The Epistemic Value of Natural Theology

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Abstract:

According to certain theories, the acquisition of knowledge of God does not necessarily depend on philosophical evidence, and a believer is not obligated to rely on philosophical arguments from natural theology to justify their religious convictions. However, it is undeniable that philosophical arguments supporting the existence of God and theodicies possess significant epistemic value. This raises the question: what is the epistemic significance of the intellectual products derived from natural theology if they are not essential for attaining knowledge of God?

Drawing upon of distinction between knowledge and understanding as separate epistemic goods, I argue that it is reasonable to assert that arguments for theism and theodicies contribute to religious understanding rather than directly providing knowledge of God. Finally, I enumerate several theoretical advantages that this proposal would offer to the field of religious epistemology.

Key words: knowledge of God, Natural theology, Understanding, Religious Epistemology

1. Introduction

Religious epistemology examines the possibility and means of acquiring knowledge of God, shaped and influenced by general epistemology as its special subfield. So, shifts and changes in

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general epistemology prompt new discussions in religious epistemology. Classical general epistemology, roughly speaking, defines knowledge as justified true belief, focusing on evidentialist foundationalism and epistemic internalism.[2] Evidentialist foundationalism requires beliefs to be supported by evidence, either self-evident or based on fundamental and indubitable beliefs. Epistemic internalism asserts that one must understand how they acquired their knowledge. Similarly, classical religious epistemology relies on these principles. Belief in God must be justified by proofs or arguments since it is neither self-evident nor related to one's own mental states. Consequently, without compelling philosophical arguments for theism, belief in God and other religious beliefs is considered irrationally unjustified. Hence in the context of classic religious epistemology, arguments for God's existence and theodicy are crucial. Rational and justified religious beliefs depend on strong arguments for or against theism. Without such arguments, belief in God is deemed epistemically blameworthy. Hence, knowledge of God must be attained through philosophical proofs and arguments. In other words, according to this perspective, one cannot claim knowledge of God without compelling arguments for theism at her disposal. Consequently, the absence of such arguments or the presence of counterarguments renders one's belief in God irrationally unjustified.[3]

In this framework, the epistemic importance and value of arguments for the existence of God and theodicy become evident. Metaphysical proofs for the existence of God, robust explanations of theodicy, and, more broadly, natural theology assume unique significance from an epistemic point of view. Rationality and justification of religious beliefs, according to this viewpoint, rely exclusively on robust arguments for or against theism. If certain arguments or proofs support the truth of theism (or its high probability), then one's belief in the existence of God becomes rationally justified; otherwise, such a believer is deemed epistemically blameworthy.[4]

2. An Epistemological Turn in Religious Epistemology

Both principles of classical general epistemology, i.e., evidentialist foundationalism and epistemic internalism, have faced substantial criticism and rejection in contemporary literature.

[2] See BonJour (2009: Ch.3).
[3] Like arguments put forth in favor of atheism, such as the evidential problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness., etc.
[4] See Flew (1972) and Scriven (1966).

Evidentialist foundationalism is challenged for limiting knowledge sources, especially with cognitive science findings revealing diverse cognitive modules for different knowledge domains. Common-sense faculties such as perception, memory, and reason are now recognized as broad and multifaceted epistemic sources, each irreducible to the others (Greco, 2017, p. 10). Epistemic internalism has also lost appeal due to objections from externalism proponents. External factors such as causal engagement with knowledge, proper functioning of cognitive faculties, and a suitable cognitive environment are seen as crucial for knowledge, which internalism disregards (Ibid 12). These critiques have led many contemporary epistemologists to move away from classical general epistemology. They now favor an approach that relies on external factors like sensory organ abilities, conducive environments, and individuals' epistemic skills to support belief rationality.[5]

The externalist turn in epistemology has also initiated a new movement in religious epistemology. Alvin Plantinga (2000), for instance, argues that religious beliefs can be considered knowledge of God even without evidential justification. He holds that if God exists, humans might be designed to hold true beliefs about God's existence. Plantinga, following Calvin, introduces the idea of a '*sensus divinitatis*,' a cognitive faculty that produces beliefs about God in an immediate way, similar to perception, memory, and a priori belief (Plantinga 2000: 172). Hence, in line with Plantinga's argument, it is possible and reasonable to possess knowledge of God without relying solely on philosophical arguments; instead, warranted belief in God can come from personal experiences, intuitions, or testimony from others. By broadening the sources of religious knowledge, Plantinga challenges the idea that knowledge of God must depend exclusively on philosophical arguments, offering a perspective that includes various experiences and avenues for understanding the divine (Ibid, 175).

In the same vein, Eleonore Stump (2010; 2018) emphasizes the importance of social elements in human cognition, arguing that knowledge of persons goes beyond propositional knowledge. Stump suggests that personal interactions reveal knowledge that eludes third-person or first-person inquiries, and that propositional knowledge fails to capture the essence of

[5] Indeed, the debate between internalism and externalism in epistemology, along with the arguments for each position, is more sophisticated than what is briefly represented here; see: Pappas (2023). Exploring the arguments in detail and assessing the success of this epistemic movement is beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to show that a shift in religious epistemology has been inspired by the move from internalism to externalism.

knowing a person. One can know a person without being consciously aware of it under an alternative description (Stump 2018: 178-180). In Abrahamic monotheism, God is omniscient and omnipotent. Stump argues that God, possessing a mind and will, resembles a person rather than an abstract universal that cannot know or act. She distinguishes personal knowledge of God from propositional knowledge, suggesting the former can be obtained through experiences like perceiving beauty or engaging in second-personal connections, even without conscious awareness (Ibid p. 183).

