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Peter Van InWagen

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SOME REMARKS ON PLANTINGA'S ADVICE

Peter van Inwagen

Plantinga says, "...the Christian philosophical community need not devote all of its efforts to attempting to refute opposing claims and/or to arguing for its own claims It ought to do this, indeed, but . . . if it does only this, it will neglect a pressing philosophical task: systematizing, deepening, clarifying Christian thought [about the problems of philosophy]." I express agreement with Plantinga about what the Christian community need not do; I go on to raise some questions about what "systematizing, deepening, clarifying Christian thought" about the problems of philosophy might come down to in practice.

The essence of Plantinga's advice to Christian philosophers can be summed up in the following quotation:

[W]e come to philosophy with pre-philosophical opinions; we can do no other. And the point is: the Christian has as much right to his pre-philosophical opinions as others have to theirs. He needn't first try to 'prove' them from propositions accepted by, say, the bulk of the non-Christian philosophical community But this means that the Christian philosophical community need not devote all of its efforts to attempting to refute opposing claims and/or to arguing for its own claims, in each case from premises accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community at large. It ought to do this, indeed, but it ought to do more. For if it does only this, it will neglect a pressing philosophical task: systematizing, deepening, clarifying Christian thought on these topics.¹

And what are "these topics"? I think it is fair to say that attention to the matter of the paragraphs that precede the quotation demonstrates that this phrase means, near enough, 'the problems of philosophy' or 'philosophical questions'. (I hope that at least the latter formulation is abstract enough that no one will regard it as favoring some parochial view of what philosophy is. I suppose it could be said correctly, if not very informatively, even of Nietzsche and Heidegger that what they did was to think about philosophical questions.)

The opposing point of view could be summed up in the following principle:



No philosopher should presuppose in his or her philosophical work any proposition that is not accepted by the bulk of the non-Christian philosophical community.

When one considers this principle, an important refinement immediately suggests itself. Since Christians are a small minority among philosophers, there cannot be much difference between the set of propositions that is accepted by the bulk of the non-Christian philosophical community and the set of propositions that is accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community *simpliciter*. Let us therefore formulate the "opposing principle" this way:

No philosopher should presuppose in his or her philosophical work any proposition that is not accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community.

This formulation of the opposing principle has the advantage of not making it appear as if its advocates were concerned to single Christians out, to place restrictions on the presuppositions of Christians—but not on the presuppositions of Muslims or Marxists or theosophists or Freudians. The principle does not, it should be noted, forbid the philosopher to question or to attempt to refute propositions that are accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community. Nor does it forbid the philosopher to attempt—like Descartes—to *prove* some of the propositions accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community, provided that he or she does not make use of any propositions not accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community. The principle does not even say that the philosopher *may* presuppose any proposition accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community. It is therefore not a very strong principle. But it is certainly possible to violate it. Here are some simple examples. A Christian philosopher argues in one of the following ways—and without significant philosophical preamble:

God is an immaterial being who has mental states; therefore, it is possible for there to be an immaterial being who has mental states;

God sometimes performs miracles; therefore not all states of the physical world are consequences of its earlier states or else due simply to chance;

It would be impossible for any real being to survey the whole of the set-theoretic universe; God knows all truths, but he could not know all the supposed truths of set-theory unless he could survey the whole set-theoretic universe; therefore, the belief of some platonist mathematicians and philosophers in the real existence of the set-theoretic universe is an illusion.

But it is not only Christian philosophers who violate the opposing principle. It would, for example, be hard to argue convincingly that the axioms

