrinal positions? That is where Plantinga's argument, as previously explained, is a great aid. If it can be cogently argued, as I believe Plantinga has, that science and theology are not mortal enemies, but rather both describing the same reality, then the possibility of carefully crafted, interdisciplinary dialogue does indeed exist. And this possibility is exciting, yet the challenge of convincing a large portion of the evangelical world to move out of the confrontational model of engaging the sciences is the first order of business.

Finally, critical realism as a philosophical system adopted by evangelical theologians concerned with maintaining the doctrinal positions of classical Christianity does have, as it should, a voice in the contemporary theological conversation. While I do believe that some form of a critical realist paradigm for doing Christian theology will ultimately become normative over and against postmodern ideas, I do welcome the continued dialogue. How could I not? The critical realist would not want it any other way.

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