

Christian Epistemology: Natural or Supernatural?

How do we know what we know?

This brief study of Christian epistemology, written at a philosophical level, is built in part from the concept grid outlined in *Understanding The Times: The Collision of Today's Competing Worldviews*, rev. 2nd ed., 2006 by David A. Noebel. Our study however first traces epistemology to its God-breathed roots in the creation of the mind and then challenges the limitations of Noebel's classic Christian apologist understanding of supernaturalism, which is itself naturalist or theoretical. We contend for a practical supernaturalist understanding of epistemology in which the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, not the mind with its own capacity for study, is the final reference point for knowing what we know.

Chris Anderson
[First Love Ministry](#)

The Origin of the Mind

“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Gen. 2:7 KJV

God is Spirit and man is earth. The soul is thus a product of both spirit and earth, a “synthesis” of spirit and earth.

The mind is a function of the soul. It is neither physical nor spiritual, but a product of their synthesis. (The same is true for the will and the emotions, parts of the soul which meet in the mind.)

Life consists of variable and invariable realities. Thus, as it proceeds through and interfaces with life, where invariability is involved, the mind must determine and live by certain absolutes and finalities of thought. This means the mind must finally rely on one reference point for reality.* (*“A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.”*).

**Reality*, also known as *metaphysics*, includes what the mind knows about the structure, origin and design of the universe (*cosmology*) and about the existence of being (*ontology*).

The Epistemological Problem

Because to interface with life and draw conclusions from it the mind must ultimately rely on one reference point for reality, yet the mind is sourced in the synthesis of two *differing* life natures, one *spiritual* and one of *earth*, the mind is posed with a problematic tension. It must choose between its two source natures in forming the basis for its final

conclusions. Because of the incompatible nature differential (visible vs. invisible, etc.), it cannot rely upon them equally, but must assign priority to them.

In selecting its final reference point, the mind must finally rely on either its source nature in spirit, *or* its source nature in earth. It must rely ultimately upon what it can perceive spiritually (*supernaturally*), or through what it can perceive *naturally* (in nature). It may then proceed to rely on the other nature secondarily in a confirmatory way if it so chooses.

Faith precedes Knowing

The word *rely* is important. In order to *know* by way of drawn conclusion, the mind must first *rely* on a source reference point based in one of the natures from which it is derived by which it may *trust* the reliability of its reasoning. This trust extends to the power source by which it has the capacity to draw conclusions. The mind must first trust either itself for the capacity to draw conclusions and its own first assumptions, or it must trust a power source outside itself to give it the power to rationalize and even to reveal knowledge to it from beyond its own capacity to perceive (*extra-rationally*).

In all cases, whichever choice is made, the mind must first exert reliance. This reliance or trust is also known as *faith*. Thus it is that faith precedes all knowledge and understanding.

Of necessity therefore, the mind is ultimately *religious*. The mind's religion is its innate trust in 1) its reference point for reality, whether of the spirit or of the earth, and in 2) its power source for its capacity to reason and receive understanding, whether of its Spirit-creator or of itself.

Naturalist and Supernaturalist Philosophy

Two broad schools of metaphysical philosophy exist to explain all cosmology and ontology. The Naturalist school of philosophy explains all reality in terms of matter and denies all immaterial reality including thought itself, which it considers to be electric impulses. However, within Naturalism, the school of Realism accepts that thought exists independently of material reality, though otherwise may not subscribe to any idea of supernaturalism.

The contention between pure Naturalism and Realist Naturalism is revealed in the *Mind/Body Problem* which argues over the relationship of the mind's properties (mental events, consciousness etc.) to the physical body, specifically the brain. Is the mind separate from the brain? Realism subscribes to *Mind/Body Dualism* which says the mind is materially separate from the brain, while pure Naturalism advances *Mind/Body Monism* which says mind and brain are inextricably material.

The Supernaturalist school of philosophy contends that an immaterial reality exists beyond both nature and the mind itself. Christian Supernaturalism is the focus of this study, but is not the only Supernatural philosophy. Other religions past and present contend for an immaterial "spiritual" reality beyond nature and the mind, including Islam

and Luciferianism. (Hinduism ultimately combines Naturalism and Supernaturalism into one philosophy, that of Brahman).

