Is it possible to do Theology without Philosophical Presuppositions?

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Spruyt quotes Land saying: “Philosophy at large can dispense with Universities, but Universities, that try to dispense with Philosophy will be found in the long run to tamper with the mainspring of their own constitution” (1889:127).

Opsomming:
Veral met betrekking tot die Godsleer word die onvermydelikheid van wysgerige veronderstellinge duidelik. Die onkritiese teologiiese gebruik om van ’n Godsbegrip te praat benodig in werklikheid die wysgerig-kennisteoretiese onderskeiding tussen begrip en idee. Wanneer hierdie funderende onderskeiding geïgnoreer word beland ons maklik in ’n teo-ontologiese verdubbeling van die skeppingsverkeidenheid. Terme wat eintlik idee-matig (d.w.s. oor die grense van begripskennis heen-wysend) gebruik word, word dan misverstaan, uit hul oorspronklike skeppingskonteks gelig en as “oorspronklik” by/in God (as “wenseeienskappe”) geplaas. Die sirkel word voltooi wanneer dergelike “eienskappe” (bv. die oneindigheid van God) ten slotte dan in afgeleide sin opnuut teruggebring word na die skeppingsdomein vanwaar dit in die eerste plek “geroof” is.

Andersyds impliseer die feit dat begripsvorming altyd geskied in terme van universalia dat daar slegs van ’n begrip van God sprake kan wees indien God nie meer enig (in die Bybelse sin van die Woord) is nie, maar inderdaad (saam met talle ander “Gode”) aan ’n universele order vir God-wees beantwoord. Slegs skepselse is onderworpe aan ’n orde wat God as Skepper daarvoor gestel het, wat derhalwe uiteindelik daarop neerkom dat die “God” wat in begrip gevat is in die skepping ingetrek is as wetsonderdaan.

Die begrip/idee onderskeidng word ook saaklik toegelig aan die hand van ’n begrips- en idee-gebruik van konstansie (inersie). Globaal staan dit binne die konteks van ’n nuwe verantwoording van die moontlikheid om sinvol (ook wetenskaplik-teologies) met behulp van skeppingsterme oor God te praat en juis daarmee erkenning te verleen aan die transsendensie van God.
Introduction

Not only the etymology of the term *theology* but also the actual history of the discipline known under this name makes it plain that in some or other way the scholarly endeavours of this subject speak about “God.” Of course there is a rich speculative legacy within philosophy concerned with what philosophers rationally constructed God to be. Wilhelm Weischedel wrote extensively about this tradition in his work on the “God of the philosophers” (*Die Gott der Philosophen*). Surely the “God of the Theologians” cannot be identified with the “God of the philosophers.” Someone like Heidegger even claims that theology is not the “science of God,” since it must rather be viewed as *reflection on faith*. For this reason theology, according to Heidegger, “avoid any sort of philosophical system” (Heidegger, 1970:25, cf. p.18).

Pannenberg, by contrast, explicitly goes back to Thomas Aquinas in order to restore and maintain the idea that theology does deal with God:

“In proclaiming the one God, Christianity appealed from the start to philosophy and to its criticism of the polytheistic beliefs of other peoples. The reference was first to the Stoic theories and later, above all, to the doctrine of God found in Platonism. Such an appeal to the philosophical doctrine of God must not be interpreted only in an external sense as an accommodation to the spiritual climate of Hellenism. Instead, it reflects the condition for the possibility that non-Jews, without becoming Jews, might come to believe in the God of Isreal as the new God of all humanity. The appeal to the philosophers' teachings concerning the one God was the condition for the emergence of a Gentile church at all. We must therefore conclude that the connection between Christian faith and Hellenistic thought in general – and the connection between the God of the Bible and the God of the philosophers in particular – does not represent a foreign infiltration into the original Christian message, but rather belongs to its very foundations” (Pannenberg, 1990:11-12).

