



REVIEW ARTICLES

Atonement and the Knowledge of God: Alvin Plantinga and Eleonore Stump

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Atonement, Eleonore Stump, Oxford University Press, 2018 (ISBN 978-0-19-881386-6), xviii + 510 pp., hb £60

Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project, Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty (eds), Oxford University Press, 2018 (ISBN 978-0-19-084221-5), xiv + 486 pp., hb £64

Abstract

Alvin Plantinga and Eleonore Stump represent the best of the analytic philosophical and theological school for the past four decades. Is God real and is God knowledge? The collection of essays from the Plantinga Project looks at just these questions. What is sin and how can it be atoned for? Eleonore Stump's book gives her new unique answer to those questions. Behind both is a method and an approach to knowing that has become formative in Christian philosophy. Has this method helped in explaining what Christians mean when they affirm that the eternal power and divine nature of God are clearly seen from the things that are made so that unbelief is without excuse?

Key Words: Plantinga, Stump, atonement, theistic proofs, love, the good, problem of evil

Eleonore Stump and Alvin Plantinga represent what is available in contemporary analytic philosophy and philosophical theology. Their work has brought ideas about God's existence, the problem of evil, and Christian doctrines about redemption into the academy in a way not thought possible in the preceding age of logical positivism. Furthermore, the editors and contributors dedicated to the Plantinga Project are an example of how new generations of Christian philosophers have used categories developed by Plantinga to shape their work in the academy. As a

review essay, what we will do here is give some sense of the content of these two books and then think about them in terms of the biblical world-view on the knowledge of God, sin, and atonement. Christians have been doing philosophical theology from the beginning as witnessed by Paul at Athens in Acts 17. The renewal of this activity is not to be taken as the aberration but rather the few decades when logical positivism seemed to be the default of the academy turn out to be the exception.

Paul said 'I want to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified'. This tells us of the central place of the crucifixion for Christians. And it tells us of the importance of the doctrines that go with it, doctrines like sin and repentance. In Hebrews 6:1, we are told that the doctrine of repentance from dead works is a foundational principle needed for going on to maturity. Eleanore Stump's *Atonement* puts just these kinds of considerations into focus for an advanced and in-depth study. It is building on her previous work, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 2010), which studied the problem of evil and the role/purpose of suffering in preparing a person to seek God. *Atonement* promises to explain how the work of Christ brings about union with God and the beatific vision.

Eleanore Stump presents us with what she calls the 'Marian Interpretation of the Atonement'. She argues that Anselm's view of satisfactory atonement falls short in affirming divine justice while losing divine love and ultimately in losing justice as well. It is unjust for the innocent to suffer in the place of the guilty. Aquinas comes closer. He affirms the right view of love and the ultimate goal of a union in relationship with God in the beatific vision. However, he does not adequately explain the necessity of the death of Christ for this goal.

In contrast to Anselm, and building on Aquinas with modifications, the Marian view says, 'On the Marian interpretation there is a twofold role for Christ's passion and death. On the one hand, Christ's passion and death are essential to the indwelling of human psyches in Christ, so that it is true that no one comes to union with God in mutual indwelling except through Christ's passion and death. On the other hand, Christ's passion and death are not necessary to bring a person to surrender that enables the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in her, but only the most promising means to this end' (p. 380).

'The atonement is a solution to the problem of the human proneness to moral wrongdoing' (p. 69). But have we seen a solution to that problem? Have we even seen there is a problem? What is the 'moral evil' that needs to be overcome? The focus in this interpretation of Atonement is on overcoming guilt and shame that take the form of causing suffering to others. 'One person can make vicarious satisfaction for another if the two are united in love at least with respect to the satisfaction being made' (p. 369). For these reasons, in addition to the other things that Christ does in his passion and death, Christ also makes vicarious satisfaction for all human sin. But that satisfaction is

not a present made to God to enable God to pardon sinners, as the Anselmian approach to vicarious satisfaction supposes. 'It is rather an offer of union in love made to each human sufferer of the depredations of others' (p. 369). It does because each of the kinds of shame 'has a defeat in the atonement of Christ. Through shame, there is honor, a true honor, that accrues to the species and to those particular sufferers of shame who come to grace' (p. 377). Sin against God is not the primary focus in this view of the atonement.

The guiding principles that shape how she understands the atonement are that God loves all humans meaning that God wants all humans to be united to God and experience the beatific vision (p. 41). She emphasizes mercy as consistent with love but in conflict with justice. There is a tension between these rather than mercy and justice finding their unity in Christ. Next, it is the human will that is fallen. The intellect still presents truths about God to the will, but the will tends toward sin. The solution involves a libertarian understanding of the human will (p. 47). God cannot produce a first order volition in a person without overriding free will. God can only give cooperative grace that affects second order volitions so that the person has the will he or she desires to have (p. 201). The human first order will sovereign. The atonement is the best way for God to bring about this change as it is the best means to get the person to stop resisting God's grace (p. 362).

