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 Excerpt  
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## Introduction: Alvin Plantinga, God's Philosopher

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### INTRODUCTION

The dominance of logical empiricism's verification principle in the middle part of the twentieth century forced philosophy of religion almost entirely out of the philosophy curriculum, and, with a few notable exceptions, few philosophers willingly identified themselves as Christians. However, logical empiricism collapsed under the weight of its own principles, and in the spring of 1980 *Time* magazine reported that in a "quiet revolution in thought and arguments that hardly anyone could have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers... but in the crisp, intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse."<sup>1</sup>

Alvin Plantinga, one of those who had played a role in the demise of the verification principle, was identified by *Time* as a central figure in this 'quiet revolution'. In fact, the article went so far as to label him the "world's leading Protestant philosopher of God."<sup>2</sup> Being singled out in this way by arguably the world's foremost news magazine is made all the more remarkable by the fact that, at the time, Plantinga was a professor of philosophy at a small Calvinist college, whose most important work was yet to come.

The intervening years since *Time*'s report have seen Plantinga emerge as one of contemporary Western philosophy's leading thinkers of any stripe. While the general thrust of his work has remained focused on questions that fall within the bounds of the philosophy of religion (or, as Plantinga would prefer to describe it, Christian philosophy), his career has also been characterised by important contributions to other areas of philosophy – such as the metaphysics of modality and, most importantly, epistemic theory – that have earned him the (sometimes grudging) respect of his most notable peers. The aspect of Plantinga's thought that has had the greatest impact to date is the central role he has played in the emergence and growth of the 'Reformed epistemology' movement, with its emphasis on the proper basicity of

religious belief. This epistemological thesis is central to Plantinga's magnum opus, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), which has established him as without doubt the preeminent figure in contemporary philosophy of religion. Indeed, one reviewer favourably compares the importance of this book to Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>3</sup>

Plantinga's impact has not, however, been limited to his writings – he has, as a past president of the American Philosophical Association (Central Division), played a role in the development of philosophy in the Anglo-American world. His greatest impact, however, has been on the development of specifically *Christian* philosophy – through his foundational role in the forming of the Society of Christian Philosophers in 1978 (which has grown into one of the largest such organisations within the APA), and through papers such as his “Advice to Christian Philosophers.”<sup>4</sup>

Alvin Plantinga is unquestionably one of the leading philosophers of our time, whose work undoubtedly warrants a dedicated volume of the *Contemporary Philosophy in Focus* series. In keeping with the other volumes in the series, the goal of this book is to introduce thoughtful readers to the most important features of Plantinga's philosophy.

## PROFILE

Alvin Plantinga was born on the fifteenth of November 1932, a week after Franklin D. Roosevelt won the U.S. presidential election in a landslide victory over Herbert Hoover.<sup>5</sup> Plantinga's parents, Cornelius A. Plantinga and Lettie Plantinga (née Bossenbroek), were then living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Cornelius was at the time a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Michigan. Though Lettie was born in the United States, her family originally hailed from the province of Gelderland in the Netherlands. Cornelius was born in the Netherlands, though in the province of Friesland, inhabitants of which are fond of viewing themselves as a separate nation altogether.

As a young boy, Alvin moved around fairly regularly as the family followed Cornelius first to Duke University in North Carolina, where he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy and a Master's degree in psychology; then to South Dakota where he taught philosophy at Huron College; and then to North Dakota where he taught Latin, Greek, philosophy and psychology at Jamestown College. It was in North Dakota that Alvin encountered philosophy for the first time – his father supplemented his high school curriculum with some Latin and Plato's *Dialogues* – and where, at age fourteen,

he resolved to become a philosopher. Contrary to stereotypes, this did not make young Alvin a bookish nerd – indeed, he was an enthusiastic participant in high school football, basketball and tennis.

