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Natural Theology and Epistemic Justification

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First it is argued that the linkage of natural theology to epistemology is invalid historically, epistemologically and metaphysically. Second it is argued that knowledge claims about the ultimate cause of everything should be evaluated not in terms of justified true belief but in terms of the intellectual virtue of wisdom.

1. INTRODUCTION

William Alston has offered a definition of natural theology that is gaining acceptance. He defines it as ‘the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs.’¹ This definition links natural theology with epistemology and logic. For the ‘support’ in question is the intellectual support for, or justification of, religious beliefs, and the term ‘premises’ obviously belongs to the context of arguments. Thus natural theology is understood as sound philosophical arguments in defence of a religion. Such an understanding agrees, of course, with William Paley’s modern classic *Natural Theology: Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*.²

However, in this paper I argue briefly against this epistemological notion of natural theology. I argue first that the linking of natural theology to epistemology is invalid historically, epistemologically, and metaphysically. I then proceed to argue that knowledge claims about the ultimate cause of everything should be evaluated not in terms of justified true belief but in terms of the intellectual virtue of wisdom.

2. NATURAL THEOLOGY

Let us start with the notion of natural theology.

First, conceiving natural theology epistemologically is historically problematic at least. For several studies have in different ways established that it was only during the so-called Enlightenment that natural theology began to be used in order to justify individual acts of faith or religious belief.³ To justify individual acts of faith is clearly the business of, say, John Locke, Immanuel Kant and William Paley. From the late seventeenth century to most of the twentieth century universally accessible evidence for the existence and revelation of God was generally thought to be necessary in order for faith to be justified.⁴ So, by linking natural theology with epistemology the project of evidentialist apologetics

developed.⁵ However, this epistemological notion of natural theology is at best historically very narrow, if not anachronistic.

This leads us, second, to the question whether or not the epistemological assumptions of this notion of natural theology are valid. Evidentialism (the theory of the necessity of inferential evidence for the justification of (religious) belief) is based on foundationalism (the theory according to which there are two kinds of beliefs: basic and inferential ones). However, even granting foundationalism, it does not follow that religious beliefs must be inferential. Modern foundationalism just presumes that belief in God cannot be basic, and (if at all) that there can only be inferential evidence for the existence of God. However, whether we should be atheists, agnostics or theists cannot be validly assumed by epistemology, but has to be argued by metaphysics.⁶

Third, natural theology need not and must not make any assumptions whether theistic or atheistic. Traditionally natural theology is not a theological but a philosophical discipline.⁷ For traditional metaphysics grows out of the recognition that some beings do not depend on matter for their existence. Philosophy of nature (*physica*) culminates with a demonstration of the efficient cause of the material world. From the investigation of being as such, or being as being, metaphysics maintains that every being of experience is composite, imperfect and finite, and therefore requires an explanation in terms of something else. Much traditional metaphysics then explains whatever exists or can exist – why there is something rather than nothing – in terms of a first cause. It is at this stage that metaphysics is traditionally called ‘first philosophy’, ‘natural theology’ or simply ‘theology’ (in a non-revelatory sense). For the absolutely independent first cause is commonly called ‘God’. Thus, traditionally natural theology is not an ‘enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs’ but a self-standing philosophical discipline. For it does not presuppose any ‘religious beliefs’, but only the possibility of immaterial being and the intrinsic importance of the question why there is something rather than nothing. To be sure, natural theology starts traditionally ‘from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs’, but not in order to provide ‘support for religious beliefs’.

So, whereas the epistemological notion of natural theology is not valid historically, epistemologically and metaphysically, the traditional notion is valid.

3. EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

Having argued against the linking of natural theology with epistemology, I do not however, deny the validity of evaluating truth claims. In particular can and ought the claim that there is a God be evaluated.

I think, however, that we should not limit epistemology to a narrow view inherited from the late seventeenth century. Epistemology on this narrow conception bases the evaluation of knowledge on the notion of justified true belief. To many philosophers this approach seems now to have come to an impasse in the debates over foundationalism and coherentism on the one hand, and over externalism and internalism on the other.⁸ It is moreover agents who believe and not beliefs that take on believers, and therefore the evaluation of agents is more basic than that of beliefs. So, I suggest that we explore an agent-based epistemology as opposed to a belief-based epistemology.

Focusing then on the knowing agent, it is generally held that the object of the power of the intellect is to take things to be true.⁹ Now, the good of any power, or that which brings

a power to completion, is operation in accordance with its power. So the good of the intellect is properly taking things to be true in the best possible way.

