

Van Til's Transcendental Argument Form and Theological and Biblical Basis

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Introduction and explanation

In this paper I will give:

- (1) Key passages by Cornelius Van Til about:
 - (a) Van Til's transcendental¹ argument for the God's existence (VTAG);
 - (b) the related borrowed capital of non-Christians;
 - (c) the related irrationalist-rationalist dilemma;
 - (d) the related witnessing to and defending the Christian faith;
 - (2) VTAG in Van Til's own words, followed by an example of VTAG by Van Til;
 - (3) A summary of VTAG with its logical form;
 - (4) Van Til's theological basis for VTAG; and
- 2 to 4 are based on 1.
- (5) Van Til's and Greg Bahnsen's key passages on the Biblical basis for VTAG.²

A bibliography incorporating the abbreviations used is given at the end.

1) Van Til's Key Passages on his Transcendental Argument Form and its Theological Basis

It should be noted that reasoning by presupposition (the two fold, for arguments sake, strategy), transcendental argument or method, the indirect method, the impossibility of the contrary or opposite, the method of implication, are all different terms for the same apologetic method, with different emphases.³

¹ As will become clear the word *transcendental* is not about what is mysterious, beyond reason or unknown to us, but what is the basis, or presupposition, or ultimate reference point, for anything (and that this is God who is transcendent). Compare footnote 48 below.

² This paper was background research for my essay "Frame's and Van Til's Apologetic" to be published in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009). That essay gives some constructive criticisms of the conclusions in this paper.

³ This can be seen by comparing DF3 100–101 / DF4 122–123 / CA1 62 / CA2 129, and SCE 10, 12, 201 and 205–6. Also see CVT 311–312 and K. Scott Oliphint, "The Consistency of Van Til's Methodology" *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (Spring 1990): 27–49 (reprinted by Westminster Discount Books Service).

In the Van Til quotes I have underlined Van Til's text which describes the form of VTAG (used in 2 and 3 below) and put in bold Van Til's theological basis for VTAG (used in 4 below). The emphasis given is Van Til's.

The quotes are given in the book order (alphabetical and the page number sequence). Where a book has a new reformatted and annotated edition the quote reference is given in both the new and previous edition (see the bibliography at the end for the details). Also where a quote is in more than one book this is given. So a reference can look like: DF3 99–101 / DF4 121–4 / CA1 / CA2 61–3 / 128–31.

a) About VTAG

Since on the Reformed basis there is no area of neutrality between the believer and the unbeliever, the argument between them must be *indirect*. Christians cannot allow the legitimacy of the assumptions that underlie the non-Christian methodology. But they can place themselves upon the position of those whom they are seeking to win to a belief in Christianity for the sake of the argument. And the non-Christian, though not granting the presuppositions from which the Christian works, can nevertheless place himself upon the position of the Christian for the sake of the argument. ... The natural man is quite able intellectually to follow the argument that the Christian offers for the truth of his position. He can therefore see that the wisdom of this world has been made foolishness by God. Christianity can be shown to be, not "just as good as" or even "better than" the non-Christian position, but the only position that does not make nonsense of human experience. (CTK 18–19)

To argue by presupposition is to indicate what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one's method. The Reformed apologist will frankly admit that his own methodology presupposes the truth of Christian theism. Basic to all the doctrines of Christian theism is that of the self-contained God, or, if we wish, that of the ontological trinity. It is this notion of the ontological trinity that ultimately controls a truly Christian methodology. Based upon this notion of the ontological trinity and consistent with it, is the concept of the counsel of God according to which all things in the created world are regulated. ...

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the "facts" and "laws" intelligible. The question is as to what the "facts" and "laws" really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes that they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?

The answer to this question cannot be finally settled by any direct discussion of "facts." It must, in the last analysis, be settled indirectly. The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake, in order to show him that on such a position the "facts" are not facts and the "laws" are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument's sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible. ...

The Reformed apologist, on the other hand, appealing to that knowledge of the true God in the natural man which the natural man suppresses by means of his assumption of ultimacy, will also appeal to the knowledge of the true method which the natural man knows *but suppresses* [Rom 1:18]. The natural man at bottom knows that he is the creature of God. He knows also that he is responsible to God. He knows that he should live to the glory of God. He knows that in all that he does he should stress that the field of reality which he investigates has the stamp of God's ownership upon it. But he suppresses his knowledge of himself as he truly is. He is the man with the iron mask. A true method of apologetics must seek to tear off that iron mask. (DF3 99–101 / DF4 121–4 / CA1 / CA2 61–3 / 128–31)

Protestants are required by the most basic principles of their system to vindicate the existence of no other God than the one who has spoken in Scripture. But this God cannot be proved to exist by any other method than the indirect one of presupposition. No proof for this God and for the truth of his revelation in Scripture can be offered by an appeal to anything in human experience that has not itself received its light from the God whose existence and whose revelation it is supposed to prove. One cannot prove the usefulness of the light of the sun for the purposes of seeing by turning to the darkness of a cave. The darkness of the cave must itself be lit up by the shining of the sun. When the cave is thus lit up each of the objects that are in it “proves” the existence and character of the sun by receiving their light and intelligibility from it. (DF3 108–9 / DF4 130–1 / CA1 68/ CA2 141)

The proofs may be formulated either on a Christian or on a non-Christian basis. They are formulated on a Christian basis if, with Calvin, they rest clearly upon the ideas of creation and providence. They then appeal to what the natural man, because he is a creature of God, actually does know to be true. They are bound to find immediate response of inward assent in the natural man. He cannot help but own to himself that God does exist.

When the proofs are thus formulated they have absolute probative force. They are not demonstrable in the sense that this word is often taken. As often taken, the idea of demonstration is that of exhaustive penetration by the mind of man; pure deduction of one conclusion after another from an original premise that is obvious. Such a notion of demonstration does not comport with the Christian system. That system is analogical. Man cannot penetrate through the relations of the Creator to the creature. But this does not in the least reduce the probative force of the proofs. (DF3 176 / DF4 197–8)

Protestant apologetics starts by listening with loving obedience to God who identifies himself to man in Christ as his creator and redeemer. Christ’s voice is, in the nature of the case, the voice of authority. Believers accept his Word for what it is by the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in their hearts.

A truly Protestant apologetic must therefore make its beginning from the presupposition that the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, speaks to him with absolute authority in Scripture. ...

Every form of intellectual argument rests, in the last analysis, upon one or the other of two basic presuppositions. The non-Christian’s process of reasoning rests upon the presupposition that man is the final or ultimate reference point in human predication. The Christian’s process of reasoning rests upon the presupposition that God, speaking through Christ by his Spirit in the infallible Word, is the final or ultimate reference point in human predication.

The unqualified acceptance of the authority of Christ speaking in Scripture, so far from excluding the possibility of fruitful discussion with unbelievers, is rather the only possible foundation for it. If reality were the sort of thing that non-Christian thinking assumes it to be, something not created and not controlled by God, then there would be no possibility of human knowledge of it at all. And if the human person were the sort of thing that non-Christian thinking assumes it to be, something sprung by chance from chance, then there would be no possibility of it knowing the world at all. It is just because the world and man are, as the Scriptures teach, created for one another and directed toward their goal through redemption by Christ, that human predication is possible. And by the same token reasoning with unbelievers is possible and fruitful for believers just so far as believers remain true to their own basic presupposition. True to this presupposition they can, for arguments sake, place themselves with the unbeliever on his presupposition, in order then to show him that he cannot even raise an intelligible objection against the Christian view. For in objecting to the Christian view he has to presuppose its truth. (DF3 179–80—not in DF4)

Without the conception of a self-sufficient God our human experience would be meaningless. It is well to note at once the nature of the argument; it is transcendental and not formally logical. An argument for the existence of God based on formal logic would imply the ability to define God and arrive at a comprehensive rationality of all our experience. A transcendental argument on the

contrary, is negative in so far that it reasons from the impossibility of the opposite. If it be said that the impossibility of the opposite is a canon of formal logic after all, the reply is that every one must use formal arguments but that the important point is to define their bearing power. As to that it seems reasonable to hold that a position in which we can see contradiction is untenable. Moreover a position which reduces our experience to chaos cannot claim the adherence of rational creatures. That is, our basis for rejecting certain views is always that we conceive them to be irrational. On the other hand we accept a certain position in the philosophical world not because we can completely rationalize all experience upon it as a basis. Our metaphysics cannot be more *geometrici demonstrata*: you cannot prove your position to anyone unless you completely have comprehensive knowledge or at least are certainly on the way toward it. Accordingly, we do not seek to prove Christian theism but only try to show that we can find no meaning in our human experience unless there be a self-sufficient God to give it meaning. (GA 3–4)

