

**IF KNOWLEDGE THEN GOD:
THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL THEISTIC ARGUMENTS
OF PLANTINGA AND VAN TIL**

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Abstract

The two Christian philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til have much in common in terms of their religious upbringing, their education, their approach to Christian philosophy, and their work on the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics. In particular, both have claimed that the existence of God is in some weighty sense a precondition of human knowledge. In this paper, I review and compare a selection of epistemological theistic arguments inspired by their writings — three from Plantinga and four from Van Til — and through drawing attention to significant points of similarity and difference suggest some ways in which such arguments might be further developed with an eye to insights gleaned from these two thinkers.

I. Introduction

The two influential Christian philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til have more in common than the possession of Dutch surnames. Both were the sons of immigrants to the United States from the Netherlands and were raised in the Dutch Calvinist tradition. Both studied under William Harry Jellema at Calvin College and both have acknowledged Abraham Kuyper as having had a significant influence on their thinking.¹ Both have sought to practice their philosophy in a way consistent with, and informed by, their Christian convictions; consequently, both have drawn inspiration from the Reformed theological tradition with which they have identified themselves. Both have expressed a principled skepticism about the epistemic

¹ Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly Lived," in *Philosophers Who Believe*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 52-54, 77; Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 8; John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 20-22.

necessity and historical success of natural theology. Both have argued that there is a profound connection between *what and how we know* and *what there is*, such that one cannot do good epistemology without delving deeply into ontology. Specifically, both have argued that a successful epistemology (that is, a verisimilitudinous theory of what constitutes human knowledge and what makes such knowledge possible) must appeal to *God* at some point; and correlatively, a thoroughgoing adherence to naturalism (roughly, the view that there are no supernatural beings) is a recipe for debilitating skepticism.

No doubt each of the points of commonality above could provide the starting point for an interesting discussion. It is the last observation, however, that I wish to examine in this paper. Plantinga and Van Til have both contended that the existence of God, as traditionally conceived, is in some weighty sense a prerequisite for a healthy epistemic life. Plantinga, after setting out his innovative “proper function” analysis of knowledge, writes in conclusion:

Once again, therefore, we see that naturalistic epistemology flourishes best in the garden of supernaturalistic metaphysics. Naturalistic epistemology conjoined with naturalistic metaphysics leads *via* evolution to skepticism or to violation of canons of rationality; conjoined with theism it does not.²

Similar claims are made in a later work:

If I reject theism in favor of ordinary naturalism, and also see that [the probability that my cognitive faculties are reliable given that naturalism is true] is low or inscrutable, then I will have a defeater for any belief I hold. If so, I will not, if forming beliefs rationally, hold any belief firmly enough to constitute knowledge. The same goes if I am merely agnostic as between theism and ordinary naturalism.³

With a striking similarity, the notion that human knowledge presupposes the existence of God also features prominently in the writings of Van Til:

² Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 237. Note that Plantinga considers his own theory of knowledge (somewhat confusingly) to be an instance of “naturalistic epistemology,” by which is meant an epistemology that gives prominence to psychological accounts of how beliefs are acquired in its analysis of rationality and epistemic warrant. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 45-47.

³ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 240.

The only way then for man to have any knowledge of either temporal or eternal things is for a God to think for us in eternal categories and reveal to us the Measure of truth we can fathom. Thus we hold that Christian theism is the only alternative to skepticism.⁴

We must not argue as though we can already know a great deal about nature by itself but that, inasmuch as we cannot know all that ought to be known about it, there must be one who knows infinitely more than we do. We must rather reason that unless God exists as ultimate, as self-subsistent, we could not even know anything; we could not even reason that God must exist, nor could we even ask a question about God.⁵

The Calvinist, therefore, using his point of contact, observes to the non-Christian that if the world were not what Scripture says it is, if the natural man's knowledge were not actually rooted in the creation and providence of God, then there could be no knowledge whatsoever.⁶

These are bold claims indeed from Plantinga and Van Til. Yet if such a relationship (or set of relationships) between knowledge and theism can be defended then we have in hand the materials for one or more epistemological arguments for the existence of God. Indeed, both Plantinga and Van Til have recognized this point and have therefore advocated the formulation of arguments in defense of theism that are anchored in the assumption (commonplace in all but the most sophisticated circles of academia) that we humans do in fact possess some knowledge of ourselves and the world we inhabit. In this paper I propose to review some of the epistemological theistic arguments offered by Plantinga and Van Til, to discuss significant points of similarity and difference between those arguments, and to suggest ways in which the arguments of each might be strengthened or extended through an appreciation of the other's.

⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 38.

⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 102.

⁶ Van Til, "My Credo," 17.

II. Plantinga's Epistemological Arguments

Plantinga's work on the connection between supernaturalist metaphysics and epistemology has given rise to a range of arguments for theism that may be broadly categorized as "epistemological" insofar as each argues to the existence of God from some generally accepted feature of human cognitive practice. I will limit myself to discussing three of these arguments. The first and most famous of the three has been dubbed the "Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism." The second argument is based on Plantinga's contention that *warrant* — defined as that epistemic quality enough of which distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief — must be explicated in terms of, among other things, the *proper functioning* of one's cognitive faculties. The third is inspired by Plantinga's provocative analysis of the vexed debate over anti-realism. While the first argument has received most attention from Plantinga in terms of public exposition and defense, he has explicitly advocated all three as potentially fruitful lines of theistic apologetics.⁷ In what follows, my goal is not to offer rigorously formalized statements of each argument, but merely to highlight the broad strokes of the reasoning involved.

Argument #1: The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism

Plantinga's "Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism" (hereafter, EAAN) was initially put forward in *Warrant and Proper Function*, defended against a first wave of objections in an unpublished but widely circulated paper,⁸ and restated (in light of those objections) in *Warranted Christian Belief*.⁹ The most refined version of EAAN to date features in a volume of essays dedicated to its analysis, where Plantinga defends the argument against a formidable array of criticisms.¹⁰

The basic idea behind EAAN is simple enough to grasp: if one believes that humans are the product of undirected naturalistic evolutionary processes, one thereby has good reason to doubt the deliverances of one's own mind — including, of course,

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments," unpublished lecture notes. (Available online at <http://philofreligion.homestead.com/files/Theisticarguments.html>.) The three arguments discussed here are labeled in Plantinga's notes as (K), (J), and (N), respectively.

⁸ Alvin Plantinga, "Naturalism Defeated," unpublished paper (1994). (Available online at <http://philofreligion.homestead.com/files/alspaper.htm>.)

⁹ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 227-240.

¹⁰ *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism*, ed. James K. Beilby (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

the belief that humans are the product of undirected naturalistic evolutionary processes. This belief is thus irrational, since it is self-defeating.¹¹

The argument proceeds in three distinct steps. In the first, Plantinga argues for the following probability claim, where R is the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable (i.e., that they furnish us with mostly true beliefs), N is the proposition that metaphysical naturalism is the case, and E the proposition that human beings arose by way of commonly accepted evolutionary processes:

- (1) $P(R/N\&E)$ is either low or inscrutable.

Roughly translated, (1) states that given a naturalistic evolutionary account of human origins, there is no basis for thinking it likely that our belief-forming processes furnish us with anything like an accurate picture of the world. Plantinga supports this pivotal thesis by estimating the individual probabilities of R on four mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive scenarios regarding the causal relationship between human beliefs and human behavior.¹²

In the second step of EAAN, Plantinga argues that for any person S:

- (2) If S believes both N&E and (1), then S has a *defeater* for R.¹³

In other words, Plantinga maintains that any naturalist-evolutionist who accepts the truth of (1) should, if reflecting rationally on their beliefs, cease to believe that their cognitive faculties are reliable. His argument for (2) proceeds mainly by appeal to analogies.¹⁴ For example, suppose Tom comes to believe that he has ingested some toxin which induces permanent loss of cognitive reliability in nine out of ten cases. It seems clear that this belief (whether true or not) will undermine any belief that his

¹¹ Plantinga credits an infamous remark of Darwin's as the inspiration for EAAN. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 219. A similar line of theistic argument is defended in Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 98-101.

