

15 Does God have a Nature?

15.1 Plantinga's Question

So far I have argued for a theory of creation and the use of mathematical ways of thinking that help us to locate God. The question becomes how can these ideas be used to clarify the idea of God. I intend to consider the question Does God have a Nature? In particular I will use the lecture given by Plantinga on this topic (Plantinga (1980)). I will summarize what Plantinga has to say, examine his answer to this question and provide one of my own based on the themes of this thesis.

Plantinga is concerned about the relation of abstract objects and necessary features of reality to the idea of God. How does God relate to things, like the number 7, whose non-existence is impossible (ibid., p5). Augustine took the Platonic Forms and made them part of the mind of God. This raises questions about the properties of God such as God's power, wisdom or justice. If God created wisdom, could it be said that God was wise before wisdom was created? Was God omniscient before God created omniscience? As opposed to the properties such as goodness, mercy and power, there are the properties of God's aseity (God's uncreatedness, self-sufficiency and independence of everything else) and God's sovereignty (God's control over all things) (ibid., p1). If God has a nature then God has, essentially, a property that includes each property essential to God (ibid., p7). Is God dictated to by God's nature? If so, then God is not sovereign or totally self

determined. How does God relate to abstract objects such as properties and propositions?

15.2 Four Answers

In his answering of these kinds of questions Plantinga covers four main areas. Firstly he discusses whether the nature of God can be discussed at all. Secondly, he discusses answers given by Aquinas where God is seen to be identical with God's Nature. Thirdly, he discusses Nominalism and the possibility of God having no nature at all, because there is no nature to be had. Fourthly, he discusses the solution of Descartes as a universal possibilism, where God has no nature because God has no essential properties. Plantinga then gives his own solution to some of these questions.

In the first discussion, Plantinga refers to Kant, Kaufman and Tillich who talk about the inaccessibility of God for any determinant knowledge of God's nature. God, as the real referent, is not available to us. Plantinga dismisses this approach, with which I concur. I believe that God can be correctly spoken about by means of creation knowledge (as I shall explain).

In the second discussion, Plantinga deals with Aquinas and the idea of divine simplicity. This theory states that there can be no distinctions made in God (ibid., p27). If God had an essence (or nature), then that essence would be God's cause; God is not subsequent to God's nature. Properties about God are, in some sense, 'in' God and are therefore identical with God. Each property of God is essential to God, for no property of God is accidental to

God. Plantinga argues, for instance, that if all properties of God are essential to God, does the property that God knows that Adam sinned (a contingent event) really comprise something essential to God?

The third approach is to examine Nominalism, whereby properties that will constitute a nature do not exist. God may be omniscient, but, according to nominalism, there is no property of omniscience (ibid., p63). Nominalism gets rid of abstract objects, for it is proposed that they have always existed and exist necessarily. This leaves the possibility of 'concretism' whereby everything is a concrete object (ibid., p65). A problem for the nominalist is the existence and usefulness of mathematics. There is an answer for the nominalist in that 'everything that is, is either a concrete object or a set whose transitive closure contains nothing but concrete objects. Then mathematics can be developed in the usual way.' (ibid., p67). Plantinga claims that the best argument for nominalism is the divine sovereignty, which puts God in control of everything. By means of God's aseity, God depends upon nothing for God's existence or character. Plantinga concludes by claiming that 'the central thrust of the sovereignty-aseity intuition, therefore, is best understood in terms of the notion of control - of what is or isn't up to God.' (ibid., p83) Plantinga argues against the dismissing of the 'Platonic horde'. He will, in fact, accommodate their existence in his own final account.

