Van Til and Analytic Philosophy

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1. Introduction

In honor of the centennial of his birth, the Spring 1995 issue of the *Westminster Theological Journal* featured a collection of articles on the thought of Cornelius Van Til. One of the articles, by William Dennison, took aim at two critics of Van Til, Cecil and Jesse De Boer, for their reliance on the methodology of analytic philosophy in their critique to Van Til's epistemology.[1] Dennison also targeted John M. Frame, a fellow 'disciple' of Van Til, for his adoption of elements of analytic philosophy in his defense and development of Van Til's apologetic.[2] In Dennison's estimation, all three had failed to reckon with a central and distinctive element of Van Til's thought, namely, the role that his philosophy of history plays in his epistemology. The article also conveyed the clear insinuation that analytic philosophy and Van Tilian philosophy are fundamentally at odds and should be kept at a safe distance.

This essay is not intended to be a response to Dennison's arguments (though readers are encouraged to review his article alongside this one and draw their own conclusions). Instead, I propose to explore the more general question of the relationship between Van Til's work and the development of analytic philosophy—both historically and conceptually—and to suggest some areas where we can find, on the one hand, some useful points of affinity or complementarity, and, on the other hand, some undeniable points of tension or conflict. I conclude by briefly considering the prospects for an "analytic Van Tilianism." Before getting to any of that, however, we should first clarify what we mean by *analytic philosophy*.

2. What is Analytic Philosophy?

Analytic philosophy is undoubtedly the dominant form of philosophy practiced in the English-speaking world today. But what exactly is it? Since analytic philosophers are known for their love of precise definitions, there's a modicum of irony in the fact that *analytic philosophy* admits of no

[1] William D. Dennison, "Analytic Philosophy and Van Til's Epistemology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 33–56.
[2] As far as I am aware, Frame never replied in print to Dennison's criticisms.

precise definition. But that is no strike against it. The same can be said of other major movements in twentieth-century philosophy, such as existentialism and postmodernism, and as with those other movements, the safest way to characterize analytic philosophy is through a historical survey of its origins, its developmental phases, and the thinkers most closely associated with it.

2.1. A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy

The history of analytic philosophy can be usefully divided into five phases.[3] Its origins lie with the revolt against so-called British Idealism by the Cambridge philosophers Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and G. E. Moore (1873–1958) in the first decade of the twentieth century. British Idealism (also known as Absolute Idealism) was a neo-Hegelian movement that arose in the mid-nineteenth century and had come to dominate the British universities. The three major thinkers associated with the movement were T. H. Green (1836–1882), F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), and Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923); later proponents included J. M. E. McTaggart (1866–1925) and A. E. Taylor (1869–1945).

One of the distinctive tenets of British Idealism was its doctrine of *internal relations*, according to which all relations between objects in the world are internal to those objects, and thus the character of any object is constituted by its relations to (all) other objects. From this followed the doctrine of *logical holism*, that one can come to understand the various parts of the world only by grasping the whole. In keeping with their Hegelian roots, the British Idealists posited an ultimate reality of pure intellect—the Absolute—which encompasses all objects in the world and thereby serves to resolve (or perhaps dissolve) the subject-object dichotomy in human knowledge. Despite having been educated in this idealist tradition, Moore and Russell became highly dissatisfied with it on several grounds. In the first place, the writings of the idealists were extremely dense and veiled in obscure terminology. If we cannot even understand what is being *asserted*, how can we determine whether it is really *true*? Moreover, the doctrines of internal relations and logical holism invite a debilitating skepticism: we cannot know something about *anything* unless we know something about *everything*, which seems beyond the reach of human intellectual faculties. In

[3] Aaron Preston, "Analytic Philosophy," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, n.d., https://iep.utm.edu/analytic-philosophy/. Cf. A. P. Martinich, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, ed. A. P. Martinich and David Sosa (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2001), 1–5; Michael Beaney, "What Is Analytic Philosophy?," in *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3–29.

addition, the idealists' conflation of the subject and object of knowledge entailed an anti-realist metaphysics according to which there are no mind-independent material objects. In rebellion against these idealist themes, Moore defended a commonsense realism about material objects, while Russell launched a devastating critique of the doctrine of internal relations, contending instead for a world constituted by discrete items standing in merely *external* relations, each fact being knowable apart from any other fact.[4] Against the obscure claims of idealism, Russell and Moore pressed for conceptual and logical clarity as the *sine qua non* of philosophical progress.

The second phase in the emergence of the analytic tradition, from around 1910 to 1930, was the rise of *ideal-language philosophy* and the associated theory of *logical atomism*. Drawing inspiration from advancements in formal mathematics, set theory, and symbolic logic, most notably those developed by Georg Cantor (1845–1918) and Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), Russell became convinced that progress in philosophy would be achieved only by developing an ideal logical language capable of expressing propositions without ambiguity, vagueness, or metaphor. If the truth-value of a proposition is a function of its *meaning*, then truth can be ascertained only by way of analytical precision and perspicuity. According to Russell's theory of logical atomism, any meaningful claim ought to be analyzable in terms of *atomic propositions*—sentential representations of the most basic facts about the real world—connected by logical operators ('and', 'or', etc.). In the ideal case such propositions, whether simple or complex, can be expressed precisely with formal symbolic notation. Each of the basic facts expressed by atomic propositions can be understood independently of any other facts; thus, our comprehension of the world can proceed from part to whole, rather than the reverse (as the idealists implied). The philosophy of logical atomism reached its apogee in the early work of Russell's student, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), whose *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* famously declared in one of its 525 numbered propositions that "The world is the totality of facts" and further contended that any statement which *fails* to express a fact about the world is strictly *meaningless*—neither true nor false.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* became one of the main inspirations for the third phase, the movement known as *logical positivism* (or logical empiricism) associated with the Vienna Circle.

[4] G. E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, ed. J. H. Muirhead, 2nd series (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925); Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), 54.

During the 1920s and 1930s, a group of European intellectuals including Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), Otto Neurath (1882–1945), and Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) held meetings at the University of Vienna with a view to reforming philosophy along strictly scientific lines. Carnap was especially enthused by Wittgenstein's logical atomism, and in the early years of the Circle the *Tractatus* was read and discussed line-by-line. In keeping with the earlier work of Russell and Wittgenstein, the logical positivists focused on the analysis of linguistic meaning with a view to determining the logical truth-conditions for sentences, an emphasis clearly reflected in the title of A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) which popularized the Vienna philosophy in the English-speaking world. The foremost weapon of the logical positivists was the so-called *verification principle,* which held that the meaning of a sentence consists in the means of its verification; thus, any non-tautological statement that cannot in principle be verified (or falsified) by empirical observations is cognitively meaningless and factually vacuous. The supposed benefit of the verification principle was that it would sweep clean the house of philosophy, banishing traditional metaphysics while leaving science intact. By the 1940s, it had become apparent that logical positivism was a failed project. Not only did it implausibly dismiss apparently meaningful statements like "God exists" and "Murder is wrong" as nonsensical, it also suffered from a terminal case of self-defeat: the verification principle itself is neither a logical tautology nor a proposition that can be empirically verified, and therefore by its own lights it is cognitively meaningless. In its attempt to purify philosophical discourse, logical positivism set the bar too high for even its own proponents to reach.

Wittgenstein had never aligned himself with the Vienna Circle, and in the 1940s, following a period away from philosophical studies (convinced that the *Tractatus* had effectively resolved or dissolved all philosophical problems), he renounced his earlier logical atomism in favor of the *ordinary-language philosophy* set forth in his posthumously published work *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). According to this new approach—the fourth phase in our history of analytic philosophy—the 'ordinary' language we use to describe our experiences of the world and to communicate with others is far more versatile, flexible, and messy than the rigid and reductionistic analysis of the logical atomists acknowledged. Sentences are not merely depictions of facts connected by logical operators. Words are more like highly adaptable tools with diverse functions that have evolved naturally for practical use in our everyday human activities and "forms of life." This appreciation for ordinary language sparked the development of "speech-act theory" by J. L.

