



Check for updates

Теория познания

УДК 231

EDN MLXFKE

<https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2687-1262-2023-5-2-107-112>

Does God really have a nature? A. Plantinga's decision

S. V. Nikonenko ¹

¹ St. Petersburg State University, 7–9 Universitetskaya Emb., Saint Petersburg 199034, Russia

For citation: Nikonenko, S. V. (2023) Does God really have a nature? A. Plantinga's decision. *Journal of Integrative Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 107–112. <https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2687-1262-2023-5-2-107-112> EDN MLXFKE

Received 18 July 2023; reviewed 13 October 2023; accepted 13 October 2023.

Funding: The study did not receive any external funding.

Copyright: © S. V. Nikonenko (2023). Published by Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia. Open access under [CC BY-NC License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Abstract. The article is devoted to the study of the concepts of 'nature' and 'the nature of God' in the theology and religious philosophy of Alvin Plantinga. The essence of his position: God does not fall under the laws of reason; he is not determined by them, but can be comprehended with the help of reason. Plantinga notes that the properties and qualities of God belong exclusively to him, and are not do not originate in our mind. Plantinga's argument leads to the assumption that God has neither 'existence' nor 'nature' as rational categories; he has chosen to be such completely freely, just as he creates the world completely freely. The most dangerous fallacy of any form of metaphysical naturalism is the loss of faith in God and criticism of the divine existence itself. Plantinga introduces the idea of proper function, according to which there is a pre-established harmony between God and the world. He formulates three key points of naturalism: undermining the idea of supreme harmony, rejection of eternal truths, and the impossibility of unshakable faith. If we proceed from theism, then God is not in any nature at all. However, the following assumption will also be wrong: God has his nature. In this regard, it can be assumed that God does have a nature, but in a potential, not an actual form. From the theological point of view, God possesses a nature; however, it is so immanently inherent in him that it cannot be distinguished as a 'property' or essence. Therefore, the concept of 'nature' is interpreted differently in theology and metaphysics. The nature of God is revealed not in reason, but in faith.

Keywords: God, Plantinga, nature, naturalism, theology, metaphysics

Есть ли на самом деле природа Бога? Решение Алвина Плантинги

С. В. Никоненко ¹

¹ Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Россия, 199034, г. Санкт-Петербург, Университетская набережная, д. 7–9

Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию понятий «природа» и «природа Бога» в теологии и религиозной философии Алвина Плантинги. Суть его позиции: Бог не подпадает под законы разума и не определяется ими, но может быть постигнут с помощью разума. Плантинга отмечает, что свойства и качества Бога принадлежат исключительно ему, а не зарождаются в нашем представлении. Аргументация Плантинги ведет к допущению того, что Бог не обладает ни «существованием», ни «природой» как рациональными категориями; он совершенно свободно выбрал быть таковым, равно как и совершенно

Для цитирования:

Никоненко, С. В. (2023) *Есть ли на самом деле природа Бога? Решение Алвина Плантинга*. Журнал интегративных исследований культуры, т. 5, № 2, с. 107–112. <https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2687-1262-2023-5-2-107-112> EDN MLXFKF

Получена 18 июля 2023; прошла рецензирование 13 октября 2023; принята 13 октября 2023.

Финансирование: Исследование не имело финансовой поддержки.

Права: © С. В. Никоненко (2023). Опубликовано Российским государственным педагогическим университетом им. А. И. Герцена. Открытый доступ на условиях лицензии CC BY-NC 4.0.

свободно творит мир. Наиболее опасным заблуждением любой формы метафизического натурализма выступает потеря веры в Бога и критика самого божественного существования. Плантинга вводит идею *propter function*, согласно которой существует предустановленная гармония между Богом и миром. Он формулирует три ключевых пункта натурализма: подрыв идеи высшей гармонии, неприятие вечных истин и возможности незыблемой веры. Если исходить из теизма, то Бог вообще ни в какой природе. Однако неверно будет и такое предположение: у Бога нет природы. В этой связи можно допустить, что Бог в самом деле имеет природу, но в потенциальной, а не в актуальной форме. С теологической точки зрения Бог обладает природой; однако она столь имманентно присуща ему, что не может быть выделена в качестве «свойства», или сущности. Поэтому понятие «природа» в теологии и метафизике трактуется по-разному. Природа Бога открывается не в разуме, а в вере.

