Friday, April 15, 2005

Putting Paul's TAG to the Geusha Test

Sometimes theistic arguments are so frail and thin on content that they only need lighthearted parody to show their absurd implications. Such is the case with Paul Manata's "transcendental argument" for the existence of the Christian god that he proposed in the comments section of Francois Tremblay's blog Manata Ja-ja.

First, let's familiarize ourselves with the basic thrust of what presuppositionalists mean by "transcendental argument." The following is taken from Greg Bahnsen who is championed by many apologists today as the foremost exponent of presuppositionalism and TAG, the "transcendental argument for the existence of God":

> "Transcendental reasoning is concerned to discover what general conditions must be fulfilled for any particular instance of knowledge to be possible; it has been central to the philosophies of secular thinkers such as Aristotle and Kant, and it has become a matter of inquiry in contemporary, analytically minded philosophy. [Christian apologist Cornelius] Van Til asks what view of man, mind, truth, language, and the world is necessarily presupposed by our conception of knowledge and our methods of pursuing it. For him, the transcendental answer is supplied at the very first step of man's reasoning - not by autonomous philosophical speculation, but by transcendent revelation from God." (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 5n.10.)

Obviously Bahnsen wanted to take this stuff seriously, for his own book on the matter is over 700 pages long! The overwhelming bulk of it, however, is preoccupied either with quoting his mentor Van Til at nauseating length, or obsessing over non-believers and their unwillingness to accept Bahnsen's religious claims on his say so. (I know, such nerve!)

Now here is the argument that Paul Manata offered after being repeatedly pressed to offer one:

> Step 1 Prove A: God exists.
> Step 2 Assume ¬A: God does not exist.
> Step 3 If ¬A, then B: there are no laws of logic, uniformity of nature, and moral absolutes.
> Step 4 ¬B: There are laws of logic, nature is uniform, and there are moral absolutes. Step 5 ¬¬A by Modus Tollens.
> Step 6 A by negation.
> Q.E.D.

Of this six-step proof, Paul claims that it "is valid so you can't pick on the form, only the premises." Of course, one can assemble a valid argument for anything, even to prove arbitrary ideas. So this is not much of an achievement. For instance, consider the following:

> (1) If paper can be made from wood pulp, then the moon is made of green cheese.
> (2) Paper can be made from wood pulp.
> (3) Therefore the moon is made of green cheese.

Following a simple modus ponens format, this argument is formally valid. But are the premises true? While the argument is formally valid, its first premise commits the informal fallacy known as non sequitur: it does not follow from the fact that paper can be made from wood pulp that the moon is made of green cheese. Formal validity is only the first hurdle one must overcome on his way to soundness.

Now, Paul's TAG does attempt to deal with the issues that Bahnsen described as belonging to a transcendental argument's chief concern, namely identifying "what view of man, mind, truth, language, and the world is necessarily presupposed by our conception of knowledge and our methods of pursuing it." So at least Paul's TAG appears to have transcendental relevance.

The problem with Paul's TAG, however, is deeper than a mere non sequitur (though this could be argued in the case of the argument Paul has presented). The problem is that its intended conclusion has no reference to reality. And while presuppositionalists are likely prone to snap at this observation by accusing me of begging the question (one wonders if they know how to say anything else sometimes), TAG's overwhelming susceptibility to parody is more than sufficient to reject it.

Below I have recast Paul's TAG to show that it fails four tests for arbitrariness, namely the Geusha Test, the Loopto Test, the V-ger Test, and the Tlacuelotlatl Test. A theistic argument fails either one of these tests when it establishes a conclusion that contradicts the conclusion of the argument as it was originally worded. If TAG fails any one of these tests, then TAG must be rejected.

First the **Geusha Test**:

    Step 1 Prove A: Geusha exists.
    Step 2 Assume ¬A: Geusha does not exist.
    Step 3 If ¬A, then B: there are no laws of logic, uniformity of nature, and moral absolutes.
    Step 4 ¬B: There are laws of logic, nature is uniform, and there are moral absolutes.
    Step 5 ¬¬A by Modus Tollens.
    Step 6 A by negation.
    Q.E.D.