Austin and (later) John Searle. Despite the repudiation of logical positivism, however, the early forms of ordinary-language philosophy reflected a similar anti-metaphysical prejudice and a corresponding skepticism about traditional philosophical questions. Wittgenstein, for example, opined that philosophical puzzles are the unwitting consequence of ordinary language being pressed into extraordinary usage; such problems only arise "when language goes on holiday." In like manner, the ordinary-language philosopher Gilbert Ryle dismissed Cartesian dualism, not on the basis of metaphysical arguments, but because it committed "category mistakes," the lesson being that dualism is not so much false as conceptually incoherent. At any rate, the conviction continued that philosophical progress can be attained (and the pitfalls of philosophy avoided) only through the careful analysis of our language.

The fifth phase of the analytic movement, extending from the 1960s to the present day, can be characterized as the reopening of the age-old questions of metaphysics, and, more generally, an open-minded eclecticism toward philosophical issues and debates. One influential figure in these developments was the Oxford philosopher P. F. Strawson, whose seminal works *Individuals* ("an essay in descriptive metaphysics") and *The Bounds of Sense* resurrected the Kantian strategy of transcendental argumentation as a means of disclosing the presuppositions of our commonsense view of the world.[5] Over time it became apparent that advances in symbolic logic and linguistic analysis, far from rendering metaphysical questions otiose, supplied a powerful and versatile toolkit for clarifying those questions and developing rigorously formulated arguments for and against competing theses. A new spring had arrived in the world of Anglo-American philosophy, dispelling the bleak winter of positivism, and a thousand flowers had burst into bloom. Every subdiscipline received the analytic treatment: metaphysics, epistemology, metaethics, applied ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, etc. One important consequence of this emerging analytical pluralism was the reinvigoration of Christian philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century at the hands of scholars such as Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Robert Adams, and Marilyn McCord Adams, all of whom operated within the broadly analytic tradition. Concurrently, a movement dubbed "analytical Thomism" arose through the work of Elizabeth Anscombe (a former student of Wittgenstein), Peter Geach, Anthony Kenny, John Haldane, and other Catholic philosophers. More

[5] P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959); P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Methuen, 1966).

recently, the discipline of "analytic theology" has emerged as what might be loosely described as the marriage of systematic (dogmatic) theology and analytic philosophy.[6] All these 'analytics' owe a methodological debt to the revolutionary writings of Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein (not to mention the pioneers of modern logic, such as Gottlob Frege, C. I. Lewis, and Saul Kripke) even while they distance themselves from the metaphysical—or anti-metaphysical—prejudices of their forebears.[7]

2.2. The Characteristics of Analytic Philosophy

With this historical survey behind us, it is perhaps easier to discern the family resemblances that characterize the movements and thinkers now associated with analytic philosophy. One thing is evident: the analytic tradition places emphasis on the careful and responsible use of language in the articulation and advancement of philosophical claims. The earliest proponents gave the impression that the task of philosophy consisted almost *entirely* of linguistic analysis, and that philosophical problems would be either solved or exposed as pseudo-problems by that method. Very few hold that view today, but the conviction remains that pursuing conceptual and logical clarity about philosophical theses and arguments is paramount for fruitful debate and intellectual progress. Similarly, while the logical atomists and logical positivists were eager to refashion philosophy in the image of mathematics and the empirical sciences, contemporary analytic philosophers are inclined to adopt the style and formal apparatus of mathematics even though they recognize philosophy as a discipline distinct from, and in important respects prior to, the natural sciences.

The manifesto of the European Society for Analytic Philosophy (founded in 1990) provides a useful summary of the most recognizable distinctives of the analytic approach:

[6] Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner Jr., eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, T&T Clark Handbooks (London: T&T Clark, 2022).

[7] Time would fail me to tell of W. V. Quine, Hilary Putnam, Roderick Chisholm, David Armstrong, John Rawls, David Lewis, and other influential figures in the history of analytic philosophy. For introductions to these seminal thinkers, see A. P. Martinich and David Sosa, eds., *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

> Analytic philosophy is characterized above all by the goal of clarity, the insistence on explicit argumentation in philosophy, and the demand that any view expressed be exposed to the rigours of critical evaluation and discussion by peers.[8]

Alvin Plantinga offers a very similar description:

> Analytic philosophy is, first of all, *philosophy*; and it differs from non-analytic philosophy, it seems to me, chiefly in the following ways. First, its investigations tend to be piecemeal, thorough, and detailed. Secondly, analytic philosophers pay a great deal of attention to argument and counter-argument; they are less likely to announce startling theses with no argument, or only a half-hearted argument, than their non-analytic counterparts. And finally, analytic philosophers (the better ones, at any rate) strive mightily for *clarity*. They try very hard to say exactly what they mean; and they try never to introduce new terminology without carefully explaining what they propose to mean by it.[9]

In the same vein, Michael Rea suggests that "analytic philosophy … refers to an approach to philosophical problems that is characterized by a particular rhetorical style, some common ambitions, an evolving technical vocabulary, and a tendency to pursue projects in dialogue with a certain evolving body of literature."[10] He highlights two ambitions in particular: "(i) to identify the scope and limits of our powers to obtain knowledge of the world, and (ii) to provide such true explanatory theories as we can in areas of inquiry (metaphysics, morals, and the like)."[11] Elaborating on (ii) Rea writes:

> The second ambition includes the quest for 'local' explanations of particular phenomena—morality, causation, and composition, for example. It also includes the quest for some sort of 'global' explanation that identifies fundamental entities and properties and helps to provide an account of human cognitive structures and their abilities to interact with and theoretically process facts about the fundamental objects and properties.[12]

As for the "particular rhetorical style" of analytic philosophy, Rea lists five prescriptions that "more or less" characterize the analytic style:

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[8] Quoted in Beaney, "What Is Analytic Philosophy?," 3.
[9] Alvin Plantinga, "Analytic Philosophy and Christianity," *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1963, 18. Emphasis original.
[10] Michael C. Rea, "Introduction," in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.
[11] Rea, 4.
[12] Rea, 4–5.

P1. Write as if philosophical positions and conclusions can be adequately formulated in sentences that can be formalized and logically manipulated.

P2. Prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence.

P3. Avoid substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content.

P4. Work as much as possible with well-understood primitive concepts, and concepts that can be analyzed in terms of those.

P5. Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence.[13]

In summary, drawing upon these and other attempts to articulate the distinctives of analytic philosophy (AP), I suggest that we can pinpoint the following characteristic traits:

1. AP, as a general rule, seeks to emulate the style and methodology of the mathematical and empirical sciences more than that of the humanities (history, literature, arts, etc.).
2. AP emphasizes the importance of linguistic and conceptual analysis for genuine progress in philosophical investigations and debates.
3. AP places a premium on clarity, precision, logical coherence, literal (as opposed to metaphorical) expression, and explicit argumentation.
4. AP encourages the use of a shared methodological toolkit of technical terms, conceptual distinctions, argumentation strategies (e.g., counterexamples, counterfactuals, thought experiments), and modern systems of logic (first-order logic, modal logic, set theory, etc.).
5. AP *in practice* tends to favor detailed analysis of narrowly defined questions (e.g., whether causal determinism is compatible with free will, whether there are irreducibly tensed facts, whether mathematical objects exist) over grand system-building or worldview-development; it generally prefers a bottom-up, parts-to-whole, analysis-before-synthesis approach to understanding the world and our place in it.
6. AP also inclines toward ahistorical treatments of questions and theses: if Theory T is attributed to Philosopher P, analytic philosophers are generally less concerned about whether P actually held to T (and, if so, what historical factors account for that fact) than about whether T itself is true, coherent, defensible, conceptually fruitful, and so forth.

[13] Rea, pp. 5-6.

7. AP tends to view itself as a methodologically neutral and intellectually autonomous discipline that (i) can operate independently of other disciplines (although it can benefit from cross-disciplinary engagement) and (ii) requires no prior commitment to any particular historical tradition or substantive philosophical theses.[14] This spirit of independence and autonomy is neatly captured in a remark attributed to John Searle: "I am an analytic philosopher. I think for myself."[15]

3. Van Til and Analytic Philosophy

With an understanding of its historical development and distinguishing characteristics in place, let us now turn to consider Van Til's stance toward analytic philosophy, first considering how to locate Van Til in relation to the analytic tradition, and then reviewing his direct interactions with representatives of that tradition.