These theories align with anti-foundationalism and externalism in general epistemology, where self-awareness and justification for beliefs are less emphasized. Plantinga argues that knowledge of God can be attained without compelling proofs or arguments, relying instead on personal experiences, intuitions, or innate cognitive faculties. Similarly, Stump posits that personal knowledge of God can be gained through interactions and experiences, surpassing the need for propositional knowledge. This means that individuals can have a deep knowledge of God even without explicit, propositional evidence. These insights challenge the idea that knowledge of God depends solely on intellectual reasoning or propositional evidence, highlighting the role of personal experiences, relationships, testimonies, and intuitive faculties in religious epistemology.

3. Theological Advantages of the New Approach in Religious Epistemology

The contemporary approach in religious epistemology, advocated by philosophers like Plantinga and Stump, holds significant theological value. It addresses how knowledge of God can be accessible to all, aligning with the belief in Abrahamic monotheisms that God provides means for everyone to know Him. This approach challenges the idea that knowledge of God is limited to intellectuals, acknowledging that most believers do not arrive at their faith through rigorous arguments. It recognizes that children, illiterate individuals, and those with cognitive impairments can still obtain knowledge of God through personal experiences or trust in considerable religious authorities. Such experiences and testimonial beliefs can generate knowledge, even for non-believers.[6] Hence, the externalist approach offers theological

[6] Nonbelievers can have knowledge of God, as personal knowledge is not necessarily propositional. People might share similar internal feelings yet form different beliefs about their phenomenal experiences. According to the doctrine of divine simplicity, God is not metaphysically distinct from goodness. Therefore, people's experience of goodness or beauty may generate such divine knowledge even for non-believers; see Stump (2023).

advantages by making knowledge of God more inclusive. However, it raises concerns about potentially devaluing arguments and theodicies within natural theology, a topic I will explore in the next section.

4. A Critical Concern: The Epistemic Significance of Natural Theology

In religious epistemology, arguments are traditionally categorized as *de facto* and *de jure*. *De facto* arguments concern the truth of religious claims, such as classical arguments in natural theology and theodicies. *De jure* arguments, on the other hand, focus on how individuals attain knowledge of God without necessarily proving God's existence.[7] Arguments by Plantinga, Stump, and others are *de jure*, emphasizing that philosophical arguments in natural theology aren't necessary for knowing God. This issue raises questions about the epistemic value of *de facto* arguments in shaping beliefs about God. Despite this, *de jure* arguments gain their significant from *de facto* arguments as the success of *de jure* arguments rely on ontological claims like God's existence. Additionally, arguments in natural theology are important as intellectual believers often base their religious beliefs on these arguments, which also serve to address challenges like the problem of evil and promote intellectual engagement to prevent dogmatism and ignorance. Therefore, while private experiences and religious testimonial cases are important, public evidence from natural theology, despite not being essential for knowing God, holds epistemic value and should be considered in shaping beliefs about the divine.[8] However, the concern arises: if these arguments are not essential for knowledge of God, what epistemic role do they play? Should we revert to the classical approach to address this concern? In response, I contend that there exists a superior solution that aligns more harmoniously with

[7] See Plantinga (2000: vi-viii).

[8] Some defend moderate approaches towards natural theology, particularly concerning theistic arguments, viewing them as natural signs, pointers, or clues to God's reality. These signs allow knowledge of God to be available for those who wish to have it, without imposing it on those who do not (Evans 2010: 17). In this moderate view, such arguments are not essential components of having a rational belief in God; however, the epistemic value of natural theology lies in providing general public knowledge of God for those who seek it, while not forcing such knowledge on others. I have some concerns regarding this approach. First, theistic arguments are not necessarily accessible to everyone who desires general knowledge of God; they are often only available to a limited number of people with specific intellectual interests. Additionally, these arguments are built upon philosophical assumptions whose truth is not universally accepted. While I agree that some products of natural theology can lead to knowledge of God, I do not believe this should be generalized to all cases. See section 6.2 of this paper. By approaching the products of natural theology as offering religious understanding, we can avoid these concerns.

contemporary findings in epistemology. In the following paragraphs, I will present this alternative solution and argue for its merits.

5. Natural Theology: A Path to Religious Understanding

In contemporary literature, a compelling case has been made for distinguishing between knowledge and understanding as distinct epistemic achievements. It is now widely acknowledged that knowledge is not the sole or necessarily the most valuable form of epistemic attainment (Hannon 2021: 270). Building upon this distinction, I argue that arguments and theodicies in natural theology offer insights into religious understanding.[9] Furthermore, I demonstrate how the essential characteristics of understanding manifest within the patterns of these intellectual pursuits.

