

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE GOD? THE MOST IMPORTANT EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract. There are three main ways to acquire knowledge of the existence of God and the knowledge of His nature. These are either the arguments taking into account the nature of the world and our thinking about the world, or the arguments trying to prove the authenticity of certain historical events, or it is a reference to particular types of experiences, called mystical experiences. In the case of Christian philosophy we will have to consider, firstly, the cosmological and ontological arguments for the existence of God, and, secondly, the attempts to show the authenticity of the reports of the events regarding Jesus of Nazareth and, thirdly, the arguments in favor of the objectivity of mystical experiences recorded in the history of Christian religion. In regard to all of the above-mentioned three sources of knowledge about God, I would like to ask the following questions. How do we know that all of them refer to the same object? On what basis can we say that even if these three 'ways to God' are correct, they refer to the same being? Are they independent of each other? But if they depend on each other in some way, what are the relationships among them? If we were not able to demonstrate that the item referred to by the term 'God' in all of these three ways is the same object or being, it would represent a significant weakness in Christian theology and philosophy. I will try to outline what relationship may exist between these three sources of knowledge about God. Then I will attempt to describe the criteria connecting all these sources of knowledge.

Many among the professional philosophers of today are convinced that one of the greatest threats to theistic philosophy in general, and Christian philosophy in particular in recent times has been the so-called verificationist theory of meaning, proclaimed at the beginning of the twentieth century by the representatives of the Vienna Circle. It stated that any linguistic expression has cognitive meaning only when a sentence containing this expression can be confirmed or rejected by experience. Thus, from this supposition, it

had to follow immediately that sentences containing the term 'God' must be cognitively meaningless, even though they may have other meanings, emotional, poetic or similar. I do not think we should worry about this position, as the verificationist principle itself can neither be confirmed nor rejected by experience, and this insight is sufficient not to treat verificationism as a serious theoretical proposal.¹

The second assumption functioning in the contemporary discussions about the existence and nature of God is that to believe in God, one has to have such an argument for His existence and nature, which could not be subject to any objections. It would be best if it was an apodictic argument for His existence, and thus one whose negation would lead to some kind of contradiction. There are interpretations of the so-called ontological argument, which assign to it the value of necessity, but here I am going to leave this issue out of consideration.² But even when we take into account only cosmological arguments, then one can notice easily that they can be interpreted as hypotheses to which one can assign a greater or lesser degree of probability. The conclusion following from these arguments is quite trivial, namely, that there is some, albeit difficult to determine, probability that God as a creator of the visible world exists. If one accepts this kind of probabilistic evidence for the existence of God, he in this way acquires a theistic religious belief, even though commonly it would be wrong to say that I believe in God, because I accept that my belief in His existence is entitled to the probability of, say, $\frac{1}{2}$.

Religious beliefs in the above sense become religious faith only when other additional elements begin to function, namely the right moral attitude, trust in God, hope for His help, hope for salvation, etc.³ Here I do not intend to examine further the relationship between religious beliefs, as the results of the acceptance of cosmological arguments, and faith in the proper sense. About someone who has religious beliefs in the sense just described, although not yet faith in the proper sense, we can say that he recognizes God on the basis of the characteristics of the divine being, which follow from cosmological reasoning,

1 Historical and ideological contexts of the Vienna Circle philosophical theories are discussed in Alan W. Richardson and Thomas E. Uebel, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Logical Empiricism* (CUP, 2007), 13–90.

2 Cf. Stanisław Judycki, "Descartes' Ontological Proof: An Interpretation and Defense", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, no. 2 (2012).

3 See, e.g., Richard Swinburne, *Faith and reason* (Clarendon Press, 2005).

that he recognizes God as the most perfect being, as being omnipotent, perfectly good, as the pure act of existence and so on.

However, we can imagine such a course of history of human cultures, in which this 'speculative recognition' would be the only way to recognize God: there would have been no significant sequences of events that suggested the revelation of God, there would have been no sequences of events such as these described in the Bible, and no one would have had any mystical experiences, that is to say, such experiences on the basis of which he could assume that he directly experienced the presence of the most perfect being. Everything would be limited to the level of hypothetical theistic beliefs, which would be perceived in more or less the same way as the atheistic rival hypotheses. In this case the recognition of God would apply only to those people who would be capable of such a kind of speculative thinking which is required in the case of philosophy, and therefore would apply only to a small number of people. As it may seem, this kind of recognizing God would be purely abstract, without any intuitive content.