3.1. Van Til's Relation to Analytic Philosophy

A cursory examination of Van Til's academic career and body of writings makes clear that he stands outside the analytic tradition in philosophy and did not have a close relationship with it. Instead, Van Til's philosophical education and early writings were conducted against the backdrop of British Idealism. Van Til first studied at Calvin College under the tutorship of William Harry Jellema, who established Calvin's philosophy department. Jellema wrote his dissertation on Josiah Royce, founder of the American Idealist school, under whom he had studied, and he assigned F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* as a textbook for his undergraduate courses.[16] Van Til graduated from Calvin in 1922, the year that saw the publication (in English) of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

In 1925, Van Til was awarded a Th.M. degree from Princeton Theological Seminary with a thesis entitled "Reformed Epistemology."[17] He subsequently completed a doctorate in philosophy

[14] I say 'tends' advisedly. There is a growing recognition among analytic philosophers that some questions cannot be resolved without drawing on other disciplines (e.g., the relevance of cognitive science to debates over the philosophy of mind).
[15] Quoted in Beaney, "What Is Analytic Philosophy?," 3.
[16] Timothy I. McConnel, "The Influence of Idealism on the Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 3 (September 2005): 557. My discussion of Van Til's relationship to idealism in this section is indebted to McConnel's article.
[17] Not to be confused with the later movement associated with Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Van Til's thesis was revised and expanded as a syllabus for his Westminster students with the title "The Metaphysics of Apologetics," eventually to be published as *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (1969).

at Princeton University in 1927 under the supervision of departmental head, A. A. Bowman, a proponent of the British Idealist school. As Van Til was pursuing his doctoral studies in the mid-1920s, the Vienna Circle was still in its 'private' phase, with Carnap leading group discussions of the *Tractatus*. Van Til's dissertation, "God and the Absolute," amounted to a direct and forceful critique of the idealist philosophy of Bradley, Bosanquet, and McTaggart. It targeted in particular the notion that "the Absolute" posited by the idealists was none other than the God of Christianity, and that idealism and Christian theism were commensurable systems of thought. As Van Til wrote in the introduction to his dissertation:

> In many quarters the idea seems to prevail that the God of Christianity and the Absolute of modern idealistic philosophy are identical. Idealism and Christianity seem to have formed an alliance against all forms of Realism and Pragmatism. It is granted that there is some difference between Idealism and Christianity in its credal statement but then the former has brought out the logical implications of the latter and gives a more systematic and coherent expression to the principle underlying Christianity. …
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> The alliance thus formed is hailed by philosophers and theologians alike as prophetic of a glorious dawn of peace and progress. Clasping hands we have stopped our wrangle and at last have found an outlet for our energies in the improvement of the human race. Yet there are some murmurings to be heard here and there that all is not gold that glitters. Now since I find myself among the group of malcontents who have not joined their voice to the applause of peace, peace, because there is no peace, I am here called upon to give an account of the faith that is in me. I still believe in the God of Christianity and not in the Absolute of Idealism. Believing my faith to be a "reasonable faith" I shall in this paper attempt to prove that the apparent similarity between Idealism and Christianity covers a fundamental diversity, that consequently we must make a choice between them and that the choice for Christianity is philosophically the more tenable.
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> To do this it will be sufficient to take the pivotal conception of God which lies at the basis of all Christian theism and contend that it is the only conception that can offer a possible unity to human experience. The only alternative to belief in this God is scepticism.

Although Van Til saw British Idealism as distinct from Christian theism and ultimately antithetical to it, he nonetheless held that the idealists were at least asking many of the right questions and had introduced some important concepts that equipped him to argue for the philosophical superiority of Christian theism over the metaphysics of Absolute Idealism. John Frame observes:

> As did James Orr, with whose writings Van Til's apologetics shows some affinity, Van Til made liberal use of the idealist philosophical vocabulary ("concrete universal," "one and many," "absolute system," "eternal novelty," "limiting concept," "logic" [as a general term for "methodology"], the contrast between "implication" and "linear inference," and even "presupposition"). Nonetheless, Van Til always insisted that he rejected the substantive content of idealism, which identified the Creator with the creature and made both of them subject to one another within an impersonal universal structure.[18]

This strategy of coopting the terminology—and to some degree the argumentation—of the idealists would continue throughout Van Til's academic career. Consequently, Van Til has been accused from time to time of relying too heavily on idealist philosophy and even of trying to synthesize it with Christianity, despite his emphatic repudiation of that charge and his forthright criticisms of the idealists.[19] In any event, it is clear that most of Van Til's jousting with modern philosophy is directed at idealism, which he considered to be the most serious philosophical competitor to Christian theism.[20] In his article, "God and the Absolute," published in the *Evangelical Quarterly* in 1930,[21] Van Til frames the contemporary philosophical debate as a three-way conflict between Pragmatism, Idealism, and Theism (by which he means specifically *Christian* theism). There he contends that although the Idealists position themselves allies of Christianity in their opposition to Pragmatism, ultimately the Idealists and the Pragmatists are on the same side, since both deny the transcendent, sovereign, self-contained God of the Bible. As Van Til introduces his thesis:

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[18] John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 21.

[19] Van Til responded to some of these criticisms in the first edition of *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), the complete text of which is reproduced in the fourth edition (P&R Publishing, 2008). Van Til's rebuttal can be found on pages 229–32 of the latter.

[20] Van Til recounted the role of idealism in his intellectual development in an unpublished letter to John Vander Stelt in 1968: "In my days at Calvin College and Seminary I read Kuyper and Bavinck assiduously and followed them through thick and thin. Then I came to Princeton Seminary where Butler's *Analogy* was the textbook for apologetics. At the same time I attended courses in the university where Professor A. A. Bowman was in charge of the department. I thought very highly of Bowman. He was, generally speaking, an idealist in his sympathies. I had already studied idealism under Jellema at Calvin. Under Bowman I took a course in Hegel. Under another professor I took a course in Kant, and later on another course by Bowman on Aristotle. All this together meant that I had to fight my way through the difference between the Amsterdam and the old Princeton apologetics. At the same time there was the question of the relation of non-Christian philosophy, particularly idealism and Christianity. I wrote my dissertation on God and the Absolute which dealt with the question whether the God of Hegel, of Bradley, of Bosanquet and the God of the Bible are the same God. Something of the content of this dissertation is found in my booklet on *Christianity and Idealism*, particularly the chapter on 'God and the Absolute.'"

[21] Cornelius Van Til, "God and the Absolute," *Evangelical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1930): 358–88. Although the article carries the same title as his doctoral dissertation, and articulates the same basic arguments, it is a distinct piece in its own right. The article was republished in *Christianity and Idealism* (1955).

> In many quarters the idea seems to prevail that Idealism and Christianity have found an alliance against all forms of Pragmatism. Both Idealism and Christianity, it is claimed, stand for the maintenance of absolute truth and value while Pragmatism has frankly embraced the relativity of truth and value. Is this presentation correct? I think it is not. Idealism as well as Pragmatism, it seems to me, has embraced the relativity of truth and value. Idealism as well as Pragmatism is a foe of Biblical Theism. Together they form a secret alliance against Theism. Such will be the contention of this paper.
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> The method by which we would establish our contention is to show that the God of Idealism is not the God of Theism but is rather the God of Pragmatism. If Idealism and Theism differ radically on the concept of God they are bound to differ radically on religion and morality.[22]

The article concludes with a succinct summary of the fundamental differences between Christianity and Idealism and the foundational shortcomings of the latter:

> It would seem that the foregoing discussion has explained why it is that so often Theism and Idealism are considered to be close allies while in reality they are enemies. Idealism has constantly avowed its friendship towards Theism. Idealism has maintained the necessity of presupposing (a) a unity basic to diversity, (b) a timeless unity basic to diversity, and (c) one ultimate subject of interpretation. On these points Idealism only *seems* to stand with Theism for Idealism has *also* maintained that we must have (a) a plurality as basic as unity (b) a temporal plurality as basic as unity, and (c) a plurality of interpreters of Reality. These two conflicting tendencies cannot but seek to destroy one another. Logic demands that Idealism choose between the theistic and the pragmatic motifs. Logic also demands that if the pragmatic motif is entertained seriously at all it will win out altogether in time. History has amply justified the demands of logic. The Absolute of Idealism is today no more than a logical principle and that a changing one. The "obsolescence of the eternal" has taken place. Idealism as well as Pragmatism is a foe of Theism; the "Absolute" is not God.[23]

In contrast, the emerging movement of analytic philosophy receives almost no attention in Van Til's corpus, with the notable exception of one appendix (to be discussed in the next section). There is an obvious chronological explanation for this. Idealism was the dominant philosophical school in the Anglo-American universities for the first half of the twentieth century, the period during which Van Til was developing his distinctive approach to Christian apologetics and writing

[22] Cornelius Van Til, "God and the Absolute," in *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), 7.
[23] Van Til, 34. Emphasis original.

the syllabi for his seminary courses. As idealism's star began to wane, and that of ordinary-language philosophy began to rise, culminating in the fifth phase of the analytic movement, Van Til was entering the final decade of his teaching career. His style of philosophical writing and argumentation had been largely conditioned by the idealist literature. He was far more comfortable with the holistic 'big picture' approach, comparing and contrasting wide-ranging metaphysical systems, than with the atomistic analytical approach of Russell and (especially) Wittgenstein. Although Van Til had plenty to say about different conceptions of logic and the role of logic in one's philosophical system, he showed little familiarity with or interest in modern systems of symbolic logic. His writings abound with potent critiques of opposing positions, but one searches in vain for a single formalized logical argument. In 1971 Van Til retired from his teaching position at Westminster, just as the analytic Christian philosophy movement was starting to spread its wings.[24] Thus, Van Til played no part in that movement.

3.2. Van Til's Engagement with Analytic Philosophy

There is only one place in Van Til's works where he engages at any length with analytic philosophy: an appendix to his book *Christian Theistic Evidences*. The book was first published in 1978, although its content dates back much earlier, to the syllabus for the 'Evidences' course that Van Til began teaching at Westminster in 1930.[25] Van Til treats Christian evidences as a subdivision of apologetics, where apologetics is understood to be "the vindication of Christian theism against any form of non-theistic and non-Christian thought."[26] *Christian evidences* refers specifically to the defense of Christianity against 'scientific' objections, that is, claims that Christianity is disproven or rendered improbable by *empirical facts*. Despite what one might assume from the title, *Christian Theistic Evidences* does not offer specific evidential arguments for Christian theism or rebut any particular evidential objections to the Christian faith. It is

[24] Alvin Plantinga's seminal works *God and Other Minds* and *God, Freedom, and Evil* were published in 1967 and 1974, respectively. Richard Swinburne's *The Concept of Miracle* was published in 1970, and the first volume in his "theism trilogy," *The Coherence of Theism*, appeared in 1977. The Society of Christian Philosophers, the founders of which were predominantly analytic philosophers, was launched in 1978, with the first issue of its quarterly journal *Faith and Philosophy* appearing in 1984. Interestingly, in the year he accepted a teaching position at Calvin College, Plantinga wrote an article entitled "Analytic Philosophy and Christianity" for *Christianity Today* (October 25, 1963). Van Til was a regular reader of CT and contributed a number of articles in the 1960s and 1970s. We can only guess at whether he read Plantinga's article, and if so, what he thought about it.

[25] Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016), ix–x.

[26] Van Til, 1.

preoccupied instead with matters of apologetic methodology. Van Til criticizes the "Old Princeton" approach for its reliance on the epistemology of Common Sense Realism and for failing to do justice to the Reformed view of Scripture, natural revelation, and the noetic effects of sin. Over against this approach, Van Til argues forcefully that 'evidences' need to be understood and deployed in the broader context of a consistently Reformed theory of knowledge. Consequently, the Reformed apologist should recognize not only that there are abundant evidences for the Christian faith—indeed, *every* fact, properly interpreted, is supportive of biblical theism—but also that the very possibility of meaningful 'evidences' rests upon the truth of a Reformed Christian worldview with its distinctive doctrines of God, creation, and providence.

The appendix to *Christian Theistic Evidences*, which bears the title "Some Recent Scientists," represents something of an excursus from the book's main argument. As Van Til explains in the book's preface:

> The appendix contains a portion of a series of three lectures given at Calvin Theological Seminary in October 1968. It deals with essentially the same subject as the first part [of *Christian Theistic Evidences*]. Its argument is to the effect that the method of more recent non-Christian scientific methodology is bankrupt because it insists that man can know nothing of God and yet speaks in all its utterance about God. As a consequence recent scientists make an absolute separation between an abstract law of logic which is like a turnpike in the sky, and an infinite number of purely contingent facts, not one of which is distinguishable from another.[27]

From the title of the appendix and the way Van Til frames it, it's apparent that he is targeting the logical atomism of Russell and (the early) Wittgenstein, and the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, both of which purported to bring philosophy into line with modern science and logic. Van Til casts these "recent scientists and philosophers" as the modern heirs of Francis Bacon, "the typical Renaissance man," who aspired to build his philosophy solely on the foundation of empirical facts organized by reason, in supposed contrast to the abstract metaphysical schemes of the medieval theologians. The modern scientists, Van Til observes, are as averse to metaphysics as Bacon—and especially hostile to theism—but one major difference is that they live in the shadow of Immanuel Kant. Although they "hark back to the empiricism of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume," they also appreciate the great difficulty of bringing the diverse individual facts of human experience into some kind of orderly unified interpretation without

[27] Van Til, xxxiv.

appealing to "the activity of an absolute God."[28] They decry the logical holism of the idealists, according to which one can only understand the parts in relation to the whole, along with the intolerable appeal to "the Absolute," but they still hope to construct some kind of rational system out of the buzzing, blooming mass of contingent facts in order to "save science."[29]

Van Til singles out Russell, Moore, and the Vienna Circle for specific criticism. Russell seeks to defend an empirical realism in opposition to the idealists, but he does so by reducing "the facts of experience to indivisible logical atoms" and attempting to comprehend the whole through a logical construction of the parts. The fatal difficulty is that Russell's mind—like every other finite human mind—lacks the kind of God's-eye perspective that could *guarantee* a unifying rational relationship between all these atomic facts, such that the world can be understood as it *really* is. Russell therefore faces a dilemma: either *embrace theism* (to save his realism) or *abandon realism* (to maintain his anti-theism). Van Til closes by noting that Russell's logical atomism, far from sidestepping disputed metaphysical questions, tacitly presupposes an *anti-Christian* metaphysic:

> To pretend to be able to give any essentially true interpretation of the world of space and time without reference to the work of the Creator-Redeemer God of the Bible is like going on a privately owned estate and claiming that one can explain the shrubbery without reference to the question of ownership.[30]

Moore is given shorter shrift by Van Til. The Cambridge philosopher applied his analytic method to the fundamental question of ethics—"What is good?"—and delivered the conclusion that 'good' is indefinable and unanalyzable. Furthermore, as Moore concedes, this conclusion tells us nothing at all about "the Universe in general" (i.e., the real world). Van Til remarks:

> What Moore actually demonstrated is that he, like Socrates, has no need of God and of Christ in his investigation of the good. Pretending to say nothing about the Universe in general he is, nonetheless, in effect, making a universal negative judgment about it. If Moore's philosophy were true, the Christian story cannot be true.[31]

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[28] Van Til, 229–30.
[29] Van Til, 231–32.
[30] Van Til, 234.
[31] Van Til, 235. Compare his later remarks: "Recent anti-metaphysical schools of philosophy and science are just as metaphysical as was what is actually called metaphysics of the past. And, more importantly, the various forms of anti-metaphysical positivism constitute, in effect, a type of metaphysics that *excludes* Christianity." Van Til, 242. Emphasis original.

The principal lesson is the same: Moore, like Russell, cannot help making universal pronouncements that go far beyond what his autonomous epistemology can license. Both philosophers exclude from the outset the only worldview that could bring a meaningful unity to the individual facts of the analytic method.

