

Cornelius Van Til's Presuppositional Epistemology as a New Model for Deep Disagreement: Relations to and Improvements on Quasi-Fideism

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written by

Simeon du Toit

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August 27, 2025

Dr Karolina Krzyżanowska
Prof Henk van den Belt
Dr Maria Aloni
Prof Martin Stokhof
Dr Tom Schoonen



INSTITUTE FOR LOGIC, LANGUAGE AND COMPUTATION

Abstract

A new model for deep disagreement is derived from Presuppositional Epistemology. This is done by a critical appraisal of an attempt to unify Duncan Pritchard's Quasi-Fideism with the Presuppositional Apologetic by Nicholas Smith. Quasi-Fideism is a version of Wittgenstein's Hinge Epistemology. The result is a novel model for deep disagreement that satisfies all the criteria identified by an influential account of deep disagreement by Chris Ranalli. The resulting theory of deep disagreement includes a model for rational reasoning that distinguishes between world-view internal and world-view external reasoning, solving multiple puzzles surrounding how beliefs are rationally justified.

Dedication

The five points of Simeon's happiness:

1. For my God, whose grace is the source of all the love, joy, and peace I have received.
2. For my parents, who excelled themselves and what they themselves received in all that they have given me.
3. For my fiancé, whose love sweetens my whole life and my imitation of our saviour.
4. For my little brother, who is my favourite sibling, and who in many ways will always be my favourite person.
5. For Nick and Harry, whose friendships has gifted me with brotherhood and more love to our Christ.

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Prof Henk likewise reread 55 pages worth of material in need of intense revision under significant time pressure. He helped me to be sensitive to the degree of caution many scholars have developed towards Van Til, helped correct significant imbalances in my formulations, and ground away a lot of material that did not matter to the main question of the text. His example of careful Christian scholarship is a pleasure to observe, and I'm thankful to have had its influence exerted on my thesis.

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List of Abbreviations

The Bible edition used throughout this essay was the New American Standard Version 1995 (NASB95).
List of abbreviations used (these all refer to books of the Bible) is as follows:

Prov.	-	Proverbs
Isa.	-	Isaiah
Matt.	-	Matthew
Rom.	-	Romans
Eph.	-	Ephesians
Jam.	-	James
Heb.	-	Hebrews
1 Pet.	-	1 Peter
1 Jn.	-	1 John

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Thesis Motivation and Overview

In this essay I will argue that *Presuppositional Epistemology* offers the best model to date for how to understand and rationally resolve *deep disagreements*. In arguing for this conclusion I will overview Presuppositionalism’s conceptual cousin Hinge Epistemology, give a reading Presuppositionalism’s epistemology, explore the relation between these two epistemologies and the philosophical problem of deep disagreement, and finally showcase Presuppositionalism’s theory of deep disagreement using the results of the foregoing investigations.

Deep disagreements are disagreements over commitments so fundamental to each person in the dispute that rational resolution seems potentially impossible. In any case, deep disagreements are often left unresolved because of their challenging nature. It is useful to also mention at this point that they are taken to be genuine: some proposition that can actually truly or falsely describe the world is at stake. There has been much philosophical discussion regarding how deep disagreements are to be defined. The philosophical concern is that it might be impossible to rationally settle disagreements that seem to exclude all common ground and all chances of giving reasons that matter to the other person involved in the dispute. This could have results like unresolvable *epistemic relativism*. Epistemic relativism is the claim that there can be two or more equally valid epistemic systems that disagree on the truth of a proposition. This would suggest that truth would be relative to each epistemic system, as opposed to something independent of one’s personal convictions (see section 4.4 of Baghranian and Carter 2025). If two people are deeply disagreed, and they both are taken to be rational with valid epistemic systems, and they cannot rationally resolve the deep disagreement, then it seems like maintaining their rationality and the validity of their epistemic systems requires surrendering the idea that the proposition’s description of the world is either true or false. Relatedly, deep disagreement plays a role in such phenomena as political polarization.

Presuppositionalism offers a potential solution that has not yet been tested. Developed by Cornelius Van Til in the first half of the 20th century, has a three-part structure: it holds to Reformed Theology,¹ develops its Reformed Theological commitments into Presuppositional Epistemology, and then applies this epistemology to the question of how people are to be rationally convinced of the Christian faith in what is known as *apologetics*. Apologetics is the giving of a reasoned account for an action or a belief.² *Presuppositional Apologetics* is then the specific form of apologetics developed by Van Til. I’ll use the term Presuppositionalism to refer to all three of these together or anyone one of the three of

1. The relevant aspects of Reformed Theology will be examined in the third chapter.

2. For instance, Socrates’ apology for his actions involved his defending and explaining them

Van Til's Reformed Theology, epistemology, or apologetic, since it is generally clear what is meant, and each part is intended to be tightly connected with the other. The epistemological interest is that Presuppositional Epistemology and Apologetics together are very well-suited to be adapted to the question of deep disagreement.

As an apologetic endeavor, Presuppositionalism seeks to give a reasonable justification of the Christian faith. This involves engaging in deep disagreement in terms of religious belief, since disagreements about whether and which God exists seem to be deep: such disagreements are not easily nor quickly resolved, and often concern some of the most fundamental beliefs a person can hold. As such, apologetics generally gives a model of deep disagreement resolution in the realm of religious belief, since apologetics precisely seeks to see such disagreement rationally resolved. Presuppositional Apologetics, however, argues for there being in principle no neutral ground between the Christian Theist and the non-Christian Theist from which to reason from. This makes the disagreement even deeper: both disputants are taken to understand the world in fundamentally different ways at every point. As such, the possibility of either disputant giving reasons that the other disputant will accept as legitimate or good reasons to change their position on Christian Theism *on their terms* is in principle non-existent. The depth and extent of the disagreement is thereby modeled as maximal. Motivating this is the underlying Presuppositional Epistemology that attempts to draw out all the consequences of what is assumed in Reformed Theology. The result is a nuanced model of deep disagreement between the Christian Theist and non-Christian Theists. I will generalize this model from deep disagreement about religious belief to general belief. In order to do so, I will also have to derive Presuppositionalism's account of rationality for beliefs in general. Neither of these goals have been undertaken before.

Presuppositional Epistemology's claims require it to live up to such a generalization to non-religious disputes and beliefs. Presuppositionalism aims to derive its epistemology from its Reformed Theology. In doing so, there are a variety of claims regarding human rationality and knowledge that are not limited to simply the religious case. The Presuppositional view of human rationality and knowledge should therefore be applicable to disputes generally. If it fails to be, that will count as a deathblow against the theory. Even though it is aimed at religious belief, it would be found not to live up to its claims. This provides a potential step forward in the debates regarding Presuppositionalism, since its critics often claim that it presents a defective view of human knowledge and/or rationality (as seen in Mathison 2024; Sims 2006; Frame 1995).

All this motivates the need for extracting a sufficiently technical account of Presuppositional Epistemology. Van Til's work is often quite programmatic, specifying epistemological commitments and justifying them from theological grounds, without ever working out a full epistemology in any one place. This was because his interest was in developing Presuppositional Apologetics. Presuppositional Epistemology therefore served to illustrate the problem he felt he had discovered in Christian apologetics generally, namely the unqualified assumption of neutral ground in apologetic disputes. Presuppositional Epistemology served to give the necessary epistemological commitments to ground his apologetic conclusions. This has left quite a bit of constructive work for those interested in his writings. It has also opened him up to a variety of critiques. These critiques have missed important distinctions in his epistemology, which I will specify and demonstrate as present in his work. Many critics have focused on the epistemological foundations (Frame 1995; Sims 2006) of Presuppositionalism, and this has often involved misreadings of the epistemology because it is so scattered. While work on Presuppositional Epistemology has picked up significantly in the last twenty years in the form of discussions of the apologetic consequences of the epistemology (Békefi 2018; Fluhrer 2015; Riley 2014), the relation of

Presuppositionalism to its sources (McConnel 2005; Tipton 2022), and the relation of Presuppositional Epistemology to Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology (Anderson 2005; Wilhoit 2022). Additionally, work to extend and improve Presuppositional Epistemology is also actively occurring (Bosserman 2014; Hunt 2019), with James Anderson spearheading the effort to develop Presuppositionalism in analytic form (Anderson 2009, 2022, 2023). However, the prevalence of PhD theses and books in the above points to the need for concise presentations of Presuppositional Epistemology that makes the position available for a critical dialogue without requiring months of reading to discover all the various pitfalls and misreadings to be avoided. This essay also serves to fill this important gap in the study of Presuppositionalism. Towards this end, I will present a reading of Presuppositional Epistemology, demonstrating its grounding in the underlying Reformed Theology in order to explain the motivation for the standpoints taken, as well as taking into account some of the apologetic consequences. The full apologetic approach is significantly beyond the scope of this essay. However, the core links between epistemology and apologetic are relevant for the question of deep disagreement and will be overviewed.

Much more epistemological work has been focused on *Hinge Epistemology*. Here, certain commitments called hinges are freed from (initial) rational evaluation in order to make rational evaluation of other beliefs possible. For instance, most persons hold the hinge that there is an external world as one of their unquestioned commitments. This hinge makes the rational evaluation of beliefs about what is in the room external to the the agent possible. The similarities between Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositional Epistemology have long been noticed (Welty 1994). However, they have only recently begun to be thoroughly explored by Nicholas Smith (2024, 2023) who focuses in on the version of Hinge Epistemology known as Quasi-Fideism (for an introduction see Pritchard 2022a). Some of the most conceptually challenging parts of Presuppositional Epistemology are shared by Hinge Epistemology. This includes such features as implicitly held commitments being key to understanding rationality and knowledge. Especially Quasi-Fideism's commitment to hinges being held arationally resonates with aspects of Presuppositional Epistemology. On the other hand, Presuppositional Apologetics assumes that you can justify holding one worldview over other worldviews, and this is entirely incompatible with Hinge Epistemology, at least in terms of Wittgenstein himself (Van Dijk and Withagen 2014).

Exploring these similarities and dissimilarities enables some of the hard-won conceptual clarity in Hinge Epistemology to be applied to the specification of Presuppositional Epistemology. Moreover, understanding where and if these two epistemologies diverge also helps identify where and whether Presuppositional Epistemology can provide progress on the question of deep disagreement. This is significant, since Hinge Epistemology is at present perhaps the most widely used model for deep disagreement. Conversely, I will argue that Presuppositionalism has a potential resolution to one of the most enduring disagreements between streams of Hinge Epistemology: are hinges rationally or arationally held? The Presuppositional view of rationality I will present here answers that, when translating from hinges to worldviews, the answer is both. In order to set the stage for answering these questions I will do a survey of Hinge Epistemology, focusing in on Quasi-Fideism as the most relevant form of Hinge Epistemology in relation to Presuppositionalism in the literature. I will also examine the Quasi-Fideist approach to deep disagreement enabling the aforementioned comparison. This is all the more significant given that Smith believes that Quasi-Fideism could and should serve as the epistemology of Presuppositional Apologetics, meaning that their solutions to deep disagreements would be equivalent. This will be shown to not be the case.

In order to better place the work of Van Til in the broader philosophical context, I will introduce a range of definitions and concepts important to understanding and developing epistemology in the

next subsection. In the second chapter, I will overview Hinge Epistemology, zooming in on Quasi-Fideism and its application to deep disagreement. In order to examine what might be productively extracted from Hinge Epistemology and Quasi-Fideism, I will then give a reading of Presuppositional Epistemology in chapter 3. I then critique Smith’s construction of Quasi-Fideism as the epistemology of Presuppositionalism in chapter 4. This leads to a clarified picture of Presuppositional Epistemology, its answers to its critics, and what an extension of Presuppositionalism in terms of a model of rationality and deep disagreement should look like. I then turn to the question of Presuppositionalism’s deep disagreement in chapter 5. There I extend Presuppositional Epistemology into the most complete answer to the questions regarding deep disagreement raised in the epistemological literature.

1.2 Preliminary Definitions and Concepts

I now turn to the preliminary definitions and concepts that will be needed to understand Hinge and Presuppositional Epistemology. In line with epistemology in general, I take propositions to be “the sharable objects of the attitudes and the primary bearers of truth and falsity” (McGrath and Frank 2024, this is originally from Frege (1948)). They are shareable, in that multiple people may have the same proposition in mind at the same time, and they are the primary bearers of truth-values in that they are what we normally talk about when saying something is true or false (in this way they are also the objects of the attitudes of truth and falsity). However, they are careful to note that this is not a canonical definition, and leaves open many of the questions that are asked about propositions. This serves my purpose in this essay well: we will have to examine various questions regarding propositions in the rest of this chapter. Propositions may then usually be taken to be expressed by sentences that are *bipolar*: they are true or false. The term typically used is “bivalent,” but I follow the nomenclature typical in the Hinge Epistemology literature.

Having defined propositions, it becomes possible to define *belief*. Belief is generally held to be “the attitude taken toward a proposition regarded as true” (see Genin 2019, 437). This is intuitive enough, since the result is that our beliefs are what we consider to be true. This means that a belief is a proposition regarded as true. This should again be sufficient for my purposes in this essay.

Epistemologically speaking, the next order of business is that of rationality. There are various approaches to rationality. I will henceforth be using rationality to refer to what it means to rationally hold a belief. This is highly contested (see the very extensive introduction of Knauff and Spohn 2021). Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositional Epistemology each has its distinctive approach to the question of rationality. To illustrate the potential diversity of approaches, consider that depending on how you approach the question of rationality it might be desirable to call conspiracy theorists rational. After all, they keep responding to new evidence to protect their core beliefs by rationalizing why it supports their position, and are unusually ready and able to provide evidence for why they believe what they believe (for an analysis of how to deal with this in terms of limiting the amount *ad hoc* justifications allowed, see Poth and Dolega 2023). The point is, if responsiveness to evidence and evidence-seeking are your only two criteria for rationality, then conspiracy theorists may be considered as behaving rationally. Regardless of the legitimacy of this stance, the point is that how you define what it means to rationally believe something can have extensive consequences, including whether there is an answer to the skeptic about whether we can know anything. After all, if we take rationality as the basis on which to build knowledge, then if there is legitimate skepticism about rationality, then there is also legitimate skepticism about knowledge by extension.

This prompts me to turn to the question of *knowledge*. When may we say that a belief counts as knowledge? Firstly, it is generally agreed for a belief to count as knowledge it is necessary but not sufficient for it to be true and justified. This justification must show that the belief is held with sufficiently good reason to elevate it to the level of knowledge. Additionally, the belief must be true. It is significant that the theory of truth involved when taking knowledge to be justified true belief is *correspondent*: the belief is true if it reflects the way things are. This is a metaphysical conception of truth (Ichikawa and Steup 2024). However, epistemologically, the *coherence* theory of truth would have that the truth of a belief is understood in terms of its coherence with certain other beliefs (Young 2024). This leads to coherentist use of evidence in the justification of knowledge (Özgün 2017, 87). Typically, theories of truth have propositions as the bearers of truth values, as opposed to beliefs. However, it seems intuitively ideal to have one's theory of truth and one's theory of knowledge align on the question of which sentences, whether they function as a belief or as a proposition, are true. After all, taking knowledge to reflect the way the world actually is, beliefs must be either true or false. That propositions are either true or false is rejected by most coherentists (Young 2024, sec. "Versions of the Coherence Theory of Truth"). Holding then to bipolar versions of a correspondence theory of true belief and a coherence theory of truth, it is at least in theory possible to hold a sentence to be true as a belief and false as a proposition (or *vice versa*). It is therefore significant that Presuppositional Epistemology takes on a dual requirement for belief to be true both in a specific form of correspondence and coherence (see section 5.1).

However, to simply say that knowledge is justified, true beliefs have been considered insufficient since Edmund Gettier's popularization of (apparent) counter-examples (Gettier 1963), though the rejection of justified, true belief as knowledge remains controversial (see Hawke and Schoonen 2021). Those counter-examples involved cases of knowledge by luck. For instance, consider the case where Andries looks at a broken clock when it is 3pm. If the clock was broken at 3pm, Andries would see the clock apparently give the right time, and clocks are generally good sources of knowledge. As such, Andries would believe that it is 3pm, and apparently be justified in that belief since he holds it on apparently legitimate grounds. Moreover, if Andries were to double check quickly enough, it would still be 3pm, and the clock would still read 3pm, and so the belief that it is 3pm may even have the support of some investigation. However, the clock is broken. As such, it could not truly function as justification for the belief that it was 3pm.

The challenges faced in trying to explain how we can be justified in holding beliefs and making knowledge claims has long elicited skepticism. The two main forms of skepticism relevant for both Presuppositionalism and Hinge Epistemology is that of external world skepticism, where it is doubted whether any knowledge of an external world is possible (Comesaña and Klein 2024, sec. "The Argument for Cartesian Skepticism Employing the Closure Principle"). Moore famously responded to such a form of skepticism (Moore 1939), which in turn was important for the development of Hinge Epistemology as a rejection of Moore's arguments as inadequate (Wittgenstein 1969). The question in such external world skepticism is whether reasons could be given against the external world that do not implicitly rely on the assumption of the external world. For instance, pointing out physical objects would be an insufficient and naïve response, since on the skeptic's count it would not be evidence of the external world unless it was assumed as existing external to the mind. Another form of skepticism claims that knowledge involves an infinite chain of inferences, such that it is ungrounded (Comesaña and Klein 2024, see sec. "Pyrrhonian Skepticism"). If you justify your knowledge of *a* by your knowledge of *b*, then you in turn need to justify your knowledge of *b* by your knowledge of *c*, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

While there are other forms of skepticism, these two concerns are the relevant ones insofar as skepticism is considered in this essay.

In this essay I will focus on Hinge and Presuppositional Epistemology as approaches to rationality and knowledge that seek to both to answer the skeptic and account for our rational epistemic practice in holding beliefs as knowledge. Both of these epistemologies make use of the concept of *worldview* to express both the grounds reasoning about the validity of knowledge of the external world as well as having worldviews be the stopping point of giving justifications for your beliefs, though in quite distinct ways. It is worth stressing emphatically that in both Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositionalism worldviews are everywhere used and effectively nowhere defined. When it is, it is often a rather sparse and vague affair. This is likely because worldview is an intuitive concept. However, specifying this concept has seen a whole process of development that will help current discussions involving the concept (Sims 2006, 8–11). The concept of a worldview is derived from 18th and 19th century German philosophy, and by the time it gets used in both Calvinist³ literature and Wittgenstein, it seems to have been generally pragmatically understood: it is the sum total of the beliefs, intuitions, and feelings that shape how you view and reason about the world.

I'll first give an example of two worldviews, illustrating the concept's relevance and my personal conception of it, and then survey some relevant definitions. Take two people, one a Christian Theist and the other a naturalist (in the sense of believing that empirical laws, analyzable by science, underlie all observable phenomena and are the sole means of explaining them). And grant, if you will, that both could be presented with sufficient historical evidence that they believe the resurrection of Christ is a historical fact. For the Christian Theist, this is proof positive that Jesus was the Son of God. For the naturalist, this is proof positive that there are interesting aspects of the phenomena of death that are yet to be understood by science. That is, the fact of the resurrection (were it taken for fact) would have different *meanings*.⁴ Part of the difficulty of defining the worldview concept is that it stretches across psychology, epistemology, and hermeneutics, since it involves feelings, beliefs, and interpretation.

From the preceding I conclude that a worldview is something to the effect of the broad complex of beliefs and feelings about beliefs that you actively engage in responding to facts and arguments. This includes determining what you view as fact, and what you view as legitimate inferences from those facts. Additionally, there is the (often implicit) *worldview ideal* of logical coherence and closure:⁵ a naturalist talking about karma based on moral values and a Christian selectively adhering to Biblical ethics are both unpleasant sights. There is a sense of inconsistency, perhaps hypocrisy, that is explainable from the perspective of worldviews: being committed to beliefs that structure how you view the world at one point, one should carry those convictions through to other areas of thought. In short, it is contrary to the worldview ideal of logical coherence and closure to have fundamental commitments used to understand facts in the realm of *e.g.* theism, and then abandon them in the realm of ethics of aesthetics, and *vice versa*. As such, the standard of rationality that gets carried along by the worldview concept is that you will resolve situations where beliefs do not fit with worldview commitments by revising either the belief or the worldview.⁶

3. For the purposes of this essay, Calvinism and Reformed Theology are synonyms.

4. To anticipate the next chapter: there is a different philosophy of fact at play in each worldview, that leads to different interpretations of the facts.

5. By logical coherence I mean that no belief is a contradiction of the other. By logical closure I mean that the logical implications of the beliefs should be believed as well. By referring to the ideal of logical coherence and closure I mean to stress that there is no commitment to viewing human cognition as successfully achieving either full coherence or closure.

6. However, this conception of the ideal may well be incompatible with the Hinge Epistemological view of worldview, since this suggests the rational evaluation of your most basic commitments. That is a bone of contention in Hinge Epistemology.

I will now briefly overview some definitions from the context of Hinge Epistemology (meant to reflect the more Wittgensteinian approach to worldview) and then from the context of Presuppositional Epistemology (meant to reflect the more evangelical, Calvinistic tradition), to see whether it is possible to speak unqualifiedly of a *worldview*, or whether it is necessary to point out which concept of worldview is operative.

The following authors operate in the context of Hinge Epistemology. Allan Hazlett gives a characterization of a specifically religious worldview as being “an interconnected set of beliefs about metaphysics and ethics” (2014, 11). Interconnectedness indicates something of the worldview ideal of relating various areas of thought. The definition of Annalisa Coliva is less aligned with what I’ve said. She takes a worldview to be “a specific way of looking at human life and the Universe, leaving room for questions regarding their existential meaningfulness” (2025, 4). Duncan Pritchard does not define it, but does characterize one’s worldview as fundamentally held as certain (Pritchard 2025a, 11). There is a basic confidence of correctness that goes with having a worldview, and you automatically justify certain steps of reasoning with your worldview, without having to consciously entertain think of it.

In the context of Protestant theology, the worldview concept has seen a truly broad range of thinkers adopt it as Bryan Sims shows in his analysis of Christian worldview thinking (2006, 1–8). Jeremy Hexham notes that Abraham Kuyper was one of the key drivers behind this trend. Hexham sums up Kuyper’s approach by pointing to three questions Kuyper posed as fundamental to worldviews. Worldview ask about (Hexham 2023, 2): “1. our relation *to God*, 2. our relation *to man*, and 3. our relation *to the world*” (Kuyper 1899, 16). It is my opinion that the development of Reformed Theological *worldview analysis* has not fundamentally departed from presenting a worldview as a systematic means of answering these three questions (this is in accordance with Kuyper’s own intentions. See Sims 2006, 11–12). By worldview analysis I mean the use of worldview as an explanatory tool in examining the thinking and position of an agent. This is a very common approach in apologetics generally. However, the concept of worldview has seen a much broader application: the compatibility with the interpreters of Wittgenstein remains evident in more fleshed out accounts. A fundamental assumption for Presuppositionalism is expressed when Greg Bahnsen wrote that “everybody has what can be called a ‘worldview,’ a perspective in terms of which they see everything and understand their perceptions and feelings” (1996, 119). The universality of worldviews claimed by Presuppositionalism makes explicit something recognized but not largely commented upon in the Hinge Epistemology literature. Namely, Wittgenstein held to worldviews being a part of our form of life. There’s no form of life without a corresponding worldview. It is further worth noting that Hazlett and Coliva’s statements on worldview are very similar to what Bahnsen says: a systematic relation of fundamental commitments and their applications to life, the universe, and their existential implications coheres well with a worldview as a perspective from which everything is understood. As the last of the limited selection from what Sims cites, Cornelius van Til asserted that “the Christian life-and-world view [...] presents itself as an absolutely comprehensive interpretation of human experience” (Van Til 2003, 83). This is a claim about what the Christian Theistic worldview actually achieves. The backdrop of this claim is the assumption that the function of all worldviews is to likewise be a comprehensive understanding of the world. Conceptually, this is seen in that no subject is approached worldview independently: everything that is observed in the world is seen in terms of our view of it. That is why the term life-view is effectively synonymous: it is the sum of beliefs, feelings, and intuitions by which everything that is experienced in life is understood. The term worldview will be taken to cover this meaning as well.

To conclude this discussion of worldviews, the following captures the general assumptions regarding worldviews. Worldviews are:

- (1) Rooted in pretheoretical and presuppositional concepts that are the foundation for all one's thought and action,
- (2) comprehensive in scope,
- (3) ideally though not necessarily logically coherent,
- (4) related in some positive way to reality, that is, to the way all things and relations are,
- (5) though not necessarily irrational, nonetheless fundamentally a matter of commitment that is not provable by reason. (Sire 2014, 36)

Between Wittgenstein, Hinge Epistemologists, and Presuppositionalism all are agreed on point 4 and 2. Points 2 and 3 together represents Presuppositionalism's worldview ideal, and doesn't at all seem to contrast with any point of Hinge Epistemology. The most fundamental difference between Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositionalism is point 5: Hinge Epistemology affirms it, while Presuppositionalism rejects that a worldview couldn't be proven as the (more) accurate view of the world. This goes back to different interpretations of point 1: despite the overlap, how the "pretheoretical and presuppositional concepts" are to be understood and how they relate to the concept of worldviews diverges significantly.

The above has involved an attempt at characterizing worldviews, and showing the basic overlap and point of divergence between how worldviews are understood by Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositionalism. One difference is that the latter attaches a normative requirement to the ideal of logical coherence and closure: the worldview best able to do be logically coherent and extend itself to explain more phenomena, and justify its process of doing so, is the worldview that should be adopted. Such a conception of switching worldviews is not underdeveloped in Hinge Epistemology. Rather, it is simply absent as not an important question. Where a worldview is often simply the sum of one's hinges, the questions that concern Hinge Epistemology are focused on hinges: what are they? How do they undergo change? How are they usefully applied to philosophical problems? Once we arrive at the discussion of Presuppositionalism's approach to deep disagreement (where worldviews are opposed against each other) it will become obvious why something more extensive may be desired.

When we enter the worlds of Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositionalism, we enter the worlds of Wittgenstein and Van Til. And while the soil forms rich ground for ideas and insights and challenging claims, it is very definition-deficient. Neither one of these two writers extensively reproduced citations to either support their claim or to validate their readings of the writers they critique, though it may be fairly said that Van Til did cite much more than Wittgenstein (which, as it turns out, is not saying all that much). Moreover, both of them sought to understand the grounds of our knowledge and rationality, and did so in a whole-system manner that left many details to be filled in and fought out. When attempting to interact with their legacies, interpretation that is open to challenge is inevitable. However, in terms of Wittgenstein, there are much more clearly defined streams of thought. While Van Til has also had many interpreters, truly distinct streams of interpretation have not yet emerged, except in terms of certain aspects of his theology of God (compare Tipton (2022) with Oliphint (2012)). As such, in doing exegetical work on Van Til, it is necessary to recognize that there are many details that one would have wished to see supplied, that aren't there, and so either have to be supplied in the spirit of his work more generally, or have to be passed over to be supplied by later research. Though Van Til's philosophical work is inextricably tied to his theology, I trust that the presence of Wittgenstein

(ever intriguing, ever suggestive, often raising conceptions about how best to define what is being expressed) in the background invites some grace for his contemporary Van Til who anticipated some of the developments in Wittgenstein's work (including his definition-by-example type approach).

This sets the stage for the discussion of Hinge Epistemology.

Chapter 2

Hinge Epistemology

2.1 The Origin of Hinges: Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

In *On Certainty* (1969), Wittgenstein battles the problem of radical skepticism by proposing that our beliefs fundamentally rest on hinges. The central passage (§341-4) reads as follows:

§341. The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

§342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.

§343. But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

§344. My life consists in my being content to accept many things.

In the above, Wittgenstein expresses the idea that certain commitments need to be held in a doubt-exempt way in order to test doubts about other commitments against them. Commitments that you simply accept as undoubted, your hinges, mean that the process of giving reasons to justify your beliefs can come to an end somewhere. Hinge Epistemology takes this idea that rational investigation depends on hinge commitments and develops it into an epistemological approach. Chris Ranalli summarizes the generally agreed upon properties of hinges as follows: hinges explain the possibility of rationally evaluating beliefs. Ranalli takes them to be the “the fundamental presuppositions of one's worldview” (Ranalli 2020, 4976). Positing such commitments, it becomes possible to explain some features of our epistemic practice (4976). It is worth noting again that your worldview is roughly how you understand the world to fit together. This includes the full range of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments one holds. The core idea of hinges is that some commitments are used as the ground for our beliefs and our reasoning about them, and are held as fixed to serve this function. Hinge epistemology asserts that is possible to understand our epistemic practice as regards justified belief and rationality when that practice is viewed in light of the idea of hinges. That practice thereby becomes *intelligible* (4976).

