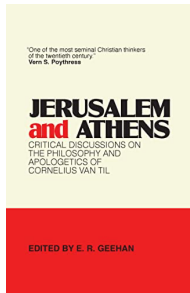


J P Mekkes

Chapter 15. Knowing

From *Jerusalem & Athens* ed. E. R. Geehan P&R Publishing



1

When the Bible-believing intellectual takes the term “knowing” on his lips, he really ought to go in only one direction. Whether he will actually do this, however, is questionable. For, in opposition to this apparently obvious remark, it is easy to place another, namely, what clearly the Christian most often does not really move in a direction different from other men, doing what according to his Christian confession he ought to do.

But it is not enough to make such points. For, apart from the decisive question where the Christian ought to discover the guide to what he is supposed to do, he already stands in the unfolding of his life within a field of force. This field of force is not, for any of us, by nature, the field of Truth. On the contrary! We find ourselves placed within the field of force of human history. What forces are at work there? We do not hesitate to employ, in place of the energetic analogy “force” (*kracht*), the word “power” (*macht*). Its sense is more embrative, including force within itself, but qualifying it, however; giving it a direction and using it.

We know how the apostle Paul speaks about the “powers,” and in this personification calls them to account. This is the case even though he recognizes that he himself, together with those to whom he is speaking in his epistles, is also threatened by them. “Power” points beyond itself to responsible and purposeful action.

In the field of force of human history, where we find ourselves placed, willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, as we take up our life’s task, the “powers” rule over us from the very outset. It is lamentable that the contemporary, humanistically distorted Christian quickly de-personifies what Paul personified hoping secretly to relieve himself of his responsibility for them.

But is it at all possible for one to be responsible for what threatens him? Is this not to confuse things? Yet, the apostle hurls forth his challenge. Consider, for example, Colossians 2. He issues his challenge in the name of his Lord, together with his Lord, united with his Lord. The decisive challenge of the great Conqueror flashes to the disciple: go over to the attack and pursue the enemy. Be on the alert!

May we in this connection speak of a specific task for the believing “intellectual?” The context in which this word occurs encourages us to answer in the affirmative. Who are the intellectuals in the eyes of the Western world? That world wants to think of them as those in general who bear the primary responsibility in science itself or in the functions for which scientific training is a requirement, even though, in the last analysis, science itself is “used.” As such this using and being is itself certainly not of a scientific character.

It is remarkable that the world of contemporary “powers” does not speak about the intellectuals and their science being used, except perhaps on the occasions when science itself becomes aware of this situation and then subsequently attempts impotently to speak of its own freedom and responsibility. In a position of power, yet

threatened by power! Nevertheless the powers that exercise the use are themselves inescapably dependent upon the science which is used. We have to be alert to the fact that, should we desire in this connection to speak of a dialectic of powers, we should already be at the point of transcending the limits of philosophical thought.

2

We have spoken about powers within the human history. Everything having to do with man presents itself within this history, which technically takes up nature within itself. However, not all of this comes within the field of investigation of the science of history. Meanwhile, man is interested in his science of history. Why is that? It is because, in its description of “eventuation,” it introduces us to the world of powers which have called the eventuation into being and have guided it in the direction which now also appears to be indicated to us.

That is to say, “appears to be” indicated, because it is indeed the case that we begin by “taking over” what occurs as it has presented itself to us in its direction and its content; but from that point on our own responsibility comes into play and standards inevitably present themselves other than the “eventuation” that the science of history at the beginning investigates.

Taking stock also of its results, it becomes immediately clear to us that it could not have taken upon itself its task apart from the historical involvement of its practitioners in what is being investigated and described by them, thus apart from what they also, as concrete, living men, bring to it as an ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ judgment.

If we put the question, why is it that not only the specialists in the science of history but also all those who are involved in any special science whatever come to their field of investigation with ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ judgments, then our attention is again drawn to the very human history which engages us and which transcends by far the field of investigation of the historian. It, by the way, goes far beyond every special field of knowledge, every special sphere of life. It embraces all of them, taking them all up into itself, including nature as the substrate of human life and as the first object of man’s cultural activity.