The activity of any human power can, moreover, be improved, enhanced, and so become more effective in act. For our powers are indeterminate in operating either badly or well. But we can choose to exercise any power to act well, not only accidentally, but essentially. Such operative strength in between power and act is traditionally called ‘disposition’ (*habitus*) or ‘virtue’ (*virtus*). These perfections of human powers according to their natures are called ‘dispositions’, because they take hold of both subject (persons) and object (powers); and they are called ‘virtues’, because they strengthen the operation of powers. In short, they bring a human power to completion in attaining whatever is its good. Such dispositions are in turn specified according to the powers of which they are perfections, and so they perfect either the intellect or the will by intellectual and moral virtues respectively.

Epistemology does not, of course, evaluate moral virtues, but intellectual virtues. Traditionally there are three virtues of the intellect: understanding (*nous*), scientific reasoning (*episteme*) and wisdom (*sophia*).¹⁰ First, the intellectual virtue of *understanding* is knowing something to be true on account of the meaning of the terms in which it is expressed. Among such self-evident propositions are ‘something cannot both be and not be in the same respect’ and ‘an extended whole is greater than any of its parts’. Although the intellect has the power in itself to form such first principles, it is an intellectual disposition of forming them easily and accurately. Second, the intellectual virtue of *scientific reasoning* is knowing *why* something is certainly true. It is, of course, also good to know *that* something is probably true than not, but that does not perfect the intellect’s power of holding something to be true. For knowing *why* something is true is better than knowing that it is true. This disposition of reasoning is found in the sciences of nature, mathematics, history, society and so forth. But, although the intellect has the power in itself to form arguments, it is an intellectual disposition of forming such easily and accurately. Last, the virtue of *wisdom* is knowing the ultimate cause of everything; knowing *why* there is something rather than nothing. When wisdom is acquired the intellect is fully perfected. For in order to reach such knowledge of everything that is insofar as it is, habituation of the intellect both by understanding and scientific reasoning is required. It is practised in what is traditionally called first philosophy and metaphysics, or simply (natural) theology, since it is taken to attain knowledge of God as the cause on whom every being depends. Although the intellect has this power in itself to form arguments about the ultimate cause of everything, it is an intellectual disposition or virtue of forming such easily and accurately.

This agent-based approach to epistemology is preferable to the belief-based one in that the good of wisdom – from which philosophy even takes its name – cannot be analyzed as a function of beliefs but as strictly dependent on the standpoint of a person. The advantage of evaluating intellectual acts in this broader perspective, is also that wisdom is commonly taken to influence not only knowledge but action, and arguments to the ultimate cause is generally expected not only to change our minds but also our lives. Indeed, Aristotle connects contemplation of the divine with human happiness.¹¹ This stands in marked contrast to conceiving natural theology merely as a matter of epistemology and logic. For the wise person judges everything in relation to the ultimate cause easily and accurately. He or she has been disposed to lead a life in connection with the cause of everything – whatever it is. Wisdom has strengthened his or her intellect to perfection in contemplating why there is something rather than nothing.¹²

4. CONCLUSION

So I conclude that we should not conceive natural or philosophical theology epistemologically for historical, epistemological and metaphysical reasons. We should rather consider it in accordance with tradition as a strictly metaphysical discipline. I conclude also that we should not evaluate knowledge claims of why there is something rather than nothing in terms of justified true belief, but in terms of the intellectual virtue of wisdom.¹³

Notes

1 William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1991) 190. A similar understanding is expressed in Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2 ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) 91–92. A recent interdisciplinary conference on natural theology held at the University of Oxford 23–25 June 2008, began the ‘Aim of the Conference’ with Alston’s definition (http://www.naturaltheology.org/beyondpaley_aim.html). Last accessed 29/09/09.) Norman Kretzmann thought that he ‘couldn’t do better than’ quoting Alston for ‘an authoritative general account of its [i.e. natural theology’s] nature and status’: Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas’s Natural Theology in Summa contra gentiles I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 2 n. 2. It is similarly used in Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) 7, Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4 ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 168, Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Nature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) 241.

2 William Paley, *Natural Theology: Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, ed. Matthew D. Eddy and David Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 1802).

3 For example, Guy de Broglie, ‘La vraie notion thomiste des praembula fidei,’ *Gregorianum* 34 (1953): 341–389, Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,’ in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 38–81, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 118–133, John Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anne M. Blackburn and Thomas D. Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

4 In the context of the so-called Enlightenment there was ‘an appeal made by rationalists and empiricists alike to limit religion to those grounds, whether *a priori* [conceptual] or experiential, which are available to all people, at all times, and in all places. The contrast is [...] between reason and faith, in so far as the latter is tied to special revelation and a particular “church.”’ Merold Westphal, ‘Modern Philosophy of Religion,’ in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 112.

