

A (Very) Critical Review of Frame the Fuzzy Van Tillian's

Book *Apologetics*

By Michael H. Warren

John Frame has reissued his popular book *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (AGG) under a new name, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*.¹ He has expanded some of the chapters and added essays in the appendix.

Prior to AGG being published in 1994, I had read Frame's book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (DKG); and I had found it interesting and helpful in the way that he restated some of Van Til's ideas in simple, normal language. But I also noticed that Frame's explanations of Van Til's thought in some areas were somewhat equivocal, such as saying that he didn't know if Van Til held that "language about God can be literal,"² and his listing of several possible meanings of "thought content" without coming to a conclusion about what Van Til meant by the term.³ Much of this involved his evaluation of the Clark/Van Til controversy, and while I agree that Van Til's language could have been clearer, I thought that Frame could have presented Van Til's views more definitively than he did. I was struck by the contrast with Greg Bahnsen's way of writing about apologetics. He had a precise position about nearly every issue under the sun. Frame sees his restrained conclusions as observant of the requirements of Christian humility,⁴ and maybe Bahnsen could have benefited from some of Frame's humility. On the other hand, claims of humility by being a moderate, movement-rejecting, middle-of-the-roader can be an excuse for obscuring the truth. Bahnsen reports that Frame wrote an essay in 1985 called "Let's Keep the Picture Fuzzy," claiming that ambiguity on the issue of theonomy was a moral imperative, "switching from considerations of theological truth and error to considerations of attitude and persuasion between the parties."⁵ This should sound familiar to those who have read Frame's critique of Van Til. The original

¹ Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2015.

² John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), p. 36.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

⁴ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 8-15.

⁵ Greg Bahnsen, *No Other Standard* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 28 n. 18. In case someone thinks that I am simply a movement-minded partisan of Greg Bahnsen, I should note that Bahnsen has criticized Van Til for having a method but not an actual argument; and I disagree with Bahnsen on that. Bahnsen's argument, which focuses on *reductios* of empiricism and rationalism, is very close to Van Til's. But Bahnsen would avoid the problem of claiming to prove the impossibility of the contrary while also taking a piecemeal approach to

AGG and the new *Apologetics* show that Frame is not just a fuzzy theonomist. Frame is a fuzzy Van Tillian.⁶ He argues that the difference between Van Til's presuppositional approach and the traditional arguments for the existence of God is not a matter of argumentative form or content, but merely "an attitude of the heart."⁷ However, my view is that his advocacy for a "presuppositionalism of the heart" obscures the teaching of Van Til, which has undermined what could have been a more faithful witness of the church to the unbelieving world in the twenty years since AGG was published.

When AGG first came out, I saw it in a Christian bookstore and thumbed through it. Nothing really caught my eye, and based on DKG I didn't have a "must have" urge to buy it; plus I had other books to get through at the time. So I didn't buy it. Then I joined a Van Til email discussion group around 1998, and the most academically trained members of the discussion group were Framians. They often initiated discussions on Van Til's views that I had never encountered in Van Til's books, and I had read most of them. I also never heard of these issues from Bahnsen, whose *Philosophy of Christianity*

refuting opposing worldviews if he had framed his argument in terms of the one and the many rather than two particular schools of epistemology, empiricism and rationalism. Van Til's focus on the one and the many allows him to make an argument that covers all possibilities for the issue of the one and the many. Also see my criticism of some statements that Bahnsen has made about the use of empirical evidence in my essay "The Scope and Limits of Van Til's Transcendental Argument," pp. 54ff, at

http://www.christianciv.com/The_Scope_and_Limits_of_VTAG.pdf.

⁶ Calling Frame "fuzzy" is saying the same thing as Gary North when he calls Frame "Sic et Non John" in *Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), pp. 202-3. Frame highlighted the need for sympathetic criticism of Van Til in his essay "The Problem of Theological Paradox," first published in a book edited by Gary North called *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1976), p. 297 n. 10; later published as "Van Til the Theologian," (Chattanooga, TN: Pilgrim Publications, 1976), p.5 n.10. After having published Frame's essay calling for sympathetic criticism of Van Til, North dedicates a book to Frame that makes such criticisms of Van Til: *Dominion & Common Grace: The Biblical Basis for Progress* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987). In the book's dedication North describes Frame's typical equivocal approach to issues: "portions of the book are good, other portions are questionable, but the topic warrants further study." Amazingly, in CVT (pp. 8-9) Frame interprets North's dedication as meaning that movement leaders, like North and Van Til, shouldn't be criticized, even though North's book was devoted to criticizing Van Til, and it was dedicated to Frame for that very reason! A more reasonable interpretation of North's dedication is that Frame has a mindset to see things as fuzzy in cases where the truth is clear, approaching a postmodern, secular attitude that we can never discover Truth or be certain that we have found it if we do.

⁷ AGG, p. 87; *Apologetics*, p. 93.

course I had taken. So at this point I had to buy AGG and his subsequent, more detailed book, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought* (CVT).

My reading of both books was that Frame had some major misunderstandings of Van Til. So when *Apologetics* was recently published, I was curious to see whether Frame had adjusted any of his positions. I looked at the notes that I scribbled in the margins of AGG, like “No!,” “Where?,” and several sentences written around the margins; and I compared those pages to the new version of the book. In the new book Frame adds some further explanation of his points to what he wrote in AGG, but unfortunately he doesn’t correct any of the errors in his understanding of Van Til. Although he responds to some critics, Frame does not interact or even mention Greg Bahnsen’s several criticisms of his positions in AGG, except for one that he takes as a compliment.⁸

There are some good additions to the book, like the essay in the appendix by Joseph E. Torres on circular argument, although Frame’s original statements in the book should have been sufficient to refute the critics of Van Til on the issue. In my view, the critics on this issue either haven’t tried to seriously understand Van Til’s point and just assume that Van Til claims that the premise of the transcendental argument should be the same as its conclusion, or they simply lack the Wittgensteinian imagination to understand that the same term can be used in slightly different ways.⁹

Positive and Negative Transcendental Arguments

The guys in the discussion group debated whether Frame was right that a transcendental argument for God’s existence can be positive, or if it must be negative as Van Til claimed. None of them asked whether Van Til actually made this claim, whether Frame had constructed a strawman. I searched Van Til’s works on the *Logos* CD for “negative” and “positive argument.” I could find only one instance

⁸ *Apologetics*, p. 115 n. 34. For Greg Bahnsen’s criticisms, see *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (hereinafter, “VTA”) (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 81,103n.39, 412-14, 500-02, 536-37, 547n.57, 674. And “Answer to Frame’s Critique of Van Til: Profound Differences Between the Traditional and Presuppositional Methods” (audio lectures with a written transcript, including a dialogue with John Frame on their differences, held at Westminster Theological Seminary), at <http://www.cmfnow.com/answertoframescritiqueofvantil.aspx>. While AGG was still just a class syllabus, Bahnsen wrote *An Answer to Frame’s Critique of Van Til* (Willow Grove, PA: Kirkland Printing, 1988). As I explain below, while I think that Bahnsen was largely on target, I have some differences with him too.

⁹ Van Til rejects the logical fallacy of circular reasoning in which the conclusion is stated as a premise of the argument. He recognizes the inescapable circularity of presuppositional arguments, in which the arguer is using reason to reason about reason. But the premise can be any fact of experience as an example of something that is rationally meaningful.

where Van Til says that the Christian argument against rival worldviews must be a negative rather than positive argument. That one mention was in a student paper he wrote in 1924 while in seminary at Princeton. It seems that Van Til would have mentioned this again a few times in his published writings if it had the importance that Frame gives it. Here it is:

Our apologetic has been negative, and as far as it has been negative, if not misrepresented, it must also be coercive for those that assume a different position from ours. We do not contend that the positive argument must therefore also be convincing. That would be a contradiction of our own position. If you have lost a child and I have found one, it does not therefore mean that the child I have found is your child. With this illustration Dr. A. Kuyper makes the position clear which we, following him, have presented. It is exactly our position that the absolute alone can furnish the positive apologetic. He must draw us out of darkness to his marvelous light. For even if we should agree that reason needs a corrective, what guarantee is there that Scripture furnishes the same and that it is not a mere result of imagination?¹⁰

Kuyper's illustration of the lost child that Van Til appeals to comes from Kuyper's *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, where he argues that, while we can show, negatively, how non-Christian philosophies have logical and factual problems, we can't prove, i.e. make a positive argument, that Christianity is correct because it is held as a presupposition that is a gift of faith imparted by the Holy Spirit.¹¹ But this is an issue about which Van Til changes his mind in his later, published works. He rejects Kuyper's idea that apologetics is limited to a negative defense: "[O]ne cannot be exclusively defensive. . . . The diathetical, the thetical and the antithetical can at most be matters of emphasis."¹² Van Til explains that he found a middle path between Kuyper and Benjamin Warfield in apologetic methodology, allowing that Christianity can be proven as Warfield held; but with Kuyper, emphasizing the incommensurable presuppositions that divide Christianity from its opponents and rejecting the

¹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," Notebook 1, "Biblical Theism;" in Cornelius Van Til & Eric H. Sigward, *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til* (Electronic ed.) (New York: Labels Army Company, 1997).

