

## **The Crisis in Contemporary Epistemology**

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Epistemology is that branch of philosophy dedicated to reflecting on our lives as intellectual beings. “What constitutes a well lived intellectual life?,” “What conditions must I satisfy in order to have knowledge?,” “What are the boundaries of human knowing?,” “What are the requirements for rational belief?,” are questions typically posed by its practitioners. Presently the discipline of epistemology is in a time of transition, some might say upheaval, making these difficult yet exciting times to be working in the field. Many of epistemology’s traditional ways of addressing its concerns, its dominant methods and models, have recently been called into serious question, with the result that there is considerable openness to new ways of addressing traditional concerns, though little consensus about what new shape epistemology should take. In this paper, I hope to accomplish the following: first, to acquaint readers with the contours of the traditional epistemological project that dominated the discipline for the last 350 years, and which still influences certain segments of academia; second, to explain why this paradigm is now considered to be untenable; third, I will propose an alternative model that I believe is more compatible with a Christian world view; finally, I will show how this model touches upon the specific concerns of academicians here at Wheaton College.

### **I The Foundationalist Paradigm: Its Underlying Motivation**

Foundationalism is an overarching account of the human knowing enterprise that offers an ideal way well ordered minds pursue knowledge and arrange their beliefs. In order to appreciate the foundationalist agenda, however, one must understand something of the underlying motivation for the program. Modern philosophy, and the versions of foundationalism that emerged in it, was born amidst cultural and social crisis. Let’s begin with the cases of Rene Descartes, often called the father of modern classical foundationalism (indeed, the father of modern Western philosophy), and John Locke, who offered considerable refinements and subtlety to Descartes’ model.

One noticeable feature of our mature intellectual lives is becoming aware of our tendency to make mistakes in the matters about which we form beliefs. Descartes observed in his famous Meditations not only that he had made errors of judgment in accepting some of his beliefs, but that he had in consequence compounded the problem by building on those errors.<sup>1</sup> The discovery that one’s set of beliefs contains a few “bad apples” might then prompt one to consider

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, in Philosophical Works of Descartes, trans. by Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Dover Publications, 1955), p. 144.

taking thorough inventory of what one believes to see how much of it passes muster. Imagine the kind of reshuffling of your beliefs that would ensue were you to discover as an adult that you were the biological child of someone other than the parents who raised you. Suppose that in taking stock of your thinking about religion or politics you became convinced you had made serious errors of judgment. Would this not result in some significant reordering of one's system of beliefs (one's "noetic structure," as epistemologists sometimes call it)?

Descartes was, I think, motivated to embark on his program of rational reconstruction by something more troubling than occasional error; namely, pervasive and seemingly intractable disagreement about fundamental intellectual, religious, moral, and political matters. Descartes was educated in Europe at a time when the scholastic paradigm that had dominated the university curriculum for centuries was in disarray. The Christian scriptures, along with the tradition comprised by popes, councils and a common reading of the Church Fathers no longer constituted the court of final appeal for resolving disputes about matters of religion and morals. The burgeoning disciplines of science were revolutionizing the way we think about the earth and its place in the universe. Various social and political events such as the religious wars following the Reformation jointly contributed to an atmosphere of intellectual uncertainty, whose disturbing effects were keenly felt by Descartes. The rediscovery of the ancient Greek texts of Carneades and Sextus Empiricus, as championed by Descartes' contemporary Michel de Montaigne, made skepticism about knowledge a serious option. Descartes complains in his Discourse on Method that his professors would argue earnestly and convincingly in support of diametrically opposite conclusions, an experience all too familiar, perhaps, to college students today. The discovery that trusted authorities whose judgments you are not competent to question disagree with one another on very fundamental intellectual matters can induce in one tremendous cognitive dissonance.

Matters grew worse for Descartes. He opted to skip graduate studies and see the world, courtesy of a stint in the army. But to his dismay he found that the fundamental disagreements over matters moral, religious, and political, were not limited to academia, but arose between different cultures. Not only is what we believe in large measure due to geographical and historical accident, observes Descartes, but persons from other cultures often have reasons in support of their convictions every bit as good or better than the reasons we have for our own.

. . . I further recognized in the course of my travels that all those whose sentiments are very contrary to ours are yet not necessarily barbarians or savages, but may be possessed of reason in as great or even a greater degree than ourselves. I also considered how very different the self-same man, identical in mind and spirit, may

become, according as he is brought up from childhood amongst the French or Germans, or has passed his whole life amongst the Chinese or cannibals. . . . I could not, however, put my finger on a single person whose opinions seemed preferable to those of others, and I found that I was so to speak, constrained myself to undertake the direction of my procedure.<sup>2</sup>

John Locke's epistemology also arose out of efforts to counteract a society wracked by fragmentation and the effects of prolonged disagreement on what were once matters of general consensus. The religious wars that waged in Europe between Catholics and Protestants following the Reformation spilled over into England, erupting into civil war, with members of some Protestant groups killing other Protestants. Instead of seeking to resolve their disputes by appealing to common authorities, the disputants became intensely partisan, justifying their various positions by appeals to favorite "local authorities."<sup>3</sup> Locke writes: that "by which men most commonly regulate their assent, and upon which they pin their faith more than anything else . . . is, the opinion of others; though there cannot be a more dangerous thing to rely on, nor more likely to mislead one; since there is much more falsehood and error amongst men, than truth and knowledge. And if the opinions and persuasion of others, whom we know and think well of, be a ground of assent, men have reason to be heathens in Japan, Mahumetans in Turkey, Papists in Spain, Protestants in England, and Lutherans in Sweden."<sup>4</sup>

There appears, then, a rather impressive list of reasons for thinking that our intellectual lives are in need of every bit of order and structure we can provide. We are liable to error in our various judgments, and prone to build hastily upon what we had little reason to think was true in the first place. Many of our convictions about a wide range of subjects are due to the accidents of birth and history and geography. Moreover, even the beliefs bequeathed to us by our culture and the intellectual traditions within it are the subjects of discord among those we trust as authorities. It is enough to produce a mild crisis in even the stoutest of intellects. The social fragmentation and protracted disagreement to which Descartes and Locke responded was but a symptom, however, of a deeper underlying malady: the misuse of Reason itself, to which the proper antidote, they claimed, must be a prescription for properly conducting our intellectual activities. The best hope for securing truth amidst the babble of competing claims

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<sup>2</sup>Discourse On Method, in *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, translated by Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, (Dover Publications: 1955) p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> See Nicholas Wolterstorff's *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 4-12.

<sup>4</sup> John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (Bk. IV, XV, 6).

lay not in the Church or the deliverances of tradition, which no longer spoke with definitive finality, but within the properly ordered mind of the knowing subject.

It is important to note that Descartes' and Locke's response to the intellectual crises of their day was not unique, but fits into a pattern of responses to the challenges of skepticism and pluralism dating back to the pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece. Hundreds of years of speculation about the nature of the universe by the earliest Greek thinkers yielded a plurality of opposing doctrines: "all is air," "all is water," "all is mind," "motion is impossible," "motion is possible," which in turn bred distrust among the Sophists in the power of reason to discern the truth about such matters. Moreover, Greek conquests of foreign peoples brought them into contact with foreign cultures whose customs, laws, and ways of thinking differed from their longstanding Athenian ideals. This not only engendered doubts about the alleged divine origin of the laws, but actually prompted Hippias and others to claim that moral law was nothing but the creation of convention.<sup>5</sup> Disagreement, pluralism, and a form of genealogical study into the origins of Greek thought and customs fostered a skepticism about reason's ability to secure the truth that found terse expression in the immortal line of Protagoras: "man is the measure of all things, of those that are, that they are, of those that are not, that they are not."<sup>6</sup> In other words, humans don't discover the truths about the world they live in, they invent them.

