Clarification on the Nature of Van Til's Transcendental Argument

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The Bridge of Necessity Problem

A chief objection to transcendental arguments finds it origins in a devastating paper from Barry Stroud. Stroud's central contention is that no transcendental argument, the premises of which appeal only to some element of human experience, can have as its conclusion any non-psychological fact. At best, propositions about the way in which we experience or think can lead us only to accept the truth of other propositions about the way we experience or think. The central project of the transcendental argument, asking about the necessary preconditions of intelligible experience, can get us only to the point in which we find that we must *believe* that those preconditions hold: we are not in a position to *know* that those preconditions hold.

Stroud asks us, in a Kantian fashion, to inquire about the kinds of things that would need to be true if, for instance, we are to be language users. About these, he says "there is a genuine class of propositions each member of which must be true in order for there to be any language, and which consequently cannot be denied truly by anyone, and whose negations cannot be asserted truly by anyone."[1] The members of the privileged class have this special epistemic status of being undeniable. Even so:

> In particular, for any candidate *S*, proposed as a member of the privileged class, the skeptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough to make language possible if we believe that *S* is true, or if it looks for all the world as if it is, but that *S* needn't actually be true. Our having this belief would enable us to give sense to what we say, but some additional justification would still have to be given for our claim to know that *S* is true. The skeptic distinguishes between the conditions necessary for a paradigmatic or

[1]Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments," 253.

> warranted (and therefore meaningful) use of an expression or statement and the conditions under which it is true.[2]

With a transcendental argument, it seems always within the ability of the skeptic to claim that the argument has only ever shown what we must believe to be true; the argument fails to cross the bridge of necessity that would permit conclusion about what must actually be true.

Accepting this Stroudian critique, some have endorsed the use of *modest* transcendental arguments: ones only intended to prove that certain conclusions are unavoidable for thinkers like us, without making further ontological existence claims. Modest transcendental arguments serve at least two useful functions, even acknowledging their weaker claims as opposed to the more ambitious forms of transcendental arguments. The first is revelatory: reflection on the way we find ourselves thinking about our experience can lead us to *discover* other ways that we must also think, if we are to be internally consistent.

The second function of such modest transcendental arguments is justificatory. There seems to be some intuitive sense in which it is appropriate, if we find ourselves *unable* to believe otherwise, and that this inability is not simply a failure of imagination on our part but rather some kind of essential feature of any intelligible thought at all, to conclude that such beliefs are, in the most essential sense possible, justified for us. That is to say, in recognizing our limits, a transcendental argument might be the very best work we can do in explaining to ourselves why we believe ourselves within our epistemic rights to believe this or that. This is not to say, in the face of Stroud, that these justified beliefs are *true*; rather, it is to claim, something in the spirit of epistemological naturalism, that we have described our belief-ratifying technique at the deepest

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[2]Ibid., 255.

level accessible to us, and therefore we can go no further. What we have found must be adequate for us; it *is*, for all that matters, the correct way for *us* to justify our beliefs.

Stroud and Van Til

It should be evident that Stroud's critique is directly relevant to Van Til's apologetic. At his strongest, Van Til either implies or directly states that a properly formed transcendental argument is the absolutely certain proof of the truth of Christianity. Other apologists in Van Til's line have spoken similarly. Stroud's critique raises serious questions as to whether such claims have any merit.

Having seen that nearly all philosophers have conceded Stroud's argument and so retreated from the possibility of a successful world-directed transcendental argument, might the covenantal apologist find refuge in a modest version of a transcendental argument for God's existence? Is such an argument sufficient to do what Van Til wishes? Have we demonstrated to the unbeliever his own status as without an apologetic (ἀναπολόγητος, Romans 1:20) if we are able to show that belief in God is among the propositions in the privileged class that cannot be intelligibly denied? To be very specific: have we made a significant apologetic gain if we can show that belief in God is, in fact, somehow *unavoidable for us*, even if we have not shown that God *exists*?

This seems as though it might be a promising way forward. First, the case can be made that a modest transcendental argument functions in much the same way that Van Til's *negative* argument is supposed to function. A modest transcendental argument certainly is not seeking to prove the truth of Christianity, and since Van Til's definition of *transcendental argument* in his doctoral dissertation explicitly disclaims positive proof as a feature of transcendental arguments, and since there are a number of good reasons to think that Van Til really should be read in this

more restricted way, the move toward a modest transcendental argument might be on the right track as far as Van Til is concerned. We noted especially that, in most of the places that Van Til describes his transcendental argument (remembering that he rarely uses that terminology), his *primary* argument is that positions other than Christian theism oppose themselves and thus "cannot claim the adherence of rational creatures." While some stronger citations from Van Til can be found, in which he seems to be making the stronger metaphysical claim or even something like a positive proof for Christianity, it is not inaccurate to say that Van Til's most common presentation of his argument either has much in common with the modest transcendental arguments.

The second reason to be optimistic about the prospects of a modest Van Tilian transcendental argument is that there are interesting resources available to the Christian apologist that may allow such arguments to have more compelling force within a Christian framework than they might otherwise have. The modest transcendental argument, as we noted, leaves us with the unsettling disconnect between "the things we must believe" and "the way things are." From a Christian point of view, a kind of theistic externalism might be able to bridge that gap. Such a move might be seen by non-theistic philosophers as a kind of epistemological God of the gaps (as, for instance, Descartes' appeal to the character of God is often summarily dismissed); but within the Christian framework itself (and recall, a transcendental argument is supposed to operate *from within*), such a move might be very defensible. Second, the Christian worldview can give a more robust account of the ethical nature of the obligation that we *must* believe this or that proposition because of a modest transcendental argument. What is the nature of this obligation? In a Christian theistic world, such *musts* have a more consequential nature than is the case in a purely naturalistic world. So even if there is no explicit way in which the argument

crosses the bridge of necessity, we may find that the *must* of believing is not merely an indication of our epistemic limits, but a *moral* obligation, of which we will have to give account of ourselves.

