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A Presuppositional Rejection of Enlightenment Evidentialism

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A Presuppositional Rejection of Enlightenment Evidentialism

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Philosophy

Bridgewater State University

May 2, 2013

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Introduction

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge, truth, and the justification of belief. Epistemology of religion considers these issues in relation to religious truth claims (e.g., whether or not it is reasonable to believe that God exists). Often, the epistemology of religion leads to inquiry into fundamental attitudes towards the criteria for justification. For example, a major strain of contemporary epistemology of religion has been characterized “as a debate over whether evidentialism applies to the belief component of faith, or whether we should instead adopt a more permissive epistemology.”¹ Thus, whether or not evidentialism is the appropriate approach to epistemology comes into question. This question functions as the primary motivation for this paper.

I will ultimately show some of the limitations of evidentialism and outline, why, on the basis of these limitations, it cannot be taken as a universal criteria for measuring the justification religious belief. That is, I will show that the evidentialist project fails insofar as it was an attempt to provide a universal criterion for justification that could be legitimately applied to any given religious belief in any circumstance. I will argue that evidentialism is limited like this because religious beliefs and their justification should not, indeed cannot, be legitimately separated from the worldview and presuppositions in which they are embedded. Rather, a more informed approach to epistemology of religion should take into account the important relationship that exists between worldviews and the justification of religious beliefs. Evidentialism fails because it does not provide a sufficiently flexible and nuanced criterion that can be legitimately applied across multiple worldviews. A corollary to this point is that it appears to be impossible to find any such universal, trans-worldview criteria for measuring the justification of belief.

¹ Peter Forrest, “Epistemology of Religion”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2013).

Procedure

We will first consider the general lay of the land, as it were, in contemporary epistemology of religion. In the first place, this will involve an outline of the position known as Enlightenment evidentialism with its characteristic claim that because there is insufficient evidence that it is therefore unreasonable to believe in God. Next we will consider several responses to this thesis including the positions commonly referred to as Natural Theology, Wittgensteinian Fideism, and Reformed Epistemology. After this treatment of contemporary epistemology of religion I will then work out an alternative response to Enlightenment evidentialism. This response is loosely grounded in the Presuppositional school of Christian apologetics.² In addition to formulating this response it will be helpful to compare and contrast it with the first three responses because there are a number overlapping concerns. The Presuppositional response to Enlightenment evidentialism is thus sympathetic to all three positions without out being ultimately reducible to any of them. Before closing we will consider several potential objections and problems with this view. In the end, this sort of response to Enlightenment evidentialism should provide many insights into the nature of epistemology of religion, epistemology proper, and even of philosophy in general.

² Apologetics is the theological discipline concerned, roughly, with defending the reasonableness of one's faith or religious belief system. Presuppositionalism is one of several apologetic methods used by Christian apologists. The central thesis behind this method is that it is philosophically necessary and, more importantly, *theologically* necessary, to presuppose the truth of the Christian faith when defending its reasonableness. Presuppositionalists typically want to argue in a "broadly circular" manner that is consistent with this pre-established conclusion. While I do not have the space in this paper to fully present and defend Presuppositionalism, this paper can be understood as laying down at least some of the philosophical groundwork that this apologetic method is built upon. That is, this paper will illustrate at least one reason why, philosophically speaking, Presuppositionalists reject Enlightenment evidentialism. In the course of this paper I will address some of the problems with such a view. For instance, that because such a view employs a form of circular reasoning that it should be rejected and also that such a view ultimately fideistic.

Contemporary Epistemology of Religion

Enlightenment Evidentialism

As its name suggests, Enlightenment Evidentialism can be traced to several 18th century Enlightenment thinkers. These thinkers include “...such notables as David Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, and the towering Immanuel Kant.”³ A common theme in their work was to “...demand that all beliefs be subjected to the searching criticism of reason; if a belief cannot survive the scrutiny of reason, it is irrational.”⁴ Their concern for properly grounded and well-formed beliefs was captured by Kant’s famous command, “Dare to know! (*Sapere aude.*) Have the courage to use your own understanding.”⁵ While many of the enlightenment thinkers were themselves theists, Enlightenment evidentialism represents a slightly later application of these basic concerns to religious belief with the resulting conclusion that religious belief, and especially belief in God, is unreasonable.

One of the most famous and frequently cited expressions of this sort of Enlightenment evidentialism is W.K. Clifford’s 1877 essay “The Ethics of Belief”.⁶ This essay has had a lasting impact and it succinctly captures the core sentiment of evidentialism.⁷ In this essay, Clifford opens by telling a story about a hypothetical ship owner. The ship owner had very good reason

³ Kelly James Clark, *Return To Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 3. For some specific examples of their work, see Hume’s essay *On Miracles*, section X of his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and also Book IV of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

⁴ Kelly James Clark, “Religious Epistemology”, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (2004).

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?*, trans. Mary C. Smith.
<<http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>>

⁶ William .K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” *Contemporary Review* 29 (1877): 289-309.
<<http://www.uta.edu/philosophy/faculty/burgess-jackson/Clifford.pdf>>. Clifford is not an Enlightenment thinker, *per se*, as he was writing in the late 19th century. However, his work is representative of his predecessors’ sentiments.

⁷ Clark, *Return To Reason*, 98.

(i.e., very strong evidence) to believe that his ship needed some significant repairs. Rather than paying for these repairs he decided to suppress this knowledge. He decided to believe, contrary to the evidence, that the ship would survive the voyage. Clifford then gives two different endings to the story: 1) the ship sank and many lives were lost and 2) it made the voyage safely and no lives were lost. In both cases, regardless of the outcome, there was still something deeply wrong about what the ship owner has done. While the outcome was far worse on the first ending, both stories involve the ship owner believing a certain proposition whether or not "...he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him."⁸ Given that the ship owner was aware of what the evidence clearly suggested about the condition of his boat, it was wrong for him to believe anything to the contrary. The ship owner did not have the right to believe such a thing. In fact, he was obligated to believe the converse, namely, that the ship was not sound and the he should repair it soon.

After this he introduces another story involving a group of people being slandered upon insufficient evidence.⁹ In this example it turns out that even a cursory glance at the readily available evidence would have proved that the allegations were not true. However the slanderers did not search for any evidence at all. They instead believed somewhat fanatically and upon insufficient grounds. He then adds further details that complicate the story. As it turns out, while the surface level evidence they ignored revealed innocence, a rigorous investigation would have revealed that the accused parties were in fact guilty after all. Thus the slanders ended up with an accidentally true belief formed by faulty and insufficient means. This works to illustrate the same point as the example of the ship owner: "...the question is not whether their belief was true or

⁸ Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief", 290.

⁹ Ibid., 290-291.

false, but whether they entertained it on wrong grounds.”¹⁰ Thus, Clifford is primarily interested in this essay with the reasons that we have for believing as we do.

It is important to note that on Clifford’s view there is a relationship between belief and obligation. One has an obligation to only believe upon the basis of sufficient evidence. Consequently, only when one has sufficient evidence do they have the corresponding right to believe something. Working behind all of this is his idea about the profoundly social nature of our beliefs. According to Clifford it is important for us to have properly formed beliefs (i.e., to only believe when we have the right to) because our beliefs always influence our actions in one way or another. Likewise our beliefs have many different ways of affecting those around us, the sorts of beliefs they hold, and by extension the sorts of actions they take. Thus society as a whole is influenced by one’s believing properly or improperly.¹¹ For this reason he extends the need for evidence to virtually every kind of belief. There is a universal need for evidence-based beliefs: “To some up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”¹² Again at the end of the essay he says, “It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence; and where it is presumption to doubt and to investigate, there it is worse than presumption to believe.”¹³

One important implication to be drawn from this is that ensuring the justification of a given belief will require some measure of intentional, methodological inquiry into the subject matter at hand. Thus, because the ship owner and the slanderers from Clifford’s examples fail to perform their epistemic duties (i.e., fail to believe on the basis of the evidence), they are

¹⁰ Ibid., 291.

¹¹ Ibid., 292.

¹² Ibid., 295.

¹³ Ibid., 309.

therefore not justified in their beliefs. Likewise, if Smith wants to test the justificatory status of his belief B, what he needs to do is review all of the relevant evidence to see if B is grounded in sufficient evidence. If, because of the evidence, B is more likely true than false, then he can have some degree of confidence in believing it. However, he would not be justified in believing B with complete confidence unless there was indubitable evidence clearly demonstrating its truth.¹⁴ Based on this we can classify Clifford's evidentialism as a deontological theory of justification. Roughly speaking, deontological justification is the idea "...that being epistemically justified in believing something is bound up with, or to be analyzed in terms of, one's living up to one's intellectual duties or responsibilities."¹⁵

This raises a few questions. For instance, what exactly counts as evidence, how do we have access to it, and what does this mean for epistemology of religion in particular? Clifford does not address these questions in a systematic or highly detailed fashion. However, I think we can legitimately surmise from something he says in passing that firsthand experience is the best kind of evidence and that it should be relied upon as a final authority. While revealing his intention to discuss inference after discussing testimony, he says: "...and then, further [after discussing testimony], we shall inquire more generally when and why we may believe that which *goes beyond our own experience*, or even beyond *the experience of mankind*."¹⁶ He seems here to be taking for granted that firsthand experience is the primary source of justificatory evidence. In a similar way, Peter Forrest identifies several sorts of evidence that are typically connected with evidentialism:

¹⁴ Forrest, "Epistemology of Religion".

¹⁵ George Pappas, "Internalist vs. Externalist Conceptions of Epistemic Justification", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2013).

¹⁶ Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," 296 (emphasis added).

Here several sorts of evidence are allowed. One consists of beliefs in that which is “evident to the senses”, that is, beliefs directly due to sense-experience. Another sort of evidence is that which is “self-evident”, that is, obvious once you think about it. Evidence may also include the beliefs directly due to memory and introspection. Again moral convictions might count as evidence, even if not treated as “self-evident”.¹⁷

Note that all of these involve some level of experience or other. Thus evidentialism functions primarily with reference to our firsthand experience and reflection on these experiences.

It is worth mentioning very briefly what Clifford thought of testimony and inference as they are related to evidence. Testimonial reports can only be counted as evidence when the testifier’s belief is richly embedded in sufficient evidence. Further, the recipient of the testimony must have at least some good reason for trusting the reporter. Or, in the very least, they cannot have any readily available reason for doubting them: “We may believe the statement of another person, when there is reasonable ground for supposing that he knows the matter of which he speaks, and that he is speaking the truth so far as he knows it.”¹⁸ Inference plays an equally important role. Just as many of our beliefs are formed on the basis of testimony so many of our beliefs involve inference at some level. For instance, my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow cannot be based upon firsthand experience because it is a belief about something in the future that has not yet come to pass. Thus I infer, based on past experiences, that the future will resemble the past and thus that the sun will rise. Clifford says that all inference must operate on the basis of this sort of an assumption whereby, through inductive generalization, what we have experienced is taken to be representative of and similar to that which we have not yet experienced. He says, “We may go beyond experience by assuming that what we do not know is like what we do know; or, in other words, we may add to our experience on the assumption of a

¹⁷ Forrest, “Epistemology of Religion”.

¹⁸ Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”, 309.

uniformity in nature.”¹⁹ By including testimony and inference like this Clifford makes his of justification system far more flexible and inclusive of a much wider range of beliefs.

