

An Analytical Presentation of Cornelius Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication

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May 12, 2017

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## Introduction

This present author intends to examine the apologetic method and arguments of Cornelius Van Til from within an analytical framework. The purpose of such an endeavor is to subject Van Til's arguments to an analytical critique to understand if they can withstand such a critique. However, before undertaking such a task, it will be necessary to briefly examine the reasoning behind the method which Van Til used to guide his argumentation.

Van Til's method has been called *presuppositionalism*, and while often criticized as a misnomer, the general sentiment is that it is acceptable to use such a term so long as the actual position is understood.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the position is *not* always understood, so the misunderstandings will be briefly looked at in this paper. Furthermore, this discussion will take into account the problems that Van Til saw with methods that differed from his own, and those problems will be briefly examined before turning to the concept of *transcendental arguments*.

Because transcendental arguments are inextricably tied to Van Til's method, the nature of transcendental arguments will become one focus of this paper. Afterwards, the discussion will turn from transcendental arguments in general to presenting an analytical formulation of Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication. This paper explains the reasoning behind, as well as presents and defends Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication.

The paper will conclude with an examination of possible objections to the argument, and the implications of the argument, as well as the possible success of such an argument. These ideas will be considered in light of the present state of Christian apologetics, and the present views on apologetics in the wider context of Christian apologetics.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Scott Oliphint would be one exception; he argues for discarding the misnomer and using the term "Covenantal Apologetics." See K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 38-39.

## Defending the Methodology

Van Til says, “Apologetics is the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life.”<sup>2</sup> With vindication in mind, Van Til does not exclude the use of positive, negative, offensive, or defensive apologetics. Usually, apologetic encounters will focus on one specific area of dissent or objection at a time, even though the goal is a defense of the *entire system* of Christian theism. Greg L. Bahnsen agrees; regarding apologetic encounters, he says, “It is this entire underlying worldview that is being defended, even when we answer a more narrow, particular attack. We cannot talk about everything at once, of course, but the specific matters about which we argue with the unbeliever are always understood and defined within the broader framework of God’s full revelation.”<sup>3</sup> The Christian apologist is not *merely* defending the concept of general theism, or Jesus Christ’s resurrection, or any other particular aspect of Christian theism during apologetic encounters, rather, the Christian apologist is *always* defending the biblical worldview *in toto*, even when the discussion is focused on one particular issue. So, James Anderson says, “The apologetic dialectic thus involves a clash of whole systems, each of which prescribes a different view of how one should properly adjudicate between those systems (and each constituted, if coherent, so as to ultimately favor itself by its own rational standards).”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Reading and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 30.

<sup>4</sup> James Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 59.

At least on this point, it seems that Christian apologists from different methodological camps agree. William Lane Craig says, “Showing Christianity to be true is, of course, precisely the task of apologetics.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Gary R. Habermas says, “[The evidential apologetic method] tends to focus chiefly on the legitimacy of accumulating various historical evidences for the truth of Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Paul D. Feinberg says, “[The cumulative case apologetic method] understands Christian theism, other theistic religions, and atheism as systems of belief. Such systems are rationally supported by a variety of considerations or data.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, even though Kelly James Clark does “not have a well worked out strategy for defending Christian belief,”<sup>8</sup> he still acknowledges that it is the entire Christian belief system which is to be defended. So, Bahnsen then concludes, “Thus, when all is said and done, apologetics becomes the vindication of the Christian worldview as a whole, not simply a piecemeal defense of isolated, abstractly defined, religious points.”<sup>9</sup>

At this point, it is appropriate to briefly discuss and define the Christian belief system which the following discussion has in view. Van Til defended the orthodox Christian view of the self-sufficient, triune God; man, created as the image of God, but fallen; Christ, as fully God and fully man, the Creator and Redeemer; and Scripture as the ultimate arbiter for doctrines of faith, because it is the revelation of God to man. Much more could be said on the subject, but suffice it to say, this current discussion will occur within the framework of the doctrinal beliefs of Van Til,

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<sup>5</sup> William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” in *ibid.*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, “Cumulative Case Apologetics,” in *ibid.*, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly James Clark, “Reformed Epistemology Apologetics,” in *ibid.*, 278.

<sup>9</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 31.

who states, “The self-attesting Christ of Scripture has always been my starting-point for everything I have said.”<sup>10</sup>

This discussion will keep in mind the wise words of John Warwick Montgomery, who says of Van Tillian debates, “I do not wish to increase the height of what sometimes appears already to be a dangerously top-heavy pile of refutations and counter-refutations.”<sup>11</sup> Although, adding to the pile is not the intent, it is the inevitable result of writing on such a topic, so the goal will be to keep the back and forth to a minimum.<sup>12</sup>

Because Christian apologetics is the defense of the entire Christian belief system, the method used to defend the belief system *must* be consistent with the entirety of the belief system. Van Til explains his discovery of the methodological predicament, saying, “I found the theologians of the ‘self-attesting Christ,’ defending their faith with a method which denied precisely that point!”<sup>13</sup> The issue which Van Til confronted regarding apologetic methodologies was that they spoke about Christ in a manner which diminished his self-attesting authority (John 8:14).<sup>14</sup> If a Christian apologist believes that Christ is the authority over all men, and that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:10, *ESV*),<sup>15</sup> he or she should not also attribute “the right and ability of the natural man, apart

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<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 3.

<sup>11</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, “Once Upon an A Priori,” in *ibid.*, 380.

<sup>12</sup> This was the inevitable result of Montgomery’s own essay, which certainly multiplied the refutations and counter refutations.

<sup>13</sup> Van Til, “My Credo,” 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version*.

from the work of the Spirit of God, to be the judge of the claim of the authoritative Word of God... With this method the correctness of the natural man's problematics is endorsed. That is all he needs to reject the Christian faith."<sup>16</sup> This is entirely in accord with the assessment of C. S. Lewis, who said:

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God in the dock.<sup>17</sup>

Van Til was adamant that any method which puts man in the position of judging God is entirely inconsistent with a belief system that views God as the ultimate judge, such as the Christian belief system.

In fact, Van Til's belief that other methodologies were inconsistent with the belief system they were defending seems correct. For example, Craig demonstrates one such inconsistency, saying, "For this reason it is important to insist on the self-authenticating nature of the Spirit's witness."<sup>18</sup> Here, Craig is saying that *Christians* can know that Christianity is true because of the *self-authenticating* Holy Spirit. But what of the non-Christian? According to Craig, the Holy Spirit is not self-authenticating, because Craig believes that in showing Christianity to be true "the use of argument and evidence assumes a primary and appropriate role, while the work of the Holy Spirit plays *no part* [emphasis added] in the demonstration proper but consists in opening

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<sup>16</sup> Van Til, "My Credo," 11.

<sup>17</sup> C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 244, quoted in Greg L. Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended*, ed. Joel McDurmon (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision and Covenant Media Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Craig, "Classical Apologetics," 34.

the heart of the obdurate unbeliever to attend to and be persuaded by the argumentation.”<sup>19</sup> But what if Craig’s arguments successfully lead the unbeliever to Christianity? Could not the new Christian then decide that it was not the arguments, but the self-authenticating Holy Spirit which convinced him or her of the truth of Christianity? Of course, and Craig has already stated that Christians must insist as much. Also, according to Craig’s method, to whom are the arguments and evidence being presented? Who are arguments and evidence presented to in a legal case? The judge and jury of course. Furthermore, what Craig is doing is ignoring the Scriptural passages that make it clear that God has revealed himself in a self-attesting manner to *all* people, saved and unsaved (cf. Psalm 14:1; Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:18-21). Craig attributes the ultimate authority for deciding truth to the fallen human’s fallen reasoning. And what of the Holy Spirit? According to Craig, he merely allows for the possibility that the Holy Spirit *might* persuade the unbeliever; but, according to Craig, the Holy Spirit by no means reveals the truth to the unbeliever in a self-attesting way. The self-attesting triune God of Scripture is not the judge in this method, rather it is the non-Christian who judges God.