In response to the skepticism of the Sophists arose Socrates and Plato. When the Academy founded by Plato became home to a new breed of skeptics, we see Augustine's response in *Contra Academicos*, Against the Academic Skeptics. Michel de Montaigne, the significant 16th century French thinker, underwent a skeptical crisis while reading the newly discovered works of ancient Greek skeptic Sextus Empiricus. He adopted the motto "Que sais-je?" ("What do I know?") and had the motto carved into the beams of his study. The response? Descartes' Meditations. Hume, called by Thomas Reid "that hero of skepticism," is in turn opposed by the philosophies of Reid and Kant. And the historical relativism of segments of 19th century German thought following Kant (most notably Dilthey) was in turn opposed by Husserl's "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," where he offers his phenomenological method of achieving unimpeachable rationality.<sup>7</sup> And so it goes throughout the history of philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup> See Eduard Zellar's Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> See Edmund Husserl, Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy, translated with an introduction by Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965). Lauer writes in his introduction: "This sort of philosophy will refuse to accept any conclusion that has not been

The skeptical challenges of one generation are opposed by the next generation's claims to have at last achieved the true insight and infallible method that eluded their predecessors. The postmodern pluralism characteristic of today's intellectual scene, then, is nothing new under the sun. What this scant history suggests, I believe, is that we have good inductive reasons for thinking that the perpetual see-saw between skepticism and anti-skepticism is likely to remain a permanent fixture of the human intellectual landscape. We should therefore give up as quixotic efforts to achieve some transcendental standpoint from which we will silence skepticism once and for all. This does not mean, as I will argue below, that we should be any less serious about our academic pursuits, nor that we should cease making claims to have discovered the truth, nor that we should avoid claims about one philosophical position being superior to another. Chastened by the lessons of history, however, we will tell a somewhat different story about the accomplishments of reason and its power to persuade all people.

## II Foundationalism: The Prescription

Unchastened by the lessons of history, Descartes sat alone in a stove-heated room and devised his foundationalist answer to an age of troubled reason. He resolved to "raze everything in my life, down to the very bottom, so as to begin again from the very foundations," treating as positively false any claim that was susceptible of even the slightest tincture of doubt (a most extreme cognitive restructuring). After applying himself to the "destruction" of his former opinions he arrived at last at that one indubitable truth for which he will forever be remembered: "cogito ergo sum;" "I think, therefore I am." And from this meager deposit of foundational truth, Descartes struggled to secure all that he had formerly believed, with this important difference: he was no longer content to have knowledge accidentally or unwittingly. He judged that if anyone genuinely knows a claim, then they are self-reflectively aware of the fact that they know it (mere hunches or surmises that one knows a claim won't suffice); there is no way a person might confuse a genuine article of knowledge with some lesser grade of belief. Moreover, he was prepared to demonstrate to anyone who might inquire that all his beliefs were firmly rooted in an unshakable foundation. That we ought to be prepared "to show that we know" is hardly a surprising demand given Descartes' consternation over protracted disagreements. After all, what kind of solace can one take from certainty one isn't even aware one has? And

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verified s absolutely valid for all men and for all times; thus it wants to be a science in direct contact with absolute being."

amidst the clamor of competing voices can be heard many *assertions* that one has certainty, but how many can demonstrate it? <sup>8</sup>

The rudiments of Cartesian foundationalism resemble those of a geometric system (which is hardly surprising given Descartes pioneering work in mathematics). <sup>9</sup> In geometry one begins with invincibly secure axioms whose truth is self-evidently obvious to reason. Not only is the truth of the axioms evident to reason, but they are supposedly incorrigible as well; it is impossible to believe them and be mistaken as to their truth. Locke, though not Descartes, added to the list of properly basic beliefs, the immediate deliverance of sense experience, which he believed gave one the pure and unvarnished truth about the objects of sensation. Next one specifies the rules of inference whereby the certainty of the axioms is imparted to theorems (or non basic beliefs), those beliefs whose truth is not self-evident to reason. By proceeding in this way, one begins with certainty and communicates the certainty to the rest of the system. The metaphor of a building is perhaps more apt given the term “foundationalism.” If one can lay an unshakeable foundation and successfully transfer its strength to the rest of the building, one has a solid edifice indeed. If one’s entire “noetic structure” can rest on so assured a foundation, one will have the wherewithal not only to claim that one possesses certainty with respect to a certain body of knowledge, but one has the tools for showing opponents the error of their ways: just the sort of theory of knowledge called for amidst a culture fraught with pluralism and disagreement. Very nice in theory but, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details.

Basic beliefs along with procedures for communicating their epistemic merits to non-basic beliefs constitute the essential core of all foundational systems. But the barrage of criticism to which foundationalism has been subjected in the last forty

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff holds the controversial view that Descartes was not concerned with knowledge in our contemporary sense, but with *scientia*, an intuitively apprehended knowledge of nature. Wolterstorff discusses the differences between Descartes’ and Locke’s project in John Locke and the Ethics of Belief (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See especially chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> I characterize Cartesian foundationalism because it has become the special target of attack among many postmodern thinkers. A helpful survey of these attacks is found in Charles Taylor’s “Overcoming Epistemology,” in Philosophy, End or Transformation, eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1987), pp.464-488. Locke’s version of foundationalism is more nuanced than Descartes’, and the “modest” foundationalism of thinkers such as Thomas Reid is more tenable still. In truth there are dozens of permutations of the foundationalist program, many of which were formulated to evade the difficulties of earlier formulations. Anyone interested in acquainting themselves with the dizzying array of foundationalist programs can consult Timm Triplett’s “Recent Work in Foundationalism,” American Philosophical Quarterly 27, no. 2 (April 1990).

or so years often touches upon less central aspects of the theory. Again, Descartes' version of foundationalism allows us to highlight some of these peripheral elements found in many foundational theories. First, Descartes' foundationalism requires that certifiable claims to knowledge must satisfy some very high "access requirements." That is, one cannot claim to have knowledge simply by asserting that one knows (any unreflective person of puny mind can do this); one must be inwardly cognizant that one's claims to knowledge are genuine, and one must be prepared to show that this is the case. Put briefly, in order to know, one must know that one knows, and be able to show that one knows.<sup>10</sup> Descartes believed that knowing agents could gain complete and infallible self-reflective clarity of the contents of their own minds. ". . . I see clearly," writes Descartes, "that there is nothing which is easier for me to know than my own mind," and the many clear and distinct ideas that guide his reasoning supposedly stem from his having clear and easy access to his own thoughts.

Secondly, a strong element of individualism marks Descartes' program. He doesn't feel obliged to seek wise counsel from fellow academics, clerics, friends, or a broader intellectual and cultural tradition to quell his doubts about whether we have knowledge of a mind independent world. Indeed, tradition, with its conflicting signals, was part of the problem, an obstacle to be overcome, not a voice to be indulged. Instead, Descartes believed he had to free his thoughts from history's influence, endeavoring to accomplish his philosophical tasks alone. A solitary mind of sufficient acumen and penetration could accomplish the task of cognitive restructuring, thought Descartes.

Third, his was an epistemology of "pure reason," one which, as he put it, has ". . . no need of any place, does not depend on any material thing . . . [and] is entirely distinct from the body. . . ." The notion that the body is an impediment to reason is at least as old as Plato, and is a recurring theme in Western philosophy. Consider the following quotation from the Phaedo (66) in which Socrates questions Simmias about the ideal conditions of knowing: "Don't you think that the person who is likely to succeed in this attempt most perfectly is the one who approaches each object, as far as possible, with the unaided intellect, without taking account of any sense of sight in his thinking, or dragging any other sense into his reckoning--the man who pursues the truth by applying his pure and unadulterated thought to the pure and unadulterated object, cutting

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<sup>10</sup>Being self-reflectively aware that one possesses knowledge, justifiably believing this to be the case, knowing this to be the case, and showing that this is the case are all distinctive requirements, many or all of which do not appear in some versions of foundationalism. Failure to keep these separated leads to what William Alston calls "levels confusions in epistemology." See his article by the same title in Midwest Studies in Philosophy V 1980 Studies in Epistemology (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), pp. 135-150.

himself off as much as possible from his eyes and ears and virtually all the rest of his body, as an impediment which by its presence prevents the soul from attaining to truth and clear thinking?" Not only does Descartes think that ideal reasoning is independent of a body, it is allegedly independent of all emotions as well. He begins his Meditations claiming to have "liberated his mind from all cares," and to be "happily agitated by no passions." By contrast, I will argue below that the well trained mind is not one that has been emptied of all passions but one that has been suitably trained to care about the right things.

Fourth, and perhaps ironically, Descartes also held that his apriori account of the foundations of human knowledge was universal, a rational reconstruction of human knowledge fit for all people, at all times, and for all places. He never intimates that his foundationalism is fit only for local consumption. In fact, it was precisely reasoning of a partisan and pluralistic nature he was trying to combat. The right use of reason championed by Descartes was supposed to overcome the limitations of particular contingent historical circumstances.