Later on in this work he adds the following remark:

“Christian theology, in contrast to Heidegger's construal of it, is essentially an inquiry [*Wissenschaft*] into God and his revelation. Everything else that occurs within theology can become a theme for the theologian only “in relation to God,” as Thomas Aquinas put it: *sub ratione Dei*. Christian theology would lose not only its specific content but also, and most importantly, the consciousness of truth that is intrinsic to it, if it were to follow Heidegger's advice to stop speaking of God in the realm of thought” (Pannenberg, 1990:120).
Suppose we accept for the moment that theology cannot avoid entering into “God-talk” (to be distinguished from the “Divine discourse” discussed by Wolterstorff – 1998). Is it then unavoidable that theology ought to employ some or other concept of God (in the “realm of thought”)? Most theologians will affirm this implication. Yet, exactly at this point inevitable philosophical presuppositions emerge because reflection on the nature of concept formation delves into the epistemological presuppositions of theology which are philosophical in nature. As we shall argue below, concept formation always entails an appeal to universal properties which cannot be divorced from universal conditions. But if God is the origin of all conditions and of being conditioned, can one then still claim that a concept of God is possible?\(^1\)

The temptation of theo-ontology

It is amazing to see how easily one can assume a certain philosophical perspective without being aware of the fact that it is indeed philosophical in nature. But once this is done, with the best of pious intentions, God is subsequently portrayed in terms of this implicit philosophical scheme. In doing this key features of creation are then “positioned” “within” God such that our experience of these properties is subsequently accounted for by deducing them from the elevated “essence” of God. This is in line with the traditional claim of theology, namely that it merely listens to the Bible – a “pure understanding” that should obediently be followed in scholarly (“scientific”) theological reflection about God. What about an attribute like infinity?

Although the Bible does not explicitly attribute infinity to God, the theological tradition deduces God's infinity from his omnipresence and eternity. Eternity is alternatively understood in terms of two apparently opposing notions: an endless period of time or timelessness. These two notions, on the one hand, may be related to the so-called Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, but actually should be appreciated in close coherence with the two conceptions of infinity operative in the history of mathematics (and theology). What I have in mind is the opposition between the so-called potential infinite and the so-called actual infinite.

Reflecting for a moment upon the assumed property of infinity as applied to God we may be able to uncover a telling example of theo-ontological reasoning.

\(^1\) Cf. Strauss, 1991:23-43 where this issue is discussed at length.
**God's Infinity**

In anticipation to what will be argued below, we start with a brief summary of what is at stake. When mention is made of God's infinity in a theological context, the (theo-ontological) assumption is simply that infinity originally (eminently) belongs to God and that whenever we employ the notion of infinity in mathematics it is derived from the theological understanding of God's infinity. (Since Nicolas of Cusa it is also customary to say that infinity in the sense of endlessness belongs to mathematics, but that the actual infinite is reserved for God only.)

Our argument will be that this theological legacy did not start by analyzing the *structural* inter-connections between a fiduciary mode of speech (the “language of faith”) and the numerical (quantitative) aspect of reality, and consequently did not realize that infinity is a mathematical notion to begin with which only afterwards could be employed theologically. If this is not realized, a neat theo-ontological circle is followed: infinity is first lifted from its cosmic “place” by assuming that originally it belongs to God and once this shift is made infinity can only be (re-)introduced within the domain of number by taking it over from theology!

In order to illustrate this mode of thought we take the stance defended by Chase (1996) as an example. The historical analysis of the examples given by Chase seems to be meaningful for demonstrating the general point that Christian theology did have an impact upon the development of modern mathematics. However, by ignoring the *structural relationships* between theology and mathematics, certain questions could be raised about the overall perspective in terms of which the historical material is placed.

Perhaps the implicit scholastic definition of theology is responsible for the above mentioned shortcoming, namely that Chase does not explicitly consider the second option open to him: exploring next to the *genetic* perspective also a *structural* analysis of the relationship. On a *structural* level, Chase should at least give an account of the fundamental *concepts* (and ideas) used by mathematicians and theologians. This *philosophical* issue pertains to the phenomenon that different scientific disciplines frequently use scientific terms which are seemingly similar, but still differ in the sense that they are used within the context of diverse scientific universes of discourse.

For example, no one can deny that both mathematicians and theologians use *numerical* terms like the numerals “one”, “two” and “three”. The underlying philosophical issue would be: are these notions originally (i.e., in a structural-ontic sense) *numerical* notions which are analogously used
within a different (faith) context when theologians say that there is but “one” God, or when they speak about God’s “tri-unity”?