In his fourth discussion, Plantinga considers the answer of Descartes to the question of the nature of God. According to Descartes, God determines what truths are eternal and

that they are indeed true. This suggests that God could have determined something stated as true to be not true; that God could have made $2 \times 4 = 8$ as false and that, by implication, every truth is contingent. In attempting to determine what is the best description of what Descartes is saying, Plantinga concludes that Descartes wants to say that everything depends on God to the extent that what appears to be is the result of arbitrary choices by God. It is within God's power to make an eternal truth false. Plantinga rejects this view attributed to Descartes as 'strongly counter-intuitive' (ibid., p124). Plantinga sees that Descartes' approach to the situation of God's control over any proposition or property, is a better solution than nominalism and divine simplicity. According to Descartes, God has no nature because God has no properties that are essential to God.

15.3 Plantinga's Solution

Plantinga then provides his own solution to the question of whether or not God has a nature. After a discussion of the conflict of various intuitions, Plantinga concludes that 'God has at least one essential property: not knowing that God does not exist. We should therefore assert forthrightly that God has a nature and that not everything is possible - even for him' (ibid., p140). Plantinga then discusses God's nature and necessary beings. It is not possible for God to fail to exist. What exists, exists essentially but God also has necessary existence. What exists, exists essentially but not necessarily. Plantinga argues that 'God has a nature' is equivalent to 'there are some necessary propositions' (ibid., p141). If God has P then this is a

necessary truth. Which properties are included in the nature of God? God believes no false proposition, so for any true proposition p , God knows that p . This belief applies in every world in which God exists. If God exists in every world then God knows (believes) everything that is true. God essentially has the property of affirming the existence of all true (what God believes) propositions, which will be part of God's nature. 'Indeed, for any necessarily existing abstract object O , the property of affirming the existence of O is part of God's nature.' (ibid., p142) Plantinga argues that God has not created the numbers because numbers are necessary beings and have not been created by anything or anyone. It is part of God's nature to affirm the existence of numbers, as it is for all necessarily existing abstract objects. God affirms the existence of all propositions and the truth of some of them. 'If no proposition could have failed to exist, then for any proposition p , it is part of God's nature to affirm that p exists.' (ibid., p143) Each possible world is such that God affirms its existence. In each possible world W , God affirms the actuality of just one world, which is W itself. Therefore, 'exploring the world of abstract objects can be seen as exploring the nature of God.' (ibid., p144)

Plantinga ends with some questions. He lists four statements as follows.

- (1) $7 + 5 = 12$
- (2) God believes (1)
- (3) Necessarily $7 + 5 = 12$
- (4) It is part of God's nature to believe that $7 + 5 = 12$.

Plantinga asks such questions as Is (4) prior to (3)? Is it better by explanatory power? Can (4) explain (3)? Is (3) true because it is part of God's nature? The series of questions that he asks are related to the relation between a truth and God's nature. Is something true because it is a part of God or is it a part of God because it is true? Is something true because God believes it or does God believe it because it is necessarily true? Because Plantinga is committed to the existence of necessary truths he has to place them in the nature of God as the one who affirms their necessity. The question becomes which comes first, the existence of God or the necessity of truth? Does God exist because God incorporates necessary truths? It appears that Plantinga sees the truths to be independent of God and that a way to state that something is necessary, is to say that God affirms it. I feel that this makes God less than God. God is going along with something that God affirms but God has not created. In the realm of numbers as abstract objects, God affirms their existence and truth. God can do no other and, apparently, would choose to do no other. How can God contradict what is necessary? It would not be in God's nature to do so. So, it would seem, God is a product of the necessary, which comes from somewhere (but not God).

15.4 My Response

What is my response to this? I claim that God is God. That is, that God is the source, the Creator. I will attempt to explain how a theory of creation can still make God, God. In the realm of possible worlds that Plantinga uses, God is a part of each world, necessarily. God exists in all

possible worlds. The difference that I wish to introduce is that if I use the concept of 'creations' (which are created worlds), then God is not a part of the creation (or of any of the worlds). God is not a creature, nor is God subject to what is created. This is God's aseity and sovereignty over the creation. The necessity associated with God is not expressed as God existing in every conceivable world but every world (creation) pointing to God as the Creator of that world.

