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## Plantinga, WARRANTED CHRISTIAN BELIEF

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more than twenty years after those treated by Cary in this book. What Augustine came to see by the end of the fourth century, according to Cary, is that in spite of the *imago Dei*, the deep kinship of the soul to God, God must always be *praeter animam*, other than and beyond the soul. God can be looked for in the inner space of the soul, a space which is in some sense infinite (the exploration of memory reveals no end to its capacities) and in some sense everlasting (it will have no end in time), but which is not identical to God. This picture of the soul, given in its most gorgeous literary form in the tenth book of the *Confessions*, is what Cary means by Augustine's invention of the inner self. The doctrine of sin is still not fully developed, but Augustine has moved sufficiently far from (for example) the *Soliloquies* of 387, that he no longer makes the soul and God necessarily co-existent. The inner self is a place in which God's traces may be found, an extended metaphor for God; but it is no longer a place identical in essence with God, nor a place inseparable from God.

This book is not the work of a philosopher with precise and analytical tastes. Its principal value does not lie in the drawing of careful distinctions or the offering of coercive and complex arguments. It is nonetheless a valuable and important book, both for those interested in Augustine's thought, and for those wanting, as Augustine wanted, to think Christian thoughts about matters of philosophical interest. For the former, Cary's analysis of Augustine's Plotinianism will no doubt provide fertile ground for future discussion. For the latter, his richly textured depiction of how a particular Christian at a particular time—Augustine at the end of the fourth century—actually thought, has some important lessons to teach. Augustine wanted to think as a Christian, to think Christian thoughts about the materials (biblical, creedal, liturgical, conceptual) provided him by the church, handed down to him by the tradition. But he found that the tradition did not provide him with everything he needed in order to think Christian thoughts about the nature of the soul, and so he was pressed by his conversion to study Platonism more deeply than before precisely in order to find what he needed. This is a portrayal of the intellectual situation of every Christian thinker; it ought to be immediately recognizable and nourishing to readers of this journal, and it may also serve as a corrective to those who want to think Christian thoughts but who take themselves to have no need of the gold of the Egyptians (Exodus 3:21-22, 12:35-36) in order to do so.

*Warranted Christian Belief*, by **Alvin Plantinga**, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2000 ISBN 0-190513192-4 — 0-19-513193-2(pbk) pp. xx + 508. \$60.00 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

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This is the eagerly awaited sequel to Plantinga's two earlier books on epistemology, *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*. This one is, however, about the rational acceptability of Christian belief, and is rooted firmly in Christian tradition, following such apparently dis-

parate figures as Aquinas and Calvin. The result is a feast of detailed argument and important insights that will stimulate much study and discussion. The book is undoubtedly one of the most important to have appeared in the field of the philosophy of religion for many years, and is all the more challenging since it combines a deep Christian faith with the highest standards of argument derived from contemporary epistemology. Plantinga hopes that it may even appeal to a general reader, but what he himself refers to as the book's 'inordinate length' will not help in that respect. He adopts the rather desperate measure of sometimes printing more detailed discussions in small print, in order to cater for the specialist, and to encourage others to skip parts. Yet either the discussions are an integral part of the argument and should be read, or they should never have been included in the first place. The result is certainly a somewhat unwieldy book, which may prove off-putting to some. As a result it may be less effective and influential than it deserves to be.

Plantinga's views will already be familiar to followers of so-called 'reformed epistemology.' He holds that some religious beliefs are as basic as any belief arising from our perception or our memory. His argument is that a religious believer "can be perfectly rational in accepting some of her beliefs in the basic way – not on the basis (probabilistic or otherwise) of other beliefs" (p. 442). We may believe there is a God, even if we have no reasons or evidence as such. Suggesting that we should have evidence, is, for Plantinga, to resort to 'evidentialism.' In fact, he is writing from a Calvinist tradition, which tends to distrust human reason, not least because it is infected by sin. Instead of using evidence to form judgments about what is true, he sees faith in less rational terms, as something causally produced.

Where does such belief come from? Plantinga's answer is to suggest causal processes, which, as in the case of reliable sense perception, connect us with the origins of belief. He argues for a so-called 'sensus divinitatis' within us. It is a faculty, which, when triggered, delivers certain beliefs about God. A natural knowledge of God may arise in us, he says, as a result of the perception of the night sky, a mountain vista, or similar glories. He says: "They are occasioned by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them" (p.175). He earlier defines the 'sensus divinitatis' as "a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity" (p.173). The idea is that our cognitive faculties have been designed by God, and amongst them is what Plantinga calls 'a belief-producing faculty (or power, or mechanism)' that under the right conditions produces beliefs that are basic, in the sense that they are not based evidentially on other beliefs. One problem, of course, is how we are to know what the right conditions are. Another mechanism at work, Plantinga believes, is specific to Christianity. He appeals to both Aquinas and Calvin to show how convictions can come "by way of the activity of the Holy Spirit" (p. 251). According to this model, 'faith is belief in the great things of the gospel that results from the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit'. The Bible can thus be a vehicle for faith, but not an argument to it. Faith becomes, after all, the result of supernatural intervention. It is neither produced by reason, nor is it susceptible to rational investigation,

though Plantinga significantly does concede that there could be arguments for giving it up, termed by him "defeaters."