While the distinction between knowledge and understanding has historical roots,[10] its explicit examination as two distinct phenomena is a relatively recent development in the literature.[11] Intuitively, it is evident that one can possess knowledge without fully grasping the underlying reasons or mechanisms, as knowledge and understanding have distinct profiles. Here are some salient differences between them:[12]

i. Knowledge encompasses unrelated and isolated pieces of information, whereas understanding emerges when these fragmented pieces are coherently integrated. Knowledge tends to be isolated or episodic, whereas understanding involves perceiving coherence, recognizing patterns, and comprehending how various elements fit together (Greco 2014: 289).

[9] It is important to clarify that in this paper, the concept of religious understanding should not be confused with the study of religion as a social and historical phenomenon, which falls under the domain of religious studies. Instead, within the context of this paper, religious understanding specifically pertains to comprehending the validity of religious assertions, such as the existence of God, His attributes, and associated doctrines, if indeed they are true.
[10] Aristotle, for instance, contends that understanding necessitates knowledge of the causes (Posterior Analytics 71b9–11). Moreover, there is evidence indicating that the Greek term ‘episteme’ aligns more closely in meaning with the English term ‘understanding’ rather than ‘knowledge.’ For further reference, see Kvanvig (2017: 175) and Greco (2014: 275).
[11] In this context, I refrain from adopting any specific theory regarding the nature of understanding. Instead, I identify these salient features as pre-theoretical aspects inherent to understanding, which any reasonable theory of understanding should duly acknowledge and incorporate.
[12] These pre-theoretical differences remain unaffected by one’s particular theory of understanding. Put simply, any reasonable theory of understanding must encompass these significant characteristics.

ii. Understanding is closely intertwined with explanation, whereas knowledge does not necessarily demand explanatory capacity (Ibid, 285). To truly understand something, one must be capable of providing an account of *why it is the case*. One cognitive benefit in the quest for understanding is the ability to see the bigger picture, i.e., recognizing the deeper structures within a vast array of details. Metaphorically, the pursuit of understanding is like seeing the forest for the trees (Doyle et al. 2019:350). In contrast, knowledge can be acquired without requiring a comprehensive understanding of the underlying reasons.

iii. Additionally, understanding is deemed more valuable than knowledge, representing a greater intellectual accomplishment (Kvanvig 2017: 176). Understanding necessitates significant cognitive effort. For instance, while an individual with keen visual perception may know that a partially submerged pen appears bent in a bowl of water, attaining a scientific understanding of why the pen appears bent requires comprehension of the natural laws discovered in physics.

iv. Furthermore, an important distinction lies in the binary nature of knowledge—either one knows something or does not—while understanding is a comparative notion that allows for degrees (Khalifa 2017: 4). For example, a first-year graduate student of physics and a seasoned professor both possess an understanding of quantum mechanics, albeit at different levels.[13]

In the subsequent section, I illustrate how these salient features are clearly evident in the patterns observed in the most famous and well-known historical theistic arguments developed within natural theology, as well as in the general formats of theodicies.

5.1. The Ontological Argument

[13] The question of whether understanding can be reduced to knowledge is a subject of controversy. Certain philosophers of science and epistemologists, such as James Woodward (2003), Kareem Khalifa (2017), and John Greco (2014), advocate for a reductionist perspective, arguing that understanding is a type of knowledge and falls under the broader epistemological concept. Conversely, other philosophers like Linda Zagzebski (2001), Jonathan Kvanvig (2003), Catherine Elgin (2007, 2009), Alison Hills (2016), and Wayne Riggs (2009), assert that understanding and knowledge possess distinct natures, with essential elements present in one but absent in the other. For a more comprehensive examination of this ongoing debate, refer to Hannon 2021. However, resolving this discussion falls outside the scope of this paper. The crucial assumption of this paper is the distinction between knowledge and understanding as delineated earlier, with both opposing sides recognizing the notable differences between the two.

A well-known and historically significant argument in natural theology for the existence of God in the theistic tradition is the ontological argument. There are various versions of this argument, all aiming to conclude that God exists based on a priori premises derived from reason alone, rather than observation. Originating with Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century, it has been revived and defended by philosophers such as René Descartes, Gottfried Leibniz, Kurt Gödel, Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcolm, and Alvin Plantinga. Despite technical differences among the various versions, ontological arguments generally seek to prove the existence of a perfect being, or the greatest conceivable being, which encompasses all attributes of God in classical theism, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.[14] A simplified version of the argument, following Anselm's pattern and resembling a reductio ad absurdum, can be formulated as follows: One can conceive of a perfect being, a being greater than which cannot be conceived. If such a perfect being can be conceived, it must exist at least in the mind. However, a being that exists both as an idea in the mind and in reality is greater than a being that exists only as an idea in the mind. Therefore, if the perfect being exists only mentally, one can still conceive of something greater—namely, a being that exists both mentally and in reality. This being, by definition, would be greater and more perfect than the mentally existing perfect being. It is impossible to conceive of something greater than the greatest conceivable being. To avoid this contradiction, the perfect being (God) must exist in reality.[15]

The salient features of understanding are apparently seen in the general version of the argument mentioned here. First and foremost, it is evident that this argument relies on a different set of metaphysical, epistemological, and cognitive assumptions and principles. One should coherently fit various elements together to fully shape this argument. The concept of a perfect being, the conceivability of this concept, the assumption that conceivability may entail possibility, the idea of mental existence as opposed to real existence, and, more importantly, the assumption that existence is a property and whether existence adds perfection to a thing, all play crucial roles in shaping and comprehending ontological arguments.

