

Plantinga's Properly Basic Belief

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Alvin Plantinga regards a properly basic belief as true even though someone holding it might convince no one else of its truth. Such a belief, he writes, can be known *immediately* to be true and need not be either self-evidently true or capable of being proved from propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible.¹ Plantinga is claiming more than that there exist some true propositions that some people believe. He wants to add that at least some beliefs are true and can be *known* immediately or directly to be true.

While purporting to advance an epistemological doctrine, Plantinga quickly draws in both psychological and moral claims when he focuses on the belief in God. His argument becomes psychological to the degree that he is talking about *believing*. Sometimes, the word *belief* refers, not to the psychological process, but to the doctrine or proposition believed. Presumably, for Plantinga, the psychological element of believing certain doctrines contributes nothing to their truth or falsity. If Paul the apostle believes X to be true, his believing it does not help make it either true or false.

Plantinga wants to affirm that the Apostle Paul *knew* that God existed and that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The question arises as to whether knowing something to be true is anything beyond the combination of (1) a claim's or doctrine's being true and (2) one's believing it to be true. Let us say that John strongly believes his wife Mary loves him. Let us say also that Mary does in fact love him. What added ingredient (psychological, logical, or whatever) is required for John's strong belief to become *knowledge*? Or is strongly believing in something that is in fact true the same as knowing it to be true?

Plantinga's epistemology dips into moral judgment-making. To point this out is to call attention to it, but it need not be a refutation. Following Calvin and other Christians in the Reformed tradition, Plantinga suggests that sin prevents Bertrand Russell, Callicles, and various Harvard professors from knowing what the Apostle Paul and Plantinga know, namely, the truth of certain evangelical Reformed doctrines.²

On pages 149-150 of *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga criticizes Flew and McCloskey for overlooking

an important part of traditional theistic belief; it is a part of much traditional belief to attribute a great deal of the evil we find to Satan ... and his

cohorts. Satan, so the traditional belief goes, is a mighty nonhuman spirit who, along with many other angels, was created long before God created men. Unlike most of his colleagues Satan rebelled against God and has since been creating whatever havoc he could; the result, of course, is physical evil.

Plantinga's free-will defense of theism appears to require the traditional belief in a havoc-generating Satan. An equally important part of the tradition with which Plantinga has identified himself over the decades is the belief that unbelievers will suffer torment forever in a hell originally prepared for Satan and his fallen angels. Plantinga's premises and arguments lead straight to the conclusion that unless Jews, the Harvard professors, and other non-Christians convert, they will upon dying enter into an eternity of excruciating torment that God has prepared for demons and others. I wish to develop the thesis that Plantinga cannot know this to be the case because it contradicts what many know to be elementary basic morality. Most people know that tormenting Jews and others in the Nazi camps was egregiously immoral and wicked. Even if the majority of Christians did not know this – or did not admit to knowing it – the moral judgment still stands.

It is important, however, to ask how it has come about that so many evangelical and Reformed Christians have professed to believe in the endless torment of fellow human mortals. It is clear that many of these Christians today are quite moral and sensitive individuals in dealing with Jews and others. So why this apparent violation of their own morality? Plantinga suggests that perhaps the doctrine that there is no God was drummed into Callicles since early childhood.³ Similarly, for many Christians, the doctrine of hell was a part of the inculcation process of childhood. The question thus emerges as to why they have not cast aside the doctrine of hell. I venture that perhaps most Christians who *think* about hell in the concrete have at one time or another felt that hell did not fit easily with the basic, elementary morality that the Golden Rule expresses so clearly.

Evangelicals and Reformed Christians might ask what price they must pay to continue to embrace the belief in everlasting torment. Various cognitive shifts have been offered in the attempt to render hell somehow compatible with basic, elementary decency. In some cases, arguments advanced in defense of hell seem to manifest shocking moral blindness. Or, to be more accurate, while the systematic defenders are quite morally sensitive in most areas, they have this pocket of moral depravity that perhaps grows increasingly perverse with each defense of it. There is a kind of hardening of the heart that does violence to the doctrine of God, turning the Creator into something of a Cosmic Nazi.

To speak of God as the Cosmic Nazi is, of course, morally offensive to the point of blasphemy. I suggest that theological defenses of hell are systematic blas-

phemy that cannot be carried out without a serious loss in moral consciousness. Plantinga subscribes to the position that atheists do not believe in the basic belief in God because they have been unwilling both to change their lives in some ways and to give up thinking in certain ways.⁴ By the same token, the defenders of hell would have to change their thinking and their moral sentiments in some ways in order to cease their blasphemy. Their change would not come about easily. They would have to pay a considerable price, perhaps disrupting profound friendships and, in some cases, losing significant social and career benefits cultivated over the years.

It seems highly likely that many Christians and Muslims believe in hell as a matter of course. For them, it is an abstraction. They do not think concretely about particular acquaintances or loved ones enduring the agonies of an everlasting concentration camp. To do so might create a moral crisis or at least intense cognitive dissonance.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the narrator describes the resentful, scornful Smerdyakov as someone who once tortured cats. In the story, he tortures a boy's dog out of spite. It should give evangelicals and Reformed Christians pause when they consider that they portray the Creator as one who at every moment sustains for human beings an endless torment that no morally sensitive person would wish to sustain for alley rats. We pass moral judgment on the Smerdyakovs of the world, and I cannot help wondering if the systematic defenders of hell have lost a major portion of their ability to pass moral judgment on their doctrine of the eternal torment called hell.

