

POST-CONSERVATIVES, FOUNDATIONALISM, AND THEOLOGICAL TRUTH: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

R. SCOTT SMITH

Post-conservative Christians commonly claim that the modern picture of theological knowledge and its justification, as an edifice that is built upon foundations, is badly flawed and ought to be discarded in favor of a post-modern, holistic alternative. A key person behind this view is Nancey Murphy of Fuller Theological Seminary, who has developed a vigorous philosophical attack against foundationalism, as well as a thoroughgoing replacement. Like many others, Murphy first claims that foundationalism requires one-hundred-percent certainty in the foundational, basic beliefs. For conservative Christians, that foundation has been the universal truth found in authoritative, inerrant Scripture, whereas for liberals, it has been universal experience.¹

While that line of critique is the most common objection against foundationalism, I will argue that it is mistaken, for foundationalism need not require certainty. However, she also offers a second kind of criticism. She argues that even for modest foundationalists, who do not require certainty in the foundational beliefs, the foundations end up “hanging from the balcony.”² By this she means that no beliefs or observations are exempt from the influence of theories. There simply is no theory-neutral observation or belief. Any so-called “foundational” beliefs end up being partly supported by higher-level theoretical beliefs, so that the foundationalist picture of how justification proceeds, from bottom to top, from foundational beliefs to inferred beliefs, simply is misguided.

What is driving this second line of critique? It is the belief that we are on the inside of language and cannot escape to know things as they are objectively, that is, in an extra-linguistic, mind-independent sense. On this view, truth as a matter of correspondence with objective reality is a mistaken notion, for we simply cannot know any such thing. If we cannot know things as they are objectively, then this position leads to humility in our knowledge claims, and in the postmodern climate in much of academia, this is an attractive position to take. In short, the post-conservative view takes off pressure to have to prove to challengers that our theological claims (such as that Scripture is inerrant) are certain.

* R. Scott Smith is associate professor of ethics at Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639.

¹ Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996) 15–17.

² Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* (Boulder: Westview, 1997) 92.

I will rebut this second critique of foundationalism by showing that she most likely presupposes the very thing she denies, namely that we can have epistemic access to an objective, extra-linguistic reality. Then, positively, I will show that she is mistaken, for we can and often do have knowledge of objective truths. Then I will apply both her epistemological method and mine to a core Christian doctrine, and will show that her view will lead to some heterodox conclusions. Along the way, I will interact with others' views, including those of Stanley Grenz, John Franke, and Brad Kallenberg.

I. MURPHY'S CRITIQUE OF FOUNDATIONALISM, AND ITS EPISTEMOLOGICAL REPLACEMENT

In her critique of modern philosophical and theological approaches, Murphy advocates a true break from modern, reductionistic presuppositions in epistemology, language, and metaphysics. In their place she argues for a threefold holism, without a return to premodern views. In this paper, we will focus on her arguments with regard to epistemology and language.

The first kind of modern reductionism with which she takes issue is that of foundationalism. She thinks it is reductionistic because of its emphasis placed upon individual propositions instead of the whole in which they are found. In her view, foundationalism is an attempt to provide "certain and universal knowledge" by appealing to universally accessible truths.³ Moderns tended to fall into two groups with respect to what counts as part of the foundations. First, empiricists appealed to claims about mental representations and supposedly universal experience. But, she claims what dealt a death blow to this kind of foundationalism was the recognition that scientific facts, which draw heavily from observations, are theory-laden, and thus not universal and available to all.⁴ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke concur, for our experiences "are always filtered by an interpretive framework."⁵

Second, for conservative Protestantism, Scripture is the foundation for theological knowledge, but Murphy rejects this view as well. First, she believes that Christian theologians' arguments do not provide the requisite certainty that the Bible is the written word of God. Also, Descartes's rationalist appeal to "clear and distinct ideas" fails to provide a certain foundation, for "what is indubitable in one intellectual context is all too questionable in another."⁶

To illustrate, she contrasts her differing presuppositions with those of Richard Swinburne over the possibility of his being changed into a crocodile and yet remaining the same person. As a dualist, it seems possible to him that his soul could be embodied in a crocodile's body. Yet, as a non-reductive

³ Ibid. 26; see also *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* 12–13, and her *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 15. See also Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 23, 30.