Turning to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, Van Til focuses his critique on the essay by A. J. Ayer in the volume *Revolutions in Philosophy*, edited by Gilbert Ryle.[32] He begins by noting the difficulties (frankly admitted by Ayer) of formulating the verification principle in a way that successfully dispenses with metaphysics without rendering the principle itself meaningless. Van Til then proceeds to expose some of the epistemological quandaries of positivism:

> What is really meant when we say that a statement is verifiable? Does it mean merely that statements about facts are internally coherent with one another? Does it not also mean that statements must be verifiable in relation to facts? Then, if I make statements about my experience of facts, how can I convey the meaning of my experience to you? For my experience is private to me, and your experience is private to you; how then, if we each have to interpret every statement of fact as referring to our own experience, do we ever succeed in communicating with each other?[33]

In other words, logical positivism faces the same basic problem as every other form of empiricism: experiences are, in the nature of the case, *private* and *subjective*. Without some metaphysical scheme to support it, there is no guarantee of a common reference point between *your* experiences and *my* experiences. There is no such thing as a 'public' or 'objective' experience. Yet when the logical positivists insisted that 'scientific' statements must be verifiable, they presumably intended that they be *publicly* and *objectively* verifiable. How then to bridge the gap between the subjective and the objective, between the 'inner' world and the 'outer' world? Van Til concludes by noting Ayer's admission of defeat:

> "On any view of philosophy," says Ayer near the end of his discussion of the Vienna Circle, "this inner-outer problem is extremely difficult, and I shall not attempt to give a solution to it here."[34]

In the subsequent section of the appendix, Van Til offers a more general critique of the early analytic philosophers (or "recent scientists"). The upshot is this: although they are eager to distance

[32] Recall that Ayer was an afficionado of the Vienna Circle who popularized the verification principle in his book *Language, Truth and Logic* (1st ed., 1936; 2nd ed., 1952).
[33] Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 238.
[34] Van Til, 240.

themselves from idealism, their philosophy fails for the same basic reason, viz., they deny the God of the Bible and try to build a foundation for knowledge on the autonomous human mind alone. We might say that they pin their hopes on a 'bottom up' epistemology rather than a 'top down' (revelational) epistemology. They seek to build the house of knowledge on a plurality of finite human minds, when the only firm foundation is the unity of an infinite divine mind, the mind of a personal absolute God who "pre-interprets" all the individual facts that comprise the universe and guarantees their intelligibility by his works of creation and providence. As Van Til puts it:

> Bacon and his followers wanted to study the facts of nature "as they are" without any pre-interpretation. Their exclusion of the creative-redemptive activity of the Triune God of Scripture in the world was, in principle, as absolute as any member of the Vienna Circle might wish. But in excluding the self-identifying Christ of Scripture from their enterprise they encumbered themselves with a problematic that is inherently artificial and insoluble. Separating man from God they also separated man from man and man from "nature." They made for themselves a false ideal of knowledge. Man must know all reality or he knows nothing at all.[35] Then if man would know everything, he would know everything about nothing. All diversity would be reduced to blank identity.[36]

Van Til goes on to observe that, despite their opposition to each other, the idealists and the "modern scientists" have this in common: both philosophize within a post-Kantian framework that assumes the autonomy of the human intellect. Indeed, the presumption of autonomy is no Kantian innovation; it goes all the way back to Eden.

> Kant followed his modern predecessors; the idealists followed Kant; the "logical atomists" and the "logical positivists" in turn follow the idealists. The "revolution in philosophy" which we have traced so far is a revolution within the Kantian revolution, within the Renaissance revolution, within the Greek revolution, within the revolution of Adam.[37]

If the new scientific philosophy has any virtue, it is only that it wears its commitment to autonomy on its sleeve while also demonstrating that such a commitment is fatal for human knowledge, because its anti-Christian anti-metaphysics—which is really a covert metaphysics—excludes any

[35] Note the parallel here with Van Til's critique of the logical holism of the Absolute Idealists.
[36] Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 240–41.
[37] Van Til, 241.

definitive pre-interpretation of reality that would bring the diverse facts of experience into meaningful relationship with the universal principles of logic.[38]

> The great service that such movements as logical atomism and logical positivism may render is to show that the more consistently the principle of human autonomy works itself out, the more clearly it appears that once man leaves the father's home, he cannot stop till he is at the swine-trough. The verification principle of modern positivism can verify nothing. It has separated absolutely between a formal rationality that is like a turnpike in the sky and a bottomless swamp of factual ooze on which the turnpike must somehow rest.[39]

In his critique of the positivists, Van Til depicts himself as merely reproducing Ayer's own pessimistic conclusions, while offering a deeper explanation for their failures:

> The "Vienna Circle," says Ayer, "did not accomplish all that they once hoped. Many of the philosophical problems which they tried to settle still remain unsolved." We may add that they will always remain unsolved so long as men seek to solve them in terms of (a) human autonomy, of (b) brute factual reality, and of (c) self-subsistent and self-sufficient logic. There will, on this basis, always be an absolute dichotomy between contingent factuality and purely formal logic.[40]
>
> There is evidence to show that at least some modern scientists and philosophers realize that they have not come in sight of solving their problems. In concluding his survey of the Vienna Circle, Ayer says, "It will be seen that the Vienna Circle did not accomplish all that they once hoped. Many of the philosophical problems they tried to settle still remain unsolved." Ayer might better have said that they have solved no problem. No problem *can* be solved if the problem of the relation between concept and fact is not solved. So long as an infinite number of wholly independent "things" must be related to one another by an infinite number of wholly independent "minds" by their being reduced to a oneness that absorbs all things and all minds, so long there is no solution for any problem.[41]

In the last section of the appendix, Van Til summons the (early) Ludwig Wittgenstein as "a final witness to the fact that the most brilliant of scientists are unable to offer a foundation for

[38] We might say that logical atomism/positivism cannot connect the two halves of its name: it has no basis for assuming any meaningful relationship between the 'logical' (universal principles) and the 'atoms' or 'posits' (particular facts).
[39] Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 242. In the preface, Van Til had made the same point, but referring to "an abstract law of logic" rather than "a formal rationality," and "an infinite number of purely contingent facts" rather than "a bottomless swamp of factual ooze." Whatever the latter expression lacks in precision, it surely makes up for in memorability!
[40] Van Til, 242.
[41] Van Til, 245–46. Emphasis added.

human speech so long as they reject Christianity."[42] Van Til's critique of Wittgenstein is subtle, but can perhaps be summarized as follows. Wittgenstein holds that ordinary language is too vague and ambiguous to serve the purposes of science; we must therefore develop a "perfect logical language" in order to obtain "the scientific ideal." This ideal, however, would be accomplished only by an exhaustive depiction (in the perfect language) of all the individual facts and their relations. That is quite evidently unattainable. In practice, then, we have to make do with ordinary language, which amounts to relinquishing the quest for scientific knowledge. Once again, the futility of grounding knowledge in finite human minds rears its head:

> We add again that not many but all problems are left unsolved and admit of no solution so long as men insist that to know anything man must have exhaustive conceptual knowledge of everything.[43]

In the final analysis, the concluding proposition of the *Tractatus*—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"—is even more radical than Wittgenstein himself appreciated, because it rules out not merely metaphysics (and philosophy in general) *but science as well*. So much for the quest for a 'scientific' philosophy!

3.3. Concluding Observations

Having reviewed Van Til's relation to the twentieth-century analytic movement and taken a close look at the one place where he directly engages with analytic philosophy, we can make the following concluding observations:

1. In his writings on contemporary philosophy, Van Til focuses most of his attention on the British and American proponents of idealism. This is not at all surprising or unwarranted in light of his own educational background and the prominence of idealism during the most formative period of his teaching career.
2. When Van Til does direct his attention to the analytic movement, he recognizes that it arose as a critical reaction to the inherent problems of idealism but argues forcefully that the logical atomists and logical positivists find no more success in solving the problems of philosophy,

[42] Van Til, 246. Van Til refers to Wittgenstein's "early period, the period of the *Tractatus Logico Symbolicus*," indicating that he was aware of the later shift in Wittgenstein's views. Somewhat disappointingly for our purposes, Van Til does not share his evaluation of the latter.
[43] Van Til, 248.

since both movements share the same root error: they fail to acknowledge the foundational necessity of the God of the Bible.