Essential to the right use of reason was making use of the proper methods of inquiry. Scattered throughout the history of Western philosophy are a variety of methods – Socratic methods, Baconian methods, Descartes' Rules for the Proper Ordering of the Mind and Discourse on Method, Locke's "historical plain method," Mill's methods, Husserl's phenomenological method, and more – each of which offered rules or procedures which, if followed faithfully, would (so it was claimed) infallibly bring the mind into possession of the truth about some matter. Now if methods are viewed simply as rules of thumb, as techniques for transmitting an already established craft or science, which the person of practical wisdom knows when to set aside, then we have no quarrel. Obviously, the empirical methods of the sciences have been fabulously successful in enlarging our knowledge of medicine, astronomy, our genetic composition, and innumerable other matters. To suppose, however, that the methods that are appropriate to one domain of inquiry are adequate for every domain of inquiry is where reliance on method runs amok. This was Descartes' error, an error that until recently exercised influence over a number of academic disciplines. In my own discipline, the logical positivists' uncritical enthusiasm for the methods of science, relegated to nonsense whole realms of discourse (religion and metaphysics among them) because they couldn't be proved by strict empirical methods.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Caputo states that "The real obstacle to understanding in human affairs lies in the tendency to believe that what we do— whether in building scientific theories or in concrete ethical life— admits of hard and irrevocable rules. it is precisely this claim that human life is rule-governed which brings hermeneutics . . . out of its corner and into the fight. Hermeneutics pits itself against the notion that human affairs can finally be formalized into explicit rules which can

Finally, Descartes believed that a noetic structure, properly ordered, reflects a mind-independent reality. There is thus an isomorphism between the things we believe, between thoughts clearly and distinctly discerned, and the very structure of the universe, a mapping from every truth one affirms to some mind-independent state of affairs that makes it true. One could undoubtedly add to the list of ingredients deemed constitutive of foundationalism. Whether these are the most important, or whether they are intrinsic to foundationalism at all, are themselves subjects of great debate in the literature of epistemology.

### III Classical Foundationalism's Fatal Flaws

Virtually every element of Cartesian foundationalist theory, those central as well as peripheral, has been the target of criticisms whose numbers are legion these days. These criticisms divide into three main classes: those attacking the notion of a basic belief, and those attacking the way in which non-basic beliefs receive their support from the foundations, and those attacking the peripheral elements of the theory. Some criticisms are meant to undermine any version of the theory whatsoever, while others apply only to strong and not weak foundationalism. I shall rehearse only a few of the most commonly leveled objections against Cartesian-type foundationalism, concentrating my attention on problems surrounding the notion of basic beliefs and the peripheral elements associated with Descartes' program. Whether these objections undermine the prospects of any form of foundationalism is a matter which we will have to set to one side.

The notion of basic beliefs is the heart and soul of foundationalism; as it goes, so goes the theory. Consequently, critics have posed what they deem to be devastating objections against human knowledge being grounded in beliefs that are epistemically basic as described by the strong foundationalist. Why, critics ask, should we think that only beliefs that are self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses are properly basic? True, any belief meeting one or more of these standards is an ideal candidate for proper basicity, but is it necessary that a basic belief meet these standards? Should this list of criteria be considered exhaustive? These criteria alone appear much too restrictive, for they fail to countenance obvious examples of beliefs we hold without the benefit of argumentative support. Consider one's beliefs in the reliability of one's senses, or memory, or consciousness; none of these beliefs is either self-evident or

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or should function as a decision-procedure." Quoted in Radical Hermeneutics (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 212-213. Other well known attacks of method in the Cartesian sense can be found in Paul Feyerabend's Against Method, and Hans Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method.

incorrigible or evident to the senses, yet they are held as properly basic by virtually everyone.

Alvin Plantinga has argued that the criteria offered for identifying genuine basic beliefs introduces a deeply self-destructive feature into the foundationalist account. If, as foundationalists claim, only beliefs that are self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses are properly basic, then it behooves us to ask about the epistemic status of this belief itself, viz., that "only beliefs that are self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses are properly basic." Is this belief itself self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses? No. Is it logically rooted in basic beliefs that meet these conditions? Again, the answer seems to be no. The strong foundationalist's acceptance of the criteria for proper basicity thus runs afoul of its own standards.<sup>12</sup>

One of foundationalism's vaunted benefits is its ability to halt the regress of reason giving. If called upon to explain why we accept a certain conclusion, we might produce the premises. And if asked why we accept these premises, we might be able to produce premises for the premises. But since this process cannot continue indefinitely (and arguing in circles is frowned upon) we must halt the regress in beliefs that are epistemically basic. A major objection to strong foundationalism, however, is that it fails at precisely this point of alleged strength.

What the objection boils down to is this: any time we accept an allegedly fundamental and invincibly certain basic belief, we in fact make use of various background assumptions and information that compromises its certainty and undermines its "basicity." Even so primitive a claim as "I think, therefore I am," turns out on closer inspection to rely on yet more fundamental beliefs. What is the "I" who thinks? Descartes tacitly assumes that he is a unified center of consciousness that perdures through time, a substantial self, and not a series of discrete disconnected states of consciousness, as Buddhists believe, or an episode in the mind of some cosmic Absolute. There is also an implicit underlying commitment to the reliability of memory, for he must at least accept that the "I" who begins this simple argument, is the same "I" who finishes it. Bertrand Russell once quipped that all Descartes was entitled to say is that "thoughts are being thunk!"

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<sup>12</sup>This line of argumentation can be explored in greater detail in Alvin Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God," in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 59-63. Also interesting is the series of exchanges on this and related points between Plantinga and Phillip Quinn, beginning with Quinn's "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," in *Faith and Philosophy* (October, 1985).

A similar fate befalls self-presenting states of one's perceptual consciousness: states such as "I seem to see a door" or "I seem to see a red patch," whose job, according to foundationalists, is to undergird all our empirical knowledge. The belief that an epistemic regress can be halted in these self-authenticating non-verbal episodes of perceptual consciousness is what Wilfred Sellars calls "The Myth of the Given." The myth consists in thinking that perceptual states such as "This is red," and our powers of sensory discrimination in general, are pure and incorrigible, completely independent of any theoretical contribution or background beliefs. On the contrary, our perceptual beliefs depend for their being intelligible on our being able to apply to them a classificatory scheme and to connect them correctly with past experiences of redness. Being cognizant of my visual field as red tacitly makes a comparison to previous occasions of my having been appeared to in this way. Behind "this is red," then, lies the logically prior reliance on our recollection of previous red experiences as well as an awareness that one's present state of perceptual consciousness betokens standard conditions for visual perceptions of a red sort.<sup>13</sup>

The non-basicality of immediate perceptual reports can be argued for, not only by the way they depend on reliable memory and a classificatory scheme, but by considering the role that concepts play in perception. Philosophers of science such as Stephen Toulmin, Thomas Kuhn, N.R. Hanson, and others in the tradition of Kant, have shown us that perceptual reports, even of so primitive a

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<sup>13</sup>Wilfred Sellars writes: "For the point is specifically that observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form X is a reliable symptom of Y. And to admit this requires an abandonment of the traditional empiricist idea that observational knowledge "stands on its own feet." Wilfred Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in Challenges to Empiricism, ed. by Harold Morick (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 1980), p. 100. While it may be the case that even my most primitive beliefs depend on prior concepts, it won't follow that my primitive beliefs are *based on* those concepts. Sellars' argument is thus best construed as an attack against the incorrigibility of basic beliefs. A similar argument is made by Frederick Will in his Induction and Justification (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), pg. 203. He writes:

. . .if knowing any truth about a sensation, if indeed *having* a sensation of the kind that is specified in that truth, involves the employment and sound working of a vast array of equipment and resource extending far beyond any individual and what can be conceived private to him, then the possibility that this equipment and resource is not in place and working soundly cannot be discounted in the philosophical understanding of the knowledge of such truth. If the sound discrimination of the sensation of X, in its character *as X*, can be made only by correctly utilizing something further, say Y, and if, in a case like this, discrimination of a sensation as X can be made while yet, for some reason, Y is not being used correctly, then a discrimination of X need not be a sound discrimination.

