

TWO EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

JACEK WOJTYSIAK

JOHN PAUL II CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LUBLIN

Abstract. In the article I outline two epistemological theistic arguments. The first one starts from the dilemma between our strong conviction that we possess some knowledge of the world and the belief that there are some serious reasons which undermine it. In my opinion theism opens the possibility of the way out of the dilemma. The second argument depends on the premise that in every time every worldly thing is actually perceived or known. I support it by four considerations and claim that the simplest explanation of the epistemic ‘non-loneliness’ of the world is the existence of the Supreme Cogniser.

Epistemological arguments for the existence of God start with premises concerning human cognition or knowledge and lead to the conclusion that God exists.¹ They can be summarized by the thought-provoking maxim *if knowledge then God*² which states a logical connection between the existence of human knowledge and the existence of God as the necessary condition of knowledge. These arguments, although they have been present in the history of philosophy at least since the time of St Augustine, are not so popular as classical (metaphysical) theistic ones but they are rooted in modern philosophy, especially in Cartesian and post-Cartesian epistemology.³ Below I will outline two of them:

1 I thank Marcin Iwanicki and all participants of the conference ‘Epistemology and Theology’ for interesting discussions which helped me to prepare this article. I paid attention to the epistemological theistic arguments due to reading the inspiring doctoral dissertations of Piotr K. Szałek and Miłosz Hołda.

2 James Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til”, *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005): 49.

3 Cf. Rene Descartes’ confession: ‘Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends strictly on my awareness of the true God. So much so that until I became aware of him I couldn’t perfectly know anything. Now I can achieve ... knowledge of countless

- the argument from the dissonance between the reasons for dogmatism and the reasons for skepticism;
- the argument from the epistemic ‘non-loneliness’ of the world.

I. THE ARGUMENT FROM DISSONANCE

We have a strong conviction that we possess some knowledge of the world. Certainly, this knowledge is imperfect, limited in many ways and it often needs to be modified or completed. In spite of these shortcomings, it would be hard to argue against its existence altogether. On the other hand, however, we could find a great number of reasons which seem to question the value of our knowledge:

- (i) we frequently make cognitive mistakes, for instance we give in to illusions;
- (ii) quite often, external factors interfere with our cognition and distort its outcomes;
- (iii) while acquiring and systematizing our knowledge, we often get entangled in assumptions difficult to justify without falling into the error of *petitio principii*.

If this is the case, then we are led to suspect (and this observation is difficult to dismiss) that:

- (i’) we make mistakes notoriously, not just occasionally;
- (ii’) our cognition is perturbed by any external factors essentially and permanently, and not just accidentally;
- (iii’) our knowledge does not have any credible basis or justification.

The suspicion discussed above, apart from undermining the value of our particular cognitive acts, generally invalidates the accuracy of our knowledge, and even its fundamental possibility. This suspicion is illustrated by various thought experiments which describe a hypothetical mechanism of a global illusion. It does not matter whether the author of the illusion is a malicious

matters [...]’. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. Johnathan Bennett (www.earlymoderntexts.com, [1641] 2007), 26.

demon influencing our minds, ill-willed scientists stimulating appropriate zones of our brains, or some other factor. What is important is that it is possible, even probable—given our proneness to mistakes and occurrence of error-generating circumstances—that our cognitive faculties function properly or normally, so to speak, and in spite of this they do not inform us thoroughly about the world.

Let us add (following Alvin Plantinga) that one of the leading scientific theories, the theory of evolution, can lead to skeptical conclusions concerning the value or mere possibility of acquiring knowledge. For if, as this theory proclaims or entails, our faculties and cognitive mechanisms were shaped in a long process of contingent changes ‘governed’ by the principle of natural selection, then we can infer that their basic objective is the survival of our biological species. This means that, thanks to the aforementioned faculties and mechanisms, we are somehow adapted to our environment. Yet, this does not mean or does not have to mean that we obtain essential or reliable knowledge of the world through them. Their function is primarily biological, not epistemic. The latter function is secondary or random at most.⁴

The above doubt can be expressed in more general terms. If we wish to describe our cognitive processes in purely naturalistic terms, as a coincidence of subtle physical phenomena—the way that neuroscience suggests—it is hard to demonstrate that they result in credible knowledge of the world. The outcomes of some physical phenomena could be just other physical phenomena, not conscious mental states which we call cognition or knowledge. In any case, even if we admit that mental states are by-products of a biological reaction of our organism to external stimuli, we do not have enough reason to believe that these states reflect reality faithfully.

