

# A Modal-Epistemic Argument for the Existence of God

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I propose a new argument for the existence of God. God is defined as a conscious being that is the first cause of reality. The argument consists in its initial form of two premises: (i) all possible truths are knowable, and (ii) it is impossible to know that God does not exist. From (i) and (ii) it follows that it is necessarily true that God exists. I argue that – and show how – this initial version of the argument is to be revised in order to be rationally acceptable. I defend the revised form of the argument against various objections.

## **1. Introduction**

Ever since Plato and Aristotle many philosophers have argued that reality is intelligible, that is, that all truths are *knowable*. These philosophers hold that all truths are in principle capable of being known by human beings or by other beings whose cognitive capacities exceed ours. The reference to these other beings is crucial. For it is highly unlikely that human beings can know all truths, even in principle. The thesis that all truths are potentially, in theory, knowable seems *prima facie* plausible, especially for epistemic accounts of truth that analyse truth in terms of cognitive notions and capabilities. The thesis seems appealing to realistic accounts of truth as well. It is not unreasonable to believe that reality has an objective structure that can in principle be discovered. Assuming infinitely many possible situations, it seems reasonable to hold that for each truth there is at least one possible situation in which it is known.

In this paper I present and argue for a new argument for the existence of God that makes use of the thesis that all truths are in principle knowable. For this argument I define ‘God’ as a

conscious being that is the first cause of reality.<sup>1</sup> This 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 it is a necessary truth that the first cause of reality is a necessary being. I leave it open whether this is so. Reasons for this thin conception of God are going to arise later in the paper.

The argument has two premises. The first premise is the aforementioned knowability thesis, namely that all possible truths are knowable, which I shall further argue for in this paper. The second premise is that it is impossible to know that God does *not* exist. For on the specific notion of knowledge used for the argument (to be explained later on) logical proof, intuition, experience and testimony exhaust the range of knowledge sources, and none of them suffices to know that God does not exist, as I shall argue for below as well.

It follows from both premises that it is necessarily true that God exists - for if that were not the case, it is possibly true that God does not exist, so that according to the first premise it is knowable that God does not exist, which contradicts the second premise. Schematically:

1. All possible truths are knowable (*first premise*),
2. It is impossible to know that God does not exist (*second premise*),
3. It is necessarily true that God exists (*conclusion, from 1 and 2*).

Both premises are modal claims about knowledge. That is why I refer to the argument as a *modal-epistemic* argument for the existence of God. Since the conclusion follows logically from the premises, the argument is successful if the premises can be justified. An interesting

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<sup>1</sup> Reasonably, the first cause is also the cause of space and time. Material objects exist *in* space and time. So they depend for their existence on the existence of space and time. But then the first cause is immaterial. For a cause does not depend for its existence on the existence of its consequences. This argument for the immateriality of the first cause is supplementary to the modal-epistemic argument I propose in this paper. One may reject the former and accept the latter.

feature of this argument is that it does not seem vulnerable to the parity objection. According to this objection it is also impossible to know that God exists, so that the first premise implies that it is necessarily false that God exists. But this objection does indeed not pose a threat. It is reasonable to hold that it is *possible* that God exists and that God knows that he is God. Hence it is not impossible to know that God exists. Moreover, since necessary existence is not part of the used definition of God, an appeal to God's *possible* existence (although ideally avoided) does not reduce the argument to an Anselmian ontological argument. Below I shall return to this and other objections.

In section 2 I introduce the specific notion of knowledge used for the argument. In section 3 I forestall two possible misunderstandings regarding the first premise. In sections 4 I argue that we need to apply two non-arbitrary scope restrictions to the first premise, in order to handle some obvious counter examples to it. In section 5 I propose a version of the modal-epistemic argument that takes the restricted first premise into account, and show that the conclusion that it is necessarily true that God exists still follows. In sections 6 and 7 I argue that the restricted first premise is plausible. In section 8 I argue that the second premise can be reasonably accepted as well. In sections 9-13 I discuss various objections against the argument, and argue that each of these objections is not effective. In section 14 I provide some closing remarks.

## **2. A specific notion of knowledge**

For purposes of the argument I define ‘knowledge’ as follows. A conscious being, human or non-human, knows that proposition<sup>2</sup>  $p$  is true if and only if  $p$  is true and the being, given its cognitive situation, cannot psychologically but believe that  $p$  is true. To put it differently, a conscious being knows a proposition  $p$  if and only if  $p$  is true and that being is in such a cognitive situation that this being cannot sincerely or genuinely believe that  $p$  is false. This

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<sup>2</sup> From now on I shall talk about propositions. Those who prefer nominalistic ways of speaking may replace my talk of propositions with talk about statements, assertions or sentences.

being cannot earnestly deny  $p$ . For this being denying  $p$  would be a form of self-deception. To put it in a Moorean way: a conscious being knows something if what is believed is true and far more convincing than any sceptical argument to the contrary.

Naturally, this includes all the cases where that being believes a true proposition with absolute certainty. However, according to this definition a conscious being can also know something without having absolute certainty. Take this Moorean proposition: ‘John has two hands’. Suppose that John indeed has two hands and that he is currently looking at them. Although John has no absolute certainty about the truth of the proposition (after all, he cannot conclusively rule out that he does not have two hands and that he is dreaming, hallucinating, or lying in the ‘Matrix’ experiencing a virtual reality), given his cognitive situation he nevertheless cannot honestly believe that he does not have two hands. John therefore knows that he has two hands, even while lacking absolute certainty.