⁴ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* 91.

⁵ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* 49.

⁶ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* 91.

physicalist, she believes our “mental and spiritual capacities arise out of the complex ordering of our physical selves in their social environment,” so Swinburne’s notion is inconceivable to her.⁷ Due to differing presuppositions, what seems basic to one might not to another.

Importantly, this leads to a second criticism of foundationalism. As she puts it, the foundations end up “hanging from the balcony,” since they are partly supported “from above,” by theoretical, nonfoundational beliefs.⁸ We never have a raw, theory-neutral observation. In the case of rationalist foundations, there always are presupposition-laden intuitions in the philosophical arguments (as in the Swinburne illustration). If foundationalism’s picture of linear reasoning moves only from bottom to top, then these counter-examples show that this picture is an oversimplification of how justification actually proceeds.⁹

Thus, on her view, foundationalism should be replaced by a postmodern, holist view of epistemic justification. She draws upon W. V. O. Quine’s “image of knowledge as a web or net,” such that “there are no sharp distinctions between basic (foundational) beliefs and nonbasic beliefs.”¹⁰ Not only do the beliefs in the web reinforce each other in a variety of kinds of connections amongst themselves as well as to the whole, they also work in a top-down manner. For example, in philosophy of science, there are no data that are simply given; rather, all “facts” are made “by means of their interpretation” in light of other theoretical assumptions.¹¹

Yet, Quine provides too circumspect a view of what counts as knowledge to allow for how we can justify claims of other disciplines in which she is interested, such as theology and ethics. There could also be competing webs of beliefs, which raises the specter of relativism. So, Imre Lakatos allows Murphy to unpack her own views of philosophy of science and later apply them to theology and ethics when considered as sciences in their own right.¹²

But more important for our present purposes, Murphy appeals to the holist views of Alasdair MacIntyre to flesh out her epistemological holism for theology and ethics, and as a broader theory of rationality. For him, rationality is found only within traditions, which are historically extended, socially embodied arguments about the nature of the good for that tradition.¹³ Like Lakatos, traditions critically involve an historical dimension, and they are tied to communities, or forms of life. MacIntyre thinks there are no theory-independent facts, for “facts . . . were a seventeenth-century invention.”¹⁴ Also, standards of rationality “emerge from and are part of a history

⁷ *Ibid.* 93.

⁸ *Ibid.* 92.

⁹ *Ibid.* 94; see also Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* 26.

¹⁰ Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² This is the burden of *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, as well as the focus of chapter 9 of *Anglo-American Postmodernity*.

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2d ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 222.

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 357.

in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition."¹⁵

MacIntyre claims that specific types of claims (e.g. scientific) make sense only in terms of historical reason.¹⁶ This is what Murphy calls diachronic justification, or how we justify modifications within a tradition. A second aspect of justification is synchronic, which addresses how to rationally assess why one tradition is rationally superior to a rival, even though rational standards are internal to a tradition. For MacIntyre, this involves the comparison of traditions' languages, such that "a tradition is vindicated by the fact that it has managed to solve its own major problems, while its competitor has failed to do so, and by the fact that it can give a better account of its rival's failures than can the rival itself."¹⁷

Rational superiority depends upon people in one tradition learning the language of another as a second, first language.¹⁸ This can only be done by participation within that alien tradition, so that they learn the grammar of that language. In this way, they can see the epistemic resources available in another tradition to help solve the problems internal to their own.

Traditions provide the context within which we "see" the world. We can only think and perceive by means of the categories and stories found in traditions, for there is no independent reality against which we may compare a text.¹⁹ Nor can we compare reality with our favored conceptual scheme, for we do not have "some sort of direct insight into the nature of reality."²⁰

II. THE RELATED SHIFT IN LANGUAGE

Another kind of shift involves language, which is closely tied to her reasons for her second critique of foundationalism. For Murphy, modern views of language, which are representational or expressivist, also are reductionistic because, first, they focus on "atomic" propositions apart from their narrative context. Second, they focus on the individual and what he or she intended by a certain expression, rather than the "move" that person made in the context of a social setting.

