

## On arguing for the existence of god as a synthesis between realism and anti-realism

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**Abstract** This article examines a somewhat neglected argument for the existence of God which appeals to the divine perspective as a way of reconciling the conflicting claims of realism and anti-realism. Six representative examples are set out (Berkeley, Ferrier, T. H. Green, Josiah Royce, Gordon Clark and Michael Dummett), reasons are considered why this argument has received less attention than it might, and a brief sketch given of the most promising way in which it might be developed.

**Keywords** Realism · Anti-realism · God · Existence · Berkeley · Ferrier · T. H. Green · Josiah Royce · Gordon Clark · Michael Dummett

In this article I wish to consider a somewhat neglected argument for the existence of God, which works by positing divine being as a way of resolving the apparently conflicting claims of realism and anti-realism. Although never very popular, over the last few centuries it has claimed the allegiance of several eminent, but very different, philosophers, which is reason enough to merit it more consideration than it has received. Because it is not well known and because it has appeared in various different guises, I begin in the first part of the paper by outlining very briefly some representative examples. In the second I draw out the common structure of the argument and suggest three reasons behind its relative neglect. In the final section I sketch out what I consider to be the most promising way in which it might be developed.

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**I**

George Berkeley<sup>1</sup>

We can begin with what is undoubtedly the best-known version of the argument, that due to Berkeley. Berkeley's various lines of argument to his conclusion that the existence of any thing consists in its being perceived may be thought of as taking the empiricist and nominalist elements in Locke's thought and stretching them until they undermine the realist base from which they started. If we are to hold with common-sense that the real world is that which immediately presents itself to us, yet to hold with philosophy that what immediately presents is an idea, the conclusion inevitably follows that objects are just sets of ideas, which exist only so far as they are perceived. However, the attachment to common-sense carries with it realist intuitions also and, notwithstanding his idealist conclusion, Berkeley wishes to hold that we are not the authors of our waking experiences, that things do not cease to exist simply because we no longer perceive them, and that in some sense we all perceive the same world. The mechanism that allows him to do this is God. If divine agency is the cause of our perceptions of material reality, our passivity towards it (and its externality to us) are preserved, while if the divine is omnipresent and eternal we may rest assured that, even when not in our minds, things continue to exist in the infinite mind of God. We may even suppose that, insofar as God's ideas are the archetypes of our own, a sense is preserved in which our experiences are all more or less accurate perceptions of a common reality.

Berkeley's argument has, of course, generated a library of response but points to highlight include the following. It has been widely objected that with respect to continuity of unperceived objects the question has been begged; for while Berkeley is clear that he wishes the argument to be read in the first direction,<sup>2</sup> continuity no more supports the existence of God than does the existence of God support continuity, and it is hard to say, in the abstract, which of these has the greater initial plausibility. The literature contains many possible solutions,<sup>3</sup> and Berkeley is not without resources in this matter but undoubtedly, given his starting point, there is a problem.

Just as troublesome is the fact that even if it is reasonable to suppose things unperceived by us are perceived by some other spirit, or that our ideas are caused by the agency of some other spirit, this in itself is no licence to infer the existence of just *one* (divine) mind. Possibly a collection of different agencies combine together to produce these effects. There is perhaps room for a solution to this worry which appeals to the harmonious co-ordination of different people's experiences,<sup>4</sup> but arguably such a move simply re-locates the original problem within the problem of other minds.

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<sup>1</sup> The argument is most clearly set out in his *Third Dialogue* pp. 230–231. For a more detailed discussion see Jonathan Bennett, 'Berkeley and God'. For a wholehearted supporter see Hastings Rashdall, 'Personality: human and divine' §9.

<sup>2</sup> *Dialogues*, p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Dale Jacquette, 'Berkeley's Continuity Argument'.

<sup>4</sup> George Botterill, 'God and the First Person in Berkeley'.

A third sort of difficulty arises if we shine a critical spotlight on the precise mechanics of the relation between God, material reality and ourselves, and especially on the issue of how to combine the three divine roles of eternal perceiver, cause of human sense perception, and ideal archetype. What is the relation between the experience God has of things when we are not perceiving them and those he causes in us? How can the former come to aid of the latter? And what is the relation between the experiences God gives us and the archetypal ones he himself enjoys? If the latter define things as they really are would that not render reality itself as inaccessible to our experience as Locke's material substance?