As we can see, our reflection on human cognition gives rise to the following dilemma. On the one hand, we are strongly inclined to accept the following thesis:

- (1) We possess knowledge of the world.

4 As Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 227–40 suggests, in connection to that we can say, waywardly, that if our knowledge has a status, which could be inferred from the theory of evolution, we have no sufficient basis to assume that this theory (or the conjunction of it and naturalism) is true. We have to search for the guarantee of the value of our cognition in the supernatural factor.

Our collective experience in knowledge acquisition and its practical application, spanning several centuries, seem to speak in favor of (1). On the other hand, however, we cannot neglect that fact that

- (2) There are significant reasons, both actual and supposed (or potential), which undermine the truth of (1).

The acceptance of (1), despite the awareness of (2), leads to naive dogmatism, whereas the acceptance of (2) contradicts (1), leading to incredible skepticism or a radical belief in non-existence of our knowledge or its fundamental and irremovable handicap. Nevertheless, this skepticism seems to be, in the light of our experience, common sense and practical life — not only destructive but also absurd.

The way out of the above dilemma could be a thesis allowing us to weaken the reasons from (2) so that they do not contradict the truth of (1). Theism puts forward such a thesis. It says that

- (3) There is God who created the world and people (cognitive or knowing subjects) in such a way that they can acquire knowledge of the world.

In the context of (3), all actual or supposed reasons against the possibility or general value of human knowledge lose their force or meaning. Let us emphasize that the aforementioned knowledge can be imperfect in a number of ways; still, it needs to be fundamentally real and not a mere illusion. The guarantee of the possibility of such knowledge can be only God, i.e. the person who deliberately adjusted human cognitive faculties to the world. This person should be perfect causally (or ontically), cognitively and morally. Otherwise, we could still doubt whether such an adjustment yields positive results. A person or anything else who or which is not omnipotent, omniscient and morally good cannot be the irremovable guarantee of knowledge. For example, let us think about an informer who (because of his ignorance or physical defect or moral vice) tells the truth only sometimes. If we had to be cognitively dependent on her or him, we would have good reasons to suspect that we do not possess knowledge.

The above remark allows us to assume that there is no alternative for (3). All other guarantees of the possibility of knowledge, apart from God, would allow for other skeptical hypotheses. All internal world mechanisms are random or blind and dependent upon other contingent circumstances. In turn,

imperfect subjects could operate with error, on the basis of erroneous knowledge or out of wrong motives. On the other hand, God

- contrary to the mechanisms of nature, has reliable knowledge and acts consciously and purposefully;
- contrary to a malicious demon or malicious scientists, uses his complete knowledge without intending to mislead anyone.

There will be voices saying that the argument reconstructed here does not demonstrate the existence of God but solves a certain artificial dilemma. Let me respond that the dilemma between the dogmatism of (1) and the skepticism of (2) constitutes one of the most fundamental and vital topics in philosophy. The role of solutions to philosophical problems consists in putting forward (hypo)theses, which eliminate dilemmas. If we take these dilemmas and solutions seriously, we should accept the existence of beings which they postulate. It would be unreasonable to expect anything more from philosophical argument. So, if theism is the only option which makes us free from the ‘dogmatism-skepticism’ dilemma, we (as epistemologists) should affirm the existence of the theistic God.

It is necessary to add that the argument from the dissonance is different from ‘the argument from reason’. According to the latter no thought (or broader: no cognitive act) ‘can be fully explained in terms of nonrational causes’ then ‘explaining reason in terms of unreason explains reason *away*, and undercuts the very reason on which the explanation is supposed to be based’⁵; if so, naturalism or materialism cannot be true and the epistemic status of theism (as the leading mentalist worldview) is enhanced. Maybe Victor Reppert (following C.S. Lewis and developing his ‘argument from reason’) is right, but my argument is based on a weaker premise: even if naturalism can be true and does not undermine the existence of cognitive acts, it (or strictly speaking: any factor allowed by it) does not warrant the general value or the possibility of knowledge as justified true belief. Knowledge can be warranted only by God as postulated by theism.