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles* (trans. J. Hendrick DeVries, 1897), pp. 268. On Kuyper's approach to apologetics, also see William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphant, *Christian Apologetics Past and Present (Volume 2, From 1500): A Primary Source Reader* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), pp.331-35.

¹² Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), p. 194.

traditional arguments for the existence of God because they fail to do that.¹³ Van Til realized that presuppositions can be proven to be true by showing that they are necessary for the possibility of intelligible experience. Like the preaching of God's word, or more precisely as part of the preaching of God's word, the Holy Spirit can use apologetic arguments as one of the means to bring a person to faith.¹⁴ In contrast to his illustration that he borrowed from Kuyper, that just because you lost a child does not prove that the one I found is yours, in his later, published works Van Til often emphasized that there are only two basic choices – either God is ultimate or man is ultimate. In terms of the issue of the one and the many, the choice is either a concrete universal God, one in whom unity and diversity have been related from eternity past, or an original abstraction of the one from the many.¹⁵ Van Til's student paper contains the basic argument of the one and the many that he used for the remainder of career, but he hadn't realized many of the implications of it at that time.

So if Van Til doesn't demand that transcendental arguments be negative in form, where did Frame get the idea? He doesn't completely make it up. He just gets confused by Van Til's terms. Van Til uses the terms "direct" and "indirect" to describe arguments. We can trace the etiology of Frame's error when we see that he assumes that Van Til is using the definition of "indirect argument" that is found in mathematics textbooks. In this passage found in both AGG and *Apologetics* and repeated in slightly different form in CVT, he says: "An indirect proof or *reductio* in mathematics is a proof in which one assumes a proposition ('for the sake of the argument,' as Van Til puts it) in order to refute it. One tentatively adopts, say, proposition A and then deduces from it a logical contradiction or some proposition that is obviously false."¹⁶ From the negation that begins an indirect argument in mathematics, Van Til's appeal to "indirect argument" becomes a "negative argument" for Frame; and a "direct argument" in Van Til's writing becomes a "positive argument" in Frame's terminology.

¹³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), pp. 358-64; and *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 229-54.

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E.R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pg. 21. Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, pp. 196-97.

¹⁵ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 42; *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 71; *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 5-6; "Introduction" to B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), pp. 18, 24-25.

¹⁶ *Apologetics*, p. 83; AGG, p. 75. Also see CVT, p. 314.

But the question should be asked, is the meaning that “indirect” suggests to Frame the same meaning that Van Til is using as we look at the context in which he uses the term? Was Van Til using the mathematics textbook definition of “indirect argument,” or did he use the phrase in a different way? Here is Van Til’s fullest explanation of what he means by these terms:

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.¹⁷

On my reading of this, Van Til is simply using “indirect argument” as a synonym for a transcendental or presuppositional argument. He describes a “direct argument” as an argument over facts in which the disputants share the same basic worldview; the “nature and significance” of facts and laws are “already agreed upon by both parties to the debate.” Since a transcendental argument is about arbitrating between conflicting worldviews, a direct argument *cannot* equate to a positive transcendental argument.¹⁸

In *Apologetics* Frame adds to what he wrote in AGG by quoting the first of the above paragraphs from Van Til. But notice what Van Til says in the second paragraph. Whereas Frame defines an indirect

¹⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 117.

¹⁸ Bahnsen responds to Frame’s claim on this issue by assuming that a “direct argument” means a non-transcendental argument rather than meaning a transcendental argument that begins with a positive assertion. He contrasts the approach of Kant, who asks about the necessary conditions of the intelligibility of any fact, with that of Descartes, who makes a deduction from particular clear and distinct ideas, and Locke, who begins with the particular simple ideas caused by sensation. VTA, p. 501.

argument as a negative argument, in this passage Van Til describes an indirect argument as having two parts, one negative and the other positive. Although Van Til first mentions the Christian placing himself on the position of the non-Christian, he does not require beginning an argument with a negation. In other places he explains that, because all facts require the existence of God for their intelligibility, an argument can begin with any fact in God's creation: "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."¹⁹ Van Til's recommended order of presentation in the quote above is for a persuasive purpose, not logical necessity. There is a principle in evangelism that people won't see their need for a Savior until they first see that they are sinners. People won't embrace the Christian worldview unless they first realize that their own worldview is bankrupt. Van Til recognizes this:

In this connection we must also say a word about the contention often made by Christians that we must be positive rather than negative in our presentation of the truth to those who have not yet accepted it. We have no fault to find with this statement if it be correctly understood. We must certainly present the truth of the Christian theistic system constantly, at every point of the argument. But it is clear that if you offer a new wife to one who is perfectly satisfied with the one he has now, you are not likely to be relieved of your burden. In other words, it is the self-sufficiency of the "natural man" that must first be brought under some pressure, before there is any likelihood of his even considering the truth in any serious fashion at all. The parable of the prodigal helps us here. As long as the son was at home there was nothing but a positive argument that was held before him. But he wanted to go out of the father's house in order to indulge in "riotous living." Not till he was at the swinetrough, not till he saw that he had made a hog of himself and that he could not be a hog because he was a man, did he at all begin to consider the servants of his father who had plenty of bread.²⁰

Van Til describes a transcendental argument as "indirect" because it goes "behind" the particular fact under consideration to see what the ultimate nature of the universe must be for that fact, or any fact, to be intelligible. This is how disputes between people holding different worldviews must be settled. The concern is not so much with an individual fact as with the common nature of all factuality and how

¹⁹ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 10. Van Til makes a distinction between the proximate starting point of knowledge and the ultimate starting point: "[A]ny point in the finite universe . . . is the proximate starting point of all our reasoning." Ibid, p. 201, cf. p. 204. But God is the ultimate starting point of all our reasoning because all knowledge and everything that exists originally comes from Him.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

different worldviews will approach that question differently. “Indirect” equates to *presuppositional*, what is assumed as the ultimate source and standard of reality behind what we see directly in experience. Transcendental arguments are, by definition, indirect in this sense; but they can be either positive or negative, or both, without violating anything that Van Til says about them.

Frame’s Six Questions about Van Til’s Rejection of Traditional Arguments

In AGG Frame asked six questions about Van Til’s approach to apologetics. They amount to questioning in the negative sense of rejecting Van Til’s alleged positions in these six areas. Since it is a handy summary of Frame’s criticisms of Van Til, they are often cited, especially by Van Til’s critics. Although the questions are not detailed analyses of Van Til’s writings and *nothing* from Van Til’s writings are quoted or even cited in the original AGG version (or in *Apologetics*), at least one Ph.D. candidate listed Frame’s six questions, just the one-sentence questions without any of the explanation that follow, in his doctoral dissertation; and his dissertation committee accepted this as a sufficient refutation of Van Til’s views.²¹ Christian academic standards are in a sorry state these days.

In *Apologetics*, Frame adds additional material to these six questions, but it doesn’t remedy the errors that I see in his understanding of Van Til.

In question 1, Frame says that he agrees with Van Til that “without God there is no meaning.” But then he asks, “How, then, is that premise to be proved?”²² One major problem here is that Frame asks this question. He doesn’t think that Van Til has an answer to the question: “Although Van Til calls it an argument, it really is a conclusion rather than an argument.”²³ Actually Van Til does have a specific argument with this as the conclusion, not the premise. It is the argument concerning the one and the many. Positively, God is understood as a concrete universal, which means that all facts and the concepts that apply to them are determined by God from eternity past. How humans have knowledge is no problem on this view because all knowledge has eternally existed, and humans are made in God’s image, with their finite knowledge reflecting God’s comprehensive, eternal knowledge. Negatively, the denial of God as a concrete universal requires the one and the many to be originally abstract from each other. An abstract one is a pure blank, and an abstract many is pure chaos, neither of which allow for rationality.

²¹ Phil Fernandes, “Rejection of Traditional Apologetics,” at <http://instituteofbiblicaldefense.com/1997/05/cornelius-van-til/>.

²² AGG, p. 71; *Apologetics*, p. 74.

²³ *Apologetics*, p. 74.

Beginning with an ultimately irrational universe, the God-denier cannot explain how knowledge and rationality could arise in humans. I have given a fuller statement of this argument in another paper.²⁴

Frame has a rudimentary understanding of Van Til's argument for the one and the many,²⁵ but admits that, "Instinctively, I feel that Van Til is right about this, but the point is terribly difficult to formulate coherently."²⁶ Apparently he has too much difficulty with the argument to try to make much use of it when trying to understand what Van Til is talking about most of the time. In fact, as quoted above, he prefers to dismiss it as a mere conclusion and not an argument. Since Frame doesn't understand what Van Til's argument is, he searches around for some arguments that could fill in to prove that without God there is no meaning. He says that we could appeal to design, cause, and morality. But, he says, to appeal to any of these amounts to an endorsement of the traditional arguments. For example, "Is it that the meaning-structure of reality requires an efficient cause? That is the traditional cosmological argument."²⁷ I have heard other critics of Van Til repeat this line. But this is a clueless statement. It reflects an ignorance of what Van Til found wrong with the traditional arguments. For some reason it doesn't occur to Frame that Van Til could criticize something about the traditional arguments without rejecting the use of design, cause, and morality to prove God's existence. This is exactly what Van Til says about his position: "Men ought to reason analogically from nature to nature's God. Men ought, therefore, to use the cosmological argument analogically in order to thus conclude that God is the Creator of the universe. . . [A]ll the theistic arguments should really be taken together and reduced to the one argument of the possibility of human predication."²⁸ And he says, "The true theistic proofs undertake to show that the ideas of existence (ontological proof), of cause (cosmological proof), and purpose (teleological proof) are meaningless unless they presuppose the existence of God."²⁹ And then, "I do not reject 'the theistic proofs' but merely insist on formulating them in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of Scripture."³⁰ Yet, Frame concludes his critique of Van Til by saying, "We should no longer

²⁴ "Christian Civilization is the Only Civilization— In a Sense, of Course: A Restatement of Cornelius Van Til's Argument for Christian Theism," at <http://www.christianciv.com/ChristCivEssay.htm>.

²⁵ AGG, pp. 49-50. *Apologetics*, pp. 46-47.

²⁶ AGG, p. 50 n. 24; *Apologetics*, p. 47 n. 53.

²⁷ AGG, p. 71; *Apologetics*, p. 74.

²⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), p. 102. Frame quotes this last line leading up to his six questions: AGG, pp. 70-71; *Apologetics*, p. 69.

²⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972), p. 190.

³⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 256.

be embarrassed, for example, to argue for the existence of God on the basis of cause, purpose, and values.”³¹ Who is this “we” who experienced this embarrassment?” Not Van Til. Not Bahnsen either. “We” are Frame, his imaginary Van Til, and maybe some others that Frame has met who share his misunderstanding of Van Til.

When I first read AGG I wondered how Frame could claim that an appeal to causality is an appeal to the traditional cosmological argument given that Bahnsen appealed to causality to argue for God’s existence in his debate with Gordon Stein.³² Frame would have to hold that Bahnsen’s argument in the Stein debate was an abandonment of Van Til’s apologetic.³³ And yet in AGG Frame also points to Bahnsen’s debate with Stein as a prime example of Van Til’s negative transcendental method in action, which, Frame claims, is against the traditional arguments because they are positive arguments.³⁴ Frame actually addresses my question in *Apologetics*, but he only compounds the confusion. He classifies Bahnsen’s argument in the Stein debate as Thomistic – and adds that that isn’t really contrary to the major thrust of Van Til’s apologetic.³⁵ For Frame, the mere claim that “motion implies a first mover,” *the mere use of those words* or ones similar, makes an argument “Thomistic” and “the traditional argument.” That’s amazingly superficial. At most, it’s the traditional *claim*, but not the traditional *argument*.

A prime example of Frame’s confusion about why Van Til criticized the traditional arguments is Frame’s critique of Van Til’s criticism of Thomas Aquinas. As I discuss in another essay, Frame invents another strawman in regard to Van Til’s criticism of Aquinas.³⁶ Even though Frame goes into detail on this in his later book on Van Til, his treatment of this subject involves four out the remaining five of his misguided questions/disagreements with Van Til in AGG/*Apologetics*.³⁷

In CVT Frame criticizes Van Til for criticizing Aquinas for not proving enough about God’s nature. “Van Til does not present enough argument to require a particular degree of definition in an

³¹ AGG, pp. 85-86; *Apologetics*, p. 91. Likewise, in his 2012 article “Transcendental Arguments” for the *IVP Dictionary of Apologetics*, Frame says, “And there is no reason to assume, as Van Til does, that anyone who uses an argument from design or causality is presupposing a nontheistic epistemology.” <http://www.frame-poythress.org/transcendental-arguments/>.

³² Also see Bahnsen’s lecture, “The Toothpaste Argument for God’s Existence,” <http://www.cmfnow.com/thetoothpasteproofofgodsexistence-3of4.aspx>.

³³ Bahnsen clearly did not think so. He maintained that there are distinctives to Van Til’s apologetic method. See VTA, pp. 530ff.

³⁴ AGG, p. 76 n.19; *Apologetics*, p. 83 n. 29.

³⁵ *Apologetics*, p. 74.

³⁶ Warren, “The Scope and Limits of Van Til’s Transcendental Argument: A Response to John Frame,” at http://www.christianciv.com/The_Scope_and_Limits_of_VTAG.pdf.

³⁷ Frame refers the reader to CVT for the details on this in AGG (p. 20 n.21) and *Apologetics* (p. 19 n. 26).

apologetic proof.”³⁸ Actually, Van Til does not mention *any* argument to prove this point because Van Til’s position here is Frame’s invention. Frame never cites a passage where Van Til makes this criticism of Aquinas, and I can’t find it in Van Til’s writings. But I can cite plenty of evidence for a different criticism that Van Til makes of Aquinas.³⁹ Van Til’s problem with Aquinas is that he incorporated the form/matter scheme from Greek philosophy into Christian theology.

The natural-supernatural theology of Roman Catholicism is the result of an attempt to fit the Christian framework of God-in-Christ and his relation to the world into the form-matter scheme of Aristotle. The transcendent God of the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas is attained by the method of remotion and is therefore relegated to the realm of the indeterminate.⁴⁰

While Frame thinks that Aquinas might be combining merely “a truncated Aristotelianism (no longer the Aristotelian system) with Christian thought”⁴¹ – not adopting the bad, anti-theistic parts of the system, like the form/matter scheme of reality – Van Til quotes Aquinas’s endorsement of these very ideas of Aristotle that are destructive to the Christian theistic worldview. In *Summa Theologica* Aquinas says, “God is a supremely simple form, as was shown above (Question [3], Article [7]). . . . Reason cannot reach up to simple form, so as to know ‘what it is;’ but it can know ‘whether it is.’”⁴² And in *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas says, “Now, in considering the divine substance, we should especially make use of the method of remotion. For, by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is.”⁴³ By remotion “we approach nearer to a knowledge of God according as through our intellect we are able to remove more and more things from Him.”⁴⁴ All particulars are removed from the concept of God, resulting in God as

³⁸ CVT, p. 183, cf. p. 264.

³⁹ See Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980 [1971]), pp. 73-105, 217-219; and *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 169-175.

⁴⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979), p.57.

⁴¹ CVT, p. 341.

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 12, Article 12.

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)* tr. by Anton C. Pegis, Vol. 2 (Garden City: Hanover House, 1955), p. 96 (1:14.2). Van Til quotes this passage in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 169, and in his article “Nature and Scripture” in *The Infallible Word*, Ed. By N.B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2002), p. 288.

