

The Metaphysics of Alvin Plantinga

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Alvin Plantinga (1932–) is one of the most important figures in the rebirth of old-fashioned, *a priori*, metaphysics in the late 20th century and early 21st century.

Along with others such as Saul KRIPKE (1980), he was instrumental in persuading philosophers that Quinean naturalism was not the only option in terms of a metaphysical worldview. Furthermore, he has been the principal force behind an enormous flowering of orthodox Christian (and, more generally, theistic) belief among analytic philosophers. When Plantinga wrote his first book, *God and Other Minds* in 1967, theism was thought of as quaint at best, and intellectually sloppy and dishonest at worst. Yet, by the end of the 20th century, the Society of Christian Philosophers had become an extremely large and active subgroup of the American Philosophical Association. In what follows, I will provide an overview of Plantinga's body of work in metaphysics, including the philosophy of religion, abstract ontology, and the metaphysics of modality.

I. God

Alvin Plantinga believes that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being--GOD--who cares about human beings and interacts in

human history (see Plantinga 19, and 1998, and for a discussion of the scope of God's knowledge, see Plantinga's 1993 exchange with Grim). This being in some way grounds or explains the existence of everything that exists, perhaps even necessarily existing entities such as propositions, properties, relations, states of affairs, and possible worlds (Plantinga 1980; for further discussion of these issues see Morris, 1987, Davidson, 2006, and Bergmann and Brower, 2006). Plantinga thinks that a version of the ontological argument is sound (see Plantinga, 1990, ch. 2, 1974a, ch. X, and 1974b, pp. 85 ff.). His discussion of the ontological argument is the most subtle and important since the discussion of the argument during the Modern period. Interestingly, Plantinga thinks that although the argument is *sound*, he does not think it is *cogent*. He does not think that the premises will convince anyone who does not already believe the conclusion of the argument.

Important for Plantinga's famous FREE WILL defense against the logical problem of evil (Plantinga 1974a) is that God has *middle knowledge*: God knows what libertarian-free creatures would do were counterfactual circumstances in which they exist *actual* (this locution will be discussed momentarily). This assumption in Plantinga's argument has revived a hearty debate from the sixteenth century between Luis De Molina and his Dominican opponents about the nature of God's knowledge (e.g. , see Hasker, 1989, Flint 1998, Hasker 2004, and Molina 2004). The thought that there is nothing to know about what libertarian-free creatures would do in non-actual circumstances has raised

questions about whether there is anything for God to know with respect to what libertarian-free creatures will do (in the actual world).

Plantinga also argues that belief in naturalism is "self-defeating" in that anyone who accepts it is irrational in her belief that it is true. He also argues, even more provocatively, that anyone who accepts it is thereafter irrational in everything she believes. This irrationality arises because the naturalist believes (or most every naturalist believes) that our cognitive faculties were shaped by mindless evolutionary forces that select for traits that foster reproductive fitness, and there conceivably are many ways whereby our cognitive mechanisms could be flawed with respect to producing true beliefs and still be selected for (or selected) by evolutionary forces. Plantinga (1993, 1994, 1998, 2002) provides rigorous argumentation for the proposition that belief in naturalism is self-defeating, and Beilby (2002) contains responses to Plantinga's provocative argument.

2. Actualism and Modality

Plantinga is a staunch proponent of *actualism*, as Plantinga puts it, the view that there neither are nor could have been objects that don't exist (see Plantinga, 1985). Furthermore, Plantinga defends *serious actualism*, the view that objects have properties only in POSSIBLE WORLDS where they exist (Plantinga 1985). In other words, necessarily, an object *o* has a property only if *o* exists (for a discussion of actualism, see Adams, 1981 and Fitch, 1996, for a discussion of *serious* actualism, see Bergmann, 1999).

One of the factors that enabled the current flowering of metaphysics is the acceptance of *de re* modality. Many philosophers for much of the middle of the 20th century accepted QUINE'S arguments (1960) that *de re* MODALITY is an incoherent notion; many believed that "modality resides in the way we talk about objects, not in the objects themselves." More than anyone else, Plantinga showed that Quine's arguments for this claim weren't convincing (see in particular Plantinga, 1969 and 1974a). With the shift to thinking that objects have modal properties (tied to things like identity conditions) independently of the way we think or talk about them, philosophers began to ask what sorts of modal properties objects have. Could Socrates have been an alligator? Could this cup lose its handle and persist?

3. Possible Worlds and Essences

As mentioned above, Plantinga believes in *states of affairs*, abstract objects which are ways things are or could have been (see PROPOSITION, STATES OF AFFAIRS). They are denoted by phrases like "Socrates's being snubnosed." Many states of affairs are *actual*, e.g. *The United States's being engaged in a preemptively-launched war*, many are not, e.g., *Iraq's having weapons of mass destruction*. Some of those that aren't actual couldn't be actual, e.g. *Cheney's simultaneously being and not being Vice President of the United States of America*. Some states affairs which are actual now, won't be later, e.g., *George W. Bush's being President of the United States of America*. A close relative of this state of affairs which always was and will be actual is

George W. Bush's being President of the United States of America in 2006.

Plantinga calls states of affairs which are actual at every time, if actual at all, *non-transient* states of affairs. All other states of affairs are *transient* (Plantinga 1985). For Plantinga, all of these states of affairs exist necessarily.

Plantinga also defines relations between states of affairs (see Plantinga, 1970 and 1974a). A state of affairs *S* *includes* a state of affairs *S'* if and only if necessarily it's not possible for *S* to be actual (or *obtain*) and *S'* not obtain. A state of affairs *S* *precludes* a state of affairs *S'* if and only if necessarily it's not possible that *S* and *S'* obtain. A *possible world* for Plantinga is a *maximal non-transient state of affairs*, a non-transient state of affairs that includes or precludes every state of affairs (Plantinga 1985). One possible world is actual, or obtains. An individual *x* exists in a world *W* just in case *W*'s being actual entails that *x* exists. A proposition *p* is true in a world *W* just in case *W*'s being actual entails that *p* is true.

Plantinga also believes there are *individual essences* (see Plantinga, 1979). An individual essence *E* of an object *o* is a property such that, necessarily, if *E* is exemplified, *o* exists, and necessarily, if *o* exists, *E* is exemplified. There are broadly two sorts of individual essences for Plantinga, *haecceities* and *world-indexed essences*. A HAECCEITY is a "primitive" sort of individual essence, denoted by a phrase like "being Socrates", or "being identical with Socrates" (see Rosenkrantz, 1993). A world-indexed individual essence is a property like *being the President of the United States in 2006* in ***insert Greek***

alpha here where "insert Greek alpha here" is a name of the actual world. The property *being the President of the United States in 2006* is possessed "uniquely" by one individual: if an individual exemplifies that property at any time, then that individual is George W. Bush.

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