James Frederick Ferrier<sup>5</sup>

Our next figure, Ferrier, was much inspired by Berkeley, whose reputation he did a great deal to rehabilitate. But for all his high opinion of Berkelean idealism, Ferrier thinks the position in need of considerable restatement. Moving away from the narrow focus on perception to a broader concern with knowledge as a whole—that is, recognising both our concepts and our sensations in the construction of experience—he argues that, shorn of its limiting subjectivism, Berkeley's true importance turns out to be as a precursor of *absolute idealism*.<sup>6</sup>

Ferrier begins by locating what he takes to be the one essential element in cognition; whatever is known or thought about, we are always also aware of ourselves. Though distinguishable, these two objects of consciousness are not separable, and so the minimum unit of apprehension for any mind is always an-object-together-with-a-subject. This result Ferrier takes as a vindication of idealism; it tells us that matter in itself, the realm of merely primary qualities, is literally inconceivable.<sup>7</sup> The realist may respond that this analysis concerns only what may be known or thought, while our interest is in what actually exists, and that perhaps is something wholly unknown and unthought. But Ferrier responds that ignorance is a privation, and so we can only be ignorant of what *could* be known. Object-plus-subject turns out to be the character, not just of the known, but of the unknown too. The point here is not merely a verbal one about the definition of ignorance, rather Ferrier's claim is that the very notion of the unknowable is contradictory nonsense. We may say of a person that they are insatiable, but to say the same of a stone is meaningless; and in the same way Ferrier is claiming that to assert the unknowability of, for example, the Kantian noumena or the Hamiltonian unconditioned is to speak without meaning. But there is a fly in the ointment for this idealist result, for while it is necessary that there be *some* intelligence to stop reality falling into contradiction Ferrier is clear that human intelligence won't suffice, for there was a universe in existence long before there were any finite minds to

<sup>5</sup> The heart of the argument is set out in his *Institutes of Metaphysics*, Part III, Proposition XI. I know of no discussion of this specific argument in the literature, but for a useful discussion of Ferrier's philosophy more generally see Jenny Keefe, 'James Ferrier and the Theory of Ignorance'.

<sup>6</sup> 'Berkeley and Idealism', p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> It should be added that it tells the same thing about the ego in itself.

appreciate it. Even if we could not be sure of that, even if there were in actuality a succession of finite intelligences co-extensive with the history of the universe, that fact would not help us, for there would be no necessity in the series and it is not contingent but necessary that reality presents to some subject.<sup>8</sup> Ferrier concludes that there exists a God, by whom reality is known, and without whose knowing activity there would be no reality at all.

A key feature of Ferrier's argument is his insistence that the principles he sets out hold for all possible intelligence, not just for human intelligence. Drawing a distinction between what is inconceivable by us and what is absolutely inconceivable, he allows that the compass of thought may extend beyond the limits of actual experience, for we are capable of conceiving that many things which are inconceivable by us are, or may be, conceived by other higher minds.<sup>9</sup>

T. H. Green<sup>10</sup>

A third illustration is to be found in the argument put forward by the British Idealist, T. H. Green, for what he calls 'the eternal consciousness.' Green begins his case with an analysis of the notion of 'reality' suggesting that to be real is to be relational, to belong to the "single and unalterable system of relations"<sup>11</sup> that is reality. But relations, he continues, are 'the work of the mind'<sup>12</sup> drawing the inevitable conclusion that there is no reality independent of mind. However, while reality may depend on thought-constituted relations, Green is equally certain that 'objective nature' must be something more than simply ourselves and our states of consciousness as we normally understand these. We do not 'make nature' if by that is meant that nature is simply a succession of states of personal consciousness, beginning with our birth and ending with our death.<sup>13</sup> Instead, suggests Green, we must think of reality as sustained by the thought of an eternal consciousness, a wider mind in which we participate and which our minds partially express. This he identifies with God.

Green's notion of the eternal consciousness has puzzled many commentators, especially the issue of its relation to our own finite consciousness. It has most commonly been interpreted as a kind of 'over-spirit' that embraces and transcends all our own conscious selves, but more modest views are possible according to which it is interpreted simply as our own inner potential for knowledge.<sup>14</sup> The problem here is not

<sup>8</sup> Appendix to *Institutes of Metaphysics*, p. 501.

<sup>9</sup> *Institutes of Metaphysics*, Introduction §68 (p. 60).

<sup>10</sup> The argument is set out in his *Prolegomena to Ethics*, chapter I. For a more detailed discussion see W. J. Mander, 'In Defence of the Eternal Consciousness'.

<sup>11</sup> *Prolegomena to Ethics* §21.

<sup>12</sup> "Every relation is constituted by an act of conception." 'Lectures on Logic', p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> 'Lectures on Kant', p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Contrast W.J.Mander, 'In Defence of the Eternal Consciousness' and Colin Tyler, *The Liberal Socialism of T. H. Green*, Chap. 4.

wholly Green's, of course, for he is drawing on the familiar notion of 'God within us' which itself permits both non-natural and natural readings.

