

[DRAFT]

**Science, Perspectivalism, and Christian Faith:
Jacques Derrida Meets Ken Ham**

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and as Construct of Human Culture and Language”
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ABSTRACT

If I defend a version of “perspectivalism” in science, blame it on my Bible college education. For the first place that I learned perspectivalism was in my Apologetics class, when my Dallas-trained professor pressed into my hand Ian Taylor’s *In the Minds of Men: Darwin and the New World Order*, showed us videos by Ken Ham (you know, the bombardier beetle, etc.), and carefully laid out the presuppositions that undergirded carbon-dating. Science, he explained to us, was not so “objective” after all. This was reinforced later when I encountered Abraham Kuyper’s famous Stone Lectures at Princeton, particularly the fourth lecture on “Calvinism and Science.” Here again was a Christian theologian emphasizing the conditioned character of *perception* itself—and thereby articulating the possibility of a radically Christian scientific endeavor.

So if later, when I would encounter Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida and Kuhn, I—as a Christian scholar—critically appropriated the accounts of knowledge offered by (gasp!) “Continental philosophy,” it was because my pump had been primed by quite a conservative Christian education. My goal in this brief presentation is to stage something of a conversation between these disparate traditions—to metaphorically introduce Jacques Derrida to Ken Ham, or preferably, Abraham Kuyper. I will try to limit myself to just three theses:

1. A radically Christian account of knowledge (in the tradition of Paul [Romans 1:21ff.], Augustine, Calvin, and the Reformational tradition of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd) also affirms a radical *perspectivalism* regarding our knowledge of the world.
2. This Christian perspectivalism does *not* entail what Al Plantinga describes as “creative anti-realism” or “relativism;” rather, it entails what I will describe as a *confessional realism* which permits the possibility of dialogue.
3. This Christian perspectivalism undergirds a radical account of distinctly *Christian* science in general (*Wissenschaften*) and natural science in particular.

INTRODUCTION

I take it that our panel's title ("The World as Object of Scientific Study, and as Construct of Human Culture and Language") is meant to evoke a certain tension, and a tension that is amplified for Christian scholars in particular. This tension is the supposed opposition between affirming the *objectivity* of the "world" as an object of scientific study, and the (admittedly recent) claim that the "world" is in some sense a *construct* of culture and language. It seems to me that the articulation of this concern can be found, for instance, in Alvin Plantinga's concerns about what he calls "creative anti-realism" and implications for Christian scholarship.

According to Plantinga, "creative anti-realism"—as the contemporary incarnation of "Enlightenment subjectivism"¹—asserts that we human beings are "responsible for the structure and nature of the world; it is *we*, fundamentally, who are the architects of the universe" (TP 128); *we* are responsible even for the *existence* of phenomena (TP 128). Tracing the lineage of this position to Kant,² Plantinga finds it articulate in Heidegger's "hermeneutical philosophy" and the "Linguistic Anti-Realism" of Wittgenstein and Derrida (TP 129).

The problem with creative anti-realism is two-fold: first, such a position seems to entail *relativism* insofar as we all construct *different* worlds. "Your *Lebenswelt* may be quite different from mine; which one, then (if either), represents the world as it really is" (TP 130)? Thus is jettisoned the very notion of objective truth (TP 130). Second, creative anti-realism signals a sinful *hubris* bordering on self-idolatry: for if we construct the world, "we human beings...really take the place of God" (TP 130; cp. Rom. 1:18ff.).

So it would seem that contemporary notions regarding the "construction" of the world by language or culture stand in direct tension to both scientific standards of objective truth as well as Christian commitments regarding God as Creator. Therefore it seems that we have to choose between "the world as object of scientific study" and "the world as construct of language and culture."

However, in what remains I want to argue that this opposition is only *apparent*; more specifically, I want to argue that (1) very briefly, I'm not sure if there really are any creative anti-realists, even amongst those post-Kantian thinkers who emphasize the "construction" of the world; (2) that a Christian account of knowledge is committed to a certain *perspectivalism* (or what I will call a *confessional realism* which emphasizes the necessary mediating role of perception in our "access" to the world—and that such a Christian account bears affinity with the post-Kantian tradition; and (3) it is just such a Christian account of radically perspectival knowledge which undergirds the project of "Christian science." In the brief space I have, I offer these only as points for further discussion, not fully established arguments.