Roderick Chisholm defends the possibility of a non-comparative use of "this is red" in Theory of Knowledge, 3rd ed. , pp. 22-25.

sort as "I see red," are embedded in larger theoretical and linguistic frameworks (language games, as Wittgenstein calls them) which invest them with the meaning they have for us; "all perception is theory-laden," as the old dictum states. Our cognitive experiences of color sensations (and other deliverances of the senses), are due in part to a contribution from a conceptual scheme whose status is anything but incorrigible, but is itself the subject of revisions over time.<sup>14</sup>

To the extent basic beliefs are embedded in larger frameworks of belief, their status as invincibly certain is thrown open to question. This will remain a problem so long as foundationalists maintain high access requirements. It is not enough to have basic beliefs, urge strong foundationalists (anybody could potentially claim anything is basic for them); one must somehow also know that these stopping points are not arbitrary and that beginning with them will indeed confer the certainty one seeks. "A report must not only have authority, this authority must in some sense be recognized by the person whose report it is."<sup>15</sup> For Descartes, or anyone else, to declare that they, and not their intellectual competitors, have the right foundations for knowledge, they must not only be reflectively aware of their foundational beliefs, but aware also of the properties or features in virtue of which these and not some other foundational beliefs are the ones by which certain knowledge is gained. Moreover, one must also justifiably believe oneself to be a competent judge of whether a belief possesses those features that make it basic. So accepting a certain claim B as basic requires that I also accept another claim K as basic, to wit, that B has whatever features are required to make it and not some alternative the proper foundation for knowledge. Thus, the regress is not halted.<sup>16</sup>

So far, then, I have considered objections against just one aspect of the foundationalist program: the nature and status of basic beliefs. The claim by strong foundationalists to base all knowledge on beliefs about which it is logically impossible to be mistaken is excessive in the extreme. Not only is it logically possible that we might be in error (a point capable of being illustrated by any number of "science-fictiony" examples – e.g. brains in a vat, evil demons, electroencephalograph scanners, etc. ), but there are actual reasons for thinking that the likelihood of error with respect to foundational beliefs exceeds zero.

Even if the problems associated with the alleged purity and invincibility of basic beliefs could somehow be surmounted, we would be left with the preposterous

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<sup>14</sup>See Keith Lehrer, "Skepticism and Conceptual Change," in Empirical Knowledge, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973) pp. 47-58.

<sup>15</sup>Sellars, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

<sup>16</sup>Arguments similar to this are given by Laurence Bonjour in "Can Empirical Knowledge have a Foundation?," in American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 15, no. 1, 1978, pp. 1-13, and in Keith Lehrer's Theory of Knowledge (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 73-75.

task of founding the vast quantity of beliefs we hold on such meager foundations as the *cogito*. We face what is called a security vs. content problem. The strict demands for unimpeachable certainty leave one with so small a set of basic beliefs that they can't possibly bear the heavy weight of all that we believe. A moment's reflection shows that the thousands of beliefs we hold about matters aesthetic, moral, religious, political, economic, historical, scientific, philosophical, and so on, can't all be derived from the very small set of basic beliefs insisted upon by strong foundationalists.

Finally, we must consider some objections that speak to some of the peripheral elements so often associated with classical foundationalism: the individualism, the access requirements, the exaggerated claims for method, the alleged universality, and the metaphysical realism. Critics have been especially scathing in their attack on foundationalism's individualism. There is, of course, something ironic about someone who embarks on an intellectual endeavor that begins by divesting himself of all his former beliefs (as if this were possible), not to mention the very beliefs that led to the conclusion that such a project should be undertaken in the first place. In fact, quite a bit escaped Descartes' chopping block: his trust in the reliability of consciousness, such beliefs as were necessary for fashioning the criteria for a new foundation, as well as beliefs directly attributable to the traditions from which he sought to extricate himself, notably his moral beliefs. At no point does Descartes propose that we start anew with respect to them.

The hermeneutical philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer argues that it is hasty in the extreme to abandon all of reason's starting points (he calls them "prejudices") simply because they are bequeathed to us from a tradition; after all, they may very well be true. Moreover, we never think in a vacuum; our reasoning begins and develops within the context of a learning community of some sort or other. To rely on authorities other than oneself, however, does not require that we abandon our own reason, but just the reverse; acknowledging another's legitimate authority on intellectual and other matters represents a judgment of one's reason. According to Gadamer:

. . . the authority of persons is ultimately based not on the subjection and abdication of reason but in an act of acknowledgment and knowledge--the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence--i.e., it has authority over one's own. . . . It rests in acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others. Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands. Indeed,

authority has to do not with obedience but rather with knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

How about strong foundationalism's high access requirements; must one know the second-order belief that one knows, and be able to demonstrate that one knows, before one has knowledge? Descartes sought to rise above the competing claims of knowledge by using a method that would, as it were, allow him to climb outside his own skull, there achieving a kind of Archimedean standpoint (a God's eye perspective if you will) from which to conduct an internal audit of all that he believed, ostensibly to settle once and for all the true relation between his claims and a mind independent reality. In retrospect, we think that efforts to achieve a kind of transcendence over one's knowledge are hopelessly naïve, a vain effort to adopt what Thomas Nagel has called "the view from nowhere."

The thinking of philosophers from diverse points of view has coalesced in the judgment that Descartes' efforts to ground philosophy in the thoughts of a solitary transcendental thinking subject is the result of an unnatural surgery separating body and mind. His artificially cerebral starting point belies the inescapable fact that we engage the world not as disembodied minds, but as flesh and blood persons *with* minds, as whole persons enmeshed in life circumstances that mediate our experience of the world.<sup>18</sup> It is a modern day gnosticism that attempts to deny the fundamental fact that all of our thinking is situated socially, historically, and linguistically. When we think about matters of knowledge and justification, we do so as denizens of a particular time and place, with concrete aims and obstacles uppermost in mind. Kuhn's discussion of "paradigms," Wittgenstein's talk of "language games," Dilthey's "life categories," as well as Gadamer's discussion of "horizons" all underscore the essential embeddedness of our thinking in concrete historical/cultural situations, from which it is plain fancy to suppose we can extricate ourselves. What this means is that strong foundationalists are wrong to suppose that they have demonstrated the norms on the basis of which all justified thinking takes place. And with the loss of a transcendental point of view, there is no way to secure an ironclad guarantee

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<sup>17</sup>Hans Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd ed. (New York: The Continuum Pub. Co., 1993), p. 279.

<sup>18</sup> The notion that the body is an impediment to reason is at least as old as Plato, and is a recurring theme in Western philosophy. Consider the following quotation from the Phaedo (66) in which Socrates questions Simmias about the ideal conditions of knowing: "Don't you think that the person who is likely to succeed in this attempt most perfectly is the one who approaches each object, as far as possible, with the unaided intellect, without taking account of any sense of sight in his thinking, or dragging any other sense into his reckoning--the man who pursues the truth by applying his pure and unadulterated thought to the pure and unadulterated object, cutting himself off as much as possible from his eyes and ears and virtually all the rest of his body, as an impediment which by its presence prevents the soul from attaining to truth and clear thinking?"

that the rational standards one does invoke precisely mirror a mind independent world.

Philosophers before, after, and including Descartes have tried their hand at distilling into a single formula or method what is essential to all instances of knowledge, and at constructing a universal theory of rationality that is grounded in the method. Doubts about the prospects of this traditional epistemological project are finding expression even among those who devoted considerable time and effort to it. After arguing that the search in recent epistemology for the single correct concept of epistemic justification has been a mistake, William Alston comments:

It will, I hope, have become clear by now that the thesis of this paper is an iconoclastic and revolutionary one, a bold departure from the well trodden pathways of the discipline. It implies that a large proportion of contemporary epistemologists, including myself, have been misguided in their researches, fighting under a false banner, engaged in a quixotic tilting at windmills.<sup>19</sup>

The merits of good thinking ("epistemic desiderata" as he calls them) are many, argues Alston, and resist reduction to a one-sized fits all formula.

Finally, we must consider that in addition to the philosophical lessons, there is a moral or theological lesson to be learned from foundationalism's failed program of self-transcendent noetic cleansing. Merold Westphal claims that not all of foundationalism's failings are philosophical; it evinces an attitude he deems morally vicious. For it depreciates, if not altogether ignores, he says, the Bible's doctrine of sin and, in particular, St. Paul's teaching about the noetic effects of sin on our intellectual endeavors. As sinful humans, we are prone to various kinds of self-deception, including the tendency to subordinate concerns for truth and rationality to personal gain, power, wealth, and other passions. But wouldn't efforts at self-purification of the sort recommended by Descartes be a perfect antidote against unbridled appetite? Where's the problem?

But the foundationalist attempt to remedy our transcendental depravity can only be problematic unless we are Pelagians. For it is, in effect, the claim that sin can be cured by our own unaided efforts, that epistemological sanctification requires nothing more than the epistemological asceticism of sound method, whether that method be syllogistic, Euclidean, experimental, transcendental, or whatever. . . . foundationalism itself is partly to be understood as a sinfully arrogant attempt at methodological self-purification, void of contrition, confession, or dependence upon divine grace.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Epistemic Desiderata" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993): 527-551; 541-2.

<sup>20</sup>Merold Westphal, "Taking Sin Seriously As An Epistemological Category," in Christian

Westphal's objection is as much against the hubris evident in foundationalism's pursuit of self-reflective purity, as it is that such efforts have failed. Gadamer says that "philosophy is the way not to forget, that man is never God."<sup>21</sup> Westphal's point is that this is a lesson we must continue to recite.