Hinges can perform their function because of the role they play in reasoning: they are the presuppositions of reasoning, which on Wittgenstein's account we have learned to simply accept

as a fundamental part of the form of life we grow up into. This offers an alternative to classical foundationalism in epistemology. There, reasoning is grounded in self-evident propositions that themselves require no grounding beyond their self-evident truthfulness. Wittgenstein's approach to hinges is incompatible with such an approach (Williams 2005). Hinges are not grounded, but are held as certainties in our epistemic practice. For instance, in general I do not question that I have two hands or that there is an external world. I am committed with certainty to such ideas. As such, when I reason about *e.g.* the strength of my hands, I do not first seek to ascertain if I have two hands. The certainty I have of this commitment means it is not something I ask about. Another way of putting this is that it does not enter into the space of reasons, but defines the space of reasons: the questions I ask regarding my hands rely on my being freed from having to ask whether I have hands. It is true that some versions of Hinge Epistemology also allows hinges to become part of the reason-giving space while forming it. Nevertheless, the key thing is that hinges are held with a certainty that generally keeps them from this space, and that this certainty is generally of such a nature to leave the hinges implicit. This implicitness is because they are so fundamental to our thinking that they are not consciously utilized. To sum up, by virtue of their certainty they make reasoning possible, though how they do this is differently explained by each version of Hinge Epistemology.

How the skeptic is answered is different per Hinge Epistemology. However, the answer comes down to the fundamental role hinges play for our rationality. Since doubting is a rational process, the skeptic has to utilize the very hinges that the skeptic wishes to doubt. The skeptical position is therefore found to be self-defeating. Consider for instance the hinge that there is an external world. In order to doubt that there is an external world, the skeptic has to utilize the hinges that enable rationality to engage in giving reasons as to why such doubt is justified. But, this affirms the necessity of hinges as certain, and by extension also the necessity of the hinge that there is an external world. To doubt, one must be certain. Though this certainty is clearly implicit in the skeptic, the point is that it is there as part of our rationality, and may be revealed by analyzing our epistemic practice. Forms of this anti-skeptic response is seen in (2017) and (2022b). This is the more common Hinge Epistemological response. Crispin Wright (2014, 2004) represents a reading of Hinge Epistemology where hinges are epistemically justified, and the skeptic is therefore just wrong (Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock 2017, 11–12). However, Wright's response will not be our focus, though very influential.

This discussion of hinges naturally leaves several important questions about hinges unanswered. What are their formal features? What precisely is their function in epistemology more broadly? I will address these questions, identifying several forms of Hinge Epistemology and their distinct approaches to the question of what hinges are and the other big application of hinges besides that of making rationality and justification intelligible: deep disagreement. The goal is to identify important questions regarding and features hinges in order to be able to address the compatibility of such an epistemology with the project of Presuppositional Apologetics.¹ This will enable a critique of the most recent attempt to relate Hinge Epistemology to Presuppositional Apologetics: Duncan Pritchard's Quasi-Fideism as Presuppositionalism's epistemology (Smith 2023).

2.2 The Features of Hinges

In studying hinges and their use in various forms of Hinge Epistemology, Annalisa Coliva makes a valuable point regarding the difference between exegetical and interpretative work (Coliva 2017). The

1. Christian apologetics is the study of how to give a reasoned defense (apology) of the Christian faith

aptness of this is especially felt in the study of Hinge Epistemology, where Wittgenstein as source is important, but the interpreters of Wittgenstein go beyond him in such a way as makes clear that simple appeals to Wittgenstein's writing cannot suffice to solve every issue. Rather, inasmuch as the various readings of Wittgenstein's Hinge Epistemology are themselves attempts at systemically working out the core idea of Hinge Epistemology, various (self-conscious) deviations from Wittgenstein's stipulations also need to be taken into account. This is all the more the case when considering a Christian Theistic apologetic understood in terms of the idea of hinges. Wittgenstein would surely have considered something like this another form of trying to make something that is beyond the question of reason (faith) a matter of reason-giving, and thereby confusing oneself (Wittgenstein 2001). Such a perspective does not govern the field of Hinge Epistemology given the debates regarding the rationality of religious belief that are held internal to Hinge Epistemology. Consequently, more general epistemic concerns are a legitimate point of data in Hinge Epistemology, broadly speaking, and exegetical data from Wittgenstein's body of work will not govern my analysis of the various Hinge Epistemologies.

Still, even when the work is not exegetical, Hinge Epistemology remains inspired and informed by *On Certainty*. With that in mind, it is very useful to consider Coliva's collection of statements by Wittgenstein on the features of hinges. They are:

1. neither true nor false (OC 196–206);
2. neither justified nor unjustified (OC 110, 130, 166, 359);
3. neither reasonable nor unreasonable (OC 559).
4. therefore, they are neither known nor unknown (OC 4);
5. they cannot sensibly be called into doubt (OC 123, 231);
6. thus, finally, for these very reasons, they aren't empirical propositions but rules (OC 95, 98, 494) (Coliva 2017).

She makes the point that various readings of *On Certainty* adapt or understand this list in differing ways, which has resulted in Hinge Epistemologies representing truly different epistemologies. Practically speaking though, Ranalli notes that despite the disagreement about what exactly hinge commitments are, there is a fair amount of agreement regarding what propositions they would be. He cites a "fairly representative list" (Ranalli 2020, 4980) of what are commonly considered hinges given by Anthony Brueckner:

There is an external world, sense perception is reliable, I am not a brain in a vat, my faculty of reasoning is reliable, the Earth is more than three minutes old, testimony is reliable, memory is reliable (2007, 285).

This list immediately presents difficulties. For one thing, it is necessary to carefully qualify what is actually meant. It might be that Brueckner is adapting his phrasing to our practice. For instance, we generally treat sense perception as immediately reliable. Even then, "sense perception is *generally* reliable" is surely a necessary adjustment. This serves to illustrate the potential difficulty of even agreeing as to what counts as a hinge that adds to the diversity of Hinge Epistemologies. Additionally, what is meant by these propositions being neither known or unknown as hinges is that they are not justified beliefs: no reasons are or could be given for holding them in our everyday epistemic practice (see the response to the skeptic below). This is not universally accepted in Hinge Epistemology.

Another problem that presents itself is the problem of truth. Coliva gives the example of “here is my hand” (Coliva 2017) seeming to require a truth value. After all, if someone were to assert that my hand is not here, that would appear to be false, and I could respond accordingly. Yet, if I hold “my hand is here” as a hinge and as a true proposition, then that hinge seems to express something that I ascribe truth to. In the case of religious Hinge Epistemology, the problem is perhaps even more unavoidable. The atheist and theist both engage in extensive argument regarding the question of whether “God exists” is in any sense true, while at the same time obviously using their answer as a hinge of their worldview. Again, approaches differ.

However, what will receive most attention in this essay is the questions of justification and the epistemological status of hinges. Regarding justification, Ranalli points out that even entirely divergent Hinge Epistemologies share that “the hinge commitments are in *some way* not subject to the same sorts of epistemic evaluations that your ordinary beliefs are subject to” (emphasis added. Ranalli 2020, 4980). This highlights commitment to Wittgenstein’s ban on the justification of hinges: they are a separate class of commitments from justified beliefs. They form the epistemological space for rational evaluation and justification, and in fulfilling this role have a different relation to rational evaluation, justification, *etc.* than other beliefs. However, this does not necessarily bar the possibility of epistemic evaluation in a way that ordinary beliefs are *not* subject to. And the approach taken to this question is intimately tied to whether and what kind of commitments hinge commitments are viewed as (beliefs, propositions, *etc.*).²

Propositions are typically taken to be statements that are truth-apt (they can take a truth-value) and bipolar (“on Wittgenstein’s bipolar view of the proposition, for a sentence to be a proposition, it must be susceptible of truth and falsity” (Moyal-Sharrock 2017, 32)). Moreover, propositions are the subjects of propositional attitudes like belief, disbelief, and suspension of (dis)belief. Coliva gives an overview of how four major readings of Hinge Epistemology understand hinges to be answering radical skepticism (Coliva 2017, 11–12). Her overview serves to illustrate that the question of whether or not hinge commitments are propositions has a determinative effect on how we think of them as being justified, which in turn largely determines how we understand certainty of knowledge to be based on hinges.

Exemplary of the radical difference the account of what hinges are makes is given by the therapeutic reading, which holds that “Wittgenstein didn’t put forward any substantive view of hinges” (12), such that hinges are neither rules nor propositions. This results in an approach to skeptical doubt that says propositions that express skeptical doubt are *meaningless*. After all, doubt is then raised in a manner out of accord with the hinges in terms of which doubts are given meaning. Expressions of skeptical doubt is thereby found to be without content, and the skeptical position untenable.

Coliva can take up the key takeaway of the therapeutic reading in the framework reading, but rejects the framework reading in general because it misses a key part of how hinges function. Likewise, bipolar proposition accounts of hinges could also take up Coliva’s key point. However, her approach to hinges being “at least minimally truth-apt” (18–19), means a problem. She defines the at least minimally truth-aptness of hinges as meaning that they are “propositions that are true, they have semantic content, which can be meaningfully negated, or embedded in conditional statements” (19). She also affirms that hinges are non-bipolar (14). If this means that hinges can only be true, this presents an immediate problem in the case of two persons who have mutually contradictory hinges. Coliva offers the example of “there has never been a man on the moon” as an example of a hinge

2. Note that the lack of analytic definition here is reflective of Wittgenstein’s practice of giving definitions by example.

that has changed over time. That this was once a hinge may be defended by the fact that someone asserting before the 1900s that there *had* been a man on the moon would have been considered crazy. It is analogous to the certainty that the average person has that no person has yet swum in the oceans of one of Jupiter’s moons. If someone expressed skepticism or commitment to the opposite that would invite ascribing an abnormal epistemic state to that person. However, if someone did go for a swim up there, likely the average person would have to receive evidence for this belief in order to become convinced of it. This gives evidence of investigation potentially playing a role in justifying some hinges. At the same time, however, it also means that a conspiracy theorist holds to this hinge, while others hold to its negation, and in both cases the hinges are true. Clearly this will not do.

Her position seems to be more nuanced than this, however. She proffers two possible approaches to the truth of hinges. One is that hinges are semantically unassessable (*i.e.* they cannot be assigned a truth value) when taking the approach that hinges require evidence to be accepted as true propositions, since the hinges themselves are the precondition for gaining evidence. This would be motivated by a conception of Wittgenstein only allowing a proposition to be considered true on the basis of evidence in favor of that proposition. Coliva rejects that Wittgenstein held to this view (Coliva 2017, 13). The alternative is the following approach to the truth of hinges:

they may be considered semantically assessable only on a very minimal understanding of truth, where to say that P is true commits one to nothing more than to holding the disquotational schema, and that P can be meaningfully negated and embedded in conditional statements (13).

The problem is that this reduces to the previous problem with the moon and man. To hold the disquotational schema of a hinge proposition P is to assert that the proposition P is true if and only if what is asserted by P is actually the case.³ “No one has ever been on the moon” is accepted by Coliva as a sentence that was a hinge proposition and at some point stopped being so. However, for neither the average Joe nor the conspiracy-theorist does the disquotational schema simply remain a schema: they are both committed to the fact that there was (not) a man on the moon, and so too the falsity or truth, respectively, of the sentence that “No one has ever been on the moon.” While the above has not *per sé* committed her to the truth of hinges, it has failed to exclude false hinges, which seems to have been at least partly her goal. In any case, false hinges surely cannot be the grounds for knowledge, and so the question that naturally follows is how, in light of competing hinges of the moon and man type, holding to a particular hinge may be justified. Or, is the false hinge to be avoided by means of another reading?

2.3 Deep Disagreement: A Big Application of Hinges

The above kind of confrontation between hinges is called *deep disagreement*: disagreements that “seem to be systematic [...] rooted in contrary worldviews” (Ranalli 2020, 4976). Shortly summarized, *deep disagreements* are disagreements that seem to involve one’s deepest commitments. Chris Ranalli gives some helpful and highly influential characterizations (2020, 2021). In his view, deep disagreements involve genuine disagreement where one or both disputant are actually wrong in a way that reasons can be given for. Moreover, both disputants sincerely take themselves to be giving rational reasons for their position. Additionally, deep disagreement is both persistent (not going away quickly or

3. ‘ ϕ ’ is true iff ϕ . See Bacon and Goodman 2022

easily) and systematic, such that the disagreement implies disagreement about many other points. There are additional considerations that will be covered in chapter 5 where I overview all the essential aspects of deep disagreement and propose the Presuppositionalist solution to it. However, what I have mentioned here are key considerations, and enable a stock example of deep disagreement to be understood: disagreement about the age of the Earth. Young Earth Creationists believe that the Earth is 6000 years old on the basis of how they interpret the Bible. To disagree about the age of the Earth would also imply disagreement on Biblical interpretation and/or Biblical authority, on how geological evidence should be interpreted, and so on. Moreover, such a dispute generally is not easily resolved, even with sincere reason-giving.⁴

Rationally resolving such a disagreement looks to be improbable in that common ground seems systematically removed: a deep disagreement is one that stretches up all the way from the most basic commitments to everyday commonplaces. For instance, the conspiracy theorist's commitment to the conspiracy likewise reflects on their trust in government, media, the trustworthiness of various communities, what counts as justified evidence regarding the conspiracy, and so on. Deep disagreement therefore tends to have a wide-ranging influence. This means it may be characterized as a clash of worldviews.⁵ *Direct deep disagreement* are "disagreements explicitly over hinge commitments," (Ranalli 2020, 4979) while *indirect deep disagreements* only involve hinge commitments by implication.

Naturally, the above discussion being cast in terms of hinges indicates that they are applications of Hinge Epistemology to the question of deep disagreement. Ranalli notes elsewhere that there are other significant approaches to deep disagreement (Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022a) that do not rely on hinges. Regardless, the question of deep disagreement is important for a theory that wishes to justify certainty without resorting to epistemic relativism, and hinges explain a significant number of the features of deep disagreement. As such, Hinge Epistemology has been a very popular model for analyzing deep disagreement. Ranalli separates Hinge Epistemologies into two categories: non-epistemic and epistemic accounts. *Non-epistemic accounts* hold that "hinges aren't subject to rational evaluation and otherwise lack epistemic properties" (Ranalli 2020, 4977). He identifies Dani  le Moyal-Sharrock's animal-trust approach, where there is an instinctive confidence regarding them such that they are an unquestioned part of your epistemic practice, and Duncan Pritchard's Quasi-Fideism as belonging to this group. For the reasons mentioned in the previous subsection, I will focus on Quasi-Fideism. In contrast, epistemic accounts do allow for rational evaluation of hinges, and Ranalli highlights the interpretation of Crispin Wright. Wright's approach takes hinges to be bipolar propositions that are subject to epistemic justification by a certain kind of warrant (The nature of these warrants lie beyond the scope of this essay; Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock 2017, 11). In the case of Quasi-Fideism, Ranalli finds it to be incompatible with holding to the rational resolvability of direct deep disagreements, while the epistemic reading does allow such rational resolutions, though under certain restrictions and assumptions. However, Pritchard clearly disagrees with Ranalli, since he continues to argue for the applicability of Quasi-Fideism as a solution to deep disagreement. However, this is a difference regarding Quasi-Fideism as a solution, and not about what deep disagreement is, and so I proceed to Pritchard's analysis.

4. The example and these point are both taken from (Ranalli 2021, 983–4). This interpretation is widespread, as may be seen by a similar characterization in (Pritchard 2024).

5. Recall that Allan Hazlett, Ranalli's source for the above, gives a characterization of a religious worldview as being "an interconnected set of beliefs about metaphysics and ethics" (Hazlett 2014, 11).

2.4 Pritchard's Quasi-Fideism

Over the course of the past twenty-five years, Duncan Pritchard has developed a distinct application of Hinge Epistemology to the question of religious belief. This is seen in his work on *Quasi-Fideism*, which he has devoted numerous articles to (a representative sample: Pritchard 2000, 2011, 2018, 2021, 2022b, 2025a). Quasi-Fideism has been applied to Presuppositionalism by Nicholas Smith (Smith 2023, 2024). An analysis of Quasi-Fideism will enable a better understanding Smith's approach to Quasi-Fideist Presuppositionalism as well as enabling a broader assessment of the similarities and differences between Presuppositionalism and Quasi-Fideism. This, in turn, serves the goal of constructing an epistemology for Presuppositionalism, and applying it to the question of deep disagreement.

In order to understand Pritchard's Quasi-Fideism, it is necessary to understand his interpretation of Hinge Epistemology. Firstly, he affirms the reading of Hinge Epistemology as centering on "the Wittgensteinian conception of the structure of rational evaluation" (Pritchard 2025b, 14). Rational evaluation, where a belief is examined to see whether it has the necessary epistemic support in order to be rationally held, is not global. That is, not all beliefs can be examined, and this is a built-in part of our rationality. Coliva accurately describes Pritchard's position when she says, "any rational evaluation proceeds by taking for granted certain presuppositions, which are not themselves evidentially justifiable or known (to the extent that knowledge requires justification), yet are exempt from doubt" (2025, 2). The point is that certain commitments being exempt from doubt make rational evaluation tractable. For Pritchard, commitments are exempt from doubt because they are arationally held: there's no rational basis for holding them, for rationally held commitments may be doubted and revised by means of rational evaluation. Once it is understood that Hinge Epistemology fundamentally involves an insistence on the localized nature of rational evaluation, much of the resulting epistemology falls logically into place, such that "it is indeed a necessary feature of our epistemic practices that they incorporate hinge commitments" (Pritchard 2025b, 14). Hinge commitments are necessitated by the localization of rational evaluation: there is a line drawn between commitments belonging to the area of rational evaluation and those that don't. Beliefs are then rationally held when they receive adequate epistemic support by coherence with the hinge commitments and the other rationally evaluable beliefs.

How hinges do hinge relate to the beliefs that they are supposed to rationally ground and what are hinges, actually? Pritchard's answer to this last question is defined firstly by his assertion that "hinge commitments are not beliefs" (2022a, 7). He does affirm that they are believed in the sense of being thought true, but not in the sense of being thought true *on the basis of epistemic support*. In order to keep this distinction clear, he introduces the notion *K-apt beliefs*: those beliefs that are the subject of the "propositional attitude that is a constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge" (6–7). K-apt beliefs require rational grounding, and are sensitive to rational evaluation: "one cannot K-apt believe that p while at the same time recognizing that one has no rational basis for the truth of p" (Pritchard 2022b, 4). In distinction from K-apt beliefs that can be rationally grounded and which can be known (in the sense of being learnable and revisable), hinge commitments are held with an animal certainty (Pritchard 2011, 8). Consequently, Pritchard describes his reading of Hinge Epistemology as a "non-belief reading" (2022a, 6), since hinge commitments are not beliefs in the "normal," K-apt sense. The insistence on animal certainty is derived, at least in part, from Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's work (2005, 2017).

On Pritchard's reading of Wittgenstein, "a subject's particular hinge commitments are manifestations of an overarching certainty that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken" (2022b, 10). Pritchard calls this the *über-hinge commitment*. The über-hinge is the certainty that, though some

of your beliefs may be mistaken, your worldview is basically the right one, and that you basically know what the world is like. Pritchard distinguishes between the über-hinge commitment and all other hinge-commitments, and uses this distinction to relate hinge commitments to K-ap_t beliefs. Specifically, for any agent having a specific set of K-ap_t beliefs, in order to be able to engage in any rational evaluation at all the über hinge must be held. Hinge commitments are then the means by which rational evaluation of K-ap_t beliefs is made possible. Hinges are thereby made the commitments you hold in order to hold your K-ap_t beliefs in a way that reflects your über-hinge commitment that you are generally correct about your beliefs. (Pritchard 2022b, 11). For instance, a belief that requires the external world results in the hinge that there is an external world, since you are committed to the correctness of your worldview and holding this belief requires you to be able to accommodate that belief in your worldview. This is a very significant aspect of Pritchard’s approach. The relation of hinge commitments to K-ap_t beliefs is then both free of possible contradiction, and hinge commitments are always fit to their task of making rational evaluation possible. For, hinge “commitments cannot be in tension with one’s wider set of K-ap_t beliefs, since the content of one’s specific hinge commitments is determined by those beliefs” (11). Pritchard therefore posits that we automatically adjust our hinge commitments to function as the certainties we need to hold to be able to behave rationally, given our rationally held beliefs.

Pritchard believes that this solves the problem of epistemic relativism for his non-belief reading, where hinges are not beliefs. Epistemic relativism may be characterized as the situation where there exists “incompatible yet equally correct judgments” (Coliva 2025, 11). However, Pritchard distinguishes two forms of epistemic relativism. Strong epistemic relativism involves incommensurable epistemic states—which makes an even in principle reconciliation between two epistemic systems impossible by the epistemic states lacking enough common ground to reason from one to the other, or for either agent to present evidence that is at all convincing—leading to irresolvable deep disagreement. Weak epistemic relativism “would simply hold that there can be distinct, but no less legitimate for that, epistemic systems” (Pritchard 2022a, 14). On this view, the real problem with epistemic relativism is what occurs when two parties are engaged in irresolvable deep disagreement (to borrow terminology from the previous section). That is, strong epistemic relativism, with its epistemic incommensurability, is the real concern of epistemologists, and this is avoided by Quasi-Fideism according to Pritchard. As such, though different agents have different epistemic states leading to weak epistemic relativism, this is not a problem.

The innocence of weak epistemic relativism rests on the claim that “weak epistemic relativism by itself does not deliver epistemic incommensurability” (14). This is achieved by two considerations. Firstly, “there are limits on this conception of hinge commitments in terms of how extensive a divergence is possible in one’s hinge commitments” (14). Pritchard relies on Wittgenstein’s view of hinge commitments as being acquired as part of inheriting a form of life: receiving one’s set of hinges occurs automatically, and without rational motivation being required for the hinges to be acquired. But since human forms of life have a great deal in common, the resulting sets of hinge commitments have a great deal in common. Divergence as to epistemic states is therefore limited. Especially given that a hinge commitment like “I am speaking Afrikaans” is only superficially different from the hinge commitment “I am speaking Dutch,” given the effectively identical role they play as hinges in the epistemic states of the respective agents holding them. To Pritchard (2022a), “this is essentially a corresponding manifestation of one’s shared über hinge commitment in light of different sets of beliefs” (8).

The second consideration vindicating weak epistemic relativism as unproblematic is an account of how hinges change. K-apt beliefs are available for rational consideration. Changing K-apt beliefs because of discussion or persuasion means changing your hinges, since your hinges are a consequence of the interplay between your über-hinge commitment, your K-apt beliefs, and your way of life. As such, even disagreements about hinges are resolvable, since you can target the beliefs related to the hinge in question. When the beliefs change, the hinges follow. (Pritchard 2022a, 10). An agent's hinge commitments are the manifestations of the über hinge commitment in relation to the agent's k-apt beliefs. Change (enough of) the K-apt beliefs, and the hinge commitments will accordingly shift. An example given is the hinge commitment of having two hands, which is not empirically verified, nor rests on rational evaluation, but which will change if you find out you've awoken from an explosion induced coma: in an abnormal condition, having two hands ceases to even be a hinge commitment. Hinge commitments are sensitive to the K-apt beliefs which they provide the necessary assumed background for. As Pritchard puts it, "If one's conception of the world undergoes enough alteration, then claims that were once mundane everyday certainties expressing core nodes of one's worldview could become, over time, more akin to normal empirical propositions, of a kind that can be believed (or doubted) on the basis of reasons" (2025b, 5). As such, by changing sufficient K-apt beliefs, one's hinges can transition to propositions sensitive to justification. This represents another avenue of resolving disagreement about hinges: hinges need not merely changing to correspond to the changing K-apt beliefs, but may join them.

To sum up, hinge commitments are not static, but can be changed by targeting an agent's K-apt beliefs. That they can change opens up the possibility for agents with two epistemic states that are sufficiently close to resolve their epistemic differences. Since Pritchard has argued that the differences between hinges have a natural and sufficient limit that makes epistemic reconciliation possible, and since he has proposed a means of such reconciliation, on his view he has dodged the problem of epistemically incommensurate states by discovering that they are impossible (or at the very least abnormal and not a consequence of Pritchard's non-belief reading).

This prepares the way for the question of religious belief. Pritchard wants to argue that the rationality of religious belief can be defended in the same way that non-religious beliefs. The go-to example here is that of specifically *theistic* belief. This is belief in God's existence (or gods existing). Belief that God exists seems to hold a similarly fundamental role for the structure of religious belief as having two hands has for belief in general: if that is doubted, then there doesn't remain much left of the rest of the belief structure. At this point, it would be useful to take a detour to define *Evidentialism*, a position against which both Presuppositionalism and Quasi-Fideism identify themselves.

Pritchard characterizes Evidentialism accurately as having at its core the tenet that "one should proportion one's religious conviction to the degree of evidential support one has for it" (Pritchard 2022a, 2). He rightly notes that this "seem[s] to set the bar for religious belief so high as to be unattainable (particularly given the strength of religious conviction and the usual constraints on what counts as applicable 'evidence' in this regard)" (2). Of key importance here is that the notion of *evidential support* is of a specific kind. Evidentialism traces its roots back to John Locke. Locke advocated "a form of classical foundationalism that demanded that all rationally held beliefs should be traceable back to what is rightly held to be certain" (Pritchard 2025b, 6). Providing sufficient evidential support for the sort of certainty that attends strong religious conviction thereby requires effectively proving beyond doubt that the theistic position is true. However, the preceding definition means that a "belief is itself certain (incorrigible or self-evident) or that it is probably true given only what is certain" (6).

The result is that “God exists” could only ever be probably true, which in turn does not seem to reflect the convictions of the evidentialists themselves. This presents a problem for anyone who wants to say that religious beliefs are rationally held, since the degree of confidence in such fundamental religious belief as God’s existence is generally best described as certainty.⁶ Even in the Evidentialist theist’s best case scenario, the result that it delivers is that God *very probably* exists. This is not proportioned to the certainty with which God’s existence is generally held to by the theist. As such, on Evidentialism’s count, the theist must be behaving irrationally, since the theist holds with certainty a belief that they are only entitled to holding with a fairly high degree of confidence (in the best case scenario). Presuppositionalism takes issue with exactly this discrepancy between Evidentialism not delivering a defense that corresponds to the faith it attempts to rationally justify. Pritchard likewise takes exception, and his reasoning is that Evidentialism “seems to hold religious belief to an epistemic standard that would not be applied to other kinds of belief” (Pritchard 2022a, 2). He cites the fact that on the basis of Evidentialism we don’t have a rational basis for our perceptual beliefs, except if we decide to say that they are self-evident. Yet, we consider it rational to be certain of the general reliability of our perceptual beliefs.

This leads him to Quasi-Fideism’s *parity argument*. A parity argument seeks to show “that provided we hold religious belief to the same epistemic standards as ordinary beliefs, then there is no standing challenge to their rationality” (Pritchard 2025b, 5–6). The parity argument of Quasi-Fideism then runs as follows: “Yes, religious belief has at its heart arational hinge commitments, but this cannot be an objection to the rationality of religious belief if it is true that belief in general has at its heart arational hinge commitments” (6). The upshot is that while religious belief has arational commitments at its core, religious beliefs in general (religious non-hinge beliefs) will be rationally evaluable like all other K-apt beliefs. Moreover, change in religious hinges are also captured by Quasi-Fideism, since sufficient change in the religious K-apt beliefs will result in change in the religious hinge commitments. In summary, “that our most basic religious convictions are lacking in the requisite rational support is no more a count against the rationality of religious belief in general than the fact that one’s basic perceptual commitments are lacking in the requisite rational support is a count against the rationality of perceptual belief in general” (Pritchard 2022a, 2–3).

This brings us to criticisms of Quasi-Fideism as overviewed above, of which there are various. The following is a short overview of a development of a position that has taken place over 25 years. Naturally, it suffers from limitations in space. However, two of Coliva’s arguments in her article, *Against Quasi-Fideism* can now be addressed, and the proposal of Quasi-Fideism being the epistemology of Presuppositionalism can be assessed in chapter 4. The criticisms I wish to highlight run as follows.

Firstly, Coliva argues that Pritchard has missed the point in the nuances he applies to epistemic relativism. The concern as regards incommensurate states is not whether there is epistemic incommensurability where two opposite judgments are equally legitimate. Rather, it is a matter of evidence. Specifically, “the systems of evidence to which the believer and the non-believer would appeal” (Coliva 2025, 8). Coliva characterizes the two systems of evidence to which she refers as follows: “non-believers would appeal to purely immanent empirical evidence, while believers would turn to existential evidence, such as what Pascal referred to as ‘the evidence of the heart’” (8). The significance of this is that the evidence base Coliva ascribes to believers is entirely one of subjective experiences. Instead of Evidentialism, Coliva seems to be assuming that the system of evidence of religious believers is fideistic.

6. This is of course not to deny the important reality of both atheistic and religious doubt, such that a proper account of such beliefs needs to accommodate doubt and certainty. See chapter 5 of this essay.

At the very least the historic popularity of Evidentialism (Pritchard 2022a, 2) should indicate that at the very least not all believers would appeal simply or primarily to subjective experiences or interpretations. Instead, empirical evidence is considered significant.

Nevertheless, Coliva's point regarding relativism is worth considering. While it is one thing to be clear of the strong epistemic relativism Pritchard defined, it is another thing to have demonstrated that two divergent epistemic states are actually close enough in order to be reconciled. And, a problem seems to be looming in the case where one agent has the hinge that "God exists" and another agent does not. The parity argument assumed that hinges like "God exists" are as fundamental to the religious beliefs of a religious agent as hinges are for beliefs generally. In my estimation Coliva rightly summarizes Pritchard's stance regarding non-religious hinges when she says that hinges "must be such that if I had to relinquish them, my entire epistemic worldview would collapse with them [...] because—presumably—I could no longer trust the cognitive faculties and epistemic methods normally used to form justified or knowledgeable [sic: knowable] empirical beliefs" (Coliva 2025, 3). This makes the question of how to deal with such radically different hinges as "God exists" and "God does not exist" very pressing for Quasi-Fideism. For, given that their fundamentality as hinges means the agent's entire epistemic state *as regards religious belief* would collapse with their loss, you would expect significant divergence in two epistemic states that diverge on "God exists."

