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JOHN C. POIRIER

Theology as a Pyramid on a Raft

No claim is more regularly made these days than that theological foundations do not exist. Those who make this claim seldom offer it as a mere suggestion—they are dead set that the absence of foundations is a sure conclusion of philosophy, and they often dismiss anyone who thinks otherwise as either a sophomore or a fogey. Yet, putting the objection to foundationalism in terms this strong or this generalizing will not do. At the very least, these terms must be qualified with explicit reference to the problem of how we *know* things. One unfortunate oversight of most antifoundationalist rhetoric is that it shows no awareness of our being confronted by two main types of foundations: epistemic (those dealing with knowledge) and alethic (those dealing with truth). While the absence of one type of foundation might be a matter of observation, the absence of the other is not necessarily so. The claim that there are no foundations – period! – is therefore too sweeping. Ernest Sosa, whose influential image I discuss below, actually recognized something of this: “It is lamentable that in our headlong rush away from foundationalism we have lost sight of the different types of foundationalism.”¹

I am aware, of course, that something epistemic is implied in the way the objection to foundations is usually stated – that is, that the main point of the objection is usually to show that there can be no universal foundation for our *knowing* a set of basic propositions to be true. But what of there being a foundation for the truth aspect of those propositions, quite apart from our *knowing* the truth? It is not defiance or fussiness that compels me to pose this question, but rather a nagging awareness that *knowledge* and *truth* are two different things, and that a failure to keep those things separate has caused a great deal of confusion in recent theology – most of it still unrecognized. Properly understood, what one thinks one knows might not be true, and what might be the truth about a given matter can easily be beyond anyone’s ken. States of affairs exist prior to, and independent of, their being known to anyone. Recent postmodernist attempts to deny this often rely on the aforementioned conceptual confusion between epistemology and alethiology.²

¹ SOSA, Eduard: The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge. In: Midwest Studies in Philosophy 5 (1980) 3–25, esp. 14.

² See POIRIER, John C.: The Epistemology/Alethiology Double Switch in Antifoundationalist Hermeneutics. In: Stone-Campbell Journal 9 (2006) 19–28.

Certainly, one verdict of philosophy that we can all accept is that there is no secure foundation for *knowledge*: if we take knowledge as the assurance of a proposition, then we are met by uncertainty (however hypothetical), and if we take it in the more fluidized sense of seeking to map reality (or a sensory construct) in its limitless distinctions, then we are met by the irreducible subjectivity of our viewpoint. As long as we define “knowledge” as somehow pitting a knower in relation to an object of knowledge, there can never be a foundation for knowledge, for if we ever found one, we could simply ask what further foundation supported our knowing that *that* was the foundation? We are met with an infinite chain of deferral.

But that chain only goes on forever because of the special nature of the category. What about the role of a foundation in those philosophical problems that are defined according to categories of *truth* rather than of knowledge? Given that subjectivity does not beset alethiological problems, there is really no reason to lump these foundations with those that have been found wanting on the grounds of the above considerations. In fact, it will be a great boon to theology when it stops doing precisely that. *Knowing* whether a given alethic foundation is correct is of course an epistemological exercise, but *positing* an alethic foundation for the working out of a given philosophical or theological system is not. (Our acceptance of that alethic foundation is of course worked out through some sort of epistemic apparatus [whether empirical, tradition-based, or rooted in some other means of conviction], but that is a separate matter that does not impinge upon the propositional shape of the alethic foundation. The absence of an Archimedean vantage point that can judge all possible paradigms does not entail the absence of a propositional core within a given paradigm.)