But this is not the case, because, as Christians believe, the series of events described in the Bible open another way to God, not an abstract way, but an intuitive one, and in this sense allow for some closer characterization of what God is. But the problem is, how do we know that a supremely perfect being of philosophical thinking is the same being, the same person, as the God described in the Old and New Testament? It cannot be excluded that the major events and teachings are described in the Bible in accordance with the truth, but that all those events were accomplished not by God as a supremely perfect being, and therefore God of philosophy, but by some great acosmic force, and we do not know what the relationship between God as a supremely perfect being and this acosmic force is.⁴

It is also possible that we could have good reasons to accept the truth of the statements contained in the Bible, but that in the history of human cultures no philosophical thinking would have occurred, and no one would have formulated any arguments for the existence of a supremely perfect being. Then the God of the Bible could still be understood as the creator of heaven and earth, but we would not know the possibility of a purely rational dem-

4 Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (OUP, 2008) argues for the divinity of Jesus but not in the context of the concept of God as a supremely perfect being. He also does not take into consideration mystical experiences and the concept of God implied by these experiences.

onstration of the existence of a supremely perfect being. Under this scenario one can also assume that there would be no mystical experiences, which after all is quite possible because neither from the concept of God as a supremely perfect being, nor from the concept of the God of the Bible does it follow that He has to reveal himself directly to particular people.

We can also take into consideration the third principal possibility in this context, namely, that in the history of humanity no speculative thinking would have occurred, and there would have been no events accepted as an important revelation of God, but still some people, sometimes, would have experienced the presence of a powerful and good person. This kind of experience would then be deprived of any means of interpretation whatsoever, and, as I believe, would be regarded as something completely incomprehensible.

There is also the possibility of the 'zero option', i.e. God as the most perfect being indeed exists, but in the history of mankind no one has ever formulated any speculative arguments for His existence, no events recognized as revelatory have been reported, and no one has had any experiences of the presence of a person infinitely powerful and good at the same time. This, probably, had been the situation in which mankind had lived for many centuries before Biblical times and before philosophical thinking appeared on the scene of human history, but such a spiritual situation could have lasted even to our own times, in spite of all our scientific, technological and cultural achievements.

However, these three principal possibilities do not exhaust all scenarios, namely, it is also possible that some speculative ways to God would have been formulated in the course of the development of human cultures and that some events considered as a manifestation of God would have been registered, but all this would have happened without the occurrence of any experiences being accepted as mystical. It is also possible that we would have speculative reasons for the existence of a supremely perfect being together with mystical experiences relating to Him, but no events deserving the name of revelatory events would have ever happened. It is also not excluded that events interpreted as revelatory would have appeared and mystical experiences would also have been registered, but without the emergence of any tradition of speculative thinking about a supremely perfect being.

But so it happens that we have all these three elements, namely speculative thinking, revelatory events, as well as different kinds of direct experience of the presence of God. It should be noted, however, that this tripartite division can be

interpreted so that all events accepted as revelatory would be classified as mystical and therefore all that was experienced by the prophets the Old Testament, as well as the experiences of the divinity of Jesus by his disciples would become some kinds of peculiar mystical experiences. But here I reserve the expression 'mystical experiences' only for all those experiences that have happened after the events described in the Bible. Neither do I recognize as mystical those experiences of the presence of God which Adam and Eve had in Paradise.

Let me start with the issue of experience related to the concept of a supremely perfect being. I would like to stress that the formula 'experience related to the concept' is not accidental. Concepts, even very abstract concepts, by appropriate configuration of their components induce some specific experience in the human mind. We are accustomed to the concept of 'God of classical theism', and to the components of this concept which are omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, infinity, simplicity. However, one should pay attention to the content of the attribute of perfect goodness. This attribute includes such features as: nobility, humility, closeness of the relationship, even with the smallest things, and many other components of the 'perfect goodness'.

Similarly, the attribute of wisdom, which certainly must belong to the concept of a supremely perfect being, has to have in its content, among other elements, axiological spirituality. By 'axiological spirituality' I mean the desire to evaluative appreciation of even the smallest things. So when we take into account the characteristics implied by the attribute of perfect goodness and wisdom of God, then the whole concept of God leads to a special kind of experience, namely the experience of a specific 'gestalt-quality' (*Gestaltqualität*), also called 'formal quality' or 'founded content'. The idea of 'founded contents' has been formulated by the representatives of the 'Gestaltpsychologie', and was mainly related to the area of sensory perception. For example, perception of melody is not a perception of individual sounds, but it consists in grasping of a new kind of thing or of a new kind of quality based on relations between particular sounds. I do not see any obstacles to argue that there may exist founded contents not only in special cases of perceptual content, but also with regard to some purely semantic contents.