Pritchard (2022b) anticipated such a critique by positing that we engage in the *compartmentalization* of the hinges of others. He argues that we can and do look externally at an epistemic state that employs hinges that diverge from ours, and then construct an explanation of why, relative to us, the other person is mistaken. He puts it as follows:

in understanding another subject who has distinct hinge commitments in a way that does not attribute massive error to them we are effectively compartmentalizing, and thereby *domesticating*, their hinge commitments. I say domesticating because we are effectively understanding them in terms of *our* epistemic frame of reference rather than theirs" (18).

That is, we don't consider the other person to have become incomprehensible to us by having a worldview that is incompatible with our own. That would mean that they are wrong as to their über-hinge commitment, and must therefore be considered as involved in "massive error" (19). Rather, we say that the other person's thought has gone awry in the local area of reasoning that is under discussion. This seems somewhat plausible, since this scheme assumes that rational evaluation is localized, not all hinges necessarily cohere at the global level. After all, rational people do hold inconsistent beliefs by virtue of not having the mental capacity of developing all the logical consequences of their beliefs in order to verify their worldview wholesale. This suggests that rational practice seems to broadly be separable into "compartment" of thought. This implies the possibility of external compartmentalization whereby hinges may be grouped and considered from an external perspective. Pritchard takes internal compartmentalization to be naturally impossible, since it is ingrained into the way of life of the agent (18). As such, when we find inconsistency in our beliefs or hinges, we normatively cannot compartmentalize that away because that would mean committing to incoherence. Internal incoherence requires change. However, viewed externally, and taking inconsistencies in beliefs and hinges to be a normal epistemic state, we can argue that in the relevant localized area of rational evaluation there is an inconsistency without giving up the fundamentality of hinges. Additionally, it then becomes possible to delineate the area of guaranteed epistemic overlap: except those compartments of rational evaluation where there is divergence in hinges, there is convergence and therefore a large area of overlap.

As such, compartmentalization plus the natural limit on divergence of hinges means that there is sufficient common ground for comprehensibility, and a defined strategy for rationalizing the divergent hinges of others, without requiring that hinges themselves be sensitive to rational evaluation or internally rationalizable. Coliva seems to have completely missed this point when she remarked that the possibility of compartmentalization of religious hinges means that “we can detach them from the rest of our hinge commitments and epistemic practices” (2025, 8). That simply was not alleged. Rather, a strategy was proposed whether two agents would compartmentalize *each other’s* conflicting religious hinges, and make use of the epistemic common ground they have to debate their K-apt beliefs. This last point, notably, is also a potential contrast with Coliva’s fideist understanding of the evidence believers would employ. Not taking the above considerations into account makes Coliva’s arguments miss the mark at certain points.

There is, however, a second argument that is worth considering. Coliva firstly restates her position (2015) of hinges being constitutive of rationality and in that sense rational (Coliva 2025, 9). She then argues that this would imply that “God exists” is no hinge at all—at least not in the same way that the hinges of general belief are. For, according to her, non-religious hinges cannot be lost without losing the ability to evidentially justify our beliefs (4). Losing a non-religious hinge would therefore mean radical skepticism (4), and consequently irrationality (10). As such, while non-religious hinges are constitutive of rationality, religious beliefs have at most existential impact (8), and do not enter into the foundations of our epistemic systems. Coliva concludes that “there is no real ‘parity argument’ on offer between religious and non-religious belief” (4). After all, the parity argument said that religious hinges serve the same role as non-religious hinges. But religious hinges do not bear the burden of epistemic rationality the way that a hinge like “there are external objects” does. As such, argues Coliva, religious and non-religious hinges are not on a par.

Perhaps the most obvious attempted response from Pritchard would be another form of compartmentalization again: religious hinges are either describing something true, and thereby functioning as the hinges of rationality in that localized area of reasoning. Or, if they are false, we could understand how those holding religious beliefs are inconsistent relative to the rest of their worldviews. However, the parity argument assumes that it is the function that “God exists” plays in terms of religious belief that gives it a parity with non-religious hinges. If religious hinges are in an entirely different compartment of reasoning than non-religious beliefs, this seems to weaken the parity argument. Though of a much less dramatic kind than argued for by Coliva, Pritchard does agree that there is some difference between non-religious and religious hinges (Pritchard 2022a, 21–22). At the same time he also argues that there is in general a variety of types of non-religious hinges, meaning that religious hinges representing another category is not a significant problem (22). However, this does not seem to account for the fact that religious hinges are a separate class from all other hinges. If this is the case, why should we assume sufficient common ground for rationally resolving deep disagreement about religious beliefs, if religious beliefs belong to their own category? It is easy to think of Christian Theists and Atheists being diametrically opposed on nearly all fronts in religious beliefs compartment. Compartmentalization therefore does not seem to provide the intended guaranteed common ground to make rational resolution possible. On the other hand, it is also the case that religious beliefs color other beliefs, such as regarding the origin of consciousness. As such, it is also not clear that the compartmentalization needed to justify the claim of parity in spite of difference could be achieved in any case.

On the other hand, two criticisms can be made of Coliva’s critique of Quasi-Fideism. Firstly, the position that hinges are rationally held because they are constitutive of rationality is her’s, not

Pritchard's. It is one thing to argue that Quasi-Fideism falls short of Wittgenstein (Coliva 2025, 6), and another to say that Quasi-Fideism has a problem internal to its model of belief because it falls short of Wittgenstein. Coliva uses the assumption of hinges being as she has taken them, while examining the consequences of Quasi-Fideism in terms of hinges as constitutive of rationality rather than the arational preconditions of rationality Pritchard takes them to be. Pritchard, in any case, takes himself to have more flexibility than Coliva gives him credit for because of his conception of the über-hinge commitment and hinges as manifestations of it (Pritchard 2022a, 22). This leaves the relevance of Coliva's critique unclear. On the other hand, Coliva's own assumptions about the independence of epistemic practice regarding non-religious beliefs from that regarding religious beliefs is highly questionable. In fact, Presuppositionalism meets this challenge head-on, and argues that it is the knowledge of God's existence and attributes that form the basis of our epistemic practices, including in the non-believer's case. I examine this in the next chapter. As such, there is at least some measure of reason to treat her assumption as questionable.

This leaves the status of Quasi-Fideism as a solution to deep disagreement a little undecided. Ranalli has a further relevant criteria to add by which to assess Quasi-Fideism, which criteria will be overviewed in subsection 5.4 of this essay. However, I will not further resolve the adequacy of the Quasi-Fideistic model except in arguing for superiority of the Presuppositionalist model in meeting Ranalli's criteria. The end-result of this section is, then, that though Quasi-Fideism readily explains many of the features of deep disagreement by taking hinges to be arationally held, that same arational approach introduces serious problems for its account of how to rationally resolve deep disagreement. Besides Coliva's complaints, Ranalli takes rational resolution to be impossible (Ranalli 2020, 4977), while Pritchard takes deep disagreement's depth to be something of an illusion since it is actually just a matter of changing K-apt beliefs related to the hinge in dispute, until that hinge changes (Pritchard 2024, 58). Neither of these are particularly desirable traits, and there is therefore a tension between the aptness of Quasi-Fideism accommodating many of the features of deep disagreement, while ultimately not seeming to be able to capture its mechanism of resolution.

I now turn to examining Presuppositionalism to see what it might offer.

Chapter 3

Van Til's Presuppositional Epistemology

3.1 A Higher Level Response to Skepticism

Hinge Epistemology was introduced in the previous chapter in terms of skepticism about knowledge. There, the skeptic claimed to not be sure about whether there can be knowledge of the external world. The Hinge Epistemological response was to say that the skeptic was relying on hinges to be able to raise skeptical questions. Specifically, since hinges make doubt possible, hinges could not rationally be doubted themselves, since their exemption (at least generally) from doubt is what enables them to fulfill their function. The skeptic has thereby involved themselves in a contradiction between their most fundamental (albeit implicit) commitments and their committing to doubt those same commitments.

Presuppositionalism, though not historically understood in terms of skepticism, may be introduced in a similar way. However, Presuppositionalism answers the skeptic at one level of abstraction higher. The skeptic is implicitly committed to various assumptions regarding the meaning of facts that characterizes rationality. In raising skeptical doubt, the skeptic is also from the perspective of worldview analysis denying the pre-conditions of rationality and knowledge.

Hinge Epistemology takes hinges to be fundamental commitments in any particular worldview. It is explicitly worldview agnostic, and denies that it is possible to philosophically evaluate one worldview relative to another for *e.g.* objective correctness. After all, that would involve stepping outside one's worldview, which contains one's understanding of objective correctness. Presuppositionalism rejects this prohibition. Instead, like natural science that functions in terms of paradigms and yet can have and identify objectively better paradigms, we function in terms of worldviews that can be made subject to our critical inspection.

Hinge Epistemology could be characterized as attempting to answer the skeptic at the level of *facts*, and Presuppositionalism as attempting to answer the skeptic at the level of the *philosophy of facts*. Hinge Epistemology argues for certain relations to facts being assumed as certain by the skeptic, even while those relations are being denied or considered dubious by the skeptic. Presuppositionalism argues that the skeptic assumes with certainty particular relations between facts while taking a position on the relations between facts that cannot cohere with those assumptions.

3.2 On The Methodology and Terminology Involved in This Chapter of Theological Philosophy

In this chapter I will derive how Van Til's Presuppositional Epistemology arrives at Christian Theistic and non-Christian Theistic worldviews being fundamentally opposed to each other. This involves translating Van Til's work that is based on Reformed Theology and directed at continental philosophy to analytic philosophy and this introduces some oddities. Firstly, this chapter is a work in *theological philosophy* in the sense that it draws out philosophical consequences from a theological position. The goal of theological philosophy is to arrive at more than theology: conclusions and theories supportable by independent philosophical considerations and with application to philosophical problems. This is not a common place approach, but proceeds from the assumption that if one's theological commitments are true in the sense of accurately describing the world, then they would have consequences broader than only theology. An example is Lydia Schumacher (2015) who has approached the question of rationality from a theology-first perspective. More closely related to the Presuppositional approach, and inspired by Van Til (Frame 1995), *Tri-Perspectivalism* is a theological philosophical position developed by John Frame and Vern Poythress that seeks to move from Reformed Theology to philosophical commitments. This has seen a variety of applications, from philosophy broadly considered (Poythress 2014) to such specialist subjects as logic (Poythress 2013). Still, theological philosophy is much less widely practiced than philosophical theology.

This chapter is also a reconstruction of Van Til's argument, as built up across his career. In this sense, two questions are being answered in this chapter. Primarily the question is: what is Van Til's Presuppositional Epistemology? Secondly, how did he get there? The motivation for tracing how the theology leads to the epistemology in a essay on epistemology is a matter of it being relevant to the field of Presuppositional Epistemology and the practical need for sufficient background to understand the epistemology. As is evidenced by this chapter and the criticisms in the chapter that follows, the lack of a firm understanding of the underlying theology and its relation to the epistemology leads to misreadings. This is at least in part because of the unusual character of the epistemological approach. A correct interpretation of the position involved is greatly helped by the understanding the reasoning that led to it. This also enables a better grasp of whether independent philosophical motivations apply to the concepts as found in Presuppositional Epistemology. Lastly, extending Presuppositional Epistemology to provide a model for deep disagreement requires a basic understanding of Presuppositional Apologetics, which provides a model for reasoning about the truth of the Christian Theistic worldview. Since the apologetic involves claims regarding argumentation in the realm of religious beliefs, it will again be neither clear what the claims are nor where they are coming from without understanding the specific theology for which reasons are being given.

This also has another important consequence for this chapter. In attempting to give a reading of Presuppositional Epistemology, I am not giving an assessment of the standpoints of any part of Presuppositionalism. As such, while critical reflection on both Presuppositionalism and its critiques of other standpoints is not only appropriate but necessary for the development of it as a position, that is not my purpose in this chapter. Instead, the goal is recovering the epistemology from the body of Van Til's work, since it is nowhere fully specified by Van Til. Instead, his epistemological position is often programmatically sketched out, and then applied in his apologetics. As such, the epistemology is there, but scattered through his work. Additionally, discussions of the epistemology in the secondary literature often start with the apologetics and attempt to derive the epistemology from

there, resulting in a defective reading. On the other hand, even when the epistemology receives due focus and derivation from the Trinity that reflects Van Til's own work (Mathison 2024), the reading still lacks essential aspects such as that of the distinction between neutral and common ground. As such, the overview nature of this chapter must be kept in mind to avoid the impression of partisan reductionism as regards the important philosophical and theological issues raised by Presuppositionalism, while there are multiple considerations motivating a new overview of Presuppositional Epistemology.

In order to make the relationship between Reformed Theology and the Presuppositional Epistemology clear I will specify the theological premise and the epistemological claim at play. Van Til was committed to the position that metaphysics and epistemology mutually influence each other (Van Til 1969b, 29).¹ This is reflected in that he draws epistemological inferences from his metaphysics of facts, as seen later. It is therefore a useful exegetical tool to follow Van Til in taking Reformed Theology to be the metaphysics that underlie his epistemology. He described this as follows:

I am interested in defending the metaphysics that comes from Scripture. This involves: (a) the doctrine of the self-contained God or ontological trinity, (b) the plan or counsel of this God pertaining to reality, (c) the fact of temporal creation as the origin of all the facts of the universe, (d) the fact of God's providential control over all the created reality including the supernatural, and (e) the miraculous work of the redemption of the world through Christ (Van Til 1955, 235).

As Van Til notes: "This metaphysic is so simple and so simply Biblical that non-Christian philosophers would say that it is nothing but theology" (235). However, each of the above points have a direct influence on his epistemology. They therefore function as his metaphysic in the following sense: "when we have established our belief in the Christian conception of God [the metaphysics], we have, in principle at least, also established our belief in a definite theory of the universe and of man" (Van Til 1969b, xiv). The consequences for rationality and knowledge that follows are then the concern for this chapter, requiring the relation of each of the aspects conception of God to be related to the epistemological consequence drawn to from it.

In this chapter I will be conducting what Coliva in section 2.2 described as the work of exegesis rather than work inspired by the text. As such, it is my intention to furnish the reader with a summary of Van Til's own thought, as opposed to a Presuppositional Epistemology inspired by him. At the same time, some of his arguments do rely heavily on the Reformed Theological background that he explicitly assumes. As such, at certain points I do supplement his writing with theology supplied from Reformed Theology, but it has not been my intention to introduce anything not at the very least clearly implicit in his work.

Some words on the question of respect and sensitivity are in order given the theological content of this chapter and the nature of Christian apologetics as a field with the goal of changing the religious convictions of those who are not Christian. Van Til's terminology reflects that he considered the Christian religion to be given with the Bible and true. And, since he considered Reformed Theology to be the most true presentation of the Bible's teaching, he used the terminology Christian theology/apologetics/philosophy of life/*etc.* when referring to the Reformed Theological version of these fields of thought. This did not imply that he denied the status as Christians of those who differed with him. This is an important point in assessing the possibility of variance in the concept of worldviews in chapter 5. At the same time, it serves to underline the specifically Reformed character

1. Interestingly enough, this conviction is shared by Sartre (Sartre 2018, 8)

of his thought. Likewise, he refers to Christians as alternately believers, those who have received redemption, and the saved, with those not belonging to those Christians being called non-Christians, non-Christian Theists, unbelievers, and the lost. This is not a question of disrespect for those belonging to other religions. In fact, I freely follow Van Til's terminology in tracing his system since in philosophy of religion when considering the teaching of a religious group the teaching is regularly explained in terms of that group, and the terminology is already sufficiently glutted as it is. This includes the use of the term *anti-theist(ic)* as opposed to non-theist(ic) since the Presuppositional framework assumes a fundamental opposition between Christian Theism and all other worldviews, which is expressed by this wording, without the motivation of giving offense underlying the wording. Following current Reformed Theological norms I also capitalize the pronouns that refer to the Christian Theistic God, which also helps disambiguation. I will also capitalize such nouns as *Being* when they bear special reference to Him. It should also be noted that it is recognized that the problem of evil is raised by what follows, and this is acknowledged as an important and serious philosophical challenge. However, it has been found to be outside the scope of this essay, not least because of considerations of space, but also because it is especially an apologetic rather than an epistemological concern.

Finally, it is worth noting for the theological reader that Van Til relied heavily on Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (1976) and in this stands within the tradition of mainstream Reformed convictions. While there has been debate, I set aside all claims of Van Til holding a non-Reformed version of any particular doctrine, as well as any claims to his being either Kantianism or Hegelianism. These have been disproven a sufficient number of times and are beyond the bounds of this essay. For an overview of the most important recent defenses against such criticisms, see Tipton (2022), Bosserman (2014), Hunt (2019), and McConnel (2005).

3.3 The Antithesis between Worldviews

A fundamental concept in Presuppositional Epistemology is the distinction made between what it calls Christian Theistic and anti-Theistic worldviews. The term *anti-Theistic worldview* applies to any worldview that is not the Christian Theistic worldview, and expresses the standpoint that all non-Christian Theistic worldviews are in an *antithesis* with the Christian Theistic worldview. An antithesis expresses a deep or fundamental opposition between two persons or viewpoints. The claim Presuppositionalism makes as regards its antithesis with anti-Theistic worldviews is that they have excluded God as understood by a Reformed Theology from the outset. That is, God's existence is excluded by the assumptions of the worldviews, such that the Christian Theistic God could not be confirmed as existing, with all the consequences of such an existence, without arriving at a contradiction with the commitments of an anti-Theistic worldview. Proofs or arguments that God does not exist then fail to have relevance as a critique of the Christian Theistic worldview, since it is derived in terms of a worldview with commitments that imply that conclusion. Likewise, a Christian Theistic critique of a non-Theistic should attempt to show that that worldview is inconsistent with itself in terms of its own commitments and presuppositions (Van Til 1969b, 206). On the assumptions of Presuppositional Epistemology, this would have to be possible on the basis of Presuppositional Epistemology taking the Trinity to be a necessary commitment for a worldview to be able to justify its epistemology.

The primary way that this is argued for is by pointing to the epistemologies of any non-Christian Theistic worldview, and arguing that the view of meaning, predication, rationality, knowledge in general, all implicitly exclude God as understood in Christian Theism without having proven His

non-existence or irrelevance for knowledge. At the same time, they must also implicitly rely on Him to justify the possibility of knowledge and rationality.

To see what this claim is based on, it is necessary to look at the Christian Theistic God with His specific attributes. Doing so will enable me to trace how Van Til moves from theology to epistemology.

3.3.1 Short Excursion: A Short Overview of the Presuppositional Method

However, first taking a short look at the Presuppositional Apologetic will help give some insight into where the epistemology is headed. Presuppositional Apologetics takes arguments at the level of worldviews to be necessarily *transcendental* in that no worldview can be argued to be involved in self-contradiction on the basis of the assumptions of another worldview. Take the position of Physicalism, which roughly says that there are only physical things (Stoljar 2024). Christian Theism cannot charge Physicalism with contradiction because it denies the existence of spiritual facts or God. Presuppositionalism insists that it is logical to conclude from the position of Physicalism that there is no God and that there are no spiritual facts. However, what one worldview might charge another with is that its assumptions and commitments are incoherent with each other and/or *presuppositions* (the assumed principle of rationality, laws of logic, and so on) which the holders of a worldview evidences themselves as holding through their epistemic practices. If a worldview is implicitly committed to *e.g.* a form of rationality or a law of self-contradiction which it cannot account for, *on its own terms*, then this poses a challenge to that worldview. Additionally, if its assumptions and commitments (such as God's existence) are incoherent with these presuppositions (such as morality), then this is taken as a genuine critique of a worldview, making it irrational to hold (since it involves commitment to mutually incompatible positions). This does mean that Presuppositionalism is committed to the existence of justifiable meta-worldview commitments (*e.g.* shared characteristics of rationality). Analyzing a worldview to see whether it lives up to these meta-worldview commitments is key to the *transcendental argument* (also referred to as the *transcendental critique*).

Besides the transcendental critique of Presuppositionalism, there is also the internal coherence critique. Presuppositionalism assumes a *worldview ideal*: a worldview should present a coherent view of the world (That this is a broader reformed principle may be seen by the following citation of Geerhardus Vos (Van Til's most influential teacher) reviewing Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (note the importance of coherent completeness as a method of worldview vindication): "What has impressed us most is that, while Dr. Bavinck's standpoint is that of a thorough Calvinist, yet in reading him one is conscious of listening not so much to a defense of Calvinism as to a scientific *vindication* of the Christian world-view in its most catholic sense and spirit. This is far from saying that the work is not also a vindication of Calvinistic theology. But it is so in the *indirect* and for that reason all the more telling way of showing how perfectly easy and natural it is to build upon the foundations of the Reformed principles a system of Christian thought which by its very largeness of grasp and freedom from theological one-sidedness becomes the most eloquent witness to the soundness and depth of the principles underlying it. *No higher commendation of Calvinism* is conceivable than that it lends itself to being made the basis of a structure of truth so universally and comprehensively Christian in all its lines and proportions." Olinger 2018, Emphasis added). A worldview's epistemology needs to be compatible with its metaphysics and its ethics, and *vice versa*. Moreover, inasmuch as there is overlap, the view of aesthetics, natural sciences, culture, and all other aspects of human experience ought to be coherently incorporated into the parts of the worldview that have been thought through. In this sense, while no human person has thought through all the consequences of their

worldviews, they are held as responsible for holding to the logical consequences of their worldviews, and therefore as responsible for adapting or switching their worldviews if it becomes clear that their worldview is internally incoherent. Presuppositional Apologetics core commitment in this regard is that a non-Christian Theistic worldviews “cannot lead to coherence because it omits the source of all coherence, namely, God” (Van Til 1969b, 2–3). What I term the worldview ideal therefore stresses a form of the *coherence theory of truth*: there is an internal coherence to how God has ordered things that our knowledge (as it is understood and held in terms of our worldview) must reflect. On the other hand, this coherence existing in God, it also is a form of *correspondence theory of truth*: the coherence of human thought must correspond to the coherence in God’s thought (see the discussion of analogical knowledge in subsection 3.5.2) (1–4).

The transcendental analysis and internal critique both extend to the question of method: is the methodology of the worldview critiquing other worldviews consistent with its explicit assumption and commitments as well as its presuppositions? Can the worldview consistently apply the same standard to itself? In all three of these aspects, Presuppositionalism’s method is self-described as an “indirect argument.” What the indirectness here stresses is that no worldview is taken to be either able or required to justify itself on the terms of another worldview. At the same time, worldviews are in need of meta-worldview justification to be held rationally, and that justification is what Presuppositional argues about.

Greg Bahnsen serves to illustrate the transcendental argument very well:

The Christian apologist must seek to uncover what this unbeliever’s personal convictions are regarding relevant metaphysical and epistemological matters: e.g. what is the nature of things that are real, how does the world operate, where did it come from, what is man’s place in the world, what is man’s nature, are there moral or epistemological norms that are not chosen by the individual, what are the criteria for truth, what are the proper methods of knowing, is certainty possible, etc? (Bahnsen 1998, 512)

These personal convictions are what I referred to as worldview commitments. The basic question is how the grounds of used by the person worldview. According to Bahnsen, a non-Christian Theistic worldviews will ultimately be “(1) arbitrary, and/or (2) inconsistent with itself, and/or (3) lacking the preconditions for the intelligibility of knowledge (language, logic, science, morality, redemption, etc.)” (513). This may well smack of intellectual arrogance on the part of the Presuppositionalist. Moreover, this essay will not be able to argue any factors ameliorating such an impression, since that would involve examining the Presuppositional Apologetic. However, the Presuppositional Epistemology that gets developed in the following section is taken to be such that, if Reformed Theology holds, then the Christian Theistic God and the worldview associated with Him is necessary to justify knowledge.

I will draw out Presuppositional Epistemology in three sections. The first is that of God and His knowledge of the world. The second is the Creator-creature distinction and what that means for the difference between Divine and human knowledge. The third is human knowledge and the distinctions between Christian Theistic and anti-Theistic worldviews. For the sake of brevity, I will not keep asserting that it is Van Til’s perspective being expressed.

3.4 Knowledge in Terms of God: Consequences of God’s Attributes

The first, most fundamental aspect of the Christian Theistic God is that He is *self-sufficient* (or equivalently, *self-contained*). This is expressed in two particular ways: self-subsistence and self-

explanatoriness. *Self-subsistence* means that He depends on nothing for His Being. Rather, everything depends upon him. Secondly, to some extent an extension of His self-subsistence, He is *self-explanatory* in that His knowledge of Himself is exhaustive and cannot be further expanded, nor is His self-knowledge understood in terms of anything other than His own Being. That is, no abstractions or categories outside of Himself serve Him in His knowledge of Himself. Moreover, His self-knowledge is identical with his Being. Both of these claims warrant further examination.

3.4.1 Self-Sufficiency as Self-Subsistence

God's self-subsistence means that He is entirely underived. This means that He has no relationship of dependence on anything, rather everything that exists depends upon Him. He alone is self-subsistent. Everything else is contingent and derived from Him, and does not have necessary existence. As such, "God is in no sense correlative to or dependent upon anything beside his own being. God is the source of his own being, or rather the term source cannot be applied to God. God is *absolute*. He is sufficient for himself" (Van Til 1955, 25). This stresses that God is not in development alongside of His creation. Rather, the relation of dependence is entirely one-sided: creatures receive their being from Him, while He receives nothing from His creatures. There is therefore no *correlativity*: change in something else never implies change in God. Van Til emphasizes another aspect to correlativism when he states that, "by correlativism I understand a mutually interdependent relationship like that of husband and wife or the convex and the concave side of a disk" (241). This implies a mutual defining of two things over against each other, so that the one determines what the other is like, and vice versa. Therefore, nothing external to God either determines or changes anything in God.

Besides external/created things not (being capable of) causing change in God, there is also no internally arising change in God either. "God does not and cannot change since there is nothing besides His own eternal Being on which He depends" (25). Being completely free of dependence on any and all created beings, and being alone uncreated, God's relations to His creatures are therefore entered into voluntarily. This is opposed to the conception of God as changing and needing creation in order to develop in *self-discovery*. By self-discovery is meant any event or process in which an individual learns more about themselves. God has nothing that He can learn about Himself. There is no change external to Himself that He can learn about in the sense of encountering it as new information, and there is no change within Himself, so that His comprehensive knowledge of Himself might be expanded at a later point in time. In terms of creatures, this also means that if a creature's relation to God changes, that does not imply any change in God. The relation has changed; He has not.

3.4.2 Self-Sufficiency and Simplicity

To take a quick and necessary detour from the examination of self-sufficiency: The attribute of *simplicity* specifies that God "is in no sense composed of parts or aspects that existed prior to Himself," (26). It is not the case that individual attributes are separate pieces of God that could be cordoned off from the rest of His Being. Who and what God is is fully identified with His Being, and *vice versa*. Though attributes like simplicity and self-subsistence are distinguishable in God, there is no part of God's Being that does not fully express all His attributes. Since He has the attribute of being self-sufficient and thereby unchanging, He is unchanging with respect to every aspect of Himself. And since He is self-sufficient, this also means that God acts entirely in terms of Himself and without any privileging of any aspect of His Being: "there were no principles of truth, goodness or beauty that were next to or

above God according to which he patterned the world. The principles of truth, good, and beauty are to be thought of as identical with God's being; they are the attributes of God" (Van Til 1955, 28). God therefore acts entirely in terms of those attributes and categories that are in His own Being.

3.4.3 Self-Sufficiency as Being Self-Explanatory

Since God is in no sense composed of parts, His knowledge of Himself should not be regarded as a separate something in the Divine Mind or Being: God's knowledge is inseparably identified with His Being, like His goodness or simplicity. Moreover, this must include His knowledge of creation. This has caused some concern that Van Til identifies God's Being with the world, since His knowledge of the world is identified with His Being. But this would mean that God could never have knowledge of the world without that knowledge being separate from His Being and co-eternal with Him (since He never learns anything new). Clearly then, there's a distinction between God's knowledge of creation and the being of God's creation. God's Being and Creation's being are not identified. However, the obviousness of this has laid this early debate to rest for some time now. God's knowledge being identical with Himself means that we cannot know as He knows without participating in that very being which we have said it is not possible to participate in. Therefore, it is concluded that we must know in a different, derivative way.

3.4.4 Self-Sufficiency and Eternity

This is related to another attribute of God. Namely, His *eternity*: "there is no beginning or end or succession of moments in God's being or consciousness" (26). This is clearly relevant in light of the preceding section: if God does not change in terms of His Being or His Consciousness, then there is no process of development possible for Him. This is important for the question of a *philosophy of history*, as Van Til often stressed, which explains what significance the events of history have, often in relation to the end-goal of history (if it is taken to have any). That is why Van Til says that, "this conception of eternity is of particular importance in Apologetics because it involves the whole question of the meaning of the temporal universe: it involves a definite philosophy of history" (26). Van Til is especially responding to the philosophies of history in systems of thought where God is taken to be involved in nature such that He changes with it. The change in God is typically understood in terms of a greater self-discovery of God, where the passage of time brings new facts about Himself or of His knowledge of the world into existence. However, if the passage of time does not mean any succession of moments in God, even after time has been created, then His changing because of the passage of time is precluded. Instead, God fully knows Himself (He knows everything about Himself that there could be known).

