

How Do I Know that I Know?

Classical Empiricism, Presuppositionalism, and the Pseudo-Challenge of *The Matrix*®

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.
Southern Evangelical Seminary



The Occasion for the Question:

The Southern Evangelical Seminary Panel Discussion with
Jason Lisle, K. Scott Oliphint, and Richard G. Howe

20th Annual NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON 2013 **CA** CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

REASONS FOR THE REAL WORLD CHRISTIANITY

THE FUTURE OF APOLOGETICS IS HERE

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JESUS: THE GENUINE CHRISTIANTY VS. THE COUNTERFEIT SOCIETY

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CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

JOURNAL

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<http://richardghowe.com/papers.htm>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/DrRichardGHowe/videos>

"A scientist who, with good right, would become indignant upon seeing a philosopher with a casual acquaintance with science uttering supposedly scientific opinions, will not himself thereupon refrain from philosophizing."



Etienne Gilson
(1884-1978)

"Holding reasonably that it is necessary to have learned a science in order to be authorized to speak about it, he does not for an instant doubt that it is a matter of indifference who may be authorized to speak of philosophy, provided only that he knows some other discipline."

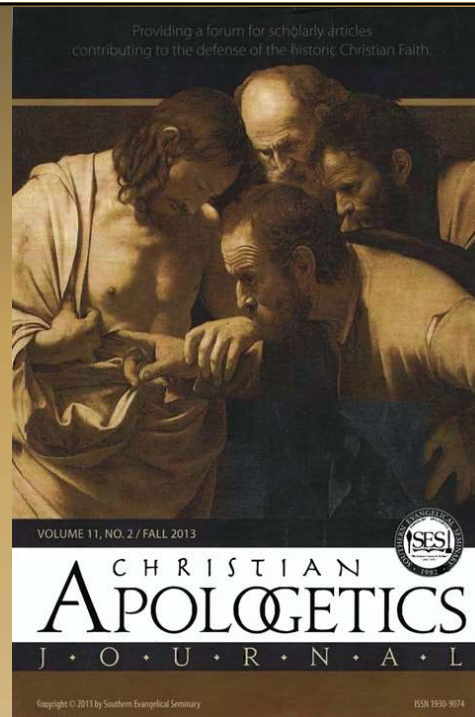
[Etienne Gilson, *Linguistics and Philosophy: An Essay on the Philosophical Constants of Language*, trans. John Lyon (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), xvii]

Etienne Gilson
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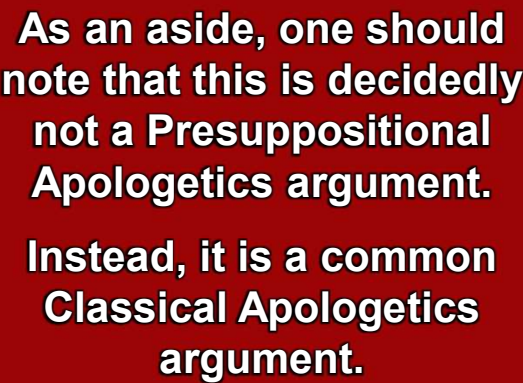
Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute



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*"In the Christian worldview, we have a very good reason to believe that our senses are basically reliable in most situations. After all, our sensory organs were designed by God (Prov. 20:12). And God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). **But if God did not exist, and our eyes (and other organs) were merely the results of billions of years of mindless chemistry and chance mutations, would there be any reason to believe that they are truthful?**"*

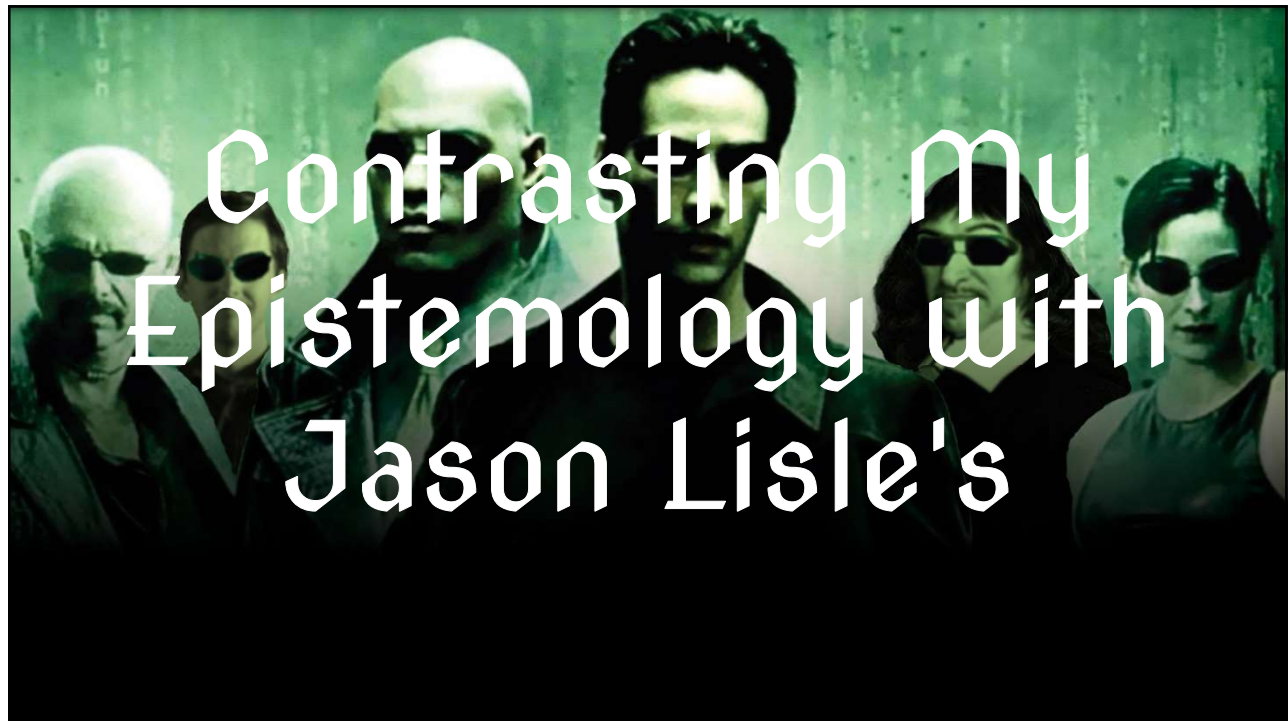
[Jason Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," in *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 67]

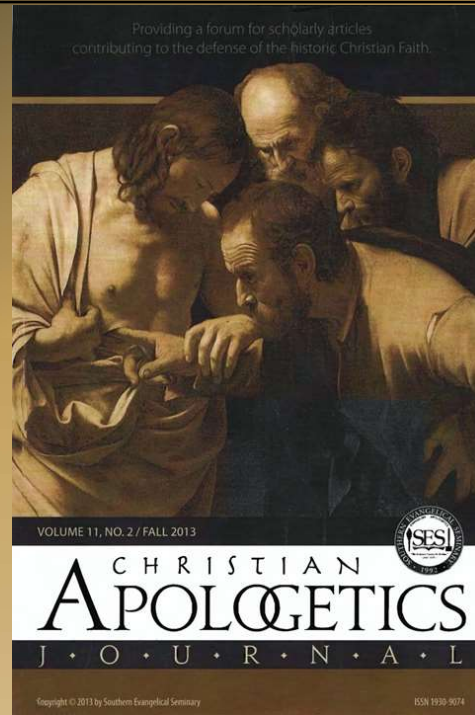


As an aside, one should note that this is decidedly not a Presuppositional Apologetics argument. Instead, it is a common Classical Apologetics argument.

*"In the Christian worldview, we have a very good reason to believe that our senses are basically reliable in most situations. After all, our sensory organs were designed by God (Prov. 20:12). And God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). **But if God did not exist, and our eyes (and other organs) were merely the results of billions of years of mindless chemistry and chance mutations, would there be any reason to believe that they are truthful?**"*

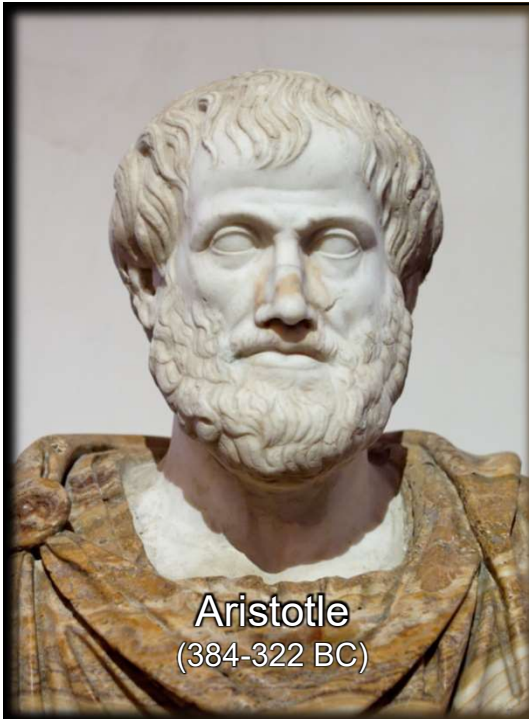
[Jason Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," in *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 67]





*"Given that Lisle is a scientist and his interests lie along the issues of the age of the Earth and the integrity of God's Word, especially regarding the Creation account vis-à-vis evolution, it is quite understandable that his emphasis regarding worldviews is on how we 'interpret' the data of sensory experience. As a **Classical (or Scholastic) Realist**, I would submit that our sensory experiences of reality also deliver to us metaphysical truths."*

[Richard G. Howe, "Classical Response," in *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 92-93]



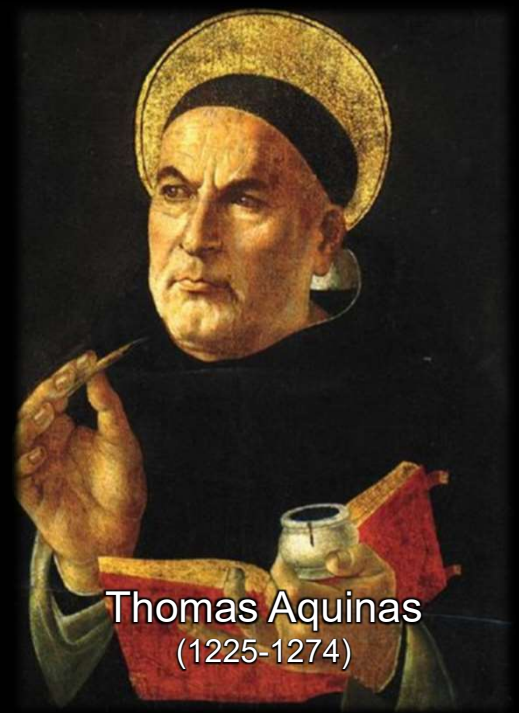
Aristotle
(384-322 BC)

"From experience . . . originate the skill of the craftsman and the knowledge of the man of science, skill in the sphere of coming to be and science in the sphere of beings. We conclude that these states of knowledge are neither innate in a determinate form, nor developed from other higher states of knowledge, but from sense-perception."

[*Posterior Analytics* II, 19, 100a7-11, trans. G. R. G. Mure in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 185]

"Our knowledge, taking its start from things, proceeds in this order. First, it begins in sense; second, it is completed in the intellect."

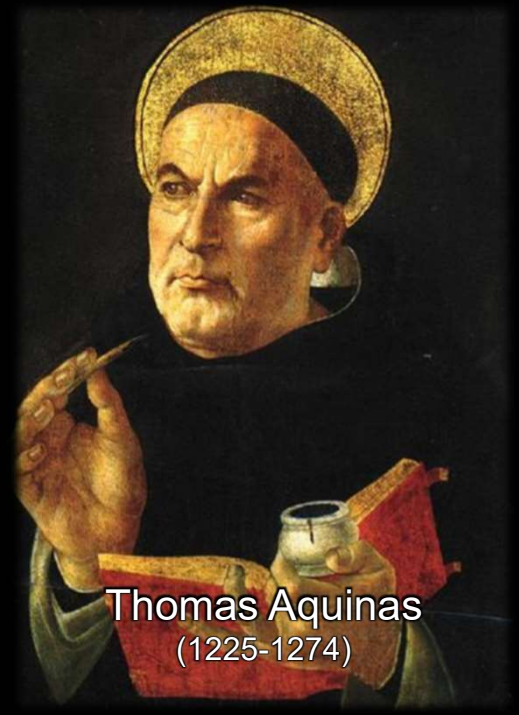
[Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, I, 11, trans. Mulligan, 48, in *Truth* (3 vols), vol. 1 trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952); vol. 2 trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953); vol. 3 trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954). The three volumes were reprinted as *Truth* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994)]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"Sensible things [are that] from which human reason takes the origin of its knowledge."

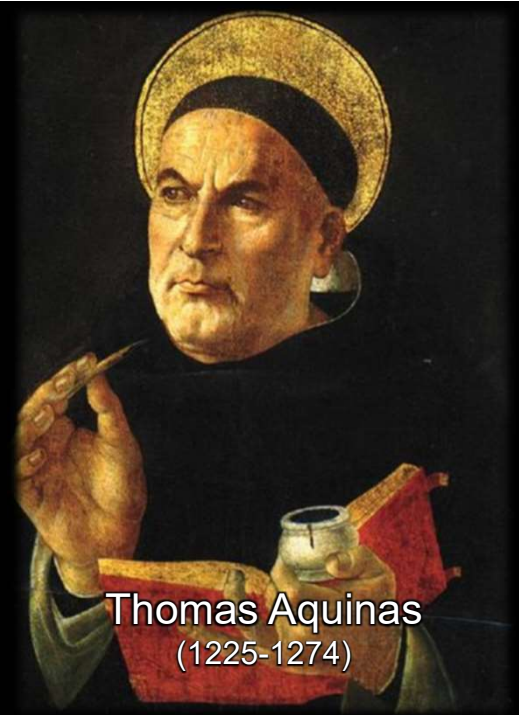
[Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 9, §2. Trans. Anton C. Pegis. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975): I, 77]



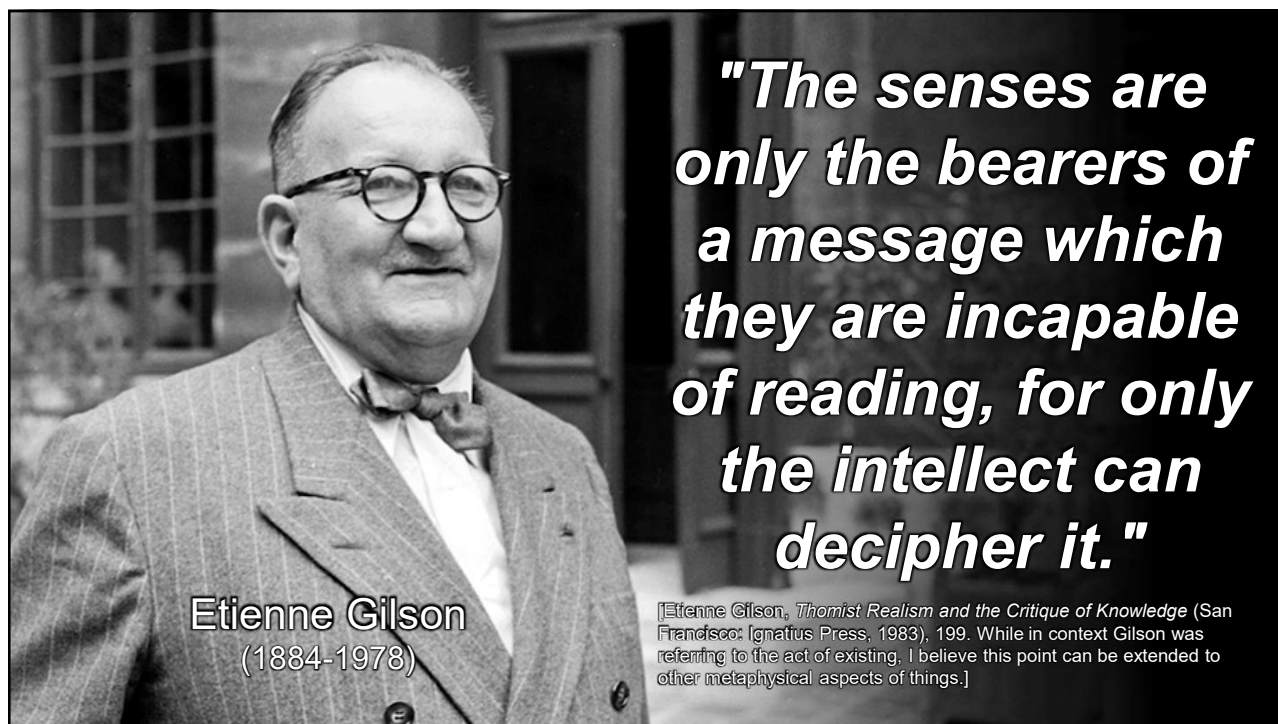
Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)

"Our knowledge of principles themselves is derived from sensible things."

[Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 83, §32. trans. Anderson: II, p. 282]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)



"The senses are only the bearers of a message which they are incapable of reading, for only the intellect can decipher it."

Etienne Gilson
(1884-1978)

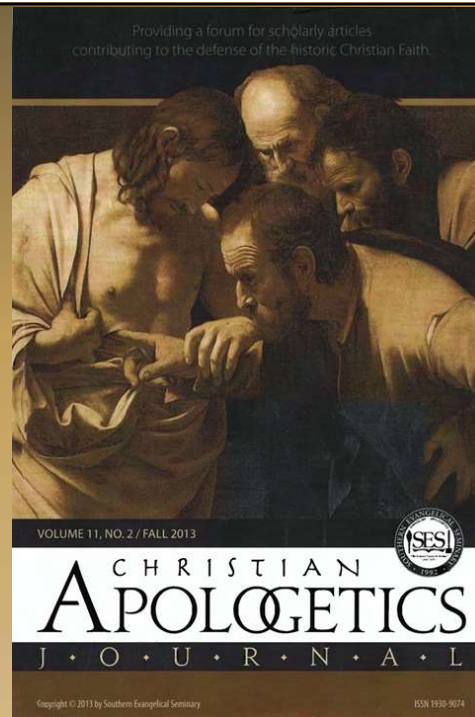
[Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 199. While in context Gilson was referring to the act of existing, I believe this point can be extended to other metaphysical aspects of things.]



**Lisle Contrasting
His Epistemology
with Mine**



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

"Presuppositional apologetics is the method of defending the Christian faith that relies on the Bible as the supreme authority in all matters."

[Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," 110]



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

"The weakness of Howe's position is evident in his statement 'As a Classical (or Scholastic) Realist I would submit that our sensory experiences of reality also deliver to us metaphysical truths.' Can we know things by sensory experience? Certainty—but not apart from the Christian worldview."

[Jason Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 110]


If all Lisle means here is that, unless God exists, we could not have reliable senses, then there is nothing controversial about this.

However, this is not enough to be Presuppositionalism.

But if Lisle means (and this is what Presuppositionalists explicitly say) that one must presuppose that God exists, this is demonstrably false.

"The weakness of Howe's position is evident in his statement 'As a Classical (or Scholastic) Realist I would submit that our sensory experiences of reality also deliver to us metaphysical truths.' Can we know things by sensory experience? Certainty—but not apart from the Christian worldview."

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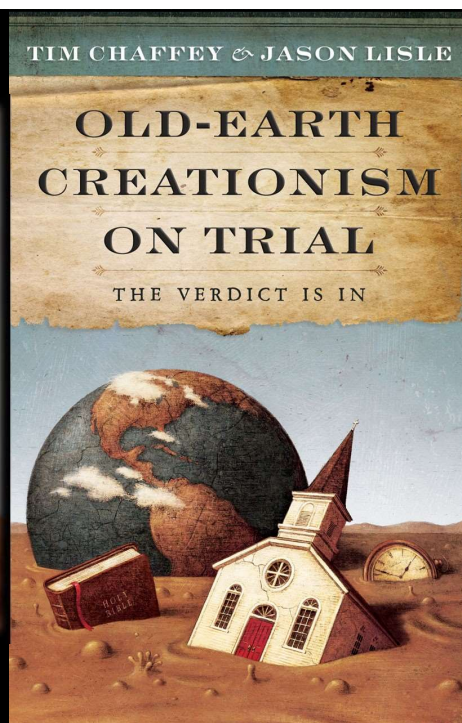
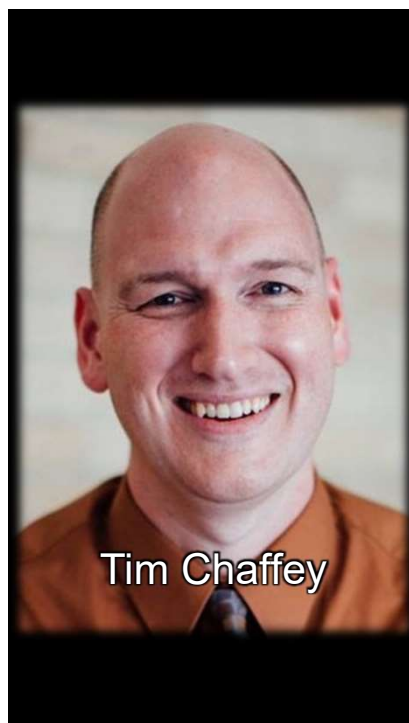


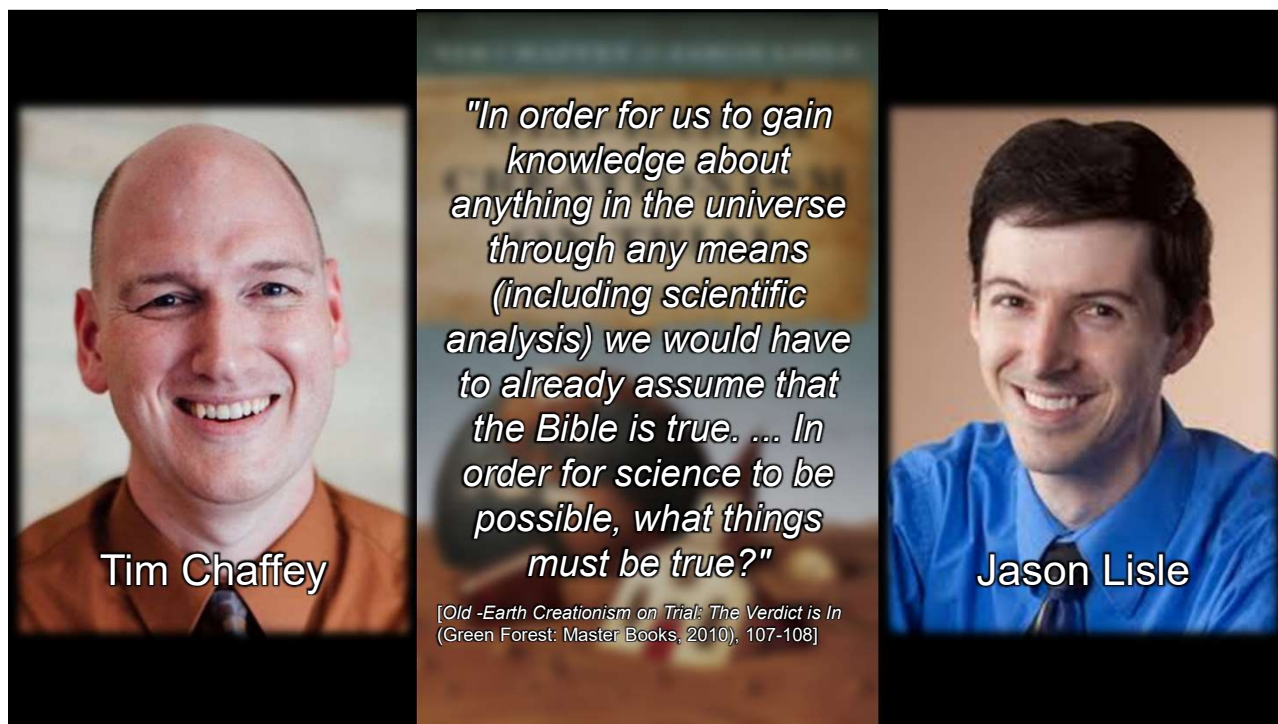
There has to be a certain amount of oxygen in the air in order for one to be able to breathe properly.