As indicated at the outset of this work, we speak of all forms of reasoning in which man is assumed to be the final or ultimate reference point of predication as *univocal* reasoning. In contrast to this we speak of the form of reasoning employed by the Christian who recognizes that God is the ultimate reference point of predication as *analogical* reasoning. (IST1 101n1 / IST2 178n6). God has continued to reveal himself in nature even after the entrance of sin. Men ought, therefore, to know him. **Men ought to reason analogically from nature to nature's God. Men ought, therefore, to use the cosmological argument analogically in order thus to conclude that God is the creator of this universe. Men ought to realize that nature could not exist as something independent. They ought to sense that if anything intelligible is to be said about nature, it must be in relation to the absolute system of truth, which is God. Hence, they ought at once to see nature as the creation of God. Men ought also to use the ontological argument analogically. Men ought to realize that the word *being* cannot be intelligently applied to anything unless it be applied to God without limitation. They ought not, as is usually done in the case of the ontological argument, first assume that the word being can be intelligibly applied to this universe in order then and thereafter to conclude that it must also be applied in an unlimited way to a still higher being than ourselves or this world. The better theologians of the church have constantly sensed the fact that the theistic argument must not be used univocally. They 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. Intelligent predication about anything with respect to nature or with respect to man were impossible unless God existed as the ultimate reference point of it all. God, as self-sufficient, as the One in whom the One and the Many are equally ultimate, is the One in whom the persons of the Trinity are interchangeably exhaustive, is the presupposition for the intelligent use of words with respect to anything in this universe, whether it be the trees of the garden or the angels in heaven. (IST1 102 / IST2 180)**

To be sure, the natural man [1 Cor 2:14] knows God [Rom 1:18]. He does not merely know that a god or that probably a god exists. ... He will not own this. He represses it [Rom 1:18]. His ethical hostility [Rom 8:7] will never permit him to recognize the facts to be true which, deep, down in his heart, he knows in spite of himself to be true. ... So the natural man is made in the image of God [Gen 1:26]. He has the knowledge of God. **The appeal is made to what is suppressed.** And then as it is the grace of God that must give man the ability to see the truth in preaching so it is also the Spirit of God that must give man the ability to accept the truth as it is presented to him in apologetical reasoning.

This reasoning will accordingly have to be by way of presupposition. Since there is no fact and no law on which the two parties to the argument agree they will have to place themselves upon one another's positions for the sake of argument. This does not mean that we are thus after all granting to the natural man the ability to reason correctly. He can follow a process of reasoning intellectually. He may even have a superior intellect. But of himself he always makes the wrong use of it. A saw may be ever so shiny and sharp, but if its set is wrong it will always cut on a slant. **Hence, following Paul's example when he asks, "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world," [1 Cor 1:20] we also place ourselves on the ground of the opponent. We may first ask him to place**

himself on our ground. We can then show that if there is to be rationality at any point there must be rationality at the basis of all ... (IW 38–9)

As a covenant being man must seek to implicate himself into the revelation of God. If he is to see the facts of his environment for what they are, he must see them as being nothing more or less than bearers of the covenant requirements and promises of God. We may therefore say that man's proper method of obtaining knowledge is that of "implication into God's revelation." (SCE p.6) **In presenting the "system of truth" of Scripture we use, therefore, the transcendental method.** Kant spoke of the conditions which make human experience intelligible. For him these presuppositions rested on the notion of self-sufficiency. **For us the condition which makes human experience intelligible is the Word of the self-attesting triune God speaking through Christ in the Scriptures. A truly transcendent God and a truly transcendental method go hand in hand.**

Our basic approach then is to accept on authority what Christ says in Scripture. Our basic presupposition is based on our belief that in Scripture God speaks to us. (JA 302)

we must now ask how Christians should argue with the opponents.

Our answer must once more be that the method of reasoning employed must be consistent with and flow out of the position defended. Non-theists *always* reason *univocally*. Christians must *always* reason *analogically*. They may and must use the same terminology as their opponents, but while using this terminology they cannot afford to forget for a fraction of a second the presupposition of the absolute self-consciousness of God, which alone gives meaning to the terminology they employ.

If this fundamental canon of Christian reasoning be always kept in mind, we can begin reasoning with our opponents at any point in heaven or earth and may for arguments sake present Christian theism as one hypothesis among many, and may for argument's sake place ourselves upon the ground of our opponent in order to see what will happen. In all this it will remain our purpose to seek to reduce the non-theistic position, in whatever form it appears, to an absurdity. In our preaching we say that those who do not accept Christ are lost. Our reasoning can do nothing less.

... we have constantly sought to bring out that all forms of antitheistic thinking can be reduced to one, and since the issue is fundamentally that of the acceptance or the rejection of the concept of God, it may suffice to apply the analogical method of reasoning in an argument with those who hold to the "scientific method" of the day. That scientific method is agnostic. It claims to be willing to accept any fact that may appear, but unwilling to start with the idea of God.

... By this rejection of God, agnosticism has embraced complete relativism. Yet this relativism must furnish a basis for the rejection of the absolute. Accordingly, the standard of self-contradiction taken for granted by antitheistic thought presupposes the absolute for its operation. Antitheism presupposes theism. One must stand upon the solid ground of theism to be an effective antitheist. (SCE xi–xii)

A truly transcendental argument takes any fact of experience which it wishes to investigate, and tries to determine what the presuppositions of such a fact must be, in order to make it what it is. An exclusively deductive argument would take an axiom such as that every cause must have an effect, and reason in a straight line from such an axiom, drawing all manner of conclusions about God and man. A purely inductive argument would begin with any fact and seek in a straight line for a cause of such an effect, and thus perhaps conclude that this universe must have had a cause. Both of these methods have been used, as we shall see, for the defense of Christianity. Yet neither of them could be thoroughly Christian unless they already presupposed God. Any method, as was pointed out above, that does not maintain that not a single fact can be known unless it be that God gives that fact meaning, is an anti-Christian method. On the other hand, if God is recognized as the only and the final explanation of any and every fact, neither the inductive nor the deductive method can any longer be used to the exclusion of the other. That this is the case can best be realized if we keep in mind that the God we contemplate is an absolute God. Now the only argument for an absolute God that holds water is a transcendental argument. A deductive argument as such leads only from one spot in the universe to another spot in the universe. So also an inductive argument as such can never lead beyond the universe. In either case there is no more than an

infinite regression. In both cases it is possible for the smart little girl to ask, “If God made the universe, who made God?” and no answer is forthcoming. This answer is, for instance, a favorite reply of the atheist debater, Clarence Darrow. But if it be said to such opponents of Christianity that, unless there were an absolute God their own questions and doubts would have no meaning at all, there is no argument in return. There lie the issues. 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. Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have, in order to be what it is. It does not seek to find *whether* the house has a foundation, but it presupposes that it has one. We hold that the anti-Christian method, whether deductive or inductive, may be compared to a man who would first insist that the statue of William Penn on the city hall of Philadelphia can be intelligently conceived of without the foundation on which it stands, in order afterwards to investigate whether or not this statue really has a foundation.

It should be particularly noted, therefore, that only a system of philosophy that takes the concept of an absolute God seriously can really be said to be employing a transcendental method. **A truly transcendent God and a transcendental method go hand in hand.** (SCE 10–11)

... we have spoken of the Christian theistic method as the method of *implication* into the truth of God. It is reasoning in a spiral fashion rather than in a linear fashion. ... If we begin the course of spiral reasoning at any point in the finite universe, as we must because that is the proximate starting point of all reasoning, we can call the method of implication into the truth of God a *transcendental method*. That is, we must seek to determine what presuppositions are necessary to any object of knowledge in order that it may be intelligible to us. ...

We can start with any fact at all and challenge “our friends the enemy,” to give us an intelligible interpretation of it. ...

What we shall have to do then is to try to reduce our opponent’s position to an absurdity. ...

... 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. It is this too that we should mean when we say that we are arguing *ad hominem*. ... Similarly, if we reason when we place ourselves upon our opponents’ position, we cannot for a moment do more than argue thus for “argument’s sake.” (SCE 201, 204–6)

[the] whole Christian theistic position must be presented not as something just a little or as a great deal better than other positions, but must be presented as the only system of thought that does not destroy human experience to a meaningless something. **This is in accord with the teaching of the Bible that those who do not accept Christ are lost.** Accordingly, if Christian theism is defensible at all it must be defensible in this way. And if it is not defensible in this way it is not defensible in any other way, because any other way of defense reduces the uniqueness of Christianity at once. The question is one of “this or nothing.”