In this paper, however, we are especially interested in how this sort of evidentialism, as represented by Clifford, has been applied to epistemology of religion. As briefly mentioned above, beliefs are to be proportioned to the evidence in such a way that partial and incomplete evidence can only justify less-than-certain belief. At the same time, only conclusive evidence justifies certainty in belief.²⁰ Thus there can be varying degrees of confidence corresponding to varying degrees of evidential force. This principle is taken over directly into epistemology of religion. The contention, then, is that religious beliefs (e.g., belief in God) must be justified on the basis of evidence just as any kind of belief must be held in accord with the evidence. Religious beliefs require evidence and only conclusive evidence can justify certainty in belief.

By and large these evidentialist criteria of justification have been employed to show that belief in God is at least unjustified and at most irrational. According to Clark, “The evidentialist objection [to belief in God] may be formalized as follows: (1) Belief in God is rational only if there is sufficient evidence for the existence of God. (2) There is not sufficient evidence for the existence of God. (3) Therefore, belief in God is irrational.”²¹ Premise (1), that belief in God requires evidence, is based upon the idea that the truth of God’s existence is clearly not something known in the basis of firsthand experience as outlined above. That is, God’s existence is not known by sense experience nor is it self-evident. Premise (2), that there is insufficient evidence, is “...usually based on a negative assessment of the success of theistic proofs or arguments. Following Hume and Kant, the standard arguments for the existence of God—

¹⁹ Ibid., 306.

²⁰ Forrest, “Epistemology of Religion”.

²¹ Clark, “Religious Epistemology”.

cosmological, teleological and ontological— are judged to be defective in one respect or another.”²² In addition to this, some problems (e.g., the problem of evil) are typically posed as counter evidence. On the basis of these sorts of arguments, Antony Flew suggests that “...the only reasonable posture is that of the negative atheist or the agnostic.”²³ In the same way, it is reported that Bertrand Russell claimed that if he were he were to ever be “Confronted with the Almighty, [that] he would ask, ‘Sir, why did you not give me better evidence?’”²⁴

Defenders of the rationality of belief in God have offered several responses to the evidentialist rejection of belief in God. I will mention three leading lines of response before formulating a Presuppositional response. For our purposes we can conveniently treat these first three responses as beginning with a denial of either premise (1), that belief in God requires evidence, or premise (2), that there is insufficient evidence for belief in God.

Natural Theology

The position roughly known as natural theology represents what is perhaps the most straight forward reaction to the evidentialist rejection of God. It is straight forward in that it agrees with the evidentialist position in terms of methodology and differs with it only in terms of results. By methodology, I mean, the method by which they hope to assess the reasonableness of belief in God. They agree about what would constitute a good reason for believing in God and thus they agree about what justification is, at least in this one area. Both views agree that premise (1) is true; that belief in God requires evidence in order to be rationally and justifiably held. The natural theologians disagree with the evidentialist rejection of belief in God, then, by negating

²² Clark, “Religious Epistemology”.

²³ Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism*, quoted in Clark, *Return To Reason*, 3.

²⁴ Leo Rolsten. *The Saturday Review*, February 23, 1974, pp.25-26. < <http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1974feb23-00025>>.

premise (2). That is, they are convinced that rather than pointing to non-theism (i.e., agnosticism or atheism), the evidence instead points to theism as the most reasonable conclusion.

Classical Natural Theological arguments for God's existence include cosmological, teleological, ontological, and design arguments, typically associated with thinkers like Aquinas, Anselm, and Paley. Consequently, the natural theologians' main project is to reformulate, rearticulate, and perhaps supplement these arguments so that they are stronger and more convincing. While it is beyond the scope this paper to consider the work that has been done this area, many philosophers and theologians have undertaken exactly this task.²⁵ Some have undertaken to provide proofs which would justify certainty in believing in God. Others have settled for demonstrating that based on the evidence there is a great likelihood that God exists and therefore good reason for some less-than-certain belief in him.²⁶ Thus the debate between evidentialists and natural theologians is rather straight forward and is understood by both of them to be a debate entirely over what the evidence suggests.

Wittgensteinian Fideism

Wittgensteinian Fideism stands out as another response to Enlightenment evidentialism and, more specifically, to similar sorts of challenges that came from the Logical Positivists.²⁷ Before discussing the position there is one important caveat: although this position bears the name "Wittgensteinian", it is not at all clear that Wittgenstein would have endorsed this position or, for

²⁵ Among them are Richard Swineburne, *The Existence of God*, (New York: Oxford University Press). See also William Lane Craig, Gary R. Habermas, Paul D. Feinberg in *Five Views of Apologetics* ed. Steven Cowen, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House).

²⁶ Forrest, "Epistemology of Religion".

²⁷In fact, Logical Positivism may classify as a sub-species of evidentialism or perhaps as an application of evidentialism to philosophy of language.

that matter, exactly what he would endorse.²⁸ There is an ongoing debate over how exactly to interpret his scattered and somewhat enigmatic remarks on religious matters.²⁹ The name is nevertheless fitting, in a sense, because this approach to epistemology of religion is predicated upon a distinctively Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of language and in particular upon his game theory of meaning.

To understand how a Wittgensteinian Fideist would formulate a response to Enlightenment evidentialism's critique of religious belief, we must briefly consider Wittgenstein's game theory of meaning in relation to one of its predecessors, the Logical Positivists. The positivists offered a theory of meaning or a set of criteria by which language was to be assessed. Roughly speaking, their theory of meaning implied that "...a piece discourse has meaning if and only if it is either analytically true or false, or capable of verification or disverification."³⁰ Thus the presence or absence of meaning was a function of the presence or absence of a truth value (i.e. being either true or false). The motivation for positivist program resembles that of Enlightenment evidentialism: both traditions are aimed at restricting careless, fanatical, or groundless believing. Furthermore, both operate by subjecting beliefs to rigorous examination and strict criteria that appeal to empirical evidence or firsthand experience.

According to the positivist view, if one can determine the truth value of a given utterance either by verification or by *a priori* analysis, then the utterance is meaningful. Likewise, if one

²⁸ Richard Amesbury, "Fideism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2013). Amesbury points that it is very unlikely that Wittgenstein would have agreed this particular application of his theories. He further says that "...Wittgensteinians generally regard 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' as a caricature not only of Wittgenstein's views but also of their own".

²⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Epistemology of Religion," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* ed. Greco and Sosa (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1999) 303-324.

³⁰ Wolterstorff, *Epistemology of Religion*, 318.

cannot determine a truth value by such criteria then it is categorized as meaningless.³¹ On this view only some non-abstract pieces of discourse were considered to be genuinely meaningful. Metaphysical language, ethical language, and religious language, as a result, were all considered meaningless. This is because they do not have truth values that can be easily determined according to the strict positivist criteria.³² Thus, while the Enlightenment evidentialist would claim that there is insufficient evidence for belief in God, the positivist would argue a more radical point: because religious beliefs are not the sorts of things that can be empirically or analytically verified, they are in fact not even truly meaningful. Again, religious language is not meaningful in the way that scientific discourse is clearly meaningful and straightforwardly descriptive of the apparent states of affairs.

In his later work, and most clearly in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein responded in opposition to the positivist view by proposing an altogether different theory of meaning. He vigorously opposed the labeling of all religious language as meaningless. He thought that "...if an interpretation of religion makes religious seem silly, pointless, or outmoded, that interpretation should be dismissed out of hand as not knowing what it is talking about."³³ Rather, there must be some other way of understanding meaning whereby metaphysical, ethical, and religious language is not meaningless *per se*, but also isn't to be assessed by the same exact criteria as more "scientific" sorts of language. The solution, for Wittgenstein, was to think about meaning in terms of its use and use in terms of what he called "forms of life". Forms of life, very roughly speaking, are ways of getting along in the world that

³¹Notice that these two statements merely parse out the earlier biconditional: "...a piece of discourse has meaning *if and only if* it is either analytically true or false, or capable of verification or disverification" (Wolterstorff, 318, emphasis added).

³² *Ibid.*, 318-19.

³³ *Ibid.*

are shared by groups of people. A group of people who partake in a common form of life have a set of assumptions or a shared understanding which loosely unites them. Furthermore, such a group of people have a common or shared understanding about how to speak and use language. Thus they can be said to be playing the same “language game”. Their common form of life provides them with a loose set of implicit rules for the game. These rules govern what utterances are meaningful or count as legitimate “moves” within the game. Thus an utterance is meaningful based on its function within a language game.³⁴

This theory is then applied to epistemology of religion in such a way that religious believers are said to be playing a certain language game.³⁵ There are several components underlying this particular application the game theory of meaning that are well worth bringing to light. Richard Amesbury articulates several of these underlying theses:

According to this interpretation [of Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning], religion is a self-contained and primarily expressive enterprise, governed by its own internal logic or “grammar.” This view—commonly called *Wittgensteinian Fideism*—is variously characterized as entailing one or more of the following distinct (but arguably inter-related) theses: (1) that religion is logically cut off from other aspects of life; (2) that religious discourse is essentially self-referential and does not allow us to talk about reality; (3) that religious beliefs can be understood only by religious believers; and (4) that religion cannot be criticized.³⁶

With these underlying commitments in mind, the fideistic nature of this position becomes quite clear. The fact that religious language is fundamentally expressive seems to be the ground for its logically isolated character. The logically isolated character, in turn, is what earns this position the title “fideism”. Fideism, here, is roughly any position that sees the pursuit of religious truth

³⁴ Anat Biletzki, “Ludwig Wittgenstein,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2013).

³⁵ As mentioned above, this interpretation and application of his theory of meaning is not entirely uncontroversial. In fact, some interpreters would argue that this is a misreading, an oversimplification, and a misapplication of this theory of meaning. For an example, see Dallas High’s *Logic, Persons, and Belief*, (New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1967) 27-130.

³⁶ Amesbury, “Fideism”.

as about faith and not about reason. Thus fideism will sometimes involve a commitment to religious belief without reasons to back it up at all. In more radical instances it may even allow for belief in spite of reasons to the contrary.

In a similar fashion, Peter Forrest says that Wittgensteinian Fideism involves both an “autonomy thesis” and an “incommensurability” thesis.³⁷ First, the autonomy thesis is roughly that religious beliefs can only be seen as justified in terms of internal criteria. According to this thesis, each religion is its own free-standing, self-referential entity. Second, there is an incommensurability thesis which says, roughly, “...that religious utterances are unlike scientific or metaphysical claims and so we are confusing different uses of language if we judge religious utterances by the standards of science or metaphysics.”³⁸ Thus religious language is not taken to function in the exact same way that scientific and metaphysical language purports to be about or descriptive of the world. They are being used in different ways and for different purposes. This is similar to what Wolterstorff says in his formulation of Wittgensteinian Fideism³⁹:

Religious “belief” and the language used to express it, these often pictorial in character, give expression to one’s religious form of life and are at the same time a component therein... Thus, to verbalize a religious “belief” is to express, often in pictorial language, some aspect of one’s religious form of life – while at the same time engaging in that form of life.⁴⁰

On this formulation, religious language is primarily expressive as opposed to more scientific language which purports to be descriptive of extramental things. In order to understand what is meant by a religious utterance, that is, what it *expresses*, one must of course be a participant in that form of life. At the same time, in order to know that something is meaningless, or not a

³⁷ Forrest, “Epistemology of Religion”.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, of course, is not a Wittgensteinian Fideist. The passage I am about to cite is part of a book chapter in which he outlines the position in question.