Josiah Royce<sup>15</sup>

For my next example I want to move forward only a few years and consider an argument from the existence of error put forward by the young Josiah Royce, in his book *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. That error occurs is undeniable, points out Royce, for if we deny it we commit at least to the erroneous belief that it does.<sup>16</sup> But what is error? Error occurs when the thing we refer to is other than we say it is, when our judgement fails to agree with its intended object. It implies that there is a gap between what we judge about the world and what is actually the case. If they are to be in error ideas call for something *other* than themselves about which they err. And yet matters become more complex if we ask ourselves *how* this might come about, for on closer reflection it is hard to see how this gap might open up. How can our judgement fail to agree with its object if the only object it has it that which it describes? A paradox appears. By definition we are in error about what we don't know, but how can we even speak about or refer to the unknown? "About a really Unknowable [writes Royce] nobody could make any sincere and self-consistent assertions that could be errors. For self-consistent assertions about the Unknowable would of necessity be meaningless. And being meaningless, they could not well be false."<sup>17</sup> He proposes an ingenious solution. If all reality is present to a single infinite thought in which, in our very limited and incomplete ways, we participate, then error may be explained as the phenomena in which, in our imperfect consciousness, we partially intend that which a wider thought successfully articulates. Our object of reference is given in the perfectly organised experience that completes it and which characterises the reality we meant, for if there is reference beyond *our* ideas there is no reference beyond *ideas themselves*. Reality just is 'perfectly organised experience.'<sup>18</sup>

But Royce's point is not merely that another sees fully what I grasp only in part, rather he is suggesting that the divine perspective fixes that which I intend but erroneously put, for it is a view in which I actually participate. The puzzling implication of this, that I somehow both known and do not know what I mean, Royce attempts to elucidate by reference to the familiar experience of finally hitting upon a lost name or idea—"That's what I meant all along" we say.<sup>19</sup> But still it must be wondered what it can really mean to say that I or my ideas are parts of another being or its ideas.

<sup>15</sup> The argument is set out in his *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, chapter XI. For more detailed discussion of the argument see W. J. Mander, 'Royce's Argument for the Absolute'.

<sup>16</sup> *Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, p. 395.

<sup>17</sup> *Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, p. 401.

<sup>18</sup> "To talk of any reality which [our] fragmentary experience indicates, is to conceive this reality as the content of [a] more organized experience" (*Conception of God*, p. 42).

<sup>19</sup> *Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. 371.

Gordon H. Clarke<sup>20</sup>

It might be thought that the argument that is being illustrated here is a version of Augustine's celebrated argument from truth,<sup>21</sup> however Augustine's case focuses solely on necessary or eternal truth, while the argument which we are considering takes a wider canvas which includes anything whatever that is the case; reality in its broadest sense. Nonetheless, it is possible to formulate the argument by appeal to the notion of truth, as is shown by our next example due to the American Philosopher of religion, Gordon Clark. Clark begins by endorsing the idealistic claim that "The object of knowledge is a proposition, a meaning, a significance; it is a thought."<sup>22</sup> He argues that both scepticism and relativism are self-refuting, and so there must exist knowledge (and with it truth—for there could be no knowledge without truth.) But rejecting empiricism, the theory that knowledge emerges out of the contact between a blank and passive mind and some non-mental reality, on the grounds that that would make knowledge impossible, he concludes that truth is "mental or spiritual," and that without mind, there could be no truth. However, unlike human minds which are constantly changing, he argues, the truth is immutable and eternal—"What is true today always has been and always will be true"—from which it follows that we are not its source. It did not begin when we were born, but has always existed. Clark then continues:

"Is all this any more than the assertion that there is an eternal, immutable Mind, a Supreme Reason, a personal living God? The truths or propositions that may be known are the thoughts of God, the eternal thought of God. And insofar as man knows anything he is in contact with God's mind"<sup>23</sup>

Clark's argument to his idealist conclusion is not very sophisticated or original while his claim that truth is greater than any individual mind rises little above the intuitive, but what is of particular interest about his argument is the way he connects its conclusion with St Paul's thought, that it is in God that we live and move and have our being,<sup>24</sup> and with the philosophy of Nicholas Malebranche. He writes, "Even if the details of Malebranche's philosophy cannot be accepted, yet it must be insisted that God is the 'place' of spirits. Minds are not impenetrable pellets. Even human minds in some degree overlap or penetrate each other, and the divine mind that encloses or surrounds all others penetrates them completely."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The argument is set out in *A Christian View of Men and Things*, pp. 318–323. It is briefly discussed in R.H.Nash, *Faith and Reason*, pp. 161–167.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Freedom of the Will*, Bk. II. This argument from eternal truth was further developed in thinking of Aquinas (*De Veritate*, Qu. 1, Art. 2, Reply) and Leibniz (*Monadology* § 43) among others, and has even found modern supporters (see T. V. Morris & C. H. Menzel, 'Absolute Creation'). Contra the assertion of Alvin Plantinga ('How to be an anti-realist' p. 68), however, it must be distinguished from the argument under consideration in this paper.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 319.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 321.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 17:28.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p. 322.

