

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A CRITIQUE OF THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT
AND A BIBLICAL DEFENSE OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL
(PRESUPPOSITIONAL) METHOD FOR PROVING GOD'S EXISTENCE.

A PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

How is one to defend the existence of God? Is there a proof for God's existence that is absolutely certain? Are there biblical guidelines for giving a sound defense? The purpose of this paper is to critique the cosmological argument and show that it is insufficient for the task of proving the Christian God and to give a biblical defense of the transcendental (presuppositional) method for proving God's existence.

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The cosmological argument has been one of the most influential arguments for God's existence and has been used throughout most of the history of the Christian Church. It has been used by such great minds as Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, Descartes, and Leibniz.¹ The word *cosmological* comes from two Greek words, *Kosmos* which is the Greek word meaning "world," and *Logos*, a Greek word that has many meanings, one of them being "reason."² When the Greeks used the word *Kosmos*, they were signifying a world that exhibits order as opposed to chaos.³ Thus the world is seen as one of reasonable and logical order.

The cosmological argument is an *a posteriori* argument meaning it logically is posterior to, or dependent on, sense experience.⁴ Although there are many variations to the cosmological argument, a simplified form of the argument will be used to facilitate a concise critique. The following is an adaptation of the cosmological argument made by Thomas Aquinas.⁵

Every effect has a cause.
There cannot be an infinite regress of finite causes.
Therefore, there must be an uncaused cause or necessary being.

¹Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, When Skeptics Ask (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 16.

²Winfried Corduan, No Doubt about It (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 109.

³Ronald H. Nash, Faith and Reason (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 121.

⁴H. Wayne House, Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992),

34.

⁵Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica I, question 2, article 3.

This being is God.⁶

CRITIQUE OF THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

An argument always begins with certain assumptions.⁷ The opening premise, “Every effect has a cause,” is at best a non-statement. To say that an effect has a cause is a statement, only if one is able to define the *effect* without bringing the *cause* into the definition.⁸ Likewise, one would have to define the cause independent of the effect. If the definition of an effect is that it has a cause, what then, is this premise even stating?⁹

The second problem with this premise is found in its *a posteriori* nature.¹⁰ It is an attempt to begin with sense perception as a means for obtaining knowledge of everything.¹¹ If the statement is saying, “all effects (one has experienced) have causes,” what about those effects that have not been experienced?¹² If experience is our means of knowledge,¹³ can anything intelligible be said of inexperienced causes or effects?¹⁴ The skeptic David Hume radically destroyed this understanding of causation.¹⁵ Hume argued that no meaningful statements can be

⁶House, 34.

⁷Edward L. Miller, Questions that Matter, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 31-42.

⁸Greg Bahnsen, Arguments for the Existence of God (Texarkana, AK: Covenant Media Foundation), ASA3 Cassette.

⁹Ibid., ASA3 Cassette.

¹⁰House, 34.

¹¹Greg Bahnsen, The Aim of Apologetics (Texarkana, AK: Covenant Media Foundation), ASA2 Cassette.

¹²One cannot assume the Uniformity of nature (or causation) without first presupposing God.

¹³As this type (*a posteriori*) of argument suggests.

¹⁴Bahnsen, ASA3 Cassette.

¹⁵David Hume, An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, ed. by Charles W. Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955).

inferred by this kind of reasoning.¹⁶ Third, it is important to note what this statement is saying, “every (natural) effect has a (natural) cause.”¹⁷

The second premise, “there cannot be an infinite regress of finite causes,” also falls short of its goal. First, it denies the *a posteriori* nature of the argument.¹⁸ Can one experience the impossibility of the infinite regress of causation?¹⁹ Personal experience of the infinite can only be possible for an infinite being, but the very purpose of the argument is to prove the existence of an infinite being. Therefore this being cannot be presumed.²⁰

Second, if the opening statement is true then the second premise cannot also be true.²¹ For if every (natural) effect has a (natural) cause then it must also be infinitely natural (for an infinite regress of causes).²² The well known atheist Carl Sagan said, “the cosmos is all that is, or ever was or ever will be.”²³ Sagan had no objection to the world not having a beginning.²⁴

The conclusion, “therefore, there must be an uncaused cause or necessary being,” is a fallacy of composition.²⁵ A fallacy of composition is when an argument assumes every part (of the whole) has “this

¹⁶Norman L. Geisler, Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976), 22; 134.