A closer analysis of the diversity of modal aspects in reality – and the accompanying modal terms – would show that the basic concepts and ideas employed in theological parlance are fundamentally dependent upon the remarkable coherence between the certitudinal aspect of reality, central in the theological concern, and the different other aspects of reality which are, by means of moments of similarity, analogically reflected within the structure of the fiduciary aspect of reality.

Let us pursue the notion of number a bit further in this context. The awareness of one, another one, and so on (indefinitely), constitutes the most basic and most primitive awareness of infinity one can have. It is only when this numerical intuition is deepened by our spatial awareness of something (which, as a whole is) being given at once, that we are able to consider any infinitely proceeding sequence (to use a phrase from intuitionistic mathematics) as if all its elements are given simultaneously, i.e., as a “completed totality”. We may designate these two forms of the infinite as the successive infinite and the at once infinite. Both these notions of infinity are originally located within the numerical aspect of reality and can only come to expression on the basis of the integral coherence between the numerical aspect and the spatial aspect (amongst others which we ignore for the moment). It is therefore surprising to hear Chase asking the question: “Could infinities such as a completed totality be brought into mathematics without a Christian theological foundation?” (Chase, 1996:209).

He proceeds by stating: “At the very least, some idea of God standing outside of our experience must have been necessary, since apart from God we have no experience of the infinite” (Chase, 1996:209). Chase also mentions the following fact: “Some Scholastics in the middle Ages and Cantor in the nineteenth century believed in an actual mathematical infinity, based on God's infinity” (Chase, 1996:209-210)

Since Chase did not investigate any structural relationship between mathematics and theology, his historical analysis precludes the option of acknowledging infinity (in both of its forms) as “mathematical” (i.e., numerical and numerically deepened) analogies operative within the theological universe of discourse. By doing this the implicit dualism pre-supposed in his argument would be reverted to its opposite. In stead of supposing that the notion of “infinities such as a completed totality” originally is a theological idea which is completely foreign and external to mathematics, one would then much rather acknowledge that within the structural nature
and interrelationships between number and space we first of all encounter
the notion of infinity – which secondarily could be reflected within the
structure of the certitudinal aspect in an analogical way. By not tracing
the notion of infinity back to its original “modal seat,” it can only serve as
a notion brought “from the outside” into mathematics, i.e., as something
“purely” theological which can only in the second place bear upon the
field of investigation of mathematics. However, by realizing the (deepened)
numerical seat of the notion of infinity, one would rather start from
the assumption that theologians could only use notions of infinity as *mathematical analogies* in their theological argumentation. A shortcoming,
in this regard, is given in the fact that Chase does not enter into a discussi-
on of the notion of infinity as it is traditionally employed in Christian the-
ology, for then, at least, he should have paid attention to the fact that the
Bible nowhere explicitly attributes *infinity* to God. Theologians tradition-
ally extrapolate God's infinity from his *omnipresence* and *eternity*.

If we proceed from a *structural-genetic* perspective as the basis of our
historical analysis (something absent in Chase's article), we would argue
the point he wants to make as follows:

Theological reflection and speculation about the “infinity” of God
indeed paved the way for and promoted the eventual mathematical
development of a theory of transfinite numbers (Cantor), but in
doing that theology simply digressed into quasi-mathematical con-
siderations which, in the first place, refer to purely *mathematical*
notions related to the inter-modal coherence between number and
space.

Chase defends a kind of “negative theology”: he does not acknowledge
the numerical and spatial descent of the “potential” and the “actual/com-
pleted” infinite, then argues that these terms are originally *theological* in
nature and eventually send them back to the *domain* from which they
were (implicitly) kidnapped in the first place – in the form of *theological notions* fruitful for the further development of modern mathematics!

The true intent of a theo-ontological approach is best understood when we
go back to the position taken by Thomas Aquinas and contrast it with a
modern theologian like Karl Barth.

*Aquinas and Barth*

Thomas Aquinas inherited the opposition of “essence” and “appearance”
from the metaphysical Greek concept of substance. In his *Summa contra
Gentiles* (I,34) and in his *Summa Theologica* (I,13,1) Thomas Aquinas
explains that we can know God through His creatures because, in an emi-
nent way, God bears all the perfections of things within Himself. We
know God by means of these perfections as they flow from Him into creatures (*procedentibus in creaturas ab ipso* – S.Th. I,13,3).