The argument in favor of Christian theism must therefore seek to prove that if one is not a Christian theist he knows nothing at all as he ought to know anything. The difference is not that all men alike know certain things about the finite universe and that some claim some *additional* knowledge, while the others do not. On the contrary, the Christian theist must claim that he alone has true knowledge about cows and chickens as well as about God. He does this in no spirit of conceit, because it is a gift of God’s grace. Nor does he deny that there is knowledge *after a fashion* that enables the non-theist to get along *after a fashion* in the world. This is the gift of God’s common grace, and therefore does not change the absoluteness of the distinction made about the knowledge and the ignorance of the theist and the non-theist respectively.

The method of argumentation will accord with the general position taken so far. It will seek to show that antitheistic knowledge is self-contradictory on its own ground, and that *its conception of contradiction even presupposes the truth of Christian theism*. It must be the method of the impossibility of the contrary, or that of the destruction of the enemy. It must show that univocal reasoning is self-destructive. (SCE 222–3)

b) About the related borrowed capital of non-Christians

... *in spite of* their basically false immanentistic assumption non-Christian scientists can and do convey much truth by means of their description of facts. If the basic assumption of non-Christian thought were true, Whirl would be king. The human mind itself would be the product of Chance. For nothing less than Chance is the alternative to the biblical doctrine of God's plan with respect to the universe. And on a Chance foundation there could be no description of facts. But the universe is not what the non-Christian assumes it to be. And precisely for this reason is it, that even those who work with false assumptions can discover much truth about the facts of the world. No created mind can function in any field, even for the fraction of a second, without taking for granted the fundamental rationality of the universe and of the coherence of the human mind in relation to it. But the universe has no rationality and the human mind has no coherence within itself or in relation to the world except upon the presupposition of the truth of Christianity. So then the non-Christian scientist must live on "borrowed capital." If he had to live by his own capital he would choke forthwith even as a scientist. To be sure, the non-Christian does not self-consciously borrow the Christian's principles. Like the prodigal son, he lives on the father's substance without owning this to be the case [Lk 15:11–16]. But as the prodigal was able to live and prosper *in spite of* being a prodigal so also the non-Christian scientist can describe the "uniformities of nature" in spite of his worship of Chance. (GH 243)

The Christian claims that non-Christians have made and now make many discoveries about the true state of affairs of the universe simply because the universe is what Christ says it is. The unbelieving scientist borrows or steals the Christian principles of creation and providence every time he says that an "explanation" is possible, for he knows he cannot account for "explanation" on his own. As the image-bearer of God, operating in a universe controlled by God, the unbeliever contributes indirectly and adventitiously to the development of human knowledge and culture. (JA 17–18)

The only "proof" of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of "proving" anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of "proof" itself. (JA 21)

If the unbeliever then points to the fact that non-Christian scientists and philosophers have discovered many actual "states of affairs," I heartily agree with this but I must tell him that they have done so with borrowed capital. They have done so *adventitiously*. The actual state of affairs about the entire cosmos is what the Bible says it is. (JA 91)

... I believe that a Christian apologist must place himself for argument's sake upon the position of the non-believer and point out to him that he has to presuppose the truth of the Christian position even to oppose it. I saw a little girl one day on a train sitting on the lap of her "daddy" slapping him in the face. If the "daddy" had not held her on his lap she would not have been able to slap him. (JA 98)

c) About the related irrationalist-rationalist dilemma

In ancient philosophy the rationalistic motif seemed to dominate the scene; in modern times the irrationalistic motif seems to be largely in control. But the one never lives altogether independently of the other. (CTK 50)

When Adam, for all men, refused to take-God's prediction of punishment for disobedience seriously, he virtually said that the facts and laws of the universe are not under God's control but operate by virtue of Chance. This is ultimate and utter irrationalism. At the same time, in the same act of disobedience Adam virtually assumed that what God threatened would come to pass could not come to pass. Assuming that he did not want to die, we must think of him as rejecting the idea that physical and spiritual death could come as the result of eating the forbidden fruit. This was ultimate and utter rationalism.

Now all men, since Adam, have been both utterly irrationalistic and utterly rationalistic. I hold this to be the direct implication of the idea that Adam's fall involved all men ... (Rom 5:12). (DF1 237 / DF4 238–9)

if the natural man is to make any intelligible assertions about the world of “reality” or “fact” which, according to him is what it is for no rational reason at all, then he must make the virtual claim of rationalizing the irrational. ... Thus all his predication is in the nature of the case self-contradictory.

Realizing this dilemma, many modern philosophers have argued that any intellectual system of interpretation is therefore no more than a perspective. (DF3 127 / DF4 148)

There is nothing surprising in the fact that modern man is both utterly irrationalist and utterly rationalist at the same time. He has to be both in order to be either. And he has to be both in order to defend his basic assumption of his own freedom or ultimacy. ...

In fact the ‘free man’ of modern non-Christian thought is Janus-faced [two-faced, double-minded]. He turns one way and would seem to be nothing but an irrationalist. He talks about the ‘fact’ of freedom. He even makes a pretence of being hotly opposed to the rationalist. ... he will boldly assert that what cannot happen according to logic has happened in fact. Then he turns the other way and would seem to be nothing but a rationalist. Surely, he says, the ‘rational man’ will accept nothing but what has intelligible meaning for him in accord with the law of contradiction. There must be coherence in experience. It is meaningless to talk about the ‘entirely single thing.’ But both in his irrationalist and in his rationalist features, the would-be autonomous man is seeking to defend his ultimacy against the claims of the Christian religion. ...

It is this Janus-faced covenant-breaker, then, who must be won for the gospel. It is he who walks the streets of New York and London. And no one but he does. All men are sinners; all are interested in suppressing the fact of their creaturehood. The irrationalist and rationalist have become friends in the face of their common foe. And this common foe is historic Christianity. (ICG 18)

d) About the related witnessing to and defending the Christian faith

When I beseech men to forsake their unbelief and accept the Christ of Scripture as God over all and therefore as their Savior, I ask them to forsake the obviously sinking raft of experience as it is assumed to be by would-be autonomous man. (JA 426)

[I do not] make any sharp distinction between witnessing to and defending the Christian faith. ... My defense of the truth of Christianity is, as I think of it, always, at the same time, a witness to Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We do not really witness to Christ adequately unless we set forth the significance of his person and work for all men and for the whole of their culture. But if we witness to him thus then men are bound to respond to him either in belief or disbelief. If they respond in disbelief they will do so by setting forth as truth some “system of reality” that is based on the presupposition of man as autonomous. I must then plead with them to accept Christ as their Savior from the sin of autonomy, and therewith, at the same time, to discover that they have been given, in Christ, the only foundation for intelligent predication. (JA 452)

Protestant Christians ought therefore to celebrate the grace of God their Savior unto them by noting carefully from what they have been saved and to what they are called. Their method of apologetics should be in line with their theology. In both Christ should be taught and preached unto men who are lost in all their thinking and living without him. The natural man must be shown that on his presupposition or assumption of man's autonomy human predication has no meaning at all. But this negative task cannot be accomplished except on the presupposition that in Christ life does have meaning. Only when Protestant theology thus sees its apologetics to be an aspect of its theology of free grace can the glad tidings of the gospel ring out clearly and fully to men. (DF3 4)

2) Van Til's Transcendental Argument in his own words

From 1 above, here is Van Til's transcendental argument for God's existence (VTAG)⁴ in Van Til's own words (with further explanations in the footnotes, especially from Bahnsen and Frame). I have added the headings, numbering and, in square brackets, linking and explanatory text where needed.

The twofold, for argument's sake, strategy (indirect, reasoning by presupposition)

Introduction

"A *transcendental method* ... seek[s] to determine what presuppositions⁵ are necessary to any object of knowledge (whether in negation or in affirmation) in order that it may be intelligible to us.⁶ We should be willing to start anywhere and with any fact that any person we meet is interested in.⁷ The question is ... what is the final reference-point required to make ... the "facts" and "laws" intelligible.

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct ...