But one does not have to **assume** or **presuppose** or **know** there is oxygen in the air in order to be able to breathe properly.

The reality of the air is an **ontological** matter.

One's assumptions or presuppositions or knowledge *about* the oxygen in the air are **epistemological** matters.





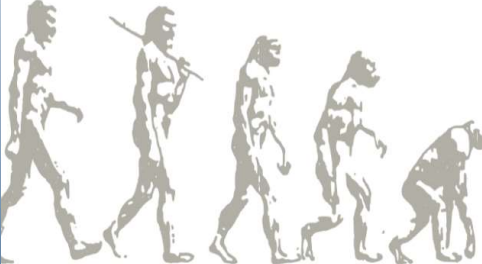
Whether one has to assume something is an epistemological matter.

*"In order for us to gain knowledge about anything in the universe through any means (including scientific analysis) we would have to already **assume** that the Bible is true. ... In order for science to be possible, **what things must be true?**"*

Whether some thing is true is an ontological matter.

[Old-Earth Creationism on Trial: The Verdict is In (Green Forest: Master Books, 2010), 107-108]


THE ABSURDITY OF



UNBELIEF

A WORLDVIEW APOLOGETIC OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

JEFFREY D. JOHNSON



Jeffrey D. Johnson

"Without knowledge of God, knowledge itself is impossible. In other words, without the God of the Bible, nothing makes sense in the grand scheme of things."

[Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Absurdity of Unbelief: A Worldview Apologetic of the Christian Faith* (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2021), 47]



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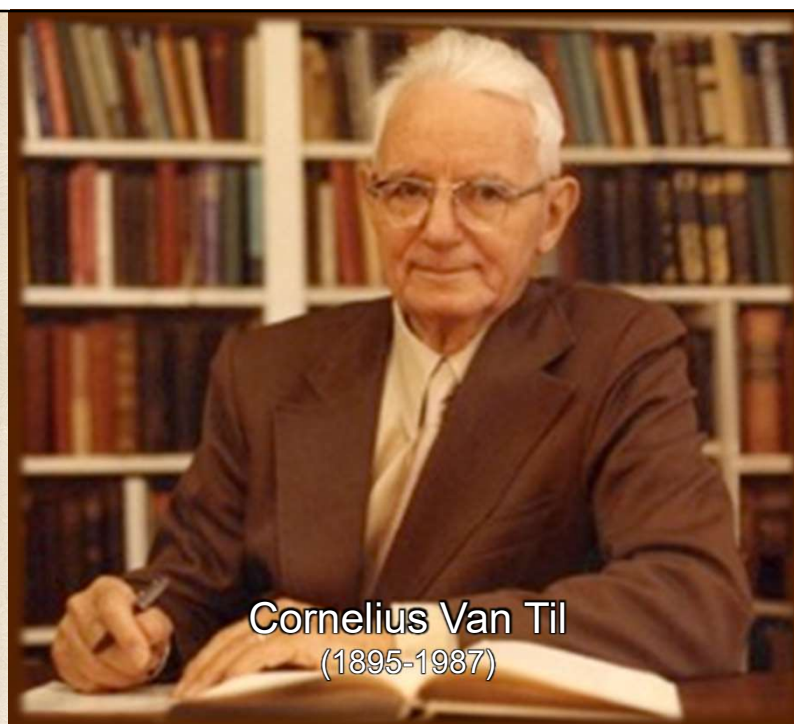
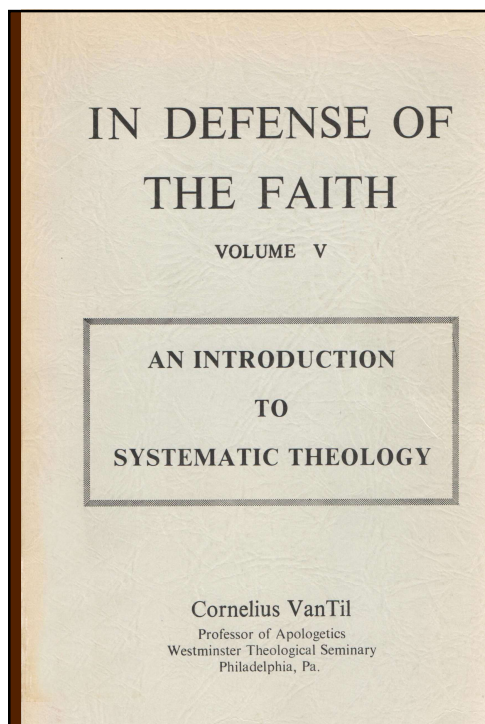


epistemology

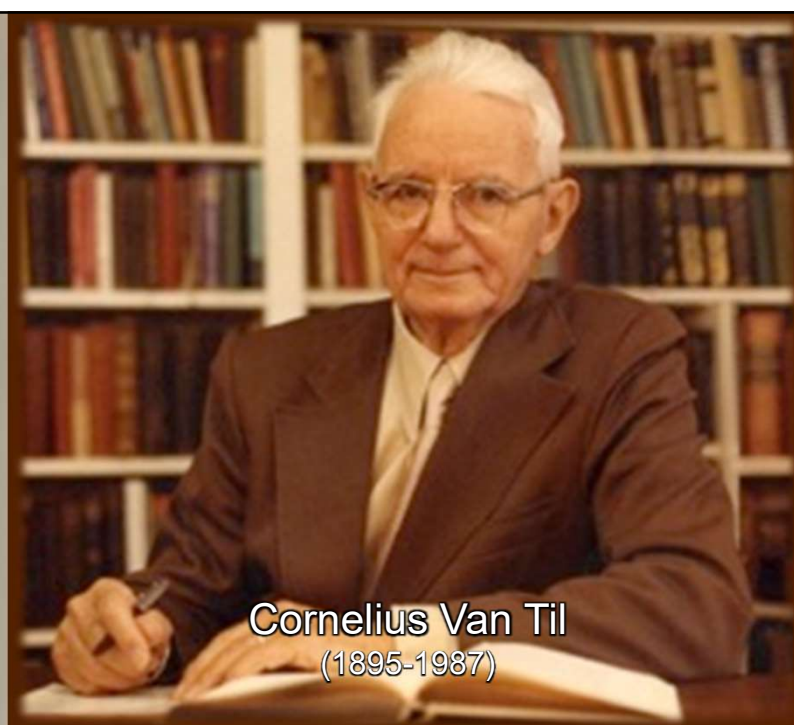
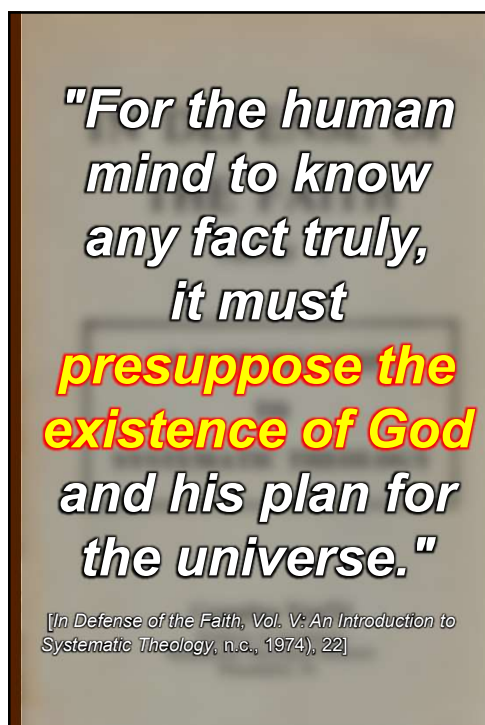


ontology

There is a difference between "God" and "knowledge of God."



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

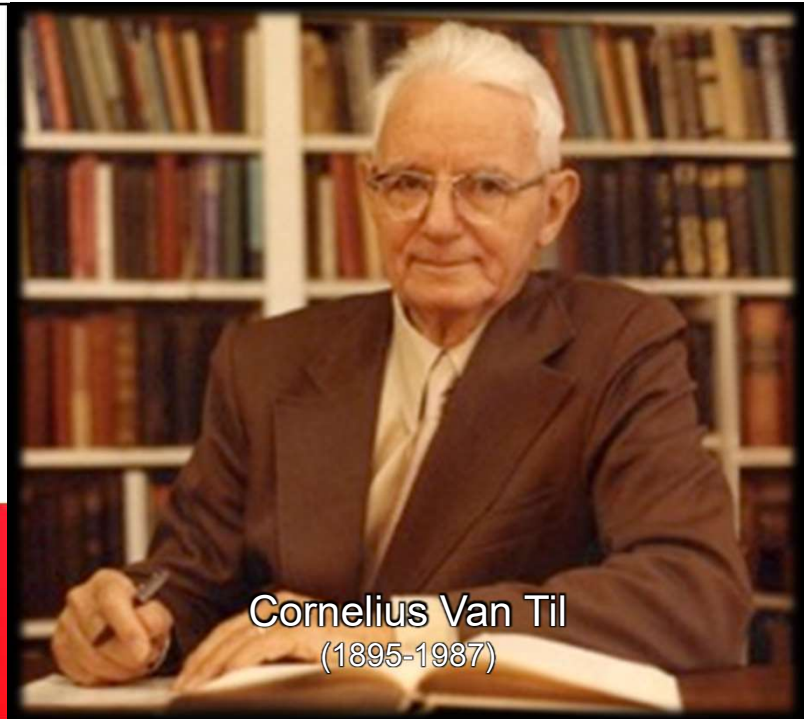


Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

JERUSALEM and ATHENS

CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS ON
THE PHILOSOPHY AND
APOLOGETICS OF
CORNELIUS VAN TIL

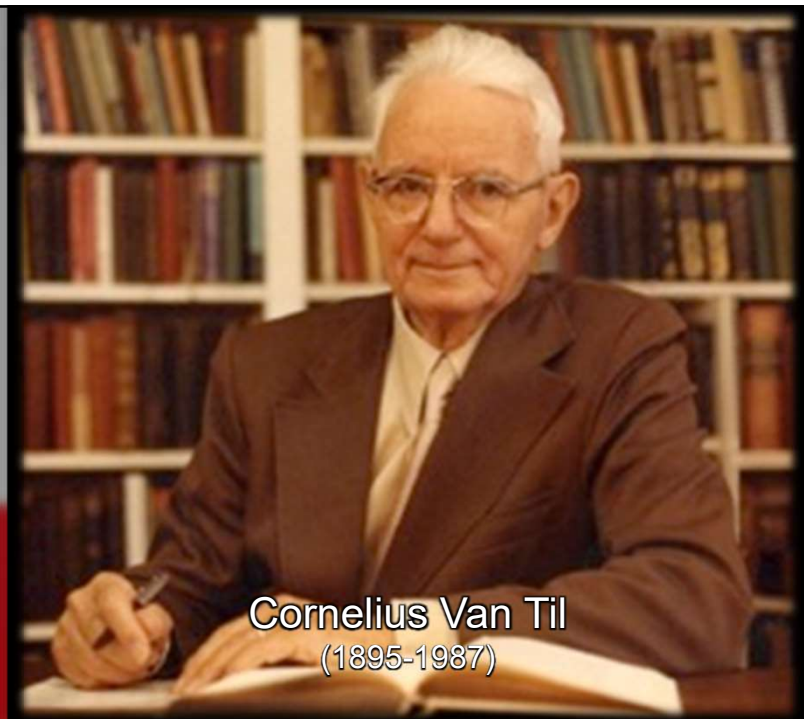
EDITED BY E. R. GEEHAN



Cornelius Van Til
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*"The only 'proof' of the
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that unless its truth is
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**The actual state of
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["My Credo" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical
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Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and
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"The only 'proof' of the Christian position is that unless its truth is *presupposed* there is no possibility of 'proving' anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of 'proof' itself."

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epistemology

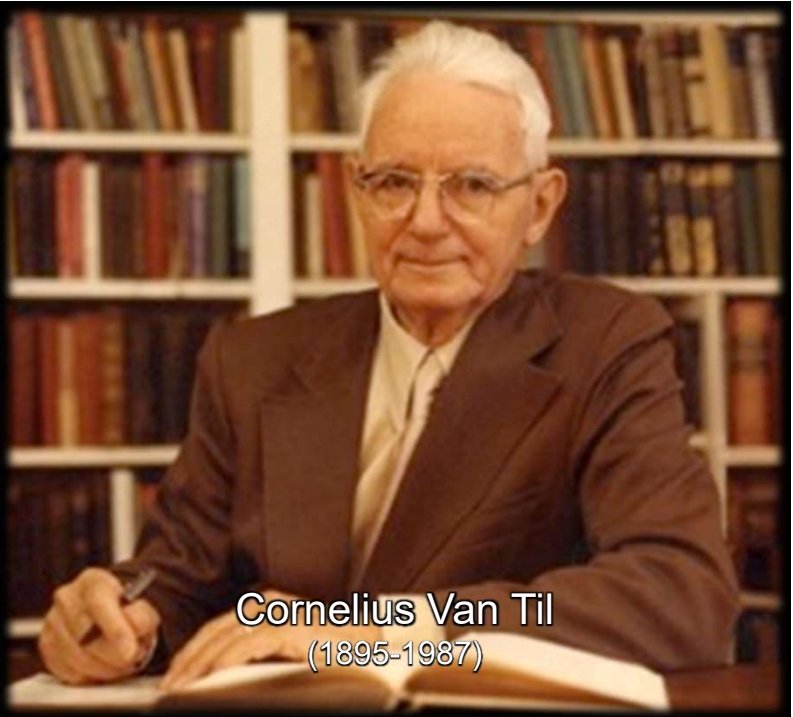


ontology

There is a difference between the actual state of affairs and presupposing the truth of the actual state of affairs.

THE DEFENSE OF THE FAITH

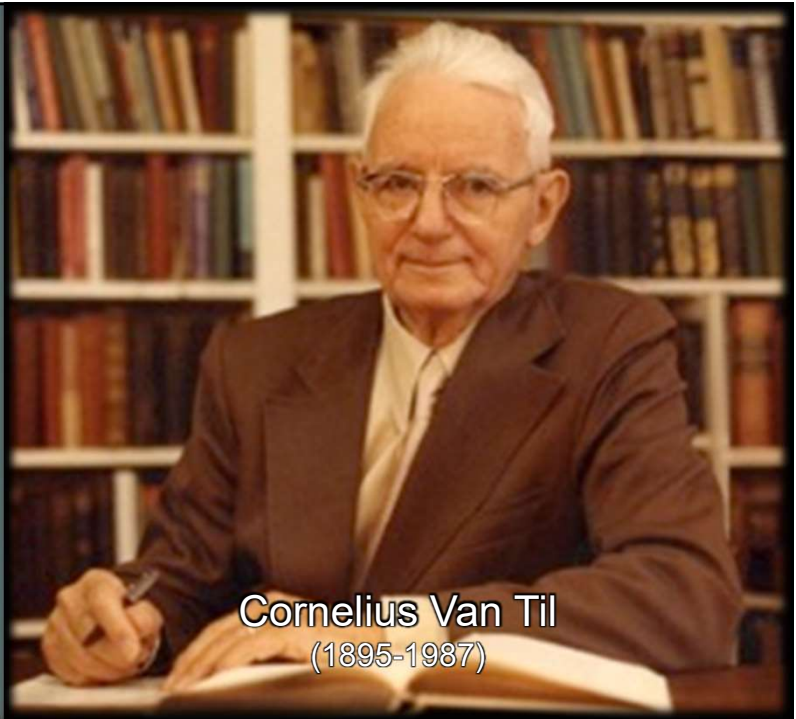
CORNELIUS VAN TIL



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

"A Reformed method of apologetics ... implies a refusal to grant that any area or aspect of reality, any fact or any law of nature or of history can be correctly interpreted except it be seen in the light of the main doctrines of Christianity."

[*The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 96]

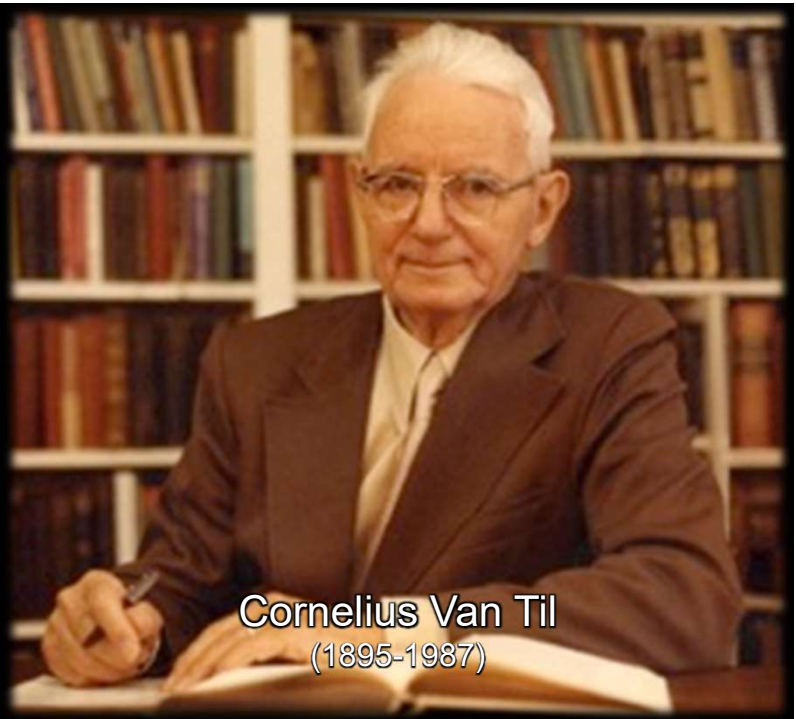


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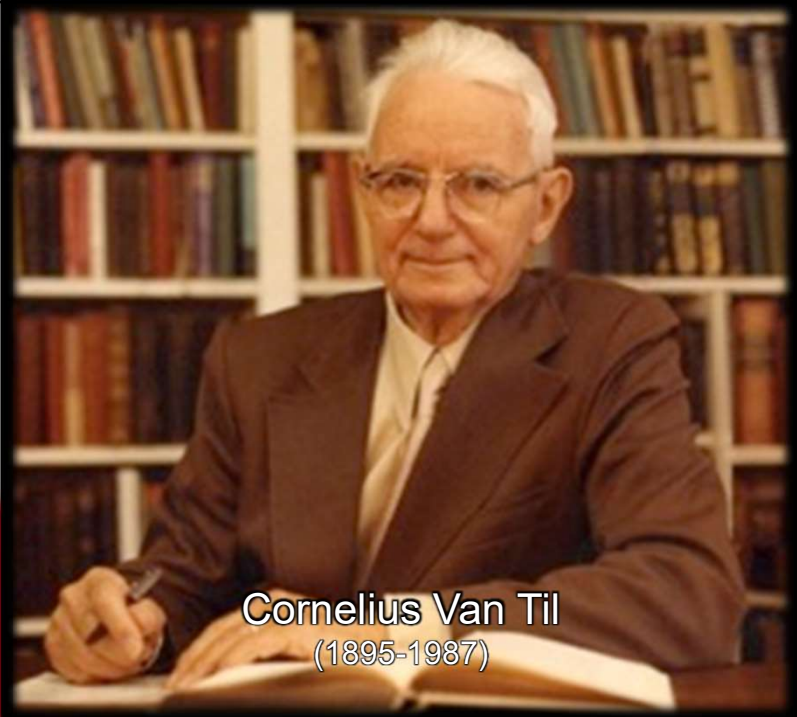
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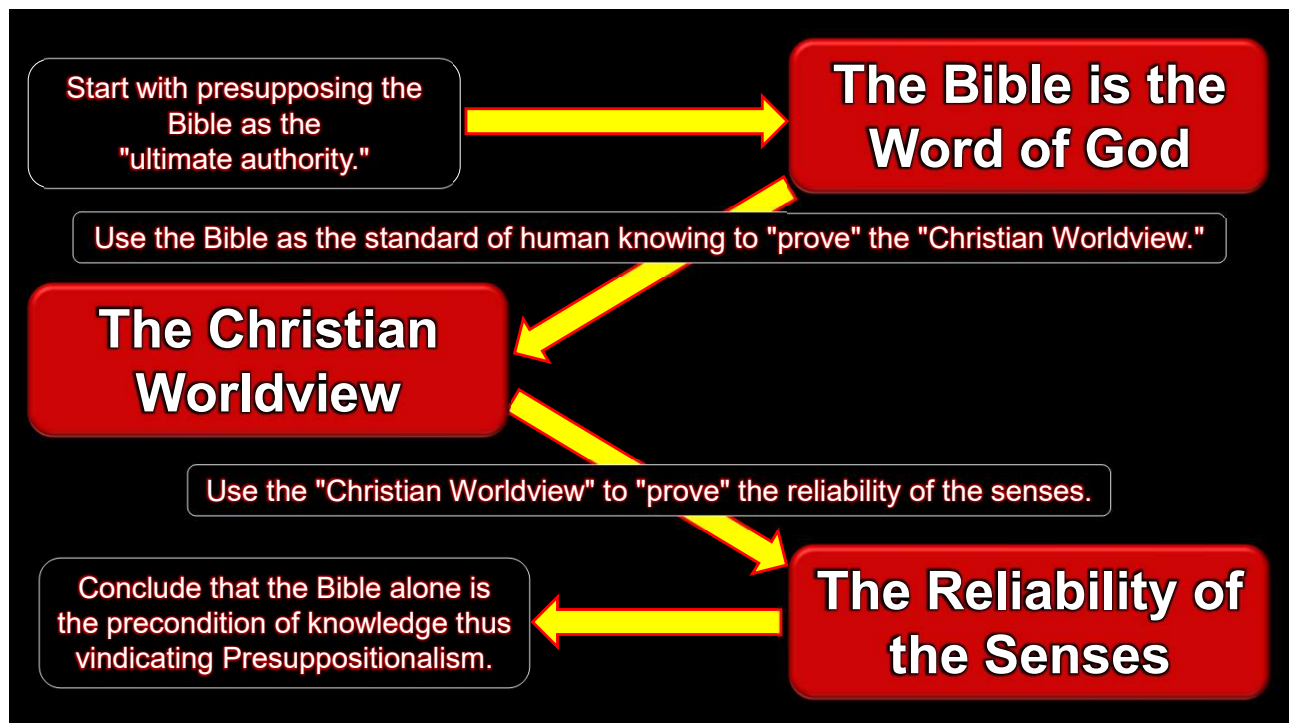
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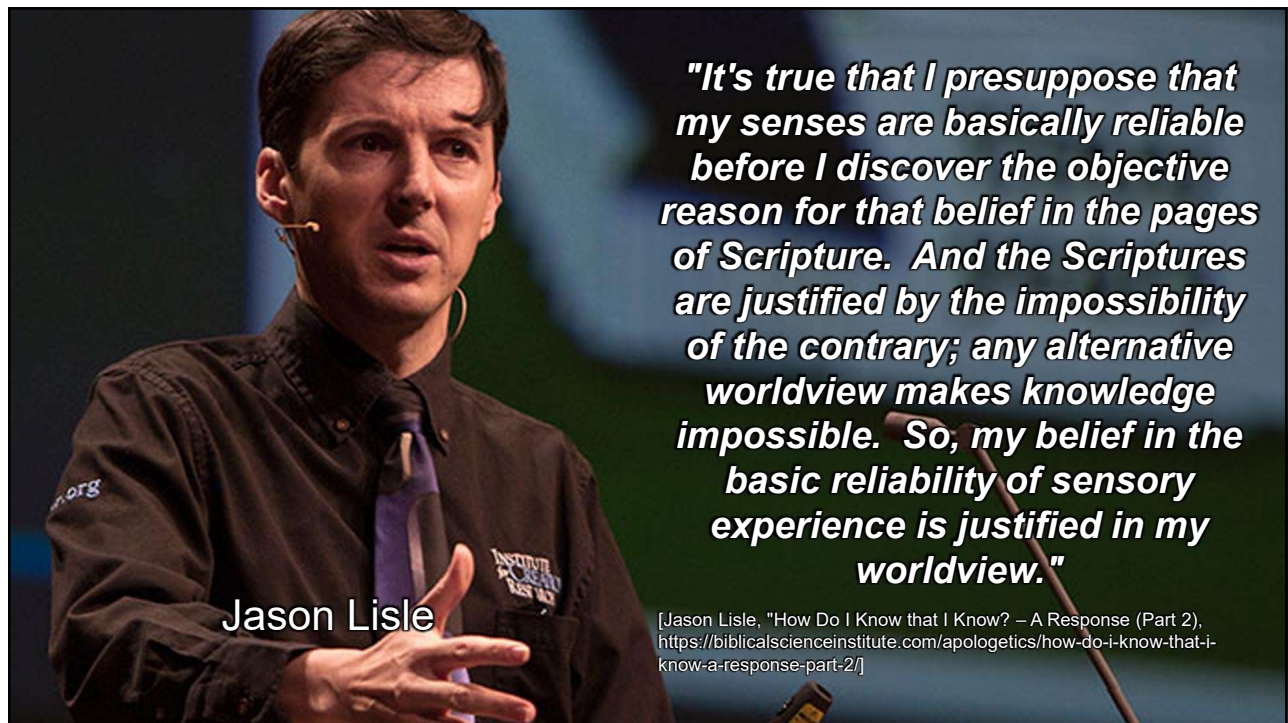
"As Christians we must not allow that even such a thing as enumeration or counting can be **accounted for** except upon the presupposition of truth of what we are told in Scripture about the triune God as the Creator and Redeemer of the world."

