

***Claritas Scripturae*, Theological Epistemology, and the Phenomenology of Christian Faith**

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Abstract: The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture maintains that the meaning of Scripture is clear to those who are enlightened by the Holy Spirit through faith. But this definition provides no way to know whether one has true faith or has been so enlightened by the Holy Spirit, a problem accentuated by persistent disagreement among persons who claim to be Christians of good will. This is a specific instance of a more general problem afflicting “closed” theological epistemologies. This essay provides an exposition of Kevin Diller’s synthesis of the “closed” theological epistemologies of Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga and critiques it on phenomenological grounds. It then concludes with a phenomenologically redefined description of Christian faith which entails rejecting the doctrine of the *claritas scripturae* and motivates an “open” theological epistemology.

1. Introduction: Faith and the Problem of Perspicuity

The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture or *claritas scripturae* has played an important role in Protestant theology from the Reformation to the present day (Callahan 1996). It is closely related to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which affirms that Scripture alone “contains all things necessary for salvation, communicates them effectively, compels one’s conscience, determines doctrinal truth, and commands the church’s allegiance above all other earthly powers and authorities, including councils and popes” (Vanhoozer 2016, 131; cf. Mathison 2001). If Scripture alone is an infallible source of theological knowledge, then it must be perspicuous or clear in order for the knowledge of God to be reliably accessible. But it is important not to misunderstand the idea of perspicuity. There is no denying that Scripture contains quite a few passages of unclear meaning; it even seems aware of this itself (see, e.g., 2 Pet. 3:16). In response, Kevin Vanhoozer, a contemporary proponent of *sola scriptura* and *claritas scripturae*, insists that “(1) the Spirit illumines our minds; (2) clearer portions of Scripture illumine passages that are less clear; (3) the deficiency is not with Scripture but with our knowledge of its vocabulary and context; and (4) for those who have been enlightened, it is impossible to miss the light (meaning) of the gospel shining out from its pages” (2016, 112-13). This means that the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture presupposes an enlightened reader. Scripture is not clear in

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such a way that “reading works *ex opere operato*, as if simply pronouncing the words magically yields understanding;” rather, it is clear to those “whose eyes of the heart ... have been opened by the Spirit” (113; emphasis original). Scripture is clear to those with faith. In pneumatological terms, as Martin Luther put it, “no man sees one iota in the Scriptures, but he that hath the Spirit of God... For the Spirit is required to understand the whole of Scripture and every part of it” (*On the Bondage of the Will* I, IV).

But this motivates an epistemological worry. Scripture is clear — though not to everyone, but only to those who have faith; it presupposes a reader who participates in the salvific economy of God by the Holy Spirit. How can a person know whether she has faith, whether she has the Spirit or not? She cannot simply read the Bible and ask herself whether she believes what it affirms, since the meaning of the Scripture is only accessible (clear) to a person who already has faith. If she does not have faith, then the validity of her interpretation of the biblical text is doubtful. Neither can she take refuge in her own sense of hermeneutic certainty regarding the meaning of the text, since there are very many persons, all of whom claim to be of good faith, who nevertheless “see” different meanings in Scripture with the same subjective clarity. Even worse, she might have changed her mind about the “clear” meaning of Scripture over the course of a lifetime of theological study (cf. Nemes 2017). Presumably Scripture does not really say, at one and the same time, one thing to one person and the opposite to another, nor different things to the same person across time. Still less could a person appeal to alleged empirical markers of faith (e.g., love of the brethren or of Christ), since very many persons of radically divergent theological understandings can all exhibit the same evidences of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. How radically different are Pentecostal, Anabaptist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and non-trinitarian theologies, and yet how many good, to-all-appearances faithful persons there are within each tradition! On the other hand, if a person were to insist on the clarity of Scripture to herself as its reader in the face of so many other readers of goodwill and comparable faithfulness from alternative theological traditions, how can she avoid the sectarian conclusion that these other readers are, despite all the evidence to the contrary, deprived of the Holy Spirit?^{1, 2} The proponent of perspicuity as it has been defined

¹ One possibility: matters which are “essential to the faith” are sufficiently clear to all those persons who have the Holy Spirit. But the same problems arise for this suggestion as before. How does a person know that she has the Holy Spirit and thus can discern those doctrines which are essential to the faith? There is the same degree of disagreement among the previously mentioned theological traditions as to which teachings are essential.

² A reviewer of this essay raises a question about the epistemology of peer disagreement. Does my argument assume the falsity of the view according to which one may reasonably remain steadfast in one’s convictions in the face of peer disagreement? I don’t know whether it does or not. In any case, I am not sure the question about the epistemology of peer disagreement is really relevant in the present context, because I am not committing myself to any position on the matter. Perhaps there is this connection. The argument being made here would seem to show that the doctrine of *claritas scripturae* entails the impossibility of genuine peer disagreement, since understanding Scripture’s clear teaching is a matter of having been enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Thus, I argue that the doctrine forces the proponent into a sectarian attitude: disagreement among apparent peers, if *claritas scripturae* is

here would consequently seem to be caught in a bind. She must either affirm her true faithfulness and adopt a sectarian attitude *vis-à-vis* those who disagree with her understanding of Scripture, or else she is left in doubt as to the reality of her own faith because there is nothing visible, external, to which she can point in order to demonstrate its reality.

