

WTJ 63 (2002) 95-117

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISES,
DRAMATIC NARRATIVES, AND APOLOGETICS:
THE *AD HOMINEM* ONCE MORE

MICHAEL W. PAYNE

In the following essay I will offer some exploratory reflections on the use of the *ad hominem* argument within a presuppositional apologetic methodology. More specifically, my purpose is to clarify its role in producing an epistemological crisis for the unbeliever. After first mapping the nature of the controversy between presuppositionalists and evidentialists over the issue of “objectivity” and “rationality,” I will survey Cornelius Van Til’s brief comments on the *ad hominem* argument’s use and usefulness, particularly the guidelines he employs in articulating its proper application. If, as Van Til seems to suggest, the *ad hominem* argument is intended to facilitate a *coming to epistemological self-consciousness*¹ on the part of the unbeliever, a problem emerges. Given the presuppositionalist’s insistence on the presuppositional nature (circularity) of all thought and predication, and subsequently that these ultimate commitments (presuppositions) are unfalsifiable (hold revisionary immunity), then what is the point of argument? The answer will require a brief consideration of Van Til’s language of *antithesis* and the role this language can and often does play in obfuscating the nature of the *common ground* that exists between believer and unbeliever. In an attempt to achieve greater clarity with regard to the role of argument in producing an epistemological crisis, I will explore two recent attempts to a) explore the nature of epistemological crises, and b) analyze the role of the *ad hominem* as a form of *practical reason*. For the former I will examine the work of Alasdair MacIntyre,² and with regard to the latter I will turn to the writings of Charles Taylor.³ In the end I will conclude that presuppositional apologetics is not stalled by its commitment to the normative role of ultimate commitments. The *ad hominem* argument of Van Til, once clarified and enlarged by the insights provided by MacIntyre and Taylor,

Michael W. Payne is Associate Professor of Theology and Missions at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, MS.

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1954), 84-87.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” originally published in *Monist* 60 (1977): 453-72. All references cited here are from the reprinted version of the article found in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 138-57.

³ Charles Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reasoning” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 34-60.

serves to promote lively argument with the unbeliever—argument circumscribed by the theological limitations imposed by Scripture itself.

I. *Introduction: The Problem Posed—The Incorrigeability Thesis*

The context in which the discussion of the *ad hominem* argument is best served is as follows. A common complaint made against presuppositional apologetics is that it finally reduces to *fideism*.⁴ This is a result, according to some critics of presuppositionalism, of having no place to go once the apologist establishes the circularity of all arguments. Critics assert that if all positions are linked to “ultimate commitments,” or “basic presuppositions,” all of which are incorrigible at the ultimate level, i.e., not subject to correction on the basis of the accumulation and presentation of new facts, i.e., “proofs”—then all the apologist has left is the appeal to his or her recognized authority which is “self-attesting” and requires faith for its acceptance. Further, it is suggested that if both the believer and the unbeliever argue consistently within their own basic presuppositions, there will be no basis for further conversation or debate. Critics charge that apologetics simply becomes a matter of restating one’s own position in ever sharper and more direct ways.⁵

Some suggest that what is needed to overcome such an impasse is a distinction between “truth” and “evaluation.” For example, it is argued that once we have established some context-independent (theory-independent) criteria of “truth”—a kind of “presuppositionless first principle” (e.g., law of non-contradiction, identity, excluded middle)⁶—we can then proceed to “evaluate” each worldview on its merits as to its being “true” or “false,” according to its ability to measure up to the neutral criteria we have agreed to in the beginning.⁷

⁴ This is the common *mantra* of evidentialists against presuppositionalism. See R. C. Sproul, A. Lindsley and J. Gerstner, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 184-87, 307-309 as well as Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 56-58. Clark Pinnock, “The Philosophy of Christian Evidences,” in *Jerusalem and Athens* (ed. E. R. Gechan; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 422-23, accuses Van Til of “irrational fideism.” *Fideism* is itself a rather complex notion which is again beyond the scope of the present study. However, an excellent analysis of the contours of the subject can be found in Paul Helm, *Belief Policies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 189-216.

⁵ These charges are not unlike those made against Polanyi, Kuhn, and Feyerabend in the philosophy of science and George Lindbeck’s *cultural linguistic* approach to religion.

⁶ For example, in *Classical Apologetics* the authors state: “The law of noncontradiction is the foundation upon which all rationality is established. . . . It creates the dimensions and prescribes the limits of all common ground for discussion. It is the necessary precondition for any and all science” (72).

⁷ This is the argument used by Harold Netland in his “Apologetics, Worldviews, and The Problem of Neutral Criteria,” *TJ* 12 (1991): 39-58; as well as in “Truth, authority and modernity: shopping for truth in supermarket of worldviews,” in *Faith and Modernity* (ed. Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, and C. Sugden; Oxford: Regnum Books, 1994), 89-115. He argues for this position more fully in his *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1991). A more sophisticated attempt at dealing with the problem of incommensurability

As a procedure intended to render intelligible the exercise of reason in the movement from one paradigm to another, it will be argued below that such an approach misconstrues “what” the unbeliever actually knows but refuses to acknowledge (Rom 1:18-20), and “how” epistemological self-consciousness is in fact experienced. In other words, we will discover how such a methodology owes more to a foundationalist epistemology rather than to a careful analysis of human agency and practical reason. In the end it will be seen that presuppositional apologetics offers a more nuanced and holistic account of argument and choice. Further, rather than ending in a vicious circularity, presuppositional argument that employs the *ad hominem*, moves in a linear way that doesn’t compromise its transcendental direction in the process.⁸

1. *The Ad Hominem Argument in General*

When we hear the phrase *ad hominem argument*, we usually assume a negative connotation, and rightfully so. After all, the *ad hominem* is classified in most logic textbooks as an informal fallacy in the class of *ignoratio elenchi*, one of irrelevance or missing the point. An *ad hominem* argument is one which argues “to the man.” There are generally two forms of this argument: abusive and circumstantial.⁹ In its abusive form, e.g., “Bill Clinton’s tax policies are wrong because Bill Clinton is a morally corrupt person,” it fits into the so-called *genetic fallacy*. As John Frame notes in his *Doctrine of The Knowledge of God*, the *abusive ad hominem* is “an argument directed against a person, rather than against a conclusion. As such, it is a form of ‘irrelevant conclusion argument’.”¹⁰ Here one is “attacking a conclusion by attacking the people who hold it.”¹¹ However, as Frame goes on to show, this obviously fallacious use of the *ad hominem* argument can be contrasted with what he and others refer to¹² as a potentially proper use of the argument, what Frame calls the *positive circumstantial ad hominem argument*. Here the person is “urged to

from a Christian perspective can be found in Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and his *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). My purpose in writing this article is not to interact with Netland’s proposals for a neutral criteria of truth which then serves as a foundation to evaluation. Such a response would take me too far afield. Further, one might respond that the entire *corpus* of Van Til’s writings are dedicated to systematically debunking the philosophical possibility of such an approach, as well as its theological inappropriateness.

