

# CW Epistemology 5

## Introduction:

**Epistemology:** the study of the possibility and nature of knowledge. Knowledge is connected with notions such as belief, justification, and truth. Asks, "what counts as true knowledge and how do we know?" This is not a settled question in the world!

We will define knowledge as **justified (true) belief**, not merely belief such as a friend's superstition that walking under ladders brings bad luck.

## I. **Dead-Ends of Autonomous Reasoning**

### A. **Three Tendencies of non-Christian Thinking**

#### 1. Rationalism

Chief concern is **certainty** (doesn't trust sense experience or subjectivity)

**A Priori** knowledge of "**criteria**" or "standards"; generally have argued that our "knowledge is built up by a deductive process" because this preserves certainty: "I think therefore I am"

#### **Critique**

Just as fallible as sense experience:

Parmenides

Few persuasive areas in which knowledge is a priori: laws of logic, our own mental states, and the existence of objective truth; but we cannot "deduce the whole fabric of human

knowledge from these or even enough  
knowledge for a meaningful philosophy”

## 2. Empiricism

Get away from arbitrary ideas of rationalists  
and ground our knowledge in the **FACTS** of our  
experience

**Not certainty** but as close as we can get

### **Critique**

Our senses **deceive** us

Our evaluation of the facts are conditioned by  
our **expectations**

**Too limited:** Cannot justify a general  
proposition such as “all men are mortal”;  
Cannot justify any statements about the  
future (induction)

**Cannot justify itself:** All knowledge must  
be based on sense experience cannot be  
justified by sense experience

## 3. Subjectivism

“Knowledge –claims are **psychological states**,  
and each of us evaluates those claims by a wide  
range of highly personal, individual criteria.”  
No “objective” public truth, only truth for the  
individual (Frame).

**Can't entirely escape** problem of criteria and  
of “facts”; tries to argue that we can't know  
objective truth; looks both ways when crossing  
a street

## **B. The Idolatry / Skeptic Dialectic**

### 1. Idolatry

Committed to a **finite god**, and thinks he has basis for knowledge and **certainty**

The finite god **cannot account for everything**, and the question mark begins to grow and call into question all knowledge

### 2. Skepticism

Resigned to the claim that **we really can't know anything** for sure

But the agnostic is **sure that Christianity and other worldviews with which he disagrees cannot be true**; and he starts to sound more and more like an idolater committed to a finite god for his knowledge

**Big Black Question Mark** eventually drives both rationalists and irrationalists to the same position

**Elephant** illustration—if no God who sees it all and directs it all, then no certain knowledge of it all—and no certain knowledge of some of it.

## **A. The Collapse of (Classical) Foundationalism**

**Properly Basic** beliefs are beliefs that are:

1. **Evident to the senses** beliefs or reports of immediate experience: “the wall at which I’m looking is pink”; “there is a tree in front of a dog”
2. **Self-evident** beliefs are those which upon understanding them one sees them to be true: “such as that  $2+2=4$ ,” “all bachelors are unmarried males”
3. **Incorrigible** beliefs are beliefs about which one cannot be wrong or reports about one’s own subjective states: “the mountains appear purple”

**Non Basic** beliefs are inferred via deduction and induction from properly basic beliefs; **cannot reason from basic beliefs to belief in God.**

**Critique** of Classical Foundationalism

1. “God and **Other Minds**”, 1967—belief in God is in the same epistemological boat as are belief in the existence of other minds and is not analogous to beliefs in mathematical theories and etc. We all accept as rational belief in the existence of other minds—like the minds of my wife and my children—but no one has produced a water-tight successful argument for such a belief that doesn’t fall prey to some of the same of the same

arguments leveled against the teleological argument for God's existence. Therefore, since it's rational to believe in other minds it's also rational to believe in the existence of God.

2. **New Reformed Epistemology**, "Faith and Rationality", 1983. Plantinga, Wolterstorff, Mavrodes, Alston. Influenced by John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Thomas Reid among others.
3. We hold **many beliefs as knowledge that cannot be deduced from the narrow** beliefs regarded as "properly basic," such as memory, the world existing more than five minutes; that my spouse has a mind; a child's belief that his mother loves him; the principle of induction; testimonial evidence; elementary truths of logic; that there is an external world; and others.
4. "**sensus divinitatis**" When we encounter certain natural phenomena, we simply believe in God's existence; and if our cognitive faculties are functioning properly, we may regard **belief in God's existence as properly basic**—we may believe in God without giving evidence for that belief. This is not an argument for the existence of God, rather, it asserts that we have the epistemic right to believe in God's existence without evidence.

