

6

Trinitarian Logic

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Logic, for Van Til, is best defined in Bosanquet's terms, as the manner in which knowledge morphs/grows.¹ In fact, Van Til adopts Bosanquet's phrase "method of implication" to describe the consistently Christian method of reasoning.² That neither deduction nor induction is true to Christian reasoning, on Van Til's account, should be clear from his rejection of internalist theories of justification. As we will see, a faithful mode of reasoning must proceed through three steps that resemble those posited by Bosanquet, even though they differ from that of the Absolute Idealist in significant respects.³ Furthermore, a Trinitarian method of reasoning demands a distinctively Christian interpretation of the laws of logic, apparent contradiction, and theological paradox.

6.2 TRINITARIAN METHOD OF IMPLICATION

First, believers ought to begin their reasoning with a concrete portrait of reality that intertwines divine revelation concerning God, man, and nature. For Absolute Idealists on the other hand, the logician begins with the

1. Bosanquet, *Logic*.

2. SCE, 2; IST, 8–9, 13–14..

3. SCE, 9–10.

unjustified intuition that reality exists as some sort of a system.⁴ Practically speaking, Van Til's view demands that "in starting any investigation the general precedes the particular."⁵ Before one can make a reconnaissance of "frogs" he must have a generally dependable idea of what they are (e.g., animals that are four-legged, green, created, etc.).⁶ Most importantly, he must acknowledge from the beginning that his notions are generally reliable because reflective of God's intellect, through Christ and the Spirit. The Absolute Idealist, on the other hand, only becomes acquainted with the standard of truth—his pantheistic Trinity—at the apex of his dialectical intellectual efforts.

Second, the movement from an initial vision of a fundamentally coherent reality to a concentrated reflection on some individual part of said reality, births the discovery of novel qualities and characteristics, which expose the incompleteness of one's previous categories. One's entire worldview is like a logical premise, while the individual fact constructively challenges that premise. In the case of frogs, man may be led to the discovery that they begin as tadpoles, which lack the four legs necessary to his original definition. Such a discovery is analytic, because it would lack meaning except in the context of a previously known definition of a class of animals. And yet, it is synthetic because it allows new information to redefine the parameters of that class, and with that redefinition, the range of what is possible for frogs.⁷ This second moment in the reasoning process, where facts challenge one's premises, need not be construed as contradicting one's earlier perspective. Indeed, if the parameters of one's categories are extended and limited in various ways by subsequent discovery, then such discoveries only serve to establish one's initial conviction that his categories are both finite and substantially true, and thus able to be refined by new revelation. On other occasions, however, fantasies (e.g., that Thor is God) may be contradicted by the already revealed system of revelation, and exposed as lies. Yet, even in this case, the redeemed man's presuppositions are not ultimately contradicted, for he anticipates that his fallen beliefs will regularly be challenged by Christ. In contrast, the Absolute Idealist admits that his highest positive vision of reality must at various points be *contradicted* by some opposing perspective/principle in order to advance

4. Recall 3.3.3.

5. SCE, 7.

6. In Van Til's words, believers know "something about everything" if only it be that it is a creature subject to the Triune Creator. IST, 83, 164–65; DF4, 282; NH, 150.

7. As Bradley explains, "analysis is the synthesis of the whole which it divides, and synthesis is the analysis of the whole which it constructs." Bradley, *Logic*, 406. Cf. DF3, 199, 205; IST, 8–9; SCE, 7–10.

toward deeper truth. This, argues Van Til, steals from man any confidence that falsity may not finally negate all truth.

Third, after allowing the facts to challenge his deductive premises, man must develop a new and more complete vision of the whole, which advances beyond the information supplied in his premise or in the facts by themselves.⁸ By observing a curve segment that connects three points, man can anticipate that certain points cannot reside on the course of its trajectory.⁹ By learning the rules of the game of football, man is able to formulate new strategies for winning that will surprise his opponents. For the Absolute idealists, these advances in human thought must be regarded as creative in the purest sense, and expressive of human autonomy. For Van Til, these advances are best described as re-creative.¹⁰ For, even the most profound progressions of human thought are due to the image of God within him, and to God's gracious providence. Finally, the method of implication thus described is equally deserving of the title "transcendental" reasoning.¹¹ The conclusion, for example, that certain points **must** lie on the trajectory of a curve is appropriately stated in the disjunctive form, "either this or nothing,"¹² since the curve and the respective points so necessitate one another that reality would be reduced to a realm of confusion if the two were not true together. Likewise, the various theological conclusions established by a Christian method of implication, can be viewed as definitively proven by virtue of the impossibility of a definite set of alternative (non-Christian) perspectives.

