

## Divine Aseity and Apologetics

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The term *aseity* comes from the Latin phrase *a se*, meaning “from or by oneself.” In the theological literature, the term designates a divine attribute by which God is “whatever he is by his own self or of his own self.”<sup>1</sup> Since God is *a se*, he does not owe his existence to anything or anyone outside himself, nor does he need anything beyond himself to maintain his existence. He is not like the idols that depend for their existence on select materials, skilled craftsmen, and ritual offerings (Isa. 40:19-20, 44:15-17, Psm. 50:8-15). Indeed, he has no needs at all (Acts. 17:25).<sup>2</sup> So the terms *self-contained*, *self-existent*, *self-sufficient*, and *independent* are often used as synonyms for *a se*.

God’s attributes are not abstract qualities that God happens to exemplify. They are, rather identical to God himself. That is sometimes called the doctrine of divine simplicity. For example, God’s goodness is not a standard above him, to which he conforms. Rather, his goodness is everything he is and does. It is God himself who serves as the standard of goodness for himself and for the world. He is, therefore, his own goodness. But he is also his own being,

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> I here summarize my exegetical case for this divine attribute. The word *aseity* is not found in Scripture, but Scripture clearly teaches that God has no need of creatures. For a more elaborate

wisdom, power, holiness, justice, and truth. These attributes, therefore, are concrete, not abstract, personal, not impersonal. Each describes the whole nature of God.<sup>3</sup> So to talk of God's attributes is simply to talk about God himself, from various perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

God's attributes, therefore, apply to one another: God's justice is holy, and his holiness just. His goodness is eternal, and his eternity is not an abstract concept, but rather the eternal life of a good person. So God's aseity, too, is the aseity of a person, one who is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, etc. And all of God's attributes are *a se*. His infinity, goodness, wisdom, and justice are all self-existent and self-sufficient.

Aseity also applies in one sense to God's relationships with the creation, particularly his Lordship, which I have defined as his control over the world, his authority over the world, and his presence in the world.<sup>5</sup> Of course to be Lord one must have servants. In that sense God cannot be Lord without his having servants to rule. Nevertheless, his power and right to rule as Lord are not derived from the creation. As King, he is not the beneficiary of a social contract, nor is he bound to terms imposed upon him by creatures.<sup>6</sup> His Lordship derives from his own being alone. God is such a God that he is necessarily Lord over anything and everything he creates.

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discussion, see my *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 2002) (henceforth, DG), 603-608.

<sup>3</sup> For more discussion of divine simplicity as an affirmation of personalism, see *Ibid.*, 225-230.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 387-392.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-115.

<sup>6</sup> He does, of course, voluntarily enter covenants with creatures, and in these covenants he binds himself to fulfill promises and threats. He is obligated to keep these covenants. But the obligations are self-imposed, not imposed by creatures.

So, considering the three attributes of Lordship noted above, we may describe God's control as self-sufficient, his authority as self-justifying. His presence in the world is an implication of his universal power and authority. Wherever we go, we cannot escape from him (Psm. 139:7-12, Jer. 23:24). God's presence is inescapable, unavoidable, and therefore not dependent on the will of creatures. This is to say that God's Lordship is *a se*.

In this paper, I shall discuss the relation of divine aseity to apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith. No one has integrated these as fully as Cornelius Van Til, Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1929 to 1972. So I shall explore Van Til's teaching, drawing some inferences and applications for the work of apologetics today. I shall suggest that the doctrine of aseity is helpful to the apologist in three ways: (1) It helps define the distinctive content of the Christian faith, which the apologist is called to defend. (2) It determines the epistemology of apologetics, how the apologist should seek to lead people to the knowledge of God. And (3) it suggests an important practical apologetic strategy.<sup>7</sup>

### **1. Aseity and the Distinctiveness of the Christian Worldview**

For Cornelius Van Til, the doctrine of divine aseity is the key to a sound theology and apologetics. As he begins his discussion of the divine attributes, he says, "First and foremost among the attributes, we therefore mention the

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<sup>7</sup> For those who may be interested in the "three perspectives" I've expounded elsewhere, (1) is situational: the facts of the Gospel; (2) is normative: the rules of apologetic thought; and (3) is existential: the actual process of apologetic dialogue.