5 Victor Reppert, “The Argument from Reason”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William L. Craig and James P. Moreland (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 353–88.

II. THE ARGUMENT FROM 'NON-LONELINESS'

The argument from the epistemic 'non-loneliness' of the world can be extracted from *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* written by George Berkeley. As Berkeley says:

[...] all those bodies that compose the mighty structure of the world, have no existence outside a mind; for them to exist is for them to be perceived or known; consequently so long as they aren't actually perceived by (i.e. don't exist in the mind of) myself or any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all or else exist in the mind of some eternal spirit; because it makes no sense — and involves all the absurdity of abstraction — to attribute to any such thing an existence independent of a spirit.⁶

The key idea of the above quotation can be expanded into the following argument:

- (4) The existence of things in the world consists in their being actually perceived or known.
- (5) There are things in the world which are not actually being perceived or known by any worldly person.
- (6) All existing things in the world which are not actually being perceived or known by any worldly person are actually being perceived or known by God as the transcendent, permanent and perfect 'perceptor' or 'knower' of the world.

An argument thus presented has at least three important shortcomings. First of all, it assumes a dubious thesis (4) stating that the existence of (worldly) things depends upon someone cognising them. Second, the transition from the thesis that each thing is always perceived or known by someone to the thesis (6) that there is one person who always perceives or knows each thing is too easy. Third, the argument seems to contain an equivocation: in (5) *to exist* (or its equivalent) is understood in an ordinary sense, whereas in (4) it is used in a special sense of Berkeley's philosophy, i.e. in the sense of being perceived or known.

⁶ Berkeley. George, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Johnathan Bennett (www.earlymoderntexts.com, [1710] 2007), 12.

In order to avoid the first and the third difficulty, the discussed argument can be simplified as follows:

- (7) If in every time every worldly thing is actually perceived or known, then the transcendent, permanent and perfect ‘perceptor’ or ‘knower’ of them exists. (Call her or him *the Supreme Cogniser*)
- (8) In every time every worldly thing is actually perceived or known.
- (9) The Supreme Cogniser exists.

I am keen on defending premise (7) by pointing out that, if in every time every worldly thing is actually perceived or known, then either the (only one) Supreme Cogniser exists, or there are many (worldly or transcendent) ‘perceptors’ or ‘knowers’, as many as it is needed for all worldly things to be actually (always) perceived or known. The first alternative seems to be, however, far simpler and more credible. It is easier for us to accept that there is exactly one transcendent cognitive subject who perfectly knows every item in time and space, than to assume that there are (apart from us) many empirically unknown subjects who know together what we do not know. If we agree to grant this, we accept (7) and thus weaken the power of the second objection to Berkeley’s argument, stated above. In other words, if (8) is true, epistemic theism seems to be a more credible hypothesis than panpsychism, monadism or conceptions which absolutise human cognitive faculties or conceptions which assume some extraterrestrial intelligences.

So, we are left with the premise (8). This is the most controversial premise of the argument. Since we are not perfect ‘knowers’, we cannot know exactly if it is true. I think, however, that there are several reasons to suppose or believe that it is the case what it says. I call them the “arguments against the epistemic ‘loneliness’ of the world”. Here are these arguments:

- (A) The realization that there are enormous areas of the space-time which are not perceived by anyone or which we know only partially or roughly can lead to some mental discomfort — from a terror to a feeling that those things are redundant, meaningless or absurd. This discomfort could have lead Nicholas Everitt to ‘argument from scale’⁷: if our universe is ‘unimaginably large, unimaginably old, and [such

7 Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-existence of God* (Routledge, 2004), 225.

that] in which human [cognitive] beings form an unimaginably tiny part of it, temporally and spatially', then classical 'theism is *probably* false'. But we can remove the discomfort in the opposite way (by *retor-sio argumenti*): if the universe is so huge and old that no its inhabitant can really (or entirely) know it, then the thesis of classical theism that the whole universe must be always known by the omniscient God is probably true.