At first glance the idea of 'abstract gestalt-qualities' may seem bizarre. How, one can ask, should it be possible to have experiences based solely on semantic contents? But the answer can be that all great poetry and all great writers of all

times aimed to discover such 'abstract gestalt qualities', e.g. after reading *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann what our minds experience is the synthetic 'abstract gestalt-quality' which was expressed by this great work of art.

When we imagine a priest from the time of ancient Egypt, who formulated for himself an argument for God's existence in the style of St. Anselm or R. Descartes, and who in this way came to the conclusion that there must be such an entity as a supremely perfect being, then he would have gained access not only to the purely conceptual knowledge of the existence of such a being, but would have probably experienced some new kind of 'gestalt-quality' or a new kind of 'founded content'. This new quality would however have been based exclusively on the components of the concept of the most perfect being and therefore it would be an 'abstract gestalt quality'.

Perceptual 'gestalt qualities' can be very different: they are generated by complicated configurations of elements that underpin them. 'Abstract gestalt quality' based on the concept of a supremely perfect being seems to be generated by a kind of 'tension' between some of the constituents of this concept, namely the constituent of an absolute power on the one hand and the constituents of perfect goodness on the other hand. The third component of this 'abstract gestalt-quality' is wisdom, and by 'wisdom' I mean here a deep and definitive understanding of each individual being. These ingredients in a sense compete with each other in the concept of a supremely perfect being and this competition leads to the constitution of the experience of God's 'abstract gestalt-quality'. 'Power', that in this case must mean total or absolute power, is 'mixed' with humility and with the desire for intimacy and openness that belong to wisdom. But this is exactly what the emblem of God is. His emblem is the unity of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*): the unity of the absolute power with weakness understood as humility and the desire for intimacy and openness. As Christians would say: omnipotence crucified. So for a speculative thinker God should look from the point of view of argument and speculation, the God independent of any historical revelations and independent of experiences called mystical. God should look like this, assuming that the speculative thinker drew enough attention to the ingredients of the concept which he discovered.

The 'competition' and mixed combination of these several features of the concept of God creates a unique and unrepeatable sign, in a similar way as the initial sounds of concerto in E minor by F. Chopin — solemn, but full of

affection and optimism — create a unique sign, or, in a sense at the other end of the spectrum, as the presence of the spirit of R. Wagner can be felt when we are listening to the Tristan Chord of *Tristan und Isolde* — full of emotional tension and at the same time of despair. There is no need therefore to experience the ‘whole’ God in order to experience Him already within purely speculative thinking, and this experience happens through an ‘abstract gestalt-quality’. Usually, however, philosophers do not notice that concepts also have their experiential profiles, their ‘gestalt-qualities’. These ‘abstract gestalt-qualities’ represent their objects in an absolutely unique manner: the initial sounds of the concerto in E minor represent the spirit of Chopin, the Tristan Chord the spirit of Wagner, an ‘abstract gestalt-quality’, based on the concept of the most perfect being, represents a uniquely personal nature of God.

There is no doubt that neither the disciples of Jesus, nor other persons surrounding Him had at their disposal such concepts as ‘a supremely perfect being’ or ‘God of classical theism’. Perhaps to the main components of their concept of God belonged such elements as: being a righteous ruler and a creator of the world, a ruler of human destinies, a giver of moral law. To recognize that Jesus was the son of God, the miracles he performed were not sufficient, the great power that He showed, the power to heal, to resurrect, to transform water into wine was therefore not enough, because despite of all this it was nevertheless still possible that His power did not come from God as a righteous ruler. All His deeds did not preclude that He was using some force of unknown origin or even an evil force. Only the deeds of Jesus, and therefore His power and His wisdom, added to the humility of the cross and to the resurrection could cause His disciples to make this specific and unique conceptual axiological discovery, namely, that a great power, a power that can do anything, can only then be called God, if it is capable of a radical sacrifice, humility and nobility.