Immediately one is faced at this point with a great danger. The “scientific world” itself discovers that it is in the grasp of that strong power which, in the course of history, from the very outset of Western thought, has increasingly gotten a hold on it and which is therefore no longer recognized by it—the power of the ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ of the scientific concept.

We have expressed ourselves in this fashion purposely. We could have done it otherwise, for example, by speaking about the power of a self-sufficient scientific activity, the power of the ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ of logical neutrality, of theoretical analysis and synthesis. We did not do this, because we all know too well how much we ourselves are in the grip of the powers of Western human history, which are on the way to becoming powers of universal human history. Against the neutrality of science, against human pride and self-sufficiency, against making theoretical activity independent, we have, as ones who could call themselves Christians, our “historical” objections. Have we probed deeply enough into the center of the sick organism that causes us such spiritual trouble? How much have we taken over from father Parmenides and his sophisticated posterity the veneration of the “concept,” and have carried it to even greater heights!

The concept delimits. This is, so to speak, what makes it a “concept.” But from what does it set off, and how far can it extend the limitation while it yet answers to its true meaning? What has been its life story within the process of the embracing and developing history of mankind? Or, does it as a matter of fact stand above this process?

A modern reader who has been humanistically formed will be unable from the very outset to understand our way of formulating the problem. That history extends farther than one’s own epoch and that the latter cannot be evaluated apart from its influence is also taken for granted by him. But if we ascribe to the history of mankind a position such as there is in mind here, then, for him, its highest status can only be that of a common denominator under which it is supposed that all aspects of life should ultimately be theoretically construed, and the professional historian comes to occupy the most privileged position among all the other practitioners of special sciences. The concept that is formed by our humanist concerning this matter, fitted out with consciously provided safeguards against the threat of limitation, brings into being an ultimate answer to the meaning of human existence. Those within his own circles who oppose him call him, according to their own way of looking at things, a historicist. Even though it be from a standpoint differing from theirs, we also must call him one.

At this point we do not want to become involved with the positivistically and pragmatistically oriented positions in science, which, even taking into consideration all of the criticism that they lodge against historicism, themselves make their own fundamental contribution to it, and which, in any case, without a dialectical counterpart, could never have laid claim to having an integral world and life view. From whatever concept he proceeds in order to attain insight into the meaning (or meaninglessness) of human history, one cannot avoid the intramural conflict concerning the formation of concepts. The equal right and unright of all conceivable common denominators keeps blocking the way. The denominators as such are not brought into being by a “free” science; they are born out of the conflict of the powers that drive it forward. The field of battle of these powers is the living history of living humanity.

3

“Science” is being driven forward at a frantic pace. Some of its practitioners will be ready to concede this and will even warn against the danger of falling prey to it. With this, however, the point in question is by no means answered. The real question is how something like this has become possible. In order to obtain an answer to that question we have to direct our attention to the legitimate place of science as well as to what Western man has thought about it and has made it into. Or, in order to return to our major point, what opinion has he formed about the status and the applicability of his concept formation?

A consideration of the development of thought in the history of Western man gives as an answer, that Western man has expected everything from it. His concept formation was supposed to give him They, too, in many respects were grasped by the powers of their historical era, which envelop again and again all living men without exception. Only a gift from above can bring new light. But we may indeed ask what they ought to have done in the face of the situation confronting them. They should indeed have proceeded to think along with their contemporaries, but in this thinking to

have taken position against the assumptions from which such thought issued. Even though no one had listened to them, they could have stood at the crossroads, in the crises into which humanism (which from that time definitely had the dominant position) itself acknowledged that it had landed, in order to point out the only direction which would lead them out of the crisis.