¹² *Naturalism Defeated?* ed. Beilby, 6-10.

¹³ The subject of epistemic defeaters is complex and cannot be entered into here. (For an overview, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 359-366.) Suffice it to say that Plantinga has in mind an *undercutting rationality* defeater, that is, a belief the truth of which would give a person good cause to doubt the rational grounds for some other belief. In *Naturalism Defeated?* Plantinga further distinguishes between three distinct types of rationality defeater — *proper-function* defeaters, *purely alethic* defeaters, and *Humean* defeaters — in response to criticism that EAAN involves the counterintuitive claim that it could be “rational” to abandon belief in the reliability of one's cognitive faculties.

¹⁴ *Naturalism Defeated?* ed. Beilby, 11, 248.

cognitive faculties are reliable. Plantinga's claim is that the situation for the naturalist-evolutionist who comes to believe (1) differs in no relevant respect from Tom's predicament.

The final step of EAAN involves defending the following claim:

- (3) If S has a defeater for R, then S has a defeater for *all* S's beliefs, including the belief that N&E.

Put simplistically, (3) states that if I have reason to doubt the reliability of my belief-forming processes, then I have reason to doubt *all* my beliefs. It is therefore *irrational* for anyone who comes to see the truth of (1) to continue to believe N&E. Noting that evolution is "the only game in town" for the naturalist, Plantinga concludes from EAAN that "naturalism simpliciter is self-defeating and cannot rationally be accepted — at any rate by someone who is apprised of this argument and sees the connections between N&E and R."¹⁵

Before moving on, it is important to note three things about this argument. First, EAAN is an argument not for the *falsity* of naturalism, but for the *irrationality* of naturalism (regardless of whether it is true or not). Second, the argument does not purport to show that naturalism *as such* is irrational; rather, it is a certain kind of epistemologically self-conscious naturalism that finds itself mired in the quicksand of skepticism. Third, Plantinga takes EAAN to function indirectly as an argument *for theism*, given that theism is the only credible alternative to naturalism.

Argument #2: The Argument from Proper Function

A second epistemological argument for theism is suggested by the main thesis of Plantinga's *Warrant and Proper Function*. In the preceding volume in his *Warrant* trilogy, Plantinga had concluded that a crucial ingredient missing from contemporary analyses of knowledge, understood as warranted true belief, was the notion of *proper function* with respect to our belief-forming processes.¹⁶ This in turn led to the idea of a *design plan* for our cognitive faculties and finally, after recognizing various important qualifications, to the following analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a belief's being warranted:

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

According to the central and paradigmatic core of our notion of warrant (so I say) a belief *B* has warrant for you if and only if (1) the cognitive faculties involved in the production of *B* are functioning properly (and this is to include the relevant defeater systems as well as those systems, if any, that provide *propositional* inputs to the system in question); (2) your cognitive environment is sufficiently similar to the one for which your cognitive faculties are designed; (3) the triple of the design plan governing the production of the belief in question involves, as purpose or function, the production of true beliefs (and the same goes for elements of the design plan governing the production of input beliefs to the system in question); and (4) the design plan is a good one: that is, there is a high statistical or objective probability that the belief produced in accordance with the relevant segment of the design plan in that sort of environment is true.¹⁷

Plantinga thus concludes that this account of warrant, which he considers to be no more than the sober truth of the matter, “depends essentially upon the notion of proper function.”

It takes little thought to see that talk of “proper function,” “purpose,” and “design plans” with respect to human cognitive faculties is unlikely to play well with those committed to metaphysical naturalism. Plantinga argues that such resistance is entirely justified. The most that a “serious naturalism” can concede is that we should treat our cognitive faculties *as if* they were the product of purpose and design: the so-called “functional stance.” It makes no sense however, from such a perspective, to claim that they are *literally* so produced — and therefore no more sense to claim that human beings *literally* have knowledge (given that warrant depends essentially upon the notion of proper function).¹⁸ Given this analysis of warrant and the inhospitableness of naturalism to proper function, Plantinga notes that we find ourselves in possession of “a powerful argument against naturalism”; indeed, in light of the “plausible alternatives,” it amounts to “a powerful argument for theism.”¹⁹

The theistic argument from proper function may be summarized thus:

¹⁷ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 194.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 194-211. It is noteworthy that a number of prominent metaphysical naturalists have been prepared to swallow not merely this one bitter pill, but the whole bottle of pills, going so far as to deny the literal sense of the other two components of knowledge, *truth* and *belief*, as well.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

- (4) For any (human) person S to have knowledge, S must have beliefs produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a good design plan aimed at true-belief production.
- (5) If metaphysical naturalism is the case, then no (human) person has cognitive faculties that (in any *literal* sense) function properly according to a good design plan aimed at true-belief production.
- (6) Therefore, if metaphysical naturalism is the case, then no (human) person has knowledge.
- (7) But some (human) persons *do* have knowledge; therefore, metaphysical naturalism is not the case.
- (8) Therefore, given the implausibility of other alternatives, theism is the case.

The support for (4) comes from Plantinga's critique of theories of warrant that do not make proper function an essential ingredient, which he argues mainly by way of Gettier-type counterexamples.²⁰ The support for (5) is drawn from the observation that notions of "proper function" and "design plan" involve an element of *normativity* that is absent from naturalistic schemas: not a *deontological* normativity, but rather a *teleological* normativity.

Note two features of the argument from proper function. First, in contrast to EAAN, the conclusion in question is that of the *falsity* of naturalism, not merely its *irrationality*. Second, in common with EAAN, this argument *against naturalism* is deemed by Plantinga to extend naturally into one *for theism* on the assumption that theism is the only credible metaphysical alternative to naturalism.

²⁰ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, passim; Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 31-37; *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), passim. In his seminal paper, Gettier showed that the classical analysis of knowledge as "justified true belief" is inadequate, because one can identify possible scenarios in which S justifiably believes *p*, and *p* is true, but S does not *know* that *p*. Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123. In such cases, S's justified belief typically turns out to be true merely by good fortune, by happy accident. Plantinga's counterexamples take the same tack, showing that there are cases in which S's belief that *p* can be true "by accident" or "by coincidence," such that S does not genuinely know that *p*, even though all of some proposed set of conditions for warrant are fulfilled. The only way to bridge this gap, Plantinga contends, is to acknowledge a proper function constraint on the relevant belief-forming processes — the basic idea being that if a true belief is formed by *design* or *intention*, then its being true by *accident* or *coincidence* is ruled out.

Argument #3: The Argument from Anti-Realism

The third argument I wish to consider here has its origins in Plantinga's 1982 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association.²¹ It has been stated more directly, albeit briefly, in his lecture "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments." The argument is based on Hilary Putnam's contention that since "metaphysical realism" inevitably gives rise to a global skepticism regarding our knowledge of the world, we would do far better to embrace a form of anti-realism for which such problems do not arise. Plantinga's ingenious table-turning contribution is to argue that (i) Putnamian anti-realism (along with all other forms of "creative anti-realism," to use Plantinga's terminology) is untenable on numerous counts and (ii) the metaphysical realism targeted by Putnam is only objectionable *if a certain theistic view of the world is ruled out*. Furthermore, it is hard to find anyone who genuinely believes that global skepticism reigns supreme. Putting these pieces together, Plantinga suggests, can furnish us with an intriguing theistic argument.

