

Tuesday, January 10, 2006

Dear Sal

Recently an individual who goes by the moniker [Sal_et_Lucis](#), apparently a Christian, kindly stopped by my blog and posted a brief comment in which he asked me a question. In this blog entry, I will attempt to provide him with a comprehensive answer.

Sal asked: "Just how much of Van Til and Bahnsen have you actually sat down and read?"

My first reaction to this question was to wonder how much of either author one needs to read before he's allowed to have an opinion on something either one of them has written. My next reaction was to wonder how much those who ask me such questions have read my own writings. And though I think these are relevant questions, I doubt I'll get much of an answer to either in return.

Nevertheless, in response to Sal's question, I must admit that I have read quite a bit of both Van Til and Bahnsen, focusing primarily on their apologetic works. For example, VT's *The Defense of the Faith, Christian Apologetics*, various articles available on the net such as "Why I Believe in God," etc.; Bahnsen's *Always Ready, Van Til's Analysis: Readings & Analysis* (which contains lengthy quotations from many of Van Til's publications), and numerous articles available on the net, not to mention the writings of other presuppositionalists such as John Frame, Richard Pratt, James Anderson, David Byron, Greg Welty, Michael Warren, Massimo Lorenzini, Matt Slick, etc., etc. I have found much of these writings tiresomely repetitive (there seems to be no end to the list of woes that they attribute to non-belief in their invisible magic beings), and yet I've taken it upon myself to wade through their tortured prose in the hopes of finding anything that resembles an argument for their god-belief.

Now, I'm not so naïve as to suppose that, even if I have read everything written by these and other authors, that this would eliminate all detractors who would want to charge me with not reading enough. I have found that the easy-chair routine of dismissing Christianity's critics by saying they don't understand or haven't read enough is overused by self-styled apologists, many of whom consider their defense of the faith a kind of "ministry" commissioned by their god. I want to believe that the fact that so few apologists attempt to answer my challenges is explained by the possibility that they're simply not aware of my blog; and I would prefer not to think that presuppositional apologists, with all the fire-power they claim to have in their "transcendental arguments," are choosing to shy away from my criticisms. Then again, I don't find that the criticisms I present in my blog and on my personal page can be found elsewhere that I know of, so it may simply be the case that those apologists who are aware of my writings currently have no answer to my challenges, or that they would prefer to simply dismiss me as someone who hasn't read enough (such as one [Jeff Downs](#) tends to do on occasion). That's fine with me, as I know the word is getting out.

But since Sal has inquired, I am always willing to read more Van Til, Bahnsen, et al., for I know there is much literature on the topic of presuppositionalism which I have yet to digest. I would be very eager, for instance, to find any passage in either Van Til or Bahnsen where they deal with the issue of metaphysical primacy. I take this to be the make-all/break-all issue in all philosophy, since it is inescapable to all cognition. And even though Van Til, Bahnsen et al. pay ample lipservice to "the necessary preconditions of intelligibility," this issue never seems to come up in their writings. I find this astounding. I have my own suppositions for why this is the case, but I'd like to know what Sal and other Christians might think on this. I'm inclined to suppose they will want to rescue Van Til by saying the issue of metaphysical primacy is unimportant, or they may say Van Til addresses it and yet will not provide any citations or quotes to support this.

And while we're on it, where do either Van Til or Bahnsen spec out a theory of concepts? Indeed, to what source would the Christian go for an understanding of concepts? The bible doesn't provide such a theory (and yet [we're told over and over](#) that "*only the Christian worldview provides the necessary preconditions for the intelligibility of human experience*"), so to find a theory of concepts, it seems that believers would have to either invent their own theory as they go or consult some extra-biblical source which does provide such a theory (thus putting the believer at risk of succumbing to "the wisdom of the world"). My suspicion is that Christianity has no native theory of concepts. I've asked believers who say I'm wrong on this to come forward and show me where the bible presents its own theory of concepts, but none have done this (many retort by saying that the bible is not a philosophical lexicon, but this only confirms my suspicion). And even though a good theory of concepts will go a long way in correcting a large number of presuppositionalism's mistakes and in answering most of presuppositionalism's characterizations of and challenges to "non-believing worldviews," it is precisely a theory of concepts which they seem to lack.

Ever anxious to find some way to turn a philosophical issue into an apologetic debating point, Van Til gives us some indication of his understanding of concepts in the following passage:

We seem to get our unity by generalizing, by abstracting from the particulars in order to include them into larger unities. If we keep up this process of generalizing till we exclude all particulars, granted they can all be excluded, have we then not stripped these particulars of their particularity? Have we then obtained anything but an abstract universal?" (*The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed., p. 26.)