Craig is not alone. Habermas also shifts his focus away from the self-attesting revelation of God in his apologetic methodology. He rightly says “historical occurrences are not brute facts that interpret themselves,”<sup>20</sup> even acknowledging that “personal preferences and prejudices can substantially color our interpretations, not to mention the affect of our worldviews on our research.”<sup>21</sup> And, “Contemporary apologists usually agree that no one can pursue evidence in a

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<sup>19</sup> Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” 38.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 94.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



neutral manner, due to many sorts of biases and prejudices that color our thinking.”<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, that does not prevent Habermas from advocating an apologetic method that is based on the “canons of historical research,”<sup>23</sup> rather than the canon of Scripture. He says that evidential apologists can show “how bias can be counteracted and how positive historical data can be established.”<sup>24</sup> By appealing to the canons of historical research and a neutral common ground, Habermas is looking “for a point of contact with the unbeliever in the unbeliever’s notions of himself and his world.”<sup>25</sup> And in doing so, Habermas encourages “him in his wicked rebellion.”<sup>26</sup> Which wicked rebellion? The wicked rebellion of the non-Christian in presuming himself or herself the judge of God.

Feinberg also demonstrates this inconsistency in his cumulative case method. He says, “The Scriptures teach that God, through the person of the Holy Spirit, witnesses to the truth of Christianity.”<sup>27</sup> He also rightly notes that “the Holy Spirit has been given to convict or convince unbelievers.”<sup>28</sup> Even going so far as to acknowledge that “God has so constituted individuals that they have a sense that there is a God... God has not left us in a state of neutrality about his existence.”<sup>29</sup> So what does Feinberg suggest the apologist do in light of the fact that the Holy Spirit self-attests the truth of Christianity to all unbelievers? He says the Christian apologist

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<sup>22</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “Presuppositional Apologetics: An Evidentialist’s Response,” in *ibid.*, 243.

<sup>23</sup> Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 95.

<sup>24</sup> Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” 96.

<sup>25</sup> Van Til, “My Credo,” 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Feinberg, “Cumulative Case Apologetics,” 158.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

should argue that “the Christian explanation is the best on offer.”<sup>30</sup> That is, Feinberg suggests an appeal to the preponderance of evidence, so that the non-Christian can make a judgment concerning God.

One has to wonder how Clark can agree with John Calvin “that people are accountable to God for their unbelief not because they failed to submit to a convincing theistic proof, but because they have suppressed the truth that God has implanted within their minds,”<sup>31</sup> and at the same time say, “Rational people could rationally reject the theistic proofs.”<sup>32</sup> He also says, “I believe that someone could rationally believe in God on the basis of theistic arguments.”<sup>33</sup> But how is it rational to disbelieve the truth that God has placed in the minds of all of humanity, and how can theistic arguments supplant divine revelation as the *basis* for *any* knowledge? Clark’s inconsistency speaks volumes on the incoherence of apologetic methods which in one way or another place fallen human reasoning above God’s perfect revelation. Moreover, this method has the same problem as the others, namely, that it puts God subject to the judgment of unbelievers.

So, it seems that Van Til correctly assessed the shortcomings of all apologetic methodologies which do not focus on God’s self-attesting revelation of himself to all of humanity, and which seek to put the unbeliever in a position by which they are allowed to judge the merits of God. But have these other apologists correctly assessed Van Til’s methodology?

The answer is a resounding, “No.” Anderson notes:

Van Til has often been labeled a fideist, because (it is said) he opposed in principle the offering of reasons or arguments in defense of the existence of God or the Christian faith.

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<sup>30</sup> Feinberg, “Cumulative Case Apologetics,” 166.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, “Reformed Epistemology Apologetics,” 272.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Nothing could be further from the truth. It would be strange indeed for someone so committed to the project of Christian apologetics, writing several syllabuses on the subject while professor of apologetics at a major Reformed seminary, to take such a negative stance. I suspect this confusion arises from superficial interpretations of his criticisms of natural theology and his opposition to certain methodologies adopted in the formulation and presentation of theistic arguments.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Joseph E. Torres says, “Many of the most basic tenets of a presuppositional apologetic are misunderstood, caricatured, dismissed, or maligned.”<sup>35</sup>

This maligning is apparent in Craig’s response to John Frame’s essay in *Five Views on Apologetics*. Craig makes several statements that are either patently false or severely maligned caricatures of Van Til and his thought. For example, Craig proclaims:

Presuppositionalism is guilty of a logical howler... begging the question... It is difficult to imagine how anyone could with a straight face think to show theism to be true by reasoning, ‘God exists. Therefore, God exists.’ ... If this were all presuppositionalism had to offer as an apologetic it would be so ludicrous that no one would have taken it seriously.<sup>36</sup>

The first inconsistency is apparent right away for those who pay close attention to the use of language, namely, Craig is implying that the goal of apologetics is “to show theism to be true.” But earlier in this discussion, Craig said that the point of apologetics is “to show Christianity to be true.” This is a telling inconsistency which points to Craig’s awareness of the implications of his own method: that is designed to argue for *generic theism*. Craig’s method is not conducive to the apologetic task of showing Christianity to be true insofar as it does not agree with Van Til’s method. However, Craig is partially correct in the quote above, but the issue is with his maligned caricature of Frame’s actual point in the essay he was critiquing. Frame was *never* saying that the

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 57.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph E. Torres, “Introduction,” in John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), xxxvii.

<sup>36</sup> William Lane Craig, “Presuppositional Apologetics: A Classical Apologist’s Response,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, 232-233.

proper way to argue is to *merely* state, “God exists; therefore, God exists.” This appears to be a sophomoric or superficial evaluation by Craig; this discussion will give him the benefit of the doubt that it is not a deliberately cherry-picked, truculent caricature. He clearly understands the point that Frame is making, saying, “But at the heart of presuppositionalism lies an argument, often not clearly understood or articulated, which is very powerful. This is an epistemological transcendental argument.”<sup>37</sup>

Craig may have rightly criticized Frame for failing “to develop for us such an argument,”<sup>38</sup> but he has unjustly maligned Van Til and his entire system of thought. Craig makes the patently false claim that “Van Til... was not a philosopher.”<sup>39</sup> This an incredibly baffling thing to say about a man who was *certainly* a philosopher *by any meaningful definition* of the word; Van Til spent decades systematically propagating a *truly* revelational epistemology, and received a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Princeton University for his work comparing the God of Christianity and the Absolute of Idealism.<sup>40</sup> It is certainly hard to understand how Craig can so severely criticize Van Til, and then praise Alvin Plantinga for his work which is more than coincidentally similar to the system that Van Til taught. This is especially true when one considers that Plantinga attended Calvin College at the same time Van Til briefly taught there, and after leaving, became the subject of much debate at the school.<sup>41</sup> Anderson also notes the

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<sup>37</sup> Craig, “A Classical Apologist’s Response,” 233.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Which is precisely why this essay is necessary; this paper will develop the “very powerful,” “transcendental argument” and present it as an analytical argument.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>40</sup> Timothy I. McConel, “The Influence of Idealism on the Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 3 (September 2005): 557.