The problem arises because the doctrine of perspicuity operates on the basis of what might be called a “closed” theological epistemology. It describes a form of special theological knowing; it has to do with a theological object of knowledge that is inaccessible by means of ordinary forms of knowing. Ordinary forms of knowing include sense perception, reasoning, perhaps rational intuition, testimony, and so on, forms of knowing which belong to the human being by nature. These forms of knowing serve as the basis for sciences such as physics, metaphysics, history, etc., which have to do with the finite world. A “closed” theological epistemology is one which denies that theological knowledge (e.g., knowledge of God or of the meaning of Scripture) can be gained by means of these ordinary forms of knowing. By contrast, an “open” theological epistemology would admit the accessibility of at least some theological knowledge by ordinary forms of knowledge (e.g. through natural theology as in Thomism or through historical critical study). The doctrine of perspicuity also implicitly defines Christian faith as a form of theological knowledge in highly formal terms: faith is a knowledgeable assent to the truths revealed in Scripture, effected by the Holy Spirit, which simultaneously makes these truths visible. This is a highly formal definition which is materially lacking. It seems to hang in mid-air with nothing connecting it to earth insofar as it does not specify more concretely which truths Scripture affirms (it cannot do this without controversy) or how to recognize the operation of the Holy Spirit empirically (it cannot do this without compromising its nature as a “closed” theological epistemology). This point can perhaps be expressed more clearly in the following terms. The doctrine of *claritas scripturae* and its corollary definition of faith are problematic because they seek to secure knowledge of an invisible reality (e.g., the meaning of some text about God or Christ) directly, without an appropriate visible mediator (e.g., the Tradition of the Church by apostolic succession). Or, alternatively, they mistakenly presuppose the adequacy of the visible biblical text as a mediator of the respective invisible realities.

The problem confronting the proponent of the perspicuity of Scripture is only a special instance of a more general affliction to which “closed” theological epistemologies are vulnerable. All such epistemologies leave one worried as to whether one truly knows; they are persistently unable to exclude the possibility of self-deception. They do this because they are insufficiently phenomenologically rigorous, as the present essay seeks to suggest. The argument will proceed in a roughly chiasmic order. The following section will present the general structure of a particular “closed” theological epistemology, the joint Barth-Plantinga proposal of Kevin Diller (2014). After the exposition of Diller’s “closed” theological epistemology, a phenomenological critique of the notion of Plantinga’s notion of “doxastic perception” will be offered in the subsequent section. Then, in the closing section of

granted, entails the absence of the Holy Spirit in at least one, which would undermine the parity between them.

this essay, an alternative, more austere, phenomenologically redefined understanding of Christian faith will be proposed, one which does not attempt to turn faith into knowledge and does not invite epistemological dilemmas having to do with self-deception or sectarianism. However, it will plainly be seen to be incompatible with the notion of the *claritas scripturae*. For this reason, the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture must be rejected, as well as any conception of *sola scriptura* which does not grant sufficient authority and priority to the Tradition of the Church.

2. “Closed” Theological Epistemology: Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga

Kevin Diller’s *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (2014) addresses a central epistemological problem confronting Christian theology in the twentieth century. What is the dilemma? In essence, it has to do with “the seemingly unavoidable tension between a properly high view of theological knowledge and yet a low view of the independent capacities of human theologians” (Diller 2014, 42). On the one hand, theological knowledge is impossible to obtain “from below,” beginning from the items of ordinary, terrestrial knowledge. On the other hand, Christianity affirms (according to Diller, anyway) the possibility of genuine theological *knowledge* in the robust sense of the word, in spite of the epistemic limitations of fallen human beings. How can human knowers attain to the epistemological rock that is too high for them (cf. Ps. 61:2)? In response to the dilemma, Diller establishes a theological framework by appeal to the work of Karl Barth, later adding philosophical meat to the bones of the Barthian schema through the proper functionalist epistemology of Alvin Plantinga. In this respect, Diller’s work is a thoroughly Reformed Protestant piece of philosophical theology.³

From Karl Barth, Diller appropriates the insight that knowledge of God is a gift: “The possibility of the knowledge of God springs from God, in that He is Himself the truth and He gives Himself to man in His Word by the Holy Spirit to be known as the truth” (*CD* II/1, 63, cited in Diller 2014, 46). This is how the dilemma is resolved: knowledge of God is not attainable by ordinary means of knowing, but it is nevertheless possessed by the faithful insofar as they are given it by God Himself.⁴ It

³ Vanhoozer (1998; 2013) has expressed sympathy for Plantinga’s construal of theological knowledge as properly basic belief. This will prove relevant when the discussion returns to the question of the perspicuity of Scripture and *sola scriptura*.

⁴ A reviewer raised the very thoughtful observation that the doctrine of creation implies that a particular mode of knowledge can be both “ordinary” and simultaneously a gift from God insofar as the whole human person and her way of knowing has been designed and made by God. I agree with this point and would hasten to note that it does not constitute an objection to my own position but rather to the “closed” theological epistemology of Barth, Plantinga, and Diller. I agree that, granting a doctrine of creation, all knowledge is ultimately made possible by God and is thus a gift. I do not distinguish strongly between “natural” and “supernatural” knowledge, which attitude is constitutive of my “open” theological epistemology. But the distinction between ordinary and special forms of

is received from the outside and on the basis of itself, rather than being accomplished through one's own epistemic powers. Theology for Barth is therefore understood as a matter of reflection on this gift of theological knowledge beginning from the gift itself (rather than, e.g., from supposedly neutral *a priori* principles of natural theology).

From Alvin Plantinga, Diller takes up the insight that Christian faith — whether in the existence of God, or in the “great things of the Gospel,” or whatever — is properly basic. This means that “what grounds one's belief is not inference from other beliefs” (Diller 2014, 154). Christian faith resides at the “bottom” of one's cognitive structure and is acquired in a special way, rather than being founded on other beliefs and convictions obtained through ordinary means of knowing (Diller 2014, chs. 4-5). Christian faith may certainly be occasioned by various experiences (e.g., by the testimony of another believer or the reading of Scripture). But for Plantinga and Diller, such experiences are only “essential occasioning condition[s] in the process whereby we are given *a view of the truth* by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Diller 2014, 157; emphasis added). By means of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, Christian faith is born in the human knower and — if Plantinga's specified conditions for knowledge are met⁵ — that faith can constitute genuine theological knowledge.⁶

knowing is necessary to formulate a “closed” theological epistemology in the first place, so as to distinguish theology and its unique mode of knowing from all other sciences.

⁵ Plantinga's proper functionalism is well known in analytic epistemology and philosophy of religion. The main details were developed over the course of three important works. *Warrant: The Current Debate* (1993) introduces the notion of “warrant,” in contradistinction to justification, as that which together with true belief constitutes knowledge. *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993) proposes an externalist account of knowledge which makes use of the concept of a properly functioning cognitive faculty. *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) addresses the question of how specifically Christian beliefs could be warranted and constitute knowledge. *In nuce*, Plantinga proposes that Christian belief can constitute knowledge if it is true and is caused by a properly functioning cognitive faculty (e.g., the Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit) which is aimed at producing true beliefs.