A more complex example of this sort of reasoning is evident in Adam's act of surveying and naming the animals (Gen 2:18–20). Adam began the process with a general portrait of reality that involved distinctions between God, man, and nature. The task assigned to him demanded that he stretch his initial worldview by taking note of more complex divisions within a particular portion of nature, namely the animals. But Adam did not simply name the animals "one," "two," "three," etc., as if they were atomic units. The text implies that in analyzing each particular animal he was simultaneously synthesizing or grouping them together in classes—cattle, birds, and beasts (Gen 2:19). Not only did he develop a notion of sexual distinctions and companionship between the members of a species (analysis), but he understood that this binary division was common to each class of animals (synthesis).

8. Cf. Bradley, *Logic*, 227–28.

9. SCE, 8.

10. IST, 162; FCE, 53; CTE, 22.

11. SCE, 10–13.

12. Bosanquet, *Implication*, 92–93; cf. 3.

The grand conclusion that “for Adam there was not found a suitable helper” (Gen 2:20) clearly advances beyond any simple sort of empirical reasoning. Where did Adam get the idea that he should even have a companion? Still more, without any *a priori* definition for how “woman” ought to be, why shouldn’t he have concluded that any one of the animals was an appropriate companion? Apparently, Adam ascended to the understanding that he was significantly like nature (and thus in need of a companion), and significantly unlike nature (and thus incapable of finding true companionship among the animals). Hence, Adam returned from his analytic/synthetic mission with a more profound view of himself and the world than could have been derived by mere deductive or inductive reasoning.

6.3 LAWS OF LOGIC

6.3.1 The Law of Identity

Logicians have traditionally defined the law of identity in such a way that a given reality is only properly identical with the entirety of itself ($A = A$). From this point of view, the law of identity cannot apply to historical realities which are constantly developing. At best, timeless forms,¹³ and perhaps the human soul, may be differentiated from a multitude of moments and accidental relations, to which they are basically indifferent. The Christian, on the other hand, begins with the notion that God is identical with three distinct persons. Analogously, the created principle of identity should be viewed as stipulating that created realities are, in varying degrees, one with distinct members, moments, and relations. They are “concrete universals.” In this case, David *was* the infant born to Jesse, *was* the young man who fled from Saul, and *was* the mature king who committed adultery with Bathsheba, each at different points. These three different expressions are inseparable from the concrete person, David. The obvious difference between David and the Trinity, is that the moments which differentiate David’s life, when taken individually, do not exhaustively express his entire story as each of the persons of the Trinity simultaneously comprehend the divine being. Within creation, certain realities may embody more profound sorts of identity in distinction than others. A random stone will be identified as a “rock,” in such a way that the object does very little to supply a unique perspective on the category, while the category itself is relatively indifferent to the specific rock. In contrast, works of art, natural systems, individual persons, political organizations, etc., manifest more profound measures of interdependence

13. CTK, 118–42.

and between themselves and their specific parts. Ultimately, the law of identity derives its own nuances of meaning from the different sorts of unity manifested throughout creation. In this case, "logic is in gear with reality, but it does not claim to control God Himself and therewith all possibility,"¹⁴ for it "derives its meaning from the [Christian] story."¹⁵

6.3.2 The Law of Contradiction

As with the law of identity, the law of contradiction must not be construed in timeless terms that would render it irrelevant to concrete matters. Beginning with the insight that the Triune persons cannot be simply identified with one another without destroying their concrete unity, Christians ought to regard the law of contradiction ($A \neq \sim A$) as stipulating that concrete universals cannot encompass just any combination of members, or morph into just anything. However, neither the law of contradiction, nor objects taken in abstraction, can tell us anything specific about what is or is not possible.¹⁶ It is only with reference to the system of reality disclosed in revelation (natural and special) that contradictories can be identified. That a square cannot be a circle is only evident from within the concrete system of two dimensional, Euclidian space.¹⁷ However, mathematicians have hypothesized that if space were of a different nature the two could be identical,¹⁸ and, as it stands, the two are meaningfully combined in the third dimension as a "cylinder."¹⁹ Likewise, to claim that the Normandy invasion was the turning point of the American Civil War, is to advance a gross contradiction, but from within the story of human history (and not, for example, in historical fiction). Most importantly, the unacceptable parameters of revision and development in each system must ultimately be determined by their relationship to the Triune God, and to his redemptive historical plan. Even our notion of God, the "supreme interpretative concept"²⁰ of Christianity is subject to historical development *for us*. But this does not undermine man's capacity to make valid applications of the law of contradiction. For, God can and has disclosed that we may know Him *truly*, though not exhaustively, in Christ (John 14:6). As a result, whatever developments our knowledge may undergo, those developments will enhance

