

HPPH7010 Knowledge, Reason and Reality

Annotated Bibliography – Assignment 1

‘Can Knowledge of God be Justified?’

Andrew Kristoffer Dean

Student Number: 1810029

Introduction

This annotated bibliography seeks to address a particularly thorny issue within philosophy, by addressing the question: can knowledge about God be justified? With at least 80 % of the world being religious (Pew Center, 2015), and a minimum of 53 % believing in God (Johnson et al., Pew Research Center, 2017) this is an acute question, and of particular interest to the faithful. Commenting on this Erica Appleros (2001, p. 2) said: ‘If you believe in God you also believe that God exists, that God is real’, thus necessitating a deeper understanding of whether knowledge of God can be justified. Having said this, we must not imagine that this question is only interesting for theists, as depending on how we ontologically position God, this is a philosophically interesting question in its own right, allowing us to ruminate at length on this epistemologically fascinating question. As we might imagine, and with depictions of God commonly varying, this bibliography has attempted to explore variation within this arena as a means to better understand epistemology and the limits of knowledge. Critically, and while three peer-reviewed publications are used as the basis of this bibliography, it must be noted that philosophy is not a static discipline, with what constitutes knowledge having varied over time (Taylor, 2003). Likewise, how God is constructed has also changed, requiring great historic sensitivity on my part to show respect for these aspects. Finally, and to aid the reader, I have examined Christian notions of God, where He is an all-powerful designer and creator of the universe, with consciousness, agency, and ability to influence cosmic affairs (Webster, Tanner & Torrance, 2010), at least as far as believers are concerned. I say this, to differentiate God from polytheistic and other Abrahamic traditions, where God’s ontological status and claims of knowing God may thus vary.

Bibliographical examination 1: William P. Alston, *Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993). Chapter 1 Review. *The Experience of God: A Perceptual Model*.

Over the past few millennia, mystical experiences have routinely been used to claim not only personal experiences of God, but to suggest that knowledge of God can be justified through these altered states of consciousness (James, 1902). This book by Alston continues with this tradition, detailing how what he defines as ‘direct’ mental images and sensory experiences of the Christian God, i.e., God, which Alston claims allows us to know that He objectively exists as really real within this universe. These are, not surprisingly, hugely contested claims, and due to their intriguing nature, are the focus of this first chapter book review. At the heart of this issue is that Alston argues that mental mystical experiences allow knowledge of God, which, as we will see in this review, might be considered a philosophical rod for Alston’s own back. Furthermore, and stepping beyond the mental realms, we will also examine Alston’s other claim that to have any experience of the world is to have an indirect appreciation of God, further ‘validating’ his existence.

Overviewing this chapter, it is clear that mystical experiences are at the heart of Alston’s epistemology, and due to the rhetorical nature of his writing, may go some way to satisfying the theologically inclined, who are looking to support their religious proclivities. While making this comment might suggest that I am suggesting this chapter is philosophically ‘light’, this is not my intention. Rather, and as I will showcase in this review, this chapter raises several key issues about epistemology and God but is perhaps skewed towards those who have a preference for such belief. In so doing, and for those interested in an in-depth overview of mystical experiences from the dominant religions, it is unlikely that you will be disappointed. For me, this was one of the most intriguing parts of this chapter, with Alston thriving in discussing philosophical theology, but in so doing, often homogenising religious as well as mystical experiences. With the greatest of respect to Alston, and while enjoying his rigorous overview of mental depictions of God, I frequently struggled to see how mystical experiences of other Gods, often the antithesis to the Christian God, supported Christian theism. Within itself and reminding ourselves of Alston’s overt faith in Christianity as the ‘one true religion’, it seemed that he (un)intentionally slipped more into a theological discussion than what we might expect from philosophy. Addressing Alston’s homogenised notion of God, it is worth noting that even within Christian theology, that this approach is frowned on for turning the faithful and scholar

alike theistic bricoleurs, where every concept of the divine is umbrellaed under the term ‘God’, no matter how illogical or contradictory (Webster, Tanner & Torrance, 2010).

