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# KNOWING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CREATION

Henk G. Geertsema

How should belief in creation affect our theoretical understanding of knowledge? In this essay I argue that traditional views of knowledge, illustrated by Plato and Descartes, cannot do justice to the integral meaning of reality as God's creation. Making use of two metaphors, the visual metaphor for theoretical knowledge and the biblical one of hearing the divine promise-command to be, I sketch the outlines of a theoretical framework that takes belief in creation as its starting point. My approach is based upon insights of Reformational philosophy and leads to a view in which beliefs and propositions concerning isolated states of affairs are replaced by an emphasis on the concrete situations in which knowing occurs. Important notions like rationality and objectivity lose their central place to responsibility and acknowledgment. I claim that in this way the biblical understanding of reality as God's creation can be better appreciated than in approaches that take their starting point in Greek and modern philosophical conceptions.

## *I. Introduction*

When in everyday life we claim to know, we usually have something or someone concrete in mind.<sup>1</sup> We know John Brown or we do not. We know New York or we do not. We know the way to Amsterdam or we do not. We know when the Berlin wall was broken down or we do not. The last example might easily figure in a theoretical discussion too, the others less likely so. The reason for this is that epistemology is usually concerned with beliefs and their content in terms of propositions. And, although the knowledge claimed in the first three examples does imply beliefs and propositions, it is too encompassing and vague to be expressed by a specific and limited number of them. In theory we like our examples to be clear and well defined. The content of the beliefs discussed, therefore, needs to be simple and, most of the time, represents isolated states of affairs.

In this essay I will look at knowing and knowledge from the perspective of the biblical view of creation. In doing so I will make a double circuit. The first round will start with a brief outline of the biblical belief in creation. I will then offer a provisional description of two important tendencies in epistemological thought, taking my cue from Plato's cave parable and Descartes's doubt experiment, and show, in a few essential matters, where tensions with the belief in creation occur. The second round will try to develop a different theoretical perspective on knowledge against the background of the biblical belief in creation and by means of



the structural theory of Reformational philosophy.<sup>2</sup> To bring out its distinctive character, I will contrast this approach with the views discussed before. Though I will argue that knowledge must do justice to its object, I make no such pretension with regard to my discussion of Plato and Descartes. Their views are discussed only in order to reveal certain fundamental tendencies in thought on knowledge which, I believe, are still relevant today.

The focus of the discussion will be on the conception of knowledge. But the view of reality as such cannot be ignored. Epistemology and ontology will prove to be intimately connected. It will appear that Reformational philosophy is closer to the everyday understanding of knowledge than epistemology is accustomed to be. The view of knowledge in terms of beliefs and propositions concerning isolated states of affairs will be replaced by an approach which emphasizes knowledge in the context of concrete relationships. Instead of taking knowledge in a universal sense, a diversity of knowing situations, each with its own kind of normativity, will be explored. Important notions like rationality and objectivity will lose their central place to responsibility and acknowledgement. It is my contention that in this way the biblical understanding of reality as God's creation can be better appreciated than in those approaches that take their starting point in Greek and modern philosophical conceptions.

## *II. An Outline of Two Traditions and their Contrast with the Notion of Creation*

### *2.1 The Biblical Belief in Creation and its Relevance to Human Knowledge*

Heidegger once said that the Christian belief in creation offers too easy an answer to the question of reality's true nature.<sup>3</sup> The answer: everything is created by God! is given before the weight of the question has been able to sink in. It is in fact true that the belief in creation is in a certain sense prior to any inquiry into reality. It is itself not a result of study. But we should equally emphasize that, correctly understood, it is far from an easy answer. To say that reality is God-created is to refer to a deep, unfathomable mystery. We may enter this mystery, but it does not become transparent to us. This is strikingly formulated in Psalm 139. The poet expresses there how he cannot comprehend the knowledge which God as his Maker has of him.

O Lord, thou has searched me and known me . . .  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is high, I cannot attain it.<sup>4</sup>

The enduring mystery of creation is also indicated by the multitude of expressions which the story of the creation in Genesis requires to describe the creation. I want to look briefly at two of these: creating as making and creating as commanding.

#### *2.1.1 Creating as Making*

And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters . . . ." And God made

the great two lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. . . . And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the cattle according to their kinds. . . . And God saw that it was good. . . . Then God said, "Let us make man . . . ." <sup>5</sup>

These images present God as a craftsman or artist who carefully and lovingly creates a work of art and enjoys it. The result reveals his wisdom, skill, power. The small details—the fine tissue of butterfly wings, neurophysiological processes—bespeak his great care, the immense energy in the universe which contracts and expands in the birth and death of stars bespeaks his unimaginable power.

Two comments are required straightaway. (1) The examples given make it clear that belief in creation stimulates rather than hampers the study of reality, as is in fact shown by the development of natural science in the sixteenth century and later. We should put it even more strongly. Someone in a museum who looks at a work of art that he does not understand, and then reads the name of an artist unfamiliar to him, does not profit much from the knowledge that this particular name is connected to this work of art. It remains meaningless. Real knowledge grows only when insight into the work of art is gained and the person behind the name takes on an identity. The same goes for God's creation. Precisely as creation, reality calls for careful inquiry against the background of the Name by which God revealed himself. This brings me to my second, related comment.

(2) A tension becomes readily visible between the investigation of reality and the Name by which God is known. The Name of God in the Bible is expressive of goodness and mercy. This is personified in Jesus Christ as he is characterized in the New Testament. The reality of nature and history is full of cruelty. How can the Name of the Creator be bound up with this? At the very least we have to say that the creation has not remained whole. The work of art is full of cracks. Through the cracks we can still discern the original lines. But sometimes it becomes difficult, if not impossible. It is clear that reality cannot be simply labelled 'creation of God.' The connection of God's Name, as it is confessed in the Christian faith, with existing reality therefore remains a matter of faith. The creation as mystery does not become transparent by itself. The disruption and degeneration as a result of evil threatens to make it an insoluble riddle. Yet the mystery remains accessible. Faith in the revealed Name begins to recognize contours of the creation's intention, though many pressing questions remain.

### 2.1.2 *Creating as Commanding*

And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. . . . And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters . . . ." And it was so. . . . And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together in one place . . . ." And it was so. And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament . . . ." And it was so. And God said . . . . <sup>6</sup>

The most characteristic feature of the creation story in Genesis is the recurrent phrase 'and God said,' followed by the creative command itself and

the realization of what is called into being.<sup>7</sup> Psalm 33 expresses the same idea succinctly as:

For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood forth.<sup>8</sup>

The absolute dependence of the created on the Creator is expressed here in two ways. The image of the craftsman or artist already brings out the Maker's close bond with his work. Great care and attention is lavished on the detail. There is an intimate presence of the sculptor in the sculpture via his fingers which mould the plaster or via the chisel and hammer which tool the stone and wood. Creating by calling into being adds another dimension. No longer is there a given material which offers opportunities but also imposes limits on what the artist can do. The creation takes place from inside, as it were. The word calls into being 'out of nothing' and thus the creature becomes real.