14. RP, 29; IST, 38.

15. DF3, 214.

16. IST, 11; CTK, 35; cf. Bradley, *Logic*, 130.

17. Cf. Hegel, *Logic*, 200–22 (§142–159).

18. Reichenbach, *Philosophy of Space and Time*, §1–11.

19. Anderson, *Paradox*, 230–31.

20. SCE, 109. Cf. CTEV, 54; CG, 64, 67, 73; CI, 31, 129; CIM, 46, 61.

rather than compromise the validity of our current perspective. Whatever surprising revisions historians may suggest, they cannot be taken seriously if they would mangle beyond recognition the organic unity of the church's historical consciousness (Matt 28:19–20), and deprive her of her God-given rule over nature and history (Gen 1:26–27; Rev 20:4). And whatever unique spatio-temporal phenomena scientists may discover at the perimeter of the universe or at the subatomic level, the Christian knows that such discoveries cannot finally obliterate the church's capacity to convene for corporate worship (Heb 10:25). For, spatial systems, physical systems, biological systems, history, etc., exist for the ends of man's communion with God according to the Scriptures.²¹ Considerations such as these compel Van Til to speak of a distinctively "Christian logic,"²² the implications of which cannot be agreed upon by the advocates of an alleged "neutral logic."

6.3.3 Contradiction

A contradictory belief refers to a sustained intellectual breach of the laws of logic. Every contradiction (a) drives a wedge between things which are combined *and* (b) confuses things which are distinct.²³ Both tendencies involve the crime of "abstracting" details of the concrete systematic reality before us with the intent to create an abstract system in opposition to divine revelation.²⁴ In its extreme form, the first tendency is one with those irrationalist visions of the universe which conceive of facts and particulars as basically disconnected from one another within a sphere of chance. And yet, it is at the same time rationalist because it treats individual facts and concepts as if they were comprehensible with reference to themselves. The second tendency may be identified with the rationalist vision of a single truth which supersedes every distinction (e.g., being, unity, goodness). But it too erects an irrationalist dichotomy between the "one" monistic reality, and the pluralistic world of appearance. More familiar contradictions may be understood in the same terms. The notion of a square circle (within two-dimensional

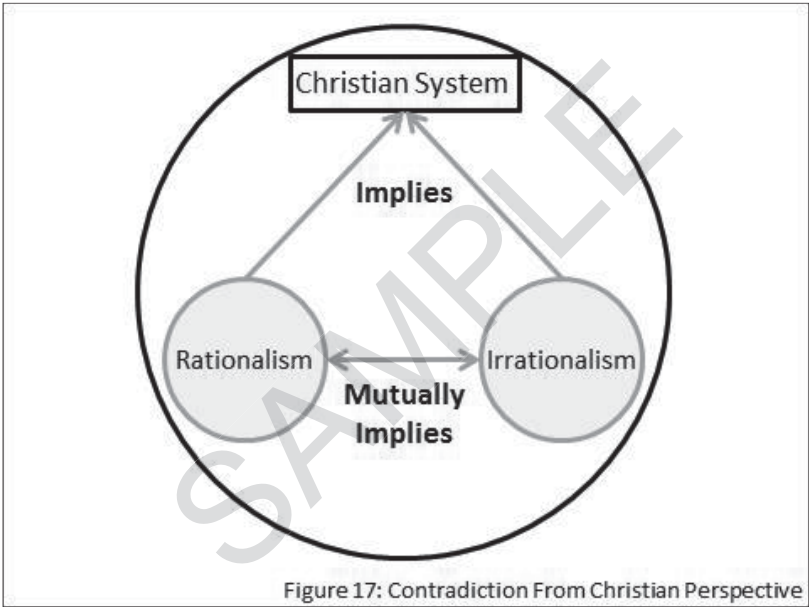
21. DF4, 50–51.