Ключевые слова: Бог, Плантинга, природа, натурализм, теология, метафизика

The categories 'nature' and 'naturalism' play an important role in the theology of Alvin Plantinga. These concepts are discussed in almost every essay. In terms of content, Plantinga (since he is not only a theologian, but also a religious philosopher and a secular epistemologist) discusses not only the context of theological thought, but also pays considerable attention to metaphysics, discussing mainly the ideas of New European, German classical and analytical philosophy. In a preliminary respect, Plantinga works with four points of view on the nature of God: 1. the nature of God is significantly different from the mundane nature; 2. the nature of God and worldly nature are one; 3. the nature of God can be comprehended rationally and be the subject of metaphysics; 4. worldly nature has its own principles that (at least partially) are outside the jurisdiction of God. I will try to show that Plantinga criticizes all four points of view, eventually forming his own point of view on the nature of God.

Although Plantinga has a number of purely philosophical works on epistemology and actively applies the methodology of analytical philosophy, he primarily acts as a theologian. Theology has its own subject, its own methods and a general attitude to working with faith, the truths of revelation and the sacred commandments. Plantinga resolutely rejects the rationalistic approach to the nature of God. The essence of his position is as follows: God does not fall under the laws of reason and is not determined by them, but, to a certain extent, he can be comprehended with the help of reason. Plantinga writes: 'So God's creation creates no special problem here: it is dependent on him in myriad ways; he is in no way significantly dependent upon it. What does or might seem to create a prob-

lem are not these creatures of God, but the whole realm of abstract objects — the whole Platonic pantheon of universals, properties, kinds, propositions, numbers, sets, states of affairs and possible worlds. It is natural to think of these things as everlasting, as having neither beginning nor end' (Plantinga 1980, 3). Plantinga introduces the concept of 'traditional theism', according to which all abstract objects (primarily universals) depend on God. According to traditional theism, God necessarily exists and is absolutely omniscient.

Plantinga seeks to emphasize that the distinguished properties and qualities of God belong exclusively to him, and do not originate in our view. Discussing the wisdom of God, Plantinga emphasizes that 'wisdom' is not an abstract concept 'separated' from the divine nature. His argument boils down to the following: 'But if God has created wisdom, then he existed before it did, in which case, presumably, there was a time at which he was not wise. But surely he has always been wise; he has not acquired wisdom. Furthermore, he seems to be somehow conditioned and limited by these properties, and dependent upon them. Take the property omniscience for example. If that property didn't exist, then God wouldn't have it, in which case he wouldn't be omniscient. So the existence of omniscience is a necessary condition of God's being the way he is; in this sense he seems to be dependent upon it' (Plantinga 1980, 6). Plantinga also refers to the point of view of Thomas Aquinas, according to whom it is necessary to distinguish between necessity applicable to God and necessity established rationally (whether it is determinism or logical necessity). The mistake of the supporters of deism and the metaphysical approach to God is that they falsely assert the dependence of God on the laws

created by him. According to Plantinga, sophism is rooted in the assumption that since God creates perfect laws, he must obey them. In fact, from the point of view of consistent theism, following the law is the sovereign choice of God; his essence is not subject to any laws, since it is the source of all possible laws. Plantinga believes: 'What this suggestion might come to in the case of God is far from clear, since on St. Thomas' view God is responsible for the character of the causal laws themselves. God instituted these laws when he created the world; but God did not in instituting these laws bring himself or his necessity into existence. Thus it is not easy to see the alternative to construing Aquinas' "necessary being" as "logically necessary being"' (Plantinga 1975, 23).