A second element is related to this. Creating as making suggests a certain independence of the result vis-à-vis the Creator. When the work of art is finished, it has its own existence independent of the maker. Creating as a command to exist implies a lasting dependence. The execution of a command remains geared to the command itself. Detachment from the command results in disobedience. Conversely, if the command is withdrawn, the execution loses its foundation. Command and execution are dynamically involved in an asymmetrical relationship of dependence.

But the creation is not just about dependence. 'And God saw that it was good.' The result of creation is more than a neutral, factual being-there. Anybody who knows anything about the Creator would not have expected otherwise. The quality of the work of art is guaranteed by who the artist is. This also applies to the command in relation to who gives it. But in this respect, too, the relationship is even more intimate. Execution and command are geared to each other. Obeying a good command leads to something good. A bad command leads to evil. In this way the command to exist determines intrinsically the quality of that which exists. Because of the goodness of the Creator creating as commanding can therefore be characterized as a promise-command to exist. Creating is a normative notion. And this brings us back to the tension mentioned in connection with creating as making: the opacity of that which exists as creation. The promise does not seem to have been fulfilled. At the very least there is a tension between the purport of the command and the way it is executed. A proper understanding of creating as commanding cannot ignore evil either. Reality does not live up to the high expectations we may justly have.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge of the Creator cannot only be acquired from what exists.

### *2.1.3 The Significance for Human Knowledge*

In the Christian tradition, gaining knowledge of reality has often been compared with reading a book. God is seen as the Author of a text. People can try to read it. The metaphor of a book is sometimes used both for the creation and for its development in history, sometimes specifically for nature, which gives the wrong impression that creation is confined to

nature. For an understanding of reality as creation, though, it is a good metaphor. It shows that reality as creation is full of intrinsic meaning and that it refers to the Creator. Both elements should set the tone for the way human knowledge deals with reality. The metaphor of the text with its author, for all that it is a new image, is a natural sequel to the notions of creating as making and creating as commanding. Creational relationship implies the qualitative meaning of the created. And knowledge here should lead to acknowledgement. Yet time and again we find that the text has not remained whole. Hence it is sometimes hard to understand and the text sometimes seems at odds with the character of the Author. This, too, should be considered when we read.

Human knowing brings us to our own position in reality as creation. Genesis 1 talks about this too. Humankind forms an integral part of creation. But our distinctive place is emphasized too:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.<sup>10</sup>

The position of power awarded to us over our fellow creatures is certainly not unlimited. The governing norm is indicated by the recurrent motif 'And God saw that it was good.' The Creator's intention for his creation must also be brought out in humankind's stewardship over it. This means that justice is done to the distinctive nature of all creatures.

Humankind's distinctive position and the norm governing it are well expressed in the story of Genesis 2 about Adam's naming of the animals. As he names them, so they will be called. But it is also clear that the names are not given at random. Names name and are consequently more than a numeric code. Language must put into words the meaning of reality. Knowledge of and conduct towards our fellow creatures come together here. The starting-point for both is always the 'fear of the Lord.'

Gen. 1 mainly develops the idea of our uniqueness in relation to our non-human fellow creatures. To gain a broader perspective on the meaning of the expression 'image of God,' we should juxtapose Genesis 1 with Jesus' answer to the question of the great commandment:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' words indicate our purpose in life. We are made with this intention. In other words, Jesus indicates the fundamental framework for the acquisition of self-knowledge, which should characterize all our knowledge, indeed our entire existence, since our self-understanding is expressed in our entire existence. Jesus' words indicate that our self-understanding is

determined by our position towards God and our neighbour. The love commandment points out how these relations are fulfilled, and thus how the Maker's intention with his image becomes visible. If we look at the words of the great commandment against the background of creating as promise-command to exist, its meaning for human self-understanding and knowing in general is brought out even more clearly. The promise-command to exist as a creative word to humankind means that two basic elements characterize our existence: responsibility and calling as an answer to the command component and desire and expectation as a response to the promise component. Both constitute our existence as human. They typify the way we exist. And this also applies to our knowledge and conduct towards our fellow creatures in all the relations in which we exist. These involve responsibility and expectation, response and desire, because we exist in God's creation. The love commandment indicates how calling and desire can be fulfilled on our part. It also shows how our actual existence has become alienated, both from the command and the promise, and from their fulfilment.

## 2.2 *The Rationality Motif in Greek Philosophy and Plato's Parable of the Cave*

In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be perceived and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness. Once it is perceived, the conclusion must follow that, for all things, this is the cause of whatever is right and good; in the visible world it gives birth to light and to the lord of light, while it is itself sovereign in the intelligible world and the parent of intelligence and truth. Without having had a vision of this Form no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters of state.<sup>12</sup>

These words of Plato in the seventh book of *The Republic* form a central statement in his discussion of justice. They are designed to show that just action in politics depends on orientation to the idea of the good. They are part of his explanation of the cave parable and should therefore be understood against the background of the human condition which it portrays.

People can be compared to prisoners in an underground prison. They are chained in such a way that they cannot move from their position or even move their head from left to right. They can only look straight ahead. High behind them burns a great fire. Its light throws shadows on the wall in front of them, shadows of objects and images which are carried past behind them. The shadows of the carriers themselves are invisible. For the prisoners are seated with their back against a wall and only the carried objects rise above it. The voices of the people can be heard, but only via echoes against the wall in front of the prisoners, so that the shadows themselves seem to speak.

This is what reality looks like to the prisoners. As far as they know, this is reality: shadows of images of real objects, animals and people. Only when prisoners are freed and led from the darkness of the cave to the light of the sun do they come to see reality as it truly is. But it takes time and effort before the eyes get used to this reality. Only at the very end can they be raised to the sun, to the light to which all reality owes its visibility. From

the perspective of the cave-dwellers this reality is unimaginable. When the prisoners return, their story is not believed, the more so because their eyes, now used to daylight, can no longer make out the shadows on the cave wall.

Plato's parable is an allegory of human knowledge. We are no better off than the prisoners in the cave. Our everyday reality is nothing but shadows of images of real things. Philosophers who have seen the truth could disabuse us. But they are ridiculed. As a result, we are shut off from real insight and the possibility of acting wisely. The idea of the Good eludes us. Someone who refuses to follow the path to real knowledge or, unable to do so himself, refuses to listen to those who have gained true insight, has not only limited his scope to 'believing' instead of 'knowing,' he has also cut off the road to correct action.

At first sight it is not surprising that Christians later felt attracted to these views of Plato. Didn't they, too, believe in the need to be saved from a sinful existence alienated from God? Didn't Plato's idea of the Good refer to God himself, who is also called the Light of the world and on whom everything depends? For Plato, the Idea was not 'just an idea,' but the highest reality. Christians did, of course, recognize that evil in human beings is not only a matter of ignorance or stupidity, but that their will plays an important part too. But this addition was not a real obstacle to adoption of Plato's ideas.

Yet this connection between Christian faith and elements of Greek philosophy puts pressure on essential elements of biblical faith. For Plato, intellectual thought is the prime entranceway to knowledge of reality.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, this thought becomes the criterion for what true reality is assumed to be. That is why Plato sees the world of ideas as more real than concretely experienced everyday reality. It is the reality in which people live and to which they therefore must always return, but it is also the world from which they must be freed if their humanity is to achieve its true goal.