So there are reasons to give attention to the prospects of a successful, modest transcendental argument for Christian theism. What shape might a modest transcendental argument for the existence of God take? A modest transcendental argument for Christian theism would, like all transcendental arguments, begin with some facet of intelligible belief or experience and then make the claim that Christian theism is a necessary precondition of that belief or experience. A modest transcendental argument for Christian theism would not attempt to go on to seek to cross Stroud's "bridge of necessity" and make any strong metaphysical claims. It would not be an argument for the *truth* of Christianity. Rather, it would be an argument that, having shown the necessary connection between Christianity and intelligible experience, belief in Christianity is somehow unavoidable for creatures like us, who have the kind of experiences that we claim to have. Essentially, a modest argument would show that, whether or not Christianity is *true*, no one could consistently or coherently make the claim that it is *false*, if they understand the argument.

Such a modest transcendental argument would be one level stronger than the kind of argument advanced by Alvin Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief*. In that volume, Plantinga clearly states that he is concerned with *de jure* rather than *de facto* objections to Christian belief.[3] That is, Plantinga is making the case that we are within our epistemic rights to believe in Christianity; he is not making the case that Christianity is *true*. Now, while this bears some

[3]Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). His discussion of the necessary relationship between the *de jure* and *de facto* questions (190–191) is extremely important.

superficial similarity to a modest transcendental argument (in that it seems limited to questions of epistemology without venturing to answer questions of metaphysics), Plantinga's argument is a weaker claim than the one made by even the modest transcendental argument, for the modest argument, if correct, would be able to make the further claim that no one is within his epistemic rights to *deny* that Christianity is true. Plantinga's argument grants Christianity a legitimized seat at the epistemic table; the modest transcendental argument seeks to deny a seat to any other position. It should be observed then, that even these modest transcendental arguments make notably robust claims; there is undoubtedly a drop off from the ambition of the world-directed transcendental arguments, but the modest arguments still seek to underwrite a stronger conclusion than nearly any other kind of theistic proof.

Positive Contributions

What do we gain by showing that the existence of God is something that we must *believe*, even if we cannot show that it is *true*? Perhaps the single most significant advantage gained by employing a modest transcendental argument in defense of Christian theism is that, if the argument is sound, the unbeliever is silenced. The idea is that even a modest transcendental argument undercuts completely the possibility of denying that which is the necessary condition of intelligible predication. Such denials would of course themselves need to be presented by the skeptic as intelligible acts of predication; indeed, even if not asserted, the denial would need to be an intelligible proposition to be considered by the skeptic himself. Thus if a modest transcendental argument holds, even though it does not prove that such necessary conditions are *true*, it does prove that asserting their falsity is utterly meaningless and self-defeating. This is a characteristic of *all* transcendental arguments, not merely those in which it is immediately obvious. Bardon explains the potency of this move to silence the skeptic:

> In questioning the epistemic foundation of a given position, one implicitly commits oneself to the possibility of the alternative. The possibility of the state of affairs ~P, in other words, is a pragmatic implication of questioning our belief that P obtains. But a successful PTA would show that the skeptic's implied commitment to the very affirmability of her doubt is incompatible with the skeptical scenario implied by the proposition affirmed. The skeptic would have to give up either her skepticism or the very ability to assert it. The skeptic's silence, in other words, could not even be explained by the skeptic herself to herself; the skeptic would not stand in accusatory silence but would be taken out of epistemological contention altogether. A well-founded modest transcendental argument would show that the skeptic cannot consistently or coherently question one's warrant for believing that P….[4]

With special regard to Van Til, the skeptic in view is not typically the standard philosophical skeptic, but the skeptic regarding belief in Christianity. And this being the case, Van Til is not seeking to answer skepticism in general, but is instead seeking to show that the alternative to Christianity (being as it is the necessary precondition of intelligibility) is this kind of abject, silenced skepticism described by Bardon. This is a significant rhetorical advantage in most cases, for true skepticism is impossible to maintain consistently. The Christian apologist only occasionally finds himself in a position in which he is trying to prove the rationality of believing anything at all; in the more common cases, he is trying to offer reasons to a person who *does* claim to know a great many things. For this reason, a modest transcendental argument that reduces *that* kind of person to silent skepticism is very effective. Furthermore, the ability to silence even the professed philosophical skeptic is also valuable. Once more, this is not to say that these skeptics have been refuted; it is merely to insist that they cannot even assert their position, if the transcendental argument is correctly, even when modestly, construed.

Van Til memorably makes this point: "Accordingly, the standard of self-contradiction taken for granted by antitheistic thought presupposes the absolute for its operation. Antitheism

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[4]Bardon, "Performative Transcendental Arguments." 15.

presupposes theism. One must stand upon the solid ground of theism to be an effective antitheist."[5] That slogan, that antitheism presupposes theism, is a most concise statement of the transcendental argument: the very act of asserting or believing that something other than Christian theism is the case can be made sense of only on the assumption that Christianity is true. And the slogan holds, rhetorically, whether an ambitious or modest transcendental argument is in play. Unbelief, if true, cannot be asserted; if it is asserted, it cannot be true.