Michael Dummett<sup>26</sup>

By way of a final example I want to consider Michael Dummett's argument for the existence of God from his 1996 Gifford lectures, which has attracted less attention than might have been expected. Dummett's argument grows out of his well-known justificationist theory of meaning. Taking up the plausible suggestion that the meaning of a proposition may be given by the circumstances in which it would be true or false, he points out that this proposal remains incomplete without some further account of what it is for a proposition to be true or false. But if to understand the meaning of words is to understand how they are actually used (including the way in which they are taught and learned) then the understanding of truth-conditions which any understanding of meaning involves must be similarly embedded in actual practice. To know the meaning of a proposition will be to possess the ability to *recognise* its truth or falsity, to determine when it has been positively confirmed or refuted. One consequence of this position is a rejection of bivalence for propositions for which there is no way of settling their truth value—there is no inaccessible 'fact of the matter' one way or the other—which as Dummett realises is to reject at least one important sense in which someone might be a 'realist'. The metaphysical implications of this are far-reaching. We may think of a world as a totality of propositions,<sup>27</sup> which are built of concepts. But since different creatures possess different conceptual vocabularies, they must all think different worlds and the notion of 'the world as it is in itself not to any view' must be a vacuous one.<sup>28</sup> Science seeks descriptions which do not depend upon any point of view, but it manages this only by abstracting from the concrete texture of things into abstract mathematical models and it makes no sense to identify any such "skeletal abstract structure"<sup>29</sup> with things in themselves.<sup>30</sup> Yet we retain a "conviction that there is such a thing as the world as it is in itself."<sup>31</sup> We suppose that there exist creatures other than ourselves, with perhaps very different experiences and thoughts—We may even say they inhabit other worlds—but our deeper intuition is that their viewpoints are partial or distorted windows on to one single world.<sup>32</sup> A similar feeling lies behind the frustration we feel in trying to integrate together the various different conceptual schemes that we ourselves can employ to capture our experience.<sup>33</sup> The solution to the problem is theistic, suggests Dummett. Where it is senseless to speak of a world independently of how it is apprehended, if there is one world as it is in itself, "this one world must be the world as it is apprehended by some mind, yet not *in any particular*

<sup>26</sup> The argument is set out in his *Thought and Reality* chapter 8. For more detailed discussion Andrew Beards, 'Dummett: Philosophy and Religion' and Benjamin Murphy 'Review of *Thought and Reality*'.

<sup>27</sup> Because the world is the totality of facts, and facts are true propositions (*Thought and Reality*, p. 17).

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> "Because [such] models are abstract, having only structure but in themselves, no content, we can get no grip on what it would be for them to exist" Dummett, 'Reply to McGuinness', p. 358.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100.

way, or from any one perspective rather than any other, but simply as it is.”<sup>34</sup> This is the mind of God, and thus “the price of denying that God exists is to relinquish the idea that there is such a thing as how reality it in itself.”<sup>35</sup> It is important to realise that what is proposed here is more than simply an appeal to the omniscience of God. “God’s knowledge of things *constitutes* their being as they are”, argues Dummett, and for this reason he is rightly called Creator.<sup>36</sup>

There are, of course, many things that might be said in relation to this argument. But let me note just one. A crucial step in the argument is that God apprehends the world from no place *within* it. This is what grounds the claim that he apprehends reality *as it is in itself*. But in truth this is a very difficult notion. If we are to reject talk of the world as it is not to any view can we really accept the notion of a view from no place within the world; for how can there be a viewpoint without some context to frame it?

## II

We may now turn to look at the core argument which the foregoing brief examples illustrate, each in their own slightly different way. The heart of the case has been expressed with great clarity by Alvin Plantinga, who writes:

what we really have here is a sort of antinomy. On the one hand there is a deep impulse towards anti-realism; there can’t really be truths independent of noetic activity. On the other hand there is the disquieting fact that anti-realism... seems incoherent and otherwise objectionable. We have here a paradox seeking resolution, a thesis and antithesis seeking synthesis.... The thesis... is that truth cannot be independent of noetic activity on the part of persons. The antithesis is that it must be independent of our noetic activity. And the synthesis is that truth is independent of our intellectual activity but not of God’s.<sup>37</sup>

We find ourselves pulled in two directions at once.<sup>38</sup> It is unclear by what means sense may be given to talk of reality which is wholly unexperienced or unthought. Recognizing that apprehension may be through different faculties, from different perspectives, under different conceptual schemes or with different eyes, we may form the notion of *known existence*; but with this we have reached our maximal abstraction, and there is no further abstraction which could take us from that point to the thought of *being* or *existence in itself*; that which is, but is not captured in any mode of thought. Yet common sense rebels at the suggestion that creatures as limited and contingent as we are might yet be the authors of the very form and measure of reality itself. Reflection on known reality further suggests that it is infinite, that our knowledge of it could

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

<sup>35</sup> Dummett, *The Future and Nature of Philosophy*, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> Alvin Plantinga, ‘How to be an anti-realist’, p. 68.