⁴⁰ Wolterstorff, *Epistemology of Religion*, 319.

genuine expression of the form of life, one must likewise have a participant's perspective. In the final analysis this formulation of Wittgensteinian Fideism appears to be a modified version of positivism.⁴¹ After all, it appears as though this theory still bars religious language from being genuinely descriptive of reality in a way that scientific language is. A religious speaker, then, who says that "There is a God," is not uttering something that is true or false, but is rather expressing something. For many religious thinkers, however, such a theory will not do.⁴² They require a more robust, realistic understanding of their truth claims.

In any case, a Wittgensteinian Fideist of this sort has the resources to overturn the positivist accusation that religious language is meaningless. Such language is not meaningless *per se*. It simply has meaning in a way that is different from more straightforward scientific language. It is just that it is embedded in a different form of life and thus part of a different language game. But what of the evidentialists' claim that belief in God is nevertheless unreasonable because it is not based upon sufficient evidence? The Wittgensteinian Fideists stand ready with an answer: "while it is appropriate to ask questions about justification within a language game it is a mistake to ask about the justification of "playing" the game in question. In this way epistemology is relativised to language games, themselves related to forms of life, and the one used for assessing religious claims is less stringent than evidentialism."⁴³ Thus, according to Wittgensteinian Fideism, the evidentialist objection to belief in God may be rejected as irrelevant. Unless it is inherent in a given religious system that their beliefs should be argued for according to evidentialist criteria then such criteria do not apply.

⁴¹ Wolterstorff, *Epistemology of Religion*, 319.

⁴² Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeper into this topic and consider any modified or augmented forms of Wittgensteinian Fideism that allow for non-expressive, cognitively meaningful interpretations of religious and theological language.

⁴³ Forrest, "Epistemology of Religion".

Consider this in terms of the evidentialist objection to belief in God as formalized above. While the natural theologian denied premise (2), that there is there is insufficient evidence for belief in God, the Wittgensteinian Fideist have taken a quite different approach. Earlier we said that the natural theologian agreed with the evidentialist in terms of methodology and differed with them only in their evaluation of the evidence (and thus in their conclusion as well). The Wittgensteinian Fideist, on the other hand, would clearly disagree with them in terms of methodology. That is, they would deny premise (1), that belief in God is the kind of belief that needs to be justified on the basis of evidence.

Reformed Epistemology

The next alternative to Enlightenment evidentialism to consider is the so-called Reformed Epistemology is. Like the Wittgensteinian Fideists they ultimately deny premise (1); that belief in God must be based upon argument and evidence. However, they do this for quite different reasons. In their denial of premise (1), they begin by directly attacking evidentialism itself and then by arguing that it is reasonable for one to believe in God without propositional evidence. Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston are among the more prominent and well-known Reformed Epistemologists.⁴⁴

In the first place the Reformed Epistemology objection begins by making explicit the sort of noetic structure that is implied by Enlightenment evidentialism. By a noetic structure is meant the way in which one's beliefs and their justification are related to or connected with each other.⁴⁵ The Reformed Epistemologists argue that Enlightenment evidentialism entails a sort of

⁴⁴ See, for example, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff *Faith and Rationality*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). See also William Alston, *Perceiving God*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁴⁵ Clark, *Return To Reason*, 126.

foundationalism.⁴⁶ Generally speaking, foundationalism refers to the idea that some of our beliefs are basic while others are non-basic. Basic beliefs are accepted and justifiably believed on their own and not in connection with other beliefs. These beliefs are like the foundation of a building. Other beliefs, however, can be “built” upon these beliefs. These are non-basic beliefs. We believe these things on the basis of other, basic, beliefs. Non-basic beliefs are inferred from basic beliefs. These non-basic beliefs correspond to the super-structure of a building that is built upon the foundation. The all-important question that this begs is which beliefs are considered basic and why.

As we saw in the above treatment of Clifford’s essay, evidentialism ultimately relies upon firsthand experience. Thus, for the evidentialist, a basic belief is justified if and only if it is “self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible” and a non-basic belief is justified if and only if it is “...inferable from a set of beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible.”⁴⁷ We may refer to this position as “classical foundationalism”.⁴⁸ This foundationalist commitment ultimately explains why the evidentialists hold that belief in God demands evidence. Belief in God is clearly non-basic (because it fails to meet the criteria for being basic). Thus, by definition, it must be inferred or deduced from a set of propositions (i.e. it needs to be based on propositional evidence). Reformed Epistemologist attack this assumption.

Their general strategy is to show that if this position is consistently applied then it turns out to be self-defeating. Evidentialism is, they maintain, self-referentially incoherent and should be dismissed without hesitation. To elucidate this point they begin by showing that very few

⁴⁶ Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality* eds. Plantinga and Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) 47-55. See also, Clark, *Return To Reason*, 132-39.

⁴⁷ Clark, *Return To Reason*, 136.

⁴⁸ See Clark, *Return To Reason* 136 and Clark, “Religious Epistemology”. Also, see Plantinga *Faith and Rationality*, 39-63.

beliefs can be justified according to strict evidentialist criteria. Accordingly, Kelly James Clark points out some of our limitations when it comes to classical foundationalism:

The first problem with the evidentialist objection is that the universal demand for evidence simply cannot be met in a large number of cases with the cognitive equipment that we have. No one has ever been able to offer proofs for the existence of other persons, inductive beliefs (e.g., that the sun will rise in the future), or the reality of the past (perhaps, as Bertrand Russell coyly puzzled, we were created five minutes ago with our memories intact) that satisfy [evidentialist] requirements for proof.⁴⁹

Thus evidentialism is automatically suspect because, if consistently applied, it seems to rob us of a number of beliefs that we normally take to be very secure. This seems to create something of a dilemma for evidentialists. For instance, if they say we that we may believe without evidence that other people have minds, then they have abandoned the very heart of their program: that “...it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, if they say that we cannot believe in other minds without proof then their theory will devolve into a fairly straightforward skepticism about almost any truth-regarding claim. The Reformed Epistemologist’s point here, or one of their points, is that is that belief in God is like belief in other minds. The two seem to sink or swim together.⁵¹

These concerns, however, do not in and of themselves amount to a refutation of evidentialism. Rather, it only shows that if it is the correct position to hold then in the final analysis we are justified in believing only a few things. In order to formulate a refutation of evidentialism based upon these observations the Reformed Epistemologist will need to do more. This, however, is not a terribly daunting task. One must simply subject evidentialism or classical foundationalism to its own standards and see that it collapses under its own weight. The crucial

⁴⁹ Clark, “Religious Epistemology”.

⁵⁰ Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” 295.

⁵¹ This argument, involving belief in other minds, comes from Plantinga’s *God and Other Minds*. However I am here interacting with Clarks summary of this argument in his *Return To Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 118-122.

question is why should someone believe that evidentialism or classical foundationalism is the correct or best theory of justification? The tenets of classical foundationalism are not self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Thus, they are not themselves basic beliefs. Therefore, by their own standard, in order for them to be justifiably believed, they must be inferable from a set of such basic beliefs. This, however, is not an easy task and has not yet been done. From this, Clark concludes that classical foundationalism "...by its own account, is irrational. If classical foundationalism were true, it would be irrational to accept it. Better simply to reject it!"⁵² Thus, Enlightenment evidentialism can be aptly described as self-referentially incoherent.⁵³ On this basis the evidentialist objection to belief in God can be overturned.

From here the Reformed Epistemologist can move on and work towards giving an account for why belief in God is in fact justified. To see they do this it will help to compare and contrast some underlying commitments of both evidentialists and Reformed Epistemologists. Despite their rejection of classical foundationalism, Reformed Epistemologists, in the final analysis, actually hold onto a version of foundationalism and modify it adopting some externalist, and specifically reliabilist, elements.

Above we classified evidentialism as a deontological theory of justification; that is, a view which maintains that justification is fundamentally about to living up to one's epistemic duties. Such a view can be more generally categorized as "internalist" epistemology because, on this view, the justification of a given belief is a matter of whether some conditions internal to the believer have been met or not. Reformed Epistemology, on the other hand, is an "externalist" epistemology, meaning that justification is a matter of whether some conditions external to a believer have been met or not. The question, then, becomes what are these person-external

⁵² Clark, "Religious Epistemology". See also, Plantinga's *Faith and Rationality*, 59-63.

⁵³ Clark, *Return To Reason*, 136-139.

criteria for justification? For the Reformed Epistemologist, the criteria involve reliable knowledge sources. Thus, they are reliabilists, meaning that beliefs formed according properly functioning belief-forming mechanisms are taken to be justified.⁵⁴ We will outline their specific criteria in greater detail below, for now it is sufficient to note that the Reformed Epistemologists are externalists and the evidentialists are internalists.

Despite these initial differences, both evidentialists and Reformed Epistemologists have the same view about the architecture of knowledge. That is, both subscribe to some form of foundationalism. The differences outlined above reveal differences in the criteria of justification and have implications for what each view take to be basic beliefs. Thus, when Plantinga rejects evidentialism with its classical foundationalism, he is concerned with the rejection of their *criteria* for what counts as basic and not with rejecting foundationalism *per se*. Clark points out that,

Where his foundationalism departs from classical foundationalism is in his specification of properly basic beliefs. The classical foundationalist has a rather sparse set of properly basic beliefs. Plantinga's foundationalism is much less parsimonious in its specification of properly basic beliefs. He also includes memory beliefs, beliefs about the external world, acceptance of testimony, and belief in God, among others.⁵⁵

Thus, they contend that belief in God is justified insofar as it is indeed a basic belief. The question that this now raises is why can it be taken as basic? How is it possible to have this more liberal set of foundational beliefs? In the first place, it is helpful to notice that the reason for rejecting belief in God as non-basic has been removed because the classical foundationalist criteria for basicity have been removed. Thus, there is no reason why it cannot be considered properly basic. This, however, seems to open the door for almost any belief to be considered basic. Thus, the next task for the reformed epistemologist is to show why belief in God is somehow

⁵⁴ Clark, "Religious Epistemology".

⁵⁵ Clark, *Return To Reason*, 141.

special and worthy of being considered basic while other beliefs, such as the belief in Santa Clause, is not.⁵⁶

The Reformed Epistemologist thus needs some criteria for basic belief that allows belief in God to be basic and yet is not so permissive as to allow just anything to be considered properly basic. By properly basic is meant any belief that does not need inferential support. Plantinga says that the way to go about this is to consider how certain beliefs can be considered basic in some situations but not in others. For instance, if I am being presented with the image of a tree, then, all things being equal, I can take my belief that there is a tree before me as basic; it does not need inferential support. If, however, I am not in a situation where I am having such presentations then I cannot have properly basic beliefs about a tree being in front of me. The same holds true for belief in God:

What the Reformed Epistemologist holds is that there are widely realized circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic; but why should that commit him to the idea that just about *any* belief is properly basic in any circumstances, or even to the vastly weaker claim that for any belief there are circumstances in which it is properly basic?...the fact that he rejects the criterion of proper basicity purveyed by classical foundationalism does not mean that he is committed to supposing just anything is properly basic.⁵⁷

On this basis belief in God can be considered properly basic without this resulting in the absurd consequence of any belief being considered properly basic as well. This solution, however, raises still further questions. Most importantly, how do we know that the circumstances are realized such that belief in God is in fact properly basic? While Plantinga does deal with this issue⁵⁸, we need not entertain the issue further. It is sufficient to note that, at least “...in *Faith and Reason*

⁵⁶ Plantinga deals with this issue in *Faith and Rationality*, 73-82. In his example he compares belief in God to believe in The Great Pumpkin (from the comic strip *Peanuts*). See also his various books on warrant: *Warrant: The Current Debate*, *Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warranted Christian belief*.