⁶ A similar dialectic is noted by the phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion in *The Visible and the Revealed* (2008, ch. 1). According to him, religion “attains its highest figure only when it becomes established by and as a revelation, where an authority that is transcendent to experience nevertheless manifests itself experientially... Revelation takes its strength of provocation from what it speaks universally, yet without this word being able to ground itself in reason within the limits of the world” (2). On the other hand, however, there is that important element of metaphysics, the principal of sufficient reason, according to which “all that is (being, *étant*) exists to the extent to which a *causa* (actuality) *sive ratio* (concept) gives an explanation either for its existence, for its nonexistence, or for its exemption from any cause.” Thus, the affirmation of a genuine revelation would seem either to require abandoning the principle of sufficient reason and rationality itself, or else it must be reduced to what is rational according to this metaphysical principle (i.e., what is knowable by natural means). Marion's solution is to appeal to the notion of a saturated phenomenon, a phenomenon in which there is an excess of givenness: “instead of common phenomenality striving to make intuition adequate to intention, and usually having to admit the failure in givenness of an incompletely intuited though fully intended object [e.g., a material object which can only be seen from a particular side and angle at any one time], revelation gives objects where intuition surpasses the intentional aim” (16). Revelation is a phenomenon which gives itself in a supreme manner. See Marion, *Being Given* (2002) for a defense of givenness (*donation*) as the ultimate principle of phenomenality.

A critical point of convergence between the thought of Barth and Plantinga is found in their mutual insistence upon a theological epistemology “from above.” Put another way, both thinkers deny that theological knowledge has to be justified on the basis of natural or ordinary knowledge. Diller (2014, 74ff.) identifies three assumptions of “modernity’s Enlightenment project” which Barth forcefully rejects. (i) The “obligation assumption” maintains that “an explanation or account of the way of theological knowledge is an obligation on which the legitimacy of the theological-knowledge claim rests.” (ii) The “general starting point assumption” maintains that “an account of the way of theological knowing must stem from a general epistemology that grounds all knowing or all metaphysical claims.” (iii) The “access-foundationalist assumption” maintains that “the way of theological knowledge must be anchored in trustworthy and readily accessible grounds.”

Against (i), Barth insisted that “it did not necessarily undermine the scientific character of theology if it had no prolegomena whatsoever. It could be sufficient to note that reflection on the fact of the *esse* (being) of the knowledge of God renders its *posse* (possibility) a foregone conclusion requiring no account” (Diller 2014, 76). Following in the footsteps of Albrecht Ritschl and Wilhelm Hermann, Barth likewise maintains against (ii) that dogmatics “does not have to justify itself before [the other sciences], least of all by submitting to the demands of a concept of science which accidentally or not claims general validity” (CD I/1, 190, cited in Diller 2014, 79). On the contrary, there is need of a special or “closed” theological epistemology for Christian theology. “For Barth, ... the uniqueness of the way of knowing in theology is entirely dependent on the uniqueness of its object” (Diller 2014, 79). It is because God is totally unlike any other object of knowing that He cannot be known by ordinary means or in keeping with the principles of “terrestrial” epistemology. This is what makes Barth’s theological epistemology to be “closed.”

As for (iii), the “access-foundationalist assumption,” Diller notes that it is founded upon two claims:

On the one hand, there is a thesis about the *structure* of human knowing; on the other hand, there is a requirement that the human knower have self-reflective *access* to the basis of that structure. The first claim is that theological knowledge must spring from solid and dependable grounds. This means that there must exist bedrock experiences or ideas that yield foundational beliefs that can be trusted to be true and that all knowledge must either be an instance of such a belief or in a linear inferential relationship to it. The second claim is that these grounds are readily accessible. This means that the human knower must be in a position to provide a reason for accepting a belief by demonstrating how that belief is inferentially connected to a foundational belief or itself could not fail to be true (Diller 2014, 81-2).

Barth clearly rejects the second of these claims. “The most obvious attempts to meet the requirements of the access-foundationalist assumption have been through philosophical proofs for the existence of God or for the truth of Christianity” (Diller

2014, 82). Barth rejects the natural theological project: “The God of faith is neither ‘demonstrable’ reality nor is he merely a possibility... He is known only where he reveals his life; and where and to whom he will reveal it is his concern” (Barth 1962, 243, cited in Diller 2014, 83). In this way is the independence of theology from other sciences established. Human reason cannot defend or prove Christian theological knowledge claims. “Only the Logos of God Himself can provide the proof” (*CD I/1*, 163, cited in Diller 2014, 84), presumably by bringing about the same knowledge directly in those who would question it. Diller then draws the conclusion: “Theological knowledge does not require human access or defense in order to be considered legitimate knowing, primarily because it is self-grounded by its object — God” (Diller 2014, 85).

As for Plantinga, he maintains that “if Christian beliefs are true, then the standard and most satisfactory way to hold them will not be as the conclusions of an argument,” but rather as properly basic (Plantinga 2000, 201, cited in Diller 2014, 197). Rational arguments “are neither necessary nor sufficient for theistic or Christian belief,” since the latter can and perhaps ought to be properly basic, though “arguments may be used by God to boost the positive epistemic status of belief or to neutralize arguments against belief and dispel doubt” (Diller 2014, 198-9). In this way, both Barth and Plantinga preserve a certain “isolation” of theological knowledge from other forms of knowing. They distinguish the special epistemology of God from the general epistemology valid with respect to all other objects of knowledge.