⁸ On the importance of the “transcendental” direction of apologetic argument, see Greg Bahnsen’s *Van Til’s Apologetic* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 496-529. For simplicity’s sake, all references to Van Til’s writings quoted directly from Greg Bahnsen’s *Van Til’s Apologetic* will hereafter be cited as *VTA*, otherwise the sources will be cited directly. An interesting reflection on this subject and the role of presuppositional apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary can be found in Robert D. Knudsen, “The Transcendental Perspective of Westminster’s Apologetic,” *WTJ* 48 (1986): 223-39.

⁹ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (5th ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1978), 89-91.

¹⁰ John Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987), 282.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Even though Copi still regards all uses of the *ad hominem* as abusive!

believe a proposition because of his or her special circumstances.”¹³ For example, “since you are a woman, you should do whatever furthers the cause of women,” or “since you are wealthy, you should be in favor of repealing the capital gains tax.” Frame notes that such an argument does not prove a conclusion and can in fact be offensive to the individual to whom it is applied. This is illustrated in the two previous examples which seem to suggest that the person has no individuality and cannot see beyond his or her group. But it also has the potential of being a useful form of argument. J. L. Mackie notes that it can be used to “point to an inconsistency and may validly establish the limited conclusion that this man cannot consistently hold this view.”¹⁴

2. *Van Til's Employment of the Ad Hominem Argument*

As noted above, this particular strategy of argument (positive circumstantial *ad hominem* argument) is employed strategically in Cornelius Van Til's own presuppositional methodology with the unbeliever and is part of his overall use of 'indirect proof' which takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* (“reducing to absurdity.”)¹⁵ Some clarification of Van Til's distinction between “direct” and “indirect” is in order to further elucidate the role of the *ad hominem* in his apologetic strategy.

For Van Til, to argue by presupposition is “to indicate what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one's method.”¹⁶ Every method, according to Van Til, “presupposes either the truth or the falsity of Christian theism.”¹⁷ Thus Van Til concludes:

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to “facts” or “laws” whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the “facts” and “laws” intelligible. The question is as to what the “facts” and “laws” really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes that they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?¹⁸

¹³ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁴ J. L. Mackie, “Fallacies,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Paul Edwards; New York: Macmillan, 1967), 3: 177-78. Arguments for consistency are notoriously difficult to prove, for example see Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 11-43. In fact, an entire “school” of logic (paraconsistency) defines itself by its ability to live with logical inconsistency without falling prey to the traditional *reductio* argument, e.g., Graham Priest, Richard Routley, and Jean Norman, eds. *Paraconsistent Logic: Essays on the Inconsistent* (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 1989), esp. 483-682.

¹⁵ Cf., 1 Corinthians 1:20; Romans 1:22.

¹⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (2d ed.; Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Van Til does not deny the use or usefulness of various arguments for the existence of God, the role of evidences, etc., but according to Van Til, they must be offered in the context of the Christian-theistic paradigm.¹⁹ When this is done, they become in essence transcendental or presuppositional arguments. He writes,

The theistic proofs therefore reduce to one proof, the proof which argues that unless this God, the God of the Bible, the ultimate being, the Creator, the controller of the universe, be presupposed as the foundation of human experience, this experience operates in a void. This one proof is absolutely convincing.²⁰

Van Til's is an "expansionist" model of apologetics and epistemology which stakes a "normative" claim on the believer and unbeliever alike. The apologist, from Van Til's perspective, is making God's claims clear to the unbeliever, claims which impinge on the most important aspects of life and experience, including the very tools we manipulate in the ordering of everyday reality and experience. These are profoundly "theological truth claims." Kevin Vanhoozer writes in a similar vein, "What is at stake in a theological truth claim, I contend, is whether we can give an explicit account of those Christian convictions about the meaning of the whole that our most important practices implicitly presuppose."²¹ Such claims are claims about what "matters most" to us.

This delineates the context in which the *ad hominem* is employed in Van Til's apologetic argument. Van Til either explicitly mentions, or employs, the *ad hominem* argument at least ten times in his published writings.²² Most noteworthy for our purposes are the following:

In his *Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, Van Til writes criticizing Warfield's inductive argument for the inspiration of Scripture:

How could unbelievers, unbelievers just because they have already rejected God's revelation in the universe about them and within them by a philosophy of chance and of human autonomy, ever concede that the claims of the New Testament writers with respect to their inspiration by God are true? The criterion they employ will compel them to deny it. It is their criterion that must be shown to involve a metaphysics of chance. Then, if the Spirit opens their eyes, they will see the truth. . . . To be sure, if Warfield's appeal to the natural man were of an *ad hominem nature*, then it would be well.²³

¹⁹ A similar emphasis is found in Vanhoozer's reflections on the "evangelical truth claim." In "The Trials of Truth" in *To Stake a Claim* (ed. J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 122-23, he writes: "I call this the 'evangelical truth claim' and I contrast it with merely empirical or existential claims, for it is primarily a claim about the reality and activity of God. . . . The evangelical truth claim is thus a claim about the meaning of the whole."

²⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 192.

²¹ Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 124.

²² Eric Sigward, ed., *The Works of Cornelius Van Til 1895-1987, on CD Rom* (Logos Library System).

²³ *VTA*, 116-17.

The *ad hominem* argument reappears in *Survey of Christian Epistemology* in Van Til's discussion of opposing epistemologies and the validity or lack of validity in posing the Christian epistemology as one hypothesis among others. According to Van Til, we may only do this "if we do it while reasoning with our opponents in an *ad hominem* fashion, i.e., if we allow him to try what he can make of Christianity as an hypothesis among many by the process of univocal reasoning."²⁴ How will this reasoning procedure extend? Van Til states:

We must point out to them that univocal reasoning itself leads to self-contradiction, not only from a theistic point of view, but from a non-theistic point of view as well. . . . It is this we ought to mean when we say that we reason from *the impossibility of the contrary*. The contrary is impossible only if it is self-contradictory when operating on the basis of its own assumptions. It is this too that we should mean when we say that we are arguing *ad hominem*. We do not really argue *ad hominem* unless we show that someone's position involves self-contradiction, and there is not self-contradiction unless one's reasoning is shown to be directly contradictory of or to lead to conclusions which are contradictory of one's own assumptions.²⁵

Van Til makes it very clear that at the point where the Christian and non-Christian worldviews come into contact, what is called for is not silence but vigorous engagement and debate.²⁶ This is not engagement of a general kind with a putative neutrality being posited as a "first step" in the argument chain. Rather, it must be of a particular kind . . . a sweeping argument for *the impossibility of the contrary*. To do this the believer must himself be reasoning in an epistemologically self-conscious way, acknowledging the epistemological lordship of Christ. Van Til identifies such reasoning as *analogical* in character, i.e., *thinking God's thoughts after Him*. The goal is to make the unbeliever herself, epistemologically self-conscious . . . to move away from an erroneous and intellectually suicidal univocism to the very analogical reasoning characteristic of the believer's reasoning. The process begins with the recognition and identification of inadequacies in reasoning hitherto assumed to be successful. This leads to the hoped-for awareness on the part of the individual to see something he hasn't seen before, or at least not as it was meant to be seen. The *ad hominem* argument (in its *reductio* form) is thus the attempt to initiate or jump-start this process. As Van Til states, "Apologetics . . . is valuable to the precise extent that it presses the truth upon the attention of the natural man."²⁷

3. *The Problem of Antithesis and Argument*

However biblically insightful Van Til's observations, there is a tendency in his writings to move quickly from premise to conclusion, particularly in his *analysis*

²⁴ *VTA*, 468.