independence or self-existence of God (*autarkia, omnisufficientia*).<sup>8</sup> He quotes Bavinck's statement that

In this aseity of God, thought of not merely as being by itself but as the fullness of being, all other virtues are included; they are but the setting forth of the fullness of God's being.<sup>9</sup>

Van Til typically refers to aseity by the term *self-contained*.<sup>10</sup> So he writes, "Basic to all the doctrines of Christian theism is that of the self-contained God, or, if we wish, that of the ontological Trinity."<sup>11</sup> And, "we must take the notion of the self-contained, self-sufficient God as the most basic notion of all our interpretative efforts."<sup>12</sup>

Although Van Til puts aseity first among the doctrines of Christian theism, he finds it closely linked to other doctrines:<sup>13</sup> (1) In one of the quotations above, and in many other places, he links God's aseity to his ontological Trinity. These two concepts go together, for "ontological" here means that God's triunity is not derived from creatures, but is self-contained. God is a Trinity, not only in history, but in and of himself. God's triune character also implies that he cannot be construed merely as the aspect of unity within the world, correlative to the world's

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<sup>8</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (No place of publication listed: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 206.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. He quotes Bavinck, *op. cit.*, 145.

<sup>10</sup> A search of "self-contained" on the CD-ROM *The Works of Cornelius Van Til* (Labels Army Corp.) yielded 395 hits. He also uses as synonyms *self-sufficient, self-existent, self-referential, self-interpreting, self-determining*.

<sup>11</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 100.

<sup>12</sup> Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 85, compare 88: "A truly Christian philosophy should, it seems to us, begin with the notion of God as self-contained." G. C. Berkouwer criticizes Van Til's emphasis on this concept in his *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956, 390-91, but he is very vague as to how precisely he differs from Van Til's position.

plurality. Rather, he has his own unity and plurality, which is distinct from the unity and plurality of the universe. (2) Van Til reasons, then from God's aseity and triunity to his all-controlling counsel: "Based upon this notion of the ontological trinity and consistent with it, is the concept of the counsel of God according to which all things in the created world are regulated."<sup>14</sup> If God is *a se*, then he has the resources within himself to carry out his purposes for history. His eternal plan does not depend on creatures for its formulation or implementation.

(3) Van Til also reasons from God's aseity to creation out of nothing:

If God is fully self-contained then there was no sort of half existence and no sort of non-being that had any power over against him... and there was no sort of stuff that had as much even as refractory power over against God when he decided to create the world.<sup>15</sup>

And he reasons also from creation to aseity:

The creation doctrine maintains that finite existence is wholly dependent upon God's rationality. And this is possible only if God is first self-contained.<sup>16</sup>

(4) In a summary of Christian metaphysics, he enumerates the above doctrines: the self-contained God, the ontological Trinity, and "the fact of temporal creation," and adds two others, "the fact of God's providential control

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<sup>13</sup> I prefer not to regard any doctrine or divine attribute as "most basic." For the dangers in such proposals, see DG, 392-394. I agree, however, that God's aseity is especially important for the work of formulating a Christian worldview in contrast with non-Christian alternatives.

<sup>14</sup> Van Til, *Defense*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>16</sup> Van Til, *The New Modernism* (No place of publication listed: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946; third edition, 1973), 373.

over all created reality,” and (5) “the miraculous work of the redemption of the world through Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

Van Til often says that the apologist should argue for Christianity “as a unit.”<sup>18</sup> That is, in his view we must not defend a general theism first and then later defend Christianity. Rather, the apologist must defend only the distinctive theism of Christianity. As Van Til often put it, we should not try to prove *that* God exists without considering *what kind* of God we are proving. And that means, in turn, that we should not try to prove that God exists without defining God in terms of the doctrines of Scripture.

Does this principle imply that we must prove all the doctrines of Christianity in every apologetic argument we employ? Critics are sometimes tempted to understand Van Til this way, and Van Til’s own expressions sometimes encouraged that misunderstanding.<sup>19</sup> But Van Til was too thoughtful to teach anything so absurd. Rather, I think what he meant was that (1) the apologist must “presuppose” the full revelation of the Bible in defending the faith. (2) He must not tone down any biblical distinctives in order to make the faith credible. (3) His goal should be to defend (by one argument or many) the whole of biblical theism, including the authority of Scripture, Trinity, predestination, incarnation, blood atonement, resurrection, and consummation. And (4) the

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<sup>17</sup> Van Til, *Defense*, first edition (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 235. In these notes, *Defense*, without further specification will refer, not to this volume, but to the revised and abridged version cited in the above notes.

