

A MODAL-EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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I propose a new argument for the existence of God. God is defined as a conscious being that is the first cause of reality. In its simplified initial form, the argument has two premises: (1) all possible truths are knowable, and (2) it is impossible to know that the proposition that God does not exist is true. From (1) and (2) it follows that the proposition that God exists is necessarily true. After introducing the argument in its crude initial form and laying out the core intuitions behind its premises, I point to two difficulties that this simplified version faces. I then go on to show how the argument can be revised to handle these difficulties. I defend the revised argument from various objections.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I propose a new argument for the existence of God. I will do so in two stages. First, after having introduced two important caveats in the next section, I will give a simplified version of the argument in section 3 so that readers can get a feel for the “mechanics” of the argument. The second phase starts with section 4, in which I introduce two difficulties for the simplified argument and show how it can be adjusted to handle these difficulties. I present the full version of the argument in section 5. Finally, I defend the argument against two general objections (section 6), objections to its crucial first and second premises (sections 7 and 8 respectively), and an objection to the specific conception of knowledge that the argument employs (section 9). Section 10 concludes the paper.

2. Preliminaries

Before I present the simplified argument, a few terminological caveats are in order. First, I define “God” as a personal being that is the first cause of reality.¹ God is thus somebody and not something. He is therefore capable of knowledge (and thus of belief, reason, intuition, and experience).

¹This definition does not require that God possesses the *omni*-properties of classical theism, such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. Neither do I assume, as many classical theists do, that the first cause of reality is a necessary being. The argument I propose leaves it open whether this is so. Reasons for this thin conception of God will crop up later in the paper.



Moreover, God is the direct or indirect originating cause of everything else besides God. If an entity has these characteristics, I claim, it is God.² For most, if not all, theistic conceptions of God have it that God is a personal being and the first cause of reality. Moreover, my definition of God is *prima facie* consistent. The concepts “personal being” and “first cause of reality” seem neither internally inconsistent nor do they seem to contradict each other (or imply contradictory attributes).³ Finally, it is easy to prove that there cannot be more than one being that has both characteristics. In other words, if God exists, then God is unique.

Secondly, the argument employs a specific and fairly demanding conception of knowledge.⁴ On my conception, knowledge requires near-certainty that has been produced in an epistemically proper way.⁵ So for a subject *S* to know that *p* is true, *S*'s epistemic position must be such that *S* cannot sincerely or genuinely doubt that *p* is true. It must be the case that *S* cannot but believe that *p* is true. This will include all cases in which a subject believes a true proposition *p* with *absolute* certainty (and satisfies the other conditions for knowledge), but a subject can also know something while not being absolutely certain. Think of the Moorean proposition “I have two hands,” spoken by a subject that is currently looking at her two hands under normal conditions. Although this subject has no absolute certainty about the truth of the proposition—she cannot conclusively rule out that she does not have two hands or that she is dreaming, hallucinating, or being deceived by an evil demon—given her epistemic position, she nevertheless cannot honestly believe that she does not have two hands. She therefore knows that she has two hands.

Even though absolute certainty is not required, the deployed conception of knowledge remains quite demanding. I'll flesh out the conception in a bit more detail, as this will be important in what follows. As far as I can tell, the ways to attain the required degree of certainty are exhausted by the following four options: (i) a proposition is deductively proven; (ii) a proposition is obviously true, i.e., intuitively self-evident; (iii) a proposition is grounded in indisputable experience; or (iv) a proposition is based

²The definition contains the minimal essential characteristics that an entity must have to be God. Of course, God may have many other characteristics as well, even essentially. Therefore, once the existence of God has been argued for, one could offer further arguments for other characteristics of God, such as immateriality, necessary existence, etc.

³Note that my definition of God thus has something of an edge over the classical theist conception of an *omni*-God. For some of the *omni*-properties, it is at least slightly controversial whether they are internally consistent and some combinations of *omni*-properties have been argued to be inconsistent.

⁴Below in section 9, when discussing objections, I shall argue that the fact that this conception of knowledge isn't identical to our ordinary conception doesn't affect the soundness of the argument.

⁵Hence, *S*'s near-certainty mustn't be the result of dogmatism or other epistemically improper psychological conditions. I will not attempt to spell out what epistemically proper is, but what I say is compatible with most popular accounts of justification and warrant.

on indisputable testimony.⁶ Other purported examples can be classified under these four options. For example, indisputable memory or indisputable introspection are instances of (iii). And compelling revelation—if it exists—is an instance of (iv) (or perhaps (iii)).