²⁵ *VTA*, 492.

²⁶ *VTA*, 474-76.

²⁷ *VTA*, 80. In "Trials of Truth," 127-28, Van Til's strategy is illustrated in Kevin Vanhoozer's "expository" moment where the apologist might be said to a "expose" belief(s). Vanhoozer writes, "I am concerned in the first instance to expose not *unbelief*, but rather *alternative* control beliefs . . . to make explicit the fundamental commitments to which our most important practices implicitly bind us" ("The Trials of Truth," 127-28).

of the process of coming to epistemological self-consciousness.²⁸ The situation is further complicated by the strong language of *antithesis* in Van Til which seems to make the methodology more formal and less substantive in practice. The latter raises a host of questions regarding the very possibility of transition(s) (cumulative arguments?) made step by step between one worldview (paradigm, set of presuppositions, etc.) and another. A brief sampling of Van Til's comments on antithesis will be helpful:

The natural man cannot will to do God's will. He cannot even know what the good is.²⁹

It will be quite impossible then to find a common area of knowledge between believers and unbelievers unless there is agreement between them as to the nature of man himself. But there is no such agreement.³⁰

[The unbeliever] interprets all the facts and all the laws that are presented to him in terms of [his unbelieving] assumptions.³¹

[T]he "reason" of sinful men will invariably act wrongly. . . . The natural man will invariably employ the tool of his reason to reduce these contents to a naturalistic level.³²

When the unbeliever *interprets* the world, he interprets it in terms of his assumption of human autonomy. . . . The unbeliever is the man with yellow glasses on his face. He sees himself and his world through these glasses. He cannot remove them. His *interpretation* of himself and of every fact in the universe relating to himself is, unavoidably, a *false* interpretation.³³

As noted above, the frequent charge of *fideism* toward presuppositionalists generally and Van Til specifically, arises from the stress Van Til places on the *antithesis* between belief and unbelief.³⁴ When coupled with his assertions concerning the self-attesting nature of ultimate commitments or presuppositions, the question arises: hasn't Van Til made the movement from one circle of commitment to another beyond reason (which is after all governed by presuppositions) and hence beyond argument? If this is the case, the transition from one paradigm (set of loyalties) to another is more like a conversion, scales falling from the eyes, etc., rather than that resulting from careful argument (*ad hominem* or otherwise).³⁵

²⁸ One cannot, however, fault Van Til for not doing what he never set out to do—namely, provide a careful analysis of this process. My purpose is to simply enlarge and pursue greater clarification of this process and hopefully fill in some of the blank spaces in Van Til's writings.

²⁹ *Defense of the Faith*, 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

³² *Ibid.*, 83.

³³ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 258-59.

³⁴ The answer to the apparent paradox in Van Til lies in a careful analysis of the relationship between common grace and the doctrine of the Fall in Van Til's theology. A complete discussion of the subject is beyond the purview of this essay, but one can find an excellent analysis in John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 187-213.

³⁵ This criticism is at the heart of John Warwick Montgomery's criticism of presuppositionalism in his "Once Upon an A Priori," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, 380-92. A detailed analysis of Montgomery's

This, I would suggest, is a reasonable understanding and interpretation of Van Til if one looks only at his most extreme comments on the antithesis mentioned above between believer and unbeliever. However, granting the qualifications offered by several of Van Til's interpreters (e.g., John Frame),³⁶ as well by Van Til himself (!), there appears to be room for a more linear direction in the presuppositional argument which is evidenced in Van Til's own use of the *ad hominem* argument.³⁷ The following, admittedly brief, selection from Van Til³⁸ is sufficient to illustrate the legitimacy of argument with the unbeliever in light of Van Til's commitment to the presuppositional nature of all thought and predication:

The answer to this question must not be sought by toning down the dilemma as is easily and often done by the assumption that epistemological terminology means the same thing for theists and non-theists alike.³⁹

The answer must rather be sought in the basic concept of Christian theism, namely, that God is absolute. If God is absolute man must always remain accessible to him.⁴⁰ Our arguments taken by themselves effect nothing, while the Holy Spirit may very well convict without the use of our argument as he may convict without the use of our preaching. *Yet because God is himself a completely rational God and has created us in his image, there is every reason to believe that he will make argumentation effective.*⁴¹

There is then even in the consciousness of the non-regenerate a formal power of receptivity. It is this that enables him to consider the Christian theistic position and see that it stands squarely over against his own, and demands of him the surrender of his own position.⁴²

arguments from a Van Tillian perspective can be found in Greg Bahnsen, "A Critique of the Evidential Apologetical Method of John Warwick Montgomery" (n.p.: Covenant Media Foundation, 1974) which is available online at <http://www.cmfnow.com>. Van Til uses dramatic metaphors to describe the experience of epistemological self-consciousness as follows: "As for the question whether the natural man will accept the truth of such an argument we answer that he will if God pleases by his Spirit to take the scales from his eyes and the mask from his face" (*VTA*, 80).

³⁶ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 187-213.

³⁷ In responding to the charge of circularity against presuppositionalists, Frame notes that in fact there is a linear direction to presuppositional argument which is demanded by our theology. He writes in "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics* (ed. Steven B. Cowan; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 209-10: "for Christians faith governs reasoning just as it governs all other human activities. Reasoning is not in some realm that is neutral between faith and unbelief. . . . Faith governs reasoning. . . . There is a kind of circularity here, but the circularity is not vicious. It sounds circular to say that faith governs reasoning and also that it is based on rationality [based on reality, on truth]. It is therefore important to remember that the rationality that serves as the rational basis of faith is God's own rationality. The sequence is: God's rationality → human faith → human reasoning. . . . That sequence is linear, not circular."

³⁸ The following selected quotes from *VTA* are all taken from Van Til's *Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1969), 195-98.

³⁹ *VTA*, 472. Greg Bahnsen's footnote to this quotation is worth repeating: "Van Til is here indicating that the philosophical conceptions of the things designated with common epistemological terminology (e.g., 'induction,' 'proof,' 'objectivity') differ between the Christian and the non-Christian worldviews" (*VTA*, 472).

⁴⁰ *VTA*, 472

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 474.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 475.

The ethical alienation, though complete and exclusive in principle, is not yet complete in degree.⁴³

We hold, then, that though the ethical miracle of regeneration must occur before argumentation can be really effectual, such an ethical miracle will certainly occur.