- (B) The fact that worldly things are prone to be known can be interpreted as a sign that they are constantly being known. As wings are the indication of the ability of flying as, for example, the mathematical structure of physical reality can be the indication of being known by any reason. It is true that not all animals with wings can fly and that animals which can fly do not fly every time. But it is also true that the essential living function of animals with wings is or was (in their evolutionary history) flying. Therefore, the existence of objects in the physical universe (or its states) which are (were and will be) never known can be surprising. These objects would be as animals with wings which (in their individual or species history) have never flown.
- (C) If something exists and it is a thing (or its state) which is never known by anyone, then no one can ever form a true proposition (or statement) concerning this thing (or its state). Then there is the truth-maker without its truth-bearer. Is it possible? It seems that the existence of a given true proposition entails the existence of its truth-maker. But does this entailment go conversely: from the existence of the truth-maker (i.e. the state of affairs) to the existence of the proposition which is made true by it? That is the question. Maybe the following consideration will be helpful to answer it.

The contingent state of affairs that (for example) the number of all dinosaurs in the whole history of the earth was exactly (say) 19257834 entails that it is possible that there is the true proposition *The number of all dinosaurs in the whole history of the earth was exactly 19257834*. It means that there is at least one possible world with this proposition. What about necessary states of affairs? Let us pay attention to the necessary state of affairs that $2 + 3 = 5$. It entails that there is at least

one possible world with the proposition $2 + 3 = 5$. But if this proposition exists in one possible world, it (by virtue of its necessity) exists in all possible worlds. As a result, if propositions cannot exist without a reason or mind, there is at least one person who knows that $2 + 3 = 5$ and there is one or more persons who know all necessary states of affairs. Moreover, if necessary states of affairs cannot exist without underlying or supporting them contingent states of affairs (such as that the sum of two apples and three pears on my dish is five fruits), all (necessary and contingent) states of affairs must be known by at least one person.

(D) Maybe Anderson⁸, explaining Van Til's epistemological argument, is right that 'if no one has *comprehensive* knowledge of the universe, then no one can have *any* knowledge of the universe' because 'unless one knows *everything* about universe, the interrelatedness of the universality means that whatever reasons or grounds one has for one's beliefs the possibility remains of some fact coming to light that radically undermines those reasons or grounds'. As a result, if we have some knowledge of the universe, it is possible only because we participate somehow in comprehensive or perfect knowledge.

Let us note that thesis (8) does not follow from reasons (A)-(D).⁹ However, in light of (A) through (D), the premise (8) can be regarded as a reasonable hypothesis, and not as a fantastic supposition. Thanks to it, the conclusion (9) — *The Supreme Cogniser exists* — will also be regarded as a credible statement. Perhaps, simply, (9) is the best explanation or explication of intuition (which inspires many philosophers, particularly idealists) that the world is not epistemically 'mute', 'empty' or 'lonely'. According to this explication, the physical world and its entire space-time content remains in a constant relationship with the transcendent subject which apprehends it perfectly. The exceptional epistemic status of this subject allows us to ascribe to it its distinguishable ontic status which is connected with the name *God*.

8 Anderson, "If Knowledge Then God", 64–65.

9 Maybe the exception is the argument (D). In my opinion it can be reinforced or replaced by the argument from perfect knowledge as the purpose of human cognition or as the term of the development of human knowledge. I am going to present this argument (transforming, in a realistic fashion, some ideas of Immanuel Kant and Michael Dummett) in another place.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, James. 2005. "If Knowledge Then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til". *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1: 49–75.

Berkeley, George. *The Principles of Human Knowledge*. Edited by Johnathan Bennett. <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/berkeley1710.pdf>.

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy: in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and body*. Edited by Johnathan Bennett. <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1641.pdf>.

Everitt, Nicholas. 2004. *The Non-existence of God*. London: Routledge.

Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford Univ.Press.

Reppert, Victor. 2009. "The Argument from Reason". In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William L. Craig and James P. Moreland, 344–90. Chichester, U.K., Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.