Comprehending ontological arguments involves recognizing coherent patterns, and understanding various ideas, principles, and concepts. As Nagasawa (2017) points out, this issue

[14] See Oppy, Rasmussen, and Schmid (2024).

[15] See Goldschmidt (2020).

describes why there has been widespread dispute over the classical ontological argument for perfect being theism since Anselm introduced it. According to Nagasawa, "the argument is structured in such a way that one cannot refute it without making a significant metaphysical or epistemic assumption that is likely to be contentious in its own right. That is, there is no uncontroversial, straightforward refutation of the argument that would convince a majority of its defenders to concede that it does not succeed" (Nagasawa 2017: 152).

Furthermore, understanding has explanatory power, and ontological arguments, as clearly stated in some formulations,[16] play a significant explanatory role. For instance, given that ontological arguments aim to prove the existence of a being that could not have failed to exist, Nagasawa holds that ontological arguments can be seen as answers to the big question of why there is anything at all: Why is there something rather than nothing? (Nagasawa, 2017: 33–35). In the same vein, in Lowe's formulation, the argument is introduced to explain the concept of necessary existence.[17]

Based on these points, we can clearly see why grasping the idea of ontological arguments and how they work can represent a significant intellectual accomplishment. The argument can be comprehended in different ways, and people's understanding of the arguments varies widely. Even among philosophers, advances in other philosophical, logical, and even mathematical concepts have broadened their understanding of this argument. For instance, recent versions of the argument are more technical and advanced than earlier ones.[18] Thus, one can easily find the salient features of understanding in ontological arguments. Therefore, it is not wrong to hold that such arguments offer an account of epistemic understanding.

5.2. The Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument is another classic theistic reasoning that seeks to infer the existence of a supernatural and unique being, commonly conceived as God, based on specific observable facts about the universe or cosmos.[19] Various versions of this argument have been presented in the literature, but despite their differences, they share a common pattern that aims to demonstrate that a singular supernatural entity (such as an unmoved mover, a necessary being, an unchanging

[16] See Lowe (2012) and Nagasawa (2017).
[17] See Lowe (2012: 181) and Goldschmitt (2020: 50–55).
[18] For instance, see Gödel's formulation of the argument as discussed in Benzmüller & Paleo (2013).
[19] See: Bruce (2021).

being, or an omnipotent God) provides a satisfactory explanation for the changes and motions observed in all tangible entities, as well as for the actual existence of the universe and its inhabitants, which are contingent and could have been different or nonexistent.

As previously mentioned, understanding involves the coherent integration of different elements. Moreover, understanding requires the ability to provide an explanation for why something is the way it is. Even a glance at the cosmological argument reveals how it brings together various pieces of information to elucidate specific aspects of our universe. Additionally, comprehending the argument and its explanatory role necessitates acquiring a foundational understanding of logic, philosophy, and science. To truly grasp how the argument functions, given its soundness, one must comprehend the truth of its premises and how they lead to the conclusion that God exists. Consequently, it can be argued that comprehending such an argument represents a more significant intellectual achievement than knowledge gained through personal experience or testimonial sources. Furthermore, people's understanding of the cosmological argument varies. While some individuals may have a basic grasp of the explanation, having learned a preliminary version of the argument from introductory sources, their understanding cannot be compared to that of a professional philosopher who possesses a comprehensive understanding of the argument's premises and logical structure. Even among philosophers, there exist differing levels of understanding regarding this issue. For example, some[20] proponents of the cosmological argument argue for its deductive logical structure, while others[21] advocate for an abductive format. Moreover, engaging in philosophical inquiries and conducting investigations into concepts such as properties, alethic modality, time, as well as scientific explorations in cosmology and physics, can directly impact one's comprehension of the cosmological argument. This observation elucidates why the cosmological argument has undergone various modifications throughout history.

All the distinctive features of understanding mentioned above can be observed in the cognitive role played by the argument in an individual's comprehension of the cosmos and its connection to God. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the primary epistemic function of this argument is to provide an account of religious understanding rather than direct knowledge of

[20] The deductive version of the argument, advocated by Ibn Sina, Aquinas, Leibniz, and other scholars, is examined in more detail in Almeida (2018).
[21] For instance, see: Swinburne (2004).

God. Consequently, the failure or insufficiency of the argument poses a challenge to one's religious understanding rather than their knowledge of God.

5.3.The Teleological Argument

Another famous argument (or maybe set of arguments) in natural theology is (are) what is named as 'design argument' or 'teleological arguments' or what is recently named as 'the fine-tuning arguments. In the cases of ontological and cosmological arguments, I tried to show that the salient features of understanding are apparently seen in the structure of these arguments. These features are more obvious and apparent when it comes to the teleological arguments. Generally, these arguments point to the natural world's elegance, purposeful or end-directed design, aiming to prove that there is a powerful and intelligent designer behind it all.[22] For instance, scientific investigations reveal that the laws of physics contain constants with precise values and measures, indicating that life would be impossible if those constants differed even slightly from their actual values and measures. Such scientific data in physics indicate that the universe's conduciveness to life is due to the delicate and elegant nature of many fundamental characteristics, particularly the values of certain constants of nature, the specific nature of certain fundamental laws, and aspects of the universe's physical conditions in its very early stages. Appealing to scientific findings about the fine-tuning of the universe's fundamental features for the existence of life, some natural theologians have developed an inductive argument for the existence of God. The main claim of the argument is that, without a powerful and intelligent designer (i.e., God), it would be highly improbable for the physical laws and constants—such as electromagnetic laws, the ratio of proton to electron mass, and many other constants in physics—to align in a manner conducive to the existence of life.[23] Based on such technical premises, the fine-tuning argument aims to prove that God exists and intentionally set the values of the physical constants to make life possible, with this being one of God's purposes.