Although absolute certainty is not required, the deployed notion of knowledge remains quite demanding. For, it requires that what is known cannot be reasonably doubted by those who know it. Let me flesh out the used notion in a bit more detail, as this will be important for the remainder of my exposition. As I said, a conscious being knows proposition  $p$  if and only if that proposition is true and if that being psychologically cannot but believe it. But then one of these cases applies: (i) The proposition is logically proven; (ii) the proposition is obviously true, i.e. intuitively self-evident; (iii) the proposition is grounded in indisputable<sup>3</sup> experience; or (iv) the proposition is based on indisputable testimony. All other examples fall under these four cases. For example, indisputable memory or indisputable introspection are instances of (iii), revelation – if possible – is an instance of (iv) (or (iii)), and God’s knowledge that he is

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Indisputable’ is meant here as a psychological qualification. It means ‘beyond doubt’ or ‘unquestionable’. As such indisputability differs from the stronger epistemic notion of incorrigibility. An incorrigible proposition is one about which it is *impossible* to be mistaken. So incorrigibility implies indisputability, but not vice versa.

God – if possible – is an instance of (iii) (or (ii)). I will come back to the latter two examples below.

Ed, for example, knows 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. To Frank, this is obvious. He obtained this self-evident insight by immediate intuition. 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 conceivable that a direct revelation from God to Kim amounts to indisputable experience or indisputable testimony, so that Kim comes to know that God exists. In general, whenever someone knows something in the defined sense, one or more of the aforementioned four cases apply.

### **3. Not just the actual world; not just human knowledge**

I might do well by forestalling two possible misunderstandings regarding the first premise. The first premise has it, as I said, that all possibly true propositions are knowable. Now, a proposition  $p$  is possibly true if and only if there is at least one possible world in which  $p$  is true. A proposition  $p$  is knowable if and only if there is at least one possible world in which  $p$  is true and known. A proposition  $p$  is known in a possible world  $w$  if and only if there is at least one (human or non-human) being in  $w$  that knows  $p$ . Given the language of possible worlds<sup>4</sup> the first premise can thus be formulated as follows. For every proposition  $p$  that is true in a possible world  $w$ , there is at least one possible world  $w^*$  – either the same as or different from  $w$  – where  $p$  is not only true, but also known. The latter is to say that there are one or more beings (whether or not of a human nature) in  $w^*$  who know that  $p$  is true in  $w^*$ .

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<sup>4</sup> In what follows 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 reasonable assumption for *metaphysical* possibility. For it seems reasonable to hold that whether something is metaphysically possible or not doesn't depend on which possible world is the actual world.

I am therefore *not* stating that all that is true in a possible world is also known in *that* world. That would be highly unlikely. Why wouldn't there be some true propositions in a possible world that no one in that world knows? For example, perhaps there is a possible world with an iron planet, even though no one in that world knows of its existence. I am only posing that whatever is true in a possible world, can be known in that world *or in another possible world*. Indeed, in the current example we can conceive of a possible world where the aforementioned iron planet *is* known, for instance because it is inhabited by an intelligent civilization. Or take as another example the following proposition: 'There exists an even number of stars in the universe'. This proposition is surely possibly true. If there are stars, the chance that it is true is actually fifty percent. Now, consider a possible world in which this proposition is true. Does the first premise demand that in *that* world it is known that there is an even number of stars? No, the first premise 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 the same as the aforementioned. It is surely reasonable to assert that there is such a possible world - for instance, a possible world with a universe where stars always emerge in pairs for some physical reason, and with an intelligent civilisation whose physics is so advanced that this fact is discovered beyond doubt. In this possible world it is known that the number of stars is even. The proposition is thus knowable, which is in line with the first premise.

Second, the premise does *not* suggest 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 surely cannot rule out that there are possible truths that can only be known by beings of a non-human nature. Indeed, why wouldn't there be possible truths out of reach to human cognition, but still knowable by certain non-human conscious beings? The mere suggestion that human beings

would be able to know all possible truths is unreasonable - to put it mildly. It is a sign of presumptuousness, of overestimating the human cognitive abilities.

Getting clear on this is important, so let us belabour the issue a bit further. Let us picture, for example, a dice in a hermetically sealed, non-transparent cup. Shake the cup. Say that the dice rolls four. Further assume that we - as human beings - are not able 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 an appeal to the first premise that it is impossible that the dice rolls four. After all, this is certainly possible. Would this example then counter the first premise? No, clearly not. For it is not difficult to show that the proposition ‘The dice in the cup rolls four’ is *knowable*. Take a possible world with the cup in question and with an extra-terrestrial civilization whose technology is so advanced that they can easily detect what happens in a hermetically sealed cup produced by humans. Now suppose that in this possible world, at the moment the cup is shaken, a team of inquirers of that civilization registers with the help of their advanced equipment what happens in the cup and thus finds that the dice rolled four. In this possible world it is known that the dice rolled four. It is thus indeed *possible* to know that the dice rolls four. And that’s why no problem for the first premise arises as long as we take into account that this premise is about knowledge *simpliciter*, that is, knowledge in any possible world, by any type of possible conscious being, either human or non-human.

#### **4. Obvious counter examples?**

Yet, aren’t there obvious counter-examples to the first premise? Suppose that John considers the following proposition: ‘God understands my reasons for being an atheist’. Now, as John could argue, there is a possible world in which God exists, in which John is an atheist, and in which it is true that God understands John’s reasons for being an atheist. Therefore, as John concludes, the proposition ‘God understands my reasons for being an atheist’ is possibly true.