In other words, if we confine the term “foundation” to the act of knowing, then we can say with full assurance that there are no absolute foundations. But we are still left with propositions that function foundationally for a given belief system. Can there not be foundations for *truth* in its purely descriptive aspect? When we consider problems of ontological truth without (improperly) nesting them within epistemological questions (that is, when we accept something as true *a priori*), it is obvious that a certain *nonepistemic* type of foundation plays a role in the further refinement of what that truth entails. (Whether there can be an *a priori* foundation for ontic constructs is a different question altogether from what we can *know* about their fields of reference.) The fact that an alethic foundation must be expressed assertorically makes it no less a foundation, since its assertoric quality traces a design for the accompanying epistemology rather than for the alethiology in question. It makes sense, therefore, to ask whether the idea of an *alethic* foundation can be displaced in the same way as the idea of an epistemic foundation. Taking “truth” as an ontic category – that is, as an index of *what is* rather than of *what we can know*

about what is – we can see that it incurs none of the losses that *knowing* suffers by being rooted in subjectivity.

Now one could simply decide to restrict the language of foundationalism to questions of *knowledge*, and to deal with questions of *truth* under a different label, but the problem with that is that so much that philosophers and theologians have already said about foundations clearly trespasses on questions of alethiology proper. That is because philosophers and theologians have been extraordinarily careless when it comes to keeping epistemic and alethic categories separate, and this carelessness has allowed a number of questionable assertions to gain a wider hearing than they deserve. Of course, one could simply redefine *knowledge* or *truth* in a way that eliminates the categorical gap between them, but that would be to evade a problem that would still exist. No matter how many times we redefine our philosophical terms so as to avoid engaging the concept of actuality in a preinterpretive world of events, that concept would still remain. The only way to deal adequately with the situation is to promote an understanding of how these categories and realms relate to one another, and to show instances in which an improved understanding makes a clear difference.

THE RAFT AND THE PYRAMID

In 1980, Eduard Sosa invoked a contrast between two images representing what he took to be different models of epistemology: “Contemporary epistemology must choose between the solid security of the ancient foundationalist pyramid and the risky adventure of the new coherentist raft.”³ Sosa’s pyramid/raft contrast has since passed into general circulation, providing what many writers consider a helpful way of expressing the antifoundationalist case.⁴ Theologians have made more of this contrast than perhaps any other group of epistemologists. On p. 1 of his introduction to “nonfoundationalism”, for example, John E. Thiel invokes this contrast as an aid to choosing between different theological models: “nonfoundationalists consider it far more appropriate to understand knowledge as a ‘raft’ rather than as a ‘pyramid,’ as relative claims, at best coherent, floating on the ever-moving currents

³ SOSA: *The Raft and the Pyramid*, 3. Sosa’s image is reminiscent of Otto Neurath’s image of repairing a ship on the open sea (relating to the ultimate lack of epistemic supports) of some 50 years prior. See NEURATH, Otto: *Protokollsätze*. In: *Erkenntnis* 3 (1932/33) 204–14, esp. 206. Neurath’s image was made famous by QUINE, W.V.O.: *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1960, vii.

⁴ See FIORENZA, Francis Schüssler: *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church*. New York: Crossroad 1984, 318 n. 115; DRILLING, Peter J.: *The Pyramid or the Raft: Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and Bernard Lonergan in Dialogue about Foundational Theology*. In: *Horizons* 13 (1986) 275–290, esp. 277. Cf. ABRAHAM, William J.: *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006, 174.

of time and culture rather than as certain truths timelessly fixed in never-shifting sands.”⁵ I will try to show, however, that this way of putting the matter is unfortunate, as a moment’s reflection reveals that, at least at the level of the unqualified image,⁶ the implied contrast between a raft and a pyramid is asymmetrical, and therefore introduces problems into the logical aspect of the matter.