⁴⁴ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1:14:2.

an empty concept. We can't know "what it is" because there is no content to God's nature to know by this method.⁴⁵

This irrational method of knowing God that excludes the possibility of knowing what God is has implications that undermine every major area of Christian theology.⁴⁶ It completely undermines the cosmological argument. While Aquinas can try to be faithful to the Christian worldview by saying that God created prime matter,⁴⁷ to define God as pure, empty form undermines the possibility of creation. A changeless, empty concept can't cause anything. As Van Til says, "Thus the argument for a first mover in the Thomistic form is to the effect that God's existence as the first mover is proved only if there be no motion, no time, no history at all."⁴⁸

Frame says that the traditional arguments for the existence of God should be acceptable as long as they have a transcendental "goal" or "thrust." But if the argument does not reach its goal, then it's not a success, it's not transcendental. Bahnsen critiques Frame's examples of arguments for God's existence in AGG as having "presuppositionalized" the traditional arguments, which is to be commended.⁴⁹ But we need to recognize that the traditional arguments need to be presented with significant modifications from their original presentations to become sound transcendental arguments for God's existence, which means that they are not really the same arguments any more. Frame adds from what he wrote in AGG the following paragraph in *Apologetics*:

It seems to me that if Aquinas argued correctly in showing that God is the first cause of everything, then God is the transcendental condition of everything: of meaning, coherent thought and predication, as well as motion, causality, and contingency. On that understanding, Aquinas's argument, like Van Til's, is transcendental and presuppositional. If that is true, then Van Til's argument might not be as original as he thought it was. I certainly reject Aquinas's view of autonomous natural knowledge. But his cosmological argument is legitimate as a part of a legitimate TAG.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Van Til's alternative to remotio is "the concrete way of negation," which can affirm the "internal fullness of the being of God": All limitations on the creature (and sin) are negated, so whatever the creature has, God has to an infinite degree. *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, pp. 203-219, esp. 212.

⁴⁶ See Warren, "The Scope and Limits of Van Til's Transcendental Argument," pp. 11-13.

⁴⁷ As Frame makes note of in defense of Aquinas: CVT, p. 341.

⁴⁸ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 95.

⁴⁹ *Apologetics*, p. 115n.34. See Bahnsen's audio lectures, "Answer to Frame's Critique of Van Til: Profound Differences Between the Traditional and Presuppositional Methods."

⁵⁰ *Apologetics*, p. 75.

However, Van Til's TAG (Transcendental Argument for God) is about knowledge and causality at the same time. The two cannot be separated except as a matter of emphasis. If Aquinas's cosmological argument is interpreted according to its original context, it involves a view of knowledge and the nature of God that undermines it. If Aquinas's cosmological argument is to be sound, then the best we can do is salvage a few of the words or phrases of his argument and include them in an argument that is contrary to his "view of autonomous natural knowledge" and the idea of knowing God's nature by remotion, of which his cosmological argument was originally a part. In that context, we *cannot say* that "Aquinas argued correctly in showing that God is the first cause of everything." God as pure form in Greek philosophy reduces to absurdity and cannot cause anything. Frame pleads that you can use some of Aquinas's traditional arguments as long as they are put in the context of a biblical epistemology, "part of a legitimate TAG." Van Til does not completely disagree, although he sees a biblical epistemology affecting the arguments themselves, whereas Frame does not. Van Til opposed "the traditional arguments" while still advocating the use of cause, purpose, being, and morality to form a transcendental argument.

While Frame says that there is nothing wrong with the five ways by themselves, even in the chapter on the Five Ways in the *Summa* we find elements of Aristotle's form/matter scheme. Aquinas sees the need to defend his arguments from an infinite regress. The problem of infinite regress only arises if your first cause is less than absolute. There's no getting in back of an absolute God. There is no cause that could be higher. Van Til's depiction of God as an absolute, concrete universal means that God is the source of *all* unity and diversity that exists or could exist. Of course, that's not where Aquinas goes. His answer to the problem of infinite regress, that you have to begin somewhere or else nothing will get started, is exactly what you would expect if he is defending a finite type of god that gets things moving in the universe but is not sovereign over all the details (even though Aristotle's god actually does not even allow that). Either the first cause is an absolute God, in which the problem of infinite regress does not arise, except from someone who does not understand the argument;⁵¹ or one posits a finite first cause, in which there is no escape from the objection of an infinite regress. As Van Til says, "It is always possible to ask for the cause of the cause till one faints in an infinite regression. When we say in this naive fashion that God made the world, the little girl will ask us, and ask us justly, who made God."⁵² Yet, Frame says that Van Tillians should be "showing (with traditional apologists) that an infinite series of causes is

⁵¹ Usually it's a knee-jerk reaction by an atheist who goes to his tried-and-true objection to Thomistic arguments. He either wasn't listening carefully or couldn't think of any objections to the transcendental argument presented.

⁵² Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 109.

unintelligible. . . .”⁵³ Frame fails to see that the problem of infinite regress is generated from Aquinas’s defective view of God and that it does not arise as problem with TAG.

Considering the Five Ways, as Frame would like us to do, in isolation from the rest of Aquinas’ book where he defends positions that undermine the Christian view of God, Aquinas has no answer to polytheism, explicitly or implicitly. He says nothing to exclude the possibility of multiple first causes. Aristotle had speculated that there could be fifty-five unmoved movers,⁵⁴ although he preferred to think of there being only one.⁵⁵ Frame says that Aquinas’s arguments are useful if they prove a first cause, even if they don’t prove other things about God’s nature. But if an argument allows *multiple* first causes, should Christians regard it as worth mentioning as proof of the God of the Bible who demands exclusive devotion as the only true God, the sole and sovereign Creator of heaven and earth? At the very least a Christian must modify the argument in some way to make it useful even if the argument is viewed in isolation from the rest of Aquinas’s philosophy.

But if we go outside of the chapter on the Five Ways to find that modification, we jump from the frying pan into the fire. Aquinas’ view of God as an abstract unity is limited too, even if there is only one. Let’s generously assume, again as Frame would have us to do, that Aquinas and Van Til agree that the world needs a unified first cause of all things in sense experience, like motion and order, to give these things intelligibility. Nevertheless, *the nature of the unity of the first cause that Aquinas posits makes a world of difference* between him and Van Til. Aquinas’s Greek principle of unity is only able to provide a finite god that *excludes* the absolute God of Scripture. His divine unity is an empty abstraction, and this kind of first cause can’t get the job done of giving unity to sense experience. Aquinas cannot view God as a supremely simple form and claim to know of God’s existence through remotion and then be able to add particularity to Aristotle’s view of the unmoved mover to get a concrete universal God in order to bring unity to all the particulars of the universe. As Van Til puts it, a person is “quite mistaken” to think that “the Christian idea of the trinity can be added to the Greek idea of the unity of God. The one God of Aristotle retains its oneness only if kept in abstraction from the world.”⁵⁶ Since all particulars are removed from the nature of God, matter must have a separate source from God, in accordance with the Greek form/matter scheme. Such a god is finite rather than absolute, even if Aristotle’s speculation about additional unmoved movers is dismissed. And a finite god is philosophically useless. Van Til writes, “[H]e has no right to claim the rationality of the one absolute God as the principle of his interpretation of life. . . . [The] so-called theistic proofs . . . must either be stated in a truly Christian-theistic fashion, or

⁵³ *Apologetics*, p. 77.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, XII, 10.

⁵⁶ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 238.

they involve the doctrine of a finite god, and a finite god is no God.”⁵⁷ The possibility of rationality requires an absolute God, not an abstract unity.

To have a finite god is philosophically equivalent to atheism. Whether the greatest minds in the universe are finite gods or finite humans, that still leaves the universe ultimately non-rational, which undermines the possibility of reason from ever arising in the universe. Reason requires appeal to universal, unchanging absolutes like logic and mathematical concepts; and these must relate to all the diversity of the world of experience. If god is a pure abstract unity, then it has no relation to the diverse world of experience. If god is just a part of the world of experience, like the gods of Greek mythology, it would not be a source of the universals. Without an absolute God, particulars can never have unity, and unity can never relate to particulars. Aquinas tries to put the two abstractions together, but that doesn’t work either because they are defined in exclusion of each other. As Van Til describes Aquinas’s position:

Besides having the non-rational principle of prime matter, one also needs the idea of a universal form in relation to which the individuality that springs from matter receives its unification. Individuation by a non-rational principle would lead to pure indetermination—to an infinite regress. If one had billions of beads without any string, how would one ever have a string of beads? On the other hand, it is equally true that if you had nothing but the string, you still would have no string of beads.⁵⁸

Only a concrete universal God allows for the possibility of intelligible experience, including knowledge of cause and effect relationships in nature. A finite, empty abstraction of a god undermines the possibility of rationality, thus an argument assuming that kind of god is self-refuting. An argument that undermines the possibility of rational argument is a bad argument. God as a concrete universal is the necessary cause of the world because without such a God there could be no argument.⁵⁹

Because Frame doesn’t think that Van Til has an actual argument, he misunderstands what is unique, or at least most important, about Van Til’s argument. Frame says that “Aquinas’s argument, like Van Til’s, is transcendental. . . . [Therefore], Van Til’s argument might not be as original as he thought it

⁵⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 198.