<sup>38</sup> Realism and anti-realism should not be thought of as two contrasting *positions* but rather as two contrasting *tendencies* or *directions* of thinking.

never be finished,<sup>39</sup> but that can only be fact if there exists also some infinite mind for which it is so. That is to say, resolution of our opposing intuitions is found in the hypothesis that while there can be nothing independent of divine cognition—nothing external to thought itself—there may yet be much that lies outside the compass of *our* thinking. In this fashion, an infinite mind which apprehends all reality takes the sting out of anti-realism, for ‘God’s knowledge’ is another way of speaking about ‘the way things really are’.

Despite its impressive register of advocates this argument for the existence of God (which for ease of reference we may call the argument from synthesis) has attracted little critical attention, and it is worth reflecting on some of the reasons why that should be. In the first place it might be objected that, ‘The argument is simply for people who can’t make up their minds. Anyone with genuine anti-realist sympathies will have no time for the second premise, while any robust realist will have no time for the first. The argument is just an unfortunate compromise.’ Now, it is certainly true that many, from both camps, will be suspicious of any dealings with the enemy or carp at the price of peace, but in a dispute as long-running as this where neither party has ever been prepared to accept defeat and leave the field it is (I would suggest) more tempting to turn this objection upside down, and argue that in light of their perennial appeal, any argument which offers to combine both sides thereby claims a certain *prima facie* attraction. To be sure the argument unfolds in a region of constant tension between them—press too firmly on either side and it begins to make trouble for the other—but that in itself is no reason to discount it.

A second reason why the argument has not received more attention than it might stems from its structure. The reasoning presents a dilemma followed by a reconciliation, however, the last step is clearly not a deductive one but rather an instance of *inference to the best explanation*. An hypothesis is proposed that would harmoniously combine the two seemingly opposed sides. This form of argument is robust enough where we can be sure that the one we propose is indeed the best explanation possible — or even available — but unfortunately in the current case there exists another apparently well-qualified rival candidate. It may be suggested that we take a modal approach to the problem and identify the adequate perspective which defines reality, not as something that actually exists, but merely as something possible that *would* exist were the appropriate circumstances to come about. There are various different versions of this basic scheme; we could say with Kant that the real world is coextensive with the realm of possible experience, with the phenomenalist that objects are sets of possible sensations, with the pragmatist that the truth is the opinion that sufficiently prolonged inquiry would converge on, or with ideal observer theory that it is what an ideally rational and fully informed scientific community of inquirers would believe. But whatever model we use, the point is that we make no commitment to the current existence of anything. If the argument to the existence of God is to go through, this weaker alternative conclusion must be ruled out.

<sup>39</sup> That reality is infinite is highly plausible, at least with regard to spatio-temporal extent and divisibility. An argument that it must actually be so was developed by Royce in his *The World and the Individual*, vol. I, supplementary essay.

Of all the thinkers considered above, the one who paid the greatest attention to this problem was Josiah Royce, for (it might be challenged) what more is needed to make sense of error than the *possibility* of its discovery? Royce responds that nothing can be *barely* possible—that whatever might be the case is so only in virtue of some underlying actuality—and specifically that error can occur only if there takes place some *actual* intention to refer to the object that we inadequately grasp.<sup>40</sup> If we define reality in terms of what *could be* experienced, we must acknowledge that only the smallest fragment of it ever *is* concretely grasped in actual experience, which ought to make us wonder just what sort of being is possessed by a possible experience when it is still only possible. Just like the denuded mathematical structures which so worried Dummett, it is hard to suppose that such abstract universals are really what we mean when we speak of reality itself.<sup>41</sup> In more recent times, Alvin Plantinga has tried to use modal logic to reach essentially the same result, urging that any definition of reality in terms of what an ideal inquirer would believe commits to the necessary existence of such an inquirer.<sup>42</sup>

By way of a third complaint it might be objected that the argument is too programmatic or sketchy for fruitful philosophic consideration. Its outline structure is clear enough—realism and anti-realism come together in a theistic synthesis—but, as our examples have shown, there are so many varied ways to fill in its basic steps, resulting in very different overall arguments, that at this level of generality there is insufficient detail for philosophical analysis to gain any useful purchase. It is a little as though someone were to ask us, baldly, how to become famous. There are just so many different kinds of fame, calling for wholly different programmes of action, that the question can only be addressed with any effectiveness if reframed in some more specific form.