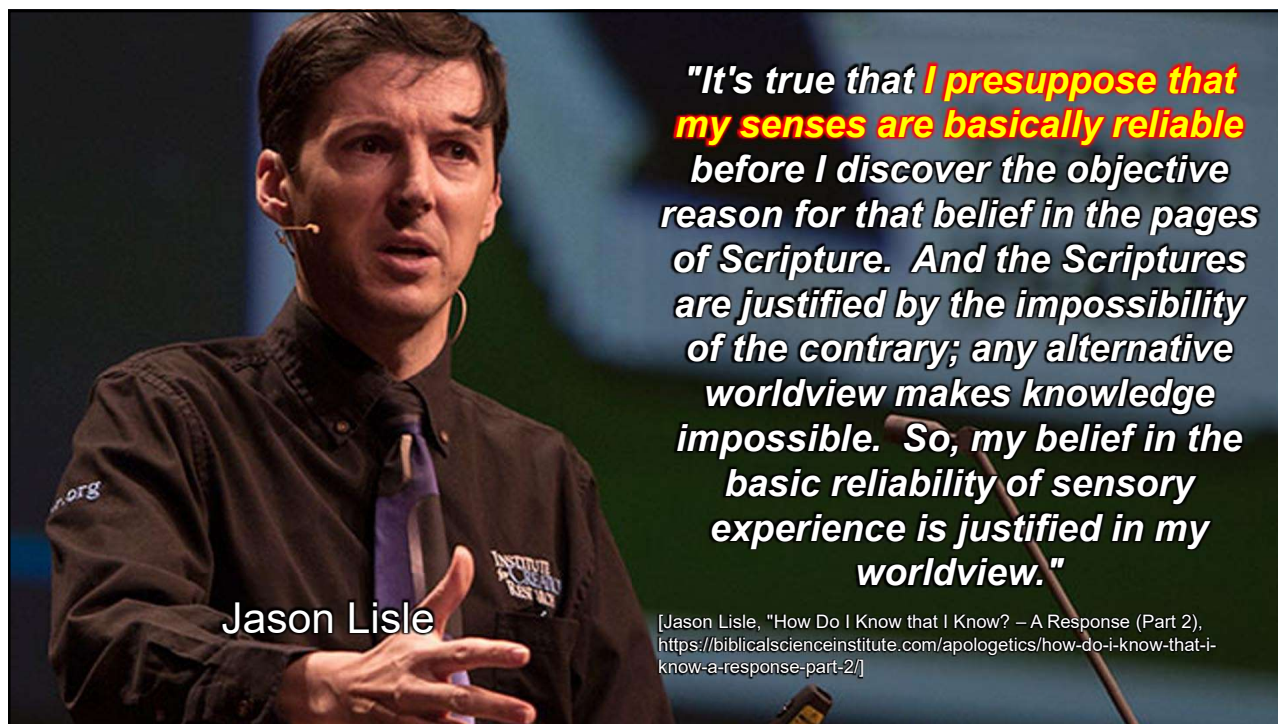
[*"Response by Cornelius Van Til to Herman Dooyeweerd, 'Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought'" in Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 91, emphasis in original*]



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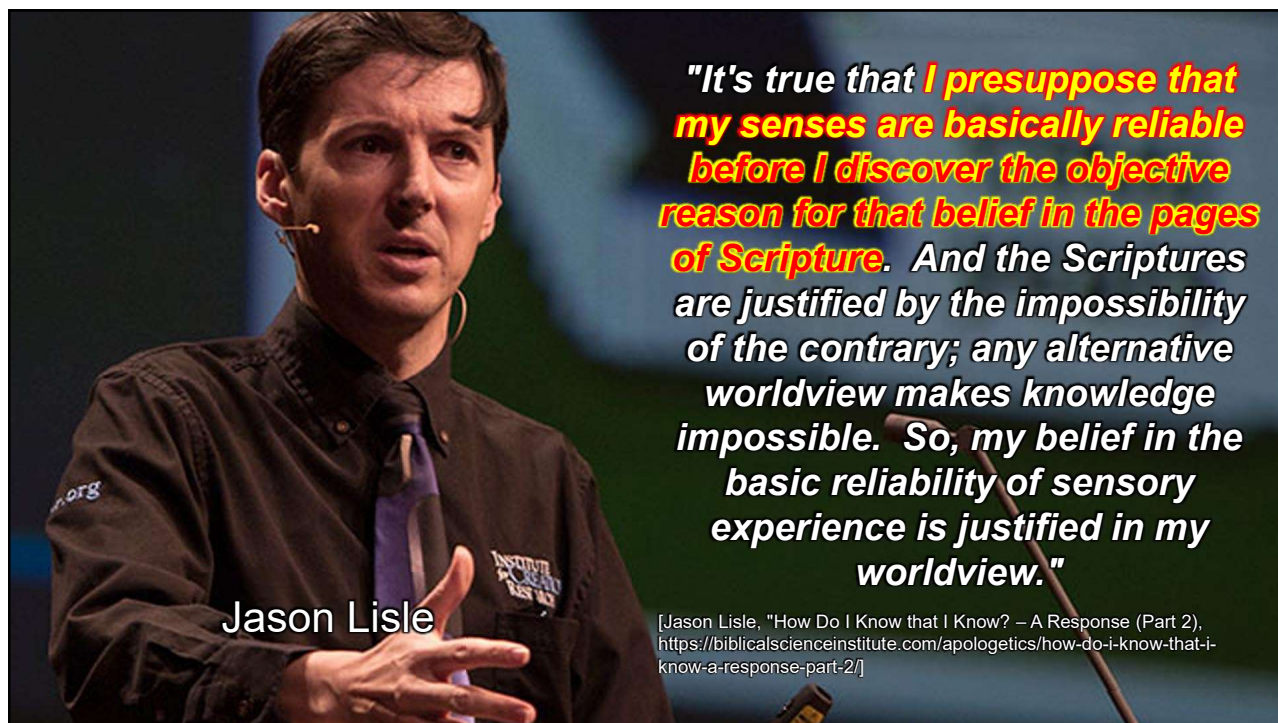




Jason Lisle

"It's true that I presuppose that my senses are basically reliable before I discover the objective reason for that belief in the pages of Scripture. And the Scriptures are justified by the impossibility of the contrary; any alternative worldview makes knowledge impossible. So, my belief in the basic reliability of sensory experience is justified in my worldview."

[Jason Lisle, "How Do I Know that I Know? – A Response (Part 2), <https://biblicalscienceinstitute.com/apologetics/how-do-i-know-that-i-know-a-response-part-2/>]



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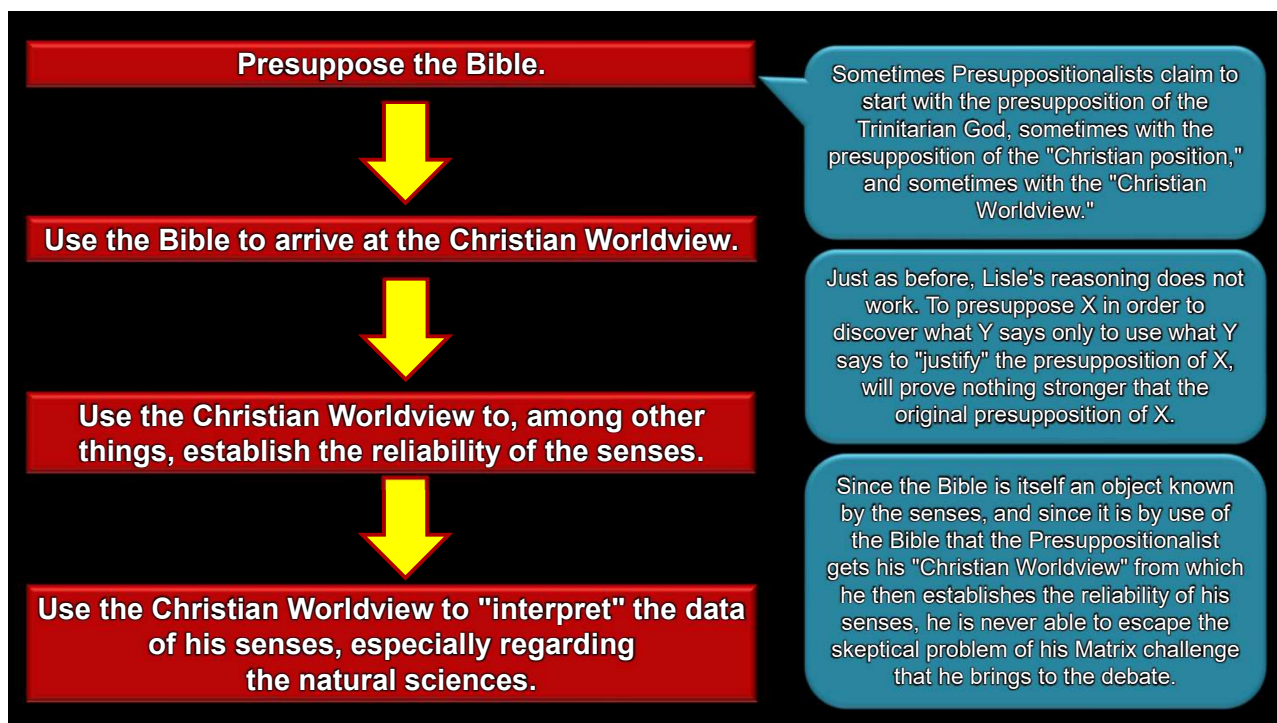
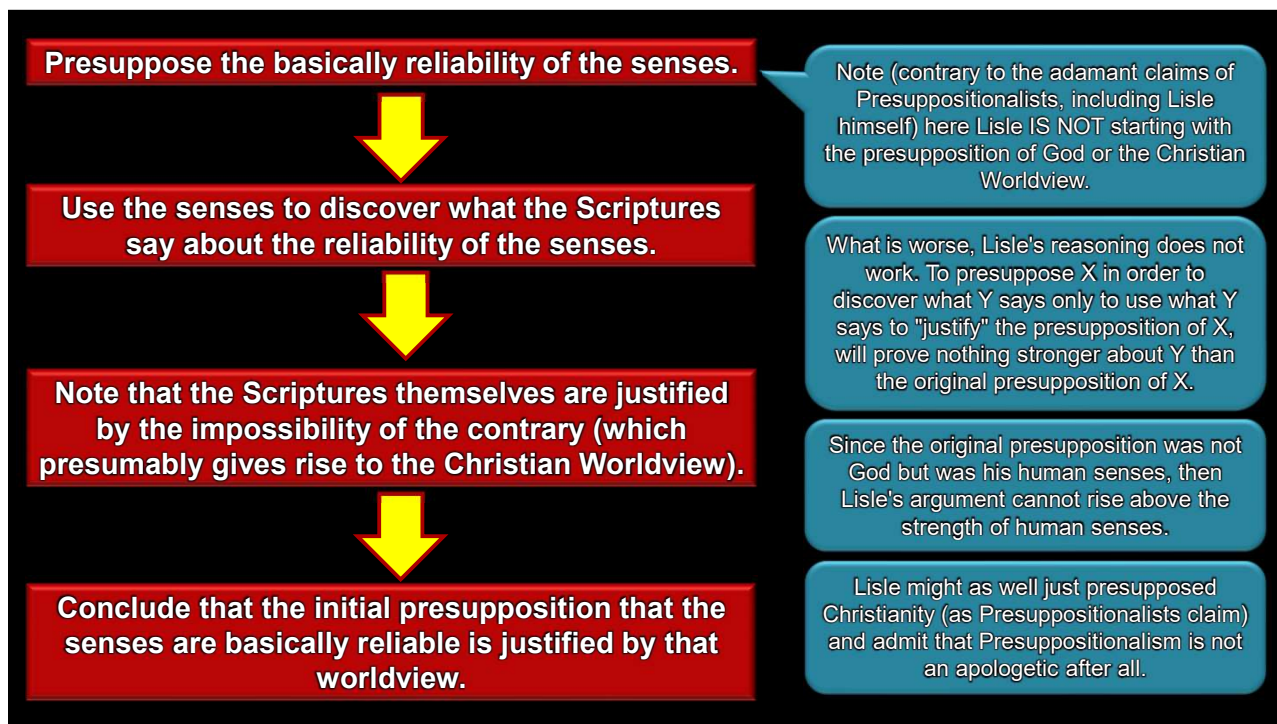
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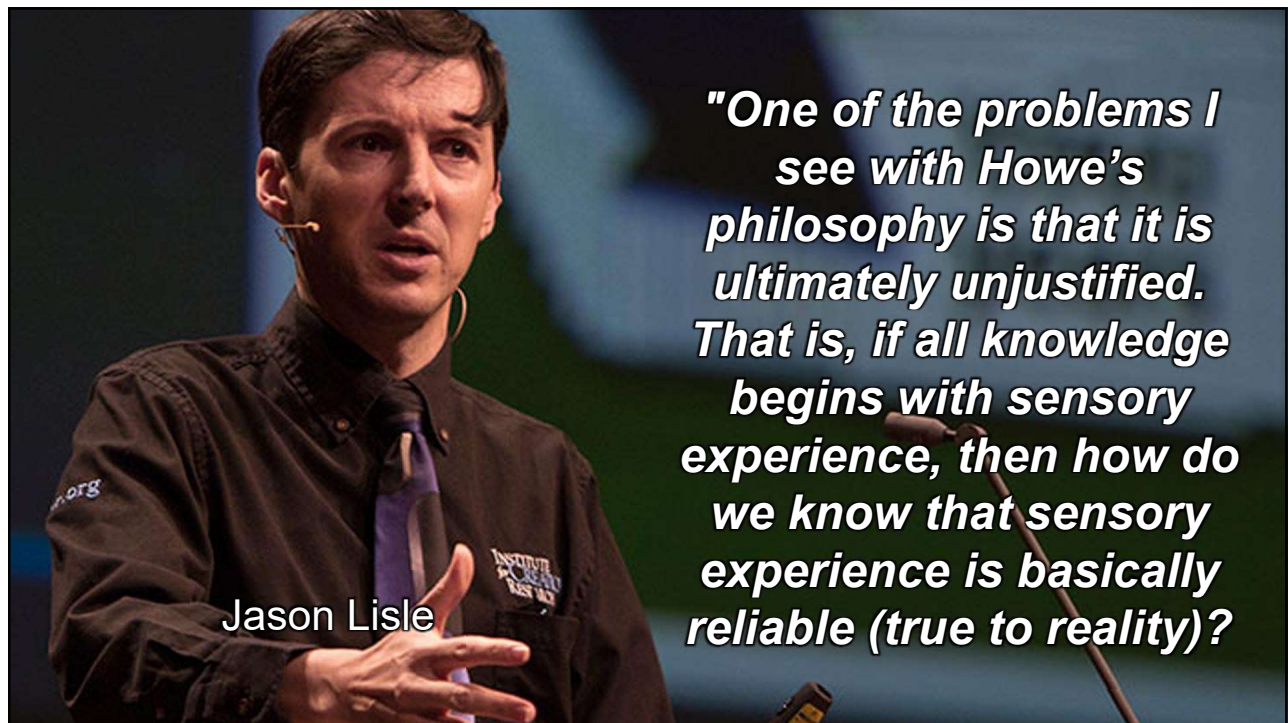
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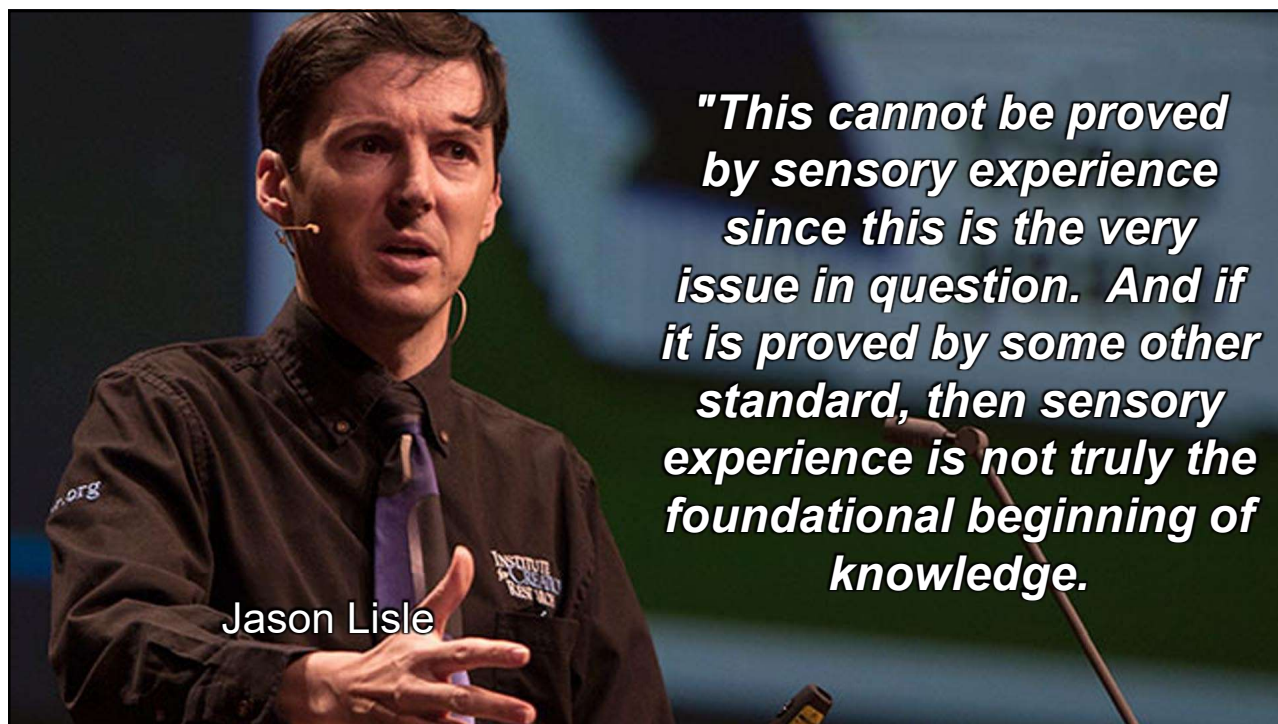
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[Jason Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): p. 65]

"Notice here Lisle claims that it is the reliability of his senses that he presupposes before the Scriptures whereas here it is the Bible that is the "only rational starting point" of our knowledge of anything."