Importantly, this chapter, and book attempt to address an ongoing concern with the spiritistic literature, i.e., the extent to which we can accept a presence within mind as separate to ourselves, and a veridical account of an external divine agent (Luhmann, 2012). While this is not an easy question to answer, Alston’s answers are not without problems. Not surprisingly, and as might be expected from a chapter focused on persuading the reader of the truth of God’s existence, multiple historic examples are given of people having phenomenal experiences of God. Broadly speaking, and while insightful for creating a brief overview of what mystical experiences were recorded, it often seemed that this approach was tactical, and a means to ‘sure up’ disbelief, where frequency of an experience allows a common-sense knowledge. Problematically, and while appealing to a shared mental experience of God, Alston appears to undermine his own premise, highlighting that not only might an individual fail to recognise God, but that they might erroneously mislabel secular experiences as deific. For me, this strikes at the heart of Alston’s thesis that we know God, because we are hardwired to do so.

More curiously, and stepping beyond mystical experiences, Alston’s turns his epistemological thinking to suggest that God is present in all things, and indeed, perceptible in all aspects of reality. While clearly rejecting deism, and a God who exists outside of this universe, we must meditate at length on this claim, particularly on Alston’s claim that God presents himself not only in the mind as an auditory-visual phenomenon, but in each aspect of the world around us. Rebuffing ‘God of the gaps’, Alston attempts to reclaim all reality as divine, leaving us to reflect on what this really means. For example, and with the greatest of respect, were this to be true, I can almost imagine myself looking down a microscope at an atom, and seeing God amongst electrons, protons and neutrons, ‘waving’ back at me. Beyond my attempt at humour, and painting with a broad stroke, we are in strangely familiar incoherent ontological territory as far as physical reality and Christian philosophical theology goes, as I will now explain. Historically, the issue of how God exists in the material or influences it, if at all, has been an ongoing concern over the past two millennia, with much difficulty in accounting for such aspects.

Finally, and in conclusion, it is important to contextualise this work within the wider extant literature looking to justify knowledge about God. Within itself, it is not surprising that the

theistically inclined may seek to draw on philosophical theology to support the existence of God as the creator being still present within this universe. Problematically though, and while providing an intriguing overview of mystical experiences, this work seems to fall short of justifying that (1) mystical experiences justify true belief, and (2) that experiences of reality within themselves demonstrate the presence of God. Not to be glib, but if mystical mental experiences are a sound epistemological approach to objective truth, Alston's premise is flawed, even by his own demonstration of other non-Christian religions depicting similar experiences with other non-Christian deities. Furthermore, I see little reason to give epistemological ground to the notion that a preference for belief about God in matter makes it so. Or that, an indirect feeling of God in our day-to-day lives, even in an abstract sense allows us to confirm his existence, as we all have many feelings about reality, often in contraction to each other, leading to a curious universe if all could be true based on a feeling. Yet, and having said this, for those looking to better understand the relationship between God and epistemology from a Christian perspective, this book has much to offer, particularly in the rich resources and discussions used by Alston.

Bibliographical examination 2: Tanya M. Luhrmann. When God talks back: Understanding the American Evangelical relationship with God (New York: Vintage, 2012). Full Book Review.

Beyond being a literary 'best seller', Luhrmann's ethnographic analysis of the collective Evangelical mind straddles both popular and academic interests in better understanding whether it is reasonable to suggest that humans can develop a personal relationship with God. Of course, and fundamental to this empiric endeavour is the notion that God is not an abstract being, but exists here in this universe, and is willing and capable of interacting as an inner voice within the Evangelical mind, at least as far as this Evangelical sample was concerned. Importantly, and positioning itself as 'scientific', we are often left to wonder what the author Luhrmann really thinks about all of this. As we will see in this review though, and without Luhrmann's explicit views presented on God's ontological status, we can still ruminate on her methodological research lens of Theory of Mind (ToM) (Baron-Cohen, 1995) to explore notions of epistemology. In so doing, and perhaps the strength of 'When God Talks Back' is that Luhrmann has attempted to do what Jackson (2005) has long recommended, to move

philosophical investigation out of the ‘classroom’ and into everyday life, where we can explore how individuals and groups ‘do’ philosophy.

Briefly, it is worth noting that ToM is a personal sensemaking model, operationalised within social life in order to not only understand that another is a functioning autonomous agent, but to infer properties about the mind of another (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Broadly speaking, ToM is a folk epistemology, working at the level of the individual, but also being used to construct common-sense views of reality amongst groups. While ToM has been used to explain a variety of psychological conditions and traits, it is certainly an innovative claim on the part of Luhmann to suggest that church congregations can work to create a new ToM to speak to God. Frustratingly, Luhmann appears to sidestep whether she considers the premise of ToM as a viable means to really speak to God, or if this is just what her participants thought they did.