<sup>41</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Self-Profile,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1985), 9. See also, K. Scott Oliphint, “Forward,” in Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*,

striking similarities, saying, “Plantinga is often found to be following (whether deliberately or not) a similar course [to Van Til’s apologetic strategy] ...”<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Craig says:

Plantinga’s epistemology can be seen as an extended transcendental theistic argument... Plantinga shows... the existence of God is a precondition of knowledge itself...<sup>43</sup> The nontheist who thinks that he is warranted in his non-belief thus unwittingly presupposes the existence of God in his very denial of God...<sup>44</sup> Moreover, when the theist attempts to argue for the existence of God, he presupposes God’s existence... This is not a vicious sort of circularity, but rather the inherent nature of a transcendental argument.<sup>45</sup>

But this is *exactly* what Van Til argued for half a century or better before Plantinga published any such idea. It is a mystery how Craig fails to see this, and then proclaims, “The Reformed tradition needs to realize what a treasure it has in Alvin Plantinga and to appropriate his insights. People came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Van Til, and behold, a greater than Van Til is here.”<sup>46</sup> The problem here is two-fold: first, it assumes that some of Plantinga’s insights were not the result of appropriating the insights of Van Til; and second, that

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vii-viii. This is not to suggest that Plantinga in any way plagiarized Van Til, but it is merely noting that whether conscious or unconscious, Van Til has certainly impacted Plantinga’s thoughts.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 70.

<sup>43</sup> “On the other hand if the Christian theory of creation by God is not true, then we hold that there cannot be objective knowledge of anything.” Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> “How then we ask is the Christian to challenge this non-Christian approach to the interpretation of human experience? He can do so only if he shows that man must presuppose God as the final reference point in predication... He can do so only if he shows the non-Christian that even in his virtual negation of God, he is still really presupposing God. He can do so only if he shows the non-Christian that he cannot deny God unless he first affirm him...” Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 13.

<sup>45</sup> Craig, “A Classical Apologist’s Response,” 234. Van Til argued this exact point for decades: “To admit one’s own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, *circular reasoning* [emphasis in original].” Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 123. K. Scott Oliphint expounds on this idea in the footnote, saying, “Van Til is not advocating fallacious reasoning here... Van Til’s affirmation of circular reasoning should be seen in the context of the point he made above about ‘indirect’ arguments. Any *peititio principii* is, by definition, a direct argument... Van Til’s indirect method moves one out of the context of a direct argument... Thus, circularity is inextricably linked to the transcendental approach and is not meant to be in reference, strictly speaking, to direct argumentation.” *Ibid.*, n. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Craig, “A Classical Apologist’s Response,” 235.

Plantinga is not in error when he differs from Van Til. This essay will briefly examine more on this later.

The rest of the responses to Frame's essay are much more charitable than Craig's, even though they are wrought with *misunderstandings*. For example, Clark erroneously declares, "Van Til's epistemological claims seem clearly to imply that non-Christians cannot know anything."<sup>47</sup> Granted, in the footnote, Clark readily admits that this is often objected to by Van Tillians, yet Clark maintains that one *must conclude* that Van Til believed that non-Christians cannot know anything. It is not immediately understandable how Clark has come to this conclusion considering what Van Til has written on the topic. For instance, Van Til explicitly states:

That we present the message and evidence for the Christian position as clearly as possible, knowing that because man is what the Christian says he is, the non-Christian will be able to understand in an intellectual sense the issues involved. In so doing, we shall, to a large extent, be telling him what he "already knows" but seeks to suppress.<sup>48</sup>

And also:

The first objection that suggests itself may be expressed in the rhetorical question, Do you mean to assert that non-Christians do not discover truth by the methods they employ? The reply is that we mean nothing so absurd as that. The implication of the method here advocated is simply that non-Christians are never able to, and therefore never do, employ their own methods consistently.<sup>49</sup>

So, Craig says it is "unfortunate" that Frame's transcendental argument "is not developed."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Habermas says "presuppositionalism is only an incomplete apologetic system. I would even say that it fails in the most important aspect – providing positive reasons to

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<sup>47</sup> Kelly James Clark, "Presuppositional Apologetics: A Reformed Epistemologist's Response," in Cowan, *Five Views on Apologetics*, 256.

<sup>48</sup> Van Til, "My Credo," 21.

<sup>49</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 125.

<sup>50</sup> Craig, "A Classical Apologist's Response," 233.

believe.”<sup>51</sup> Clark also notes, “Van Til, I’m afraid, had a similar awkward tendency to prefer assertion over argument.”<sup>52</sup> But not all who recognize the lack of formal presentation consider it a negative mark against Van Til, for example, Anderson says, “Disappointingly for many of his readers, not least those accustomed to the rigorous systematic argumentation of Plantinga and others writing from within the analytic tradition, Van Til never formally states his transcendental argument at any point in his published works—at least, not in any detailed way.”<sup>53</sup> And, even Van Til lamented the lack of clarity in the presentation of his argument, saying, “The argument may be poorly stated, and may never be adequately stated. But in itself the argument is absolutely sound... By stating the argument as clearly as we can, we may be the agents of the Spirit in pressing the claims of God upon men.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the need for a well-articulated, transcendental argument in the Van Tillian tradition has never been more clear, so the following discussion will attempt to present a well-developed transcendental argument, analytically formulated, which provides positive reasons to believe, without preferring assertion over argument.

### **The Transcendental Argument**

This discussion, thus far, has established the need for the presentation of a refined transcendental argument that does justice to Van Til’s position. But what exactly is a transcendental argument? Anderson answers, “Brought to prominence by Kant, transcendental

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<sup>51</sup> Habermas, “An Evidentialist’s Response,” 241.

<sup>52</sup> Clark, “A Reformed Epistemologist’s Response,” 256.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 60.

<sup>54</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg: NJ, P&R Publishing, 2015), 77.

arguments purport to uncover what must be the case (or alternatively, what we must take to be the case) in order for various kinds of intentional operation (e.g., individuating, predicating, perceiving, knowing) to be possible.”<sup>55</sup> Although philosophers like Craig commend the usefulness of transcendental argumentation, not all philosophers are on board. There is currently much discussion on what a transcendental argument is, if there even is such a thing. Moltke S. Gram famously quipped, “The problem about transcendental arguments is whether there are any.”<sup>56</sup>

### The Nature of a Transcendental Argument

The debate over the existence of transcendental arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief examination on the nature of transcendental arguments and a demonstration is called for by the discussion. The primary issue is whether truth values can be assigned to propositions which include non-existent entities. For example, Bas C. van Fraassen says, “The sentence ‘The King of France (in 1967) is bald’ is neither true nor false... *because* [emphasis in original] the King of France does not exist.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, the ability to assign a truth value to the first proposition presupposes that there is a King of France. This could be demonstrated as  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ , where  $P$  is “The King of France is bald” and  $Q$  is “There is a King of France.” Whether  $P$  or  $\sim P$  it is still the case that  $Q$  is true. If  $Q$  is not true ( $\sim Q$ ), then neither  $P$  nor  $\sim P$ .