Yet, this proposition is surely unknowable. For, knowledge entails belief, and no atheist can believe that God understands his or her reasons for being an atheist. What should we think of this proposed counter example? I would respond that, surely, no being can *rationally* believe that God understands that being's reasons for being an atheist. For this belief would entail that God does in fact exist, which contradicts atheism. Now, it seems to me that we can reasonably exclude *rationally unbelievable propositions* from the scope of the first premise. That is, we may restrict the antecedent of the first premise to propositions for which there is a possible world in which one or more beings rationally believe that proposition. For similar reasons the proposition 'I do not exist' is not a counterexample to the first premise either. For no being can rationally believe not to exist.

One might think that, in order to refute both counterexamples, we do not have to restrict the scope of the first premise to rationally believable propositions. For both 'God understands my reasons for being an atheist' and 'I do not exist' are not propositions. They contain respectively the indexicals 'my' and 'I' and therefore only become propositions after the context of utterance has been fixed. For example, if Mary says 'God understands my reasons for being an atheist', then she expresses the proposition 'God understands Mary's reasons for being an atheist'. And if Mike asserts 'I do not exist', then the proposition expressed by Mike is 'Mike does not exist'. Now, these propositions are in fact knowable (by God in a possible world in which God exists, or, in the case of Mike, for example by Eva in a possible world where Eva knows that Mike died). And since the first premise is about propositions, no problem for it arises as long as we, where needed, fix upfront the context of utterance.

However, this approach will not do. Take for example the proposition 'There are no conscious beings'. If possibly true, then this claim is unknowable. For to know that there aren't conscious beings entails that there is a conscious being who knows that, which contradicts there being no conscious beings. Here the suggested approach fails since there are no

indexicals in this case. But if we hold on to the original proposal to limit the first premise to propositions that are both possibly true and rationally believable, then no problem arises here either. For that there aren't any conscious beings is not something that can be rationally believed by a conscious being. The same holds for example for the proposition 'Nothing exists'. If possibly true, it would be unknowable. Yet, if we limit the first premise to rationally believable propositions, no problem arises. For this proposition is not rationally believable either. In what follows I shall therefore restrict the first premise to rationally believable propositions, which seems to be a natural restriction.

Nevertheless, this leaves us with another counter-example to the first premise. Take the following proposition: 'John left Amsterdam and nobody knows it'. This proposition seems possibly true. John could have left without leaving a trace and he himself might have lost his memory. Nevertheless, it is unknowable. For, if somebody knows that John left Amsterdam and that nobody knows it, then he or she knows that John left Amsterdam (if we plausibly take it that those who know a conjunction also know each of its conjuncts). So there *is* someone who knows that John left, which contradicts the original proposition. Does this counter-example falsify the first premise? Yes and no. Yes, it is brushed aside in the sense that we cannot uphold it as a *universal* principle. However, we may also curtail it in a non-ad hoc manner. Let me explain how. 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 these propositions *second order* propositions. There are also third order propositions, such as 'Marie knows that Pim knows that Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands'. To handle the counter-example in a non-arbitrary manner I propose to limit the scope of first premise to first order propositions, that is to say, to propositions about the world itself rather than about what is or can (or what is not or cannot)

be known about the world.<sup>5</sup> In other words, I limit the scope of the first premise to the *object level* and leave the *meta level* aside. This is not uncommon. In order to arrive at his definition of truth, Alfred Tarski (1944) made an well-known distinction between the *object language* in which the word ‘truth’ does not occur and a *meta language* that allows for discussions as to whether propositions in the object language are true or not. Mine is a similar approach, applied to the word ‘knowledge’ instead of ‘truth’. By restricting the antecedent of the first premise to first order propositions we avoid that second order propositions like ‘John left Amsterdam and nobody knows it’ disprove the first premise. And for the same reason other second order counterexamples, such as ‘There are no known propositions’ or ‘Nobody knows this proposition’, are not effective anymore either. To conclude, in what follows I shall limit the antecedent of the first premise to (a) rationally believable and (b) first order propositions.

## 5. A revised version of the argument

Because of the above mentioned two restrictions the first premise becomes as follows. All rationally believable and first order propositions that are possibly true are knowable. This results in the following revised version of the modal-epistemic argument:

1. If a rationally believable first order proposition is possibly true, then it is knowable (*first premise*),
2. The proposition ‘God does not exist’ is unknowable (*second premise*),
3. The proposition ‘God does not exist’ is rationally believable (*third premise*),
4. The proposition ‘God does not exist’ is first order (*fourth premise*),
5. The proposition ‘God does not exist’ is not possibly true (*from 1, 2, 3 and 4*),

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<sup>5</sup> Knowledge is a propositional attitude, similar to belief, hope and desire. I defined a first order proposition as a proposition that does not refer to propositional attitudes of *knowledge*. But then many first order propositions refer to *other types of* propositional attitudes. Are these propositions still properly called ‘first order’ in the sense of ‘basic’ or ‘fundamental’? Perhaps not, but this is not problematic. For, one may also define a first order proposition as a proposition that does not refer to any type of propositional attitude.

6. The proposition ‘God does not exist’ is necessarily false (*from 5*),
7. The proposition ‘God exists’ is necessarily true (*conclusion, from 6*).

The additional third and fourth premise are clearly justified. For, the proposition ‘God does not exist’ is a rationally believable and first order proposition. Further, the derivation of the conclusion is straightforward. According to the third and fourth premise the proposition ‘God does not exist’ is rationally believable and first order. But then it cannot be possibly true, for else the first premise entails that it is knowable, which contradicts the second premise.