It is easy to understand and appreciate the sense in which knowledge is a “raft”, but why should we say that it is a raft “*rather than . . .* a ‘pyramid’”? If the point of the contrast is to pit the free-floating nature of the raft against its opposite, then a “tree” or a “promontory” would have made a better contrasting image. Although pyramids happen to be as immovable as trees, the image of a pyramid is more directly emblematic of deductive thinking, of building stone upon stone to achieve a stable and complete structure. And while it is true that deductive thinking is thinking nonetheless (and is therefore epistemic), the fact remains that it is thinking through a chain of alethic necessities, so that the pyramid it constructs exists primarily in the realm of truth and only secondarily in that of knowledge. This is why I say that the raft/pyramid contrast lacks symmetry, and as such represents a logical muddle. It is, in fact, a mixed metaphor, and the mixing hides the more troubling aspect of the conflation of alethic and epistemic categories.

These problems beset Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s use of the pyramid image: “Foundationalism is an epistemology . . . that likens what we know to a pyramid based on a set of indubitable beliefs.”⁷ How does one, according to this image, represent the legitimate piling of logical inferences atop a *fideistically accepted* set of propositions? The image, as usually applied, does not accommodate this simple alternative, thereby (wrongly) suggesting that fideistic acceptance will have little to do with logical inferences.

When we consider the pairing of the raft and the pyramid in light of the separate roles of epistemic *versus* alethic foundations, an alternative to the either/or suggests itself: Why not put the pyramid *on* the raft? Such an arrangement makes more sense, for a number of reasons. The raft makes the

⁵ THIEL, John E.: *Nonfoundationalism*. Minneapolis: Fortress 1994, 1.

⁶ I say “at the level of the unqualified image”, because it is not clear to me that Sosa commits the error of asymmetry, or at least that he does so in a manner as egregious as those who later reused the raft/pyramid contrast. For his part, Sosa gives due attention to the intercoherence of the parts of the raft. Nevertheless, Sosa’s avoidance of any hierarchy of inferences within the raft metaphor is unfortunate, and would seem represent an element of asymmetry since the (architectonic) pyramid clearly represents such a hierarchy for Sosa. On p. 6 of his essay, Sosa seems to contrast being “proved deductively on ... a basis” with “coher[ing] with a comprehensive system of beliefs”, but why cannot the deductive method work with the acceptance of an a priori foundation?

⁷ VANHOOZER, Kevin J.: *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2005, 292.

point that absolute epistemic foundations for a particular belief system are not forthcoming, while the pyramid speaks to the fact that a system built upon *a priori* grounds is not thereby loosed of the rules of rationality and conceptual possibility. The real problem with offering “raft” and “pyramid” as competing epistemological models is that “pyramid” does not efficiently stand for knowledge as such but for *truth*. In other words, Sosa’s alternative between a raft and a pyramid is an unfortunate way of pitching the issue, because it reinforces the conflation of “knowledge” and “truth” that marks most antifoundationalist rhetoric. A given belief system is a “raft” in the sense that we can never erase all hypothetical doubts from its claims, but it is also a “pyramid” if it builds upon those claims in a manner consistent with its own assumed alethiological ground. (On this model, the blocks of the pyramid do not represent truth *claims*, but rather truth itself, *viz.* preinterpretive ontic relations.) Helmut Hoping expresses the relation of theology to the raft in Thomistic terms: “The subject-matter of the theology of Sacred Scripture is a *quidam credibile* for which there exists no *ratio demonstrativa* but only a *ratio persuasoria*.”⁸

Showing that a given claim for an epistemic foundation will always be more or less a *pretender* (in terms of its justification) is not the same as questioning the way in which logical necessities will be bound to that foundation *if* it should be true. This means that narrative theology (in its more developed North American variety) can hardly be considered the simple alternative to a theology built on a foundationalist epistemology. When Ronald F. Thiemann classifies a “conceptual frame” as both necessary for grasping a purported epistemic foundation and as being itself in need of epistemic justification, he writes in terms that are strictly true but which must be handled somewhat more guardedly than he allows. Indeed, Thiemann too quickly takes the purported lack of a frame’s justification as a support for a narrative-theological reading of the gospels.⁹ This is to stretch the terminology of a “conceptual frame” beyond its usefulness by placing even normal rules of logical inference within its purview. The reason those rules are valid for epistemology is that they are first valid for alethiology: to arrive at a proper knowledge of something means to understand the truth about it, so that the success of one’s knowledge is best guaranteed by tracing those ontic relations. When the validity of those rules is questioned by a well-intentioned but misguided crack-down on foundations of every sort, the temptation to deny those rules any epistemic usefulness often carries into an understanding of their alethiological

⁸ HOPING, Helmut: *Understanding the Difference of Being: On the Relationship between Metaphysics and Theology*. In: *The Thomist* 59 (1995) 189–221, esp. 193.