We conclude this section echoing the judgment of Nicholas Wolterstorff: "On all fronts foundationalism is in bad shape. It seems to me there is nothing to do but give it up for mortally ill and learn to live in its absence."<sup>22</sup> Learning to live in its absence requires that we acknowledge with St. Paul that "now we know in part" and "see through a glass darkly." Notice: we do know and we do see, but not in such a fashion that allows us to demonstrate with invincible clarity and distinctness, the truth of our basic beliefs and all that is supposed to follow from them.

What are the alternatives to foundationalism? Many postmodern writers have succumbed to the false dichotomy of supposing that since we can't have metaphysical certainty, conceptual relativism of one sort or another is our only recourse. So Richard Rorty says that we must ". . . treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance."<sup>23</sup> Jack Caputo recommends that we pursue his vision of a "post metaphysical rationality," one which favors free play, emancipation, decentering and deconstruction. Michel Foucault concentrated his energies on showing the ways in which claims to knowledge subserve various political agendas as instruments of power. But if we look to Christian thinkers of a premodern period, before the time of Descartes and Locke, we find a vision for the knowing enterprise that succumbs to neither extreme.

#### **IV Epistemology As If Intellectual Virtue Mattered: Biblical Background**

Christians are not limited to the resources of secular philosophy to draw insight about a well lived intellectual life any more than they are limited to such sources in the moral life. In our moral lives, we are guided by Christ's explicit ethical teachings, his example, the deliberations of the Church, and by reflecting on the life that is made available to us through his Holy Spirit. We receive from these sources direct normative commands, such as "to love our neighbors as ourselves." But we also receive insight into how to think about the moral life in

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Philosophy, ed., Thomas Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 209 and 218.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Philosophers, by Steve Pyke (London: Cornerhouse Publications, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), p. 52.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press: 1989), p. 21.

less directly normative, more theoretical terms, so much so, that a student of moral philosophy can study ethics from a distinctively Christian perspective. According to this perspective, Christ's life and teachings are rich enough to support our thinking about the moral life, its concepts, ends, and notions of human flourishing in a way that makes Christian ethics unlike secular ethics or ethics grounded in any other religious point of view. Analogously, I wish to argue that the philosophical subject of epistemology, and not just ethics, can be given distinctively Christian contours.

My own account of intellectual excellence invokes the notion of intellectual virtues. Briefly, we display cognitive excellence when we believe virtuously, that is, in accordance with traits such as wisdom, prudence, understanding, creativity, discernment, discretion, foresight, love of truth, hermeneutic sensitivity, and related traits. The prescription for the excellent intellectual life, then, is that we should cultivate within ourselves intellectual virtues and shun intellectual vices. An epistemology rooted in the intellectual virtues offers a promising alternative to the widely acknowledged limitations of Descartes' epistemology of "pure reason." Before turning to this proposal with more specificity, I want to sketch how the Bible in general and the life of Jesus in particular bear on epistemological concerns.

How does the life and work of Christ impart lessons for our intellectual lives and contribute to the work of a Christian epistemologist? Christ's early followers said things that can reasonably be construed as bearing on the intellectual life. St. Paul, for example, enjoins us to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 2:5). In what ways does the renewal of which Paul speaks "by the transformation of our minds" or his injunction to "set your minds on things that are above" make the work or belief policies of a Christian epistemologist distinctive?

The word "mind" or "minds" is crucially ambiguous. Sometimes it signals an intention, such as "I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit" (II Cor. 2:1). Or the term might designate some specific propositional content, as in "let those of us who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you" (Phil. 3:15). But the two senses of chief concern here are as follows: "mind" can refer to a set of cognitive capacities as well as to a "mindset" or outlook consequent upon one's having deployed these capacities aright. So when Peter directs us to "prepare your minds for action and discipline yourselves. . ." (I Pet. 1:13), or when Paul urges that we "set our minds on things that are above" (Col. 3:2), we should construe these as referring to a repertoire of cognitive abilities – abilities such as perception, memory, introspection, receptiveness to testimony and others – that, to varying degrees, are subject to our voluntary control. Properly cultivated, these capacities

can contribute to our forming intellectual virtues of various sorts; so, John writes “this calls for a mind that has wisdom. . .” (Rev. 17:9), and Paul commands that we “. . . put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of the creator” (Col. 3:10). We may reasonably suppose that a mind suitably developed and renewed in knowledge is better able to follow the command “to love God with all of our minds.”

Unfortunately, persons sometimes fail to exercise due care over their moral and intellectual formation, resulting in what Paul calls persons of “corrupt” or “depraved” mind – minds that are “bereft of truth” or which “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” Such persons are described as having “. . . a veil that lies over their minds. . .” (II Cor 3:15), to the effect that their minds are not set upon the things of God, but upon the things of the flesh (Rom. 8:6-7). Our cognitive powers are therefore subject to disuse and abuse, with the result that we not only miss important truths, but undermine our chances of successfully arriving at the truth.

Let us now reflect on the intellectual life of our Lord. Jesus was the Logos enfleshed, the rationality of God in human form. This staggering fact informs us, first of all, that human nature was a fit receptacle for the wisdom of God. By becoming flesh, God vindicates the capacity of the human frame and faculties to bear and apprehend truth. Contrary to some Greek philosophy and Gnostic teachings, our creaturely capacities by themselves pose no barrier to our being able to know truth or to know him in whom the fullness of deity was pleased to dwell. We should also note that Jesus’ intellectual life was a “situated” life, one embedded not just in flesh, but in a culture with its distinctive history, language, intellectual traditions, not to mention prominent political and religious concerns. Obviously, our thought lives are not deficient simply in virtue of being context-laden.

Intellectual traits connected to a virtuous mind are either directly ascribed to Jesus, or may be inferred from information given about him. First, Jesus “increased in wisdom” and he “learned obedience through the things that he suffered.” Moreover, we may infer that he learned many other things as well: carpentry, for example. He did not emerge from the womb with muscles readily developed to wield a hammer, nor a human mind innately knowledgeable in the workings of a lathe. And inasmuch as he didn’t suffer any moral failings that made learning such subjects difficult, we could say that he possessed the virtue medieval philosophers called docility, or teachableness. He displayed various pedagogic virtues, prompting the gospel writers to record that the crowds were “amazed at his teaching” and “spellbound by his teaching.” He not only was able to discern the minds of his audience, but able to convey his points with powerful examples and illustrations. He honored Thomas’s and our need for

evidence to buttress our beliefs by underscoring the probative force of the miracles he worked. His dialectical skills were felt by the Pharisees bent on entrapping him, as Jesus adroitly turned their traps back upon them. (“Whose inscription is on this coin?”) And it goes without saying that Jesus was utterly truthful and honest in all his teachings and interactions with others. So we see that Jesus displayed intellectual honesty, wisdom, understanding, discernment, docility, dialectical skill, and more besides. He was both a virtuous moral and intellectual agent.

I believe it is no accident that Jesus was described in terms of moral and intellectual virtues, for this was part and parcel of the Hebrew wisdom tradition that informed his culture. Note the language of the intellectual virtues from the opening lines of Proverbs:

That men may know **wisdom** and **instruction**, **understand** words of **insight**, receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice and equity; that **prudence** may be given to the simple, **knowledge** and **discretion** to the youth--the wise man also my hear and increase in learning, and the man of understanding acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Inter-testamental apocryphal books show that this wisdom tradition continued into Jesus’ time. The book of Wisdom, most likely penned by a Hellenistic Jew sometime toward the end of the first century BC, elegantly expresses the author’s desire to embody a full measure of intellectual virtue.

May God grant that I speak with judgment and have thoughts worthy of what I have received, for he is the guide even of wisdom and the corrector of the wise. For both we and our words are in his hand, as are all understanding and skill in crafts. For it is he who gave me unerring knowledge of what exists, to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements; the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year the constellation of the stars, the natures of animals and the tempers of wild beasts, the powers of sprits, the reasonings of men, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots; I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. (Wis. 7:15-22)

The fourth Book of the Maccabees, thought by scholars to have been composed in Jerusalem or Antioch approximately 30 years before the first gospel, also titled On the Supremacy of Reason, is a panegyric on religious reason and its power

over the body and emotions. Note the explicit use of virtue language in the following passage from Chapter 1, verses 1-4:

The subject I am about to discuss is most philosophical, that is, whether devout reason is sovereign over the emotions. So it is right for me to advise you to pay earnest attention to philosophy. For the subject is essential to everyone who is seeking knowledge, and in addition it includes the praise of the highest virtue--I mean, of course, rational judgment. If, then, it is evident that reason rules over those emotions that hinder self-control, namely gluttony and lust, it is also clear that it masters emotions that hinder one from justice, such as malice, and those that stand in the way of courage, namely anger, fear, and pain.