We have to realize that the emphasis is upon what is supposed to “pre-exist” within the “essence” of God. What we consider good in creatures “pre-exist” in God, albeit in a *superior* and *alternative* way.\(^2\)

Initially, under the influence of neo-Platonism and Augustine we find an inclination towards a negative theological designation of God in the writings of St. Thomas. Sometimes the Plotinian conviction, namely that we could only positively say what God is *not*, almost verbally recurs in his writings.\(^3\)

The conviction that being is the *primum notum* (that what is *known first*) rests on the conception of an *analogy of being* (*analogia entis*) which entails that both God and creation are subsumed under the basic denominator of *being*. [According to St. Thomas *being* (*esse*) and *essence* (*essentia*) coincide in God – S.Th.I,3,4 and I,13,11.]

Although things by themselves are finite and caused, they exist in God in such a way that they are *nothing but* God.\(^4\)

The ultimate epistemological shortcoming in the understanding of Thomas Aquinas is that he assumes a *universal condition* for the existence of God, i.e., he deems it possible to form a *concept* of God. With regard to entities, however, concepts always either relate to the *order for* the existence of a particular type of entities (in which case we form concepts of type-laws), or they relate to the (universal) orderliness of entities (the *being* an atom of an atom). This approach ultimately levels the difference between God and creature by subjecting God to the universal order for being a God. But then there are many instances of “Gods” conforming to these universal conditions for being a God – in contradiction with the biblical account which unequivocally claims that there is but *one* God, that God is *unique*. Pannenberg saw this shortcoming in his own way where he writes: “The idea of God is destroyed when he is conceived as an application instance (even though it be the highest instance) of some general structure which in its generality is distinct from God and which is asserted as a predicate of God” (1990:145).

\(^2\) “*Cum igitur dicatur: Deus est bonus; non est sensus: id, quod bonitatem dicimus in creaturis, praeexistit in Deo: et hoc quidem secundem modum altiorem*” – S.Th. I,13,2.

\(^3\) S.c.G.III,49; cp. S.Th.I,13,8; I,1,7 and especially I,13,1.

\(^4\) Cf. Kremer, 1966:399: “*Alles Seiende ist so in Gott, dass es in Gott nichts anderes als Gott ist. Die Dinge sind nicht so in Gott wie sie in sich selbst sind. In sich selbst gesehen sind sie nämlich verursacht und endlich, in Gott dagegen unendlich, weil sie in Gott zusammenfallen mit dem göttlichen Wesen... In sich selbst gesehen sind sie Vielheit, in Gott dagegen Einheit.*”
Karl Barth distinguishes the oneness (unity) of God in the sense of uniqueness from the oneness of God in the sense of simplicity (simplicitas). The uniqueness of any creature, according to him, is only relative because it belongs to a species which merely is the “instantiation” of a genus. This is just a different way to articulate the nature of concept formation which is directed towards an understanding of universal type-laws and the universality (orderliness) of entities “instantiating” these type-laws. The uniqueness of God, on the other hand, Barth claims, in itself is absolutely unique in a way that cannot be grasped in any concept (Barth, 1957:447). Clearly, Barth here aims at an important distinction needed in order to account for the way in human beings can meaningfully speak about God.

It is clear that Barth does recognize the cosmic “residence” of the intuition of being unique (being distinct), as it is employed by him. We may raise an immanent-critical question: if it is possible to refer to creatures by using the property of being unique does this not entail that we have subsumed both God and creatures under the same “condition,” namely that of being unique?

The only way out of this impasse is to introduce a distinction with deep roots in the philosophical legacy of the West, namely that between concept and idea (cf. Strauss, 1973). One side of this distinction was already explored by Plato in his Dialogue Parmenides, which actually provides the starting-point of negative theology (where it is only permitted to say what God is not), while the other side in a certain sense reached its apex in the thought of Immanuel Kant. According to him the acquisition of knowledge proceeds in three steps: it starts with the senses, proceeds from thence to understanding, and ends with reason, beyond which there is no higher faculty to be found in us for elaborating the matter of intuition and bringing it under the highest unity of thought (1878, B,355, cf. B,730).