3.4.5 Self-Sufficiency and The Trinity

This leads up to the final aspect of God to be explained: God exists as the Trinity, "as a tri-personality" (28). That is, God exists as three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And these three Persons have one Being. Naturally, this should not be taken to be a contradiction to the statement that God is not composed of parts. "The three persons of the trinity are co-substantial; not one is derived in his substance from either or both of the others. Yet there are three distinct persons in this unity; the diversity and the identity are equally underived" (28). *Co-substantiality* here refers to the fact that each Person partakes fully of God's Being: there is no part that could be called *e.g.* the

Father's part of the divine Being. God's Being remains a unity, with each Person fully sharing that Being. As such, all attributes of God's Being belongs fully to each Person. The result is that there is a fundamental diversity to God, in that He exists as three Persons. At the same time, there is a fundamental unity to God, in that there is only one Being. Moreover, neither the diverse Persons nor the unity of the one Being is more ultimate than the other, such that the Persons are derived from the Being, or the Being from the Persons. Recall that to be underived is to have no source or to not be the effect of any cause. The result, that diversity and the identity are equally underived is one of the most central tenets of Van Til's Presuppositionalism. Since God as Creator is the ultimate source of reality, the conclusion is that the categories of unity and diversity are equally *co-ultimate*. Co-ultimacy refers to the equally underived status of these two categories, by virtue of their reflecting the equally co-ultimate Persons and Being of God.

This brings us to the first epistemological claim derived from a theological premise:

Theological Premise 1. *The Christian Theistic Trinity provides conceptual co-ultimacy of unity and diversity.*

Epistemological Claim 1. *Epistemological problems that arise from (implicit) commitment to the fundamental unity or diversity of reality are resolved by the Christian Theistic Trinity.*

3.4.6 God's Counsel: Meaning Holism and Realism

It has been indicated that God is unchanging and simple (not composed of parts), and that by extension His knowledge of creation is unchanging. But, it is not merely that God has simply known from all eternity all that would be the case in Creation. In Van Til's terminology, any object of knowledge is called a *fact*. Reformed Theology holds that it is God's "comprehensive interpretation of the facts that makes the facts what they are" (Van Til 2008, 32). The facts are what they are according to God's plan and purpose.² This plan is comprehensive and determinative of what comes to pass.

This plan or counsel³ of God encompasses all created reality (nothing at the creaturely level of being happens that falls outside this plan),⁴ and is unchangeable, determining everything that happens.⁵ God has determined all of creation and history before they began.

The end result of this is God's control of all that comes to pass according to His *decrees*. It is in His decrees that God determined everything beforehand. That is, His decrees are the specific aspects of His counsel. As such, when the question is posed, "Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?" (Lam. 3:37), Reformed Theology takes such commands to be what God has decreed from the beginning to fulfill His counsel (Isa. 46:10). This serves to underline the comprehensiveness of God's plan for reality, even extending to matters of apparently pure chance: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Prov. 16:33).

2. Purpose may connote change to some readers. However, in Reformed Theology this is denied. Reformed Theology, and Van Til likewise, insists that the Creator-creature distinction between the Divine and human minds means that much of what is said regarding God will seem to exist in paradox. Not least is that God is both three and one. However, the distinction being in place, Reformed Theology holds that while what is said about God is true, it is limited to a true analogy, such the Divine reality, though rightly represented in the analogies used, nevertheless transcends finite categories. As such, what is an irreconcilable paradox at the level of human thought, is reconcilable in God

3. That God's plan is called a counsel emphasises that it is a plan made by three Persons.

4. "Him who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11)

5. "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring[/Decreeing] the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (Isa. 46:9-10)

Van Til closely ties “the plan or counsel of this God pertaining to reality” (Van Til 1955, 235) to the question of meaning. By *meaning* he refers to any significance given to facts, whether existential, historical, telic, or otherwise in terms of the worldview held by the person assigning meaning. To refer back to the worldview example given earlier, the meaning of Christ’s rising from the dead would be the occurrence of a strictly material phenomenon to the Physicalist, without even the possibility of spiritual significance, while on the Christian account it vindicates Jesus as the Son of God. In Van Til’s terminology, *interpretation* is the process of assigning meaning to facts, including how they should be understood as objects of knowledge (Van Til 2003, 7). For example, the difference between the physicalist and the Christian Theist generalizes from the different views they would take of the resurrection, to the significance they would give to a cup on the table. To the physicalist, what may be known of the cup is limited to ultimately physical categories of interpretation: knowledge of it is traced to physical causes in the brain and environment, and so also personal experience of it and the significance of that cup in “the grand scheme” of things and history. As such, interpretation includes an analysis of the theory of justification of knowledge. And since the analysis of all these factors occurs internal to the human mind, Van Til specifies this as humanity making itself the final reference point of interpretation.

In contrast, in Christian Theism⁶ God having a comprehensive plan that assigns meaning to all facts means that any analysis of meaning has an objective standard to be measured against (7). In all interpretation of facts, the assigning of meaning is a re-interpretation. God’s initial assignment of meaning in His counsel was the first “interpretation.” Van Til notes that this word is used in an unusual way when applied to God, since it suggests that the fact first exists and is then assigned meaning rather than the fact coming to be what it is because of the meaning assigned to it in God’s plan. Nevertheless, speaking of God’s original assignment of meaning as an interpretation enables human assignment of meaning to be termed *re-interpretation*, stressing the derivative nature of human assignment of meaning (35). Human interpretation is either discovery of the meaning at a finite level that was already there in the Divine Mind, or it is misascription of meaning to facts and therefore misinterpretation. Secondly, because God is unchanging, His plan never changes, and therefore the meaning determined by the plan is fixed. This requires taking into the assertion that knowledge includes meaning and facts have meaning (which is not typically ascribed to facts).

This leads to a specific kind of *meaning holism*. Whereas meaning holism typically refers to a linguistic conception of a particular word’s meaning depending on all other words, in Presuppositional Epistemology, the kind of holism at play is that of the meaning of facts depending on other facts.

It is the plan of God that gives any fact meaning in terms of the plan of God. The whole meaning of any fact is exhausted by its position in and relation to the plan of God. This implies that every fact is related to every other fact. God’s plan is a unit. And it is this

6. There are many aspects of Van Til’s analysis that I do not have space for in this analysis. This includes his argumentation that non-Christian Theistic epistemologies likewise make man the final reference point of interpretation. Even when making active use of the concept of a god or gods in their epistemology, they ultimately make that god either beyond human thought such that man’s mind functions independently and without reliance upon that god, making human persons again the final reference point of interpretation. Or, that god is likewise subject to laws of logic, thought, and other relevant categories by which humanity understands creation. Since those laws are either in the human or exist independently “out there” to be grasped by the human mind, humanity once again becomes the ultimate reference point. Naturally this sketch finds much fuller expression across the works of Van Til, and again rests on his understanding of the Trinity, such that this conclusion has its justification in a theological and transcendental argument beyond the scope of this essay. The reciprocal impact of these other aspects on the core of the epistemology presented here should not be underestimated, but is largely a matter of nuancing and extension, since these core epistemological considerations remain in place.

unity of the plan of God, founded as it is in the very being of God, that gives the unity that we look for between all the finite facts (Van Til 1969b, 6).

Van Til here claims the total interrelation of all facts with all other facts. This includes the unity sought for when attempting to relate facts to categories (such as animals to their species, or parts to the whole to which they belong). Moreover, this total interrelation is given meaning by the plan that determines its structure. This gives Van Til's meaning holism:

Theological Premise 2. *All facts are determined by God's counsel, which includes a specific reason and consequent meaning for each fact in relation to all other facts.*

Epistemological Claim 2. *The meaning of a fact is objectively and exclusively determined by God's counsel in terms of its place in relation to all other facts.*

The other result is that of *realism* with respect to groupings of facts. By such groupings I mean groups such as "all triangles" and "some hairs on his head." Such groups that involve the unification of various particular instances of some kind are called *universals*, and will receive more extensive treatment later. Realism about such universal categories is most easily defined in contrast to its opposite: *ism*. Nominalism "asserts that there are no entities of certain sorts [...] nominalist theses typically deny the existence of universals or abstract entities" (Cowling and Giberman 2025). In contrast, realism asserts that such entities and universals exist. Realists can then say that when we talk about universals (like blueness or boils-at-100-degrees-celsius), we are actually referring to something (as one might refer to a chair) when making assertions. The truth of the assertion would then depend in some way on whether the universal you predicate of the subject has the right relation to it. For instance, water is such that it boils-at-100-degrees-celsius under specific conditions. A realist would say that you refer to a universal that exists when you predicate that it universally holds for all water under specified conditions that it boils at 100°Celsius. Such a claim is thereby understood in terms of reference that is made to a universal that is real—out there, independent of the human mind, as opposed to a product of it.

Realism has a long and contested history (Miller 2024), but the challenge for the nominalist is to explain particulars without the use of universals (Cowling and Giberman 2025). Van Til specifically rejects nominalism on the basis of its being "directly opposed to the idea of the plan of God" (Van Til 1969b, 105). For, if God has a unified all-encompassing plan for the world, then the particulars of this world are ultimately understood in terms of that universal. Van Til's point in this is that "according to theism the relation of the human mind to the objects of the physical universe is mediated through the plan of God" (105). That is, the plan of God is the source of the objective relations between facts, which relations means there are universals that are ultimately understandable in terms of the universal of the plan of God, which brings all the particulars together without losing their distinctions. This explains why, on the assumptions of Presuppositionalism, nominalism is not a tenable option. This does not yet express a critique of nominalism by Presuppositionalism. Such a would be transcendental in character (looking whether anti-nominalism can justify the presuppositions it holds to) as will be covered later in this chapter.

However, the point at present is that it is the case that Presuppositionalism is realist with regards to universals, and thereby committed to an epistemology making use of universals and particulars in the sense explained. This is a fact that has not often been stressed. It will be important for an endeavour seeking to relate Van Til's work to analytic philosophy for which there seems to be increasing attention (Anderson 2009, see; 2023). On the basis of his realism, Van Til stresses that the metaphysical categories of universals (metaphysical, because they are taken to exist in some sense) and

particulars generate a problem for epistemology because if either particulars or universals are ultimate, intelligibility is lost: the capacity to understand particulars in terms of universals could no longer be explained.

Theological Premise 3. *God's plan determines all facts according to His purpose such that all facts are interrelated with all other facts in accordance with this plan.*

Epistemological Claim 3. *Realism with regards to universals is correct.*

This gives a structure of knowledge where two kinds of relations between facts are asserted. The first relation is that of each fact to all other facts in such a way as to produce all groupings, kinds, and collections (universals) that can be referred to. The second is that of each fact's relation to God's plan in its interrelatedness to all other facts. This implies a specific meaning for all facts in terms of God's plan. Since these relations reflect an objective reality in the Divine Mind, they are themselves objective. Moreover, since these relations obtain as a result of God's plan, and since this plan cannot change, they are fixed.

However, in both the knowledge of a fact in terms of its meaning, as well as in the sense of understanding it in terms of the relations which hold with respect to it (such as an animal belonging to a species, or all water boiling at 100°Celsius under specific conditions), requires knowledge of all relations. Since God knows everything, this supplies a Mind capable of holding this knowledge structure. However, the question is then how human knowledge is possible, and what should be understood by it. This is examined in the next section.

Theological Premise 4. *God as all-knowing can ground meaning holism and realism with respect to universals.*

Epistemological Claim 4. *Knowledge for God consists of knowing all facts in interrelation according to His counsel.*

3.5 Knowledge and the Creator-creature Divide

God is the self-sufficient source of all being. This means that God's being is qualitatively different from that of any creature. (Van Til 2003, 9) From this follows an absolute distinction between God as Creator and all creatures. Note that though *creature* has a negative connotation in non-theological English, it simply means a created being. This is in opposition to an analogy of being as in Aquinas, where one might think of there being a scale of being, from God to man and to things above and below man. There is instead an division between God, the Creator, and everything that is created with an absolute divide in terms of being. This divide does not mean the absence of relations between God and Creation. However, it does mean that human categories are not directly applicable to God. This does not mean no human knowledge of God, but it does mean a qualification of such knowledge (section 3.5.2).

Furthermore, there is no crossing this divide in being from creature to God or *vice versa*, so that God could lower Himself to changing or elevate humanity to the level of His Being. If this seems to contradict the doctrine of Christ's incarnation, it is worth pointing out that the doctrine has since the Council of Nicea taught that the changeable human nature of Christ was taken on by the second person of the Trinity, the Son, without intermixture of the divine essence with the human, so that there was no change introduced into God. As with His Being, God and His knowledge is on an entirely

different side of the divide from human being and knowledge. This raises the question of how human knowledge is to be understood, given the preceding section's insistence on meaning holism and realism.

3.5.1 An Initial Idea to be Supported: If the Trinity Exists, Then There is no Justifying Knowledge or Rationality Without the Trinity

It is necessary now to specify an intuition generated by this description of the Trinity. The Trinity is unchanging and can't possibly change being self-sufficient, and this includes the Trinity's knowledge of creation. In that case, there is *comprehensive knowledge* of the world and of history that exists before human thinkers should come on the scene to examine this world and its history.⁷

The intuition generated by this (and which will be further specified by additional doctrines regarding the Trinity) is that what we understand under knowledge and rationality would be determined by what is already in the divine Mind before time began, if this Mind exists. That is, the Trinity as described would be determinative of rationality and knowledge. This being the case, it would follow that a right understanding of rationality and knowledge would depend upon the Trinity.

This claim requires two clarifications. Firstly, when Van Til talks about the "possibility of knowledge" (Van Til 1969b, 74) or the "intelligibility of science, philosophy and theology" (Van Til 1969a, ch. 11) he is making meta-epistemological claims. Knowledge requires belief that are justified. But the justification offered comes in terms of an epistemology. Moreover, this epistemology has certain metaphysical and ethical consequences as part of a worldview. Van Til would ask: can you justify the way you justify your knowledge? That is, if your knowledge is justified in terms of an epistemology that is untenable in terms of meta-epistemological considerations, then your knowledge was never justified in the first place. You may be accurate in designating certain beliefs as knowledge in the sense of those beliefs being true and you having, practically speaking, the needed grounds to hold that belief as knowledge. For instance, we may well assume that we are justified in our belief about the accuracy of our memories. An epistemology is to account for such seeming certainty. However, Van Til holds with the skeptic that your epistemology needs to not be self-defeating. The forms of self-defeat Van Til focuses on is that of internal and transcendental incoherence (corresponding to the internal and transcendental critique). Presuppositional Epistemology argues that only by means of reference to the Trinity can an epistemology avoid such self-defeat. Secondly, a key element to Presuppositionalism is the idea that part of an apologetic discussion is making the interlocutor epistemologically self-aware: they have a view of the world including some ideas regarding being or mind, and the idea is then that since that forms part of the disagreement about religious belief, it is legitimate and proper to challenge and help the interlocutor to develop their ideas to the point of being giving their basic commitments, and to then consider the presuppositions involved transcendently. This makes Presuppositional Epistemology especially a meta-epistemological endeavour, as McConnel (2005, 586): Van Til assumed the legitimacy of human knowledge, and then asked what the pre-conditions of such knowledge are.

This sets the scene for the following claim. A philosophical system that assumes knowledge or rationality can be adequately understood without the Trinity has, in effect, excluded the trinity from the outset (Van Til 1969b, 202). This is because such a philosophical system has assumed a view of rationality and knowledge that is incompatible with the consequences of the Trinity existing. If rationality and knowledge are taken to be understandable up to a point without the Trinity (and the Trinity may be found to be relevant later), then the fundamentality of the Trinity for rationality and knowledge is made optional, and thereby denied.

7. Comprehensive knowledge refers to the knowledge state to which there cannot be added further knowledge

This fundamental claim of Presuppositionalism is made even more necessary as a consequence of the Trinity by how Van Til fleshes out the doctrines of creation, God’s counsel, and God’s providence. But, the underlying intuition remains: if the Christian Theistic Trinity exists, It has necessary consequences for how knowledge and rationality are to be understood. In fact, anything less than the assumption of the consequences that It has for epistemology means that it has been assumed that a different God, if any, exists (Van Til 2003, 215). Consequently, any system that assumes facts and knowledge can be understood without the Trinity has from the outset assumed the Trinity does not exist without having proven this point. As such, perhaps the most fundamental claim of Presuppositional Apologetics as an evaluation of other worldviews may be stated as follows:

Theological Premise 5. *The Christian Theistic Trinity’s fundamental role in shaping what knowledge is means that it has necessary consequences for human knowledge and rationality.*

Epistemological Claim 5. *A philosophical system that assumes knowledge or rationality can be adequately understood without the Trinity has, in effect, excluded the trinity from the outset.*

A Preview of the Critique of Hinge Epistemology via Coliva

The significance of the preceding epistemological claim may be seen in examining Coliva’s critique of Quasi-Fideism. She argues that Quasi-Fideism fails because “God exists” as a proposition is not critical to rationality. In doing this, she shows that the Christian Theistic God is assumed to not exist. For, “God exists” is treated as at best a loose proposition, which, on the basis of Christian Theism, it could not possibly be.

This is plain to see in the statements of Coliva on “God exists” as a potential hinge. The loss of commitment to “God exists” would mean “nothing detrimental to the proper exercise of our rational faculties” (Coliva 2025, 4). As such, “it is apparent that ‘God exists’ is not itself a hinge of epistemic rationality. For one can form justified beliefs about material objects, without holding such a hinge. Its abandonment has no effect on those practices of ours that are constitutive of epistemic rationality, and it would not plunge us into irrationality altogether” (10). In analyzing these statement it is necessary to note again that Coliva rightly takes the parity argument of Pritchard to be that “God exists” is justifiably taken as a religious hinge because of its necessity for rationality of religious believers.

Two problems arise from the fact that Coliva takes hinges to be such that, if lost, they would destroy rationality wholesale if removed from the commitments of a rational agent. Firstly, her definition of rationality is limited to that of forming “justified beliefs about material objects”. This makes rationality fundamentally (and, in effect, exclusively) a matter of epistemic justification as regards empirical investigation. That leaves the question, for instance, of rationality in the question of morals, defunct. If it taken to be desirable to make morality an arational matter (so that *e.g.* someone can contradict themselves in believing murder to be both wrong and acceptable in the same case at the same time) then this does not pose a problem. If, however, if it is undesirable to say that there is such a thing as moral progress or moral right and wrongs as Coliva seems desirous of doing (2012, 56), then it also seems necessary to be able to rationally evaluate moral questions. And, given that Hinge Epistemologists defend against skepticism regarding rationality by means of hinges, it does seem like we would then need moral hinges of some kind. Yet, the presence or absence of a moral hinge does not seem likely to immediately produce a breakdown of our ability to form epistemically justified beliefs about material objects, except for his hands. That is, it seems very plausible that people can and do localize skepticism about particular hinges.

The second problem seems to be more fundamental in that it seems to have led to the first. There seems to be an ambiguity at play in the way hinges are understood to function. Let us summarize Hinge Epistemology's (and, by extension, Coliva's) view of hinges by saying that a person's hinges together form the (often implicit) assumptions of a worldview in terms of which rational evaluation occurs. More granularly expressed, hinges form (as it were) brick-by-brick the possibility of the house of rationality, such that if someone denies a specific hinge (like that there are external objects or that one has a body), they are doubting something they have to treat as certain in order to be able to rationally exercise doubt in the first case. The ambiguity in this is that one may take this in one of two ways. The first way, which seems to be the point to me, is that the possibility and means of *vindicating* rationality lies in recognizing the use of hinges that have been there all along (Pritchard 2022a). That is, if someone gives up a hinge, or wishes to doubt hinges, then they are giving up something they require for an adequate account of rationality. The second way, which Coliva employs here, is to say that giving up such a hinge is like pulling out a cornerstone brick out of the house of rationality: rationality comes tumbling down because a key ingredient (that hinge) is no longer in place. That this is her view may be seen from the fact that she explicitly rejects "God exists" as a hinge on the ground that rationality (in terms of empirical beliefs) remains intact after such a hinge is lost. The standard employed, therefore, is that a true hinge cannot be lost as a commitment without rational inquiry becoming impossible.

However, given the inconsistencies of people, even assuming the Hinge Epistemological account Coliva herself gives, it is perfectly reasonable to think of someone supplying *ad hoc* explanations for the world around them in the absence of a hinge that Coliva considers essential to rationality. For example, think of someone who insists that he does not believe he has two hands, despite being able to see them. Let us further suppose that his having given up that hinge is evidenced by his not doing anything with his hands. Assume further that this person is a physicist, or some other empirical scientist, who is able to afford lab assistants who carry out his instructions. It seems entirely plausible to me that such a person would be able to rationally engage in empirical research leading to epistemically justified beliefs about material objects. That is, it seems very plausible that people can and do localize skepticism about or loss of particular hinges.

On the other hand, assuming the Hinge Epistemological point of view for a moment, we would not trust a person we believe to be missing a hinge to give a proper account of epistemic justification or rationality. Such a person's ability to vindicate epistemic justification would fail. For, though the person may still behave in a generally rational way, it seems necessary that any account of that rationality would have to explain two fundamentally different patterns of belief justification. Both the behavior towards the hands as well as to the rest of the empirical world around that person would have to be justified. Since such a distinction seems arbitrary and therefore untenable, that person's theory of rationality would be doomed from the start, since it attempts to accommodate an irrational distinction. Coliva's view of rationality cannot accommodate the rational behavior nor distinguish between worldview internal and the transcendental justification aspects of the preceding example. Moreover, I have shown that the standard she employs for testing if something is a hinge could not be passed by her own hinges. As such, it would be more reasonable to ask whether rationality could still be defended if the commitment "the Christian Theistic God exists" is lost (a very different question to the one Coliva poses), and Presuppositionalism centers on addressing precisely this question. That is, the central argument of Presuppositional Apologetics is that rationality cannot be justified except when assuming the Trinity. Additionally, Presuppositionalism would also analyze Coliva's form of

rationality as something that cannot be out of hand assumed to be neutral. I will now further examine the Presuppositional Epistemology that leads to this apologetic.

It should be added that there is a difference between a person behaving rationally and being able to give an account of rationality. However, the meta-epistemological concern driving Presuppositionalism is to ask whether the account of rationality that is implicitly or explicitly held is justifiable. And when Coliva makes rationality entirely a matter of empirical investigation, this raises meta-epistemological questions that Presuppositionalism is eager to answer. Key to doing so is considering what the transition from one side of the Creator-creature divide to the other entails for knowledge.

3.5.2 Presuppositional View of Human Knowledge as Analogical

Having described God as self-sufficient, such that everything is derived from Him and the categories by which He understands Himself is entirely found within Him, two things seem to follow: the necessity of revelation and *analogical knowledge* of God. From these also follow the necessity of analogical knowledge in general.

Van Til argues that for any knowledge of the Christian Theistic God to be possible, He would have to reveal Himself. Given the Creator-creature divide, it is not possible to reason from creation to the Creator simply by means of human categories (*e.g.* through reasoning from apparently neutral assumptions, such as commonly occurs in theistic proofs). Any such process of reasoning would necessarily result in a God comprehensible strictly in terms of human categories, since He could be discovered and specified by them. However, claims Van Til (and Reformed Theology more broadly) a revelation of God expressing His self-knowledge in terms of human categories is feasible. That is to say, revelation that gives limited but true knowledge of such a God is feasible.

The key idea is that human created categories are *analogies* to the divine reality. Then revelation makes use, for instance, of the love of a father for a son to teach something of the love of God the Father for God the Son in the Trinity. At the same time, it is to be understood that such an analogy is partial, but true. *true*, meaning that if we wish to think of relationship between the Father and the Son, we can be helped to the relationship between a father and a son. The analogy corresponds to God's knowledge of Himself. The analogy would be *partial* in that it is clear that the divine reality transcends the corresponding created reality.

This expresses what is meant in Reformed (and broader) theology by knowledge of God being *analogical*. Our knowledge of God corresponds truly but on a limited, finite scale to the full and infinite scale of God's knowledge of Himself.⁸ Part of this is that our categories correspond truly, yet in limited fashion, to the Divine categories. In this way, knowledge about God ultimately relies on the knowledge He has of Himself and the categories He has in Himself. The term *analogical knowledge* therefore does not stress the use of analogies but the analogous nature of the knowledge of God: there is a limited, accurate representation of God's knowledge of Himself that describes Him truly, but partially. Additionally, analogical knowledge depends on God's revelation in order for the knowledge claims about God to be justified. A last point to note in this respect is that Reformed Theology holds that God has actually revealed Himself in this way in nature so that the world reveals both who He is and His counsel (Van Til 2003, 35–6). This revelation is called *general* because it is universally to all humanity in general (35). Moreover, it is to be noted that general revelation is understandable by all

8. By knowledge being infinite here is meant that God as object of knowledge, humanly speaking, would not be understandable by any finite set of assertions. Otherwise expressed, it would take eternity for a finite subject to learn all there is to know about God.

by virtue of all having the image of God (Van Til 1955, 393). The end result is that general revelation is sufficient for the purpose for which it is given (Van Til 1967, 264–266): who God is and what He morally requires of humanity is clearly revealed to all.

A significant aspect of Van Til's epistemology is that he stressed that not only knowledge of God is analogical, but also knowledge in general. In order to explain this claim, it is first necessary to define the image of God in each individual person. The image of God enables humanity to understand God's revelation and has two aspects. The wider aspect is each person's morality and rationality (Van Til 1977, 174). The narrower aspect of the image consists in that "when man was created he had true knowledge, true righteousness and holiness" (Van Til 1955, 29). The adjective "true" here refers to a distinction between formal and material components to knowledge, righteousness and holiness. How this relates to *righteousness* (doing that which morally good according to God's will) and *holiness* (being free from wrongdoing against God) will be examined later. At this point it is useful to expand on the image in terms of knowledge.

Presuppositional Epistemology, in focusing on meta-epistemological considerations, assumes the "validity of human knowledge" (McConnel 2005, 568). The wider aspect of the image of includes rationality (Van Til 1977, 174). The consequence is that "all men, whatever their ethical relation to God, can equally use the natural gifts of God" (Van Til 1955, 61). The natural gifts of God here refers to the ability to acquire knowledge. Empirical science is the premier example of the use of the "natural gifts" to learn more about the world. Van Til assumes that empirical research, philosophy, and other forms of employing rationality leads to beliefs that are justified as knowledge, and asks what the presuppositions or pre-conditions of such justified knowledge are. This is not to say that all the results of the use of reason leads to justified knowledge, but that the epistemological intrigue is not so much that humans have justified knowledge, but what the pre-conditions are for justifying knowledge. Knowledge requires belief that is justified, and knowledge is assumed to be generally validly called knowledge, and so justification is succeeding. But the justification offered comes in terms of grounds, and this varies per worldview. As such, the question becomes when are you justified in holding your justifying grounds? That is can you justify the way you justify your knowledge?

Formal knowledge consists of the beliefs validly considered knowledge, considered separately from an attempt to justify or ground the beliefs as knowledge. *Material knowledge* is formal knowledge that is also justified and understood in terms of the meaning it receives in God's counsel. Van Til's term is actually true knowledge, but he uses this term in two ways: only God has true and full knowledge in the sense of being to know in terms of the structure of knowledge that involves epistemic holism. Human general knowledge then is true in the formal sense of relating facts according to the interrelation of all facts in the Divine counsel. For instance, learning that all water boils at 100° Celsius is true knowledge in the formal sense.

Yet, true in the sense of formally correct knowledge is not what Van Til generally meant by true knowledge. Rather, the assumption of the validity of human knowledge, noted above, means that when Van Til speaks of the possibility of having true knowledge requiring the Christian Theistic God (Van Til 1969b, 131), he does not mean that God's existence is needed as an axiom by which to deductively derive knowledge. Rather, his assertion is that the justification of knowledge requires the concept of the Trinity and the Christian Theistic worldview (Van Til 1977, 173). True knowledge is therefore distinguished from formal knowledge in that it not only recognizes the interrelation of facts in a manner analogical to that determined by the Divine Counsel, but also the meaning of the fact in relation to the meaning given by that counsel. Naturally, human ascription of meaning to a fact is

partial, but can truly correspond to the meaning holistic structure of knowledge in the Divine Mind. Furthermore, true knowledge also recognizes God as the *ultimate ground* of the fact and the knowledge of that fact. By ultimate ground I mean that in the final analysis, God is taken to be the explanation for how that fact came to be and the ground for how that fact can be known.