5 ‘Evidentialist apologetics is a strategy’, according to Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘for the construction of support beneath’ faith or religious belief: Wolterstorff, ‘The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,’ 79.

6 ‘There is a presumption in favor of atheism.’ Ibid. Perhaps there can only be a presumption for what exists and not for what does not exist. ‘The principle of Credulity claims only that how things seem positively to be is evidence of how they are; but how things seem *not* to be is not such evidence.’ Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* 92.

7 Plato *Republic* VI, *Timaeus* and *Laws* X, Aristotle *Physics* VII, VIII and *Metaphysics* XII.vi-viii, Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, vol. 43, *Opera omnia* (Roma: Editori di San Tommaso, 1976, 1252–1256) II.xvii.1 and IV.x, Thomas Aquinas, *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium seu Summa contra Gentiles*, ed. P. Marc, C. Pera, and P. Caramello (Taurini/Rome: Marietti, 1961, 1259–65) II.xvii.1 and IV.x, Thomas Barlow, *Exercitaciones aliquot metaphysicae de Deo*, 2 ed. (Oxford: Lichfield, 1658).

8 In Ernest Sosa, ‘The Raft and the Pyramid,’ in *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology*, ed. Ernest Sosa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 1980), 165–191, suggested a solution to this that has become a cotton industry, namely virtue epistemology. ‘What is today called “virtue epistemology” is a sprawling, diverse, even chaotic territory.’ William P. Alston, *Beyond ‘Justification’: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) 153. For overview, see Heather Battaly, ‘Virtue Epistemology,’ *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008): 1–25, and Guy Axtell, ‘Introduction,’ in *Knowledge, Belief, and Character: Readings in Virtue Epistemology*, ed. Guy Axtell (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). To my knowledge the earliest evidence of this changed direction of epistemological evaluation is in the beginning of Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover, N.H./London: Brown University Press, 1987). The debatable and debated suggestion is that one should start with the believer or agent instead of the belief or act, but even if this fails it can clarify central epistemological issues. Yet, virtue epistemology is appealing by its allowance of a combination in evaluation of what is accessible and what is not accessible to introspection or reflection. For virtues are character traits or dispositions which both are within and beyond the reflection of the subject. However, there is confusion over the notion of virtue. Intellectual virtues are equated with

mechanisms in Sosa, ‘The Raft and the Pyramid,’ and Alvin I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), while intellectual virtues are reduced to moral virtues in James A. Montmarquet, *Epistemic virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1993), and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). I suggest that we predicate intellectual faculties in two senses: potentially as kinds of powers and actually as good practices. I hope to argue this point on another occasion.

9 For reasons of space I here take for granted the distinction between the senses and the intellect, sensation and intellection. I also take for granted that ‘intellect’ is here used for ‘theoretical intellect’ (or its theoretical function) as opposed to ‘practical intellect’ (or its practical function). That there are two functions of the intellect – one theoretical and one practical – was argued for at least as early as Aristotle.

10 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.

11 For example, Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics* 1101a14–21, 1178b21–3 and *Metaphysics* 983a6–10. For an empirical discussion, see Christopher Feb Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Washington, D.C./Oxford American Psychological Association/Oxford University Press, 2004) 609–619.

12 There is to my knowledge little contemporary discussion on the intellectual virtue of wisdom. For example, despite the virtue framework, wisdom (as traditionally understood) is not developed in W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998) 190–196. It is somewhat odd that Linda Zagzebski, who is a major virtue epistemologist, does not associate the virtue of wisdom but that of prudence (*phronesis/prudentia*) with God. ‘*Phronesis* is a concept which I suggest should govern the methodology of any inquiry, whether it be inquiry into the nature of God, inquiry into the nature of the world, or an inquiry into the nature of value, and at least some of the criteria for its application are independent of religious considerations.’ Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, ‘The Place of Phronesis in the Methodology of Theology,’ in *Philosophy and Theological Discourse*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (London: Macmillan, 1997), 217. Eleonore Stump places Aquinas’s understanding of wisdom in the contemporary epistemological discussion, but trots between understanding it as a moral virtue and an intellectual virtue: Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003) esp. 339, 349–350.

13 Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at a conference on natural theology at the University of Oxford, June 2008, and at a conference on the academic status of theology at Helsjöns folkhögskola, Sweden, June 2009. I thank the participants for their comments, especially Tim Mawson and Kurt Christensen; my doctoral student Stefan Lindholm for comments on the penultimate version, and Misjonshøgskolen, Stavanger, for a travel grant.

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