One of the strengths of this approach is the way in which it takes religious beliefs seriously enough to suppose that they do not have to be subordinated to other forms of belief. Why should we only trust our senses, and use them as a standard by which to judge faith? Trust in the deliverances of our senses, and trust in the product of 'faith' may not be so very different. Another strength is Plantinga's unremitting realism. God exists independently of belief and may be regarded as its causal origin. There may therefore be good reason for our having the theistic beliefs we do, even if we cannot ourselves give it. We may be justified, without being able to offer a justification.

Yet there are bound to be some misgivings about the overall project, however impressive it is. Some people will have a basic belief that God exists, and others not. Plantinga seems to be ruling out any way of rationally resolving this, even if one side is right and the other wrong. His programme is influenced by naturalist pictures of epistemology, which explain the reliability of our beliefs in terms of a causal story. Yet because he is far from being a metaphysical naturalist, he can allow a significant causal role to a transcendent God. Our beliefs, though, are still only properly grounded with the right causal background. Grounding is in this case a causal, rather than a rational, process. This allows a connection with an external reality, but in the end, all such causal explanations find it difficult to account for normativity. We may happen to believe something. Ought we to? The issue of truth is difficult to recover when a wholly causal account is given. Causal stories tend to be illuminating only if we already know what is true and what is illusory. We have to be able to distinguish reliable from unreliable causal chains.

Plantinga is happy to talk in terms of faculties, processes and even mechanisms. Yet the idea that our cognitive faculties operate mechanically sits rather uneasily with a theistic view of reason. We should see things as they are, but that does not mean that the world is just an automatic trigger for beliefs. Saying that reality is the occasion for belief, and not the reason for it, removes any intrinsic connection between our beliefs and what they are about. If the beauty and grandeur of nature are mere stimuli that trigger the working of a sense of divinity, the relationship is causal. Natural theology would argue from facts in nature to the existence of God, giving the one as evidence for the other. Plantinga opposes this. Yet once a causal connection is set up, why should not, say, the grandeur of nature actually trigger atheistic beliefs or a belief in a devil? There is no reason connecting fact with belief. Anything could be a trigger for anything. No doubt the answer will come that we have not been designed like that. Faith is given by the grace of God in those circumstances. This, though, is a statement from the standpoint of faith, and does nothing to explain why some connections are set up and not others. Are they arbitrary, or do they reflect the rationality of the Creator? If so, why cannot we be supposed, at least in part, to share in that rationality, and understand, if dimly, an inherent rationality present in the world, reflecting the mind of its Creator?

There are other philosophical issues at stake. The causal model of God's

grace may fit in well with a determinist view of the world. There are even echoes in it of old arguments about predestination. Why does God select some and not others, as recipients for the gift of faith? If the offer is open to all, why is it triggered only on selective occasions? The use of the term 'mechanism,' in connection with our cognitive faculties, downgrades rationality in favour of causal processes presumably having their origin in God. Yet reason is important in human beings because of its associations with universality and freedom. Without the ability to exercise a (God-given) reason, we are at the mercy of particular causal pressures, whether emanating from the Holy Spirit or not. Calvinist doctrines of election hover in the background. Not all are chosen. Being subject to reason, and being able ourselves to choose freely and responsibly, are different sides of the same coin. We can adopt beliefs about what is objectively true, and choose to act for reasons which ought to hold for everyone. The paradigm of creative freedom is that of the Creator, and in Christianity it has traditionally been held we were made in God's image. Plantinga's account, by downplaying the role of rationality, suggests that we cannot reflect, even partially, the rational freedom of God.

Further, an emphasis on rationality carries with it an implied claim to universality. All humans could then share it, and it is not a particular gift to a few, bestowed on arbitrarily chosen occasions. On the other hand, any view of faith which grounds it in a way that does not make reasoned claims, cannot be expected to be listened to by those outside it. The downplaying of the role of reason in linking our faith to reality can only mean that we appear to live in a world constructed by a particular faith. Inevitably, the emphasis then changes from the character of the reality we all confront, whether religious believer or unbeliever, to the faith we do or do not hold. Plantinga deliberately does not allow a place for 'independent' reasons. The result is that we cannot reason to faith, only from it.

Even if I have had some direct experience of God, I will need some assurance that it was God I was experiencing. Once ideas of evidence and justification are given up, an arbitrary element creeps in. I can be caused to believe in God, but I can also be caused not to. Which line of causation is to be relied on? If there is no answer, we are inevitably forced back to rely on the standards of a community of faith, and that is relativism. Otherwise, I can be forced to retreat to my own personal convictions and experiences, but that is subjectivism. Without grounds that can recommend the content of my faith to others, religious claims to a knowledge of an objective reality, (which others should also share) must be given up.

The fact that discussion of Plantinga's views takes us so directly to central philosophical and theological controversies that have echoed down the centuries shows how important this book is. Written with great philosophical acuteness and incisiveness, it is also sensitive to the deepest theological issues. It should be a starting-point for discussion in the philosophy of religion for years to come, and could be used with great profit in any serious University course on the subject.