But what must be seen is this: behind almost all Naturalist and Supernaturalist philosophies, the mind's ultimate reference point for validating its beliefs is drawn from its *source in the earth* rather than through *direct access to* its source in its divine Creator. Correlatively, its prevenient trust ("faith") is in its own capacity to reason rather than in the Creator-Spirit's revelatory impartation from beyond for understanding.

While this is to be expected with all forms of naturalist philosophy and those supernaturalist philosophies which according to Christian philosophy lie outside the direct personal "knowledge of God," *it is not expected to be found at the heart of the Christian Supernaturalist philosophy itself*. Nevertheless, this is the case, and that this is so forms the basis for this study of what marks genuine Christian epistemology.

Theoretical Supernaturalism

Classic Christian epistemology lays claim to the fact of divine revelation given to mankind by God through the Bible. Classic Christian Supernaturalism teaches that an immaterial reality exists around and beyond the material creation—that God preceded all, created all, has interfaced with mankind throughout human history in various supernatural forms and ways, having gone so far both to incarnate Himself in human flesh to ascend again to heaven as well as to today actually "indwell" the believer in Christ with the Holy Spirit! These are amazing claims indeed!

Yet underneath the portrayal of this philosophy, there exists an equally amazing irony and inconsistency. It is that virtually all Christian supernaturalist philosophers argue their case from the identical basis of the "worldly" philosophies they oppose. Their minds operate from their source origin in *nature* as their final reference point for reality, and their prevenient faith is in the rational power of their own minds to draw the right conclusions about reality from all the evidence they can mentally apprehend! Their minds do not draw from the parent support of their mind's source origin in the living breath of God that first created the mind, and they do not trust in any actual mental access to the Creator's divine inspiration from beyond their minds.

On paper the Christian Supernaturalist argument is based in the supposed "infallibility" of a book supposedly provable from nature as the ultimate reference point of reality. As David J. Noebel writes in *Understanding the Times*, p. 87,

"Christian epistemology is based on special revelation, which in turn is based on history, the law of evidence, and the science of archaeology."

In other words, the ultimate reference point for the truth about the Bible is not the author's parent source in the Spirit of God empowered by his dependent access to that same Spirit's divine revelatory impartation to him of the truth. Rather, his ultimate reference point is in the "law of evidence" according to his mind's parent source in the earth empowered by his own mind's capacity to make its own right conclusion about the truth of the Bible where "unbelievers" accessing that same source of evidence and

drawing on that same capacity in their own minds have made the “wrong” conclusion. Speaking of that same evidence in the preceding paragraph however, Noebel says,

“Christians know that scientists make mistakes and scientific journals can practice discrimination against views considered dangerous. Christians know that history can be perverted, distorted, or twisted and that personal experience is not a good source of fact or knowledge.”

This is amazing. The writer disclaims as authoritative the very source to which he goes on to appeal for the authority of the special revelation on which his epistemology is based! Interestingly, he also goes beyond natural evidence to deny “personal experience” as a valid basis of authority without offering any basis, yet the very Bible itself internally witnesses to itself based on the experiences of its many writers! Noebel is in fact denying his own access to Spirit-witnessed verification of truth sourced in the Spirit of God who formed the mind. Noebel concludes the paragraph thusly,

“On the other hand, Christians believe that Biblical revelation is true and that God would not mislead His children.”

After debunking his own basis for asserting the Bible is true and denying his only personally valid one, Noebel offers a simple statement as a self-standing fact that in effect concludes that Biblical revelation is true because Christians believe it is, followed by a statement based in religious sentiment!

In a nutshell, the Biblical record itself teaches that man’s mind was created as a product of living union between earth and Spirit, but due to sin, the human spirit died and so man’s mind lost access to its supernatural parent source for knowing truth. However, through faith in Christ’s atonement initiated by God Himself, the human spirit may be reborn in direct personal encounter with the Living God and the mind thus renewed through restored access to its formerly lost direct access to knowledge by the Spirit on whom it may depend for the spirit of “wisdom and revelation” in the “knowledge of the truth.” To wit:

***Jn. 16:13** "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth;...*

***1 Cor. 2:5** so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God....**10** For to us God revealed them through the Spirit...
12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, **13** which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. **14** But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.*

***Eph. 1:17** that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.*

The grace of Holy Spirit revelation, quickening and impartation is necessary for a true apprehension of *all* knowledge, not just spiritual knowledge. It is the only biblical reference point given us for knowing what we know as Christians.