Let us look a little closer at the argument so as to discern the reasoning behind it. First of all, what exactly is meant by "metaphysical realism"? As Putnam uses the term, metaphysical realism is a thesis about the connection between the *truth* (or the *facts*) about the world and *our knowledge* of the world. Put crudely, it is the idea that things are what they are regardless of what we know or even think about them. Thus, for the metaphysical realist, if the Mariana Trench is the deepest seafloor depression in the world then it is just so whether or not anyone *knows* it to be so; likewise, if the Sun exists and is orbited by nine planets then that is the case regardless of what you or I or anyone else takes to be the case. Stated in such terms, metaphysical realism seems entirely reasonable and indeed difficult to plausibly deny.

Nevertheless, Putnam wishes to bring the following anxiety to our attention. On the assumption that there are various epistemic norms according to which we reason and make judgments about the world, suppose that some person — an extraordinarily gifted person, no doubt — were to adhere *perfectly* to those norms in formulating a comprehensive theory of the way the world is *in its totality*. Since metaphysical realism denies that *the truth* about the world depends in any conceptual sense on *our view* of the world, Putnam argues, it follows that this epistemically impeccable

²¹ Alvin Plantinga, "How to Be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 56:1 (1982): 47-70.

individual could still be *radically mistaken* about the world; moreover, no rational strategy could be adopted for assessing or improving on this situation. If this global skepticism arises for an *ideal* thinker, given metaphysical realism, then *a fortiori* it must arise for common folk such as Putnam and the rest of us.

Faced with this skeptical anxiety, Putnam's counsel is that we revise our *concept* of truth so as to incorporate some relevant epistemic virtue: verifiability, for example. The price of such a radical revision, however, is a commitment to the idea that the way the world is (and was, and will be) must depend, in some significant manner, on the noetic activities of human beings. As Plantinga sees things (and he is far from alone) this is on a par with decapitation as a treatment for migraine. Apart from its "intuitive unloveliness" — after all, how seriously can we take the idea that *our* noetic activity is somehow responsible for whether or not dinosaurs once ruled the earth? — creative anti-realism such as Putnam's is plagued by self-referential difficulties and unpleasant modal consequences (such as the necessary existence of at least one human mind).²² Far better, then, to reflect further on whether metaphysical realism *necessarily* leads to the global skepticism envisaged by Putnam. As it turns out, little imagination is required to conjure up a scenario in which it doesn't so lead: a scenario in which God, the omniscient creator of the universe, constructs human beings so as to ensure that their noetic practices (rightly conducted) furnish them with generally reliable beliefs about that universe. For a metaphysical realist who is also a naturalist, however, things are indeed as bleak as Putnam warns; for no such guarantees of epistemic success can be constructed from the impoverished furniture of a naturalistic universe.

This theistic argument from realism may be formalized as follows (where MR stands for metaphysical realism, T for theism, and GS for global skepticism):

- (9) If MR and \sim T, then GS [Plantinga's adaptation of Putnam's thesis].
- (10) MR [since its denial is counterintuitive and reduces to absurdity].
- (11) \sim GS [since we know things about the world].
- (12) Therefore, either \sim MR or T [from (9) and (11)].

²² Ibid.: 64-67; Alvin Plantinga, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist* 75:3 (1992): 300-303.

(13) Therefore, T [from (10) and (12)].

III. Van Til's Epistemological Arguments

I turn now to examine Van Til's use of epistemological theistic arguments. Van Til has often been labeled a fideist, because (it is said) he opposed in principle the offering of reasons or arguments in defense of the existence of God or the Christian faith.²³ Nothing could be further from the truth. It would be strange indeed for someone so committed to the project of Christian apologetics, writing several syllabuses on the subject whilst Professor of Apologetics at a major Reformed seminary, to take such a negative stance. I suspect this confusion arises from superficial interpretations of his criticisms of "natural theology" and his opposition to certain *methodologies* adopted in the formulation and presentation of theistic arguments. However, this is not the place to document and explicate such misinterpretations; instead, I propose to examine the peculiar form of theistic argumentation that Van Til *did* in fact recommend, since it is a form that is best categorized as epistemological.

Van Til's Transcendental Argument: The Basic Idea

Van Til's proposed method of arguing for theism has four striking characteristics: (1) there is only *one* argument involved (indeed, there *can* be only one); (2) this one argument yields not merely generic theism as its conclusion, but specifically *Christian* theism; (3) the argument yields a *certain* (not merely probable) conclusion; and (4) the argument is a *transcendental* argument. As we will discover once we examine Van Til's reasons for these claims, each point is closely connected to the others.

To illustrate these four features of Van Til's apologetic, consider the following passages from two of his best-known works:

The best and only possible proof for the existence of such a God is that his existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all

²³ One recent instance is provided by C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 19.

things in the world. ... Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism.²⁴

The argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity is objectively valid. We should not tone down this argument to the probability level. The argument may be poorly stated, and may never be adequately stated. But in itself the argument is absolutely sound. Christianity is the only reasonable position to hold.²⁵

The theistic proofs therefore reduce to one proof, the proof which argues that unless *this* God, the God of the Bible, the ultimate being, the Creator, the controller of the universe, be presupposed as the foundation of human experience, this experience operates in a void. This one proof is absolutely convincing.²⁶

[T]he argument for Christianity must therefore be that of presupposition. With Augustine it must be maintained that God's revelation is the sun from which all other light derives. The best, the only, the absolutely certain proof of the truth of Christianity is that unless its truth be presupposed there is no proof of anything. *Christianity is proved as being the very foundation of the idea of proof itself.*²⁷

These are bold statements by any standards, but at least Van Til makes reasonably clear his basic stance on theistic argumentation. Note first of all that he refers consistently to “the” and “the only” argument. Van Til evidently has a single argument in mind (although, as I later observe, that one argument may consist of multiple *subarguments*). Moreover, this argument is not merely for the existence of God, a celestial being defined sufficiently broadly that the argument could be appropriated by advocates of any number of theistic religions. No, the argument is for the existence of God *and the truth of Christian theism*. And as if that were not enough

²⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 103.

²⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972), 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 192, emphasis original.

²⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 298, emphasis original.

to excite us, Van Til insists further that this argument furnishes “absolutely certain proof.” Its conclusion can only be denied on pain of utter irrationality.

On the face of it, these first three points go naturally hand-in-hand. If one has an absolutely certain proof of theism, then additional theistic arguments are superfluous; and if one has an absolutely certain proof of *Christianity*, then no other argument is needed *period*. However, once the *transcendental method* of Van Til’s argument is understood, it becomes much more clear why Van Til expressed such a confidence about his apologetic.

The reasons for Van Til’s advocacy of transcendental argumentation are complex, but the general idea runs as follows.²⁸ In any apologetic dialectic between a Christian and a non-Christian, Van Til noted, it is not simply that the two parties disagree about whether or not some entity of a certain description exists or whether or not certain events in history have occurred. On the contrary, if the God of the Bible exists, and if he relates to us and our universe as the Bible suggests, that fact has the most profound implications for our epistemology and epistemic practices: what we know and how we know it, how we determine facts, how we interpret evidence, how we weigh lines of reasoning, what we consider probable, plausible, possible, and so forth.²⁹ As a consequence, the two parties will adhere, in principle, to quite different sets of epistemic norms, that is, canons of proper reasoning and knowledge acquisition. The apologetic dialectic thus involves a clash of whole *systems*, each of which prescribes a different view of how one should properly *adjudicate* between those systems (and each constituted, if coherent, so as to ultimately favor *itself* by its own rational standards). In such a situation, appeals to “facts” and “evidence” by either side will prove woefully inconclusive because of the epistemological differences between the systems being debated. The only way *in principle* to settle such a debate, according to Van Til, is to appeal to the common ground that exists by virtue of the fact that the parties are nevertheless engaged in debate: that is, one party must argue that *the very possibility of debate* presupposes the *falsity* of the other party’s system.