<sup>18</sup> Van Til, *Apologetics* (no publication data), 72. This is another of Van Til’s favorite terms. A search of “unit” on the Van Til *Works* CD-ROM yielded 88 hits.

<sup>19</sup> See my *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 183-84, 264-68.

apologist should seek to show that compromise in any of these doctrines leads to incoherence in all human knowledge.

But beyond these general principles, Van Til also had in mind a focus on divine aseity, the “self-contained ontological Trinity.” For aseity designates what most clearly distinguishes the biblical worldview from its alternatives.<sup>20</sup> Thus it makes clear in what way Christian teachings are a system of truth, one “unit,” and not just a fortuitous collection of ideas.

Only the Bible teaches that the universe is created and controlled by a personal<sup>21</sup> God who is *a se*, not dependent on the world in any way. Polytheistic religions teach the existence of personal gods, but those gods are not *a se*. Monistic worldviews, like Hinduism, Taoism, and the philosophies of Parmenides, Plotinus, Spinoza, and Hegel, teach the existence of an absolute being, and indeed most polytheisms place a principle of absolute fate beyond the realm of the gods. But these “absolute” beings and fates are impersonal, so they do not have personal control over the world. Indeed, as Van Til emphasizes, these absolutes are *correlative* to the non-absolute sectors of the world. They could not exist without the world. They cannot be defined or described except as aspects of the universe. They serve as the element of unity in the world, correlative to the world’s plurality, contrary to the biblical doctrine of the ontological Trinity. They serve as the unchanging aspect of the world, correlative to the changes of the

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<sup>20</sup> Van Til says in *The Triumph of Grace* (no publication data, 1958), 28, “There is no speculative system that entertains the idea of such a self-contained God. It is only the Scriptures which teach us about this God.”

<sup>21</sup> Van Til correlates “personal” with “self-contained” in *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (No place of publication listed: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 74: “This reference point [for human thought, JF] must be taken as *self-contained*, or ultimate, that is, self-sufficient

world of our experience. So these supposed absolutes depend on the world as much as the world depends on them. They are not truly *a se*.<sup>22</sup>

In this way, the doctrine of divine aseity defines what is distinctive about the biblical worldview. To defend the faith is to defend its distinctives. So the phrase “self-contained ontological Trinity” summarizes the content that the apologist is called to defend.

## 2. Aseity and Biblical Epistemology

The second service that the doctrine of divine aseity renders to apologetics is that it determines what sort of knowledge we may have of God, or, indeed, of anything else. I noted earlier that Van Til uses terms like “self-interpreting” and “self-referential” in apposition to “self-contained,” and that he regards God as self-contained, not only in his being, but also in his “knowledge and will.”<sup>23</sup> For Van Til, then, God’s aseity has definite epistemological implications.

First, God knows himself and the world, both by knowing himself. He knows himself intuitively and perfectly. He knows the world also by knowing himself: He knows what is possible in the world by knowing his own powers; and he knows what is actual in the world (at all times) by knowing his own eternal

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and self-interpretative; in the nature of the case it cannot be impersonal.” His point is that an impersonal principle cannot *speak* to bear witness to itself or interpret itself.

<sup>22</sup> There are traces of the doctrine of aseity in Judaism, Islam, and in heresies such as the views of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. On this fact, two remarks: (1) To the extent that they ascribe aseity to God, they do it because at that point they are influenced the Bible. (2) Their divergence from Bible teachings leads them to compromise the aseity of God: Islam makes God unknowable and remote, fearing that his direct involvement in the world will relativize him. If their God were truly *a se*, he would not lose his transcendent glory by entering history. Islam also turns predestination into fatalism, thus veering toward an impersonal concept of God. Judaism today (whatever recent scholarship may conclude about first century Judaism) is a religion of works, rather than of a *a se*

plan, as well as by his perfect awareness of the temporal accomplishment of that plan. In other words, he does not depend on the creation for his knowledge even of the creation. His knowledge is exhaustive and perfect, because it is *a se*. Van Til says,

