

A Van Til Glossary

John M. Frame

References:

Bahnsen = Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1998).

Frame = John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: an Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995).

VT= Van Til

Absolute Personality: VT's basic characterization of God. Unlike any non-Christian view, the biblical God is both absolute (a se, self-existent, self-sufficient, self-contained) and personal (thinking, speaking, acting, loving, judging). See Frame, 51ff.

Ad hominem: Argument that exposes deficiencies in the arguer rather than deficiencies in the proposition under discussion. Thus, a logical fallacy. But often ad hominem argument is appropriate. See Bahnsen, 116ff, 468, 492, Frame, 153.

All-conditioner: VT's characterization of God in "Why I Believe in God" (see Bahnsen, 121-143). God is the one who ultimately influences all reality, including our own thinking and reasoning about him.

Analogy, analogical reasoning: (1) (Aquinas) Thinking in language that is neither literally true (univocal), nor unrelated to the subject matter (equivocal), but which bears a genuine resemblance to that subject-matter. (2) (VT) Thinking in subjection to God's revelation and therefore thinking God's thoughts after him.

Antithesis: The opposition between Christian and non-Christian thought. See Frame, 187ff.

Apologetics: That branch of theology that gives reasons for our hope. VT saw it as involving proof, defense, and offense.

A priori: Knowledge acquired prior to experience, used to interpret and evaluate experience. Contrasted with **a posteriori** knowledge, knowledge arising out of experience. See Bahnsen, 107n, 177.

Authority of the expert: Submission to the knowledge of someone better informed, rather than absolute submission to God as the very criterion of truth. To VT, this is the only kind of authority the unbeliever will accept.

Autonomy: The attempt to live apart from any law external to the self. To VT, this is the paradigm attitude of unbelief. See Bahnsen 109, n.

Blockhouse methodology: An apologetic approach that begins with beliefs supposedly held in common between believers and unbelievers, then tries to supplement that common ground with additional truth. VT finds this methodology in Aquinas's distinction between natural reason and faith,

and in other forms of “traditional apologetics.” See Bahnsen, 64, 535f, 708f

Borrowed capital: The truth known and acknowledged by the unbeliever. He has no right to believe or assert truth in terms of his own presuppositions, but only on Christian ones. So his assertions of truth are based on borrowed capital.

Brute fact: (1) (in VT) fact that is uninterpreted (by God, man, or both) and therefore the basis of all interpretation; (2) objective fact: fact not dependent on what man thinks about it.

Certainty: (1) Assurance of one’s beliefs (also “certitude”). (2) The impossibility of a proposition being false. VT emphasized that Christian truth is certain and should be presented as a certainty, not a mere probability, q.v.

Chance: Events that occur without cause or reason. See Bahnsen, 728.

Circular argument: (1) argument in which the conclusion of an argument is one of its premises; (2) argument assuming something that would ordinarily not be assumed by someone who didn’t believe the conclusion. See Bahnsen, 518ff, Frame, 299 ff.

Common Ground: That which believer and unbeliever have in common, making it possible for them to engage in apologetic discussion. See “point of contact.” VT sometimes denied that Christians and non-Christians had any beliefs in common. But his actual view was that they *would* not have such common beliefs if each were fully consistent with his presuppositions. See Bahnsen 276, 420-24, 730.

Common Notions: Beliefs that Christians and non-Christians have in common. VT sometimes denied there were any of these. But see “Common Ground,” above.

Contingency: (1) Dependence on something else for origin and/or continued being; the opposite of necessity. (2) Chance.

Correlative: Mutually dependent. For VT, the unbeliever holds that God and the world are correlative.

Creatively Constructive: What unbelieving thought attempts to be on VT’s view. It attempts to be the original standard of all truth, as opposed to Christian thought, which is “receptively reconstructive” (= analogical in the second sense).

Deductivism: (1) Trying to deduce the whole of theology from one “master concept,” (2) drawing deductions from one biblical concept that are incompatible with other biblical concepts. See Frame, 166.

Determinism: (1) The view that every event in the world has a cause. (2) The view that every event in the world has a *finite* cause. VT might be considered a determinist in sense (1), but not in sense (2). However, determinisms of both kinds often presuppose *impersonal* causation as ultimate. In that sense, VT rejected determinism and pointed out that it is equivalent to chance.

Eminence: Reasoning that God must possess the best qualities of creatures in infinite degree. One of Aquinas’s three means of knowing God, the others being causality and negation. Van Til believes that this method, if not

governed by Scripture, yields a finite God, only somewhat larger than creatures.

Epistemology: Theory of knowledge.

Ethics: Theory of behavior.

Evidence: (1) the facts used in an argument to establish a conclusion; (2) statements of such facts. See Frame, 177ff.

Fact: A state of affairs in the real world, governed by law.

Fideism: Belief that God is known by faith and not by reason. VT is sometimes accused of fideism, but he repudiated it frequently. See Bahnsen, 77-82.

Full-bucket difficulty: God is all-glorious; no glory can be added to him. Yet he calls on creatures to glorify him. VT said, therefore, that glorifying God was like trying to add water to a full bucket.

Implication: (1) The act of deriving a conclusion from a premise or premises. (2) The conclusion derived from the premises. (3) (In Idealist Philosophy): a method of thinking that employs logic with an understanding of the psychological workings of the mind in its situational context. VT sometimes speaks of his approach as a “method of implication” in the third sense, something more than mere deduction or induction, but including both of them. See Bahnsen, 172-73.

Incomprehensibility of God: (1) Our inability to know God exhaustively, (2) The lack of identity between any human thought and any divine thought. (1) is the more common meaning in theology; (2) was the subject of the Van Til/Clark controversy.

Indirect Argument: a synonym for reductio, q.v.