²⁸ The clearest explanation from Van Til as to why he advocates a transcendental method can be found in Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 10-13. Cf. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 99-105. See also Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), 496-529.

²⁹ Even if the non-Christian does not hold that the existence of God has such a significant bearing on our epistemology or epistemic practices, the point remains that the Christian *does* so hold (or at least should do, says Van Til) — and therein lies the apologetic antithesis.

This is precisely what transcendental argumentation aims to achieve. Brought to prominence by Kant, transcendental arguments purport to uncover what must be the case (or alternatively, what we must *take* to be the case) in order for various kinds of intentional operation (e.g., individuating, predicating, perceiving, knowing) to be possible.³⁰ Van Til's recommended strategy is to argue that his opponent's position, if it were true, would render debate itself impossible, because that position denies (explicitly or by implication) the very things that undergird human language, reasoning, and knowledge.

It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or affirmation, unless it were for God's existence. Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have, in order to be what it is.³¹

As Van Til sees matters, this approach must be equally appropriate whether the Christian system is being pitted against naturalism, pantheism, idealism, deism, or any other alternative to Christian theism — even a competing *theism*. After all, if transcendental argumentation turns out to be the only strategy that can locate a rational foothold for settling debates over fundamental metaphysical views, objectively and without question-begging appeals on either side, then it had better prove nothing *less* than the whole Christian system. Otherwise, the potential always remains for an irresolvable standoff between Christian theism and some alternative system (or systems) with equally good transcendental credentials.

The transcendental character of Van Til's theistic argument thus serves to explain the three other features previously noted. The argument must provide us with an absolutely certain conclusion, since that conclusion expresses the necessary preconditions of reasoning *itself*; if the argument is sound, and understood to be sound, then doubting the conclusion amounts to doubting the possibility of doubt. Moreover, since transcendental argumentation is the only method capable of settling

³⁰ A succinct overview of the nature of transcendental arguments can be found in *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Robert Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2-5.

³¹ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11.

disagreements over fundamental philosophical systems, there can only be one argument — and that argument must establish the Christian system *in toto*.

Van Til's Transcendental Argument: The Details

This is all stirring stuff, to be sure. Van Til's transcendental apologetic casts itself as the mother of all epistemological arguments. Among many questions that immediately present themselves, however, one in particular clamors for an answer: What exactly *is* the argument? We apparently know its conclusion, but what are its premises and its inferences — and how are those premises to be defended?

Disappointingly for many of his readers, not least those accustomed to the rigorous systematic argumentation of Plantinga and others writing from within the analytic tradition, Van Til never formally states his transcendental argument at any point in his published works — at least, not in any detailed way. There may be several reasons for this apparent omission, including matters of style and philosophical schooling. Van Til developed his apologetic using the vocabulary and methodology of British idealism, with its absolutistic claims and “big picture” perspective, rather than that of circumspective Anglo-American linguistic analysis. In addition, Van Til's view appears to have been that the transcendental argument is only incarnated, so to speak, within a concrete apologetic dialectic (whether real or simulated); for whatever reason, it cannot be stated as an argument against a non-Christian position *considered in the abstract*.³²

This conspicuous omission notwithstanding, there are numerous suggestions scattered throughout his writings as to how the argument ought to be fleshed out. My impression is that Van Til considered these to be representative illustrations or applications of his apologetic strategy; as such, they are perhaps best thought of as subarguments of one overall transcendental argument. But despite Van Til's all-or-nothing rhetoric, such arguments may also be taken as self-contained theistic arguments in their own right, albeit ones rather more modest in their scope and conclusions. In the remainder of this section, I identify and summarize four such

³² The suspicion that Van Til took this view is fuelled by his frequent characterization of apologetic practice not in terms of formulating person-independent arguments but in terms of a concrete dialogue with particular non-Christians. See, for example, Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 99-102, 225-257; *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 91; Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 18, 310; Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* (Philadelphia, PA: Committee on Christian Education, Orthodox Presbyterian Church).

arguments. I remind the reader that my goal in what follows is not to provide a rigorous statement or defense of these arguments, but rather to indicate their basic thrust for the purposes of comparison.

Argument #1: The One-Many Argument

This first argument is often considered to be the centerpiece of Van Til's apologetic and it features in one form or another in numerous places throughout his writings. The inspiration for the argument lies in what Van Til refers to as "the problem of the one and the many," a philosophical conundrum which dates back to the pre-Socratics. In Van Til's view, only theism — indeed, only *Christian* theism, with its trinitarian view of God — can provide a solution to this problem:

As Christians, we hold that in this universe we deal with a derivative one and many, which can be brought into fruitful relation with one another because, back of both, we have in God the original One and Many. If we are to have coherence in our experience, there must be a correspondence of our experience to the eternally coherent experience of God. Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; *our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition.*³³

But what exactly *is* the problem and how does it relate to the possibility of our knowing the universe? The ontological predicament in question is notoriously difficult to state with precision, partly because any conceptual apparatus we might employ to express it will in the nature of the case exemplify the problem, but the basic idea proceeds along the following lines.³⁴

One intriguing feature of reality is that it exists in aspects of both unity and plurality: for example, Angus and Shona manifest unity by virtue of the fact that they are both human persons, and plurality by virtue of the fact that they are not *one and the same* but *two distinct* human persons. Further, in order to have knowledge of Angus, I need to be able (at least in principle) to grasp both what *unifies* him with other things in the world and also what *distinguishes* him from those other things.³⁵ It

³³ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 23, emphasis added.

³⁴ The most direct discussion of the problem can be found in Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 23-28.

³⁵ If I cannot even *in principle* grasp what distinguishes Angus from other things, why should any knowledge I possess be considered knowledge of *Angus* (rather than, say, Shona)? And if I cannot even

follows as a general principle that in order to have knowledge of objects in the world, the world must be such that its unity and plurality are *related* yet *distinct*. As such, the expressions of unity and plurality in the world must *themselves* manifest unity (through relations of commonality) and plurality (through distinction).

The question naturally arises (as it did in ancient Greece) as to which aspect of reality is *ultimate*: unity or plurality? Suppose, on the one hand, that *plurality* is ultimate. It follows that reality consists at bottom of an aggregate of things that are utterly *dissimilar* and *unrelated* to each other (since anything serving to connect them would amount to a more ultimate unifying principle, which *ex hypothesi* does not exist).³⁶ Yet as I noted above, nothing can be known *in principle* about utterly dissimilar and unrelated things. Suppose, on the other hand, that *unity* is ultimate. It follows that reality is fundamentally *monistic*: it is one undifferentiated thing. But once again, nothing can be known *in principle* about such a thing, because there can be nothing from which to distinguish it.³⁷ In either case, since reality cannot be cognized at its most basic level, the prospects for understanding any *part* of it are bleak (not least because in both cases the very notion of a “part” would be unintelligible).³⁸

Why does Van Til think that Christian theism evades this dilemma? His reasoning is that in a Christian theistic ontology, neither unity nor plurality is ultimate over against the other, but rather the two aspects of reality are *co-ultimate* insofar as they

in principle grasp what unifies Angus with other things (e.g., that he has qualities that are not *sui generis* but can be exemplified by other things, such as Shona), why should I be thought to possess any *meaningful information* about him?

³⁶ In fact, it is somewhat misleading here to speak of an “aggregate” of “things” since such terms presuppose an underlying unity by which things can be “aggregated” together as instances of “thingness.” An anonymous referee asks why a plurality of *related* things could not be ultimate. If the particulars are related, then there must be something (label it R) that serves to relate them. The question then arises as to whether R is *itself* related to the rest of reality. If so, then there must be something *further* (label it R') that serves to relate R to everything else — and an unsatisfying infinite regress looms. If not, then reality *in toto* is not a plurality of *related* things after all.