In his contribution to *Four Views on Apologetics*, William Lane Craig suggests value in making a distinction between the ways in which Christians *know* the truth of their position and the ways in which Christians can *show* the truth of their position.[6] I think the distinction is a profitable one, and can be quite suited to the purposes of a covenantal apologetic. Contrary to popular misconceptions of Van Til, he is not opposed to appeals to evidence or reasons for believing. Thus, his comment:

> Every bit of historical investigation, whether it be in the directly biblical field, archaeology, or in general history, is bound to confirm the truth of the claims of the Christian position. But I would not talk endlessly about facts and more facts without ever challenging the non-believer's philosophy of fact. A really fruitful historical apologetic argues that every fact is and must be such as proves the truth of the Christian theistic position.[7]

Thus, the covenantal apologist always looks with a level of approval at the work of apologists with whom he might disagree at the level of methodology and epistemology. Those who, for instance, offer arguments for the plausibility of the resurrection by discounting less likely options fall short of the goals of a Van Tilian argument, but the Van Tilian ought to

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[5]Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, xii.

[6]Craig, "Classical Apologetics," *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 28ff.

[7]Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*. Logos.

recognize that, within a Christian worldview, such evidences *do* make sense and help reinforce what he knows to be true.[8]

Therefore, even for those who wish to maintain the stronger reading of Van Til, it seems that a modest transcendental argument can *at least* have this kind of role. That is to say, even those who believe that a proper Van Tilian argument should prove Christianity can find value in arguments that fall short of this standard. Within the boundaries of Christianity, for those then who have the epistemic right to believe, an argument like this is a buttress for the faith. Van Til is no fideist; he does not believe that reasonless faith is a virtue. And so long as one is self-consciously operating from within the framework of a Christian theistic worldview, in self-conscious epistemic submission to the covenant Lord, a host of arguments and evidences are now accepted for what they truly are: proof of God. Therefore, even if the claim of the transcendental argument were to be reduced to a modest level, it could be employed for its value in knowing, rather than showing, the truth.

A Proposed Articulation of Van Til's Argument

We have seen that Stroud's dilemma presents the covenantal apologist with a difficult problem, particularly if we give due weight to Van Til's stronger statements about the intended potency of argument by presupposition. We have found that transcendental arguments seek to uncover that *something* has to be in place for us to be able to have intelligible experience, and indeed to assert anything at all. Van Til contends that this *something* is Christian theism; I have not addressed any of the specific reasons for this claim, but there is a surface plausibility to Van

[8]In this regard, see Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

Til's claim: consciousness, intentionality, etc. (which tend to be a bad fit for naturalism and are very difficult to account for on that assumption) are much more intelligible on Christianity. But Stroud's question is this: what can we *legitimately* conclude from the indispensability of (in this case) Christianity? Stroud's initial claim is that indispensability does not entail truth. His more advanced attack is that indispensability is actually an *obstacle* to rational belief.

In light of Stroud's attacks, how might the covenantal apologist rearticulate or rebuild Van Til's argument? We have already noted the potential of retreating to some kind of modest transcendental argument, in which the apologist would restrict himself to the claim that we all must *believe* that Christianity is true, while making no claim that Christianity (with all of the metaphysical conclusions it requires) is actually true. Such a move, we noted, is not entirely without value, but it does fall short of Van Til's promise of absolutely certain proof.

My claim is that Stroud's attack on transcendental arguments is of value to the covenantal apologist, because it highlights a certain flawed approach to the apologetic use of transcendental arguments. The flawed appropriation of Van Til's apologetic is problematic by advancing a transcendental argument that is rooted in autonomy. And I contend that, especially on the popular level, this view of Van Til's argument is quite common. Indeed, even on an academic level, Van Tilian-style transcendental arguments have also been employed in ways that are ultimately faulty because of the assumption (stated or tacit) of autonomy. Therefore, I want to consider the distinctions that are necessary between a transcendental argument that is autonomous versus a transcendental argument that welcomes its status as belonging to a created mind.

The catch is it seems that to the degree that a transcendental argument abandons autonomy in the way necessary to be consistent with Van Til and Reformed theology, the

argument loses its argumentative force. It seems to become a mere assertion of the truth of Christianity, and all of the accusations of fideism that have typically attached themselves to Van Til's apologetic begin to loom again. In my estimation, much of the contention between the proof and persuasion readings of Van Til hangs on this point: if we eliminate the autonomy from the transcendental argument, what is left of the argument? What power is such an argument supposed to have? Is it simply a call to repentance, or is there supposed to be something that can be said *rationally* that would prove the truth of Christianity?

The Central Issue: Autonomy

Without question, the most significant point that Stroud highlights for Van Tilians is the possibility that a transcendental argument can be just as committed to autonomy as the traditional arguments are. Perhaps it would be clearer to say that Stroud does not so much establish *that* transcendental arguments can be founded on autonomy; what Stroud does is make clear the *futility* of arguments that are so founded. What Hume does to undermine the epistemic confidence of the modernist, Stroud does to undermine the epistemic confidence of the Kantian (even, in this case, the non-idealist Kantian).