Although Plantinga cannot remember ever not having been convinced of the claims of the Christian religion, it was when he was around eight or nine years old that he first began to seriously wrestle with the tenets of the Calvinism he encountered in the churches he attended alongside his parents (he particularly remembers struggling to come to grips with the Calvinist view of total depravity). He writes: “I spent a good deal of time as a child thinking about these doctrines, and a couple of years later, when I was ten or eleven or so, I got involved in many very enthusiastic but undirected discussions of human freedom, determinism (theological or otherwise), divine foreknowledge, predestination and allied topics.”<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Plantinga was an active lay preacher, and there is no question that what Alvin learned of the Christian faith from his parents laid an essential foundation for his future life and work. That said, it must not be thought that Alvin Plantinga's upbringing was without its difficulties – in 1993 he wrote that his father, Cornelius, had suffered from manic-depressive psychosis “for fifty years and more,”<sup>7</sup> which cannot have made life easy in the Plantinga household. Alvin credits his mother, Lettie, with playing a crucial role in holding the family together, bearing the responsibility for caring for and helping Cornelius with “magnificent generosity,” “unstinting devotion” and “a sort of cheerful courage that is wonderful to behold.”<sup>8</sup>

At his father's urging, Alvin reluctantly skipped over his senior year of high school and enrolled in Jamestown College. The enrolment was short-lived, however, for during Alvin's first semester, Cornelius was invited to join the psychology department at his alma mater, Calvin College. Alvin (again reluctantly) made the move to Grand Rapids, Michigan, but in a rebellious move applied for a scholarship to Harvard during his first semester at Calvin. To his surprise the scholarship was awarded, and in the fall of 1950 he relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The undergraduate Plantinga found Harvard to be a most impressive and enjoyable place. He also found it to be the locus of his first real spiritual challenge. For the first time he came across serious non-Christian thought ‘in the flesh’, and like many undergraduates found his faith shaken. In a telling passage, which suggests the beginnings of Plantinga's approach to Christian philosophy, he writes:

My attitude gradually became one of a mixture of doubt and bravado. On the one hand I began to think it questionable that what I had been taught and had always believed could be right, given that there were all these others

who thought so differently (and [who] were so much more intellectually accomplished than I). On the other hand, I thought to myself, what really is so great about these people? Why should I believe *them*? . . . [W]hat, precisely, is the *substance* of their objections to Christianity? Or to theism? Do these objections really *have* much by way of substance? And if, as I strongly suspected, *not*, why should their taking the views they did be relevant to what *I* thought? The doubts (in that form anyway) didn't last long, but something like the bravado, I suppose, has remained.<sup>9</sup>

One of the events that dispelled the doubts Plantinga experienced at Harvard was a moment in which he experienced what he was convinced was the presence of God, something which he describes as a rare but important event in his spiritual walk. The other crucial event in this regard took place during a trip home, when he had the opportunity to attend some classes at Calvin College. Here he encountered something that held an even stronger attraction for him than the stimulating environment at Harvard – William Harry Jellema's philosophy classes. Harry Jellema was, in Plantinga's own words, "by all odds . . . the most gifted teacher of philosophy I have ever encountered."<sup>10</sup> More than this, Jellema was "obviously in dead earnest about Christianity; he was also a magnificently thoughtful and reflective Christian."<sup>11</sup> Deeply affected by Jellema's teaching and his response to the modern philosophical critique of Christianity, Plantinga resolved after only two semesters at Harvard to return to Calvin, a decision he never regretted.

Under the direction of Jellema and Henry Stob, Plantinga and his classmates (who included Dewey Hoitenga and Nicholas Wolterstorff) spent much of their time on the history of philosophy, particularly Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz and Kant. In order to read some of these philosophers' works in the original languages, Plantinga also spent a significant amount of time studying French, German and Greek (having already learned Latin from his father while in high school). Apart from philosophy, Plantinga also majored in psychology (taking six courses from his father) and English literature.

In January 1954 Plantinga left Calvin for the University of Michigan, where he commenced his graduate studies. There he studied under William Alston, Richard Cartwright and William K. Frankena. Plantinga enjoyed his studies at Michigan, and the connection made there with Alston was to be one of the more important friendships that grew out of his philosophical career (Plantinga dedicated *Warranted Christian Belief* to Alston, with the words "Mentor, Model, Friend"). Moving on to graduate studies was not the only threshold crossed during this period of Plantinga's life. It was

while at Calvin, in 1953, that Plantinga had met Kathleen De Boer, then a Calvin senior. Plantinga describes himself as having been “captivated by her generous spirit and mischievous, elfin sense of humor.”<sup>12</sup> In 1955 they were married and in the intervening years have become proud parents to four children – Carl, Jane, William Harry and Ann. It was through Kathleen’s relatives that Plantinga was introduced to the pleasures of rock climbing and mountaineering, which became an enduring passion.