3. Van Til echoes some of the same criticisms of early analytic philosophy offered by other Christian philosophers; for example, the problem of formulating a verification principle that is robust enough to banish metaphysics yet forgiving enough to allow the principle itself to be meaningful and plausible.[44] However, Van Til also presses some unique and arguably more profound criticisms, such as his observation that the logical atomists have concealed metaphysical presuppositions that exclude the very system (Christian theism, with its distinctive doctrines of creation and providence) that would save the scientific knowledge they so treasure.
4. Although Van Til appears to be cognizant of more recent developments in analytic philosophy, such as the shift toward ordinary-language philosophy, it's clear that his critique is targeted only at the first *three* phases (the rebellion against idealism, the logical atomism of Russell and Wittgenstein, and the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle). For that reason, we should not assume that he would direct the same critique toward *all* analytic philosophy as we find it propounded and practiced today. The broadening of the analytic movement in the 60s and 70s, the widespread rejection of logical positivism as self-defeating, the resurgence of interest in the perennial questions of metaphysics and epistemology, and the emergence of analytic Christian philosophy (by scholars with remarkably conservative theological convictions) all suggest that there is more scope for a positive relationship between contemporary analytic philosophy and Van Tilian thought.

With these general observations in place, we are now well situated to consider, on the one hand, some points of affinity or complementarity between Van Til and analytic philosophy (in all its phases), and on the other hand, some points of tension or conflict.[45]

[44] Compare Plantinga's assessment: "The Verifiability Criterion, then, has been subjected to these two lines of attack. Its critics first have shown that every statement of the criterion proposed by the positivists is either so strong that it eliminates many statements the positivists themselves wished to accept as meaningful […] or so weak that just any statement turns out to be meaningful, in which case metaphysics and theology aren't eliminated at all. And secondly it was argued that there appears to be no reason to *accept* the Verifiability Criterion." Plantinga, "Analytic Philosophy and Christianity," 20.

[45] A more comprehensive treatment of our topic would also explore the extent to which subsequent expounders of Van Til's work—most notably John M. Frame, Greg L. Bahnsen, Vern S. Poythress, and K. Scott Oliphint—have engaged with contemporary analytic philosophy. Space constraints preclude such a discussion here.

4. Points of Affinity or Complementarity

4.1. Criticism of British Idealism

Van Til has been frequently (and unfairly) accused of drinking too deeply from the well of idealism.[46] There is no question that he deliberately coopted some of the concepts and insights of the British Idealists, but it is also beyond reasonable dispute that he rejected Absolute Idealism as a philosophy and considered it incompatible with Christian theism. The early analytic philosophers, most notably Russell and Moore, also repudiated idealism, and it is worth highlighting that they did so for some of the same reasons as Van Til. Both recognized that the idealists' doctrines of internal relations and logical holism meant that to know *anything* one would need to know something about *everything*—but since that is impossible for any finite human mind, the idealists could not escape the specter of skepticism. Furthermore, the analytic philosophers and Van Til wanted to affirm (contrary to any Kantian noumenal-phenomenal distinction) some kind of *epistemological realism* about objects in the world, according to which such objects exist independently of our perceptions but are nonetheless apprehensible to our minds.

Nevertheless, what the logical atomists and Van Til proposed as *alternatives* to the logical holism and anti-realism of the British Idealists could hardly have been more different. The former swung from the extreme of logical holism to the opposite extreme of logical atomism. Rather than knowing the parts by way of the whole, we can know the whole by way of the parts. Empirical observations of particular facts can be assembled into knowledge of universal laws. In Van Til's view, this is just a different flavor of the same ice cream: another anti-theistic autonomous epistemology that fares no better in explaining how we can make rational sense of the world of experience. In effect, Van Til's critiques play the two anti-Christian philosophies off against one another. The idealists were right in thinking that for there to be *any* knowledge, there must be *comprehensive* knowledge at some level; there must exist "the Absolute." The atomists were right in thinking that if there is no personal absolute God—no sovereign pre-interpreter of reality—then on the idealists' assumptions we are doomed to subjectivism and skepticism. Science would be impossible. Van Til contends that the only resolution to the dilemma is to presuppose the existence

[46] For two recent examples, see: J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 144–49; Keith A. Mathison, "Christianity and Van Tillianism," Tabletalk, August 21, 2019, https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/christianity-and-van-tillianism-2019-08/.

of the God of the Bible, in whom both unity and diversity are equally ultimate, who orders the individual facts and events of the universe in accordance with a rational plan, and in whose image we are created such that we have capacity—not autonomously, but analogically—to "receptively reconstruct" God's knowledge in our own knowledge.[47]

4.2. Transcendental Argumentation

Van Til is well known for his advocacy of a "transcendental argument" for the existence of God. Generally speaking, a transcendental argument aims to expose the necessary preconditions of human reason, experience, or knowledge; in other words, the argument seeks to demonstrate that some human cognitive operation (individuating, inferring, predicating, perceiving, etc.) necessarily presupposes some concept, belief, or state-of-affairs. Transcendental arguments have often been deployed as *anti-skeptical* arguments, the general idea being that the skeptic who professes to doubt P (e.g., the existence of a mind-independent external world) must tacitly *presuppose* P in virtue of his doubt (or his profession of doubt). Thus, Van Til's transcendental argument for God can be seen as an attack on *skepticism about God*: the atheist who denies God's existence (or the agnostic who doubts God's existence) is actually dependent on God's existence even to express and defend that denial (or doubt). As Van Til pithily stated the matter: "Antitheism presupposes theism."[48]

Van Til's rationale for transcendental argumentation in Christian apologetics is partly theological and partly philosophical.[49] On the theological side, Van Til's conviction is that the triune God of the Bible is the absolutely sovereign creator, sustainer, and director of all things, such that nothing in the entire universe makes rational sense apart from the existence and activity of God. Furthermore, Van Til holds to a *revelational* epistemology, according to which all human knowledge is utterly dependent upon divine revelation (both natural revelation and special revelation, designed to work in conjunction). A rational understanding of anything at all—whether God, ourselves, or the world we inhabit—is possible only because the human mind is derivative

[47] Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), 9, 13; Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), 26; James Douglas Baird, "Analogical Knowledge: A Systematic Interpretation of Cornelius Van Til's Theological Epistemology," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 26 (2015): 77–103.
[48] Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1969), xii.
[49] James N. Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Plantinga and Van Til," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005): 57–60.

of God's mind and designed to "think God's thoughts after him." Van Til contends that transcendental argumentation is uniquely equipped to capture this absolute dependence upon an absolute God: "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."[50] Indeed, the transcendental argument alone can demonstrate the rational inescapability of the Christian God:

> 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 things in the world. ... Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism.[51]

The genius of the transcendental argument, then, is that it proves God's existence by showing it to be a presupposition of the possibility of proving anything at all:

> [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.[52]

The philosophical side of Van Til's rationale for transcendental argumentation is that it offers the only way of settling disputes at the level of ultimate presuppositions (or worldviews).[53] Since one can defend one's ultimate epistemic authority only by an appeal to that authority (e.g., the rationalist has to appeal to *reason* in defense of his rationalism) it might appear that there is no prospect of resolving disputes over competing ultimate authorities without viciously circular reasoning or sheer assertion. Van Til's solution to the problem of presuppositional stalemate is to argue that the non-Christian's presuppositions cannot account for his ability to articulate and defend those presuppositions in the first place; in other words, if the non-Christian's presuppositions *were* true, he would not be able to reason intelligibly at all. Ironically, the non-

[50] Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11.
[51] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 125–26.
[52] Van Til, 381.
[53] Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 59–60; Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 482–89, 496–515.

Christian has to stand on Christian ground in order to attack the Christian position. This is precisely the kind of anti-skeptical rug-pulling strategy that transcendental argumentation deploys.

