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**Progress,
Knowledge and God**



Philosophical Initiatives
Philosophische Anstöße

Table of Contents

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Progress, Knowledge and God	3
Annotations	8
The Author	8
Impressum	9

Progress, Knowledge and God

Thomas K. Johnson

One of the chief characteristics of society in the developed world is progress driven by the growth of new knowledge. For example, we all expect our medical doctors to be able to cure or control a few more medical problems this year than they could last year. This medical progress is enabled by new knowledge about the human body, illness, and medications. Our computers today are much more powerful and faster than the museum pieces we used five years ago. This progress is powered by new knowledge in the realm of information technology. The cars we drive today produce about 98% less air pollution per mile or kilometer that we drive, in contrast with the cars made in 1970. This progress results from applying new knowledge in multiple fields, including automotive design and fuel chemistry.¹

Progress driven by new knowledge is one of the characteristics of society that lends plausibility to a postmodern theory of knowledge that seems to pop up almost everywhere. According to this type of postmodern theory, knowledge is something that we humans create or construct, regardless of whether this supposed knowledge is about medicine, religion, morality, or technology. With hardly a second thought people tend to slide from the creation of new knowledge in the technical fields to seeing all of human knowledge and culture as a

purely human construction or creation. And to say that this habit of mind is central to the secularization of western society may be the understatement of the century. Once people tend to see true and new knowledge as a human construction, two results seem almost inevitable: It seems perfectly normal for people to create new gods to fit their image, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob seems totally irrelevant to the important developments in our world.

Those of us who are classical Christians and think that the God of the Bible is not irrelevant to postmodern society need to directly address the relation of God to the creation of new knowledge, as well as to the progress that is driven by this new knowledge. A failure to do so may not only confirm the prejudice which says the biblical message is irrelevant to most of life; it can also drive us into spiritual schizophrenia by separating our love of God from our love of progress. A good way to address these questions is to look at the classical evangelical theory of knowledge developed by the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921). This will require some hard thinking, but this hard thinking is worthwhile.

A basic distinction Bavinck makes is between archetypal knowledge and ectypal knowledge. This is the distinction between God's knowledge about

some topic and human knowledge about that same topic. God knows everything about our world as the designer and creator of the world. His knowledge existed before the world and is the plan according to which he made the world. „The world is an embodiment of the thoughts of God,“ thoughts or knowledge which God had eternally before creating the world, thoughts which came before God created by his Word.² God’s archetypal knowledge of everything stands in sharp contrast with our limited, human ectypal knowledge. „God is the first principle of being (*principium essendi*); present in his mind are the ideas of all things; all things are based on thoughts and are created by the word. It is his good pleasure, however, to reproduce in human beings made in his image an ectypal knowledge that reflects this archetypal knowledge (*cognitio archetypha*) in his own divine mind.“³

From Bavinck’s perspective we should not speak of humans creating or constructing knowledge, nor should we even speak of God creating new knowledge. God has eternally been omniscient, so he created the world in light of his eternal, comprehensive knowledge. But this does not mean there is no progress of human knowledge. When God created humans in his image, obviously He intended for human ectypal knowledge to be a reflection or image of his eternal archetypal knowledge, with humans thinking God’s thoughts after him. And God has been giving knowledge to humans progressively over the

centuries, leading to the unfolding of culture that we sometimes call progress. At all times in human history part of what people have claimed to know has been mistaken, with some of these mistaken knowledge claims arising out of self-deception, spiritual blindness, or unbelief. And these mistaken knowledge claims tend to become more common, the closer one comes to giving an overall philosophy of life that is not informed by the Christian faith. But this human fallibility should not lead the believer to despair of attaining any knowledge. It should lead to more humble and sincere efforts to make our supposed knowledge a proper reflection or analogy of God’s archetypal knowledge.

Whether we are talking about theology or any of the other social or physical sciences, Bavinck thinks we must always distinguish among three foundations or principles of knowledge. The first is the essential principle or foundation of knowledge, which means the source, which is the mind of God. The second is the external principle or foundation of knowledge, the external means by which God gives knowledge to people. This external principle of knowledge is revelation, both special revelation (centered in the covenant of grace, Christ, and the scriptures) and general revelation (which comes through all of creation, including human nature). The third is the internal principle or foundation of knowledge by which knowledge goes from being knowable to actually being known and possessed

by real people. These three principles of knowledge hold true whether we are interested in theology, medicine, computer technology, or auto mechanics.

Bavinck is famous among theologians for his grasp of the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. He claimed, „The thoughtful person places the doctrine of the trinity in the very center of the full-orbed life of nature and mankind. ... The mind of the Christian is not satisfied until every form of existence has been referred to the triune God and until the confession of the trinity has received the place of prominence in our thought and life.“⁴ He thought that distortions in the religious and cultural life of Christians usually arise from distortions in our understanding of the Trinity.

It is no surprise that Bavinck thought his theory of knowledge was Trinitarian. And while he taught that every work of God is always a work of all three Persons of the Trinity, he also claimed we can distinguish the leading role of the different Persons of the Trinity in many acts of God. In his epistemology, the essential foundation of knowledge is in the mind of God the Father. It is the second Person of the Trinity, as the Logos, who reveals truth about God and about creation by means of special revelation (especially through sacred scripture) and general revelation (through creation), providing the external principle of knowledge. And the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, is the internal principle of knowledge who opens our eyes to receive knowledge and per-

ceive truth, both truth in scripture and truth in creation. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit we would remain blind to both the truth about God and his grace in the scriptures and to the many truths about the world that are revealed in creation.