It is exactly the deep conviction that there is metaphysically only one type of consciousness, and that the non-regenerate and the regenerate consciousness are but ethical modifications of this one fundamental metaphysical consciousness, that leads us to reason with unbelievers.⁴⁴

4. *Preliminary Conclusions*

Several recent philosophers have explored this process of coming to greater epistemological self-consciousness, as well as the usefulness of the *ad hominem* argument in furthering this goal. Among the most important are Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. As we consider some of these observations it will appear that the more narrowly construed interpretation of Van Til (strong antithesis view) exaggerates the fideistic character of the presuppositional method (what we may call the *incorrigibility thesis*). A broader understanding (common grace ameliorated) lends itself to an appreciation of “process” and “transition” from one paradigm to another thus making arguments an important part of the process without compromising the Scripturally affirmed need for “new eyes” and “new ears” which only the Spirit can provide.⁴⁵

II. *Alasdair MacIntyre and Epistemological Crises*

1. *From Seems to Is*

MacIntyre defines an epistemological crisis as an individual’s recognition of asymmetry where previously there *was* symmetry. He illustrates this experience as follows:

Someone who has believed that he was highly valued by his employers and colleagues is suddenly fired; someone proposed for membership of a club whose members were all, so he believed, close friends is blackballed. Or someone falls in love and needs to know what the loved one *really* feels; someone falls out of love and needs to know how he or she can possibly have been so mistaken in the other.⁴⁶

For the individual there is a movement from “seems” to “is,” from the previously assumed unambiguous character of human experience to the personal experience of the threateningly ambiguous. Earlier one assumed that their perspective was certain and univocal. Now there is the disruptive experience of pluriformity. MacIntyre writes,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 476.

⁴⁵ See the excellent analysis of this aspect of Van Til’s thought in Richard B. Gaffin, “Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor. 2:6-16,” *WTJ* 57 (1995): 103-24.

⁴⁶ MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises,” 138.

They discover that there is a problem about the rational justification of inferences from premises about the behavior of other people to conclusions about their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes and of inferences from premises about how individuals have acted in the past to conclusions expressed as generalizations about their behavior—generalizations which would enable us to make reasonably reliable predications about their future behavior.⁴⁷

MacIntyre recognizes that there is an inescapably historical dimension to this aporia, one that is experienced by the individual in question (perhaps) for the first time. There is an encounter with other subjects with their own linguistic and historical trajectories of language and experience. Someone else is deploying his or her own rhetorical and conceptual strategy which parallels at some points and doesn't at others. Rowan Williams comments on this experience, "I recognize a strategy that is faced with what I am faced with, yet one that operates out of a distinct accumulation of past negotiation and from a different material location, whose perspectives are accessible to me *only* in the exchanges of language."⁴⁸ I further recognize that the very concepts and language I employ (uncritically and unreflectively) are part of the environment I share with the *Other*." Therefore, it is "impossible for me to have as the matter of my thought and speech only what I generate for myself."⁴⁹ These environmentally shared tools are the very schemata which make the individual intelligible to himself as well as the world of others intelligible to him. MacIntyre writes:

To share schemata which are at one and the same time constitutive of and normative for intelligible action by myself and are also means for my interpretations of the actions of others. . . . It is these schemata which enable inferences to be made from premises about past behavior to conclusions about future behavior and present inner attitudes.⁵⁰

At the moment of an epistemological crisis, possibly for the first time, an individual's schemata which functions both constitutively and normatively in making self and world intelligible, are thrown into confusion, an oftentimes paralyzing confusion. More importantly, as MacIntyre observes, it is perhaps for the first time that these very schemata actually become visible. This has the consequence of producing in the subject the awareness of the "possibility of systematically different possibilities of interpretation, of the existence of alternative and rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around him."⁵¹ Williams sees the awareness of two previously unacknowledged misperceptions being uncovered by the interlocutor:

⁴⁷ MacIntyre, 138.

⁴⁸ Rowan D. Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in The Wake of Gillian Rose," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁰ MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises," 139.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

The illusion that any specific (individual or group) subject has unlimited access to the use of the goods of an environment, and the illusion that any (individual or group) subject can intelligibly define its good as the possession of such use in exclusion of all others.⁵²

MacIntyre observes that there are two general descriptions available for explicating this epistemological crisis—one of which is true to the very nature of the crisis (illustrated by *Hamlet*), the other which is not (illustrated in the Cartesian *Meditations*). The latter has predominated Western philosophical history, thus undermining any hope of coming to a better approximation of just how such crises occur and how they help illumine our understanding of philosophical and scientific progress. For MacIntyre however, our best hope is to be found in Shakespeare and not in Descartes.

2. *The Historical Dimension: The Necessity of Narrative or Hamlet vs. Descartes*

For MacIntyre, to make sense of the epistemological crisis is fundamentally to make sense of the *self*. The loss of equilibrium extends beyond individual objects of knowledge and the specific actions of individuals and extends to the very intelligibility of the self, its identity in the larger context of the individual's inner experience of past, present and future. This requires narrative history of a peculiar kind. MacIntyre writes,

We identify a particular action only by invoking two kinds of context, implicitly if not explicitly. We place the agent's intentions . . . in a causal and temporal order with reference to their role in his or her history, and we also place them with reference to their role in the history of the setting or settings to which they belong. In doing this, in determining what causal efficacy the agent's intentions had in one or more directions, and how his short-term intentions succeeded or failed to be constitutive of long-term intentions, we ourselves write a further part of these histories. Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions.⁵³

Pursuing analogous insights in Augustine, Stephen Crites appeals to Augustine's definition of time as anticipatory of what we might refer to as the narrative nature of experience. Augustine, in defining time wrote, "But perhaps it might properly be said: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things future."⁵⁴ Each of these exists inseparably in what Crites refers to as "tensed modalities." All inner human experience is thus determined by the union of these three and "the tensed unity of these modalities requires narrative forms both for its expression and for its own sense of the meaning of its internal coherence. For this tensed unity has already an incipient

⁵² Rowan D. Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics," 5.

⁵³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 194.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* XI, xx, quoted by Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative?* (ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 76.

narrative form.”⁵⁵ Only narrative can “contain the full temporality of experience in a unity of form.”⁵⁶ The chronicle of memory (past) and the scenarios of anticipation (future) are gathered together in what Augustine referred to as the *praesens de praesentibus* (present of things present). This is not the experience of a disembodied consciousness however. The emphasis upon the present gives constant reminder of the material or bodily nature of this experience. Crites writes,

The conscious present is that of a body impacted in a world and moving in process, in that world. In this present, action and experience meet. Memory is its depth, the depth of its experience in particular; anticipation is its trajectory, the trajectory of its action in particular. The *praesens de praesentibus* is its full bodily reality.⁵⁷

The present takes on a decidedly dramatic character by definition. The past remembered and the future anticipated collide in the present of inner experience. This becomes a peculiarly unsettling crisis where there is a profusion of multiple potentialities which intrude on one’s otherwise stable stock of scenarios of anticipation.⁵⁸

The very self-description one operates with gives one’s life direction and context—one’s very identity as a self, and precisely this is what has come up for interpretation or review in the crisis situation. It is the recognition of the lacunary and the contradictory that must be articulated or expressed in a new way that propels the agent to re-write his or her narrative.