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship*, Stob Lectures, Lecture I, "Reformed Thinking: Christian Scholarship," in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986-1998* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 128. Henceforth abbreviated in the text as TP.

² For a challenge to Plantinga's reading of Kant, see Merold Westphal, "Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution," in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 161-179.

§1. Where Does One Find a Creative Anti-Realist?

I won't spend much time on this, but I would just want to emphasize that what Plantinga ascribes to "creative anti-realism"—*viz.*, some sense in which humans are responsible for the structure and existence of the world—is not a position held by anyone I know, including Heidegger, Derrida, and Wittgenstein.³

Let me take the most extreme (and most misunderstood) example: when Jacques Derrida asserts that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*"⁴ (literally, "there's no outside-text"), he is *not* making the silly ontological claim that there is no reality outside of books as though he were some kind of linguistic Berkeleyan. In other words, he is not making a claim about *existence* (cf. TP 128-129) but rather something like our "access" to the world.⁵ There is nothing outside of textuality, which is to say, that we have no unmediated access to "*the-way-the-world-is*" (cp. TP 131). That does *not* mean that there isn't a "the-way-things-are," but only that our perception of the-way-things-are (or "state of affairs"⁶) is always mediated by a semiotic system (or "language") which is itself conditioned by the conditions of finitude: time and space. In other words, our perceptive frameworks have a history. I want to describe this understanding of the necessary mediation of knowledge through semiotic systems of significance as *perspectivalism*, meaning simply that we always only have access to "the-way-the-world-is" through a particular perspective.⁷

§2. A "Radically"⁸ Christian Account of Knowledge

Now, I want to make the claim that a Christian understanding of what it means to "know" the world—even as an object of scientific study—entails something like the perspectivalism I just described. Let me begin with St. Paul: according to Romans 1, there is a deep sense in which the *structure* of the world ("the-way-

³ It could be that some actually do intend the surprising *ontological* claims that Plantinga suggests. In that case, I would side with Plantinga that we should have concerns about that.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158. Spivak's translation ("there's nothing outside of the text") is one of the problems which has given birth to rather silly readings of Derrida on this point. The word "thing" appears nowhere in the original text. For a helpful corrective to these misreadings, see John D. Caputo, "The Good News About Alterity: Derrida and Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993), esp. pp. 454-456.

⁵ I think one of the reasons that Plantinga, and many other, misunderstand Derrida is because they fail to read him within the horizon of phenomenology. Phenomenology is, simply put, a philosophy of *experience* which is launched by "bracketing" questions of existence. This bracketing should not be misunderstood as a *denial*.

⁶ For a discussion in these terms, see Herman Dooyeweerd, *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Vol. 2, Part II, ch. iv. I will return to Dooyeweerd below.

⁷ I'm also alluding to Dooyeweerd's discussion of the "perspective structure of truth" (NC, II, p. 578ff.)

⁸ I employ the qualifier "radical" in relation to *radix*, which means "root." I want to articulate an account of our knowledge of the world which is *rooted* in a Christian understanding of the world—that is, the account itself springs from Christian roots.

things-are”) is nevertheless not *perceived* as such. Recall that Paul does claim that “since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes are *clearly seen*, being understood by [or through] the things that are made” (Romans 1:20). So the world has a *structure* about it which points to its Creator, and there is even a sense in which this referential structure is “clearly seen.” However, Paul goes on to emphasize that this structure—though it continues⁹ to inhere in “the-way-the-world-is,” is nevertheless not *perceived* by all who “see” it. Because their “foolish hearts were darkened” (1:21) their “world”—their *construction* of the “world,” we might say—does not conform to “the-way-the-world-is.”