To consider this, let there be God and a series of created worlds or creations. The question I ask is, can God be pointed to by each creation? Each creation will have its own way of doing things. Assuming that God speaks each creation into being, then language and conceivability will be a possibility in that creation. If there is a language agent in that creation then there can be an understanding about the possibility of the existence of God. Language and conceivability may be available but there may be no agent there to use it. Therefore the question of God does not arise, although God is still the Creator of that world. There is no one there to reflect the glory of God in the creation. If there is a language user there, they may seek God, if they reflect on the creation. There are tools for reflecting on the possibility of God, as promoted in this thesis. These tools are used in a creation where objects are discernible by means of relations. There can be collections of discernible objects, sequences of objects and varieties of relations between discernible objects. I do not know how to describe a creation without discernible objects. Given discernible objects, the language reifies

the relations between them. The language becomes the way to handle the creation and permits a conceptual abstraction (or universal) from the created, existing, physical objects. I do not posit the separate existence of abstract objects, other than to say that they reside in the language and are accessible to the language user. It becomes very difficult to decide the origin of abstract ideas such as justice and 'God'. Certain behaviours are said to be just or unjust. What is seen concretely, is a person doing things, which can have a variable interpretation. I may propose a scale of just acts, (not having seen all such types of just act) and suppose that there is the most just act. But where does the full sense of justice come from? Can I build up an idea of justice from lesser acts of justice? Can I build up an idea of God from lesser ideas of God? How far can I go with the ideas of justice and God anyhow? There seem to be cognitive leaps in the language whereby the whole (of the concept) is greater than any of the lesser parts (of the concept). Greater ideas of God include lesser ideas of God. I may experience the idea of God or justice in various ways, but is the way I am experiencing these ideas the genesis of these ideas? If I have to decide, I will decide for the given-ness of the concept of which we go in search. So where do the completed concepts come from? The only place is the conceivability of the creation. Our experience and use of the concept in the language is incremental and fragmentary, but approaching the limit concept of justice or 'God'. By this means the creation supplies the ideas (knowledge) which become the way we approach God. Without this knowledge we have no way of articulating the idea or experience of God. I would also

claim that God speaks a language that is consistent with the idea of God. The language is 'God-bearing'. This means that genuine attempts can be made to search out (by the language) the meaning and significance of God, as expressed in the language. That is, truths about God can be expressed in a language. I link this to the belief that the creation is a spoken creation. Hence the creation is conceivable because it was spoken into existence.

The basic issue here is the reality of conceivability associated with the creation. The third claim I make about the creation is that it is a whole and completed. That is, the physical is accompanied by the conceptual. I attempt to establish the plausibility of conceivability by the claims that the creation is spoken and articulated by language, and the existence of relations between discernible objects. These relations become the mechanism by which variable terms of n-ary relations are able to construct conceivable worlds, or in Plantinga's phrase, books of worlds (Plantinga (1974), p46). The question is, what is the nature of this property of conceivability of what is created? If relations between objects exist then there is the possibility of relations between objects that are not physical. Such objects are conceptual and exist in the language. But the conceptual is not (inductively) built up from the physical, because the concept is already there in the language, or available to the language. I am aware of the deep argument over the existence of abstract objects. I want to avoid their existence because I am maintaining creation ex nihilo. But possibly part of the creative act is the creation of objects accessible by the language only.

These objects are ready-made concepts such as justice and 'God'. This is part of the completion of the creation. This would imply that the creation is conceptually complete as well as physically complete. We may not know all the concepts (as we do not know all the physical objects), but in principle, all concepts can be known. We may not know their truth or provability but they are conceivable. What about the concept of the infinite? Is this asking whether we can have a concept for something that is not conceivable? Well we can conceive infinity and we have a word 'infinity' for it. This raises other questions about what is being denoted by our words and I do not wish to canvas these issues. What I want to say is that our language ranges over concepts which are spoken into the creation.