A secondary issue related to the discussion is whether this type of argument is implicational in nature. In an implicational argument,  $P$  would imply  $Q$ . Using the above

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<sup>55</sup> Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 59.

<sup>56</sup> Moltke S. Gram, “Transcendental Arguments,” *Nous* 5, no. 1 (February 1971): 15.

<sup>57</sup> Bas C. van Fraassen, “Presupposition, Implication, and Self-Reference,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 5 (March 1968): 137.



example, it could be argued (1) If the King of France is bald then (implies) there is a King of France; (2) The King of France is bald; therefore, (3) there is a King of France. This is a *modus ponens* argument:  $P$  implies  $Q$ ;  $P$ ; therefore,  $Q$ . A transcendental argument may take this same form:  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ ;  $P$ ; therefore,  $Q$ .

However, it is at this point where a transcendental argument departs from an implicational argument, for an implicational argument may validly deny the consequent, but a transcendental argument may not. In implicational arguments, one can deny the consequent and still have a valid argument:  $P$  implies  $Q$ ;  $\sim Q$ ; therefore,  $\sim P$ . This is a *modus tollens* argument; in implicational argumentation this is a valid argument, but in transcendental argumentation this is *not* valid. To say that  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ , as demonstrated above, means that  $P$  can only be either true or false if  $Q$  is true. So, to formulate a transcendental argument with *modus tollens* results in the following invalid argument:  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ ;  $\sim Q$ ; therefore,  $\sim P$  (i.e.  $P$  is false). Returning to the example of the King of France, the argument would be formulated as follows: (1) If the King of France is bald then there is a King of France; (2) There is no King of France; therefore, (3) The King of France is not bald. This is *formally* invalid in transcendental argumentation, as the first premise makes the conclusion impossible because it is neither true nor false that the King of France is bald since there is no King of France. That is to say, if there is no King of France, then it is not true that the King of France has hair.

The closest analogue of *modus tollens* in transcendental argumentation is invalid in implicational argumentation, namely, the formal fallacy of denying the antecedent:  $P$  implies  $Q$ ;  $\sim P$ ; therefore, (either  $Q$  or)  $\sim Q$ . For a simple example consider the following: (1) If it is raining then the grass is wet; (2) It is not raining; therefore, (3) The grass is not wet. This conclusion does not follow, and for an easy illustration, imagine that the sprinklers are watering the lawn: it

is not true that it is raining but it is true that the grass is wet. One cannot determine if the consequent,  $Q$ , is true or false if the antecedent is denied in implicational argumentation. It may be the case that  $Q$  is true, or it may be the case that  $Q$  is false, but the conclusion is not deducible one way or the other. Conversely, in transcendental argumentation, denying the antecedent is valid and does produce a valid conclusion:  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ ;  $\sim P$ ; therefore,  $Q$ . This is because, as van Fraassen says, “ $A$  presupposes  $B$  if and only if:

- (a)  $A$  necessitates  $B$ ,
- (b) (*not-A*) necessitates  $B$ .”<sup>58</sup>

Once again, returning to the earlier illustration, it can be said: (1) If the King of France is bald then there is a King of France; (2) The King of France is not bald (i.e. he has hair); therefore, (3) There is a King of France. This is valid in transcendental argumentation because the King of France *must* exist in order to have hair (or to be bald for that matter). If the King of France does not exist, then proposition (2) is utterly meaningless, or more importantly, *unintelligible*. Van Fraassen concludes, “Thus presupposition and implication are not the same, but they have something in common. What they have in common is that, if  $A$  either presupposes or implies  $B$ , the argument from  $A$  to  $B$  is valid.”<sup>59</sup>

Not all agree, even within the presuppositional camp, that a transcendental argument is distinguishable, *per se*, from an implicational argument. Recently, there has been a rift, most notably between Frame and Don Collett. Frame maintains that a transcendental argument is implicational. He says:

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<sup>58</sup> Van Fraassen, “Presupposition, Implication, and Self-Reference,” 138.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

For if God is the transcendental ground of intelligibility, causality cannot be meaningfully affirmed *or denied* [emphasis in original] unless God exists. So Van Til argued that even atheism presupposes theism; even the denial of God presupposes God... Van Til would modify Aquinas's argument to say not only that causality *implies* [emphasis added] God, but also that the denial of causality *implies* [emphasis added] God."<sup>60</sup>

However, Collett disagrees, saying that "a distinguishing feature of arguments based upon the concept of presupposition" is that "the truth value of the conclusion is *not* [emphasis in original] a function of the truth value of the antecedent minor premise [(2)], since the conclusion remains true whether" *P* or *~P* obtains.<sup>61</sup>

At first glance it may be difficult to discern the difference in positions, but further elaboration illustrates sufficiently. For Frame, a transcendental argument is a "double argument" with a "double premise" and "to construct an argument with that double premise is to argue by presupposition, to argue transcendently."<sup>62</sup> Frame grants some ground to Collett, yet maintains:

But I still wonder if Collett isn't exaggerating the difference between presupposition (Strawson's sense) and implication.<sup>63</sup> Isn't it more like this, that Strawson's presupposition embraces two implications? A presupposes B = if A, then B, and if not-A, then B. "If A, then B" is one traditional implication. "If not-A, then B" is another. So why shouldn't we look at "A presupposes B" as shorthand for talking about two traditional implications at the same time?<sup>64</sup>

If nothing else were argued, it can be acknowledged, at the very least, that a transcendental argument is *two arguments in one*, which is not the same as *two distinct implicational arguments*, so at the very least, a transcendental argument differs from an

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<sup>60</sup> Frame, *Apologetics*, 75.

<sup>61</sup> Don Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, eds. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 270.

<sup>62</sup> Frame, *Apologetics*, 75.

<sup>63</sup> Frame is referring to Peter F. Strawson's discussion on presupposition, which was refined by van Fraassen as presented in this paper.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

implicational argument in that regard. Also, the inability to use *modus tollens* also suggests that they are distinct types of argumentation. Much more could be said, specifically regarding the Frame and Collett disagreement, but the previous discussion should be sufficient to demonstrate the formal difference between an implicational argument and a transcendental argument. To summarize, implicational arguments may take the form of either:  $P$  implies  $Q$ ,  $P$ , therefore  $Q$ ; or,  $P$  implies  $Q$ ,  $\sim Q$ , therefore  $\sim P$ . Conversely, a transcendental argument takes the form of:  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ ; either  $P$  or  $\sim P$  (but it must be the case that either  $P$  or  $\sim P$  obtains); therefore,  $Q$ . Using one final look at the King of France illustration, the transcendental argument would say: (1) The ability to say that the King of France is either bald or is not bald presupposes that there is a King of France; (2) The King of France is either bald or not bald; therefore, (3) There is a King of France.<sup>65</sup>

#### Presenting an Analytical Formulation of Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication

The very essence of Van Til's entire school of thought can be summed up in a single sentence in his own words: "It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or in affirmation, unless it were for God's existence."<sup>66</sup> It is this well-developed but sometimes unrefined concept that this discussion seeks to refine and present formally. Before doing so, some of Van Til's ideas must be presented to develop this formal transcendental argument.

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<sup>65</sup> This is a formally valid transcendental argument, but it does not have a true conclusion, because  $\sim Q$  has obtained, so proposition (2) is unintelligible. The King of France is neither bald nor not bald because there is no King of France (at the time of writing of this paper).