Shortly after her marriage to Alvin, Kathleen Plantinga endured the first of what is to date almost twenty relocations – this time to Yale. Despite enjoying Michigan, and there developing a strong interest in the philosophical challenges mounted against theism, Plantinga had felt that philosophy there was “too piecemeal and too remote from the big questions.”<sup>13</sup> Yale seemed to offer a solution, and so the newlywed Plantingas made the move to New Haven. Though he was impressed by teachers like Paul Weiss and Brand Blanshard, Yale turned out to be something of a disappointment for Plantinga. He found the high level of generality in the courses on offer to be perplexing and frustrating: “The problem at Yale was that no one seemed prepared to show a neophyte philosopher how to go about the subject – what to *do*, how to think about a problem to some effect.”<sup>14</sup>

It was in the fall of 1957 that Plantinga had his first taste of teaching – focusing on the history of metaphysics and epistemology – which he describes as a harrowing experience, one familiar to many new academics:

I spent most of the summer preparing for my classes in the fall; when September rolled around I had perhaps forty or fifty pages of notes. I met my first class with great trepidation, which wasn’t eased by the preppy, sophisticated, almost world-weary attitude of these incoming freshmen. Fortified by my fifty pages of material, I launched or perhaps lunged into the course. At the end of the second day I discovered, to my horror, that I’d gone through half of my material; and by the end of the first week I’d squandered my entire summer’s horde. The semester stretched before me, bleak, frightening, nearly interminable. That’s when I discovered the value of the Socratic method of teaching.<sup>15</sup>

Plantinga’s lack of teaching experience was not something that in any way dampened the enthusiastic advances of George Nakhnikian of Detroit’s Wayne State University, who in that same year began tirelessly to pursue Plantinga for his department. Despite initial reservations Plantinga eventually gave in to Nakhnikian, and in the fall of 1958 the Philosophy Department at Wayne became Plantinga’s first faculty home. Looking back, Plantinga considers the move to be “one of the best decisions I ever made.”<sup>16</sup>

Plantinga's colleagues at Wayne State were Nakhnikian, Hector Castañeda, Edmund Gettier, John Collinson, Raymond Hoekstra and Robert C. Sleigh. Collinson left soon after Plantinga arrived, and the department was boosted a couple of years later by the arrival of Richard Cartwright and Keith Lehrer. In contrast to Yale, Plantinga found the Wayne approach to philosophy a lot more to his liking: "There wasn't nearly as much talk *about* philosophy – what various philosophers or philosophical traditions said – and a lot more attempts actually to figure things out."<sup>17</sup> Among the central topics of discussion at Wayne during Plantinga's years there were Wittgenstein's private language argument and the place of modal concepts in philosophy. This latter topic particularly fascinated Plantinga, an interest that is evident in much of his published work. It was here, too, that his interest in epistemology began to grow. Cartwright and Sleigh had both been students of Roderick Chisholm at Brown University, a consequence of which was a series of seminars between the Wayne and Brown departments. This turn of events brought Chisholm's work to Plantinga's attention, and looking back he opines that "there is no other contemporary philosopher from whom I have learned more over the years."<sup>18</sup>

After five happy years at Wayne State University, Plantinga was invited to replace the retiring Harry Jellema at Calvin College. He found it a difficult decision to make, though not for the reasons many of his friends saw as obvious. For those with no previous connection with Calvin, there seemed little reason to leave the lively and impressive Philosophy Department at Wayne State, which Plantinga had found to be enormously stimulating and enjoyable, for a little-known Christian college in western Michigan. For Plantinga, however, the call to Calvin was all but irresistible. It was only his trepidation at stepping into Jellema's shoes that made the decision a difficult one. Calvin was a natural home for Plantinga – it was a place built on a deep commitment to the Reformed Christianity that had been the central plank of his life since early childhood; the philosophical topics in which he was most interested (many of which centred around the relationship between Christianity and philosophy) could be most naturally pursued at Calvin; and Calvin and Plantinga shared a common belief in the idea that the academic enterprise cannot be viewed as religiously neutral, and that there is therefore a need for university education built upon Christian fundamentals. Thus, overcoming his trepidations, Plantinga moved to Calvin College in 1963, and remained there for the following nineteen years.