But I say that Stroud has done the covenantal apologists a service, because Van Til has inspired in some of those who claim him as a mentor a kind of naïve optimism about the force of a transcendental argument for apologetics. This optimism rarely has taken seriously objections like that of Stroud and Körner, and therefore fails to grasp that *a transcendental argument form alone* is not what is distinctive about Van Til's apologetic. It is not the form of the argument, in the abstract, that is compelling. If a transcendental argument that hopes to show that Christian theism is true is formulated uncritically, it is going to smuggle in autonomous assumptions. To the extent that the argument does so, it will fall prey to Stroud's dilemma, and will therefore fall

short of its apologetic goal. And this will be the case whether or not the apologist is called out for his error. A "Van Tilian" argument that employs an autonomous transcendental argument will, at best, only ever reach the conclusion that Christianity is the most probable explanation available to us for the validity of our intelligible experience. It would be the very same kind of inference to the best explanation argument that Van Til would reject in, for instance, a traditional teleological argument. And this "best explanation" would, for Stroud, always be beset with worries that perhaps all really *is* sound and fury signifying nothing, even if we could never coherently affirm that. We could never affirm nihilism, but we also would not have shown it impossible.[9] Christianity becomes nothing more than a *desirable* alternative to nihilism, not a demonstrated truth.

Why is autonomy the centerpiece of the Stroud/Van Til dialogue? Here, I want to make more explicit that Stroud's foundational assumption is, in fact, autonomy: "In fact, of course, much of the world we claim to know about was here long before we were and some of it will remain after we have gone."[10] That is to say, Stroud seems to operate under the assumption that our minds are the only minds that we can speak of; and if there are other minds, they must more or less operate in the same manner as ours. All such minds would be secondary, in an important sense, to the real world in which they exist, from which they derive their sense data, etc. That is to affirm, then, that there is no ultimate Mind behind reality. All minds are on a level. And this, from a Christian point of view, is the essence of the commitment to autonomy. For if all minds are on a level in terms of their knowledge, they all exist within the same (essentially impersonal)

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[9]And this is to say nothing of Körner's objection, in response to which the Van Tilian argument would need to show that Christianity *alone* provides the necessary preconditions of experience.

[10]Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, 77.

environment. This is the essence of the nature of autonomy, from the position of Reformed theology: man and God (should his existence be conceded, even hypothetically) are essentially on a level.

As we have noted, Stroud is a defender of the skeptic. The skeptic's case is bound to the principle of autonomy: if we are to know anything, we must have for ourselves the God's eye view. The confusion evinced in the autonomous dismissal of skepticism (the common position of contemporary philosophy against which Stroud pushes) is that they allow a greater place for uncertainty, but still insist on calling the result *knowledge*. Given the foundation of autonomy, I believe that Stroud is correct to fault them for this, and to insist that they should not find such a position philosophically satisfying.

As for autonomy and Van Til, it is obvious, even on a cursory reading of Van Til that autonomy is a central concern of his.

> As you know, I have constantly maintained that there are basically only two philosophies of life. One of these views is that which is based on the triune God of Scripture as the final reference point for all predication. This is my position. The other is that which assumes that man, fallen and apostate man, is the final reference point in predication. This is the position which I oppose.[11]

This is a touchstone idea for Van Til, and it is rooted in his Reformed theology just as much as his apologetic commitment to the Trinity, covenantal revelation, and the exhaustive sovereignty of God. These are all intertwined, such that a denial of one will undo them all. This commitment, then, is foundational for his entire apologetic, and the root of his objections to the traditional method. It is for this reason that in a telling passage in his *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til lists nine (deeply interrelated) points which the traditional method of apologetics must

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[11]E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Nutley, NJ, 1971).

compromise, at least in principle: 1) the biblical doctrine of God's aseity, 2) the counsel of God as the "ultimate cause of whatever comes to pass," 3) the clarity of God's revelation, 4) the need for supernatural revelation, 5) the sufficiency of supernatural revelation, 6) the authority of Scripture, 7) the created status of man, 8) the covenantal nature of Adam's representation, and 9) the nature of sin.[12]

There is, for the Van Tilian, a constant recognition that man faces an epistemic double limitation: he is finite, and he is fallen.[13] A denial of these epistemic limitations (or, at least, an ignoring of their implications) is inherent in all positions of autonomy:

> Moreover, according to Calvin, the primacy of the intellect as taught by the philosophers, in virtually denying the fact of sin, therewith in practice always denies the Creator-creature relationship. For man to ignore the fall is always tantamount to ignoring his creation. It is the proper part of the creature to subject himself to God; it is the part of the sinner to refuse such subjection.[14]

The heart of Van Til's argument is that autonomy is epistemologically self-destructive. For Van Til's transcendental argument, it is *autonomy* that generates the performative inconsistencies. It is also for this reason that Van Til would be able to contend, in principle, for the *uniqueness* of Christianity answering the long-entrenched problems of philosophy: Christianity and Christianity alone rejects autonomy in a way that allows for an eternal one and many. This is why Van Til insists that there are "only two philosophies of life."

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[12]Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia, 1955).

[13]And these ought not be confused with one another. Man does not need revelation because he is fallen; he needs revelation because he is finite. But because man is finite, God is incomprehensible. Because man is fallen, he is likely to twist revelation further.

[14]Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1979).

So then, whatever else we say about Van Til's transcendental argument, it must comport with his staunch rejection of autonomy. In the next section, I want to flesh out some of the implications of Van Til's rejection of autonomy, to see what a truly Van Tilian transcendental argument must be like, and what it would then say to Stroud's challenge.