⁵⁷ Plantinga, *Faith and Rationality*, 74-75.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-78.

the emphasis is on epistemic *rights*” as opposed to epistemic obligations.⁵⁹ That is, Plantinga is here arguing that one is within their epistemic rights when they believe in God without argumentation, and he is not arguing that one therefore *must* believe in God.

Towards Presuppositionalist Rejection of Evidentialism: The Myth of Neutrality

In the last section we considered some of the main contours of the discussion in contemporary epistemology of religion. Following Peter Forrest we have viewed this as a debate over whether Enlightenment evidentialism should inform the belief component of religious faith. With this background we can now turn to the main focus of the paper: an alternative response to Enlightenment evidentialism that finds its origins in the Christian Presuppositional method of apologetics. While the previous responses have involved epistemological debate, this alternative involves some meta-philosophical concerns which are in turn motivated by certain theological concerns. As mentioned in an earlier footnote, what follows will not be a full-bodied formulation of the Presuppositional method of apologetics, but just a formulation how they might reject Enlightenment evidentialism. Thus we will not need to frame these meta-philosophical concerns in terms of their theological foundations. Rather, we can appreciate these meta-philosophical concerns by framing them as a response to Enlightenment evidentialism.⁶⁰ This will involve four topics of discussion: **I.**) an unavoidable interdependence between epistemology and metaphysics, **II.**) the nature of presuppositions and ultimate truth criterion, **III.**) how these two topics can be woven together to elucidate the concept of a worldview, and then, **IV.**) what all of this means for

⁵⁹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishign) 384.

⁶⁰ For a full presentation of Presuppositional apologetics, including these theological concerns, see Cornelius Van Til’s *Christian Apologetics*, Edited by William Edgar, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2003.) and his *A Defense of the Faith*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1967). Greg Bahnsen’s *Presuppositional Apologetics*, edited by Joel McDurmon (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision Press, 2008). John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1994.).

epistemology of religion and how this can be formulated as rejection of Enlightenment evidentialism.

I.) The Interdependence of Metaphysics and Epistemology

In chapter 3 of his *Presuppositional Apologetics*, Greg Bahnsen argues for the unavoidable interdependence of metaphysics and epistemology.⁶¹ On this view, metaphysics and epistemology are necessarily and unavoidably related. Neither of these areas of inquiry has complete primacy over the other and neither can be done in a way that is truly independent of the other. Rather they have a relationship whereby no advances can be made in either field without necessitating some conclusions the other. For instance, one cannot develop a metaphysic without an epistemological method underwriting it. If someone attempted to, their theory would be no more than unjustified, ungrounded conjecture. Likewise one cannot develop an epistemological system without reference to and dependence upon some necessary metaphysical conclusions. The relationship between the areas of inquiry can thus be described as unavoidably circular. Of primary importance for us here is that there are no metaphysically neutral theories of knowledge.

Bahnsen begins in his argument for this by addressing what he believes to be a common misunderstanding in philosophical methodology. He asserts that in our day there is a common but mistaken view which says that we can "...settle matters concerning epistemology and method prior to, and in abstraction from, questions of metaphysics."⁶² He then goes on to expose the error in this view. I will expand upon his work and illustrate the nature of their independence from two different perspectives. First we will consider how we argue for or come to believe in theories of justification and knowledge. I will show that such argumentation, if it will be convincing at all, will involve reliance upon some previously held metaphysical beliefs.

⁶¹ Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 77-131.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 84.

Secondly, we will consider how theories of knowledge and justification in and of themselves entail some metaphysical conclusions. From both of these perspectives we will see that epistemology should not be thought of as a metaphysically neutral inquiry.

Part of Bahnsen's argument hinges upon a problem with defending theories of justification. Justification is something that can be ascribed to either beliefs or believers. When a belief is justified this means, at minimum, that our affirming of this belief is reasonable. That is, when we affirm that the belief is true we do so in a way that is not in violation of the basic canons of good epistemic practice. Similarly, when a believer is justified this means in the act of believing they are not violating these basic canons of good epistemic practice. Also, when believers are justified, they can usually expect their belief to be true. I suggest, along with Bahnsen, that a functional commonality in various theories of justification is that justification always involves some connection or other between beliefs, the truth or falsity of these beliefs, and the expectation that a believer has that his beliefs are indeed true. That is, regardless of what specific criteria and theories are offered, they are always offered, at least in part, for the sake of ensuring the maximum amount of true beliefs and the minimum amount of false beliefs. "...The notion of justified belief is related to that of true belief in that justifying reasons for a belief are those that will most [often] lead a person to hold beliefs that are true."⁶³ Thus, the justification of a belief and the truth of this belief are always related. At the very least they are related in that justificational theories are supposed increase the likelihood that we will end up with true beliefs.

To illustrate these points, consider what happens if Smith proposes **J**, his theory of justification. One of his intentions when offering **J**, if not his chief intention, is that if its criteria are met then we will have an increased likelihood of having true beliefs in a non-accidental, knowledge-creating way. If the criteria laid out in **J** are met and there are no defeaters, then our

⁶³ Ibid., 79.

true beliefs can count as knowledge (at least according to the view that knowledge is something like justified true belief). However, if we have a conversation with Smith and he tells us about his theory **J**, we would do well to ask why he maintains that **J** is the best justificational theory to hold. Or, far less stringently, we should ask why he maintains that it is valuable for the justification of some of his beliefs some of the time.

The kind of answers given to these questions illustrates some of the interdependence of metaphysics and epistemology that I wish to point out. Given the connection between justification and true beliefs just described, any theory of justification that is proposed will have to be argued for, to some degree, on the basis of its success. That is, a theory of justification can only be seen as tenable if it can be argumentatively demonstrated that the theory does in fact provide some truth-ensuring criteria. This is because it is the very purpose of the theory of justification is to provide some criteria according to which beliefs may be counted on as being true (or at least counted on as being more likely true than false). The unavoidable problem is that any argumentation or reasons given for a theory of justification must necessarily make reference to some already-known-to-be-true states of affairs:

The kind of [criteria] that will be sanctioned as offering “justification” for belief... will be so selected because these lead to beliefs counted as true in a satisfactory number of cases...justification is conferred on certain [criteria] because of the relatively high degree of success they have in engendering true belief...Now if types of [criteria] are to be sanctioned in this fashion, it is obvious that knowledge of the existing states of affairs is essential. One could not estimate the success factor for particular kinds of [criteria] unless he possessed some knowledge of truth (propositions corresponding to existing states of affairs) with which to make comparisons...Epistemological considerations are not capricious guesses; they are given because someone feels they are appropriate for the reality in which he lives.⁶⁴

Thus, the only way Smith can know that his theory is the best one is if he has he somehow already has sufficient knowledge the states of affairs. Likewise, in order to argue for his theory

⁶⁴ Ibid., 79, 83.

he must at some point make reference to this same pool of knowledge. Indeed, the only way anyone can have reasons for holding their preferred theory of justification is if they "...already know something about the world."⁶⁵ The conclusion that Bahnsen draws from this is that is impossible, in terms of philosophical methodology, to begin by developing an epistemological theory without reference to at least some beliefs about what the world is roughly like (a metaphysical question).⁶⁶ Put concisely, we do not come to hold theories of knowledge and justification in a philosophical vacuum. Instead, we become convinced of one theory or another only upon careful reflection on the system in question and always with reference to our previous life experience, i.e. some beliefs about the reality in which we live.

To be clear I am not at this point going so far as to say that every epistemology always brings in some full, robust metaphysical system (though some philosophies seem do something like this, e.g. Plato's theory of the forms, which supports to both his metaphysical and his epistemological theories). Rather, I am arguing for the less controversial but easily overlooked point that epistemology is never a metaphysically neutral subject matter. In order for a theory of knowledge to be convincing to us to we must rely on some underlying beliefs depicting what the states of affairs are at least roughly like. Only with recourse to such beliefs can we validate a theory of knowledge. Thus we can see that there is some interdependence between metaphysics and epistemology at least in the sense that we are unable to develop or believe theories of justification without reliance upon some beliefs about the states of affairs. These beliefs fall under the category of metaphysics, broadly conceived.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁶ William Alston makes similar points in chapter 4 of his *Perceiving God*, 146-183. Here he discusses the impossibility of avoiding some epistemic circularity when arguing for the reliability of belief sources.

To further illustrate this conclusion we can briefly consider theories of knowledge and justification from another perspective. Rather than investigating *how* we become convinced of certain theories, we can consider the content and structure of these theories in and of themselves. To do this we could review small web of general metaphysical presuppositions that hang together and underwrite theories of knowledge and justification.⁶⁷ I would like to suggest that these kinds of metaphysical beliefs are universal and unavoidable for all epistemological systems.⁶⁸ First, every theory of knowledge necessarily presupposes, at the very least, that human beings do in fact have a sufficient mental capacity for entertaining beliefs about some part of the reality in which they live, whatever that reality may be. Secondly, these theories always involve some explanation of how we actually come to, or should come to, hold beliefs about whatever parts of reality are available to us. That is, epistemological and justificational theories make reference to and rely upon some particular faculties or knowledge sources that are taken to be the grounds for our beliefs. In the final analysis though, these two presuppositions can be collapsed into one: that we are connected to our environment in some epistemic manner; that because the states of affairs are what they are, our faculties in conjunction with our environment can engender some beliefs about these states of affairs.

The very idea of a justificational theory or a theory of knowledge presupposes some state of affairs whereby we are epistemically connected to our environment in an appropriate way. When a theory of justification or some criterion for knowledge is offered, this involves taking a

⁶⁷ Bahnsen does something very similar to this however I am accentuating this point a different way and adding some of my own ideas. See Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 81.

⁶⁸ Consequently, some legitimate skeptics may avoid making these sorts of commitments. However, this does not undercut the main idea we are considering here, that neutrality is ultimately impossible. Skepticism, even with its inherent hesitation to affirm beliefs, is not necessarily an example of neutrality. For instance, skepticism usually implies a denial that certain states of affairs obtain (e.g., any states of affairs in which people would have legitimate reasons for overriding the skeptic's attack on knowledge). We will continue to unpack this idea in the following pages.

stance on the specific nature of our epistemic connection with our environment and then parsing out some of the ramifications of this connection. Taking such stance as this entails, at least implicitly, some further stance about what the states of affairs roughly are or what the world is roughly like. Again, this is not to say that such a theory necessarily smuggles in or implies some robust, systematized metaphysic, but rather that it is at least not a metaphysically neutral theory. Put concisely, since a theory of justification or knowledge involves some specific epistemic connection to the world, it thus presupposes some states of affairs which match this theory. To illustrate this in somewhat generic terms, consider empiricism and rationalism. Both of these systems presuppose *that* we have some sort of epistemic connection with reality. At the same time, however, they disagree over exactly *what* this connection is like. Roughly speaking, an empiricist believes that this connection is fundamentally mediated by our senses while a rationalist believes that it is by our rational faculties. Consequently, both the empiricist and the rationalist would have to give at least slightly different accounts of the states of affairs. That is, their epistemological systems have slightly different metaphysical presuppositions.

To continue with this example, in order for the empiricist to have the best theory, it must be the case that the states of affairs roughly correspond to or at least do not contradict their view that we are epistemically connected to our environment through our senses. These states of affairs are, at least to some degree, different from the states of affairs that undergird the rationalist position. Consider, alternatively, the position of some radical skeptics. A radical skeptic, for our purposes, can be defined as one who denies that there is an epistemic connection with the world or at least denies that we can know about such an epistemic connection if there is one. I would suggest that such a skeptic is no more metaphysically neutral than the rationalist or empiricist. To be sure, they are not advancing any metaphysical theses and would be quick to

point out reasons for doubting any metaphysical theses. However, the very assertion that there is no epistemic connection with reality, or that we cannot know about such a connection, is a metaphysically loaded assertion. In his view, the skeptic is dependent upon the states of affairs being one and not another; namely, that there is no epistemic connection between us and the outside world or that at least that if there is one that we cannot know about it with certainty.