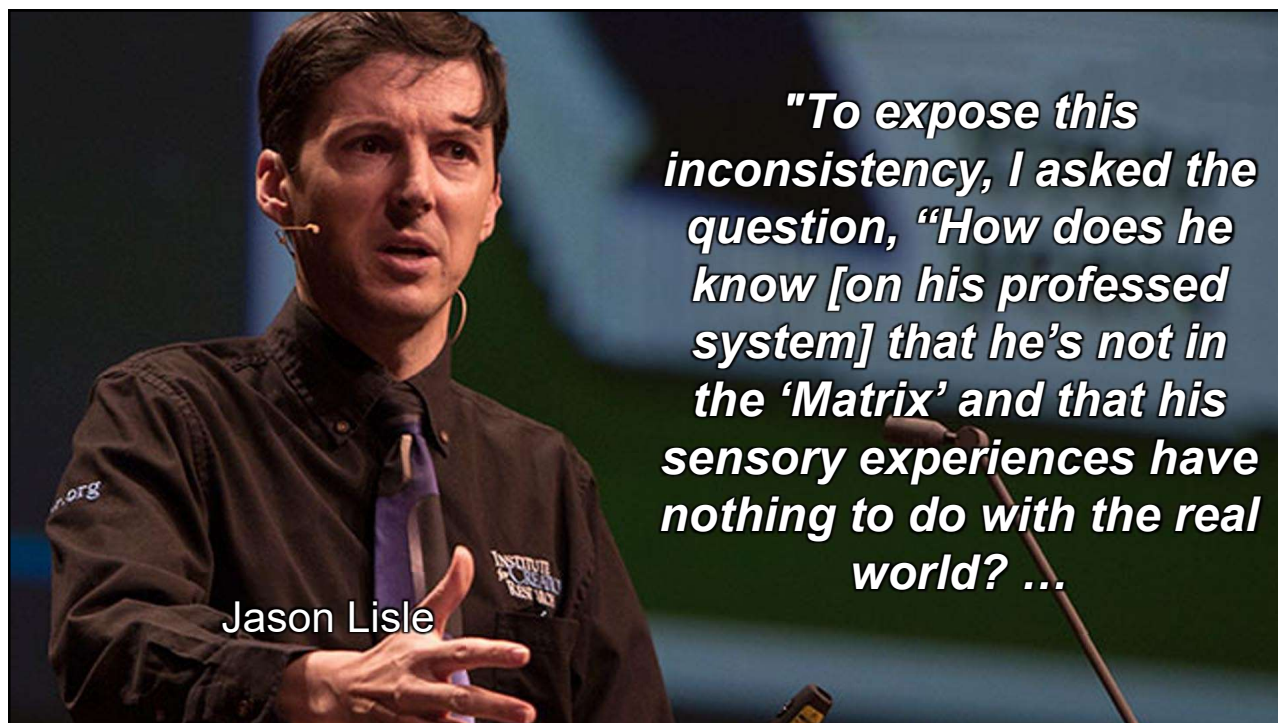






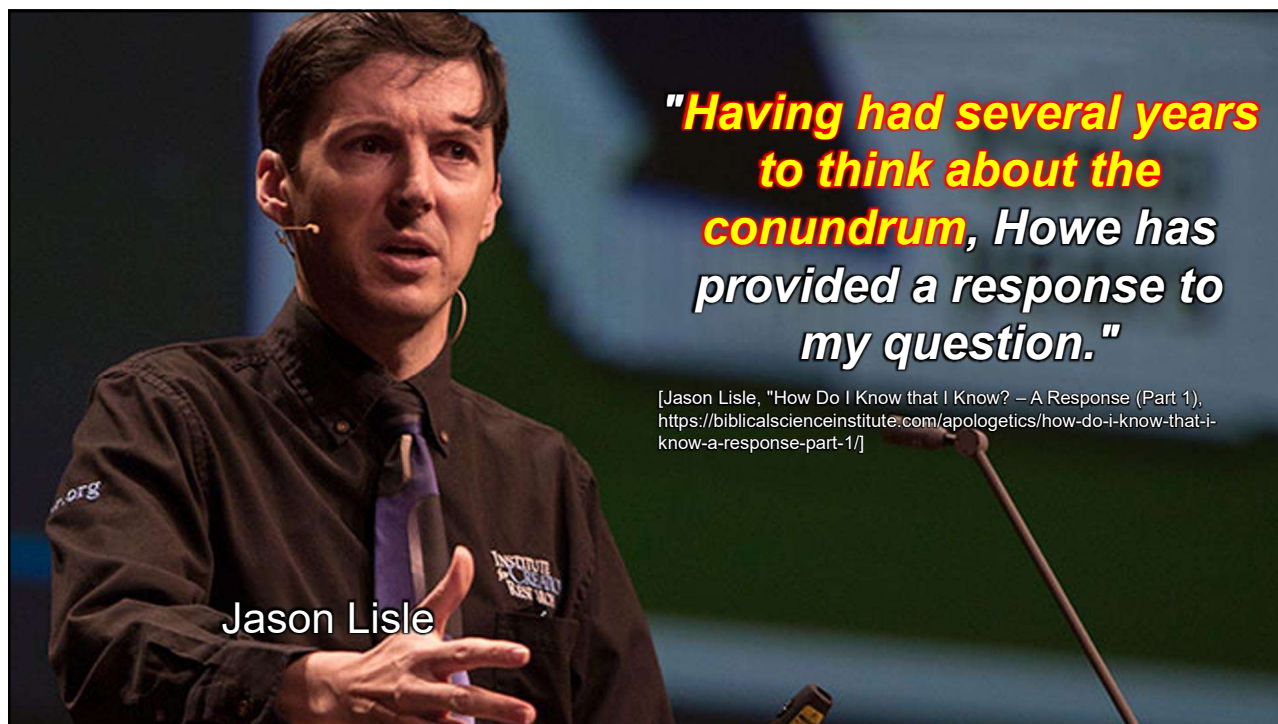
Jason Lisle

"This cannot be proved by sensory experience since this is the very issue in question. And if it is proved by some other standard, then sensory experience is not truly the foundational beginning of knowledge."



Jason Lisle

"To expose this inconsistency, I asked the question, "How does he know [on his professed system] that he's not in the 'Matrix' and that his sensory experiences have nothing to do with the real world? ..."



"Having had several years to think about the conundrum, Howe has provided a response to my question."

[Jason Lisle, "How Do I Know that I Know? – A Response (Part 1), <https://biblicalscienceinstitute.com/apologetics/how-do-i-know-that-i-know-a-response-part-1/>]

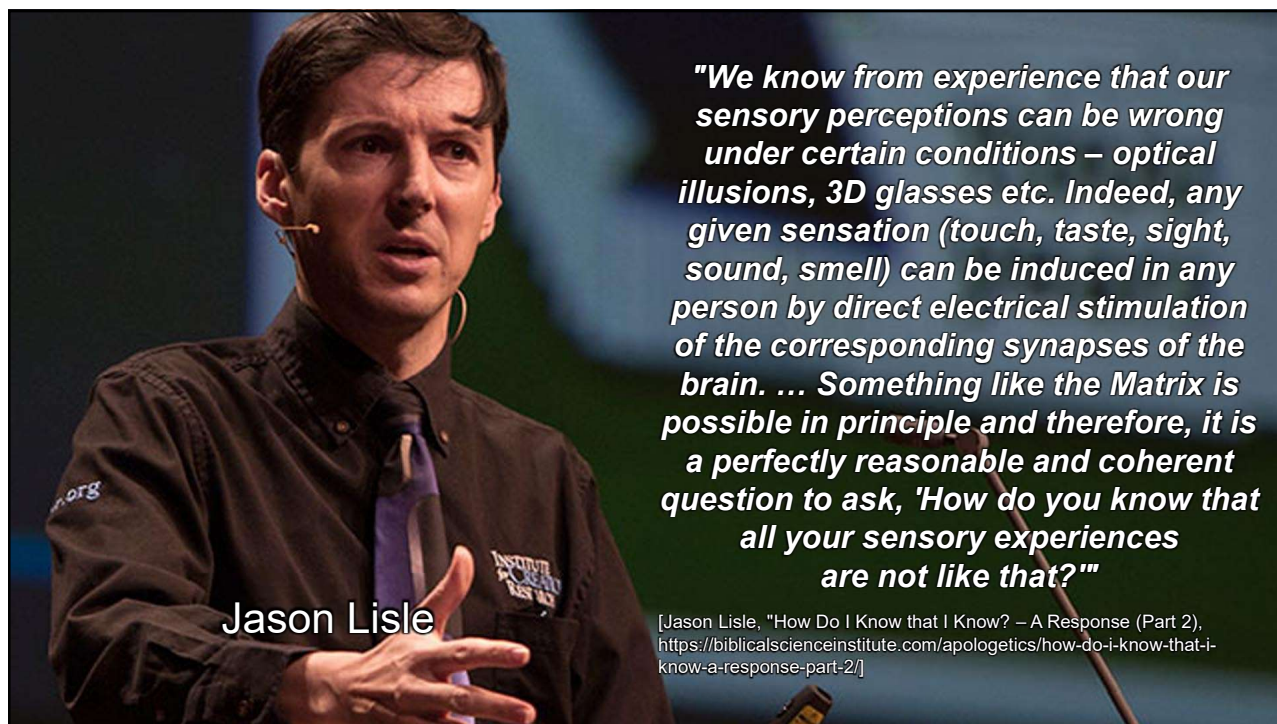
Jason Lisle



"Howe has tacitly presupposed (among other things) that our senses correspond to reality. Now how does he know that he's not in the 'Matrix' and that his sensory experiences have nothing whatsoever to do with the real world?"

[Jason Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 110]

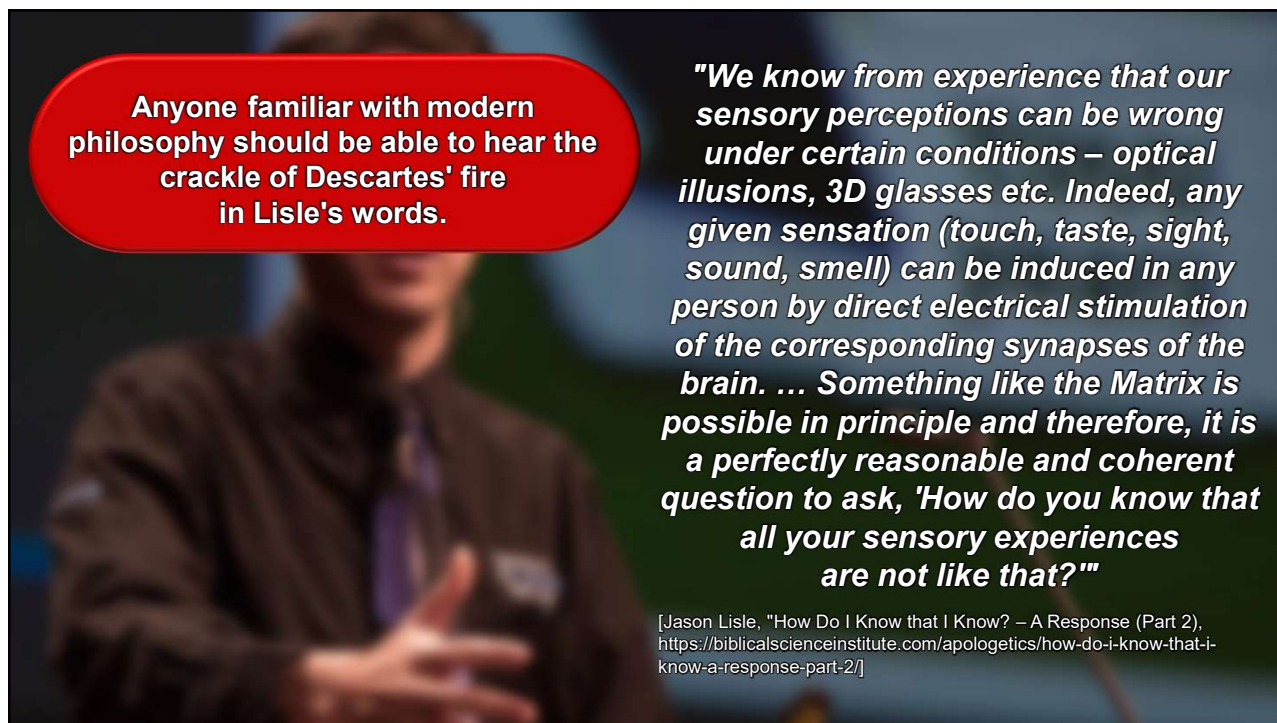
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"We know from experience that our sensory perceptions can be wrong under certain conditions – optical illusions, 3D glasses etc. Indeed, any given sensation (touch, taste, sight, sound, smell) can be induced in any person by direct electrical stimulation of the corresponding synapses of the brain. ... Something like the Matrix is possible in principle and therefore, it is a perfectly reasonable and coherent question to ask, 'How do you know that all your sensory experiences are not like that?'"

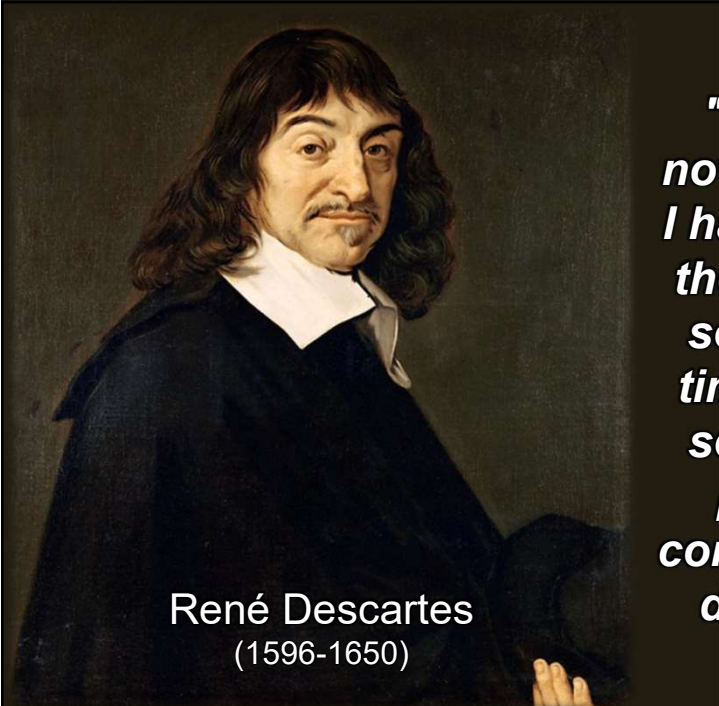
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Anyone familiar with modern philosophy should be able to hear the crackle of Descartes' fire in Lisle's words.

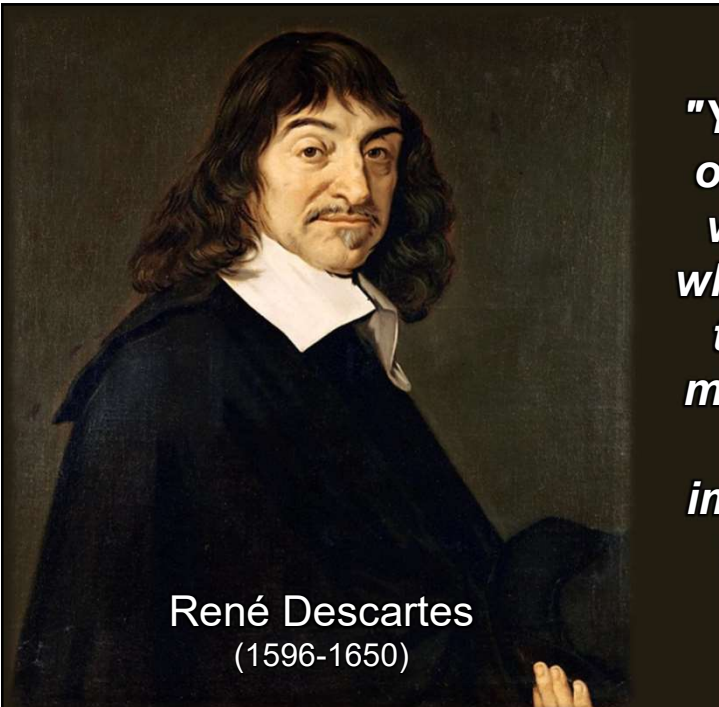
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A portrait of René Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a dark blue or black robe with a white collar. He has long, dark, wavy hair and a small goatee. He is looking slightly to the right of the viewer.

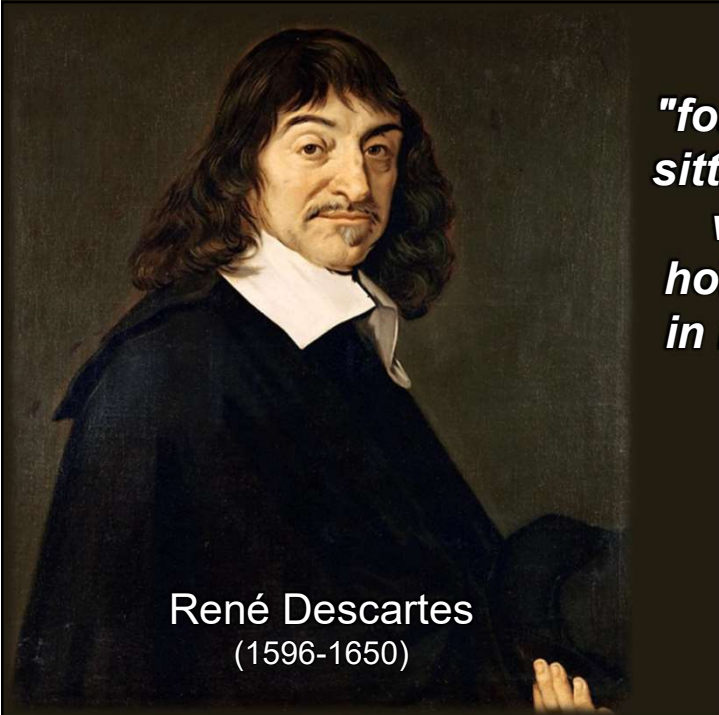
René Descartes
(1596-1650)

"Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once."

A portrait of René Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a dark blue or black robe with a white collar. He has long, dark, wavy hair and a small goatee. He is looking slightly to the right of the viewer.

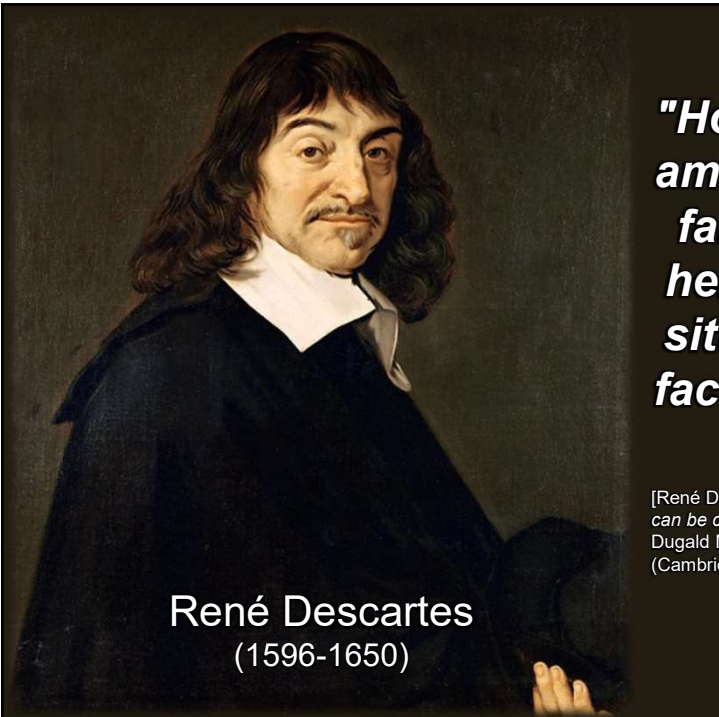
René Descartes
(1596-1650)

"Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses—"



René Descartes
(1596-1650)

"for example, that I am here sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. ..."



René Descartes
(1596-1650)

"How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events—that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by my fire—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!"

[René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: First Meditation: What can be called into doubt*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 17-18]

Anyone familiar with modern philosophy should be able to hear the crackle of Descartes' fire in Lisle's words!

Since Lisle is willing to grant the plausibility of the Matrix, he will not be able to rise above the possibility that his presupposition of God is itself just a product of the Matrix.

"We know from experience that our sensory perceptions can be wrong under certain conditions – optical illusions, 3D glasses etc. Indeed, any given sensation (touch, taste, sight, sound, smell) can be induced in any person by direct electrical stimulation of the corresponding synapses of the brain. ... Something like the Matrix is possible in principle and therefore, it is a perfectly reasonable and coherent question to ask, 'How do you know that all your sensory experiences are not like that?'"