The conclusion of the argument is that God exists in every possible world. Every possible world contains a personal first cause. Apart from being a personal first cause there may be many characteristics that God has in one possible world and lacks in another one. After all, the argument does not entail that God has the same collection of properties in all possible worlds. But this doesn’t make the conclusion of the argument less important or relevant.

## **6. All rationally believable first order possible truths are knowable**

Let’s consider the revised first premise. From now on I shall refer to it as the first premise. Also, in what follows, the above two scope restrictions will be assumed implicitly when talking about propositions, unless specified otherwise.

In our daily lives we express all sorts of propositions. We say things like ‘The stock market has fallen in the last quarter’ or ‘The Statue of Liberty is more than 125 years old’. In science we come across numerous propositions as well, such as ‘a water molecule is comprised of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom’ or ‘the cosmos is around 13.8 billion years old’. It seems reasonable to think that these propositions are true and known. And, if they are not

true, it seems fair to say that they *could* be true and *could* be known. These common and scientific propositions are both *possibly* true and *knowable*.

The same seems to apply to the propositions expressed by our other ordinary and scientific assertions. They seem possibly true and knowable as well. By applying inductive reasoning proceeding from our daily and scientific speak, we obtain the first premise: all propositions that are possibly true, are knowable. This generalization is not unreasonable. After all, if the first premise holds for our daily and scientific propositions, why would it suddenly not apply to some other truths? In the absence of a good reason to think otherwise, it is not reasonable to insist that there must nevertheless be unknowable truths. This is especially so for those of us who are friends of the metaphysical principle that reality is uniform or simple.<sup>6</sup>

Take for example the following proposition: ‘A treasure is hidden close to the centre of the earth’. We have no reason to believe that this proposition is true in the actual world, but it is surely *possibly* true. There is for example a possible world in which extra-terrestrials have

<sup>6</sup> In 1963 Fitch logically deduced that if all actual truths are knowable, then all actual truths are known (Fitch 1963). If this is correct, the first premise entails that *all actual truths are known*, which is surely problematic for atheism. Alexander Pruss suggested to me in personal writing that this might be a reason for atheists to reject the first premise. But such an objection seems to me weak. First, Fitch’s result is 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. It should therefore only be accepted if there are no or hardly reasons for doubt. And this is not the case. The result is heavily debated (Williamson 2000, Rückert 2003, Kvanvig 2006, Restall 2009). Second, even if it holds, atheists cannot simply reject the first premise merely because it has a problematic consequence for atheism. For, if there are proper *independent* reasons for accepting the first premise, it would be begging the question for atheists to reject it anyway only because it does not fit well with atheism. Besides, if the second premise of my argument is true, then Fitch result should not be that surprising. After all, in that case the knowability thesis leads to the conclusion that God exists, so that it *might* very well be the case that all truths are indeed known, namely by God (if God is omniscient).

hidden a treasure close to the centre of the earth. Thus, according to the first premise this proposition is knowable. And indeed, there is a possible world in which the extra-terrestrials *know* that they have hidden a treasure near the centre of the earth. For how else could they have hidden the treasure? Did these beings perhaps hide the treasure unintentionally? Or is their memory deficient? In that case we simply consider a possible world in which the extra-terrestrials are endowed with a properly functioning memory, and in which these creatures hide a treasure near the centre of the earth intentionally. Or, we may consider a possible world in which human beings discover the treasure with the help of advanced detection equipment. And so on. There are quite some possible worlds in which the proposition is known.

Examples like these suggest that for all possible truths it is rather straightforward to identify a possible world in which that truth is known. That is to say, if a proposition is possibly true – that is, true in one or more possible worlds – then there seems to be *at least one* possible world where one or other conscious being, human or otherwise, *knows* that proposition to be true. Precisely because there are so many, perhaps infinitely many, possible worlds, it is plausible to take it that each possible truth is known in at least one of these worlds. So it is quite reasonable to believe that all possible truths are knowable, as the first premise has it.

To put it differently, if no conscious being whatsoever in any possible world - not in the actual world, nor in rather similar possible worlds, nor in different possible worlds, nor in radically deviating possible worlds - knows that a certain proposition is true, then it seems that the proposition in question just *cannot* be true. Hence, if a proposition cannot be known in any metaphysically possible way, it seems reasonable to believe that it is necessarily false. But that is what the first premise conveys in contraposition: all possible truths are knowable.

## **7. The intelligibility of the world**

As mentioned in the introduction a basic intuition behind the first premise is the age-old idea

that the world is comprehensible, that it has a rational structure that can be discovered, at least in principle.<sup>7</sup> The first premise expresses a commitment to the view that reality is intelligible, amendable to understanding or knowable. This is a presupposition of inquiry, as for example Thomas Nagel points out in his *Mind and Cosmos* (Nagel 2012, p. 16). Inquirers do not *seek* intelligibility, they *presuppose* it. Inquiry is predicated on the presumption that reality is, at least in principle, understandable by us or any other type of possible being. The presumption that the structure of the world is knowable in principle has led to extraordinary discoveries.

One may object that inquirers only have to assume that much (even the vast majority) of the world is knowable, which is compatible with there being unknowable possible truths. Yet, I would respond that this weaker comprehensibility assumption still increases the *prima facie* likelihood of the first premise. Moreover, and more importantly, the weaker assumption does not seem the best way to cash-out the basic intuition, which is that the *fundamental* structure of reality is in principle knowable, that is, knowable by us or another possible conscious being. As for example Ted Sider points out: ‘The goal of inquiry is not merely to believe many true propositions [...]. It is to discern the structure of the world. An *ideal* inquirer must think of the world in terms of its distinguished<sup>8</sup> structure; she must carve the world in its joints in her thinking and language’ (Sider 2009, p. 401). Now, if all fundamental truths are *in principle* knowable, then, plausibly, all *derived* truths, that is to say, all truths grounded in fundamental truths, are in principle knowable as well. For, they may be taken to be in principle derivable from truths about reality’s fundamental structure. But then *all* possible truths, fundamental and derived, are knowable, which is what the first premise asserts.