In sharp contrast, she argues that these modern views of language are seriously flawed. Liberal Protestant theology makes use of expressivist religious language, and such language describes an inner state of the speaker. But Murphy contends that this view requires too sharp a separation between the cognitive and expressive functions of language. For instance, if theolog-

¹⁵ Ibid. 7.

¹⁶ Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* 58.

¹⁷ Ibid. 59.

¹⁸ E.g. see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) 114.

¹⁹ Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* 140.

²⁰ Ibid. 127.

ical statements are just expressions of inner states of a speaker, why should that description be of interest to anyone else?²¹

Conservative Protestant theology, with its use of scriptural foundationalism and propositional, referential language, also faces severe problems. First, the language of scriptural foundationalism cannot secure the connection between these propositions and a reality beyond our experience. Second, this view of “religious language needs to be criticized for its neglect of the self-involving character of religious discourse.”²²

Instead, Murphy embraces the holism found in the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. Holism in this sense is found in at least two ways. For her, sentences have their meaning in their narrative context. Translation of a proposition into any other language simply will not preserve its meaning, for meanings are not universal. Also, meanings are not a matter of a first-person awareness, or intention; rather, meaning is a matter of use in a linguistically shaped form of life, the whole in which words have their meaning. Such uses are a matter of publicly observable behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal.

Furthermore, language and life (i.e. behavior) are inextricable, such that language is not *about* the world, as it would be if it were a reflection or representation of reality.²³ Rather, language is *in* the world. She indicates that “the biblical narratives *create* a world, and it is within this world that believers are to live their lives and understand reality.”²⁴ If we draw upon Brad Kallenberg, whom Murphy mentored at Fuller, we may see his similar use of Wittgenstein and how language is “in” the world.²⁵ In his view, language and world are *internally* related. We do not somehow get outside language to know how things are from some supposedly neutral standpoint. Rather, “the connection between ‘language and reality’ is made by definition of words, and these belong to grammar, so that language remains self-contained and autonomous.”²⁶ Accordingly, “it is in language that it is all done.”²⁷ Or, in Kallenberg’s terms, “language does not represent reality, it *constitutes* reality.”²⁸ Grenz and Franke clearly agree: “We do not inhabit the ‘world-in-itself’; instead, we live in a linguistic world of our own making.”²⁹ The focus of theology becomes “the world-constructing, knowledge-forming, identity-forming ‘language’ of the Christian community.”³⁰

Does this mean that the way the world is has no bearing on how we may talk? Certainly not, for we are talking about how a certain world is due to

²¹ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* 81.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 127.

²⁴ Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* 120 (emphasis mine).

²⁵ See Brad J. Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). See her endorsement on the jacket.

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar* (ed. Rush Rhees; trans. Anthony Kenny; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974) §55.

²⁷ *Ibid.* §95.

²⁸ Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar* 234.

²⁹ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

how some particular community's members have made it by their language use. The community's grammar will constrain the appropriate kinds of expressions.³¹ But to talk of the "real" world in itself would bifurcate world and language.

III. FIRST CRITIQUE: WHAT DOES MURPHY'S VIEW PRESUPPOSE?

Murphy has offered a highly sophisticated, tightly argued case for Anglo-American postmodernism, and in so doing, she has given a highly integrative approach to Christian thought. In her mind, she has served to restore Christian theology back to its role as the queen of the sciences, and thus her work deserves careful consideration by Christians and other kinds of scholars.³²

Here are a few strengths of her work. First, she is right to draw our attention to how our "situatedness" and particularity can and does influence our beliefs. Grenz and Franke also call us to consider the historical, cultural context of our theologizing, for we are influenced by it.

Second, her emphasis upon how we do in fact use our language is illuminating. We do shape our understanding of the world by the terms we use. By the *Los Angeles Times's* editors' choice to favor the use of "anti-abortion" over "pro-life," they shaped and pitted the debate over abortion as between those who favor a good thing, choice, and those who are against something ("anti-abortion"), rather than as those who also have a positive stance ("pro-life").

Third, some things are *made* into what they are by how we use our language. A minister declares that a man and a woman are now husband and wife. Defendants are declared guilty or not when the jury foreperson utters those words. Adoptions are finalized when the judge uses words to declare that to be the case.