Now, the observation on which this objection rests cannot be disputed. For one thing, hailing as they do from different philosophical eras and climates, the samples canvassed above employ different conceptual structures in which to frame their problematic. Berkeley is concerned with the status of perceived objects and qualities, Ferrier with the objects of knowledge, Green and Royce with judgements, Clark with truths, Dummett and Plantinga with propositions. For another thing, the realisms and anti-realisms between which they offer mediation are of several different kinds. Berkeley's anti-realism puts perception centre stage (to be is to be perceived), but other versions prioritize conception (all thought and experience are structured by our own concepts), verifiability or falsifiability—even pragmatic notions of what works or might be agreed upon (now or in the future). And a similar variability may be found among the realisms. The key thought may be that there is more to reality than just what I or we apprehend (for example, the distant past, the microscopically small, outer space, or things beyond the limited range of our senses); alternatively it may be an anti-relativist intuition that there exists just one shared world, that even if our various attempts to capture truth are fragmentary and haphazard, without pattern or system, there is for all that a common reality they attempt to hold on to, one which anchors

<sup>40</sup> *Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, pp. 426–430. See also *Conception of God*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>41</sup> *The World and the Individual*, volume I, p. 260.

<sup>42</sup> Alvin Plantinga, 'How to be an anti-realist', pp. 64–67. Needless to say this argument has proved controversial.

and accounts for their various partialities; again, the realism may rest on the thought that knowing makes no difference to what is known, the intuition that things are ‘there anyway’ whether we apprehend them or not; different again, realism may find its base in the need to maintain a distinction between appearance and reality, for clearly at least some of what we commonly experience must be downgraded as in some way or other unreal or subjective.

Acknowledging this inexactness, and the fact that judgements of validity are possible only where one is faced with a detailed argument, in the final section of the paper I sketch out the version of the argument that I regard as having the best chance of being sound. I do so, however, with a word of caution. Philosophical arguments are like weeds. Any individual may be destroyed, but where the roots remain, another very similar one will often enough spring up in the same place. No one would imagine that by dismissing some specific version of, say, the ontological, cosmological or teleological, argument for the existence of God that they had seen the last of that general line of reasoning about divine existence. A recurrent temptation will always find a new formulation, and the fate of such arguments does not really stand or fall with that of any one of their instances. In the same way, I would suggest, that the ever present possibility of appealing to the divine perspective as a way of combining realism and anti-realism gives to this argument a perennial interest that floats free of any of its more specific constructions.

### III

If the anti-realist limb of the argument sets out from too individualist or subjective a starting point it undercuts the possibility of its own antithetical realist limb. This problem is most clearly illustrated in the case of Berkeley. Like all of the classical empiricists, Berkeley adopts a first person psychological stance with respect to knowledge, but notoriously this makes it difficult for him to justify not merely his belief in unperceived objects but his commitment to any species of externality, including both God and other minds. His much-maligned ‘master argument’<sup>43</sup> is easy to critique on the grounds that he ought properly to have concluded against the existence, not simply of things unperceived, but more solipsistically of things *unperceived by me now*; while nearly all the attention that has been directed at his argument for the existence of God from the continuity of material objects has focused on the problem of how (without begging the question) he can substantiate the claim that objects *do* continue to exist when he no longer perceives them.

However, there was no need for Berkeley to start where he did. The ‘egocentric predicament,’<sup>44</sup> once widely taken to confront all philosophy, is nowadays equally often recognised to be a spurious problem, for the challenge of how we may pass beyond the conception of our own mind to the conception of that which is other than our own mind dissolves once it is recognised that these are correlative concepts which arise together as a reciprocal pair. There can be no subject without an object, no ‘in here’

<sup>43</sup> *Principles* §23, *Dialogues*, p. 200.

<sup>44</sup> R.B.Perry, ‘The Egocentric Predicament’.

without an ‘out there’. Only when some external content is given to consciousness can we become self-conscious, for until then there is no awareness to become reflectively aware of. Just as we learn of our own physical bodies only in touching and being touched by the physical world, so we come to grasp our own subjectivity only in and through our encounter with objective reality. This is the lesson of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction. But similarly there can be no understanding of ourselves without an understanding of other minds, no ‘I’ without a ‘we’. If it is to rise to self-awareness, mind must become simultaneously both the subject and the object of its own knowing, but we can only comprehend what it means to think of ourselves as an object of awareness if we can appreciate how some other would see us, that is to say, if we can form the conception of another mind. As children begin by speaking about themselves in the third person, a grasp of how others identify us is a prerequisite for any ability to identify ourselves. This is the lesson of Hegel’s derivation of self-consciousness in his *Phenomenology*.