Van Til's advocacy of transcendental argumentation raises many significant issues that cannot be addressed in this essay. The only observation I wish to make here is that it marks an important point of affinity with contemporary analytic philosophy. Although the notion of a transcendental argument was originally brought to prominence by Immanuel Kant, who is generally associated with the idealist tradition, the fact is that transcendental arguments have received far more attention from analytic philosophers than from those working outside the analytic tradition. As noted earlier, this interest can be largely traced to the seminal work of P. F. Strawson. The literature on transcendental arguments (some supportive, some critical) is extensive and continues to grow.[54] Already some work has been done to connect Van Til's claims with the discussions of transcendental argumentation (and the related notion of presuppositions) in the contemporary analytic literature.[55] It seems clear that if Van Til's transcendental argument for Christian theism is to be more rigorously developed and defended, this positive engagement with ongoing work in analytic philosophy will need to be furthered and deepened.

4.3. Analytical Tools in the Van Tilian Workshop

I've suggested that Van Tilian presuppositional apologetics can be strengthened by engaging with and drawing on the recent work on transcendental argumentation by analytic philosophers. More generally, however, Van Tilians could benefit significantly from the rich analytical toolkit developed within the analytic tradition over last 60 years or so (i.e., the fifth phase of the movement). For example, developments in linguistic theory and modern logic have the potential

[54] For a helpful overview and extensive bibliography, see Robert Stern, "Transcendental Arguments," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/transcendental-arguments/.

[55] Michael R. Butler, "The Transcendental Argument for God's Existence," in *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Steven M. Schlissel (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 65–124; Donald Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument Revisited," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 460–88; James N. Anderson, "No Dilemma for the Proponent of the Transcendental Argument: A Response to David Reiter," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (2011): 189–98; Michael P. Riley, "Barry Stroud's Argument against World-Directed Transcendental Arguments and Its Implications for the Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til" (Ph.D., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2014); Gabriel N. E. Fluhrer, "'Reasoning by Presupposition': Clarifying and Applying the Center of Van Til's Apologetic" (Ph.D., Philadelphia, PA, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2015); Bálint Békefi, "Van Til versus Stroud: Is the Transcendental Argument for Christian Theism Viable?," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 2, no. 1 (2018): 136–60.

to clarify, among other things, Van Til's notion of 'presupposition' as well as some of his more provocative claims about the relationship between God, logic, and possibility.

Furthermore, a significant portion of contemporary analytical work in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of logic has bearing on the themes and arguments that play a prominent role in Van Til's writings and thus offers resources for the further development and defense of Van Tilian thought. Some examples:

- The *proper functionalist* account of knowledge developed by Alvin Plantinga and others has obvious relevance to Van Til's claims that (1) epistemology cannot be separated from metaphysics and (2) the human capacity for knowledge rests upon *theistic* metaphysics.[56]
- Recent work on the metaphysics of abstract objects provides useful material for defending the idea that truth, logic, and universals must be grounded in an absolute divine mind.[57]
- In contemporary analytic epistemology, the distinction between *internalist* and *externalist* conditions on knowledge (or epistemic justification) may help to shed light on some of Van Til's more provocative claims about (1) the natural knowledge of God suppressed by unbelievers and (2) non-Christians having to "presuppose the truth of Christian theism" in order to have scientific knowledge of the world.[58]
- Likewise, some of Van Til's more perplexing statements about the epistemic situation of unbelievers (e.g., "the natural man knows nothing truly" yet "knows all things after a fashion") beg for clarification in light of some of the concepts and distinctions routinely employed in contemporary analytic epistemology.[59]

All this to say, the toolkit of analytic philosophy might be put to good use in the Van Tilian workshop. Van Til's critics have accused him of making claims that are obscure or even self-

[56] Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 53–55; Kenneth Boyce and Alvin Plantinga, "Proper Functionalism," in *The Continuum Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Andrew Cullison (New York: Continuum, 2012), 124–40; Tyler Dalton McNabb, *Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 33–43.

[57] James N. Anderson and Greg Welty, "The Lord of Noncontradiction: An Argument for God from Logic," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 2 (2011): 321–38; Greg Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism," in *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul M. Gould (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 81–111; Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2017), 87–116; Greg Welty, "The Conceptualist Argument," in *Contemporary Arguments in Natural Theology: God and Rational Belief*, ed. Colin Ruloff and Peter Horban (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 217–34.

[58] Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God," 70–72; Bálint Békefi, "Knowledge and the Fall in American Neo-Calvinism: Towards a Van Til–Plantinga Synthesis," *Philosophia Reformata* 87, no. 1 (2021): 27–48.

[59] Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (1995): 1–32; K. Scott Oliphint, "Epistemology and Christian Belief," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63, no. 1 (2001): 151–82.

contradictory.[60] Such charges are often exaggerated and fail to engage with the best expositions of Van Til's thought, but they are not entirely without justification. In my view, Van Til's most distinctive ideas would be none the worse for a dose of analytical clarity and precision, and there is no reason in principle why his most important arguments, which often receive no more than a sketch in his own writings, could not be spelled out with more formal rigor. Indeed, unless Van Til's thought is brought into closer conversation with the analytic tradition, his influence on contemporary Christian philosophy will remain marginal—and that would be a tremendous shame.

5. Points of Tension or Conflict

I have noted three points of affinity or complementarity between Van Til and analytic philosophy, both in its earliest phase and in the more mature form practiced today. However, given that Van Til stands outside the analytic tradition and the analytic movement was pioneered by non-Christian (indeed, mostly non-theist) philosophers, it is not surprising that we also find tension or conflict between Van Til and that movement. We have already explored Van Til's critique of the logical atomists and logical positivists, so we will not retread that ground here. Instead, I will briefly highlight three areas where Van Til's approach to philosophy appears to be at odds with contemporary analytic philosophy.

5.1. Style and Mode of Argumentation

We have already observed that Van Til was educated in the milieu of British Idealism, and that his writings largely reflect the style and vocabulary of the tradition, and to some degree its mode of argumentation. Van Til's general approach to philosophy operates predominantly at the levels of systems or worldviews, focusing on the 'big picture' rather than the fine details. When he engages with historical philosophers, his primary concern is whether they start from a biblical theistic position. Do they *presuppose* a Christian view of God, the universe, human nature, and human history? Do they adopt a revelational 'top down' epistemology or an autonomous 'bottom up' epistemology? His arguments, while penetrating, are never stated in any formal fashion. Numbered propositions and symbolic logic are conspicuously absent. Instead, Van Til employs vivid analogies and images to express his critiques. The unbeliever who assumes that the universe is

[60] For a recent example, see David Haines, ed., *Without Excuse: Scripture, Reason, and Presuppositional Apologetics* (Leesburg, VA: The Davenant Press, 2020).

governed by impersonal chance rather than a personal creator, and attempts to develop his epistemology on that basis, is like "a man made of water in an infinitely extended ocean of water" who tries vainly to climb out of the water by making a ladder of water and leaning it on the water.[61] The atheist's attempts to bring rational order to a world of brute facts are as futile as trying to string together an infinite number of beads without holes on an endless thread.[62] And so on.

In contrast, contemporary analytic philosophy, living up to its 'analytic' name, still tends to focus on very specific, narrowly defined issues, without giving much attention to the 'big picture'. It is relatively rare to find a system-builder or worldview-defender among analytic philosophers today.[63] That would be too ambitious, too grandiose, too… *continental*.[64] Analytic philosophy has become highly specialized, and the unspoken code of practice is that it is best to start with small, manageable, isolatable problems, to make progress on the micro-level, before tackling the macro-level questions. From Van Til's perspective, this is naïve and wrongheaded, on a par with trying to microscopically analyze a blood cell without considering the role that it plays in the organism as a whole. It must be said, however, that the analytic approach to philosophy doesn't *exclude* that kind of holistic, integrationist approach.