Yet Christian supernaturalist philosophers (ie, Christian apologetics ministers) argue their philosophy from a worldly position, not a reborn living spiritual one of direct Spirit encounter. They do not argue for their truth from a knowledge based in experientially witnessed spiritual reality confirmable by natural creation, but rather they argue for a form of truth from a once removed knowledge based in natural evidences according to their native power of rationality. As such, this form of Christian philosophy must be rightly identified as *Theoretical Supernaturalism*. It is indeed a form of the human philosophy the Bible itself condemns and does not do justice to the living philosophy for which the Bible apostles contend.

Practical Supernaturalism

Theoretical Supernaturalism presents only a caricature of genuine Christian epistemology. A merely naturally-defended philosophy is in essence a naturalist philosophy, even if it is in fact arguing for supernatural reality. Theoretical Supernaturalism is thus a natural philosophy according to the principles of this world to be avoided as described by Paul. It has the form, but denies the true power of Christian epistemology.

In real contrast, true Christian epistemology is primarily spiritual, not natural. It is spiritually defended, using natural argument and evidence as mere tools to bring about a spiritually convicting-based change of mind in naturalists and other unbelieving supernaturalist philosophers. We may distinguish the genuine from the form by calling this *Practical Supernaturalism*.

In simplest terms, Practical Supernaturalism appeals primarily to the renewed mind's parent source in the Spirit of Christ according to dependent faith in the Spirit's capability to reveal all truth to the believer about metaphysical reality. It further depends on the Spirit's power, not the mind's ability to present and defend as necessary the truth of Christian epistemology, using the evidences of nature on a Spirit-guided basis to form the arguments the Spirit knows will best work to convert the heart and mind to the truth of Christ.

Practical Supernaturalism makes appeals to living spiritual evidences and utilizes real time spiritual experiences that Theoretical Supernaturalism unbelievably rejects on the same natural bases as Naturalism rejects all Supernaturalism. Most Theoretical Supernaturalists reject most claims of access to supernatural revelation and experience as mere human emotion in the same way the Naturalists automatically dismiss their arguments as "unscientific religious thought."

In conclusion, the following graph outlines the comparatives between all the forms of naturalism and supernaturalism, highlighting the distinctions between Theoretical Supernaturalism and Practical Supernaturalism:

Naturalism		Supernaturalism	
Pure Naturalism	Realism	Theoretical Supernaturalism	Practical Supernaturalism
All is of matter, including thought which are but electric impulses.	Thought exists independently of matter.	Spiritual reality exists beyond material reality, but thought ultimately references material reality to prove so.	Spiritual reality exists beyond material reality, but thought ultimately references spiritual reality to interpret material reality
Denies spiritual reality	Secular realism denies spiritual reality; <i>Christian realism</i> accepts spiritual reality in theory.	Accepts spiritual reality but denies direct thought access to it or verification by it. (may accept limited forms of access; otherwise relegates testimony of such access to the emotional side of the soul)	Accepts spiritual reality and promotes direct thought access to it and verification by it.
Considers naturalism to be scientific and supernaturalism to be religiously anti-scientific.		Considers itself to be scientifically-based religious; sees naturalism as pseudo-scientific and practical supernaturalism as <i>experientially anti-scientific</i>	Considers itself to be faithful beyond both <i>science & religion</i> ; sees naturalism as unbelieving and theoretical supernaturalism as religiously unbelieving.
Denies supernatural revelation		Supernatural revelation confined to the mentally-apprehendable Bible	Supernatural revelation extends to spiritually apprehendable extra-Biblical revelation.
Denies differentiation between the brain and the (natural) mind	Differentiates between the brain and the (natural) mind	Differentiates between the brain and the (natural) mind identified as part of the one <i>soul - spirit</i>	Differentiates the brain from the natural mind as part of the soul, and from the spirit which directly accesses God
Denies the concept of the spiritual mind		Equates spirituality and religion. Defines the spiritual mind by the natural mind's interest in spiritual things, and the <i>carnal mind</i> by attraction to baser natural interests.	Distinguishes spirituality from religion. Differentiates the spiritual mind from the lower natural mind as the <i>carnal mind</i> and <i>religious mind</i> .