

Review of “Reforming Apologetics” by J.V. Fesko

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Book: J. V Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019)

Introduction

With the resurgence of interest in Aristotelianism within the Reformed community, it should not come as a surprise that the topic of apologetics would come under the spotlight for *ressourcement*. Presuppositionalism after all is a novel system that began in the 20th century with Cornelius Van Til and/or Gordon H. Clark, whereas classical apologetics was the system utilized in the Medieval, Reformation, and Post-Reformation era.

In this light, Dr. John Fesko has taken on the task of “reforming” apologetics. According to Fesko, the 20th century turn to presuppositionalism is flawed and contrary to the Reformed tradition. While not necessarily against all aspects of presuppositionalism, stating for example his position that the TAG (Transcendental Argument for God) “can be a useful argument” (p. 137), Fesko rejects presuppositionalism as a whole.

Fesko’s book has eight chapters in it. In the first two chapters, he argues for the confessional and biblical support for *common notions (koinas ennoiai)*. In chapter 3, he enlists John Calvin for support, linking Calvin’s concept of *prolēpsis* with the concept of common notions (p. 58). In chapter 4, he looked at Thomas Aquinas and charged Van Til with reading Thomas through Kantian lenses and thus misrepresenting him (pp. 74-90). In chapter 5, Fesko attempts to draw a line from Immanuel Kant to “Historical Worldview Theory” (HWT) to Van Til, concluding that HWT “was born under the dark star of Enlightenment rationalism, a mind-set committed to eradicating the concept of common human knowledge” (p. 132).

This attack on presuppositionalism continues as Fesko examined the transcendental arguments in chapter 6, whereby Van Til is charged with violating his own principles by engaging in synthesis thinking (pp. 143-6) and appealing to idealist thinkers (p. 146). Fesko also points out that some Vantilians focus excessively on the coherence theory of truth (pp. 149-151), and argues that transcendental arguments appeal to idealism, which he asserts to be a passing philosophical trend (pp. 155-6).

Chapter 7 is a short digression on the issue of the nature of “dualisms,” with a primary focus on Neo-Calvinists of the Dooyeweerdian variety. According to Fesko, most claims about dualisms here fail because “they separate what theologians merely distinguish, have little or no historical evidence to support them, ultimately rest on questionable philosophical claims rather than biblical exegesis, and employ the debunked Hellenization thesis of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930)” (p. 164).

In his final chapter, Fesko draws everything together (and more) to put forward his revised classical apologetics scheme. Fesko links epistemology with covenant and redemptive history (pp. 195-203), pointing out that “no amount of rational argumentation, evidence, or cajoling will persuade sinful covenant breakers to turn to God in repentance” (p. 203), and that the goal of apologetics is “(1) to refute intellectual objections to the Christian faith, (2) to clarify our understanding of the truth, and (3) to encourage and edify believers in their faith,” and also “to refute unbelievers of all sorts, even heretics within the church” (p. 204). Evidences are “points of contact,” and the book of nature should be used in “the process of defending the gospel” (pp. 205-9). To the Vantillian notion that unbelievers cannot truly know truth, Fesko asserts that such confuses epistemology with *axiology* (rightly valuing something) (p. 213).

Preliminary analysis

How should Fesko’s book be evaluated? It must be said that Fesko’s book is an important contribution on the topic of apologetics, especially in its takedown of Dooyeweerdian concepts. Dooyeweerdian thought is an extremely niche Dutch Reformed subject, and while it is not integral or important to presuppositionalism as a whole, parts of it has seemingly infected certain areas of the Reformed community, especially in the resistance to natural law and the Law-Gospel distinction. Fesko’s chapter on dualisms is thus helpful in this regard.

Fesko is also helpful in pointing out the historic focus on *common notions*. His argument for Van Til’s misrepresentation of Thomas Aquinas is interesting, but as a Clarkian, I have no bone in the fight. Similarly, Fesko’s focus on transcendental arguments is fascinating, but I will comment only insofar as his critique has any relation to Clarkian apologetics.