³⁷ Including “nothing” — for in such a case even the distinction between being and non-being is dissolved. The oddity of the observations in this footnote and the last arguably serve to underline the conceptual hazards of a universe where either unity or diversity is ultimate at the expense of the other. An anonymous referee asks why an ultimate unity could not even know itself. I think there are a number of ways of arguing the point, but here is one suggestion. In order to know anything meaningful about oneself, one must be able to judge that one exemplifies certain qualities and not others; yet if reality is an ultimate unity, there can be no genuine distinction between one quality and another.

³⁸ Metaphysicians will note that Van Til’s argument, as I have unpacked it, presupposes a distinctly realist view of universals. A full defense of the argument would thus require a defense of realism against competing views (nominalism, conceptualism, etc.).

are expressed in God's tri-unity.³⁹ God exhibits both ultimate unity and ultimate plurality: he is one in "essence" and three in "person," as the traditional labels have it.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the creation reflects the unity and plurality of its Creator in a *derivative* way.⁴¹ The epistemological pay-off, as Van Til sees things, is not that such a scheme makes a comprehensive grasp of the universe possible for *us*, but rather makes it possible for *God*, who in turn can furnish us with a partial and derivative understanding of the universe. At any rate, the main point here is that only an ontology in which unity and plurality are co-ultimate at the most fundamental level can allow for knowledge *in principle*.⁴²

Van Til's epistemological argument from the one-many structure of reality may be summarized as follows:

- (14) The ontology of the universe is such that either (a) unity is ultimate and not plurality, or (b) plurality is ultimate and not unity, or (c) unity and plurality are co-ultimate.
- (15) If unity is ultimate and not plurality, then knowledge of the universe (even in part) is impossible.
- (16) If plurality is ultimate and not unity, then knowledge of the universe (even in part) is impossible.
- (17) Knowledge of the universe is *not* impossible.
- (18) Therefore, the ontology of the universe must be such that unity and plurality are co-ultimate.

³⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 25-26.

⁴⁰ Questions arise here as to whether this argument is compatible with all of the various contemporary models for trinitarian metaphysics. It appears that Van Til's understanding of the Trinity involves at least a modest commitment to divine simplicity, whereby God is not composed of parts, which would presumably rule out "social trinitarian" models (according to which each person of the Trinity stands in a part-whole relationship to the Godhead). Cf. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23:1 (1988): 37-53.

⁴¹ Van Til's (somewhat misleading) term for this relation is that of "analogy." Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 230.

⁴² A more detailed exposition of the argument would require, among other things, further explication of the crucial terms *ultimate* and *co-ultimate*. A first approximation might run as follows. (1) Some metaphysical feature or quality F is *ultimate* for X if and only if (i) X exhibits F and (ii) X's exhibiting F can be accounted for without appealing to anything *metaphysically external* to F. (2) A pair of metaphysical features or qualities, F₁ and F₂, are *co-ultimate* for X just in case both F₁ is ultimate for X and F₂ is ultimate for X.

- (19) Therefore, Christian theism is the case (since only Christian theism posits an ontology in which unity and plurality are co-ultimate).

The reasoning behind (19) is presumably along the lines of Plantinga's reasoning from the falsity of naturalism to the truth of theism: in each case, the conclusion identifies the last man standing from a line-up of plausible candidates.

Although Van Til's writings often frame apologetic issues in terms of idealized philosophical positions (e.g., "pure rationalism" and "pure irrationalism"), he invariably illustrated those positions by way of concrete examples. In that spirit, I suggest that in terms of a contemporary metaphysical taxonomy, nominalistic materialism provides a paradigmatic case of ultimate plurality, monistic pantheism provides the same for ultimate unity, and Platonic realism exemplifies an inherently unstable halfway-house.⁴³

Argument #2: The Argument from the Unity of Knowledge

The second argument, like the first, is inspired by themes in idealist philosophy; in this instance, the notion that everything in the universe is related to everything else. The following statements by Van Til indicate the thrust of the argument:

This modern view is based on the assumption that man is the ultimate reference point in his own predication. When, therefore, man cannot know everything, it follows that nothing can be known. All things being related, all things must be exhaustively known or nothing can be known.⁴⁴

Here too every non-Christian epistemology may be distinguished from Christian epistemology in that it is only Christian epistemology that does not set before itself the ideal of comprehensive knowledge for man. The reason for this is that it holds that comprehensive knowledge is found only in God. It is true that there must be comprehensive knowledge somewhere if there is to be

⁴³ A more detailed account of Van Til's use of the one-many problem is provided by Rousas John Rushdoony, "The One and Many Problem — The Contribution of Van Til," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 339-348.

⁴⁴ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 163.

any true knowledge anywhere but this comprehensive knowledge need not and cannot be in us; it must be in God.⁴⁵

Van Til's reasoning appears to run as follows:

- (20) If no one has *comprehensive* knowledge of the universe, then no one can have *any* knowledge of the universe.
- (21) Only God could have comprehensive knowledge of the universe.
- (22) We have *some* knowledge of the universe.
- (23) Therefore, God exists.

The controversial premise of the argument is (20). What reason is there to think it true? To my knowledge, Van Til never explains the argument for (20) in any detail, but the idea seems to be that unless one knows *everything* about the universe, the interrelatedness of the universe means that whatever reasons or grounds one has for one's beliefs the possibility remains of some fact coming to light that radically undermines those reasons or grounds.⁴⁶ Indeed, for all we know (or *think* we know) that *possibility* could be a significant *probability* — but whatever the case, without comprehensive knowledge we will always end up peering into darkness at the boundaries of our purported knowledge. The probability that what we *don't* know will support rather than undermine what we think we *do* know is, as Plantinga might say, *inscrutable*.⁴⁷ Ignorance seems to have an unsettling infectiousness about it. The very fact that we are ignorant about those areas of which we are ignorant means that we do not know how they bear on everything else — and thus how everything else may depend on them. The old adage “what you don't know can't hurt you” may reflect an admirable optimism, but on sober analysis it couldn't be more wrong.

God, of course, is immune to such worries. Knowing everything in the nature of the case includes knowing how one's knowledge of one fact bears on one's

⁴⁵ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 41.

⁴⁶ A prospect vividly dramatized in the movie *The Matrix* (although on reflection the disruption in question is actually relatively benign).

⁴⁷ The problem may run even deeper than this, for who can say that there is not some fact about the universe which, if discovered, would reveal that our reliance on probability judgments is entirely misplaced anyway?

knowledge of another fact. Furthermore, if God exists, then presumably he is able to so arrange things that the noetic faculties of human beings function in such a way as to *implicitly* take into account all that God alone knows. The idea is not that each one of us has an exhaustive knowledge of the universe tacitly built, as it were, into our cognitive apparatus. Rather, it is that — to use a motoring metaphor — we have been given reliable vehicles and set off in the right direction on accurately signposted, well-constructed and well-connected roads. Or as Van Til remarks: “My unity [of knowledge] is the unity of a child who walks with its father through the woods.”⁴⁸

Argument #3: The Argument from the Uniformity of Nature

A third epistemological argument suggested by Van Til is concerned with a particular *type* of knowledge: inductive or “scientific” knowledge. Just as the previous two arguments were inspired by much-debated philosophical problems, so also in this case. The infamous “problem of induction,” brought forcefully to our attention by Hume, refers to the deceptively difficult task of accounting for the rationality (construed in terms of truth-directedness) of inductive inferences. Why should it be thought eminently reasonable to make generalizations about future events on the basis of past events or to posit “causal laws” on the basis of finite observations of coincidental occurrences? Such inferences are grounded on the assumption of uniformity and order in nature, but the task of *justifying* that assumption without reasoning in a vicious circle has proven all but intractable. This is hardly an abstruse, irrelevant concern detached from the realities of everyday life; on the contrary, it brings into question the rationality of all scientific investigation but and such mundane practices as looking both ways before crossing the road.