There are at least two points on which this view conflicts with the biblical belief in creation. (1) Reality is divided into higher and lower. This emerges very clearly in Plato's theory of the human soul. He distinguishes three parts here: the appetitive, the spirited, and mind. The first is the source of evil according to Plato. In his mind, man is akin to the gods and like these has access to the reality of the ideas, unless he is prevented by sensual desire. Thus mind is set against the senses, the intellectual against the material. The created itself displays a tension between higher and lower. Corporeality is in danger of being undervalued. The origin of evil is located somewhere in creation. This violates the integral character of creation as expressed in the Bible. Everything is no longer good 'by nature,' as created. The distance to the Idea of the Good, supreme being, becomes determinative. What is farther away from supreme being becomes more characterised by non-being. Creation thus becomes a connection of being and non-being. As such it is seen to be defective.

(2) The second point is directly connected with the defective being of the created. The being by which all that exists is measured has an absolute character. It is divine in nature. In other words, the criterion for the



created is no longer itself creatural, so that it can be judged according to its nature. Divine being is taken as criterion for the created. This is borne out by Plato's theory of knowledge. Though Plato emphasizes that people are distinct from the gods precisely in the nature of their cognition—the gods have absolute knowledge, people can only aspire to it (philosophy)—yet precisely this shows that the knowledge of the gods is seen to be the ideal of knowledge. It becomes the standard by which human knowledge is judged. Absolute knowledge of an absolute reality therefore becomes the ideal. The finiteness of both knowledge and reality implied in createdness is thus misunderstood in its positive nature ('And God saw that it was good').

### *2.3 The Subject-object Scheme of Modern Philosophy and Descartes's Doubt Experiment*

For a long time I had remarked that it is sometimes requisite in common life to follow opinions which one knows to be most uncertain, exactly as though they were indisputable. . . . But because in this case I wished to give myself entirely to the search after Truth, I thought that it was necessary for me to take an apparently opposite course, and to reject as absolutely false everything as to which I could imagine the least ground of doubt, in order to see if afterwards there remained anything in my belief that was entirely certain.<sup>14</sup>

René Descartes (1596–1650) is mainly known for his methodological doubt: by systematically trying out how far his doubt can go, he wants to find an absolutely certain starting-point from which the edifice of knowledge can be rebuilt. His doubt mainly concerns three points. The senses sometimes deceive us and so Descartes assumes for a moment that the senses delude us in all cases. Arguments are prone to error and so Descartes rejects for a moment all arguments which he had previously considered valid. We have all kinds of images both when we dream and when we are awake. Descartes therefore assumes for a moment that all his images have no more reality than when they occur in his dreams. And then he realizes that 'from the very fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it very evidently and certainly followed that I was.'<sup>15</sup> To his mind he has thus found the starting-point for his philosophy, or to be more precise, for knowledge of the truth.

A striking feature of the above quotation is that Descartes does not connect the search for certain truth with action. Action, says Descartes, is often based on something uncertain, even though it is necessary to assume absolute certainty. We might conclude that Descartes's doubt experiment is not concerned with action at all. This would be a wrong conclusion, as we can see from a different place. In the second part of his account Descartes mentions a number of examples in which it is attractive but actually unfeasible to demolish an existing structure and rebuild it: a city which has been built in the course of time by different architects, so that it makes a disorderly impression; or a lawbook to which new laws have gradually been added, so that its original coherence is lost. And he continues:

But as regards all the opinions which up to this time I had embraced, I thought I could not do better than endeavour once for all to sweep them completely away, so that they might later on be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the uniformity of a rational scheme. And I firmly believed that by this means I should succeed in directing my life much better than if I had only built on old foundations, and relied on principles of which I allowed myself to be in youth persuaded without having inquired into their truth.<sup>16</sup>

This quotation shows that Descartes's demolition-reconstruction experiment also serves practical purposes, even though he subjects it to all kinds of restrictions. He is clearly concerned with a ideal of knowledge for science, but he also envisages practical results allowing application of the acquired knowledge. The consequences of his project therefore do not remain purely academic. Because the method for the reconstruction of knowledge is derived from mathematics and so links up with the mathematical method of natural science, its practical application deeply affects the nature of reality. In this sense Descartes's enterprise is totally revolutionary: the old must be demolished and built up from scratch. This does not take place directly but only via the way in which action takes shape and direction—but the effects are no less radical. The traditional basis of action in acquired convictions and views is replaced (where possible) with scientific analyses and reconstructions by means of natural science.

The consequences of this revolution are radical, because after the demolition-reconstruction procedure all extra-conscious reality is seen as something that can be understood and controlled by means of the mathematical-scientific method. It is not deemed to have any other quality than that which can be represented by mathematical means. In practice this means that it is seen as being without qualities. It is nothing but material that as such does not yet possess meaning. Its nature can be computed and then manipulated in such a way that it becomes serviceable to chosen ends. This gives rise to the idea of an objective reality without intrinsic value, without inherent normative limits to how it is dealt with. Meaning and significance can only be derived from the human subject. The result is a sharp distinction of values and norms on the one hand and facts on the other. Facts are objective, values and norms belong to the subject.

The first consequence of the Cartesian revolution has mainly to do with the method chosen for reconstruction: mathematical-scientific thought. But the way Descartes believed he could reach a certain starting-point had profound consequences too. The turn to the subject in the doubt experiment means that human consciousness is placed in opposition to reality. 'I think, therefore I am' was the point where Descartes ended up. This could not be doubted. The great problem was: how do you get away from there?

Descartes finds his starting-point in consciousness. This may provide a starting-point for certain knowledge, but not yet certainty of the knowledge itself. The doubt experiment can be set up in a different way too. If I look out of the window, I see trees, houses and cars. Now I can imagine that I am dreaming. For sometimes I see the same things in my dreams. So I can wonder whether reality corresponds to my images. But there is

no point in wondering whether I really have the images which I see. The images are immediately certain in my consciousness. I cannot meaningfully doubt them. The question is whether there is something outside of my consciousness that corresponds to these images.

Precisely because Descartes's doubt experiment withdraws to the unassailable certainty of the individual consciousness, the outside world becomes a problem. And this problem is not really solved by the mathematical-scientific method. Though it can point to great successes, scientific knowledge, in Descartes's thought, remains mind-constructed knowledge. The method is a method of the mind or consciousness. And so the question remains whether and how reality corresponds to it. The question of certainty of knowledge with its answer in the undeniable fact of consciousness and the reliability of scientific method means that the character of knowledge as true to reality remains problematical.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly Descartes did not intend to cast doubt on the Christian faith. Indeed, faith in God plays an indispensable role in reconstructing the edifice of knowledge. The fact that an immediately evident insight can be trusted depends on the truthfulness of God, who does not deceive us, says Descartes. Yet it is clear that his revolution in thought clashes with the biblical belief in creation. This is easy to see if we look at the two consequences mentioned.