As a Clarkian of sorts on epistemology and apologetics, I certainly disagree with Fesko’s overall thrust in his book. The main points of disagreement are: the nature of apologetics and the issue of the Enlightenment, the reality of paradigms and worldviews, and the nature and place of *common notions*.

Critical analysis: What is apologetics? Enlightenment, Idealism and Apologetics

What is apologetics? What is the nature of apologetics? Fesko has given as the goal of apologetics: “(1) to refute intellectual objections to the Christian faith, (2) to clarify our understanding of the truth, and (3) to encourage and edify believers in their faith,” and also “to refute unbelievers of all sorts, even heretics within the church” (p. 204). While these do constitute some goals of apologetics, Fesko’s summary here is deficient and misses one main ingredient: to understand truth and the relationship of truths with each other, and truth to opinion. Apologetics is not just to *clarify* truth but to *know* truth.

The main problem with Fesko's position is a naïve realism with regards to truth and truth claims. Fesko asserts that evidences stand by themselves and that even sense experiences are "a path to insight and understanding" (p. 216). But how are what they present true, exactly? This goes back to Descartes' demon and his general skepticism of most things, which is not to say that Descartes' solution is true. But the question of epistemology, and apologetics with it, is to ask the question of what truth is and how we can know what is indeed true.

This goes back to Fesko's rather simplistic portrayal of the Enlightenment as something evil, and that presuppositionalism through its lineage from Kant to James Orr to Abraham Kuyper to Cornelius Van Til (Gordon Clark is not mentioned) is bad because of its Enlightenment lineage, being "born under the dark star of Enlightenment rationalism" (p. 132). But was the Enlightenment a purely evil age whereby the intelligentsia conspired together to destroy the Christian faith, or was it rather a diverse and mixed potpourri of movements some of which were attempts to be faithful to Scripture? Just because certain questions were asked during the Enlightenment does not mean that we should discount them, and attacking presuppositionalism due to its lineage is to commit the genetic fallacy. While our new Aristotelians would love to just return to the Reformation era, that is just not possible. The questions asked during the Enlightenment need to be treated seriously even if we reject their answers. To revert to a form of naïve realism just because medievalists and Reformational era philosophers and theologians had held to it is just not a viable strategy to engage with the real world.

We next consider Fesko's attack on transcendental arguments. While I am not necessarily a fan of arguments like TAG (Transcendental Argument for God), the question remains as to how one knows anything for certain. Fesko's naïve realist answer seems to be that certain things are just known, due to *common notions*, senses, and the various academic disciplines. But how do we know what they think they know to be true as truly true? This question of epistemology, while stemming forth from the Enlightenment, is still a valid question. Since apologetics should help believers understand how to know the truth, not just what the truth is, such questions are important. Fesko's neglect of this question shows the weakness of his 'reform' of apologetics, since aspiring to a more 'pristine' time of Aristotle and the Reformed Scholastics will not suddenly make the questions of modernity and post-modernity go away.

This brings us to the issue of knowledge. Somebody can know something that is true, without knowing why it is true. For example, I know I am not in the Matrix, but how do I know why I am not in the Matrix? Most people can assert the former, but are not able to answer the latter. The role of epistemology is to get truth, and thus truth has to be justified in order to be true. Most people operate with a subconscious set of truths as it were, but they cannot defend them. This is what transcendental arguments are there for, not to show that people do not know what in front of them is true, but to show that they have no basis for understanding these things to be true, or even that their beliefs are self-contradictory in their incoherent paradigm.

Critical analysis: Paradigms and worldviews

In his attack on what he calls Historical Worldview Theory (HWT), Fesko denies the existence of worldviews. Rather, facts are just facts, and “human beings do not impress their understanding upon the world” (p. 215). Fesko is true insofar as we understand that to God, facts are objectively facts. But subjectively, how creatures interpret the facts differ. In this interpretation of the world, they DO impress their understanding upon the world, oftentimes in a semi-coherent manner. Even in science, philosopher Thomas S Kuhn has shown that scientists think in terms of paradigms despite science being often thought of as being purely about facts.¹ The fact of the matter is that while facts are objectively facts, our interpretation of the facts are shaped by our worldview of paradigm. The same facts can mean totally different things to different people. This is what incommensurability means when it comes to worldviews and paradigms — an acknowledgement of how important worldviews and paradigms are to our interpretations of facts.