<sup>66</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 11.

Van Til's idea that the Christian God is the ultimate foundation for the intelligibility of human experience, and the ability to meaningfully discuss such experiences, will be called (for the purposes of this paper) Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication. Van Til argued this point consistently for his entire career, but as demonstrated above, he left the argument informal and subject to misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Bahnsen defines predication as "the mental or verbal act of attributing or denying a property or characteristic (a 'predicate') to a subject."<sup>67</sup> Merriam-Webster defines predicate as "something that is affirmed or denied of the subject in a proposition in logic."<sup>68</sup> Thus, predication is, for the purposes of this discussion, the ability to (meaningfully and intelligibly) assign attributes, specifically truth values, to propositions.

So, when Van Til says that the Christian apologist must show the non-Christian "that on the presupposition of human autonomy human predication cannot even get under way" he is saying that the Christian presuppositions found in the biblical worldview are the only presuppositions that provide the necessary conditions for meaningful discussion.<sup>69</sup> He says that all non-Christian worldviews are "utterly destructive of predication in any field,"<sup>70</sup> and "that which is in the Bible [is] the only defensible philosophical position."<sup>71</sup> Elsewhere, Van Til says,

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<sup>67</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 22 n. 7.

<sup>68</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "predicate," accessed on March 2, 2017, available from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/predicate>.

<sup>69</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Toward a Reformed Apologetic* (Philadelphia, PA: privately printed, 1972), 10, accessed on January 29, 2017, available from <https://presupp101.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/van-til-toward-a-reformed-apologetic.pdf>, Adobe PDF eBook. This is also quoted from the print copy (no specific page given) in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (London: Tyndale Press, 1950), quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 87.

<sup>71</sup> Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 19.

“Christianity is the only reasonable position to hold. It is not merely as reasonable as other positions, or a bit more reasonable than other positions; it alone is the natural and reasonable position for man to take.”<sup>72</sup> Bahnsen elaborates:

This represents the essential “defense of the faith” for presuppositional apologetics, namely, that only Christianity has a defensible philosophical position that can give an intelligible account of the ability to speak meaningfully... to be rational, to know anything, etc. Christianity is not one of many internally reasonable worldviews... but the only candidate if one is committed to rationality.<sup>73</sup>

In fact, if the Bible is correct that unbelievers are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20), then Van Til and Bahnsen *must* be correct in their position, because any person that holds to a perfectly reasonable and internally consistent worldview is not without excuse, for one cannot be justly faulted for adhering to truly rational thinking and truly rational conclusions. It would be an internal contradiction in the Christian worldview to say that a perfectly benevolent God gives humans the ability to reason and then punishes them for *properly* using that ability.

According to Anderson:

If the God of the Bible exists, and if he relates to us and our universe as the Bible suggests, that fact has the most profound implications for our epistemology and epistemic practices: what we know and how we know it; how we determine facts; how we interpret evidence; how we weigh lines of reasoning; and what we consider probable, plausible, possible, and so forth.<sup>74</sup>

So, Van Til says, “We cannot allow that if rational argument is carried forth on true premises, it should come to any other conclusion than that the true God exists. Nor can we allow that the

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<sup>72</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 77.

<sup>73</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 150 n. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 59.

certainty with respect to God's existence would be any less if acquired by a ratiocinative process rather than by intuitions."<sup>75</sup>

To summarize, Van Til has argued that there is no ability to meaningfully and intelligibly assign truth values to propositions apart from the biblical worldview, particularly what the Bible declares to be true about the nature of God and the nature of reality. But Frame objects, saying that Van Til, by his own standards, was not "sufficiently holistic."<sup>76</sup> He says, "I do not think the whole of Christian theism can be established by a single argument, unless that argument is highly complex! I do not think an argument should be criticized because it fails to prove every element of Christian theism."<sup>77</sup> Here, it is as clear as ever how much Frame has departed from the tradition of Van Til, for Van Til says, "The theistic proofs therefore reduce to one proof, the proof which argues that unless *this* [emphasis in original] God, the God of the Bible, the ultimate being, the Creator, the controller of the universe, be presupposed as the foundation of human experience, this experience operates in a void."<sup>78</sup> And again, "The better theologians of the church... have sensed something of the fact that all the theistic arguments should really be taken together and reduced to the one argument of the possibility of human predication."<sup>79</sup> Anderson thoroughly explains Van Til's contention, saying, "Because transcendental argumentation is the only method capable of settling disagreements over fundamental philosophical systems, there can only be one argument—and that argument must establish the Christian system *in toto*... Van

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<sup>75</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 76.

<sup>76</sup> Frame, *Apologetics*, 79.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 220.

<sup>79</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg: NJ, P&R Publishing, 2007), 180.

Til's transcendental apologetic casts itself as the mother of all epistemological arguments."<sup>80</sup>

Anderson then asks, "What exactly is the argument? We apparently know its conclusion, but what are its premises and its inferences—and how are those premises to be defended?"<sup>81</sup>

Before answering this question, one should note that from the Christian point of view, the Scriptures themselves contain every element of Christian theism. So, instead of arguing for God's existence, even transcendently, a sufficiently holistic, Van Tillian transcendental argument will argue for the truth of the Scriptures themselves, particularly regarding the biblical description of God and his creation. With this in mind, the discussion will now present the analytical formulation of Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication as: (1) That there is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions presupposes that the Bible is entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings; (2) There is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions; therefore, (3) The Bible is entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings.

The rest of this discussion will seek to vindicate this contentious and controversial argument, but first, the discussion must briefly examine these premises. The first premise refers to the possibility of philosophical predication, that is, assigning truth values to propositions. To say that a proposition is either true or false is to predicate. When this discussion refers to the Bible being entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings, this includes several of the following concepts and doctrines: (a) there is one eternally self-existent God; (b) he is triune in nature; (c) he is the creator of all that exists apart from himself; (d) he is distinct from his creation; (f) that all of creation is dependent upon God for its continued

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<sup>80</sup> Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 60.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.



existence, including all of humanity; and (g) all of humanity is therefore obligated to worship and serve the biblical God. These are just a few of the implications of the concept that the Bible is entirely correct in all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings. Obviously, there is much more to these doctrines, but the thrust of the premise is that the Bible is entirely true and without error when it speaks of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. This distinction is more specific than a premise that simply says, for example, “Everything in the Bible is true.” After all, there are things in the Bible that are not true when they are taken out of context. For instance, the Bible says “There is no God” (Psalm 14:1). But this is *not* what the Bible *teaches*. The Bible clearly teaches that there is a God, so when this discussion refers to the truth and veracity of the Bible it is referring to the truth and veracity of the overarching teachings contained within the entire corpus of Scripture. This is related to the theological issue of biblical inerrancy, but this proposition is also more specific than a proposition which claims that the Bible is inerrant, in that it is specifically referring to metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical truths.