of Spinoza's *Ethic* were even in his day accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community—that the bulk of the late-seventeenth-century philosophical community held that all Spinoza's errors were due to his having made various logical mistakes in course of constructing his demonstrations. More to the point, it is very hard to believe that any philosopher of our own day really subscribes to the opposing principle. It is very hard to believe that there exists a set of propositions that the bulk of the present-day philosophical community accepts and that even one member of the present-day philosophical community presupposes no propositions but those contained in this set. It is very hard to believe even that any present-day philosopher *thinks* this is the way he or she proceeds. For one thing, it is very hard to believe that there is one intellectual community that comprises all those who do profess and call themselves philosophers. But let us waive this point. Let us consider a small, representative group of philosophers who belong to the same intellectual community if any philosophers belong to the same intellectual community. Let us imagine that John Searle, Daniel Dennett, and David Chalmers are engaged in a philosophical debate about the nature of consciousness. (A good sense of what this debate would be like can be gathered from Searle's reviews of books by Dennett and Chalmers in the *New York Review of Books*, and the subsequent correspondence concerning these reviews. Searle's reviews and some of this correspondence have recently been collected by Searle in his book *The Mystery of Consciousness*.)² If you try to imagine such a debate, you will see, I hope, that it is simply ludicrous to suppose that there is some set of propositions that is accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community and that Searle, Dennett, and Chalmers are each of them assuming the truth only of propositions that belong to this set. It is ludicrous to suppose even that this is what they *think* they are doing. Each of them does indeed assume certain things that are incompatible with Christianity—that the physical world is a closed causal system, for example—but that's not to the point. Each of them presupposes the truth of propositions that are controversial indeed, controversial within the very intellectual community to which they belong, and this is a feature of all philosophical debates, past, present, and, I daresay, future.

The part of Plantinga's advice I have so far discussed seems to come down to the statement that Christian philosophers need not regard themselves as bound by a certain principle that no philosopher in fact honors or tries to honor. This piece of advice is self-evident, trivial, and very valuable. It is valuable simply because Christian philosophers live in an intellectual atmosphere pervaded by a curious double standard: Christian belief is judged and condemned under an epistemic standard that very little of what anyone believes could satisfy. Let me give an example of this standard at work. A philosopher once told me that he could not accept Christianity or any other religion because there were many religions, each of them logically incompatible with the others, and it was impossible to determine which of them was correct. This is, when you think about it, a very odd thing for a *philosopher* to say, for, *mutatis mutandis*, it is an exact description of the situation in philosophy. And yet the oddness of what this philosopher was saying was something that had never occurred to

him. (The fact that it had never occurred to him—a very intelligent and well-trained philosopher—is itself a very odd fact, one well worth reflecting on.) The double standard works like this: the beliefs of Christians—that the physical world was created by God; that Christ was raised from the dead—are condemned on epistemological grounds because their truth cannot be demonstrated from principles that the bulk of the philosophical community accepts. But this standard is not applied to beliefs in most other areas—beliefs about the reality of universals, or about whether literature should be taught in universities on the basis of a canon of time-honored works, or about the effectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent. It is not, in fact, mentioned in debates about non-religious matters.

Plantinga's advice to Christian philosophers, or the part of that advice that I have so far discussed, is therefore self-evidently true and very important. But it will be noted that this advice is essentially a *permission*. Plantinga points out to Christian philosophers that they *need not* do a certain thing. And he points out that if they devote too much of their time to doing this thing that they need not do, they will have less time to do something important that they—or at least a significant proportion of them—should be doing: "systematizing, deepening, clarifying Christian thought on [philosophical questions]."

What exactly is this project that Plantinga recommends to Christian philosophers? I have tried to apply these words to myself. I have looked at my own work and I have asked myself whether what he recommends is something I do, and, if it is something I do, when I do it and how much of it I do. One thing I find when I look at my own work, a thing that seems obviously relevant to his recommendation, is a fair amount of Christian apologetic. Various philosophers have attacked Christianity on philosophical grounds, using the techniques that are generally approved of in my corner of the philosophical world. I, naturally enough, believe that all these attacks are in one way or another erroneous, and I have attempted to refute them. When I look at my work, I find, besides apologetic, attempts to solve philosophical problems that are raised by various Christian doctrines—for example, the problems about identity and predication that are raised by the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. And I find a few essays that are addressed primarily to my fellow Christians, essays in which I attempt to convince them of things that Christians generally don't believe, but which are, or so I maintain, compatible with Christianity and which should be "live hypotheses" for Christians. (For example, that we are living animals and have no immaterial part.) Do these essays, or some of them, represent cases of "Christian thought about philosophical questions"? I suppose they all do, but perhaps not in the same sense. I think we should be suspicious of phrases like "Christian thought," "Christian literature," and "Christian society"—suspicious at least to the extent of making an effort to be absolutely clear about what we mean when we use them. (I believe that the name that was first proposed for this association³ was "The Society for Christian Philosophy," and that this name was rejected by Bill Alston on the excellent ground that it isn't clear what 'Christian philosophy' means.)