Having introduced the above preliminary provisions, Plantinga directly proceeds to discuss the idea of the nature of God. He is writing: 'I shall discuss Descartes' universal possibilism, according to which God has no nature, not because there are no properties but because he has no properties essentially. These answers, I argue, should all be rejected; and <...> I defend what I take to be the simple truth: God has a nature which is not identical with him' (Plantinga 1980, 10). Let us remember that Descartes' world includes two substances — thinking and extended ones, but God is above the world. Therefore, it does not mix with nature in any way. Such a point of view, it would seem, should appeal to Plantinga, who is an atheist. However, he reveals a certain imperfection of Descartes' position: the nature created by God turns out to be completely outside of God; that is, it is ontologically assumed that there is something besides God. Such an assumption seems to Plantinga to be untenable; therefore, he is ready to assume beforehand that God has a nature.

Plantinga criticizes the inherent division of rationalism into substance and accident. If in metaphysical cosmology such a division looks justified, then in relation to God it is misleading. Plantinga thinks: 'Accordingly, God is not identical with any property accidental to him. But then if he has an accidental property, there is something distinct from him that limits and conditions him; for then he could not be the way he is if that property did not exist. Hence each property he has must be essential to him' (Plantinga 1980, 40). I can see the difficulty that has already been noticed: we begin to perceive accidents as part of God's nature by highlighting God's inherent accidents. Whereas everything in fact is quite the opposite: the nature of God exists before any accidents are isolated; accidents are not properties, but manifestations of the divine nature. Plantinga believes that the question of the relation-

ship between substance and accident in relation to God was successfully resolved by Thomas Aquinas. Plantinga writes: 'Now Aquinas speaks, not of God's having properties, but of properties being in God; he thinks of God's properties as constituents of Him. There is a difference between thinking of God as having properties and thinking of his properties as constituents of him. In some contexts this difference may be significant and we must bear it in mind. Here, however, I think it is not significant, and for ease of exposition I shall use "having properties" to cover having properties as constituents' (Plantinga 1980, 55). Attention should be focused on the assumption that the properties of God are in God himself, and are not 'inherent' in him as additional qualities.

Plantinga's argument leads us to the assumption that God, paradoxically, has neither existence nor nature (taken as rational categories). Plantinga writes: 'For if God has no nature, then no property is essential to him, so that for any property P he has, it is possible that he should have existed but lacked P. If God has no nature, he could have existed but not been omniscient; indeed, he could have existed and not known anything at all. In the same way he could have existed but been without goodness, power and life. Still further: existence is a property he has; but if it is not essential to him, he could have existed, but lacked it — i. e., existed and not existed. The fact is he doesn't both exist and not exist; but if he has no nature, he could have done so' (Plantinga 1980, 62). Suppose the following: God necessarily exists and has his own nature. According to Plantinga, this conclusion is incorrect. It should be corrected like this: God exists freely and possesses his (and only his) own nature. In my opinion, Plantinga comes to the fundamental question of the separation of metaphysical and theological necessity. The latter necessity includes the theistic principle that there is no determination in God; he has chosen to be such completely freely, as well as he creates the world completely freely.

Starting to criticize Kantian naturalism, Plantinga preliminarily divides naturalism into two types: 1. agnostic naturalism, according to which concepts are applicable only to nature, and not to God; 2. materialistic naturalism, according to which reason is a product of nature and there is nothing outside of nature. Plantinga's first type of naturalism leads back to Kant's teaching about the ideal of pure reason. Plantinga writes: 'Now Kant clearly teaches that our concepts do not apply to God. Of course he also seems to teach that some at least, of our concepts do apply to God; this is part of his charm. But the agnostic teaching is what has historically had the greatest impact and what