Knowledge in my sense is demanding but not impossible. Sue, for example, could know that one plus one equals two because this proposition can be proven by mathematical logic. Frank knows that he cannot be at two different locations at the same time, because this is intuitively self-evident to him. Further, it is because of indisputable experience that Sophie knows that she feels pain when she is in pain. Finally, if God exists, it is possible that direct revelation from God to Kim amounts to indisputable experience or indisputable testimony, so that Kim could know that God exists.

3. *The Simplified Argument*

With these two caveats in place, we are now in a position to state the simplified argument. Since both its premises are modal claims about knowledge, I refer to the argument as a *modal-epistemic* argument for the existence of God.⁷ Here it is:

- (1) All possibly true propositions are knowable.
- (2) It is impossible to know that the proposition that God does not exist is true.
- (3) The proposition that God exists is necessarily true.

The conclusion obviously follows from the premises. From (1) and (2), it follows that the proposition that God does not exist is not possibly true. Hence, it is necessarily true that God exists. Thus, the argument is successful if the premises are true.

I'll first say three things that will clarify the argument further and then I'll offer reasons in support of the premises. First, premise (1) states that all possible truths are knowable. It is important to see that this does not mean that all that is true in a possible world is also known *in that same world*. That would be highly unlikely indeed. Why couldn't there be true propositions in a possible world that no one in that world happens to

⁶“Indisputable” is a psychological qualification here; it means “beyond doubt” or “unquestionable.” Indisputability differs from the stronger epistemic notion of incorrigibility. An incorrigible proposition is one about which it is *impossible* to be mistaken. Incorrigibility implies indisputability, but not vice versa.

⁷Let me note two things about this argument. First, as far as I can tell, the argument does not fall within one of the traditional categories of arguments for the existence of God. It is neither an ontological argument, nor a cosmological, teleological, moral, aesthetic, etc. argument. For that reason, I have dubbed the argument a *modal-epistemic* argument. Secondly, I assume the S5 system of modal logic. That is, I take it that every possible world is accessible from any other. This is a common assumption for *metaphysical* possibility. Whether something is metaphysically possible or not doesn't depend on which possible world is the actual world.

know? For example, perhaps there is a possible world with an iron planet, even though no one in that world knows of its existence. Premise (1) states only that if some proposition p is true in a possible world, it is known in either that world *or another possible world in which p is true as well*. In our example we can conceive of a possible world where the existence of the iron planet is known, for instance because it has been discovered by an intelligent civilization. Or take as another example the following proposition: "The number of stars in the universe is even." This proposition is possibly true. If there are stars, the chance that it is true is actually fifty percent. Now, consider a possible world w in which it is true. The first premise now requires there to be *a* possible world with an even number of stars where this fact is known—and this world does *not* have to be w . Surely, such a world is possible—for instance, a world with a universe where stars always emerge in pairs for some physical reason, and with an intelligent civilization whose physics is so advanced that this fact has been established beyond doubt.

Secondly, the first premise does *not* claim that all possible truths can be known by *human beings*. The first premise is not only about *human* knowledge. It is about *every possible* conscious being that is capable of knowledge; human or non-human. This is important, since we cannot rule out that there are possible truths that can be known only by beings of a non-human nature. In fact, the suggestion that human beings would be able to know all possible truths is unreasonable—to put it mildly. It would be a presumptuous overestimation of the human cognitive abilities. Suppose a dice sits in a hermetically sealed non-transparent cup. The cup is shaken and the dice rolls four. Further suppose that we—as human beings—are unable to create devices that can register what happens in the cup. In that case, it is impossible for us humans to know that the dice in the cup rolls four. But that does not allow us to conclude, by appeal to an analogous modal-epistemic argument, that it is necessarily false that the dice rolls four. This is because the proposition "The dice in the cup rolls four" is clearly *knowable*. Take a possible world with the cup in question and with an extra-terrestrial civilization whose visual apparatus is so different from ours, or whose technology is so advanced that they can easily see what happens in a hermetically sealed cup produced by humans. Members of this civilization could know the proposition in question, supposing they get a hold of the cup.