Syllogistic inference implies that the conclusion is always subsumed under the condition of a universal rule (the major premise). By applying this rule of reason once more, the condition of the condition must therefore be sought (by means of a prosyllogism) whenever practicable. Thus, according to Kant, the principle peculiar to reason in general, in its logical employment, is: “to find for the conditioned knowledge obtained through the understanding the unconditioned whereby its unity is brought to completion” (B,364). The concepts of pure reason are called transcendental ideas (B,368). These ideas instruct us only in regard to a certain unattainable completeness, and so serve rather to limit the understanding than to extend it to new objects (B,620). The unconditioned is never to be met in experience, but only in the idea – whenever “the conditioned is given, the
entire sum of conditions, and consequently the absolutely unconditioned (through which alone the conditioned has been possible) is also given” (B,436). This means that the transcendental ideas are simply categories extended to the unconditioned (B,436) (this applies only to those categories in which the synthesis constitutes a series of conditions subordinated to one another). To Kant, therefore, the transcendental ideas serve only for ascending, in the series of conditions, to the unconditioned (that is, to principles; cf. B,394).

No constitutive use of these ideas are allowed, because then we only arrive at pseudo-rational dialectical concepts (the source of which Kant called the antinomies) (cf. B,672). The three ideas of the soul (thinking nature), the world and God are all to be used in an as if way, i.e., regulatively (cf. B.710-714).

The “thing-in-itself” is not merely an idea. On the contrary, due to the fact that we cannot know the “thing-in-itself,” but nevertheless think it, a mode of conceptualization should exist in which we can think (be it as something unknowable) the “thing-in-itself.” This is Kant's transcendental idea (cf. Hartmann, 1957: 311). To put it differently: in order to think about that which transcends concept formation we still need a “conceptual form” by means of which we can think whatever transcends the boundaries of conceptual knowing.

Although the German term “Grenzbegriff” is normally captured with the English translational equivalent: limiting concept, this practice may be seriously misleading. The intention is not to emphasize what lies at this side of the limit, but to point at that which transcends the limit. Perhaps the best way to capture this intention is to circumscribe it as follows: ideas are those forms of thought through which we approximate that which transcends the limits of a conceptual grasp. Ideas then refer to limit-transcending knowledge.

In a certain sense the modal dimension of reality (i.e., the aspects of number, space, movement, the physical, the biotical, and so on) conditions both the employment of concepts and that of (limit-transcending) ideas. This follows from the fact that the different modalities always serve as points of entry to our experience of and reflection on created reality. Modal concepts are always formed in relation to universal features of the different modal aspects – for example the concept natural number, set, dimension, cause and effect (causality), and so on. Ultimately, the nuclear meaning of every distinguishable modality is indefinable, providing as such the primitive terms used for our concept-formation and definitions. In the final analysis, therefore, one can only comprehend by employing
terms which themselves are beyond the grip of concept-formation – evincing the self-insufficiency of rational thought!

But let us return for a moment to the twofold way in which one can employ modal (functional) terms. Our primitive arithmetical intuition of a discrete multiplicity underlies our awareness of the being distinct of different entities and therefore founds our knowledge of things in their individuality or uniqueness. Consequently, the limit-transcending concept (idea) of uniqueness (individuality) ultimately rests upon numerical terms in service of an approximating and referring mode of thought – transcending the limits of normal concept-formation. In passing we have to note that apparently Barth is unaware of the speculative metaphysical background of the notion of the simplicitas of God – a legacy dating back to the simplicity metaphysics of early Greek philosophy (compare Visagie, 1982:8-9).

Consider also other modal terms used by the Bible within the context of referring to God in the said approximating and limiting manner of idea-knowledge. God is revealed as omnipresent (an idea-usage of a spatial term); God acts (an idea-usage of a physical term); God is life (an idea-usage of a biotical term); God is omnipotent (an idea-usage of a historical term); God is love (an idea-usage of an ethical term), and so on. Surely these idea-usages of (modal) terms find their counter-part in the familiar conceptual usages of such terms. In the latter case these terms are not employed to refer to something transcending the limits of the aspects in which they have their “modal seat,” since they merely capture whatever functions within the boundaries of a particular mode. Saying that there are 20 people present in a meeting employs the numerical property of being twenty in a conceptual sense. Saying that a body moves uniformly employs our kinematical intuition conceptually. Saying that a tree is alive does the same with respect to the way in which this kind of entity functions within the confines of the biotic mode of reality.