If reality is viewed extra-consciously as material without intrinsic quality, it can hardly still be seen as a work of art that expresses the greatness of its creator. Once again the metaphor of the text can help to clarify the meaning of the separation between norms and values on the one hand and facts on the other. Subject-object thinking forces us to view the text as a fortuitous result, e.g., of a word-processor operated by a monkey. The print-out can be tested for all kinds of regularities: the nature of letter combinations, frequency of letters, etc. Everything can be computed. We can even make predictions. But the 'text' does not have meaning. Someone who says: 'what a beautiful poem!' has given it a meaning which is not intrinsically present on paper. There is no author. The text produced in this way is not based on meaning-giving intentionality. If we consider extra-conscious reality to be without intrinsic meaning, and therefore without intrinsic limits to what may be done with it, we leave its Creator out of the picture.

The same applies to the starting-point in consciousness. The connection between humankind and the reality surrounding him, a connection implied in creation, cannot be ignored without detracting from createdness itself. The creation comprehends humankind and world. And the latter cannot be constructed on the basis of the former. Any such attempt must somehow put the human subject in the place of the Creator. In fact the very search for absolute certainty goes against a recognition of our creatureliness. It is an attempt to transcend the vulnerable finiteness of the human condition by refusing to be satisfied with the creaturely possibilities and aspiring to a 'God's-eye point of view.'

### *III. Knowledge and Rationality: Two Metaphors*

The striking thing about Plato's cave parable is that, to explain what he means by true knowledge, he uses the metaphor of seeing—but sensory

cognition is precisely what he wants to move away from. Its orientation, he says, is to the shadows of images of true reality. Only the mind or the intellectual part of the soul is able to know the true reality of the ideas. Not the senses but thought gives access to truth. Yet he uses a visual metaphor for this. Mind is interpreted as an ability to 'see.' We can compare the word 'insight.' The word 'theory' originally has this background too, with the meaning 'to see intellectually.' If we examine the history of Western thought, we find that the metaphor of seeing has strongly shaped the conception of intellectual cognition.

In modern times the visual metaphor has retreated into the background somewhat. It has gradually been overtaken by the idea of 'rationality.' This idea is more concerned with the arguments that can be given for a particular view. Argumentation itself becomes determinative. Method takes prime position. Yet the goal continues to be (theoretical) insight. Indeed, as Descartes's discourse on method shows, insight is indispensable at the beginning and at every stage of argumentation, at any rate if it is to lead to valid knowledge. So there remains a connection between the modern idea of rationality and Plato's visual metaphor. Hence we use 'rationality' here to describe this entire way of thinking that goes back to Plato.

An entirely different metaphor functions in the biblical creation belief. If creation can be expounded in terms of a promise-command to exist, the created can be interpreted as an answer to this. The metaphor here refers less to knowing than to reality itself. But just as the visual metaphor for knowing has consequences in Plato for the conception of reality, so the answering or hearing metaphor for created reality must have implications for the way that knowing is understood.

The rest of this essay will take these two metaphors as its starting-point. First the metaphor of seeing will be used to say more about the conception of reality implied in the view of knowing that comes with the idea of rationality. Then the metaphor of hearing will be used to explore the understanding of reality based on the belief in creation, in order to outline the distinctive character of the related view of knowledge.

### *3.1 Rationality and the Metaphor of Seeing*

It is easy to recognize why Plato chose the metaphor of seeing to explain what he wanted to say. After all, everybody who can use their eyes knows about shadows, images, reflections, and real things. In this way Plato enlisted visual reality to illustrate distinctions for which metaphors derived from (sensory) hearing would be inadequate. We could point to the echo which we sometimes hear. But this, too, involves real sounds which are governed by the same laws as the sound which produces the echo. This does not apply to shadow images created when objects are placed in a strong light. This metaphor can illustrate the existence of various degrees of reality. But the visual metaphor has even more possibilities.

When we make a sketch of something we have seen, a special house or a striking tree, we will, in most cases, not just indicate a number of colours on paper, but first of all try to draw the form. The visible form of things allows us to recognize them. Hence the world is experienced very differently by those who cannot see. We identify things primarily by their visual form.

Clearly this is not the way Plato wants to go when he describes reality in terms of ideas. True reality cannot be grasped by the senses. But Plato does use the orientation of our seeing to form. The visual form becomes a metaphor for what is visible to the mind's eye. It is not sketched by means of lines and surfaces, but by concepts and definitions. Not the external form which we apprehend with the sensory eye indicates the essence of things, but the internal form which we see with the eye of the intellect. Not the drawing shows what things are, but the concept of which words (or nowadays formulas) form the best expression.

Plato's turn from the senses to the mind thus involves a radical change in the concept of form as the mark of thing identity. His entire view of reality is bound up with this. Three points in particular are important here.

(1) The forms we see with our eyes are all subject to change. Some forms change rapidly, like smoke coming out of a chimney. Others change more gradually, like trees that grow: at first relatively fast, later very slowly. Some forms seem constant through the centuries, like rocks made of hard stone. But they too have a beginning and an end. For Plato, the forms seen by the mind do not. Trees come into being and die, but the same cannot be said of the concept 'tree.' What a tree is endures forever. Plato thus places form as concept or idea outside of time. Insight into form means access to an unchanging, eternal reality, a reality which therefore possesses greater reality than the concretely experienced world of generation and death. Hence knowledge of this reality can have an absolute character.

(2) Someone who focuses his attention on the form of a tree or a house will mostly look at it without noticing the surroundings. We can also look at the overall picture, even at the relations between various forms. In general, though, concentration on form isolates the object from its environment. This element returns in the focus on intellectually seen form, certainly in Plato. A definition tries to see something in itself. This is what Aristotle will later call the substance. Characteristically, the substance does not need anything else for its existence. In this it differs from properties, which occur only in things. A tree can be seen in itself. The colour brown never occurs as such. It is always the colour of something.

Another, related element comes into play here. Concentrated perception tends to objectify. This association is certainly implied in the word 'to observe.' When an object or even a person is observed, some kind of distance takes place between the observer and his object. This does not mean that the observer is not interested. He may watch with great absorption, even admiration. Yet he looks at an 'object' as if it exists in itself, not in a specific relation to him as observer. Or really it is the other way round. Because seeing is not integrated in a specific relation, it is the perceptual relation itself which bestows a certain character on seeing. As a result, the object seems to be seen in itself. As if it exists as such.

The above descriptions try to make something clear about the self-subsistence of reality as implied in the Platonic metaphor of visual form. The ideas are seen in their being-as-such. Herein lies the essence of things. This does not mean that there are no relations between the ideas. There certainly are. But these relations are abstract, not concrete. There is an affinity between the ideas and the intellectual part of the soul. That is why they can be known. There is an interrelation between the ideas, and

certainly the relation to the One or the Good is important. But there is still something of a world in itself whose being-as-such is determined by the objectifying visual perspective. That is why only theoretical cognition can do justice to this being.