⁵⁸ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 94. Another way he presents the analogy is that the beads have no holes, and the string does not have ends that can be found, thus having both together cannot produce a string of beads (particulars related to universals). *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, pp. 2, 17.

⁵⁹ Van Til, “My Credo,” pg. 21.

was.”⁶⁰ But while making the argument for God’s existence transcendental is important for Van Til and unique compared to many other apologists, Van Til did not make the transcendental nature of the argument the be all and end all of a good theistic argument. Arguments for paganism can be transcendental. Van Til knew of bad transcendental arguments. Immanuel Kant made transcendental arguments famous, and since Van Til was trained as an idealist philosopher, Van Til certainly learned some things about transcendental arguments from Kant, including the focus on the issue of the one and the many as the key to establishing the preconditions for rationality.⁶¹ Yet Kant argued for a view of the one and the many as the preconditions for rationality that, as Van Til often points out, are incommensurable with the Christian worldview and which fail in their goal of accounting for the possibility of human rationality.

Even transcendental arguments that claim to be arguments for God’s existence can be bad arguments if they mischaracterize the nature of God, like Aquinas’s view of God as pure form in accordance with Greek philosophy. Van Til is accurate to characterize Aquinas’ arguments for God’s existence as “direct” arguments rather than transcendental arguments because Aquinas ignores the differences between Christian presuppositions and the presuppositions of the natural man, meaning particularly Aristotle.⁶² Aquinas thinks that he is on neutral common ground with the pagan Aristotle when he should recognize that the common ground is pagan. But Aquinas’ overall philosophy is transcendental because he argues for the preconditions of rationality. He argues for a view of how humans gain knowledge in terms of the ultimate nature of the universe. Unfortunately, he argues that these preconditions include Aristotle’s presuppositions about form and matter that are incommensurable with Christian presuppositions. Aquinas’ Five Ways are part of Aquinas’ overall philosophy that is saturated in Aristotle’s form/matter conception of reality, which makes Aquinas’ transcendental argument one that is against non-Aristotelian worldviews, including against the Christian worldview.

The transcendental “thrust” of Aquinas’s argument for the existence of God can be compared to a spaceship with two thrusters aimed to move the ship in two different directions at the same time, even though the pilot, Major Tom, thinks that they are aimed to take him to the same place. Since Aquinas’s arguments for God’s existence are supposed to be following “reason” rather than “faith,” the argumentative thruster toward paganism is on full throttle while the thruster toward the triune God of Scripture is barely above idle (and allegedly not on at all because the natural reason thruster allegedly has

⁶⁰ *Apologetics*, p. 75.

⁶¹ Kant said “Thoughts without intuitions [sense impressions] are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 75. Van Til agrees with this, but disagrees with Kant about how to bring the two together to allow for intelligible experience.

⁶² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 122.

autonomous power to take him to the same place as the faith thruster). Major Tom ends up spaced out, losing contact with Ground Control and floating away into the void in his tin can. Such is the unstable “wisdom” of the double-minded man (James 1:8). The upshot of all this for Van Til is that what’s more unique about Van Til’s argument than being transcendental is his description of God as *a concrete universal* in his transcendental argument. That’s what makes it work. That’s what makes it unique with respect to both Kant and Aquinas.

In Frame’s second question/rejection of Van Til’s position, he says that “I do not agree that the traditional arguments necessarily conclude with something less than the biblical God. . . . It would be wrong to think of God merely as a first cause, but the cosmological argument does not entail such a conclusion.”⁶³ This question is related to the fourth question, where he says, “But I do not think that the whole of Christian theism can be established by a single argument, unless that argument is highly complex!”⁶⁴ Van Til never claims that a single argument should establish the whole of Christian theism or everything about the nature of God.⁶⁵ These objections relate to Frame’s mistaken claim that Van Til criticizes Aquinas for not proving enough about God’s nature, as if the issue were a matter of degree. As argued above, Van Til’s problem with Aquinas is that he reasons about God in a way that relies on Aristotle, whose view of form and matter *excludes* the Christian God, whose nature as a concrete universal makes Him the only candidate who could be the first cause of the world. Van Til says, “How could ‘the theistic proofs’ then be sound, for if they ‘prove’ that the God of Aristotle exists, then they disprove that the God of Christianity exists.”⁶⁶ And he says, Aristotle’s view of reality “does not allow” God to create the world out of nothing.⁶⁷ In the Thomistic syncretism between Aristotelianism and

⁶³ *Apologetics*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶⁵ My answer is slightly different than Greg Bahnsen’s. He responds to Frame by saying that “at stake in the transcendental argument is nothing less than the *whole* of the Christian worldview as revealed in Scripture.” VTA, p. 502n.64. That’s true, in a sense. But the transcendental argument entails only a subset of the propositions that make up the Christian worldview. It proves the necessity of an absolutely authoritative special revelation, but not all the content of that revelation. I do agree with Bahnsen when he says that “The Christian worldview, as Van Til never tired of emphasizing, must be defended as a unit (comprising metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics in an unbreakable system) over against the sinful worldview of the natural man.” VTA, p. 549n.64. This system covering the three basic areas of philosophy sets the rules for and has various other implications for every area of life, but it does not dictate every detail. It does not even dictate everything about the Trinity that we find taught in Scripture. See my essay, “The Scope and Limits of Van Til’s Transcendental Argument.”

⁶⁶ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, p. 182; cf. *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 102, 302.

⁶⁷ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 96.

Christianity, Van Til says that “‘reason’ and ‘faith’ make contradictory statements about reality.”⁶⁸ The reason that the various traditional arguments for the existence of God cannot be added together for a cumulative case is not because Van Til requires one argument to prove everything about God. Van Til says that it is because the traditional arguments involve assumptions that are logically *inconsistent* with the nature of the biblical God, and therefore fail to prove such as God: “Moreover, how shall these several autonomous entities be forged into a chain? How shall there be cumulative force in the series of arguments if each argument is itself without force?”⁶⁹

Greg Bahnsen, borrowing from Anthony Flew, compared the situation to adding leaky buckets together, resulting in several buckets that still leak.⁷⁰ I have heard the retort that if the buckets are tightly crammed into each other with the holes offset, the buckets together can hold water. The retort gets carried away with the analogy rather than addressing the point behind it, which is specifically addressed to *failed* arguments, not ones that carry some weight.⁷¹ Van Til’s own analogy should be clearer: Adding the traditional arguments together to get the biblical God is like adding zeros together and expecting the sum to be a positive number.⁷²

Even if Frame disagrees with Van Til that the traditional arguments entail human autonomy, he should have understood from Van Til’s writings that his position is not that one argument must prove everything about God. Van Til often makes the point that the Christian worldview allows us to have true knowledge without having exhaustive knowledge. That applies to the knowledge of God. Van Til says of Adam, “He needed not to know about God comprehensively to know him truly.”⁷³ Van Til strongly affirms our need to rely on special revelation to increase our knowledge of God, both before the Fall and

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 377.

⁷⁰ “The Bahnsen/Sproul Debate Over Apologetic Method” (audio), at <http://www.cmfnow.com/thebahnsensprouldebateoverapologeticmethod.aspx>. Also see Greg Bahnsen, “Critique of Natural Theology” (audio), Philosophy of Christianity course, at <http://www.cmfnow.com/philosophyofchristianity-critiqueofnaturaltheology-8of23.aspx>.

⁷¹ Flew states his analogy as follows: “A failed proof cannot serve as a pointer to anything, save perhaps to the weaknesses of those of us who have accepted it. Nor, for the same reason, can it be put to work along with other throwouts as part of an accumulation of evidences. If one leaky bucket will not hold water, there is no reason to think that ten can.” Antony G. N. Flew, *God and Philosophy* (Prometheus Books, 2005), p. 73. I think that Van Til can endorse the distinction that Flew makes, “between, on the one hand, the valid principle of accumulation of evidence, where every item has at least some weight in its own right; and, on the other hand, the Ten-leaky-buckets-Tactic, applied to arguments none of which hold water at all” Ibid., p. 146.