From this discussion may rightly conclude that there is no metaphysical neutrality when it comes to epistemology. It is not as though we can develop or become convinced of a theory of knowledge or justification without recourse to some beliefs about what the world is like. We also saw that justificational theories and theories of knowledge always entail some metaphysical beliefs. If it is true that epistemology and metaphysics are connected in this way, then debate between adherents of radically different systems can be somewhat problematic. We will turn to this now.

II.) Presuppositions and Ultimate Truth Criteria

Having established that metaphysics and epistemology are unavoidably connected in this way, we can now start to touch upon a similar point about philosophical argumentation. In this section we will consider the kinds of standards that are appealed to when determining whether a given proposition is true or false. To do this we will consider two overlapping topics: presuppositions and ultimate truth criteria. Much of this section is a reflection of John Frame's work.⁶⁹

Frame describes a presupposition as a kind belief that one is committed to in a foundational sort of way. He contends that amongst our wide network of beliefs there are some beliefs that play a more basic role and foundational upon which other beliefs are built, as it were. Frame first offers a general definition of presuppositions: "A presupposition is a belief that takes

⁶⁹ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* 3-14, Frame, *A Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* 45 and 125-133; and his contribution to *Five Views on Apologetics* 208-231.

precedence over another and therefore serves as a criterion for another.”⁷⁰ Take, for instance, the law of non-contradiction: that a thing cannot be both P and not-P at the same time and in the same sense. While we do not very often entertain the belief that this law obtains, it is nevertheless is foundational in that it undergirds just about all of our thinking and argumentation and functions as a criterion according to which other beliefs are judged. In this way it is *presupposed* in just about all of our thinking. In addition to this, he specifies a certain kind of presupposition that he calls an “ultimate presupposition”. As the name indicates, he uses this term to refer to a presuppositional belief “...over which no other takes precedence.”⁷¹ That is, there are certain presuppositions that are held onto or committed to with a special degree of commitment. Frame says of these kinds of presuppositions that:

Everyone has them because everyone has some commitment that at a particular time (granted, it may change) is “basic” to him. Everyone has a scale of values in which one loyalty takes precedence over another until we reach one that takes precedence over all the rest. That value is that person’s presupposition, his basic commitment, his ultimate criterion.⁷²

The idea is that if we ask someone why they believe what they believe they will likely offer some other belief or reason. If we kept pressing them and asking give further reasons for these reasons, they will eventually arrive at some basic kind of commitment like this that is not supported by some deeper more foundational commitment. At this point we will have reached the end of the chain of their beliefs, we have arrived a belief with no further external support.

It is worth noting some of the differences between presuppositions in general and ultimate presuppositions. In addition to the level of precedence, there also appears to be difference in exactly what kind of beliefs they are and how they are held. When offering his

⁷⁰ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 45.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 45

⁷² *Ibid*, 12

general definition of presuppositions, Frame simply classifies them as a sort of belief that takes precedence over other beliefs. However, when defining ultimate presuppositions, he adds that they are a sort of value or loyalty. I bring this up to point out that, on Frame's view, ultimate presuppositions seem to be more akin to dispositions or tendencies than to mere propositional beliefs. That is, while ultimate presuppositions are without a doubt a certain kind of belief which entails propositional content, they are often held onto and reasoned from as though they were something very valuable and indeed worth being loyal to and committed to. For this reason it is difficult to elucidate what exactly an ultimate presupposition is without using some theological or religious language. For instance, a Christian's ultimate presupposition or ultimate commitment should be to Jesus Christ as King, Savior, Lord, and God, "...and hence his word is the very *criterion*, the ultimate standard of truth".⁷³ The contention is that there are "non-religious" analogues such that everyone, the religious and the non-religious alike, have ultimate commitments. For instance, one may be committed to the idea that the basic deliverances of reason or sense perception are sufficient arbiters of truth; that we should trust these deliverances as the final authority and condition for truthfulness in all areas of inquiry. Thus, without adhering to any religious doctrines, one may nevertheless have an ultimate commitment that is functionally analogous to that of the Christian's ultimate commitment to Jesus Christ.

Frame maintains that these ultimate presuppositions are a kind of commitment that is brought into all of our thinking because they govern all of our thinking. That is, all of our ideas are either built upon it as a foundation or are brought into conformity with it somehow. Thus they are normative beliefs in the sense that they regulate other beliefs or provide some standard by which they can be judged. For this reason he describes them as ultimate truth criteria.⁷⁴ An

⁷³ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 7.

⁷⁴ Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics" in *5 Views*, 209.

ultimate truth criterion is some belief about what our knowledge sources ultimately are and how we ultimately have access to truth. Beliefs of this sort are placed high above other beliefs, given precedence, and taken to be a trustworthy and reliable standard for judging all other beliefs and ideas. To use the language from above, they involve a belief about what our epistemic connection with reality is. Thus they tell us how we should ultimately go about our philosophical inquiry. Put in other words, an ultimate truth criterion reveals what final authority that we appeal to in making judgments about what is true and false. Naturally, these sorts of commitments or beliefs serve as the basis for a given philosophical system. The empiricist, for example, holds onto sense perception as the reliable truth-determining authority and thus builds his philosophical system in a way that is governed by this truth criterion. Likewise the rationalist holds that human reason is the ultimate truth criterion and thus builds a system in line with this truth criterion.

An important question that comes to mind is how do people come to hold to such a criterion and how can they argue for why their criterion should be held over against another? Though it may sound strange at first glance, ultimate truth criteria cannot be believed in or argued for in a non-circular way.⁷⁵ This is because, by definition, an ultimate presupposition is not held onto for any reason beyond itself. This does not mean that they are necessarily picked out in an arbitrary fashion and without any reason whatsoever.⁷⁶ Ultimate presuppositions are typically held because of what is taken to be some inherent virtue of the belief itself. The rationalist and empiricist both espouse truth criterion that have at least some prima facie attractiveness. According to Frame, every philosophical system or belief system holds to some

⁷⁵ Williams Alston says something very similar to this: "...With respect to even those sources of belief which we are normally the most confident we have no sufficient noncircular reason for taking them to be reliable... Epistemic circularity would thus appear to be inescapable". (*Perceiving God*, 146-147).

⁷⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 125.

ultimate truth criterion or other in this manner; that is, in virtue of some inherent quality of the truth criterion itself. An implication of this point is that any argument for such a truth criterion must rely upon that criterion:

Every philosophy must use its own standards in proving its conclusions; otherwise it is simply inconsistent. Those who believe that human reason is the ultimate authority (rationalists) must presuppose the authority of reason in their arguments for rationalism. Those who believe in the ultimacy of sense experience must presuppose it in arguing for their philosophy (empiricism). And skeptics must be skeptical of their skepticism (a fact that is, of course, the Achilles' heel of skepticism). The point is that when one is arguing for an ultimate criterion, whether Scripture, the Koran, human reason, sensation, or whatever, one must use criteria compatible with that conclusion. If that is circularity, then everybody is guilty of circularity.⁷⁷

The purpose of this discussion is to suggest and illustrate that there is no philosophical neutrality when it comes to discussing criterion for truth. It is impossible to offer a cogent argument for one truth criterion or another without presupposing that truth criterion in the argument and then arguing by that criterion.

III.) Worldviews

The last two sections have shown that philosophical neutrality or non-circularity is not as easy to come by as one might initially assume. In the first section this came out when we saw that there are no metaphysically neutral ways to actually argue for a theory of knowledge. Likewise, theories of knowledge in and of themselves always entail some metaphysical commitments. We also saw that there is no philosophical neutrality when it comes to the discussion of ultimate truth criterion. While these first two sections involved a negative assertion, that philosophical neutrality is impossible in these areas, in the present section we will consider a positive assertion: that because there is no philosophical neutrality in these areas that therefore our thinking and reasoning is relative to a “worldview” as will be defined shortly.

⁷⁷ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 10.

Given the impossibility of neutrality and the fact that we cannot reason without presuppositions it should come as no surprise that equally rational people can arrive at completely different and even contradictory understandings of what the world is like. In fact it is easy to see why this happens once we acknowledge our circular reliance upon presuppositions and that the fact that these epistemological commitments entail at least some further metaphysical commitments. Suppose, for instance, that Smith and Jones have different ultimate truth criterion. Not only will they have to argue for these commitment in the circular way described above, but they must also presuppose some necessary metaphysical conclusions to match their truth criterion. What this means is that before they have even begun in their philosophical inquiry they already have at least slightly different views of what some states of affairs are like. In the same way they already have different conceptions of what will make for a convincing argument and what will suffice as evidence for a given proposition. These differences begin to show as they start to consider different philosophical questions. As Bahnsen says,

What take to be problems, what kind of analysis they say is required, and what methods and standards they use will all be viewed differently. What each school sees as amounting to “making a good case” for a basic position – what each will count as plausible or not – depends on their own initial perspectives or presuppositions.⁷⁸

The result of this is that since Smith and Jones start from different positions they may differ greatly in their understanding of the world. They may well provide contradictory answers to various philosophical questions they ask. If pressed, they are liable to offer different views of what the world is ultimately like.

These observations about presuppositions suggest that all of our reasoning and thinking is ultimately worldview-thinking. By this I mean that the non-neutral, presuppositional bases that we all work from can, and do, serve as grounds for other beliefs that are formed in a systematic

⁷⁸ Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 82-83.

or coherent way. In reasoning from our basic presuppositions we tend to develop a worldview. To be sure, our presuppositions do not in and of themselves constitute a robust worldview. Nevertheless they do serve as the implicit guides in developing and systematizing one. Most basically, then, a worldview is a somewhat systematized, coherent understanding or interpretation of what the world is like. A worldview thus consists of the answers to a number of crucial philosophical questions. According to Bahnsen, “Each worldview has its presuppositions about reality, knowledge, and ethics; these mutually influence and support each other.”⁷⁹

Likewise, Clément Vidal offers a comprehensive list of worldview questions that include:

- (a) What is? *Ontology* (model of being);
- (b) Where does it all come from? *Explanation* (model of the past);
- (c) Where are we going? *Prediction* (model of the future);
- (d) What is good and what is evil? *Axiology* (theory of values);
- (e) How should we act? *Praxeology* (theory of actions).
- (f) What is true and what is false? *Epistemology* (theory of knowledge);
- (g) Where do we start to answer those questions?⁸⁰

As we are faced with these sorts of philosophical questions the way in which we answer them, as mentioned above, will hinge upon our ultimate truth criterion and ultimate commitments. Likewise, our answers will most likely cohere with the answers we give for other questions. There are many questions that this raises and a handful of implications that should be drawn from this.

First, one might ask if everyone has a worldview. It has already been established that everyone must make use of presuppositions if they are to reason at all. But does it follow from this that everyone must participate in the philosophical inquiry that seems to be necessary for the development and identification of a worldview? Must one intentionally consider these

⁷⁹ Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 15.