The longevity of Plantinga's stay at Calvin is a reflection of the natural home that the department was for him. In his "Self-Profile," Plantinga

singles out two aspects of life in the Philosophy Department at Calvin that he particularly appreciated. Firstly, the department was characterised by the same outlook on philosophy as that held by Plantinga – that the purpose of “doing philosophy” (for Christians, at least) is to contribute to specifically *Christian* scholarship, and that this endeavour is a communal one. The other characteristic of life at Calvin of which he writes with great approval is related to this communal effort, namely, that Calvin’s size made it possible to interact with, and form friendships with, colleagues in other disciplines. Among the philosophers and other colleagues whom Plantinga credits with having been of great help to his scholarly growth in his time at Calvin, he singles out Peter de Vos, Del Ratzsch, Kenneth Konyndyk, Thomas Jager (mathematics) and particularly Nicholas Wolterstorff and Paul J. Zwier (mathematics). Also significant was the period (1979–1980) when Plantinga (along with Wolterstorff, George Mavrodes, William Alston, David Holwerda, George Marsden, Ronald Feenstra and Michael Hakkenberg) was a fellow in the Calvin Centre for Christian Scholarship. During that time these scholars dedicated themselves to a yearlong project entitled “Toward a Reformed View of Faith and Reason,” the result of which was the publication in 1983 of a book, *Faith and Rationality* (edited by Wolterstorff and Plantinga) that has the best claim of any work to being the first comprehensive account of the Reformed epistemology project.

The latter years of Plantinga’s tenure at Calvin also saw some of his greatest involvement in service to the philosophical community. In 1980–1981 he served as vice-president of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association, and subsequently, in 1981–1982, he became president thereof. Following this service, he took on the mantle of president of the Society of Christian Philosophers, a position he held from 1983 until 1986.

In 1982 Plantinga made the move to his current academic home, at the University of Notre Dame. Before this transition he described the prospect of leaving Calvin as “disturbing and in fact genuinely painful.”<sup>19</sup> Despite this, the reasons for the move were for him straightforward. The prospect of teaching primarily graduate students was a central motivating factor. The other was linked to Plantinga’s ongoing goal of exploring what it means to be a Christian in philosophy. Despite being a university firmly shaped by Roman Catholicism, Notre Dame boasted (and boasts) a very large concentration of philosophy graduates who share the same essential belief framework as Plantinga. His desire to pass on to these ‘new’ Christian philosophers some of what he has learned along the way was a significant reason for the move to Notre Dame.

Plantinga has now been at Notre Dame for more than two decades, and there is no question that it has been a productive environment. Notre Dame boasts possibly the largest philosophy faculty in the United States, some of whom have reputations to rival even Plantinga's. Added to the obvious benefits gained from presenting work at staff seminars in such an intellectually rich environment, Plantinga has certainly benefited from teaching an impressively bright group of graduate students. Many of those students – Michael Bergmann, Kelly James Clark, Robin Collins, Thomas Crisp, Thomas Flint, Trenton Merricks and Michael Rea among them – are increasingly recognised as the vanguard of the next generation of Protestant Christian philosophers. It might be argued, only partially in jest, that the lack of a single Dutch surname among this group shows that Plantinga's move to Notre Dame has done much to widen the membership of the Protestant Christian philosophers' club! During his time at Notre Dame Plantinga has published some of his most important work, including his magnum opus, *Warranted Christian Belief*, and has twice been invited to present the prestigious Gifford Lectures, a rare honour indeed.

Another important aspect of Plantinga's tenure at Notre Dame has been his involvement with the Centre for Philosophy of Religion, established in 1976. The centre's focus is today twofold: firstly, the original goal of promoting scholarly work in traditional philosophy of religion, and secondly, to encourage research relevant to Christian philosophy, where this is conceived of as philosophy that takes Christianity for granted and works out philosophical issues on that basis. This latter goal, in particular, reflects the central theme of Plantinga's philosophical work, and there can be no question of his contribution to the centre's goals in this regard. He took over the directorship of the centre in 1984, and only relinquished that duty in the summer of 2002. At the time of writing Plantinga remains a member of the centre's board, and he was honoured in 2003 by having one of the centre's key fellowships (formerly the "Distinguished Scholar Fellowship") named for him. It is described as being intended "to provide time for reflection and writing to those whose work is in the forefront of current research in the philosophy of religion and Christian philosophy."<sup>20</sup>

## THE WAY AHEAD

One of my chief interests over the years has been in philosophical theology and apologetics: the attempt to defend Christianity (or more broadly, theism) against the various sorts of attacks brought against it.<sup>21</sup>

