Transcendental Arguments
An Essay
by John Frame

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is responsible for introducing the term "transcendental" to philosophical discussion. Seeking to repel the skepticism of David Hume, but unable to accept the methods of his rationalist teacher Christian Wolff, Kant came to advocate transcendental argument as a new means of grounding the certainty of mathematics, science, and philosophy.

All of us, he argued, must concede that knowledge is possible. Else there is no point to any discussion or inquiry. Now, given that knowledge is possible, said Kant, we should ask what the conditions are that make knowledge possible. What must the world be like, and what must the workings of our minds be like, if human knowledge is to be possible?

Kant argued that among the conditions of knowledge are the transcendental aesthetic, in which the mind orders sense experience into a spatio-temporal sequence, and the transcendental analytic, in which the mind imposes categories such as substance and cause upon experience. So we know by transcendental argument that the world (more precisely, the world of appearances, the phenomena, not the world 'in itself') is a collection of substances located in space and time, with causal relationships to one another. We do not get this knowledge from sense-experience alone (Hume) or from rational deduction alone (Leibniz, Wolff), but from an argument assuming the reality of knowledge and showing the necessary presuppositions of that assumption.

Transcendental argument became a staple of the writings of the idealist school that followed Kant, and from there it made its way into Christian apologetics. James Orr (1844-1913) employed it. But the twentieth-century apologist who placed the most weight on the transcendental argument (which he sometimes called "reasoning by presupposition") was Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987), q.v.

Like Kant, Van Til was unhappy with empiricism and rationalism, and with traditional ways of combining reason and sense experience such as that of Aquinas. Kant found these approaches to knowledge logically invalid. But for Van Til they were also wrong in a distinctively theological way. Traditional methodologies applied to apologetics, said Van Til, assume that human sense-experience and/or human reason can function adequately without God, that is, "autonomously" or "neutrally." So, at the very outset of an apologetic argument, they concede the whole game. They adopt a presupposition contrary to the conclusion they wish to argue. They seek to gain knowledge of God by adopting a non-theistic epistemology.

The only alternative, Van Til argued, is to adopt a theistic epistemology when arguing for the existence of God. But that approach seems to be viciously circular: presupposing God in our epistemology and then using that epistemology to prove his existence.

Van Til answered the charge of circularity in these ways: (1) every system of thought is circular when arguing its most fundamental presuppositions (*e.g.* a rationalist can defend the authority of reason only by using reason). (2) The Christian circle is the only one that renders reality intelligible on its own terms.

In defense of (2), Van Til developed his own transcendental argument. He maintained that Christian theism is the presupposition of all meaning, all rational significance, all intelligible discourse. Even when someone argues against Christian theism, Van Til said, he presupposes it, for he presupposes that rational argument is possible and that truth can be conveyed through language. The non-Christian, then, in Van Til's famous illustration, is like a child sitting on her father's lap, slapping his face. She could not slap him unless he supported her. Similarly, the non-Christian cannot carry out his rebellion against God unless God makes that rebellion possible. Contradicting God assumes an intelligible universe and therefore a theistic one.

But how can we defend the logical move from "intelligible universe" to "theistic universe?" Van Til rarely articulated his reason for that move; he seemed to think it was self-evident. But in effect, he reverted at this point to apologetics of a more traditional type. Apologists have often noted that we could not know the world at all unless it had been designed for knowledge. If the world were nothing but matter, motion, time, and chance, we would have no reason to think that the ideas in our heads told us anything about the real world. Only if a person had designed the world to be known, and the human mind to know it, could knowledge be possible. So Van Til at this point reverted to a traditional teleological argument. He never admitted doing this, and he could not have admitted it, because he thought the traditional teleological (like the other traditional arguments) were autonomous and neutral.

If Van Til's transcendental approach is to succeed, however, it must abandon the assumption that traditional arguments are necessarily autonomous and welcome the assistance of such arguments to complete the transcendental argument. The traditional arguments are in fact necessary to establish the existence of God as a transcendental conclusion. And there is no reason to assume, as Van Til does, that anyone who uses an argument from design or causality is presupposing a nontheistic epistemology. On the contrary, people who use these traditional arguments show precisely that without God the data of our experience suggesting order and causality are unintelligible.

What, then, does transcendental argument add to the apologist's arsenal, beyond the traditional arguments? First, it presents a goal for apologetics. The

goal of the apologist is not only to show that God exists, but also who he is: that he is the source of all meaning and intelligibility in the universe.

Further, it suggests apologetic strategies somewhat neglected in the tradition. Traditional apologists have often argued that causality (for example) *implies* God. A transcendental argument makes a stronger claim: that causality *presupposes* God. The difference between "implies" and "presupposes," according to Peter Strawson and Bas Van Fraasen, is that in the latter case God's existence is implied either by the assertion *or the denial* of causality. That is, not only does the existence of causality imply the existence of God, but even to deny (intelligibly, if it were possible) the existence of causality would be to invoke a framework of meaning that presupposes God's existence. Don Collett argues that the Strawson-Van Fraasen kind of presupposition is identical with Van Til's. So if creation presupposes God, even the denial of creation presupposes him, and the atheist is like the little girl slapping her father while sitting on his lap.

The Bible does make this kind of radical claim, that creation not only implies, but presupposes God. For God is the creator of all, and therefore the source of all meaning, order, and intelligibility. It is in Christ that all things hold together (Col. 1:17). So without him everything falls apart; nothing makes sense. Thus Scripture teaches that unbelief is foolish (Psm. 14:1, 1 Cor. 1:20). There are many arguments to be made on the way to that conclusion. Not every individual apologetic argument needs to go that far. But the apologist's work is not done until he reaches that conclusion, until he persuades the objector that God is everything the Bible says he is. That is to say that a complete argument for Christian theism, however many sub-arguments it contains, will be transcendental in character.

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