## **B. The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism**

Read the quotes of Patricia **Churchland** and Charles **Darwin**

## **Time Magazine and the “God Gene”**

**P(R/N&E):** P=**Probability**; R=the proposition that our cognitive faculties are **reliable**;  
N=**Naturalism**; E=**Evolution**

“it is likely that their behavior is (or was) adaptive; but nothing follows about their beliefs. **Everything depends upon the way in which their behavior is related to their beliefs.**”

1. **Maybe their beliefs don’t cause their behavior** (Thomas Huxley): In this case, beliefs would be “invisible” to evolution. Our beliefs are more like the whistle on a train that blows as a result of the train rather than the other way around. I might think that I’m teaching a Sunday School lesson when, in fact, I’m fighting off hungry crocodiles in a swamp somewhere.
2. **Maybe beliefs do indeed cause behavior, but only by virtue of their electro-chemical properties, not by virtue of their content:** A belief may be either a long lasting neural event of a certain configuration of synapses firing in a certain order or a mental conception that ‘p’. With these in view, only the electrochemical interaction causes the behavior; but there may be a host of differing mental conception beliefs that somehow take the same electrochemical form and stimulate the same behaviors. The majority of materialists accept this view of beliefs and behaviors.
3. **Maybe beliefs cause behavior but are maladaptive.**

4. **Maybe beliefs cause behaviors and are also adaptive.** But this doesn't assure that our beliefs are true, for many false beliefs could "get our body parts into the right place" to reinforce behavior: Read "Paul and the Tiger" by Plantinga.

5. **All of the above options render the probability about R low;** but maybe we don't really know all that's involved in assessing such a probability. Instead, we might think such a project is inscrutable, that is, we just don't know what the probability is that our cognitive faculties are reliable given N & E. Perhaps we should be agnostic about R.

**6. Therefore P(R/N&E) is either low or we must be agnostic about it.**

**7. Two analogies:**

- Belief in God is **wishful thinking.**
- Are the **widgits** red?

What if a man committed to naturalism and also to evolution read this argument and was so shaken by it that he set out to prove by science or by any kind of reasoning that his cognitive faculties yield true beliefs? "...so **this defeater can't be defeated.**"

P(R/g&TE&SN)? P=Probability; R=the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable; g=generic god; TE=Creation and theistic evolution; SN=Supernatural

## II. The Resolution of Divine Revelation

### A. Christians are Committed to Dependence upon Revelation for our Thinking (both to natural and special revelation)

Read from Genesis 2

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven. **[Man and his environment]**

5 Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. **[Suggests that man was created with regard to his environment]**

7 Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

8 And the LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. **[Mankind's Environment]**

9 And out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. **[Oriented environment to man]**

15 Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. **[Work is a Divine calling, not merely a survival mechanism]**

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely;

17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die. **[God Interprets His Creation for Man]**

Genesis 3 records man's first attempts to autonomous reasoning contrary to God's revelation:

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"

2 And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat;

3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.' "

4 And the serpent said to the woman, "You surely shall not die!

5 "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

## B. **The Creationist Argument for the Reliability of our Cognitive Faculties**

P(R/CG&C&SN)? CG=Christian God; C=Creation; SN=Supernatural (including providence)

## C. **The Necessity of Presuppositions (for Faith) for Rationality**

**Presupposition:** A belief that takes priority over all other beliefs and that serves as the criterion for all other beliefs. Approaches Wolterstorff's "control belief".

Ultimate presuppositions **cannot be proven** by reason or by sense experience since they serve as the criteria for all beliefs

When arguing for one's worldview, one must necessarily use evidence / facts / arguments that are themselves interpreted and justified by the ultimate presuppositions of the worldview in question, therefore **circularity is unavoidable** at the level of arguing for ultimate presuppositions.

Illustration: **How did Adam know** that it was God who spoke with him in the Garden of Eden? How could Adam know that God is all-powerful, all knowing, and etc?

When comparing competing worldviews, one must ask, "**Whose worldview better accounts** for knowledge, facts, experience and etc. Which worldview provides the 'preconditions for knowledge'?"

#### **D. The Three Perspectives of Christian Knowing: "knowledge always involves a subject, an object, and law."**

1. Normative (criteria or standards)—God's **Law** for our Thoughts; Logic reflects the way in which God "thinks"

Proverbs 9:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

I Peter 3:15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;

Colossians 2:3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

2. Situational (facts of our experience)—Accord with the Facts

“Scripture will tell us how to make use of natural revelation”

3. Existential (the testimony of the Holy Spirit to redemptive truth; the help of the Spirit to “apply” Scripture to our experience)

## **E. A Foundation for Confident Knowledge**

Elephant Illustration Revised: We can have true knowledge of some of reality without having to know all reality.

View of reality comports with view of knowledge:

No **?**

We can have true knowledge about the world even though we don't know everything about the world: new discoveries won't intimidate us (i.e., quantum mechanics)

We have a basis for justifying **induction**:

Genesis 8:22 "While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, And cold and heat, And summer and winter, And day and night Shall not cease."

Genesis 1, "according to their kind"

Matthew 16:2 But He answered and said to them, "When it is evening, you say, '*It will be* fair weather, for the sky is red.' 3 "And in the morning, '*There will be* a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times?"