Interestingly, we see in the notions of intellectual and moral virtue that the Hebrew and Greek traditions roughly coincide, and that the language of intellectual and moral virtue saturated the ancient middle-east when the Church was in its infancy. This is not to deny the evident contrasts separating divine wisdom and wisdom purely "in the tradition of men," yet in their general structure they were thought by many to be compatible.

The epistles are replete with the language of the wisdom tradition, where we are urged on several occasions not to be children in our thinking, but mature (I Cor 14: 20). The language of moral and intellectual virtue appears among the requirements mentioned for bishops; they must hold to the truth as taught, be sensible, apt teachers, and able to confute those who oppose sound doctrine. (I Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:9). We are also enjoined in the epistles to avoid intellectual vices, including credulity, crippling doubt, folly, obtuseness, disputatiousness, and unteachableness, to name but a few.

Since the Bible demands that we grow in the intellectual virtues, you would expect it to offer guidance on how to develop these traits. And so it does. First, Scripture teaches that cultivating the virtues is a developmental process, that extends through a lifetime. As was mentioned, even Jesus grew in wisdom, and St. Paul had to learn not to think as a child. The writer of Hebrews laments not being able to share deep theological matters with his readers because they are still babies in their thinking, fit only for milk and not solid food (Heb 5:14). Second, growth in the virtues is not automatic, but requires effort. To secure wisdom one must conscientiously seek it out. The writer of Proverbs likens wisdom and other intellectual virtues to buried treasure; they must be hunted and dug for. The book of Wisdom says we should "wear down the doorstep of the wise person." Third, we are not alone in our efforts to become virtuous persons; our careers as moral and intellectual persons develop within the context of a community. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another," says

Proverbs (27:17). "Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ (Col. 1:28)." Virtue epistemology is, in several respects, a "situated epistemology;" it recognizes that prescriptions for the well-lived intellectual life, as well as the analyses we offer of the virtues themselves, reflect of the goals and purposes of a particular intellectual tradition. It is within a community that we learn what intellectual goals are worth pursuing, what goals should be subordinated to others, what practices ought to be avoided, and what resources are available to assist one in moral and intellectual growth. Fourth, we must work to sustain our gains in the moral and intellectual life, since regression is a real possibility. Again the writer of Hebrews accuses those to whom the letter is directed of having "**become** dull in understanding," of needing to be "taught **again**" the basic teachings of God. The life of Solomon stands as a warning that if one forsakes careful oversight of the intellectual and moral life, one can lose one's hold on the virtues. Finally, intellectual virtues are not fostered in isolation from other human excellences. Scripture presents a holistic picture of persons, so we shouldn't be surprised to find that it links up in intimate ways a virtuous mind with the whole person. Virtue epistemology acknowledges our full humanity as knowers by placing our knowing in the larger context of human life; this is not epistemology done only from the neck up. It recognizes the indispensable contribution to cognitive flourishing made by our emotions, our bodies, and our moral character. Surely, if we are persons marked by traits such as compassion, empathy, and justice, we are more likely to achieve insight and understanding in matters of social justice, interpersonal relations, and interpretation (among other areas). Virtue epistemology thus corrects the prevailing idea that the passions are but a barrier to good judgment.<sup>24</sup>

The two-way causal connection between right thinking and right morality is an important motif that runs throughout scripture and is attested to by common sense. Arrogance, dishonesty, pride, pugnacity, laziness, and many other vices undermine our ability to think well and to pursue the truth. A vicious character can undermine good thinking just as effectively as some physical debility. Thomas Aquinas quotes the Latin Bible saying: "Perverse thoughts separate men from God, and when his power is tested, it convicts the foolish; because wisdom will not enter a deceitful soul, nor dwell in a body enslaved to sin" (Wis. 1:3-4). And Ephesians says: "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (Eph. 4:18).

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, this conclusion is supported by the recent work of neurobiologists and cognitive psychologists. For examples, see Oliver Sacks' *An Anthropologist On Mars*, Antonio D'Amasio's *Descartes' Error*, and Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*.

## V Epistemology As If Virtue Mattered: Development and Application

Though the Scriptures have much to say about the importance of cultivating virtues within ourselves and the training to virtue of those over whom we have charge, they say little of a precise nature on the subject of moral or cognitive psychology and epistemology. The logical analysis of the virtues and their various interrelations are left unspecified. If we examine the structure of the virtues more closely, however, we can nevertheless note further connections with some important Scriptural themes. In particular, I wish to emphasize how my virtue account of epistemology reflects three Biblical themes: personal responsibility, responsibility for each other, and the uniqueness of Christian wisdom.

A virtue, as I will use the term, is a well anchored, abiding disposition persons acquire over time enabling them to think and feel and act in ways that contribute to their fulfillment as persons. Vices, by contrast, are settled traits of character we have acquired that undermine human flourishing. Let's first consider moral virtues and vices since their language and concepts are fairly familiar. Generous persons, for example, will *ipso facto* embody three qualities constitutive of that virtue. First, they must have acute powers of moral perception and judgment that reliably indicate to them persons to whom it would be appropriate to give, and that allow them to negotiate successfully and gracefully the various impediments that oppose our virtuous activities. Moreover, their judgments will be accompanied by a corresponding set of emotions; they will typically take delight in being able to confer a gift on another, and will feel frustration or sadness if their efforts fail or are thwarted. Thirdly, generous persons act appropriately when giving to others, often requiring them to take counsel and deliberate very carefully.<sup>25</sup> An indulgent parent or a co-dependent spouse may give lavishly, but do not give appropriately, and hence not virtuously. This way of analyzing the virtues shows just how easily one can go awry in the moral life. To perceive need and act to alleviate need, but inwardly to resent doing so is not to act virtuously. The right sort of emotional state must accompany the action. An obtuse person who simply fails to notice occasions for generosity, even if he would respond appropriately upon detecting them, is likewise not virtuous. All three elements, characteristic patterns of thought, appropriate emotions, and right actions, must be present, and present in the right degree.

Of course, it does not follow from the fact that a person is not maximally virtuous that he or she is automatically vicious in the worst possible way.

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this is one way to understand St. Paul's prayer for the Philippians (1: 9) "that their love abound more and more with all knowledge and all discernment."

Classical Greek philosophers distinguished between moral virtue, moral strength, moral weakness, and moral viciousness, and plain moral immaturity such as that characterizing a small child. A morally vicious person is flawed in thought, word, and deed; not only do they not judge correctly about moral matters but, as a result, do not act or feel appropriately either. Morally weak persons suffer from what the ancients called *akrasia* (weakness of will). Morally weak persons may correctly identify the path of virtue, but lack a motivational structure of sufficient strength and development to move them to act virtuously. Morally strong persons judge aright with respect to moral matters, but must nevertheless struggle with temptation and contrary inclination. Morally virtuous persons not only judge and feel appropriately, but move effortlessly to act in morally appropriate ways. Perhaps Mother Theresa's nature was so transformed that she not only readily identified and empathized with the poor and sick, but reached out to them effortlessly and without having to struggle with any contrary inclinations. She never thought to herself "oh, let the damn sick kid fend for himself, I'm going off to play golf." Here too, we can note a contrast between Greek and Christian concepts of the virtue. According to the Greek conception, I must act relatively flawlessly, say, with respect to my giving, to have the virtue of generosity. Medieval Christian thinkers (perhaps owing to the influence of the model of the adult convert as opposed to the aristocratically bred Athenian gentleman), claimed that this side of heaven we never escape contrary inclination in all areas of life.<sup>26</sup>

The concept of a virtue on the above analysis is rooted in the notion of human flourishing, from which it follows that a contrasting notion of human flourishing will correspondingly give rise to a differing account of the virtues and their various interrelations. Traditionally, theories of virtue and vice and the concepts they employ are embedded if not in an account of human ends and purposes, at least in some broader notion of human flourishing or happiness. Whether a trait is virtuous or vicious hinges on our beliefs about where our lives as a whole ought to be headed. Thus, what we regard as intellectually virtuous and vicious behavior will vary as we are committed to one or another account of human flourishing.

Consider how notions of human flourishing and the goals of cognition corresponding to them change as we alternatively embrace the ideals of Aristotelian *Eudaimonia*, Stoic *apatheia*, the Christian beatific vision, or Buddhist annihilation. Our analyses of intellectual virtue and vice, as well as what we take

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<sup>26</sup> "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. (Romans 7: 19-23)

to be the distinctive features that make certain traits good or bad, are situated in larger philosophical commitments that impart to them their own distinctive grammar. This was no less true in Augustine's day, when his version of Christian virtue competed in a pluralistic world against rival accounts of virtues and vices.