Thirdly, it is important to realize that the conclusion of the argument formulates a *de dicto* necessity. The proposition that God exists does not necessarily designate the same state of affairs in all possible worlds, since "God" can refer to different personal first causes in different possible worlds. My argument proves only the necessity of *a* personal first cause in all possible worlds, but not that the personal first cause is the same in all possible worlds. Another way of putting the point is to say that "God" is not to be read as a proper name that rigidly designates the same being across all possible worlds. Rather, it is a common noun which applies to

any and all beings that are the personal first cause in worlds in which they exist. The conclusion of my argument is thus notably weaker than that of the ontological argument, but surely the necessary truth of the proposition that a personal first cause exists is no trivial matter.

Let me now defend the premises of the argument. As to premise (1), ever since Plato and Aristotle many philosophers have held that reality is intelligible; that there is a deep fit between our cognitive capacities and the ultimate nature of reality. They hold that all truths can in principle be known by human beings or by other beings with suitably enhanced cognitive capacities. The reference to other beings is crucial, as I stressed above. In view of our finite cognitive powers, it is highly unlikely that human beings can know all truths, even in principle. One way of making this thought more precise is to say, as premise (1) does, that *all possible truths are knowable*. The first premise expresses a commitment to the view that reality is amenable to understanding and knowledge.

Apart from the weight of tradition, the following systematic considerations can be offered on behalf of the first premise. First of all, it receives inductive support from our everyday cognitive practices and from scientific inquiry. In both our daily lives and in science we acquire knowledge of vast numbers of true propositions. As long as we aren't given special reasons for thinking that what applies to everyday and scientific truths suddenly ceases to apply to other truths, an inductive generalization to the knowability of *all* possibly true propositions seems warranted, especially if we take into consideration that knowability isn't limited to what *human beings* can know.⁸ What's more, the knowability of possibly true propositions is a presupposition of our knowledge-seeking endeavors.⁹ Without this presupposition, there would be no point to them.¹⁰

Secondly, the premise can be supported through the use of a simple thought experiment. Take any possibly true proposition about the world and imagine a world in which this proposition is indeed true. It may be that the proposition is already known in that world. But if it isn't, it is easy to imagine a further possible world in which the proposition is not only true, but also known by a conscious being, either a human being or some being with superior cognitive powers. To put it differently, if no conscious being whatsoever in any possible world—neither in the actual world, nor in similar possible worlds, nor in very different possible worlds—knows that a certain proposition is true, then it seems that the proposition in

⁸Although I should say that we will encounter reasons to qualify this thought in two crucial respects in the next section.

⁹Cf. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16.

¹⁰One may object that inquirers only have to assume that a substantial portion of the world is knowable, which is compatible with there being unknowable possible truths. But this weaker assumption might not be the best way to cash out the presumption on which inquiry seems to be predicated. That some truths will remain forever and necessarily hidden is not something inquirers naturally presuppose, especially when we realize that the premise invites us to consider inquirers with superior cognitive abilities.

question just *cannot* be true. If a proposition cannot be known in any metaphysically possible world, it is reasonable to believe that it is necessarily false. That is what the first premise conveys in contraposition: all possible truths are knowable.

Note that I've implicitly been relying on something like a realist conception of truth here, according to which a proposition is true iff what it states to be the case is indeed the case. For any possibly true proposition, it would certainly seem logically possible that someone knows this proposition to be true. That is to say, if a proposition is true in some world w , then it seems logically possible that someone knows this to be so, either in w itself or in some other world w' in which that proposition is also true. To deny this would be to claim that some truths are essentially "hidden" and, in the absence of strong reasons for believing this, such a claim seems unwarranted. On an *epistemic* conception of truth, however, the first premise is even easier to defend. For the knowability of all truths follows by definition on such a conception of truth. If truth is defined in terms of, e.g., what is known in the limit of inquiry, then all truths are indeed knowable, on the plausible assumption that "the limit of inquiry" refers to a logically possible state of affairs.

Finally, as I will show below when dealing with objections, premise (1) can be defended against many alleged counterexamples, which further increases its plausibility. In sum, then, the first premise possesses a great deal of plausibility.¹¹

What about premise (2), the claim that it is impossible to know that the proposition that God does not exist is true? As I said above, there are four ways in which this could be known. The first would be to show that the notion of God is contradictory. However, as we saw, no logical contradictions can be deduced from the notion of a personal first cause. The second way would be to have the direct rational intuition that God does not exist. But the proposition "God does not exist" is certainly not immediately self-evident, nor obviously true. The third way would be to have indisputable