The second premise is an opportunity for the antecedent in premise (1) to either obtain or not obtain, which in implicational logic would impact the conclusion. However, this particular premise is interesting because it obtains whether or not it is true or false, and regardless, the conclusion is true whether or not this premise obtains! This discussion will say more on this below. Finally, the conclusion of this argument is merely an affirmation that the overarching teachings of the Bible are true. That is to say, the conclusion affirms that the Bible is entirely correct and infallible when properly interpreted, including and especially regarding metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics

## Supporting and Defending the Transcendental Argument

Before this discussion can move on to defending against objections, there must first be a technical discussion regarding the functions of the premises. For example, the second premise should be almost entirely without controversy. It is important to note, however, that there is a significant nuance to this premise. Recall the transcendental formulation of  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ ; either  $P$  or  $\sim P$ ; therefore,  $Q$ . In a transcendental argument,  $P$  may either be true or false and  $Q$  will still obtain so long as  $P$  is *either* true or false. In this case, there is a dual transcendental aspect to this argument, in that premise (2) is not only a proposition, but a proposition which refers to its own truth value. So, if (2) is true, then  $P$  has obtained (and so has  $Q$ ), but if (2) is false, there is a formal contradiction where the second proposition is both false *and* neither true nor false. Denying the second premise, therefore, results in self-referential absurdity. Not only that, but denying (2) is to say that  $P$  is false, in which case  $Q$  also obtains ( $\sim P$ ; therefore,  $Q$ ). Whether (2) is affirmed or denied,  $Q$  obtains and (3) is true.

Furthermore, recall the results of denying the consequent in a transcendental argument:  $P$  presupposes  $Q$ ;  $\sim Q$ ; therefore, neither  $P$  nor  $\sim P$ . In this particular argument, denying the consequent in premise (1) would be to say that the Bible is *not* entirely correct in all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings. However, given the argument, this too is self-referentially absurd. For if the consequent is denied, the antecedent would be neither true nor false, in this case, it would be neither true nor false that there exists the possibility of predication. In other words, denying the consequent would be the equivalent of predicating that the very concept of predication is unintelligible. The very denial would require an argument for the idea that arguments are not possible because the concept of predication is an unintelligible and meaningless concept. Moreover, if the consequent is denied, the result would be tantamount to

saying “There is neither a possibility of predication nor an impossibility of predication because the Bible is not entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings,” which is exactly the point this argument is making, namely, the very possibility of predication hinges on the nature of God and the nature of reality corresponding to the Bible’s overarching metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings.

In a formally valid argument, the conclusion is always true if the premises are true. It has already been shown that (2) must be true because denying the truth of the premise results in a contradiction which affirms its truth or renders argumentation impossible (which also necessarily affirms the truth of the entire argument through *reductio ad absurdum*).

So, the entire argument hinges on premise (1). But, is this argument a logically airtight argument with absolutely no chance at refutation? It depends entirely on whether the conclusion is true or not. If the conclusion is true, then this is a logically airtight argument with no chance of refutation. However, the very idea that this conclusion could be false should be rejected by the Christian apologist who holds to biblical inspiration, and definitely by the presuppositional apologist. That is the very idea behind this type of argument. As Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr. note, “Whereas Plantinga argues for the rational respectability of theism, especially Christian theism, Van Til argues for the rational inescapability of Christian theism (and only specifically Christian theism).”<sup>82</sup> So it is not the case, as Clark asserts, that Van Til prefers assertion over argumentation, rather, it is that Van Til’s argument does not allow for his strong conclusion to be denied.

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<sup>82</sup> Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 267-268.

There are attempts that could be made to refute this argument: one could argue that the first premise is not true or is incorrectly formulated. That is to say, one could argue that premise (1) should be: (1) That there is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions *does not* presuppose that the Bible is entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings (that is to say, it is not true that *P* presupposes *Q*, or *P* does not presuppose *Q*). This could come from a G. E. Moore Shift along the lines of: (1<sub>a</sub>) The Bible is *not* entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings; (2<sub>a</sub>) There is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions; therefore, (3<sub>a</sub>) That there is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions *does not* presuppose that the Bible is entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings. Or, one could go further, *à la* Michael Martin, and attempt a transcendental argument with a contradictory conclusion, along the lines of: (1<sub>b</sub>) That there is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions *does not* presuppose that the Bible is entirely *incorrect* on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings; (2<sub>b</sub>) There is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions; therefore, (3<sub>b</sub>) The Bible is entirely *incorrect* on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings.<sup>83</sup>

Also, one could attempt to detract from the argument by proposing a counter argument that substitutes the Bible with the Quran, and the argument (supposedly) becomes a logically airtight argument for Islam. For example, Frame says, “A Muslim could just as easily employ Van Til’s TAG as could a Christian.”<sup>84</sup> But does this constitute a logically airtight argument for

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<sup>83</sup> The entire exchange between Michael Martin and John Frame on Martin’s Transcendental Argument for the Nonexistence of God is available from [https://infidels.org/library/modern/michael\\_martin/martin-frame](https://infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/martin-frame).

<sup>84</sup> Frame, *Apologetics*, 80. TAG is the abbreviation for the Transcendental Argument for God’s Existence. This is the common name given to Van Til’s argument, although, this discussion prefers Van Til’s Transcendental Argument from Predication. Anytime that TAG is used in this paper it can, at the very least, apply to all Christian theistic transcendental arguments, such as the one in this discussion, insofar as they seek to establish the Christian

Islam? Or are these types of transcendental arguments merely logical word games that result in paradoxes when one attempts to refute them, like a Liar's Paradox? Frame does not necessarily think so, saying, "Insofar as Islam compromises the biblical doctrine of God, it loses the only possible transcendental ground of science, logic, and ethics. So TAG does not appeal to bare theism. It presupposes the distinctives of the Christian doctrine of God."<sup>85</sup> This stands in stark contrast to other theistic arguments, even very similar arguments, such as those by Plantinga.

Anderson says:

Plantinga's arguments are offered in support of theism *simpliciter*; they purport to give good reasons for believing in the existence of an all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing Creator. As such, they could be equally well appropriated by a Jew, a Muslim, or even a theist who rejects *all* [emphasis in original] of the ancient monotheistic traditions.... In contrast, Van Til maintains that not merely theism but specifically Christian theism can be supported by transcendental argumentation."<sup>86</sup>

There is, however, more argumentation to be put forth. No contentious argument ends with the presentation of the premises, rather, the premises must be argued and defended, at least in an attempt to be persuasive to those who do not already agree with the conclusion. Frame says that "no single argument will prove the entire biblical doctrine of God,"<sup>87</sup> but that is exactly what this argument attempts to do. So, is this argument an exercise in futility? Not exactly. It should be obvious that anyone who does not already believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God will have a tough time accepting this argument, even after they recognize that it is formally valid. Plantinga agrees, saying, "That is because I don't know of an argument for Christian belief that

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concept of God as the necessary precondition for the intelligibility of human experiences. Nearly all conceivable objections to the TAG will apply to the argument in this paper as well.

<sup>85</sup> Frame, *Apologetics*, 81.

<sup>86</sup> Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 73.

<sup>87</sup> Frame, *Apologetics*, 80.

seems very likely to convince one who doesn't already accept its conclusion."<sup>88</sup> But that does not mean that this argument cannot be convincing to some, nor does it mean that it is not a sound argument.