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<sup>7</sup> I thank D. Georgoudis for this specific way of expressing the basic intuition behind the first premise.

<sup>8</sup> Sider means reality’s *fundamental* structure (e.g. p. 416). For ‘[t]he central task of metaphysics is illuminating the fundamental structure of reality’ (p. 401). Realists such as Kit Fine and Jonathan Schaffer hold similar views.

Not surprisingly, at least since Parmenides many philosophers accepted the first premise, such as notably Aristotle and Hegel. Hegel argued as part of his doctrine of the Idea that reality has a comprehensible structure. It was he who famously proclaimed the comprehensibility of all being: ‘What is reasonable is real, that which is real is reasonable’, which fits in with the first premise. And before him Aristotle held that reality is intelligible in the sense that there is a deep parallelism between being and thought. That is, he holds that ‘being’ and ‘being-known’ are extensionally equivalent, so that all truths are knowable. Contemporary *neo-Aristotelians* also assume a close correspondence between the order of being and the order of knowledge, so that truth and knowledge correspond, and the first premise follows.

Or take Kant’s *transcendental idealism*. Kant argues that all our knowledge claims are about the phenomenal world, which according to him *is* a mental construct. But then there is a tight parallel between phenomenal truth and knowledge, so that *within the phenomenal world* all possible truths are knowable, and the first premise follows.<sup>9</sup> Further, the famous verification criterion of 20th Century *logical positivism* also concurs with the first premise. According to this criterion both meaning and truth are analysed in terms of verifiability, so that all possible

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<sup>9</sup> Philosophers defending a view I label *innerworld realism* (which differs from Kant’s transcendental idealism, although I do not have the space here to explain how) cannot reasonably deny the first premise either. Innerworld realists claim that we only have access to the world *as it is for us*, that is, to the world as we humans experience and think it. We are unable to know anything about the world as it is in itself, independently from our cognitive faculties, since we cannot relinquish our human, all too human, cognitive condition. True reality, *the-world-in-itself*, will forever remain inaccessible to us. That is why, according to these philosophers, all our knowledge claims are about how the world is for us, *the-world-for-us*, and never about the world-in-itself. This even holds for such basic claims as that there is something ‘out there’ that grounds our experiences. The ‘out there’ is still an ‘out there’-*for-us*. Within the context of the-world-for-us knowledge and truth necessarily correspond. For truth in the-world-for-us is that which is for us conclusively justified. We cannot but believe it. It follows that *within the-world-for-us* all that is possibly true is knowable, just as the first premise has it.

truths are knowable (in the sense of verifiable). Moreover, many other forms of first-order<sup>10</sup> anti-realism concur with the first premise as well, such as (*Berkeleyan idealism*, *Husserlian phenomenanism*, *Putnamian internal realism* and *(Dummettian) semantic anti-realism*). All these anti-realist positions conceive of truth as conceptually related to cognitive capacities.

In general all those philosophers who embrace an epistemic or mind dependent construal of truth should be friends of (or at least sympathetic to) the first premise. We may then add *pragmatists* as well (if we did not already take them into account as part of the above mentioned *other* forms of anti-realism). After all, the sensitivity of truth conditions to the mentally informed activities of conscious beings is a form of mind dependence of truth as well (Anderson 2002, p. 134). Now, pragmatists hold that truth is “what works”, whereas what works can presumably be known to work. So pragmatism fits the first premise as well.

As the reference to Aristotle made clear, not only anti-realists, but also realists can be friends of (or at least sympathetic to) the first premise. For, as stated, if there is a mind independent fundamental structure out there, then it seems not unreasonable to assert that it can, at least in principle, be discovered, so that all non-fundamental facts of the world (each grounded in the world’s fundamental structure) are in principle discoverable as well. But then the first premise does follow.

The above brief overview of various philosophical positions shows that the first premise fits a wide range of different philosophical stances, both within the realist and anti-realist camps. This gives us a further reason to believe that, plausibly, all possible truths are knowable.

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<sup>10</sup> I use the adjective ‘first order’ to distinguish it from ‘meta-ontological’ anti-realism, according to which there simply is no objective fact of the matter as to whether for example properties exist, so that both the Platonist and the nominalist are wrong (Chalmers 2009). This type of meta anti-realism differs from the one in the main text.

Finally, friends of a specific weak version of Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason, namely the principle that all possible truths *possibly* have explanations, do not have to accept the first premise right away. They might upfront merely accept that *explanations* are knowable, which seems not unreasonable on an epistemic (instead of ontological) account of explanation. But then the first premise follows by derivation.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, as will become clear in the rest of this paper, many alleged counterexamples against it can be adequately refuted, which further increases its epistemic credibility.

I conclude based on the aforementioned considerations that the first premise is reasonable. It is plausibly true and we do seem to be justified to accept it. Yet, I admit, it is still speculative.