⁷² Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 20.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 100.

after: “If then even man in paradise could read nature aright only in connection with and in light of supernatural positive revelation, how much the more is this true of man after the fall. . . . Of God’s intention to save a people for his own precious possession he could learn nothing from nature.”⁷⁴ In fact, he criticizes Aquinas for needing to prove everything about God in order to prove anything about God.⁷⁵

The bulk of the additional material that Frame adds to his six questions involve his interaction with Don Collett on the logical form of Van Til’s transcendental argument. Unfortunately this is just a case of the blind leading the blind. Since neither one knows what Van Til’s actual argument is, trying to determine its form is largely a matter of groping in the dark. Collett describes the form of Van Til’s argument as follows:

- If A, then B. (Meaning that B is the presupposition of A.)
- Not–A.
- Therefore B.⁷⁶

Frame notes that this commits a formal fallacy, but is willing to give it a pass because presuppositional arguments are a special kind of argument. Then Frame substitutes normal language statements for the symbols and comes up with this:

- If anything is intelligible, God exists.
- Nothing is intelligible.
- Therefore, God exists.⁷⁷

That, Frame rightly observes, is nonsense. It means that God “is the transcendental ground of intelligibility and nonintelligibility, meaningfulness and meaninglessness. This dissolves, for me, the original meaning and attractiveness of TAG.”⁷⁸ Van Til famously said that “atheism presupposes theism.”⁷⁹ But this does not mean that if God does not exist, then God does exist. As quoted above, Van Til characterizes his argument as the “argument of the possibility of human predication.” Van Til’s point is that the statement “God does not exist” is an instance of intelligible predication, and intelligible

⁷⁴ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 123.

⁷⁵ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, p. 95

⁷⁶ *Apologetics*, p. 76.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. xii.

predication requires the existence of God. The Van Tillian apologist is to abstract away from the particular claim made in the sentence and focus on the fact that the sentence is an instance of intelligible predication. If there were no intelligible predication, then we could not prove the existence of the Christian God. (We wouldn't even be trying, since there would be no "we" or anybody thinking.) The initial proposition of the argument can be false. The initial proposition could be, "The apple is red," and if the apple is really green, or if the apple is really a rock, the argument still works. Whether the statement is true or false, it can still be an instance of intelligible predication, so it can be used by the transcendental argument. On the other hand, if "The apple is red" is denied to be an instance of intelligible predication, then there is nothing for a transcendental argument to work with.

But having an instance of intelligible predication, the next step in the argument is to look at the choices for the ultimate nature of the universe in terms of the one and the many and examine them according to their ability to allow for intelligible predication. This method is how the transcendental argument is indirect, rather than directly being concerned with particular factual claims (although some specific factual claims will follow from it⁸⁰).

Certain and Probable Arguments

Although it's the subject of Frame's sixth question, in the next section after his six questions Frame examines in more detail Van Til's claim that there is an absolutely certain rather than probabilistic argument for God's existence. Frame's discussion of certainty mainly focuses on subjective certainty, a person's feeling of confidence that something is true, rather than the objective certainty of a sound, deductive argument. Frame relies on his triperspectivalism to describe a good argument as valid, sound, and persuasive.⁸¹ Persuasiveness is an important part of a good argument, but we should also recognize that the persuasiveness of an argument is logically distinct from its validity and soundness, especially given that, against their better knowledge, men have rebelled against God, who is the standard of truth (Rom. 1:18-25). "Let God be true though every one were a liar" (Rom. 3:2). Our primary concern is truth, not persuasiveness. We should be "all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:22), but we should not be "outside the law of God but under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). Before Frame ever raised the objection, Van Til responded to those who said that "there is no absolutely compelling proof that God exists, or that the Bible is the word of God" by noting that "there is a confusion between what is objectively valid and what is subjectively acceptable to the natural man. It is true that no method of argument for Christianity will be acceptable to the natural man."⁸² While Frame talks of certainty having

⁸⁰ See for example, Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, pp. 79-80.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁸² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 121.

a subjective component, Bahnsen notes that certainty and subjective confidence can be defined in distinction from each other: “there is a conceptual difference between ‘certainty’ (a property of propositions) and ‘confidence’ (a property of persons).”⁸³

Ultimately, we have to leave the persuasiveness of our arguments to the Holy Spirit. Frame should know this, being a Calvinist; and he acknowledges earlier in the book that “good proofs do not always persuade, for unbelievers repress the truth.”⁸⁴ But then in the next chapter when he is questioning Van Til’s argument, he writes as if the three members of his triperspectivalism triad are all necessary for an argument to be certain. Since each one is a perspective on the other two, one member of the triad cannot be rejected without degrading the other two, which means here that an argument’s validity and soundness cannot be separated from its persuasiveness. Concepts that are logically distinguishable become inseparable by equivocating between the subjective and objective senses of the word “certain” as a result of being viewed through the distorting lens of Frame’s triperspectivalism. Because of this, Frame places the problem of the certainty of Van Til’s argument on its persuasiveness rather than acknowledging that the problem could be with the God-hating hearer. Frame rejects the certainty of Van Til’s transcendental argument because “no single argument is guaranteed to create certainty in all its hearers.”⁸⁵ True, but that shows no defect in the argument, particularly any reason to doubt its objective certainty. From the lack of any one argument’s universal persuasiveness, Frame draws the conclusion that there cannot be one argument that proves the existence of God.⁸⁶

Bahnsen gave a lecture at Westminster Seminary in which he commented on the sixth question that Frame asks in the previous section of the original AGG. Bahnsen quotes the following two statements by Frame: “All this suggests a further reason why there is no single argument that will prove the entire biblical doctrine of God. . . . Since there is no single argument guaranteed to persuade every rational person. . . .”⁸⁷ Bahnsen responds, appropriately, “And did you catch that – the move from ‘prove’ to ‘persuade?’ And that confusion, I think, has to be cleared up.”⁸⁸

Frame does say that “the evidence for Christian theism is absolutely compelling,”⁸⁹ but assumes that it is impossible to for humans to state such absolutely certain evidence without distortion. Why?

⁸³ Bahnsen, VTA, p. 79n.100. Also see Bahnsen’s *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Atlanta, GA: American Vision; and Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), p. 127.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁸⁷ Bahnsen, “Answer to Frame’s Critique of Van Til” (transcript), p. 36, quoting AGG, p. 73 (*Apologetics*, p. 80).

⁸⁸ Bahnsen, “Answer to Frame’s Critique of Van Til,” p. 36.

⁸⁹ AGG, p. 81, *Apologetics*, pp. 88-89; cf. CVT, 278-79.

Frame does not articulate a view of human depravity that would require that. We should remember that Scripture tells us that we have “divine power” to engage in spiritual warfare by destroying “arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:4-5). That does not sound like God calling us to make apologetic bricks without straw. Van Til acknowledges, of course, that we *may* distort the evidence when formulating an argument.⁹⁰

If non-Christians reject an attempt to explain the transcendental argument, the Christian can try explaining the argument in different terms to accommodate different hearers; but that is not really creating a different argument, no more than a Bible written in Greek means something different than one written in English. If some people don't accept the one argument that you give for God's existence, even after you explain it different ways, that does *not* mean that you are obligated to create new arguments. First, it's possible that there are no other sound arguments to give them. Second, they may not have ears to hear, and you need to dust off your feet and find someone who is ripe for the harvest. Third, if persuasion is your concern, jumping to other arguments when the first one doesn't work is not a good strategy. It makes your abandoned argument look weak. If you have a good argument, you should have the fortitude to stick with it and corner the skeptic with the unreasonableness of his opposition to it so that it is evident to everyone listening. (A person who displays conviction and confidence can often persuade others even when he has a bad argument.)

Since Frame is supposed to be interpreting Van Til here rather than promoting his pet triperspectivalism theory, we should ask whether Van Til is within his rights to say that he there is an argument that yields a certain rather than probabilistic conclusion if the premises are true and the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises by valid logical deduction, even if very few people are persuaded by it (which seems to be the case at this point in history because very few people even know what Van Til's argument is). I say, most certainly (objectively and subjectively), yes. Frame never gets around to asking the question this way, so he provides no reason against it.

Transcendental arguments are usually seen as deductive arguments.⁹¹ Van Til says that a transcendental argument (TA) is a combination between inductive and deductive.⁹² A TA is inductive because it can start with a statement about any fact whatsoever. A TA is deductive because it abstracts the instance of predication from the particular claim in the predication, and draws necessary conclusions from that. The essential part of the argument is deductive, so it possesses the deductive certainty of any other sound deductive argument, plus it concerns the necessary source of all possibility in the universe, so

⁹⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 256; *Common Grace and the Gospel*, pp.179-80.