These two points taken, the base line from which philosophy starts is not the view that reality is known *by me*, or even *by us*, but simply the view that reality is *known*; for the relativity of everything to knowledge is indeed inescapable. Our natural first intuition is that the world is known in being given through sensory experience, but the clearly subjective and perspectival nature of such encounters casts doubt on that suggestion and encourages us to extend and develop one particular aspect of perceptual experience—present in it from the start—and *think* our way to a more objective stance; that is, to come to understand the world by placing it under (increasingly adequate) concepts. These concepts through which our grasp of the world is structured cannot be isolated and set apart as specific elements within our experience, but rather penetrate and colour everything, such that it is not possible to take our knowledge and separate out from it the knowing process leaving only the known. However, it must be remembered that even though they move away from the subjective limitations of sense experience, concepts themselves are always inherently mental. That is to say, a system of concepts form a world whose inter-linkages are internal ones of logic or meaning, rather than external ones of proximity or causation. We may suppose that our conceptual lenses are broadly transparent, so that reality outside thought would not be so different from thought reality, but with no way of ever taking off our cognitive glasses that is certainly not something we could ever have reason to believe, nor is it something we can even properly *think*, for while they may not be equivalent expressions we can no more abstract off and subtract ‘our thought of the world’ from ‘the world we are thinking of’ than we can a thing from its properties or a conscious self from its states. The upshot is that we can make no sense of reality other than reality apprehended in some act of cognition.

It is no objection to this result that there was surely a world before there was sentience, for this is something we have good reason to believe and so, while it may take us beyond the compass of experience it does not take us beyond the scope of thought. Events revealed to us by science as having taken place before there were any creatures to experience or think them should not be thought of as though they did not belong to our phenomenal world. As T.H.Green argued, limit ‘our experience’ to simply our current sensory experiences and it is no ‘world’ at all, but if we extend it to include the factors that determine those feelings there is no reason why it cannot stretch back

before the emergence of sentience.<sup>45</sup> More problematic is the fact that different cognitive perspectives apprehend the world in different ways, for we want to think that there is a single world of which they all attempt to take hold, a single way things actually are. This may prove inaccessible to our cognition, but the very aspiration of knowledge itself presupposes its reality.

That this is one of our strongest intuitions is apparent as soon as we try to countenance its denial, the suggestion that there might obtain multiple points of view or interpretations but no central reality to arbitrate between them.<sup>46</sup> At one level that might seem to make sense; after all, there are many interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but further unique object ('the play itself') of which these are all interpretations, and often there is no need to choose between different biographies of the same person.<sup>47</sup> But pressed further the attempt to work out such a position undermines itself. We may suppose that there exists nothing but an aggregate of individual thought-worlds, and in so doing find that we have fallen back into a single overarching point of view which describes how things really are. A single higher-level narrative emerges in which differing stories sit neatly side by side, no longer pictures in their own right but pieces of a larger jig-saw.

If the way things are must be distinguished from the way they are to any particular point of view, it yet remains the case that reality can in no way be conceived except through the lens of awareness, and so the intuition that there is a unique reality must not be equated with the intuition that that reality has an existence outside and independent of all cognition. If the way things are must be known, but our own knowledge can yield only the way they seem to one particular point of view, then it is natural to propose that they are known by God, by one who knows the world but not from any place within it, by the one who occupies 'the view from nowhere'.

But what exactly does it *mean* to cast ultimate reality in terms of what is 'known by God'? The complaint could well be raised here that realism is being given a wholly unconstrained free-run for, unknown by us, the category of 'known-by-God' begins to look like just another mysterious inaccessible in-itself. In other words, simply designating ultimate reality 'known-by-God' is not necessarily by itself enough to satisfy the anti-realist. How might one respond to this objection? It is true that our nature and context shape and circumscribe all our thinking but, as Ferrier clearly saw, we must recognise too that in at least one sense we can see beyond our own conceptual circumference. As I can only speak and think the languages which I do, but had things been otherwise might have been able to speak and think in different languages, so I can at least recognise the possibility of my having thoughts which are in fact, as things actually stand, unavailable to me. This trick of 'conceiving the inconceivable' works by regarding cognitive capacity *indirectly* as a function of our nature and circumstances and, insofar as these may sensibly be changed, as something which can be gradually altered and, especially, extended. As each horizon is crossed a new and larger one may come into view. In ways such as this, the realist can make good sense of the thought

<sup>45</sup> Green, 'Lectures on Kant', p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> Such a conception of reality has been defended by Leslie Armour, 'Error and the Idealists'.

<sup>47</sup> And certainly we would not want to privilege autobiography over biography as necessarily 'truer' or 'definitive'.

that we are but small creatures in a very much larger world; he can, for example, make sense of the notion of that which scientific inquiry would converge upon.