Presuppositional Epistemology takes knowledge and rationality to be understood in terms of worldviews. It is a given for Presuppositional Epistemology that justification of knowledge and the evaluation of evidence is done relative to a worldview (recall section 1.2). As such, the above claims come down to true knowledge being formal knowledge justified in terms of the Christian Theistic worldview, with the Trinity being the most fundamental commitment of that worldview for understanding knowledge (section 3.3). However, some distinctions are in order. Firstly, that the Christian Theistic worldview is taken to be the unique worldview that can justify knowledge without becoming internally incoherent or contradicting its presuppositions (Van Til 1969b, 123) is a result of the structure of knowledge that was developed as the consequence of the Presuppositional view of God (section 3.4.6). As such, it is a worldview internal commitment, and in and of itself has no relevance in relation to other worldviews. However, the claim that the Christian Worldview exclusively provides the Trinity that can fulfill the function of grounding knowledge has two consequences in relation to other worldviews. Firstly, a specific view of other worldviews is at play. Secondly, that specific view plays a fundamental role in Presuppositional Apologetics. Since the goal of this chapter is to specify the commitments of Presuppositional Epistemology to get an epistemologically clear account of Presuppositional Apologetics, and abstract from there an account of rationality to extend into a theory of deep disagreement, I will examine the rest of the Presuppositional Epistemology in terms of worldviews.

It is necessary to define *interpretation*, which is closely tied to knowledge for Van Til (118–124). *Interpretation* occurs when a person holding a particular worldview ascribes either meaning or grounds to a fact, or gives grounds for knowing that fact. This is done in terms of the worldview of that person. This involves relating the facts to the interpretive model offered by their worldview, which is in principle broad enough to include epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical considerations. The differences that can result with different have been illustrated by the example of different meanings being assigned to the resurrection (supposing it is a fact) by Physicalism and Christian Theism. Van Til called the interpretative model applied to any particular subject its philosophy. So, in the case of historical facts, any attempt at interpreting historical facts would be called a philosophy of history (Van Til 1977, 1–2). A worldview then has multiple such “philosophies of ...” (often implicitly held and un(der)developed by the person who holds the worldview) that determines the significance assigned to facts by the person holding the worldview. One’s philosophy of history is how one ascribed meaning to historical fact, if such meaning is ascribed in one’s worldview. Worldviews also determine whether facts are taken to exist (Van Til 1969b, 117).

Theological Premise 6. *On the Christian Theistic worldview, rationality and the ability to acquire knowledge is accounted for in terms of the wider image of God.*

Epistemological Claim 6. *The question is not whether true beliefs can be justified as knowledge, but whether the worldview in question has a justification of knowledge that is not internally incoherent or inconsistent with its presuppositions.*

Theological Premise 7. *Only the Christian Theistic worldview has the Trinity that is needed for justifying knowledge.*

Epistemological Claim 7. *Only the Christian Theistic worldview does not suffer from internal inconsistency or a contradiction between its commitments and presuppositions.*

Yet Van Til is anxious at every point to emphasize that God is necessary for knowledge, and so natural science must implicitly rely on Him, even while implicitly or explicitly denied by its practitioners. As such, the apparent neutrality of natural sciences is rejected while its successes are explained and celebrated within the presuppositional framework. But it is not merely that Van Til insists that he has never denied that unbelievers do not have “a great deal of knowledge about this world which is true as far as it goes” (Van Til 1974, 26) (formal knowledge). It is in fact part and parcel of his method to insist that even formal knowledge is analogical in that it makes use of laws of logic and various natural laws, which in turn require explanation that rests in God. In this sense, Van Til states that knowledge (and interpretation and predication) either has its *ultimate point of reference* in God or man. Ultimate reference of knowledge here refers to that which is given as the foundation for knowledge. Van Til would argue that either it is man as having the laws of logic in his mind or as grasping them out there that is the foundation for formal knowledge, or God is. It must be emphasized that this view of knowledge is in no way contradictory to the success or conductance of natural science. Natural science especially studies empirical phenomena in terms of natural laws. That is a field in which formal knowledge, in the sense of collecting and relating data is rich, and which is precisely accounted for by the component of formal knowledge. However, this does not mean that the understanding of knowledge in natural sciences generally is neutral with respect to the question of God. Rather, Van Til argued that induction as typically understood rests upon the idea that any fact whatsoever might appear and therefore bases a scientific open-mindedness on an acceptance of the possibility that even anti-theistic facts might appear. This treats the possibility of predication as something that may or may not depend upon God and represents an approach to knowledge that implicitly already implies denial of the Christian Theistic God.

It perhaps worth deviating from the line of reasoning to recognize that such a claim by Presuppositional Epistemology may seem very naive and arrogant. However, it perhaps a point of amelioration that any worldview of philosophical system, insofar as it claims to be the right one, must by implication claim that others are false. This is of course not the norm for the detached standards of analytic philosophy. At the same time, when analyzing the epistemology of an apologetic argument, which in the nature of the case involves arguing for why its position is *the* correct one, it seems difficult to avoid statements that could be offensive to those who do not hold that worldview (as for instance in the term anti-Theism). Van Til’s own approach to this was to argue that it is important for each person party to the discussion to recognize each other’s worldviews as requiring analysis *on their own terms* (Van Til 1969b, 205). The disagreement is real, and the claims are exclusive, but not without taking the disputant seriously and in the context of disputational norms meant to hold each worldview to the same standard. The extent to which this is accomplished is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.

3.5.3 Worldviews Distinguished: The In Principle/In Practice Ethical Antithesis and Neutral Ground

What are the differences between Christian Theistic and anti-Theistic worldviews? The nuances involved in answering this question has caused a lot of misdirected criticisms. The first point to note is that of a specific type of common ground between all worldviews: Presuppositional Epistemology holds that “metaphysically believers and unbelievers have all reality in common” (Van Til 1969a, ch.

9). This falls into two major categories. The first is that all persons share the same world filled with general revelation. Secondly, all human persons have the image of God, and by extension (except in exceptional cases) rationality and morality. This rationality includes the ability to acquire formal knowledge, as noted above. The image of God in humanity also includes the *sense of deity* by which there is a necessary recognition of God in His general revelation. As such, the claim is made that all people everywhere necessarily recognize God in nature because of the combination of general revelation being universally present and the sense of deity being part of the image of God. Everyone therefore necessarily knows both God and His morality (Van Til 1977, 160).

This point left as-is would clearly be untenable, given both those who deny Christian Theism and those who deny Theism in general. It is at this point that a difference is made between the holders of non-Christian Theistic worldviews and the Christian Theistic worldview. Reformed Theology takes mankind to have been created under ethical probation by God. When humanity failed to pass the probation in what is known as *the Fall* when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree. The Fall was the result of *sin*, and the entrance of sin into the world. Sin is the trespassing of God's moral law (Van Til 1955, 31), which is the objective standard of morality in Reformed Theology. Knowledge of this moral standard is given with the human conscience that communicates the ethical content of God's moral law to the human consciousness (Van Til 2003, 33).

The ethical consequences of the Fall are best understood in terms of total depravity and total inability, which I will overview now, before examining their shared epistemological consequence. *Total depravity* means that: "sin has [...] corrupted the will of man. [...] the natural man is at enmity against God" and *moral inability* means that, "the natural man cannot will to do God's will" (Van Til 1955, 71). The doing of God's will here refers to obeying God's moral law. In the case of moral inability, there is an utter inability to will that which is morally good, and in the case of total depravity there is an utter alignment of the will to that which is morally evil. Throughout, humanity's behaviour is characterized by enmity with God: "After the fall, therefore, all men [...] are opposed to God" (Van Til 1974, 253).

It would be natural to object at this point that the above picture does not fit the facts: it is quite clear that humanity is not as absolutely evil as indicated above. Additionally, if humans cannot will the good, they cannot be held morally responsible for what they cannot do. Both of these are legitimate concerns. However, they are also both answered in Reformed Theology. The fact that humanity is not as bad as it could be is explained by the work of God restraining evil. This is called *common grace*. The term common refers to the fact that all humanity have in common that they experience this grace and are indebted to thankfulness to God for it. This term distinguishes common grace from *saving grace*, which is grace that changes the ethical orientation of the person who receives it. This does not share the universal character of common grace in that it is exclusively mediated by the Bible as *special revelation*. Special revelation is likewise distinguished from general revelation in that it is not universally accessible to all human persons. Common grace is taken to stop the ethical evil of humanity from coming to full expression, and which also works good things like rain in its season for those ethically alienated from Him. This qualifies the total depravity of humanity: it is absolute in principle, and in practice restrained by God, allowing also a form of good to come into expression. This form of good is called *civil good*. Civil good consists in doing things that are actually beneficial for others. However, it fails to be done out of obedience to God (moral inability) and without the presence of sin in the act (total depravity). Civil good is therefore distinguished from moral good.

The *in principle, in practice* distinction is essential to understanding Presuppositional Epistemology.

What obtains in principle has a real effect on what the situation in practice looks like in light of common grace. It is because of in principle “Absolute Ethical Antithesis” (Van Til 1974, 253) between God and humanity that common grace produces only civil good, as opposed to moral good: common grace does not change the ethical nature of humanity, and so does not remove the ethical antithesis, though it restrains the antithesis to non-absoluteness. It is therefore a matter of common grace that civil good is done to others, and a matter of ethical antithesis that this does not go beyond civil good in fallen humanity. Even in light of God’s grace then, humanity’s depravity is *total*: meaning that depravity reaches to every act. This does not mean that someone without saving grace cannot do good to their neighbor. It does mean that even such good is tainted by sin. Fallen humanity therefore has a total inability (in principle absolute, but in practice restrained) to will what is truly good, which is always done in submission to and not opposition to God, who is the source and measure of what is good. Van Til stressed with great regularity that this absolute antithesis is “one of principle, not one of full expression. If the natural man fully expressed himself as he is in terms of the principle of ethical hostility to God that dwells within his soul, he would then be a veritable⁹ devil. Obviously he is often nothing of the sort. He is not at all as ‘bad as he may be’” (253).

Beyond the nature of humanity characterized by total depravity and total inability is the epistemological consequence. Explaining the relation between the ethical antithesis with God and human interpretation, Van Til asserts that “God had interpreted the universe for him, or we may say man had interpreted the universe under the direction of God, but now he sought to interpret the universe without reference to God” (Van Til 1955, 31). When rain in its season or out of its season are taken to be entirely understandable in terms of strictly natural laws, this would be an example. Likewise, ethical systems that make no reference to God would also be attempts at interpreting the moral situation and obligations of humanity in strictly creaturely terms. As such, the moral rebellion is not merely involved in the actions undertaken externally. Also in terms of understanding the facts there is moral rebellion in refusing to acknowledge the revelatory part of their meaning. Because of the totality of rebellion, the result is total: “the natural man [without saving grace] has epistemologically nothing in common with the Christian. And this latter assertion was qualified by saying that this is so only *in principle*” (189). As there is *in principle* an *absolute* depravity and inability that results from the Fall, but which is restrained to the point of only being total, there is also an in principle absolute departure from true interpretation in opposition to God. As a result, Van Til objects against any view that states that “there is not necessarily any sin involved in what the unbeliever, or natural man, does by way of exercising his capacities for knowledge and action” (90). The rebellion in denying the God-given signification of the facts is morally culpable, making the whole issue of knowledge an ethical one, that must be understood in terms of revelation and rebellion. It has been noted that all facts fundamentally depend for their meaning upon God’s decrees. The consequence is that humanity before and after the Fall are “surrounded by a world that reveals in its every fact God’s power and divinity” (253). The ethical opposition to the God in every fact causes humanity to “suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18), and this runs through all facts.

It is the universality of this problem that obtains on Reformed Theology’s grounds that Van Til seeks to capture in Presuppositional Epistemology. This also explains what Van Til meant regarding the image of God before the Fall when he said that “man would even in every act of knowledge manifest true righteousness and true holiness” (29): there was ethical conformity before the Fall rather than opposition in the act of knowing. This explains the ethical component to a misinterpretation of the

9. “Veritable” means “true.”

facts. Van Til's contribution was to push the relation of sin and knowledge further than had been done before, to consistently note that it presents a problem for general knowledge in a way that had not been done before with any great consistency.

Important in this is that Van Til denies that "common grace [...] creates a neutral territory between believers and unbelievers" (Van Til 1974, 257). It is not that unbelievers have wills that are made morally neutral, and therefore can choose to do good or evil. Rather, common grace restrains their rebellion, such that the civil good done remains moral rebellion, though it rightly benefits another. This lack of neutral territory is the complement to the stance that all facts elicit an ethical reaction from humanity that is oriented, in principle, entirely against God.

As in the case of no neutral territory for the will, so in the case of humanity's interpretation of facts. For Van Til this follows because he further insists that there is an ethical reaction, not only to the positive moral commands, but also to God giving the commands. And since God is revealed in the facts of general knowledge, there is a consequent rebellion in relation to these everyday facts. Moreover, the God who is revealed implies various positive moral consequences (Rom. 1:18-32). This rebellion is *in principle* absolute, and so in principle the interpretation of facts would be in terms of a worldview that is entirely opposed to God. Interpretation was explained as ascribing meaning to, specifying grounds for, and justifying knowledge regarding a fact or facts. Moreover, this was taken to depend on the Trinity of Christian Theism, including all the epistemological consequences that follow from His existence. The result of an absolute ethical antithesis would be an absolute epistemological antithesis, where every aspect of the worldview employed in interpretation would evidence the orientation away from God. Van Til therefore rejects "neutral territory of interpretation" (Van Til 1977, 152). This lack of *neutral ground* in interpretation should not be confused with a lack of *common ground*. The common ground was the shared world full of general revelation and the image of God giving the capacities of morality, rationality, and the sense of Deity. The lack of neutral ground refers to a lack of epistemological common ground in terms of there being no overlap between the worldviews in terms of which interpretation is done. The lack of neutral ground would be the result of *suppressing* the knowledge of God and His moral law (172). By this is meant that the ethical orientation away from the Christian Theistic God would mean that each of the three aspects of interpretation (meaning, grounds, and justifying knowledge of a fact) would be realized in a way that fundamentally opposed Christian Theism, and the worldview itself would be one fundamentally opposed to the Christian Theistic God and His existence. Moreover, the human mind would be taken as the final point of reference in that knowledge and rationality would ultimately be explained in terms of human categories, as opposed to the Trinity. However, here as before the in principle absolute epistemological antithesis is in practice restrained (163). There is, in fact, significant common ground between worldviews because of common grace at work in terms of the metaphysical common ground. Specifically, Van Til argues that though the ethical antithesis causes one to suppress the knowledge of God in general revelation, common grace means that anti-Theistic worldviews, though fundamentally opposed to God, nevertheless have much of what is needed to justify knowledge, rationality, morality and so on implicitly held in their worldview, or in unnoticed contradiction with other worldview commitments or presuppositions.

The key thing to take away in all this is that as saving grace and common grace have in common that they operate on the image of God, they also have in common that they are exclusively ethical in nature. This is as opposed to supplying something missing in the cognitive *natural* ability of man, whether considered in regards to his psychology or the image of God more generally (Van Til 1955, 189). Humanity has the *natural* ability to understand facts in terms of their full, God-determined,

and God-revealing content, and is therefore culpable in its *moral* inability to do so. Additionally, the citation that God “enables [humanity] by this [common grace] restraint to cooperate with the redeemed of God in the development of the work He gave man to do” (Van Til 1955, 189) is explained hereby: the analog of civil good in knowledge is achieved by common grace, and enables scientific, moral, and other forms of general knowledge. God’s common grace is recognized as exclusively ethical when applied to the question of civil good. Van Til’s point is that it remains ethical at the level of knowledge.

The difference between the Christian Theistic and the anti-Theistic worldview is that saving grace has removed the ethical antithesis of those who hold it. The result is interpretation in terms of the Christian Theistic worldview found in Scripture. This is the last part of Presuppositional Epistemology that needs to be covered before overviewing the parts of the Presuppositional Apologetic relevant for the epistemological investigation in the next chapters.

3.5.4 A Change in Worldview: Saving Grace, Testimony, and Self-Attestation

Presuppositional Epistemology claims that deviation from the Christian Theistic worldview is a consequence of an ethical antithesis with the Christian Theistic God. Conversion would therefore involve a change to a fundamentally different worldview.

The Presuppositional account of this involves a number of factors. Firstly, the *testimony of the Holy Spirit* is not a verbal communication, but an affirmation in the consciousness of human persons that the revelation they see around them and in them (in having the moral law in their conscience) is true. That is, it is work done by the Holy Spirit to convince the person under consideration to accept what is observed by means of the sense of Divinity as true. This is part of common grace, since the ethical antithesis means that the data gotten from the sense of Divinity is suppressed. That some of it is nevertheless incorporated into the worldview (such as moral commitments) held as the implicit grounds for knowledge means that it is referred to as *suppressed knowledge*. Secondly, this testimony also applies to special revelation as it is found in the Bible. Special revelation presents a worldview, and part of that worldview is the commitment that faith in Christ will result in salvation from the judgment that is threatened in general revelation for breaking the moral law. Christian theology generally takes this to be an offensive message for those who are not Christians on the basis of the fundamental ethical orientation away from God. Thirdly, the basis of acceptance is special revelation’s own authority (Van Til 1969b, 117).

Most fundamentally, it is necessary to recognize that Presuppositionalism has a “two-fold structure: It is accepted on the authority” and is the necessary pre-condition of true knowledge (117). As such, though the dialogue may be significantly differently structured (as Van Til indicates), in principle, the “method of argument is first constructive. It presents the biblical view positively by showing that all factual and logical discussions by men take place by virtue of the world’s being what God in Christ says it is” (225). This is the fold that depends on acceptance on Scripture’s self-convincing authority. It corresponds to the position that it is epistemically reasonable from within your own worldview. The Christian Theist insists that this is moreover rational because there is an objective authority vindicating that specific worldview. This authority is recognized by means of the sense of Divinity. In terms of the second fold, the Presuppositional method of argument “then proceeds negatively to show that unless all facts and all logical relations be seen in the light of the Christian framework, all human interpretation fails instantly. It fails instantly in principle” (225). This recognizes both the consequences of common grace but also that non-Christian Theistic worldviews must leave interpretation and predication

unjustified if the Christian Theistic worldview is true. This is done by analyzing whether the worldview can justify its commitments and assumptions. Additionally, incoherence between assumptions and commitments must occur because of common grace. Non-Christian Theistic worldviews would therefore have no grounds for claims to knowledge or rationality, in the final analysis, if it were not for the considerations of the previous section.

3.5.5 Circularity and a Brief Look at Presuppositional Apologetics

The question then arises whether one can argue for one's worldview being rationally held. The difficulty with this is that it seems to necessarily involve *epistemic circularity*. In answer to this, Van Til distinguished two forms of circular reasoning: spiral or worldview-internal reasoning, and argumentative or vicious circularity. *Spiral* reasoning involves working out the conclusions of your commitments (Van Til 1969b, 201). For greater clarity, I shall refer to this as worldview internal reasoning. For instance, that Christian Theism has the epistemological category of seeming paradox and that it is employed in coming to terms with problems that are not reconcilable in the human mind is consistent with its worldview. For a given non-Christian Theist to have a morality that rejects the commitments of Christian morality could readily be consistent with that person's worldview regardless of whether Christianity obtains. In both cases the standard of reasonability as regards morals is being specified in terms of the respective worldviews at play. That is not vicious: it is a structural feature of our reasoning that our conclusions follow from our assumptions as they exist in our worldviews. Inconsistencies may and do occur in individual persons, but that the the system of thought that constitutes a worldview must logically lead to specific conclusions seems inescapable and necessary. This facilitates, rather than undercutting, rational inquiry.

Nevertheless, there exists *Vicious* circularity: the assumption of the desired conclusion or assumptions that are logically equivalent to the desired conclusions as a premise at the level the facts you are using in your explanation. That is, when reasoning in terms of a worldview, you necessarily use the assumptions of your worldview. But when, while using those assumptions to reason regarding a particular hypothesis, you assume what you are trying to prove with those assumptions, that is vicious. In worldview-internal reasoning, you work out the consequences of the worldview. In vicious circularity you assume a consequence you wish to work out, so that there is no argument produced *in terms of the worldview in which you are reasoning*.

But to leave the question here would make Presuppositionalism a form of worldview relativism, where everyone has their worldview, and what is true (whether as regards moral or other facts) is determined for each person by their worldview. Perhaps one could claim that the most internally coherent worldview would be the rational one to adhere to. However, this would only make the problem inductive: it would never be certain that the next, equally or more internally coherent worldview is not around the corner, and so subjectivism would not be escaped.

However, Presuppositionalism goes two steps further in attempting to conquer the potential problem of relativity. Firstly, it holds (as discussed earlier) to meta-worldview preconditions of rationality. This is typically referred to as the transcendental argument. This argument involves asking whether a worldview can consistently account for the preconditions of knowledge and predication it (at minimum) pragmatically evidences that it is holding. Presuppositionalism claims that the Christian Theistic worldview supplies the answer to the one-and-the-many problem. In the case of morality, the Triune God relates the moral particulars to His moral nature, which in turn rest in the unity of the three Persons. It has also been discussed that the need for other worldviews to solve this problem was

transcendentally argued for in terms of *common ground* (not neutral ground) that forms the foundation for understanding between worldviews while also being internally motivated by the Christian Theistic view of the metaphysical dependence of humanity on God.

Secondly, there is the appeal to the self-convincing *authority of Scripture*. Hereby is meant that Scripture is both imbued with authority and this authority is communicated to those who come in contact with it. However, since humanity is not neutral with respect to the God revealed, the response to this authority is not one of acceptance, except when grace removes the ethical orientation away from that God. Regardless of the human response, Scripture has an inherent authority in virtue of it being revelation by God who speaks authoritatively. Now, on Christian Theism's terms, the Christian worldview is exclusively coherent if God has in fact revealed Himself.¹⁰ If He has revealed Himself in the Bible, then the Bible does demonstrate an authority on the basis of which it is rational to take on the Biblical worldview. Otherwise, it cannot be a revelation of a God with authority, which is central to the Biblical claim. Consequently, what Presuppositionalism believes it achieves with the preceding step is that, under the assumption of the uniqueness of the Trinity (see 4.3.1), the impossibility of the contrary to the Christian Theistic position has been demonstrated (McConnel 2005, 566), given the Triune God's existence. For, the argument is that in the first case, the Christian worldview is justifiable, and in the second case it is authoritative and exclusive.

If the presuppositions of Presuppositionalism have been demonstrated as an effective solution to the problems raised by meta-worldview considerations, and under the assumption of its uniqueness, it follows that the Biblical worldview is the only worldview it is possible to hold rationally. This would be because it can account for its presuppositions without contradiction to its worldview commitments. The result is that Presuppositionalism's "argument [allows] only two alternatives, Christianity and skepticism" (566). And, if choosing for the skeptical worldview, one relies on an ability to make assertions, indicating that one is not yet free of the complaints raised by Presuppositionalism.

10. See 1 Cor. 15:14-19

Chapter 4

Quasi-Fideist Presuppositionalism

In the preceding chapter I have sought to outline Presuppositional Epistemology with sufficient clarity to make an engagement with the fields of Hinge Epistemology and deep disagreement possible. While other works like that of Bahnsen (1998), Bosserman (2014), and Hunt (2019) include much or all of the preceding chapter, and while Van Til's epistemology has been often discussed by adherents (McConnel 2005) and critics (Mathison 2024), I attempted to bring a focus on the epistemology that recognized it as being a position in its own right, rather than simply serving the purposes of the apologetic. In doing so, various similarities between Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositionalism came to the fore. This included the holding hinges or commitments of one's worldview as certain. Such similarities suggest the possibility of fruitful engagement between the two epistemologies. This is more so the case since Presuppositionalism has not yet been applied to the problem of deep disagreement though it has features that make it seem ideally suited for that problem. On the other hand, Hinge Epistemology has seen widespread application to the challenge to rationality that is posed by deep disagreement. Deep disagreements were characterized as those disagreements that appear to be clashes about the most fundamental aspects of our worldview (subsection 2.3).

Presuppositionalism, in opposing worldviews to worldviews in apologetics, argues that disputants are in genuine disagreement when they engage in debate about highly contested issues of the religious commitments of Christian Theism, especially that of God's existence. Further subproblems such as the problem of the one-and-the-many involves persistent and systematic disagreement. In fact, in arguing for no neutral ground between the Christian Theistic worldview and all other worldviews, Presuppositional Apologetics effectively insists on deep disagreement as the default of apologetic discussion. Quasi-Fideism, likewise, has a ready application to deep disagreement. It enables rationality to not require one objective core set of hinges, but in each case it demands that a particular relation between hinges and beliefs obtains.

The possibility of combining Quasi-Fideism with Presuppositionalism thereby presents itself. Though already suggested by Welty (1994), Nicholas Smith (2023) has been the first to grab this chance, and in so doing analyzed the epistemology of Presuppositional Apologetics as being so similar to Quasi-Fideism as to be identified with it.¹ I will critique Smith's Quasi-Fideistic Presuppositionalism as missing key aspects of the Presuppositional Epistemology. That having been accomplished, the needed groundwork will have been laid for identifying in what respects Presuppositionalism can contribute to the discussion of deep disagreement that is distinct from Quasi-Fideism. This is necessary distinction because of their noteworthy similarities, as will be seen.

1. He has also expanded his analysis to include Reformed Theology as Quasi-Fideist in Smith (2024).

Along the way, I will quite briefly address one alternative epistemological model for Reformed Theology and two critiques of Presuppositionalism, all of which will clarify the claims of Presuppositionalism as it will be applied to deep disagreement. Specifically, Smith makes claims with specific bearing on how rationality is to be understood in Presuppositional Epistemology. As such, Smith not only currently forms the only author who has attempted to systematically relate the two epistemologies, but challenging his reading requires developing an account of Presuppositionalism's view of rationality, which is required for extending Presuppositional Epistemology into a theory of deep disagreement.

It is useful to add two more points of method here. Because the theology determines the epistemology and the apologetic, part of challenging Smith's reading of Presuppositional Epistemology requires examining his understanding of the theological assumptions underlying it. For this purpose, the perspective and terminology of Presuppositionalism are still at play as in the previous chapter. This allows the consequences of Presuppositional Epistemology to be developed on its own terms. Once this account of rationality is in place, it will be possible to proceed in purely epistemological terms when addressing deep disagreement.

4.1 Quasi-Fideistic Presuppositionalism?

Having seen Presuppositionalism introduced in the previous chapter, there is much reason to think that bridges may be built between Quasi-Fideism (and Hinge Epistemology generally) and Presuppositionalism. However, there is also much reason to think that either one could not be reduced to the other. Take, for instance, the most fundamental epistemological point of contention for Van Til: knowledge cannot be justified (and in this sense, cannot be had) apart from Christian Theism supplying the Triune God as the ultimate point of reference. Quasi-Fideism allows knowledge to be justifiable with man as final point of reference. As such, when Smith argues that Presuppositionalism's epistemology is Quasi-Fideistic (Smith 2023, 32), there is good reason to think that he has missed the core concern of Presuppositionalism, and the key element of Presuppositional Epistemology. That he has confused Presuppositionalism's commitments at various point evidences itself in the three assertions by which he equates the epistemology of Presuppositional Apologetics to Quasi-Fideism. I will analyze Smith's assertions to specify a more concrete characterization of the relationship between Quasi-Fideism and Presuppositionalism.

It is worth noting first that Smith has done important work in seeking to highlight some of the most salient similarities between Quasi-Fideism and Presuppositionalism. Though the similarities have been known at least since Greg Welty's essay in 1994 (Welty 1994), much work remains to be done. Smith's goal of fruitfully bringing the two frameworks in touch with each other has been partially accomplished. This is only possible because his presentation of Presuppositional *Apologetics* is accurate as far as it goes. However, he has missed some fundamental concepts in Presuppositional Epistemology (sometimes by misunderstanding the underlying theology). Still, this shortcoming is ameliorated by the fact that Van Til never gave a clear and succinct overview of his epistemological framework and so it is necessary to extract such features from a fairly broad range of texts, as I have attempted to do in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, when he claims that there are three factors that show that Presuppositional Apologetics has a Quasi-Fideistic epistemology, several misconceptions become evident.

It may be worth pointing out that Smith discusses specifically Presuppositional Apologetics in terms of its Reformed Theological commitments and some of its resulting epistemological assumptions.

That is, he does not appear to have much awareness of Van Til having presented his own epistemology. That is partly why I have stressed Presuppositional Epistemology as the basis of the method, without which it would be difficult to rightly understand either Van Til’s method or how he arrives at it. The lack of academic discussions of Van Til’s epistemology on its own terms is a dearth that contributes to confusion between critics and adherents of Presuppositionalism alike. This may be partly starting to change, thanks to the work of James Anderson (see for instance Anderson 2009) and other very recent writers (Langley 2025).

Smith’s three claims supporting his conclusions that Presuppositionalism has a Quasi-Fideistic epistemology may be summarized as follows. are that Presuppositionalism and Quasi-Fideism both:

1. Hold to absolutely certain ungrounded grounds in order to explain rational belief (Smith 2023, 36–7).
2. Base the rationality of religious beliefs on a parity argument between how religious and non-religious beliefs are held in terms of the respective ungrounded grounds (37).
3. Advocate the use of an indirect method to cause changes in hinges (37–9).

I will specify these claims more closely, and then critique each claims as having missed an essential part of Presuppositional Epistemology. I will also show the wider relevance of the missing concept to the broader discussion of Presuppositionalism by critiquing a position that misses it or answering an objection that arises by not accounting for that concept.