Near the end of his work, Diller attempts to apply the insights of the joint Barth-Plantinga theological epistemology to the question of the authority of Scripture. “On this view, belief in the reliability and authority of scripture is not based on reasoning from propositional evidence but rather from the evidence provided by the deliverances of faith that immediately recommend belief. Like convictions formed on the basis of phenomenal imagery, the convictions formed on the basis of faith result from being given *a view or perception of the truth of what is believed* by the illumination of the Spirit” (Diller 2014, 282; emphasis added). Plantinga cites Calvin in this regard: “Illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.7.5, cited in Plantinga 2000, 260). There are two ways in which for Plantinga it might be possible for the reader to know that Scripture has special divine authority. It may be that, “when considering a collection of human writings commonly called ‘the Bible,’ the Spirit enables one to *grasp the truth of the proposition* that scripture comes from God and therefore is authoritative” (Diller 2014, 285). A second option, one preferred by Plantinga himself, holds that “upon reading or hearing a given teaching ... the Holy Spirit teaches us, causes us to believe that *that* teaching is both true and comes from God” (Plantinga 2000, 260, cited in Diller 2014, 285-6; emphasis original). Diller comments: “On this view, the Spirit does not establish our confidence in the authority of scripture with a generic endorsement... Instead, the Spirit works as a person engages the particularity of scripture within a sufficiently propitious environment, and confidence in its general authority is therefore retrospective on this engagement” (Diller 2014, 286).

For Diller's joint Barth-Plantinga proposal, then, Christian faith is thus a kind of knowledge that consists in the perception of the truth of the central propositions of the Gospel specially enabled by the Holy Spirit. Presumably this account can be brought to bear on the epistemological quandary afflicting Kevin Vanhoozer's notion of the perspicuity of Scripture. By appeal to Plantinga's epistemology, a person may claim that the Holy Spirit enables her to see the truth of some particular teaching which she understands to be taught by Scripture. But is this solution satisfactory?

3. "Closed" Theological Epistemology: A Phenomenological Critique

In the closing chapter of his work, Diller addresses what would appear to be the most important concern to be raised against his joint Barth-Plantinga "closed" theological epistemology, namely the *"self-deception concern."* This objection maintains that "the Barth/Plantinga proposal leaves us with no way of ruling out the possibility of self-deception" (Diller 2014, 296-7; emphasis original). Diller's first response to the self-deception concern is to point out that it does not apply only to theological knowledge, since "being unable to rule out this possibility [of self-deception] is just a feature of being human and follows from our acknowledgment that we are humanly unable to self-secure the grounds of knowledge" (Diller 2014, 297). As he says, "this difficulty, if it should even be considered a difficulty, is a challenge to all claims to human knowledge and not just theological knowledge."

It is important to understand why this worry arises in the first place, because Diller's responses do not seem to recognize the true strength of the objection. The worry about self-deception arises precisely because Diller proposes a "closed" theological epistemology, according to which theological knowledge operates in its own sphere, somehow isolated from the world and from ordinary forms of knowing. If there is no way "into" the circle of theological knowledge from the outside, from within a greater context of ordinary knowledge, then there is seemingly also no way to know whether one is really in it at all or whether there even is such a circle. Consider an example. Suppose Peter is the only person on earth who hears certain melodies echoing in the atmosphere. If no one else can hear it, if it is not publicly accessible, then Peter has no way to establish that what he is hearing is really there, rather than merely something invented by his mind. Likewise, there is nothing intersubjectively accessible to which one might appeal in order to establish the objectivity of theological knowledge on a "closed" theological epistemology. Since objectivity is established intersubjectively as multiple knowers take into consideration the same visible thing and speak about it to each other (Sokolowski 2000; 2008), a "closed" theological epistemology cannot motivate confidence in the objectivity of theological knowledge precisely because it attempts to gain knowledge of an incorrigibly invisible reality (e.g., of God or of certain historical events) apart from the mediation of the visible (e.g., a natural theology or the Tradition of the Church). Hence the persistent worry about self-deception.

Closely related to the self-deception concern is the “*practicality concern*,” an objection that finds fault with the strong externalism of the joint Barth-Plantinga proposal on account of which it is apparently useless for “determining whose view is the right view on a number of debated questions in contemporary theology.” Diller responds to the effect that “a properly fallibilist view of human knowing is consistent with confident assurance” (though this does not address the problem raised by the practicality concern) and that his proposal “nevertheless gives us reason to engage differences with generous humility and still full conviction. It gives us reason to persevere in the search for unity of mind by positing a unity of action in God. And it removes the fears that improperly intensify our disagreements when we see ourselves as responsible for securing the ground of our own knowledge” (Diller 2014, 297-8).

In the end, Diller considers a phenomenological interpretation of the self-deception worry, one which seems better to get at the essence of the objection:

Perhaps this is a question about the nature of the experience of receiving God-given assurance. Perhaps the question is seeking a kind of phenomenological description of what it is like to receive the gift of faith. On this question the proposal gives us reason to believe that the experience may be quite unique to each individual. The proposal argues that this assurance is grown in us by the mediation of revelation in a process of whole-person transformation, influencing our unique noetic structures and environments, taking into account our particular historical, psychological, social, cultural and linguistic frameworks. In this light we can see why it would be important not to give an oversimplified answer. The immense variety of testimonies of personal experience underscores this point (Diller 2014, 299).

But there is much that is objectionable in this response from the phenomenological point of view. In the first place, it must be noted that phenomenology is an eidetic science which aims at apodictic knowledge of the essence of consciousness *per se* (Husserl 1983, §27ff.). If there is an experience of revelation or theological knowledge, then phenomenology would seek to discern the essence of that experience as it is shared by a number of persons, beyond the inessential multiplicities and contingencies which characterize its particular instantiations (cf. Sokolowski 2000, ch. 12). But going further, it is clear that the phenomenological preoccupation with visibility and immanence to consciousness implicit in this objection is really an attempt to “open” the “closed” theological epistemology of the Barth-Plantinga proposal insofar as it tries to situate the object known within experience. Diller cannot acquiesce to this attempt without compromising the closedness of his “closed” theological epistemology. On his view, anything that appears in perceptual experience — whether it is the natural world or the testimony of a believer or whatsoever — can only occasion the formation of a belief in some item of Christian doctrine, rather than grounding the claim to knowledge or serving as a foundation for that belief.