What then of Hamlet? How does this play illumine our understanding of the need for a new narrative to “make sense” of self and world? As the story of Hamlet unfolds, Hamlet returns to Elsinore from Wittenberg. Upon his arrival he immediately confronts a dilemma: how to interpret the events unfolding before his eyes. As MacIntyre notes, he has a number of options: “There is the revenge schema of the Norse sagas; there is the Renaissance courtier’s schema; there is a Machiavellian schema about competition for power.”⁵⁹ If that weren’t enough, “he also has the ordinary agents’ problem: whom now to believe? His mother? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? His father’s ghost?” Unless he chooses some grid or schema, “he doesn’t know what to treat as evidence; until he knows what to treat as evidence he cannot tell which schema to adopt.”⁶⁰ Hamlet is confronted with the question of exactly how to construct a narrative of the events unfolding before him. The answer to the question “what’s going on?” must begin by Hamlet’s recognizing the need for a radical reconstruction based on the discontinuity which has emerged between “seems” and “is.” MacIntyre explains:

⁵⁵ Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” 77.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927), Div. II, chs. #3, #4.

⁵⁹ MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises,” 140.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Hamlet's problems arise because the dramatic narrative of his family and of the kingdom of Denmark through which he identified his own place in society and his relationships to others has been disrupted by radical interpretative doubts.⁶¹

He must now rewrite his own history of past events with the goal being to be truthful and to provide some framework of intelligibility from which he can make reliable predictions concerning the future. MacIntyre notes that "when an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative which enables the agent to understand both *how* he or she could intelligently have held his or her original beliefs *and* how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them."⁶² Thus, the old way of thinking (schemata) is not only criticized and overcome, but both of these exercises are now integrated into the larger narrative which is now constructed.

Descartes's own description of an epistemological crisis provides a startling contrast to that illustrated by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As shown above, Hamlet's experience is grounded in a particular historical context. What he previously trusted and depended upon to give him truth and intelligibility (both of the world and the self), has now collapsed—but he nonetheless "recognizes" it as having collapsed.

Descartes's crisis or "anxiety"⁶³ is precipitated by the path he chooses to pursue in his quest toward certainty and a repudiation of skepticism. Unfortunately the standard set by Descartes was one where error was inconceivable, and the level of epistemic achievement extraordinarily difficult to acquire. His struggles over the problem of knowledge based on perception are proffered in his distinction between dreams and sense perception. What grounds are there for determining that the latter provides reliable information about the external world? What he discerns from the experience, might be just as misleading as a dream.⁶⁴ What is needed is something distinct or independent from perception which can judge reliably. Descartes needs a place to stand, a means of comparing judgements or representations with that which they purportedly represent. The place cannot be external to the thinking self but internal to it. Having a correct and certain representation becomes the goal for Descartes. This is possible for Descartes "only by means of the ideas I have within me."⁶⁵ The standards are thus derived from the thinking activity of the knower himself. The existence of the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 16-18.

⁶⁴ "Every sensory experience I have ever thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleep; and since I do not believe that what I seem to perceive in sleep comes from things located outside of me, I did not see why I should be any more inclined to believe this of what I think I perceive while awake" (Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross; 2 vols.; Cambridge University Press, 1973), 1: 189.

⁶⁵ Rene Descartes, *Descartes: Philosophical Letters* (trans. Anthony Kenny; Oxford University Press, 1970), 123.

thinking subject or cogito becomes the indubitable foundational proposition, the necessary truth. Even the existence of God is derived from the prior establishment of the thinking subject as one of his ideas. The ego's necessary existence founds all else for Descartes. It becomes the epistemically basic background belief from which our very notions of "truth" derive. Thus begins Descartes's long journey into doubt and ultimately existence.

This entire process is supposed to occur without any context—it is in fact purportedly "contextless doubt," as MacIntyre describes it. This is what makes it fundamental and foundational to all human knowledge. Subsequently, the Cartesian epistemological crisis is one that is generalized and made paradigmatic for the establishment of some first principle upon which one then works outward toward greater and greater deductive certainty. As MacIntyre notes, "Descartes' doubt is intended to lack any such background. . . . Hence also that tradition of philosophical teaching arises which presupposed that Cartesian doubts can be entertained by anyone at any place or time."⁶⁶ The establishment of some "presuppositionless first principle," an indubitable starting point, assures the generalizability and universalizability of the procedure. Reason or the mind (intellect) becomes the central focus in his methodology.⁶⁷

However, what is unexamined in Descartes's quest for certainty are the very things that make the epistemological crisis he describes possible.⁶⁸ How does one know when one has reached the bottom, the original point *sui generis* from where one proceeds to develop a chain of clear and distinct perceptions? The problem for Descartes is that everything must be put into doubt all at once, simultaneously in fact. MacIntyre observes, "someone who really believed that he knew nothing would not even know how to begin on a course of radical doubt; for he would have no conception of what his task might be, of what it would be to settle his doubts and to acquire well-founded beliefs."⁶⁹ Once one acknowledges his possession of such categories and skills, which are not being put into doubt at all (since they are required for "doubt" all along!), one must also acknowledge that the quest itself is futile.

As a result, Descartes fails to achieve his goal in at least two ways. In the first place, the very language and concepts he employs are "ways of ordering both thought and the world expressed in a set of meanings," i.e., both the language(s) and the concepts have histories. MacIntyre states:

It was perhaps because the presence of his languages was invisible to the Descartes of the *Discours* and the *Meditationes* that he also did not notice what Gilson pointed out in detail: how much of what he took to be the spontaneous reflections of his own mind

⁶⁶ MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises," 143.

⁶⁷ See Stephen Toulmin's insightful comments and commentary on the Cartesian strategy and its practical implications for philosophy and culture in his *Cosmopolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁶⁸ Jay Rosenberg, *One World and our Knowledge of It* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980), 88. MacIntyre

⁶⁹ MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises," 143.

was in fact a repetition of sentences and phrases from his own mind was in fact a repetition of sentences and phrases from his school textbooks.⁷⁰

Secondly, Descartes seems unaware of the very tradition that supplied the goals he was pursuing. It was in fact his own Platonic-Augustinian heritage which supplied, in fact, pushed him in the direction he moved in pursuit of a satisfactory account which was necessitated by that very tradition. There is no question that there is also a dramatic alteration in that very tradition as well. As Charles Taylor notes,

Cartesian internalization has transmuted into something very different from its Augustinian source. For Augustine, the path inward was only a step on the way upward. Something similar remains in Descartes, who also proves the existence of God starting from the self-understanding of the thinking agent. But the spirit has been altered in a subtle but important way. Following Augustine's path, the thinker comes to sense more and more his lack of self-sufficiency, comes to see more and more that God acts within him.⁷¹

For Descartes the goal is now certainty, and that a self-sufficient certainty. Through the order imposed by reason and the application of the right method—a disengaged rationality—we gain mastery over a now subordinated world domain.⁷² Thus, “Descartes also cannot recognize that he is responding not only to the timeless demands of skepticism, but to a highly specific crisis in one particular social and intellectual tradition.”⁷³