Regarding the first three objections mentioned above, all of them are counter arguments, and as such they are not direct rebuttals. Merely proposing these arguments does not refute the argument presented in this paper. For example, in the G. E. Moore Shift, the Christian may rightly reject premise (1<sub>a</sub>) and require that such a premise be supported through argumentation. This would be a very tall order, to say the least. And any attempt to support this premise can be met with strong objections by the Christian. Similarly, if one were to argue that predication presupposes that the Bible is *incorrect*, as in premise (1<sub>b</sub>), the Christian can likewise require argumentation to support such a premise. This attempt would also be met with strong opposition by the Christian apologist. Finally, if one were to present a transcendental argument for the truth of the Quran as a rebuttal to the Christian theistic transcendental argument, the Christian may rightly point out that this, like the others, is a separate argument, and a separate argument is grounds for a separate debate, and nothing more than a red-herring in the current discussion. If a Muslim apologist desires to debate such an argument, it is not the time and place to do so during a debate over a Christian theistic transcendental argument. However, no adequately skilled Christian debater with knowledge of transcendental arguments should turn down such a debate. It would be a great opportunity to show that the Christian does not merely talk past his opponents, as well as a great opportunity to show why the Quran does not provide the necessary conditions for the intelligibility of human experiences.

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<sup>88</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 201.

However, some have raised several criticisms against transcendental arguments in general, and Christian theistic transcendental arguments more specifically, which are directly relevant to this discussion. Michael R. Butler has identified several of both the former and latter types of objections.<sup>89</sup> There are two objections that Butler feels apply to both the generic transcendental arguments as well as the Christian theistic transcendental arguments, such as the argument that is the focus of this paper. The first is “The Uniqueness Proof for the Conclusion of TAG,” and the second is “The Move from Conceptual Necessity to Necessary Existence.”<sup>90</sup> Montgomery presents the former in Van Til’s festschrift, and David P. Hoover presents the latter in an essay available online.<sup>91</sup>

Butler explains the nature of Montgomery’s objection, saying, “Montgomery contends that there is no way to establish that the Christian God is the necessary precondition of human experience since there is no way to eliminate all of the possible alternatives.”<sup>92</sup> The issue is that Christian theistic transcendental arguments seek to show that the Christian God is the *necessary* precondition for intelligibility of human experiences. The problem is that it does not appear possible to refute all other worldviews. Even if one refuted all known worldviews, it could be postulated that there is some unknown worldview that provides the necessary precondition for the intelligibility of human experiences. If this is true, then Christian theistic transcendental

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<sup>89</sup> Michael R. Butler, “The Transcendental Argument for God’s Existence,” in *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Steven M. Schlissel (Nacodoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 65-124, especially 104-122.

<sup>90</sup> Butler, “The Transcendental Argument,” 82-89.

<sup>91</sup> David P. Hoover, “For the Sake of Argument: A Critique of the Logical Structure of Van Til’s Presuppositionalism,” *IBRI Research Report* 11, (1982), accessed on March 2, 2017, available from <http://www.ibri.org/RRs/RR011/11vanTil.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Butler, “The Transcendental Argument,” 82.

arguments do not show that the Christian God is the necessary precondition for making sense of the world, rather, they merely show that the Christian God is a sufficient explanation.

Butler calls the next objection “the most powerful argument against TAG and the most difficult to answer.”<sup>93</sup> This objection logically follows the previous one, and focuses on the idea that even if a Christian theistic transcendental argument were to successfully establish the necessity of the Christian conception of God as the necessary precondition for the intelligibility of human experiences, it does not follow that the Christian conception of God is ontologically necessary. It may very well be the case that one must *believe* in the Christian conception of God in order to make sense of human experience, but it does not follow that the God of Christian conception necessarily exists.

Butler also neatly summarizes the most appropriate responses to each objection. Regarding the Uniqueness Proof for the Conclusion of TAG, it is not necessary to refute all other possible conceptual schemes and worldviews. Butler says, “The proof is provided by refuting the negation of the conceptual scheme or worldview that one is attempting to establish.”<sup>94</sup> From the biblical worldview, there are only two types of people, and thus two types of conceptual schemes: there are those under the covenant of God’s grace, and those under the covenant of God’s wrath. There are those who presuppose that the triune God of Scripture is the Creator and primordial interpreter of all facts, and those who do not. Butler explains:

The non-Christian worldviews share the common feature that experience can be made sense of independently of God and His revelatory word. Thus, all non-Christian worldviews deny the Creator-creature distinction, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the biblical doctrine of man as being created as God’s image. They deny the fall and the noetic effects of sin. They deny the necessity of Christ’s redeeming work for not only

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<sup>93</sup> Butler, “The Transcendental Argument,” 87.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.



personal salvation but also the salvation of the human intellect. They also deny the necessity of divine revelation, the foundation of these doctrines.<sup>95</sup>

The defense of this argument, by its own standards, does not need to refute every other possible worldview, instead it merely needs to demonstrate that the negation results in absurdity. Van Til says:

We must point out to them that univocal reasoning itself leads to self-contradiction, not only from a theistic point of view, but from a non-theistic point of view as well. It is this that we ought to mean when we say that we must meet our enemy on their own ground. It is this that we ought to mean when we say that we reason from the impossibility of the contrary. The contrary is impossible only if it is self-contradictory when operating on the basis of its own assumptions.<sup>96</sup>

Of course, demonstrating that the negation results in absurdity is easier said than done, at least when attempting to be persuasive. So, Butler concludes:

Thus, the Christian apologist may boldly assert that without an absolute personal being as the foundation of all things, there is no possibility of ethics. Without the ontological Trinity as the fount of all being, there is no possibility of unifying the particulars of human experience.<sup>97</sup> Without the combined doctrines of the Trinity and man being God's image bearer, there is no possibility of predication and, thus, language. Without the doctrine of God's sovereignty and providence, there is no ground for inductive logic and science. Without a good and all-powerful God who creates both man and the natural realm there is no reason to believe that our senses are reliable. From these considerations it is clear why TAG is often described as an argument that proves the impossibility of the contrary. There is, at bottom, one non-Christian worldview, and this worldview is easily reduced to absurdity... When one version of the non-Christian worldview is refuted, the general non-Christian worldview is refuted, for all of them are variations on a common theme.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Butler, "The Transcendental Argument," 116.

<sup>96</sup> Van Til, "Survey of Christian Epistemology," 205.

<sup>97</sup> "As Christians, we hold that in this universe we deal with a *derivative* one and many, which can be brought into fruitful relation with one another because, back of both, we have in God the original one and many. If we have *coherence* [all emphasis in original] in our experience, there must be a correspondence of our experience to the eternally coherent experience of God. Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition." Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 59.

<sup>98</sup> Butler, "The Transcendental Argument," 117.

So, if these responses sufficiently demonstrate that the Christian worldview is the only worldview that makes sense of human experience, then the remaining piece of the puzzle is the move from the necessity of believing the Christian worldview to the Christian worldview actually being true: The Move from Conceptual Necessity to Necessary Existence, as it is called. Butler summarizes the issue saying, “If TAG does show that we must believe in Christianity in order to make our experience possible, this is certainly a powerful apologetic tool. The problem, however, is that while TAG... demonstrates that the Christian worldview is necessary precondition [*sic*] for experience, it does not prove that the Christian worldview is true.”<sup>99</sup>

For Butler, this is the strongest objection to Christian theistic transcendental arguments. He says that Bahnsen’s “contentious assumption” that at least one worldview must be true is not in the least bit obviously correct. However, he grants that Bahnsen was able to show that any objection along these lines has already been shown to outwardly deny the very foundation of rationality, while inwardly relying on the Christian worldview for its account of rationality. Butler says, “Surely, we can, for argument’s sake, conceive of the world being ultimately irrational and amoral. And if can [*sic*] do this, it follows that TAG, on this interpretation, fails to prove that Christianity is true.”<sup>100</sup> However, despite Butler’s assertion, it does not seem possible to actually imagine the world as irrational. To do so would require a rational concept of what an irrational world would look like. One could not use rational cognitive abilities to imagine an irrational world without relying on rationality. The endeavor presupposes a rational world while attempting to envision an irrational world. It is altogether absurd.