Being ethnographic in nature, Luhmann detailed rich Evangelical talk to demonstrate how the participants attempted to undertake philosophical processes and explain their epistemologies. As is often the case with everyday philosophy, it is often pre-theorised and embedded within incoherence, as multiple contested notions of knowing jostle and are eventually codified into a formalised method to achieve religious ‘truth’. Within itself, this often appeared to be one of the most intriguing parts of this book, highlighting how church members constrain organisational discourses and try to ‘adjust’ new member cognitive processes through intense social and religious pressure as a means to support the view that not only is God real, but knowable through an inner voice within mind. While debates continue over (1) how much we can really know about another’s mind, and (2) whether we can have true experiences of a spirit such as God speaking within our mind, Luhmann’s work suggests that both aspects are indeed possible, at least for the Evangelical Christian. This is of course a massive departure from more traditional Christian theism where God reveals Himself, and instead is known only through the faithful constructing a new ToM, allowing mind to function as a conduit to the divine.

Problematically, and severely undermining this ToM premise is a reasonable epistemological approach is the key notion that before we can hear God’s voice, we must fake his voice, and through discursive mental charlatanism embrace God’s presence. Perhaps due to Luhmann’s background as a psychologist/anthropologist, we never really get to grips with her epistemological thoughts on how God might exist within mind, whether God is limited to being within mind, why deception is needed to communicate with God, and just as importantly, how

we would know when God replaces the fake inner voice? These are intriguing questions, not only because they are of interest to the Christian and theologian alike, but because they are of great philosophical concern. Simply speaking, for example, it is difficult to see how deliberate false belief could ever satisfy justified true belief, i.e., knowledge. Furthermore, and just as troubling for the theologian is that God's voice is not revealed through this ToM process, as it is wilful mental construction of a deity, where belief-in this voice being God requires increasing levels of faith, tantamount to fideism, where doubt just requires more faith.

In conclusion, and while the use of ToM as a mental model to 'communicate' with a supernatural being may satisfy religiously orientated individuals and groups, it is not without substantive concern. For example, it should be obvious that fakery is a dubious route to achieve true justified belief, arguably undermining the entire premise. Furthermore, we might well wonder what other aspects of life, or supernatural beings we can claim have an objective existence, because of erroneous belief and preference for a desired religious outcome. Finally, and in a time of increasing fake news, and the concept of objective truth being eroded, 'When God Talk Back' seems to have much to offer for those looking to better understand the cognitive and social processes at play. Yet, it must also be noted, that this work on ToM does little to support the broader Christian claim that knowledge in God can be justified, as if anything, Luhrmann's work undermines it. Finally, we are also left to ruminate on what type of God is suggested within this form of Evangelism, as seemingly, this God lacks the ability or intention to make Himself known, which suggests an impotent existence, embeds God within falsehood, and hardly satisfies more typical Christian notions of an all-powerful, truthful and good creator being.

Bibliographical examination 3: Alvin Plantinga & Michael Tooley. Knowledge of God (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2012). Chapter 1 Review. Against Naturalism.

Presented with each chapter functioning as a dialogue between two philosophers/theologians, this review examines Alvin Plantinga's first chapter 'Against Naturalism', and his reasoning for humanity to favour Christian theism as a means to form knowledge. Intriguingly, and while Georges Florovsky (1978, p. argued that Christianity is 'an expansive science of the cosmos', Plantinga takes us much deeper into theism being the only meaningful way to know. Of course, and as we might already be questioning, how reasonable is this claim? So, let us start to explore

Plantinga's notions, explicating his reasoning, and whether we can support his approach to knowledge, which, not surprisingly, is not without issue.

As a starting point, this chapter takes an explicit Christian theistic position detailing who God is, what he is capable of, while arguing that God is good, powerful and practically without limit, apart from being unable to be illogical or evil. Coupled with this is a more fundamental claim that God's being is a metaphysical foundation to the universe, which receives no further consideration, which is unfortunate, as to assert that the universe would disappear without God is fascinating. Turning our attention therefore to the main thrust of this chapter, we quickly come to Plantinga's view that there are two predominant ways to understand reality, with the first being theism, which Plantinga prefers, and the second being naturalism, which Plantinga rejects outright. Before I address Plantinga's thoughts, it is worth saying that this is not an easy piece to read, as it heavily draws not only on Plantinga's other works but requires an in-depth knowledge of several areas including epistemology, cognition, philosophy of mind, and a myriad of aspects relating to Christian conceptualisations of God. Having said this, for those interested in exploring the epistemology of God from a theistic perspective, there is much to offer here.