4.2 Worldview Change: Rational? Arational? Both?

Firstly, Smith claims that Presuppositional Apologetics “clearly relies on an absolutely certain ungrounded ground—a hinge” (36). Smith’s clear and accurate assessment is that worldviews are taken as the grounds in terms of which other grounds are understood, and the Christian Theistic worldview is held to the only true ground on which knowledge and rationality can be based. And, though hinges are largely taken to be simple statements, he argues that there is nothing to stop a worldview from being a hinge-like commitment (While this seems doubtful to me, I will not discuss this assertion here for lack of space. 36). Moreover, this worldview is held with absolute certainty (*in principle*, since religious experience allows of doubt). It needs to be asked, however, whether the Christian Theistic worldview is taken to be itself ungrounded, and this is tightly tied to the question of whether a change in worldview is ultimately rational or arational.

Smith rightly links this to the question of the self-convincingness of revelation: “Commitment to Scripture comes not from something else that counts in its favor, but from itself” (36). To quickly recap the self-convincingness of Scripture as explained in the previous chapter (section 3.5.4): Scripture shows itself to be God’s authoritative revelation without need of external evidence. Rather, by virtue of its being God speaking to humanity made in His image, there is an inborn, irresistible recognition of God’s revelation being from Him. Moreover, since God speaks as Creator, His word is authoritative over His creature. Every human person recognizes God’s revelation for what it is by virtue of the sense of divinity,² which is the faculty by which mankind recognizes God’s revelation and the content thereof in nature. However, because of the Fall, humanity is not neutral towards God. The result is the suppression of God’s revelation as it occurs in nature and in Scripture, which equates to the

2. Also referred to as the *sensus divinitatis*.

Bible's self-attestation being recognized at one level, but consciously rejected at the level of rational reasoning. Presuppositionalism takes, on the basis of its Reformed theological roots, the Scriptures to be the ground of faith, and in turn the testimony of the Holy Spirit to Scripture's truth and authority to be the cause of conversion.

The way Smith understands this is that "the believer is committed to the authority of Scripture simply on the grounds of the authority of Scripture, not because of any rational process that has led them to accept its truth" (Smith 2023, 36–7). To fit this into the broader Reformed Theological context that frames this discussion, on Smith's view the testimony of the Holy Spirit functions like a switch that causes the person in question to arationally commit to the authority of Scripture (and consequently the whole Christian Theistic worldview). The change in worldview is *entirely* understood in terms of going from rejecting the recognition of Scripture's authority, to accepting it. The change in worldview would then be like an arational change in hinges. That fits well with Quasi-Fideism, and Hinge Epistemology generally, since hinges being held arationally as the means of rational evaluation means that they are exempt from rational evaluation (for most Hinge Epistemologists) and thereby could not be changed as a result of direct analysis. A common solution to understanding changes in hinges is then that of *persuasion* (Smith doesn't use this terminology but the concept of persuasion is clearly at play. 39), where hinges change as a result of another practice or belief having been explained (See also Durante 2016, 100). The change is arational in that no reasons can be given for why one hinge should be preferred.

The first problem with such a view of Presuppositionalism is that Van Til equates the contents of Scripture with the Christian Theistic worldview (Van Til 1955, 132). The Bible is the sole means of knowing of the Triune version of God that Van Til points out is the only God that Christianity could properly care about (Van Til 2003, 72). That is, for Van Til the only form of Theism that was relevant for a Christian apologetic was specifically Christian Theism with its Trinity (Van Til 1967, 280). As such, the Presuppositional Apologetic that serves to vindicate the necessity of the Triune God for predication and interpretation is also meant to serve as the vindication of the Scripture by which that Triune God and His counsel are known. The two are therefore entirely involved with one another for Van Til (Van Til 1969b, 207). The significance of this is that there is no separation for Van Til between arguing for the Christian Theistic worldview as opposed to arguing the authority of Scripture. Presuppositionalism presents itself as a rational defense of the Christian faith, and in doing so, a rational defense of the authority of Scripture. The question is nevertheless raised: how is Scripture taken to be accepted rationally if (as Van Til agrees) it has an arationally recognized, in-itself authority as the ultimate basis of its acceptance?

The answer is that Scripture has a two-fold basis of acceptance for Van Til, reflected in the two-fold structure of Presuppositionalism (117). Though the arational is more foundational, it is nevertheless not without rational defense. The Holy Spirit's testimony involves a "witness *by* and *with* the Word in our hearts" (emphasis added. Note that "Word" is another way to refer to the Bible/Scripture. Van Til 1967, 280). Arationally, the Holy Spirit's testimony involves appealing *by* means of the sense of Divinity for the recognition of the Bible's authority. But, there is also the appeal *with* the Bible to the reasons for believing in it. In Presuppositionalism's case, it is especially the necessity of the Bible's worldview for justifying rationality and knowledge that serves as the basis of rationally arguing for the truth of the Christian worldview (along with all the other evidences that Presuppositionalism affirms may be given in light of this necessity (Van Til 1977, 49)). The testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Bible as God's revelation has both arational and rational aspects. Though it fundamentally rests

on the recognition of the authority of Special revelation, His testimony nevertheless achieves this by means of the conviction of the truth of Scripture's message (the contents of the Christian worldview). The aim, after all, is that the Gospel³ be believed. As such, the Holy Spirit's testimony is both aimed at causing conviction as regards the Bible's authority, as well as the truth of its contents.

As such, The Holy Spirit's persuasion of the human agent is not that of suddenly sparking the mental adoption of the Christian worldview. It is true that there is an ethical change required: "it is only when the Holy Spirit gives man a new heart that he will accept the evidence of Scripture about itself" (Van Til 1967, 281). The wording of "a new heart" refers to the ethical orientation away from the Christian Theistic being changed to an ethical orientation to Him. That special revelation's authority is recognizable by the sense of deity is taken as one of the evidences special revelation gives of itself. What is significant is that though the Holy Spirit's testimony of changing the ethical orientation of humanity to accept special revelation is necessary, at the same time there *is* evidence in Scripture and in general revelation. Presuppositionalism's commitment to both these aspects means that it is committed to both an arational and a rational aspect to conversion. The whole Presuppositional Apologetic endeavor is meant to make the non-Christian Theistic see the necessity of the Christian Theistic position for rationality and knowledge, by extension its reasonableness, and by inference the truth of the Christian Theistic position, so that the non-Christian Theist would become convinced. However, the final step in the apologetic discussion is the change of the ethical orientation away from this worldview, which seems an arational step at least from the perspective of the person undergoing conversion. But the fact that an ethical change is required to reach a conclusion rationally argued for does not mean that the conclusion that such a conclusion is arational. Rather the ethical has become involved in the rational process.⁴

Theological Premise 8. *The Holy Spirit's testimony, changing the ethical orientation of a person to God, and thereby enabling the acceptance of the evidences of Scripture and apologetics, forms an arational complement to the rational reasoning in apologetics.*

Epistemological Claim 8. *Modeling rational disputes regarding worldviews requires for the ethical dispositions of the disputants.*

As such, it must be insisted that on Presuppositionalism's view there is a rational component to holding Scripture as authoritative, and by extension, holding the Christian Worldview as the ground for all one's other beliefs and practices. Smith's claim that the Christian Worldview acts as an ungrounded ground in Presuppositional Epistemology has missed the entire point of Van Til's insistence that Presuppositional Apologetics has a two-fold structure of taking Christian Theism to be adopted as a worldview on the basis of special revelation's authority, as well as on the basis of its necessity for the possibility of justifying knowledge (Van Til 1969b, 117). This two-fold structure matches the conviction that appeals from the Bible and Biblical worldview are legitimate because of the Bible's innate authority. On the other hand, appeals for the Bible's necessity and truth are likewise legitimate, though not without bearing in mind the innate authority to which the worldview is committed to. The apologetic method reflects the Christian Theistic worldview it attempts to vindicate.

However, the above has raised another issue relevant to assessing Smith's point (and it is also relevant for the next section): the nature of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. In Van Til's account,

3. "Gospel" means good news, and is the Biblical word used for characterizing its message of redemption. What is to be believed therefore is that Christ came to save sinners, and those who trust in Him for such forgiveness will receive it. As such, the Christian faith has propositional content that can be the target of doxastic attitudes.

4. I am indebted to (Waldron 2020, 129–139) for highlighting this line of reasoning in Presuppositionalist terms.

the reason why people do not accept Special revelation or recognize the God of General revelation is *purely* ethical. As such, the work of the Holy Spirit in His testimony is *purely* ethical in the sense of only changing the nature of humanity as far as ethical considerations go (the metaphysical constitution remains unchanged, excepting how far the ethical nature and total depravity may be called metaphysical). The question of conversion, from the perspective of the Christian Theistic worldview, is whether the ethical orientation with regards to the Christian Theistic God will change. But the ground of conversion is always God's authoritative revelation and the reception thereof by the person in virtue of being made in God's image.⁵ The testimony of the Holy Spirit involves restraining ethical rebellion before conversion and enabling a degree of ethical conformity to God's revelation to the point of formal knowledge. At conversion, this testimony takes a new character in the form of regeneration: a new ethical nature is given. The point is that both the negative aspect of restraining evil and the positive aspect of ethical conformity is an ethical work. The point is that Van Til insists that there is nothing metaphysically wrong with humanity. The epistemological problem as it relates to the Christian Theistic worldview is ethical. This is necessary for understanding Smith's critique in section 4.4. Moreover, this ethical emphasis represents distinct emphasis in the broader context of Reformed epistemology. This may be observed by means of the recent work of Henk van den Belt.

4.2.1 *Geestspraak: Reformed Theology Without the Combination of Natural Ability and a Purely Ethical Testimony*

In a notable work on Reformed Hermeneutics and Epistemology, Henk van den Belt (2024) has recently emphasized like Van Til that Reformed Theology requires dependence on God's revelation and the Holy Spirit for the possibility of justifying knowledge. This convergence seems to be the result of the shared influence of Herman Bavinck's (Bavinck 1976) epistemology. In a passage that strikingly echoes Van Til, he writes "our knowledge of created reality rests on God's revelation and is given to us through the work of the Spirit" (Own translation of "onze kennis van die geschapen werkelijkheid berust in Gods openbaring en ons ten deel valt door het werk van de Geest." van den Belt 2024, ch. 8.2). As in Van Til, the validity of human knowledge rests on God's creating both humanity and the world in such a way as that the world can be known, and that the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to God's revelation is the necessary precondition for this occurring (ch. 8.7).

However, van den Belt does not specify what the mechanism is by which the Spirit works to make knowledge possible. Nor does he have a distinction between formal and true knowledge. Van den Belt does implicitly have the in principle absolute, in practice restrained epistemological antithesis. For, the results of sin are "not so absolute that we cannot at all think clearly, let alone that there should be no logic in a fallen world" (My translation of "niet zo absoluut dat we helemaal niet meer helder kunnen denken, laat staan dat er in een gevallen wereld geen logica meer zou zijn." ch. 8.2). At the same time, no knowledge is possible without the working of the Holy Spirit. However, without the Presuppositional categories (or van den Beltian equivalents) being expressed, the impression is given that the Spirit is supplying a link between the world and the mind that would otherwise be lacking. This seems especially the case when he seems to agree with Bavinck that "only our Creator can guarantee the trustworthiness of our knowledge" (My translation of "alleen onze Schepper de betrouwbaarheid van onze algemene kennis garanderen." ch. 8.2) and this is done by virtue of it

5. The concept of the mental faculties working rightly as a precondition for knowledge that has been met, including the sense of divinity means that the potential for interaction with Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology (see Plantinga 2000) is rich, but beyond this essay. However, see Anderson 2005 for an initial exploration.

not being possible to “separate the knowledge of creation from the Spirit” (Note that van den Belt connects this with a broader framework related to God’s counsel as regards salvation. van den Belt 2024, ch. 8.2). The significance is that, while it is affirmed with Presuppositionalism that the Christian Theistic God is needed for justifying the claim to knowledge, and that the alternative is skepticism, the unqualified assertion that it is possible in the context of sin to think more or less clearly and logically introduces confusion. This confusion rests on a lack of clarity regarding what precisely the Spirit’s work in testifying to the truth is. Presuppositionalism specifies this work ethical restraint and positive ethical guidance in thought, and the result is a clear epistemological picture of an in principle ethical antithesis that explains the in practice epistemological situation of formal knowledge.

Such a stance captures van den Belt’s eagerness to assert the dependency of human knowledge on God’s Spirit and revelation, while pushing the clarity of how both the epistemological and theological commitments at play are worked out. This signifies that Presuppositional Epistemology involves an advance in understanding Reformed Theology’s epistemological implications at the level of general knowledge and revelation. At the same time it emphasises the need to have the nature of the Holy Spirit’s testimony as ethical clear.

4.3 Circularity and the Creator-creature Distinction: Smith’s Parity Argument

The second point of similarity between Quasi-Fideism and Presuppositionalism that Smith argues for is that “Van Til takes a commitment to Reformed Christianity [...] as the ground of epistemic activity in general, not just of religious rationality or epistemology” (Smith 2023, 37). Smith uses this position to argue that Presuppositionalism uses something very much like Quasi-Fideism’s parity argument (see section 2.4). This argument says that religious belief is rational in the same way as other beliefs are rational because they depend in the same way on hinges. On this view, Smith’s point is that religious belief and non-religious belief would both be rational since they would both depend on the Christian Theistic worldview being held as their ungrounded ground. Since both views use the same kind of argument, Presuppositional Apologetics stands ready to use the Quasi-Fideistic version of the parity argument. And Smith adds that this would be preferable since he believes that Presuppositionalism is problematically circular. However, his analysis goes no further than that Presuppositionalism recognizes the circularity of its method. He then points out that “circular arguments are fallacious” (41). He shows almost no engagement with Presuppositional Epistemology’s defense against problematic circularity in terms of worldview reasoning. Though he mentions K. Scott Oliphint’s work attempting to give a defense by means of another William Alston’s work on epistemic circularity (41), this still misses the core defense that Presuppositionalism itself supplies in distinguishing *types* of circularity. Namely, circular arguments are fallacious. To reflectively reason out the logical consequences of your worldview and arguing in terms of those consequences to understand your worldview and the world in terms of your worldview is not fallacious. The alternative would require access to worldview neutral facts from which one could argue without presuppositions.

Nevertheless, Smith argues that Presuppositional Epistemology makes all belief circular and not well-founded, and is therefore unappealing (41). This is why his solution is to embrace Quasi-Fideism’s defense of the rationality of religious belief. It removes the problem of circularity, because Quasi-Fideism’s hinges are “a different kind of thing than rationally argued for” (42). Since hinges are not beliefs on Quasi-Fideism’s count, but commitments necessary for rationally holding beliefs, it

is not problematic for beliefs to be based on hinges. The result would be that Presuppositionalism could claim that “rationality demands an ungrounded but optimally certain commitment to Reformed Christianity” (Smith 2023, 42). The claim to the necessity of Christian Theism for justifying rationality and knowledge would then be made in terms of ungrounded grounds (Note that this reflects Hinge Epistemology in general’s approach to religious belief: Boncompagni 2022), like all other beliefs, as opposed to claiming that all knowledge requires a form of circularity, including both religious and non-religious beliefs.⁶ This introduces a parallel with Quasi-Fideism’s parity argument that says that religious belief is rational in the same way as other beliefs are rational because they depend in the same way on hinges. Religious belief and non-religious belief would both be rational since they would both depend on the Christian Theistic worldview being held as their ungrounded ground.

In response, firstly, it has been demonstrated that Presuppositionalism does not take itself to depend on ungrounded grounds. This more or less ruins the argument, since ungroundedness is what allows hinges to function as the terminal point in the process of grounding beliefs. Quasi-Fideism and Presuppositionalism share that they hold to a worldview of beliefs being held as the precondition for rationality and knowledge being justifiable, and though they both hold that holding those worldviews with certainty is necessary and part of rationality. However, Presuppositionalism holds the Christian Theistic worldview to be self-grounded, and Quasi-Fideism holds to one’s worldview to be ungrounded, since the hinges that constitute it are. As such, Presuppositionalism nowhere allows for ungrounded grounds as a necessary part of our rationality, and therefore also not of our knowledge.

Still, leaving this basic incompatibility aside, Coliva’s objection that religious hinges have a fundamentally different relation to rationality has been noted in the first chapter. Smith would need to answer this, and it is not clear that he would have recourse to the defense I gave in the previous chapter, if he is taking over Quasi-Fideism’s view of rationality. After all, that view of rationality does not depend on the Christian Theistic God, which the Presuppositionalist defense against Coliva rests on. Ignoring also this obstacle, we arrive at Smith’s basic claim: Presuppositionalism is problematically circular. A defense of rationality based on hinges is not circular because hinges “are a different kind of thing than whatever is rationally argued for” (Smith 2023, 42). Not being part of your beliefs, you can’t be charged with problematic circularity when assuming hinges to justify your beliefs.

Smith seems confused here. Presuppositional Apologetics claims that Christian Theism is true since without it rationality and knowledge cannot be justified. Hinge Epistemology argues for the hinges and their use that it posits as without hinges rationality and knowledge cannot be justified. In doing so, Hinge Epistemology assumes the validity of human knowledge, and then vindicates this validity based on being able to account for the underlying rationality in terms of hinges. But, the rationality defended by Hinge Epistemology is also the rationality specified by Hinge Epistemology, just as in the case of Presuppositionalism.⁷ This is indeed not problematically circular: a worldview couldn’t properly defend a different form of rationality other than the one it affirms or assumes as the right model of rationality. Otherwise, if it could really vindicate multiple forms of truly distinct rationalities (such that it would be rational for the same person on the same grounds to hold two contradictory beliefs), then that worldview would be committed to irrationality. For, on that worldview’s basis, rational behavior could lead to an irrational state of believing two contradictory beliefs.⁸ But then

6. It seems worth asking whether as much would be gained as Smith seems to think, even if his analysis at this point was accurate. Such a fight would not seem promising: ungrounded grounds versus circularity in belief. If the situation was as Smith depicts it, it would seem like choosing between varieties of relativism.

7. Such similarities between the two epistemologies are, again, important and striking.

8. It would not be legitimate to interpret a rationality leading to two contradictory beliefs as simply “that worldview’s version of rationality,” for the presupposition of being able to discuss the same concept in different worldviews is that

that worldview's vindication of rationality is determined by the worldview's commitments regarding rationality and the worldview's other philosophical commitments. This is exactly how Presuppositional Apologetics proceeds when it claims it can vindicate its view of rationality.

However, it is possible to focus in more specifically on Smith's claim. He argues that hinges avoid circularity by being ungrounded grounds held with optimal certainty and thereby being able to function as the ground for other beliefs. They are in this sense "a different kind of thing than whatever is rationally argued for" (Smith 2023, 42). In the case of religious belief, since hinges are not beliefs, they are at a different epistemological level than the religious beliefs argued for. Therefore dependence upon them is non-problematically circular, since they are functioning as ungrounded grounds. As such, you do not end up using your beliefs justify your ability to rationally hold beliefs. This eliminates the circularity Smith is concerned by.

Though Smith overstated his case in calling Scripture the ungrounded ground of Presuppositionalism (or of the underlying Reformed Theology, for that matter) (See for his assertion to the contrary: Smith 2024), he was correct in his insistence that there is an arational aspect to holding to Scripture on Presuppositionalism terms. The ground of Christian Theistic belief is "accepted on authority" (Van Til 1977, 9). Therefore, we may well think of Scripture or the corresponding worldview as being held in both an arational and rational manner. Quasi-Fideism's insistence that arationality must ground rationality, and Coliva's insistence that arational commitments couldn't ground justified belief, both get vindicated by Presuppositionalism. The Presuppositional view of rationality suggests that they both represent aspects of justifying belief.

In response it may be asked how it is that the arationally held "hinge" of the Christian Theistic worldview cannot be seen as likewise being on a lower epistemological level than the beliefs that are grounded in terms of it? In fact, the separation between belief and ground is even more significant here because of the Creator-creature distinction. Presuppositionalism argues that rationality and knowledge depends on the counsel of a Triune God and His revelation, and that this dependence is pragmatically evidenced by all worldviews. This makes Christian Theism's arational ground also a rather "different kind of thing than whatever is rationally argued for" (Smith 2023, 42). Whether it is the hinges of Hinge Epistemology or the Triune God of Christian Theism, in both cases the worldviews involved are vindicating their specific form of rationality by means of a specific kind of ground. It is true that the Presuppositional commitment is much more extensive. However, in the previous section it was pointed out that Smith accepts Reformed Theology as Presuppositionalism's hinge. It is therefore not clear to me that if the charge of problematic circularity were to apply to Presuppositionalism, it wouldn't also apply to Smith's Quasi-Fideism.

As such, in this case, there does not seem to be a great difference between the two epistemologies. They both have an arationally held ground they claim is necessary for rationality. Additionally, the right relation of beliefs to that ground is necessary for rationality and knowledge to be justifiable against skepticism. Lastly, they both hold that this specific relation between ground and belief is common to all instances of human rationality, and necessary for it.

Of course, I do not wish to deny the rational aspect of holding the Christian Theistic worldview. However, it is exactly in respect to how it is held as a ground that it is held arationally. It is held rationally with respect to other worldviews and in terms of vindicating the arational holding of the

there is sufficient overlap in content that that concept can be referred to by each. That there will be still be differences in content is given with Presuppositionalism, and assumed in this argument. After all, rationality on Presuppositionalism and Hinge Epistemologies terms are both different, though aiming at the same epistemic goal of justifying holding beliefs and knowledge.

worldview with respect to challenges from other worldviews. The Presuppositionalist, it seems, can have their (a)rationality cake and eat it too.

Two versions of Smith's charge of problematic circularity have been constructed, and it has been argued that Smith's Quasi-Fideism would also be guilty of problematic circularity if Presuppositionalism would be. Moreover, it was found that Presuppositionalism's fundamental Creator-creature distinction addressed the version of the argument he more likely intended. This means that the parity argument as Smith sees it does not work out. On his view, Presuppositionalism defends the rationality of religious belief by it being based on the same groundless ground (the Christian Theistic worldview) as all other beliefs. Since the same relation between the beliefs and the groundless ground obtains and is in both cases taken to be necessary for rationality, there is no difference in the rationality involved. As such, there is parity of rationality between religious and non-religious belief. A problem noted with this parity argument was that Presuppositionalism does not hold to groundless grounds. Another problem, perhaps more fundamental, is that Quasi-Fideism proceeds from the rationality of empirical inquiry before considering the rationality of religious belief.

On Quasi-Fideism's view, religious belief can enjoy the status of the rationality of empirical beliefs by virtue of structural similarity in the relation between the respective beliefs and the respective hinges. On Presuppositionalism's count, they share the same dependence as analogically corresponding to God's knowledge. There is therefore also a structural similarity in the relation between the respective beliefs and their correspondence to God's knowledge. However, Quasi-Fideism proceeds from the established validity of rationality in the context of empirical beliefs, and then attempts to draw a parallel with religious beliefs. Presuppositionalism, proceeding as it does in terms of presupposing the entire Christian Theistic worldview, the rationality of empirical beliefs and religious beliefs are both taken to depend from the start on Christian Theistic presuppositions. Presuppositionalism gives a unified view of rationality in terms of those presuppositions for both empirical and religious beliefs. That means that there is no prior establishing of the rationality of either empirical or religious beliefs, such that a parity argument could be made justifying the rationality of the one based on the other.

It might be responded that taking on the Christian Theistic worldview *is* taking on religious beliefs, and so clearly there is commitment to the rationality of religious beliefs before the commitment to other beliefs. This confuses the process of conversion with the structure of the worldview. That the temporal priority of becoming a religious believer before holding a religious worldview is a distinct matter from how that religious worldview addresses rationality of belief (religious or otherwise) is sufficient to defuse this objection. And this leaves the Quasi-Fideistic parity argument for the rationality of religious belief out of reach for Presuppositionalism (For context from Van Til, consider the following citation: "Reason and revelation should not be contrasted as two sources of knowledge. It ought to be clearly understood that the 'facts' by virtue of their creation by God cannot be known otherwise than by revelation. By virtue of creation the 'facts' are themselves a revelation of God. And the revelation of God in the facts of the created world was, from the beginning supplemented by the 'supernatural' word revelation of God. Hence if reason is to function fruitfully it must always function upon revelational material." Van Til 1969b, 123-24).

There is, however, a parity argument that might be constructed that is different from the one Smith mentions. This would be in regard to the burden of proof for Theistic worldviews. Those holding non-Theistic worldviews will often argue that the burden of proof is on the Theists to prove God's existence. After all, there is a claim that something exists which everyone is not convinced by. Therefore, the person making the claim for existence needs to prove that claim, and inversely,

those not holding to that existence are not required to go out and prove non-existence, especially since that is often harder to do, if not entirely impossible. However, Presuppositionalism argues that there is a similar burden upon both the Christian Theistic worldview and non-Theistic worldviews. In the first place, non-Christian Theistic worldviews hold assumptions that exclude the possibility of the Christian Theistic God existing from the get-go.⁹ I mean that the assumptions held logically exclude the possibility of God, rather than that God's non-existence is *per sé* explicitly excluded. The result is that arguments against His existence are not conclusions reasoned for on the basis of neutral assumptions. Rather, concluding God does not exist is very much a consequence of one's worldview. As such, the problem of evil is not raised from neutral analysis, but from a worldview that has from the outset made assumptions that preclude the possibility of the Christian Theistic God.

The parity argument regarding burden of proof would argue from this that when the argument is made that the assumption of God adds an additional assumption designed to explain the world, and as such, the burden of proof is on the theist for making this assumption. From the perspective of Presuppositionalism, however, the non-Theist is required to engage in an entire range of assumptions in order to explain the facts explained on the basis of Christian Theism's assumption of God. In short, the non-theist must likewise assume an entire worldview, in fact, and the absence of the concept of God does not necessarily mean a simpler philosophical system. Even supposing it does, Presuppositionalism would have that the commitment to the Christian Theistic God has much explanatory power. As such, the application of Ockham's razor, by which the simplest *working* model of reality would be selected would involve the claim that the non-Christian Theistic worldview adequately describes the world without need of the Christian Theistic God. But this not only what was implicitly assumed from the outset, but also involves a worldview internal evaluation of how satisfactory the facts have been accounted for. The following considerations are then at play for Presuppositionalism: the non-neutrality of non-Christian Theistic worldviews as regards the existence of the Christian Theistic God. The consequent circularity in appealing to a more parsimonious model. The argument that applying Ockham's razor requires not only parsimony but also a judgment as to the more parsimonious theory being adequate, which seems to require a worldview-dependent judgment. And lastly, that the parsimony in question does not merely concern the rejection or acceptance of the proposition that "God exists," but the adoption of an entire worldview in order to account for what might otherwise be accounted for by the worldview that rests on the Christian Theistic God existing. These considerations suggest a parity argument as regards the burden of proof between non-Christian Theistic worldviews and Christian Theistic worldviews, where the assumption of the existence of the Christian Theistic God is balanced in terms of burden of proof by explanatory power, the lack of clear parsimony, and the impossibility of world-independent parsimony claims.

By such a parity argument, Van Til's standpoint that Presuppositionalism asks of other worldviews what it asks of itself in terms of meta-worldview standards is at least somewhat vindicated (See for a relevant discussion Van Til 1969b, 116–121). If Presuppositionalism's explicit commitment to the existence of the Christian Theistic God with the worldview that results may be considered as parallel to the non-Christian Theistic commitment to worldview excluding the existence of that God, then it could be argued that both forms of worldview proceed from assumptions that require vindication in terms of the worldview in which they feature and help define. However, this paves the way to another objection.

9. See subsection 3.5.1 in the previous chapter.

4.3.1 Bryan Sims and the Ontological and Psychological Chasm

Somewhat related to the question of circularity and arguing from a specific worldview is the problem of the *ontological and psychological chasm*. This problem is raised by Bryan Sims regarding the best case scenario for Presuppositional Apologetics. The problem states that, supposing that it has been shown that certain beliefs or convictions lead by necessary steps to certain conclusions about the world is, it still does not follow that the world actually *is* that way (Sims 2006, 52). For instance, believing that God exists does not make it so. Naturally, this is not the Presuppositionalist claim. At the same time, it is the case that Presuppositional Apologetics precisely does try to argue for God's existence (ontological side of the chasm) by means of the epistemological considerations that show that He is necessary for knowledge and rationality (psychological side of the chasm; psychological in the sense of being an epistemological claim, and therefore held in the mind). The question would be how it can be defended that, even if Presuppositional Apologetics' claim that the Christian Theistic God is necessary for rationality is demonstrated to someone holding a non-Christian Theistic worldview in such a way that that person is convinced, why should the person go from believing in God's epistemological necessity to believing in God's existence?

Sims notes (55) that Presuppositional Apologetics' (in particular Greg Bahnsen) answer is that, in the case of an apologetic debate, there is a pre-existing commitment that the right worldview "must affirm rationality" (Bahnsen 1998, 486, n.37). After all, in an apologetic debate where reasons for and against Christian Theism are being given, a form of rationality must be assumed for there to be any ability to assess the reasons being given. Moreover, Bahnsen seems to imply that since the apologetic discussion includes giving reasons for or against the existence of God and other spiritual beings, the kind of rationality at play must be assumed to justify beliefs about the existence of things. If it were justifiably believing that something exists is a separate question from whether it actually exists, then it is unclear by what "justified" would mean. Consequently, if Presuppositionalism succeeds in showing that the Christian Theistic God is the necessary presupposition for rationality, then that Christian Theism is the right worldview is implied by what was assumed at the outset of the argument.¹⁰ If the theoretical interlocutor was indeed convinced that the Christian Theistic argument had shown that rationality depends necessarily on Christian Theism, the apologetic interlocutor might claim to not hold to rationality after all. Or at least not rationality as had been held to at the start of the debate, such that reasons can be considered, and the law of non-contradiction would hold. Bahnsen argues that in such a case, the interlocutor not only loses the original debate as regards rationality, but "forfeits the right to assert or believe that he has repudiated rationality, since without rationality assertion and belief are unintelligible" (486, n.37).