(3) Someone who takes sensory form as the starting-point for describing something is usually aware that more can be said about it. This is certainly true in the case of people. Reality is too complex and too rich to be adequately characterized in sensory terms. This no longer goes without saying for the 'form' which the mind sees. After all, the idea is that the concept as 'form' indicates the essence of things. Of all 'things,' including human reality. In this sense the world of ideas is homogenous or uniform. Everything essential can, in principle, be understood by thought on the basis of the ideas. In Plato himself there remains a clear awareness of diversity, precisely because reality as a whole does not coincide with the ideas. It is determined in the nature of its being by its relation to the ideas. Reality is stretched between the being of the ideas, or what transcends it, and non-being. After Plato this even leads to an elaborate hierarchy of being. If, as in Descartes, it is assumed that reality can be reconstructed by means of mathematical-scientific concepts, it becomes possible, in principle, to interpret reality as a system of concepts. This is in fact what happened. The diversity of reality is reduced to an intellectual or rational system.

If in this way, on the basis of the metaphor of seeing for knowing, the 'form' which Plato saw in the ideas comes to determine his view of reality, the latter in its turn is reflected in his view of knowing. The rational form becomes the criterion for true cognition. It is this 'form' to which cognition is orientated and which returns in cognition as the concept. The concept as 'form' in cognition must reflect the form which constitutes the essence of things, just as a sketch of a tree must represent its form in reality. In the sensory form there can be no question of real identity, if only because the drawing is a representation on a flat surface without the three-dimensional space of reality itself. This restriction does not apply to the form which the mind sees, unless the concept is mistakenly identified with the word by which it is expressed. Thought as such does not have this restriction. We have thus returned to the identity of thought and being posited by Parmenides: truth becomes a correspondence between knowledge and reality, not just in the sense that one corresponds to the other, but as identity in form.<sup>18</sup> Knowledge must be capable of expression in terms which refer to self-subsistent being. And just as the being of the rational form is far removed from concretely experienced reality, so true knowledge cannot be orientated to it either. The distinction between 'knowledge' and 'opinion' is thus made clear. The first applies to the rational reality of the ideas, the second to the concrete reality of the senses. The first, if attained, is unchanging and eternal, in short: absolute; the second is relative and transitory. It is clear which of the two is to be preferred.

### *3.2 Normativity and the Metaphor of Hearing<sup>19</sup>*

By talking about cognition and reality in metaphors of seeing, Plato can easily distinguish between the true reality of the ideas and the shadowy reality of ordinary phenomena. The ideas form the criterion by which the phenomena are judged. And these are always found to be defective. The

particular nature of the concrete phenomenon can never express the idea in its generality. There is always a limitation. This tree is never 'the' tree in its fullness. For this very reason the general idea has a greater reality than the concrete phenomenon. In fact the relationship is one-sided. The concrete phenomenon depends on the general idea. That is why it is what it is, why this tree is 'tree.' But the dependence is not mutual. The concept of tree does not rely on concrete trees.

The relation between the concrete and the general looks very different when we examine it against the background of the metaphor of hearing as it functions in creation belief. Creation can be seen here as a command-promise to exist. The general element that can be heard in a command or a promise is directly related to the concrete action by which it is carried out. Examples may clarify this.

'The shop has to be evacuated at once. There has been a bomb alarm!' This summons is addressed to everyone in the building who hears it, on whatever floor or in whatever corner they happen to be. In this sense it is a general command and everybody must do the same. But it is also clear that if everybody acts or moves in the same way, evacuation of the building will descend into chaos. How the general order is carried out depends on the particular circumstances of the individual. The command is directly related to these circumstances. Only in concrete circumstances can a command be executed. These do not form a limitation, they are implied in the understanding and execution of the command.

'I will follow you wherever you go,' someone says to Jesus in the Gospel. Someone who makes such a promise cannot be sure of what he is actually saying. He cannot know in advance where Jesus will go. Yet all these possible situations are implied in his promise. The promise is general, but as such, as promise, it relates to all the relevant situations. Jesus' answer is therefore a warning: 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Matt. 8:20)

A promise or command with general import is geared as command or promise to the concrete situations which it covers. There is no question of a dual reality as there is in the general as idea. Even though there is no symmetrical relation, the general command and the concrete execution are geared to each other, depend on each other. Applied to reality, the norm for phenomena does not reside in an ideal reality which exists in itself and of which they can only be a poor reflection. The norm lies in the promise-command to be, which even as a general call is geared to the particular phenomena and which can uniquely come into its own in every phenomenon. The particular circumstances do not detract from the reality of command and promise, they form an essential part of it.<sup>20</sup>

The metaphor of hearing in the sense of responding to a promise or command implies a different view of reality compared with Plato's visual metaphor.

(1) Plato's conception of rational form allowed him to see true reality as an eternal, unchanging world. The phenomena are in time. The ideas to which they relate are not. If reality as a whole exists as an answer to a word of creation, interpreted as a promise-command to be, its logical place is to be integrally in time. After all, it takes time to carry out a command or promise. Time is the trajectory along which being-as-answer is

realized. The concrete existence in time is fully real. As such it does not suffer from a deficiency of being, like the world of phenomena in Plato. The criterion is not absolute form, but being-an-answer to the promise-command to be.

Contrary to what Plato thought, it is not necessary to think the essence of the tree by which it is tree, the idea or the concept, as being out of time. The concept of a tree does not in fact perish with the tree itself. But this is not to say that the concept itself is out of time. The concept which we form of things clearly belongs to our temporary existence. True enough, it is not bound up with particular individuals, it has constancy through time. But it does not exist separately from temporary human existence. This is also shown by the changes which concepts, too, undergo. Plato called that which makes a tree a tree an idea, but it is better to call it a structure. A structure also has a certain constancy, but there is no reason to see it as raised above time. Rather it is a constant structure in time, and this constancy need not even exclude change.

The structure of a thing can be viewed as a complex of rules, as in the game of chess. These rules apply to every game that can be called chess. They determine its distinctive character and make this game the game of chess. They also make it possible. Without rules no game as such can exist. They can therefore be called constitutive. If we try to incorporate rules in the metaphor of the promise-command to exist, we can say that the rules are implied in the promise-command. It gives the rules for what exists as answer to it. It gives structure. Even if the promise-command itself would not be regarded as in time, this does not apply to the structure which determines the phenomena in their own nature.

(2) Command and promise are as such geared to the circumstances in which they obtain. Their execution is always connected with the particular nature of the situation in which they take place. If we look at the existence of things through the prism of this metaphor, they will not be seen in isolation from the relations in which they exist. Whereas the focus on form tends to separate things from the concrete relationships in which they exist, if existence is seen as an answer in a particular situation, the relations in which things function must be coinvolved in the concept. 'Everything is connected with everything': this also applies to the way things exist.

At the same time this metaphor can make it clear that things do not primarily exist as objects of observation. It is not the perceptual relation which determines the character of things, but their being-an-answer. Everything that exists is an active subject in this sense. It may exist as such and has a right to be acknowledged in its integral existence. Things exist as an answer to the creative word. This characterizes their being-there, not the fact that they can be seen as an object.<sup>21</sup>

(3) The metaphor of seeing, as used by Plato, awards an exclusive place to rationality and mind. The sensory world has a second-rate status. The view of existence as answer tries to do justice to the integral meaning of things. All aspects are included, according to their nature, in the being-an-answer of things. Moreover, a diversity of aspects can be distinguished which is much richer than that of sensation and mind. Even the physical and the sensory cannot be reduced to each other. The entire diversity of aspects analyzed in Reformational philosophy<sup>22</sup> could be mentioned here.



The special relation between thought and being no longer obtains. The same applies to the exclusive connection of concrete experience with sensation. All aspects are part of the being of things and are involved in the way they are experienced.

If reality is interpreted in this way as existing integrally in time, with a great diversity of structures and relations, real precisely in its concreteness and pervaded in all this by normativity, the conception of knowledge will have to be different too. Four points in particular are important here.

(1) If the Platonic distinction between the true or ultimate reality of universal ideas and the secondary world of concrete appearances loses its validity, the nature of philosophical or scientific in contrast to everyday knowledge needs reinterpretation. Its characterisation in terms of knowledge concerning what is essential or ultimate over against mere opinion based upon subjective experience can no longer be maintained. Theoretical knowledge has its advantages because it is based on method and well-defined concepts. At the same time, precisely for this reason, it is often abstract and, therefore, farther away from integral reality than everyday knowledge in practical situations.

(2) It is not rationality which determines the validity of knowledge, but whether justice is done to things. In their own nature things ask to be acknowledged. Because this is not determined by some or other rational form, rationality cannot be the primary criterion for knowledge. All aspects of experience should function according to their nature. The sensory and the logical, but also for instance language and faith. The important thing is to watch and listen closely, think and argue lucidly, choose the right words to render the meaning of things and to have a sound perspective in which all this receives its own place and the ultimate meaning of reality can be understood. Only in this way can justice be done to integral existence. Openness and precision are crucial.

(3) To know is to respond to the call for acknowledgement implied in existence. But existence itself is not absolute. It is always determined by concrete situations and circumstances. It is in relation. This returns in knowledge. Different situations involve different criteria for knowledge, precisely with a view to doing justice to things. A mother knows her child differently from a doctor in a consultation room. A painter knows his paint differently from an analyst in a laboratory. And this is how it should be. The existence of things cannot be laid down by a certain approach, by some or other definition. It is open and in relation. The plurality of relations is matched by a plurality of ways of knowing, each with its own normativity. And just as each situation has an individual character, because e.g., justice or love or sickness or money is involved, so knowledge can be typically characterized by a certain aspect of reality.<sup>23</sup> Reality is many-sided and open, never absolute. The same goes for knowledge. It must comply with the norms obtaining to it. But absolute knowledge does not exist. Even as an ideal it is impossible. It would fail to do justice to reality.

(4) The metaphor of seeing tends to connect knowledge with thought and mind in particular. In this way thinking or knowing and being are easily set against each other. If mind and thought lose their exclusive place, then this opposition can no longer be maintained either. If there is a

plurality of relations and aspects in which the act of knowing takes place, knowing itself must be situated in reality. Knowing forms part of these relations. All kinds of aspects are modes of being and modes of experiencing. Knowledge opens up reality, not only in the sense that a world can be opened for those who enter it, but also within this world itself, just as a flower opens in the light of the sun. This is perhaps most obvious where knowledge is directly connected with action. For action changes something in the world, it opens or, as the case may be, closes. But the same applies to knowledge that is not directly incorporated in action. Clearly this knowledge is not extraneous to reality either. Knowledge itself has the nature of an answer and as such forms an intrinsic part of reality. In this way it serves to open or, as it may be, close. It only depends on whether the answering nature of what is known is in fact recognized.

To sum up in one sentence: the visual metaphor tends toward absolute knowledge, because rationality is seen as the absolute norm, norm interpreted as idea, whereas the metaphor of hearing points to intrinsic normativity which makes knowledge possible and tests it, with great emphasis on diversity, openness, and relationality, without detracting from the normative validity.<sup>24</sup>

#### *IV. The Human Nature of Knowing*

The modern turn to the subject has introduced a new element into the motif of rationality. Ancient philosophy sees rationality (intelligibility) mainly as a property of reality itself. In Plato the ideas are not primarily the ideas of thought. They exist independently, as a reality of their own. And as such they are known. Descartes's methodological doubt looks for the starting-point of knowledge in thought itself. The knowing subject now becomes the intersection for the relation between knowledge and reality. The rationality of reality is mainly a matter of rational thought itself. It is methodologically constructed rather than contemplatively discovered.

The new position of the subject is therefore ambiguous. On the one hand the rationally constructive method is the way in which objective knowledge can be obtained. This suggests that knowledge is not made impure by something of the subject, mixed with elements which do not belong in objective knowledge, like emotions or value judgements. Objective knowledge is only concerned with the 'facts.' On the other hand the rationally constructive method itself is clearly something of the subject. For it is the mind which reasons and uses its concepts with a view to reality. Hence the recurrent question: what validity do these concepts have in relation to reality as such?

The traditional position on rationality incorporates the human subject in the order of reality. There is a tension between rationality and what fails to meet its criteria, but the human subject as such is not set off against reality. On the contrary, human existence shares in the tension within reality. It self is partly rational, partly sensual and material. This dualism is also found in Cartesian thought, but there it is connected with another dualism, that of inside and outside, of consciousness and reality. As consciousness human subjectivity stands opposite reality and the question is how she can find her way back to it.

The result of this new conception of the subject is that much more emphasis is put on human subjectivity, because it is both the starting-point of methodologically acquired knowledge and the origin of values and norms. On the other hand reality becomes less human, because only methodological, preferably mathematical-scientific, value-free knowledge is supposed to give a reliable representation of objectively given reality.

Section 2 of this contribution already showed how Descartes's position comes into conflict with the biblical belief in creation. I will now try to give a more philosophical elaboration of our place in reality. Some elements from the third section will return in more detail.

#### *4.1 Knowledge within Qualitative Structures*

There is a popular notion of knowledge which puts all emphasis on its projective character. Knowledge starts with a certain expectation, with an assumption or hypothesis. The next step is to wait and see whether this hypothesis is correct. Reality is the test which confirms or disproves the hypothesis. Knowledge acquisition is like a net that is cast out in the hope of catching something. If the expected catch is found in the net, we have knowledge.

The projective element is doubtless present in our knowledge. But the question is whether our knowledge starts with it. In the first place we can ask whether expectation is not preceded by something. Is the hypothesis purely random or is it formulated on the basis of existing data? Isn't an expectation mostly based on certain experiences? If I expect someone to be nice, I have probably found her to be nice. A second point is more fundamental. A design cannot lead to knowledge if there is not already a connection between the design and what it relates to. A fishing net cannot catch words or drops of rain. Net and fish share certain physical-spatial properties, so that the meshes in the net can be geared to the size of the fish. Only in this way is it possible to catch fish with such a net.

Knowledge as projection is only possible when there is a connection between the knowing subject and the known object. The suggestion of the notion of knowledge as projection is that knowledge starts as something in consciousness, is then tested against reality, and is confirmed or disproved in this way. This is a natural sequel to the Cartesian scheme: consciousness as starting-point opposite reality. But to take knowledge in this way is to put it in an impossible position from the outset. Casting a net only makes sense if it is based on a given correlation. Seeing depends on visibility. Thinking depends on conceivability. Description in language depends on something being describable. If these 'passive' properties are not present in the object of knowledge, the active functions are nothing but an attempt to catch air or words with a fishing net. So knowledge presupposes all kinds of coherences.