A reader first encountering this statement might be forgiven for presuming that a central thrust of Plantinga's work has been what is traditionally called natural theology, the attempt to prove God's existence or facts about God's nature by rational argument based on ordinary experience. In fact, however, as Graham Oppy points out in Chapter 1 of this book, Plantinga's early work (particularly in his *God and Other Minds*) was characterised by a clear conviction that the project of natural theology is a failure. This has not meant that natural theology has been of no use to Plantinga in his attempt to defend belief in God against its detractors – the heart of his argument in *God and Other Minds* is that the arguments of natural theology are *no worse than* the arguments for the existence of other minds, and that therefore we have as much reason to believe in God as in other minds. Still, this negative view of natural theology, which characterised Plantinga's early work, has contributed to the view that Plantinga and those who share his approach to philosophy are constitutionally opposed to the natural theology project. At least one book, *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*,<sup>22</sup> is in large part dedicated to defending natural theology against Plantinga and his ilk. Graham Oppy, however, argues that a survey of Plantinga's work shows an increasing acceptance of the value of natural theology. Oppy, himself an opponent of natural theology, argues that the later Plantinga's more positive view is in fact a step backwards, and that his earlier position is the better supported.

There is one observation that seems to me worth making here about Oppy's chapter. The reader will observe that Oppy is reluctantly willing to concede that many of Plantinga's arguments are, or could be, successful in showing that Christianity or theism is not irrational, though he argues that this on its own does not show atheism to be irrational. Whether or not Oppy's arguments here are successful, his concession is striking when considered in the light of the recent history of Western philosophy. When Plantinga first entered the world of academic philosophy, logical positivism still exerted a strong influence, and it was widely considered that the verifiability criterion of meaning showed that the claims of Christianity and theism are little more than nonsense.<sup>23</sup> That we have come to a point where a leading atheologian like Oppy feels compelled to defend the rationality of atheism against Plantinga's arguments shows the immense growth in credibility that theism has achieved in philosophical circles in recent decades, a development for which Plantinga himself is in large part responsible.

Where Chapter 1 of this book provides, through Oppy's survey of Plantinga's views on natural theology, a very useful overview of Plantinga's work, Chapter 2 focuses on one particular challenge against which Plantinga

has long been at pains to defend the Christian faith – the problem of evil. Indeed, he has gone as far as to claim that “of all the antitheistic arguments only the argument from evil deserves to be taken really seriously.”<sup>24</sup> Richard Gale begins his contribution to this volume by pointing out that Plantinga’s responses to the problem of evil address two different forms of the problem: the logical form (in which it is argued that there is a logical contradiction in the notion that both God and evil exist, and given that evil clearly does exist it is therefore impossible that God does exist) and the evidential form (which points to the evidence of all the evil there is in the world as grounds for the claim that it is very unlikely that God exists). Plantinga has been careful to ensure that his readers know he intends neither of these defences to be *theodicies*, in which it is claimed that some particular state of affairs makes it such that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing evil. Instead, he has contended that Christians must accept that they do not know in detail why God permits evil.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the form of Plantinga’s defences against this particular challenge to the faith he holds so dear is to argue that it is *likely* there are reasons that would justify God in allowing evil, even if we do not know what those reasons are. Against the logical form of the problem of evil Plantinga offers his well-known free will defence, while he responds to the evidential challenge of evil with an argument from theistic skepticism, which in its roughest and most general form is the claim that the ‘problem’ of evil only looks like a problem because of our limited knowledge and perspective. If we knew all God knows, then we’d see that there’s no problem. In his chapter Gale addresses both of these arguments and offers a thorough critique of Plantinga’s position.

Plantinga’s response to the problem of evil exists against the background of his exceptional work on the metaphysics of modality. As mentioned earlier, this is an interest that extends back at least as far as his Wayne State days, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In recent years it is perhaps only David Lewis (who is the focus of another volume in this series) who can be singled out alongside Plantinga as having developed influential and fully fledged theories of modal metaphysics and ontology. In Chapter 3 John Divers begins by setting Plantinga’s work in the context of the recent history of thought in this area. He then outlines twelve distinctive features of Plantinga’s position, before briefly pointing the reader towards perhaps the three most important lines of critique that have been directed against Plantinga in this regard.

In the fourth chapter Ernest Sosa considers what has become known as Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism. In this argument, which Plantinga first outlined in 1991,<sup>26</sup> the traditional relationship