Fourth, there is an apparent strength of her view's "humble" approach to knowledge claims. Today, this approach appeals to many people who think we should be suspicious of universal truth claims. Some people feel that to appeal to objective, universal claims is in effect to oppress them and limit their autonomy. Also, science has enjoyed enormous prestige, such as in medicine, and it has promised an inevitable progress, for the good of humanity. Yet, that promise was shattered when science was used to create the atom bomb and to perform hideous experiments upon Jewish captives in Nazi concentration camps.

Despite these strengths, I want to focus on one core aspect of her view, namely, that we are on the "inside" of language and cannot get "out" to know the world as it is objectively. If we take the later Wittgenstein seriously, as she does, then we should conclude like Kallenberg that in language all is done. Since she depends heavily on MacIntyre to justify her epistemological holism, we should note that he too draws heavily upon the later Wittgenstein.³³ It is MacIntyre who instructs us that there is no such thing as lan-

³¹ Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* 25.

³² For instance, see *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, chaps. 9 and 10.

³³ This is the argument of my second chapter in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge: Philosophy of Language After MacIntyre and Hauerwas* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

guage as such, but there are only discrete, historically situated languages.³⁴ For if there were an essence to language that we could know as such, then there would be something that exists determinately in the real world, which we can know as such apart from the use of particular languages.

So, what is the relevant community out of which she writes? It will make all the difference, for if there is no essence to language, but only many languages; language use makes a given world; and language and world are internally related, then there are as many worlds as there are languages. What someone has to say is tied to the grammar of a particular community. So, it would not be sufficient for her to write simply as a Christian, for Christians are quite diverse. There are many denominations, along with divisions within each such group. So, what is her primary community? Consistently, she writes as one who is a conservative Christian, but also one who has rejected the assumptions of modernity, and she writes as a philosophy professor at a conservative Christian seminary. Yet, she does not specify in detail her exact communal commitments, except in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* There we see that she explicitly owns her communal affiliation, which is Fuller Seminary, where she writes as a fellow Christian amongst other non-reductive physicalists.³⁵

But if languages are internally related to their respective worlds, then what if that is how she (and others at Fuller) happen to talk? The discrete, historically situated character of ways of life means that she writes from a relatively small Christian community. On her view, languages are discrete and internally related to their own particular worlds, so other groups literally talk in different languages and inhabit different worlds. Even other Christians would have their own languages, which may or may not share some of her presuppositions.

In this light, what are her many claims? One possible answer is that they are just constructs of her discrete community's way of talking, but if that is the case, then so what? Yet, Murphy has explored a response to this point. Even if we do speak different languages, the community and tradition still matter since we can see the rational superiority of one over another. She has embraced the holism of MacIntyre precisely because of its ability to adjudicate between rival traditions, which boil down to different languages, with their own related worlds. So let us see if MacIntyre's work can provide the solution she expects. Like MacIntyre, or his exemplar, Aquinas, she somehow must have learned and mastered many different languages (such as those of science, theology, ethics, philosophy of language, and more, in their modern and postmodern versions), or else we would have to deny her scholarly grasp of her material. And, indeed, Murphy presents impressive credentials with doctorates in both theology and philosophy of science. But on MacIntyre's account, linguistic mastery is what she needs in order to see the rational

³⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 357.

³⁵ Even this specificity may not be sufficient, for surely there are subgroups within Fuller. In that case, it will not do to refer just to Fuller as the relevant community. Rather, which group within Fuller is the relevant one? The result also obtains if she were to appeal to a generalized Anabaptist community, which had been suggested by some of her students when I presented a different paper.

resources available in various traditions, and their rational superiority and inferiority. How does one gain such mastery?

To master a language as a second first language, one has to learn it as an insider. It is not a simple matter of translation, for we lose meaning in that way. Becoming bilingual involves mastering a language's verbal uses as well as the gestures (that is, the nonverbal behaviors). But that presents a problem. How could Murphy master these languages? She did not live in the time of Locke, Descartes, or Kant, or the nineteenth-century theologians she cites, and that is significant, for on her view languages are highly particular. It therefore seems impossible for her to master languages of people groups who no longer are alive. Also, presumably, she does not speak as a native the language of representational theorists in language, nor of foundationalists, since those are not her communal affiliations.