Paul Tillich uses a similar distinction in a different context. He places it within the framework of the distinction between form and dynamics. Nevertheless, it intends to account for the same difference we have in mind with our distinction between concept and idea. He argues that dynamics transcends a delimited form and, consequently, cannot be grasped in a concept. According to him we nevertheless discover an approximation of this dynamic element almost in all mythologies:

“It underlies most mythologies and is indicated in the chaos, the tohu-va-bohu, the night, the emptiness, which precedes creation. It appears in metaphysical speculations as Urgrund (Böhme), will (Schopenhauer), will to power (Nietzsche), the unconscious (Hart-
mann, Freud), \textit{élan vital} (Bergson), strife (Scheler, Jung). \textbf{None of these concepts is to be taken conceptually} (I am emphasizing – DFMS). Each of them points symbolically to that which cannot be named” (1964:198).

At this point it should be clear that the counter pole of our \textit{concept-idea} distinction is provided by the \textit{negative theological} denial that we can say anything \textit{positive} about God. The latter position, however, simply cannot account for the straightforward \textit{positive} biblical mode of speech about God.

**The positive biblical approach**

We may now return to the \textit{necessity} and \textit{inevitability} of a \textit{theoretical} (philosophical) \textit{view of reality} – not only for theology in general – but also for the way in which theology may account for the possibility to speak (scientifically) about God.

Given the role of this (mostly implicit) philosophical view of reality, it should not surprise us that theologians could come up with such opposite extremes when they speak of God theologically. For example, when Thomas Aquinas refers to God as the highest being (\textit{ipsum esse}), his mode of speech reveals a \textit{philosophical} view of reality differing radically from some prominent theological approaches of the 20th century – approaches which would prefer to refer to God as the \textit{loving Father} who is \textit{close to us}. Apparently complementing nuances easily develop into \textit{mutually exclusive} perspectives – in which case, for example, either the \textit{power} of God or the \textit{love} of God is chosen, without accounting in any way for the \textit{coherence} present between these two emphases.

The decisive point to be observed, however, is that there simply is no single scientific discourse dealing with God that is not completely in the grip of and determined by some particular philosophical view of reality (“paradigm”). The crucial question therefore is not \textbf{whether} such an underlying view of reality is operative in our discourse about God, but much rather whether or not this (mostly \textit{concealed}) theoretical world-view is itself in the \textit{grip} of the \textit{central meaning} and \textit{radical direction-giving motive-power} of the biblical message! In a slightly different context Van Huyssteen recently correctly emphasizes the committed nature of rational thought in the sense that it is rooted in supra-theoretical convictions:

“The high degree of personal involvement in theological theorizing not only reveals the relational character of our being in the world, but epistemologically implies the mediated and interpretative character of all religious commitment, which certainly is no irrational retreat to commitment, but on the contrary reveals the
committed nature of all rational thought, and thus the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality” (1997:44).

The point stressed here implies the following “hermeneutical circle”: the soundness of a theological call upon specific Bible texts, in the final analysis, is not determined by the pious habit to substantiate a theological argument with quotes from the Scripture, since the outcome of “Bible-text-support” could only be reliable when it is done in full obedience to the integral Kingdom perspective of the Bible itself. Whenever the central meaning of the Bible is distorted, the unity of God’s good creation is jeopardized by identifying the directional antithesis between good and evil with distinct terrains/domains within creation – the source of a dualistic legacy easily leading Christians to fight the wrong battles (such as church versus state, theology versus philosophy, faith versus reason, soul versus body, calling versus occupation, direct service to God versus indirect service to God).

Given the contemporary emphasis on the eschaton anyone mentioning the presupposition of creation entailed in the notion of the eschaton is questioned. Olthuis correctly remarks:

“The current eschatological orientation in theology which tends to seek even the beginning in the end will need revision. The Bible begins with Genesis and Genesis begins with creation. The Scriptures see the Gospel as the link connecting creation and consummation. And this link between past and future is revealed as the Word which connects the end with the beginning, the consummation with the creation. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:12). A proper vision of the consummation requires a proper appreciation of the beginning. Without this understanding, the fulfillment lacks substantial content and tends to evaporate into pious words about hope. A non-robust view of creation emasculates the gospel, for it is the creation which is brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ even as it began in him” (quoted by Strauss, 1998:75).