22. Ibid., 92–95; Van Til, "The Development of My Thinking," WCV, n.p.

23. "[M]an, in rejecting the covenantal requirement of God became at one and the same time both irrationalist and rationalist. These two are not, except formally, contradictory of one another. They rather imply one another. Man had to be both to be either." CTK, 49.

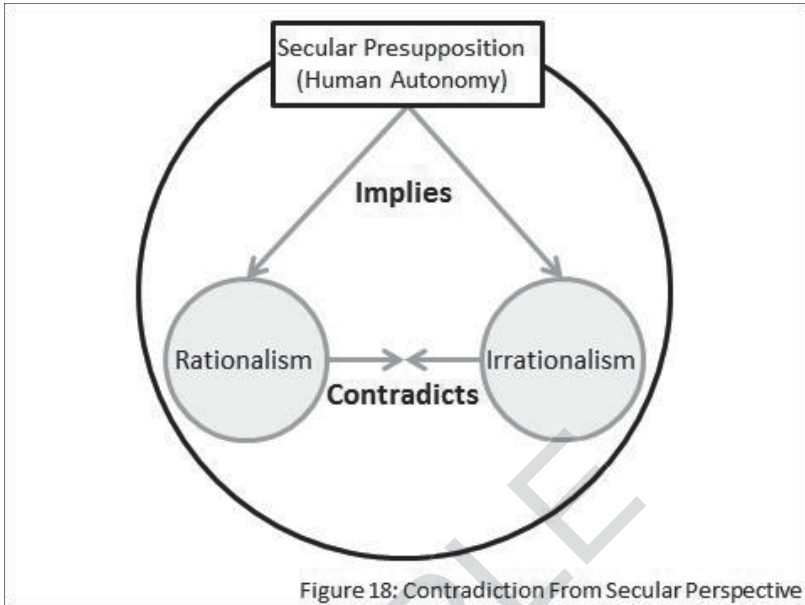
24. IST, 37–39, 210; CA, 32–34; CJ, 51; CTE, 200–201; CTK, 129ff. Van Til is not opposed to considering things in relative isolation from their context in order to organize them systematically. The negative and altogether self-contradictory form of abstraction involves treating any feature of the creation as if it were self-evident.

Euclidian space) confuses two distinct members of a particular system, and represents an idea that is wholly incompatible (in dichotomy) with geometry, as we know it. In every case, unbelieving contradictions attest to the Christian system by borrowing from it (see fig. 18), and failing to supply a viable alternative to it even on its own terms (see fig. 19). Finally, although Van Til refrains from defining “contradiction” directly, as we just have, his writings are nevertheless painted with demonstrations that various theological and philosophical systems are self-destructive because they combine “pure rationalism” with “pure irrationalism.”²⁵ Such a locution is Van Til’s way of saying that a particular belief system is marked by destructive self-contradiction, rather than a constructive paradox.



Even with formal descriptions of a proper method of implication, and of self-defeating contradictions, we must stress the fact that the one can only be distinguished from the other with reference to a concrete system. Earlier we observed that Adam’s conclusion that none of the animals could serve him as a suitable companion reflects a complex understanding of the continuities and discontinuities between men and animals. But what if he had decided that he was like the animals in the sense that any one of them could function as his companion, but unlike the animals in the sense that “man” is not divisible into male and female? Adam would still be asserting a sort

25. IST, 115, 162, 174; CTK, 96; 119–35; CG, 68; RP, 141; NH, 42, 44–45; SG, 10–11; TJD, 48; JA, 101; CB, 207; *Later Heidegger and Theology*, 34.



of “unity in difference” between himself and the animals. However, it would have represented a self-destructive contradiction. Adam would find himself emotionally, intellectually, sexually, and spiritually frustrated in his attempt to regard an animal as his fit companion. Still more, as he labored to live and to act in harmony with some animal, he would have to abandon the very sort of intellectual and even regal existence that enabled him to study and evaluate the animals in the first place. Hence, although Adam’s actual conclusion would have left him with many mysterious questions concerning the likeness and difference between man and beast, it is clearly distinguishable from a self-defeating contradiction when considered within the context of the biblical story. The difference, then, between paradox and contradiction can be formally defined, but whether a specific concept enhances or fatally disrupts the Christian worldview can only be determined with reference to special revelation.