⁹¹ Robert A. Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Skepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 93-94.

⁹² Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 10.

probability is eliminated from that angle as well. If the conclusion of a TA is proven like and other sound deductive argument, then the rejection of the conclusion is implicitly an acceptance of the world being purely meaningless and irrational, in which case all the skeptic's doubts would be meaningless.

The transcendental argument can be person-variable because Van Til says that it can start with any fact in God's creation, or even a statement that is false; so the argument can start with any fact that the unbeliever accepts as true. The Van Tillian will then abstract from that statement of fact to the issue of the intelligibility of the fact, and at that point the argument is the same for everybody. Whether you are talking to a godless commie, who thinks that capitalism is oppressive, or to a godless capitalist who thinks that the empirical evidence shows that socialism is inefficient, the Christian can sidestep the specific merits of those claims and ask both of them how it makes sense for abstract universals like moral, logical, and mathematical laws to exist in a purely materialistic world. The Christian can concentrate on any of the areas of the traditional arguments – cause, design, necessary being, or morality – depending on the subject that the non-Christian raises, but the main issue in all those cases is the same – how abstract universals can apply to changing sense experience. Whether the non-Christian's claim is moral predication, like “capitalism is oppressive,” or empirical predication like “birds evolved from reptiles,” Van Til's transcendental argument focuses on the common issue for both: How is predication possible?⁹³ “[A]ll the theistic arguments should really be taken together and reduced to the one argument of the possibility of human predication.”⁹⁴ After showing that the non-Christian worldview is inconsistent with ethics or empirical knowledge, the Christian can positively argue that the existence of an absolutely rational God allows for their possibility.⁹⁵

Frame claims that “it is illegitimate for him [Van Til] to demand that all actual (as opposed to ideal) apologetic arguments claim certainty for their conclusions.”⁹⁶ There he goes again with a

⁹³ On the moral argument reducing to the argument concerning predication, see *Christian Theistic Ethics*, p. 25.

⁹⁴ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 102.

⁹⁵ To get to the specific ethical and epistemic claims of the non-Christian, the full philosophical procedure from that point is as follows: The apologist points out that an absolute God can only speak with absolute authority, then argues that special revelation is necessary given such a God and man's sin, and then, within that theistic worldview (not from a position of religious neutrality), offers evidence for the canonicity of the specific contents of the Bible (e.g., fulfilled prophecy, accuracy of manuscript transmission). Then God's word is used to judge the specific claims of the godless commie or godless capitalist. Of course, not every non-Christian will be so resistant as to need the Christian apologist to go through the full argumentative procedure. Given time constraints or other limitations of the situation, the Christian may just want to teach them what God's word says on a specific subject and leave them to wrestle with that in their own mind and hope that the Holy Spirit will lead them to believe it.

⁹⁶ *Apologetics*, p. 90.

strawman. Van Til does *not* demand certainty for *all* actual apologetic arguments. Frame fails to recognize areas in which Van Til endorses probabilistic arguments, such as judging the canonicity of a claim of revelation and the accurate transmission of the manuscripts of Scripture through time.⁹⁷ Van Til insists on objective certainty rather than probability regarding the existence of God because God is the source of all possibility.⁹⁸ But, as I discuss in the previously-mentioned paper, this gives Van Til room to endorse probabilistic arguments in areas that don't determine the source of possibility for the universe.⁹⁹

And last, Frame brings his positive/negative argument issue into the issue of certainty, claiming that because negative transcendental arguments can be restated as positive transcendental arguments, this is somehow a reason to doubt the certainty of Van Til's transcendental argument.¹⁰⁰ But he does not even attempt to explain why the ability to formulate an argument in two equivalent ways undermines an argument's objective certainty.

Point of Contact

Van Til says that the Protestant apologist should see the issue with his point of contact to reason with unbelievers about God differently than the Roman Catholic apologist sees it. Frame does not disagree, but he sees the issue as one of attitude rather than objective argument. Frame's confusion here is another consequence of and example of his misunderstanding Van Til's criticism of Aquinas. Van Til's difference with Aquinas is not a mere matter of the attitude of the heart but a matter of how God's nature is described in their arguments – a concrete universal (Van Til) versus an abstract unity (Aquinas). The difference between the Calvinist and the Roman Catholic on the issue of apologetics in general and the point of contact in particular is no more a mere matter of the heart than their differences in theology are a mere matter of the heart: “The difference between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic conception of the point of contact will naturally have to be formulated in a way similar to that in which we state the difference between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic theology.”¹⁰¹ The issue of point of contact is a product of differing theological positions between Calvinists and other Christians on the nature of God, the necessity of Scripture, and the depravity of man.

⁹⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, pp. 27-28, 128-29; “Introduction” to *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* by Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948), pp. 3-4.

⁹⁸ *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, pp. 114-15.

⁹⁹ See section IV, “The Legitimate Role of Empirical Evidence in Van Til's Approach” in my essay, “The Scope and Limits of Van Til's Transcendental Argument,” pp. 43-56.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, AGG, p. 77, *Apologetics*, p. 86.

¹⁰¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 86.

The issue of point of contact is the same as the issue of neutrality with the unbeliever's worldview. Whereas the Roman Catholic seeks neutral common ground with the unbeliever in order to argue for the existence of God, the Protestant, in keeping with the doctrine of God's sovereignty as taught by Calvin and Luther, should recognize that there is no neutral common ground with the unbeliever. While not neutral, there is, however, common ground everywhere, a.k.a. a "point of contact," which is the fact that "men by virtue of their creation by God in his image have knowledge of God."¹⁰² Frame says that he agrees with Van Til on the denial of neutrality and even sees that it manifests itself in objective ways in arguments.¹⁰³ Frame acknowledges, for example, that Aquinas' view of knowledge is compromised by his attempt at finding neutral common ground with unbelieving thought (although Frame does not see this error extending to Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God).¹⁰⁴ But since the issue of point of contact is the same as the issue of neutrality, Frame should acknowledge an objective sense to the issue of point of contact.

Since the issue of neutrality effects whether one accepts the necessity of Scripture in order for an unbeliever to acknowledge God, the apologist's view of the theological issue of the necessity of Scripture is an objective indication of whether the apologist understands his point of contact with the unbeliever correctly. As Van Til put it, rather than seeing that, "to the extent that [the unbeliever] interprets nature according to his own adopted principles, he does not speak the truth on any subject," non-Calvinist apologists "attribute to the natural man not only the ability to make formally correct statements about 'nature' or themselves, but also to mean by these statements what the Christian means by them."¹⁰⁵ Non-Calvinist apologists do not see unbelievers as needing the corrective lens of Scripture to interpret God and His world because they reject the doctrine of the total depravity of man. Consequently, when non-Calvinists find agreement about the nature of God with unbelievers (like Aristotle), they can only have done so because they have distorted the nature of God in anti-biblical ways.

Extra-Biblical Knowledge Phobia

Frame says that using facts outside of Scripture to prove Scripture raises the fear that we are using the extra-biblical facts as a higher authority than Scripture to bring Scripture into judgment. Then he says, "Van Til himself seemed to fear this, though not consistently."¹⁰⁶ What proof does Frame offer for Van Til's occasional phobia of extra-biblical facts? He cites a passage in which Van Til criticizes

¹⁰² Van Til, *A Christian theory of Knowledge*, p. 45.

¹⁰³ AGG, p. 6. *Apologetics*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Apologetics*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁶ AGG, p.19; *Apologetics*, p. 19.

starting with “cause and purpose as intelligible to man without God.”¹⁰⁷ Frame acknowledges, “True enough.”¹⁰⁸ So then, where is the proof that Van Til feared extra-biblical facts? Frame never produces. His proceeds to make the point that arguments that begin with cause and purpose need not assume that such facts are intelligible without God, as if Van Til would disagree. As shown above, Van Til affirms that a transcendental argument for the existence of God can begin with any fact in creation, including cause and purpose.