Hindsight now tells us that humanism never would have listened and over against the Christian witness would have presented every one of its crisis positions as a new triumph of thought over the Christian faith. Under the given circumstances, however, it was just that much easier to the degree that those on the side of the confessing church let go the reins, indeed, even more than this, attempted to advance their own “theology” with the aid of the humanistic discoveries. This could only increase the confusion and could only give new impetus to the “power of apostasy.”

As in ancient philosophy, again and again the silent conviction about the irrepressible power of the unchartable life-process of nature had placed limits on the rational power of form, so in modern reflection on the self and on things the attempt to attain universal domination by way of thought struck up against the irrational element which in the depth of this reflection represented the humanistic idea of autonomy, the element that humanism could not abandon so long as, allowing for all dialectical variation, it still wanted to remain humanism. But—rational or irrational, ancient or modern—it was only by means of systematized and more and more efficient concept-formation that Western man thought that he was able to get into focus for himself the rational approach to his lived reality.

4

For Western man thus knowing was identified with knowing in concepts, made possible and limited by “concepts,” that is thoughtful, thoughtfully enveloped and protected, in a thinking that strives after his consummation, appearing in the “idea.” The ancients had given it the title “□□□□□□,” the moderns sometimes that of “intellectual contemplation”; now they speak of “operational verification,” and the existentialists of “*Andenken*.” Finally theologians crown it by their so-called “*kerygma*.”

What can one expect of “conceptual understanding?” What may it mean for knowing?

Within the general Western tradition what is called “knowing” can only be constructed out of a progressive forming of logical concepts which have been molded in a process of thinking, as these in an ascending order take their place along the way of a fulfillment of thought which is thus identical with the fulfillment of knowing. With this, two questions which we have already touched upon present themselves: Where does the way come from? Where does it lead?

It is these mutually presupposing questions (which have been at times, but at other times, not taken into consideration, brought to critical expression and then apparently completely suppressed, but always in a constant mutual tension) which set the Western development in motion and which have kept it going. The tension itself had the character of a fundamental *dynamis*, a moving force at the foundations of human existence, which elevated the “powers,” including the power of thought, to the throne and which cast them down again, and which held the spirits in motion until the nihilistic revolutionary tendencies of our time.

As one takes into view philosophically this boundary and origin movement, it appears to be recognizable by a peculiar basic pattern, which, as such, could be domiciled only because of the unfolding process it was undergoing. Not taking account of the “powers” that were driving him, Western man thought he could comprise the trajectory he had to make under what someone has strikingly called the arch of “intelligibility.” This arch presupposed the ability in principle to close off the horizon of thought to which we have just referred. Meanwhile, on closer inspection, this arch appeared to be suspended between two abstractions, which were misunderstood as to their nature, and which, as such, could maintain nothing more than an abstract mutual relationship. The fundamental pattern was the duality of “the subject of thought” and “that which was known,” subjected, as this pattern furthermore remained, to a necessity that kept cropping up along the way of changing its name.

This necessity presented itself under the influence of the powers of which we have spoken. We shall not speak of it any more in detail, except to call attention to the fact that the term “subject of thought” inescapably anticipates the course of our argument. If one should think that he could sufficiently understand “subjectivity” as correlative over against “objectivity,” then he would not only have misunderstood our intention but it would be clear from his misconception that he had already become established in one of the forms of the dualistic pattern that must come under criticism. On our part we understand by “subject” a “being subject to.” Can this mean being subjected to what ought to be called “objective?”

The reaction against such an insight from the side of Kant and from the idealistic and phenomenological schools could have only a temporary and relative character; it ran along to emerge currently in Heidegger’s philosophical dilemma between the turning course of time and *An-denken*, while positivism on its part dodged this fundamental problem by restricting what, from ancient times, had stood over against *noesis*.

The critical element which, in reality, has come to view in this *verschwiegene Philosophie*, which gradually insinuated itself into the special sciences and practical action, forces us, however, to “isolate” the particular cell upon which our investigation of the scientific “organism” has to concentrate itself. We do not allow ourselves thereby to be led by considerations derived from such positions as positivism, no matter how much, for example, the so-called “instrumental test of truth” has an analogy that may not be ignored with what we have in mind.