is presently relevant; these Kantian ideas have enjoyed enormous popularity in recent theology' (Plantinga 1980, 13). Plantinga quite rightly notices the ambivalence of Kant's teaching about God. Being an agnostic, Kant is not an atheist. On the contrary, Kant, to a certain extent, refers to the apophatic tradition, emphasizing that the ideas of the worldly mind about God lead to a radical distortion of the understanding of his nature. However, skeptical pathos, according to Plantinga, acted as a powerful impulse for the activation of subjectivism in Protestant theology. In particular, Plantinga completely disagrees with the existential interpretation of faith in God, criticizing the ideas of R. Bultmann. In the end, Plantinga questions the anthropological approach in the field of religious philosophy. Such approach is full of delusion with the undoubted activation of religious feelings and the depth of personal faith, erasing the necessary distance between God and man. Criticizing the humanistic aspirations of agnostic naturalism, Plantinga notes: 'For if none of our concepts apply to God, then there is nothing we can know or truly believe of him — not even what is affirmed in the creeds or revealed in the Scriptures. And if there is nothing we can know or truly believe of him, then, of course, we cannot know or truly believe that none of our concepts apply to him. The view that our concepts don't apply to God is fatally ensnared in self-referential absurdity. We cannot sensibly respond to our question then — the question whether God has a nature — by dismissing it as naively presupposing that our concepts apply to God' (Plantinga 1980, 26). As Plantinga emphasizes, Kant absolutized the 'naivety' of the human conception of God. Indeed, it is impossible to assume God as he appears in concepts; however, it is even more false to assume that the subject of such concepts is another 'God' of metaphysics. No matter how incomplete our conceptual understanding of God is, it comes not only from people, but is also inspired by God himself at the creation of the human mind.

The most dangerous fallacy of any form of metaphysical naturalism is the loss of faith in God and criticism of the divine existence itself. Plantinga reduces the essence of this position to the following provisions: 'According to the first perspective, *philosophical naturalism*, there is no God, and we human beings are insignificant parts of a giant cosmic machine that proceeds in majestic indifference to us, our hopes and aspirations, our needs and desires, and our sense of right and wrong. This picture goes back to Epicurus, Democritus, and others in the Ancient world and finds magnificent expression in Lucretius' poem, *De Rerum Natura*;

it is also extremely popular in the contemporary (Western) world. According to the second perspective, it is we ourselves—we human beings—who are somehow responsible for the basic structure of the world. We somehow bring it about that the world has the structure and nature it displays; it is we who are somehow responsible for the truth of those propositions that are true. Call this *creative anti-realism*' (Plantinga, Tooley 2008, 14–15). Plantinga does not mention contemporary authors in the chapter from which we quote this judgment. However, given analytical tradition in which Plantinga works, one can recognize both types of agnostics as representatives of early analytical philosophy. For example, B. Russell repeatedly emphasized the insignificance of man and spiritual nature on the scale of the universe (he even wrote the anticlerical story *The Theologian's Nightmare* about this). G. E. Moore emphasized the neutrality of the analytical method to questions of theology, he had neither religious nor anti-religious beliefs. L. Wittgenstein (being personally a deeply religious person) was forced to admit in *Tractatus* that God 'does not manifest' in the world, as logic and ideal language describe it. If we take the secular American philosophy of religion closer to Plantinga, then, for example, we should cite the judgments of R. Smalian and D. Dennett, who defend anti-realism and epistemological pluralism, questioning the fundamental position of the Bible that God creates a single world. Linking modern and New European philosophical ideas, Plantinga emphasizes that modern analytical philosophy has not gone far from the discussion of Leibniz, Voltaire and Diderot about the permissibility of the existence of multiple worlds. Placing accents, Plantinga reveals the essence of naturalism, emphasizing that it is much more dangerous than atheism. Plantinga writes: 'I outlined the theistic perspective above: there is God, with his special and unique properties, and then there is the world he has created. The basic idea of philosophical naturalism (which from now on I'll just call "naturalism") is that there is no such person as God, or anything at all like him. So first, a naturalist (as I'm using the term) will be an atheist. But not every atheist is a naturalist. Naturalism is *stronger* than atheism, in the sense that it is possible to be an atheist but not a naturalist, but not possible to be a naturalist but not an atheist' (Plantinga, Tooley 2008, 19).