The various irreducible aspects or modes of being distinguished in Reformational philosophy can be seen as so many relations of coherence. In principle, according to this theory, all phenomena in reality function in all aspects, either 'active' as subject or 'passive' as object. Let me explain this unusual terminology by giving an example.<sup>25</sup> A tree has subject functions or 'active' properties in e.g., the spatial, the physical, and the biotic aspect and object functions or 'passive' properties in the psychic, the logical, the

aesthetic, the legal aspect etc. That is to say, a tree itself does not feel and think, it does not have any experience of beauty and justice. But it can be felt and logically distinguished. It can also be an object of aesthetic emotion or of a conflict that is fought out in court. These object functions are only actualized in relation to subject functions or 'active' properties in the relevant aspects. The first example involves animals or human beings. The three others only involve human beings. But this does not mean that these objective properties are projected onto things. All the cases revolve around the tree itself. Hence the subject-object relations within an aspect are relations of coherence, like subject-subject relations.

As relations of coherence subject-subject relations and subject-object relations are presupposed in all knowledge. The human subject does not primarily function opposite reality, but within it, and as such is connected with it by a plurality of aspects. Knowledge therefore does not start with a projection, but starts from a primary connection. In knowledge this gradually unfolds as acquaintance. Subject-object relations need to be opened up. This happens when sensory perception develops, when thinking and speaking are learnt. In short, when reality opens up in experience, in the development of one human being and in the history of culture.

Unlike the subject-object scheme of Cartesian thought, therefore, this approach does not primarily place the knowing subject opposite reality, but incorporates it in reality. Knowing itself, too, takes place within reality and is not a connection which must bridge the gap between consciousness and reality. Other differences link up with this. In an alliance with mathematical-scientific thought, the Cartesian scheme tended towards a view in which objective reality has no other quality than quantitative determinacy. Objective, measurable facts opposite subjective values and norms. If a plurality of qualitatively different aspects as correlations can be found in reality, it is clear that in this respect, too, the Cartesian approach to reality cannot be maintained. Reality itself is characterized by qualitative diversity. Knowledge which fails to take this into account is valid at the very most only if its one-sided character is taken into consideration. The certainty achieved in this way means that justice cannot be done to the integral character of reality in a qualitative sense.

The qualitative aspect of reality immediately implies the normative aspect. This is best illustrated by examples. Someone who enters a room where a court session is being held will not understand what is happening if he has no notion of what jurisdiction involves. The qualitatively distinctive nature of justice versus beauty, but also versus political power and economic benefit must be appreciated if someone is to understand what the judge is doing. The interest of justice may be at odds with the political advantage or economic benefit of those involved. The judge may include these aspects of the case in his considerations, but as such they should not be the deciding factor. The judgement must meet the criteria of the law, even if this involves political or economic disadvantage for parties. The quality of the law depends on the application of the law in a normative sense. This is true in every field.

Another example. Someone who sees marriage as socially recognized cohabitation in a sexual relationship with certain rights and duties laid down in law has cut off access to an understanding of the qualitatively

distinctive nature of marriage. Though the normative dimension of marriage is not absent in this formulation, it is interpreted in legal terms. And this does not tell us what is distinctive about marriage. For the promise that is made in front of the registrar is not primarily entrance into a legal contract, but the public confirmation of a mutual promise of faithfulness in a relationship of which the inner quality is determined by the degree to which mutual love is present. Someone who enters into a marriage takes on a normative task. And the quality experienced in marriage depends at the least to some extent on the degree to which this is taken seriously. The quality of life is closely bound up with the application of the norms obtaining to it. In fact this formulation is not yet adequate. The norms are not added from outside, they form an intrinsic part of life. They themselves constitute the quality. Hence they can never be totally ignored.

In contrast to what the Cartesian scheme suggests, the qualitative diversity with implied normativity therefore functions intrinsically in reality itself. Related to this is the fact that knowing forms an intrinsic part of reality. The qualitative diversity is experienced as such. Or also: known. This is borne out by language. Our speech expresses the entire diversity within reality. And thus we encounter normativity again. For the way we speak can open up and close off reality. Someone who talks about sexuality primarily in words deriving from obscene language will have great trouble with its significance in the context of a marital relationship. The view of the intimate encounter between two people can be blocked by a wrong use of language. Our being is codetermined by our knowing. And conversely, the way we exist helps to give direction to the development of our knowledge. And all aspects of reality function in this. In this way human knowledge forms part of reality itself, because human functioning with the typical human aspects forms an intrinsic part of reality in its integral existence.

#### *4.2 Knowledge as Human Responsibility*

There is another tension in Descartes's argumentation in which he tries to indicate the foundation for certain knowledge. At first he has enough in the starting-point 'I think, therefore I am' and the criterion which goes with it: every step in the methodological argument must have the same immediate obviousness as the starting-point found. But further on his account identifies another foundation: God. If human knowledge seems to have an absolute character on the basis of starting-point and method, the very fact of doubt itself makes it clear to Descartes that human knowledge is not perfect. This is also shown by the fact that the idea of God which we have cannot be explained on the basis of humankind itself. That is why God himself must exist. Next, all knowledge is found to be dependent on God for its reliability.

For to begin with, that which I have just taken as a rule, that is to say, that all the things that we very clearly and very distinctly conceive of are true, is certain only because God is or exists, and that He is a Perfect Being, and that all that is in us issues from him. From this it follows that our ideas or notions, which to the extent of their being clear or distinct are ideas of real things issuing from God, cannot but to that extent be true.<sup>26</sup>

If it seems at first that knowledge can be entirely founded in its certainty on the fact of consciousness and strict method, later everything is sustained by Descartes's faith in God. Ultimately the certainty of method depends on religious trust. The influence of the Christian tradition is undoubtedly felt here. And because for Descartes truth depends on God, it will ultimately mean more to him than methodological certainty, which is significant only because it can be practically used.

In the course of the Modern Age this perspective changes. Knowledge must be able to stand on its own two feet, separate from any external foundation, and certainly independent of any faith. Certainty becomes exclusively a matter of subject and method. And the significance of knowledge is mainly seen to lie in its use. If this use cannot do justice to the significance, because knowledge also has value as such, the meaning must still be thought as having its origin in the human subject.

It has become increasingly clear that thought on knowledge has thus set itself too difficult a task. Absolute certainty has not only proved unattainable in practice, even in science, the ideal itself has also come under criticism, because it does not agree with the human character of knowledge. Modern philosophy of science has come up against the same limits indicated in this essay from the perspective of creation belief. A similar problem occurs when we try to think the meaning of knowledge as constituted in the knowing subject. The problems caused by the subordination of all reality to human purposes have become evident in the negative consequences entailed in technological control over both nature and society. If knowledge is not viewed as the means to an end, but as meaningful in itself, it is not easy to see how human subjectivity could be its origin. The problem is shown for instance by the fact that in philosophy it is usually not concrete people which are seen as the subject constituting this meaning. Especially in philosophy it is rather an abstract idea, which is then called a transcendental subject. More accurately, it is an absolutized function of concrete human beings, for instance their thought or their consciousness. It could also be language.