Intriguingly and for Plantinga, human cognition is central to his thesis that not only is God real but allows us to know that God is really God, and the only way to form knowledge about God. Having said this, Plantinga does not mean an everyday mundane cognition, but instead draws on Calvin's '*Sensus Diviniatis*', arguing that cognition can become a divine process, and potentially unchallengeable way to know about God. Discussing this, Plantinga (p. 7) states: 'the idea is that *Sensus Diviniatis* is a faculty analogous, in some ways to sense perception'. The important word here is 'analogous', as accepting that sense perception can be flawed, Plantinga certainly doesn't want us to think that *Sensus Diviniatis* is likely to lead to false belief or misconceptions of reality. Not surprisingly for a theological depiction of epistemology, we have sin as the corruption of mind and cognitive processes, limiting the human's ability to know God. While all of this may or may not sound desirable or even plausible depending on your religious and epistemological views, we are left to ask a critical question, i.e., how does *Sensus Diviniatis* work? Troublingly, and quite literally for Plantinga, knowledge of the otherworldly, requires the interjection of the otherworldly, through the Holy Spirit, who repairs the corrupted mind from sin, and apparently transforms mind to process (im)material sensory information through divine cognition, therefore allowing faith in God. Problematically, you

may well be thinking, “but wait a minute, I thought Plantinga was arguing for knowledge of God, and not faith?” You would be right to think this, but Plantinga asserts it is our common-sense understanding of faith that is incorrect. Thus, and if we reject the notion that faith is belief in something known to be false, we can re-interpret it as a certain form of knowledge, and in fact, faith is knowledge of truth. The crux of the matter can thus be simplified to, only a mind working with divine cognition can achieve faith, i.e., a special form of knowledge that God is real. Troublingly, if a meaningful epistemology is only available to the faithful, I suggest that it is meaningless for those who sit outside of this mental sensemaking model, which, and within itself, is not a particularly new claim for theistic approaches to epistemology. Furthermore, why should we suppose that Christianity is true? Addressing this, Plantinga says we should not necessarily believe that it is. But if we do not, it seems that his premise for *Sensus Diviniatis* and the divinely functioning mind is on particularly weak ground. Just as importantly, Plantinga is clearly not suggesting religious pluralism can allow us to achieve theistic knowledge, as what knowledge would this be? If all religions can claim divine cognition and knowledge of God, then perhaps it is as Rorty famously mused, i.e. that truth is whatever we can get away with.

Having initially laid out his premise for how knowledge of God is formed, Plantinga devotes the rest of the chapter to undermining naturalism as the main epistemological competitor to Christian theism. While of course accepting that there are multiple forms of naturalism, Plantinga is most interested in materialism embedded within secular-atheism, which takes the view that all that matters is matter, and outside of matter, there is nothing. Not surprisingly, Plantinga walks a well-worn path with while attempting to undermine naturalism, using typical arguments based on (1) function can only arise with design, (2) that knowledge within naturalism is erroneous, as naturalism annihilates the possibility of belief, and (3) that a purely material universe fails to account for consciousness, mind or sensemaking. While these claims may appear disparate, Plantinga deploys these three criticisms of materialism to say that if we can accept any of his concerns then, naturally, we are left with God ‘did it’, thus accepting that knowledge of God is proper. In fact, and for those using their mental faculties as God intended and designed, knowledge of God is inescapable, although, and as mentioned earlier, not accessible for those outside of Christianity.

In conclusion and reminding ourselves that this chapter review is part of a larger dialogue about whether we can ever really know God, Plantinga has eloquently and to some degree

persuasively argued for knowledge of God. However, some caution should be shown with this comment, as an efficacious rhetor may well be an ill-advised guide for the pursuit of knowledge. To this end, we see Plantinga presenting an admirably skewed argument, so that in his preferred defined terms, the outcome is always that Christian theism is the only reasonable epistemological approach to know God and reality. This is no small problem when we consider that through the attempt to validate Christianity, we are left with many thorny questions, with less than satisfactory answers. Of course, it depends what you want from a book such as this, as for those looking for an acute philosophical challenge, this chapter certainly delivers, and in a highly readable and engaging style. I would suspect however, that different audiences may view this book quite differently, and most likely on their propensity to be persuaded by philosophical theology through a Christianising lens.

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