Let me illustrate: We in philosophy prize analytical rigor; we work to cultivate that skill whereby we can dissect concepts into their component parts, and note their various logical interrelations. Sometimes the full truth about the world is revealed only after logical dissection. Zen Buddhists, however, condemn such thinking as intellectually vicious, as symptomatic of an underlying spiritual defect that keeps us bound to the wheel of rebirth. "For the attainment of incomparable satori, one has to cast away his discriminating mind. Those who have not passed the barrier and have not cast away the discriminating mind are all phantoms haunting trees and plants."<sup>27</sup> Ironically, though Buddhists defend my general thesis about the connection between intellectual and personal vice, they reject the Christian account of persons and flourishing on which I try to build my account and, as a consequence, reject at points the specific grammar of Christian virtues. But this result is precisely what we should expect, for the New Testament contrasts, for example, wisdoms grounded in different root concerns, those grounded in purely human precepts and those grounded in God.

Virtue epistemology resists the theme prominent in so much modern epistemology that there is a generic, one-size-fits-all formula for the well-lived intellectual life. A virtue approach claims instead, that the parameters of a successful intellectual life are set against the backdrop of much broader historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts, which pose for us certain overriding goals and purposes. A Christian's views about an excellent life (intellectual, moral, social, etc.) are embedded within a religious framework specifying God's desires for us and the world. My success as a cognitive being will therefore be determined, in part, by how well I am achieving the goals my tradition sets for me (whether, say, I am closer to the beatific vision). Significant differences will no doubt mark the accounts of intellectual excellence given by Christians from those accounts of excellence depicted by, say, Theravadan Buddhists, who teach the illusory nature of a unified mental life, and who seek the dissolution of the self. We ought to pause, therefore, before we accept the adequacy of an "epistemological everyman" as the proper subject of our epistemological investigations. Whether or not someone is judged as a virtuous knower will depend upon the cultural and historical context of which the person is a part, the roles that the person plays in those contexts, how the person's beliefs are related to other aspects of his or her interior life, and so on. Just as we

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<sup>27</sup> From Zenkei Shibayama, Zen Comments on the Mumonkan, in Koller and Koller's Sourcebook In Asian Philosophy (New York: MacMillan Press, 1991) p. 361.

cannot do epistemology from the neck up, we cannot do epistemology in a vacuum.

A mature intellectual virtue, on the other hand, arises out of a concern for human wholeness and, in their Christian form, union with God. A part of practical wisdom consists in an agent's ability to survey the shape of his life, to monitor his strengths and weaknesses, and to undertake strategies of self-improvement where possible. Viewed this way, intellectual and moral virtues have an integrating function; they draw together the threads of a person's life and weave them together in a coherent and vital whole. This idea clearly opposes Descartes' notion that the life of the mind was "dis-integrated" from other aspects of the human personality.

Now let us look more carefully at intellectual virtues. Following the model of a moral virtue, we can analyze an intellectual virtue as an abiding, reliable trait we have acquired that allows us to orient our intellectual lives--our believings, reasoning habits, and cognitive powers--in ways that contribute to human flourishing, most notably to acquiring truth and avoiding falsehood.<sup>28</sup> An epistemic vice, by contrast, is a trait (an attitude, affection, or disposition) that bears unfavorably on some aspect of our intellectual life. I have mentioned traits such as wisdom, understanding, and foresight as examples of intellectual virtues. Intellectual vices include traits such as gullibility, superstitiousness, willful naivete, closed-mindedness, and being prone to self-serving beliefs.<sup>29</sup>

Intellectual virtues range over a variety of intellectual activities, centrally perhaps, that of gaining truth and avoiding falsehood about important matters. But our intellectual lives are not devoted exclusively to acquiring beliefs; we also are concerned to maintain, communicate and apply our beliefs to practical

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<sup>28</sup> The notion of flourishing or failing is evident in the words of a personified Wisdom in Proverbs: "For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord, but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death (Proverbs 8:35-36)."

<sup>29</sup> Let me distinguish between purely natural intellectual abilities, intellectual skills, and intellectual virtues. Someone born with perfect pitch or a photographic memory will obviously excel in discovering a certain range of truth. Though such abilities are admirable on some level, they are not virtues, indeed, they may be found in some *idiot savants*. Consider next someone with an acquired skill in doing proofs in deductive logic: here too the agent will be adept at discovering a certain range of truth and of avoiding falsehood. He or she will know, for example, the correct procedures for running a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Though such skill requires effort to acquire, and granted that such skill is better off to have than to lack, it still does not constitute an intellectual virtue in a robust sense of term. For such skills can be cultivated and deployed in ways relatively disconnected from human flourishing. (This is one of the lamentable features of the Unabomber's life.)

affairs, and intellectual virtues pertain to the entire range of our intellectual endeavors. For example, after we acquire a belief, we are sometimes called upon to defend it against objection and, perhaps, to modify it in the light of criticism. Whether and to what extent we should modify the belief, or whether we should abandon the belief altogether is a judgment requiring the virtue of proper tenacity of belief. In communicating our knowledge, a range of dialectical and pedagogic virtues are called into play.

It might appear at first glance that intellectual virtues do not follow the same structure as moral virtues. For when I display the virtue of understanding or discernment does some emotion or action necessarily accompany it? This leads to complicated issues regarding differences between judgments, emotions, and feelings, which I must set to one side. Briefly, however, I think it is correct to say that intellectual virtues often come accompanied by a corresponding emotion. Do we not “desire” to know things, “rejoice” in the truth, “delight” in wisdom, and feel “gratification” upon understanding some complicated matter? Do we not feel relief when we turn back nagging doubts or a pointed objection to one of our beliefs, and feel satisfaction when our students master the lessons we impart to them? And while it is true that not every display of intellectual virtue is automatically action guiding, neither is every moral virtue. For instance, I might be virtuously hopeful or humble without those virtues leading automatically to some specific action. Rather we should say that the virtues, moral and intellectual, dispose us, as appropriate, to various courses of action.

By saying that the virtues are acquired traits I mean to underscore the fact that whether the virtues or the vices take deep root within us is in some measure owing to the deliberative will of the agent; I am not compassionate or patient or self controlled accidentally. No doubt I could have taken steps to thwart the growth of these traits, and have made choices contributing to their development. Similarly, there are belief forming practices of a positive and negative sort over which the agent has a measure of voluntary control. And it is for this reason that we are proper objects of praise and blame insofar as we are virtuous or vicious persons. If, for example, I believe myself to be gullible, I can resolve not to accept any testimony that is not corroborated.

To require that cognitive agents attend to the processes of belief formation, maintenance, and revision, might make it sound as if we are wholly at liberty with respect to what we believe, that what we believe is under our direct voluntary control. But surely this is false. Which of us can, by sheer effort, reject the belief that the earth is round or accept the belief that our bank account contains millions more dollars than its actual balance? Beliefs aren't subject to our direct control in this way. Typically, we don't decide what to believe, but rather find ourselves believing as we do as a result of various life experiences,

early training, the testimony of authorities, other forms of social conditioning, and so forth, long before we come to think critically about the sources of our beliefs. If most of our beliefs come to us unbidden, how, then, can I say that we should preside over our accepting and rejecting beliefs?

While it is true that we do not exercise *direct* voluntary control over what we believe, we can influence the processes of belief formation, maintenance, and revision *indirectly*. We can for instance, voluntarily commit ourselves to a course of study which will very likely eventuate in our coming to accept new beliefs. We can note tendencies we might have to believe with undue readiness unflattering statements about people we don't like, or to discount unfairly the criticisms of those who disagree with our preferred ways of thinking about a subject, and undertake disciplines that will loosen the power these tendencies have to affect the way we believe. We can, as behavioral psychologists often recommend, voluntarily commit ourselves to courses of action—volunteer work in the inner city, for instance—which will change the way we think about, say, matters of race and interpersonal relations. In these and many other ways, we can bring it about indirectly that we acquire, modify, or reject beliefs.<sup>30</sup>

Since, however, the level of complicity in our intellectual shortcomings varies, so will the consequent degree of culpability. There is no single degree to which we bear responsibility for our moral and intellectual traits; rather the responsibility we bear should be thought to fall somewhere along a continuum. We should resist the idea that individual cognitive and moral agents are all equally responsible for their intellectual and moral states. Being raised and taught in a moral environment by morally astute people will assuredly make it easier for me to acquire virtues than were I to have been raised in a thieves' den. My genetic endowment and the training I receive undoubtedly contribute to whatever degree of mental acuity I may possess. So while I may bear some personal responsibility for being morally and intellectually virtuous, it may also be due, in varying degrees, to accidents of history, geography, and the natural lottery. We find multiple causes and varying degrees of culpability for our coming to possess traits of mind and character that hinder our cognitive goals.