Now, this would seem to prove Plantinga’s point: only darkened foolish hearts “construct” the world! But on a closer look I don’t think that’s the case. The fact that we perceive the world through the lens of our particular commitments—or within “horizons” of perception—is not a result of the Fall, but rather constitutive for finitude.¹⁰ See the world “the-way-it-is” is not a matter of *escaping* such horizontality or structures of perception; rather, what is required for *us* to “see” the structure of the world for what it is (a structure which refers to the Creator), it is necessary that our *perception* be redeemed. Enter Augustine.

In *De vera religione*, Augustine emphasizes that our perception of the world is distorted because the “eye of the mind” is diseased and must be *healed*; and for Augustine, this is a *moral* matter (we can’t separate his epistemology from his ethics). Thus Augustine offers us what we would not call, following Zagzebski, “virtues of the mind”: “the mind has to be healed,” he concludes, “so that it may behold the immutable form of things which remains ever the same” (*De vera religione* iii.3). Redemption or healing is the redemption *of* our (conditioned) perception, not a redemption *from* perception.

[This same point—in the line of Augustine—is emphasized by Abraham Kuyper in his lecture on “Calvinism and Science.” First, in contrast to an idolatrous “empiricism,” Kuyper remarks that “[e]ven the minutest microscopic, the farthest reaching telescopic investigation is nothing but *perception* with strengthened eyes.”¹¹ This enters into “science” when these perceptions are organized into an account of the world (in other words, when we try to *explain* them and their interconnection with other phenomena). And for Kuyper, such an account or explanation of the world is rooted in a *religious* commitment regarding fundamental characteristics of the “world” being described. Kuyper thus concludes: “Notice that I do not speak of a conflict between faith and science.¹² Such a conflict does not exist. Every science in a certain degree starts *from faith*.”¹³ Kuyper goes on to link these fundamental faith commitments to what we would likely describe as “paradigms” today.]

⁹ However, we must also account for the cosmic effects of the Fall on the structure of the *kosmos*.

¹⁰ I have argued for this point in my *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (InterVarsity Press, 2000).

¹¹ Kuyper, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), p. 112.

¹² Thus it is so surprising that Plantinga, claiming to be unfolding a broadly Kuyperian project (TP), can nevertheless author “When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible,” *CSR XXI* (1991).

¹³ Kuyper, *Calvinism*, p. 131.

[Finally, I think even the most ardent of “creationists” recognize the perspectival character of our knowledge of “the-way-things-are.” In other words, creationists—in almost Foucauldian fashion!—call into question the notion of the “facts” of science. For instance, Ian Taylor subjects the *assumptions* of carbon dating to a fairly radical critique (like a good presuppositional apologist!).¹⁴ (Taylor, et. al.)]

§3. Confessional Realism

What I’m trying to suggest above is that we need not be forced to choose between “the world as an object of scientific study” and “the world as construct of culture and language;” in fact, my point is more radical than that: I’m suggesting that we *cannot* choose between the two—that as finite created beings our perception of the world is necessarily mediated by a semiotic (or linguistic) system of signification or meaning through which we “see” the world. The “world,” of course, exceeds our perception as a *given*, but is always only given *to us* through such frameworks. This is not “creative anti-realism,” because I’m making no claims about the *existence* of the world; but neither is it a “naïve realism” which posits an *unmediated* access to “the-way-things-are.”

Instead, I will describe this as a *confessional realism*. Something similar has recently been suggested by Alister McGrath in his unfolding trilogy on a scientific theology. McGrath argues, for instance, that the very “concept of ‘nature’ is a socially mediated notion, not an objective entity in its own right.”¹⁵ He goes on to note the essential mediation of such an ‘observation’ of the world: “This process of mediation means that our perception of what ‘nature’ means [...] is covertly shaped by influences, which deny us direct access to an allegedly neutral or self-sufficient notion of ‘nature’ itself. [...] [G]iven that ‘nature’ is an interpreted and mediated notion, what interpretation is to be preferred?”¹⁶ And in this context, he in fact draws a correlation between the views of N.R. Hanson¹⁷ and John Calvin as both emphasizing the way in which observation of the world is *theory-laden*.¹⁸ However, this claim—a correlate of what I’m describing as perspectivalism—does not jettison realism *per se*, nor does it deny that the world is, in a sense, a *given*, or that the world has a given structure. But this structure is ‘unveiled,’ as it were, within a perspective, and these perspectives are ultimately informed by *faith*, but a fundamental confessional. Hence I’m describing this as *confessional realism*: a *realism* insofar as it maintains that the world is a *given* structure, but confessional insofar as our perception of and access to the world is mediated by horizons which are ultimately *religious*.