The precise formulation of the fine-tuning argument is technically complex, replete with scientific propositions and intricate details that exceed the scope of this paper to delve into here. However, this technical aspect of this literature, and its close integration of philosophical and

[22] Teleological arguments have historical roots in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and the Indian philosophical tradition (see Sedley 2008; Brown 2008). In the early modern period, the argument is primarily associated with William Paley (1867), who brought significant attention to it.

[23] For more technical discussions, see Adams (2019), Barnes (2012), Hogan (2000), and Uzan (2011). For simpler versions of the argument, see Leslie (1989, ch. 2) and Rees (2000).

theological discussions with precise scientific details from physics, biology, cosmology, and other natural sciences, underscores why the fine-tuning argument, in particular, and teleological arguments in general, represent key elements of epistemic understanding. Comprehending these arguments requires a synthesis of information from physical sciences, mathematics, philosophy, theology, and more. While a comprehensive grasp demands familiarity with scientific analyses, mathematical formulations, and philosophical concepts, individuals at various levels of knowledge can still comprehend the essence of the arguments and enhance their understanding through further learning. This complexity highlights that teleological arguments, as explanations of fine-tuning, allow for degrees of understanding. Moreover, it illustrates why this nuanced understanding can be epistemically richer than a singular proposition such as 'God exists.' Teleological arguments, alongside other philosophical arguments for theism such as ontological and cosmological arguments, represent intellectual achievements of natural theology, encompassing key features of epistemic understanding. Therefore, they provide an account of religious understanding rather than asserting religious knowledge.

5.4. The Nature of Theodicy

Philosophically, the primary objective of a theodical project is to justify the justice or goodness of God considering the immense amount of evil observed in the world.[24] Consequently, a theodicy seeks to provide a rational explanation for why a perfectly good and just God permits His creations to endure excruciating suffering. While it is widely accepted that certain pain and suffering are necessary and even beneficial for human flourishing, as they contribute to the development of achievements and virtues, the controversy arises when considering the excessive amount of suffering that appears to surpass what is essential for human well-being. Some forms of pain seem unnecessary and even detrimental to sentient beings' lives, and this type of pain is commonly referred to as "evil." Therefore, a credible theodicy endeavors to ascribe to God valid

[24] Historically, theistic arguments such as those mentioned above are seen as products of natural theology. In a narrow sense, 'natural theology' refers to the project of arguing for the existence of God based on pure reason, as opposed to revealed theology, where religious scripture is seen as an epistemic source. However, from a broader perspective, the project can include any philosophical attempt to prove truths about the existence and nature of God and other religiously significant ideas using ordinary human cognitive faculties like reasoning, sense perception, and introspection. In this broader definition, natural theology encompasses philosophical endeavors that seek to explain the relationship between God and the existence of evil in the world, as well as why an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient being allows the occurrence of evil. Therefore, defenses and accounts of theodicies, as long as they are built upon general resources available to human cognitive faculties, can be considered products of natural theology.

reasons for allowing the occurrence of such evils, ultimately aiming to offer a rational and defensible explanation from God's perspective.

In general, a viable theodical explanation must fulfill certain conditions as a bare minimum. Logical coherence is undoubtedly an essential requirement; however, it is merely necessary but not sufficient. It is crucial to recognize that a theodicy differs from a defense, which is presented as a response to the logical problem of evil. A defense demonstrates that there is no logical inconsistency between the existence of God and the existence of evil, whereas a theodicy is expected to elucidate why God permits the occurrence of evils. Trakakis (2007), for instance, argues that, in addition to logical coherence, a defensible theodicy must be compatible with "what we know and justifiably believe." According to him, "all we know" includes at least "(a) commonsensical views about the world, (b) widely accepted scientific and historical views, ... and (c) intuitively plausible moral principles" (Trackakis 2007: 240).

To fulfill these conditions, a theodicy must integrate relevant psychological, historical, moral, and commonsense information into a coherent framework that explains why God allows evil to exist in the world. As individuals' understanding of theodicy's content varies, their comprehension of it also differs. Ultimately, comprehending a defensible theodicy necessitates profound investigation and contemplation, making it a valuable epistemic accomplishment. All the salient features of understanding discussed above must be evident in the structure of a defensible theodicy. In this context, the term 'structure' refers to the role that theodicy plays in shaping our cognitive state. Therefore, a theodicy is expected to shape our understanding of why God would permit His creation to endure tremendous suffering.