Procedure 1

⁸The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake,⁹ in order to show him that on such a

⁴ The nature of transcendental arguments and VTAG is debated. See Michael R. Butler, "The Transcendental Argument for God's Existence" in Steven M. Schlissel, ed., *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002), also available at <http://butler-harris.org/tag>; Don Collett's, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 289–306 later revised and expanded as "Frame and Transcendental Argument Revisited" to be published in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame*; and VTARA, 499-500n60. For Frame's description of VTAG see CVT 311–315 and DKG 359–360, for Bahnsen's see VTARA 482–529, and Edgar's see CA2 7–8.

⁵ For Van Til *presupposition* means not a mere personal preference or hypothesis to be verified but "the final or ultimate reference point" (DF3 100 / DF4 122 and IST2 178n6); objective "state of affairs" or "foundation" (JA 21 (5)); necessary "precondition" (CTETH 245). Frame adds, this is "a belief that governs all other beliefs, or the most fundamental commitment of the heart" (from The Glossary: Van Til, in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame*).

⁶ SCE 201 with SCE 11 inserted in brackets.

⁷ SCE 204.

⁸ Bahnsen's explains the first step as "The apologist then subjects the unbeliever's worldview to an internal critique to show that it is (1) arbitrary, and/or (2) inconsistent with itself, and/or (3) lacking the preconditions for the intelligibility of knowledge (language, logic, science, morality, redemption, etc.). Since that is the case, the unbeliever cannot "know" the things that he urges against Christianity—indeed, he could not know anything at all and loses all claim to rationality. Thus, the Christian has proved the rationality and necessity of His scripturally based worldview" (VTARA 513).

⁹ That is "believers remain true to their own basic presupposition" (DF3 180). As Frame explains "The Christian never really abandons his own presupposition, even for a moment. Even when accepting the unbeliever's principles "for the sake of argument," he still is thinking as a Christian. What really happens, then ... is that the Christian is telling the unbeliever how the unbeliever's principles look to him as a Christian" (DKG 359 cf. CVT 319–321). Van Til adds otherwise "we would drown with him. We use the figure of drowning in order to suggest what it is that we really do when we say that we are placing ourselves upon someone else's position. We may then compare ourselves to a lifesaver who goes out to save someone from drowning. Such a lifesaver must be bound to the shore to which he wants to rescue the other party. He may depend upon his power to swim, but this very power to swim is an invisible cord that connects him to the shore. Similarly, if we reason when we place

position the “facts” are not facts and the “laws” are not laws¹⁰—we ... challenge “our friends the enemy,” to give us an intelligible interpretation of the fact. ... What we shall have to do then is to try to reduce our opponent’s position to an absurdity [*reductio ad absurdum*].¹¹ ... It is this that we ought to mean when we say that we reason from the *impossibility of the contrary*.¹² The contrary is impossible only if it is self-contradictory when operating on the basis of its own assumptions¹³—a transcendental argument ... is negative in so far that it reasons from the impossibility of the opposite.¹⁴

**a) You can point out the unbeliever’s knowledge from borrowed capital
(presupposing the truth of the Christian position)**

If the unbeliever then points to the fact that non-Christian scientists and philosophers have discovered many actual “states of affairs,” I heartily agree with this but I must tell him that they have done so with *borrowed capital*.¹⁵ The Christian claims that non-Christians have made and now make many discoveries about the true state of affairs of the universe simply because the universe is what Christ says it is. The unbelieving scientist borrows or steals the Christian principles of creation and providence every time he says that an “explanation” is possible, for he knows he cannot account for “explanation” on his own.¹⁶ To be sure, the non-Christian does not self-consciously borrow the Christian’s principles. Like the prodigal son, he lives on the father’s substance without owning this to be the case [Lk 15:11–16].¹⁷ [In fact the believer can] point out to the non-believer that he has to presuppose the truth of the

ourselves upon our opponents’ position, we cannot for a moment do more than argue thus for “argument’s sake” (SCE 204–5).

¹⁰ DF3 99–100 / DF4 122 / CA1 62 / CA2 129.

¹¹ Cf. footnote 39 (D). This method of Van Til’s is similar to one of his most famous students, Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer calls this “pushing the non-Christian to the logical conclusion of their presuppositions and taking their roof off” (Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, Second edition 1985, 138–142). Frame says “Schaeffer’s apologetic is transcendental ... Schaeffer argues that the only alternative to belief in the biblical God is matter, motion, time, and chance, in which there is no basis for rationality, moral standards, or aesthetic values” CVT 396. Hence, I like to think of Schaeffer as more in the presuppositional apologetics camp than any other camp—Bahnsen calls him “a quasi-prespositionalist” (ATJF 14). See further William Edgar, “Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995), 57–80 (especially 70–75), cf. Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, *Faith has its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Colorado: NavPress, 2001), 472–473 and Bryan A. Follis, *Truth with Love: the apologetics of Francis Schaeffer* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2006), 61–67, 29–30, 99 and 107–122. Also see my footnotes 21 and 24 and Frame’s “Some thoughts on Schaeffer’s apologetics” to be posted on www.frame-poythress.org.

¹² Bahnsen explains that the ““the impossibility of the contrary,” [is] showing that only Christianity provides the preconditions of intelligibility for man’s experience and reasoning. If Christianity were not true, the unbeliever could not prove or understand anything” (AR 152).

¹³ SCE 204–5.

¹⁴ GA 3.

¹⁵ JA 91, emphasis added.

¹⁶ JA 17–18.

¹⁷ GH 243.

Christian position even to oppose it. I saw a little girl one day on a train sitting on the lap of her “daddy” slapping him in the face. If the “daddy” had not held her on his lap she would not have been able to slap him.¹⁸ The only “proof” of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of “proving” anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of “proof” itself.¹⁹ Hence, following Paul’s example when he asks, “Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world,” [1 Cor 1:20] we also place ourselves on the ground of the opponent.²⁰

b) You can point out the irrationalist–rationalist dilemma

[Also the believer can point out that] if the natural man is to make any intelligible assertions about the world of “reality” or “fact” which, according to him is what it is for no rational reason at all, then he must make the virtual claim of *rationalizing* the *irrational*. ... Thus all his predication is in the nature of the case self-contradictory. ... [this is a] *dilemma*.²¹

Procedure 2

²²He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument’s sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do “facts” and “laws” appear intelligible. ... The Reformed apologist will frankly admit that his own methodology presupposes the truth of Christian theism.²³ Basic to all the doctrines of

¹⁸ JA 98.

¹⁹ JA 21.

²⁰ IW 39.

²¹ DF3 127 / DF4 148, emphasis added. Compare CVT 315 and 322 for how this unbeliever’s *irrationalist-rationalist dilemma* (or dialectic) can be part of doing VTAG. This dilemma has existed from the fall onwards (DF4 238–9). It is the tension and self-contradiction of being certain about uncertainty (irrationalism) and uncertain about certainty (irrationalism). For example Postmodernism self-destructs with its slogans: “It’s certain that there is no certainty”; “It’s wrong to say others are wrong.” Frame says that “In my view, Van Til’s analysis of the history of non-Christian thought in terms of rationalism and irrationalism, together with its theological justification, is one of his best accomplishments. ... Van Til’s analysis provides a good perspective from which to understand the twists and turns of the history of thought. ... Van Til, therefore gives us the courage to take “cultural sea-change” in stride ... And students who learn their apologetics from Van Til, if they learn it well, will be prepared for the next development when it comes; they will not have to learn their apologetics all over again. ... My only caveat is that we should avoid using this analysis in a wooden way, insensitive to the diversity among non-Christian thinkers. Nor should we assume that everything can be exhaustively explained by the rationalist-irrationalist dialectic. ... Nevertheless, [Van Til] introduces a very helpful apologetic tool in showing that unbelief is inseparably linked to the dialectic of rationalism and irrationalism, which destroys all basis for intelligible predication” (CVT 236, 238 and 399). Also see: VTARA 316–317 and 389–402; DKG 60–61; CVT 232–238 and 328–329; and FV, 212–213. For Frame’s application of this tool to actual people including that the dilemma is in unbeliever’s logic *and life* see DKG 360–363 and AGG 201–202. Van Til’s student Francis Schaeffer has his own version of the dilemma which he calls “The point of tension” (Schaeffer, *Complete Works, Volume One*, 131–137 cf. 76–79).

²² The two steps can be done in any order—this is a *two-fold strategy* comprising of two complementary moves. Obviously, as Bahnsen says, “in actual conversations, the order in which things are discussed, the relevant illustrations, the irrelevant sidebars, personal quirks, and unpredictable mental associations will all contribute to a specific dialogue that will likely differ from other ones and wander in many different directions” (VTARA 512n95).