What then are the theological implications of a biblical founded philosophical view of reality/creation?

The rich diversity within creation simultaneously evinces a coherent unity. This unity-in-the-diversity is not a product of scientific thinking. Much rather, every scientific distinction should seriously take the given creational diversity into consideration. By its very nature scientific thinking, as deepened analysis, should explain the structural possibilities and limitations of our human capacity to know rationally, without rationalistically limiting knowledge to conceptual knowledge.
An amazing return to a radical form of this rationalistic position of (Kant and) modernity is found in Van Huyssteen's identification of the structure of the universe with human rationality and mathematics: “What is astounding, however, is to what extent our world is truly rational, i.e., in conformity with human reason” (1998:68).

Only the universal conditions for and that which behaves in a law-conformative way (as factually subjected to (God's) law) could be conceptualized. Consequently, the only way to form a “concept of God” would amount to subjecting God to some “creational law-order” for “being-a-God,” as we have argued above.

The epistemologically sensitive theologian would, at least at this point, be prepared to support our thesis that humankind is incapable of comprehending or grasping God conceptually. It stands to reason that a pan(en)theist, believing that everything is (in) God, would think differently about God than someone accepting that God transcends His creation. Traditionally, this boils down to the question whether there is an essential difference (wezensverschil) between God and creation. Medieval speculation postulates God's aseitas – deduced from the Latin expression a esse which means: to exist in and of itself. The intention is to honour God's self-sufficiency, i.e., that God, in his elevated aseitas cannot be grasped in any human concept. The way in which this intention is given shape, however, once again illuminates the philosophical indebtedness of theological reflection. From God's transcendent aseitas certain attributes are deduced, such as God's eternity, omnipresence and infinity. These attributes are denoted as incommunicable. They should therefore be distinguished from the communicable attributes, such as God's love, justice, mercifulness, etc.

That this distinction is found in the classical philosophical distinction between essence and appearance has been argued in Strauss (1991).

**Inertia and God**

Pannenberg remarks that when the assumption that movement inherently belongs to the nature of bodies was combined with the principle of inertia it was no longer necessary to induce the cooperation of God in order to explain natural processes (1993:31). Particularly in the light of the contingency of natural events Pannenberg questions the strict interpretation of inertia. According to him the principle of inertia entailed the emancipation of natural bodies from the creator God (1993:20). In spite of his own preference for contingency and historicity as a more encompassing framework in terms of which we have to understand nature, Pannenberg ultima-
ently had to fall back onto the faithfulness and identity of God: “Yet there emerge regularities and persistent forms of created reality giving expression to the faithfulness and identity of God in affirming the world that God has created” (1993:22).

It is not quite clear how he harmonizes this “identity-”appeal with his conviction that in the course of time “new patterns of regularity” emerge: “Thus it also becomes understandable that new patterns of regularity emerging in the sequence of time constitute a field of application for a new set of natural laws such that “the laws governing matter in a higher level of organization can never be entirely deduced from the properties of the lower levels”” (Pannenberg, 1993:21; the last phrase is a quote from A.R. Peacocke).

On the basis of these considerations Pannenberg argues against the supposed eternity and atemporality of the laws of nature – but he never contemplates the key notion of *constancy* in this regard. Constancy indeed pertains to the core meaning of the phoronomic (or: kinematic) aspect or reality where it is embodied in the notion of a *uniform motion*. In fact, the law of inertia aims exactly at this: a body in a state of uniform motion will continue its movement except when some force impinges upon it.

Although Plato already accounted for the possibility of knowledge with an appeal to *constancy* (elevated to his metaphysical realm of ideas), it was Galileo (inertia) and Einstein (the velocity of light in a vacuum) who realized that it belongs to the core meaning of motion. Similar to all other aspects of created reality also the kinematic mode allows both for conceptual and idea-usages of kinematical terms. A first example is the idea of *identity*. Applied to existing entities the idea of their identity employs the intuition of constancy/persistence – it not merely refers to the kinematic aspect of an entity, but to the full many-sided reality of an entity.

The basic kinematical intuition of constancy can also be stretched beyond the confines of this aspect when it is used in an idea-context in order to refer to the identity of God – in which case its referring meaning not only transcends the boundaries of the aspect of movement, but in fact it also exceeds creation as such in pointing beyond it to God. Just think about the Old Testament account where God said to Moses: I am who I am (Ex.3:14). Clearly, this entails an idea-usage of the kinematical meaning of *constancy*, of *persistence*.