Nevertheless, there is one repeated motif of Diller's theological epistemology which merits closer phenomenological consideration. That is the notion that one can perceive the truth of some proposition, an idea which was emphasized in numerous quotations in the previous section. This suggestion is especially prominent in Plantinga's writings. An example: "By virtue of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, we come to see the truth of the central Christian affirmations... In giving us faith, the Holy Spirit enables us to see the truth of the main lines of the Christian gospel as set forth in Scripture" (Plantinga 2000, 206; emphasis added). Diller calls this a "doxastic experience," whereby "a person comes to grasp the truth of" some proposition (2014, 148; emphasis original). This notion is particularly important for Diller's theological epistemology because it is precisely this supposed perception of the truth of a proposition that grounds one's confidence in a belief apart from some inferential basis in experience. It is not a perception of some thing in the world which makes a person confident in her faith, but rather the direct perception of the truth of a certain faith proposition, which may be occasioned by some experience. This notion may also be used in response to the problem of the perspicuity of Scripture. The reader can claim simply to see that it is true that Scripture affirms such and such a thing, in spite of the objections of others who claim to see otherwise. And it is precisely this seeing the truth of a proposition that makes a person believe sufficiently strongly as to have knowledge. Thus, the notion of a "doxastic experience" is clearly important for Diller's joint Barth-Plantinga proposal.

What does it mean to perceive the truth of a proposition? Is there really such a form of perception? Plantinga evidently attempts to justify the notion phenomenologically. He notes a certain qualitative difference in some beliefs compared to others. It may be that some belief "seems *right, acceptable, natural*; it forces itself upon you; it somehow seems inevitable (the right words are hard to find). The belief *feels* right, acceptable, and natural; it feels different from what you think is a false belief" (Plantinga 2000, 110-11; emphasis original). This invites a further question: What is a proposition? Diller quotes Plantinga to the effect that propositions are "the things that are true or false; they are also the things we believe, and the things expressed by our sentences" (Plantinga 1985, 355, cited in Diller 2014, 232). Propositions occupy a kind of mediatorial role between the human mind which intends them by way of belief (and various other doxastic stances) and things in the world. As Diller says, "propositions are about things, things that are referred to in sentences under some description or designation" (Diller 2014, 233). Plantinga therefore maintains that it is possible to stand in such a relation to a proposition, something outside of the human mind, such that one can see whether it is true or not. This can happen even in the absence of the referent of the proposition in question (e.g., when someone sees the truth of the proposition that Jesus loves her).

Is this a phenomenologically adequate construal of things? It would seem not. Consider that a person may at one time "see" that a proposition is true and later "see" that it is false, even though the actual truth of the proposition in question could not have changed in the meantime. This happens any time a person changes her mind about some issue of abiding truth (e.g., about some historical fact, or a metaphysical matter, or about some ethical principle). Once she would have said that some proposition *p* "feels right, acceptable, and natural," to use Plantinga's words, whereas

now she comes to say the same about $\sim p$, or perhaps about some proposition q such that $q \supset \sim p$ and which she understands to be such. This invites a different description of the experience which Plantinga relates in his text. Rather than understanding his experience as the perception of the truth of a proposition, of a property of some mediating entity between the mind and the world, what gives itself in Plantinga's reflection is simply the strength of a disposition within him to construe the world in a particular way. Plantinga oversteps the bounds of phenomenological reflection when he claims that one can see the *truth* of a proposition about some matter which is absent from consciousness. Phenomenological reflection reveals truths about consciousness, not (necessarily) about actualities.

Robert Sokolowski's *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (2008) provides a phenomenologically more adequate way of thinking about these things. In context he does not deal with propositions *per se*, but with the notion of a "mental representation" as "a kind of bridge that links our minds to the objects that we know," as "what is behind our words," "the 'meaning' that makes the sounds we utter to be words" (2008, 157). Yet insofar as what Sokolowski understands by "mental representation" seems to serve the same purpose as those entities which Plantinga calls "propositions," it might therefore be appropriate to import his discussion into the present context.

3.1. Sokolowski on "Mental Representations"

Robert Sokolowski identifies two basic problems with mental representations: "First, it is hard to say what sort of things they are. They never present themselves to us directly. We don't experience them, even when we reflect on our experiencing" (2008, 157). Rather, they would appear to be "hypothetical constructs" to which "we attribute ... precisely the features we need them to have if we are to 'explain' how we can know things in the world," such that they "seem more like contrivances than real entities." Second, — here the connection with Plantinga's propositions is especially evident, — "they threaten to become taken as the things we directly know. They are originally posited as intermediaries between us and the things we think about, but surreptitiously and almost inevitably we begin talking about them as the direct targets of our awareness" (158).

Sokolowski believes that "mental representations" constitute the fundamental trap of modern philosophy. Hume's skepticism and disillusionment with philosophy at the end of the first book of *A Treatise of Human Understanding* was, according to Sokolowski, inevitable because "he, the poor man, starts with a doctrine of what one might call mental representations ('perceptions,' which he divides into 'impressions' and 'ideas,' which differ only in their vivacity)" (159-60). The danger, as in Hume's case, is that the conclusion is drawn that "what we really and directly know are those representations, not the things themselves." This raises the question of "how we can ever go beyond our concepts; how do we even know there is a world out there? We seem to be imprisoned in the cabinet of our own minds" (158-9).

It is worth noting at this point, before continuing the discussion of Sokolowski, that the problem with Plantinga is rather the opposite of that of the "way of ideas."

The danger with his system is not that knowledge of what lies beyond the proposition is made impossible, but rather that knowledge is being claimed far too easily. The problem is that Plantinga claims to be able to see that something is so in the absence of the referent of the proposition, something that is only possible if what is primarily “seen” is the proposition itself rather than the thing it is about. But what connects the two errors is the supposition of a mediating entity between the mind and things which can itself be an object of perception. The argument to be offered in what follows is that propositions, similarly to “concepts” or “mental representations,” are not properly the objects of perception, but rather the things they are about.

Now, according to Sokolowski, this error of the “way of ideas” arises in the first place because of a mistaken understanding of the appearance of things. “The chief reason why we tend to go astray in the ‘way of ideas’ is that it is extremely difficult to speak coherently about the appearances or the presences of things... We tend to flatten appearances out and reduce them simply to more things. For example, even something as simple as the color of an object, which is one of the ways an object appears to us, becomes reduced in many analyses to an entity that is generated in our eyes and brains, something caused by the thing and not one of its manifestations. A meaning or a concept or a thought also become something in our ‘minds’ or ultimately in our brains, and it is likewise separated from the thing of which it is a meaning or concept or thought. Instead of being the thing’s appearance to our thinking, it becomes another thing to us” (Sokolowski 2008, 161-2).