²³ For Van Til it is not just bare theism (that just a God exists) that matters, but that it is the unique *Christian* God who is vindicated (DF3 105–106 / DF4 128 / CA1 66 / CA2 136–137). It will become clear that this is *the triune Lord and Savior*. As Van Til says “I am interested in defending the metaphysics that comes from Scripture. This

Christian theism is that of the self-contained God, or, if we wish, that of the ontological²⁴ trinity.²⁵ For us the condition which makes human experience intelligible is the Word of the self-attesting triune God speaking through Christ in the Scriptures²⁶—[this] is the final or ultimate reference point in human predication.²⁷

In 1 and 2 the apologist appeals to unbelievers' suppressed knowledge, and pleads with the unbeliever to accept Christ as their Savior from the sin of autonomy

[In 1 and 2] the Reformed apologist [is] appealing to that knowledge of the true God in the natural man which the natural man suppresses by means of his assumption of ultimacy [Rom 1:18],²⁸ [and pleading with the unbeliever] to accept Christ as their Savior from the sin of autonomy, and therewith, at the same time, to discover that they have been given, in Christ, the only foundation for intelligent predication.²⁹

involves: (a) the doctrine of the self-contained God or ontological trinity, (b) the plan or counsel of this God pertaining to created reality, (c) the fact of temporal creation as the origin of all the facts of the universe, (d) the fact of God's providential control over all created reality including the supernatural, and (e) the miraculous work of the redemption of the world through Christ" (DF4 236). Here (a) = triune, (b) to (d) = Lord and (e) = Savior. It is important to note that the God of Christian Theism is not the god of pantheism, Islam or Jehovah's Witnesses. Practically for people in the West, God is not just a God of love, he is also the judge and only Savior.

²⁴ Van Til says the ontological trinity is that "God exists in himself as a triune self-consciously active being. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are each a personality and together constitute the exhaustively personal God. There is an eternal, internal self-conscious interaction between the three persons of the Godhead. They are co-substantial. Each is as much God as are the other two. The Son and the Spirit do not derive their being from the Father. The diversity and the unity in the Godhead are therefore equally ultimate; they are exhaustively correlative to one another and not correlative to anything else" (CA1 8 / CA2 29). This definition is important for Van Til for the ontological trinity resolves the (philosophical) *one and the many problem*—"man's problem is to find unity in the midst of the plurality of thing. He sometimes calls this the One-and-Many problem" (DF3 24 / DF4 46–7) and "the Trinity is the conception by which ultimate unity and diversity is brought into equal ultimacy" (SCE 206). As Frame puts it, "On Van Til's own view, there is in the created world an equal ultimacy of both universal and particular, and both whole and part, because there is an equal ultimacy of one and many in the ontological trinity" (CVT 7). This gives the "possibility of human predication" (IST1 102 / IST2 180). Also see: CVT 71–78; AGG 49–50; VTARA 59n49 and 239–241; PTA 81–83 cf. 200–202 and Rushdoony's essay JA 339–348. Furthermore "Francis Schaeffer's use of the Trinity to solve the problem of the one and the many is right out of Van Til" (CVT 396)—see Schaeffer, *Complete Works, Volume One*, 287–290.

²⁵ DF3 100–101 and 99–100 / DF4 122–123 and 122 / CA1 62 and 61 / CA2 129 and 128.

²⁶ JA 302.

²⁷ DF3 180 (not in DF4).

²⁸ DF3 101 / DF4 124 / CA1 63 / CA2 130–131.

²⁹ JA 452. Note that as William Edgar says, "Van Til's apologetics is profoundly gospel driven. ... So many of the insights for which Van Til is justly famous fall flat if they are isolated from the great work emphasis on redemption that pervades his work. ... Apologetics for Van Til is simply a thoughtful form of evangelism" (CA2 14). For instance Van Til says "I [do] not ... make any sharp distinction between witnessing to and defending the Christian faith. ... My defense of the truth of Christianity is, as I think of it, always, at the same time, a witness to Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (JA 452). "Protestant Christians ought therefore to celebrate the grace of God their Savior unto them by noting carefully from what they have been saved and to what they are called. Their method of apologetics should be in line with their theology. In both Christ should be taught and preached unto men who are lost in all their thinking and living without him. The natural man must be shown that on his presupposition or assumption of man's autonomy human predication has no meaning at all. But this negative task cannot be accomplished except on the presupposition that in Christ life does have meaning. Only when Protestant theology thus sees its apologetics to be an aspect of its theology of free grace can the glad tidings of the gospel ring out clearly and fully to men" (DF3 4)—note the two fold strategy. Also see: Bahnsen VTARA 43–

Conclusion: [The triune Lord and Savior exists.]

Regarding VTAG there is a related matter, which is defending Christian theism *as a unit*. Van Til says, “Christian theism is a unit. Christianity and theism are implied in one another. If we ask, e.g., why Christ came into the world, the answer is that he came to save his people from their sins, But what is sin? It is “Any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God”.³⁰ And who or what is God? ... If we are to defend Christian theism as a unit it must be shown that its parts are really related to one another. ... In [Systematic Theology] we have the system of truth that we are to defend.”³¹ So “the method of presupposition requires the presentation of Christian theism as a unit. ... A truly Protestant method of reasoning involves a stress upon the fact that the meaning of every aspect or part of Christian theism depends upon Christian theism as a unit. When Protestants speak of the resurrection of Christ they speak of the resurrection of him who is the Son of God, the eternal Word through whom the world was made. ... This does not imply that it will be possible to bring the whole debate about Christian theism to full expression in every discussion of individual historical fact. Nor does it imply that the debate about historical detail is unimportant. It means that no Christian apologist can afford to forget the claim of his system with respect to any particular fact.”³² “The Christian faith as a whole, as a unit, must be set over against the non-Christian faith as a whole. Piecemeal apologetics is inadequate, especially for our time.”³³

44, 52–54, 70–71 and 82–85; Frame AGG 16, 26–27 and 54; DKG 350 and 355 and K. Scott Oliphint, “Van Til the Evangelist,” http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=118.

³⁰ Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer to Question 14.

³¹ CA1 1–2 and / CA2 18–19 and 23.

³² DF3 114–5 and 118 / DF4 136 and 139 / CA1 72–73 and 75 / CA2 149 and 153.

³³ IST1 Preface / IST2 12–13. As Bahnsen explains “presuppositionalism, as a method of defending the faith, does not seek to build up a worldview element by element, with one argument for this, another argument for that, etc., etc. [such as general theism and then Christianity or the inspired Bible then the divine Christ]. ... Dr. Van Til said, “Presuppositionalism doesn’t like a blockhouse method” [see DF3 114–115 / DF4 136–137]—you know, where you build the house block, by block, by block. Now it is true that we can only talk about one thing at a time ... we can’t say everything that can be said about the faith, nor can we use every argument that’s usable about the faith at the same time. However, don’t confuse that fact that we can only deal with one thing at a time with the idea that presuppositionalists are trying to bargain for one limited point, then another limited point, and they finally want to add all them up to the house of knowledge, or the house of faith, whatever it’s going to be. Even though we can only talk about one thing at a time, or focus attention on a particular aspect of our philosophy, or even pursue a specific line of argument one at a time—these specific arguments are part of a larger more basic strategy ... to prove the possibility of the contrary, or how it’s impossible to make sense out of anything apart from the [Christian] worldview ... But all I’m getting at here is that ideally or in theory we begin with an entire worldview, and then we go and set that over against whatever the unbeliever has to offer by way of contrast.

You need to be remembering that the unbeliever might not be able to tell you what his worldview is. Many unbelievers, many believers, don’t talk that way. You have to learn to communicate, obviously. And Dr. Van Til said we mustn’t expect that unbelievers walk around with all of their philosophical system worked out ready to just give it to us. So when we get into an argument and somebody challenges our faith, he says what you have to do is to start inquiring into the presuppositions that this person is using—even though he or she didn’t know that they were using them. You may take a while to set the stage if you do this correctly; but eventually, in theory, to whatever degree we can with the time, and circumstances, and personalities involved, we want to set out the entire Christian worldview against the entire worldview of the unbeliever. And as we start arguing then, we’re dealing with isolated elements and illustrations of the presuppositional challenge” (ATJF 31–32). See further: VTARA 102–103 and 708–709; and John M. Frame, “Divine Aseity and Apologetics,” in Lane Tipton and Scott Oliphint, eds., *Revelation and Reason* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 119.