In rejecting the Anselmian view, she does not wrestle with important developments in the reformation. By way of contrast to her view is understanding the atonement to address the problem of Adam as covenant representative and Christ as the Second Adam who undoes what Adam did and does what Adam failed to do. Her assessment of Anselm and the substitutionary atonement does not deal with covenant representation or triple imputation. She briefly mentions Calvin under the Anselmian view but does not develop the differences in substitution theory and covenant representation which would have addressed many of the problems she aims at the Anselmian view. Her intuitions about what love must look like are set in contrast with divine justice.

Consider how shame and guilt work in Genesis 3. Eve's understanding of God is challenged. First, she is told to believe that God lies (you will not surely die) and that she, a creature, can be as God, the Creator. She believes these things and eats and gives to Adam who also eats. They immediately feel shame and tried cover themselves with fig leaves. When questioned by God, they do not repent but blame another. God then imposes natural evil including physical death. God then provides the covering of animal skins. Sin is covered by the death of another. We see this repeated in the story of Cain and Abel where Abel brings an offering that represents this need for atonement through the death of another and Cain does not. The need for atonement begins in the failure to know God as root sin.

For the atonement to help overcome sin, guilt, and shame, we would need to have a clear understanding of what these are. How does it help address the original problem of not knowing God? Although her view primarily focuses on the will, the presentation in the book of Romans includes the intellect and the will. There in Chapter 3, in quoting the Psalmist, Paul says that none seek, none understand, and none do what is right. Adam and Eve were not able to respond to challenges to their understanding of God because they had not been seeking. This failure to seek and understand culminated in their not doing what is right in eating the fruit. Sin affects all of these areas and involves an exchange of the truth of God for a lie and worship of the creature (Rom. 1: 25). Then in Romans 9, we are told that God makes both vessels of wrath and objects of mercy for the revelation of the riches of His glory. She does not deal with this part of Romans. Instead, she says that Romans can be read in many different ways and she looks at a few passages in Romans 3 and Romans 8 about the intellect and the will (p. 400). The overriding intuition is her claim that God loves each individual and wills them to have union and the beatific vision. The alternative is to affirm that God's purpose is to reveal the divine glory including the perfection of justice and mercy. These are displayed and united in Christ's atonement on the cross. It is knowing this glory that is man's chief end and God's goal in all of creation and providence.

How does the Atonement restore us to the knowledge of God? The second book we are considering here helps us think about that knowledge of God. Is God knowable and if so how? Are the theistic arguments necessary or are they just niceties for some intellectual Christians? Alvin Plantinga has reshaped how many of the problems in epistemology and the philosophy of religion are discussed. *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God's Existence* fits into that larger project of Plantinga's work and is an excellent introduction to the state of theistic arguments in contemporary philosophy.

Plantinga began working in academic philosophy at a time when it was taken for granted that there were no sound theistic arguments. This was due to unanswered challenges from Hume and Kant to the three traditional arguments plus the rise of logical positivism and the default materialism (see my book *The Clarity of God's Existence*, 2008). J. L. Mackie's work on the problem of evil was thought to be a decisive attack on theistic belief. Belief in God was suspect as irrational or non-rational.

Plantinga's response to this was to adjust the definition of knowledge. Classical foundationalism claimed that an argument must work from self-evident premises through deductively valid steps or work to a conclusion that is sufficiently probable with respect to most people's foundation (p. 4). Plantinga challenged this and instead argued we consider many beliefs to be rational that do not start with these features. His example was our belief in other minds. We don't have an argument that

meets the criteria of classical foundationalism for the strength of our belief in other minds, and yet, we maintain it is rational to believe in other minds. By analogy, belief in God can be rational. The meaning of 'rational' here seems to be in terms of accepted conventions of belief formation (since it is possible that an important part of some religions is that other minds are not real, the self is not real, and so belief in other minds is not rational).

In contrast to classical foundationalism, Plantinga argues for warranted belief. A belief is warranted when the belief is formed by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a cognitive environment for those faculties by a design plan aimed at truth. A basic belief is one that is formed in this immediate way rather than as the produce of deliberation or deduction. And so we can have warranted belief in God that is properly basic without any theistic proofs or arguments.