Summary Propositions

A transcendental argument reflects an inherent tension, an instability at its very heart. On the one hand, transcendental arguments aim to be transcendent. Although this ought to be obvious, we have already seen one argument (from David Bell) that feels that it must labor to defend that very point: transcendental arguments, by definition, refuse to be naturalized. He is right to wonder, "how very perverse this question is, and how close it comes, in allowing that an argument might be simultaneously both transcendental and naturalistic, to oxymoron.[15] The transcendental argument is the best attempt by cognizers like us to reach beyond our limitations, to seek to attain the God's eye view. The other argumentative advantage of this kind of transcendence is that it appears to begin with incredibly modest assumptions, of the sort that must be acceptable by any who would wish to enter the discussion. So, on this hand, a transcendental argument offers a modest entry while promising tremendous results.

On the other hand, I have argued that essential to any transcendental argument is that it is offered self-consciously "from within" the framework that it is defending. In this sense, a transcendental argument is *contained:* it cannot and must not step outside these boundaries, lest it itself suffer the same kind of self-defeat and contradiction that must befall any who dare assert anything from outside the framework. It does not *transcend* itself as an argument. Furthermore, a

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[15]Bell, "Transcendental Arguments and Non-Naturalistic Anti-Realism" 194.

transcendental argument, when the implications are worked out, shows that the cost of entry is much higher than originally thought; those modest conditions of entry turn out to demand assent to the entirety of the framework implied by the argument.

All of this makes a genuinely transcendental argument difficult to evaluate *as an argument*. In a typical argument, the debating sides agree on certain premises, and then one side seeks to demonstrate that acceptance of those premises obligates one to believe the further, disputed premise. In a transcendental argument, what seems to be the agreed upon premise (that there is intelligible experience, etc.) is shown *not* to be held in common after all, because it can only be maintained cogently on one set of premises. So what may have originally been set forth as grounds for agreement, as a basis for ensuing discussion, is shown to be no agreement at all.

And this is especially true of Van Til's argument, which is committed to a repudiation of autonomy. A Van Tilian argument uses the same kind of initial premises as a normal transcendental argument (that there is intelligible experience, that predication is possible, etc.); these appear to be points of agreement between believer and unbeliever. The argument then seeks to demonstrate that these are really no point of agreement at all. Instead, the Christian position demands that the unbeliever renounce the claim that he rightly predicates *anything* at all on his own terms. The all-encompassing nature of this move seems to make it less of an argument and more of an assertion.

Whenever we find ourselves discussing topics that bring us to the boundary of our creaturely status, our inclination is to run through that barrier. Such transgressiveness is especially likely when philosophy forgets its place as the handmaiden to theology and instead angles for magisterial status. Transcendental by their very nature seek to transcend our creaturely status in some way. And so those apologists who would employ such arguments need to be

especially circumspect about *how* they are used; a Christian apologist must not employ such an argument in a way that seeks to transcend creatureliness.

For this reason, it is useful to establish more clearly the boundaries. When contemplating Trinitarian theology, it is profitable to be reminded of the revelatory lines that must not be crossed; so also here, with transcendental arguments, the Van Tilian needs to mark well those things he must affirm and those things he must deny, before beginning the work of speculation about the structure, potential, and employment of the arguments. It is in this spirit, then, that I offer the following propositions that should guide the apologist's use of transcendental arguments:

1. Autonomy: *Arguments committed to autonomous, univocal views of reality are disallowed to the covenantal apologist.* This should, at this point, be well established. Arguments constructed on the assumption of autonomy are simply not permissible for the Van Tilian, primarily because they run counter to the theology that a Van Tilian is trying to defend. Furthermore, such arguments ought to be avoided because they are always unsound. Again, this is what Stroud has shown us so clearly: a transcendental argument that assumes autonomy can simply never reach the sort of world-directed conclusions to which it might aspire, and if it only reaches modest conclusions, they may well be an obstacle to rational belief in whatever conclusion that they hope to demonstrate.

For those committed to autonomy, giving it up is not a simple thing. It is for this reason that a Van Tilian argument is not intended merely to state and defend the case for Christianity; it truly is a call to repentance. It highlights (rather than obscures) the difference between covenant keepers and covenant breakers. And this antithesis (and the call to forsake covenant breaking) is just as radical epistemologically as it is ethically or religiously.

2. Transcendental Arguments and Autonomy: *A transcendental argument form is, in itself, an insufficient safeguard from autonomy.* Again, I have already presented my argument for this proposition. Transcendental arguments are *intended* to be autonomous in their standard formulations. The goal of such arguments, in a Kantian fashion, is to establish the validity of our ways of thinking in a way that gets outside of our created limits. Stroud has highlighted the impossibility of making this move, crossing the bridge of necessity, merely by argument. So the covenantal apologist must not think that he has avoided the snare of autonomy simply because he has employed a transcendental argument.

I would argue, instead, that a transcendental argument is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a Van Tilian apologetic. The theological foundations of Van Til's apologetic demand a transcendental argument: "A truly transcendent God and a transcendental method go hand in hand."[16] This is not to say, however, that a Van Tilian apologist will use only this single form of argument. As I have already said, the argument for Christian theism, in its broad contours, must be transcendental. But the articulations of the specific reasons that Christianity is the necessary precondition of intelligible experience will not always adhere to this particular argument form. That is to say, if I intend to show that answering the one and the many problem is essential to having knowledge, and that Christian theism alone provides the answer to the one and the many problem, my statements need not always be set up in the form associated with transcendental arguments. In Frame's language: "That is to say that a complete argument for Christian theism, however many sub-arguments it contains, will be transcendental in

[16]Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11.

character."[17] It is for this reason that the *primary* identifying mark of transcendental arguments is their function, not their form.