6.3.4 Apparent Contradiction

Van Til argues that, due to human finitude, apparent contradictions must arise at the perimeter of man’s knowledge.²⁶ What distinguishes an apparent from a genuine contradiction is the fact that both of the apparently oppos-

26. CG, 142; cf. DF3, 44–46.

ing truths are based upon a faithful receptivity to revelation (see fig. 19). Stated another way, both contraries are implied by the Christian system, because they are based on the sorts of evidence that it sanctions as authoritative. Apparent contradictions would include apparent discrepancies within the biblical narrative (e.g., the different genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke); apparent conflicts between Scriptural revelation and natural revelation (e.g., the age of the universe); and apparent divergences within natural revelation (e.g., the apparent dual nature of light as a particle and a wave, etc.).²⁷ When it comes to evaluating apparent contradictions, the believer has every right to expect that these can be resolved in some fashion, if all of the relevant information were available to him, since God's revelation cannot contradict itself (Deut 13:1–5; 1 Cor 14:29–33).²⁸ Furthermore, he may determine that the resolution must be centered on one side of the apparent conflict as opposed to the other. For example, Van Til is quite convinced that the biblical system would be destroyed if Adam were taken as anything less than a historical personage. Therefore, the conflict between the biblical doctrine of the origins of the human race and certain scientific theories with respect to the same must be resolved by a refinement of the latter, and not of the former.²⁹