From this “test” it appears, namely, that fundamentally the “concept” does not rule but is ruled. If we cannot agree with what positivism and pragmatism understand by “instrumental,” we must, nevertheless, say to which horizon it has pointed us. It was always a matter of a criterion of “verification.” What had to be verified in terms of its utility was the “knowing” that was arrived at along a positivistic path, which was not considered to be adequate until the result was attained in this fashion. Knowing is not adequately verified along the way of “concept” formation. More is necessary.

Where does this “more” lead to for positivism? To this question it is not possible to give an answer that goes farther than that which had already been given; but the path goes by way of “objectivity.” Just as, on the other side, Heidegger’s way over “subjectivity” cannot be pointed out beyond the conscious foundation of being, after which there is only the *Absprung*. The pillars upon which the “arch of intelligibility” rested slide in both directions in the quicksand of Western philosophical contemplation which has abandoned itself to the trustworthiness of understanding and concept. And the cause of this is that the opinion has taken hold, under the influence

of the powers, that it is possible along the way of thought to bring knowing to its consummation.

5

The initial phase of Western rational reflection consolidated in the duality “noetical-ontical,” in which the latter was supposed to establish “objectivity,” the law of knowledge for the former, which, in contrast, was held to be subjective and individual with the remote verification test of the infinite divine spirit (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) that required thought to come to its fulfillment.

The difficulty with respect to this spirit is that it, too, if one is going to treat it, first must be. Unwittingly Aristotle brought to the sharpest expression the antinomy which resides here by giving to this spirit within the totality of what was in essence “divine” being an exclusive, supreme position, where it was safe from being influenced by the transitoriness of the rest of being—indeed, more, where it emerged as the itself unmoved mover of the incalculable movement. In addition, however, this spirit knows the totality of being in the divine intellectual contemplation of itself and so, it is identical with this totality of being. The principle of transitoriness is not able to be reconciled with it as pure form and consequently cannot be included, yet, as we saw, cannot be excluded by it. It is clear that in this conception of the intellectual archetypes we have only to do with a hypostatization of creaturely thought in its active function, thus with a concept that man has formed of it that has been exalted to the position of the ultimate former of all concepts, which can be formed by humankind only in connection with it. Human (philosophical) thought has struck here upon its creaturely boundaries and can no longer extricate itself from being enveloped by an ultimate, i.e., speculative, “concept” of a consummated actuality of thought.

It is this concept, which has again and again been generated, which has kept the initiative in hand for the progressive generation of all further concepts. It was from the beginning the concept at the most ultimate boundaries of the possibility of thought and remained this as the embracing (further, the ratiocinated) substance of Descartes and Spinoza, the idea of God in Kant which embraces and sifts out morality and theoretical knowing, the “Idea” of post-Kantian philosophy; it remained this in Husserl’s “ego-ontology” and Heidegger’s history of Being, and finally in the “belief,” that in neo-positivism has been elevated to a “faith,” with respect to the exclusive reliability of methodical creative thinking. Under the guidance of the powers we have come to the end of the boundary possibilities. The newly arising interest in the questions of hermeneutics, in whatever form, now that *doxa* (opinion) threatens to get the upper hand over *episteme* (theoretically responsible knowledge), is one indication among others of this.

That Western man will not be brought to capitulation by way of an attack through concepts is apparent. The decision must be reached between the powers, which envelop all concept-formation together with all other activity. Has it not become time for the Christian to give another orientation to his desire for knowing? To whom shall we go?

Not to a □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□!