Thus, I do think that there is continuing value in Frame's notion of presuppositionalism of the heart; such an idea is relevant not only to those who employ traditional arguments, but to those who employ covenantal ones as well. Just as a teleological argument or archeological evidence can be employed by a covenantal apologist, so can arguments that are not explicitly transcendental. But the overall structure of the argument, of which those other arguments and evidences play a part, must be transcendental. And this overall structure, while never less than a covenant-keeping inclination of heart, also should be more than that. It should, rightly articulated, be committed to a certain form of argument as well.

3. Fideism: *Nonetheless, Christianity is not an irrational leap of faith, and covenantal apologists should continue to insist that their approach to apologetics must be distinguished from fideism.* This is another clear Van Tilian idea. Bahnsen argued that it is the traditional apologists who are more accurately identified as *fideists*, in that their arguments and evidences fall short of proof, and yet they would ask the unbeliever to embrace the faith nonetheless. I take Bahnsen's reading as essentially right: Van Til does not believe that his own position is fideistic, despite many accusations that it is. This leads me to the conclusion that, however we construe the transcendental argument in reply to Stroud, we have taken a wrong turn if our result is fideistic. This means that modest transcendental arguments ultimately are insufficient for the covenantal apologist. It also means that a transcendental argument is not *merely* the assertion that Christianity is true and that everything contrary to it is false. Thus, my next proposition:

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[17]John M. Frame, "Transcendental Arguments," *IVP Dictionary of Apologetics*, 2006.

4. Transcendental Argument as Argument: *The transcendental argument is intended to function as an argument.* Again, this might seem like it should be obvious. But as the debate over the proper goal of Van Til's apologetic project indicates, it is not always affirmed that Van Til really is offering an argument for Christianity, and one that is supposed to be taken as credible and even (rationally) compelling. We have seen why: it is difficult to articulate all of this as an argument while remaining faithful to the theological foundations of Van Til. That is to say, the more explicit the argument is made, the more likely it will seem that the apologist is being univocal, or advancing illegitimate notions of common ground, or employing a problematic version of a blockhouse methodology.[18] And so the temptation arises to retreat from the actual argumentative aspects of Van Til's program.

I contend, by contrast, that Stroud's challenge should provoke covenantal apologists to a more careful articulation of their argumentation. We have seen that any transcendental argument gains its argumentative force by exposing performative inconsistencies. We have also seen that this is not adequate as a positive proof of the truth of the transcendental claim. This is Stroud's whole argument. In some ways, Montgomery's criticism of Van Til is of almost the exact same kind as Körner's:

> And even if it were possible in some fashion to destroy all existent alternative world-views but that of orthodox Christianity, the end result would still not be the necessary truth of Christianity; for in a contingent universe, there are an infinite number of possible philosophical positions, and even the fallaciousness of infinity-minus-one positions would not establish the validity of the one that remained (unless we were to introduce the gratuitous assumption that at least one had to be right!).[19]

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[18]As, for instance, in Anderson and Welty's argument from logic for a not-necessarily-Trinitarian God (implying a second needed step to go from bare theism to Christian theism).

[19]Montgomery, "Once Upon an a Priori," 387–388.

And yet Montgomery unintentionally concedes the vital point: Van Til's transcendental argument is never intended to work given the assumption of a world of flux. One of Van Til's chief goals for his transcendental argument is to answer the problem of a world that is reduced to mere flux. Van Til would agree with Montgomery that in a world of flux, there will be no move, not even an argument from presupposition, that gets us to stable and necessary truth. But that goes just as much for Montgomery's approach to finding the "facts" as for Van Til's argument. One can never begin with the assumption of autonomy in a world of flux and reach the conclusion of the truth of Christianity. But Van Til's point is that one can never begin with the assumption of autonomy in a world of flux and reach *any* conclusion.

This is why it is a vital component to Van Til's argument to understand him as speaking *from within* Christianity, in a universe that is of the nature described in revelation:

> I greatly appreciate your frankness in expressing your opposition to my views. You are quite right in saying of me, "he believes he can begin with God and Christianity without first consulting objective reality." This is the heart of the matter. If I were to attempt to know what "objective reality" was, apart from the all-embracive message of God as Christ speaking in Scripture, I would deny, it seems to me, all that it means to be a "Christian"!… Just so I use reason (induction, deduction, forms of implication) in full recognition that I discover truth by means of them because each individually, and all collectively, operate in God's world and therefore as part of the realization of his plan. To attempt to understand such abilities of man in using reason apart from what God has revealed about his plan would be, for the Christian, "unscientific."[20]

Van Til would contend with Montgomery, Stroud, etc. that *if* the universe is a universe of flux, they would be unable to predicate that fact. This is not the entirety of his argument, but it is a component of it. But note: Van Til is not merely positing the kind of universe that he needs to make his argument work. His transcendental argument is, in this sense, diametrically opposed to Kant's. Kant thought that a transcendental argument could *discover* the necessary preconditions

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[20]Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens*, 426.

of intelligibility. Stroud has shown us that the only way that a Kantian argument could discover such preconditions in the robust manner needed would be if the knower *creates* the conditions; that is, by idealism; else, the "discovery" of the necessary conditions only leaves us with an unfounded hope that the conditions hold. By contrast, Van Til's transcendental argument is never intended to discover the necessary preconditions. The preconditions are *revealed*:

> It is therefore only if the Christian presupposition of the all-controlling plan of God is made that there is any effective argument against scepticism. It is therefore all important that in seeking to refute scepticism and oppose irrationalism. Reformed theologians make careful distinction between the sort of *a priori* that is involved in the idealist position that does not and the sort of *a priori* that is involved in the Christian position that does base itself upon the Creator-creature distinction.[21]

Once again, the paradox is apparent: if the preconditions are revealed, and especially if they are *self-attesting*, what role can an argument have in proving (or even persuading)? A major element of the answer is found in my next proposition.