The absolutization of a certain function as a designation of human subjectivity continues a tendency already present in Descartes. After he has found his indisputable starting-point in 'I think, therefore I am,' he soon draws the conclusion: 'I am thinking.' This shows that the first proposition, which seems at first sight unproblematic, is open to criticism on further consideration, because the 'I' is introduced as a matter of course. When, next, in the second proposition, this 'I' is identified with one of its functions, namely the function in the first proposition, this self-evidence proves deceptive. It seems as if the subject of thought, and so of knowledge, is thought itself, as the title of an article by Karl Popper strikingly puts it: 'Epistemology without a knowing subject.'<sup>27</sup> As a result, the true subject, we in our concrete existence, disappears from view.

It is this approach which puts all emphasis on the certainty of knowledge. Insofar as the matter of human responsibility is raised in connection with knowledge itself and not only with its application, it remains confined to this. But this fails to address the question whether knowledge also does justice to reality's distinctive nature. Our integral responsibility for the qualitative opening up of reality in a normative sense cannot develop

in this way. The presumption of an absolute position obscures the view of the real position. The human subject is not constitutive of knowledge in the sense of providing meaning, but in the sense of being responsible, of responding to the norms which determine the specifically structured cognitive situation.

It is clear from the above how much the view of knowledge held by people implies a view of themselves. As a natural sequel to the Cartesian method, humans are understood either from one or more of their functions—this is the sense in which we interpreted Descartes's statements above—or as the elusive subject which precedes them all: all functions can be objectified and analyzed, but the subject which carries out these acts remains invisible for that very reason, just as the eye that sees objects cannot see itself at the same time. In both cases it is difficult to call humankind to account. If the person is approached from the viewpoint of some or other function, the nature of this function will be seen to determine her knowledge. In that case it is the actual structures which determine the nature and scope of knowledge. These can be analyzed, but are not connected with responsibility. If the person is seen as a transcendental subject, which needs to be assumed in order to understand knowledge, any talk about responsibility is inappropriate too.

The perspective becomes very different when we reorientate ourselves to the biblical belief in creation. The human self as subject can then no longer be seen as withdrawn from structures nor as coinciding with them. She exists in these structures. Or rather, the structures enable her to exist. If we interpret existence once more as response, structures can be described as response structures. Typical human structures like thought, language, law etc. are response structures in a double sense. As creatures we respond to the promise-command to be on the basis of the structures by which we exist. As human beings we can be said to answer in responsibility for the structures in which we exist give us this possibility of responsibility.

But precisely when we speak about response and responsibility, it becomes clear that we as human beings are not absorbed in the structures. We are addressed as this unique human being. As such we must respond, also when we do this communally with others. The biblical belief in creation means we as human beings are addressed by God, uniquely and together with others. This should determine our self-understanding. On this basis the structures of our existence receive their deep meaning as response structures. The creational relationship contains the ultimate foundation of our responsibility. Our knowledge of reality forms the horizon within which we bear responsibility. But because in acquiring knowledge, too, we make choices and choose directions, knowledge itself is part of our responsibility. Its basic structures are given with the creation itself. From the creation they derive their qualitative nature and their normative determination. But how we exist in these structures and unfold them is our responsibility. That is why, in our knowing, we can open up and close off reality.

## NOTES

1. This essay is a revised version of chapter 12 'Kennis in reformatorisch wijsgerig perspectief' in *Cultuurfilosofie. Katholieke, reformatorische, humanistische, islamitische en joodse reflecties over onze cultuur* (Philosophy of culture. Catholic, Reformational, Humanist, Islamic and Jewish reflections on our culture), ed. Edith Brugmans (Open Universiteit Nederland, 2002), pp. 419–54. Translated from the Dutch by A. P. Runia.

2. See Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. Volume 1: The necessary presuppositions of philosophy; Volume 2: The general theory of the modal spheres; Volume 3: The structures of individuality of temporal reality; Volume 4: Index of subjects and authors. Original edition—Amsterdam/Paris/Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1953–1958. Reprint—Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997. A similar approach can be found in Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World. An integral Ontology* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984); and Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality of Science. An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2d revised edition, 2005, 1991).

3. Actually he says that biblical faith cannot ask the question 'Why is there something and not nothing?' because the question makes no sense for faith. Cf. M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953), p. 5f. (Translated as *Introduction to Metaphysics* by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

4. Ps. 139:1, 6. Revised Standard Version (1952). All further references are to this translation.

5. Gen. 1:6, 16, 25, 26.

6. Gen. 1:3, 6, 7, 9, 14, 15, 20.

7. Cf. Claus Westermann, *Genesis, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament. Teilband I Genesis 1–11* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), p. 117f. (Translated as *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

8. Ps. 33:9.

9. The significance of Jesus Christ for the Christian faith has everything to do with the fulfilment of the promise given with creation.

10. Gen. 1:26–27.

11. Matt. 22:37–40.

12. Plato, *Republic*, vii 516b–c. Translation F. M. Cornford.

13. Plato follows the Greek philosopher Parmenides in this.

14. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911). Reprinted in *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy / René Descartes*, ed. David Weissman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 21.

15. Op. cit., p. 21.

16. Op. cit., p. 10.

17. Cf. Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press 1986), 69f.

18. For a discussion about knowledge as correspondence with reality, see Henk G. Geertsema, 'Dooyeweerd on knowledge and truth.' In *Ways of Knowing in Concert*, ed. John H. Kok (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2005), pp. 85–100.

19. It is important to bear in mind, for what follows, that 'command' and the related concept 'hearing' should be understood against the background of the creative word as a word that 'calls into existence,' as discussed in section



2.1.2. Though this 'command' implies authority, it primarily involves making possible, calling into being. Because of its inner quality, this implies a promise. Hence 'promise-command-to-be.' That the relation is not one of external compulsion is also made clear by the command's appeal to responsibility in the case of humans.

20. Gadamer makes an interesting point in this connection. He draws attention to the special relation between the general and the particular which emerges from Aristotle's ethics. Practical cognition cannot be accommodated in Plato's abstract model. Application to the concrete situation is an essential component of ethical insight. See H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Ges. Werke, Bd. I, J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), pp. 317ff. Translated as *Truth and Method*. 2d revised ed. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1993).

21. This view allows nature to come to life in the books of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.

22. Cf. e.g., Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality. An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories*, 2nd edition (University of Notre Dame Press 2005).

23. In a concrete situation tensions may arise between different kinds of knowledge as between faith and science. This certainly will happen if either or both are made absolute or closed off from other approaches. The reason can also be the complexity of the situation.

24. From a very different background the visual metaphor has been criticized as a starting-point for the conception of knowledge by, among others, R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell/Princeton University Press, 1980).

25. The reader should realize that subject and object functions as active and passive properties are primarily ontological not epistemological categories. They have also epistemic meaning because of the close connection between epistemology and ontology that I argue for later in the text.

26. Op. cit., pp. 24–25.

27. In Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: At The Clarendon Press), pp. 146–52.