Rather than mental representations or anything of the sort, Sokolowski prefers to speak of the intelligibilities of things. This way of speaking “allows us to see more clearly that we are not dealing with two disjunct entities” (namely, a thing and a person’s concept or mental representation of a thing; 174). The intelligibility of a thing, that which can be known about it, exists in the first place in the thing itself, just as the intelligibility of Eisenhower “exists primarily in him” (175). (Sokolowski prefers to speak of “intelligibility” rather than “form” or “*eidos*,” though it is obvious that these are extremely similar ideas.) Through speech, the intelligibility of a thing can become present to those who are involved in the conversation, though it remains identically the intelligibility in the thing itself. As he says elsewhere: “This is the magic of words. They capture the intelligibilities of things and weave them syntactically into statements, arguments, narratives, and conversations. Our use of words enables us to become datives of manifestation and agents of truth” (2017, 31).

How does this happen? As follows. The multiple facets of the intelligibility of a thing becomes evident in experience: “When we perceive an object, we run through a manifold of aspects and profiles: we see the thing first from this side and then from that; we concentrate on the color; we pay attention to the hardness or softness; we turn the thing around and see other sides and aspects, and so on. In this manifold of appearances, however, we continuously experience all the aspects and profiles, all the views, as being ‘of’ one and the same object” (2010, 53). This is referred to as the “identity” of the object, its essential unity beyond the manifold of appearances. But this sort of perception of a thing’s properties does not yet have “syntax” or structure. This only occurs later, when “the continuous perception [of a thing] ... come[s] to an arrest as one particular feature of the thing attracts our attention and holds it. We focus, say, on the color of the thing. When we do this, the identity of the object, as well

as the totality of the other aspects and profiles, still remain in the background” (55). As Sokolowski says, “We make the move into categoriality and syntax when we do the following: we go back to the identity of the thing; we now focus on the identity and on the thing as a whole (we establish a subject, *S*, ‘the ball’), and we focus again on the feature in question — say, the color — but we now take it explicitly as a part of the whole (we establish a predicate, *p*, ‘is green’). When we do this, we do not just have more of the continuous perception of the thing; we do not just prolong the perceptual experience; rather, we now have a new beginning, a discrete new elevation into something structured, into the proposition or the state of affairs, “The ball is green.” It is at this point that the intelligible structure of the object has been made explicit through the use of syntactical language. Sokolowski strongly emphasizes the intersubjective, linguistic element as essential: “My claim is that there can be subjects and predicates, there can be predication, ‘the very core of universal syntax,’ because, through the use of words, an object can be brought before a speaker and a listener as an object of reference, and an aspect of that object can be differentiated and registered in it” (60).

For Sokolowski, words present things as intelligible, understandable as parts and wholes (see especially Sokolowski 2017). “It is only because [an object of discourse] has become enfolded and unfolded in syntax [i.e., through predication in the form ‘*S* is *p*’] that its intelligibility comes to light, that what it is becomes manifest, and that such a multitude of articulations becomes possible” (2008, 100). But speech also possesses another very important power. Through conversation, in which one person articulates to another that things are such and such a way, “the speaker gets very deeply into the mind of the listener through the grammar of his, the speaker’s, words. The speaker’s words immediately shape the mind of the listener, and the listener is laid open, in the act of listening, to receive what the listener says... It is almost as though the listener is forced to think the thought the speaker expresses; he immediately thinks the world in a certain way” (89). This point is especially clear when “the speaker says something that the listener finds repulsive or something he strongly disagrees with. Even if the listener does not assent to the statement being made, *he does have the thought* as soon as the speaker states it” (emphasis original). “This immediate insertion of thoughts into the minds of others, through the grammar of speech, is the reason why people sometimes get very angry when they hear someone saying something they, the listeners, vehemently dislike,” as when a person is insulted (90). At the same time, this power of speech also enables a speaker to “elevate the listener’s mind and enable him to think in a way he never could have thought on his own.”

3.2. Perceiving the Truth of a Proposition?

In light of what has been explained thus far by appeal to Sokolowski’s phenomenological account of speech and thought, it is possible to propose an alternative to Diller’s epistemology and phenomenology of Christian faith. Suppose a person reads Scripture and understands it to be affirming that Jesus died for her sins. What is true for speech, as Sokolowski noted, is also true for reading. What an author

communicates through her writing is immediately taken into the mind of the attentive, “listening” reader — at least to the extent that it is understood. For a moment, however brief, the world is presented to the reader as being some particular way and she in turn conceives it as such. What happens in the case of the faithful reader is that she finds an inner impulse to accept this description of things, to assent to it, to appropriate it for herself, to take it as her own.

However, it would be too quick to say that she sees the truth of what is said at any point in this process. She may later come to disbelieve and disagree with what she previously “saw” Scripture to be saying, even vehemently, or she may come to understand the same words in a substantially different way while still assenting to them out of faith. What she once “saw” as true, she now “sees” to be false, or else the presentation of the world has changed drastically but she still accepts it. There is no “seeing the truth of a proposition” in any of this, but only believing and disbelieving, construing the world in one or another way. This is a persistent problem when what is spoken of is not present, when it does not give itself directly to perception. There is a fundamental difference between the cases. To put it in phenomenological terms, the intending prompted by testimony about incorrigibly absent objects (e.g., about past or intrinsically invisible states of affairs) is always empty. (As a persistent disposition, however, it may be variously strong or weak and more or less precise.)