If summaries like this are at all any indication of the presuppositionalist understanding of concepts (James Anderson, in his paper [If Knowledge, Then God](#), cites pp. 23-28 of Van Til's *The Defense of the Faith* as "the most direct discussion of the problem [of the one and the many]" in Van Til's writings), then non-believers needn't worry whatsoever about what this camp has to say. Van Til errs by supposing that the process of abstraction involves "excluding particulars," when in fact this is not at all the case. The process of abstraction involves, among other operations, the omission of specific measurements precisely so that particulars can be *included* in the scope of reference subsumed by a concept. My suspicion is not only that Van Til did not understand this, but also that such facts would not be very welcome news to someone like Van Til for they do not avail themselves to the conclusions he hoped to draw, namely that "the problem of the one and the many" requires a supernatural solution (cf. the "concrete universal" which Van Til equated with the Christian trinity).

Sal listed three options to explain his impression of my understanding:

"You either are a poor reader, have a short term memory, or you haven't read them at all."

I can name two more possibilities which Sal overlooks. One is that I have misunderstood these authors. Consider the following admission which one presuppositionalist found necessary to make in order to highlight Bahnsen's contributions to presuppositionalism:

One of the major obstacles in the way of promoting presuppositionalism has been Van Til's own writing style. Friends and critics alike have expressed chagrin at his 'torturous English', his redundant and unclear style, his penchant for sloganeering, and his disorganization of themes. Though he considered these criticisms overstated, Bahnsen likewise recognized these shortcomings in Van Til. (Michael Butler, "The Transcendental Argument for God's Existence," ed. S. M. Schlissel, *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*, p. 70.)

Even those who are sympathetic to Van Til's program have complained about the warbling mentor's muddled handling of the issues central to his primary thesis. And while many would point to Bahnsen one of the prime movers in clarifying Van Til's apologetic, he often turns out to be little more than a cheerleader who is content to cloak those same issues in similar vague jargon and "penchant for sloganeering." So if I have misunderstood Van Til, some apologists have already provided a good explanation for this.

The other possibility which Sal overlooks is that I have read and understood these authors, and that my detractors simply want to dismiss my writings out of hand by tarnishing their source (i.e., me). This of course only serves to attack me personally, and allows my criticisms to go unchallenged. This means that, if my understanding and criticism of these authors are in error, we will not learn of my faults from these detractors. Indeed, it's not unusual for my detractors to do a "drive-by comment," saying I don't understand, I've misrepresented, or that I'm simply dishonest, and yet provide no substantiation whatsoever to these charges when my own writings are right there, available for examination.

There are numerous examples in my writings where I examine and interact with the authors Sal mentions which provide opportunity for my detractors to cite when casting their character slurs against me. One such example is Bahnsen's opening statement in his debate with Gordon Stein. To my utter amazement, many Christians seem to think Bahnsen's performance in this debate was somehow impressive. For instance, [John Frame recently wrote](#) that "it was evident as the debate progressed that the audience became convinced that Bahnsen won the debate," and that "Bahnsen's transcendental argument was carefully put together and eloquently stated." I wonder if he attended the same debate whose transcript I read and examined. I've made [my interaction with Bahnsen's opening statement](#) available to my detractors for quite a while now, and even though many of them have, as Frame characterizes Stein, "huffed and puffed and sputtered away" in defiance of my conclusion that Bahnsen offered a *poof* rather than a *proof*, none have come forward to piece together an actual argument which validly infers the existence of the Christian or any other god from anything Bahnsen claims in his opening statement. I'm willing to entertain the possibility that I've missed something, but unless one of Bahnsen's defenders takes the time to point it out to me, I'll rest with my analysis.

So, to address Sal's question, the answer is yes, I have read these authors, and no, I don't think I'm a poor reader. But, I will also answer by saying again that I am always willing to read more, and if my detractors want to specify a passage in either Van Til's, Bahnsen's or someone else's writings which is supposed to present the knock-down, drag-'em-out argument that presuppositionalists think they have, I'm certainly willing to examine it.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:31 AM](#)

24 Comments:

[Frank Walton](#) said...

Kudos to Sal. You probably read Van Til and Bahnsen but you don't have a comprehensive understanding of them. I think they're way beyond your understanding of what little "philosophy" you have left in you. I don't mean to be mean but it's true. If you're the edifice of what it means to criticize Bahnsen and Van Til then Christians are in great shape :o)

[January 11, 2006 4:52 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

"Edifice?"