5. Centrality of the *Imago Dei*: *For the covenantal apologist, the performative inconsistency on which the argument turns depends on the unbeliever's status as an image bearer of God.* The first reason that this assumption is vitally important is that, at the outset of the conversation, it makes clear that the "common" ground shared by the apologist and the unbeliever is not neutral. The argument only claims to work by denying what the unbeliever claims about himself: that he is a successful cognizer whether or not Christianity is true. The inconsistency is not generated by contrasting the unbeliever's notion of himself with the Christian's notion; the contrast is generated between what the unbeliever knows himself to be by

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[21] Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 187.

virtue of his creation and what he claims about himself. In this way, the argument, rightly construed, is not rooted in autonomous assumptions.

It is for this reason that Van Til takes issue with Dooyeweerd's presentation of a transcendental argument:

> It is this that I tell my friend Jones. I tell him that I do not claim to be able to show the inner relationships between "logic" and "fact" any better than he can, but that I have been told by Christ in Scripture what I am as his image-bearer, and that as such I undertake my cultural task in reinterpreting his revelation to me to his praise. Can you not see, Mr. Jones, that you must repent and believe, lest you and your philosophy, your science, your art, in short your culture, go to ruin? You have nothing on which to stand in order to remove the Creator-Redeemer God from your sight. By his light alone you can see light. By his light alone can you distinguish between truth and falsehood. You are trying to remove the sun by taking out your own eyes.[22]

For Van Til to make a move like this is *entirely* consistent with the structure of a transcendental argument. Van Til is arguing *from within* the only system that will allow him to intelligibly predicate, and one exceedingly important feature of that system is an acceptance that all people everywhere are made in the image of God. As image bearers, they are capable of meaningful thought. They are to do so in a way that acknowledges, at every point, their derivative nature.

If the unbeliever is in fact an image bearer of God, the apologist (who *believes* that the unbeliever is an image bearer) ought to address him *as* an image bearer. And (again), if the Christian position is indeed correct, the unbeliever (as an image bearer) *will* be in position to be addressed by and convinced by the correctly formed transcendental argument. It will connect with him, but not because of the abstract power of the argument.

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[22]Geehan, *Jerusalem and Athens*, 97.

6. Reasons Behind the Argument: *Laying out the actual reasons that intelligible predication presupposes Christianity is not the transcendental argument itself, but is a necessary task if the transcendental argument is going to have any persuasive (or proving) force.* This is a point that I have already made, so I will not repeat my argument here. To give the reasons that Christian theism is the necessary precondition of intelligibility is not, in itself, a blockhouse methodology of the defense of the faith.

7. Limits of Argumentation: *Apologetics, like all other forms of explanation, has limits; a* rational *defense of the faith is useless against pitched irrationality.* This is important for our understanding of what a transcendental argument is actually supposed to accomplish. In the discussion of the proper way to understand Van Til's apologetic goals, I contended that it is important to distinguish *the properties of the argument* from *what we expect it to accomplish*. These cannot be entirely separated, obviously. But as Bahnsen observed, the covenantal apologist wants to be able to assert that his argument is sound, apart from any considerations as to whether it is *effective*. Moving persuasion into the center of focus typically has one of two results. It either tends to downplay the soundness of the argument, which can lead to a kind of fideism, or (less commonly among academic apologists, more commonly on a popular level) aims for a kind of compulsion apart from the work of the Spirit. The covenantal apologist ought never think that his *argument* is the decisive element in conversion: it will succeed if the Spirit is pleased to remove the scales from the unbeliever's eyes.[23]

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[23]Such dependence on the work of the Spirit in conversion is not at all the unique possession of covenantal apologists. Summarizing areas of agreement among the various perspectives on apologetics, Cowan writes, "All apologists are agreed that the work of the Holy Spirit is crucial if apologetics is to succeed in convincing unbelievers of the truth of Christianity…. This means that apologetics arguments cannot by themselves bring a person to faith in Christ" (*Five Views*, 376).

All of this is to say that an *argument* for Christian theism assumes an interlocutor interested in following an argument. Another element of Christian belief, however, is that the covenant breaker is opposed to God; "by their unrighteousness [they] suppress the truth" (Rom 1:18). The unbeliever's situation is complex; he does not wish to acknowledge the truth that he is a covenant breaker, accountable to God, etc. So the apologist ought not be surprised to find that he will not follow the argument to its appointed end. And for this evasion, there is nothing to be done in terms of *argument.* The transcendental argument is to be a rational defense of the faith, "the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life."[24] But it is only so for those willing to enter the debate.

8. Logic within Christianity: *Finally, the potential accomplishment of logical argument, within the framework of Christianity, is difficult to evaluate.* This is a crucial point in responding to Stroud, but it is honestly quite difficult to see the way through clearly. We have seen already that if Van Til's argument is to be transcendental in the way that it ought to be (both in terms of a good transcendental argument, and in terms of its necessary theological fidelity), it must operate self-consciously *from within* a Christian theistic worldview. Deficient versions of Christian transcendental arguments fail to do this, thinking that they will be more effective on a common ground; such arguments fall prey to Stroud's dilemma.