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<sup>11</sup> Let me explain. It is quite natural to think that there is always an explanation for the existence of an entity (e.g., the Statue of Liberty in New York), the occurrence of an event (e.g., a hurricane) or the obtainment of a matter of fact (e.g., that the Mount Everest is more than 5,000 meters high). After all, in our daily lives and in our scientific endeavours we find all kinds of reasonable explanations for things, events and facts. Especially science has been tremendously successful in finding explanations, which gives us a good reason to believe that there is always some explanation to be found for what exists, happens or obtains. One might object that there could still be things, events or facts that do not have an explanation. This may be so. However, even in that case it is still reasonable to think that it is at least *possible* for these things, events and facts to have an explanation. (In the case of a necessary entity it seems at least *possible* for it to be self-explanatory.) In other words, it is reasonable to think that there is at least one possible world in which they are explained. We can thus reasonably accept the principle that all truths are *explainable*, which is a weak version of Leibniz' principle of sufficient reason, according to which all truths *actually* have an explanation. Many objections that have been raised against Leibniz' principle do not apply to the weaker version, which contributes to its plausibility (Gale and Pruss 1999, p. 463). Further, on an epistemic (instead of ontological) account of explanation, one may reasonably accept that explanations are knowable. For, on this account explanation and comprehension fall under the same genus of the cognitive. Explanations are nothing more than comprehensible descriptions of causes or reasons. Their nature is thus such that, plausibly, they are in principle knowable. But then the first premise follows. For if all possible truths are explainable, and all explanations knowable, then all possible truths are knowable.

But that doesn't mean that it isn't interesting to explore how it can inform a new type of deductive argument for the existence of God, which is the primary aim of this paper.

## **8. It is impossible to know that God does not exist**

Let us now look at the second premise of the argument. According to this premise it is not possible to know that God exists. Is this premise justified? In it I refer to God. Now, I define God as *personal first cause of the world*. Let me clarify this. First, God is a conscious being and not an unconscious thing. And God is, among other things, capable of knowledge (and thus of belief, reason, intuition and experience). God is somebody, not something. Second, God is the direct or indirect originating cause of everything else besides God. Now, if an entity has these characteristics, it can rightfully be referred to as God.<sup>12</sup> For most, if not all, theistic concepts of God have it that God is a conscious being and the ultimate ground of reality. Moreover, this definition of God is consistent. For the concepts 'conscious being' and 'first cause of the world' are each coherent in themselves. Besides, these notions do not imply mutually contradictory attributes. They are conceptually independent from one another, so that when we combine these notions into the comprehensive concept of a personal first cause of the world, no contradictions arise. Therefore, unless a good reason is provided for believing that the combined concept is inconsistent, we are justified to hold that the definition of God is coherent. Further, as mentioned earlier, note that this definition does not require God to be omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent or omnibenevolent. Hence, we do not need to assume that, say, 'omniscient personal first cause' or 'omnipotent personal first cause' are concepts devoid of logical contradictions. For all we know, these more complex concepts might be

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<sup>12</sup> The definition contains the characteristics that an entity must have to be properly called 'God'. Besides these *essential* characteristics, God could have many other characteristics. Therefore, once the existence of God has been argued for, one may continue with providing arguments for other characteristics of God, such as God's immateriality, God's necessary existence, etc.

incoherent.<sup>13</sup> Finally, it is not difficult to deduce that there cannot be more than one being that meets both characteristics. In other words, if God exists, then God is unique.

Now, is it reasonable to believe that it is impossible to know that God, defined as the personal first cause of the world, does not exist? This seems indeed to be the case. As indicated there are four ways in which it can be known that God does not exist. The first is to show that the notion of God is contradictory. However, as mentioned above, we are justified to believe that a logical contradiction can't be deduced from the notion of a personal first cause. The second is to have the direct intuition that God does not exist. But the proposition 'God does not exist' is certainly not immediately self-evident, for it is not obviously true. The third way is to have indisputable experience of the non-existence of God. But this does not apply either, since experience, whatever its extent, cannot establish the non-existence of God. After all, the non-existence of God is not some positive state of affairs that can be directly observed. Moreover, it is not possible to infer that God does not exist by having experienced everything that exists and not found God. For it is impossible to experience or reason that *everything* that exists has indeed been experienced. Hence one cannot conclude that God does not exist. The fourth and final way concerns indisputable testimony. However, not a single witness, whatever his/her reliability, is able to put someone in the cognitive 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 witness. I conclude that by none of the four ways a conscious being can *know* that God does not exist. But then it is indeed reasonable to believe that it is impossible to know that God does not exist. The second premise is thus plausibly true as well. We are justified in accepting it.

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<sup>13</sup> If omniscience would be impossible, the conclusion of my argument would be that God is a *non-omniscient* personal first cause. And the same holds for the other omni properties of classical theism.

## 9. A parity objection

In what follows I shall discuss various objections against the argument. Let me start with the earlier mentioned parity objection. Someone might object that it is also impossible to know that God exists. And 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 respond that it seems quite reasonable to believe that there is at least one possible world in which God exists<sup>14</sup>, and where God is able to let someone know of God's existence by direct revelation. Remember the above example of Kim.

Besides, *even* if it were impossible for God to use revelation to reveal his existence to some being, it is still not impossible to know that God exists. For, take a possible world in which God exists. Now, plausibly, in such a possible world there is at least one being that knows that God exists, namely God. God knows that God exists. So, it is not impossible to know that God exists. It seems indeed quite reasonable to believe that God knows that God exists. Plausibly, God could know that he is God (and therefore that God exists) by means of indisputable inner experience of his own nature. God's introspection of his own being seems sufficient for God to know that he is God. Or perhaps is it immediately self-evident for God that he is God, so that God knows that he is God by direct intuition, similar in the way God could possibly know all mathematical and logical truths. In both cases God does not have to

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<sup>14</sup> One might think that considering a possible world in which God exists begs the question since by doing so I appeal to God's existence in order to show that God exists. But this is not the case. *Possible* existence does not imply *actual* existence. There is a possible world in which God exists, and from this it does not follow that God exists in the actual world. So there is no circle. Moreover, it is perfectly reasonable to take it that God possibly exists, given that the concept of a conscious being that is the first cause of the world is free from contradictions. Further, as mentioned before, necessary existence is not part of the argument's definition of God. Hence an appeal to the possibility of God's existence does *not* reduce the argument to the ontological argument.