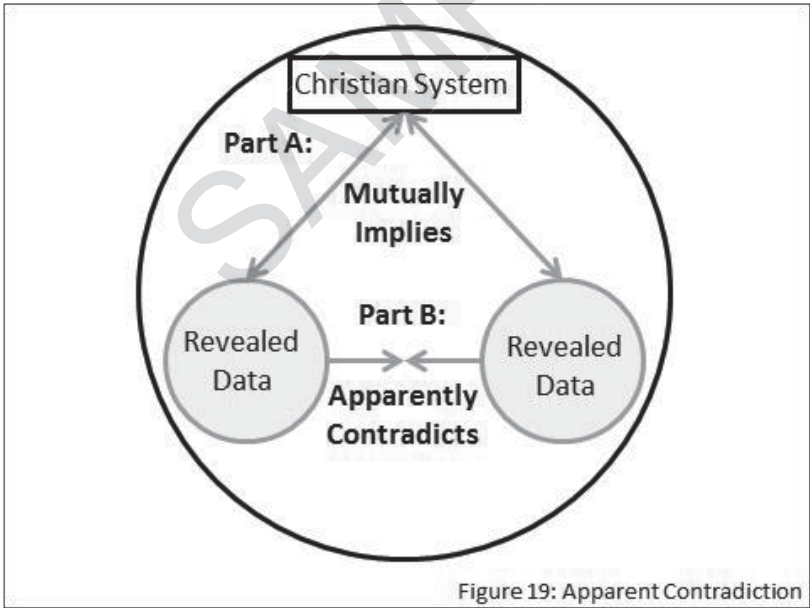


Figure 19: Apparent Contradiction

27. CTK, 34–38.

28. This point is reminiscent of the Princeton school, and particularly of William Henry Hodge. Recall 1.2.3.

29. IST, 29.

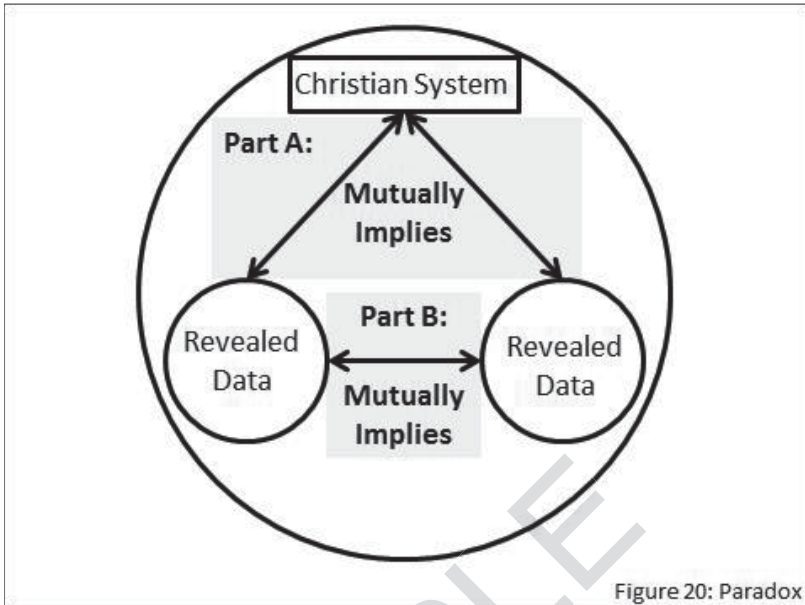


Figure 20: Paradox

6.3.5 Paradox

Although Van Til never formally distinguishes between “apparent contradictions,” “mysteries,” and “paradoxes,” it is quite clear that he regards certain apparent contradictions to be qualitatively different from others. In the examples listed above, Van Til encourages man to seek out resolutions to the conflicting data. With respect to those apparent contradictions which we will specially designate “paradoxes,” Van Til argues that pursuit of a resolution is sinfully imperceptive of their profundity. We may identify three distinguishing features of a paradox. First, a paradoxical doctrine must be based on two apparently opposing pieces of information that are required by Christian revelation,³⁰ and in turn prove themselves to be necessary to the very Christian system which facilitated their discovery. In other words, the poles of a paradox are discernibly essential to the Christian system, and the Christian system is essential to a right understanding of each pole. Of course, the only way for newfound truths to prove necessary/essential to the worldview through which they are discovered is if one already has a healthy appreciation for the fact that he does not fully comprehend even his basic presuppositions about reality. Furthermore, the sort of necessity of which

30. With respect to God’s love for the reprobate, Van Til reasons, “How can God have an attitude of favor unto those who are according to his own ultimate will to be separated from him forever? The first and basic answer is that Scripture teaches it.” CG, 140.

we speak is something quite different from formal, deductive necessity. The Christian system is not a "master concept"³¹ from which one may directly deduce the opposing elements of every given paradox, and the many details of the Christian faith. However, the poles of a paradox and the Christian system to which they belong can be said to necessitate one another in the strict sense that, once they are discovered, one of them cannot be regarded as true without acknowledging the truth of the other.³²

Second, in addition to validating and receiving validation from the Christian system, the poles of a paradox must discernibly imply one another (see fig. 20).³³ The classic Van Tillian example is the doctrine of the Trinity. Both the unity and the diversity of the Trinity require one another. For, God could not be a *self-sufficient* unity apart from an equally basic distinction of persons toward whom God might express his personality; and the three divine persons could not be meaningfully distinguished and related to one another except in the wholly personal/rational context of the one divine Being.³⁴ And of course, the Christian system implies the Trinity, since it rests upon absolutely authoritative disclosures from God, and only a self-contained person who transcends the one-many problem can be such an unparalleled authority.³⁵ And finally, the Trinity necessitates many other essential details of the Christian system (e.g., absolute ethical standards, a covenantal theory of reality, the value of historical development, etc.). Were the paradox of the Trinity logically resolvable, and reducible to familiar categories, the entire Christian system would collapse. For, God would be comprehended by finite universals, and He would, therefore, not be the archetypal Standard/Creator of them. Notably, the same sorts of observations cannot be made about apparent contradictions. It does no service to the Christian system to take Matthew and Luke's genealogies at face value, and to conclude without further reflection that two different men—Jacob and Eli—were both at once Jesus' paternal grandfather. Indeed, the notion of a "bi-nitarian" human being would mangle a host of biblical doctrines. It is appropriate, then, to

31. CTK, 38. Cf. DF4, 206ff.

32. Variations on the phrases "mutually imply," "mutually presuppose," "mutually require," and "interdependence" are prominent in the Van Til corpus, and all have the same meaning. In the second chapter of *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* alone, Van Til identifies at least eight examples of doctrines which mutually imply one another, which one might initially suppose are at odds, or at the very least, indifferent to one another. CTK, 25–40; cf. SCE 96; CTE 21.