¹¹Fitch famously offered a logical proof of the claim that if all actual truths are knowable, then all actual truths are known (Frederick Fitch, "A Logical Analysis of Some Value Concepts," *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 28 [1963], 135–142). If this is correct, the first premise entails that *all actual truths are known*, which may be thought to be problematic for atheism. Alexander Pruss suggested to me in personal writing that this might give atheists reason to reject the first premise. But such an objection seems to me weak. First, Fitch's result is at least highly counterintuitive, if not truly paradoxical. It leads to a collapse of the obvious and clear difference between *possible* and *actual* knowledge, which is seriously disturbing. Therefore, it should only be accepted if there are no compelling objections against it. This is not the case. The result is heavily debated (cf. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]; Helge Rückert, "A Solution to Fitch's Paradox of Knowability," in *Logic, Epistemology and the Unity of Science*, ed. Shahid Rahman, John Symons, Dov M. Gabbay, and Jean Paul Van Bendegem [Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004], 351–380; Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Knowability Paradox* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006]; Greg Restall, "Not Every Truth Can Be Known: At Least, Not All at Once," in *New Essays on the Knowability Paradox*, ed. Joe Salerno [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 339–354). Secondly, even if Fitch's proof is correct, it would be dialectically inappropriate for atheists to reject the first premise merely because it does not sit well with atheism.

experience of the non-existence of God. This seems impossible too, since experience, whatever its contents, cannot establish the non-existence of God indisputably. After all, the non-existence of God is not some positive state of affairs that could be observed directly. Moreover, it is impossible to infer that God does not exist by having experienced everything that exists and, in doing so, not having experienced God. For one cannot experience *that everything that exists has indeed been experienced*. And hence one cannot conclude that God does not exist. The fourth and final way would be indisputable testimony. However, no testifier, whatever her reliability, is able to put someone in an epistemic position to know that God does not exist. Only a personal first cause of reality might act as such a witness and provide someone with indisputable knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality. But if God does not exist, there is no personal first cause of the world that could act as such a testifier. So none of the four ways can give a subject knowledge of the truth of the proposition that God does not exist. The second premise is thus plausibly true as well.

4. Problems for the First Premise

Now that we are familiar with the argument in its simplified form and the intuitions behind it, it is time to move to the second stage of the paper and to introduce two complications. Consider the following proposition: "There are no conscious beings." Perhaps this is a possible truth,¹² but it is unknowable. For knowledge of the truth that there are no conscious beings presupposes the existence of a knowing subject, i.e., a conscious being, and this contradicts there being no conscious beings. The same goes for propositions like "Nothing exists" or "Nothing but dead matter exists." Arguably, these are possible truths, but they are unknowable. Therefore, they constitute counterexamples to the first premise.

What should we make of them? Observe that these are propositions that no subject can believe *consistently*. You cannot believe consistently that no conscious beings exist. Having such a belief—in fact, believing as such—commits you to the further belief that you yourself exist and since you are a conscious being, this contradicts your original belief. So I propose we restrict the scope of the first premise to the class of *consistently believable possible truths*. That is, the antecedent of the first premise ranges over only those propositions for which there is a possible world in which they are true and consistently believed by at least one subject.

One might wonder whether such a restriction isn't ad hoc or whether it doesn't limit the applicability of the argument. This is not so, however. Since the argument makes claims about knowability, it isn't ad hoc to consider only those propositions that can be believed consistently. Belief is, after all, a condition on knowledge, so if a proposition cannot be believed

¹²If classical theists are right that God's existence is necessary, then "There are no conscious beings" is a necessary falsehood. But in the present context, of course, classical theism cannot be presupposed. And as I said before, necessary existence is not part of my conception of God.

consistently in the first place, it cannot figure in claims about knowability. Furthermore, as long as the relevant propositions about God's existence and non-existence fall within the scope of the first premise, the argument's applicability isn't affected. Clearly, both the proposition that God exists and the proposition that God does not exist are consistently believable. The first modification to the argument, then, is a restriction to the class of consistently believable propositions.

There is a second kind of counterexample to the first premise. Take the following proposition: "John left Amsterdam and nobody knows it." This proposition is possibly true. John could have left without leaving a trace and he might have lost his memory or even have failed to know that it was Amsterdam he was leaving in the first place. The proposition is also unknowable. For, if somebody knows that the proposition that John left Amsterdam and that nobody knows it is true, then she knows that John left Amsterdam (under the uncontroversial assumption that someone who knows a conjunction also know each of its conjuncts). And hence there *is* someone who knows that John left, which contradicts the original proposition. Note, furthermore, that the proposition that John left Amsterdam and nobody knows it is consistently believable. Someone may have some weak reason for thinking that John left Amsterdam and also be aware that she is the only one who has this reason. Hence, she could believe the proposition in question.¹³ So this proposition constitutes a counterexample to the first premise, even in its restricted form. And it is easy to see how this example can be generalized to create a class of similar counterexamples.