This method is not without its weak points, however, and where we introduce any sudden break into its gradual progression the more sceptically minded anti-realist may refuse to follow us. The attempt to pass from finite to infinite cognition is arguably, just such a radical step; for what (we may ask) can it really mean to say that God has a perspectival-less view of reality, that he grasps the whole universe but from particular place within it? Surely, if experienced, an object must be experienced *from somewhere*, while the notion of an object as it is in itself rather than from some perspective is precisely the notion of any object without regard to any experience of it. Perhaps, however, the puzzling notion can be given some motivation as follows. Different experiences may be combined together in a further experience, a wider one that includes them both. Past views, for example, are not simply abandoned, but taken up into our current understanding. Similarly our visual and tactile frameworks are combined together into one unified sensory experience. But, it will be asked, must not any wider experience itself be from some point of view? Perhaps not; for it may be argued that perspectives require contrast. We pick out one perspective as different from another; something is seen from one point of view rather than another. A perspective is always partial, something which might be set against another perspective, something with a rival. It is the view from here as opposed to the view from there, the view from the front as opposed to the view from the side, the view from above as opposed to the view from below. Were an experience to encompass or bring together all possible experiences, however, it could have no contrasting experience. As a structure combining together different experiences, it would itself be an experience, but as something unique without any contrasting way of grasping its content, it could not properly be thought of as a perspective or point of view. To put it paradoxically the view that combines together all possible views can have no rival, there can be no ‘from there’ to contrast with its ‘from here’ and so it is not really a viewpoint at all.

To the anti-realist argument that is being developed here the dependence of reality on thought is not ancillary or external. Universals or concepts provide the very stuff and substance of reality. The world manifests or expresses concepts, such that if we can make no sense of reality apart from concepts and no sense of concepts apart from thought, then we can make no sense of reality apart from thought. We may truly say that thought creates reality. But if the world cannot be external to mind, then it cannot be external to God’s mind either and so what the proposed synthesis between realism and anti-realism amounts to is reality a species of panentheism. Things the way they really are in and through God’s knowing them to be that way.

This strong idealistic implication, no doubt, gives us a further reason why the argument from synthesis has not been more popular than it has. Alvin Plantinga, for example, while keen to appropriate that part of the argument which points to the existence of an omniscient being is less welcoming of this more extreme implication, and attempts to extricate himself from it.<sup>48</sup> Being true and being believed by God are co-extensive, he allows, but the explanatory relation goes from the latter to the former;

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<sup>48</sup> Alvin Plantinga, ‘How to be an anti-realist’, pp. 69–70.

God knows things because they are true, they are not true because he knows them. However, a distinction needs to be drawn between the truth of a proposition and its existence, he suggests; for matters are quite different with respect *existence*; even if propositions are not true because God thinks them, they *exist* because God thinks or conceives them, propositions being regarded as nothing but the thoughts of God. This defensive strategy depends upon drawing a hard distinction between the truth and the existence of a proposition, but in the divine context this distinction is unsustainable. Since God has no false thoughts, there seems no scope for drawing any such distinction between God's thinking something and its truth.

If things are real in and through God's knowing them, the question raises itself in what sense we too may know them? What access have we to the real world which God knows? The simplest answer to this puzzle would appeal to the notion of correspondence. If divine experience fixes reality, then our experience is of the same reality in so far as it matches that ideal; to the degree that our ideas duplicate the divine archetypes. This is the answer that Berkeley gives in setting out his immaterialist system, but few have found it convincing, for while the substitution of qualitative for numerical 'sameness' may save the phenomena it lets slip the underlying intuition.<sup>49</sup> We do not live in the same world in the sense that we read the same books. A genuine fashion in which our minds connect with the very same objects as God's may be found if we abandon the assumption that different minds cannot overlap, allowing instead that our grasp of the world may be a genuine part (albeit small and one-sided) of God's all-inclusive vision. We find such thoughts in highly rationalistic systems such as those of Spinoza or Hegel, but such schemes are not the exclusive property of rationalist metaphysicians. Something very similar may be found, for instance, in the Calvinistic theologian Jonathan Edwards. Edwards is a phenomenalist, but his belief that God is the only true cause -that everything we experience is immediately produced by God—leads him to reason that nothing can possibly be found apart from God to under gird, contain, individuate, or sustain the different phenomena we experience. Without power to persist beyond the moment, what is experienced at each second is a new creation which, having no strict identity with anything past, can be individuated only according to principles of identity which issue from God as surely as do the phenomena themselves. Crucially for Edwards what holds for the material realm holds equally for the spiritual; an individual mind too is nothing but a sequence of divinely created ideas grouped on divine principles. With no intelligible sense in which they may be thought of as separate or independent entities, material things and mind thus become 'parts' of God; limited aspects, perhaps, but not autonomous beings.<sup>50</sup> As proper parts of God's knowledge the reference to reality of our own ideas is secured, but as merely parts their limited and perspectival character is retained.

The sketch given above is too brief to stand as a fully articulated argument for the existence of God, and no attempt has been made to anticipate and rebut potential objections. The outline suffices to show, however, that the ambition of combining our anti-realist intuitions, that the understanding of reality can never transcend the

<sup>49</sup> *Dialogues*, pp. 247–248.

<sup>50</sup> For recent discussion see W. Wainwright, 'Jonathan Edwards, God, and 'particular minds''.

cognition in which it is given to us, and our realist intuitions, that there is a single way in which things rally are, still offers philosophers an attractive route for the construction of such an argument.

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