6. Theoretical Advantages of the New Proposal

As previously elucidated, the salient features of understanding that have been mentioned can be readily observed in the structure of theistic *de facto* arguments and theodicies that have been developed within the realm of natural theology. Thus, it is entirely justifiable to maintain that *de facto* arguments play a role in fostering religious understanding. While they may not be indispensable for attaining knowledge of God, these intellectual achievements within natural theology hold significant epistemic value and are, in fact, even more esteemed than religious knowledge itself. Moreover, I am of the opinion that adopting this perspective on natural

theology brings forth theoretical benefits. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will explain how we can address certain philosophical concerns through the lens presented in this paper.

6.1. The Problem of Probabilistic Arguments

Within the realm of natural theology, it is notable that some arguments adopt a probabilistic approach to establish their claims. For instance, Swinburne (2004) challenges the efficacy of deductive theistic arguments and raises pertinent doubts regarding their success. In his analysis, Swinburne contends that there exist compelling reasons to demonstrate that the probability of God's existence surpasses the threshold of 0.5. This probabilistic perspective introduces an element of uncertainty, acknowledging that the existence of God cannot be conclusively proven beyond a reasonable doubt, but can be reasonably inferred based on the available evidence.

Contrasting this viewpoint, Plantinga (2001) presents a counterargument, suggesting that even in the most optimistic scenario where the probability of God's existence, deduced from public evidence, reaches as high as 90%, such evidential support falls significantly short of providing definitive knowledge of God. Plantinga asserts that while strong probabilities can lend support to the probability of God's existence, they are insufficient to establish a comprehensive knowledge of the divine. In other words, the mere existence of evidence that highly favors the likelihood of God's existence does not inherently grant individuals knowledge of divinity.[25] Plantinga writes:

> I hear the weatherman announce that the probability of rain for this afternoon is 0.9. Now if I am thinking straight, I won't believe that it will rain this afternoon; I will believe only that it is very likely that it will. And if I do rashly believe that it will rain, this belief will have little by way of warrant." (Plantinga 2001: 220-221)

These contrasting perspectives within the realm of probabilistic arguments in natural theology shed light on the inherent complexities involved in grappling with the knowledge of God, surpassing the limitations of empirical evidence and engaging in philosophical discourse. In this regard, Plantinga effectively argues that probabilistic arguments, even if they were to succeed, do

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not lead to the generation of knowledge. Nevertheless, when viewed as potential avenues for understanding, such probabilistic arguments retain their epistemic significance, even if they do not yield direct knowledge of God. Understanding, unlike knowledge, can possess a probabilistic nature since it allows for degrees of comprehension. Consequently, under this interpretation, successful probabilistic arguments for the existence of God can maintain their credibility and serve an epistemic function in religious understanding.

6.2. Addressing Skeptical Concerns about Natural Theology

Another strength of the proposal advocated in this paper is its ability to effectively address skeptical concerns about natural theology. Historically, some philosophers and theologians have raised significant doubts about the efficacy of natural theology in discovering the existence of the theistic God and truths about divinity, particularly as understood within the Abrahamic traditions. These critiques typically raise doubts about the projects of natural theology from various perspectives. Generally, they either highlight gaps between the conclusions of natural theology and the core aspects of revealed theology, or they point to human cognitive and epistemic limitations in discovering truths about divinity. The former expresses skepticism about the role of natural theology in forming faith in God or fostering a personal relationship with Him,[26] while the latter questions whether human cognitive abilities are adequate tools for understanding or proving the existence of a transcendent being, given the inherent limitations of finite human minds in grasping infinite realities.[27] Furthermore, they argue that natural theology may fall into the trap of anthropomorphizing God by projecting human traits onto a divine being, potentially leading to misunderstandings or oversimplifications of the divine nature.[28] Here, I briefly note these two main general skeptical concerns and argue that, in light of the proposals

[26] This kind of skepticism has motivated some, like Pascal, to differentiate between the "God of the philosophers" and the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Similarly, Kierkegaard is generally unsympathetic to natural theology. In contemporary literature, this concern is echoed by thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga (1983) and Paul K. Moser (2002).

[27] The extreme form of such critiques arises from the Kantian perspective on metaphysics, wherein human cognition is confined to the phenomenal realm of appearances and unable to access the noumenal world of things in themselves. Consequently, this perspective dismisses natural theology as a viable metaphysical endeavor. However, contemporary philosophical discourse has challenged this extreme skepticism. Metaphysical inquiries have been revitalized, exploring alternative approaches that address Kant's concerns while reaffirming the potential for meaningful metaphysical exploration (see Taliaferro, 2013). Hence, I proceed this section under the assumption of the possibility of metaphysics and, consequently, natural theology.

[28] Notable philosophers who take this critical approach include David Hume (1933), Immanuel Kant (1993), Ludwig Feuerbach (1957), and Paul Tillich (1951).

advocated throughout this paper, we can mitigate such concerns without debunking the epistemic value of natural theology.