Plantinga develops a powerful argument against naturalism. First of all, he introduces the idea of *proper function*, according to which there is a pre-established harmony between God and the world. From his point of view, if we accept faith in the perfection and goodness of God, we will not

have a naturalistic hypothesis at all: it will simply not be necessary to assume that nature — as a divine creation — can completely or partially fall away from God. From this point of view, Plantinga formulates three key points of rejection of naturalism. He writes: ‘First, naturalism cannot accommodate the idea of *proper function*, for such organisms as plants and animals and human beings. It therefore cannot accommodate the notions of health, sanity, sickness, disease, and the like. Further, as I argued above, warrant, the quality or quantity that makes true belief into knowledge, essentially involves proper function. This means, then, that if naturalism were true, there would be no such thing as knowledge, as well as no such thing as health, sanity, illness, or any other condition that entails these. Second, and more devastating, naturalism leads directly to Humean skepticism, the condition in which you have a defeater for whatever you believe and cannot sensibly trust your cognitive faculties. In this connection I’ll also argue that naturalism is self-defeating, in that if it is true, it is irrational to believe it. Third, and perhaps most devastating, naturalism cannot accommodate *belief*; if naturalism is true, no one believes anything’ (Plantinga, Tooley 2008, 19). Thus, naturalism undermines the postulating of highest harmony, the assumption of eternal truths and the possibility of unshakable faith. In the end, naturalism leads either to materialism or to ‘substantial realism’, as a result of which there is a prejudice about the existence of nature as an autonomous ontological entity. The only way to solve the problem is to follow the call: ‘But where are the arguments for naturalism? Perhaps it would be sensible to give up all those ordinary ways of thinking if there were powerful arguments for naturalism. But where are those powerful arguments? As far as I can see, there aren’t even any decent arguments, let alone powerful arguments, for naturalism. So I suggest a third possibility: give up naturalism, and perhaps accept instead some form of theism’ (Plantinga, Tooley 2008, 69).

Plantinga believes that the main arguments against naturalism were outlined in medieval theology. First of all, they are rooted in the ontological argument of Anselm of Canterbury. Plantinga writes: ‘Thus St. Anselm. I think we may best understand him as giving a *reductio ad absurdum* argument; postulate the non-existence of God and show that this supposition leads to absurdity or contradiction’ (Plantinga 1974, 198). Plantinga is one of those modern theologians who tend not to oppose, but to bring religion and science closer together. Rightly noting that modern natural science originated in medieval theological universities, Plantinga urges not to lose the syncretism of knowledge

characteristic of scholasticism. Plantinga emphasizes: ‘From a theistic point of view, one task of science is to come to know something about this wonderful structure — to learn about it in the systematic and communal way that is characteristic of science. Theism is thus, as such, not only hospitable to science, but enthusiastic about it. It is because God has created the world with these regularities and structures that it can be apprehended and known (to a significant degree) by creatures such as we are’ (Plantinga, Tooley 2008, 4). Of course, culture in modern realities is such that science has sovereign independence. However, the institutional independence of science can cause significant harm to cognition if it is inspired not by theism, but by naturalism.

To complete my research, I have left the question in the title. What matters to me is not whether God exists, but whether he *really* exists, i.e. being embodied in the form of his own nature. It seems to me that this is as ‘ultimate’ a question for Plantinga as the question of the existence of a thing in itself for Kant. Therefore, I can assume that if we proceed from ‘pure’ theism, then God does not need any nature at all. However, this assumption will also be wrong: God has his nature. Let’s turn to what Plantinga writes: ‘We speak of God as *creating* the world; yet if it is a of which we speak, what we say is false. For a thing is created only if there is a time before which it does not exist; and this is patently false, as it is of any state of affairs. What God has created are the heavens and the earth and all that they contain; he has not created himself, or numbers, propositions, properties, or states of affairs: these have no beginnings. We can say, however, that God *actualizes* states of affairs; his creative activity results in their being or becoming actual’ (Plantinga 1974, 169). Plantinga is inclined to believe that ‘the creation of heaven and earth’ should be understood as a parable, interpreting it in the language of religion, not metaphysics. God does not create what is not inherent in him from the metaphysical point of view; he only ‘actualizes’ what potentially exists.