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<sup>99</sup> Butler, “The Transcendental Argument,” 121.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

Of course, if one must adhere to the idea that the world is ultimately irrational and meaningless in order to refrain from accepting the Christian worldview, then the transcendental argument was a success. It has shown that denying the overarching teachings of the Bible regarding metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics results in absurdity. It confirms Van Til's proclamation: "In fact, we may contrast every non-Christian epistemology with Christian epistemology by saying that Christian epistemology believes in an ultimate rationalism while all other systems of epistemology believe in an ultimate irrationalism."<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, nobody need take seriously the objections of a person who argues that nothing is intelligible and everything is meaningless. The very act of arguing for such an argument is self-refuting. One can easily show that the objector relies on the Christian worldview to live his or her life, and yet is inconsistent when denying it with his or her words. In this, Van Til was absolutely correct, saying, "A three year old child may slap its father in his face only because the father holds it up on his knee."<sup>102</sup>

Returning to Craig's criticism of Van Til and praise of Plantinga, what can be said after considering the analytical formulation of Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication? First, there is an apparent disconnect between what Craig thinks both Van Til and Plantinga are saying, and what they are actually saying. Plantinga retrospectively affirms Van Til's method, saying:

[The Christian philosopher] has a right to take the existence of God for granted and go on from there in his philosophical work—just as other philosophers take for granted the existence of the past, say, or of other persons, or the basic claims of contemporary physics... The Christian philosopher quite properly starts from the existence of God, and presupposes it in philosophical work, whether or not he can show it to be probable or

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<sup>101</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 64-65.

<sup>102</sup> Van Til, *Toward a Reformed Apologetic*, 10, Adobe PDF eBook.

plausible with respect to premises accepted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or most philosophers at the great contemporary centers of philosophy... It is entirely fitting for him to give... an answer that presupposes precisely that of which the skeptic is skeptical—even if this skepticism is nearly unanimous in most of the prestigious philosophy departments of our day.<sup>103</sup>

However, Plantinga has, to some degree, been critical of Craig's position. For example, speaking of natural theology, which is inextricably tied to Craig's classical method, Plantinga says, "Aquinas' followers and commentators have tried to mend matters by various ingenious suggestions; none of these, I believe, is successful... Hume's criticism seems correct. The conclusion to be drawn, I think, is that the teleological argument, like the cosmological, is unsuccessful."<sup>104</sup>

Regarding the similarities of Van Til and Plantinga, one should note that they are not similar enough that one should think of them as correlative systems of apologetics. Oliphint says, "Like Plantinga, Van Til is not content to answer evidential objections by piling on more and more evidence. Neither is he content with a method that seeks to prove or demonstrate theism by way of an evidential argument... But Van Til is not content, either, to tout common sense realism, or any other kind of realism... as a sufficient structure for Christian apologetics."<sup>105</sup>

Craig wants to assert that Plantinga is head and shoulders above Van Til, but this is not obviously true, and appears contradictory to Craig's own standard, in that Plantinga is content with staying away from arguments for the truth of Christianity, saying "The only way I can see

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<sup>103</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (July 1984): 260-261.

<sup>104</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 80, 84.

<sup>105</sup> K. Scott Oliphint, "Forward," in *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016), xxviii.

to argue that Christian belief has *these* virtues is to argue that Christian belief is, indeed, *true* [all emphasis in original]. I don't propose to offer such an argument."<sup>106</sup> But Craig has already asserted that showing Christianity to be true is the entire point of apologetics. By Craig's own standard, only one of these apologists has even attempted to perform the task of apologetics, and it is not Alvin Plantinga. One who believes, like Craig, that "the task of apologetics" is to show "Christianity to be true" can justifiably claim: "The Reformed tradition needs to realize what a treasure it has in Cornelius Van Til and to appropriate his insights. People came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Plantinga, and behold, a greater apologist than Plantinga is here."

### **Conclusion**

Cornelius Van Til was a controversial Christian apologist with a revolutionary take on methodology. In seeking to defend the Christian faith, Van Til was not content to do so with a method that was not also consistent with the entirety of the faith he was defending. With his high view of God, Van Til was unwilling to allow fallen man to presume to be the judge over God. He sought to remove God from the dock, so to speak, and to use a method of apologetics which never seeks to deny God his rightful seat on the throne. This method, typically called presuppositionalism, is to argue for God on the grounds that God is the ultimate reference point for all human experience.

Van Til taught that the only way to argue in a manner consistent with the Christian faith, is to argue transcendently. A transcendental argument is an argument which shows what must be the case for some state of affairs to obtain. For Van Til, the most notable state of affairs for

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<sup>106</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 200-201.

argument sake, is the very possibility of argument itself. In this, Van Til sought to show that the very concept of argumentation through predication presupposed that the metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics taught in the Bible must be true.

Some have lamented that Van Til never formally presented his argument, at least analytically, so this discussion centered on completing that task. In the process, Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication was analytically formulated and is now subject to critical engagement from an analytical perspective. The formulation is as follows: (1) That there is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions presupposes that the Bible is entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings; (2) There is a possibility of assigning truth values to propositions; therefore, (3) The Bible is entirely correct on all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical teachings.

Possible objections to this argument were examined. It was shown that an argument which seeks to establish a contradictory argument is not a rebuttal of this argument, rather, it is a separate argument which necessitates a separate discussion. There were however, two particular objections which were relevant to this argument: first, that the argument does not establish the necessity of the Christian worldview because it has not excluded all other worldviews; and second, that even if this did establish the necessity of believing the Christian worldview, it does not establish that the Christian worldview is necessarily true. The former objections was answered by showing that all non-Christian worldviews are refuted by showing that the negation of this argument results in absurdity. The latter was refuted by showing that one could only maintain such a rebuttal if they were to argue that the universe is ultimately irrational and unintelligible, but such an argument can be dismissed as ultimately self-refuting. If one needs to

maintain that the universe is irrational and meaningless to avoid concluding that the Christian worldview is true, then Van Til's Transcendental Argument from Predication is a success.

One tangential focus of this paper was the claim made by William Lane Craig that Alvin Plantinga is a far superior apologist than Van Til. Although, when looking at the methods of all three, it appears that Plantinga is much closer to Van Til than Craig, and that Plantinga had much less respect for Craig's method than Van Til's. Furthermore, by Craig's own standard regarding the task of apologetics, Plantinga has explicitly stated that he will not engage in such an endeavor, on the other hand, that is precisely the endeavor in which Van Til engaged. There is no reason that an apologist like Craig should readily accept Plantinga's arguments which do not seek to show the truth of Christianity and at the same time reject Van Til's argument which does seek to show the truth of Christianity, when Craig has already said that the very task of apologetics is to show the truth of Christianity. In fact, the opposite is true: Craig should be more supportive of the presuppositional method, as should all apologists.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> This author is indebted to the valuable insights and advice from the following: Walter Davis, Gary Habermas, Michael Butler, Gray Sutanto, Don Collett, Scott Oliphint, William Edgar, Jason Lisle, Mike Lawyer, and Doug Wilson.

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