“reach out” beyond himself into the external world to know that he is God. It suffices for God to have immediate internal access to its own nature or intuition.

Let me elaborate the point that it is reasonable to believe that in those possible worlds where God exists, God knows that he 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, is from God. God is at the root of the world. God oversees reality in its entirety. Now, it is not unreasonable to assert that a conscious being in such a maximally ideal cognitive situation also knows that he is 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. Thus it is indeed reasonable to submit that God, if God exists, knows that he is God, and therefore that God exists.

Moreover, *and perhaps most importantly*, to refute the first objection *just one* possible world in which God exists and knows to be God is already sufficient. I do not have to affirm that God knows that he is God in *all* possible worlds where God exists. And it is surely reasonable to believe that there is *at least one* possible world in which God exists and knows to be God, given, as mentioned above, that God is the ultimate ground and origin of everything else in all those possible worlds where God exists. All in all I conclude that, contra the parity objection, it *is* possible to know that God exists.

## **10. Parody objections**

Consider the following parody of the 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 Santa Claus, Superman, a flying teapot, the flying Spaghetti Monster, and so on. They all exist necessarily.

This is clearly absurd. So the argument for the existence of God should be dismissed. Or so the parody goes. Let me respond to it. Take a possible world in which God exists, in which God knows that he is God, and in which God is alone since he decides not to create anything.<sup>15</sup> 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. Moreover, in that possible world God also knows that there are no flying teapots, flying spaghetti monsters, and so on. So the parody fails. Besides, since it is not impossible to know that there is no *impersonal* first cause (God knows that the first cause is not *impersonal* in those worlds where God exists and knows that he is God), the first premise cannot be used to infer the necessary existence of an *impersonal* first cause either.

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 respond that it is not impossible to know these propositions. Take a possible world where God exists, in which God is (not) good, and in which God knows his moral nature by indisputable introspection. Such a possible world plausibly exists. In it God knows that God is (not) good. So, it isn't impossible to know that God is (not) good.

## **11. Objections to the first premise**

Earlier I assessed some counterexamples to the first premise, and argued that they are unproblematic (given two scope restrictions to the first premise). I now consider some further

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<sup>15</sup> One 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 can still be said to cause God's thoughts, being mental objects *internal* to God. Besides, we can also take a possible world in which God creates, say, exactly one causally inefficacious external object, not being a unicorn. In that case God does know that unicorns do not exist.

counterexamples that one might propose. Take the following proposition: ‘The population of Amsterdam is larger than the population of The Hague’. It seems for humans impossible to know that this proposition is true, for we cannot logically prove it, it is not self-evident, we cannot know it based on indisputable inner or sensory experience, and it is not possible to learn the truth of the proposition through indisputable testimony. Shouldn’t we then generalize and conclude, contra the first premise, that this possibly true proposition is unknowable? I would respond that it is surely reasonable to take it that *we* in the *actual world* cannot know this proposition in the sense of the definition I provided. But, as discussed, the first premise relates to *all* possible conscious beings (human or not) and *all* possible worlds (similar or radically different from the actual world). Now, consider a possible world in which the proposition is true, and in which there exists an extra-terrestrial civilisation whose members can observe an extensive geographical area on our planet with the same degree of certainty as we can observe our hands. Assume that one of the members of the extra-terrestrial civilisation observes an area that comprises Amsterdam and The Hague and concludes that the population of Amsterdam is larger than that of The Hague. In that case this member knows that the population of Amsterdam is larger than that of The Hague. But then the proposition in question is in fact knowable and the objection doesn’t go through.

As another counterexample one may want to point to a true mathematical Gödel proposition that cannot be proven in any proper mathematical axiom system. But then not all truths are knowable, contra the first premise. 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 intuition with respect to 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 further illustrate this response. We know for example by immediate 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 part of our knowledge 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 truths, but all logical and mathematical truths (including Gödel's theorems and all Gödel propositions) are self-evident, and thus instances of God's knowledge. Note that I do not 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.

The above alleged counterexamples of the first premise fail, and the same holds for many other alleged counter examples.<sup>16</sup> This in itself raises the credibility of the first premise. But there are still other ways to attack the argument, though. In what follows I shall discuss some of them.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Another alleged counterexample involves Heisenberg's uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics.

According to this principle it is impossible to know the position and momentum of an elementary particle simultaneously, yet these particles *do* 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 reply 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. In that case the observer does know the conjunction, so that it is not unknowable.

<sup>17</sup> Yet another objection runs as follows. The first premise has it that all that is possibly true can be known. But what about the proposition 'God does not exist'? Isn't it possibly true, and thus, according to the first premise, knowable? But this is what the second premise denies. On the other hand, if 'God does not exist' is unknowable, then it seems that not all possible truths are knowable, which violates the first premise. So, as this objection

## 12. Objections to the second premise

Another way to challenge the argument would be to argue, contra 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? My response would be twofold. First, omniscience might be metaphysically impossible. Second, if omniscience is possible, it is reasonable to believe that also an omniscient being cannot know that God does not exist. For, each instance of knowledge must have some *source of knowledge* (just like anything that exists has some *source of existence*). And, as argued above, none of the possible sources of knowledge (i.e., logical proof, self-evident intuition, indisputable experience and indisputable testimony) enables a conscious being to acquire the knowledge that God does not exist. Whether this being is or is not omniscient is not relevant. Notice that, according to the second premise, the existence of an omniscient being actually entails that God exists. For, if there is an omniscient being, then the second premise entails that this being does not know that God does not exist. Therefore, since this being is omniscient, it is not true that God does not exist. So God exists.

concludes, the premises cannot both be true. I respond as follows. The objection effectively assumes upfront that the conclusion of the argument is false, for only then one may conclude that the premises are not both true. Now, surely, a denial of the conclusion of the argument entails that the premises are not both true. After all, the conclusion *logically* follows from both premises. The argument is intended to demonstrate that it is necessarily true that God exists. Anyone who aims to refute this conclusion cannot simply presuppose upfront that the conclusion is false. That would be begging-the-question. I have given various reasons for accepting the first and second premise. These reasons are *independent* from the conclusion of the argument. That is to say, these reasons do not presuppose upfront the truth of the conclusion. Anyone who wishes to refute the conjunction of both premises should therefore also give *independent* reasons for at least one of them being false, that is, reasons that do not already presuppose that the conclusion of the argument is false. An example of such a reason would be a convincing counterexample to the first premise that is compatible with the argument's conclusion. Denying the conclusion of the argument upfront, in order to point out that one of the premises must be false, isn't an apt objection.

### **13. Do we need to embrace the specific conception of knowledge to accept the argument?**

Here is yet another way to challenge the argument. The argument is based on a specific notion of knowledge, which is merely one of many feasible conceptions of knowledge. And, since no reason is given to adopt this specific conception instead of one of these others, the whole argument is problematic. Is this objection effective? Surely, there are many accounts of knowledge, many views on what it means for a conscious being to know a proposition. But that does not imply that we do have to defend the used conception of knowledge against other alternative conceptions. After all, the argument's premises are *about* the specific conception of knowledge. One does not have to adopt the conception itself in order to accept statements about it. One does not have to accept the claim that the used specific conception is the most adequate conception of knowledge in order to claim that certain properties of it are plausibly true, such as those expressed by the premises of the argument. Consider this analogy. One does not have to embrace a specific interpretation of quantum mechanics in order to accept certain assertions *about* it as plausibly true. Consider the following proposition: '*If* a specific deterministic interpretation of quantum mechanics is true, *then* quantum indeterminacy is an expression of our limited understanding of nature'. One can easily accept this proposition to be true, without being or becoming adherents of a specific deterministic interpretation of quantum mechanics. Similarly, one does not have to embrace the specific conception of knowledge employed for the argument in order to accept claims *about* it. Someone who prefers another conception of knowledge can reason as follows: "I do not embrace the used specific notion of knowledge. Yet, I do accept that, *if* some proposition is possibly true, *then* it is knowable on the specific conception used". And the same holds for any other plausibly true conditional claim concerning the used notion of knowledge for the argument.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> If we denote 'Proposition  $p$  is knowable in the sense of the used specific notion of knowledge' by  $\text{SK}(p)$ , then the first premise of the argument can be rendered as 'For all (first order and rationally believable) propositions  $p$ ,

But isn't the first premise *itself* unknowable on the specific notion of knowledge? If so, the first premise is false. For if it were true, all that is unknowable would be false, including the first premise itself. It therefore cannot be true. However, I would argue that plausibly, it is not metaphysically unknowable that all possible truths are knowable. For God, in those possible worlds where God exists, is the absolute origin of the whole of reality. God is the final source of everything that exists; the ultimate ground of all being. It is thus reasonable to think that God, in those possible worlds where God exists, knows the fundamental nature of being, and hence knows that being is intelligible. In any case, it is reasonable to hold that there is *at least one* possible world in which God exists and knows that being is comprehensible. That is, there is at least one possible world where God exists and knows that there is a close parallel between cognition and reality, that knowledge and being are co-extensive, so that all possible truths are knowable. It is thus reasonable to believe that there is at least one possible world where God exists and knows the first premise. So, the first premise is not metaphysically unknowable.

#### **14. Closing remarks**

In this paper I presented a new argument for the existence of God defined as a personal first cause of the world and argued that various types of challenges against it can be answered. Now, until and unless other objections are proposed and shown convincing, I conclude that the argument is tenable. It raises the likelihood of the existence of a personal first cause of reality and thus of theism over atheism.<sup>19</sup> In any case, I take it that the prior plausibility of

if  $p$  is possibly true, then  $\text{SK}(p)$ ', while the second premise in that case becomes: 'not- $\text{SK}(\text{God does not exist})$ '. Both propositions can be accepted by proponents and opponents of the specific notion of knowledge. Together these premises entail that God necessarily exists, and this conclusion does indeed not refer to  $\text{SK}(\cdot)$  anymore.

<sup>19</sup> Classical theism is often taken to include the claim that God has (one or more of) the 'omni'-attributes, such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence or omnibenevolence. In that case the argument's conclusion does of course not *entail* classical theism.

both premises is higher than that of the proposition that it is necessarily true that a personal first cause of the world exists. Further, the argument does not fall within one of the traditional categories of arguments for the existence of God. For it is not ontological, cosmological or teleological. And it is not phenomenological either, such as for example the aesthetic or moral argument for God's existence. As I mentioned in the introduction, I propose to refer to the argument as a *modal-epistemic* argument. Ways to further improve it may be found, just as has been done with arguments in the other categories. I believe that if this happens, the prospects for the argument are rather promising.

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