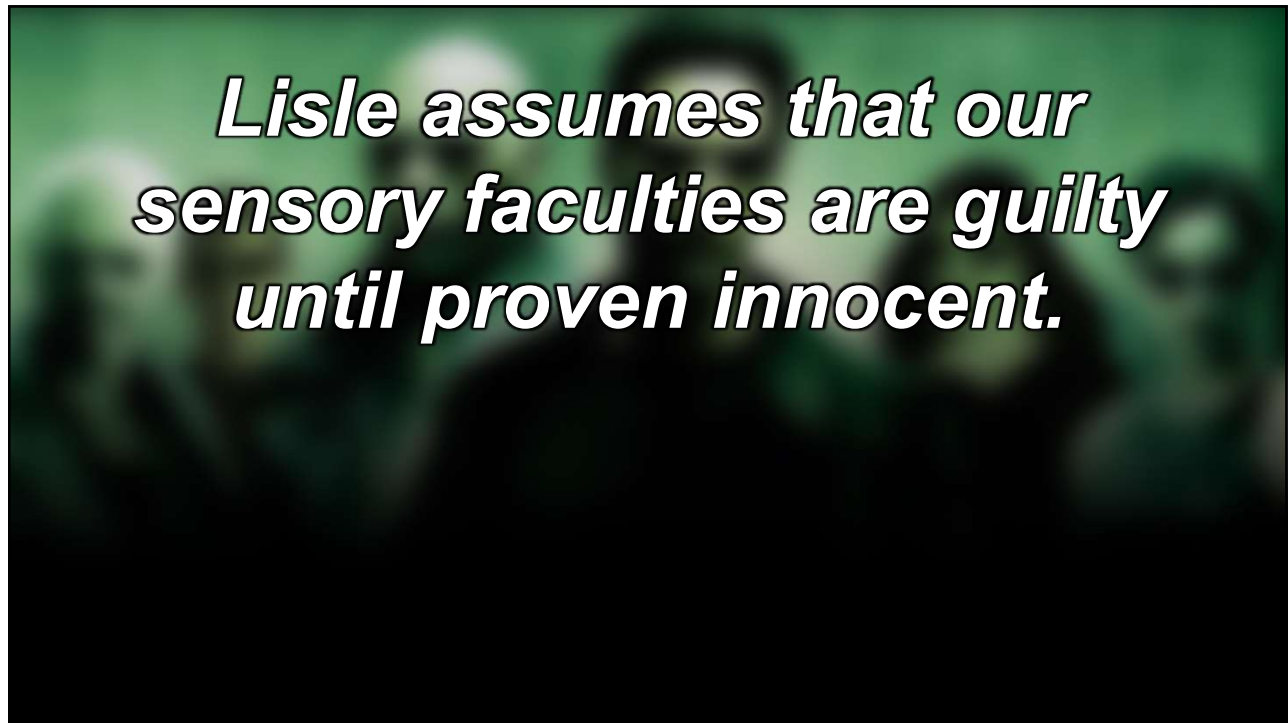
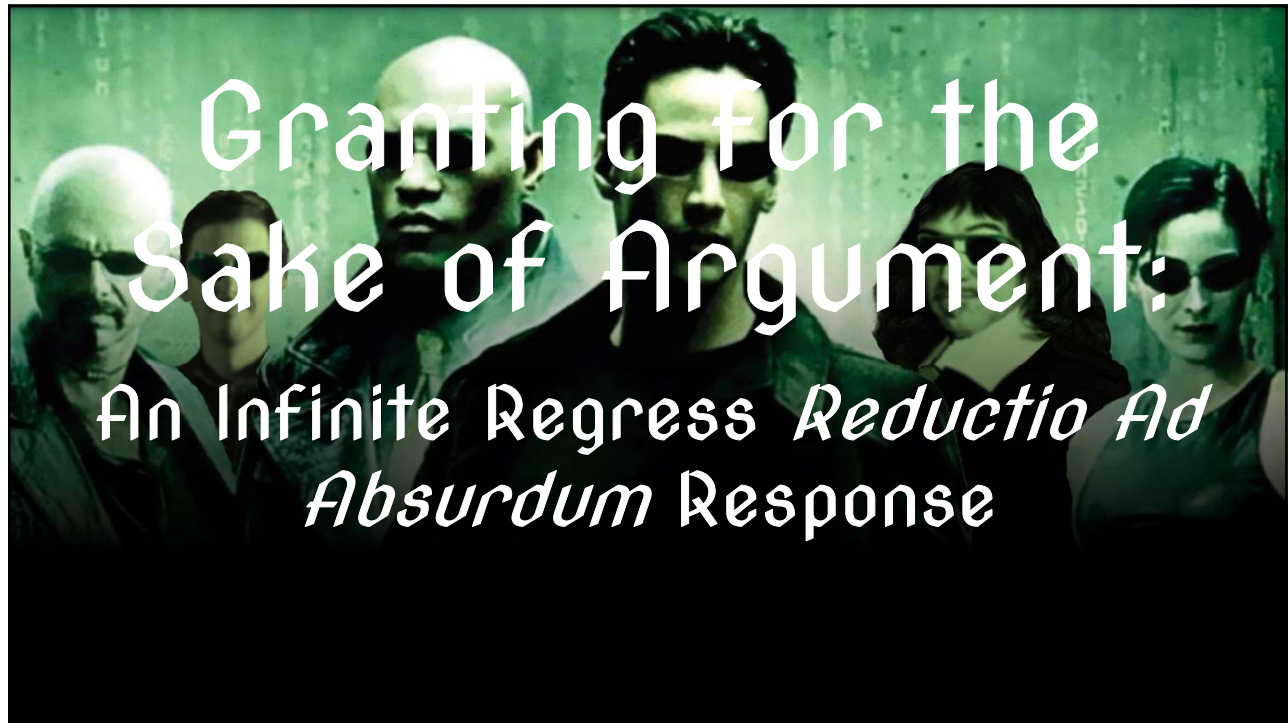
[Jason Lisle, "How Do I Know that I Know? – A Response (Part 2), <https://biblicalscienceinstitute.com/apologetics/how-do-i-know-that-i-know-a-response-part-2/>]

This is a perfect example of a point I shall raise later, to wit, Presuppositionalists' indebtedness (if only unwittingly) to the methods and commitments of certain modern and contemporary philosophies.

They offer their Presuppositionalism as the only solution to philosophical problems which arise almost entirely from those modern and contemporary philosophies.

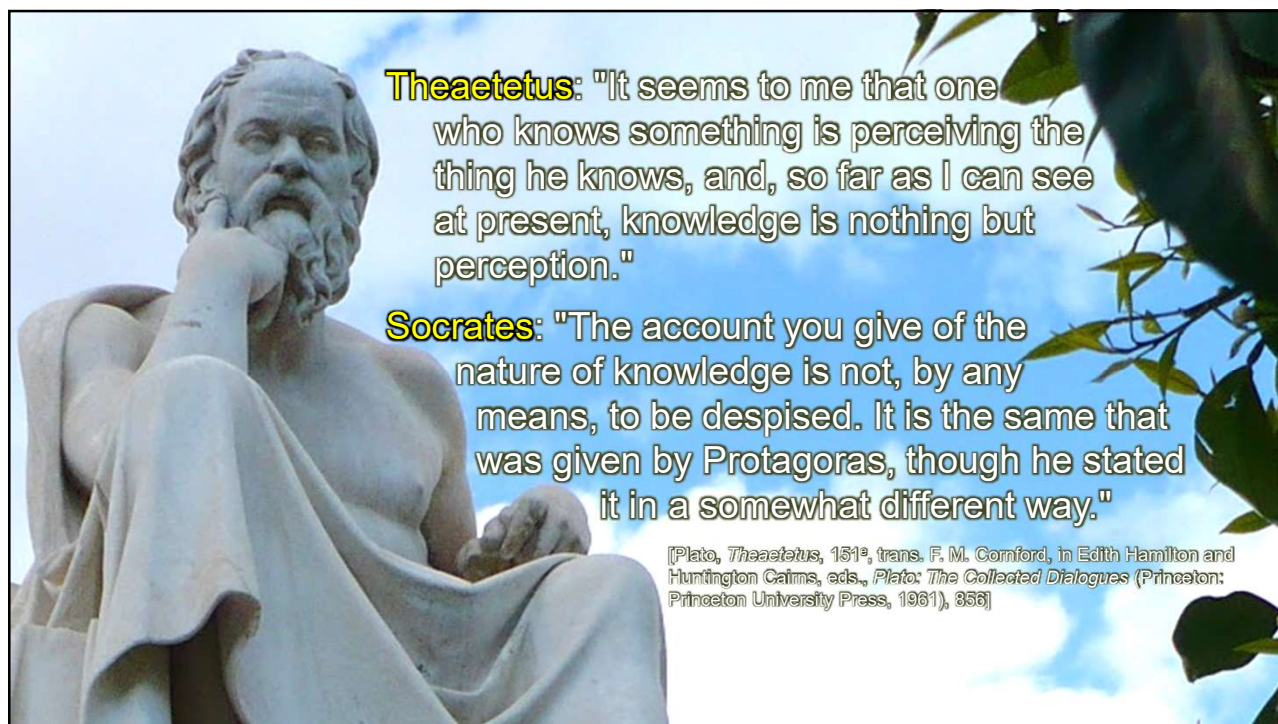
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[Jason Lisle, "How Do I Know that I Know? – A Response (Part 2), <https://biblicalscienceinstitute.com/apologetics/how-do-i-know-that-i-know-a-response-part-2/>]



To be sure, epistemological questions are certainly philosophically legitimate, including questions about our sensory experience.

The latter has roots in ancient philosophy.



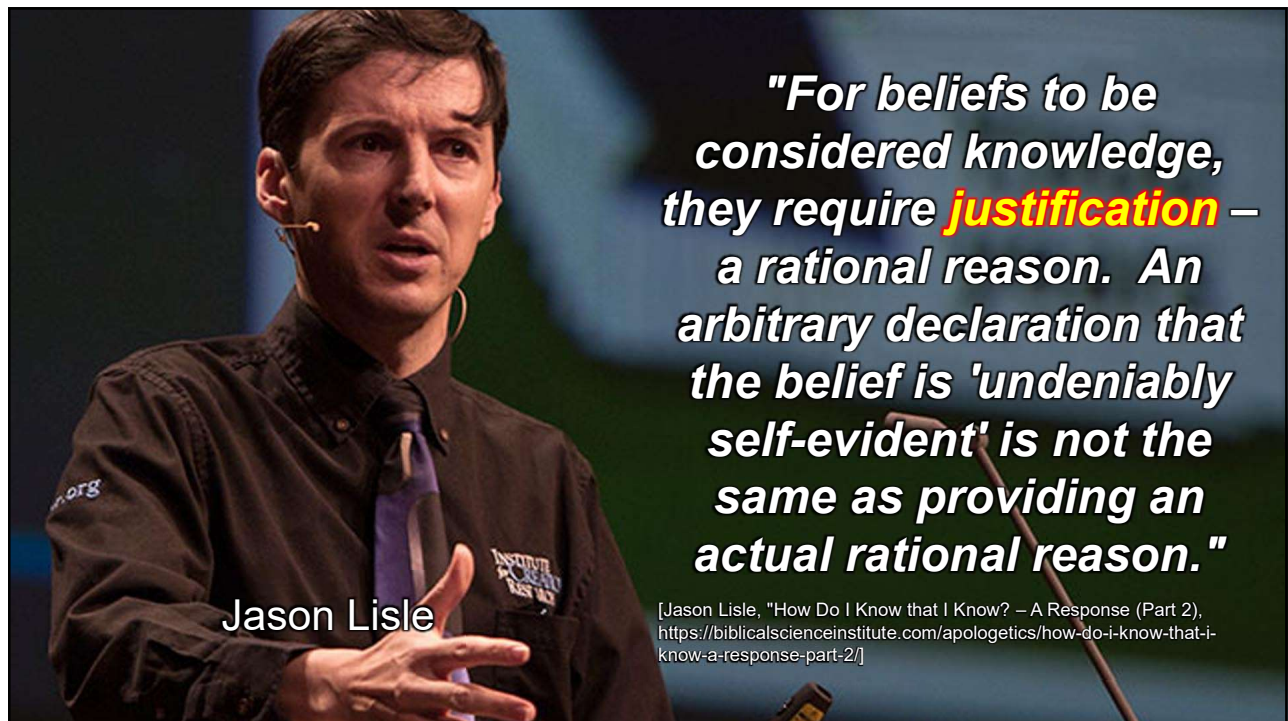
Theaetetus: "It seems to me that one who knows something is perceiving the thing he knows, and, so far as I can see at present, knowledge is nothing but perception."

Socrates: "The account you give of the nature of knowledge is not, by any means, to be despised. It is the same that was given by Protagoras, though he stated it in a somewhat different way."

[Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151^a, trans. F. M. Cornford, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 356]

Lisle's indebtedness to contemporary analytic philosophy is evident by how often he frames this debate in terms of whether one's worldview "**justifies**" the belief that one's sensory faculties are reliable.

Lisle's assumption here is undoubtedly taking for granted a standard definition of knowledge in contemporary philosophy, viz., knowledge as justified, true, belief.



While it is certainly the case that one's philosophy of knowledge requires **explanation**, I have never found anywhere in Lisle's material where he defends this point that knowledge requires **justification** in order to be considered knowledge.

*"For beliefs to be considered knowledge, they require **justification** – a rational reason. An arbitrary declaration that the belief is 'undeniably self-evident' is not the same as providing an actual rational reason."*

[Jason Lisle, "How Do I Know that I Know? – A Response (Part 2), <https://biblicalscienceinstitute.com/apologetics/how-do-i-know-that-i-know-a-response-part-2/>]

What is more, I have never found anywhere in Lisle's material that he is at all acquainted with the "Gettier Problems" associated with this discussion.

*"For beliefs to be considered knowledge, they require **justification** – a rational reason. An arbitrary declaration that the belief is 'undeniably self-evident' is not the same as providing an actual rational reason."*

[Jason Lisle, "How Do I Know that I Know? – A Response (Part 2), <https://biblicalscienceinstitute.com/apologetics/how-do-i-know-that-i-know-a-response-part-2/>]

As we shall see in due course, Aquinas's view of knowledge is free from such requirements of seeking to account for knowledge ultimately in the categories of knowledge itself.

*"For beliefs to be considered knowledge, they require **justification** – a rational reason. An arbitrary declaration that the belief is 'undeniably self-evident' is not the same as providing an actual rational reason."*

[Jason Lisle, "How Do I Know that I Know? – A Response (Part 2), <https://biblicalscienceinstitute.com/apologetics/how-do-i-know-that-i-know-a-response-part-2/>]

In contrast to contemporary analytic philosophy, Classical (or Scholastic) Realism in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas has a different definition of knowledge.

Lisle's Matrix challenge is saying that I could know that I know reality only if I know that my senses are reliable.

Only by a prior knowledge that my senses are reliable can I know that I am not in the Matrix.

In other words, only by a prior knowledge that my senses are reliable can I know that my senses are conveying to me truths about reality.

For the sake of argument, let us grant Lisle's point that one can know that one's sensory faculties convey truths about reality only if one already knows that his sensory faculties are reliable.

*Consider what questions one
could to ask about Lisle's
challenge.*

Questions for
Jason Lisle

What means could I use to confirm to myself that my senses are reliable?

Whatever that means is, how would I be able to know that this means is itself reliable?

If I have means #2 to confirm to me that means #1 is reliable when it confirms to me that my senses are reliable, how can I know that means #2 is reliable when it tells me this?

If I posit means #3 to confirm to me that means #2 is reliable when it confirms to me that means #1 is reliable when it confirms to me that my senses are reliable, then how can I ...

You get the picture.

***It leads to an infinite regress so
that nothing is ever confirmed.***

*To be sure, Lisle does not think he
has an infinite regress because he
thinks he knows that God has told
him that his senses are reliable.*

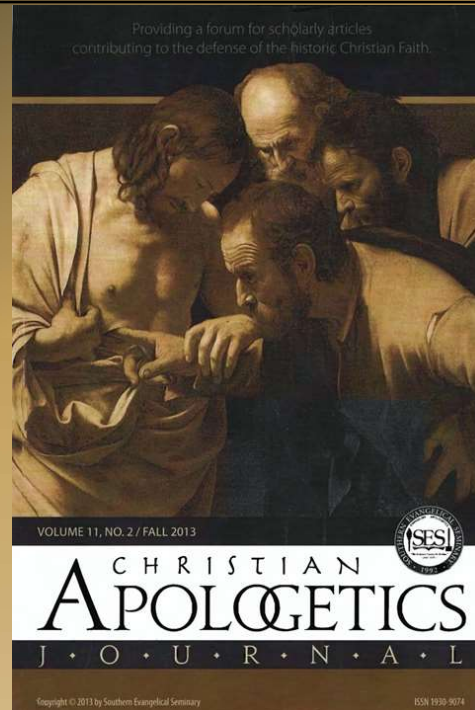
*How does Lisle know that
God told him this?*

*He thinks he knows this through
revelation from God (which
includes the Bible) which gives him
the "Christian Worldview."*

*Lisle's view is that the "Christian
Worldview" "justifies" the reliability
of our senses and allows us to
proceed with the assurance that
our senses are telling us
truths about reality.*



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

"Sensory experience is only reliable if our senses correspond to reality; and only the Christian worldview can rationally justify this."

[Lisle, "Presuppositional Reply," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 110]

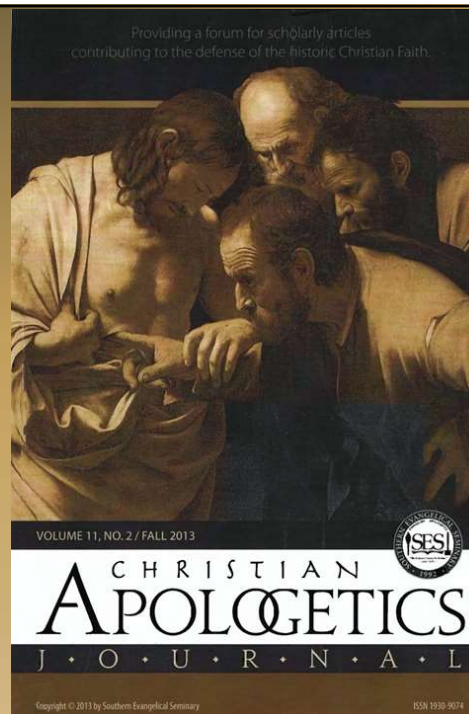
Does This Make Lisle's Argument Circular?

While admitting some sense of circularity, Lisle will try to distinguish the way in which his argument for Presuppositionalism is circular from the type of circular argument that is fallacious.

He insists that in my response to him, I have formulated his argument erroneously by making it into the fallaciously circular version.



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

"This charge of fallacious circularity is, I believe, one of the main reasons why many Christians are inclined to reject presuppositional apologetics at the outset. I will show below that it is logically inescapable that indeed the Bible must be the ultimate standard even when evaluating its own claims. I will also show that this can be done in a logical, non-fallacious way. "

Jason Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," in *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 65]

Given this, exactly how does Lisle and other Presuppositionalists defend the (supposedly non-fallacious) version of the circular argument offered for their Presuppositionalism?

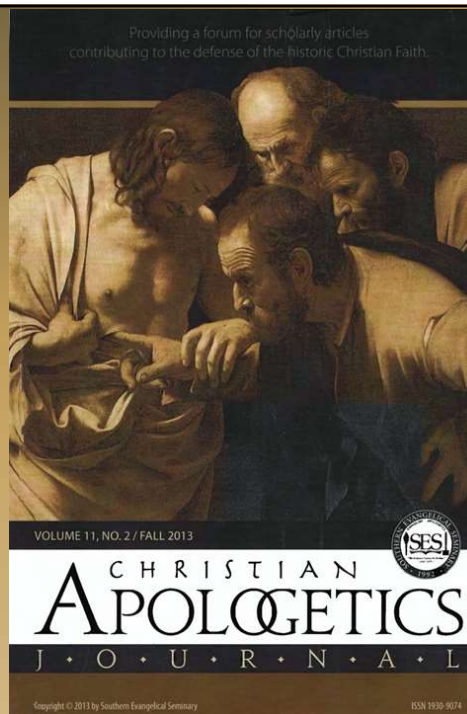
First, Lisle points out that circular arguments are actually logically valid.

Second, Presuppositionalists claim that all arguments for ultimate standards are circular.

Lisle points out that circular arguments are actually logically valid.



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute



"It may surprise some people to learn that circular reasoning is actually logically valid."

[Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," 80]



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

My Response to Lisle's Point that Circular Arguments Are Actually Logically Valid

Given the definition of what it means to be logically valid, it is easy to see that every circular argument is always valid.

It is also easy to see why this is a completely trivial observation about valid arguments and does nothing to support Lisle's position.

↻ Definition of Valid ↻

an argument is valid just in case it is impossible for the argument to have all true premises and a false conclusion.

↻ Proving an Argument Is Valid ↻

showing how it would be impossible for a given argument to have a false conclusion where all the premises are true

Premise 1: Point A

Premise 2: Point B

Conclusion: Result C

In a valid argument, the truth of the premises necessitate the truth of the conclusion.

If the conclusion can be false when all premises are true, then the argument is invalid.

An easy way to show an argument is valid is to show that it cannot be invalid.

Premise 1: Point A

Premise 2: Point B

Conclusion: Result C

Thus, if you cannot make the conclusion false while all premises are true, you have proven that the argument cannot be invalid.

Any argument that cannot be invalid has to be valid.

Premise 1: Point A

Premise 2: Point B

Conclusion: Result C

To say that an argument is circular is to say that the conclusion is already contained in the argument.

In other words, in a circular argument, the conclusion is saying the same thing as one of the premises.

Premise 1: Point A

Premise 2: Point B

Conclusion: Result C

Given this, watch what happens when you try to make a circular argument invalid.

Remember, to be invalid the argument has to have a false conclusion with all premises true.

If it cannot be made invalid, then the argument is by definition valid.

Premise 1: Point A

Premise 2: Point B

Conclusion: Result C



To be a circular argument, the conclusion has to say the same thing as at least one of the premises.

Because the conclusion says the same thing as at least one of the premises, they will have the same truth value.

Premise 1: Point A **FALSE**

Premise 2: Point B **TRUE**

Conclusion: Result C **FALSE**



To be an invalid argument, the conclusion has to be false while all premises are true.

Since the conclusion says the same thing as one of the premises, that premise must also be false.

Premise 1: Point A **TRUE**

Premise 2: Point B **FALSE**

Conclusion: Result C **FALSE**



To be an invalid argument, the conclusion has to be false while both premises are true.

Since the conclusion says the same thing as one of the premises, that premise must also be false.

Premise 1: Point A **FALSE**

Premise 2: Point B **TRUE**

Conclusion: Result C **FALSE**

No, it does not really say anything important about circular arguments.

After all, it is also the case that any argument where one of the premises is a contradiction is also logically valid!

Given the definition of what it means to be logically valid, it is easy to see that every circular argument is always valid.

It is also easy to see why this is a completely trivial observation about valid arguments and does nothing to support Lisle's position.

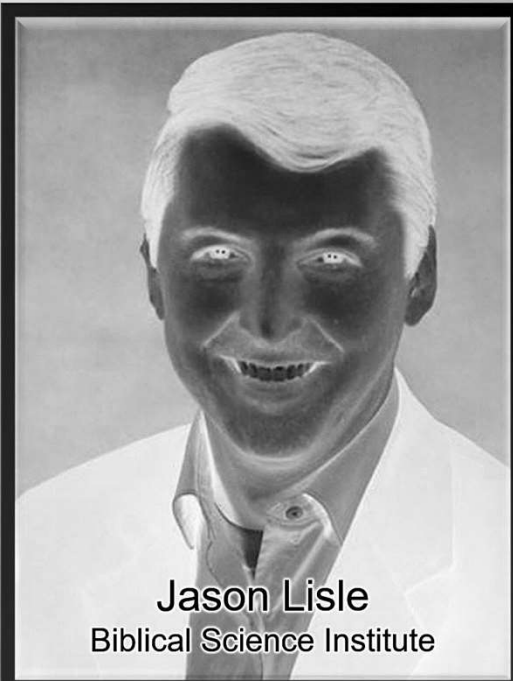
It is also the case that any formally logical argument where one of the premises is a contradiction is also valid.



Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

"It may surprise some people to learn that circular reasoning is actually logically valid."

[Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," 80]

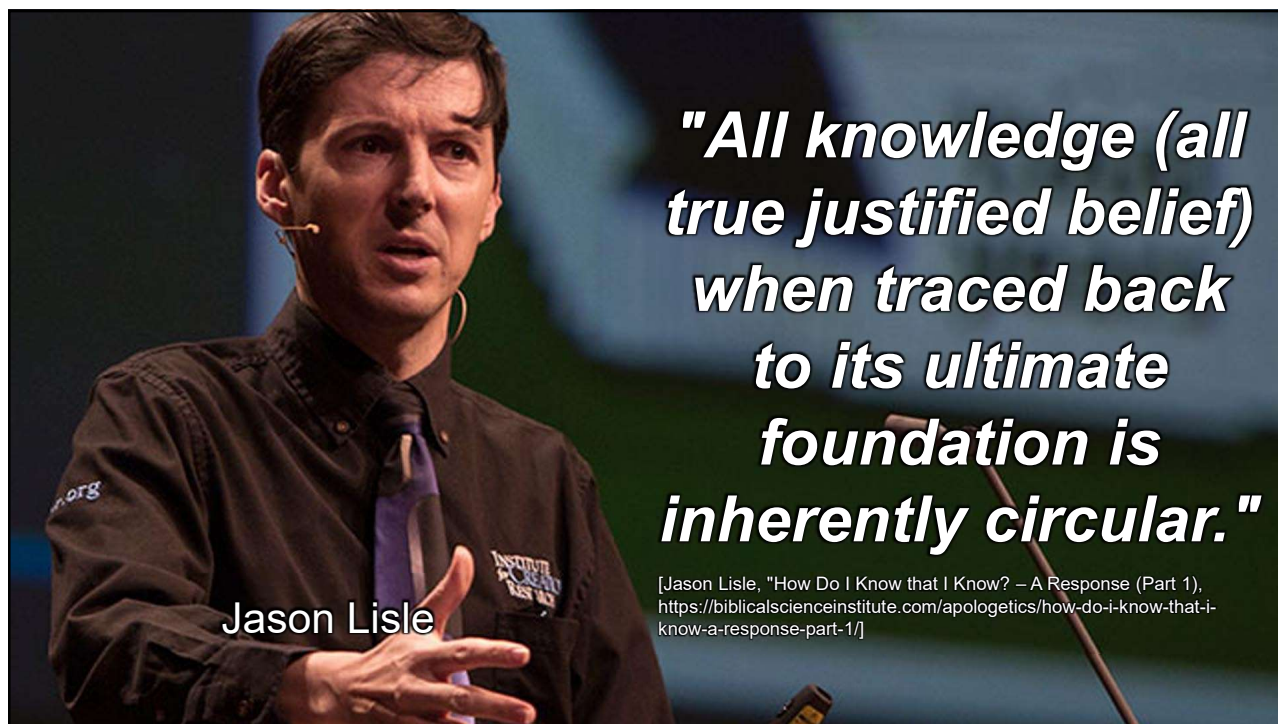


Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

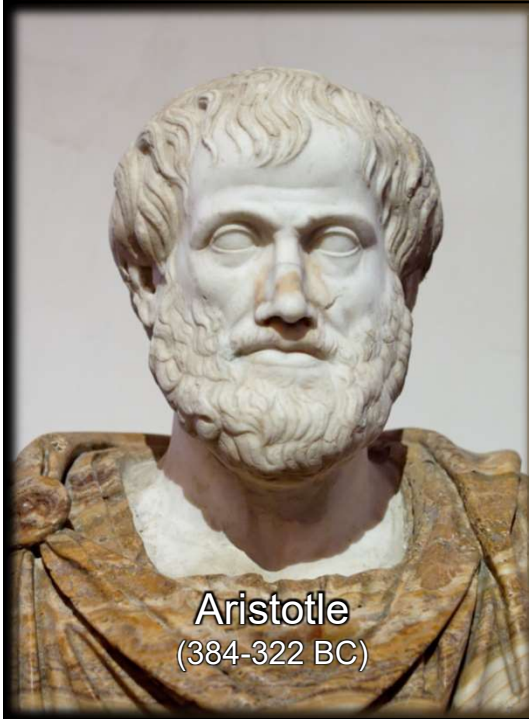
"It may surprise some people to learn that any argument where one of the premises is a contradiction is actually valid!"

Just as it should bother one to make an argument where one of the premises is a contradiction, it should also bother one make an argument which is circular.

Presuppositionalists claim that all arguments for ultimate standards are circular.

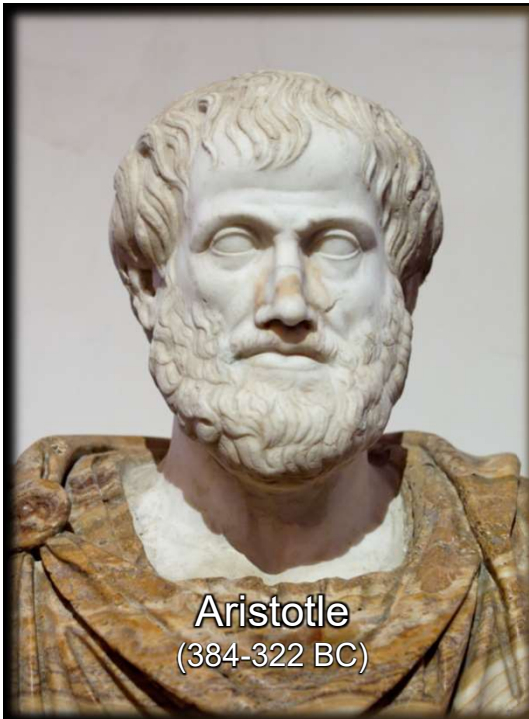


As an example, Lisle asks his reader to consider how one would "justify" the laws of logic.



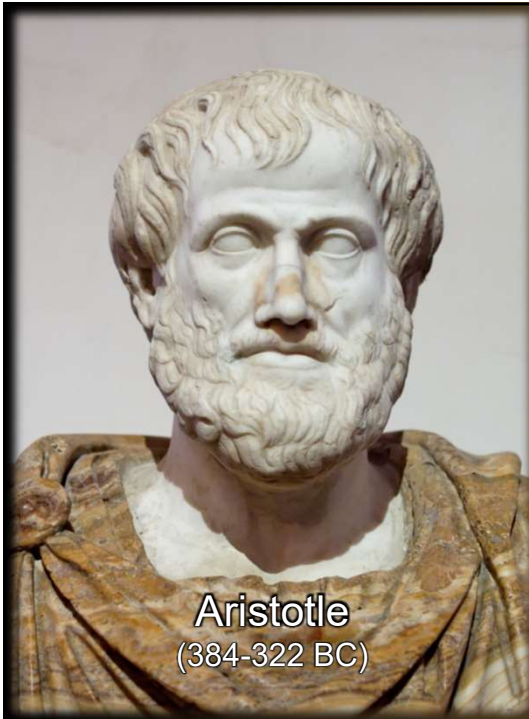
Aristotle
(384-322 BC)

"But we have now posited that it is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not to be, and by this means have shown that this is the most indisputable of all principles."



Aristotle
(384-322 BC)

"Some indeed demand that even this shall be demonstrated, but this they do through want of education, for not to know of what things one should demand demonstration, and of what one should not, argues want of education."



Aristotle
(384-322 BC)

"For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything (there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration)."

[Metaphysics, IV, 4, 1006a5-10. Translation by Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941)]

Notice here that Aristotle is talking about how we know a principle, also known as a first principle.

This, however is not the debate between Lisle and me about the Matrix and how we know the world around us.

Surely Lisle does not hold that the physical world around us or, for that matter, God, are principles.

What is more, notice that Aristotle does not say that our knowledge of the principle is circular.

There is a difference between giving a circular argument for X and X being self-evident.

Mary Christine Ugobi-Onyemere, IHM

The Knowledge of the First Principles in Saint Thomas Aquinas



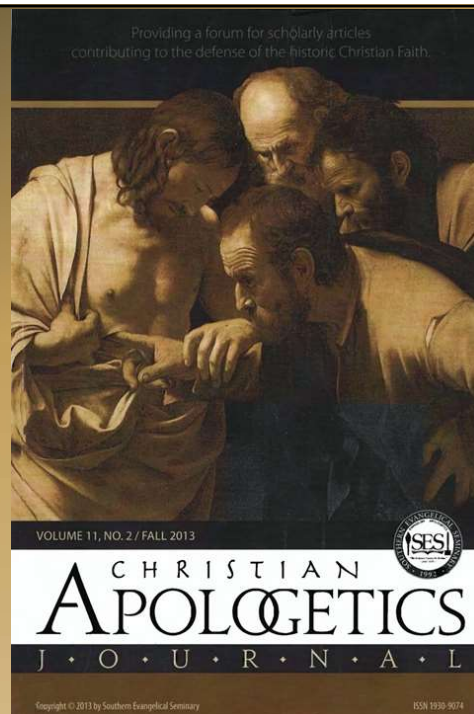
Peter Lang



Mary Christine Ugobi-Onyemere



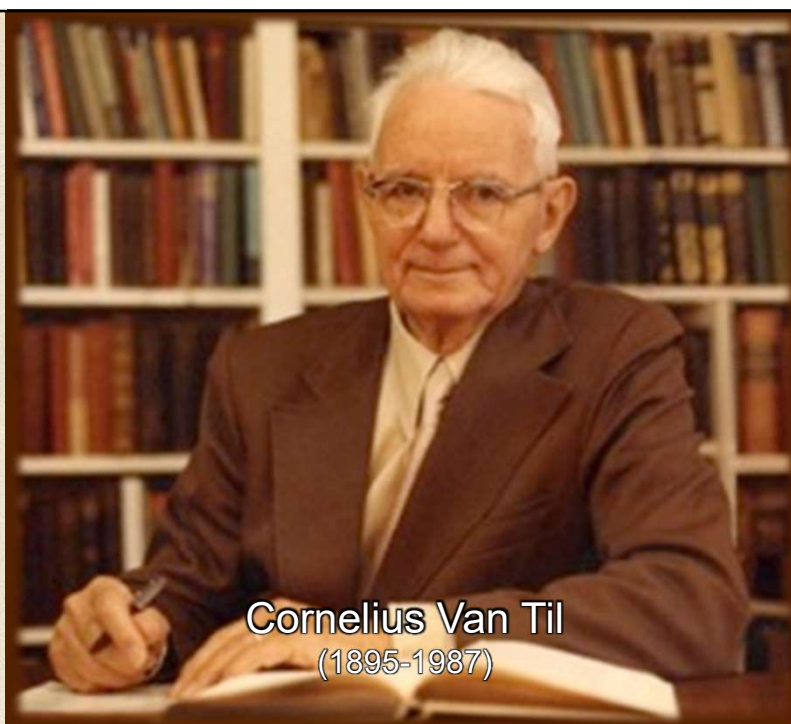
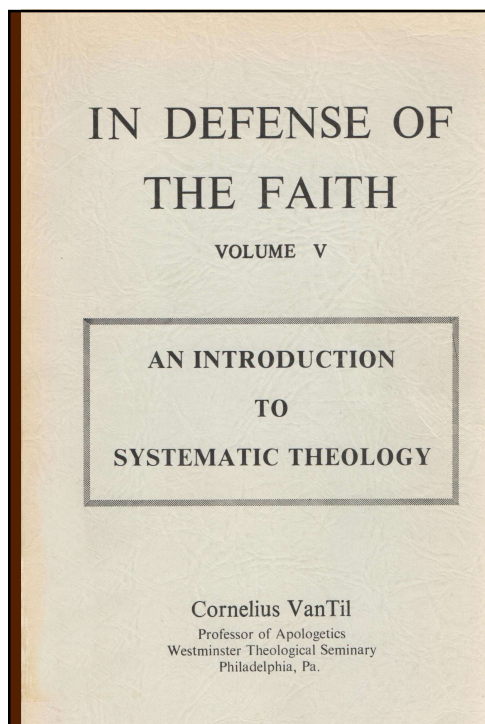
Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute



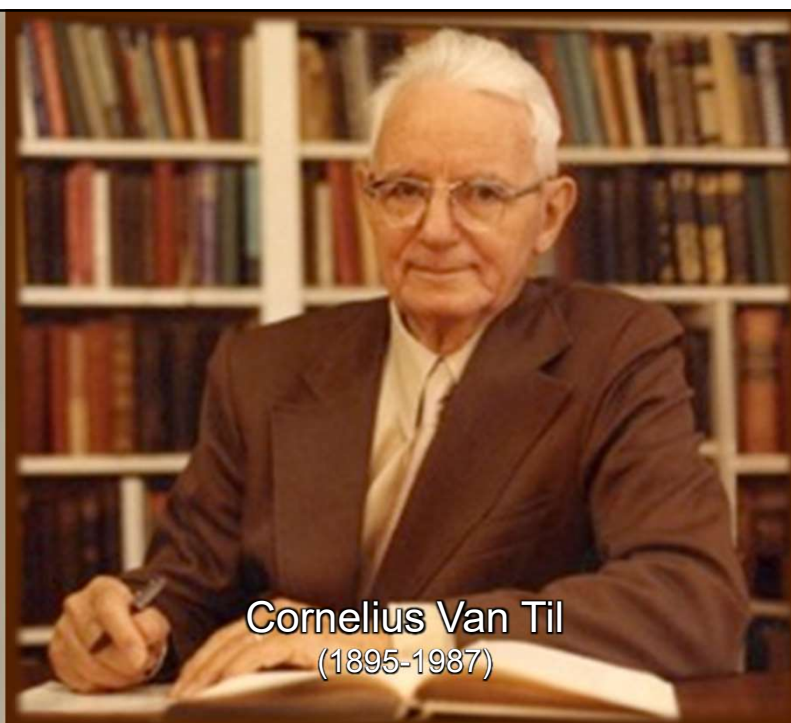
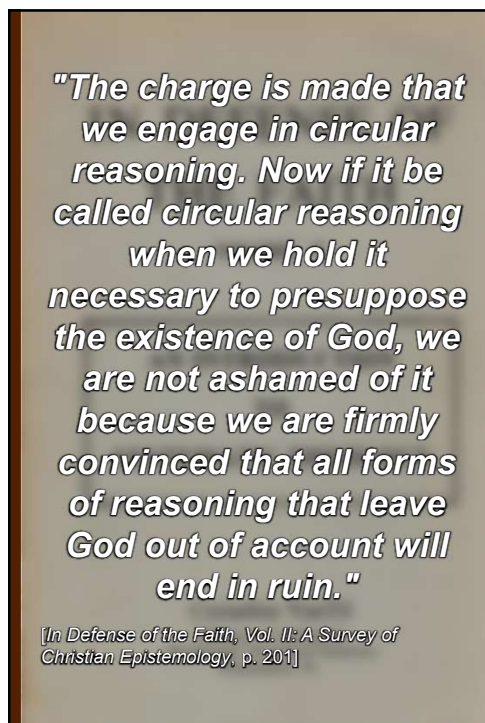
Jason Lisle
Biblical Science Institute

"The notion that circular reasoning is always wrong reveals a bit of philosophical naivety. In fact, all **ultimate standards** must be defended in a somewhat circular way (by a transcendental argument)."

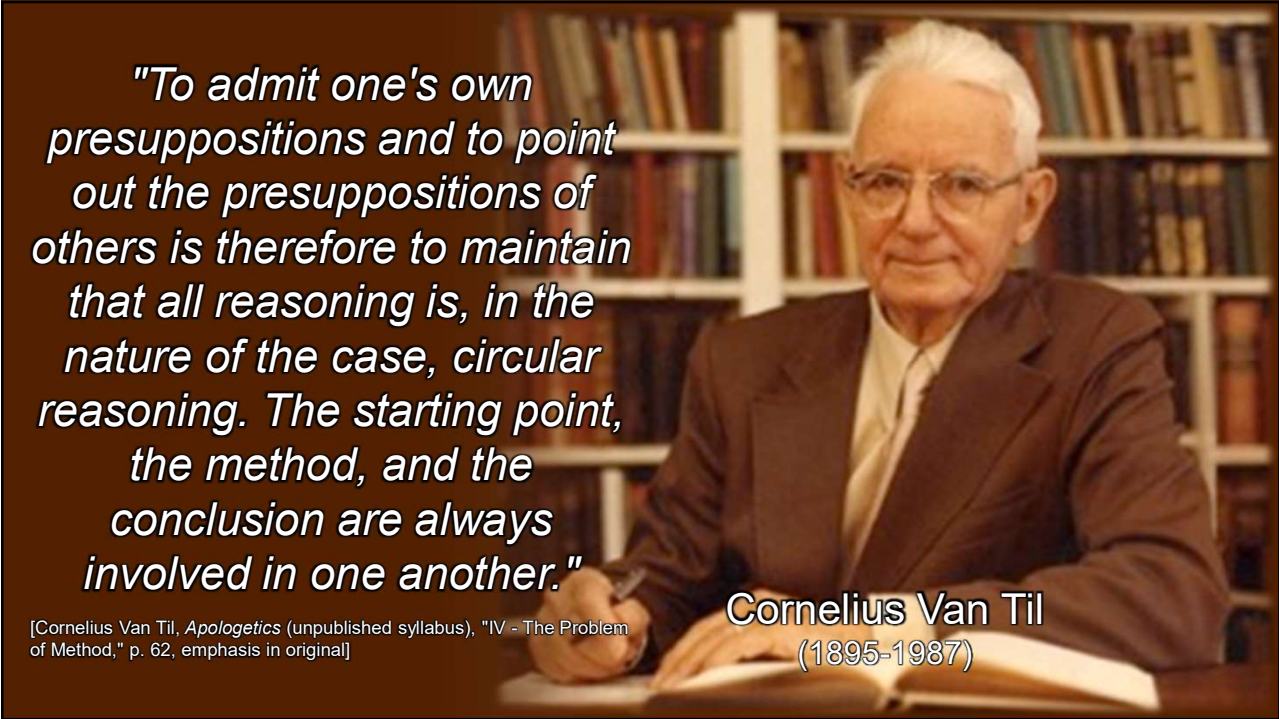
[Lisle, "Young Earth Presuppositionalism," 81]



Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)



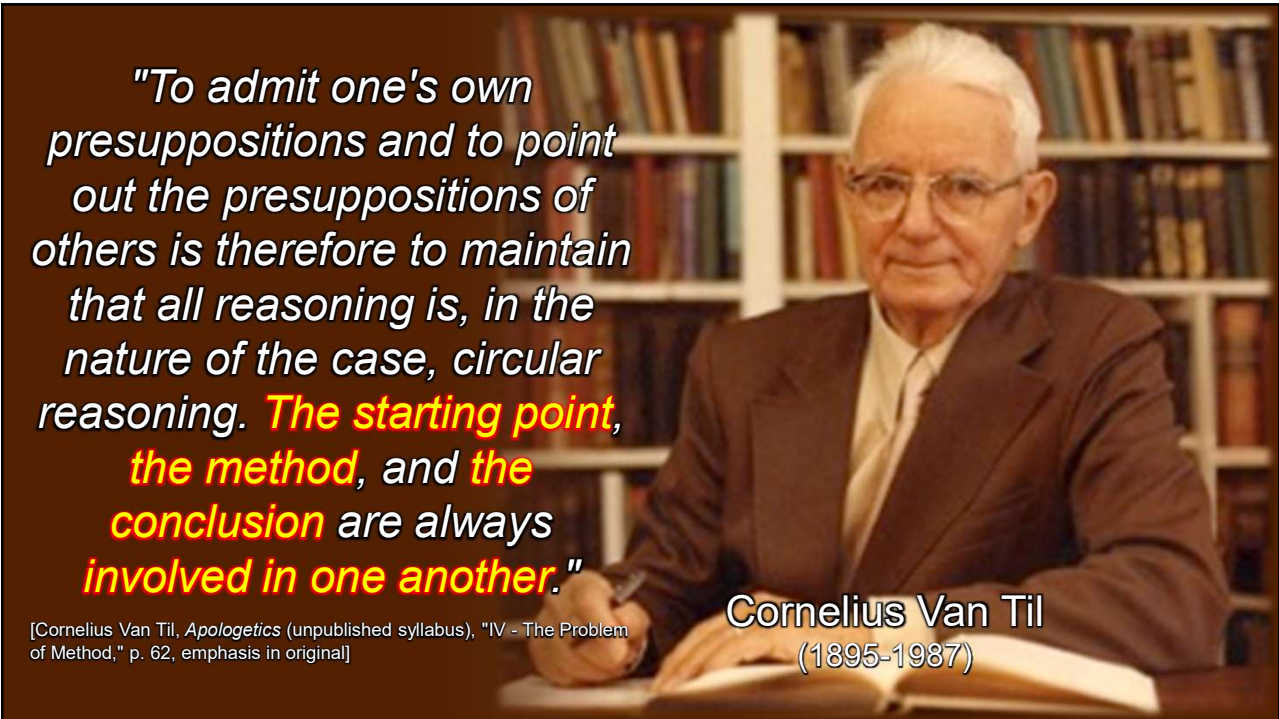
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)



"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. The starting point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another."

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

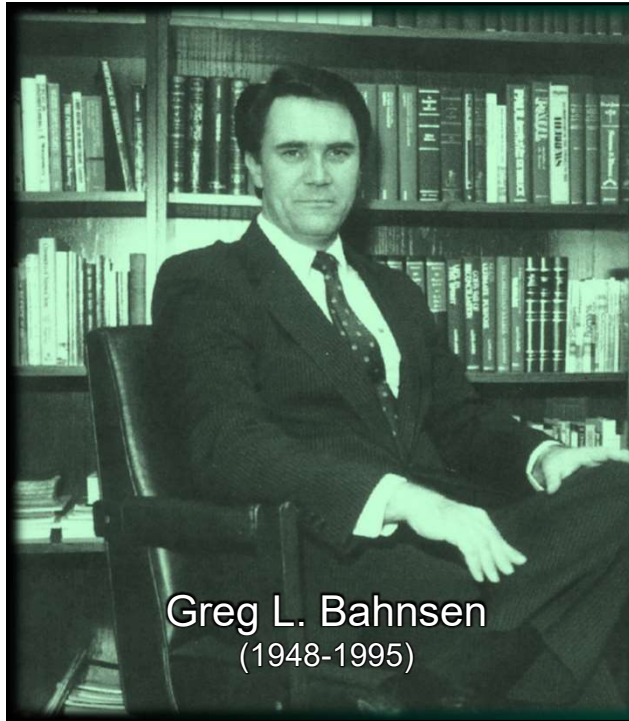
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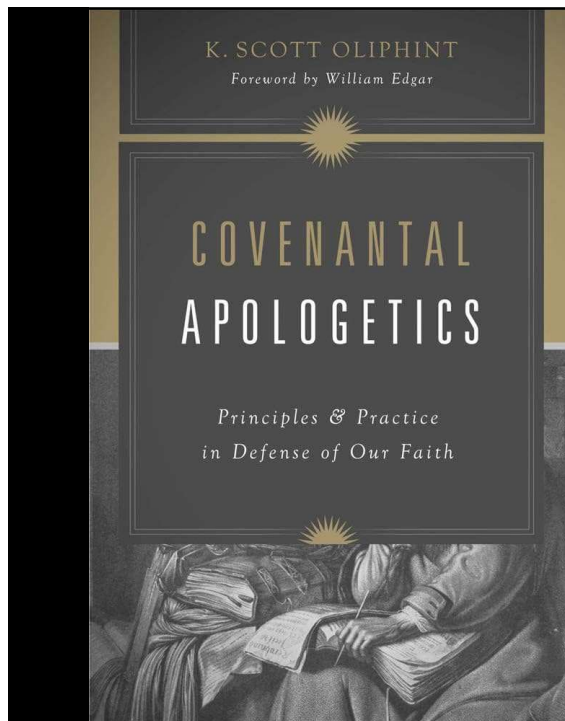
Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)



Greg L. Bahnsen
(1948-1995)

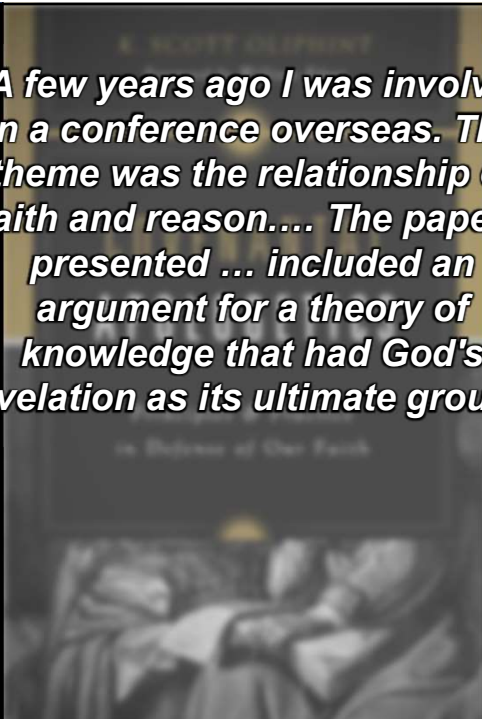
"So if, when it comes to the fundamental question of Christian faith, arguments are **ultimately circular** (since metaphysics and epistemology depend on one another), then the matter reduces to one of submission or rebellion to the authority of the revealed God. ... Hence a Christian's apologetical argument (working on a transcendental level) **will finally be circular ...**"

[Greg Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Power Springs: American Vision Presuppositionalists; Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2008), 86]



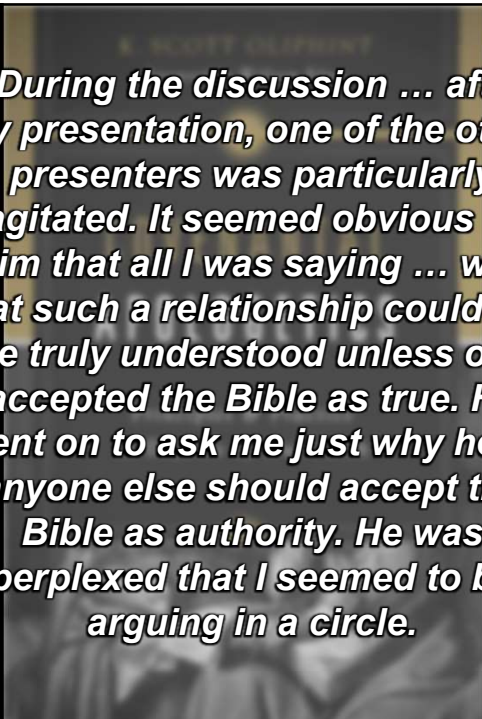
K. Scott Oliphint

"A few years ago I was involved in a conference overseas. The theme was the relationship of faith and reason.... The paper I presented ... included an argument for a theory of knowledge that had God's revelation as its ultimate ground.