God is absolute rationality. He was and is the only self-contained whole, the system of absolute truth. God's knowledge is, therefore, exclusively *analytic*, that is, self-dependent. There never were any facts existing independent of God which he had to investigate. God is the one and only ultimate Fact. In him, i.e., with respect to his own Being, apart from the world, fact and interpretation of fact are coterminous.<sup>24</sup>

This view of God has implications for human knowledge. Van Til says that only on the presupposition of the self-contained God "can man know himself or anything else."<sup>25</sup> First, "from the Christian point of view, it is impossible to think of the non-existence of God."<sup>26</sup> If God alone provides the rational structure of all reality, then we cannot understand anything without presupposing him, even though we may verbally deny his existence. So all people know God, as Paul says in Rom. 1:21, though apart from grace they repress this knowledge.

Yet God is also *incomprehensible*. This term

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God who gives what we cannot repay. And Judaism, like the Jehovah's Witnesses and other cults, rejects the Trinity which, as we've seen, is closely related to God's aseity.

<sup>23</sup> Van Til, *Apologetics*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 10. Note also Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (No publication information: 1967), 19: "The Christian religion says that God is self-contained; that he can say 'I' without needing to relate himself to anything over against himself while doing so." And in his *Apologetics*, 7, he says, "God is self-sufficient or self-contained in his being. He therefore knows himself and all created existence by a single internal act of intuition."

<sup>25</sup> Van Til, *Christian Philosophy* (privately reproduced by Lewis J. Grotenhuis). (I could access this pamphlet only from the *Works* CD-ROM, which does not provide page numbers.)

<sup>26</sup> Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 9-10.

...does not mean that God is incomprehensible to himself. On the contrary, man's inability to comprehend God is founded on the very fact that God is *completely self-determinative*.<sup>27</sup>

A self-contained God is necessarily beyond our complete understanding:

If God does actually exist as a self-contained and eternally self-conscious being, it is natural that we, his creatures, should not be able to comprehend, that is, understand him exhaustively.<sup>28</sup>

So our knowledge of God is, in Van Til's terms, "analogical" rather than "univocal." He defines this distinction as follows:

...Christians must also believe in two levels of knowledge, the level of God's knowledge which is absolutely comprehensive and self-contained, and the level of man's knowledge which is not comprehensive but is derivative and re-interpretative. Hence we say as Christians we believe that man's knowledge is analogical of God's knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

So our knowledge of God depends on God's original knowledge of himself. How do we gain access to that original divine self-knowledge? We can

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10. I shall not enter into the discussion of divine incomprehensibility of God in the controversy of the 1940s between Van Til and Gordon H. Clark, a controversy in which the Van Til party defined incomprehensibility rather differently, as the lack of any identity between any human thought and any divine thought. See my *Cornelius Van Til*, 97-113. As a definition of incomprehensibility, I prefer the simpler definition used in the present quotation.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 12. In *Cornelius Van Til*, 89-95, I argue that this terminology is misleading. Thomas Aquinas used these terms to distinguish between literal ("univocal") and figurative ("analogical") uses of language to refer to God. Van Til's distinction concerns a different, though related issue. He does not deny, as Aquinas does, the possibility of literal language about God. Nor does Van Til use these terms to suggest any form of agnosticism, though that has sometimes been inferred from Aquinas's distinction. Van Til does say, as did Calvin, that God's revelation is "anthropomorphic," that is, "an adaptation by God to the limitations of the human creature," in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (No place of publication listed: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 41, and therefore that the Confessions of the Church are "approximated statements" (ibid.). But,

never know God as he knows himself. But we do have access to his thoughts in the revelation he has chosen to give us, his thoughts given to us through created media. Van Til, as the Reformed tradition generally, distinguishes special revelation (God's words to us in human language), general revelation (God's self-manifestation in the created world), and a divine revelation in ourselves as the image of God. Thus we receive knowledge of God from God, from the world, and from ourselves, knowledge of the world from the world, God, and ourselves, and knowledge of ourselves from ourselves, God, and the world.<sup>30</sup>