One might honor these very proper suspicions by playing definition-and-counterexample with the notion of Christian thought. Or one might

declare that 'Christian thought' is understood in several senses and proceed to enumerate and distinguish them—the various senses of the phrase being illustrated respectively by, say, *The Imitation of Christ*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *A Grammar of Assent*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and *Warranted Christian Belief*. You will be relieved to learn that, despite my suspicions about the phrase 'Christian thought' being very deep indeed, I am going to do neither of these things. I am not going to do either of them because I want to consider a fact that seems to me to present a more pressing problem: the body of my philosophical work falls under no definition of 'Christian thought' that anyone could conceivably find plausible. If this were a merely autobiographical fact, I would not bother to bring it to your attention. But I think that many (certainly not all) Christian philosophers are in the same situation as I in this respect. And, to revert my own case, not only does the body of my work fall outside the bounds of any reasonable definition of 'Christian thought', but all the philosophical work I take the most personal satisfaction in falls in this category—all the work in the doing of which I have felt that my mind was operating at its highest capacity. If you like: all the work I am most proud of. Here, pray God, I am not referring to pride in the theological sense, that perilous state of the soul in which she challenges God's authority and attempts to become her own sole ruler. I am referring, I hope, to the pride of the artist or craftsman. The pride of the craftsman can, God knows, be the occasion of all manner of sin, but I do not think it is *per se* sinful. It is simply spiritually dangerous—like erotic love or political action or concern for one's physical health. (The point of this list is: What *isn't* spiritually dangerous?)

The proof that the body of my work in philosophy is in no sense "Christian thought" is simple enough: if you read this work in ignorance of its author's biography, you wouldn't be able to tell whether it was written by a Christian. This fact is not a consequence of some deliberate policy of mine; I have not chosen on methodological grounds to exclude my religious views from my work. (With one exception, which I'll mention in a moment.) It's just that I have generally had no opportunity to include or exclude them. Much of philosophy is simply so remote from the concerns of the spiritual life that, like number theory or condensed-matter physics, it does not interact with one's religious convictions. In this matter, religion can be usefully compared to politics. W. V. Quine, as most of us know, is politically very conservative. But one could never have inferred this from the writings on which his philosophical reputation rests. And this is not because he has adopted a deliberate policy of keeping his readers in the dark about his politics. It's simply because when one is writing about analyticity or ontic commitment or the problem of radical translation, one doesn't encounter many opportunities to express one's views on Reaganomics or capital punishment or affirmative action. And, of course, if one is writing on these topics one doesn't encounter many opportunities to discuss the Incarnation or the Atonement or the Body of Christ.

I concede that the comparison is not exact. If one is a Christian, one's Christian beliefs interact with more philosophical questions than one's political beliefs, whatever they may be, for the beliefs that are *de fide* for Christians fall in very widely separated areas. Christianity is, as we might

say, *about* a very wide range of topics. This fact is connected with the "one exception" I mentioned a moment ago—with the one case in which I avoided appealing to my religious beliefs on methodological grounds. My book *Metaphysics*,⁴ since it was about metaphysics in general, by the nature of the case contained some discussion of those metaphysical questions that do impinge on theology; for example, the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? At the outset of the book, I explicitly confessed my Christian beliefs, and then explicitly stated that I wasn't going to appeal to them, or was going to try not to. But in that book there was a special reason for doing this: namely that, in my view at least, a book that advertises itself as a general introduction to a subject (and one that is not written specifically for the members of some religion or denomination) ought to be as nearly neutral as possible about religious matters.

It is obvious enough that many commonly held philosophical opinions are inconsistent with Christianity. A Christian cannot believe that the physical universe is all that there is or that the world had no beginning in time or that matter is inherently evil. (This last may not be a very popular position nowadays, but times change.) Still, as I say, much of philosophy concerns matters that have no connection with the life of the spirit. In philosophy's house there are many mansions, and it is possible to wander about its corridors for quite a long while without encountering anything that either affirms or contradicts the Christian faith.