I think, however, that the first premise can be further qualified to deal with this type of counterexamples. Note that the proposition is about two different states. The first part is about the world itself, namely that John left Amsterdam. Let us call such propositions *first-order* propositions. The second part is about knowledge of the world, namely that nobody knows that John has left Amsterdam. Let us call such propositions, i.e., propositions that state something about the propositional attitudes of subjects vis-à-vis first-order propositions, *second-order* propositions. There are also third-order propositions, such as "Mary knows that Peter knows that Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands." In response to the kind of counterexamples introduced in the previous paragraph, we should limit the scope of the first premise to first-order propositions, that is to say, to propositions about the world itself rather than about people's propositional attitudes towards propositions about the world. This strategy is an

¹³Note that the proposition may not be consistently *assertible*. If knowledge is the norm of assertion, as various philosophers have suggested (cf. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* [Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000]; Keith DeRose, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Context," *The Philosophical Review* 111 [2002], 167–203), it would be contradictory to assert that "John has left Amsterdam and nobody knows it." In asserting the first conjunct, one would be presenting oneself as knowing that John has left Amsterdam, while denying this by asserting the second conjunct.

instance of a familiar way to deal with paradoxes and inconsistencies: One has to distinguish between an *object-level* and a *meta-level* and make sure that claims about the meta-level are not confused with claims about the object-level.¹⁴ By restricting the antecedent of the first premise to first-order propositions, we avoid the objection that second-order propositions like “John left Amsterdam and nobody knows it” undermine the first premise. For the same reason, other potential second-order counterexamples, such as “There are no known propositions” or “Nobody knows this proposition,” are not effective anymore either. Hence, the second modification of premise (1) is a further restriction to only first-order propositions.

5. The Revised Argument

By taking the two restrictions from the previous section on board and altering the first premise of the modal-epistemic argument accordingly, we arrive at the following revised argument:

- (1) All possibly true, consistently believable first-order propositions are knowable.
- (2) It is impossible to know that the proposition that God does not exist is true.
- (3) The proposition “God does not exist” is consistently believable.
- (4) The proposition “God does not exist” is a first-order proposition.
- (5) The proposition “God does not exist” is not possibly true. (*from 1, 2, 3 and 4*)
- (6) The proposition “God does not exist” is necessarily false. (*from 5*)
- (7) The proposition “God exists” is necessarily true. (*conclusion, from 6*)

It is this version of the argument that I think is cogent and that I will defend in the remainder of the paper. The defenses of premises (1) and (2) that I have offered above still apply. Premises (3) and (4) are clearly true. The proposition “God does not exist” is consistently believable: It has no presuppositions that contradict what it states to be the case. It is also a first-order proposition: God’s non-existence is a purported fact about the world itself and not about anyone’s propositional attitudes towards this purported fact. As before, the conclusion follows straightforwardly. According to the third and fourth premises, the proposition “God does not exist” is a consistently believable first-order proposition. If we assume that it is possibly true, the first premise would entail that it is knowable.

¹⁴One famous exponent of this is of course Tarski’s theory of truth (cf. Alfred Tarski, “The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4 [1944], 341–376), which also distinguishes sharply between an object language, which does not contain the word “truth,” and a meta-language in which the truth of propositions in the object language can be stated. My approach is similar, except that it applies to knowledge (and other propositional attitudes) rather than truth.

But this contradicts the second premise. Hence, our assumption fails and “God does not exist” is necessarily false.

6. Two General Objections: Parity and Parody

Let us now consider various objections that might be leveled against the modal-epistemic argument. We’ll get to objections to specific premises in the following sections, but in this section I want to look at two general objections: a parity objection and a parody objection.

Starting with the former: Someone might object that, just as it is impossible to know the truth of the proposition that God does not exist, the truth of the proposition that God exists cannot be known. Therefore, by an appeal to the first premise, it follows that it is necessarily false that God exists, which renders the argument untenable.