Van Til focuses especially on God's written revelation, holy Scripture. For him, the authority of Scripture and God's aseity are related as follows:

It is this God, as self-contained, who has spoken clearly while on earth in Jesus the Christ and who speaks clearly to men now in the Scriptures. The idea of the Scriptures as the Word of God is both the source and the result of knowledge of the self-contained triune God. To appeal to the one without appealing to the other is impossible.<sup>31</sup>

The [message of Christianity] comes, in the nature of the case, by authority. The God of the Bible, as self-contained, cannot speak in any other way than by authority.<sup>32</sup>

Not only is God self-contained, but the Word of God is also self-contained.<sup>33</sup> So the Scripture does not depend for its truth on anything other than

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although he regards revelation as anthropomorphic and approximated, he does not deny that we can confess it as true: true anthropomorphisms and true approximations.

<sup>30</sup> Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 62-109.

<sup>31</sup> Van Til, *The Great Debate Today* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 33.

<sup>32</sup> Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 104-5.

<sup>33</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 41. Van Til has much to say about the self-contained God and the consequent self-contained character of Scripture in his "Introduction" to B. B.

itself. It is not true because it accords with some higher standard. It is true because it is God's Word, and God's Word is true because he says it. And God "alone can identify himself."<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Scripture's testimony, even about itself, must be accepted on its own authority.

That we must accept the Bible on the Bible's own testimony raises the most standard objection to Van Til's apologetic, namely that it is circular. In reply, Van Til insists (1) that all systems of thought are circular when it comes to establishing their most basic principles: e.g., rationalists must assume reason in order to prove reason. (2) Unless one presupposes biblical theism, all human thinking, including non-Christian thought, becomes incoherent.<sup>35</sup>

To summarize: Scripture is God's Word, and therefore it is self-attesting. There is no higher authority than Scripture by which we can verify it, for there is no authority higher than God. God's Word is self-attesting because he is self-contained. He has within himself all the resources he needs to justify his Word to us.

So apologetics seeks to bring to unbelievers that self-attesting message. Apologetics also seeks to present reasons for believing that message. But the reasons may not contradict the message itself. So our ultimate appeal may not

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Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 3-68. On 23, for example, he says, "The self-contained circle of the ontological trinity is not broken up by the fact that there is an economical relation of this triune God with respect to man. No more is the self-contained character of Scripture broken up by the fact that there is an economy of transmission and acceptance of the word of God it contains."

<sup>34</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> For more discussion, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 130-33, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 9-14, *Cornelius Van Til*, 299-309, and "Presuppositional Apologetics" in Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 208-210.

be to human reason, sense expression, feeling, or any merely human authority. Ultimately the apologist must appeal to Scripture in order to defend Scripture. To say that doesn't mean that we must simply say "Believe Scripture because Scripture says so." As Van Til emphasizes elsewhere, we may use all sorts of rational arguments and evidences.<sup>36</sup> But we must allow Scripture to determine what evidences and arguments are appropriate. In this sense, the apologist must "presuppose" Scripture, not only in his own worldview, but also when defending that worldview before unbelievers.

### **3. Aseity and Apologetic Strategy**

The third emphasis of Van Til's doctrine of divine aseity is that it shows us the most radical defect in non-Christian thought. Of course, non-Christian thought often errs in its statements of fact, and it often presents invalid arguments. These are fair game for apologists, though the apologist must be willing to admit it when unbelievers discover such flaws in his own thought and witness. But the main issue between Christians and non-Christians is not incidental facts and occasional logical mistakes. Rather, the issue is the self-contained ontological Trinity. And it is always important for the apologist to be properly focused on that big picture.

Let us see how that big picture is relevant to two areas of philosophical debate.

#### **1. Non-Christian Metaphysics**

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<sup>36</sup> See Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 293. For discussion, see Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) and my *Cornelius Van Til*, 177-184.

Many non-Christian thinkers have sensed the need to find something in the world that is *a se*. That *a se* being may be the universe as a whole (Parmenides, Spinoza, Hegel) or something within the universe (Plotinus, Hinduism) that somehow encompasses the whole. It is the *a se* being that accounts for everything else. Others have been skeptical as to the existence of such a being. But Van Til points out that those who affirm an *a se* being are not terribly different from the skeptics. For what is *a se* in non-Christian thought is either the universe itself, or it is relative to the other aspects of the universe. The *a se* being is “correlative” to the rest of the world.