15.5 Searle and 'Brains cause Minds'

This issue appears in the mind-body problem. Searle in Minds, Brains and Science (1984), claims that 'brains cause minds' (ibid., p39). According to my creation theory, language requires a user and a user of language would have a mind usually instanced as a brain. There are interesting questions about whether a mind (something that produces mental activity) requires a brain. In humans a mind is expressed by a brain. I want to resist the phrase 'brains cause minds', in particular the word 'cause'. In humans brains and minds go together. When I think then my brain is working, but I resist the implication that 'thinking is neuron firing'. Thinking is memory, visualization, desire, recognition etc. Thinking may be associated with neuron

firing but it is not neuron firing. Neuron firing is another idea that is not 'thinking'. The question is whether neuron firing represents a loss of information from the information content of thinking. Consider the process: thought A - (encoding) - neuron firing - (decoding) - thought B. If thought A = thought B in every respect then there has been no loss of information. Here neuron firing is not thought but a coding of thought, just as printed words on a page are not thought but a representation of thought. I would argue that a mind is a different thing from a brain although they may well be connected. In the same way I would argue that the conceivability of the creation is different from the objects of the creation although connected with them. I do not feel that I need abstract objects as long as I have access to language to manipulate objects.

Searle argues, I believe accurately, that computers cannot have brains because they are mechanisms using syntax and not semantics. Language (or thinking) is about meaning that is expressed by the structures of syntax. Computers are not creating a representation of a world; the computer program does not have a context (it works in a context-free language). In a creation the language works in the context of the conceptual givens of the conceptually closed creation. If concepts are abstract objects their life is only for the life of the creation. There is also the possibility of a stable, conceptually closed creation being separable from a new physical creation, or at least a creation where certain principles such as death and corruption no longer apply. A new heaven and a new earth

(creation) would be conceptually stable but physically new (not necessarily different). An entirely new physical creation, with different relations, would mean a different language and different concepts. But the principle of conceivability over the physical creation and its properties would still apply.

15.6 Multiple Creations

The possibility arises of multiple creations. Because each creation is spoken, the creation is amenable to language and can therefore be conceptually manipulated by a language. I have claimed (in the body of this thesis) that knowledge of God can be obtained by a sequence, no sequence, a limit, lack of total definition, incompleteness, paradox and complexity. These mathematical tools do not invent the idea of God ('God'), but they can be used to articulate ideas about God.

Consider a creation where there is only a finite number of objects. Such a creation may not have a rich language but it can still contain the idea of God, although any description of God would be very limited. If their arithmetic was modulo 10, there would be a sequence of only 10 terms (0-9). The limit of the sequence would still be a limit, although not the limit of an infinite sequence. But it may well be pointing to that than which nothing greater could be thought. Generally, results not using infinite limits could apply. The point is that God can still be pointed to by this language, in this creation.

Does God have a nature? Each (modulo) creation will have its language for talking about God. A one step sequence of 'God is good', without any qualifications of the goodness can still apply to God. The degree of sophistication depends upon what God has determined in speaking the creation into existence. The way the creation works is the way provided to know God. As long as there are discernible objects in relation in the creation then the mathematical tools mentioned will suffice. If there are no discernible objects I do not know how to describe the creation. We may say that God is the source of the creation and the conceivable (conceptual) goal of the creation. I can assume that God reveals God as God chooses in a given creation. A nature can be seen to be a bondage for God in the creation system. Can God choose to reveal God in contradictory ways? If God is a deceiver then this is possible. I would claim that God is as God speaks. Language users can misuse or misunderstand the data in the language and refuse to reach or be unable to reach any concept of God.

Ultimately, I will say that God does not have a nature. A nature sounds like an abstract object that is conceived as separate from God and determining of God. As Creator, God consistently acts out of choice and self-determination. Reliable behaviour from God is an expression of God's constant reliable choice. Consistent choice is not a nature, it is a choice or a series of choices. We can reify choice in a nature that, in my opinion, makes God less than God.