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Warranted Christian Belief

Alvin Plantinga

New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, xx + 508 pp., £16.99, pb., ISBN 0-19-513193-2

RÉSUMÉ

Dans son livre Warranted Christian Belief, Alvin Plantinga applique la théorie de la légitimité qu'il a développée dans les deux premiers livres de sa trilogie. Ce volume est le troisième de cette série dans laquelle il étudie le statut épistémologique de la foi théiste et chrétienne. Cependant, ce volume, vise un double but : d'une part, il s'agit d'un ouvrage de philosophie chrétienne, montrant la façon dont un chrétien peut envisager le statut épistémologique de sa foi ; d'autre part, c'est une œuvre d'apologétique négative, réfutant les objections opposées à la foi théiste et chrétienne. Plantinga distingue deux différentes objections que l'on pourrait soulever contre le théisme ou le christianisme : l'objection de facto selon laquelle cette croyance est fautive, et l'objection de jure selon laquelle cette croyance est pour une raison ou pour une autre rationnellement inacceptable. La principale affirmation du livre de Plantinga est que ces deux objections ne sont pas indépendantes : même une objection de jure à peine viable présuppose la fausseté du théisme ou du christianisme. Plantinga plaide en faveur de cette affirmation en proposant un 'modèle' c'est-à-dire une explication, inspirée de Thomas d'Aquin et de Calvin, montrant combien une foi théiste ou chrétienne, si vraie, pourrait être rationnelle, légitime et de manière générale, acceptable d'un point de vue épistémologique, même si elle ne repose pas sur des preuves explicites. En chemin, Plantinga démolit presque toutes les objections que l'on pourrait imaginer contre le théisme traditionnel ou le christianisme, depuis le point de vue de Kant, de Kaufman, et de Hick, jusqu'aux problèmes du mal, du pluralisme, du postmodernisme et de la critique biblique historique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Alvin Plantinga verwendet in Warranted Christian Belief seine Berechtigungstheorie, die er in den ersten beiden Bänden seiner Trilogie, deren dritter Band der vorliegende ist, entwickelt hat, für Überlegungen zum

erkenntnistheoretischen Status theistischer und christlichen Glaubens. Der vorliegende Band erfüllt dabei einen doppelten Zweck: er ist einerseits ein Werk christlicher Philosophie, das einen Weg aufzeigt, auf dem ein Christ über den erkenntnistheoretischen Status seines Glaubens nachdenken kann. Andererseits ist es ein Werk negativer Apologetik, das Einwände gegen theistischen und christlichen Glauben zurückweist. Plantinga unterscheidet zwei Arten von Einwänden, die jemand gegen Theismus oder das Christentum vorbringen kann: den de facto Einwand, daß der Glaube falsch ist, und den de jure Einwand, daß der Glaube auf irgendeine Weise rational inakzeptabel sei. Die Hauptthese des Buches ist, daß diese zwei Arten nicht unabhängig voneinander sind: jeder ernstzunehmende de jure Einwand setzt die Unrichtigkeit von Theismus oder Christentum voraus. Plantinga argumentiert für diese These, indem er ein 'Modell' aufstellt, d. h. eine Erklärung, die, Thomas von Aquin und Calvin aufgreifend, erläutert, wie theistischer Glaube, wenn wahr, zugleich rational, berechtigt und erkenntnistheoretisch akzeptabel sein könnte, auch wenn er nicht auf propositionaler Evidenz beruht. Teil der Argumentation ist die Entkräftung sämtlicher ernsthafter Einwände gegen Theismus und Christentum von Kant, Kaufman und Hick, bis zu den Problemen des Bösen, Pluralismus, Postmoderne und historisch-kritischer Bibelauslegung.