In this last point we encounter Bavinck's version of the classical evangelical theory of the „common workings“ of God's Spirit. The „special work“ of God's Spirit is that of bringing people to faith and repentance, testifying to the truth of Scripture, bringing spiritual comfort, assisting in the life of holiness, etc. Obviously the special work of the Spirit is closely related to matters of faith and saving grace. In contrast, the common work of God's Spirit includes the activity of the Holy Spirit in culture and among people who may not be believers. An oft cited biblical example of this common work is the way king Cyrus of Persia is described by Isaiah as specially prepared by the Holy Spirit for his work, even though he may not have been a worshipper of the God of the Bible.

Bavinck can wax very eloquent to describe the common work of God's Spirit to bring knowledge to mankind. Influenced by Saint Augustine he describes God as the sun of our minds. „Just as with the physical eye we cannot see anything unless the sun sheds its rays over it, so neither can we see any truth except in the light of God, which is the sun of our knowledge.“⁵ Then borrowing language from Saint Thomas he adds, „Just as we look into

the natural world, not by being in the sun ourselves, but by the light of the sun that shines on us, so neither do we see things in the divine being but by the light that, originating in God, shines in our own intellect.⁶

If Bavinck is right (or even close to right) in his theory of knowledge, we need to radically change the way we talk about progress and the growth of knowledge that is driving progress. According to Bavinck there is no knowledge that is new, since God has always been all knowing. What is new is that a particular group of people has some particular knowledge that God has always had. Knowledge that is new to people, whether in medicine or information technology, comes from God the Father, is revealed by the Logos through creation, and is received by men and women when the Holy Spirit opens their eyes in a work of illumination. All of the knowledge that is enabling the many rapid changes in society comes by the work of all three Persons of the Trinity working in harmony. Since God is the Creator of everything, all knowledge has its source in his Mind. Christ the Logos is the external means through whom all knowledge is revealed from God in the creation and in scripture. And only by the common work of God the Holy Spirit are men and women enabled to perceive and understand new things about God's world, whether those new things are in the realm of medicine or information technology. „New knowledge“ is a means of God's common grace by which he sends information

driven progress to all people, just like he sends his rain on the just and the unjust alike (Matthew 5:45). There is no such thing as secular knowledge, since all knowledge comes from God the Father, through God the Logos, by means of the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Far from being irrelevant to the changes in an information driven rapidly developing society, we should recognize that the triune God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the One who is making available the rapidly developing knowledge and information that keeps society in constant motion.

A few comments are needed to put this Trinitarian view of knowledge and progress in it proper context.

1. To say that new knowledge comes to the human race from divine general revelation which we receive by the illumination of the Holy Spirit does not mean we may become passive with regard to knowledge. God created Adam and Eve to be active learners, and the Bible is filled with exhortations and commands to pursue knowledge, wisdom, and insight, commands which believers sometimes neglect. Somehow the Holy Spirit brings illumination in and through our searching, including research in a medical laboratory or the work station of a computer scientist. Bavinck once borrowed from Thomas Aquinas the language of the „active intellect“ to describe the place in which illumination usually occurs.⁷

2. If we do not recognize that new knowledge (and the technical progress empowe-

red by that knowledge) is a gift of God's common grace through the common working of the Holy Spirit, we are guilty of reprehensible ingratitude to God. Everyday we should thank God for the gifts of his common grace that make our lives so much more comfortable, healthy, convenient, and lengthy than the lives of our grandparents. If we and all people do not daily thank God for these gifts, it documents the claim of the apostle Paul that ingratitude is central to sin. (Romans 1:21)

3. Since God gives new knowledge (and the rest of his common grace) to the just and the unjust alike, new knowledge very easily gets mixed up in the idolatry, unbelief, deceptive philosophies, and godless worldviews that fill our world. The new knowledge that continually comes from God is received by ordinary people whose hearts and minds may be controlled by their revolt against God. For God-fearing people to make full use of the full range of new knowledge will require the hard work of discernment to distinguish God-given truth from sinful deception. Our biggest source of help in this process of discernment will be God's special revelation in Scripture.

4. All new knowledge, like anything else in creation, can either be used to love God and our neighbors, or it can be used to attack God and our neighbors. Anything in creation can be used for good or for evil. Moral responsibility before God never stops. Jesus taught us to use what we have been given to help those in need. (Matthew

25:31–46) This should include using our developing knowledge of medicine and information technology to help the millions still living in great need.

We live in a world characterized by rapid technological progress that is driven by ever expanding amounts of new knowledge. The lack of a theological interpretation of progress driven by new knowledge continually pushes us as a society toward secularization. Of course, if anything in this essay is true, secularization primarily means ingratitude toward God. Whether or not one can accept the entire proposal made in this essay, believers need a biblically informed view of new knowledge and progress.

Several years ago I lived in the former Soviet Union. There I knew a very godly medical doctor who had received her limited medical training in an un-developed Soviet medical faculty. In light of the radically new and overwhelmingly powerful medications and treatment methods brought into her country by medical humanitarian aid workers she once commented, „The people who developed these things must be very close to God.“ After thinking about her comment for several years, I would partly agree and partly disagree. Some medical scientists are God fearing people, but others are totally godless. Maybe it would be better to say about modern technology, „God is very close to the people who develop these things, though many do not give him the thanksgiving he deserves.“

Annotations

Anmerkungen

¹ A good discussion of the nature of progress is Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, (New York and Toronto: Random House, 2003).

² The quotation is from Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 1, Prolegomena*, translated by John Vriend, edited by John Bolt, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), p. 233.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, translated and edited by William Hendriksen, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 329.

⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, p. 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

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Über den Autor



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