⁸⁰ Vidal, *Metaphilosophical Criteria for Worldview Comparison*, 5-6. Vidal is neither a Presuppositional Apologist nor a Christian. Nevertheless, he acknowledges some of the same Metaphilosophical concerns as the presuppositionalists.

philosophical questions in order have a worldview? In answer to this question, Vidal makes the distinction between implicit and explicit worldviews: “Most people adopt and follow a worldview without much thinking. Their worldview remains implicit. They intuitively have a representation of the world (components (a)-(c)), know what is good and what is bad (component (d)) and have experience on how to act in the world (component (e)). And this is enough to get by.”⁸¹ On the other hand, an explicit worldview is one that has been developed and adopted in a more intentionally. In such cases “...some curious, reflexive, critical, thinking or philosophical minds wake up, and start to question their worldviews. They aspire to make it explicit.”⁸² In addition to this distinction, he also asserts that everyone is in need of a worldview. We will consider this in just a moment. Before this, we will take up a question that is a corollary to the implicit/explicit distinction.

If it is possible for a worldview to be held either explicitly or implicitly, then what is it like to have a worldview? Or what is a worldview like? One analogy that can be readily made is that a worldview is like a pair of glasses. A worldview is like a lens through which one views (i.e. interprets or understands) everything in their experience. Just as one who wears glasses might forget that they are wearing them so awareness of our worldview can be implicit and need not be at the forefront of one’s thinking. Another feature of this analogy is that it can be used to illustrate some of the difficulty associated with thinking about one’s own worldview. We almost always look *through* our glasses. It is only by intentionally deciding to look *at* one’s glasses, and much strain on the eyes, that we can actually adjust our focus and look *at* the lenses that are

⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

⁸² Ibid.

before our eyes. Much in the same way it is difficult, especially at first, to examine one's own worldview.⁸³ Now we can return to the unanswered question above.

To continue with the analogy, can we remove our glasses? If so, what sort of difference would this make? Would it result in complete blindness, a slightly blurred vision, perhaps improved vision? That is, can we reason without a worldview and, if so, what would this be like? There are two ways to answer this question. First, there may be a very weak sense in which one could abstain from developing or holding to a worldview. One might somehow abstain from answering worldview questions and thus ultimately remain agnostic. This is what some sorts of skeptics do. They could maintain that we cannot finally settle matters of ontology, explanation, prediction, axiology, and praxeology. In this sense they may not develop a robust, content-rich worldview in the way that other thinkers typically do. Nevertheless they still have a method, albeit a skeptical method, for answering the worldview questions. That is, they still have an overriding commitment (e.g., a commitment to skepticism) which guides them in answering worldview questions. The skeptic's guiding principles steer them away from positively affirming many things and thus they end up with a strange sort of worldview, perhaps an anti-worldview. The skeptic's anti-worldview is still a worldview of sorts, it just a worldview with very little content. It is still a worldview in the sense that a worldview, as defined above, is a systematized understanding or interpretation of what the world is like. According to skeptic's anti-worldview, the world is something which we may experience but about which we cannot truly know. From this we may conclude, along with Vidal, that "Every one of us is in need of a worldview, whether it is implicit or explicit".⁸⁴ There may only be one possible exception. One who lacks

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 8.

sufficient cognitive faculties may thereby refrain from developing or subscribing to a worldview. Thus, we cannot truly reason without a worldview.

We can arrive at this conclusion in a more decisive way by considering two related theses about the relationship between facts, interpretation, and worldviews. First, consider how Smith and Jones, if they have different worldviews, will interpret certain facts differently. Suppose that Smith has a roughly Judeo-Christian worldview. Jones, on the other hand, has a materialist worldview. When they consider the readily observable fact that, say, “The cat is on the mat”, they will understand or interpret this fact in different ways. By this I mean that they will embed this fact within different constellations of belief. For Smith, “The cat is on the mat...and (implicitly) is *in God’s universe*”. For Jones, on the other hand “The cat is on the mat...and (implicitly) is *in a materialist universe*”. Thus, at the very least, we can at least accept the relatively noncontroversial thesis that a worldview is able to suffice as a fact-interpreting framework (i.e. worldviews influence how we interpret facts and what they ultimately mean). This phenomenon becomes more relevant as we consider more significant facts. For instance, consider how Smith and Jones might interpret the fact that human beings are social creatures. Since Smith’s view of reality involves an ultimate personality (i.e., God), personhood and sociality will likely be understood as somehow derivative of this. Jones, on the other hand, will have to interpret and explain the existence of personhood and sociality differently. Thus, pointing out to them the fact that human beings are social entities will mean something quite different in both cases.

Now, consider a more controversial thesis: not only do worldviews provide this kind of interpretive frame work, but that it is impossible to interpret any fact whatsoever outside of a worldview. To put this in positive terms, there are no such things as “brute facts” that can be

merely understood without interpretation. Suppose that someone who attempts to reason without a worldview, who attempts to rid themselves all of their commitments and be a tabula rasa willing to be written on only by brute facts that need no interpretation.⁸⁵ Even though this task is probably impossible, if someone could do this they would thereby establish a set of conditions which would make it impossible to know or understand anything at all. Accordingly, Bahnsen says “There are no facts or uses of reason which are available outside of the interpretive system of basic commitments or assumptions which appeals to them.”⁸⁶ Frame also says that

We have no access to reality apart from our interpretive faculties. To seek such access is to seek release from [being human]. We cannot step outside of our own skins... We never dig deep enough to reach some “bedrock” of pure facticity—facts undefiled by any interpretive activity... It is better to recognize that all statements of fact are interpretations of reality and that all true interpretations are factual.⁸⁷

To use the analogy, if we remove our glasses we will be completely blind, and not merely left with some blurry vision. There is nothing there for us to know without using employing a worldview because there is no way for us to know except by using a worldview. Thus, we can conclude that all of our thinking and reasoning can be considered worldview-reasoning.

IV.) Evidentialism Rejected

The implications of this discussion are far reaching. If all of this is true, then there are definite conclusions that we can draw about the nature and scope of philosophical inquiry, epistemology proper, and epistemology of religion. On the one hand, since neutrality is impossible, philosophy should not be understood as dispassionate, discursive truth-finding discipline comprised of isolated and discrete areas of inquiry. It is not clear that rational reflection by itself will automatically yield unqualified true conclusions or even conclusions that every rational person

⁸⁵ This point is similar to Wilfrid Sellars’s attack on what he calls “the myth of the given”. See his *Empiricism and the Philosophy of the Mind* (1956).

⁸⁶ Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 15.

⁸⁷ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 71-72.

must agree upon. Likewise, though it is helpful and good to recognize different areas of philosophical or philosophical inquiry (e.g., metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, etc.), philosophy nevertheless involves a cohesive network of related questions. In this way philosophic inquiry will perhaps be best used as a tool for the development and comparison of worldviews. By asking philosophical questions one can come to better understand, to adjust, or perhaps even to replace their worldview if they should find that it is faulty, inconsistent, or unable to account for important data. It will also help us identify inconsistencies and work to iron them out, as it were. Similarly, because philosophy helps us look critically *at* our lenses rather than *through* them, it can help us to develop a vocabulary for explaining and comparing worldviews. As one comes to understand their own worldview in this way they will become more articulate and able to explain their worldview to someone who differs. This can also help us consider something of what it is like to look through someone else's lenses and to see how, based on their presuppositions, they arrive at the conclusions they do.

Perhaps one of the most important implications of this whole discussion has to do with how we engage in philosophical debate. If philosophy could be conducted in a neutral way then it would make sense to debate individual questions one at a time without any reference to other questions. If, as has been argued, philosophy is relative to worldviews then it does not make as much sense to employ this methodology. If Smith and Jones get into a debate over the nature of, say, substance and fail to acknowledge the fact that they are operating with different presuppositions and from different worldviews, then the whole debate is in jeopardy of being undermined. Ignoring this truth does not change the fact that there is no absolute neutrality. It only ensures that one will lack the philosophical self-consciousness that comes from acknowledging their worldview. If one acknowledges this fact they can hope to have meaningful

philosophical discussions. Consider Smith and Jones again. They would both do well to acknowledge the basic presuppositions that they are building their systems upon. If they do this can they hope to have meaningful philosophical dialogue despite their different starting points. Likewise they can begin to understand each other's systems in a well informed manner that lends it the maximum amount of charity. This way they can also make sense of the fact that, though both of them are seemingly reasonable people, they nevertheless disagree on so many things, understand the world differently, find different arguments convincing, and so on.

This last point has particular relevance when it comes to contemporary epistemology of religion and the debate over Enlightenment evidentialism. By appealing to these observations, the Presuppositionalist can reject Enlightenment evidentialism as irrelevant and misleading. The notion of evidence as something that is purely objective and which lends itself to one and only one neatly identifiable interpretation is somewhat mistaken. As we saw above, facts and evidence need interpretation and are thus meaningfully situated within and understood in terms of worldviews. Thus the Enlightenment assertion that religious belief can only be justified if it is proportioned to the evidence, while intuitively appealing, can be misleading and very easily misapplied. This evidentialist notion appears to be built upon the faulty assumption that there is sufficient philosophical neutrality to develop universal, uncontextualized criteria for gathering, weighing, and interpreting evidence for religious belief. The problem, however, is that just as each worldview comes complete with its own truth criterion so each religion has (or at least can have) its own truth criteria and epistemology.⁸⁸ Thus, when an Enlightenment evidentialist

⁸⁸ Religions and worldviews should be understood as largely overlapping. Every religion involves the acceptance of a worldview. Likewise even the most secular, atheistic worldviews are held in a way that bears some resemblance to how religious belief systems are held onto as a matter of ultimate commitment. While secularists and atheists do not have a formalized religion that involves ritualistic or worshipful activities, I would suggest that they are nevertheless "religious" in the very loose sense that they too have a worldview that answers the same sorts of questions that religious believers do. Van Til argues for a point very similar to his on page 55 of his *Christian Apologetics*.

requires evidence in order to justify a religious belief, they will almost assuredly be committing a sort of informal fallacy. That is, they will be making illegitimate and uninformed demands unless they pay very careful attention to the specific truth criteria of the religion in question and only require evidence and argumentation that is consistent with these internal criteria. This is because the only “evidence” that can ever suffice for a worldview/religion is that which is consistent with whatever truth criterion that the worldview/religion presupposes. Recall the observation from above that if one sets out to argue for their ultimate truth criteria by appealing to some other criteria then they are necessarily confused about what it means to hold to an ultimate truth criteria. This is the same sort of problem that comes when we impose foreign, external truth criteria to a belief system.

The point here is that justification is not a neutral topic. To lay down one theory of justification that all religions must adhere to, be it evidentialism or whatever, is to fail to understand that religions and worldviews already appeal to and are built upon their *own* internal epistemic criteria. The result of this is that rather than offering one universal criteria, each religion must instead be allowed to stand on the basis of its own criteria. Just as ultimate truth criteria can only be argued for in a circular manner, so a worldview or religion can only be argued for in a way that is consistent with its own presuppositions. It is problematic, then, to evaluate a worldview by any criteria other than the ones it was founded on. If Smith’s religion is unjustified according to Jones’s evidentialist criteria then this does not tell us anything about Smith’s religion, *per se*, except that Jones disagrees with it based on his own presuppositions. In such a scenario we can learn more about Jones and his commitments than about Smith’s worldview which he is interacting with (rather, *failing* to interact with). The only way for Jones to accurately and adequately assess Smith’s religion is in accord with its own presuppositions.

Accordingly, Cornelius Van Til concludes that a believer in one system must, for the sake of argument, step inside their interlocutor's system and be aware of their presuppositions and vice versa. If they do this they can hope to have a meaningful, insightful dialogue despite their different starting points. In this way they can begin to understand each others' systems in a reliable way that lends a maximum amount of charity to the systems in question. Thus, what we had earlier concluded about philosophical debate in general applies to epistemology of religion in the same way: awareness of worldviews helps us make sense of the fact that reasonable people may disagree on many things, understand the world differently, find different arguments convincing, and so on.