Is this parity objection convincing? I do not think so. It is reasonable to believe that there is at least one possible world in which God exists¹⁵ and is able to let someone know of his existence by direct revelation. Besides, *even if* it were impossible for God to use revelation to reveal his existence with near-certainty to some being, the proposition that God exists is still not unknowable. Consider a possible world in which God exists. Plausibly, in such a possible world there is at least one being that knows that God exists, namely God himself. God knows that God exists. It is important to see clearly what this claim means. For God to know the truth of the proposition that God exists, isn’t just for him to know the *de re* truth of “I exist.” It is for him to know the *de dicto* truth of “God exists.” Hence, God must know that he exists and is God.

Is this plausible? It seems so. Here are two ways in which God could possess said knowledge. He could know that he is God (and therefore that God exists) by means of indisputable inner experience of his own nature. Or perhaps it is immediately self-evident for God that he is God, so that God knows that he is God by direct intuition. In both cases God does not have to “reach out” beyond himself into the external world to know that he is God. It suffices for God to have immediate internal access to his own nature or intuition.

For those who remain doubtful, let me add a further consideration to support the thought that God can know that he exists and is God. In a possible world in which God exists, God is the first cause of everything else. Hence God is the absolute origin, the ultimate ground, of all being. Everything that is, originates with him. God is, so to speak, at the root of the world. Now a conscious being in such a maximally ideal cognitive

¹⁵Note that considering a possible world in which God exists does *not* beg the question against atheists. Appealing to God’s *possible* existence isn’t the same as, and doesn’t entail a commitment to, his *actual* existence and hence there is no circularity in such an appeal. (Remember that my conception of God does not include necessary existence as an essential property of God, so that really is no implicit commitment to God’s necessary and hence actual existence via an ontological argument of sorts.) Moreover, it is perfectly reasonable to take it that God’s existence is logically possible, given that the concept of a personal first cause of the world is free from contradictions.

situation plausibly also knows himself to be in that situation. Thus, in those possible worlds in which God exists, God plausibly knows that he is the ultimate ground, the first cause, of the world.

Moreover, *and perhaps most importantly*, to counter the first objection it is already sufficient if there is *just one* possible world in which God exists and knows that he is God. I am not committed to the much stronger claim that God knows that he is God in *all* possible worlds where God exists. Surely, it is reasonable to believe that there is *at least one* possible world in which God exists and knows that he is God, given that God is the ultimate ground and origin of everything else in all those possible worlds where God exists. So I conclude that, *pace* the parity objection, the truth of the proposition that God exists *is* knowable.

For a second general objection, consider the following parody argument. It is impossible to know that there are no unicorns. For it is impossible to know that unicorns do not exist by means of logical proof, direct intuition, indisputable experience or indisputable testimony. The first premise thus entails that it is necessarily true that there are unicorns. And the same holds for such popular characters as Santa Claus, Superman, a teapot orbiting the earth, and the flying Spaghetti Monster. They all exist necessarily. This is clearly absurd. So the argument for the existence of God should be dismissed. Or so the parody goes.

On closer inspection, however, the parody doesn't go through. Take a possible world in which God exists and decides not to create anything.¹⁶ In that world God, being the solitary personal first cause, does in fact know that unicorns do not exist. So it is not impossible to know that unicorns do not exist. In addition, in that possible world God also knows that there are no orbiting teapots, flying Spaghetti Monsters, and so on. So the parody fails.

The same line of response also takes care of analogous objections, such as that it is impossible to know that there is no impersonal first cause and that, therefore, an impersonal first cause exists necessarily. After all, God knows that the first cause is not *impersonal* in those worlds where God exists and knows that he is God. So the first premise cannot be used to infer the necessary existence of an *impersonal* first cause.

But isn't it still the case that, for example, the propositions "God is good" and "God is not good" are both unknowable, so that the first premise entails the contradiction that God is necessarily good *and* not good, which refutes the argument? Again, I would argue that it is not impossible to know these propositions. Take a possible world where God exists, in which God is good, and in which God knows his moral nature by indisputable experience in the form of introspection. Such a possible world plausibly

¹⁶One might point out that God, being the first *cause*, must create something. I reply that in the possible world in question God does not create anything *external* to God. But God still causes God's thoughts; mental objects *internal* to God. Besides, we can also take a possible world in which God creates, say, exactly one causally inert external object that is not a unicorn. In that case God can know that unicorns do not exist.

exists. In it, God knows that God is good. So, it isn't impossible to know that God is good. The exact same line of reasoning can be used to argue for the knowability of the proposition that God is not good. In conclusion, then, there are no good parity or parody objections.