Therefore it should be noted that VTAG is about the unique triune Lord and Savior, of Biblical Christianity, rather the god or gods of any religion or cult, such as in Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism or atheism (where the self is god) and agnosticism (which is practical atheism cf. Ps. 14:1–3).³⁴ In other words that God is triune and the Savior (by Christ, by grace alone through faith alone) is only in Christianity.³⁵

An example of VTAG by Van Til

And here is an example of VTAG by Van Til³⁶ that deals with the evolutionary worldview.

The Christian presupposes the triune God and his redemptive plan for the universe as set forth once for all in Scripture.

The non-Christian presupposes a dialectic³⁷ between “chance” and “regularity,” the former accounting for the origin of matter and life, the latter accounting for the current success of the scientific enterprise. ...

If the non-Christian attempts to account for the amenability of fact to logic in terms of the ultimate rationality of the cosmos, then he will be crippled when it comes to explaining the “evolution” of men and things. If he attempts to do so in terms of pure “chance” and ultimate “irrationality” as being the well out of which both rational man and a rationally amenable world sprang, then we shall point out that such an explanation is in fact no explanation at all and that it destroys predication.³⁸

³⁴ In Islam and Jehovah's Witnesses god is one but not three persons. In Mormonism there are many gods whilst in atheism (and agnosticism) there are no gods outside of the self as the self is god. Essentially all of these religions believe in salvation by works. Compare AGG 100, 92 and 54.

³⁵ As Bahnsen put it, “Christianity is in a league of its own” (ATJF 48 and mp3 GB1462 from <http://www.cmfnow.com>). Also hear the “war” cry of the Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah 43:11–12:

“I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no Savior.
I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—
I, and not some foreign god among you.
You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “that I am God.”

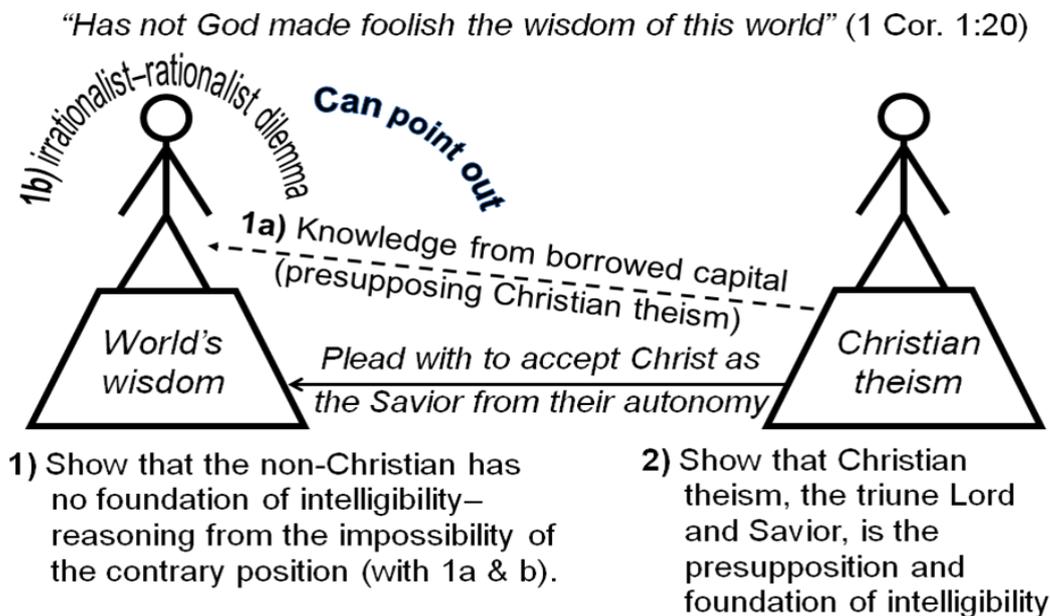
Any apologetic, including VTAG, worth its salt must show this.

³⁶ Also especially see Van Til's *Why I believe in God*.

³⁷ Notice here that Van Til uses the unbeliever's *irrationalist-rationalist dialectic* (or dilemma).

³⁸ JA 19 (B1a&b) and 20 (4b).

We can also put this in a diagram as follows.



This appeals to suppressed knowledge of God

Van Til’s transcendental argument – the twofold, for arguments sake, strategy (indirect reasoning by presupposition)

Figure 1

- A. Highlighting that it is about the *intelligibility* of something, (including its *affirmation* or *negation* / denial, see Van Til, SCE 11)—for instance “what is the basis of affirming or denying the *intelligibility* of causality?” However, it should be noted that in Van Til’s writings about VTAG “intelligibility or meaningfulness” is loosely interchangeable, with “predication (affirmations or denials)” and “(truth) claims” (e.g. SCE 10–11; IST1 102 / IST2 180; SCE 222–223). I chose intelligibility for my description of VTAG because that is the word Van Til uses in three of the most important VTAG passages DF3 100 / DF4 122–123 / CA1 62 / CA2 129 and SCE 10–11 and 201 and 204.
- B. Including Van Til’s “appeal to the unbeliever’s suppressed knowledge of God” and clearly including “pointing out (a) [the unbeliever’s] knowledge is from borrowed capital, and/or (b) the irrationalist-rationalist dilemma,” can be part of “reasoning from the impossibility of the contrary position” cf. CVT 315, 322.
- C. Including “pleading with the unbeliever to accept Christ as their Savior from the sin of autonomy” and that the God we prove is “the triune Lord and Savior.”
- D. Van Til also says that Procedure 1 is about reducing the non-Christian position to absurdity (a *reductio ad absurdum*) e.g. SCE xi and 204. However I have not included in this summary form because it could be misleading as: (1) strictly speaking a *reductio ad absurdum* derives a logical contradiction in a person’s beliefs whereas VTAG shows that the person’s presupposition cannot make x intelligible (this is not a *logical* inconsistency but a *performative* or operational inconsistency) and, (2) “Van Til’s transcendental argument from predication makes a stronger claim than the claim generated by the *reductio*. The latter generates a contradiction from the non-Christian position, while Van Til’s transcendental argument from predication makes the more radical claim that contradiction itself is impossible apart from the truth of God’s existence,” Collett, *Van Til and Transcendental Argument*, 303.

4) Van Til's Theological Basis for his Transcendental Argument

From 2 above, Van Til's theological basis for VTAG rests on three doctrinal footings.⁴⁰ He argues that the Reformed apologist must use the indirect, transcendental argument (reasoning by presupposition—the two fold, for arguments sake, strategy including reasoning from the impossibility of the opposite / contrary) because of:

1. *The fallen nature of man* (total depravity)—As believers and unbelievers do not agree on the transcendental basis (presupposition) needed to interpret any fact (they are not neutral), the indirect, transcendental argument must be used.⁴¹
2. *The transcendent (absolute⁴² and self-sufficient) nature of God*—Van Til's slogan is “the only argument for a transcendent God that holds water is a transcendental argument” for:–
 - a. As God alone is *transcendent* (the absolute, self-contained God, that is the ontological trinity) who is the only *transcendental* basis (presupposition) of everything, there is not a *direct* straight line argument to God from something within this universe, instead the argument for him is *indirect* and *transcendental*, presupposing his existence,⁴³
 - b. As God alone is *transcendent* (self-sufficient with comprehensive knowledge of all things) and we are without comprehensive knowledge, we cannot prove and define God by mathematical demonstration, instead the argument for him is a *transcendental* argument to show that we can find no meaning in our human experience unless there be a transcendent (self-sufficient) God—this is reasoning from the impossibility of the opposite / contrary.⁴⁴
3. *The uniqueness of Christianity*, with its claims of “this or nothing” and that those who do not accept Christ are lost—our method of argumentation must show the same by the method of the *impossibility of the contrary*.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ And the first two are distinctively Reformed.

⁴¹ IW 38–39, DF3 99–101 / DF4 122–124 and CTK 18.

⁴² “God is ‘absolute’ in the sense that he is the creator of all things and thus the ground of all reality. As such, he has no need of any other being (Acts 17:25) for his own existence. He is self-existent and self-sufficient” AGG 34.

⁴³ SCE 10–11 cf. DF3 108–109 / DF4 130–131 / CA1 68 / CA2 141 and JA 302.

⁴⁴ GA 3–4 cf. DF3 176 / DF4 197–198.