Thus the Presuppositionalist rejects Enlightenment evidentialism in a highly nuanced way when compared to the first three responses we considered (i.e., Natural Theology, Wittgensteinian Fideism, and Reformed Epistemology). We treated these three responses as a straightforward rejection of either premise (1), that belief in God is the sort of belief that requires evidence, or as a rejection of premise (2), that there is insufficient evidence for belief in God. The Presuppositionalist rejection, however, cannot be neatly categorized in this way. This position has important things to say about both premises but does not build its position around a straightforward rejection of either of them. To clarify this point it will be helpful to see how the Presuppositionalist is sympathetic to the first three responses we considered.

While the Presuppositionalist would disagree with the Natural Theologian in terms of methodology, there are nevertheless some important areas where they are sympathetic that are worth pointing out. Above we established that the Natural Theologian and Enlightenment evidentialist agree in terms of methodology. That they, they agree that in order for belief in God to be considered rational or justified that it must be backed up with sufficient propositional

evidence. We have just seen how the Presuppositionalist rejects this Enlightenment position because there is no neutrality when it comes to evaluating evidence and also because each worldview comes complete with its own justificational and epistemic criteria. In taking this stance, however, the presuppositionalist has not said anything about what the evidence and data point towards. In a strange sense the Presuppositionalist, being a Christian, will agree with the Natural Theologian that there is sufficient evidence for believing in God. While they do not advocate that this is the source of justification for belief in God, they nevertheless agree with the Natural Theologian that the correct assessment and interpretation of all the evidence will of course point to belief in God as being reasonable. The Presuppositionalist can thus stand in an intermediate position and give a reason for why the Natural Theologian and the Enlightenment evidentialist disagree. They disagree over what the evidence itself means and why it is or is not convincing because there are different worldviews at play. Every discrete piece of evidence and every argument will be handled differently and situated within a different wider constellation of beliefs.

Again, the Presuppositionalist denies that there is neutrality when it comes to the gathering, definition, and interpretation of evidence and data. However, they do not go so far as to say that worldviews are never grounded in data or experience. There may be some conceivable worldview or religious systems that are fideistic or for some internal reasons do not care about grounding their beliefs in experience, but this is not contradict the point. Some worldviews, probably most worldviews, do make use of evidence in some capacity or other. They may or may not choose to argue for what they believe based on evidence. However, since worldviews are interpretive systems or frameworks they will most often provide their user with a set of criteria for understanding and interpreting the world around them. That is, worldviews typically purport

to have some explanatory force; they typically allow their user engage all sorts of information and make sense of our common experiences in the world. Worldviews are, after all, interpretive lenses that we use to make sense of our lives. Thus the way that evidence relates to worldview is not as the Enlightenment evidentialists and Natural Theologians suggest. Evidence, as has been explained, is something that subject to worldviews. Thus evidential claims cannot be used in the straightforward Evidentialist sense for inter-worldview debates. Rather, interpretations of evidence may be used if one wished to demonstrate that their worldview has explanatory force or makes sense of our experience. Thus, by giving evidences for the truth of one's worldview, one is not able to set it up as true and other as false. Rather, one is merely able to suggest that there is viable. Only if it were possible to show that a worldview were not viable, perhaps that it has some radical inconsistencies, could it then be rejected. Even this, however, is not on the bases of discrete evidence in and of itself but instead on the basis of an internal problem.

There is a thesis behind all of this that it is important to bring forward. In bringing this thesis to light we shall compare the Presuppositional response to evidentialism with Wittgensteinian Fideism. As we mentioned above Wittgensteinian Fideism was formed as a denial of premise (1), that belief in God requires evidence if it is to justifiably believed. We also saw that this position was built upon both an autonomy thesis and a certain version of an incommensurability thesis. At this point the similarities between the Presuppositionalists and Wittgensteinian Fideists are apparent but the ways in which they differ need to be highlighted. First, they are similar in that both recognize that belief systems have their own internal methods of justification. One way they differ, however, is in their understanding of incommensurability.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ The greatest differences between Wittgensteinian Fideism and Presuppositionalist thought would become clear upon a review of the theology that underlies and motivates Presuppositionalism.

Both, I would say, hold to some version of incommensurability, but the Wittgensteinian Fideists have a much more stringent position than the Presuppositionalists.

For the Wittgensteinian Fideists the incommensurability thesis primarily involves their criteria of meaning. As we saw above, meaning for them was relative to language games and religious belief systems gives rise to language games that are logically isolated from metaphysical, scientific, and historical language games. On this basis they understand religious language to be expressive of a form of life rather than descriptive of reality. As we mentioned in passing, this sort of view is not acceptable to religious conservatives because they maintain that their religious and theological utterances are aimed at describing reality in exactly the same way that the scientist's or metaphysician's language is understood to be aimed at describing reality. The Presuppositionalist number among these sorts of religious realists who maintain that their language is meant to describe reality in just the same way as these other sorts of language is. Thus the presuppositionalist denies the Wittgensteinian Fideists' version of the incommensurability thesis. In their denial of this, however, they still maintain a softer sort of incommensurability.

The Presuppositionalist denies that religious language is logically isolated and cut off from other areas of inquiry. Nevertheless they do maintain that there is some incommensurability on some levels. Rather than religious language being incommensurable with scientific, historical, and metaphysical language, they maintain that there is some incommensurability between worldview themselves. However, there is not a complete and rigid incommensurability whereby people with different worldviews are completely isolated from each other. Rather, there is enough in common for there to be effective communication between people with different worldviews. Consider, for example, what happens when people from different religions first

meet. Provided that they speak the same language they can communicate effectively on whole range of topics. The incommensurability of their worldviews only really begins to show itself when their conversation turns to more detailed philosophical or worldview-related questions. At this point they will begin to disagree over a number of topics, provided that they actually know and believe enough of the view that they profess.

This sort of incommensurability thesis further explains the ways in which the Presuppositionalist both agrees and disagrees with the Natural Theologian. According to this sort of an incommensurability thesis, what is incommensurable is not different language games *per se* but rather worldviews as whole units. They are incommensurable in that they are not directly comparable in terms of evidence. As we saw above, it is impossible, by mere appeals to evidence, to say that one worldview is superior to another. Again, this is because each viable worldview will be able to make sense of the same data and interpret it differently. Or based on internal reasons, it may not have a need to deal with the issue at all. Thus, we cannot appeal directly to evidence in order to show that one worldview is better than another. The closest we could come to this is to point out that a given worldview fails to give an account for something that it attempts to give an account for. This, however, would not be an example of commensurability *per se* but rather an example of what presuppositionalists call an internal critique.⁹⁰

Despite this sort of incommensurability I am not suggesting that worldviews are in no way comparable. As mentioned studying philosophy can help one elucidate and make explicit their worldview. Likewise, by engaging in philosophical discussion we can compare worldviews and see how and why they provide different answers to the fundamental worldview questions

⁹⁰ As the name suggests, an internal critique is when one demonstrates that a worldview fails because it is somehow self-referentially incoherent.

outlined above. This is quite different from the Wittgensteinian Fidesits who seem to be suggesting a much more radical incommensurability and incomparability of different worldviews. They paint religion as an isolated and closed circle. On my view, however, worldviews and religions are comparable and communication between them and about them is possible even if they are, in the end, incommensurable in terms of mere evidence.⁹¹

Lastly, we can identify some ways in which the presuppositionalist is very sympathetic to the Reformed Epistemologist. As is clear by now, these schools reject enlightenment evidentialism for slightly different reasons. The Reformed Epistemologist does so by offering differing criteria for proper basicity. The Presuppositionalist, however, argues on the basis of worldviews. Nevertheless, they stand in full agreement with the Reformed Epistemologist when they say that belief in God does not necessarily require propositional evidence. The reason that the Presuppositionalists believe this, however, is usually tied more directly and explicitly to their theology.⁹² Since the Presuppositionalists argue that criteria for justifying beliefs are internal to worldviews, they look directly to the Bible for the criteria and justification for belief in God. While we cannot investigate their theological arguments and exegesis of Scripture, the Presuppositionalists arrive at a conclusion almost identical to that of the Reformed Epistemologists: belief in God properly basic. In fact, they go so far as to say that every human being, by virtue of their construction and design as God's image bearers, inescapably has

⁹¹ Despite this incommensurability, some presuppositionalists have worked towards offering a transcendental argument which would establish their Christian worldview as true and all other worldviews as false. While this topic is interesting, the arguments seem to be slightly underdeveloped at this point and it far beyond the scope of this paper to consider them here.

⁹² For a helpful essay on the similarities and differences between Presuppositionalism and Reformed Epistemology see K. Scott Oliphint "The Old-New Reformed Epistemology" in *Revelation and Reason*, eds., Oliphint and Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2007) 207-219. In this essay, Oliphint shows that, epistemologically speaking, Presuppositionalism closely resembles Reformed Epistemology even if the two arrive at their conclusions by different arguments.

immediate knowledge of God which they either acknowledge or suppress. On this basis, one is fully justified to believe in God without argumentation. In fact, some Presuppositionalists would say that because we are designed to know God immediately, that demanding proof for his existence is imprudent.

Notice here that the Presuppositionalist has the freedom to turn directly to internal reasons for defending the reasonableness of belief in God. The Reformed Epistemologist does not quite have this luxury. Instead, they are committed, for better or worse, to defending the idea that belief in God is properly basic without recourse to theological evidence. Thus, things like God's nature or character cannot be used to discuss the reasonableness of believing in him as properly basic. Nor can they appeal to the theological character of human beings. The presuppositionalist would be unwilling, because of their theological commitments, to argue in such a way. Thus, the Reformed Epistemologist has a seemingly daunting task of defending the basicity of belief in God without specifically challenging the presuppositions that others are bringing to the discussion. They allow their interlocutors to continue using their own presuppositions and do not ask them to recognize and suspend judgment for the sake of argument. The Presuppositionalist then agrees with the conclusion that the Reformed Epistemologist arrives at while simultaneously disagreeing the exact method used to arrive at this conclusion.

Tentative Conclusions

From all of this we can draw several tentative conclusions regarding epistemology of religion and the justification of religious belief. First, and more generally, we can conclude that a large part of epistemology of religion should be conducted on the worldview-level or on the presuppositional level. That is, when we engage in epistemology of religion we must keep in

mind that presuppositions play a crucial role and they should not be ignored. Thus we should not carelessly assert some normative, universal criteria for measuring the justification of belief and assume that they will apply in all circumstances and to all belief systems. This is sort of project will most surely fail to take into account the fact that each worldview operates with its own epistemological criteria and theories of justification. Such an approach may thus end up labeling some beliefs as irrational or unjustified without taking into consideration the actual reasons that one might believe them. Rather than carrying on this like, an epistemologist of religion should always be careful to identify presuppositions and worldview-commitments; fist their own and then others'. For this reason, whenever an individual religious belief is being considered, its justification must ultimately be understood as relative to the belief system of the believer.