In attempting to defend the doctrine of hell, apologists are prone to attach the doctrine to a web of moral claims that they label as *objective* morality. Since most systems of objective moral decency rank justice among the values and virtues, the apologists try to clothe hell in the dress of justice. Their arguments, however, not only corrupt the ideal of justice but make a mockery of objective morality by holding basic, elementary decency in contempt. I will return to this point later.

Plantinga holds that all disease is a result of sin. This perhaps explains in part his objection to theistic evolution.⁵ If animals lived centuries before human beings, their deaths would have come about, presumably, by diseases existing on earth prior to human sin. If, however, evangelicals like Plantinga should theorize that the sin of earlier beings in the universe somehow introduced disease to the planet Earth, they might be free to embrace some theory of evolution.

Plantinga holds that sin prevents individuals from accepting what he calls properly basic beliefs. Somewhat surprisingly, he goes so far as to claim that sin is the cause of "error, confusion, fundamental wrong-headedness, and *all the other epistemic ills to which humanity is heir*."⁶ This seems to say either that being humanly finite is somehow sinful or that finitude is not what we ordinarily think it is.

On Plantinga's view, if Adam and Eve had not sinned, it would have been impossible for them to miscalculate or make a mistake in the garden. They could not have bumped into a tree, done anything accidentally, mistaken a chipmunk for a rabbit, lost an object in the grass, or become momentarily confused as to which day it was. Adam and Eve would have experienced no disagreements between them about anything for eternity. In a million years neither of them would have faced being corrected or having even one of his or her judgments revealed to be false. Every prediction and expectation would have come true. This need not imply human omniscience, however, since the innocent couple in the garden might have had a severely limited number of expectations and predictions about their future. They could have been infallible provided they never yielded to the temptation to risk learning by trial and error. Indeed, for the first human couple, learning would be more like infusion than the normally finite process of trial and error.

Plantinga's epistemology appears to have been not carefully developed. Would infants and children born in the garden enjoy infallibility, making no mistakes, embracing no error? Descartes held that error was the extension of the will beyond the intellect's capacity. This hypothesis succeeds in placing guilt on the human individual for making mistakes and being in error, but it is scarcely a reliable account of the thinking process, which is largely and inevitably by trial and error. This is perhaps why classical theism has portrayed the Creator as learning nothing new, which implies a previous degree of ignorance and therefore sin.

There can be no denying the striking contrast between the idyllic scene of the infallible, care-free couple in the garden and the scene of those presumed to be suffering the irrevocable agonies of hell. I submit that the Reformed tradition is prepared to sacrifice properly basic morality by boldly asserting that the Creator planned from the beginning to send some of his creatures to an endless hell that is so horrible as to make Hitler's and Stalin's camps mild and anemic by comparison. To be sure, a part of the Reformed tradition has developed an auxiliary hypothesis called *infralapsarianism*. This development may be viewed as an attempt to deal with the moral claim of elementary human decency. But the effort does not bear fruit.

Plantinga's free will defense over the years has sometimes been carried on in unnecessarily tortuous language and symbols that perhaps reflect a tortured soul struggling with basic decency and kicking against the pricks of conscience.⁷ It is perhaps worth asking why Plantinga's elaborate free will defense is conspicuously silent about free will (and its risk) in heaven.⁸ Unfortunately, his efforts are too feeble to deal with the problem of the eternal concentration camp. It is perhaps not too far afield to say that the tortuous language for which Plantinga for a while became famous or infamous served to hide from his fellow evangelicals the fact, if it is a fact, that he ends up with a limited Creator, hardly the omniscient Creator of

traditional Reformed and evangelical Christianity. In any case, so long as Plantinga pictures the Creator as the conscious sustainer of the eternal concentration camp, he gives us not God, but the Cosmic Nazi in violation of properly basic morality.

The epistemological gains thought to exist in the hypothesis of an infallible Bible (with its notion of hell) seem not to compensate for the loss suffered in turning away from basic, elementary morality. When evangelicalism goes so far as to affirm that hell is a demonstration of respect for the individual's *dignity*, a new cavern of denial and perversity has been entered. Evangelicalism at this point is reminiscent of the Nazi's big lie, labeling evil as good.

Earlier, I suggested or implied that human *finitude* makes error and confusion inevitable in various areas of our lives. It is therefore quite possible that many decent Christians profess to believe in hell because of the limits of time and inclination to examine it. They have not yet seen the utter evil of the doctrine.

The systematic defenders of hell, however, are in a different category. If my suggestions in this paper have any insight into the human condition, then it is quite possible that, unlike the average finite Christian, the systematic defenders of hell have moved far closer to hardness of heart and moral perversity than have ordinary Christian believers. They may be compared to the intellectuals who defended Stalin's atrocities in soaring ideological language.⁹

Notes

1. See Alvin Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," *The Reformed Journal* 32, no.1 (January 1982), 14.
2. *Ibid.*, 14, 16.
3. *Ibid.*, 16.
4. *Ibid.*, 16.
5. See *ibid.*, 16; Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) chaps. 11 and 12.
6. Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," 17. Italics added.
7. See Alan Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974).
8. See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), chap. 6 for the putative advantages in possessing free will.
9. See Richard Grossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1952); Arkady Vaksberg, *Stalin's Prosecutor: The Life of Andrei Vyshinsky*, trans. Jan Butler (New York: Grove

Weidenfeld, 1990); Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle With the Truth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). Chapter 26 of *Albert Speer* – entitled “The Great Lie” – deals with the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe.