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Can We Know Anything if Naturalism is True? Or: A Plea for Creativity with Theistic Arguments

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Abstract: This brief essay considers the ontological implication of Scott Smith's central thesis in *Naturalism and our Knowledge of Reality*, by focusing on one mental phenomenon, the phenomenon of intentionality, in order to see whether an argument to God from intentionality can be generated. In his book, Smith offers a bold and sustained attack of naturalism and its ability to deliver us knowledge. His master argument is a kind of transcendental argument: *If philosophical naturalism is true, then we do not have knowledge of reality. We do have knowledge of reality, therefore it is not the case that philosophical naturalism is true.* This essay concludes with a particular challenge: We need more work that advances the following kind of argument: if, as the theist claims, God exists and is the source of all reality distinct from Himself, then any existent phenomena that is not God, ought (in principle, at least) be able to figure into a premise of a philosophical argument with a theological conclusion.

John Calvin famously claimed that we cannot know God unless we know ourselves and (conversely), we cannot know ourselves unless we know God. Calvin thinks there is a tight relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man. Scott Smith's new book, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*¹, seeks an even tighter relationship between God and knowledge: we cannot have knowledge of *anything* unless God exists.

Scott's book is a bold and sustained attack of naturalism and its ability to deliver us knowledge. His master argument is a kind of transcendental argument: *If philosophical naturalism is true, then we do not have knowledge of reality. We do have knowledge of reality, therefore it is not the case that philosophical naturalism is true.* The bulk of Scott's book (in fact, Chapters 1-8) is concerned with showing the

¹ R. Scott Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012). Subsequent references will be provided in the main text.

inability of naturalism to ground knowledge (he engages with the Direct Realism of D.M. Armstrong, the Representationalism of Dretske, Tye, and Lycan, Searle's Naturalism, Papineau's naturalized epistemology, Dennett's neurophilosophy, the Churchland's eliminativism, and Kim's physicalism). Finally, in Chapter 9, Scott begins to build a positive case for the kind of ontology required for knowledge. Mental properties are *sui generis*, irreducible to the physical; knowledge requires substance dualism; and the "natural affinity" exhibited between mind and world is best explained via a divine mind. Thus, the reality of knowledge entails theism and a decidedly theistic world.

If correct, Smith's thesis has huge implications. For, we clearly do know things. Thus, we find an argument, or probably a family of arguments, from the reality of knowledge to the existence of God. And, if God exists, this is as it should be—if God is the creator of all things, that means that all knowledge (that is, all truths discovered) as well as knowledge itself—somehow connects to and illuminates the divine.

In this brief essay, I propose to consider in greater detail the ontological implication of Scott's central thesis by focusing on one mental phenomenon, the phenomenon of intentionality, to see whether an argument to God from intentionality can be generated.

The Phenomenon of Intentionality

Let's call platonism the view that there are abstract objects. Such a platonism is neutral with respect to "where" such abstracta are located (that is, Plato's Heaven or God's mind), their modal status, and whether or not they exist in virtue of their own nature or through another. The reality of intentional facts, as articulated by Scott, seems to establish platonism.

Mental entities are intentional objects; they are *of* or *about* things. A question that quickly arises is this. In virtue of what does a mental entity (or state) possess intentionality at all? Scott's answer is that intentionality is a *property* of mental states: "if intentionality itself were a relation, then any time it is represented in an experience, the object it is of would have to exist" (49). But, we can and do think of non-existent objects, such as the unicorn Pegasus, and we can and do have hallucinations and other kinds of conceptual errors. Thus, Scott's road to platonism begins with a claim about the nature of intentionality:

Fact 1: Intentionality is a property.²

A second observation, following Franz Brentano, is that intentionality is *the distinctive mark of the mental*. Mental states are intrinsically intentional, hence:

Fact 2: Intentionality is an essential property of mental states.³

Further, it seems that intentionality is multiply-instantiated: A mental representation of a double-stuffed Oreo cookie can be possessed by me variously in acts of thinking, liking, and desiring. Further, distinct individuals can be thinking about the same thing—say Socrates or Socrates wisdom. It seems that the intentional property had by these mental states exactly resemble. Plug this resemblance fact into an One Over Many Argument and we have good reason to think that the resemblance of intentional properties is grounded in their identity, that is, intentionality is a universal. Hence,

Fact 3: Intentional properties are universals.

Scott argues that the above Facts 1-3 are best explained given platonism, hence it is not just naturalism that fails to deliver knowledge, is it nominalism as well.

An Argument for God from Intentionality

Scott argues that the incredibly high degree of correlation between a mental representation and the object represented, indeed, the information present within mental acts is best explained if there is a non-natural designer (201-204). The fact of intentionality fits best within a broadly theistic framework. I think Scott is right; there is a designer argument in the neighborhood that can be generated from the phenomenon of intentionality. I also think we can figure the phenomenon of intentionality into other kinds of theistic arguments for God.

Here is a new kind of conceptualist argument. First we supply a plausible premise that follows from Scott's internalism and atomism regarding mental representations:

² At this point, all I mean by 'property' is "a monadic abstract object capable of being had or possessed by another." I do not take a stand on whether such objects admit of their own ontological category or are reducible to an entity in some other category.

³ Or of many, if not all. Even if, as some contemporary philosophers of mind argue, intentionality is not the mark of *all* mental states, that is, if it is a sufficient but not necessary condition of the mental, the above fact would still stand, suitably restricted to mental states such as beliefs, likings, desires, intentions, and the like.

(1) Mental representations have intrinsic intentionality (that is, intentional properties essentially belong (are had/possessed) by minds.) [conjunction of internalism & atomism]

Next, we add a modally charged platonist premise,

(2) Some (if not all) intentional properties (understood as abstract objects) exist necessarily.

From which it follows:

(3) In every possible world, there is some (necessarily existing) mind that possesses intentional properties.

Supplemented with an auxiliary premise such as (4) and we have found our Anselmian conclusion (5).

(4) It is impossible that there exists an x such that x is a necessarily existent mind and different than God.⁴

(5) God exists in every possible world [that is, Anselmian Theism is true].

This argument is not unassailable, but its premises can be independently motivated. Premise (1) is entailed by Scott's internalism and atomism, defended throughout his book.⁵ What about the platonist premise? One could deny

⁴ This premise is supplied from Quentin Smith's, "The Conceptualist Argument for God's Existence," *Faith and Philosophy* vol. 11 (1984): 38-49.

⁵ Scott has more in mind that the mere directedness of mental acts when he talks about their intrinsic intentionality. Mental acts are *representations* of some determinate object. My thought of a cat does not, along with the cat, exemplify the universal *cathood*—my concept of cathood is a representation, not the object itself. In his explication of how a thought is about its object, Scott endorses *internalism* (instead of externalism) and atomism (instead of holism). According to internalism, mental representations possess their intentional properties independently of how things stand in the external environment, that is, the content or intentionality of representational states is determined solely by properties intrinsic to the subjects of such states. Further, according to atomism, the intentional properties of a given mental representation are determined independently of any relation it bears to other representations; in principle, therefore, it is possible for the mind to think about an object (say, Socrates), even if it possesses no other mental representations

premise (2) by arguing that intentional properties are contingent; they obtain only in worlds where contingent minds obtain. But it seems that there are some intentional objects, namely, necessarily true propositions that are true in every possible world. If so, then there are some necessarily existing intentional properties. Thus, I conclude that if Scott Smith has established his case regarding intentionality, the theistic philosopher finds herself with new resources for engaging the question of God's existence, and submit the above as but one example of how a new argument for God might run from the phenomenon of intentionality.

In closing, I offer a challenge. I think that we need to see more books, articles, and arguments like Scott's advanced in the academic and popular presses—if, as the theist claims, God exists and is the source of all reality distinct from Himself, then any existent phenomena that is not God, ought (in principle, at least) be able to figure into a premise of a philosophical argument with a theological conclusion. Robert Adam's article "Flavors, Colors, and God," and Alvin Plantinga's widely cited "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments" are suggestive of this kind of thinking. Scott Smith's book is a sustained argument from knowledge to God, motivated by paying attention to the necessary ontology required for knowledge. And now a challenge for theists: pick any existent phenomena of our world. I submit that in investigating the ground or cause of the phenomenon, we will be led, if we follow the dialectic carefully, to a divine source. Let's begin to construct and articulate these philosophical arguments—ours is a magical world, an ontologically haunted world, where the immaterial constantly is breaking into the material, the abstract into the concrete, the mental into the physical, and non-natural into the natural, and evidence of such breaches are everywhere.

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whatsoever. As Scott states, in summarizing Husserl: "therefore, the mental act's own *intrinsic* parts and properties *alone* determine what its object is and *how* that object is presented before the act" (188).