Yet what many philosophers have viewed as an intractable epistemological problem, Van Til views as a fulcrum for an apologetic argument:

Says A. E. Taylor in discussing the question of the uniformity of nature, “The fundamental thought of modern science, at any rate until yesterday, was that there is a ‘universal reign of law’ throughout nature. Nature is rational in the sense that it has everywhere a coherent pattern which we can progressively detect by the steady application of our own intelligence to the scrutiny of natural processes. Science has been built up all along on the basis of this

⁴⁸ Van Til, *Why I Believe in God*.

principle of the ‘uniformity of nature,’ and the principle is one which science itself has no means of demonstrating. No one could possibly prove its truth to an opponent who seriously disputed it. For all attempts to produce ‘evidence’ for the ‘uniformity of nature’ themselves presuppose the very principle they are intended to prove.” *Our argument as over against this would be that the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe is the only presupposition which can account for the uniformity of nature which the scientist needs.*⁴⁹

Expressed more formally:

- (24) If theism is not the case, then one cannot account for the uniformity of nature presupposed by inductive reasoning.
- (25) If one cannot account for the uniformity of nature presupposed by inductive reasoning, then beliefs based on inductive reasoning are not warranted.⁵⁰
- (26) Beliefs based on inductive reasoning are warranted.
- (27) Therefore, theism is the case.

It might be said that the epistemological problem behind this argument is simply a special case of the epistemological problem behind the previous argument, in which case there is nothing to be gained from adding this argument to the previous one. Even if the arguments are so related, it is important to recall that the strength of an argument depends, among other things, on how difficult it may be to explain and defend its premises. I would venture that the “problem of induction” is often easier to explicate and grasp than the “problem of comprehensive knowledge,” which would indicate that this third argument has a significant utility in its own right.

⁴⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 103, emphasis added.

⁵⁰ The charge of epistemic level confusion can be avoided if premises (24) and (25) are understood to refer to an inability *in principle* rather than one indexed to a particular reasoner. If Susan cannot account for the uniformity of nature, it does not follow that her inductively-inferred conclusions are unwarranted; but if the uniformity of nature cannot be accounted for *in principle*, by *any* human reasoner, then the warrant of *all* inductively-inferred conclusions is cast into doubt. For a discussion of epistemic level confusion, see William P. Alston, “Level Confusions in Epistemology,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980): 135-150.

Argument #4: The Argument from Conceptual Schemes

Kant made much philosophical hay from the conviction that our minds play more than a merely passive role in gaining knowledge of the world. This seems intuitively right: our judgments about the objects in our experience are not simply “given” to us by way of the stimulation of our senses, but are shaped by a considerable raft of *a priori* concepts concerning the fundamental structure of reality — logical principles, causal relations, metaphysical necessities, notions of self, and so forth. Perhaps we can pick and choose among these concepts as to which to apply and when; perhaps not. Either way, certain skeptical questions arise. First of all, given that the applicability of these concepts is an essential ingredient in our view of the world, does the world *in itself* (Kant’s realm of *noumena*) actually possess a coherent, relational structure *independent* of our noetic activity? If not, why think that what we call “knowledge of the world” is anything of the sort — indeed, how could there be anything *to* know? Secondly, if the world *does* exhibit such a structure, why think that there is any necessary connection between that structure and our conceptual schemes? And thirdly, what grounds do we have for assuming that we (if indeed there *is* a “we”) are so fortunate as to share *one and the same* conceptual scheme? Without such good fortune, communication and knowledge transfer would be but a vain hope.

It is crucial epistemological presuppositions such as these that Van Til seems to have had in mind when writing the chapter of his *Survey of Christian Epistemology* entitled “A Sample of Christian Theistic Argument”:

If God is left out of the picture it is up to the human mind to furnish the unity that must bind together the diversity of factual existence. It will not do to think of laws existing somehow apart from the mind. And even if this were possible it would not help matters any, because even these laws would be thought of as independent of God and as just there somehow. In other words, the only alternative to thinking of God as the ultimate source of the unity of human experience as it is furnished by laws or universals is to think that the unity rests in a void.⁵¹

It is clear that upon pragmatic basis, and for that matter upon antitheistic basis in general, there can be no object-object relation, i.e., there can be no

⁵¹ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 216.

philosophy of nature, so that the sciences become impossible, and no philosophy of history, so that the past cannot be brought into relation with the present nor the future with the present. Then there can be no subject-object relation, so that even if it were conceivable that there were such a thing as nature and history, I would be doomed to ignorance of it. In the third place, there can be no subject-subject relation, so that even if there were such a thing as nature and history, and even if I knew about it, I could never speak to anyone else about it. There would be Babylonian confusion.⁵²

Our conclusion then must be that the various devotees of the open universe, who take for granted that the human mind can furnish all the universals that the facts require, must be regarded as having reduced human experience to an absurdity.⁵³

The argument may be sketched as follows:⁵⁴

- (28) Human knowledge and communication are possible only if (i) the world exhibits a coherent, relational structure and (ii) human minds possess a common conceptual scheme which properly reflects that structure (and thus allows for correspondence between the way the world is and the way we *think* it is).
- (29) If theism is not the case, then there are no grounds for believing (i) and (ii).
- (30) Therefore, if theism is not the case, then there are no grounds for believing that human knowledge and communication are possible.
- (31) There are grounds for believing that human knowledge and communication are possible.
- (32) Therefore, theism is the case.

⁵² Ibid., 217.

⁵³ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁴ I note that a similar argument is developed at some length in Ian Markham, *Truth and the Reality of God: An Essay in Natural Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998).

IV. Comparing Plantinga and Van Til

Having identified and briefly summarized some of the epistemological arguments of Plantinga and Van Til, I want to draw attention to some important similarities and differences between them and in so doing to suggest points at which the insights of each may help to strengthen or develop further the arguments of the other.

Transcendental Argumentation

I have already noted Van Til's advocacy of transcendental argumentation and explained some of the reasoning behind it. For Van Til, because the existence of the Christian God has such profound epistemology implications, not least for the practice of apologetic debate, "the only argument for an absolute God that holds water is a transcendental argument. ... A truly transcendent God and a transcendental method go hand in hand."⁵⁵

Plantinga, on the other hand, has little if anything to say about transcendental arguments. Although he appears to concur with much of what Van Til (following the lead of Kuyper) maintains about the different standards and starting-points of Christians and non-Christians,⁵⁶ nowhere does he recommend this form of argumentation, let alone *insist* upon it. Nevertheless, some of Plantinga's theistic arguments exhibit what might be described as a *transcendental direction*, by which I mean that they seek to demonstrate that the existence of God is in some weighty sense a *necessary precondition* of certain noetic activities. The upshot of such arguments is that we face a choice between theism and skepticism: if there is no God, then we do not — indeed *cannot* — possess knowledge.

Superficially, it may seem that Plantinga's "Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism" is just such an argument, given its provocative contention that naturalism and skepticism go hand-in-hand. Although it might be considered a close relative, EAAN is not a genuinely transcendental argument. The argument in question is not that if naturalism is *true*, then we have (or can have) no knowledge; it is that a person's *belief* in naturalism will lead to that person having no knowledge — and then

⁵⁵ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1:3 (1984): 253-271. Consider also Part IV of *Warranted Christian Belief*, where Plantinga argues that many of the arguments for the irrationality of Christian belief only carry weight from the perspective of one who *already* takes Christian theism to be *false*.

only on the additional condition that the person recognizes a certain probability relation between naturalism and the reliability of their cognitive faculties. As Plantinga is the first to note, EAAN does not purport to prove the *falsity* of naturalism (as a metaphysical position) but only to show that *belief* in naturalism suffers from a certain disagreeable irrationality.

The second and third of Plantinga's arguments, however, are more plausibly thought of as transcendental in character. By an analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for warrant, the argument from proper function contends that our having belief-producing faculties constructed according to a *good design plan* is a precondition of our having knowledge and furthermore that such a notion is alien to metaphysical naturalism. Likewise, on the back of a case against anti-realism, the argument from realism maintains that global skepticism follows from the conjunction of realism and atheism: thus, given metaphysical realism, the existence of God (conjoined with a thesis about his conditioning of our noetic faculties) is a precondition of human knowledge.

On reflection, it should not be so surprising to find this kind of argumentation in Plantinga's work as in Van Til's. Transcendental arguments are commonly thought of as *anti-skeptical* arguments: the idea being to show that whatever it is that the skeptic doubts or denies turns out to be a necessary precondition of some other principle or experience that the skeptic takes for granted. In the case of a *theistic* transcendental argument, it is skepticism about the existence of God that comes under scrutiny. With this in mind, the essence of Van Til's apologetic strategy seems to have been to identify classic epistemological problems pertaining to those noetic activities that the unbeliever takes for granted and to show that such problems only have teeth on the assumption of a non-theistic or non-Christian view of the world. Plantinga is often found to be following (whether deliberately or not) a similar course: consider his appeal to "Darwin's Doubt" in explicating EAAN and his adaptation of Putnam's argument against metaphysical realism.⁵⁷

Significantly more could be said on this topic, but it is worth noting at least how fruitful this type of argumentation can be. One of the great strengths of a good transcendental argument against some position is that it utterly undercuts (and even

⁵⁷ In "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments," Plantinga also sketches an epistemological argument from induction along the same lines as Van Til's, complete with reference to Hume's skepticism, as well as an "argument from reference" inspired by other Putnamian skeptical anxieties.

reverses) the force of any *empirical* evidence offered in favor of that position; thus if naturalism renders knowledge impossible then *any* appeal to empirical knowledge (e.g., suffering or dysteleology) must thereby presuppose the *falsity* of naturalism.

Internalism and Externalism

One evident weakness of Van Til's epistemological arguments is that he nowhere supplies an *analysis* of knowledge or displays much awareness of distinctions now commonplace in contemporary epistemology: foundationalism versus coherentism, justification versus warrant, overriding defeaters versus undercutting defeaters, and so on. Van Til should not be judged too harshly for this, since such epistemological niceties were not brought to prominence until near the end of his career.

I would suggest however that one recent distinction in particular has significant implications for many of his arguments, namely, the distinction between *internalist* and *externalist* conditions of knowledge. An *internalist* condition (of justification or warrant) is one to which a person has "introspective access"; in other words, the person can ascertain whether or not the condition is fulfilled with respect to a particular belief simply by reflecting internally on his or her own mental states. For example, consider the following necessary condition of epistemic warrant:

(W1) S's belief that *p* is warranted only if S is aware of some reason *q* for thinking *p* to be true.

W1 is an internalist condition, since it requires that the knower be subjectively aware of some warrant-relevant factor. In contrast, an *externalist* condition is one that does not require any subjective awareness on the part of the knower, such as the following:

(W2) S's beliefs that *p* is warranted only if S's belief that *p* was formed by reliable (i.e., truth-conducive) cognitive processes.

Note that W2 does not require S to be *aware* that his belief was reliably formed; it only requires that his belief *was* reliably formed.

Now one of the central debates in contemporary epistemology concerns whether there are any necessary *internalist* conditions of knowledge. Generally speaking,

“internalists” say yes, while “externalists” say no.⁵⁸ Whether there are necessary internalist conditions of knowledge (and, if so, of what kind) has deep implications for what sort of truths can be known, how they can be known, and by whom. As one might expect, Plantinga is well aware of this debate; having entered into the fray in his *Warrant* series, he takes a self-consciously externalist position. Moreover, his epistemological arguments reflect a sensitivity to the distinction between internalist and externalist conditions. Van Til’s arguments do not, however, and his statements of them often seem to assume (at points where specificity might be significant) an internalist perspective that tends to weaken the arguments. For instance, after summarizing the argument from induction, Van Til writes the following:

Even non-Christians presuppose [the truth of Christian theism] while they verbally reject it. They need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own [scientific] accomplishments.⁵⁹

What does Van Til mean by “presuppose” here? Is the idea simply that if the truth of Christian theism is a precondition of scientific knowledge then a person is *implicitly* assuming its truth by engaging in science (or claiming to have scientific knowledge)? Or is it that for a person to have scientific knowledge, not only must Christian theism be true but that person must also stand in some positive epistemic relation towards its truth — by either *knowing* it, *believing* it, or *accepting* it? The latter interpretation clearly involves a stronger claim but consequently requires rather more by way of argument. It is easier to show that inductive reasoning has as necessary conditions (i) the uniformity of nature, and (ii) the good design of our cognitive faculties by a being that knows and ensures that nature is uniform, than it is to show that (i), (ii), *plus* our believing or knowing (i) and (ii), are all necessary conditions.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The taxonomy is further complicated by a distinction between “positive” and “negative” internalist conditions. A positive internalist condition is something of which a person *must* be aware in order to know that *p* (e.g., a reason for thinking *p* to be true). A negative internalist condition is something of which a person *must not* be aware in order to know that *p* (e.g., a reason for thinking *p* to be false). For an invaluable analysis of the internalism/externalism debate, see Michael Bergmann, “Internalism, Externalism and the No-Defeater Condition,” *Synthese* 110:3 (1997): 399-417.

⁵⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 103.

⁶⁰ Perhaps, though, there is a near relative of EAAN lurking in the vicinity. Suppose I grasp the connection between inductive reasoning and the uniformity of nature but also come to believe, by way of a Humean pessimism induced by an unyielding commitment to thoroughgoing naturalism, that I have no rational grounds whatsoever for believing nature to be uniform in that way. Would I not thereby obtain a defeater for all my inductively-inferred beliefs?

Another example of the relevance of the internalist/externalist distinction pertains to Van Til's argument from the unity of knowledge. The argument appears to posit a precondition of knowledge that involves a mixture of internalist and externalist considerations: a person S can know some fact *p* only if either (a) S knows how every other fact bears on knowing *p* (an internalist condition) or (b) the epistemic faculties employed by S in knowing *p* have been constructed by some other person G who knows how every other fact bears on knowing *p* (an externalist condition).⁶¹ Whatever the answers here and elsewhere, it is evident that Van Til's arguments would benefit from a dose of disambiguation with respect to this important distinction.

Human Minds and the Divine Mind

A recurring theme in the epistemological arguments of both Plantinga and Van Til is the observation that in order for us to have knowledge of the world certain conditions must be fulfilled that *cannot* be fulfilled by the human mind alone (either singularly or collectively). For example, if it turns out that human knowledge requires the possession of cognitive faculties that are literally *well designed*, we cannot claim with a straight face that *we ourselves* are the designers in question. Likewise, suppose it really is the case that for anyone to have *any* knowledge of the world, at least one person must have *comprehensive* knowledge of the world; the shortlist of *human* candidates who might take the credit would be a short list indeed.

In Plantinga's writings, this insight is closely linked to *anti-realist* tendencies, those sophisticated contemporary outworkings of the Protagorean motto, "Man is the measure of all things."⁶² If the anti-realists are right, Plantinga suggests, then we are in over our heads; for careful reflection on the conditions of knowledge suggests that to our embarrassment we just don't measure up.⁶³

⁶¹ Although Van Til's tendency toward internalist assumptions might be deemed a weakness by many contemporary Christian epistemologists, including Plantinga, the disjunctive precondition posited by this argument hints at an interpretation of Van Til's transcendental arguments according to which a strongly internalist stance would be far more plausible; namely, an interpretation where the primary focus is on the preconditions of knowledge *in general* rather than *human* knowledge *in particular*. In an unpublished paper, I develop this thesis and thereby propose a basis for a more favorable analysis of Van Til's epistemological theistic arguments.