Fesko here fails to deal with the issue of worldview. Rather, he opts for the genetic fallacy of tarring it with the Enlightenment instead of actually engaging with the topic. But if one interacts with people outside of one’s “tribe,” surely the existence of worldviews and paradigms is readily apparent. How can the same fact (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) result in widely divergent interpretations by diverse groups of people? Or is Fesko agreeable with terming all who disagree with him on the issue not just incorrect, but as intellectually dishonest and immoral? I sure hope not.

This is not to claim that Idealism is true, but rather that just because something comes from Idealism it does not make it false. In this review’s opinion, the reality of worldviews and paradigms is so apparent that a case against it must be convincingly made, instead of naïve realism being treated as the default setting as our new Aristotelians seem to have done.

Critical analysis: *Common notions* as Law and non-propositional in substance

Lastly, while it can be agreed that common notions exist, it is disputed how they ought to be understood within epistemology and apologetics. The text of Romans 1: 20-23 and of Romans 2: 12-15 focuses on the Law of God. Thus, these biblical passages support the notion of Natural Law and of General Revelation revealing what is sufficient to condemn Man in sin. In other words, what is revealed is **Law**, the moral law of God. *Common notions* is Law and not Gospel. It has a specific content and goal, to function as the moral Law of God in the world.

¹ Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3rd ed.; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970, 1996)

Once we understand that to be true, it is surely a leap of logic to go from this biblical understanding of common notions to the idea that therefore the unregenerate can justify truth. One can appeal to *common notions*, but not in apologetics but in evangelism, where the Law serves to convict the heart. Evangelism however is not apologetics, even though apologetics can be used as part of evangelism.

Since that is the case, it is puzzling how Fesko thinks that showing that the Reformed orthodox, and the catholic faith, is one that teaches common notions is relevant. As a reaction to the Neo-Calvinists that deny Natural Law, such would certainly be helpful. However, a denial of Natural Law is part of Neo-Calvinist philosophy, not part of presuppositional apologetics, and the two are not the same time. Natural law is true, but presuppositionalism does not depend on its veracity or falsity.

In order for things to be known to be true, they must be justified. The beauty of Clarkian presuppositional apologetics is that it provides that the only infallible justifier or knowledge is the inspired Word of God, the *principium cognoscendi externum* (the external principle of coming to know). Against Fesko, who holds that God's revelation in the *principium cognoscendi externum* includes nature as well as Scripture (p. 206), we deny that nature can justify anything. Nature is the *occasion* for many of our second-order knowledge of the world, but it cannot justify any of them. Nature does not speak and cannot create propositions that can be verified or falsified. Even in science, it is not nature that speaks but humans that apply their intellect to nature, and test which hypothesis better fits what is happening in nature. This approximation to nature is what we call "scientific truth," which is a second-order knowledge that functions as truth within the parameters of its own scientific paradigm.

While *common notions* are true and we should recover them, they should not play a prominent part in apologetics. After all, common notions are "common" only in the sense that it appeals to the human conscience, not to the human intellect. Being non-propositional in nature, they cannot justify anything and thus *in themselves* are not proper in apologetics and epistemology.

Conclusion

Fesko's book is supposedly about reforming apologetics back to the standard of the Reformers and the historic Reformed tradition. However, in the realm of philosophy and epistemology, turning back the clock is impossible. Thus, while there is great historical information on the historic Reformed scholastic manner of apologetics, there is nothing here that actually interacts with the demands of epistemology and apologetics in the modern and post-modern world.

As a book in theological prolegomena and historical apologetics, Fesko's book is helpful. Unfortunately, by holding to naïve realism, this is all it can be. Therefore, on the topic at hand, the book does not actually reform apologetics but deform it.