When Thales said “all is water,” for instance, he took water to be *a se*, the cause and explanation of all else. But on this view, the water that explains is no different from the water that needs explanation. The water that causes is the water that is caused. The mind that seeks to understand water is itself water, and therefore no more fit to analyse water than water itself is.

Plato considered his Forms<sup>37</sup> to be *a se* and therefore to be a sufficient explanation for the changing world. But the Forms could not cause the world, or be intelligibly defined, without the aid of the changing world. The Forms cannot account for all reality, because some of that reality is by nature unformed matter and therefore irrational. So the Forms are *correlative* to the world. As such, they are correlative to the irrational aspects of the world, the aspects that are not Forms. So they cannot serve as the standard of rationality.

Aristotle’s divine Prime Mover is supposed to be the cause of motion in the world. But it, like Plato’s Forms, is impersonal, and it can be defined only by

contrast with the finite world. It too is limited by the irrationality of Prime Matter, which is just as eternal and immortal as the Prime Mover.

Hinduism regards Brahma as the explanation for the world. But Brahma is an impersonal principle, not a person. He cannot be known, except as the opposite of the changing world, or as the content of human mystical experience that transcends reason.

In Plotinus, Spinoza, and Hegel also, the *a se* absolute is similarly relative to the temporal, irrational world. So, in Van Til's terms, the rational principle is correlative to an irrational principle.

So skepticism and its opponents ultimately come to agreement. The proposed *a se* rational principles are not really *a se* because they are correlative to the realities they try to explain. Therefore, they themselves need explanation. Indeed, there is no way to rationally account for the world apart from the self-contained God of Scripture.

Nor is skepticism, however, a legitimate option. For skepticism is itself a rational metaphysical statement, that the world is such that no sure knowledge is possible. Being a negative position, skepticism is even harder to prove than a positive principle would be. If one affirms it nevertheless, he affirms irrationalism by way of an arrogant rationalism. To be a skeptic, one must make, as Van Til says, a "universal negative statement."

The most radical attack on divine aseity in our day comes from the so-called open theists, Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Gregory Boyd, William Hasker, and others. For these, God was once *a se* but he somehow renounced his aseity

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<sup>37</sup> I.e., perfect, unchangeable archetypes of the things and qualities in our changing world.

so that now he cannot accomplish his goals without the free<sup>38</sup> choices of creatures. So in the present world, nothing is *a se*. In one sense, open theism wants to attribute aseity to the human free will. On the open theists' libertarian concept of freedom, human free decisions have no cause: not God, not the natural order, not even their own desires. But if my decision is not caused by my desire, then it is something I don't want to do. So even I do not cause my free decisions. They are random, arbitrary, irrational events, like the realm of Prime Matter among the Greeks. Not only does this view fail to give a rational account of free choice, it makes any such account impossible. The rationalism of the open theists (seeking a definitive explanation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility) has them to posit a principle of sheer irrationality.<sup>39</sup>

## 2. Non-Christian Epistemology

So far we have looked mainly at metaphysical issues: philosophers trying to give an account of the nature of reality. But the same issues exist in epistemology. We saw earlier that aseity is both a metaphysical and an epistemological category. God, who is metaphysically self-contained, is epistemologically self-attesting. In non-Christian thought, it is man himself who becomes epistemologically *a se*. It is, of course, implausible to regard man as *metaphysically a se*, though mystics have frequently tried to identify themselves with the ultimate. But many others have claimed *epistemological* autonomy, which is epistemological aseity. When a thinker claims that that human reason,

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<sup>38</sup> In open theism, *free* is always to be taken in the libertarian sense, defined below.