Now, at this point, she could object that this point is irrelevant. Today we have many liberal and conservative theologians, foundationalists, and others, so it does not matter if a past community, along with its world and language, no longer exists. But each of these generalized groupings has diverse characteristics. Again, the same issue resurfaces: which is the relevant community? That we her readers know this is highly important, for if language use by a particular community makes a world, then it makes all the difference that we know her relevant community.

But this surfaces a major issue. She has given us accounts of foundationalism and its degenerative state, as well as the failures of representational views of language, along with her holistic replacements. In what world do these conditions obtain, and what are these claims? To be consistent, they must be constructions made by how she talks according to the language of her community. They cannot be statements that are true in a sense of corresponding with an extra-linguistic reality, lest she undermine one of her core beliefs.

Therefore, why are there problems with foundationalism? It is because that is how she and her fellow community's members talk, according to their grammar. The same holds for all her views, including that we can rationally adjudicate between rivals. All these claims are moves within language games in her way of life, and as such they are meaningful only because that community's members have decided that such uses have meanings. Even the claim that one tradition is rationally superior to another is but a claim made from within a way of life and how its members have made its world. But so what? Why should anyone else in a different community talk as she does? There is no basis for commending her views to outsiders of her group, except that she talks in a way that they should join with her and see "reality" as she does.

But, surely this conclusion is drastically opposed to her apparent intentions in writing more than three detailed books on these subjects. She has not written these essays in such a way as to just state how her community talks. Her choices of publishers (e.g. Fortress, Trinity, Westview, and Cornell) indicate that she expects a far broader audience to understand her work. Also, she has argued that we *should* reject modern epistemological, linguistic, meta-

physical, and theological views in favor of her post-conservative, holistic ones. But since she does not seem content with just telling us how they talk in her community, then it seems she actually presupposes an epistemic access to the real world in itself, even though she denies that this is possible.

IV. SECOND CRITIQUE: CAN WE HAVE ACCESS TO OBJECTIVE TRUTH?

Thus far, I have argued that Murphy's two criticisms of foundationalism fail. First, foundationalism need not require certainty. Second, I rebutted her other criticism of foundationalism, for on her own view, she too most likely presupposes the very thing she denies, thus refuting her own view. Or, her criticism is just the way a particular community talks and has made its world.

Now I will develop a second, positive argument against her views. I will attempt to sketch how we can, and often do, have epistemic access to objective truth (i.e. the way things are in reality, apart from how we talk, think, or conceptualize about them). Time and space will not permit a full-blown account; for now, let me sketch how I think such an argument would go.³⁶ We will look at a few cases of everyday kinds of events, to show that we do have access to know objective reality. If I am right, then I will have shown that foundationalism is *right* to presuppose that our foundational beliefs rest upon access to the real world and objective truth.

1. *How a toddler learns to identify an apple.* I have enjoyed watching my two-year-old daughter develop her understanding of what apples are. When she was quite young, my wife and I would show her a book that helped her learn what different fruits look like. There are about twenty-four pictures of Red Delicious apples, oranges, grapes, and bananas on two adjacent pages. We would start by pointing to a picture of an apple on the left page, and we would then say "apple." Then we would point to another apple picture and say "apple" again. We would repeat this through all the apple pictures, as well as the oranges and so on. Later, we would return to this book and ask her, "Where are the apples?" She would point to one, and we would affirm her by saying "good!" Then I might ask, "Where is another apple?" As she has grown older, she has developed the ability to identify all the other apples pictured there. She also would get to see different apples we would eat at home, not all of which were Red Delicious.

What was going on? She had to see each apple picture for *what it is*, hear the word "apple" uttered for *what it is*, learn to associate the apple's picture with the word "apple," and then develop a concept of what an apple is from many observations. She then could go into the grocery store's produce section and be able to pick out as apples not just Red Delicious ones, but also Gala, Golden Delicious, Fuji, and more.

³⁶ However, for a brief sketch as to how the argument goes, see my "Hauerwas and Kallenberg and the Issue of Epistemic Access to An Extra-Linguistic Realm," *Heythrop Journal* 45/3 (July 2004) 322–25.