Not sure I get the context of how the word is used here. Isn't an 'edifice' a building?

Perhaps you meant epitome?

Awesome critique though...you nailed it...all of the well argued points you made....oops....you didn't...just hit and run like normal.

[January 11, 2006 7:59 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Mr. Walton, or whoever you are, I'm wondering if you read my blog, given your praise of Sal's post-and-run comment and your repetition of essentially the same mistake he made. Like Sal, you've not pointed to any examples of where I allegedly misunderstand Van Til, Bahnsen or anyone else. If I do this repeatedly, there should be numerous examples of this in my writings for my detractors to cite when they make their accusations. But substantiating their charges does not seem to be their habit. Meanwhile, Bahnsen's would-be defenders do not show where either he or his mentor addressed the issue of metaphysical primacy. Indeed, from what I can tell from their writings, they took the matter completely for granted without realizing it. If I wanted Bahnsen to speak for my position, this would worry me quite a bit.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 12, 2006 7:46 AM](#)

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

Frank Walton is an atheist-hater. See his web site :
<http://www.tekcities.com/atheismsucks/index.htm>

He is a brazen anti-materialist and atheist-hater. I wouldn't put any weight to what he says. Trusting him is like trusting Ernest Zundel to tell you about Jewish history.

[January 12, 2006 11:55 AM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[January 12, 2006 3:50 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

badly_reformed: *sigh* "edifice" has been used in the context I'm using it in many times before. Your ignorance of that is quite laughable. LOL, in fact it's the edifice of humor.

Dawson Brainless: you need only read ALL your posts to realize you've misunderstood Van Til and Bahnsen (among others) by a long shot. But hey, don't delete your critiques - they are so good at being so bad it makes Christians look good :o)

Francois Trembling: Yes, I am anti-materialist but I'm not an atheist-hater though I am an atheism-hater. Thanks for promoting my website.

[January 12, 2006 3:54 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

frank_walton,

inhale, exhale

Edifice: (from dictionary.com)

- 1 A building, especially one of imposing appearance or size.
- 2 An elaborate conceptual structure:

So, Dawson is a building, or an elaborate conceptual structure? I read a lot, and I've never read the word "edifice" used in the way you used it. Perhaps you could point me to another example where its used this way? I'm sorry I'm not as smart as you...your other sentence also makes so much sense:

"I think they're way beyond your understanding of what little "philosophy" you have left in you."

Huh?

Also...you still never actually pointed anything out that was incorrect with Dawson's post...I'm sure somebody who is the edifice of theological craptitude like yourself should have no problems with it.

[January 12, 2006 4:27 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

Hey badly_reformed:

>>>So, Dawson is a building, or an elaborate conceptual structure? I read a lot, and I've never read the word "edifice" used in the way you used it. Perhaps you could point me to another example where its used this way?<<<

sigh still a moron. First off, you actually used it in your very last sentence against me. So, you do know how it's used. You're feigning confusion all the while trying to make yourself look smart. But if you don't know what an expression is... Look at it this way, I can say that not_reformed is the "goliath" of all idiots. That means you're a really big idiot. Or how about this, not_reformed is the "empire state building" of all wackos who don't know what an expression is. Get it? Nah, I don't think you do. You are after all an edifice of poor thinking. Man, and I thought Dawson Brainless was bad.

>>>I'm sorry I'm not as smart as you...<<<

Figures.

>>>your other sentence also makes so much sense<<<

LOL, you just spelt "sentence" incorrectly. So please don't tell me what makes sense or not. Since, as you admit, I'm smarter than you, take my word for it.

Thanks again,

Frank

[January 12, 2006 6:55 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Thanks for the help Frank.

Oh wait, you forgot to actually point out one of your devastating arguments against Dawson's blog entry...I'm excited to see your scholarly interaction with his work.

You are a literal edifice of "I think they're way beyond your understanding of what little "philosophy" you have left in you."

Looking forward to your clearly stated objections and arguments against this blog!

[January 12, 2006 8:19 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Mr. Walton, you're getting irritated with NR for doing what you yourself did on the Unchained Radio forum.

In [this exchange](#) between yourself and me, recall what I had stated and note your childish response:

I had written:

"At any rate, defining 'morality' as "whatever God deems evil or good" makes your "biblical morality" indistinguishable from a subjective species of morality which informs its code of conduct with someone's wishes and preferences."