The □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ which has threatened the Christian faith from ancient times was, for the most part, by way of Aristotle and neo-Platonism, the scholastic doctrine of the ideas in the divine “Logos,” which were supposed to be “thought” after by man in his concept-formation. With this procedure of thought,

In our practice we spontaneously go wrong. Therefore we need this instruction. He teaches us, in our activity, in opposition to our apostasy, to discern properly. He instructs by means of all the fortunate and the unfortunate experiences of life, activity, and suffering, through the experiences of human history, and he does not thereby speak ultimately to the function of our analysis, which we, together with the intuition comprised in it, are accustomed to call “thought.” Our thought is indeed present, in various degrees of overtness, in all of our acts, yet always present therein in a servant (distinguishing) role. If we, who are taught in the Western school, proceed to speak of this distinguishing as “thought,” then we are used to attaching something to it as an “object.” It is not inadmissible, so far as we are conscious of what we are doing, unless we, as always too eager theoreticians, have engaged ourselves silently in an easy-going abstraction of a function of our activity, an abstraction which is not present in that activity itself. I do not experience explicitly the analytical function of my loving, with an “object” included in it to boot, so long as it truly concerns loving. This entire act is a conscious unity, from beginning to end, in which nevertheless pre-eminently knowing must reach its high point. To this knowing our function of distinguishing (“thought”) makes an implicit contribution by way of founding it; yet, in this connection can the term “concept” bring any clarification in any fashion into the situation for me? I become acquainted with loving by way of loving the one who is loved, just as I become acquainted with right by doing right (or by being subjected to it) in situations where justice is at stake, with nature in its operation and necessary forming, etc. This holds for all of our life, for all of our knowing of this life, that is, of the creation.

For this reason knowing occupies a central position within the history of created and called mankind, and the sense it must have can be told us only by the gospel! From it we understand that it has to do with the consummation of all things, a fulfillment that the apostle sets forth for the believer tellingly in Philippians 3:10–11.

The Christian understands the gospel and the letters of the apostles; through that he “understands” even the Old Testament, which sometimes appears to be so far removed.

Does he understand by way of concept-formation? A concept-formation which, as far as human capabilities extend, in its searching holds its own fulfillment in view?

In his understanding there indeed occurs a formation of concepts. The nobility of love is its awareness, and one cannot speak responsibly of an unconscious faith. We meet God in his self-disclosure, his revelation in the creation which is supported and embraced by the Word—consciously, even if we deny him. The encounter and the understanding do not occur, however, by way of what Western man after his own fashion has come to call a “concept.” In knowing—of God and the neighbor—there are, if one pleases (see above), “objects” involved of the most diverse kinds, among which are analytical (“thought”) objects. They are all subjected to the subjectivity of concrete experiencing (*belevingssubjectiviteit*), even as this itself is “subjected” to him who knows.

6

If we who are Western Christian “intellectuals” wish to reflect systematically about these things which in their depth transcend our understanding—what we have been doing for centuries—then we must first of all pay close attention to the fact that we are walking in the passageway of Western human history. There the dominant

force, as we saw, has been from the very beginning another motive than that of the Word (the Power) of God. And this motive confronts us in a peculiar way as soon as we put our hand to the legitimate creaturely task of doing science. It is the motive of the dominancy of concepts, with its insoluble problem of the “arch” that can never be completed. Under its historical suggestiveness we are in danger of forgetting not only that thought is only one of the (always menial) functions, but most of all that our act of theoretical thinking, which is among many acts, is carried on just as much as any other in a living, way. There is one characteristic difference. In the act of thought it is not, for example, loving, believing, politicking, etc., that take us in their grasp but the logical differentiations which are involved in these experiences. The latter can only be wrested out of the living differentiations of our activities, ultimately to receive its systematic treatment in theoretical thinking by means of the formation of synthetic concepts.

Our non-theoretical “understanding” already takes its practical direction and thereby gives a particular cachet to differentiation, before this is taken up for systematic analysis in the yet to be consummated theoretical act of thought. In the theoretical concept which arises out of this are incorporated two kinds of choices of direction, namely, that which arises out of practical activity, followed by that of the equally living theoretical act of thought, in which the consequences of the first choice make their contribution in what is now theoretical analytical distinguishing. In both instances the question is whether the activity (act) has become directed to the Truth or to “this world.” In both cases the conflict of the decisive choice of direction manifests itself by means of the evangelical or the worldly faith.

