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Knowledge Arguments

Yujin Nagasawa

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PART I

THE STRUCTURE OF KNOWLEDGE
ARGUMENTS

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I

The Structure of Knowledge Arguments

I.1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge arguments attempt to transform, via arcane alchemical processes, the base metal of epistemological premisses into the gold of ontological conclusions. From what one knows and does not know, they attempt to derive what there is and is not in this world.

In this work I purport to reveal a hitherto unnoticed connection between the debates on the mystery of phenomenal consciousness, on the one hand, and the existence of God, on the other, by discussing four knowledge arguments in two distinct areas of philosophy: Frank Jackson's Mary argument and Thomas Nagel's bat arguments in the philosophy of mind; and the argument from concept possession and Patrick Grim's argument from knowledge *de se* in the philosophy of religion. I compare and refute these arguments and derive from their failure a novel metaphysical thesis, which I call 'nontheoretical physicalism'. However, before attempting to achieve this goal, it is important to understand the relevant conceptual background so that we can appreciate the full force of the knowledge arguments.

I.2. JACKSON'S MARY ARGUMENT

The term 'knowledge argument' is most commonly used to denote Frank Jackson's influential argument in the philosophy of mind (Jackson 1982, 1986). In this work I call his knowledge argument the 'Mary argument' because, as we will see below, it appeals to a scenario about an imaginary scientist called Mary. The aim of the Mary argument is to show that physicalism is false. Physicalism is the ontological doctrine that, in the relevant sense, everything is ultimately physical. Hence, according to physicalism, such things as tables, galaxies, cheesecakes, cars, atoms, and even our sensations, are physical. Jackson (1986)

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says, however, that we can undermine the doctrine by appealing to the following simple hypothetical scenario.

Mary is confined to a black-and-white room, is educated through black-and-white books and through lectures relayed on black-and white television. In this way she learns everything there is to know about the physical nature of the world. She knows all the physical facts about us and our environment, in a wide sense of ‘physical’ which includes everything in *completed* physics, chemistry, and neurophysiology, and all there is to know about the causal and relational facts consequent upon all this, including of course functional roles. (p. 291)

If physicalism is true, Jackson says, Mary knows all there is to know. However, it seems obvious that she does not know all there is to know. Jackson continues:

[W]hen she is let out of the black-and-white room or given a color television, she will learn what it is like to see something red, say. This is rightly described as *learning* – she will not say “ho, hum.” Hence, physicalism is false.¹ (p. 291)

Jackson formulates the Mary argument schematically as follows:

- (1) Mary (before her release) knows everything physical there is to know about other people.
- (2) Mary (before her release) does not know everything there is to know about other people (because she *learns* something about them on her release).

Therefore,

- (3) There are true propositions about other people (and herself) that escape the physicalist story.² (p. 293)

Physicalism is undoubtedly the most dominant metaphysical doctrine in the philosophy of mind; since the mid-twentieth century the central task of philosophers of mind has been to defend and articulate the doctrine. Peter Carruthers (2005) notes, for instance, ‘Just about everyone now working in [the philosophy of mind] is an ontological physicalist, with the exception of Chalmers (1996)³ and perhaps a few others’. It is interesting that physicalism is purportedly refuted by such a simple imaginary scenario that even children can understand.

¹ After sixteen years of defending the Mary argument, Jackson announced in 1998 that he had changed his mind, stating that although the argument contains no obvious fallacy, its conclusion, that physicalism is false, must be mistaken. In this work, I am concerned mainly with Jackson’s original anti-physicalist position. For his recent position, see Jackson (1995, 1998b, 2003, 2004) and Chapter 7 of this work.

² I have modified (3) slightly so that we can see the connection between the Mary argument and my formulations of omniscience below. Jackson’s original statement of (3) is ‘There are truths about other people (and herself) that escape the physicalist story’. Jackson would not mind this modification because he thinks, as he must on pain of inconsistency, that what Mary comes to know upon her release are new propositions.

³ See Chapter 6 for Chalmers’s anti-physicalism.

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I.3. NAGEL'S BAT ARGUMENT

Another well-known knowledge argument in the philosophy of mind is Thomas Nagel's (1974) 'bat argument', so called because it appeals to an example of a bat's sensory apparatus.⁴ To describe the elusiveness of phenomenal consciousness Nagel draws attention to a bat's sonar:

Now we know that most bats (the microchiroptera, to be precise) perceive the external world primarily by sonar, or echolocation, detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high-frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. (p. 438)

Nagel claims that the uniqueness of a bat's sonar and the phenomenal experiences associated with it pose difficulties for theorists of the mind:

This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. We must consider whether any method will permit us to extrapolate to the inner life of the bat from our own case, and if not, what alternative methods there may be for understanding the notion. (p. 438)

While Nagel is not himself explicit about the implication of this line of reasoning in his 1974 paper, his argument has been taken as a strong criticism of physicalism. In fact, many philosophers claim that Nagel's argument is, at its root, identical to Jackson's Mary argument, which, as we have seen, is specifically designed to defeat physicalism.⁵ Some even call this style of anti-physicalist argument the 'Nagel-Jackson knowledge argument'.⁶ Moreover, Nagel himself rejects physicalism in a later book (1986). Hence, in this work, I make the assumption that is commonly made, namely, that the bat argument is, just as is the Mary argument, an argument against physicalism. On this assumption, the thrust of the bat argument is that even complete physical knowledge of a bat does not enable one to understand what it is like to be a bat.