Highlighting the limited persuasive power of arguments, even sound ones, in convincing a substantial number of unbiased individuals, some argue that natural theology, even if successful, cannot adequately provide the foundation for faith in God and a personal relationship with Him. Paul K. Moser (2002, 2014, 2024), for instance, refers to the unique personal feature of God in Abrahamic traditions, in which Abraham's God "offers a promise of redemption for all cooperative people, even God's former enemies" (Moser 2014: 71), holding that, at their best, philosophical arguments can never play this role. The gods proven by philosophical arguments do not offer the universal redemptive promise of Abraham's God or anything comparable. In fact, Moser argues, it is difficult to identify any other initially plausible candidate for such a God of redemptive promise. An argument is a finite sequence of claims, where some of these claims, known as premises, are meant to support another claim in the series, known as the conclusion, through inference. This inferential support can be either deductive or inductive (including abductive). Inductive inference can establish the probability of a conclusion in various ways, including through abductive, or explanatory, inference. Moser questions the ability of such arguments to generate knowledge of the Abrahamic God. The kind of relation between God and humans in this tradition is kind of personal and I–thou interaction. How can an argument, no matter how sound it is, can transfer the sense of the intrinsic personal agency to offer an I–thou interaction. It would be a category mistake to expect an argument to do so (Ibid, 72). In this view, God, who possesses perfect redemptive power, offers humans forgiveness and mercy. However, arguments and their conclusions, even if they can describe such power, lack the capability to act as agents of redemption.

This concern and similar ones can be effectively addressed. If the arguments for the existence of God are viewed as explanations of religious understanding, there is no requirement for them to promise redemption for all believers or facilitate an intimate I-Thou interaction between God and human beings. Understanding does not inherently necessitate such capabilities. Moreover, given the distinction between understanding and knowledge, it is plausible to hold that one can engage in such an interaction without having a comprehensive account of its nature. For instance, one may fully experience a loving relationship without completely understanding

what a loving relationship is, or without having an argument that supports its underlying concept. The understanding of a loving relationship is distinct from the experience and enjoyment of the relationship itself; these two should not be conflated, as each holds its own epistemic value.

As noted, the other important concern that has historically led some to be skeptical about natural theology is the belief that it is beyond human capacity to discover truths about divinity, such as God's true nature, existence, and the precise reasons why God allows evil to exist in the world, through pure reasoning alone. Many argue that these profound and complex truths are not fully accessible to human intellect. This skepticism stems from the recognition that human reasoning is limited and may not be equipped to grapple with the divine, which transcends ordinary experience and comprehension. Consequently, this perceived inadequacy of natural theology and theodical explanation to address such fundamental issues has been a significant point of contention for its critics.

I contend that by regarding the products of natural theology as accounts of understanding, this concern can be effectively addressed. Epistemologists argue that understanding, unlike knowledge, can be quasi-factive or non-factive.[29] Knowledge is typically regarded as factive, implying that one cannot possess knowledge of something that is false. However, understanding does not necessarily require such a strict criterion. In the realm of science, models, idealizations, thought experiments, and even fictional scenarios are employed to enhance our understanding of the natural world, despite not being true in a literal sense. For instance, Schrödinger's cat, though fictional, aids in comprehending the paradox of quantum superposition in quantum mechanics. Therefore, grasping the reasons behind something does not necessarily entail that all aspects of it correspond to the truth. As Eglin (2007) states:

> Some bodies of information, even though they are not true, nonetheless display a measure of understanding. The growth of understanding often involves a trajectory from beliefs that, although strictly false, are in the right general neighborhood to beliefs that are closer to the truth. The sequence may terminate in true beliefs. But even the earlier steps in the sequence should fall within the ambit of epistemology. For they are, to an extent—often to a considerable extent—cognitively valuable. A second grader's understanding of

[29] For instance, Zagzebski (2001), Elgin (2009), Riggs (2009), and others argue in favor of non-factive understanding.

> human evolution might include as a central strand the proposition that human beings descended from apes. A more sophisticated understanding has it that human beings and the other great apes descended from a common hominid ancestor (who was not, strictly speaking, an ape). The child's opinion displays some grasp of evolution. It is clearly cognitively better than the belief that humans did not evolve. But it is not strictly true" (Elgin 2007: 37).

Considering the discussion on quasi-factive or non-factive understanding, one can coherently hold that arguments in natural theology and theodical explanations retain cognitive value, even if, due to human cognitive limitations, these theoretical endeavors cannot directly align with the truth about divinity. Given the possibility of non-factive or quasi-factive understanding, one can consistently maintain that even if arguments and theodicies in natural theology do not assert absolute truths, as long as they are defensible and coherent, and in the absence of better and more defensible alternative explanations, such arguments and theodical explanations can still offer a foundational level of understanding regarding divinity.

Concerns about the effectiveness of these arguments and theodical explanations may arise from questioning the validity of specific metaphysical and scientific principles assumed in these arguments or accounts of theodicies. For instance, when considering fine-tuned arguments and the scientific assumptions embedded within them, one might question the validity of these assumptions in light of future scientific investigations. It is reasonable to anticipate that future physics will be far more developed and precise than it is today. Consequently, future advancements may falsify some of the theories and assumptions currently taken for granted within scientific communities. Even if such theories or assumptions are approximately true, they remain strictly false. However, a strictly false proposition may still provide significant insight into divinity and the intelligent designer behind it. This approach preserves the value of fine-tuning arguments and illustrates how similar teleological arguments has historically evolved alongside scientific progress. By maintaining the epistemic importance of these philosophical endeavors, this perspective aligns with various theistic models and arguments, providing a robust account of understanding and reinforcing the epistemic value of such philosophical pursuits.