In this regard, it can be assumed that God really has a nature, but in a *potential*, not an actual form. The arguments about the nature of God, to which philosophy has turned since the second half of the 16th century, are necessary and significant, but only within the framework of metaphysics. There is no problem in theology in assuming the fact that the nature of God is not distinguished as his essential property. After all, the nature of God is impossible to single out as a property that is inherent in the totality of the divine essence. Based on the assumption of theism and proper function, Plantinga develops a theological version

of naturalism. He writes: 'So the view I propose is a radical naturalism: striking the naturalistic pose is all the rage these days, and it's a great pleasure to be able to join the fun. The view I urge is indeed best thought of as an example of naturalistic epistemology; here I follow Quine (if only at some distance). Naturalistic epistemology, however, is ill-named. In the first place, it is quite compatible with, for example, supernaturalistic theism; indeed, the most plausible way to think of warrant, from a theistic perspective, is in terms of naturalistic epistemology' (Plantinga 1993, 46). The duality of Plantinga's position can also be traced in this judgment: 'Initially, the answer seems to be no; one who makes the claim seems to set up a certain subject for predication — God — and then declare that our concepts do not apply to this being. But if this is so, then, presumably, at least one of our concepts — *being such that our concepts don't apply to it* — does apply to this being. Either those who attempt to make this claim succeed in making an assertion or not. If they don't succeed, we have nothing to consider; if they do, however, they appear to be predicating a property of a being they have referred to, in which case at least some of our concepts do apply to it, contrary to the claim they make. So if they succeed in making a claim, they make a *false claim*' (Plantin-

ga 2000, 16). After all, naturalism stems from the confusion of the essence of God and the idea of him.

Trying to understand Plantinga's logic and argumentation, I imperceptibly came to an agreement with his judgments. It is possible to conclude the following: *from a theological point of view, God does have a nature; however, it is so immanently inherent in him that it cannot be distinguished as a 'property' or an independent 'substance'*. One way or another, the concept of 'nature' in theology and metaphysics is interpreted *differently*. Plantinga believes that judgments about the nature of God are false in the metaphysical sense. The nature of God is revealed not in reason, but in faith. But even in faith, it remains for the most part mysterious and incomprehensible.

Conflict of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests, either existing or potential.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to extend his gratitude to Professor I. I. Dokuchaev, Doctor of Sciences (Philosophy).

Sources

- Plantinga, A. (1974) *The nature of necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 276 p. (In English)
Plantinga, A. (1975) *God and other minds*. 4th ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 275 p. (In English)
Plantinga, A. (1980) *Does God have a nature?* Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 146 p. (In English)
Plantinga, A. (1993) *Warrant and proper function*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 256 p. (In English)
Plantinga, A. (2000) *Warranted Christian belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 532 p. (In English)
Plantinga, A., Tooley, M. (2008) *Knowledge of God*. Oxford: Blackwell Publ., 284 p. (In English)

Сведения об авторе

Сергей Витальевич Никоненко

SPIN-код: 1500-7938, Scopus AuthorID: 57194571478, ResearcherID: AAH-9181-2021, ORCID: 0000-0001-6410-2063, e-mail: s.nikonenko@spbu.ru

Доктор философских наук, профессор Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета

Author

Sergei V. Nikonenko

SPIN: 1500-7938, Scopus AuthorID: 57194571478, ResearcherID: AAH-9181-2021, ORCID: 0000-0001-6410-2063, e-mail: s.nikonenko@spbu.ru

Doctor of Sciences (Philosophy), Professor, Saint Petersburg State University