A second conclusion that we can draw from this discussion regards Enlightenment evidentialism. Since this view fails to recognize these sorts of concerns, we can conclude that its rejection of belief in God is misguided and thus has no teeth, as the saying goes. That is, while the evidentialist thinks that there is insufficient evidence for belief in God, they fail to engage with theists on a presuppositional level. Thus, while some theists, Presuppositionalists for example, have internal reasons for believing in God without propositional evidence, this methodology is presumed to be faulty by the Enlightenment evidentialist before any debate can occur. In this way they impose their own criteria for justification on other systems in a way that wrongly falsify them. To put this all into general terms, worldviews should not be dismissed or dispelled without concern for their content, internal justification, and epistemic criteria. It seems as one of the only ways that we can legitimately reject a worldview is if it somehow fails to meet its own standards or is otherwise self-referentially incoherent.

Objections and Responses

Coherentism

Before closing there are some potential problems and objections that should be addressed. The first and perhaps most pressing objection is that presuppositionalism as I have outlined is just another form of Coherentism. Coherentism is a theory of justification that can be understood as a solution to what has been referred to as the “epistemic regress problem”. Briefly, this problem starts with recognition of the fact that the justification of a given belief often depends upon the justification of other beliefs. That is, when justifying our beliefs we very often refer to other beliefs in the course of justifying the one in question. If we carry on like this we will discover a sort of justificatory chain whereby one belief is justified by another and that by another and so on and so forth. The problem that this raises is how does justification come about in the final analysis? Where and how might such a chain end if we were to keep following it? There are several potential answers. It could be that the chain extends infinitely, that it ends at some point, or that it is circular and loops back over itself. The first solution is dismissed as unhelpful for obvious reasons. The second solution is roughly “foundationalism” as we outlined above. The third potential solution is, roughly, “coherentism”.

Coherentism, then, is a theory of justification that depends upon epistemic circularity. One of the problems that coherentists face is that if mere coherence is sufficient for justification then it seems possible to arrive at multiple coherent systems that represent the world quite differently. Presuppositionalists face the same problem. In fact, the theory of worldviews outlined above seems suspiciously similar to coherentism. On this basis one might object that all I have offered is a different version of coherentism. This objection, however, misses the mark. As mentioned earlier, the presuppositionalist is not offering a strictly epistemological rejection of

enlightenment evidentialism, but rather bringing up some relevant metaphilosophical concerns.⁹³ Thus, calling Presuppositionalism a form of coherentism is something of a category error.

I have been arguing that we do in fact make use of worldviews and that this is relevant for rejecting Enlightenment evidentialism. I have not been arguing for the epistemic thesis that justification is always and only a matter of coherence. Rather, as mentioned above, each worldview has its own criteria for justification. To be sure, some worldviews may incorporate a coherentist epistemology. Others, however, may incorporate some form of foundationalism (this is exactly what the Reformed Epistemologist sets out to do for Christianity), or any other theory of knowledge. Coherence certainly plays a role in the theory of as worldviews outlined above, but it does not play the same role that it does for the coherentist: being a universal source of justification. Rather, what it means for a worldview to be coherent is, partly, that its conclusions and constitutive beliefs cohere with *whatever* epistemology and truth criteria it incorporates. Thus, while I certainly make much of coherence, I would not argue along with a coherentist that coherence alone is sufficient for justification. Instead, I would assert that an incoherent worldview is problematic and that it needs either to be reworked or rejected. Thus I see coherence as necessary for the viability of a worldview but not as the only necessary and sufficient condition for justification. Again, justification is a condition of whatever theory of knowledge a given worldview incorporates.

Circularity

A second objection is the charge that the Presuppositionalist is advocating for a kind of circularity and thus their position should be dismissed. The Presuppositionalist certainly does advocate for some kind of circularity but it is not clear that their position should be dismissed as a result. To illustrate the kind of circularity that the Presuppositionalist admits consider their

⁹³ See page 21 above.

method for justifying belief in God. If asked why they believe in God, or why it is rational for them to believe in God, the Presuppositionalist will only offer evidence and reasons deemed appropriate by scripture. They will thus employ a biblical epistemology when arguing for the existence of God. However, at this very point they are engaging in a kind of circular reasoning. However, this is not a vicious circle (e.g., “The Bible is true; therefore the bible is true”), but rather a kind of broad circularity.⁹⁴ It is not a fallacious circle but a kind of circularity that seems to be unavoidable.

Pointing out this sort of circularity does not constitute a good reason for rejecting everything that the Presuppositionalist has to say. To be sure, one will most likely not be convinced on the basis of such a narrow argument that they should believe in God. Nevertheless, what the Presuppositionalist is doing when they argue in this way is demonstrative of how all presuppositions and worldviews must be argued for. No presupposition and no worldview can be argued for in a non-circular way. As outlined above, to argue for such a belief or commitment by any other criteria would simply betray a commitment to these other criteria. Thus the Presuppositionalist allows for this kind of circular reasoning because they take it to be ultimately unavoidable. To allow for this kind of circularity, however, is not to condone the use of fallacious question begging tactics. Rather, this position simply recognizes that for human beings all of our reasoning must be circular because we employ worldviews that either explicitly or implicitly guide our thinking and interpretation of the world around us.

Fideism

Another objection that could be made is that this position is ultimately fideistic. However, this claim is certainly a misunderstanding. There are two ways of defining fideism and it is easy to demonstrate that a Presuppositionalist is not advocating either one. First, fideism could mean

⁹⁴ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 9.

believing without positive reasons for believing. This is not what the Presuppositionalist is advocating. It is true that some conceivable worldviews might perhaps operate on such fideistic terms and the Presuppositionalist would have to allow them to do so. However, even with such a worldview we would expect some internal reasons for why they operate in such a way. Furthermore, simply denying the evidentialist claim that belief in God requires evidence does not suffice for this kind of fideism. As we saw, the Presuppositionalist denies this proposition not because evidence is in itself undesirable but rather because such a requirement is easily misleading and apparently involves the mistaken assumption that there is sufficient neutrality when it comes to gathering, weighing, and interpreting evidence. Thus the Presuppositionalist is not fideistic in these terms. Likewise, as mentioned in the section on circularity, the Presuppositionalist would give evidence and reasons for their belief provided that they are understood and interpreted according to biblical presuppositions. Rather than being fideistic in this way, the Presuppositionalist simply wants to leave room for people within different worldviews to define on their own terms what counts as evidence and what counts as good reason for believing a given thing.

A second sort of fideism, which is much more radical, is the notion that one may believe something despite counter evidence. Again, this is not what the Presuppositionalist is setting out to defend. It may seem that the Presuppositionalists take this position, or at least allow for this position, because they can allow for different and contrary interpretations of the same data set by people with different worldviews. However, this is different from saying that one believes something in spite of evidence to the contrary. The issue that is at play here is what exactly would suffice as counter evidence. If two people with different worldviews disagree about how to interpret a set of data (e.g. the Enlightenment evidentialist and the Natural Theologian), this is

not to say that one of them must necessarily entertain their beliefs in spite of counter evidence. A trans-worldview disagreement of data interpretation does not suffice as counter evidence in the relevant, fideistic sense. Rather, what would suffice as counter evidence for a worldview is when it can be demonstrated that the worldview fails to account for something that it is expected to or attempts to give an account for. Thus the Presuppositionalist is not advocating a brand of fideism whereby religious believers may entertain unjustified contradictions.

Normative Epistemic Truth Claims

A fourth problem for the Presuppositionalist has to do with making normative epistemic claims. One of the conclusions that we drew earlier was that worldviews should not be dismissed out of hand and without concern for their content, internal justification, and epistemic criteria. This constitutes something of a normative epistemic or methodological claim. The potential problem here is that if epistemology is something that is relative to worldviews, then how is it possible to make such normative claims? Furthermore, is it possible to conceive of some worldview which uses internal reasons to legitimize critiquing other worldviews in a way that disregards these normative standards? At this point, unfortunately, I am unable to formulate a satisfactory or very well thought out response. However, I can suggest two potential lines of defense. First, one could move in the direction of an ad hominem attack and suggest that someone who will ignore this normative methodological claim will only prove to be closed-minded. That is, if someone argues on the basis of their own worldview that another's worldview is false or problematic, they are not saying anything richly informative or meaningful. Rather they are something like a child stopping their ears and screaming until they get their way.

Another potential line of defense could be to reference some sort of common ground in a way that does not contradict or undercut the myth of neutrality. By common ground I mean some

area of inquiry in which adherents of different worldviews can, for the most part, successfully interact. The idea of there being no absolute neutrality (i.e., the myth of neutrality) does not necessarily conflict with the idea of their being some sorts limited of common ground. For instance, it is possible for people who have different worldviews, upon sufficient reflection, to recognize the existence of different worldviews. This awareness of different worldviews is significant and perhaps constitutes a sort of common ground. If there is this sort of common ground then perhaps it is possible to make the sort of normative claim we are interested in: that it is methodologically unsound to dismiss a worldview without recourse to its internal content and structure. However, both of these lines of defense will need to be further worked out in another paper.

Subjectivism or Skepticism

One last potential problem for this position is the charge it ultimately sets up some sort of subjectivism or skepticism. That is, if worldviews rely only upon internal reasons for the justification of belief, then what is to prevent any number of conceivable worldviews from being valid or viable? Furthermore, and more pressing, how can anyone *know* in the final analysis whether or not their worldview is in fact the correct one to hold? Internal reasons cannot confirm that the worldview actually maps onto or corresponds to reality. After all, every viable worldview will purport to explain reality and thus will see itself as truly descriptive of the way that things are. Thus there is a need for something external to worldviews to ground them if there is to be certainty that one's worldview is the correct one. However, if it is true that there is no such thing as absolute neutrality then seems as though it impossible to arrive at such a conclusion. In

the final analysis the Presuppositionalist has theological reasons to not worry so much about this threat of subjectivism or skepticism.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, some Presuppositional thinkers have been working on developing a transcendental argument which aimed at demonstrating that their position is true (i.e., does accurately capture reality). By a transcendental argument is meant a kind of argument which aims at establishing some premise as logically primitive. By logically primitive I mean something that is argued from and not to. For instance, the law of non-contradiction is held onto in what might be classified as a transcendental way. It is logically primitive and must argued from and not to. That is, this law is presupposed in our reasoning. One cannot even begin argue against it without presupposing it. Thus, it is an underlying condition that makes argumentation possible. In an analogous way some Presuppositionalists, lead by Cornelius Van Til, have worked on establishing a transcendental argument for God. If they succeed they would in effect be showing that the existence of the God of the bible is, like the law of non-contradiction, an underlying condition that makes true and false predication possible.⁹⁶ However, this argument, in its current stage of development, needs a lot of work and is far from satisfactory.

Closing Remarks

In this paper we have undertaken to outline the main contours of the contemporary epistemology of religion. We have understood this as a debate over whether or not evidentialism applies to the belief component of religion or not. First we considered Enlightenment evidentialism and its rejection of belief in God. Next we surveyed several mainstream responses including Natural

⁹⁵ That is, based on theological reasons internal to their system they do not worry about the charge of subjectivism or skepticism. This is because of the sort of epistemology they ultimately argue for which depends upon God's perspicuous revelation of himself both in nature and in scripture, and not ultimately upon autonomous human reasoning.

⁹⁶ For a recent essay on this see Don Collet "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," in *Revelation and Reason*, eds., Oliphint and Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2007) 258-278.

Theology, Wittgensteinian Fideism, and Reformed Epistemology. Lastly, we turned to a more obscure response that is loosely grounded in the Presuppositional school of Christian apologetics. We saw, according to this theory, that philosophy, epistemology, and epistemology of religion are all influenced by the fact that we reason on the basis of presuppositions and according to a worldview. While there are some areas in which this view, as presented here, needs to be strengthened, it nevertheless suffices as a rejection of Enlightenment evidentialism.

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