    "This is valid so you can't pick on the form, only the premises."

Look at that! Paul's TAG clearly fails the Geusha Test, for the Geusha Test reveals that one can reach a conclusion that contradicts TAG's by using the very same course of reasoning that TAG employs. So to answer Bahnsen, we have the following:

    "For the Geusha believer, the transcendental answer is supplied at the very first step of man's reasoning - not by autonomous philosophical speculation, but by transcendent revelation from Geusha."

Now the **Loopto Test**:

    Step 1 Prove A: Loopto exists.
    Step 2 Assume ¬A: Loopto does not exist.
    Step 3 If ¬A, then B: there are no laws of logic, uniformity of nature, and moral absolutes.
    Step 4 ¬B: There are laws of logic, nature is uniform, and there are moral absolutes.
    Step 5 ¬¬A by Modus Tollens.
    Step 6 A by negation.
    Q.E.D.

    "This is valid so you can't pick on the form, only the premises."

Here we have another failure, this time with the Loopto Test. It reveals that one can reach a conclusion that contradicts TAG's by using the very same course of reasoning that TAG employs. So to answer Bahnsen, we have the following:

    "For Loopto believer, the transcendental answer is supplied at the very first step of man's reasoning - not by autonomous philosophical speculation, but by transcendent revelation from Loopto."

Here we have the famous **V-ger Test**:

    Step 1 Prove A: V-ger exists.
    Step 2 Assume ¬A: V-ger does not exist.
    Step 3 If ¬A, then B: there are no laws of logic, uniformity of nature, and moral absolutes.
    Step 4 ¬B: There are laws of logic, nature is uniform, and there are moral absolutes.
    Step 5 ¬¬A by Modus Tollens.
    Step 6 A by negation.
    Q.E.D.

    "This is valid so you can't pick on the form, only the premises."

Again we have failure. For the V-ger Test reveals that one can reach a conclusion that contradicts TAG's by using the very same course of reasoning that TAG employs. So to answer Bahnsen, we have the following:

    "For the V-gerist, the transcendental answer is supplied at the very first step of man's reasoning - not by autonomous philosophical speculation, but by transcendent revelation from V-ger."

And finally the formidable **Tlacuelotlatl Test**:

    Step 1 Prove A: Tlacuelotlatl exists.
    Step 2 Assume ¬A: Tlacuelotlatl does not exist.
    Step 3 If ¬A, then B: there are no laws of logic, uniformity of nature, and moral absolutes.

Step 4 ¬B: There are laws of logic, nature is uniform, and there are moral absolutes.
Step 5 ¬¬A by Modus Tollens.
Step 6 A by negation.
Q.E.D.

"This is valid so you can't pick on the form, only the premises."

Paul's TAG also fails the Tlacuelotlatl Test. It reveals that one can reach a conclusion that contradicts TAG's by using the very same course of reasoning that TAG employs. So to answer Bahnsen, we have the following:

"For the Tlacuelotlatlist, the transcendental answer is supplied at the very first step of man's reasoning - not by autonomous philosophical speculation, but by transcendent revelation from Tlacuelotlatl."

Although this may seem repetitive, I wanted to make sure that I wasn't slighting Pau's TAG in any way. But the results of the tests are clear: Paul's TAG is just too vulnerable to parody to be worthy of any further serious consideration. So long as any of these tests establish a conclusion that rivals TAG's by TAG's own course of reasoning, TAG fails. And that's precisely what happened when TAG was put to these tests. QED.

It seems Paul's TAG just got goosed!

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at 7:30 AM

3 Comments:

Francois Tremblay said...

You forgot Cthuluhu.

April 15, 2005 9:22 AM

Bahnsen Burner said...

Ha! Well, Cthuluhu didn't return my voicemail, so I didn't want to use his name without his consent...

April 15, 2005 11:42 AM

Zachary Moore said...

You're mopping the floor with Paul's arguments. Great work.

April 18, 2005 8:49 AM