The temptation which, out of the Western □□□□□ of reason and science, invades the creaturely sphere of operation of science is, as we saw, that of the identification of knowing and the consummation of thought. The cultic result for life is the deflection of human knowing from the direction intended by Christ to that which the powers have in mind to pursue with the aid of the Western theoretical pattern. In our days, it would appear, the theological alliance makes even more than ever a deplorable contribution in the service of the powers.

7

Does our warning mean a deprecation of doing science? By no means! How would it be possible to deprecate the creation as such in its development? It is a matter of the two decisive questions, whence and whither. Do we set out upon the way of knowing from our subjectivity of thought which forms concepts, in the expectation of traveling, if need be supernaturally enlightened and informed, the path of truth? Or is the scientific concept for us once and for all wrapped up in the concrete, living understanding of God’s history with his humanity in every terrain of life, by which theoretical thought fulfills its doubly limited calling, which is pointed out to it by the Creator and is recognizable in faith? Then this limitation, which is to be held fast in faith, holds for philosophy, theology, and all the special sciences alike. In its proper place theoretical thought can never be more than an “aid” to knowing, no matter to what accomplishments for good or for bad it helps man in his power formation.

Knowing itself is illimitable when it is seen in the perspective of him who in his election has known his creation, it in us and us in it.

Only here lies the meaning of the history of creation: I know whence I have come and whither I am going....

(Translated by Robert D. Knudsen)

Response by C. Van Til

Dear Dr. Mekkes:

When your book *Sheppingsopenbaring en Wijsbegeerte* (1961), appeared, it served as a renewed inspiration to me to go on trying to understand the details of modern existentialism. One of my great faults has been to deal with very general and basic thrusts of a movement without giving adequate attention to details. It is a weariness of the flesh to follow the endless windings of the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* and then of the “later” Heidegger, etc. Yet we must do so if we are to make the Christian approach to “thinking” intelligible to men of different philosophical stripe.

Your exposition with respect to concepts has helped me understand more accurately what Dr. Dooyeweerd was getting at in his dealing with the subject. You will notice that I have dealt with this in my responses to both Prof. Dooyeweerd and Dr. Knudsen, so I shall not attempt to discuss it again here.

It may be apropos to say something about “Father Parmenides,” for it is his “logicism” which we must distinguish clearly from a Christian notion of rationality. “Father Parmenides” was not, as are modern humanists, in full self-consciousness, setting up himself as autonomous and insisting that nothing can exist except what “logical” “consistent” thinking says can exist. But surely, not only apostate thinking but also “Christian” thinking has wrought much havoc by assuming such to be the case! The only escape apostate thinkers have from the clutches of pure, abstract determinism is pure Chance. Aristotle attempted a sort of compromise between these two with his “analogy of being.” The Medievals attempted to “Christianize” Aristotle’s “way out.” Only further confusion resulted.

But with the Reformers, notably with Calvin, the biblical vision began to appear. The Christian receives his notion of “coherence” and of “rationality” from the Bible and in doing so places the “ideal of conceptualization” in biblical perspective. The God of the Bible is not Laplace’s Great Mathematician or a Supernatural Computer. The unity of creation is the organic unity of the plan of God. Our logic touches the “faith” of the world because of the plan of God back of both. When we talk of the “rationality” of God we do so after the manner of men, i.e., in view of his plan of creation this is the way he must appear to us if he is to reveal himself, and if we are to know him. This is the thrust of Calvin’s distinction between knowing God in his revelation and knowing God in himself. The former is actual for man, the latter is not even possible. □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□! We must, as Calvin says, not engage in idle speculation.

How thankful I am to you all who have, in the steps of Calvin and Kuyper and Bavinck, helped us forward toward thinking biblically. Your work has, Dr. Mekkes, in this special sense, I repeat, been of inestimable value to me.

-CVT

1

¹ Van Til, Cornelius, *The Works of Cornelius Van Til*, (New York: Labels Army Co.) 1997.