Or so I say. But on this point, I think, there is some sort of disagreement between Plantinga and me. He finds much more of philosophy to be of relevance to Christianity than I do. An adequate and fair discussion of this disagreement would have to take into account Plantinga's work on epistemology. I shall have to do the best I can without discussing this work, however, because to do so in any meaningful way would require a paper wholly devoted to that topic, and I am nearly finished with this one. I will confine my remarks to the philosophy of mind and metaphysics.

Plantinga and many other Christian philosophers see much in the current philosophy of mind that is anti-Christian. And they are right about this if one sees rhetoric and incidental remarks as integral to the works in which they occur. It is undeniable that most current books and essays on the philosophy of mind contain fervent and frequent pledges of allegiance to philosophical naturalism. But to my mind, these pledges of allegiance are mere decorations. If you crossed them out, you would not affect the real philosophical content of the books and essays in which they occur, and, once you had crossed them out, there would be nothing in them that was inconsistent with or even unfriendly to Christianity. The exhortations to philosophical naturalism that one finds in the writings of John Searle or David Chalmers or Paul Churchland remind me of the opening words of an article in a Chinese geological journal that I happened to glance at in the early 1960s: "Applying the thoughts of Chairman Mao to the geology of the Yellow River Basin, we discover" (The remainder of the article was a perfectly straightforward piece of scientific writing.) Of course, the current philosophy of mind is resolutely anti-dualist, and anti-dualism pertains to the essence and not merely the accidents of its content. And it is true that some forms of dualism are consistent with Christianity; it is in fact

true that some form of dualism has been maintained by almost every Christian philosopher and theologian of any importance. Still, there is nothing anti-Christian about anti-dualism (anti-Hindu, yes; anti-Buddhist, yes). It is hard to find any support for dualism in the Bible (I would say it was impossible to find any biblical texts that unambiguously support dualism), easy to find anti-dualist texts (or so I would argue), and it cannot be found in the Creeds.

I have to admit that I am, as a philosopher, not very impressed with most current work in the philosophy of mind, but that is because most of it seems to me to be irremediably infected with metaphysical and logical nonsense, metaphysical and logical nonsense that I claim to have detected by the exercise of natural reason. Rhetorical decoration aside, I find little if anything in it that contradicts God's revelation. (Except, perhaps, in a certain trivial sense: One might argue that logical nonsense contradicts everything.) If there is much in it that contradicts some of the human constructs that have been built on God's revelation, well, the same could be said of geology. We must never confuse revelation and the human constructs that have been built on revelation.

Let me consider a second example, this one metaphysical. Plantinga contends that the Christian philosopher should believe that human actions are undetermined. But his argument for this thesis is odd. He argues that God is just and holds us accountable for our actions; and a just (and omniscient) being holds one accountable for one's actions only if one *is* accountable for those actions. This seems obvious enough, but he goes on to argue, or, rather, to assert, that one is accountable for one's actions only if those actions are undetermined. From these premises he validly concludes that our actions are not determined. But it is obvious that God and his justice play no essential role in this argument. Essentially the same argument could be employed by anyone who believed that *any* being was both just and sometimes held people accountable for their actions. (For example, if Alice believes that she herself is just, and if she sometimes holds people accountable for their actions and believes that she is right in so doing, then essentially the same argument is available to her.) The crucial premise of the argument has nothing to do with God's justice. It is this: One is accountable for one's actions only if those actions are undetermined. And whether this premise is true is a purely technical question in philosophy, a question that a Christian and a non-Christian could debate in great depth and at great length without either discovering the religious views of the other. There are Christians who vehemently reject this premise (Jonathan Edwards, for example), and non-Christians who regard it as self-evident (R. M. Chisholm, for example—or Jean-Paul Sartre). I can imagine Edwards's reaction to his fellow Calvinist's suggestion that a Christian philosopher should regard human actions as undetermined. In reading Plantinga out from the pulpit, he would probably lay some stress on Romans 9:14-24, and exhort Plantinga to repent his Arminianism. (And what part of the Word of God could Plantinga appeal to in reply—other than the deuterocanonical text Ecclesiasticus 15:14?)