There is a sense in which one can “see the truth of a proposition,” but it requires the givenness to consciousness of the referent of the proposition. For example, suppose one person discloses to another in conversation some aspect of an object present to the both of them — say, by describing a particular cadence in Bach or some chord progression in Pat Metheny. In this case, the “truth” of the “proposition” put forth by the one can be “seen” by the other in the sense that the object itself is present and gives itself (or not) in precisely the way being proposed. But if the object in question is not and cannot be made present, if it cannot be consulted perceptually, then the truth of a proposition about it cannot be seen in any sense, because this “truth” is a relation which holds between the proposition and its referent, the latter of which is missing. What occurs is not a perception of the truth of what another is saying, but rather the arising of an inclination to trust and to accept what the first person has said and to intend the world in that way, however strongly or weakly and for whatever reason. Again, it is too much to say that the object itself has somehow made itself known or been made known through the testimony of the other, since this assumes a judgment about the truth of the testimony which is phenomenologically inaccessible; what has taken place, rather, speaking very strictly, is that the consciousness of one person has been molded by another in such a way that she now is oriented to the world differently, disposed to construe it and relate to it otherwise than before. It may be that the thing really is such as it is being presented, but so long as the relevant object is not present, there is no phenomenological basis for admitting any description of the state beyond that one person is inclined to accept the articulation of the world provided by another.⁷ This line of reasoning, inspired

⁷ In response to this argument, a reviewer proposed that Plantinga’s externalist epistemology does not require one to know that a proposition is true or see that it is true in order to know it. This is true, but such a reply would seem beside the point of my argument. The objection offered here is that what

from Sokolowski, makes clear that, contrary to the tendency of Plantinga's epistemology, it is not primarily the proposition but rather its referent — the thing in the world — which is the object of experience and knowledge.⁸ And it clearly undermines Diller's conception of Christian faith as knowledge consisting in doxastic experience of the truths (propositions) of the Gospels. If such doxastic experience is not possible, then Diller's account of Christian faith is also inadequate.

This leads back to the concern about self-deception which so naturally arises in response to the Barth-Plantinga "closed" theological epistemology. Diller's first response to the objection was to the effect that it is "just a feature of being human" that we are "unable to self-secure the grounds of knowledge" (Diller 2014, 297). This response does not seem to recognize the true significance of the fact that, on a "closed" theological epistemology, the relevant kind of knowledge would appear to be intrinsically "private," in sharp contradistinction to the knowledge had through the common world of the senses inhabited by all human beings and which, as Sokolowski emphasizes, is susceptible to being made intersubjectively clear through speech. One can accept the reality and objectivity of knowledge gained through the senses and even maintain that such knowledge is metaphysically robust (especially if one rejects the "way of ideas," the errors and dangers of which Sokolowski laments so persuasively). But this is knowledge which is public and can be discussed with others. It is about things that are given "in the flesh," so there is the possibility of intersubjective confirmation. On a "closed" theological epistemology, theological knowledge does not possess an equally public character; one either has it or not and there is no way into it from the outside; it is a gift. This makes it impossible to establish its objectivity intersubjectively and hence to escape the worry about self-deception.⁹

Plantinga calls "doxastic experience" or "seeing the truth of a proposition" does not actually happen, that it is not real, at least not in the case of propositions the referents of which are not given in experience. In other words, Plantinga has mischaracterized the phenomenon he describes in those passages. And since the notion of doxastic experience of the truths of the Gospel, the referents of which are incorrigibly absent, is central for Diller's Barth-Plantinga proposal for theological epistemology, — indeed, for Diller it is precisely in such experience that Christian knowledge consists, — it follows that such an account suffers from a fatal weakness. At the same time, however, Plantinga does hold that it strongly seeming to someone that *p* can confer warrant upon her belief that *p*. If "it strongly seeming to someone that *p*" means anything like "someone seeing the truth of *p*," then the phenomenological counterargument of this essay would also undermine this aspect of Plantinga's epistemology as regards at least some propositional knowledge without imposing upon it question-begging internalist standards.

⁸ This does not mean that a proposition can never itself be the object of a mental state or attitude. This is obviously possible. For example, one can make judgments as to whether a proposition is conjunctive or disjunctive. But in this case, the proposition is no longer considered as describing some reality but rather for its own sake. To judge a proposition about empirical realities as true or false is to see "through" the proposition to the world and the things to which it refers. The claim being proposed in this essay is only that propositions which refer to "empirical" realities cannot be "seen to be true" in the experiential absence of their referents.

⁹ A reviewer suggested that I give the impression that externalists are constantly worried about self-deception and lack the resources to ground confidence in the possession of knowledge, and that while externalists may be fallibilists, they are often highly confident that they know very many things. In response I should say the following. On the one hand, whether externalists actually happen to be worried about self-deception or not is perhaps irrelevant to the question of whether they should be. It

Theological knowledge is more lacking in givenness than Diller recognizes (cf. the discussion in Deketelaere 2018 which makes the same point against Marion). He attempts to find a way out by positing a kind of propositional givenness: “The [internal instigation of the Holy Spirit] makes the truth [of the Gospel] evident, not on the basis of propositional evidence [i.e., by means of discursive reason] but with the immediacy that characterizes self-evident truths or the deliverances of our memory. The evidentiality of the truth made known does not have the kind of phenomenality attending sense experience but is nevertheless rightly considered a real perceiving” (Diller 2014, 149). The phenomenological critique offered here has instead maintained that such an experience is not rightly called a “real perceiving” insofar as the intentional object does not actually present itself. That is simply not what is happening. It is perhaps founded on a confused notion about propositions as objects of a kind of perception. Propositions are not the objects of perception or experience, but rather their referents are. Sokolowski’s arguments against “mental representations” and the “way of ideas” also apply to propositions conceived of as objects of perception. Propositions are merely ways of construing realities which one might find oneself inclined to accept or not. They point beyond themselves to things. What actually occurs within a person in those cases of “doxastic experience” described by Diller and Plantinga is not a perception of the truth of a proposition, but only the arising of a very strong inclination to believe that things are a certain way, which may or may not intend them as they really are. For that reason, too, the notion of the self-givenness of special theological knowledge on a “closed” theological epistemology is phenomenologically undermined.