The disciples of Jesus made not only such an axiological discovery, a theological discovery as we would say today, but they could see directly, that in His person the ‘gestalt-quality God’ manifested itself. They intuitively encountered this ‘founded quality’ that is the quality based on power, humility and wisdom. This quality can be directly felt, one can feel that only such a being can be called a supremely perfect being which is able to give up His power, to give up absolute pride, to which in a sense He is ‘entitled’ by the power He possesses, and to participate in what is not comparable in any re-

spect with His power and with His fullness. Before the Resurrection only part of the emblem of God was available to the disciples, after the Resurrection they could see this emblem clearly, they could see this ‘gestalt quality’, though obviously they could see it in quite a different manner than a speculative philosopher sees it. They saw that God as the absolute power does not contemplate Himself for all eternity, but by its deep nature aims to be close to everything, close to every rational creature and is able to silently endure the folly of human pride.

It is noteworthy that these two kinds of experience, i.e. speculative experiences of God and historically registered experiences of some people support each other and begin to form a coherent whole. I now turn to the third element of this whole, namely mystical experiences. In his already classic book *Perceiving God*, W.P. Alston argues in favor of the objectivity of experiences exhibited by what he calls ‘Christian mystical practice’ (CMP).⁵ Alston justifies the objectivity of the experiences taken from Christian mystical practice by reference to the concept of ‘doxastic practice’. According to him doxastic practices are socially sanctioned ways of forming and justifying beliefs. Doxastic practice would be, for example, the practice of forming beliefs about physical things based on sense perception, but doxastic practices would also comprise practices of forming memory beliefs, introspective beliefs and beliefs belonging to the area of *a priori* knowledge (mathematics and logic). In the same line Alston also claims that the practice of forming beliefs about God is based on mystical experiences and argues that each doxastic practice is epistemically circular, that is, its reliability cannot be established independently of the practice itself.⁶ At the same time Alston stresses that each doxastic practice is connected to its own ‘over-rider system’. CMP has an over-rider system consisting of scriptures and Christian dogma. From all this it should follow that it is rational for a person in such a practice to accept the outcomes of its beliefs as true unless the practice is shown to be unreliable. It should

5 William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

6 Alston however in a sense distances himself from his own thesis on the circularity of every epistemic practice when he writes (Alston, *Perceiving God*, 10–110) : “So if arguments for the existence of God deployed by Descartes are satisfactory he really was succeeded in squaring the circle. I won’t try to go into a critical discussion of the arguments. Suffice it for the present purposes to say that one would be hard pressed to find a defender on the current scene.”

be noted that Alston's argument consists in part in highlighting perceptual character of mystical experiences.

In my opinion, however, the main weakness of the argument put forward by Alston lies in the fact that even if the CMP is on a par with other doxastic practices, this fact does not by itself indicate that in CMP we experience God. What is needed is some criterion which would enable us to recognize God. So far I have suggested that this criterion consists of two components: the 'gestalt-quality of God', which simultaneously is revealed and concealed by the concept of a supremely perfect being, and of the same 'gestalt-quality', which was revealed in the person of Jesus. In the first case the presentation of this peculiar quality is more abstract, while in the second case this presentation is more intuitive (experiential), but as it happens with every experience this intuitive presentation can be transformed into general and abstract shape. This transformation happened in the history of Christianity: the teaching and attitude of Jesus led to the constitution of theological and philosophical concept of a supremely perfect being.

In the case of mystical experience we have to do with intuitiveness, which, when subjected to reflection, can also lead to the formation of the concept of a supremely perfect being. I would like to argue here that the principal 'gestalt-quality', which is revealed by CMP, is composed of two main characteristics, which are power and humility. Humility of God in mystical experience takes the form of closeness to the existential situation of each individual. The main goal of God is not to inform about His attributes, but mystic experiences are intended by Him as comforting and reinforcing events for particular people. Let me quote three examples taken from Alston's book:

In a state of intense inner wretchedness of such intensity that my mind seemed on the point of breaking, I got up at 4 a.m. and began wandering aimlessly on the wooded hillside. This went for some time until, unexpectedly, the words of the 130-th psalm sounded in clearly in my mind: 'And plenteous redemption is ever found in Him; and, from its iniquities, He Israel shall redeem'. With these words a light seemed to enveloped me, and there flowed into my desolate heart such a flood of Love and Compassion that I was overwhelmed and overpowered by the weight of it; it seemed to flow through my whole being with a cleansing and healing virtue. From that moment I knew that Love is the nature of reality.⁷

7 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 18.