This, Plantinga's *magnum opus*, is the final volume of his trilogy on warrant, which he defines as that 'quality or quantity (perhaps it comes in degrees), whatever precisely it may be, enough of which distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief'. This volume follows *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), hereafter 'WCD', and *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), hereafter 'WPF'. *Warranted Christian Belief* (hereafter 'WCB'), as its title suggests, is devoted to the application of Plantinga's views on warrant to the consideration of the epistemic status of Christian belief. It approaches this topic from two distinct angles: first, Plantinga argues against every objection he can find to the epistemic acceptability of Christian belief, arguing for the conclusion that there is no viable objection to its epistemic respectability which is not also an

objection to its truth. Here Plantinga presupposes nothing about the truth of Christianity. Secondly, Plantinga discusses a particular way in which a Christian could think of her beliefs as having positive epistemic status; this project *does* presuppose the truth of Christian belief. The rigorous and detailed discussion (extending to two type faces: standard for the rigorous, and small for the *really* rigorous) of the 508 pages of this massive book is enlivened by Plantinga's ready wit and refreshing choice of examples—those familiar with Plantinga's previous works will be pleased to see more examples taken from the author's hobby of mountain climbing and from his (distant) relative Feike, the Frisian.

Plantinga begins by distinguishing two objections someone might have to theistic or Christian belief—the *de facto* objection that the belief is false and the *de jure* objection that the belief is intellectually unacceptable. In *WCB* Plantinga deals with the *de jure* objection seeking to show that the sort of person who says 'Well, I don't know whether Christian belief is true (after all, who could know a thing like that?), but I do know that it is not intellectually acceptable' him or herself holds a rationally untenable view. Plantinga tries to elucidate the objection: in virtue of what could theistic or Christian belief be intellectually unacceptable? He distinguishes three candidates for reconstructing the objection: (i) that theistic or Christian belief is unjustified, (ii) that it is irrational internally or externally, and (iii) that it is unwarranted.

Plantinga deals first with (i), which he interprets as the objection that theists or Christians are not conforming to their intellectual duties in believing in God or Christianity. Plantinga doesn't say in *WCB* what our intellectual duties are, since he has briefly discussed this in *WCD*, but he thinks that it is just *obvious* that a theist or Christian is within her epistemic rights to believe in God or Christianity, even if she holds these beliefs as basic, i.e., without any (propositional) evidence. He discusses the classical view on what may be held as a basic belief, initiated by John Locke, in some detail, calling this answer 'classical foundationalism', and taking it to be the view that the only sort of beliefs which may be held as basic by a believer *S* are those which are self-evident for *S*, incorrigible for *S*, or about things evident to *S*'s senses. Every other belief has to get propositional evidence from somewhere. Plantinga claims that on this view most of our beliefs

turn out to be unjustified. But he also goes on to show that classical foundationalism is 'self-referentially incoherent': the principle itself is not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses for anyone, and cannot be validly inferred from premises which are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses for anyone, and so by its own lights should not be believed.

So Plantinga turns his attention to another candidate in his search for a viable *de jure* objection, *viz.* (ii). Here he discusses various concepts of rationality, fastening on the concept of rationality as proper function, on which concept 'irrationality' means malfunction of the rational faculties. He then distinguishes internal rationality from external rationality. He defines internal rationality as being a matter of proper function of all belief-producing processes 'downstream' from experience, i.e., principally, forming or holding the appropriate beliefs in response to experience. Plantinga argues that the *de jure* objection couched in terms of internal rationality is also too easy to rebut. If somebody's experience includes it strongly seeming to her that theism or Christianity is true then obviously, he says, she is internally rational in believing in God or Christianity, indeed, she would be internally irrational not to.

Plantinga next turns to *external* rationality, which he defines as proper function of the cognitive faculties 'upstream' from experience, i.e., with respect to formation of the right kind of experience. Plantinga concedes that there is a *prima facie* plausible objection to theistic or Christian belief if one interprets the *de jure* objection as alleging that theistic or Christian belief is *externally* irrational. But, Plantinga says, warrant includes external rationality, so he considers the *de jure* question in terms of warrant, and thereby also considering it in terms of external rationality.