2. *The prescription refill example.* I use my telephone to call in refills for prescriptions. I bring the vial with me to the phone while I call, and I am prompted by the system to enter certain information, starting with my phone number. I have to look at the phone's keypad, notice which keys are for which numbers, and then press the correct numbers in sequence. How do I (or anyone else) do that? I am thinking of a number, then I see which key is for that number, and then I direct my finger to that key and press it. After doing that for all the digits, I hear the number replayed back to me, and again I have to verify that I entered the number correctly. How do I do that? I listen to the digits, and then I compare the numbers spoken back to me in a sequence with those of my phone number. I have to be able to hear the numbers for what they are, compare them with what I know to be my number, and see that they match up.

The same follows when I enter the prescription number, which in turn is repeated back to me. Again, I have to be able to see the number, this time on the vial, as it really is, then see which keys are for which numbers, and then direct my finger to press the right keys. If I make a mistake, I can know that because I see that I pressed the wrong one. I must be able to see the numbers for what they are on the vial, do the same with the keypad, and then match up the audio feedback with the number as I read it on the vial. In all cases, I have to be able to see the numbers for what they are, in order to match them up.

3. *The example of reading a text aloud.* Suppose you are reading a passage of Scripture aloud in your church's worship service, and your passage is Rom 1:16–17 (NASB): "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the love of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" Suppose you read the passage just like that. Now, you may notice that some people look up at you with a puzzled look on their faces. You might start to wonder why. Then, maybe someone pulls you aside and, to your surprise, tells you that you read it wrong, that you substituted "love" for "righteousness" in the last verse.

How would people present know whether what you read was right or not? Somehow they have to hear the sounds you uttered for what they are, see what the word in the passage actually is, compare the two, and then express their thoughts properly in language (e.g. "you misspoke," not "great job!"). I did this intentionally in a philosophy class one day, to see how attentively my students were following my reading, and to force them to pay attention to their awarenesses—what they heard, what they read, their comparison of the two, and their judgment. How could we ever correct anyone if we do not have access to these things as they really are, and that we can each see what is indeed the case?

What should we make of these case studies? In each case, we have to be able to see a thing for what it is. From many observations, we develop a concept of what that thing is. We also must see that a particular object of our awareness is another instance of that kind of thing (perhaps a Golden

Delicious apple). We learn to associate a term with our awareness of the object by hearing the term for what it is, seeing the object for what it is, and then comparing them and seeing that, yes, this object is indeed that kind of thing. That is, we can see that an object of our awareness fulfills the concept, and then we can see that the thing in question is indeed such-and-such.

Dallas Willard explains “in fact we do this sort of thing all the time, whenever we look at something to see if it is as we have thought it to be.”³⁷ He observes,

A primary manifestation of the affinity between thought and object is the fact that no one ever has to be taught what their thought (or perception) is a thought (or perception) *of*, nor could they be, though of course they have to learn language for talking about their thought and its objects, and they also have much to learn about thought and its objects. But the child knows what its thoughts (perceptions, etc.) are of as soon as it becomes aware that it is having experiences; and that is one foundation of most other learning that transpires.³⁸

This is the pattern I have observed in my little girl. I could not identify her experiences for her; she alone can do that. She has a privileged access to her experiences, and while I can have the same experience (of a thought, concept, etc., lest interpersonal communication break down completely), I cannot have her having of it (which is particular to her). I can pay attention to what is present before my mind in my own experiences, and then even label the objects of my experiences with words, but she has to be able to experience the same thing and be aware of it, lest I not be able to teach her, period. If Willard is right, and it surely seems that he is, then it is our own, first-person access to our intentional states, as well as to the objects that are given in our experiences that allows us to identify what our thoughts (with their concepts) are.

But, how do we know this? This leads to a crucial point: we each can compare the object that is given in our experience with our concept of that object, to see if they match up. That is, I can compare my thought of something to that thing as it is given in my experience. I can see if they are the same or different, and I can see if my thought of that thing does (or does not do) anything to modify it. This is where I think we must pay very close attention to what is present before our minds in experience, for we can compare our concepts with things in the world, and we can see that they are different, and that my thought (or, awareness, or language use) does not modify its object.