<sup>39</sup> For more discussion of open theism, see Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth, ed., *Beyond the Bounds*

experience, or feeling is the ultimate criterion of truth, he is claiming epistemological aseity. So Van Til says,

The natural man virtually attributes to himself that which a true Christian theology attributes to the self-contained God. The battle is therefore between the absolutely self-contained God of Christianity and the would-be wholly self-contained mind of the natural man. Between them there can be no compromise.<sup>40</sup>

The doctrine of epistemological autonomy can be made to seem plausible: mustn't we think for ourselves, even in deciding what authority to submit to? Even if we embrace the God of the Bible, must we not do so on the basis of our own judgment? So Van Til refers to A. E. Taylor, who "cannot believe that any man could receive any revelation from such a [self-contained—JF] God without to some extent, in the very act of reception, confusing it with his own experiences that operate independently of this God."<sup>41</sup> On this basis, even the act of submitting to revelation is an act of our autonomous rationality, for revelation can never be clearly distinguished from our rationality.

But Van Til points out that Taylor's argument assumes the non-existence of the self-contained God of Scripture. If that God does exist, he can reveal himself clearly in history. He is the Lord of history and the Lord of our experience. He can control, not only the initial revelatory events, but also our reception of that revelation, so that we can receive it with confidence. He has not chosen to make

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(Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), Douglas Wilson, ed., *Bound Only Once* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), and John Frame, *No Other God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Van Til, *Apologetics*, 97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

our subjective reception of that revelation infallible. But he has given us sufficient justification to affirm the infallibility of the revelation itself.

Of course we cannot appropriate God's revelation without making use of our own thought, our "epistemic apparatus," which is part of our subjectivity. The question is whether, as Taylor thinks, that subjectivity necessarily distorts the revelation or renders it uncertain. The Bible itself teaches that is not the case.

### **3. A General Strategy**

The aseity of God, therefore, suggests this general strategy for apologetic argument: We should make clear to the non-Christian that his substitutes for divine aseity (in biblical terms, idols) cannot do their job. A principle within the world can never account for the world. For such principles are "correlative," as dependent on the rest of the world as the rest of the world is dependent on them.

Epistemologically, we must challenge the necessity of assuming intellectual autonomy. And we should show that such autonomy offers no adequate criterion of truth and falsity. At most it can come up with a standard of rationality that turns out, on inspection, to be correlative to irrationality. On the contrary, only on the assumption that the self-contained God exists and has revealed himself can we have any basis for claiming knowledge.

This kind of apologetic argument is not only cogent and persuasive (if the Spirit opens the heart of our opponent). It also focuses the apologetic encounter upon what is most important. Apologetic discussions are easily encumbered with complex syllogisms and factual detail. But the ultimate issue is the self-contained

ontological Trinity. This is the doctrine that is most clearly distinctive of the Christian faith.

Let us remember, too, that apologetics is evangelistic, a communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Of course, apologetics is valuable in dealing with the doubts of believers. But in dealing with believers, as with unbelievers, apologetics should help them to look to Jesus as the answer to their questions. Van Til's argument from aseity has the virtue of leading people to Jesus, for these reasons: (1) It exposes the pretensions of unbelief as delusions, lies, and idols. (2) It convicts people of the sin of claiming intellectual autonomy, and thus provokes intellectual repentance. (3) It presents Jesus as Lord, for, as a member of the ontological Trinity, Jesus is himself *a se*, and therefore in control of all things in heaven and earth. (4) It presents a God who does not need our good works in order to bless us, who therefore offers grace most freely. (5) It presents God's Word as self-attesting, warranting assurance that the Gospel is true. (6) It shows that salvation is by grace, not only in the atoning work of Christ, but even in the illumination of mind necessary to believe in that atoning work. (7) It presents Christ as savior of the mind as well as all other aspects of human life.

With many kinds of apologetics, it is exceedingly difficult to make a transition between the apologetic argument and the Gospel. In Van Til's argument, the argument is already the Gospel, *suaviter in modo*,<sup>42</sup> and it naturally leads to a more explicit presentation of the Gospel. Of course, even Van Til's presuppositional argument can go off track, as when the apologist takes

pride in presenting his transcendental refutations of Plato, Kant, etc. Satan tempts apologists of all schools to display their own intellectual achievements rather than saying what is evangelistically helpful. Scripture urges us here as in all other situations to speak the truth in love. But Van Til's model is useful even here, for it rebukes our pride and magnifies the power, wisdom, and grace of God.

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<sup>42</sup> Van Til often expressed appreciation for the Latin slogan, *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*, which in a discussion of apologetics can be rendered "gentle (or subtle) in the mode of presentation, but strong in content."