Irrationalism: Belief that human reason is inadequate to discover truth. VT believes that unbelievers are both irrationalistic and rationalistic at the same time. See Bahnsen, 717ff, Frame, 231 ff.

Limiting (or supplementative) Concept: Concept of something (like an actual infinity of objects) that doesn't exist (or cannot be proved to exist), but which can serve a useful purpose in thought. Kant believed that the concepts of God, freedom, and immortality were limiting concepts. On his view, we should live “as if” these existed. VT holds that some theological concepts (e.g.: the idea that sin can destroy the work of God) are not literally true, but can be affirmed on a similar “as if” basis. See Frame, 165-69.

Metaphysics, ontology: (1) A general view of the world, a world-and-life view. (2) The fundamental realities that exist.

Monism: Belief that reality is all of one kind; hence, denial of the creator-creature distinction.

Negation, remotion, via negativa: Way of knowing God by ascribing to him the opposite of creaturely qualities that are perceived as limits. One of Aquinas's three means of knowing God, the others being eminence and causality. In VT's view, when this method is used apart from Scripture, it yields a god who is a “pure blank,” a mere negation of finite reality.

- Neutrality:** Trying to think or live without making a religious commitment or ultimate presupposition. In VT's view, this is impossible. Attempting it presupposes a commitment against the true God.
- Noetic effects of sin:** The effects of sin on human thought, reasoning, knowledge. In VT: the sinner knows God, but represses that knowledge (Rom. 1)
- Objective Knowledge, Truth:** Knowledge or truth whose truth does not depend on what man thinks.
- One-and-many Problem:** Knowledge involves uniting particulars into universal categories. But if every particular is exhaustively described by universal categories, then it is no longer particular. But if some particularities cannot be described by universal categories, then they can't be known, or they have no nature. The same problem can be described in terms of the relation of logic to fact, and of that of subject to object. See Bahnsen, 706, Frame, 63ff.
- Point of contact:** A belief held in common between two people that enables them to reason toward further agreement. In VT, particularly the point of contact between believer and unbeliever. For VT it is found, not in a common world view, but in the true knowledge of God that the believer has, and the unbeliever also has, but suppresses. See Bahnsen, 105, n.
- Predication:** attaching a predicate to a subject; hence, making an assertion. VT says that only the Christian world view makes predication possible.
- Presupposition:** (1) a belief that precedes other beliefs; (2) a belief that governs other beliefs; (3) ultimate presupposition: the belief that governs all other beliefs, or the most fundamental commitment of the heart.
- Probability:** The degree to which a proposition approaches certainty. VT believed that Christianity was certain, not merely probable, and that for an apologist to claim mere probability is to deny the clarity of God's revelation.
- Proof:** An argument that establishes the truth of a conclusion. VT believed that there was "absolutely certain proof" of Christian theism by way of his transcendental argument. See Bahnsen, 78-82.
- Qualitative/Quantitative Difference:** In the Clark Controversy, these terms designated different views of God's incomprehensibility, q.v. Clark denied holding a "merely quantitative" view (that God knows more propositions than we), because he held that God knows the world by a different *mode* from man. Van Til found Clark's view of the difference to be insufficient, but he refused to state precisely the difference he referred to as "qualitative."
- Rationalism:** (1) Belief that human reason (seen as the whole apparatus of human thought, including sensation, memory, etc.) is the ultimate arbiter of truth and falsity. (2) Belief that human reason (as opposed to sense experience) is the road to knowledge. VT believes that all unbelievers are rationalistic in the first sense--- and also irrationalistic, q.v.
- Reductio ad absurdum:** A form of argument in which, rather than directly prove a conclusion, the arguer reduces the contrary conclusion to an absurdity.

- Hence it is also called “indirect argument” or “argument from the impossibility of the contrary,” VT believed that all transcendental arguments must take this form. Frame disagrees.
- Self-attestation, self-authentication:** In any system of thought, the ultimate authority justifies itself. For VT that ultimate authority is God, especially when speaking in Scripture. See Bahnsen 209-219, 715.
- Sense of deity, divinity (also, *sensus deitatis*, *divinitatis*, *semen religionis*):** Calvin’s way of describing the knowledge the unbeliever has, but suppresses.
- Starting point:** In VT, synonym for “presupposition.” Therefore, it doesn’t necessarily refer to a beginning point in time, but rather to a belief that governs other beliefs.
- Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re:** Gentle in manner, strong in substance. VT’s description of an ideal apologetic presentation. See Bahnsen, 441.
- Supplementation:** In apologetics, presenting Christian truth as something merely additional to what the non-Christian believes already. See “blockhouse methodology.”
- System:** One’s attempt to express his world view in a coherent set of thoughts.
- That and What:** VT criticizes some apologists for trying to prove *that* God is, without considering *what* he is. Frame emphasizes that you can never prove God’s entire nature in one argument, so the *what* is a matter of degree. We cannot actually mention everything. But an apologetic argument be consistent with everything the Bible says about God. See “unit.” See Bahnsen, 217, 708.
- Transcendental argument:** an argument that seeks to show the necessary conditions for the possibility of rational thought or meaningful discourse. VT believed this was the only kind of argument appropriate to a Christian apologetic, since the biblical God is the author of all meaning and rationality.
- Unit, Whole (Defending Christianity as a):** Defending the particular elements of Christianity with an awareness of the connection of each element with the overall system of truth. Not proving everything at once, though VT sometimes seems almost to demand that of apologists he criticizes. See Bahnsen, 26, 103n, 511.
- Univocal:** (1) (Aquinas) Language that describes its object literally. (2) (VT) Thinking autonomously rather than analogously (q.v.), as if one were divine.
- Worldview (also, world-and-life view):** A philosophy, particularly a metaphysic. A way of understanding reality that governs all thought and life.