Pretending not to know the meaning of the word 'species', you came back with the following mocking reply:

"Subjective species of morality? So animals make moral choices? Then do we punish a frog for eating a fly?"

From questions like this, you demonstrate either that you do not grasp the principle behind the genus-species distinction, or that you simply want to use laughter as a diversionary tactic, which, according to sources cited by Paul Manata, is a big no-no. But now when you think someone is distorting your words in similar manner (and not even to the degree that you did here), you lower yourself to name-calling. By doing so, you simply confirm the points I made in one of my recent blogs, [With Minds of Children](#).

At any rate, you are free to think what you want, and enshrine your wish-fantasy worldview to your heart's content. But do not come here and call other people names. This will not be tolerated and further instances like this will simply get you banned from posting your comments here.

Meanwhile, if you should choose to interact in an adult manner, you are invited to support your charges of misunderstanding, or kindly retract them if you cannot support them.

Oh, and one last thing... If mistakes in writing such as spelling and grammar errors are an indication of ignorance on the part of a writer, I am happy to provide examples of such errors in Van Til's writings. Shall I do this?

Thank you,
Dawson

[January 13, 2006 3:55 AM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

It's quite funny how you recognize me from the unchainedradio.com forum when earlier you said, "whoever you are." Meaning, you knew who I was all along but can't stand the fact that I keep refuting you over and over again, so you try to forget me like a bad dream.

Your critique of my rhetorical question as "childish" is childish in of itself, Dawson. I'm quite serious about that question. I'm well aware of the "genus-species distinction" which would have one believe (such as yourself) that morality is subjective EVEN AMONG ANIMALS. My question while ridiculous is really a refutation of your equally ridiculous claim that "subjective species of morality which informs its code of conduct with someone's wishes and preferences." I know you don't like the idea that I got you there but being mean about it won't do.

Am I childish? Well, at least some children don't [lie](#). Compared to you, I'm a mature adult.

[January 13, 2006 1:40 PM](#)

[VanTilsGhost](#) said...

NR and Dawson,

You should both know that Frank Walton is not really a Theist. He's actually a non-believer, but he plays the role of 'whacko theist' to make Christians look foolish.

I've read his funny postings on various boards/blogs, and eventually figured out his clever ruse! That is why he just rants/name calls, and doesn't actually make any intelligent arguments or refutations.

Good work Frank! You're a hoot! ;)

[January 13, 2006 4:08 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

LOL I think a person who thinks he knows what's intelligent ought to spell "wacko" correctly. I may be a hoot but you're an idiot.

[January 13, 2006 4:29 PM](#)

[VanTilsGhost](#) said...

Frank,

Dear chap...

Your obsession with spelling is pretty funny...check out this link for the alternate spellings of 'whacko.'

<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=whacko>

As usual...you do a GREAT job of making Theists look silly! (I applaud your 'wolf in sheep's clothing' efforts!)

[January 13, 2006 5:46 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

sigh

<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=wacko>

Notice the first spelling in the link you sent me, it's spelt "wacko." I guessed, you missed it since you're a wacky wacko.

This makes you look not only silly but stupid.

[January 13, 2006 10:20 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Frank,

You may want to check with a pulmonologist (that's a breathing specialist) for that *sighing* problem you have. An inhaler may be a simple solution.

As usual, you are great entertainment! Maybe you should take your 'edifice of Theism' act on the road? Or, you could become a "Master Speller." Does your quality college offer that option?

In all seriousness...its been fun reading your comments...but I was wondering when you were going to actually interact with Dawson's blog? Are you still putting something together?

[January 14, 2006 4:09 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Hi Dawson,

As I gather material from the corpus of your writings, I came accross something interesting in your entry on "Bahnsen's Poof." You said: "*But a treatment of the problem of universals is not what my blog today will focus on.*"

And, since I do enjoy studying this issue in metaphysics (read a book or two or three on it) I would really like to see you answer "the problem of universals."

Just thought I could offer you some fodder for an up-coming entry?

best,
Paul

[January 14, 2006 8:37 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Paul,

It is good that you come back to me after all these months. It is also good that you have chosen to read a book (or is it two or three?) on metaphysics, but I wonder which one(s) you have chosen to read.

You ask me to present a solution to the problem of universals. I'm not sure why you would want this since you've already presupposed that whatever I present will be wrong and internally incoherent, haven't you?

Meanwhile, I'd like to see Jesus' solution to the problem of universals, but I cannot find it in the New Testament. Perhaps you could point it out to me since such a solution must be infallible and therefore flawless, right? Besides, you wouldn't expect something from a mere human being like me that your own incarnadictory god-man doesn't already provide, would you?