As Willard argues, even those who deny such access to the real world do this all the time, yet they additionally hold that in thinking, seeing, or mentally acting upon some object, we modify it, such that we cannot get to the real thing in itself. But this is nonsense, as that very ability to access the real, objective world is presupposed in that denial. The way to show that

³⁷ Dallas Willard, “How Concepts Relate the Mind to Its Objects: The God’s Eye View Vindicated?” *Philosophia Christi* 1/2 (1999) 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 14–15 (my emphasis).

this view is mistaken is by paying close attention to our awarenesses and then showing (1) what must be taking place; and (2) that this must be presupposed by its detractors, in order for them to deny it. But that result undercuts this entire constructivist project.

V. APPLYING THESE TWO METHODOLOGIES

So far I have argued that Murphy's first critique of foundationalism, that basic beliefs require indubitability, is mistaken. Moreover, her second critique, that so-called "foundational beliefs" cannot function as such since they too are theory-dependent, fails because her own view also presupposes an epistemic access to a mind-and-language-independent world. Or, her view is just the construction of how some local community happens to talk, and if so, then who should care? I also just argued that foundationalists are right to hold this presupposition, for we can and often do have such access to objective reality. Even so, there is further reason to reject Murphy's kind of constructivist project. I now will apply both her epistemological methodology and mine to a core Christian doctrine, to show implications that follow for the faith itself.

Let us consider the resurrection. Orthodox Christians have held that the resurrection is historically real, in that Jesus arose bodily from the grave. Now, such a view makes sense if we adopt the epistemological methodology I have suggested, for it explains how we can know such an event as one that objectively took place. We need to examine the evidence and see if the actual states of affairs match up with our concepts. If Jesus rose, then we should find certain things to be the case. For example, we compare the facts (including documentary evidences) with our concepts and see if they match up. Also, the resurrection should be the best explanation to fit the facts. Does this mean that theories have no influence on this process? No; as one example, the Jesus Seminar's members' naturalism undoubtedly has a crucial impact on their conclusions. But on my view and Willard's, we can compare theories (including naturalism and the resurrection hypothesis) with reality and see if they match up.

Now let us see what the resurrection is on Murphy's view, as well as our ability to know it as an historical event. If we take her view seriously, the resurrection must be a construction of Christians' language. Following her, we cannot know objective truth, and so the "truth" of the resurrection must be the result of the telling of our story, which makes the resurrection what it is. So the Christian claim that Jesus rose bodily from the dead is logically equivalent to the statement that Christians say that Jesus arose from the dead. But in other worlds, such as that of Islam, Jesus did not rise from the dead, for that is how Muslims talk. Notice that the difference between Muslim and Christian views of the resurrection no longer would be over the issue, Did Jesus in fact rise from the dead? That issue is settled; in the Christian one, he did rise, but not in the Muslim one, all due to the uses of different languages, which made the respective worlds. Thus, Jesus would not be the Savior of the world in the Islamic world, but only in the Christian one. But

that conclusion clearly is heterodox and therefore ought to give us further reasons to reject Murphy's methodology.³⁹

VI. CONCLUSION

Should conservative Christians abandon foundationalism? Clearly not. But does this mean that my view suffers from a lack of epistemic humility? I do not think that needs to be the case at all. We do not need to have invincible certainty to be justified in believing that we can and do come in epistemic contact with the objective, language-and-mind-independent world. There are many things we know, such as that we exist and that Jesus is the only way to God. We do not have to have certainty to know these truths, as well as many, many others. Instead, we can show humility by giving reasons for our beliefs, all the while acknowledging that we could be wrong. For example, it is possible that I am just a brain in a vat, and these sentences are just the result of the stimulation of "my" brain by a mad scientist. But, then I want to reply to a questioner, Why should I believe that? If we have ample reasons for our beliefs, then the burden of proof is upon the one who challenges us. And we can walk humbly before our God, all the while having great confidence that we know the truth, and we can (and should) commend it to others with confidence and compelling evidence.

³⁹ I have argued at greater length about the effects of this kind of linguistic methodology upon several core Christian doctrines in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge* chap. 7.