When I was middle-aged and the 2-nd World War upon us, there came a night when I was in deepest distress of mind. I was alone in my bedroom, pacing the floor ... Suddenly, I heard a voice firmly say 'Be still and know that I am God!' It changed my life, I got into bed, calm and confident.⁸

During the night in September 9th 1954, I awoke and looking out of my window saw what I took to be a luminous star which gradually came nearer, and appeared as a soft slightly blurred light. I was seized with violent trembling, but had no fear. I knew that what I felt was great awe. This was followed by a sense of overwhelming love coming to me, and going out of me, then of great compassion from the Outer Presence. After that I had a sense of overpowering peace, and indescribable happiness.⁹

If all these three sources of knowledge about God, that is, speculation, some events from human history and mystical experiences reveal Him by showing the same kind of 'gestalt-quality', then in this way we can also obtain the solution to the problem of cultural dependence of mystical experiences: mystical experiences are dependent on the content of a particular religion, but these contents themselves are not dependent on a particular religion, they were constructed either by speculative reasoning or were based on specific historical experiences. All these three elements form one diagnostic criterion of the recognition of God. How did Teresa of Avila or Faustina Kowalska know that their visions were not illusions? How did they know that these visions were not induced by some powerful being but by God? They knew this because they knew this 'gestalt-quality', which was revealed in different elements of their visions. The same melody can be played on different instruments and in different arrangements. How did Abraham know that the three visitors in front of his tent were God? He could know this because he knew the 'gestalt-quality' of God and quickly recognized it in each of these three visitors.

But how do the mystics, and above all the so-called ordinary people know this quality? They know it because they were created by the most perfect being and are sustained by it in their existence. In terms of the notion of the 'gestalt-quality of God' we can interpret the following famous Bible passage:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created: created man and woman (*Genesis* 1: 27)

8 Ibid., 19.

9 Ibid., 18.

There are people who never knew their parents up until adulthood. We can imagine a situation in which they do not know their parents even purely conceptually when encountering them. Nevertheless they are able, sometimes slowly, sometimes at first sight, to recognize the similarity of appearance, similarity of behavior etc., and in effect to recognize that they have encountered someone very close to them. There is no true love without kinship, and by 'kinship' I mean here spiritual kinship. It manifests itself in everything: in the manner of speaking, in the ways of reaction, in the decisions, in sensitivity. Every like loves his like. Those who do not recognize their parents do so either because of their cognitive weakness, or because of ill will: they do not want to recognize them. According to Christian doctrine all things were created by God, and everything is dependent on Him, but from this it does not follow that everything that has been created, has got the 'seal' of God, and this seal is revealed by innate 'gestalt-quality', which one can recognize in the common people and also in the persons other than human persons.

In this way we can therefore answer the question posed in the title of this text: how do we recognize God? We recognize God by cognitively grasping 'gestalt-quality' that characterizes Him. This quality manifests itself also in our inner experience:

Thou wast more inward to me than the most inward part of me; and higher than my highest reach (*Confessions* III, 6)

This quality is disclosed in our behavior, as well as in the behavior of other people. Knowledge of this quality is innate, and in this sense can be called *a priori* knowledge, but at the same time it is a hidden knowledge ('tacit knowledge') which is actualized by experience. This experience can be speculative, based on thinking about the concept of a supremely perfect being. Very few people have access to this experience. These are the ones who deal with philosophical and theological issues. Most people actualize their innate knowledge of God through mystical experiences. These mystical experiences belong either to the so called 'great mystique', registered in the history of human cultures, or to the 'little mystique', which is realized in devotion and prayer of many people through centuries. 'Little mystic', I think, does not even need the knowledge of the content of Christian doctrine: in such a case we talk about the '*anima naturaliter Christiana*'. The 'gestalt-quality' of God is also recognized on the basis of the information transmitted by the Old and New Testament. In this way the sense or the meaning of the term 'God' comes

from our experience: it comes either from ‘speculative experience,’ or from historical experience, or from mystical experience.¹⁰ On the basis of all this we can say that even when purely discursive arguments for the existence of God were claimed to be weak, nevertheless the above-analyzed sources of the knowledge of God would support each other and in this way would bear witness to the truth.

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¹⁰ Some speculations on the subject of human experience in eternal life can be found in Stanisław Judycki, “Transfiguration of Human Consciousness and Eternal Life”, in *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, ed. Dariusz Łukasiewicz and Roger Pouivet (Ontos Verlag, 2012).