I suspect that when writing this footnote, Frame had in mind his criticism that Van Til claims that unbelievers don't have any knowledge. But since this criticism is barely touched on in this book (it is briefly mentioned in the appendix in Frame's response to Ligonier's critique of Van Til) and covered in detail in his later book on Van Til that I am not reviewing here, and since this review is long enough already, I won't get into this issue further here.¹⁰⁹

Van Til's Seamless Robe Versus Apologetics of the Heart

In CVT Frame claims that his criticisms of Van Til refute the view held by some that Van Til's apologetic is a seamless robe, that it must be accepted or rejected *in toto*.¹¹⁰ I have shown that Frame's case for this fails in AGG and *Apologetics*. That's not to say that a person can't still criticize Van Til on some points while accepting his basic philosophy. And of course that allows for the possibility that Van Til has mischaracterized the views of others a times (although at least in the case of Aquinas, it is Frame who has distorted Van Til's views). But because Frame does not understand Van Til's basic argument, he sees it as more divisible than it is. The robe of Van Til's apologetic is nearly seamless because in all Van Til's multiple volumes of writings critiquing a myriad of different authors, Van Til is really only applying his one transcendental argument concerning the one and the many. If you ever can't figure out what Van Til is talking about in a passage, he is almost always talking about the issue of the one and the many. It's always some variation of non-Christians being Parmenidian rationalists or Hericlitian empiricists or trying to combine the two errors as in Kantianism; and they all reject the one solution to their problems, the concrete universal God of Scripture.

Disabused of Frame's claim that Van Til offers only an attitude of the heart and not an argument, one can find arguments all over the place in Van Til's writings, not merely encouragements to treasure God's sovereignty in your heart and avoid a cocky attitude. It amazes me that Frame can claim that in all

¹⁰⁷ AGG, p.19 n.21; *Apologetics*, p. 19 n. 26.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ See Bahnsen's response on this issue here: VTA, p. 547 n. 57. Also see James Anderson's "Van Til FEM," <http://www.vantil.info/articles/vtfem.html#AI2>.

¹¹⁰ CVT, p. 7.

the multiple volumes that Van Til has written, Van Til merely offers an attitude of the heart and an apologetic goal for someone else to figure out how to achieve. Is Van Til merely recommending an attitude when he says something like this?: “The rationalizing effort that is inherent in phenomenism would, if successful, destroy all individuality.”¹¹¹ Is he not advancing a real argument against a non-Christian worldview? Or how about when he evaluates Hume’s philosophy and concludes: “It is to this position of total indifference with respect to the future that anyone embracing a pure empiricism is driven.”¹¹² Isn’t this a criticism with teeth against a non-Christian philosophy, one that could and should be taken into the halls of academia to show how their view of knowledge reduces to absurdity? With these pointed critiques, Van Til is doing more than recommending an attitude of the heart that life is meaningless without God. (He is addressing the issue of the one and the many in both examples.) But Frame’s presentation of Van Til’s philosophy discourages anyone from looking for something more in Van Til’s writings.

Frame’s concern with an apologetic of the heart leads him to completely miss Van Til’s point at times. Frame quotes this passage from Van Til: “If therefore, he [the Christian] appeals to the unbeliever on the ground that nature itself reveals God, he should do that in such a manner as to make it appear in the end that he is interpreting nature in the light of Scripture.”¹¹³ What does Frame think Van Til means by appealing to Scripture? He thinks that Van Til is warning against cocky attitudes: “Adopting an autonomous stance” while witnessing to an unbeliever “through body language, a cocksure tone of voice, or omissions of significant points.”¹¹⁴ I am sure Van Til would oppose a cocky attitude, but that’s not what his appeal to Scripture is about in this quote. What Van Til is really talking about is the necessity of special revelation given God’s personal nature and the noetic effects of sin after the Fall. The unbeliever needs to understand that the Christian came to acknowledge God’s existence only after hearing the message from Scripture, not by looking at nature apart from Scripture. As Van Til puts it, “Believers accept this view of God because they accept the Scriptures to be the Word of God. They have not first worked up a philosophy of theism in order to find this theism afterwards corroborated by scriptural teaching.”¹¹⁵ Ironically, Frame talks about the reasons for the necessity of special revelation earlier in his book,¹¹⁶ but fails to apply that to his understanding of Van Til in the later chapter.

¹¹¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 136.

¹¹² Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, p. 25.

¹¹³ AGG, p. 86; *Apologetics*, p. 92.

¹¹⁴ AGG, p. 87; *Apologetics*, p. 92.

¹¹⁵ Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 122. For more on this, see my essay, “The Scope and Limits of Van Til’s Transcendental Argument,” pp. 27ff.

¹¹⁶ AGG, p. 22; *Apologetics*, p. 21.

One reason that understanding Van Til's arguments is often difficult is because Van Til usually presents his material as critiques of other authors, so Van Til's own philosophy has to be pieced together from his criticisms of a variety of other schools of thought.¹¹⁷ It's also universally acknowledged that Van Til could have written more clearly. A part of the problem here is that he wrote to philosophers, but has been read mostly by non-philosophers. Van Til thinks that he is providing a clever and succinct description of the problem with the materialist worldview as "a metaphysics of the night in which all cows are black."¹¹⁸ Many professional philosophers might understand that he is referring to Hegel's response to Schelling's view of knowledge, and what Hegel meant by that. But how many budding Christian apologists know what Van Til is talking about?

Conclusion

James Anderson gives a blurb to Frame's new book that credits Frame's AGG for causing a Copernican Revolution in his thinking on apologetics.¹¹⁹ I am glad that AGG potentially saved Dr. Anderson from a life of theological crimes.¹²⁰ But I see the broader influence of Frame's critique of Van Til as largely negative. If presuppositionalism is a matter of the heart rather than a matter of argument methods, then it is largely irrelevant. Do we really need Van Til to write multiple volumes of books purely for the moral counsel that the Christian apologist should be humble? Although Framians like Anderson who have wrestled with Van Til's writings directly see more to Van Til's philosophy than that, those who just read Frame and don't attempt to dig into Van Til's writings themselves are not going to see much value in the school of apologetics that he founded.

Frame does not give us anything approaching a close-reading analysis of Van Til's writings, the type that you might have read in your English or philosophy classes where Shakespeare's or Plato's

¹¹⁷ Van Til's lengthiest and most straightforward explanation of his basic argument that I have found is his section on "Block-House Methodology" in *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 131-39. He begins the section as a critique of Roman Catholic and Arminian approaches to Christian apologetics. But he says that these approaches compromise with God-denying worldviews, so then he launches his general argument against God-denying worldviews.

¹¹⁸ Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, p. 115.

¹¹⁹ Dr. Anderson also reviewed the new book prior to publication: *Apologetics*, p. xl.

¹²⁰ This is somewhat tongue-in-cheek of course. He was an intelligent and fair-minded moderator of the Van Til discussion board mentioned above. I recommend his website, <http://www.vantil.info/>, particularly the "Van Til FEM (Frequently Encountered Misconceptions)" at <http://www.vantil.info/articles/vtfem.html>. I also recommend his book *What's Your Worldview?: An Interactive Approach to Life's Big Questions*. His published article on proving God from logic, written with another member of the aforementioned Van Til discussion group, Greg Welty, is commendable as a Van Tillian argument: James N. Anderson and Greg Welty, "The Lord of Non-Contradiction: An Argument for God from Logic," *Philosophia Christi* 13:2 (2011).

writings are examined line by line. That's what any serious literary analysis requires. Frame does not quote or even cite any passages from Van Til's writings that he disagrees with in his six questions/rejections of Van Til's views in the original AGG and in its revision, *Apologetics*. In the rest of the book, Frame often neglects to quote or cite the offending passages in Van Til that he is disputing.¹²¹ (That's also true in his lengthier exposition, CVT; but my full critique of that book will have to wait for another day.) With respect to Frame's critique of Van Til on such issues like Van Til's position on the use of causality to prove God's existence and the use of extra-biblical facts, Frame's indictment of the Ligonier critique of Van Til can be applied to Frame's own critique of Van Til: "The authors make statements about Van Til which can be contradicted from his writings; but instead of reconsidering the accuracy of their interpretation in these cases, they simply accuse Van Til of inconsistency. Thus their accounts of Van Til's positions are almost always oversimplified at best."¹²²

Since Frame has been recognized as the leading living scholar on Van Til's apologetic since the passing of Greg Bahnsen twenty years ago, presuppositional apologetics has been stuck in a ditch with Frame in the driver's seat. I do not see any of Frame's major criticisms of Van Til's apologetic approach as valid. I can commend Frame in the areas in which he agrees with Van Til because he usually explains Van Til very clearly in normal language. Yet, in nearly all those areas of disagreement, he has covered Van Til's philosophy with a veil of ignorance and misrepresentation.

¹²¹ For example, AGG: p.19 n.21, p. 85, p. 87 n. 36; *Apologetics*, p. 19 n. 26, p. 66, p. 93 n. 47.

¹²² AGG, p. 224 n. 19; *Apologetics*, p. 223 n. 19.