In the same vein, we can hold that even if a coherent and reasonable theodical explanation does not perfectly reflect God's reasons for the existence of evil and suffering, it can

still contribute to a basic understanding of how an omnipotent and benevolent being might allow pain and suffering to exist. This allows theistic philosophers and theologians to formulate hypothetical answers to religious why-questions within natural theology. These hypothetical arguments and scenarios can provide a minimal level of understanding that is epistemically advantageous. They can alleviate intellectual curiosities and existential concerns, help distinguish religious beliefs from superstitious notions, bolster the plausibility of theistic worldviews, refute defeaters, and serve various other purposes. Consequently, by interpreting arguments in natural theology as candidates for religious understanding, there is no substantial problem even if we assume the skeptic's perspective on natural theology. Recall that understanding often involves integrating a package of information, and as Eglin points out, it is legitimate to include certain elements even if they are not strictly true, as they can aid in idealization and modeling, thereby improving our understanding. For instance, in some theodical explanations, anthropomorphism may be inevitable despite strong evidence that a transcendental God does not behave like a rational human. However, given that God's attributes—such as power, knowledge, mercy, and will—might differ significantly from human analogs, some idealizations can help us grasp how an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient being might permit evil and suffering. Understanding admits degrees, and its growth often involves a progression from beliefs that, although not strictly true, are in the right general vicinity, to beliefs that are closer to the truth. Therefore, theodical explanations, even if they appear anthropomorphic, can still contribute to our understanding. Despite recognizing the limitations of such fabricated scenarios, they possess cognitive value and enhance our comprehension. Given the potential for non-factive understanding, arguments and theodicies in natural theology, despite their inability to establish absolute truths about divinity, retain epistemic significance and usefulness as they assist us in grasping some aspects of God's reasons behind the existence of evil in the world.

6.3.Reviving the Historical Approach towards Natural Theology

In the preceding paragraphs, I have put forth an epistemic normative claim, presenting my thesis concerning the epistemic status of natural theology. If my arguments prove successful, they demonstrate that intellectual accomplishments in natural theology, from an epistemological standpoint, should be regarded as a means of understanding religion rather than a prerequisite for

knowledge of God. In this section, I will briefly provide descriptive evidence to illustrate how the distinction defended in this paper aligns better with historical perspectives on natural theology.

There are compelling reasons to posit that, from a historical perspective, natural theology was not originally developed solely for the purpose of establishing an epistemological framework to validate individuals' knowledge of God. As Rehnman (2010) argues, "Conceiving natural theology epistemologically is historically problematic at least. [...] From the late seventeenth century to most of the twentieth century, universally accessible evidence for the existence and revelation of God was generally thought to be necessary in order for faith to be justified" (Rehnman 2010: 1017). Several historical studies indicate that it was only during the Enlightenment, a relatively brief period in the modern era, that natural theology assumed epistemological significance in justifying individual faith or religious belief. It was during this time that "rationalists and empiricists alike appealed to limit religion to grounds, whether a priori or experiential, that are available to all people, at all times, and in all places" (Westphal 2010: 112).

For instance, Wolterstorff (1986) contends that it was John Locke who first directed epistemological attention toward natural theology and issued an evidentialist challenge to believers as a rational demand. Locke (Essay IV, xix, 13-14) maintained that religious beliefs, deemed epistemically valuable and capable of transforming into knowledge, were contingent upon reliable evidence in the form of arguments derived from natural theology, enabling believers to discern between the deceptions of Satan and the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. However, Wolterstorff points out that Locke's predecessors, particularly medieval philosophers and theologians, did not share his perspective on the obligatory nature of natural theology. According to Wolterstorff, figures such as Aquinas "never suggested that the pursuit of natural theology is obligatory for all believers" (Wolterstorff 1986: 60). Instead, medieval philosophers approached natural theology for one or more of the following purposes, which extended beyond the mere acquisition of "knowledge of God"; rather, their motivations were more closely aligned with seeking understanding in the sense elucidated earlier.

The first approach, referred to by Wolterstorff as "natural theology as metaphysics," can be traced back historically to Plato and Aristotle. Under this framework, natural theology is

viewed as an independent philosophical discipline that strives to develop scientia to the fullest extent of our natural reason. The second approach involves engaging in natural theology for apologetic purposes, aiming to convince opponents who do not accept the authority of religious revelation, despite their partial agreement with its content. Lastly, one might delve into natural theology with the objective of enabling believers "to transmute sight into some of what already he believes" (Ibid 78).

These approaches differ significantly from the evidentialist approach espoused by Locke and his contemporaries regarding the epistemic role of natural theology. While it goes beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the accuracy of these historical interpretations, what they teach us is that the idea presented in this paper resonates harmoniously with the historical expectations surrounding intellectual pursuits in natural theology.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, my argument revolves around the observation that the essential traits of understanding are prominently manifested in the structure of *de facto* arguments and theodicies formulated within the domain of natural theology. As a result, these elements deserve due recognition as plausible avenues for nurturing religious understanding, surpassing the mere acquisition of knowledge concerning God. In the concluding sections, I have endeavored to demonstrate the theoretical advantages and fruitful implications that arise from adopting this interpretive approach to natural theology, offering compelling insights from an epistemological standpoint.

Declaration

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