In the end, Shakespeare in many ways is a reflection of the alternative which emerges more fully in postmodernism, namely, the recognition of the fragility

⁷⁰ Ibid., 144. As Wittgenstein put it in his *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; New York: Macmillan, 1958), 31: “Only someone who already knows how to do something with it [a ‘name’ in this instance] can significantly ask a name.” Charles Altieri in *Act and Quality* (Cambridge, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 45, notes: “Wittgenstein discovered that basic facts cannot be discovered independently of methods of projection which guarantee their status as facts.” In other words, Wittgenstein realized that there are many ways of dealing with the facts in the world, many ways for language to project a relationship to the world. Thus, what should concern the philosopher is not whether a statement “pictures” the world, but rather “the way utterances and descriptions fit in specific contexts or operations, and fit, as a matter of appropriateness to specific forms of acting on objects.” Wittgenstein introduces *language game* to explain the relation of language to world. In *Philosophical Investigations*, 7, 19 he writes, “I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the language game. . . . To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” Gone now are any pristine notions of some pure idealized connection between mind and nature. In its place is the far more complex *game of life*. There are multiple methods of projection which affect every line of projection imaginable. As attractive as the world of the *Tractatus* may have appeared, it was a world in which it was impossible to actually live and communicate. As Wittgenstein describes it, “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction (the world of the *Tractatus*) and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground” (*Philosophical Investigations*, 107).

⁷¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 156.

⁷² Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 1:119.

⁷³ Ibid., 144. In Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis* he notes that it is clearly a reaction against the relativism implicit if not explicit in the work of Michel de Montaigne whereby “if nothing can be

of any interpretation to the possibility of alternative schemata. Descartes arguably represents “modernity,” i.e., the attempt to achieve a kind of ahistorical notion of reason and intellect—an attempt doomed to failure. Shakespeare however, offers the apologist something Descartes does not: “He invites us to reflect on the crisis of the self as a crisis in the tradition which has formed the self.” Descartes, on the other hand, makes such a self-recognition impossible. He “has invented an unhistorical, self-endorsed self-consciousness and tried to describe his epistemological crisis in terms of it.”⁷⁴

III. *MacIntyre and Taylor: The Movement from One Paradigm to Another*

Up to this point we have observed that epistemological crises are characteristically about the recognition (on the part of an individual or a community) of discontinuity between “seems” and “is,” and that such experiences are deeply historical and reflect a narrative quality, i.e., a story which explains the present in terms of the past and makes predictions based upon what was hitherto perceived or experienced to be stable now possible. It is precisely at the point where the story or narrative comes into crisis that a reconstruction or re-writing of the narrative must occur. Contrary to Descartes’s picture of crisis, there is no contextless doubt and *ipso facto* there is no contextless certainty.

However, a question immediately arises concerning the “context-bound” nature of rationality, i.e., its historical character. Does this make the choice between competing narratives an irrational one, i.e., since it is not finally judicable by some contextless, neutral and absolute reason? The answer is yes if rationality itself is defined ahistorically in a Cartesian and foundationalist way. Yes, if the epistemological crisis itself is so construed following the path charted by Descartes and others who would postulate some epistemically neutral criteria as the background belief which determines the validity of all other assertions. However, is this really the way arguments work? Is this the way transitions advance from one circle of commitments to another? Of course they can occur this way, i.e., a Damascus road experience. But are such means normative?

1. *Charles Taylor: Explanation and Understanding*

Charles Taylor believes that the preceding dilemma is the direct result of a bifurcation methodologically which forces one to make a choice: (a) between a natural sciences approach to rationality and choice, i.e., one constituted by neutral criteria which are universalizable and generalizable, and above all, context-independent; and (b) what we have been referring to as an incorrigible approach,

known with absolute certainty, nothing can be absolutely certain”—this too, sets the tone of Descartes’s project, see especially 36-44. Also see Charles Taylor’s extraordinary reflections on the *traditioned* character of Descartes’s journey in his *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 143-58.

⁷⁴ MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises,” 145.

i.e., one which views alternative worldviews as completely self-contained, watertight deductive systems which are impervious to criticism from outside the particular circle of operations.⁷⁵ The former is arguably designed to preserve a hygienic rationality and the latter is seen as unwittingly opening the door to irrationalism and subjectivism. The natural sciences approach assures the hegemony of reason understood in a foundationalist sense, and requires that argument follow the lines of apodicticity so that certainty can be guaranteed as a result. On the other hand, the recognition of the theory-ladenness of observational language and methodology and hence the less than objective character of such matters, seems to guarantee only subjectivism as its outcome (at least as far as its critics are concerned). Is there another way of construing the argument which guarantees that movement can occur between one set up presuppositions (narratives) and another without acquiescing to either a rationalism or an irrationalism?⁷⁶

Charles Taylor thinks there is, and he suggests that the answer can be found in a reconsideration of the nature of human rationality and agency itself—through an overcoming of the limits of traditional construals of epistemology.⁷⁷ The problem, among other things according to Taylor, arises through the attempt to disentangle or distinguish a theory of *explanation* from one of *understanding* (the latter most often associated with the realm of morals or ethics). Our modern (postmodern?) predicament is the result of a movement which began with Descartes and developed consistently (with some deviations) through seventeenth-century theories of physical science up to the present, namely, the attempt to describe reality in absolute terms. This required a detachment or removal of the subjective (human perspective) dimension that was judged to be nothing more than one of complex prejudices (which are determined and sustained by traditions).⁷⁸ Descartes initiates what we might call a detached stance toward the world, an instrumentalism, which characterizes reason procedurally. What evolves is a canonical form of reason which rather than making the adjudication of disputes over correct representations of the world a certainty, resulted in the nearly impossible satisfaction of such a goal. In fact, this movement only highlighted the aporiai inherent in a radical separation of

⁷⁵ The contrast is illustrated most effectively in the work of Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 307-24.

⁷⁶ An excellent (if flawed) attempt from a Rawls(ian) (Kantian) perspective to adjudicate this problem can be found in David Kamitsuka, "The Justification of Religious Belief in the Pluralistic Realm: Another Look at Postliberal Apologetics," *JR* 76 (1996): 588-606. For an approach which more closely resembles my own (although not exactly), see William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," *JR* 66 (1986): 282-301. Both of these attempts fail due to a loss of nerve both biblically and theologically.

⁷⁷ Cf. Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (eds. Kenneth Baynes, J. Bohman, and T. MacCarthy; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 464-88.