4. In Lieu of a Conclusion: “Open” Theological Epistemology and Imperspecuity

One way of understanding the phenomenological objection to Diller’s “closed” theological epistemology is that it attempts to gain access to the invisible (knowledge of God, or of the meaning of Scripture) apart from the mediation of the visible (the natural world, or the Tradition of the Church through apostolic succession, or whatever). Against this, however, there is a principle which holds that the invisible, if it is to be known at all, must necessarily be mediated through the visible. Even knowledge of invisible realities such as mathematics is supposed to have been mediated through the visible in some way; for example, the notion of “one” and “many,” and therefore of mathematics, is gained by abstraction from the experience

may well be that externalist confidence in knowledge is unjustifiable, though I have made no such claim. But more importantly, the concern of this essay has not been to proffer arguments against externalism in general, but only to argue against a doctrine of *claritas scripturae* which is founded on the Barth-Plantinga proposal for a “closed” theological epistemology defended by Kevin Diller. It just happens that this particular “closed” theological epistemology is at least partly externalist. I do not here wish to commit myself to the claim that all “closed” theological epistemologies must be externalist, or that all forms of externalism are subject to certain worries about self-deception, or any other such claim.

of the oneness or identity lying behind the manifold of a thing's appearances to consciousness.¹⁰ The Barth-Plantinga proposal attempts to gain knowledge of the invisible by means of "doxastic experience" or the perception of the truth of theological propositions. The phenomenological counterargument offered above showed that this sort of perception is actually only possible in the case of propositions about present objects and not in the case of propositions about incorrigibly absent objects such as the truth of the Gospel message or the love of Christ. A phenomenology of Christian faith demands an "open" theological epistemology.

A similar line of reasoning can be brought against the application of this scheme to the context of the *claritas scripturae*. If Scripture is perspicuous, it should always "say" that which it clearly teaches. But as a matter of fact it does not, and this is something that anyone who has ever changed their mind about some doctrinal issue can recognize. Sokolowski wrote that one advantage of the written word over the spoken word is its apparent permanence: "[Written words] seem to have great authority [in comparison to spoken words] precisely because they have been written down and because they say the very same thing every time they are read. They are less fleeting than a voice, which vanishes immediately, and they do not waiver in their conviction" (2017, 24). But a person can read Paul's words in the Epistle to the Galatians or to the Romans at one time as teaching that justification is a declaration of righteousness to the faithful person on the basis of Christ's merits (cf. Westerholm 2013) and later as referring to an ontological deliverance from tyrannical forces of sin, death, and ignorance through Christ's faithfulness (cf. Campbell 2009). What the text seems to say — the truth being "perceived" — has changed substantially, though presumably the actual meaning of Scripture (that which Paul and God intended to communicate) cannot have changed in the meantime. This impermanence of meaning on such a central topic is incompatible with the perspicuity of Scripture. The phenomenology of Scripture therefore demands a doctrine of the imperspicuity of Scripture.

These meditations suggest a different conception of Christian faith, one which has been phenomenologically redefined. Thomas Joseph White is closer to the mark when he writes that "there is a simple, almost indefinable, but utterly real presence of the risen Lord to all those who have the grace of supernatural faith. Even in its darkness and obscurity, the faith makes us aware that Christ is personally present to each of us, not only in his reality as God, but also in his sacred humanity, as a human being like us, in body and soul. The sense of his presence can be more faint or acute at various times, and it can grow in us the more we are given to contemplative prayer and conversation with Christ. But it is enduring and undeniably real" (2017, 178). In light of the austerity of the argumentation of the present essay, the point might better be put in the following terms: Christian faith is a persistent orientation towards the

¹⁰ The discovery of the origins of the knowledge of the invisible in lived experience is the task of so-called "genetic phenomenology." See (Wells 2018, ch. 2) for an informative discussion of Husserl's genetic phenomenological project and the proposal for the discovery of geometry as a science. (Stein 2002), to give another example, attempts to ground knowledge of various metaphysical realities (such as potentiality) phenomenologically through introspection.

person of Jesus Christ, an enduring and seemingly permanent intending of Him.¹¹ This is what it means to have faith and, by extension, to be a Christian. There is no worry of self-deception on this account because whether or not a person has such an orientation can easily be discerned through introspection. At the same time, however, this phenomenological conception of faith cannot be called “knowledge” insofar as its object (viz., Christ) is not given in experience. It is not even primarily propositional in form, but rather a kind of magnetic preoccupation with Jesus as person. Plantinga is correct in saying that this orientation towards Christ generally is basic, not conditioned on some argument or inference from visible phenomena, arising spontaneously in life concomitantly with various experiences, but he goes too far in trying to turn it into knowledge. The intending is always “empty” because Christ is not present.

This is what Christian faith consists in. It is clear that not all persons with Christian faith thus described understand Scripture to be teaching substantially the same things, even if they agree about certain verbal formulas (e.g., the Apostles’ Creed). For this reason, the notion of the *claritas scripturae* and any corresponding doctrine of *sola scriptura* which presupposes it must be rejected.¹² This prepares a way for an “open” theological epistemology, one which grants a greater theological-epistemological authority and priority to the Tradition of the Church as the condition of the visibility of Scripture (see Nemes 2017; 2018) and perhaps also to natural theology as establishing a context in which special revelation can be recognized and accepted for what it is (cf. Staniloae 2000, ch. 1). The “closed” theological epistemology of Barth, Plantinga, and Diller is not unmotivated. The Apostle Paul’s teaching that “no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God” and that believers “have received ... the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (1 Cor. 2:9-12 NRSV) certainly inclines in the direction of a “closed” theological epistemology. But the spirits must be tested (1 John 4:1; cf. 2 Cor. 11:14). The Apostle John provides a rule for discerning the spirits: “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6). The “we” to which he refers is arguably the same “we” that speaks at the beginning of the epistle: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes,” etc. (1:1) — in other words, the apostolic college. He proposes a visible instrument for attaining to an invisible reality. Indeed, the phenomenology of Christian faith reveals the need of “terrestrial” mediators for theological knowledge. In phenomenological terms, the invisible must be given through the visible.

¹¹ In phenomenological terms, “intention” or “intentionality” refers to that property of consciousness by which it reaches out towards the object of which it is a consciousness. “Intuition,” on the other hand, refers to the givenness of the object to consciousness in experience. An intention is empty if it lacks a corresponding intuition (Sokolowski 2000, 33).

¹² (Rahner 1961) considers the possibility of a Roman Catholic doctrine of *sola scriptura* which affirms the material (not formal) sufficiency of Scripture. See also (Breck 2001, ch. 1) and the discussion in (Boersma 2007).

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