¹⁷Bahnsen, ASA3 Cassette.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹One must keep in mind that the epistemology behind this argument is built on experience alone.

²⁰John M. Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 72.

²¹Bahnsen, ASA3 Cassette.

²²The author will soon show that from the naturalistic framework of the argument a leap to a supernatural initial (first) cause is impossible.

²³Carl Sagan, Cosmos (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

²⁴Which is to say that it is not an effect.

²⁵Miller, 48.

certain characteristic,” therefore, the whole has “this certain characteristic.” It would be like saying, every Lego Block weighs less than one ounce, therefore the entire castle built with Lego Blocks would weigh less than an ounce.²⁶ To say that every effect has a cause, therefore the whole of the “effects” also has a cause, is the fallacy of composition.

Second, there is no explanation as to how one gets from the many effects to the one (cause) of the many effects.²⁷ If there are many effects, having many causes then there could be many “first causes” not simply one supreme first cause resulting in many effects. Third, there is a dramatic leap from “natural” to the “supernatural” in this string of causes.²⁸ Why must there be an initial cause that goes beyond the natural sense perception found in the opening premise? Should it not follow that there is an initial “natural” cause and not an initial “supernatural” cause?

SELECTIVE BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR APOLOGETICS

If Scripture is to be the ultimate source of authority²⁹ for the biblical Apologist, then how should Scripture shape the apologetic?³⁰ Scripture does not just command Christians to witness, but it tells them how to witness. Scripture does not simply command Christians to edify each other, but it also tells us how to edify. Should one assume that Scripture abandons this formula and merely tells the apologist “to give a defense,” without also teaching him how to do it?³¹ No, it can be shown that Scripture espouses a method of defending the faith.³²

²⁶Bahnsen, ASA3 Cassette.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹This author is assuming this (not proving it).

³⁰Bahnsen, ASA2 Cassette.

³¹1 Peter 3:15.

³²Bahnsen, ASA2 Cassette.

First, there must be a proper biblical understanding of the unbelieving heart.³³ For “the fool has said in his *heart*, ‘there is no God.’”³⁴ Greg Bahnsen, one of the premier Reformed apologists, explains this verse this way. “He [the fool, the unbeliever] lives and reasons in an atheistic manner—as though he were his own lord.”³⁵ He has not said in his *head*, but in his *heart*, that there is no God.³⁶

The Apostle Paul in the first chapter of Romans reveals still more insights concerning the reasoning of a lost man. He shows how the unbeliever “suppresses the truth,”³⁷ that is to say he has knowledge³⁸ of the Truth, yet he hides from it.³⁹ “God has revealed himself clearly to the unbeliever, even to such an extent that the unbeliever knows God.”⁴⁰

Paul goes on to say that unbelievers become “futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts are darkened.”⁴¹ They no longer can reason rightly⁴² because they have failed to, sanctify the Lord God in their hearts.⁴³ The unbeliever refuses to understand because it is in Christ that, “are hidden *all* the treasures of

³³This will by no means be an exhaustive explanation of the depravity of the unbeliever, however it is necessary to at least scratch the surface as to their blindness to the Truth.

³⁴Psalms 14:1, emphasis added.

³⁵Greg L. Bahnsen, Always Ready (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), 57.

³⁶Bahnsen, ASA3 Cassette.

³⁷Romans 1:18.

³⁸See verse 19, “God has shown it to them” and in verse 20, “clearly seen.”

³⁹Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God, 90.

⁴⁰Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God, 11. Not in the salvific way.

⁴¹Romans 1:21.

⁴²For a more exhaustive treatment of this subject see, Bahnsen, Always Ready, pp 1-23 and Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God, pp. 1-30.

⁴³1 Peter 3:15.

wisdom and knowledge.”⁴⁴ Because the unbeliever does not “fear the Lord,” he fails to have even the elementary “beginning[s] of knowledge.”⁴⁵ Their denial of the Truth is because they “*hate* knowledge, and do not choose to *fear* the Lord.”⁴⁶

If the unbeliever’s reason is so corrupted, how is the apologist to confront him with the Truth of the Gospel? If there is no “common ground”⁴⁷ between the apologist and the unbeliever what should be his method of argument? The apologist must realize that his opponent has a darkened and veiled understanding and matters of faith will appear foolish to him (1 Cor. 2:14).