⁷⁸ This is reflected in what Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (trans. Catherine Porter; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) calls the emphasis on "purification" in Enlightenment Science. A fixation which, interestingly enough, persists up to the present.

subject and object. This became evident both within and outside “pure” science.⁷⁹

Of greatest importance for our purposes is the definition of rationality which grows out of this canonical foundationalism, one which focused exclusively on criteria. It is this emphasis that has so obscured the role of the *ad hominem* argument in our current context and continues to perpetuate the myth of epistemology even today. One of the implications of this self-perpetuating myth is the distinction maintained between “fact and value,” a distinction which truncates reason and thus exacerbates the tension between reason and faith.⁸⁰

The *Trostlosigkeit* (Husserl) of our current apologetic and philosophical predicament thus advances from the addiction we seem to have for explanatory models and their companion models of truth, which simply don’t comport with the extraordinary varieties of argument forms we encounter in everyday life,⁸¹ nor with the nature of human agency or decision making we experience in normal human life. Unfortunately, these representationalist epistemological models of truth, which exercise a hegemonic relationship over our apologetic methodologies, don’t comport with the biblical picture we have of truth (wisdom, knowledge), man or his agency either.⁸² Rather, Taylor suggests that argument (rationality) is much closer to “practical reason” than to *techne* or *episteme*. What do we mean?

Taylor observes that when we are confronted with the need for arbitration, e.g., an argument between radically different viewpoints, it appears that facts simply won’t do. Opponents simply dig their feet into the ground and the argument ceases.⁸³ The experience of such seemingly unarbitrable positions, according to Taylor, can easily lead to skepticism. Everything ends up being a

⁷⁹ Thomas Kuhn’s work is probably the most well known publication chronicling this melding of the objective with the subjective in scientific development. See his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). The implicit “fact-value” distinction in this Enlightenment view of science is critiqued most insightfully in Willard Van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 20-46.

⁸⁰ Kevin Vanhoozer in “The trials of Truth” writes: “Can Christian truth claims be verified? Not, perhaps, according to *episteme* or *techne*. There is no proof or process that can conclusively verify a theological truth claim. . . . There may nevertheless be a kind of verification in the domain of practical reason or *phronesis*. We verify or corroborate biblical wisdom in situations where, in the light of a Christian vision of the whole, we are able to act well” (132).

⁸¹ Similar insights can be found with application to different kinds of logic in the work of Gilbert Ryle, “Formal and Informal Logic,” in *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 126ff. Also, Stephen Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 146-210.

⁸² John Frame discusses at some length the interrelationship between truth, wisdom and knowledge in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 48-49. The richness of human experience and our knowledge transactions call for different forms of logic. The fixation we have for “formal” truth often obscures this reality. An excellent illustration can be found in the work of Gilbert Ryle, “Formal and informal logic,” 111-29. Also, see Stephen Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument*.

⁸³ This situation is described most forcefully in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); especially the Introduction.

matter of subjective choice, upbringing, or worse, conditioning. However, as Taylor suggests, such a conclusion is unwarranted. It derives from a misconception, namely, that our opponent is unconfusedly and undividedly convinced of his or her position.⁸⁴ In fact, as Taylor notes, we don't face such an opponent. What we in fact face is someone or some group engaged in a series of special pleadings.⁸⁵ And there are, as Taylor notes, "limits to what people can unconfusedly and undividedly espouse," at least, without the addition of innumerable special pleas.⁸⁶ All of these in the end are then in a sense, vulnerable to reason. Such projects raise the question as to the conditions of judgment, to use a phrase from Rowan Williams. Once we have begun to "construct a city in speech or discourse," there are conditions that must be met:

We might say that here the question of how we spell out the conditions of coherent thought arises with urgency only as we unscramble what it is to speak at all about an interest that is more than local; how we make sense of "common life" as opposed to seeing it as simply the battleground of competing bids for the use of goods.⁸⁷

We are now moving beyond the realm of "happens to be" or some arbitrary state of affairs, to what seems to be demanded or required of us as interlocutors living in a "city of discourse." Practical argument then is the uncovering of "confusion, unclarity, or an unwillingness to face some of what [he] can't lucidly repudiate; and reasoning aims to show up this error."⁸⁸

Practical reason then pushes one to consider the implications flowing from whatever we choose to place a value on—the goal being to increase "self-clarity and self-understanding." This kind of reasoning is fundamentally about normative judgments. Practical reasoning is about "making sense" of self and other. Taylor writes,

"Making sense" here means articulating what makes these responses appropriate: identifying what makes something a fit object for them and correlatively formulating more fully the nature of the response as well as spelling out what all this presupposes about ourselves and our situation in the world. What is articulated here is the background we assume and draw on in any claim to *rightness*, part of which we are forced to spell out when we have to defend our responses as the right ones.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ This is precisely the picture drawn in Scripture of unbelievers: they are said to be "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18). Thus, every person has this knowledge: it is inescapable (Ps 139:8) since *everyone* sees God's glory (Ps 19:1-4; Ps 97:6). The suppression of this knowledge leads to a "divided self" (self-deception) (2 Tim 2:23-25).

⁸⁵ Taylor uses as his example, the Nazis, who held to such a position with respect to certain groups (Jews, etc.). However, they "never attack the ban on murder of conspecifics frontally. They are always full of special pleading: for instance, that their targets are not really of the same species, or that they have committed truly terrible crimes which call for retaliation, or that they represent a mortal danger to others" ("Explanation and Practical Reason," 35).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁷ Williams, "Beyond Politics and Metaphysics," 6.

⁸⁸ Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 36.

⁸⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8-9 (emphasis mine).

The claim to *rightness* is thus a recognition and acknowledgement of obligation which is implied even in the most basic syllogism. There is hence an ethical/moral dimension to reasoning about even about the most seemingly trivial things. John Frame has noted how epistemology itself is perhaps better understood as a subdivision of ethics, particularly in light of the nature of “justification” which seems to occupy much of the epistemologists’ work. After all, “to ask a person to justify a belief is to ask an ethical question. It is to ask what ethical right that person has to believe such and such; it is to ask whether and why we are ethically obligated to believe it.”⁹⁰ Believing, like other human activities, is done either responsibly or irresponsibly, in an obedient fashion or a disobedient way. Thus, Frame writes, “we sense an obligation to accept justified beliefs and to act on them, to live ‘according to the truth’.”⁹¹

This is in fact the way *ad hominem* arguments are designed to work, contrary to the way reason construed along a natural sciences model is designed to work. The latter is apodictic in design and flows from what Taylor describes as the whole “naturalistic bent” of modern intellectual culture. As we noted earlier, this emphasis is predicated on disengagement and proceduralism (à la Descartes, Locke, etc.) as the highest virtue and surest method. Again, the role of and the importance placed upon “criteria” illustrates the point. Taylor suggests,

What is aimed at by this term is a set of considerations such that, for two explicitly defined, rival positions *X* and *Y*, (a) people who unconfusedly and undividedly espouse both *X* and *Y* have to acknowledge them, and (b) they are sufficient to show that *Y* is right and *X* is wrong, or vice versa. It is then driven home, against those who take an upbeat view of practical reason, that for any important moral dispute, no considerations have both (a) and (b). If the rift is deep enough, things that are (b) must fail of (a), and vice versa.⁹²

However, such an approach begs the very question it seeks to establish, namely, who can agree on (b)! If this is the case, are we left in the proverbial Kuhnian cul de sac? As noted above, (b) is an absolute judgment from the foundationalist’s perspective. One simply checks *X* and *Y* against the facts. *X* or *Y* is then seen to be superior to the other (either in predicting or explaining phenomena) and so the argument goes.⁹³ However, as Kuhn and others have noted, this simply doesn’t explain how theory change actually occurs in the real world. But doesn’t this leave us with the incorrigibility thesis once more?