7. Objections to the First Premise

I already evaluated several potential counterexamples in the discussion in section 3 about the original first premise. This gave rise to a modified first premise that incorporates two scope restrictions. Are there any counterexamples to the modified premise (1)? Take the following proposition: "The population of New York is larger than the population of Amsterdam." For humans, it seems impossible to know the truth of this proposition in the required and demanding sense of "know" employed in the argument. There is no logical proof for it, it is not self-evident, we cannot know it based on indisputable inner or sensory experience, and it is not possible to acquire knowledge of it through indisputable testimony. Hence, the objection would go, we can conclude that this possibly true proposition is unknowable and thus a counterexample even to the restricted first premise.

This is too quick. I grant the point that *we* in the *actual world* cannot know this proposition in my demanding sense of knowledge. But, as discussed, the first premise relates to *all* possible conscious beings (human or not) and *all* possible worlds. Now, consider a possible world in which the proposition is true, and in which there exists an extra-terrestrial civilization whose members can observe an extensive geographical area on our planet with the same immediacy and resulting degree of certainty as we can observe our hands. Assume that one of the members of the extra-terrestrial civilization observes the areas that comprise New York and Amsterdam and sees that the population of New York is larger than that of Amsterdam. This extraterrestrial now knows the proposition in question. Hence, it is knowable and the objection doesn't go through.

For another potential counterexample one may point to a true Gödel proposition that cannot be proven in any proper mathematical axiom system. This proposition, an objector might argue, is unknowable and so not all true propositions are knowable and the first premise fails. My response would be that true Gödel propositions are in fact knowable. Consider a possible world in which God exists and in which God's immediate rational intuition about logical and mathematical propositions is perfect. In this world God knows all logical and mathematical truths by direct intuition, including all Gödel propositions.

Let me illustrate this response a bit further. We know by rational intuition that " $a = a$," " $3 + 4 = 7$ " and that a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time. Such logical and mathematical truths are self-evident for us and therefore knowable for us on the defined notion of knowledge. The difference between us and God in a possible world where God has

perfect logical and mathematical intuition is that for God not only these simple truths, but all logical and mathematical truths (including Gödel's theorems and all Gödel propositions) are self-evident, and thus known by God. Note that I do not need to claim that God's logical and mathematical intuition is perfect in all possible worlds where God exists. I am not committed to the claim that perfect logical and mathematical intuition is a necessary property of God. Further, knowing all logical and mathematical truths does not entail omniscience. So, my response does not depend on the metaphysical possibility of omniscience.

Before we look into objections to the second premise, however, there is one final clever possible counterexample that we must consider. Isn't the proposition "God does not exist" possibly true? If so, then, according to the first premise, it should be knowable. But the second premise denies just this. Alternatively, if the second premise is right and "God does not exist" is indeed unknowable, then it seems that not all possible truths are knowable, which violates the first premise. So, this objection goes, the premises cannot both be true.

I think this objection fails for a rather different reason than the previous objections. The problem is that this objection in effect assumes up front the falsity of the conclusion of the modal-epistemic argument. The objection only gets off the ground by assuming that it is false that "God exists" is necessarily true. Now, of course, since the argument is logically valid, a denial of the conclusion of the argument entails that at least one of the premises is false. But to mount a successful attack on an argument, one cannot simply assume the falsity of its conclusion. That is dialectically inappropriate and question-begging.

I have given extensive reasons for accepting the argument's premises—reasons that do not presuppose the truth of the argument's conclusion. So an objector would either need to show that these reasons are bad or to attack one or more of the premises directly, by giving independent reasons for thinking them false—reasons that do not depend on assuming the falsity of the conclusion. In this section I have considered various attempts to reject the first premise and I will look at attempts to attack the second premise in the next. But at any rate, bluntly denying the conclusion of the argument, in order to point out that one of the premises must be false, isn't a good objection.¹⁷

¹⁷One final potential counterexample involves Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. According to this principle it is impossible to know the position and momentum of an elementary particle simultaneously, yet an elementary particle *does* have a position and momentum. I respond that for each elementary particle *A* there is a possible world in which Newtonian mechanics instead of quantum mechanics holds, and in which the position and momentum of *A* is known. One might counter that the following proposition is still a counterexample: "Quantum mechanics holds and particle *A* has position *P* and momentum *M*." I respond that this conjunction is not unknowable. Consider a possible world in which quantum mechanics holds and in which there exists an observer that knows that quantum mechanics holds and that is able to observe *A* directly without having to rely on light waves. This observer can know the conjunction, so that it is not unknowable.