Heb. 11:3 says, “by *faith* we *understand*.” All knowledge first begins with a basic presupposition.⁴⁸ Saint Augustine held that “faith is understanding’s [first] step; and understanding [is] faith’s [reward].”⁴⁹ He also asserts that one must first believe in order to know (or understand).⁵⁰ “The two systems, that of the non-Christian and that of the Christian, differ because of the fact that their basic assumptions, or presuppositions differ.”⁵¹

Heb. 11:6 says, “he who comes to God must believe that He is.” The Christian apologist must sanctify

⁴⁴Colossians 2:3, emphasis added.

⁴⁵Proverbs 1:7.

⁴⁶Proverbs 1:29, emphasis added.

⁴⁷Bahnsen, Always Ready, 41-44.

⁴⁸The Great Debate: Does God Exist?, Debate Between Greg L. Bahnsen and Edward Tabash, at the University of California (Davis), (Texarkana, AK: Covenant Media Foundation), ASST Cassette.

⁴⁹Augustine, “Sermons on the New Testament Lessons”, 76.1; in The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 1st series, vol. 14, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 6:481 (citations are to the reprinted edition).

⁵⁰Augustine, On Free Will, 2.1.6.

⁵¹Cornelius Van Til, A Christian Theory of Knowledge, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 18.

the Lord God in his heart⁵² so that he will always be on the alert, “lest anyone [attempts to] cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.”⁵³ Greg Bahnsen expounds on this passage giving remarkable insight into what Paul said:

It has been mistakenly thought [from] time to time that this passage condemns any and all philosophy, that without qualifications the Christian must avoid philosophic thought like the plague. However, a careful reading of the passage will evidence that this is not so. Paul does *not* disapprove philosophy absolutely, for he delineates certain qualifications. It turns out that there is a *particular kind* of philosophic thinking that Paul scorns. Paul is not against the “love of wisdom” (i.e., “philosophy” from the Greek) *per se*. Philosophy is fine as long as one properly finds *genuine wisdom*—which means, for Paul, finding it in *Christ* (Col. 2:3).⁵⁴

Scripture never gives an argument for God’s existence.⁵⁵ It simply declares that if we consider the heavens⁵⁶ and observe the incredible vastness of the world with the magnificence of its order, that these facts alone have a value beyond that of any verbal argument, whether teleological or cosmological.⁵⁷ Furthermore, there does not (nor can there) exist an argument that will persuade everyone of the truth of the God of the Bible.⁵⁸ The apologist should understand his goal⁵⁹ as being, to formulate an argument “which *ought* to persuade, rather than as something that *actually* persuades.”⁶⁰

However, Cornelius Van Til was convinced that “there is [an] absolutely certain proof for the existence

⁵²1 Peter 3:15

⁵³Colossians 2:8

⁵⁴Bahnsen, Always Ready, 12.

⁵⁵Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God, 65.

⁵⁶Psalms 8:3.

⁵⁷Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God, 65.

⁵⁸Nash, Faith and Reason. 106.

⁵⁹The author is writing from a Calvinistic view of evangelism that sees the salvation of man totally in the hands of God. This should add clarity to this part of the paper.

⁶⁰Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God, 63. Emphasis added.

of God and the truth of Christian theism.”⁶¹ He continued his claim by stating:

the Reformed apologist...cannot do less without virtually admitting that God’s revelation to man is not clear. It is fatal for the Reformed apologist to admit the man has done justice to the objective evidence if he comes to any other conclusion than that of the truth of Christian theism.”⁶²

THE TRANSCENDENTAL METHOD

Since the Bible (God’s Revelation) is the best source and only foundation for Christian reasoning and the only philosophically sound foundation for any reasoning,⁶³ there is an absolutely certain proof for God’s existence.⁶⁴ “Van Til’s presuppositional defense of the faith mounts a philosophical offense against the position and reasoning of the non-Christian.”⁶⁵

Presuppositional apologetics argues for the truth of the Christian God from “the impossibility of the contrary.”⁶⁶ Winfried Corduan calls this kind of reasoning, “transcendental logic.”⁶⁷ John Frame explains how philosopher Immanuel Kant, answered David Hume, by using his “transcendental method.” Kant asked the question, what are the necessary preconditions of human knowledge.⁶⁸ This apologetic method is an adaptation of the legacy of Cornelius van Til, longtime professor at Westminster Seminary.⁶⁹ Van Til went so far as to say

⁶¹Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955; 2d. ed., 1963), 103.