K. Scott Oliphint

"During the discussion ... after my presentation, one of the other presenters was particularly agitated. It seemed obvious to him that all I was saying ... was that such a relationship could not be truly understood unless one accepted the Bible as true. He went on to ask me just why he or anyone else should accept the Bible as authority. He was perplexed that I seemed to be arguing in a circle.



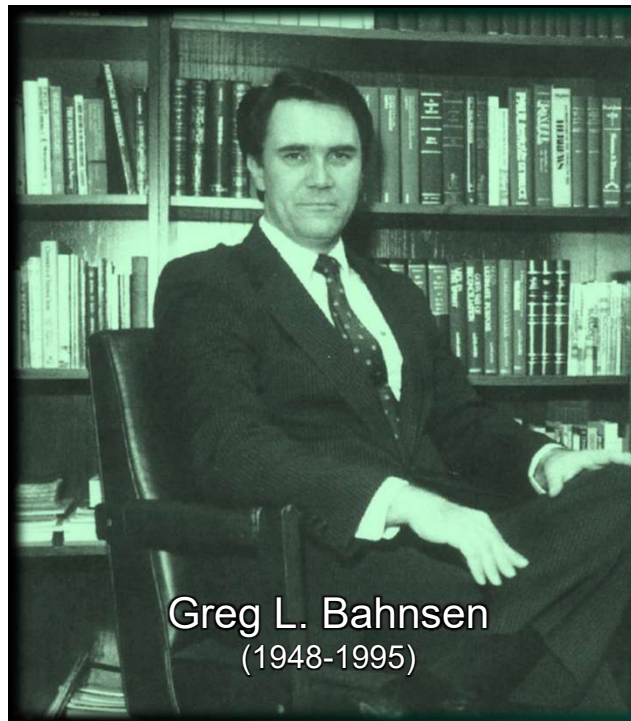
K. Scott Oliphint

"I admitted to him that I certainly was arguing in (some kind of) a circle. ... Then I made clear to the other presenters that they were all asking that their own views, based on their own reasoning and sources, be accepted as true. In every case, I said, every other presenter appealed to his own final authority. 'So,' I asked, 'on what basis should I accept your circle over mine?'"

[K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 23-24]



K. Scott Oliphint



Greg L. Bahnsen
(1948-1995)

"Where do all philosophical justifications come to an end? Every system must have unproven assumptions, a starting point not antecedently established, with which reason begins and according to which it proceeds to conclusions. Therefore, all argumentation over ultimate issues of truth and reality will come down to an appeal to authorities which, in the nature of the case, are ultimate authorities. Circularity at this level of argumentation is unavoidable.

[Greg Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Power Springs: American Vision Presuppositionalists; Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2008), 87]

Granted that there must be a "starting point" with which "reason begins," why must the starting point be "assumptions"?

Are not assumptions themselves a category of cognition or reason?

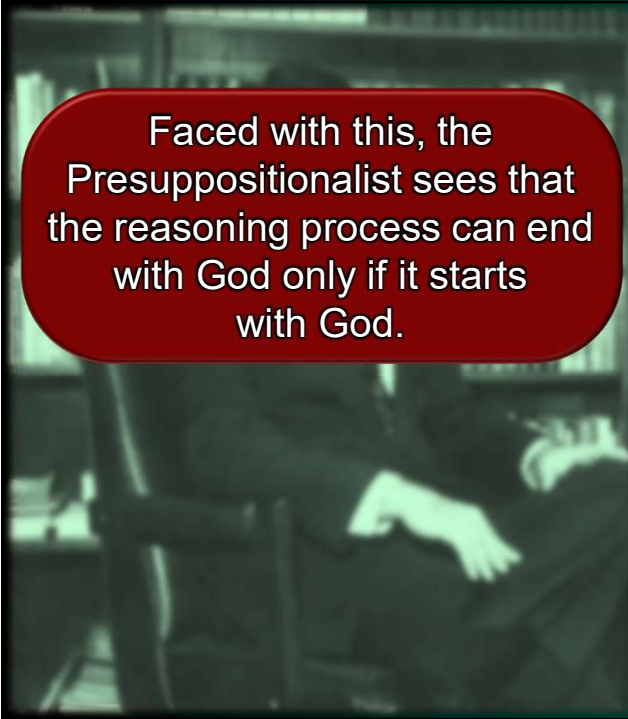
"Where do all philosophical justifications come to an end? Every system must have unproven assumptions, a starting point not antecedently established, with which reason begins and according to which it proceeds to conclusions. Therefore, all argumentation over ultimate issues of truth and reality will come down to an appeal to authorities which, in the nature of the case, are ultimate authorities. Circularity at this level of argumentation is unavoidable."

[Greg Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Power Springs: American Vision Presuppositionalists; Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2008), 87]

It would seem that the Presuppositionalist's insistence that such circularity is unavoidable is entirely a product of stipulating a cognitive starting point (assumptions) and then observing that the cognitive end point (conclusions) makes the argument circular.

"Where do all philosophical justifications come to an end? Every system must have unproven assumptions, a starting point not antecedently established, with which reason begins and according to which it proceeds to conclusions. Therefore, all argumentation over ultimate issues of truth and reality will come down to an appeal to authorities which, in the nature of the case, are ultimate authorities. Circularity at this level of argumentation is unavoidable."

[Greg Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Power Springs: American Vision Presuppositionalists; Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2008), 87]



Faced with this, the Presuppositionalist sees that the reasoning process can end with God only if it starts with God.

Where do all philosophical justifications come to an end? Every system must have unproven assumptions, a starting point not antecedently established, with which reason begins and according to which it proceeds to conclusions. Therefore, all argumentation over ultimate issues of truth and reality will come down to an appeal to authorities which, in the nature of the case, are ultimate authorities. Circularity at this level of argumentation is unavoidable."

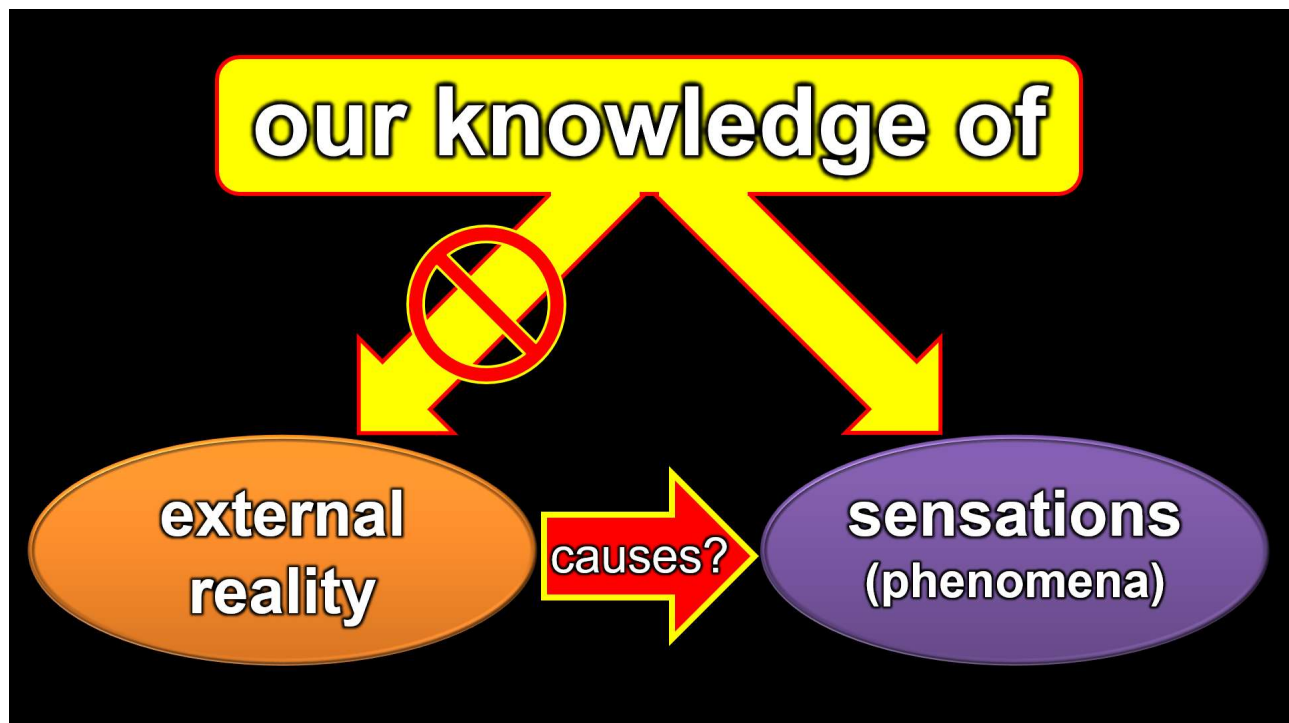
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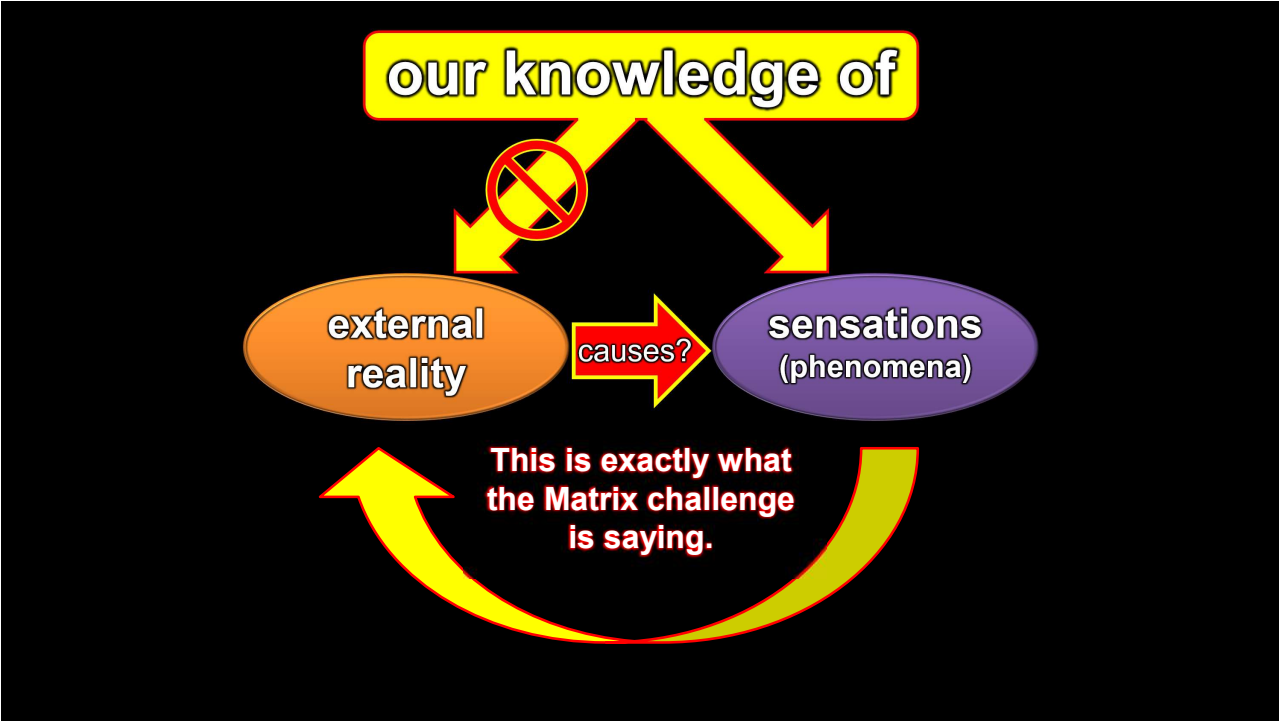
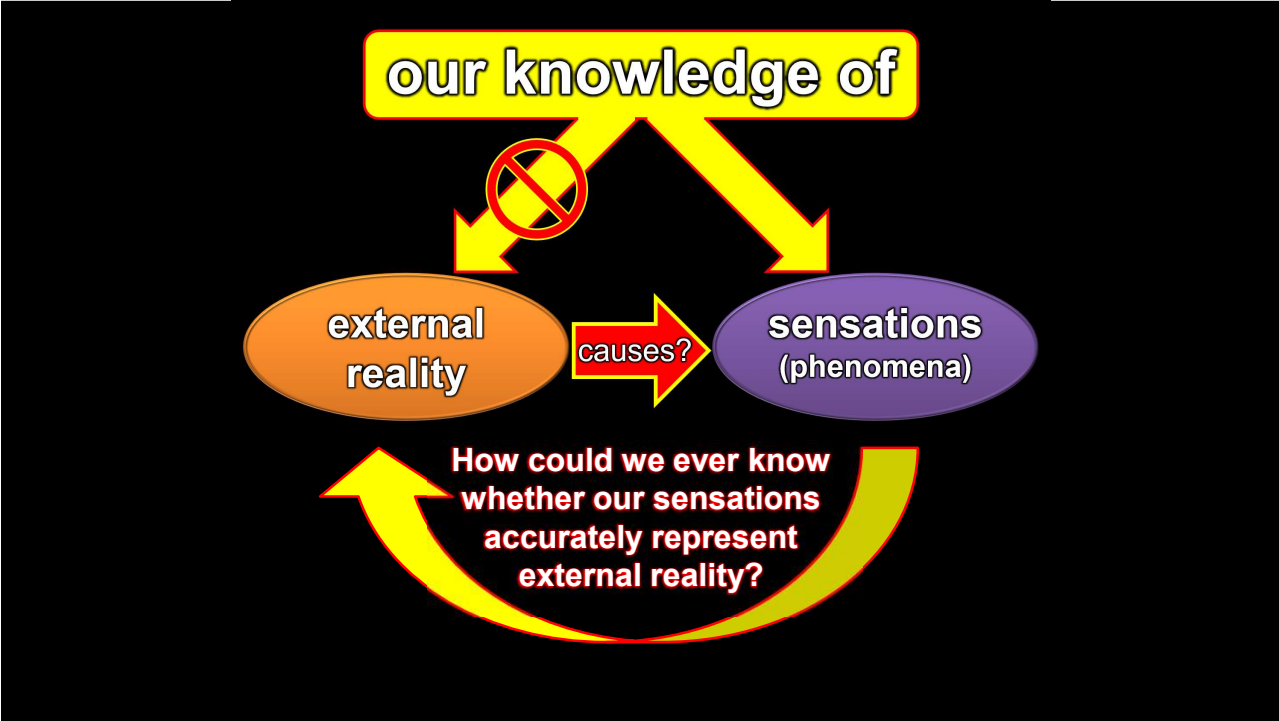
The problem is that Presuppositionalism does not start with God, but starts with the assumption of God.
But 'God' and the 'assumption of God' are not the same thing.

Where do all philosophical justifications come to an end? Every system must have unproven assumptions, a starting point not antecedently established, with which reason begins and according to which it proceeds to conclusions. Therefore, all argumentation over ultimate issues of truth and reality will come down to an appeal to authorities which, in the nature of the case, are ultimate authorities. Circularity at this level of argumentation is unavoidable."

[Greg Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Power Springs: American Vision Presuppositionalists; Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2008), 87]

My Response to Presuppositionalists' Claim That All Epistemologies Ultimately Circular





Anyone conversant with the history of philosophy should see how indebted to modern and contemporary philosophy the Matrix challenge is.

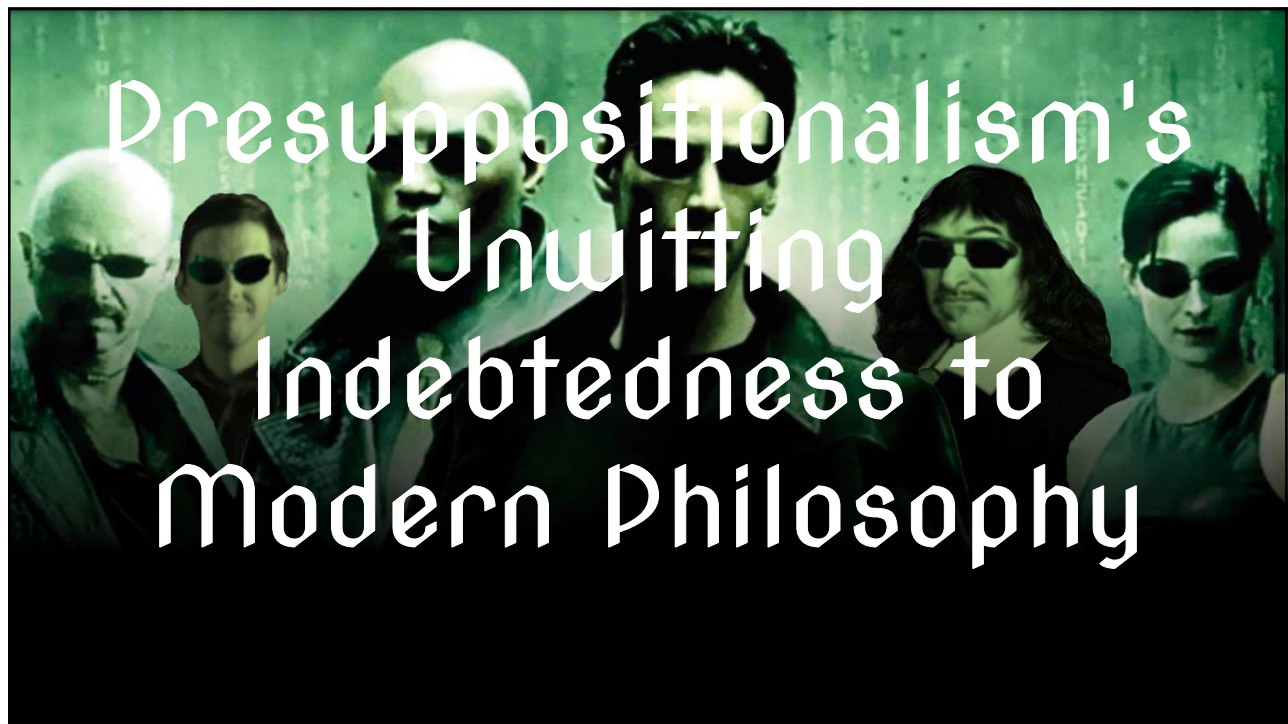
external reality

sensations (phenomenal)

It remains to show how it is that Classical Empiricism is entirely immune to the Matrix challenge and is in no wise circular.


external reality

sensations (phenomenal)



Much of modern philosophy frames human knowing along the categories of:

- ❖ *"experiences" or "appearances" (Descartes), or*
- ❖ *"qualities" or "properties" (Locke), or*
- ❖ *"ideas" and "perceiving" (Berkeley), or*
- ❖ *"sensations" or "phenomena" (Hume).*



- ✓ *the Matrix problem*
 - ❖ *how we can know our senses are reliable*
 - ❖ *the egocentric predicament*
 - ❖ *the problem of the correspondence of thoughts to external reality*
- ✓ *the problem of induction*
- ✓ *uniformity of nature*
- ✓ *Hume's skepticism of our knowledge of causality*
- ✓ *knowledge as justified, true, belief*
- ✓ *the fact/value dichotomy*
- ✓ *is/ought fallacy*
- ✓ *the specter of brute facts*
- ✓ *the problem of the one and the many (from Ancient Greek Philosophy)*

By offering their Presuppositionalism as the "answer" to these problems, Presuppositionalists show their unwitting commitment to the assumptions of the very philosophies that created the problems in the first place.



Uses of the Term 'Realism'

- ❖ *Non-philosophical use*
- ❖ *Realism Regarding the Nature of Universals*
- ❖ *Realism Regarding the Existence of External Reality*



Realism

maintains that there is a reality external to us as knowers

Critical Realism

insists we must "justify" our knowledge that there is a reality external to us as knowers

Classical

Concerned primarily with the knowledge of things (substances) together with the attributes (accidents) of things .