The theo-ontological tradition, of course, will simply turn this relationship upside down: in stead of acknowledging the original “cosmic seat” of the meaning of constancy within the kinematical aspect of reality, it will
start with the idea-usage (sometimes twisted into the idea of God's *immu-
tability*) and then in turn attempts to explain endurance within created real-
ity by deriving it from God's “immutability.” This is exactly what Des-
cartes did in a letter to Mersenne (April 15, 1630) where he argues that 
the foundation for the eternal validity of natural laws is found in the un-

**Transcendence approached from “within”**

Thus far we have selected a number of examples illustrative of the way in 
which an understanding of the unity and diversity within creation – ac-
counted for by philosophy – plays a role in theological parlance, in parti-
cular in connection with the difference between conceptual and idea us-
ages of modal terms. This approach amply substantiated our answer posed 
in the title of this article: Is it possible to do theology without philosophi-
cal presuppositions?

A positive way to demonstrate our basic claim is to ask: how can we ac-
count for God's transcendence without becoming a victim of *negative the-
ology* and without advocating the other extreme position which simply 
(theo-ontologically) *duplicates* the creational diversity by projecting it 
“into” the “essence” of God and then derive creaturely properties from 
God?

The constructive service to be rendered by a biblically founded Christian 
philosophy is to help theologians to understand that in order to speak of 
God we do not have access to terms which are not proceeding from and 
making an appeal to givens *within* creation. By using these (creational) 
terms, however, we exactly want to convey the conviction that God *trans-
cends* all of creation. But how can we continue this claim when we are 
“doomed” to do this in a “creational way” by using “creational terms”?

Of course the situation is complicated when the creational location of 
terms employed in our speaking about God is not recognized. Brunner, 
for example, states: “The omnipresence of God is his elevation above spa-
ces whereas his eternity and immutability constitute his elevation above 
time” (Brunner, 1972:272). Brunner does not realize that he has to *use* 
spatial terms in order to assert that God is “above” space! Similarly, when 
we refer to God as *causa sui* we first have to realize that it is only within 
the *physical aspect* of reality that we discover the *primitive meaning* of 
*energy-operation*, *causing* certain *effects*.

It simply seems to be unavoidable that the difference between God and 
creation can only be explained while inevitably using certain *creational 
terms* – and we have accounted for this inevitability by introducing the
(philosophical) epistemological distinction within knowledge, namely between conceptual knowledge and (the limits of concepts transcending) idea-knowledge.

**Concluding remark**

Through all of this it also must be clear that just as much as a biblically founded Christian philosophy may benefit from a biblically founded Christian theology, the reverse is equally true!

**Consulted Literature**


Kant, I. (1787): *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1st print 1781 (references to 1781 and 1787 are given as: CPR A or B).


“The day is now past that Reformed dogmatics can afford to be unaware of the importance of a Christian philosophy for its theology. The renewal of Reformed dogmatics now calls for a more explicit delineation of its philosophical foundations and context. To neglect the Christian philosophy associated with the names of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd is to impoverish Reformed theology.”

(Spykman, 1991:100)

Synopsis
The current discussion about the status of theological reflection and the authority of Scriptures – focused on themes such as “eternal truths” versus “contextualized metaphors” reveals an intrinsic link with broader philosophical developments during the past centuries. Particularly the horizon of epistemic ideals dominating the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries are recurring within the sketch which Jaap Du Rand gave of his own intellectual development. In this article these underlying perspectives are brought to light and assessed.

1. Aanloop
Te midde van diepnydende gesprekvoering oor die status en gesag van die Bybel, oor die uniekheid van die Christendom en oor ’n begeerte om tot ’n positiewe waardering van die “postmodernisme” te kom, het een van die prominente teoloë van Suid-Afrika in ’n artikel in die Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif stilgestaan by die hoofkontoere van sy denkontwikkeling. Jaap Du Rand verduidelik hoe sy gedagtegewêreld verander het en hy doen dit aan die hand van drie kontrasterende oriëntasies, met name dié van “teologiese beginsels” of “eweige waarhede” (Du Rand,