Plantinga also argues that what is at stake in the debate about free will and determinism is really the concept of agent causation, which encapsu-

lates, if I understand him, the properly Christian view of human action. But, as I see it, the question whether agent causation is a coherent concept, and the question whether (granting its coherency) it is of any *use* in making sense of free will, are purely technical questions in philosophy. Again, a Christian and a non-Christian could debate these questions in great depth and at great length without either discovering the religious views of the other. Plantinga argues that theists must believe in agent causation—they must believe that this is the mode of God's action—and that, therefore, Christians know that agent causation is a coherent concept and that they should therefore feel free to appeal to it in their theories of human action. But, for my part, I do not claim to understand how (in a metaphysical sense) God acts. All I know about God's actions are some propositions about the things he has done, propositions that are revealed in Scripture. And the Bible is not a metaphysical text. I grant that the words of Scripture are among the Christian metaphysician's data. In this respect, they are like the findings of science and the deliverances of the senses. Like the findings of science and the deliverances of the senses, they require interpretation and understanding before they can be put to any theoretical use. Whether the concept of agent causation can help us to arrive at any sort of metaphysical understanding of God is to me an open question. But one thing is obvious: If it is not a coherent concept, it certainly can't. Since I am not convinced that it is a coherent concept, the question remains open for me. And it remains a purely philosophical question, one I would debate with an unbeliever in much the same terms that I would with a Christian. And I would add that even if I were convinced that God, as agent, can bring about events that have no prior events as their causes, this would not seem to me to be much of an argument for the conclusion that it is possible for human beings to bring about events that have no prior events as their causes. We may be, we are, made in God's image and likeness. Nevertheless, God and creatures are, metaphysically speaking, so vastly different, that any argument of the form 'God has F; therefore it is possible that human beings have F' is bound to be rather weak—even in cases in which F is a property that is consistent with finitude and contingent existence.

It seems to me, therefore, that the positive aspect of Plantinga's advice to Christian philosophers, if it contains nothing that is strictly false, has, as philosophers say, a false conversational implicature: That much of philosophy overlaps Christianity in a significant way. My arguments, I concede, may be parochial. I have discussed only the philosophy of mind and metaphysics, and have only briefly touched on these. (I have not, for example, talked about the possibility of arguing against philosophical naturalism.) Perhaps if I had examined ethics or epistemology, I should have come to a conclusion more favorable to Plantinga's positive advice. (By the way, one of the best examples of what is uncontroversially Christian philosophy I know—"best" as an example that shows what "Christian philosophy" could mean and "best" as regards philosophical quality—combines ethics and epistemology: Merold Westphal's "Taking St Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category."⁵) My suggestion that Plantinga's advice embodies a misleading implication about the relation between Christianity and philosophy should, therefore, be regarded not as a thesis I claim to

have established, but as a provocation, an attempt to stimulate discussion.

If I myself have any advice to Christian philosophers, it is this. Don't suppose that philosophy is terribly important. (I'm going to except apologetic from this general statement—not because I necessarily think that apologetic is terribly important, but because it is a special case that requires separate discussion.) Philosophy is what we philosophers do—in the sense that farming is what farmers do and cabinet-making is what cabinet-makers do. (Of course people in all three categories—philosophers, farmers, cabinet-makers—do lots of things besides philosophizing and farming and making cabinets, things like having families and resisting temptation and voting in elections.) I think the following thesis is one that we should all take seriously: the earthly works of Augustine and Aquinas that are remembered in heaven are not their writings; they are acts unknown to history, acts the earthly memory of which perished when the last people who knew Augustine and Aquinas in this life died.⁶ And—if we join them in heaven—so, *a fortiori*, it will be with us.

The University of Notre Dame

NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1984), pp. 253-71. The quoted passage occurs on p. 268.

2. New York: The New York Review of Books, 1997.

3. This paper was originally written to be read at a meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers.

4. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.

5. In Thomas P. Flint (ed.), *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), pp. 200-26. I should say, however, that Westphal's criticisms of Plantinga and "Reformed epistemology" in this essay (pp. 211 *et seq.*) are based on—dare I say it?—perverse misreadings of the texts he cites.

6. When this paper was read to an audience of Christian philosophers—see note 3—, this statement provoked some rather severe negative reactions from several members of the audience. Let me stress that 'we should all take *p* seriously' does not mean 'we should all accept *p*'; it means 'we should all think seriously about whether *p* might be true'.