Sims is not enamored of Bahnsen's argument. He responds that "the door remains ajar concerning the metaphysical truthfulness of the Christian worldview" (Sims 2006, 55). Even if rationality would verifiably depend on the presuppositions and commitments of a specific worldview, that cannot force the conclusion that this particular worldview describes the world accurately. For it "remains conceivable that the experience of these phenomena is necessary but illusory," (55) referring to the phenomena that lead to the conclusion that rationality depends on the Christian Theistic worldview. In context this seems to express either skepticism about knowledge of the world (such that the existence of the phenomena themselves is illusory, and consequently the knowledge of them), or that rationality can

10. The alternative form of this argument is demonstrating transcendental justification fails or that there is internal incoherence for the other worldview, and not for the Christian Theistic worldview. However, this would not establish the necessary truth of the Christian Theistic worldview, since all other worldviews would have to be considered. See Welty 1994.

give justified beliefs about the phenomena (such that the ability to justify beliefs about phenomena fails because the seeming applicability of rationality to the phenomena is illusory).

In either case, I do not believe that Sims' argument can work. Consider a thought experiment where it has been verifiably proven that the Presuppositional transcendental argument holds. It is then the case that either Christian Theism is the case or no form of rationality holds. What Sims is saying is that even in this case the skeptical position as regards rationality might be tenable, since it is not precluded by the foregoing reasoning. But from both a Hinge Epistemological and a Presuppositionalist perspective this would not be acceptable. On Hinge Epistemology's ground the skeptic regarding knowledge is taken to have a self-defeating position, because he must doubt those very hinges in terms of which doubt is understood. In terms of rationality, the self-defeat is even more fundamental: skepticism as regards rationality would be the use of rationality to question rationality. The skeptic is in a similar situation on Presuppositional grounds, since the skeptic would be making use of the presuppositions of Christian Theism and the rationality and ability to assert things that it brings to assert that Christian Theism is not the case and so the position would again be self-defeating. That is to say, on neither Hinge Epistemological nor on Presuppositionalist grounds is skepticism seen as a tenable option. Yet, Sims is saying that even if Presuppositionalism was verifiably necessary for rationality, and therefore the only worldview that you would be rationally justified in believing, it need not be an accurate description of the world. But if one opts for the choice of a worldview that can no longer justify a claim to rationality, then one must choose for a skeptical worldview, since this is exactly what is meant by a skepticism regarding rationality: one is not sure there is such a thing, and surrenders one's commitment to it. Therefore, Sims requires that what is impossible on Presuppositional grounds to be possible, assuming Presuppositionalism.

4.4 Common and Neutral Ground Equated in the Absence of the In Principle/In Practice Distinction

Smith's last claim as to why Presuppositional Apologetics has a Quasi-Fideistic epistemology is that "Van Til's indirect apologetic method aligns with the accounts of hinge change found in Quasi-Fideism" (Smith 2023, 37). He highlights that core to Presuppositional Apologetics is the analysis of the consequences of assuming the person who is being discussed with is right as regards their most important commitments. The end-goal is showing that even these "deepest commitments cannot make sense of the things they take themselves to believe, know, and understand," (38) as has been discussed in the previous chapter. This is both indirect and an attempt to change these deepest commitments. In this, Presuppositionalism therefore parallels Duncan Pritchard's Quasi-Fideism, since it is also indirect in its approaches to changing hinges: change in non-hinge beliefs that are closely related but not held as hinges will result in the underlying hinges also slowly changing (See Pritchard 2024, 58). If this is the case, then not only would there be structural similarities between the epistemology of Presuppositional Apologetics as Smith sees it, but also the "apologetic" approach of Quasi-Fideism would match that of Presuppositionalism. This would certainly bolster the claim of Presuppositionalism being implicitly Quasi-Fideistic.

However, Smith notes two differences. Firstly, that Quasi-Fideism is committed to exclusively slow hinge change, which Presuppositionalism could not be, given the sudden recorded conversions in the Bible (Smith 2023, 37 and 44, n. 25) Such sudden conversion also occurs generally, it might be added. Well-known examples include Saint Augustine's conversion, as well as those recorded by Jonathan

Edwards (2022). Secondly, and more significantly, Smith notes that Quasi-Fideism moves from the available epistemic common ground to attempt to change the other person's worldview in terms of the beliefs they hold, and then gradually get them to see that the view of the world they've come to have is not reconcilable with their hinges. Putting aside how good of a summary this is of Quasi-Fideism, my concern is the contrast Smith makes with Presuppositionalism's approach to common ground.

This time around I do not take issue with Smith's claim, since there are indeed fruitful comparisons to be made between the indirectness of the methods of Quasi-Fideism and Presuppositionalism. Van Til specifically calls Presuppositional Apologetics an indirect method (Van Til 2003, 62). Rather, I take issue with his analysis of the kind of common ground at play. The idea of hinges being changed by engagement with higher level commitments coheres very well with Presuppositionalism's method of worldview change on the basis of analyzing the internal coherence and requiring transcendental justification of the worldview in question. In neither case are the target commitments directly engaged as if they can be neutrally evaluated. However, Smith's account of the grounds on which Presuppositionalism claims to go about this suffers from a shortcoming present in criticisms of Presuppositionalism (Anderson 2022, 79). He seems to equate neutral and common ground, and to deny the Presuppositionalism holds to real common ground, and the result is that his understanding of the Presuppositional toolset for analyzing worldview change is limited, giving a distorted reading.

Smith's exposition on Presuppositionalism's view of common and neutral ground leaves me confused as to whether he has equated the two. The use of "neutral ground" appears three times in this article, with the first two cases appearing in a single paragraph. In that paragraph he seems to contrast of Quasi-Fideism's use of epistemic *common* ground with the denial of any "religiously *neutral* ground" (Emphasis added. Smith 2023, 38) between Christian Theists and non-Christian Theists. This suggests an equivalence between common and neutral ground. The fact that he refers to *religious* neutral ground muddles the waters further, since as has been made clear Presuppositionalism opposes epistemic neutral ground in both religious and non-religious belief. He goes on to say that Presuppositionalism "repudiates apologetic methods that move from shared *neutral* ground to deeper convictions" (Emphasis added. 38). In context, this contrasts with Quasi-Fideism that does move from shared epistemic *common* ground to deeper convictions. This seems again to equate common and neutral ground. At the same time, however, it may be that he is using the contrast to highlight the need for epistemic common ground, which he subsequently rightly argues is needed for an apologetic endeavor (39).

The third time Smith uses the term "neutral ground" it is again to say that though "religiously neutral ground" (38) is denied, there is a "shared epistemic starting point" (39). A "shared position" (39) for Presuppositionalism is how he constructs the parallel with Quasi-Fideism's common ground in his defense of how Quasi-Fideism and Presuppositionalism can cohere. As such, in this third use, he could be arguing that Presuppositionalism both denies neutral ground and affirms specific epistemic common ground. This is an accurate reading. However, in the preceding paragraph Smith also says that "the Presuppositional Apologist starts from what *seems* to be common ground" (38). This means that Smith takes there to be no real epistemic common ground, and seems to reject the use of all common ground for Presuppositionalism early on (Note that he specifically refers to no common ground "regarding small matters of fact," which leaves the matter of larger size facts unclarified, though his other statements seems to make clear that in his analysis Presuppositionalism rejects all actual epistemic common ground. 28). The significance of this is that it is not clear whether there is a distinction made or maintained between neutral and common ground in this third use of the former term. Though there is no religiously neutral ground, there is the "shared epistemic starting point" (39) that exists *seeming*

common ground, though it is *also* the “shared position” (Smith 2023, 39) from which an apologist can reason.

To sum up, the shared epistemic starting point between believers and non-believers simultaneously serves the function of real common ground and yet only *seems* to be common ground. Additionally, it is simply not clear whether Smith has distinguished neutral and common ground, or in what that distinction would consist. Consequently, it would not be fair to argue that he has definitely confused the two. Nevertheless, equating the categories of neutral and common ground would explain the problems with how he proceeds to characterize the seeming common ground. It would be beneficial if he could clarify his position, and show whether he still believes the relationship he specifies between Quasi-Fideism and Presuppositionalism holds. This is more so the case since the problem of common versus neutral ground is one that has often surfaced in critiques of Presuppositionalism.¹¹ This is unfortunate given the fact that Van Til carefully distinguishes them.¹² It is however noteworthy that Smith is citing from the 2008 edition of Van Til’s *Defense of the Faith*, which lacks some of the most pertinent discussions of this distinction. The abridgements of Van Til’s work adds another layer in the challenge of extracting his epistemology, and so this counts as a mitigating factor in evaluating Smith’s work.

Still, that being said, Smith rightly delineates between the use of neutral ground, where disputants “build from a shared commitment,” (29) and epistemic common ground, where there are shared epistemic materials for use by both disputants for giving reasons for their positions that have some epistemic relevance for the other. It is only that what this epistemic common ground *is*, what its grounds are, and how it functions are not accurately brought to the fore by Smith. Shortly exploring what he does say regarding seeming common ground and how that relates Presuppositionalism to Quasi-Fideism will prove useful.

According to Smith the *seeming* common ground of Presuppositionalism has the following features. Firstly, Smith argues that, for Presuppositionalism, “the epistemology of the nonbeliever is good ‘as far as it goes,’ [...] the nonbeliever uses the same laws of logic as the believer, makes many of the same empirical observations as the believer, and so on” (38). This is a complicated statement, since it was pointed out in the previous chapter that Van Til uses the wording of “true as far as it goes” in describing formal knowledge (see section 3.5.2; Van Til 1974, 26). The problem at play here is that while in some sense having knowledge that is true as far as it goes suggests an epistemology that is good as far as it goes, in another sense the whole ground of the specifically Presuppositional Apologetic is that non-Christian Theistic epistemology is fundamentally opposed to God, such that no fact is understood in terms of “the only framework in which it can have meaning” (Van Til 1969b, 123). While the framework referenced here is surely the Christian Theistic worldview as a whole, the focus is on the epistemology. Given the preceding chapter, I believe I can be rather brief in noting that Van Til specifies that “it is therefore the idea of a common ground of interpretation that the ‘presuppositionalist’ rejects” (Van Til 1969a, ch. 9). Interpretation remains the key idea: being able to both know truly *and* justify knowledge is what Presuppositionalism argues belongs exclusively to the Christian Theistic worldview. If this is not kept in mind, then the word “know” is ambiguous in a claim like the following: “there is no fact that can be known truly without the revelation of Scripture” (Van Til 1969b, 123). This is the in principle absolute epistemological antithesis: there

11. See the critique of Mathison below for another example. See also Orlebeke 1953.

12. See for an early and very relevant discussion *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 24-30. For an example of how Van Til makes use of the distinction: *The Defense of the Faith*, 287-300. For the most clear and helpful overview of his position see the section titled “Facts or the Object of Knowledge,” *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 150-63.

is no neutral ground from which there can be reasoned, because there are no facts without a prior meaning assignment in the plan of God (For a review of this claim, see Van Til 1977, 70). As such, there are no facts that are not exclusively rightly understood and with regard to which true knowledge cannot be justified except in terms of God's revelation and Trinity. Epistemologically, not even the laws of logic are explained and justified in the same way by the Christian Theist and the non-Christian Theist (Van Til 1969b, 189–90). As such, to say that the Presuppositionalism takes the non-Christian Theist to have an epistemology that is good as far as it goes is at best ambiguous, at worst confused: it suggests that there may be some common ground of interpretation.

This enables another aspect of Smith's analysis to be answered. For Smith, Presuppositionalism's commitment to Scripture is entirely arational:

it is only on the grounds of being committed to Scripture that reasoning could function.

There is no way to find anything more sure than Scripture on which to base a commitment to Scripture, because any rational search or argument for such a thing would rely on powers of reason that would only function as they should *if one is already committed* to the authority of Scripture, that is, the very thing for which one would be trying to find a rational ground (Emphasis added. Smith 2023, 36–7).

The preceding paragraphs demonstrate that this could not be an accurate description of Presuppositionalism, since it does hold that there is complete metaphysical common ground: humanity has a capacity for reason that is not lost in the fall. It is humanity's capacity to use that reason interpret the world correctly (including the objects of knowledge) that is lost. As such, while Presuppositionalism holds that Scripture and revelation is necessary for a proper justification of reason, it is not the case that reason itself waits for the Bible. Instead, by virtue of humanity's constitution and the aspects of common grace at work in common ground in knowledge just discussed, humanity has rationality.

It is not that rationality cannot function outside the Christian Theistic worldview. In fact, because of complete metaphysical common ground, the normal situation is that human persons do function with rationality. The question is whether that rationality and the knowledge based on it can be justified in terms of the worldview underlying it. According to Presuppositionalism, apart from the Christian Theistic worldview, it cannot. And, the deficient grounding leads consequently to internal incoherence or incoherence between worldview commitments and worldview presuppositions. But, that is because of ethical opposition, not because metaphysical inability. Presuppositional Epistemology holds to an in principle absolute ethical and epistemological antithesis, that is qualified *in a specific way and sense* in the in practice epistemological situation.

Smith's ambiguity around what is meant by an epistemology that is good as far as it goes and the Christian Theist having lots in common with the non-Christian Theist is significant. For instance, when van den Belt writes something similar regarding logic functioning in spite of the effects of sin on the human mind (2024, ch. 8.2), it is unclear whether there is an in principle and in practice simple weakening of the epistemological functions of humanity or whether there is instead an in principle absolute epistemological antithesis leading to a specific in practice epistemological common ground. This may seem to be straining at gnats, but it is precisely a lack of understanding that the absolute ethical antithesis against the backdrop of the image of God leads to a specific form of common ground in Van Til that serves to explain his whole methodology. If the in principle in practice distinction is not in place on the basis of an ethical rather than a metaphysical antithesis between God and humanity, then there is no presuppositional methodology. This is further vindicated by examining the following critique below shows.

4.4.1 Keith Mathison: The Difference Rightly Understanding the Antithesis Makes

Keith Mathison's summary of Van Til's position covers a lot of important ground as regards Van Til's epistemology. However, on the basis of his five chapter summary, he critiques Van Til's epistemology as self-contradictory. His characterization of Presuppositional Apologetics "as a worldview vs. worldview method necessitated by the absolute antithesis between the knowledge of the believer and the unbeliever" (Mathison 2024, ch. 6) has at first-glance a real appeal. However, the way he interprets the use of the absolute antithesis is precisely where his criticism arises. His focus is on the fact that the apologetic of Van Til is motivated by the absolute *ethical* antithesis, resulting in an absolute *epistemological* antithesis, which is qualified in this life because of common grace. Mathison takes this combination of absolute and qualified to be an untenable flip-flopping between positions.

Mathison's argument comes down to this: "Because it is the absolute epistemological antithesis that necessitates the method of presupposition, the moment that this antithesis is qualified, for whatever reason, the method of presupposition is no longer necessitated" (ch. 10). Though Mathison himself subscribes to the qualified ethical antithesis and epistemological antithesis, his that Van Til has lost sight of the fact that it *is* qualified when constructing his apologetics and arguing its necessity, only to turn around and make use of the qualification when trying to offer a hope of successfully engaging someone with another worldview. Mathison stresses that part of what makes clear that there is not an absolute epistemological antithesis is that there is "shared knowledge of language and of things in the world" (ch. 6). But, says Mathison, that is "much more common ground [...] than Van Til's theory of knowledge allows" (ch. 6). This is because Van Til removes all common ground when he insists on an absolute epistemological antithesis, and so shared knowledge of the world is out of the question if Van Til wants to make use such an antithesis in theorizing the dialogue between Christian Theists and non-Christian Theists. And yet, Van Til also describes the antithesis as qualified. But then "a qualified antithesis does not necessitate the method of presupposition," (ch. 6) in that everyone has shared common ground and so it is possible to use that in reasoning. Interestingly, like Smith (section 4.4), Mathison opposes this insistence such common ground to the concession that there is no "religiously neutral ground" (ch. 6).

Mathison has a fundamentally wrong picture in mind. His charge looks identical to that of a critic whom Van Til cites as saying that Van Til begins with the Absolute Ethical Antithesis (Van Til 1974, 253). Van Til responds that he begins instead with humanity as made in the image of God, which in turn leads directly to the suppressed knowledge just discussed above.¹³ Another way to put this, as Van Til goes effectively goes on to say, is that he starts with the qualified Absolute Ethical Antithesis and its consequent qualified Absolute Epistemological Antithesis. The problem is that Mathison has a defective view of what a qualified Epistemological Antithesis would look like for Van Til, because to him that simply means "shared knowledge of things" and the ability to use laws of logic, think and communicate, as seen above. Van Til was shown to affirm these same things precisely because of a completely shared metaphysical common ground between Christian Theist and non-Christian Theist. However, Van Til specifically stresses that it is common ground of interpretation that he rejects, and as was covered above, this means a sustained and complete lack of *all* neutral ground, while both the metaphysical common ground, the formal knowledge based on that common ground, and suppressed knowledge and borrowed capital remain at play. The significance of all this is that the way Mathison argues requires the qualification that common grace achieves relative to the absolute epistemological

13. Recall that the image of God includes how humanity was made, including the sense of divinity. Moreover, the whole world is revelational of God. This together leads to knowledge of God, which is suppressed, as has been discussed.

antithesis to apply in the same at all points related to knowledge. He has missed the importance of the distinction between common and neutral ground, and he has failed to see that there is an internal structure to knowledge that Van Til uses to draw an equivalence to the question of civil good.

Van Til strongly brings forward the ethical nature of the image of God. Regeneration changes a person ethically, not metaphysically or physically. Because that resolves the Absolute Ethical Antithesis, civil righteousness can grow into true righteousness. Recall that civil righteousness was characterized by acts that truly benefited others, yet did not attain to the status of a true morally righteous work because it was not done in obedience to God, nor to His glory, nor according to His principles, and also had elements of by virtue of total depravity. Benefiting to one's neighbor in an act of civil righteousness is the formal aspect of the material act of obeying the command to love one's neighbor. Mathison at this point affirms the foregoing as a Reformed theologian. However, he fails to see that Van Til has the same dynamic at play for knowledge. Total depravity is an aspect of an in principle Absolute Antithesis, that is qualified in practice, without the antithesis disappearing or having just less of an effect. The reality of the antithesis has a specific, qualified effect, which sees the material aspect of the ethical deed removed, though the formal can appear by the working of common grace.

The distinction between formal and material is ethical at every point. It does not cease to be ethical in the act of knowing. So when Van Til qualifies the epistemological antithesis what he means is that the sinner is still incapable of true knowledge, or of interpretation that leads to true knowledge, or of accepting the view of knowledge that rests on the Trinity and the consequent view of, for instance, logic that accompanies right interpretation. Nevertheless, the non-Christian Theist can accept the conclusions of what would result from right interpretation, for instance, that murder is wrong. But this still does not mean true obedience to such borrowed capital, nor is there subscription to it on the basis of revelation or an acceptance of the revelation that it brings that God is holy and righteous and has made man in His image.

As such, on Reformed Theology's basis, a qualified epistemological antithesis still leaves the non-Christian Theist with an anti-Theistic worldview that fundamentally is oriented against the Christian Theistic God, with principles that is incompatible with the Christian Theistic worldview. Understanding the ethical nature of regeneration in relation to the image of God enables one to see the specifics of Van Til's motivation of his apologetic. It is not merely that qualifying the absolute epistemological antithesis eliminates some of the absolute effects of the absolute antithesis, just like qualifying the absolute ethical antithesis does not eliminate total depravity. Likewise, for Van Til, when the unregenerate mind is faced with the message of Christian revelation, it cannot approach any aspect of it neutrally, though there is much common ground at play.

This also enables one to see what Van Til meant with the continuing legitimacy of discussing the facts and not only the philosophy of fact. The qualification of the absolute ethical antithesis means that the unregenerate person can accept a claim like that murder is wrong, *and* that their system cannot explain why murder is wrong. They can accept the significance of historical evidence and weigh and measure it, because of common grace and because of the continuing functioning of their capacities by virtue of their metaphysical dependence on God. Furthermore, by virtue of being made in God's image, they can be confronted with evidences and with interpretation, and can recognize their need to answer to it. This gives the consequences of the in principle epistemological antithesis, and in practice epistemological common ground.¹⁴ This is as much as to say that while the world

14. I would claim that not clearly specifying this distinction hampers van den Belt in *Geestspraak* from more fully achieving his goal of urging that God and His revelation are necessary for knowledge. It is difficult to specify in what way they are necessary without being able to relate epistemology and ethics with the nuances that the antithesis and

is in common between the non-Christian Theist and the Christian Theist, and while various facts and commitments are shared between their worldviews, fundamentally, one is oriented to God and the other is oriented away from God, in such a way as to make it impossible for reason to function neutrally either way. The result for Van Til is that there is an absolute opposition, but it is realized in a particular way, and certainly not evidenced at all points. Regardless of its accuracy, this view clearly does not involve him in self-contradiction.

4.5 Conclusion

Analyzing Smith's attempt at unifying Quasi-Fideism with Presuppositional Epistemology has highlighted a number of things. For instance, simple arationality as the way of understanding how a worldview is held is not sufficient to cover all the commitments of Presuppositionalism. This is a result of the commitment that Presuppositionalism has that is absent in all forms of Hinge Epistemology: that one's worldview can be objectively defended. The result was that there was found to be both a rational and an arational component to worldviews.

It was also clear that in examining the relationship between Presuppositional Apologetics and Quasi-Fideism that Presuppositionalism has epistemological features and distinctions that must be kept in mind if Presuppositionalism is not to be misread. For instance, that of the Creator-creature distinction and the in principle in practice distinction as it is applied to the absolute ethical and epistemological antithesis. The significance is that by means of these distinctions and its own world-view using epistemology, Presuppositionalism has a different view of rationality than that of Quasi-Fideism and Hinge Epistemology generally.

On the other hand, it was necessary to clarify both an arational and rational aspect to how worldviews are held in Presuppositional Epistemology. Significantly, parallels between Quasi-Fideism's stance on how a belief is rationally held when there is a specific relation between a hinge and that belief is seen in how a belief is rationally held when there is a specific relation between worldview and belief *and* worldview and the world, as seen in transcendental justification. This additional criteria introduces complexity that I will explore in the next chapter.

The preceding means that Presuppositionalism commits to something absent in Hinge Epistemology by design, namely an attempt to justify one's own worldview. This has much to do with later Wittgenstein's insistence on our inability to go beyond the bounds of our own worldview, leaving that worldview ultimately rationally unjustified, though not disconnected from the world and arbitrary. Rather a specific form of life in the world leads to a specific worldview.¹⁵ This means that though there is significant overlap between the two, Hinge Epistemology and Presuppositionalism are ultimately unreconcilable. Further dialogue between these two systems could help sharpen the internal debates regarding them as well. For instance, it seems to me that the difference between Hinge Epistemologists like Coliva, who insist on hinges as being subject to rational evaluation and therefore being subject to justification as beliefs, and those like Pritchard who hold that our epistemic practice requires our relation to our hinges to be arational, are wrestling with different aspects of our epistemic practice. On the other hand, the challenge of Quasi-Fideism to give a clear account of how there can be arational *and* rational aspects to our use worldviews as the grounds of belief has significantly helped sharpen the picture in the preceding chapter.

common/neutral ground distinctions bring.

15. This basic stance is already present in the *Philosophical Investigations*, as argued by (McGinn 2013)

Unless Presuppositional Epistemology gets recognized as the grounds for the Presuppositional Apologetic, and an epistemological stance in its own right, confusions as seen above will continue to hamper dialogue, and irreconcilable combinations between the Presuppositional Apologetic and other epistemologies will continue to be introduced. And what all the above together means is that Presuppositional Epistemology brings a distinct view of rationality and a distinct view of disagreeing about one's most fundamental commitments. And that in turn suggests that it brings a distinct view to the problem of deep disagreement to which Quasi-Fideism and Hinge Epistemology has seen so much application.

Chapter 5

Presuppositional Deep Disagreement

In this chapter, I move beyond the exegetical focus of chapter 2, and the mix of application and extension of my exegesis of Van Til's Epistemology in chapter 3, to purely an extension of Presuppositional Epistemology as I have characterized it. I will seek to define Presuppositionalism's view of rational belief and action, and will apply it to the question of deep disagreement, making use of the nuances worked out in the previous chapter. This means that I will be rather brief where repetition is involved. It has been noted that Presuppositional seeks to relate rational norms and rational practice by means of the worldview ideal. As a reminder, the worldview ideal states that every rational agent should seek to develop their worldview as fully as possible so that they may approach life and intellectual matters with an increasingly interrelated and consistent worldview. This means that striving for maximal logical coherence and closure is normative, and this also applies to having one's metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments cohere with each other. Epistemologically, this means an ideal of epistemic self-awareness so that one both knows what one bases one's knowledge on and so that one can give the best possible account of why one believes what one believes. Presuppositionalism's commitment to apologetics requiring two disputants with very different worldviews to meta-epistemologically evaluate their worldviews suggests a model of disagreement that could be too demanding for the average person. At the same time, by arguing for a collaborative effort to develop what each disputant's worldview has to say about the worldview in question this challenge is localized to the belief being discussed.

There is good philosophical reason to think that an adequate account of rationality will try and relate rational behavior and rational norms. Consider Ester, who has been indoctrinated into a cult. Ester holds very firmly to a variety of beliefs which are objectively wrong. When Ester acts in accordance with these beliefs, or believes doctrines or claims because of these beliefs, then the temptation arises to say that Ester is acting *both* rationally and irrationally. If Ester is considered in terms of whether their beliefs are justified with reference to what is commonly accepted as objective fact, then she is acting irrationally. However, if Ester is considered in terms of whether she is acting irrationally with respect to her beliefs, the conclusion must be that Ester is acting rationally. After all, if Ester is fully committed to the beliefs that imply this specific action or belief, and then did not commit to that action or belief, she would be acting irrationally relative to her commitments. So on the one hand, there is intuitive reason to consider her rational and irrational, on the basis of practical and normative considerations, respectively. However, describing the situation in this way would involve equivocation, since two different standards of rationality are being employed. Yet intuitively, an account of rationality ought to be able to account for both our epistemic practice of giving reasons for our beliefs, and that we are fallible in giving those reasons. That is, it seems desirable for an account of

rationality to be able to accommodate both normative and descriptive features when these diverge in practice.

Similarly, consider Christof, who is a person suffering from schizophrenia. If one could bring him to the point of acting contrary to his schizophrenic beliefs, then Christof would be acting rationally with respect to the world, in the sense that his commitments and his actions would be justified with respect to what he should have normatively believed and held to, given what the world is like. On the other hand, Christof's actions or beliefs will be irrational because he will be doing that which he does not believe follows from what he believes he is justified in committing to because of his schizophrenia. When reasoning with such a person in the hopes of bringing him to the point of seeing the falsity of his beliefs to some extent then he must be taken to be a rational agent *in some sense* if the endeavor is to have any chance of improving his condition.¹ On the other hand, it is precisely Christof's irrationality with respect to the world that would be the target of reasoning with him that he has a fundamentally wrong view of the world. It does not seem desirable to have to equivocate in order to capture our epistemic practice as outlined in the cases of Ester and Christof.

This interplay between norms and descriptive standards is also seen in Hinge Epistemology. On the one hand, Pritchard points out that Wittgenstein insists that we need something arational in order to be able to conduct rational investigations. Ranalli seems to agree with this. On the other hand, Coliva would point out that it is not the case that those same hinges which function as arational grounds are never the subject of rational inquiry, so they cannot simply be arationally held. Presuppositionalism's worldview approach to rationality manages to bridge this gap between our seemingly combined arational and rational epistemic practice as regards the foundations of our thought. Considerations from deep disagreement also urge the idea that the right view of epistemic practice will be able to accommodate both arational and rational behavior.

For in the case of arational approaches to deep disagreement, such as Pritchard's Quasi-Fideism, certain features like a *lack of shared background* between disputants are readily understood (Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022a, 9). Shared background as an aspect of deep disagreement will be explored shortly, but the intuitive idea is that when two people have epistemologies that rest on arationally held hinges, then it is not surprising that they should have a deep disagreement if they disagree about a hinge. There is then a sense in which both parties are committed to grounds which are not based on neutral ground between worldviews, but are part of the very framework they use for thinking, and therefore seem to be inaccessible to their conversational partner. There is then a lack of shared epistemic background, which seems to hamper or block the possibility of effectively giving reasons for either side of the disagreement. At the same time, the hope of deep disagreements being rationally resolvable seems to require that there is some possibility of disputants rationally engaging with each other's foundations in a manner that enables some increasing understanding between them. Other aspects of deep disagreement which will be considered below likewise display a receptivity to having their existence explained by arational epistemic behavior, but ideally being open to rational resolution.