Regards,
Dawson

[January 14, 2006 1:07 PM](#)

[Clarence the Theologian](#) said...

Mr. Bethrick,

I posted this comment on the "Bahnsen-proof" post you hav emade, but it works here just as well: "The previous commentor above is right. You have indeed misunderstood the argument. I'm not sure who said this quote (and if you know, it will help me), it may have been Niebuhr or Heidegger, but "If God did not exist, we would not know to ask that question." Without God (as the source of logic and the precondition for knowledge, the epistemic a priori), all is arbitrary. As Sartre said, "Since there is no god, there is no theoretical difference between helping an old woman cross the street or pushing her in front of a truck." But there is a god, which is why it is repulsive to push women in front of trucks. Bahnsen proved god's existence by the impossibility of his non-existence. There is nothing accounted for in the atheist's epistemology to secure certainty in reasoning from A to B in his deduction or induction. In fact, since all thought is arbitrary (given the atheist's presupposition of epistemic relativism), it is true

that there is god and non-god; Hitler=innocence; squares are round." N.B. I would add that Jesus' infallible words here would be "the reason you do not believe is that you're not part of my flock" (cf. John 10).

[January 14, 2006 8:48 PM](#)

[Clarence the Theologian](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[January 15, 2006 8:04 AM](#)

[Clarence the Theologian](#) said...

Mr. Bethrick,

I want to add to what I said above. You ask for compelling proof, such as the "beyond reasonable doubt" business from a courtroom or the syllogism. That's not what is being offered here. We have been saying along with Kant, that without a transcendent source to define logic, then logic is arbitrary and unintelligible. If the rules for logic are social conventions, then I win this discussion. Because $2 + 2 = 7$. Why? Because of relativism. But even there, I'm stuck, because relativism says that all is relative, even the law of relativism. As Aristotle said, if you want to see that the law of non-contradiction exists, open your mouth. Your mouth is either open or closed, it can't be both. One of us is wrong sir. We cannot both be right. Even if one espouses some form of Eastern metaphysic that denies the "either/or" for a "both/and." Either the both/and is right or the either/or is right. I cannot prove to you logically God's existence (and I agree with Van Til, we are talking about the Trinity, not allah, or brahma). The only reason I believe is because God ordained me to do so (Acts 16; Ephesians 1.1-16; John 6.33ff; Romans 9). That's the difference between me and you; as I said elsewhere, I was an atheist once. **Then God saved me**; hence, His existence is existentially self-validating. How is the Bible infallible? The same reason. A priori--and not an arbitrary a priori like Kant (which is why Rousseau and Voltaire rejected Kant's theism), but one based upon an absolute self-validating metaphysic you keep hunting for: the Trinity. But I can't convince you (as Whitehead observed) that the last five minutes have actually occurred or whether the Civil War actually happened. God must convince you as well, but I think He's beginning to, which is why you have this website devoted to showing His non-existence. Odd, you are fighting against what you believe is a non-entity. Hmm . . . Tell me this, when did you stop believing in God and why?

[January 15, 2006 8:10 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Hello Dawson,

Were you asking me which books I've read? or was that rhetorical? Anyway, I've read Loux, the articles in Routledges companion to metaphysics (i.e., Russell, Davidson, Quine, et. al.) and Moreland's book on the subject (not to mention, a few other articles here and there).

I would want you to write an entry so that I could see your "treatment." Even if I presupposed what you would say was incoherent, that doesn't mean I can't/won't offer a refutation. The refutation will stand or fall on its own merits, not because I have presupposed that you can't answer it. The posting will be public and I think that even those who don't share my presuppositions will be able to notice if I was able to show problems (or not) in your "treatment."

I'm not getting the Jesus point? I don't see the argument (remember, you don't like people just asserting things; e.g., "Dawson misrepresents Christianity," etc) where if Jesus never gave a "treatment" on something then that is somehow problematic for me?

Anyway, if you just want to play games that's fine, I won't comment anymore. But if you want to post your "treatment" then I'd like to read it.

best,
Paul

[January 16, 2006 2:04 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Oh, and Dawson, thank you for your respect. I was pleasantly surprised to see that I am not considered a "mind lost in confusion" over on your links list.

[January 18, 2006 9:15 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Oh, and Dawson, thank you for your respect. I was pleasantly surprised to see that I am not considered a "mind lost in confusion" over on your links list.

[January 18, 2006 9:15 AM](#)