5.2. Autonomy and Neutrality in Philosophy

Analytic philosophers tend to be very independent-minded. Searle's reported quip, quoted earlier, captures the general attitude well: "I'm an analytic philosopher; I think for myself." Authorities and traditions may be respected to some degree, but they are also to be questioned and challenged, for such is the way of progress. No issue is beyond dispute; no assumption is beyond refutation. Consequently, many analytic philosophers are inclined to see their discipline as independent of most other disciplines, whether theology, sociology, psychology, or biology.[65] In other words, philosophy is to be regarded as something like an *autonomous* discipline. What's more, analytic philosophy *as such* is generally understood to be neutral with respect to all philosophical questions;

[61] Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 131–32.
[62] Cornelius Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 2; Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1969), 309.
[63] I'm not suggesting that analytic philosophers do not *possess* or *propound* systems or worldviews, only that their inclination is to "bracket them out" from their academic work.
[64] Analytic (Anglo-American) philosophy has often been contrasted with Continental (European) philosophy, although the distinction is somewhat dubious.
[65] If there is one exception, it would be mathematics.

it does not commit one in advance to any substantive metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical theses. The analytic philosopher should endeavor to be open-minded about all philosophical questions and to adopt (as far as humanly possible) a detached, indifferent stance toward such questions, at least at the outset. Subjective prejudices and personal convictions (especially religious ones) must be set aside for the sake of true philosophy. The model philosopher is *not* an apologist.

Readers familiar with Van Til's writings will appreciate that he has no sympathy for such a perspective. For Van Til, philosophy is the handmaiden of theology—and not just any theology, but the *true* theology, rooted in divine revelation and "the self-attesting Christ of Scripture."[66] Philosophy is not, and cannot be, an autonomous discipline. Christians, of all people, should recognize and celebrate that truth. Van Til stands in the line of Abraham Kuyper: the lordship of Christ is comprehensive and applies to the discipline of philosophy no less than to any other pursuit. If we are serious about our Christian convictions, we must renounce the myth of neutrality. Philosophy is not *metaphysically* neutral, for the existence of the triune God and the ontological Creator-creature distinction are the necessary precondition for rational human thought. Philosophy is not *epistemologically* neutral, for God did not create us to think autonomously but analogically, in submission to his revelation in nature and Scripture. Philosophy is not *ethically* neutral, for we are covenantal creatures—either covenant-breakers in Adam or covenant-keepers in Christ—and the "love of wisdom" cannot be detached from our supreme duty to love God above all. On all these points, Van Til insists, there can be no room for confusion or compromise. Yet they are not points that sit easily with the sentiments of analytic philosophers.

5.3. Rationalistic Tendencies

One further point of tension (or at least potential tension) is worth noting. Contemporary analytic philosophy is not 'rationalist' in the sense that René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, G. W. Leibniz, and G. W. F. Hegel were 'rationalists'. It doesn't insist that human knowledge must begin with *a priori* truths of pure reason or that "the real is the rational." (No doubt some analytic philosophers *are* sympathetic toward that kind of rationalism, although the early analytic philosophers, as I've noted, were far more favorable to empiricism.) Nevertheless, analytic philosophy's distinctive

[66] Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 3–21.

emphasis on clarity, precision, logical coherence, and rigorous critical argumentation indicates that its practitioners tend to hold a high view of the power of reason—which is to say, *natural human* reason—to uncover at least some of the most important and fundamental truths about life, the universe, and everything. The impulse of the analytic tradition is to subject every philosophical claim (once it has been suitably clarified!) to a rigorous trial at the bar of reason, and to reject—or at least flag as dubious—whatever fails to pass muster. Whether admitted or not, 'reason' typically amounts to whatever strikes the *qualified experts* (the analytic philosopher and his academic peers) as intuitively reasonable or plausible. If rationalism is broadly defined as treating reason as the final authority when adjudicating competing truth claims, then it is hard to deny that analytic philosophy—from its infancy to the present day—has rationalistic tendencies. These tendencies can be seen in the work of analytic Christian philosophers over the last 50 years, where theological orthodoxy—or at least longstanding theological tradition—has often been set aside for the sake of (perceived) rational acceptability.[67]

Again, readers familiar with Van Til's writings will immediately discern a very different perspective on the role and authority of reason in philosophy. As a confessional Calvinist, Van Til holds to the doctrine of total depravity: every human faculty, including the intellect, has been distorted and corrupted by sin. The reasoning powers of the natural man are not employed toward an open-minded, impartial pursuit of the truth, but toward suppressing natural revelation and rationalizing his rebellion against his Creator. Christian philosophers must therefore always take into account the noetic effects of sin, in both the unregenerate mind and (to a lesser degree) the regenerate mind. Indeed, even *unfallen* human reason has its limits. The fact that our minds stand in a derivative, analogical relationship to God's mind entails that our philosophizing and theologizing will sometimes bump up against the limits of our rational comprehension. We should expect—and do in fact encounter—paradoxes or "apparent contradictions" when we try to systematize divine revelation. As John Frame has noted, Van Til's position on the use of reason and logic is complex and nuanced: he is both "pro-system" and "anti-system."[68] I suggest that Van Til's stance toward analytic philosophy's emphasis on logical perspicuity and rational coherence

[67] Consider, for example, Richard Swinburne's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge and his social trinitarianism (widely criticized for failing to secure a robust monotheism), Alvin Plantinga's influential attack on the doctrine of divine simplicity, and William Lane Craig's defense of a 'neo-Apollinarian' Christology.

[68] John M. Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1979), 295–330.

would be one of *qualified* approval. Yes—clarity, precision, and coherence are commendable goals. All else being equal, we should pursue them with enthusiasm. But they should never be prioritized over theological orthodoxy and fidelity to divine revelation.[69]

6. Conclusion: Analytic Van Tilianism?

One lingering question begs for an answer: Is there any *inherent* conflict between Van Tilian philosophy and analytic philosophy? If there can be analytic Christian philosophy, analytic Christian theology, and analytic Thomism, why not analytic Van Tilianism? William Dennison, as we noted at the outset, has suggested that analytic philosophy is incompatible with Van Tilian epistemology. But I do not see why that must be the case. Even if Dennison is right that Frame and the DeBoers fail to appreciate the central role that Van Til's philosophy of history plays in his epistemology (and in the case of Frame, I'm not persuaded that Dennison *is* right) it seems to me that there's nothing essential to analytic philosophy *as such* that would preclude an epistemology "rooted in the Christian God of revelational history and the content of the Reformed confessions."[70] Furthermore, when we reflect on the three points of tension identified in the previous section, none of them appears to be irresolvable. The difference in style of argumentation between Van Til and analytic philosophers is just that: a difference in style. There's no reason in principle why Van Til's arguments could not be reformulated (and even reinforced) in the idiom of analytic philosophy. Regarding the second point, although many *practitioners* of analytic philosophy suggest that their trade is committed to principles of autonomy and neutrality, none of the characteristics of analytic philosophy (enumerated in Section 2.2) actually demand such a commitment. Indeed, Alvin Plantinga—as analytic a philosopher as they come—has argued that it is entirely appropriate for Christian philosophers bring their Christian convictions to bear on their work, as opposed to adopting a 'neutral' or 'secular' stance.[71] As for the rationalistic

[69] In my own work I have defended a broadly Van Tilian approach to theological paradox which draws on insights from contemporary analytic epistemology. James N. Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007); James N. Anderson, "On the Rationality of Positive Mysterianism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 83, no. 3 (June 1, 2018): 291–307.

[70] Dennison, "Analytic Philosophy and Van Til's Epistemology," 34. In personal correspondence, Greg Welty points out that Plantinga's extended account of warranted Christian belief, which takes into account the doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption, as well as drawing from themes found in John Calvin, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards, serves as a counterexample to Dennison's complaint.

[71] Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1984): 253–71; Alvin Plantinga, "Augustinian Christian Philosophy," *The Monist* 75, no. 3 (1992): 291–320.

tendencies among analytic philosophers; again, there's nothing in analytic philosophy *as such* that requires one to eliminate paradox or mystery at all costs.[72]

In conclusion, given the significant respects in which analytic philosophy and Van Tilian thought can complement one another, I suggest not merely that "analytic Van Tilianism" *may* be pursued, but that it *must* be pursued.[73]

[72] Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology*. For a more dramatic example, see Jc Beall, *The Contradictory Christ*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[73] I'm grateful to Bálint Békefi, Jared Oliphint, and Greg Welty for invaluable feedback on an earlier version of this essay.