5.1 Presuppositional Epistemology's Rationality

In answer to all this, Presuppositionalism would insist that the question of what it means to rationally hold a belief is ambiguous. It requires dividing the question into two further considerations regarding

1. While the chance would of course be very small, for the sake of this thought experiment it may be worth pointing out that such reasoning having a positive effect is not unheard of. See for an anecdotal example Davidson (1997).

justification. Namely, justification in terms of the worldview that is held by the epistemic agent (justification by internal coherence between beliefs and commitments), and secondly justification of the belief that is held in terms of whether this worldview can be determined to be rationally held by its being able to account for its presuppositions and having coherent commitments (justification in terms of the underlying worldview). Let us call beliefs held in terms of the former kind of subjective justification *coherent*, and the latter kind of objective justification *correspondent*, since the idea is that if it is rationally defensible to hold a worldview, then the beliefs cohering with that worldview will correspond to objective reality. Note that these two types of justification correspond to the epistemological standards of internal coherence and transcendental justification that have been covered previously. The significance here is that worldviews as understood in Presuppositional Epistemology enables two types of justification to be characterized, and related to rationality. The first kind, worldview internal justification, rests on arationally held commitments, and the second kind rests on rationally justifying the worldview in terms of which the belief in question is held or the action in question is evaluated.

In terms of arational worldview commitments, there is a clear parallel to Hinge Epistemology's hinges. There are significant differences that prevent worldview commitments from being described as hinges. At the same time, worldview commitments are also arationally held as to the manner of their use in epistemic investigation. When you analyze a belief to see if you are justified in holding it in terms of your worldview, and holding it and all the commitments that define it arationally in the sense that you take the worldview's accuracy for granted. The worldview does not go under the microscope as part of the analysis of the belief's justification in terms of the worldview. Instead, the worldview as a whole functions as the microscope, determining how you see the belief.

It is also not the case that the worldview is held arationally in the sense of there being no rational reasons available to give for it. For transcendental justification is exactly when the worldview comes into view as opposed to the world coming into view by means of the worldview. Here you analyze your worldview commitments to see whether they are consistent with what they presuppose and whether they are consistent with each other. In this sense, you are justified holding a belief that is consistent with a worldview that can be rationally held. Presuppositionalism allows for greater and lesser accuracy of worldviews,² such that there could be greater and lesser justification for holding beliefs consistent with more or less accurate worldviews. Note that this does not imply that the commitments themselves may be more or less accurate. It seems to provide the most simple model of worldview comparison if the fundamental commitments of worldviews are bipolar. I therefore take commitments to be either true or false propositions about the world (whether with respect to metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics), under the assumption that such propositions can be refined until they are either true or false.

In both internal coherence and transcendental justification the analysis is comprehensive. No area of metaphysics, epistemology or ethics is to be cut off from the rest, since the only motivations for doing so would either be willful ignorance or the avoidance of recognition of a self-contradiction in one's commitments. This opens the door for ethical considerations in epistemic practice. It is at the same time recognized that as emotive and biased creatures our manner of arationally holding our worldview in investigation can be affected by non-rational considerations such as racism. In fact, Presuppositional Epistemology insists that our epistemic behavior is informed by our ethical nature and commitments.

Since moral values are taken to have objective reality, it becomes irrational to accept reasons which one believes are morally repugnant. On the basis that one's morality forms part of one's rational

2. An example of this would be where Van Til critiques what he calls "less consistent Calvinism" (Van Til 2003, 47). Demonstrating less internal coherence with the fundamental aspects of the Christian Theistic worldview by being inconsistent in its epistemology and apologetics, such a worldview is less accurate.

worldview structure, those commitments and conclusions that are held on the basis of moral intuitions are not arationally held, even in the case of a mistake as regards what is moral. The consequence is that it is rational for a person to reject a belief or belief system that the person finds morally repugnant because moral knowledge forms part of the rational knowledge structure. This means that even when rational dispute fails to rationally resolve the dispute in favor of the morally preferable position, it is not the case that it is irrational to reject the morally repugnant position. An argument with a genius racist about the worth of some group of humans over others need not end in an irrational rejection of racism for a person of lesser intelligence who cannot win the argument or convince the racist, but who does not wish to accept racists beliefs. The commitment to the moral wrongness of racism involves objective moral facts that form part of the worldview by means of the conscience. Since the conscience serves to (imperfectly) supply objective insight into moral facts, this means an integration of ethics into the worldview as the structure by which reasons are to be given. Moreover, the conscience is only one aspect of the common ground shared between all disputant. This is similar to Pritchard’s optimism regarding there always being sufficient shared hinges to resolve deep disagreement.

This is an important result in terms of epistemic injustice (see Fricker 2007). For, Lagewaard (2021) has argued that epistemic injustice can be a driver of deep disagreement between disputants. Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022b, 10) have argued that deep disagreement should include precisely such moral repugnancy criteria. It will be worth further exploring how the ethics of Reformed Theology relate to this epistemological consequence. This all leads then to deep disagreement on Presuppositionalism’s view. However, it is first necessary to get a grip on what is to be expected of a theory of deep disagreement.

5.2 The Metaphysical Desiderata of a Theory of Deep Disagreement

In order to situate Presuppositional Epistemology in the discussion on deep disagreement I will rely on Chris Ranalli’s influential analyses of deep disagreement, as well as his later work with Thirza Lagewaard. Ranalli argues that we can separate the question of deep disagreement into the metaphysical question of what we mean by deep disagreement and the epistemological question of how we think deep disagreement should rationally be resolved and whether and how the problem of epistemic incommensurability can be avoided. As to the metaphysical aspect of what deep disagreement is, Ranalli (in cooperation with Lagewaard in some of the articles used below) identifies a variety of what he calls “plausible desiderata” (Ranalli 2021, 985) for theories of deep disagreement to sufficiently cover the characteristics commonly observed of deep disagreements.

Firstly, there are the **structural features** of deep disagreement that need explaining. Deep disagreements display:

1. *Genuineness*: the disagreement does not consist in confusion or preferences, but out of at least one of the disputants being wrong.³
2. *Reasonableness*: both disputants must take themselves to be giving reasons and willing to accept them. The disagreement is not had in bad faith.⁴

3. Ranalli (2021, 985). See also the additional criterion that he adds that genuine disagreement requires a doxastic attitude in Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 11).

4. Ranalli (2021, 985). I have changed the term from “reason-taking” for greater clarity.

3. *Systematicity*: the point disagreed about is so fundamental that it implies disagreement about many other points.⁵
4. *Persistence*: attempts at rational resolution which would otherwise succeed, may fail or involve much more time and effort to carry out. Such disagreements have a kind of epistemic toughness to them, that often lead to them being unresolved.⁶
5. *Variety of kinds*: deep disagreements seem to be capable of being spread across metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.⁷
6. *Prevalence*: deep disagreements are exceptional, but not exceedingly rare.⁸
7. *Depth*: deep disagreement seem to be more fundamental than other disagreements. Some distinguishing feature(s) must be identified in order specify what drives this fundamentality, that results in the above being common to deep disagreement.⁹

Ranalli and Lagewaard also note **two common assumptions** regarding deep disagreement. Namely, many theories of deep disagreement assume that they involve either or both of:

1. *A lack of shared background*: shared background is the needed epistemic common ground enabling giving and evaluating reasons. Deep disagreement suggests that the necessary background for rational argumentation is missing. This expresses that in deep disagreement disputants do not seem to attach much relevance to the reasons offered by the other disputant.¹⁰
2. *Epistemic circularity*: while it is not a necessary aspect of deep disagreements, it is often assumed in the literature, and a theory of epistemic disagreement should explain why it looks like there may be epistemic circularity involved.¹¹

Lastly, Ranalli adds the **normative constraint** that a theory of deep disagreement should not imply the following results:

1. *True epistemic relativism*: deep disagreement ought not to result in the unfavorable result of equally legitimate, distinct epistemologies.¹²
2. *Rational irresolvability*: deep disagreement might be ultimately rationally irresolvable. However, this should not be by definition. After all, intuitively, some deep disagreements *do* seem at least possibly rationally resolvable (Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022a, 985).

Ranalli usefully specifies that “rational resolvability” is an ambiguous term (Ranalli 2021, 985). It may refer to at least one of the following three:

5. Ranalli (2021, 985) and Ranalli (2020, 4976).
6. Ranalli (2021, 985) and Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 8).
7. Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 10, 12). This is not explicitly named as desideratum, but then used in evaluating proposals.
8. Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 12). Again not named as desideratum, but used in evaluation.
9. Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 9, 12). Again not named as desideratum, but used in evaluation.
10. Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 7).
11. Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 3). Epistemic circularity can take multiple forms, like using an epistemic principle in the obtaining of evidence for that principle, but also more broadly the simple use of one’s frame of reference involves a kind of circularity, as has been noted.
12. Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a, 11). This is only brought as a critique, but that implies it was an implicit desideratum.

1. A dispute may be *epistemically* rationally resolved if disputants afterwards take the epistemic attitude they ought to take in virtue of the specifications given by the theory (*e.g.* being less confident about their beliefs).
2. A *practically* rational resolution would result in the actions being undertaken that accord with the practical reasons that have been derived from the disagreement.
3. A *reasons-based* rational resolution would see the disagreement resolved by the giving of reasons, so that the two disputants have reached a state of agreement.

Especially this third form of resolution is what Presuppositional Epistemology is after: having found something to deeply disagree about (*e.g.* God's existence), disputant engage in giving reasons in the manner specified by Presuppositional Apologetics, and in the end the disagreement is rationally resolved if one disputant has been convinced of the other's position, or both are convinced they are wrong, on the basis of the giving of reasons that has taken place.

Pritchard's characterization of deep disagreement is significantly less extensive, but coheres well with the above:

We thus have the following (admittedly rough) tripartite account of deep disagreements: they are disagreements (i) about matters of objective importance, (ii) where both parties are deeply committed to their positions, and (iii) the dispute is in its nature difficult to resolve. In turn, we have understood this third condition as breaking down into two parts, one concerning the nature of the disagreement (*i.e.*, that the disagreement is well-constructed) and a second concerning the parties themselves (*i.e.*, that they both meet minimal standards of rationality; Pritchard 2024, 54).

This can straightforwardly mapped to Ranalli's criteria of (i) genuineness, (ii) reasonableness,¹³ (iiia) the other structural considerations at play in Ranalli,¹⁴ and (iiib) an additional requirement for minimal rationality implicit in Ranalli. The significance of this is that Pritchard is both influential in the field of deep disagreement, and his Quasi-Fideism has been criticized by Ranalli repeatedly as leading to epistemic relativism (*e.g.* Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022a, 11). Ranalli therefore does not take Quasi-Fideism to be an attractive option (though also for other reasons). Pritchard has long maintained that Quasi-Fideism does not lead to epistemic relativism (2021, 1123). The upshot is that while there is a question here in terms of correct interpretation and application of one possible Hinge Epistemological solution to deep disagreement, both parties are in general agreed as to what the problem of deep disagreement is.

As such, the above features represent an important list of criteria against which to measure the success of a theory that attempts to define deep disagreements. The question is then whether Presuppositional Epistemology take on rationality as specified above can live up to these standards.

5.3 Defining Deep Disagreement on Presuppositionalism's Terms

Deep disagreement on Presuppositionalism's view occurs when two disputants disagree on a proposition that functions as a commitment in their respective worldviews. With respect to each disputant the belief in question is arationally held in his epistemic practice as fundamental to other beliefs. This

13. Though this may not seem to fit his wording, it certainly fits his use (Pritchard 2024, 52).

14. Again, his wording suggests a more limited idea than what he in practice takes into consideration (53).

explains *depth* in that worldview commitments have a clear function in grounding worldview internal reasoning, giving them the fundamental character needed for deep disagreement. Moreover, it gives a hierarchical account of depth because certain commitments may be part and parcel of a particular worldview but could change without fundamentally changing that worldview. For instance, Van Til viewed *Arminianism* as a defective form of Christian Theism, because he regarded it as a less consistent form of the Biblical worldview (Van Til 1959, 22). Arminianism is a branch of Christian theology that does not take God's knowledge of history to be determinative of it. In some sense, from Presuppositionalism's Reformed perspective the Arminian worldview has a serious shortcoming because it fails to live up to the worldview ideal. Nevertheless, the consistency is significant enough that it can be thought of still as Christian Theism. Whereas if the Trinity would be given up or a heresy committed, the Christian Theistic worldview would thereby be given up. This validates the inference that some worldviews are closer to each other, and that some worldviews may have less consistent forms through the variance of less important commitments.

The theory of deep disagreement that results from the above can be used as a model to explain many of the features of deep disagreement that the previous section specified a theory should be able to explain. Firstly, deep disagreements being about worldview commitments also explains *systematicity*, since worldview commitments are the basis for various other beliefs. If they are challenged, those beliefs are in turn implicitly challenged. Deep disagreement is also *genuine*, in that at least one of the disputants have an uncorrespondent worldview commitment (since worldview commitments are either true or false propositions about the world). *Reasonableness* is also captured because even in the naive case of two disputants who are not sensitive to the worldview commitment nature of their disagreement, and therefore do not accommodate their reasoning strategies, both may be operating in good faith and seeking to give the best epistemic reasons they have on offer for adopting their position, as well as being open to any good reasons on offer to change their own position. Naturally, such reasons are not likely to come, precisely because it is a deep disagreement, and under this analysis good reasons would be those reasons that cohere with the commitment in dispute.

The Presuppositional view of deep disagreement also explains *persistence* in a multifaceted manner that captures many important elements. Genuine reasons are being given and received in Presuppositionalism's view of disagreement, and reasons are generally evaluated worldview internally. As such, the form of the argument invites holding the commitment arationally as a ground of evaluation, as opposed to an object of evaluation. For the deep disagreement to be resolved a disputant will have to consider reasons given by the other disputant as a relevant cause to review the consistency of the commitment in question with other commitments and their shared presuppositions. This would be undertaken despite not having received reasons relevant to the disputant's own worldview. This may be ameliorated by the strategy of worldview critique advocated for by Presuppositional Apologetics. On the other hand, the *lack of shared background* is also evident in that a worldview commitment is not shared, which otherwise forms part of giving and evaluating reasons. This contributes to the difficulty, and thereby to the persistence of deep disagreement.

Variety of deep disagreement occurs because worldviews are so comprehensive in scope, and so diverse across populations. This variety plus the universality of worldviews also accounts for the *prevalence* of worldviews. Worldviews also nicely explain the intensification of the rate and depth of deep disagreement as either polarization or diversification increases.

Apparent *epistemic circularity* can also be accounted for in terms of worldview internal reasoning, without the norm of no *true epistemic relativism* having to be violated. There are various epistemologies,

but not equally legitimate. Lastly, Presuppositionalism's epistemology leads to its apologetic, and that apologetic seeks to rationally overcome deep disagreement over the truth of Christian Theism. The Presuppositional account of deep disagreement I have developed here is intended to be in line with that epistemology and apologetic, and so has built in optimism about the *rational resolvability* of deep disagreement.

Specifically, by means of the worldview ideal, even if an reasons-based rational resolution was not achieved, at least an epistemically rational resolution seems required by Presuppositionalism. Under the worldview ideal, having been confronted with an alternative worldview, it may be read as an ethical imperative to examine your worldview for internal and transcendental coherence. However, the goal of Presuppositionalism is naturally an reasons-based rational resolution.

This means that every characteristic required by Ranalli, Lagewaard, and Pritchard together has been taken into account by the Presuppositional theory of deep disagreement. The significance is that none of the approaches Ranalli (2021) and Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022a) consider manages to do that!

5.4 The Epistemological Desiderata of Deep Disagreement

Additionally, the upshot of all this is that there is part and parcel with Presuppositionalism a means of resolving deep disagreement in terms of internal coherence, transcendental justification, as well as the ideal of epistemic self-awareness. It is true that at first glance many people could not live up to the standards imposed by Presuppositionalism to engage in rational resolution. However, this is a twofold answer in Presuppositionalism. Firstly, it is part of Presuppositionalism to argue for the ideal of becoming epistemologically mature, thereby being more and more able to account for one's worldview. Secondly, by virtue of common ground, there is a degree to which the philosophical structure of the worldview can be ignored and persuasion can be engaged in, such that one rationally presents reasons from one's own worldview to the other person, and that on the basis of ethical considerations, good or bad, or intuition, or a sudden restructuring of one's outlook, or a gradual restructuring of one's outlook, one comes to accept the other position. This provides another link to Hinge Epistemology, where persuasion as the main form of rational reasoning in case of deep disagreement is held to (Durante 2016). That is to say, by means of persuasion, deep disagreement does not cause the rational resolution of deep disagreement to entirely depend on rational capacities of the disputants.

At the same time, the worldview ideal, transcendental justification, and checking whether the worldview commitments cohere with each other and their presuppositions, altogether mean that there is a fairly clear roadmap for the resolution of deep disagreements, along with a view of rationality that satisfies effectively every desiderata raised by Pritchard as well as Ranalli and Lagewaard.

However, before continuing to consider the Presuppositional approach to deep disagreement, it is necessary to specify the epistemological desiderata to complement the metaphysical commitment specified in the previous section. Ranalli and Lagewaard raise two criteria regarding deep disagreement (Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022b, 1–2).

1. The *epistemic incommensurability* criterion requires that a theory explain how the disputants are to argue for the fact their epistemic system is the right one, in a non-question-begging way.
2. The *rational resolvability* criterion requires the theory of deep disagreement to specify what it means to rationally respond to deep disagreement.

It is worth recalling that in the previous section an adequate theory of deep disagreement was required to have rational resolvability as a potential possibility. As such, it is here assumed that the theories specify that there is some rational response possible, even if it is only not to engage in rational reasoning. This would give a practically rational response to deep disagreement, where the practical reason would be that the deep disagreement is not resolvable by giving reasons. For instance, this is what Ranalli and Lagewaard take to be the consequence of Quasi-Fideism (Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022a, 6–7).

Ranalli and Lagewaard identify two more normative constraints, which I will call the *resolution is in reach* (2022b, 5) and the *no moral repugnancy* norms (2022b, 7).

1. The *resolution is in reach* norm states that the theory of deep disagreement’s specification of what it means to rationally respond should be generally attainable for the average disputant.
2. The *no moral repugnancy* norm says that it ought not to be the case that rationally resolving deep disagreement requires considering it rational to hold morally repugnant beliefs.

This warrants some discussion. Firstly, I take the *the resolution is in reach* norm to be reasonable. Ranalli and Lagewaard, Pritchard, and the position I take here all assume that deep disagreement, intuitively speaking, does sometimes get rationally resolved between epistemically average disputants. As such, you would expect that deep disagreement in general does not require genius epistemic capabilities. This norm plus the requirement to specify what it means to respond rationally to deep disagreement means that a theory meeting the epistemological criteria will provide a basic roadmap to solving deep disagreement. After all, it must demonstrate the possibility of rational resolution in a manner attainable for average disputants, which implies a sufficiently explicit approach to justify the claim of having met the norm.

Secondly, the *moral repugnancy* norm is an effort to avoid having things such as racism being legitimated as rational. What Ranalli and Lagewaard specifically have in mind is that a harmful belief may be held as a hinge, or with respect to a hinge. This has multiple bad outcomes (7). In the case of arationally held hinges, it could be the case that a morally harmful commitment is held as a hinge and therefore neither justified nor unjustified. This conflicts with the sense that morally wrong beliefs are unjustified. Of course, justification here must refer to justification with reference to the way the world is, and perhaps secondly also the worldview itself.

When it comes to epistemic incommensurability, the question is how to argue for one’s own epistemic system in a manner that is non-question-begging. It has already been covered how the transcendental argumentation of Presuppositionalism seeks to do precisely that, and so this particular challenge has already been answered. It is worth further noting that it has been answered in a manner that is particularly sensitive to the concern raised by Ranalli and Lagewaard for a similar kind of view that it would be beyond the epistemic capacities of the average epistemic agent to work out whether their worldviews have adequate epistemic support (5). It has been pointed out that the limitations of average epistemic agent have been taken into account. Even for cases where there is a case of deep disagreement too great for the average epistemic agent, at the same time this is not a normative situation, and the idea would be to seek to work through this.

Then in terms of the second challenge raised by deep disagreement, rational resolvability, the Presuppositional argument has also been covered in the preceding section, and so it only remains to indicate some advantages obtained by the Presuppositional approach. The epistemology of deep disagreement has two broad divisions:¹⁵ *Steadfast views* and *Conciliatory views* on rational resolvability.

15. See both Matheson (2021, 1026) and Ranalli and Lagewaard (2022b, 7).

The idea being that the Steadfast view camp holds to the idea that the rational response to deep disagreement is to retain confidence in your worldview, while the conciliatory camp says that it is rational to change your confidence in your worldview when encountering deep disagreement. This division is unhelpful because reductionistic. After all, if there is to be any change in the worldview, there must be a reduction in confidence possible, such that an epistemic agent can go from confidence in one view to confidence in another worldview.

Otherwise, an epistemic agent always has to go from full confidence in one point of view to full confidence in another point of view, which is a very unintuitive result. On the other hand, it seems unintuitive to assume that whenever deep disagreement occurs, there is a legitimate reason to lower one's confidence or increase one's confidence in a specific point of belief. After all, why would it be a given that in a disagreement there would be a deep disagreement, there is necessarily also a legitimate reason given for you to doubt your standpoint? On the other hand, why assume beforehand that the most rational course of action would be to retain full confidence or unchanged confidence after encountering a deep disagreement? Legitimate reasons may be given in the discussion that ensues.

The worldview change dynamic that has been described, where two agents interacting with one another, suggests that a model of deep disagreement that involves increasing and decreasing confidence in one's commitments and worldview coheres very well with Presuppositionalism. Moreover, such a position coheres well with the idea that deep disagreement is rationally resolvable. In non-deep disagreements, one would generally take a rational resolvability to at least imply a process of presenting reasons and those reasons becoming more and more convincing to the one being convinced if there is any convincing happening. Moreover, such a view coheres well with conversion on which Presuppositionalism's view of worldview change is based. Namely, it can happen slowly with the reasons for conversion for religious worldview change becoming suddenly or slowly appealing.

As such, one may also think of someone who goes to a political rally after spending their lives in a fairly apolitical manner and suddenly becoming quite heavily invested in a particular kind of politics. There's therefore intuitive reason to think that prescribing either retained confidence or necessarily changing confidence has both missing an important aspect of real-world examples of deep disagreement, resolution, or worldview change. As such, it is a benefit that Presuppositionalism does not seem to belong to either camp.

Yet both camps stress distinct and important features of deep disagreement resolution. The steadfast view emphasizes that there is a kind of continued confidence and optimism in our worldview. This is of course tied to the rationality aspect of holding a worldview and looking at the world through it.

On the other hand, conciliatory views highlight the fact that in deep disagreement one may be receiving reasons to change one's positions. In the previous section, such behavior was tied with the worldview ideal. In all this, it does not seem surprising that the conciliatory/steadfast view distinction seems to wrestle with the same basic problems as the Hinge Epistemological distinction between our rational commitments and rationally valuable beliefs.

On the one hand, there is the basic confidence needed in order to be in one's the steadfast view's assertion that it is rational to maintain your own standpoint and in quasi-fideism's über-hinge commitment that the most basic commitment one has is that one's worldview is correct, as well as the basis of our rationality that one is not questioning one's worldview in order to ask questions in terms of that worldview. On the other hand, conciliatory views and views that take hinges to be rationally evaluable are both stressing pragmatic considerations regarding how one does seem to actively change

one's confidence in one's worldview, even in deep disagreement and even as regards hinges. Given these two sets of considerations, it seems to speak highly in the favor of the Presuppositionalist view of rationality and worldview change that it can conceptually accommodate both.

As such, Presuppositionalism's account of deep disagreement says that the rational response to deep disagreement is to check one's worldview for internal coherence, check one's worldview in particular as regards to this point of belief that deep disagreement is involved in for transcendental justification, and in doing so attempt to identify whether this deep disagreement has revealed a blind spot in one's worldview where one is incoherent or transcendently unjustified. As well as when engaging in this consideration, being sensitive to intuitive and ethical considerations on the proposition that in both intuitive and ethical considerations can function as evidence in considering the validity of the reasons one has for one's position, and it is therefore appropriate to feel less confident of one's worldview when one finds the evidence for one's worldview or point of belief less compelling. However, at the same time, it is neither feasible nor rational to abandon one's world point or suspend belief in one's worldview because of doubt regarding one's worldview. This fits with the Presuppositional view of worldview change as having two aspects, both the rational portion which may result in fast or slow or no persuasion and the actual change of worldview which happens in a moment, though the internal coherence of that worldview as held by that person may take a while to develop.

5.5 An Overall Evaluation

In evaluating the overall potential of Presuppositionalism's view of rationality, a major fact to be considered is that, as opposed to Hinge Epistemology, Presuppositionalism allows for objectively arguing for one's world view. This allows significant advantages over Hinge Epistemology in tackling the problem of deep disagreement. Yet, transcendental argumentation comes paired with presuppositionalism. This is not a neutral subject, though the debate has been beyond this essay. Additionally, the idea of objectively being able to argue for one's world view may be a step too far for some, and therefore epistemologically objectionable to them. It suggests the pretense of laying down your epistemic norms in order to test those same norms, as if you wouldn't be using your epistemic for that very purpose and thereby involving yourself in vicious circularity.

On the other hand, the transcendental form of argumentation as layed out by Presuppositionalism does attempt to avoid vicious circularity, and the position can be motivated as reflecting epistemic practice in regards to giving and receiving reasons. Moreover, biting the bullet may be worth it, given that no other model of deep disagreement completely complies with either the metaphysical nor the epistemological desiderata identified in the literature. The Presuppositionalist view of deep disagreement, together with the underlying view of rationality, complies both with all metaphysical and with all epistemological desiderata. This gives it at least some credibility as a theory of deep disagreement.

Further refinement of this extension of deep disagreement may also contribute to a further refinement of the transcendental argumentation as advocated by Presuppositionalism. This could be critical to furthering the debate, and to further specifying Presuppositionalism in analytic terms.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In this essay I have presented a new theory of deep disagreement which seeks to account for all the characteristics of deep disagreement. The necessity for a new theory is demonstrated by the fact that other theories of deep disagreement as covered by Ranalli and Lagewaard fail to comply with all the desiderata that they propose. In order to present Presuppositionalism and its view of rationality that I extended from it as a novel solution to deep disagreement, it was also necessary to distinguish Presuppositionalism from Quasi-Fideism.

The epistemology of Presuppositionalism has been generally under-appreciated and under-specified in the literature regarding Presuppositionalism by both critics and adherents. By this I do not mean that there was no consciousness of Presuppositionalism having specific epistemological features. Greg Bahnsen's version of Presuppositional Apologetics relied heavily on epistemological considerations (1998). An epistemological focus is also clear in John Frame (1995). Specific aspects of the epistemology such as the transcendental argument have also been debated (Butler 2001). At the same time the cohesion between the fundamental level of a Reformed Theology the resulting epistemology followed by the resulting apologetic has not been sufficiently appreciated. This has partly been because the epistemology has not often enough been fully derived. Attempts at such derivations have occurred in, for instance, Mathison. However, Mathison's Presuppositionalist epistemology clearly is defective in that it failed to include crucial distinctions such as that between neutral and common ground, as my response showed. This essay has therefore been an attempt at facilitating an advance on several fronts.

Firstly, it has sought to derive the epistemology with a new level of clarity and specification serving the drive to relate Presuppositionalism to analytic philosophy. Additionally, it was systematically shown how the theology leads to the core parts of the epistemology, which in turn leads to core parts of the apologetic. This is intended to provide greater conceptual clarity regarding what Presuppositional Epistemology is. Lastly, the philosophical relevance of Presuppositional Epistemology was shown in terms of its application to deep disagreement.

At the same time, at the level of both Hinge Epistemology and deep disagreement progress has been made in arguing that the different camps are capturing relevant aspects of rationality. The camp that makes use of arational commitments (to which Quasi-Fideism belongs) is capturing our epistemic practice whereby we do arationally hold a worldview and use that to evaluate the world around us. On the other hand, the rationally held commitments camp was also found to be capturing a legitimate aspect of our epistemic practice: the practice of critically reflecting on our worldview and that of others. This suggested some mechanism by which those holding different worldviews nevertheless have sufficient common ground to be able to effectively engage others. This was argued to obtain even in

cases of extreme divergence as Presuppositionalism takes to be case for the difference between the non-Christian Theist and the Christian Theist.

Presuppositionalism presents an apologetic roadmap for reasoning between worldviews as well as an epistemology to understand this by. It's worth noting that certain features in this debate were anticipated by Van Til because of his theological commitments about a hundred years before they became philosophically relevant. This includes the idea of a non-vicious circularity and self-supportivity (Matheson 2021).

The philosophical work done in this essay has been based on the movement from theological convictions to an abstraction from those theological convictions. Though Presuppositionalism has its focus on worldview change in the sense of conversion, formalizing and abstracting an understanding of (non-religious) worldview change in general from this has proven profitable. It seems to me well worth asking where else such an abstraction may prove fruitful. One potential example would be the common ground commitments of Presuppositionalism which go here very well with for instance Pritchard's optimism about there always being sufficient shared hinges for resolving deep disagreement or Donald Davidson's collapse of the content-structure distinction. Naturally, Presuppositionalism presents different views on these matters but the resonance between these views and Presuppositionalism promises for fruitful future dialogue.

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