Not if, as Taylor argues, we pursue *comparative* judgments rather than *absolute* (detached) judgments. With the former our attention is focused on *transitions* and

⁹⁰ Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 109.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 109. In a similar vein, see James A. Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 1-17.

⁹² Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reason,” 41.

⁹³ Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 233 illustrates this: “Assuming that the truth-content and the falsity-content of two theories t^2 and t are comparable, we can say that t^2 is more closely similar to the truth, or corresponds better to the facts, than t^1 if and only if either (a) the truth-content but not the falsity content of t^2 exceeds that of t , (b) the falsity-content of t^1 but not its truth-content, exceeds that of t^2 .”

not on apodictic certainty. In so doing, our focus is immediately drawn to judgments of value, i.e., what constitutes a *gain* or a *loss*. These can only make sense in terms of certain goods which impose themselves (bind us) on our practices (methods). The conundrum of faith and reason is thus partially at least the result of our modern yearning to segregate explanation (objectivity) from understanding (subjectivity), representation from attunement. Taylor chronicles this movement and shows how this has contributed to the escalating importance we (apologists?) place on context-independent criteria of truth as opposed to contextualized understanding (wisdom?).

The *ad hominem* approach, which is inherently *phronetic*, forces the conversation partners to do several things, all of which are linked to conceptions of value and good. For example, one begins with what an individual is already committed to (moving from the particular to the general). Why should one believe that giving up position *X* in favor of position *Y* is an advance in understanding? The *ad hominem* is not in the first instance concerned with whether or how *Y* deals with the facts in a superior way than *X*. After all, neither *X* nor *Y* agree on which facts are the most important to consider. Rather, there is a more important issue at stake, namely, “how both *X* and *Y* deal with each other.”⁹⁴ How does *Y* explain not just the facts under question, but the very history of *X* and its dealings with various anomalies? Taylor notes that “in adopting *Y*, we make better sense not just of the world, but of our history of trying to explain the world, part of which has been played out in terms of *X*.”⁹⁵ This is illustrated by the success of the Galilean inertial theory of motion over an Aristotelian theory in explaining a host of questions that were simply inexplicable on Aristotelian terms. Taylor concludes,

The superiority is registered here not simply in terms of their respective scores in playing “the facts,” but also by the ability of each to make sense of itself and the other in explaining these facts. Something more emerges in their stories about each other than was evident in a mere comparison of their several performances. This shows an asymmetrical relation between them: you can move from Aristotle to Galileo realizing a gain in understanding, but not vice versa.⁹⁶

The *ad hominem* takes us thus another step forward in our understanding of reason and progress. Rather than simply allowing for each theory to assess the other in terms of its own canons, it “demands of each that it give an account of the existence of the other; that is, not just explain the world, but explain also how this rival (and presumably erroneous) way of explaining the world could arise.”⁹⁷ From the pre-Galilean perspective, understanding and explanation are occupied with the discovery of a meaningful order which exists independently of my experience of it. The goal of life is the determination of the good and how one is to

⁹⁴ Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reason,” 43.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

align oneself with it. Identity, for example, is defined not by asking “who am I?” but by asking “where do I stand?” in relation to the order of reality.

Galilean science, on the other hand, makes manipulation and technological payoff the criterion. Here “rendering the puzzling comprehensible by showing how the phenomenon to be explained flows from mechanisms or modes of operation we understand. . . .”⁹⁸ Pre-Galilean science believed that the concerns of Galileo would never be the concerns of most people. They turned out to be wrong. Under the old regime, “the very nature of the material embodiment of Forms, as varying, approximate, never integral, ensured that no important discoveries could be made here, and certainly not an exact and universal body of findings.”⁹⁹ The realization of such generalizable truths created a problem for Aristotelian conceptualizations of science. However, this dispute did not occur outside real time and history. The transition was not the result of some “failure on its own terms,” or its inability to “downgrade the standards of its rivals.”¹⁰⁰ This would be consistent with the incorrigibility thesis: two completely self-contained systems confronting one another with the result that one breaks down internally due to the accumulation of anomalies. Taylor observes,

But what the earlier science can't explain is the very success of the later *on the later's own terms*. Beyond a certain point, you just can't pretend any longer that manipulation and control are not relevant criteria of scientific success. Pre-Galilean science died of its inability to explain/assimilate the actual success of post-Galilean science, where there was no corresponding symmetrical problem. And this death was rationally motivated.¹⁰¹

Galilean science recognizes (makes explicit) what was hitherto unrecognized, namely, the importance of manipulation and of getting things done. This is nothing more than the “extension of our practical capacities and is therefore a reliable criterion of increasing knowledge.” Thus, there is a gain in knowledge, and our understanding and practical ability are linked together. What we discover (make known!) is that what was previously seen or felt to be an undivided and unconfused commitment is in reality, i.e., after deeper consideration of practical need, one implicitly linked to another commitment altogether. The goal is to have our interlocutor attribute the correct significance to that commitment. This is a decidedly spiritual issue, one that is not decided by facts but by dispositions to certain judgments.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² This is surely what the Apostle Paul means when he describes unbelievers as those who encounter the “word of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18, 23), which is said to be revealed by the “powerful demonstration of the Spirit” (1 Cor 2: 4-5, 13), but who reject it nonetheless, showing themselves to be fools after all (1 Cor 1:20).

IV. *Conclusions*

From what we have considered previously, it should be apparent by now that apologetics understood presuppositionally, à la Van Til, does not give the believer a pass on engaged argument and rational reflection (e.g., the charge of *fideism*). Quite the contrary, Van Til sees argument and reason to be part of the believer's resources in overturning unbelief. Granted the theological dimensions of unbelief, e.g., the noetic effects of sin (Eph 4:17-18), we are never allowed to simply argue in terms of some kind of putative neutrality. However, an acknowledgement of this biblical truth does not paralyze the believer (e.g., *incorrigibility thesis*) but rather should motivate him to argue on the basis of the true nature of the case (e.g., the evangelical truth claim) and not on the basis of a fundamental misunderstanding (e.g., foundationalism). We have seen how a clearer articulation of the epistemological crisis can assist us in apprehending what the experience of moving from "seems" to "is" actually consists in (e.g., *transitional* or *comparative* arguments). It is the "control beliefs" themselves that are made explicit in the very experience of crisis! We have also seen how a deeper appreciation of the historical/narrative character of this experience (which is consistent with human experience) legitimizes the use of the *ad hominem* argument, e.g., what do our practices commit us to? The *ad hominem* argument is thus a primary weapon in the believer's arsenal. It is best understood as conducive to the experience of an ameliorating transition, what Taylor refers to as an "error-reducing" move. Whether it is recognizing gains and losses, pointing out contradictions, overcoming confusions or recognizing the demand our positions place on us for consistency—all of these function to precipitate the crisis which it is hoped will ultimately be used in God's providence to produce humility and eventually, by God's grace, a new heart and a new mind (Eph 2:8-9).