⁴⁵ SCE 222–223 cf. CTK 18–19.

5) Van Til and Greg Bahnsen's Key Passages on the Biblical basis for Van Til's Transcendental Argument

Transcendental argument Biblical basis analysis

The following main passages of Van Til on VTAG (*Reasoning by Presupposition (the two fold, for arguments sake, strategy) / Transcendental argument or method / the indirect method / Impossibility of the contrary or opposite*) were examined to see what supporting Bible texts Van Til refers to: **CTK**⁴⁶ 18 & 310; **DF3** 99–101/ **DF4** 121–4 / **CA1** 61–3/ **CA2** 128–31; **DF3** 105 / **DF4** 127–8 / **CA1** 65–6 / **CA2** 136; **DF3** 108–9 / **DF4** 130–1 / **CA1** 68 / **CA2** 141, **DF3** 114 / **DF4** 136 / **CA1** 72 / **CA2** 148–9; **DF3** 117–8 / **DF4** 138–9 / **CA1** 74–5 / **CA2** 152–4; **DF3** 179–80 (not in **DF4**); **ECE** 88–9; **GA** 3–4; **IST1** Preface / **IST2** 12–3; **IST1** 13–4 / **IST2** 35–6; **JA** 98 & 302; **IW** 38–9; **SCE** xi, 6–7, 10–11, 201, 204–7 & 222–3; **TRA** 20; and **WIB1** 3–4.

Passages on VTAG from Bahnsen's VTARA, AR and *Pushing the Antithesis* (PTA) were also examined, and the Bible texts he quotes are also given.⁴⁷

The conclusion is that Van Til focused on theological reasons for using VTAG (given at 4 above). It fell to one of his student, Greg Bahnsen, to give what he considered to be the Biblical basis for VTAG. Van Til simply refers to only two Bible texts, Romans 1:18 and especially 1 Corinthians 1:20 (see **IW** 38–9, given below); Bahnsen also views 1 Corinthians 1:20 as *the* Bible text basis (see **AR** 59–60, given below, **VTARA** 4–7 (p5), given below, 484–9 (p486); and **ATJF** 48), adds that Proverbs 26:4,5 describes VTAG (see **AR** 59–64 and **PTA** 140–44) and that VTAG is substantiated and illustrated by Matthew 7:24–27 (see **VTARA** 5 and **PTA** 143–44), plus he adds Deuteronomy 32:31a (see **VTARA** 524n126) and Romans 1:22 (see **VTARA** 5 & 486). In the key quotes later I have put in bold these main Bible references.

This data is also summarized in the following table.

⁴⁶ See the Bibliography at the end for the explanation of these abbreviations.

⁴⁷ I recently received Greg L. Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended*, ed. Joel McDurmon (Georgia: American Vision and Texas: Covenant Media Press, 2008), (PASD). As far as I can tell this does not add specific further Bible texts supporting VTAG.

Van Til and Bahnsen's Biblical basis for Van Til's Transcendental Argument

This is in Bible reference order and the main Van Til and Bahnsen passages are in bold.

Bible texts (NKJV)	Van Til Books	Bahnsen Books
Deuteronomy 32:31a For their rock <i>is</i> not like our Rock		VTARA 524 n.126
Proverbs 26:4,5 Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes.		AR 59–64 PASD 75 Prov. 26:5: VTARA 6 PTA 140–44
Matthew 7:24–27 [Jesus said] “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”		AR 75 PTA 143–44 VTARA 5
Romans 1:18–20 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown <i>it</i> to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible <i>attributes</i> are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, <i>even</i> His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.	1v18: DF3 99–101 / DF4 121–124 (also CA1 61–63 / CA2 128–31) & IW 38–9	1:20: AR 59–60 1:18–20: PTA 142
Romans 1:22: Professing to be wise, they became fools.		VTARA 5 & 486
1 Corinthians 1:20: Where <i>is</i> the wise? Where <i>is</i> the scribe? Where <i>is</i> the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?	IW 38–9	AR 55, 59–60, 64, 75 & 122 ATJF 48 VTARA 4–7 (p5), 484–9 (p486)
	Van Til and Bahnsen view 1 Corinthians 1:20 as <i>the</i> Bible text basis.	

Key Van Til Quote on the Biblical Basis for Van Til's Transcendental Argument

To be sure, the natural man [1 Cor 2:14] knows God [Rom 1:18]. He does not merely know that a god or that probably a god exists. ... He will not own this. He represses it [**Rom 1:18**]. His ethical hostility [Rom 8:7] will never permit him to recognize the facts to be true which, deep, down in his heart, he knows in spite of himself to be true. ... So the natural man is made in the image of God [Gen 1:26]. He has the knowledge of God. The appeal is made to what is suppressed. And then as it is the grace of God that must give man the ability to see the truth in preaching so it is also the Spirit of God that must give man the ability to accept the truth as it is presented to him in apologetical reasoning.

This reasoning will accordingly have to be by way of presupposition. Since there is no fact and no law on which the two parties to the argument agree they will have to place themselves upon one another's positions for the sake of argument. This does not mean that we are thus after all granting to the natural man the ability to reason correctly. He can follow a process of reasoning intellectually. He may even have a superior intellect. But of himself he always makes the wrong use of it. A saw may be ever so shiny and sharp, but if its set is wrong it will always cut on a slant. Hence, following Paul's example when he asks, "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world," [1 Cor 1:20] we also place ourselves on the ground of the opponent. We may first ask him to place himself on our ground. We can then show that if there is to be rationality at any point there must be rationality at the basis of all ...

IW 38–9

Key Greg Bahnsen Quotes on the Biblical Basis for Van Til's Transcendental Argument

Arguing from the Impossibility of the Contrary

... Van Til's approach ... constitutes the strongest intellectual challenge that can be directed to the thinking of the unbeliever. God's revelation is more than the best foundation for Christian reasoning; it is the only philosophically sound foundation for any reasoning whatsoever. Therefore, although the world in its own wisdom sees the word of Christ as foolishness, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Cor. 1:18, 25). Christians need not sit in an isolated philosophical tower, reduced to simply despising the philosophical systems of non-Christians. No, by taking every thought captive to Christ, we are enabled to cast down reasoning that is exalted against the knowledge of God (cf. 2 Cor. 10:5). We must challenge the unbeliever to give a cogent and credible account of how he knows anything whatsoever, given his espoused presuppositions about reality, truth, and man (his "worldview").

Van Til's presuppositional defense of the faith mounts a philosophical offense against the position and reasoning of the non-Christian. Following the inspired lead of the apostle Paul, it rhetorically asks: "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor. 1:20). This theme is predominant in Van Til's practice of presuppositional apologetics. The task of the apologist is not simply to show that there is no hope of eternal salvation outside of Christ, but also that the unbeliever has no present intellectual hope outside of Christ. It is foolish for him to build his house on the ruinous sands of human opinion, instead of the verbal rock of Christ (**Matt. 7:24–27**). He needs to see that those who suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness inescapably "become vain in their reasoning. Professing themselves to be wise, they become fools" (**Rom. 1:21–22**). Their opposition to the faith amounts to no more than a "knowledge falsely so called" (1 Tim. 6:20–21), by which they actually "oppose themselves" in ignorance (2 Tim. 2:23, 25).

The unbeliever attempts to enlist logic, science, and morality in his debate against the truth of Christianity. Van Til's apologetic answers these attempts by arguing that only the truth of Christianity can rescue the meaningfulness and cogency of logic, science, and morality. The presuppositional challenge to the unbeliever is guided by the premise that only the Christian worldview provides the philosophical preconditions necessary for man's reasoning and knowledge in any field whatever. This is what is meant by a "transcendental"⁴⁸ defense of Christianity. Upon analysis, all truth drives one to Christ. From beginning to end, man's reasoning about anything whatsoever (even reasoning about reasoning itself) is unintelligible or incoherent unless the truth of the Christian Scriptures is presupposed. Any position contrary to the Christian one, therefore, must be seen as philosophically impossible. It cannot justify its beliefs or offer a worldview whose various elements comport with each other.

In short, presuppositional apologetics argues for the truth of Christianity "from the impossibility of the contrary." Someone who is so foolish as to operate in his intellectual life as though there were no God (Ps: 14:1) thereby "despises wisdom and instruction" and "hates knowledge" (Prov. 1:7, 29). He needs to be answered according to his folly—demonstrating where his philosophical principles lead—"lest he be wise in his own eyes" (**Prov. 26:5**).

...