⁶²Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, 104.

⁶³Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 5.

⁶⁴Ibid., 78.

⁶⁵Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶Ibid., 6.

⁶⁷Corduan, 108.

⁶⁸Frame, Apologetics to the Glory of God, 70.

⁶⁹William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 202.

that all thinking even the use of mathematics and economics were rooted in the biblical knowledge of God.⁷⁰

In, No Doubt About it, Corduan gives the following illustration of how to argue transcendently:

“Rick Mears must really know how to drive because he has won the Indianapolis 500.” If someone were to challenge such a statement, what could we say in response? We would point out that being able to drive a car well is a necessary condition for winning [or even entering] the Indy 500. Strictly speaking, we would offer [offer] neither an inductive nor a deductive argument. We would appeal to what hopefully counts for common sense and experience to make our case: “Unless Rick Mears knew how to drive a car well, he would not have been able to win the Indy 500.”⁷¹

Likewise, if one was to name any president of the United States, one could be sure that this person was at least thirty-five years old, because the constitution makes it a necessary condition.⁷² In Corduan’s words, “unless there were a God, there could not be a world.” In all these cases, “the conclusion follows because in some way it represents a necessary prerequisite for whatever items is under discussion.”⁷³

When using this kind of argumentation it must be seen as ultimately two different world views clashing together.⁷⁴ For acceptance of the presuppositions of the Christian world-view will lead one to conclusions quite different from those presuppositions of one with a Naturalistic world-view.⁷⁵ An unbeliever will often evaluate factual arguments very differently from the way a Christian does.⁷⁶ For example, if certain “facts” about a miracle were given to someone with naturalistic presuppositions it would be impossible for that person to deduce that a miracle had taken place, because their world-view would not allow for a supernatural explanation.⁷⁷

⁷⁰Nash, 61.

⁷¹Corduan, 108.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., 109.

⁷⁴Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 102.

⁷⁵For more discussion on this matter see Nash pp. 21-66 and Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, pp. 261-72. Nash, 28.

⁷⁶John Frame, Cornelius Van Till: An Analysis of His Thought, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 308.

⁷⁷See, Gary R. Habermas, The Historical Jesus, (Joplin, MI: College Press, 1996).

One must first realize “that every method, supposedly neutral one no less than any other, presupposes either the truth or falsity of Christian theism”⁷⁸ So how then is the apologist to argue on these grounds? We are to argue from “the impossibility of the contrary.”⁷⁹ The apologist must challenge the unbeliever to give a cogent and credible account of how he knows anything whatsoever, given his espoused presuppositions about reality, logic, truth, and man.⁸⁰

John Frame said of Greg Bahnsen, “he is in my opinion, the sharpest debater among Christian apologists today, [and] quite bewildered atheist Gordon Stein in a debate . . . with his transcendental argument for the existence of God.”⁸¹ The following is a summation of the argument Greg Bahnsen used against Gordon Stein. It is an excellent example of the transcendental method.

Gordon Stein had been mounting his assault on the presupposition that the Christian world-view is illogical. At the end of his the cross-examination section, Bahnsen asked if the laws of logic were material or immaterial? Stein answered, “how can a law be material?” Bahnsen, “that is my question.” “Immaterial,” answered Stein. With that Bahnsen ran out of time.

Now it was Gordon Stein’s turn to cross-examine Bahnsen. He asked, “Is God material or immaterial?” Bahnsen answered, “immaterial.” Stein then asked, “What is immaterial?” Bahnsen answered, “something that does not extend out in space.” Stein then asked, “can you name something that is immaterial other than God that exists?” Bahnsen without hesitation answered, “the laws of logic.”⁸² Here Bahnsen was bringing it to Stein’s attention that his presupposition (the laws of logic) are immaterial just as is Bahnsen’s presupposition that a Christian God exists. Bahnsen later shows how the Naturalistic presuppositions cannot account for abstract,

⁷⁸Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, 100.

⁷⁹Bahnsen, Always Ready, 74, 152, 253; Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 6.

⁸⁰Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 5.

⁸¹Frame, Cornelius Van Til, 318.