⁶² Plantinga, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," 302.

⁶³ Although Plantinga categorizes it as a metaphysical rather than epistemological argument, it is interesting to compare his argument for the necessary existence of propositions in Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 117-120, and his related theistic argument from intentionality in "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments."

For Van Til, on the other hand, Protagoras's dictum is implicitly embraced by *all* forms of non-theism, whether they wear the badge of realism or anti-realism, and even by all forms of non-*Christian* theism, since competing or pared down theisms fail to give God his rightful place in the (epistemological) universe. Knowledge of some things presupposes a measure of all things; and if that measure is not uniquely located in the mind of an *absolute* God then all of us (including any lesser deities) are fumbling about aimlessly in the dark, searching for a non-existent light switch.

Such themes should hardly be thought surprising. If the universe *is* the creation of a divine mind, and our human minds are so constructed as to reflect in some derivative way the workings of that divine mind, then it seems more than likely that an analysis of our noetic activities will reveal numerous lines of dependence on the existence of a divine mind (belonging to a God with certain characteristics). The arguments of Plantinga and Van Til already suggest that this is a fruitful avenue for research; perhaps Christian philosophers should be spending more time strolling along it.

Christian Distinctives

Lastly, I wish to discuss one significant difference between the epistemological arguments of Plantinga and those of Van Til. Plantinga's arguments are offered in support of theism *simpliciter*; they purport to give good reasons for believing in the existence of an all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing Creator. As such, they could be equally well appropriated by a Jew, a Muslim, or even a theist who rejects *all* of the ancient monotheistic traditions. Despite his firm conviction that theistic belief is usually *properly basic*, that is, held rationally but not on the basis of inference from other beliefs, Plantinga still sees *some* value in theistic arguments. When it comes to distinctively *Christian* beliefs, however, he is rather less sanguine about the prospects of inferential support.⁶⁴

In contrast, Van Til maintains that not merely *theism* but specifically *Christian* theism can be supported by transcendental argumentation.⁶⁵ Whether or not this

⁶⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 201, 268-280. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, "Rationality and Public Evidence: A Reply to Richard Swinburne," *Religious Studies* 37:2 (2001): 215-222.

⁶⁵ The question naturally arises as to what *counts* as "Christian theism." This is an issue that Van Til nowhere directly addresses (though clearly there is a close association in his mind with the Reformed theological tradition); it is nonetheless a question that must be answered if his apologetic claims are to be evaluated.

optimism is warranted, one can hardly fault Van Til for aiming high. After all, if theism *simpliciter* has such profound implications for our epistemic situation, why assume that the implications end there? Might it not be the case that some of those attributes or activities that distinguish the God of Abraham from the God of the Philosophers *also* constitute necessary conditions of our knowledge of the world?

I have already discussed Van Til's argument for a specifically *trinitarian* theism; a detailed evaluation of that argument must await treatment elsewhere. However, there are other aspects of biblical theism that may well have a place in the conclusions of epistemological theistic arguments. For example, Van Til's argument from the unity of knowledge may serve to narrow the field of theistic candidates by excluding so-called "open" or "process" theisms, according to which God is viewed as lacking omniscience (as traditionally construed). Moreover, several of the arguments surveyed above indicate that not only the existence of God, but also something like *our being created in his (epistemic) image*, is a precondition of our knowledge; there must be a sufficient continuity or analogy between our minds and God's mind for the former to enjoy the fruits of the latter.

A further example. Reflection on our "doxastic practices"⁶⁶ suggests that there is a distinct *deontological* aspect to our reasoning. Certain policies for belief maintenance and revision are deemed "good" or "bad," and accordingly we make moral or quasi-moral judgments about our own reasoning and that of others: "Alistair really *ought not* to have come to that conclusion." Combining these insights with a version of the traditional *moral* argument for theism results in an epistemological argument for the Christian teaching that we are morally responsible, in some significant manner, to God for the way we use our minds (cf. Matt. 22:37; 2 Cor. 10:5).

One final, and admittedly very sketchy, suggestion. Christian theism distinguishes itself from theism *simpliciter* by, among other things, its claims about *special revelation*. It affirms that God can communicate, and indeed *has* communicated, propositional knowledge to us. Could it be that at least the *availability* of such revelation is in some sense a precondition of our having knowledge of the world? If so, why? If there is anything worthwhile to be found along this road, perhaps a clue lies in Plantinga's concept of a *cognitive environment*. According to a proper function

⁶⁶ The term is borrowed from Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 269.

epistemology, our knowledge depends on our faculties operating in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which they were designed. In particular, Plantinga has drawn attention to the crucial role our environment plays in ensuring the warrant of *testimonial* knowledge.⁶⁷ Now it would seem that beliefs gained via testimony will be warranted only if an implicit assumption is made about the trustworthiness of testimony; in a society where lying is epidemic, testimonial beliefs will generally lack warrant. Taking things a step further, one could argue that an environment conducive to testimonial knowledge would require positive maintenance of the *prima facie* trustworthiness of testimony, such that there is regular reinforcement or confirmation of its reliability. Imagine a world in which you were to gain, for the first time, one or two items of knowledge via testimony, but then came to know nothing else (via testimony) for several years. Even with a perfect memory of the original testimony, doubts arise as to whether the initial warrant of those beliefs would be sustained in this impoverished cognitive environment, given the utter absence of any fresh instances of trustworthy testimony.

If this idea about the positive maintenance of human testimony is correct, then it is likely that something analogous holds with respect to *divine* testimony (which would cover both *natural* and *special* revelation). On this view, given that the warrant of beliefs obtained through natural revelation depends on certain moral characteristics of God (truthfulness, faithfulness, benevolence, etc.) it would appear that the cognitive environment in which the warrant of such beliefs may be *sustained* must be one in which God, from time to time, provides fresh instances of trustworthy testimony so as to reinforce or confirm the trustworthiness of *extant* revelation (and it is hard to see how this could be accomplished effectively with anything other than special revelation). Whatever the philosophical merits of this argument, I submit that it at least enjoys some support from Scripture; for if the biblical narrative tells us anything about human confidence in the divine character, it is that man cannot live by the bread of natural theology alone.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 82-88.

⁶⁸ One might ask how Van Til would defend Christian theism over against Jewish theism, given that the latter also posits a special revelation from God. I suspect that either he would appeal to the one-many argument in the face of modern Judaism's unitarianism, or he would treat this as effectively an *intrasystemic* debate (given that both views formally acknowledge the inspiration of the Old Testament) and would argue that Jesus Christ is the proper fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (in other words, modern Judaism amounts to a theologically deviate form of Judeo-Christian theism). Similar considerations would apply to Islamic theism.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I have summarized three epistemological theistic arguments drawn from the writings of Alvin Plantinga and four from the writings of Cornelius Van Til, before discussing points of similarity and difference with a view to identifying some ways in which the arguments of each philosopher could be developed by drawing on the concerns and insights of the other. The *prima facie* similarity between the claims of Plantinga and Van Til regarding our epistemological dependence on God has been shown to run deeper than mere rhetoric in light of the philosophical themes represented in their theistic arguments. The reflections of these scholars on the nature of God and the prerequisites of human knowledge have borne fruit by elucidating various lines of dependence between the two, providing both ready material for provocative theistic arguments and also inspiration for further research. It would not be unduly speculative, I think, to suppose that the distinctive Calvinist tradition shared by Plantinga and Van Til, with its exalted view of God and its humble view of man, has played more than a small part in this.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ I am grateful to Michael Sudduth for invaluable comments on an earlier version of this paper.