This warrant can be lost when a defeater is raised. And here is where the need for theistic arguments might arise. Plantinga gives some reasons why theistic arguments are valuable including that they can bring a person closer to theism, they reveal interesting connections between theistic beliefs, they strengthen theistic belief, and they increase the warrant of theistic belief (p. 3). They are not necessary for that initial warrant and so to be considered rational basic beliefs. But they become necessary as soon as challenges arise, and these challenges can be internal (raised by the person) or external (raised by others).

Plantinga suggests that it can be difficult to evaluate when an argument is a good argument (p. 5). One important feature is moving from premises that are generally accepted through logically valid inferences. As such their conclusions are rationally permissible. And the arguments in this volume are meant to be independent meaning that whatever support they lend to theism is cumulative (p. 5).

We can notice that there are significant *ifs* associated with Plantinga's definition of knowledge. *If* the belief is properly formed. *If* it is the cognitive environment is correct. *If* it was the outcome of a design plan aimed at truth. That there is a design plan is precisely one of the issues at stake in theism and so building it into the definition of warrant might be said to beg the question. Each of these *ifs*, or the general conditionality, raises a challenge about defining knowledge in this way. The challenges to the theistic beliefs by Hume and Kant were not essentially tied to classical foundationalism. The warrant described by Plantinga disappears so quickly in the face of defeaters that we are soon left with the necessity for proofs and arguments. The problem of where these begin is not unique to the modern era. Aristotle recognizes that we cannot have an infinite regress of proofs but must start somewhere. For him, it was the law of non-contradiction. We can identify this starting point as a foundation without that term importing all of the assumptions of what is called classical foundationalism.

We begin to consider these arguments noting that because of defeaters, arguments are necessary. Additionally, arguments can be cumulative meaning that rather than one argument (say, the ontological) concluding with ‘theism’, each argument might have a conclusion that establishes part of theism and the arguments taken together establish theism itself. In general, these have been divided into the ontological, cosmological, and teleological (which includes both natural design and moral design). Even so, in the interview with Plantinga at the end of the book he says:

‘With respect to most of these arguments I don’t think they typically really establish their conclusion. They are evidence for the conclusion, maybe they raise the probability of the conclusions, maybe they make that conclusion more probable than not, but I don’t think they actually establish it, so if a person believes in God in the wholehearted way that many of us on at least some occasions do, I don’t think that sort of degree of certainty would be appropriate with respect to the conclusion of any of these arguments. And the other thing about the arguments is that they typically establish—if they establish anything—the existence of a being with, say, one or two or three of God’s attributes, but not all of them. So an argument or a creator, let’s say, a first cause argument or something like that won’t typically give us the conclusion that this being is wholly good, as the Christians think. So, in general I think the arguments are important and useful, but I don’t think that they are strong enough to bear the full weight of Christian, or even theistic conviction, let alone Christian conviction’ (p. 447).

The interviewer, Trent Dougherty, suggests that evidence by way of experience is what does give that stronger conclusion. The problem of course is that experiences can be interpreted in many different and contradictory ways, so an experience itself is not sufficient. Appeals to increased probability require that we have *knowns* that are used to measure what is probable or possible.

Both Stump and Plantinga make statements like this that ultimately they are not going to establish the truth of their conclusions. She says, ‘It is not an argument for the truth of the doctrine of the *atonement*. As I hope goes without saying, an argument to that conclusion would be exceedingly difficult to come by. On the other hand, of course, the argument of this book, that the doctrine is coherent, morally acceptable, and consistent with the relevant theological claims, is clearly also pertinent to considerations of the truth of the doctrine’ (p. 36). What, if anything, is clear to reason about God and the good? Can reason distinguish between God and non-God sufficiently to at least tell us what is meant by the term? Are we able to use reason to distinguish God from the creation and to understand the eternal power and divine nature of God from the things that are made? Any appeal to experience still requires that these matters are clear to reason so that we can understand the meaning of the experience.

These two books intersect, and it is important to see how two of the most influential contemporary Christian philosophers have addressed

and related these questions. Specifically, how can we know God and does atonement restore us to the knowledge of God? A spontaneously arising belief about God is true if I was designed by God to have that belief arise in those conditions. But how do we know that God is real and that God did so design me? Answering these involves using arguments to respond to challenges. It is insufficient to define warrant in a way that assumes God the designer or to merely assert one is warranted in their basic belief about God. Instead, can the Christian show that the eternal power and divine nature of God are clearly seen in the things that are made so that unbelief is without excuse? The Christian can and should affirm that the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God so as to leave unbelief without excuse. Knowing the glory of God in all that by which he makes Himself known is our chief end of highest good. This is to reverse the problem on the logical positivist and affirm that it is unbelief that is without excuse and in need of atonement.