33. CG, 73. cf. 140; CTE, 48; DF3, 160; SCE, 49; CFC, 35.

34. DF4, 31; SCE, 97.

35. "The Bible must be true because it alone speaks of an Absolute God. And equally true is it that we believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one." SCE, 12. Cf. Van Til, "God and the Absolute," 22.

theorize about possible resolutions to this particular conflict.³⁶ Hence, it may be said that an apparent contradiction is “vindicated” as an informative paradox only when its poles mutually imply one another and the Christian system.³⁷

Third, paradoxical combinations continue to challenge men even after they have been systematically vindicated, because they stretch the boundaries of how various concepts (e.g., one, person, three, etc.) are employed in familiar contexts (e.g., when counting change, trying an individual in court, etc.). As we have seen, God’s special mode of unity in diversity cannot be replicated by Jesus’ paternal grandfather. If apparent contradictions establish the *quantitative* difference between man’s knowledge and that of God, since man lacks sufficient information to resolve them, genuine paradoxes call attention to the *qualitative* difference between the two, since man should never expect to be able to reduce them to familiar terms. Hence, Van Til agrees with Bradley that the concept of “person” is self-contradictory, and an unworthy descriptor of the Absolute, if one embraces Bradley’s “assumption that the human categories are ultimate” and self-explanatory.³⁸ Yet, if one begins with the assumption that human categories are analogues of God, then only the latter can confirm that they are meaningful descriptions of creatures, and truly applicable to Himself when appropriately qualified. Still more, only God can supply us with a perspective on the whole that is capable of facilitating true and dependable interpretations of ourselves, nature, and Himself. Of course, the idea of a God who is uni-personal and tri-personal is utterly challenging to us, because it is irreducible to familiar instances of unity in difference. However, if man could resolve the mystery of the Trinity by reducing His unique mode of being to an instance of something that he regularly encounters in nature or human society, then God would be degraded to a member of the universe, as opposed to that self-contained personal context upon whom all true knowledge depends.³⁹ Additionally, believers ought to realize that every member of reality is paradoxical (as Bradley made much headway in showing) in the sense that

36. For example, a popular explanation is that Luke’s record hints at the fact that Jesus’ maternal genealogy is being recorded by designating Joseph (but no other ancestor) as the “supposed” Father of Jesus (Luke 3:23).

37. Van Til alludes to both criteria in the same breath in his short summary of the argument in *Common Grace and the Gospel*: “Such doctrines of election and freedom must be thought as limiting one another or, as supplementing and supporting one another, always with the idea that God and His revelation in Christ through Scripture gives us a theology of reality on the basis of which any human concept must be made.” Van Til, “The Development of My Thinking,” WCV, n.p. Cf. DF4, 207, 267; CG, 65–95.

38. SCE, 160. For a discussion of Bradley’s position, recall 3.3.1.

39. Ibid. 47; cf. 49–50, 59–60, 107; CTK, 11ff.

they cannot fully illuminate their own mode of being, and must fall into contradictions when treated as self-explanatory.⁴⁰ From this perspective, the Trinity is no less paradoxical than the universe as a whole, even if our sinful suppression of the knowledge of God renders theological paradoxes less familiar (and more offensive) than those of day-to-day experience. And yet, the paradox of the Trinity is, in another respect, the most logical of all doctrines. For, He alone is capable of setting all things in their proper light, so that men may rest assured that their knowledge of reality is true even if incomplete, and in many ways, apparently contradictory.⁴¹

At first glance, the Van Tillian strategy for vindicating theological paradox may very well appear unnatural and impractical. However, pursuit of an appreciation for how distinct features and components (a) imply one another when viewed through the lens of a common system, and then (b) together enhance our perspective on that system is (on our account) one of the most basic characterizations of a concrete reasoning process.⁴² If one became acquainted with the qualities of flesh and bones in disconnection from one another, it would initially seem as if the two sorts of material had nothing significant in common. But, viewed through the lens of the bodily system, the two clearly require one another and cannot perform their respective functions without the other. In return, a detailed understanding of the interaction between the skeletal and muscular systems makes for a more robust understanding of the human body as a whole. What this sort of example goes to show is that the method of vindicating paradox described above is a natural corollary of reasoning by implication. The chief difference between the regular process of reasoning by implication, and vindicating theological paradox is that the latter involves discerning the mutual necessity between characteristics of God, ultimate reality, human freedom, etc., which stretch the day-to-day sense of various terms.

40. SCE, 24–43; CGG, 142; DF4, 67–68.

41. CGG, 9.

42. Recall 3.3.1.