8. An Objection to the Second Premise

Another way to challenge the argument would be to argue, against the *second* premise, that it is possible to know that God does not exist. After all, might there not be an omniscient being that knows that God does not exist? Or perhaps a being with infallible knowledge that is limited to specific issues but includes knowledge of God's nonexistence?

My response is that, perhaps contrary to first appearances, these scenarios are in fact impossible. No being can know that God does not exist, no matter how superior its cognitive abilities. To see this, note that each instance of knowledge must have some *source of knowledge*. And, as I argued above when I first defended the second premise in section 3, none of the possible sources of knowledge (i.e., logical proof, rational intuition of self-evidence, indisputable experience, or indisputable testimony) enables a conscious being to acquire the knowledge that God does not exist. Whether or not this being is (nearly) omniscient is irrelevant.

9. An Objection to the Conception of Knowledge Used in the Argument

Here is a final challenge to the modal-epistemic argument. It employs a specific and very demanding conception of knowledge, which is presumably rather different from our actual conception of knowledge. And, since no reason has been given to adopt this specific conception instead of a more common and plausible one, the whole argument is rendered problematic.

First of all, there are of course many accounts of knowledge—many views on what it means for a conscious being to know a proposition. But there is no need for me (or for anyone who accepts the argument, for that matter) to defend the demanding conception of knowledge employed in it against alternative conceptions. That is because the argument's premises are *about* this conception of knowledge. One does not have to adopt the conception itself in order to defend statements about what is and is not the case on this conception of knowledge. There is no need to claim that this conception of knowledge is to be preferred in order to argue that it has certain properties, such as those expressed by the premises of the argument. Consider an analogy. One does not have to embrace a specific interpretation of quantum mechanics in order to defend certain assertions *about* it as true. Take, for instance, the following claim: "If a deterministic interpretation of quantum mechanics is true, then quantum indeterminacy is an effect of our limited knowledge of nature." One can argue that this proposition is true, without having to be an adherent of a deterministic interpretation of quantum mechanics. Similarly, one does not have to embrace the specific conception of knowledge employed for the argument in order to defend claims *about* it. Someone who prefers another conception of knowledge can reason as follows: "I do not embrace this conception of knowledge. Yet, I do accept that, *if* some proposition is possibly true, *then* on this conception of knowledge, it is knowable." And the same holds for

other conditional claims concerning the conception of knowledge used in the argument.¹⁸

But isn't the first premise *itself* unknowable on this conception of knowledge? Surely nobody can *know* in this demanding sense that all possibly true, consistently believable first-order propositions are knowable? If so, then the first premise is false, and necessarily so. For if it were true, all possibly true, consistently believable first-order propositions that are unknowable would be necessarily false, and this would include the first premise itself. So the first premise is hoisted by its own petard.

However, this objection fails, because the first premise doesn't apply to itself. Being a principle about knowability, it is in effect a *higher-order* proposition about the knowability of *first-order* propositions. So, even if it were true that the first premise is unknowable, this cannot be used to argue that it must therefore be necessarily false. It falls outside its own scope.

10. Closing Remarks

I presented a new argument for the existence of God defined as a personal first cause of reality and argued that various types of challenges against it can be met. Now, until and unless other objections are proposed and shown convincing, I conclude that the argument is sound. Since I take it that the prior plausibility of both premises is higher than that of the proposition that it is necessarily true that a personal first cause of reality exists, the argument makes genuine progress in raising the likelihood of the existence of a personal first cause of reality and thus of that of theism over atheism.¹⁹

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¹⁸In fact, by formalizing slightly, we can see that the conception of knowledge simply drops out of the argument. If we denote "Proposition p is knowable in the sense of knowledge employed by the argument" by $SK(p)$, then the first premise of the argument can be rendered as "For all first-order and consistently believable propositions p , if p is possibly true, then $SK(p)$." The second premise becomes: "Not- $SK(\text{God does not exist})$." Both propositions can be accepted by anyone, regardless of her views on the feasibility of the conception of knowledge. However, in combination with the other premises stated in section 5, these premises entail that the proposition that God exists is necessarily true. This conclusion does not refer to $SK(\cdot)$ anymore.

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