So Plantinga then turns to (iii) and examination of warrant, which, as mentioned above, he has defined as that thing enough of which turns a true belief into knowledge. Plantinga's central claim here is that a belief is warranted if and only if (roughly) it is produced by cognitive faculties which are functioning properly in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs. Thus warrant includes in its first condition (cognitive faculties functioning properly) external rationality, internal rationality, and justification (if there are epistemic duties, and perhaps vacuously if

not). However, it is hard to see that *God* has any knowledge on Plantinga's definition here: God was not designed and so there is no design plan in accordance with which his faculties may work. Hence God's beliefs are not warranted in Plantinga's sense and so fail to count as knowledge.

Plantinga then claims that Freud's and Marx's complaints about theistic or Christian belief are best interpreted as versions of the *de jure* complaint that theistic or Christian belief is unwarranted. Freud, he says, alleges that theistic belief is produced by wishful thinking—a cognitive process which, though working properly, is not aimed at truth. For Marx, theistic belief is produced by cognitive processes aimed at truth, but which are not functioning properly, because they are perverted by an unjust social structure. Plantinga points out that neither Freud nor Marx offers much in the way of an argument for either of these claims, and each seems to *presuppose* the falsehood of theism. One might be tempted to respond that their belief that theism is false could be just as properly basic as Plantinga's that theism is true. But the onus is on Freud and Marx (or their followers) to convince Plantinga that theism is unwarranted rather than on Plantinga to prove that their atheism is unwarranted.

Plantinga then makes his major claim of the book: that the *de jure* objection to theistic or Christian belief is not independent of the *de facto* objection. Hence the claim that theistic or Christian belief is unwarranted presupposes that theism or Christianity is false. Plantinga argues for this by claiming that if theism or Christianity is true then very likely theistic or Christian belief is warranted, and argues for *this* by giving a possible model of how it could be that it is warranted. Plantinga does not try to show that his model is true, since it presupposes the truth of theistic or Christian belief, merely that it is true for all we know, in particular, that the objector cannot show that it is not true, and cannot give any cogent objections to it which are not also cogent objections to the truth of theism or Christianity. He then concludes that, since the two versions of the objection are not independent, the person, described above, who says 'Well, I don't know whether Christian belief is true (after all, who could know a thing like that?), but I do know that it is not intellectually acceptable' does not have a rationally tenable position. Plantinga thus concludes that 'a successful atheological objection will have to be to the *truth* of theism, not

to its rationality'.

Plantinga then gives the details of his model, which are, for theistic belief, that God has created each of us with a natural faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*, along with our other natural faculties (perception, memory, reason), which, in appropriate circumstances, directly creates theistic belief in us without those beliefs resting on any propositional evidence. Plantinga calls this 'the Aquinas/Calvin', or 'A/C', model. On the A/C model theistic belief is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (as their designer, God, intended) in an appropriate environment (that for which they were designed—life on Earth) according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth (we can presume that God does not make mistakes and wants us to form true beliefs about him). Hence theistic belief has warrant, and, if true and held sufficiently strongly, constitutes knowledge. Where does this leave *atheistic* belief? Plantinga says: 'Failure to believe can be due to a sort of blindness or deafness, to improper function of the *sensus divinitatis*. On the present model, such failure to believe is irrational.' So atheistic belief and even lack of theistic belief appear to be universally irrational (since the *sensus divinitatis* is universal, and, presumably, because the universal design plan would never prescribe withholding theistic belief).

Plantinga then turns to the defence of Christian belief. This the reviewer found more ambiguous. The centrepiece is the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit ('IHS' for short), which directly produces in Christians, by way of direct or indirect testimony from the Bible, basic beliefs in 'the great things of the gospel', that is 'trinity, incarnation, Christ's resurrection, atonement, forgiveness of sins, salvation, regeneration, eternal life'. This set of basic beliefs is identified with faith by Plantinga, though he unhelpfully uses the term 'faith' to denote both Christian belief and the process of forming that belief. There are a couple of important differences between the IHS and the *sensus divinitatis*: the IHS is not part of anybody's natural cognitive equipment, and is not universal, so it does not follow here that every theistic non-Christian is irrational. What is ambiguous in Plantinga's account is the exact source of the warrant for the Christian belief in question: is it the Holy Spirit, the internal instigation which forms the belief, the scriptures, testimony, or some combination of the above?

Plantinga claims that Christian belief is