[The Christian apologist] challenges the philosophical adequacy of the unbeliever's worldview, showing how it does not provide the preconditions for the intelligibility of knowledge and morality. His case for Christianity, then, argues from the impossibility of the contrary. From beginning to end, both in his own philosophical method and in what he aims to bring about in the unbeliever's thinking, the Christian apologist reasons in such a way "that in all things Christ might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18).

VTARA 4–7

A two-fold apologetic procedure (AR 59–64)

"Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world?
Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" [**1 Cor. 1:20**]

Paul could stake his apologetic for Christian faith on this set of rhetorical questions (**1 Cor. 1:20**), knowing that the word of the cross destroys the world's wisdom and brings its discernment to nothing (v. 19). The unregenerate heart, with its darkened mind, evaluates the gospel as weakness and folly (vv. 18, 27), but in actual fact it expresses God's saving power and true wisdom (vv. 18, 21, 24).

⁴⁸ Bahnsen: The term "transcendental" should not be confused with the similar sounding word "transcendent" (an adjective for whatever goes beyond human experience). Transcendental reasoning is concerned to discover what general conditions must be fulfilled for any particular instance of knowledge to be possible; it has been central to the philosophies of secular thinkers such as Aristotle and Kant, and it has become a matter of inquiry in contemporary, analytically minded philosophy. Van Til asks what view of man, mind, truth, language, and the world is necessarily presupposed by our conception of knowledge and our methods of pursuing it. For him, the transcendental answer is supplied at the very first step of man's reasoning—not by autonomous philosophical speculation, but by transcendent revelation from God. ...

What the world calls "foolish" is in reality wisdom. Conversely, what the world deems "wise" is actually foolish. The unbeliever has his standards all turned around, and thus he mocks the Christian faith or views it as intellectually dishonorable. But Paul knew that God could unmask the arrogance of unbelief and display its pitiable pretense of knowledge: "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (v. 25). Although the unbeliever sees the Christian faith as foolish and weak, that faith has the strength and intellectual resources to expose "worldly wisdom" for what it truly is: utter foolishness. God has chosen the (so called) foolish things of the world in order that He might *put to shame* those who boast of their (so called) wisdom (v. 27).

In the face of God's revelation the unbeliever is "without an apologetic" (cf. **Rom. 1:20**, in the Greek). His intellectual position has no worthwhile credentials in the long run. When he comes up against the intellectual challenge of the gospel as Paul would present it, the unregenerate is left with no place to stand. The outcome of the encounter is summarily expressed by Paul when he declares, "*Where is the wise? Where is the disputer of this world?*" The fact is that God *makes foolish* the wisdom of this world, and thus the genuinely wise unbeliever is not to be found. The man who can adequately debate and defend the outlook of this world (i.e., unbelief) has never lived. Rejection of the Christian faith cannot be justified, and the intellectual position of the unbeliever cannot be genuinely defended in the world of thought. The Spiritual weapons of the Christian apologist are mighty before God unto the *casting down* of every high imagination that is exalted against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:4–5). The unbeliever, as we saw in the last study, is a fool in the scriptural perspective, and as such his position amounts to a *hatred of knowledge* (Prov. 1:22,29); his intellectual attack on the gospel stems from "knowledge" which is *falsely so called* (1 Tim. 6:20).

The apologist should aim to put this pretense of knowledge (which is, at base, a hatred of knowledge) to shame; he should manifest the foolishness of this world's "wisdom." This calls for much more than a piecemeal attempt to adduce vague probabilities of isolated evidences for the reasonableness of Christianity. It requires, instead, the full scale demonstration of the *unreasonableness* of anti-Christianity in contrast to the *certainty* of truth to be found in God's word. Dr. Van Til writes:

The struggle between Christian theism and its opponents covers the whole field of knowledge... Christian theism's fundamental contention is just this, that nothing whatsoever can be known unless God can be and is known... The important thing to note is this fundamental difference between theism and antitheism on the question of epistemology. There is not a spot in heaven or on earth about which there is no dispute between the two opposing parties (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969, p.116).

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate... The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake, in order to show him that on such a position the "facts" are not facts and the "laws" are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument's sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible...

Therefore the claim must be made that Christianity alone is reasonable for men to hold. And it is utterly reasonable. It is wholly irrational to hold to any other position than that of Christianity. Christianity alone does not crucify reason itself... The best, the only, the absolutely certain proof of the truth of Christianity is that unless its truth be presupposed there is no proof of anything. Christianity is proved as being the very foundation of the idea of proof itself (*The Defense of the Faith*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955, pp. 117–118, 396 [DF3 100-101, 298 / DF4 122-123, 381]).

The fool must be answered by showing him his foolishness and the necessity of Christianity as the precondition of intelligibility.

In **Proverbs 26:4–5** we are instructed as to how we should answer the foolish unbeliever—how we should demonstrate that God makes foolish the so called “wisdom” of this world. “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own conceit.” The two-fold apologetic procedure mentioned by Van Til above is here described. In the first place, the unbeliever should not be answered in terms of his own misguided presuppositions; the apologist should defend his faith by working within his own presuppositions. If he surrenders to the assumptions of the unbeliever, the unbeliever will never effectively set forth a reason for the hope that is in him. He will have lost the battle from the outset, constantly being trapped behind enemy lines. Hence Christianity’s intellectual strength and challenge will not be set forth.

But then in the second place the apologist should answer the fool according to his self-proclaimed presuppositions (i.e., according to his folly). In so doing he aims to show the unbeliever the outcome of those assumptions. Pursued to their consistent end presuppositions of unbelief render man’s reasoning vacuous and his experience unintelligible; in short, they lead to the destruction of knowledge, the dead-end of epistemological futility, to utter foolishness. By placing himself on the unbeliever’s position and pursuing it to its foolish undermining of facts and laws, the Christian apologist prevents the fool from being wise in his own conceit. He can conclude, “Where then is the wise disputer of this world?!” There is none, for as the history of humanistic philosophy so clearly illustrates, God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. It is confounded by the “foolish” preaching of the cross.

ANSWERING THE FOOL

... It has been observed that (1) the intellectual outlook of the unbeliever is that of a “fool” (in the scriptural sense⁴⁹), (2) the unbeliever proclaims a pseudo-wisdom which is in reality a hatred, and destruction, of knowledge, (3) God makes foolish the wisdom of the world and puts it to shame through His people, who are enabled to cast down every high imagination exalted against a knowledge of Him, and (4) in order to give an answer to the fool, the believer should follow a twofold procedure: (a) *refusing* to answer in terms of the fool’s presuppositions, for they undermine the

⁴⁹ That is “the fool is not ... [an] illiterate ignoramus,” but one who has “forsaken the source of true wisdom in God and relies on his own (allegedly), self-sufficient and autonomous, intellectual powers. ... *A fool is one who does not make God and His revelation the starting point* (the presupposition) *of his thinking*” (AR 55 and 57).

Christian position, and then (b) *answering* in terms of the fool's presuppositions in order to show where they lead, namely, to epistemological futility.

Here we find the prescribed course for giving an answer to every man who asks a reason for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). The apologetic strategy rehearsed above meets the precondition laid down by Peter for defending the faith, that we "set apart Christ as *Lord* in your hearts." By refusing to suspend the presupposed truth of God's word when we argue with those who criticize the Christian faith, we acknowledge the lordship of Christ over our thinking. His word is our ultimate authority. If we were to reason with the unbeliever in such a way that we trusted our own intellectual powers or the teachings of the (so-called) experts (in science, or history, or logic, or whatever) more than we trusted the veracity of God's revelation, we would end up the argument (if consistent) by agreeing with the unbeliever. In the language of Proverbs 26, we would answer the fool and end up being *like him*.

Also, by employing the apologetic procedure laid out above we can arrive at the same conclusion as did Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, that the intellectual outlook of the unbeliever is at base foolishness. Consequently, we can rhetorically ask "Where is the wise? Where is the disputer of this world?" The fact of the matter will be abundantly manifest: God makes foolish the wisdom of the world, and He does it by the word of the cross. By demonstrating to the fool that his presuppositions can produce only *falsely called* knowledge, the believer answers him in such a way that he cannot be wise in his own conceits. Thereby this two-fold procedure in presuppositional apologetics aims at argumentative success without compromising spiritual fidelity. It renders a reasoned account of the Christian hope as well as reducing all contrary and critical positions to impotence. It is to be remembered at this point, of course, that the apologist must do this destructive work "with humility and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15b).

AR 59–64

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