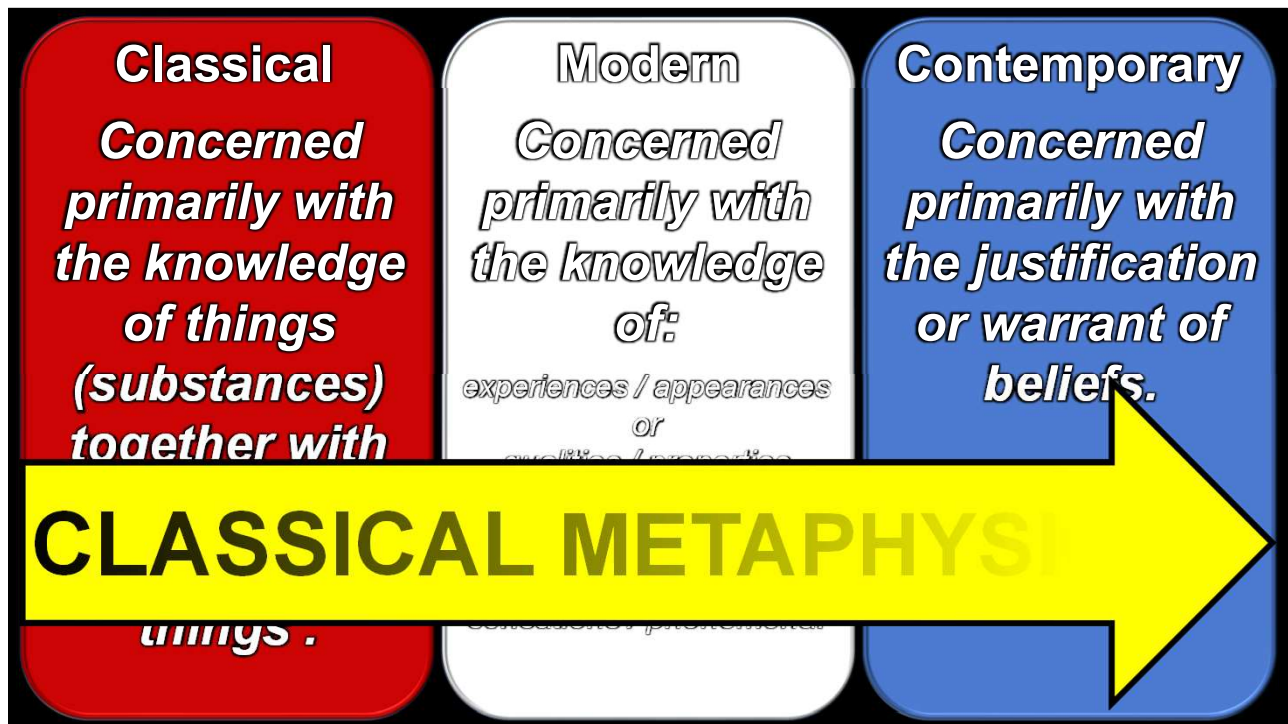
Modern

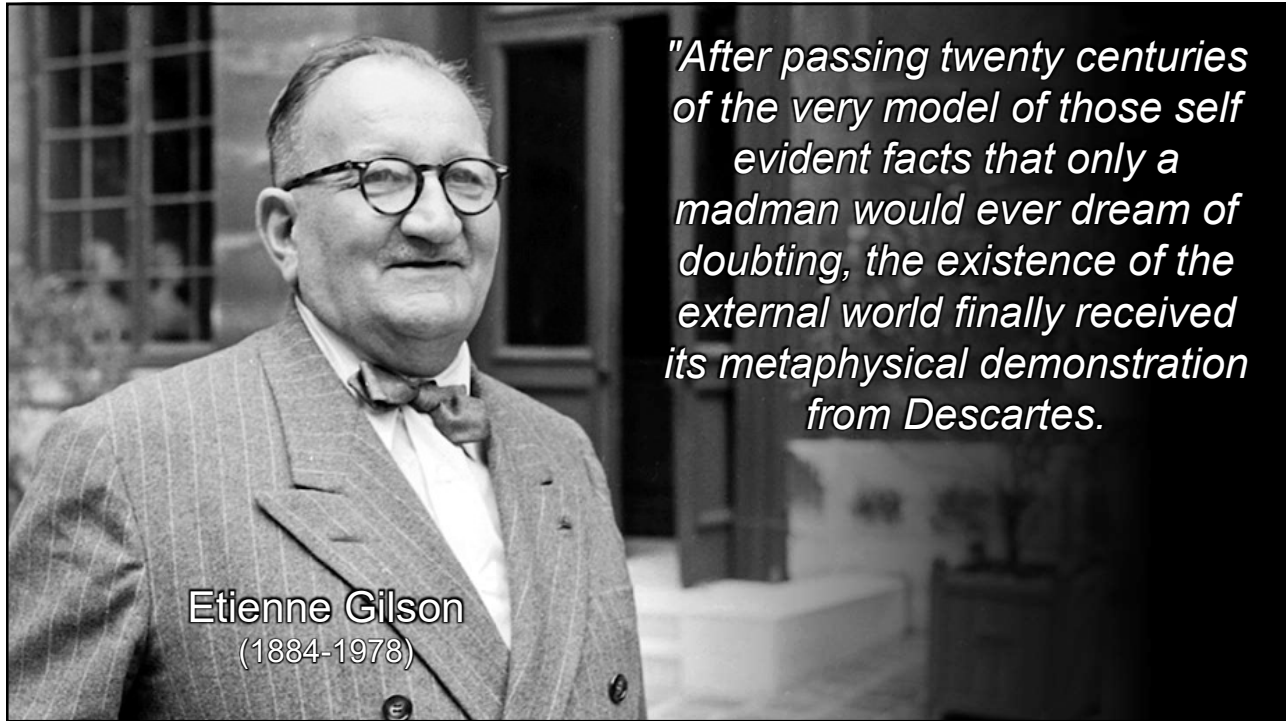
Concerned primarily with the knowledge of:

*experiences / appearances
or
qualities / properties
or
ideas / perceiving
or
sensations / phenomena.*

Contemporary

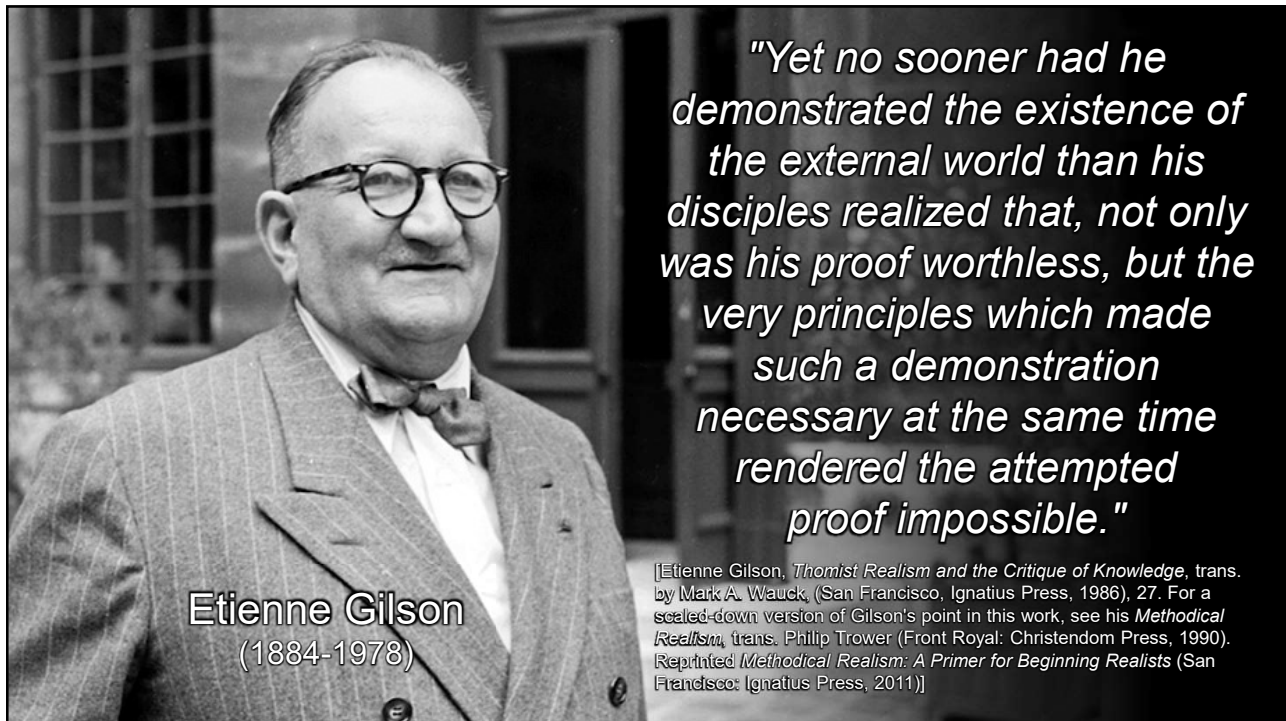
Concerned primarily with the justification or warrant of beliefs.





Etienne Gilson
(1884-1978)

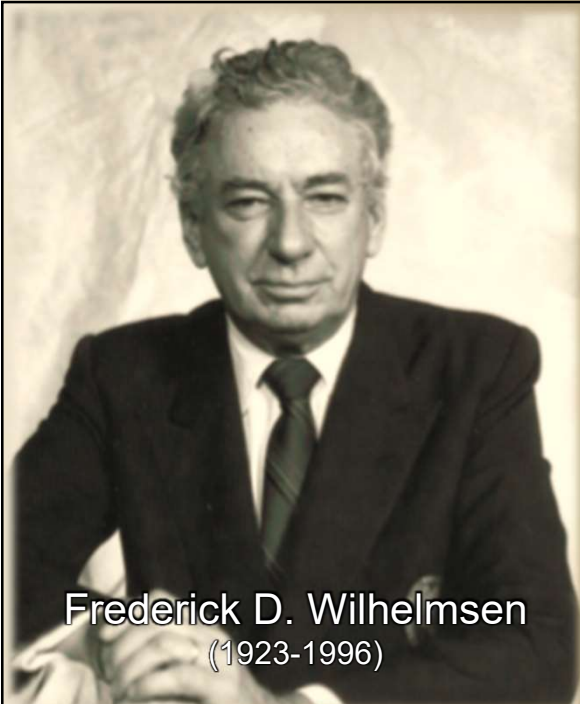
"After passing twenty centuries of the very model of those self evident facts that only a madman would ever dream of doubting, the existence of the external world finally received its metaphysical demonstration from Descartes."



Etienne Gilson
(1884-1978)

"Yet no sooner had he demonstrated the existence of the external world than his disciples realized that, not only was his proof worthless, but the very principles which made such a demonstration necessary at the same time rendered the attempted proof impossible."

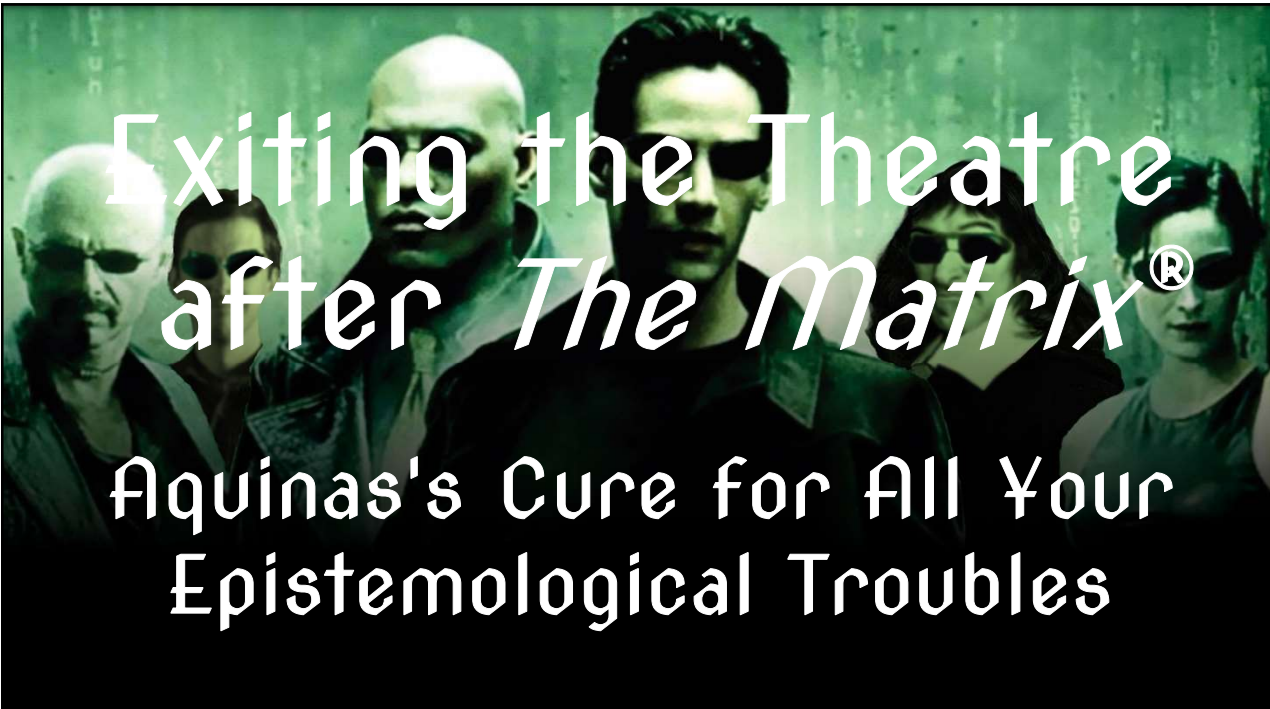
[Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. by Mark A. Wauck, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986), 27. For a scaled-down version of Gilson's point in this work, see his *Methodical Realism*, trans. Philip Trower (Front Royal: Christendom Press, 1990). Reprinted *Methodical Realism: A Primer for Beginning Realists* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011)]



Frederick D. Wilhelmsen
(1923-1996)

"The realist is a philosopher who does not forget that he is a man when he begins to philosophize. As a man, if he be sane, a philosopher has not the faintest shade of doubt that he exists in a world of things existing in independence of his cognition; even more, the very data of that knowing tell him that knowing is of being and not of knowing."

[Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "Forward," in Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. by Mark A. Wauck, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986), 15]

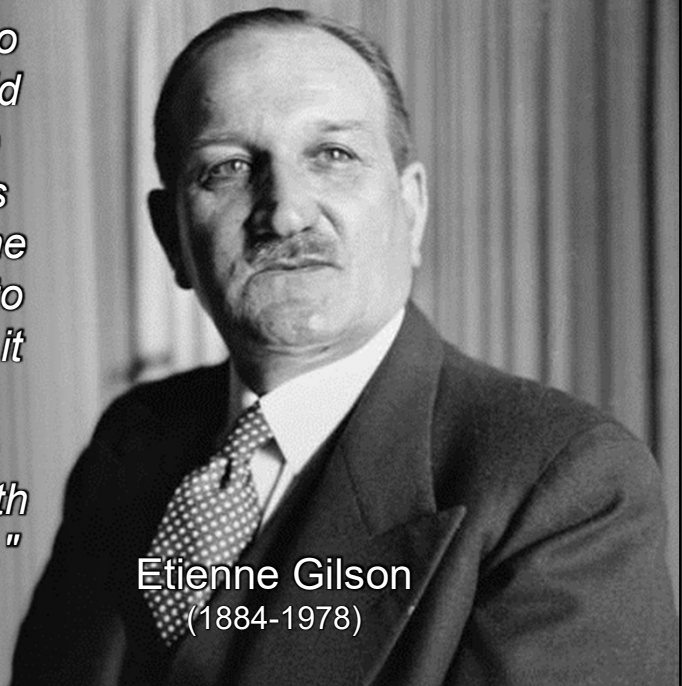


Exiting the Theatre
after *The Matrix*®

Aquinas's Cure for All Your
Epistemological Troubles

"There are countries where no professor of any science could hold his job for a month if he started teaching that he does not know what is true about the very science he is supposed to teach, but where a man finds it hard to be appointed as a professor of philosophy if he professes to believe in the truth of the philosophy he teaches."

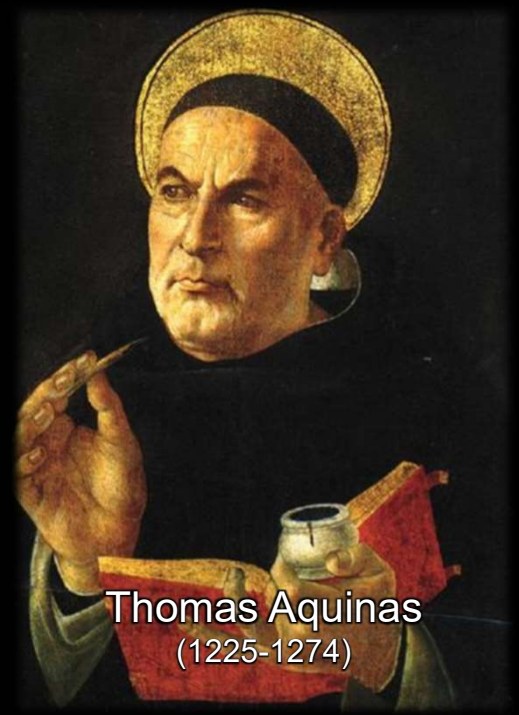
[Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), viii]



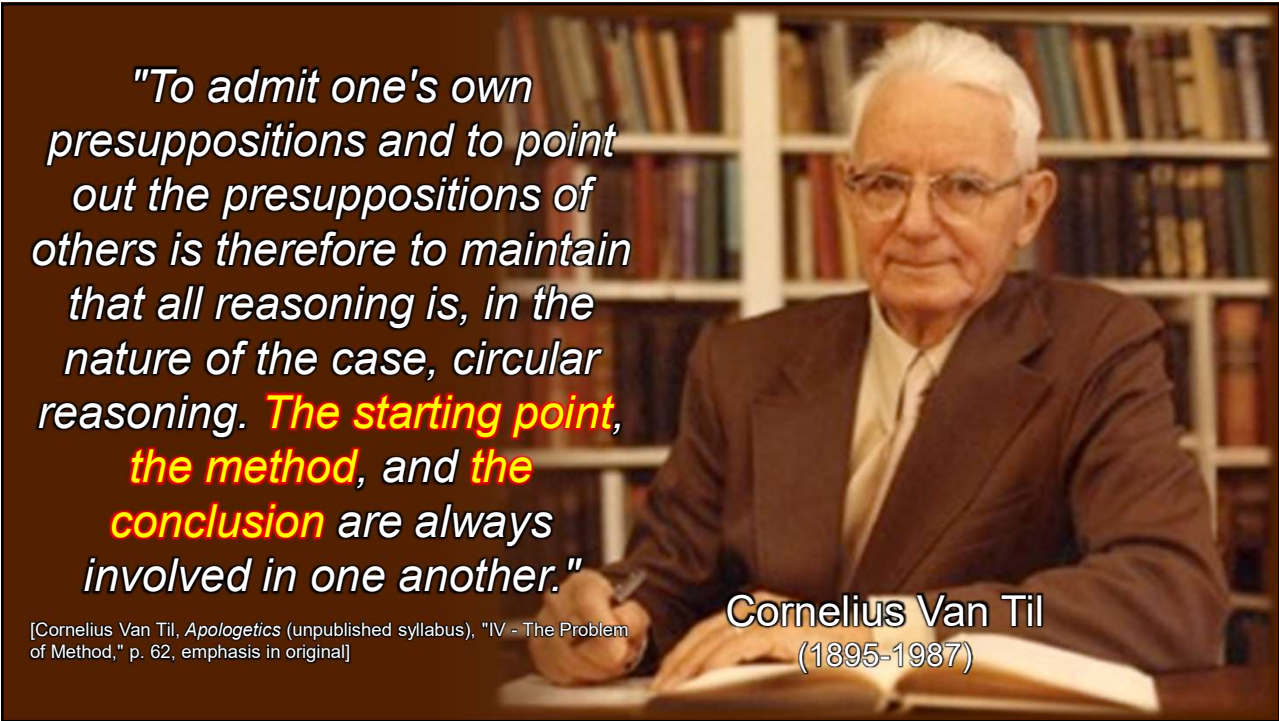
Etienne Gilson
(1884-1978)

"Our knowledge, taking its start from things, proceeds in this order. First, it begins in sense; second, it is completed in the intellect."

[Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, I, 11, trans. Mulligan, 48, in *Truth* (3 vols), vol. 1 trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952); vol. 2 trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953); vol. 3, trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954). The three volumes were reprinted as *Truth* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994)]



Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)



*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

Cornelius Van Til
(1895-1987)

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

Herein lies the problem for the Presuppositionalist.

Since for him, the starting point for experience as a human is a presupposition (which is a cognitive i.e., an epistemological category) instead of an externally existing sensible object (which is a metaphysical category), then the Presuppositionalist's conclusion can never rise above the level of cognition.

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

This is exactly why Van Til admits that "the starting point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another."

And this is exactly why Lisle thinks "something like the Matrix is possible in principle" and why he thought the Matrix challenge had anything to do with my epistemology.

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

If one wants to frame the discussion in terms of what we experience, the Thomist would say that when he encounters a sensible object, for example, a tree in his yard, what he is "experiencing" is that the tree is existing external to him as a knower.

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

The Thomist would deny that what he is experiencing is something in his mind (concept, idea, qualia) from which he reasons that there is an external object "causing" him to have that particular experience.

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

Instead, for the Thomist, knowledge is defined in terms of what it is to be a knower and what it is to be a known.

Knowledge is conformity of intellect and thing.

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

In the classical tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, knowing has to do with being. Epistemology reduces to metaphysics.

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

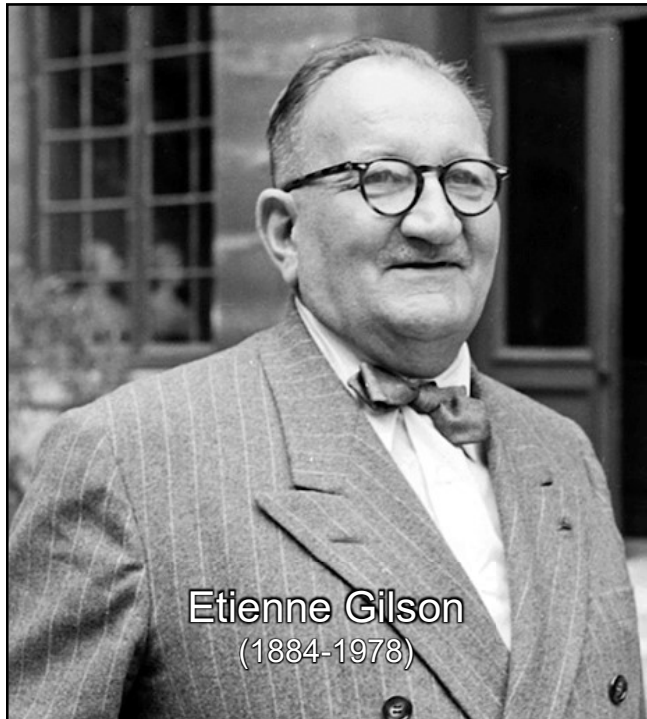
[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

This conformity takes place at the level of Form. In metaphysical terms, the knower "becomes" the thing known at the level of Form.

*"To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. **The starting point, the method, and the conclusion** are always involved in one another."*

[Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus), "IV - The Problem of Method," p. 62, emphasis in original]

Unless one gets the metaphysics right (e.g., Form/Matter; Substance/Accident; Act/Potency, etc.), knowledge is forever lost to the unbridgeable gap between the knower and external sensible reality.



Etienne Gilson
(1884-1978)

"The realist, therefore, when invited to take part in discussions on what is not his own ground, should first of all accustom himself to saying No, and not imagine himself in difficulties because he is unable to answer questions which are in fact insoluble, but which for him do not arise."

[Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 128]