⁹ THIEMANN, Ronald F.: *Revelation and Theology: The Gospels as Narrated Promise*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1985, 45.

function. This leads once again to the basic confusion between epistemic and alethic categories that is found at the heart of the antifoundationalist project. This confusion plagues even the most basic gestures toward narrativist thinking. Amos Yong points out, for example, that Richard Rorty “seems to have confused the difference between what the truth relation is and how we go about demonstrating that relation.”¹⁰

It might still be objected that the implied “rules of rationality and conceptual possibility” that I invoked above cannot be accepted *a priori*, but are themselves in need of an epistemic foundation. While I do not agree at all with that sentiment, I wish to draw attention to the fact that the New Testament everywhere presupposes that normal rules of logical inference are incontrovertible. The operation of a realist/materialist alethiological scheme is most conspicuous in 1 Cor 15, where Paul presses the realist/materialist sense in which Christ’s resurrection must be true in order for our faith to count: “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). If it were enough for Christ’s resurrection to be *narratively* true (that is, actualized in *storytime*), Paul would have had no contention with the Corinthians, who manifestly possessed the same resurrection *narrative* as Paul. (In fact, it was *because* they possessed the same narrative as Paul that he could make his appeal.) But Paul presses the theological necessity that Christ’s resurrection is true in an extranarrative sense: indeed, it is the Corinthians’ denial of the possibility of the believer’s (future) *actual, extranarrative* resurrection that Paul connects to an implicit denial of Christ’s resurrection. Paul’s argument trades on the irreducibly realist ontology of the kerygma, and in such a way that the kerygma itself serves to guard against the threat of a linguistic turn in understanding reality. Thus an alethiological sounding of Paul’s argument reveals a thoroughly realist ontology, trading in simple “logocentric” rationality and the logical force of conceptual possibility. The alethiology of the argument, of course, is not distinctively Pauline, but rather is a tacit conceptual support for the apostolic kerygma itself. It is an alethiology that counts actuality *in spacetime*, rather than actuality *in storytime*, as what is really “true”.

CONCLUSION

A lot of people think that the absence of secure epistemic foundations somehow entails the demise of propositional truth, but epistemology and alethiology must be kept in separate compartments. Narrative theology, in particular,

¹⁰ YONG, Amos: *Spirit – Word – Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2002, 169. See POIRIER: *The Epistemology/Alethiology Double Switch in Postfoundationalist Hermeneutics*, 19–28.

is deeply entrenched in a naive conflation of knowledge and truth. Contrary to what most recent theological discourse seems to assume, the uncertainty or perspectivity of knowledge can have no purchase on truth as an ontic category. This means that there is nothing intrinsically wrong or naive about placing the alethiological grounding of theology within a set of propositions. Within the language of rafts and pyramids, this arrangement is best represented, not by replacing the latter with the former, but rather by situating the latter *on* the former.¹¹

Abstract

Antifoundationalists seldom distinguish between foundations of knowledge and foundations of truth. That the shortcomings of the former do not apply to the latter suggests that the common contrast between the image of a raft and that of a pyramid should be replaced: the image of a pyramid on a raft speaks more accurately to the role of alethic foundations for a belief system lacking an absolute epistemic foundation. This article takes up these considerations, and argues against the idea that Christian theology can dispense with a realist/materialist understanding of truth.

¹¹ I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful suggestions.