⁸²Bahnsen vs. Stein, The Great Debate.

immaterial entities that go beyond the atheistic “matter in motion” world-view.⁸³

In his book Bahnsen explains it this way:

Our argument as over against this world is that of 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.⁸⁴

Does not this argument render little more than circular reasoning? Van Til openly admits that his approach is circular in one sense:

To admit one’s own presuppositions and to point out that presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, *circular reasoning*. The starting-point, the method and the conclusion are always involved in one another.⁸⁵

Likewise, when one tries to offer an argument for one’s ultimate source of truth (authority) it must be circular.⁸⁶ For example, if one was to say that his ultimate authority is personal experience, and then they try to prove it with something other than personal experience then the “other” then becomes their ultimate source of authority.⁸⁷ So one *must* prove one’s ultimate authority with one’s ultimate authority (or from the impossibility of the contrary). Van Til went on to explain:

Yet we hold that our reasoning cannot fairly be called circular reasoning, because we are not reasoning about and seeking to explain facts by assuming the existence and meaning of certain other facts on the same level of being with the facts we are investigating, and then explaining these facts in turn by the facts with which we began. We are presupposing *God*, not merely another fact of the universe.⁸⁸

So how does this argument work? Van Til explained:

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 78.

⁸⁵Van Til, Defense of the Faith, 201-2.

⁸⁶Frame, Cornelius Van Till, 304-9.

⁸⁷Bahnsen, ASA3 Cassette.

⁸⁸Cornelius Van Til, A Survey of Christian Epistemology (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969,)201.

from a certain point of view, the method of implication⁸⁹ may also be called a *transcendental method*....A truly transcendental argument takes any fact of experience which it wishes to investigate, and tries to determine what the presuppositions of such a fact must be in order to make it what it is....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. It does not seek to find *whether* the house has a foundation, but presupposes that it has one.⁹⁰

It is quite apparent that Van Til fails to ever develop an argument (such as a syllogism). He seeks to show "that the unbeliever's position involves the application of purely abstract laws to irrational facts." And that, "in this way the non-Christian's position makes rational thought impossible."⁹¹ So then, "Van Til's presuppositional defense of the faith mounts a philosophical offense against the position and reasoning of the non-Christian."⁹² His method is an offense based argument that shows the various inconsistencies of the unbeliever's world-view.

TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENT IN A SYLLOGISM

The reader must realize that Van Til would never put his argument in the form of a syllogism.⁹³

However, his followers have done so. For example, John Frame offered this syllogism:

Premise 1: If the world is intelligible, God exists.

Premise 2: The world is intelligible.

Conclusion: Therefore, God exists.⁹⁴

Should one even consider this to be a legitimate argument? It is in the form of a standard and valid syllogism.⁹⁵

⁸⁹Early on Van Til referred to the "presuppositional method" as the "method of implication."

⁹⁰Van Til, A Survey of Christian Epistemology, 10-11.

⁹¹Frame, Cornelius Van Til, 315.

⁹²Bahnsen, Van Til's Apologetic, 5.

⁹³See, Frame, Cornelius Van Til, 299-322.

⁹⁴Frame, Cornelius Van Til, 318.

⁹⁵See, Miller, Questions that Matter, 31-51.

It does not contain any fallacies.⁹⁶ The question must be asked, are the opening premises true? Well, if premise two were false, then one would not know it, nor could one prove it. If one did, then the world would be “intelligible” which itself would negate the very argument.

So what then of premise one? Well here is where the problem lies. One must realize that an argument need not be accepted as true for it to be true.⁹⁷ That is why the presuppositional apologist argues from the “impossibility of the contrary.”⁹⁸ When the unbeliever claims a presupposition will make the “world intelligible” the apologist performs an internal critique to show that the unbeliever’s world-view fails to make meaningful “the laws of logic, science, and morality.”⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

The reader has seen from the development of this paper that the cosmological argument fails to give a valid argument for the existence of the Christian God. The cosmological argument is both self-negating and invalid. There also has been an examination of the biblical considerations concerning the method of apologetics. The apologist needs to sanctify the Lord God in his heart in order that he might give a defense to everyone who asks him for the hope that is within him.¹⁰⁰

This led to a defense of the transcendental method. The transcendental method is effectively built on an offensive rather than the defensive. It seeks to establish that without the presupposition of a Christian God as the basis for logic, reality, and morality, there can be no intelligible conclusions on any basis for logic, reality and morality.

⁹⁶Ibid., 45-47

⁹⁷Bahnsen, ASA3 Cassette.

⁹⁸Bahnsen, Van Til’s Apologetic, 6.

⁹⁹Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁰1 Peter 3:15

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