¹⁴ See Ian T. Taylor, *In the Minds of Men*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: TFE Publishing, 1987), pp. 317-319.

¹⁵ Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, Volume 1: Nature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁷ N.R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (Cambridge, 1961).

¹⁸ McGrath, p. 137.

[In order to articulate this confessional realism, permit me to active one set of categories employed by Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. Dooyeweerd, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, distinguishes between what he describes as a “subjective *a priori* insight” and the “*a priori* structural laws of human experience” (NC II.548,573). Sometimes he’ll speak of these in terms of the “subject-side” and “law-side” of existence. The structural *a priori* of the world is a *given* that confronts every perceiver; but such perception only occurs within the subjective horizons of the perceiver, and these horizons are conditioned—and ultimately rooted in faith commitments. So we have what could be described as a “confessional realism”: a *realism* insofar as it maintains that the world is a *given* structure, but confessional insofar as our perception of and access to the world is mediated by horizons which are ultimately *religious*.

It follows from this that all science (as a mode of both perception and explanation), because it is governed by fundamental faith commitments, is ultimately *religious*. And such religious commitments determined *how* we “see” the world, and thus, in a loose sense, constitute the “world” as such.]

§4. A Concluding Question for Reflection

Let me close with a more concrete question, and then suggest a metaphor for how I’m thinking about this. First, the question:

- If I have a “correct” understanding of the structure of the human genome, but fail to recognize it *as* created by God, do I really know the *truth* about the human genome? Do I really know “the-way-the-world-is?”

Now, let me try out a metaphor, and let you judge whether it works or not:

Imagine, for a moment, a couple of art historians with a critical eye. They are both considering the same piece: a rich, allusive, vibrant early Renaissance painting of a peasant woman tending her infant child. The poverty of the woman is evident by her meager clothing, the shoddiness of their place of habitation, her infant son’s lack of clothing. Moreover, the painter has meticulously portrayed a disturbing emotion on the face of this young peasant woman. Is it fear? Is it sadness? Is it a kind of disgusted aloofness? The first art historian has spent countless hours reflecting upon the work, comparing it to similar works from the period, making suggestions as to who the anonymous artist might be, and offers her reading: here we have a powerful portrayal of the plight of oppression, a mother fearing for her child and herself, having been impregnated by a master who has treated her as only an instrument for his satisfaction. On the face of the mother is both her fear *and* disgust, even a certain disgust for this product of such an unholy union.

The second art historian, however, has a different perspective; this stems largely from the fact that there is something she knows that her colleague does not: that this work they are

considering is in fact only a detail of a cathedral ceiling which portrays the biblical narrative from Creation to Consummation. And that this peasant servant woman is, in fact, the servant of the Lord who was happy to say, "Let it be." And that the look on her face is one of confusion and fear, stemmed by the curious pronouncements of shepherds, angels, and an old man in the temple who has terrified her with his talk of swords and the rise and fall of many.

Which of these scholars, these observers of the work, "got it right?" While the non-Christian and Christian alike are confronted by the same *given*, the same object, and while their descriptions and accounts might in fact *correspond* in important ways (*e.g.*, both of these descriptions were consistent with the work as presented, and the first art historian was 'right' when she read the elements of fear and poverty), it seems to me that the perspective which sees this given *as* a detail of the cathedral ceiling makes all the difference. In the same way, it seems to me that the scientist or scholar who would see the world *as* creation alone knows the world "as-it-truly-is." And we know the world *as* creation only by beginning *from revelation*.