But once we move within the framework of Christian theism, we must ask: what does a logical argument *prove*? If I have a valid syllogism and true premises, and I am employing them within a worldview that allows for intelligible experience, what force can I expect my argument

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[24]Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, Logos.

to have? Can I reach conclusions about extramental realities? Van Til acknowledges this challenge with transcendental arguments even from his dissertation:

> 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.[25]

That is to say, in order to do any kind of argumentation, we must rely on some kind of logical laws. This is true of believer and unbeliever both. But for the Christian, those laws are what they are neither in a conventional sense (as mere agreements or rules for language) nor as abstract impersonal verities. And this runs counter to every position that is founded on autonomy; as Oliphint maintains: "It comes down to this: on this way of framing things, the divine mind(s) exist(s) by virtue of logical necessity; but Christian thought says that logic exists by virtue of God's unique necessity."[26] The entire argument, in terms of its persuasive force, hangs on the idea that any non-Christian worldview is barred from making any statements that could be either rational *or* irrational; the categories are meaningless on autonomy and flux.

But within a Christian worldview, do arguments allow us to draw positive metaphysical conclusions? We must admit that within Christianity, logical conclusions have mixed value: there are syllogisms, which seem to be properly formed and with true premises, that run us into conflict with revelation. This is the nature of paradox, and we have already noted that Van Til insists that paradox is to be an expected feature of Christianity. Accepting paradox (not actual contradiction) is the alternative to knowing nothing at all. But if this is the case, then it would

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[25]"God and the Absolute."

[26]Shannon, "Necessity, Univocism, and the Triune God," 7.

seem that any argument at all, even a transcendental argument that is properly avoiding autonomy, would be substantially weakened. Certainly, a transcendental argument does not go through on premises of autonomy and flux, for no argument goes through on such premises. How does the argument fare on the assumption of Christianity? And why so?

It certainly is the case that Christianity gives reasons to think that, in ordinary situations, conclusions validly drawn from true premises can be relied upon. Such confidence is derived from the fact that we are created:

> The first is that the reason logic, proofs, evidences, and the like can succeed, albeit within the circle, is because of the reality of creation. God made the world such that human beings are to live in it, make discoveries about it, verify certain views, all to the end of honoring God.... An appeal to such discovery-by-trial is in no way a denial of ultimate circularity, but it takes away the intellectualism of "it is true because it is true"—the sort of tautology presuppositionalists are accused of believing.[27]

> The point to be made here, however, is that there is an inseparable and ineluctable link between ourselves and the world, a link that is both established by God and intended to reflect his character…. It is this crucial but (almost) neglected truth—that our covenantal connection with the world is initiated, constituted, orchestrated, and sustained by the triune God—that is the theological key to a Christian understanding of our "situated-ness" in the world and our access (and knowledge of that access) to reality.[28]

But because these confidences rest on revelation, they are not of the character of impersonal laws. That is to say, *law* in God's universe is not an invariant abstraction; it reflects the character of God. But this presents us with two problems. The first is that the laws are reflections of a God who transcends our understanding; the laws that reflect his character will partake in this same transcendence.

> If, however, we confess first the unique ontological self-sufficiency of the triune creator God, and, indeed, the (moral) authority and (epistemological and soteriological) necessity of divine self-disclosure in Scripture, then we always have ready in hand the derivative,

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[27]Edgar, "Frame the Apologist," 417.

[28]Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics*, 96.

> dependent, and partial nature of the laws of logic. There is no possible world in which an iron axehead floats; this one did. This is a true or even only an apparent contradiction only if it is assumed that our logical tools exist independently of God, and apply equally to creator and creature.[29]

Laws of logic, then, as formulated by us, will fail to capture all truth. This is again a necessary consequence of giving up autonomy.

Second, we face obstacles in that, if the laws are personal, there may be times at which they are (at least from our perspective) set aside or transcended.

This, however, does not leave the covenantal apologist in a position of acknowledging that his transcendental argument, *even on his own terms*, is untrustworthy. Because laws of logic are, for us, derived from revelation, our trust in them does not ultimately rest on law, as such, in the abstract. Our trust rest on the One who has revealed these laws. There is, then, a necessary and acknowledged circularity in this argument, but as we noted earlier, this is an essential feature of *any* transcendental argument. There is no way to get behind, as it were, that which makes predication possible. And because predication is indeed uniquely possible on the foundations of Christian theism, it is there that we must stand.

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[29]Shannon, "Necessity, Univocism, and the Triune God," 9.

That is to say: we ought not give the impression that Christianity is true in the real world *because* it satisfies this kind of logical puzzle. The causal

As with Stroud, one of the positives of Körner's objection is that it helps the covenantal apologist clarify his understanding and employment of transcendental arguments. Without getting too far ahead of myself, I think that both Stroud and Körner show the limits of transcendental arguments that are construed in a manner consistent with human autonomy. Such autonomous versions of transcendental arguments would be, by definition, incompatible with a consistently Van Tilian (and therefore Reformed) defense of the faith. That said, because of the potential to make a kind of knock-down argument for Christianity (a potential that I will argue Van Til himself encourages at points), some advocates of transcendental arguments have unintentionally set forth such arguments in an autonomous manner. When they are set up in this way, they *do* fall short of the lofty goals that an apologist might have for them. I suspect that an answer to Körner's objection to transcendental deductions would be an equally informative and profitable study for some defender of covenantal apologetics; the key idea would be to show how a transcendental argument is supposed to work *within* the parameters of a fully Christian worldview.