I have stressed the importance of intellectual virtues and vices for any thorough approach to epistemology, and I have contrasted a "virtues approach" to epistemological matters with orientations that ignore virtues and vices. But I wish to guard against the mistake of supposing that all of the questions and concerns raised by epistemologists are reducible to the business of acquiring

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<sup>30</sup> I have noted the way undertaking certain behaviors can bring about a change of beliefs. But leaves to one side, however, the important ways in which changing our affections leads to changes in the ways we think. Frequently we change our minds about important matters because we have first experienced a change of heart.

intellectual virtues and eschewing intellectual vices. As William Alston has taught us, there are many “epistemological desiderata,” many epistemic merits that we as knowers are better off having than lacking; intellectual virtues comprise a part—albeit a very important part—of these desiderata. But it is also good that cognitive agents be warranted and justified in their beliefs. Even here, though, our being intellectually virtuous can contribute significantly to our being warranted and justified, and our achieving other epistemic merits.

## VI The Intellectual Virtues In A Liberal Arts Context

The question that remains to be considered is what bearing all of this talk about intellectual virtues has for the work of a Christian liberal arts institution. What practical difference does this make in the work of specific academic disciplines? I believe that recasting the concerns of epistemology as centering chiefly (though not exclusively) on the virtues saves us from the hyperbolic demands of modern foundationalism and frees up academicians to reflect on those virtues most salient for their own particular disciplines. Let us examine each of these benefits in turn.

Virtue epistemology avoids the pitfalls that befell foundationalism. It doesn't suppose that all rational agents must follow in slavish devotion a single supreme methodology, nor that every discipline should adopt the methodology that works so well in a particular discipline. As Aristotle reminds us, “. . . it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.”<sup>31</sup> Each subject matter will vary as to the methods deemed most appropriate to yield understanding. Philosophers and historians are not deficient because they don't make use of the methods that work so well in the empirical sciences, nor are economists and psychologists subpar intellectually for neglecting the means of exploration and understanding common to the arts. No single royal road paves the way toward intellectual virtues.

Virtue epistemologists don't lament what could in fact never be had, so they feel no regret that not all our beliefs are invincibly certain or demonstrable. Of course it in no way follows that virtue epistemologists cease being interested in truthfulness and argumentative rigor. Consider St. Thomas Aquinas, as ardent a proponent of truth and argument as was ever likely to be found. He never ceased reminding us, however, that what truths we uncover are always held in a manner that befits humans, not gods. So while he wrote more, defended more vigorously, and argued at greater length than any other single Christian thinker

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics (Bk. I, Chap. 2, 25).

about matters pertaining to the Christian faith, he also reminded us of the limitations of human language and thought to capture fully such sublime truths. Now we do not see God face to face, nor does our language capture with utter precision the religious claims we demand that it convey. That is why, taught Thomas, our language about God, though truthful, is analogical only. Not only should we expect no more precision than the subject matter allows, as Aristotle admonishes, but we should demand no more from our creaturely intellects, earthen vessels that they are, than can rightfully be expected of them.

To be freed from the artificial agenda of Enlightenment epistemology makes us free to pursue other epistemological goals. But what, exactly? Simply to be told “be intellectually virtuous and avoid intellectual vices” doesn’t offer much guidance. What more is needed is sometimes called by philosophers a grammar of the virtues, the contours of which can only be hinted at here.

A grammar tells users of a language what are the elemental parts of language, their various functions, relative importance, and various interrelations. It comments on what constitutes correct and incorrect, elegant and inelegant use of the language. It is a map, so to speak, that enables language users to orient their way through a linguistic landscape with grace and precision. A grammar of sorts can also be constructed for the intellectual virtues.

Each academic discipline needs to reflect on what particular virtues and vices are most salient to its sphere of activity. First it needs to specify the virtue, articulating what sorts of judgments or perception it involves, what kinds of emotions it generates, and what sorts of behavior and activity it calls forth. It needs to reflect further the sorts of causes that most commonly generate the virtue, as well as the consequences that stem from having it. Virtues don’t spring up overnight like mushrooms, but develop as a result of a pattern of causes whose history is usually quite discernable. Moreover, virtues typically have logical allies, supporting traits that are either partly constitutive of the virtue or assist us in being virtuous in a particular way. Consider, for example, how the virtue of friendliness contains within it subordinate virtues such as kindness, honesty, and loyalty. One could not be a friend in any deep way without exemplifying these other traits. Finally, a grammar of the virtues could engage in comparative analyses, noting the ways in which a particular virtue in one tradition receives a different treatment in another. Christians and Buddhists, for instance, both commend the virtue of compassion, but each tradition imparts to it a distinctive analysis and understanding. Unfortunately, these remarks remain quite abstract and in need of a concrete illustration.

Consider a chemist, at pains to solve a particular problem having to do with medicine, say, devising a drug that will inhibit rejection of donor organs. What

will be the virtues of an outstanding chemist? It seems plain that the good chemist will be *creative* in the business of puzzle solving, ingenious perhaps at devising new ways to test the potential side effects of the drug without bringing harm to the patients. She will also be acutely *perceptive*, sensitive, say, to the slightest alterations in the patient's blood chemistry, and *accurate* in her reporting of the changes. She will most likely possess tremendous *synthesizing* powers, being able to draw on information from a wide range of sources to see how it might bear on her concerns. In testing her hypotheses, she will have to display *foresight*, being able to anticipate the likely consequences of certain kinds of experimental procedures. Given the cooperative nature of scientific research these days, she will have to be *cooperative* and *humble*, open to surprise and not expecting that nature will always conform to her expectations. Setbacks and anomalous results will call forth *perseverance*, and when at last a solution is at hand, *elegance* and *simplicity* in its expression. We see, then, that certain kinds of thought, feeling, and behavior characterize the virtuous chemist. Similar analyses can be done for the practitioners of other disciplines.

The intellectual virtues that predominate in other academic disciplines may or may not overlap with those of the sciences. Literary theorists will, perhaps, prize interpretive sensitivity over scientific precision with its customary measurements stretched out to the uttermost decimal point. Rhetoricians may value dialectical acumen more highly than novelty or originality sought after by artists. But even where disciplines prize a common trait, say accuracy, it's not clear that it amounts to precisely the same thing in each discipline. So the epistemological work to be done in each discipline is to identify, analyze, rank in order of relative importance, and determine how to bring about in its practitioners, the intellectual virtues that will promote the ends of the discipline. An appropriate task for the philosopher would be to set forth a comparative study which explored the ways in which the virtue terminology of the respective disciplines did and did not overlap.

But here we must consider an objection. If, say, the virtue of accuracy does not mean exactly the same thing when moved from one disciplinary context to another, is not the virtue of accuracy stripped of a determinant meaning and left hopelessly ambiguous? Not at all. Consider an analogy. While we all agree that gluttony is a vice and temperance with respect to our eating is a virtue, do these traits amount to the same thing in every context? Not at all. The caloric needs of an Olympic decathlete far surpass those of someone who is mostly sedentary, as do those of young and old, male and female. The point of caloric intake at which the sedentary person slides into gluttony may yet leave our Olympian with pangs of hunger. What constitutes gluttony must therefore be set against a particular context and set of roles. So too with many other virtuous traits, as Jesus was at pains to point out with his lesson about the widow's mite.

## VII Conclusion

My central concern has been to sketch how an epistemology rooted in the notions of intellectual virtues and vices is not only congruent with the themes of the Christian tradition, but avoids on the one extreme the exaggerated claims of enlightenment foundationalism as well as extremes of global skepticism and relativism. I suggest that what constitutes virtuous intellectual agency must be viewed against a context that takes into consideration the goals of a discipline, its customary activities, and the roles and responsibilities that commonly accrue to its practitioners. And in a liberal arts setting, additional work needs to be done to show how the virtues of various disciplines do and don't coincide with each other and, also of great importance, how the virtues and vices of one world view or tradition, do or don't coincide with those of a Christian world view. I have left untouched and undeveloped many concerns raised by such a proposal, but I hope that enough has been said to convince the reader that it deserves a closer look.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The interested reader might wish to consult my longer treatment of the subject in Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous (Downer's Grove: IVP Press, 1998).