I.4. DEFINING A KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT

So far, I have introduced two knowledge arguments in the philosophy of mind: Jackson's Mary argument and Nagel's bat argument. Because they are representatives we can extract the template of knowledge arguments from them. This will be helpful in understanding why the two arguments in the philosophy

⁴ Jackson (1982) calls the bat argument the 'what it is like to be' argument.

⁵ See, e.g., David Lewis (1983), Carolyn McMullen (1985), and Derek Pereboom (1994).

⁶ See, e.g., Torin Alter (1999, 2001), and Pereboom (1994).

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of religion that I introduce below are also rightly regarded as knowledge arguments, even though their premisses and conclusions are radically different.

The most salient feature of knowledge arguments is, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, that they derive ontological conclusions from epistemological premisses.⁷ Again, the conclusion of the Mary argument and the bat argument is that physicalism is false. Because physicalism is an ontological doctrine, one might think that the most straightforward way of undermining it is to identify difficulties at the level of ontology. However, the Mary argument and the bat argument do not take such a direct ontological path, but an indirect *epistemological* path. The Mary argument derives the falsity of physicalism from the epistemological premisses that Mary knows everything physical in her black-and-white environment and that nevertheless she does not know everything. Similarly, the bat argument derives the falsity of physicalism from the epistemological premisses that one knows everything physical, including the complete physiology of a bat's sensory apparatus, and that nevertheless one does not know what it is like to be a bat. This means that the Mary argument and the bat argument purport to refute physicalism by deriving the falsity of the following thesis:

Physical Knowledge Thesis: Complete physical knowledge is complete knowledge *simpliciter*. (Jackson 1986, p. 291)

At first glance, taking such an indirect epistemological path to derive the ontological conclusion that physicalism is false seems inefficient. However, the indirect path in fact *strengthens* significantly the force of the arguments. For while none of the apparently innocuous epistemological premisses of the Mary argument and the bat argument demand that we make any ontological commitment when taken separately, once we accept them simultaneously we cannot but affirm the falsity of physicalism. In this way the arguments, if successful, manage to derive a significant ontological conclusion without begging the question against physicalism.

⁷ Robert Van Gulick (2004) calls arguments with this form 'boomerang arguments':

The distinctive feature of a boomerang argument is that it reaches across to the epistemic/cognitive/conceptual domain of facts about our representation of the world, and then swings back to reach a conclusion in the metaphysical/ontological/factual domain about the nature of reality itself. It moves from facts about how we represent or conceptualize the world to supposed results about the necessary nature of the world itself. More specifically, boomerangs often move from supposed gaps or lacks of links in our representations or concepts of the world to conclusions about objective gaps within the world itself and ontological distinctions between the real things in it. (p. 367)

Van Gulick marks Jackson's Mary arguments and Chalmers's conceivability argument as boomerang arguments in particular, because both Jackson and Chalmers are Australian philosophers. According to my definition, the conceivability argument is not a knowledge argument because it is not designed to refute the physical omniscience thesis explained below.

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We can make this point more clearly by using the notion of *omniscience*. Omniscience, more precisely omniscience *simpliciter*, is most standardly formulated as follows:

Omniscience *Simpliciter*: For any x , and for any proposition p , x is omniscient if and only if it is true that p , then x knows that p .⁸

I call this formulation of omniscience ‘omniscience *simpliciter*’ because it subsumes *all* true propositions. Omniscience *simpliciter* is not, however, the only form of omniscience. We can also formulate omniscience with respect to a specific kind of proposition or about a specific subject matter. So, for instance, we can regard Mary in Jackson’s argument and the agent in the bat argument as being omniscient with respect to physical objects and properties.⁹

By referring to the formulation of omniscience *simpliciter* we can formulate omniscience with respect to physical objects and properties, or ‘physical omniscience’ for short, as follows:

Physical Omniscience: For any x and for any physical proposition p , x is physically omniscient if and only if it is true that p , then x knows that p .¹⁰

By ‘physical propositions’ I mean (a) propositions about events, entities, and properties in the world that have basic physical entities and properties as their

⁸ This is by far the most popular formulation of omniscience in the literature of the philosophy of religion. The following is a list of philosophers who subscribe to this formulation, or one very similar to it: Peter Geach (1977, pp. 40 and 43), Anthony Kenny (1979, p. 10), William E. Mann (1975, pp. 153–154), Alvin Plantinga (1980a, p. 91), A. N. Prior (1962, p. 114), James F. Ross (1969, p. 214), Richard Swinburne (1977, p. 162), and James E. Tomberlin and Frank McGuinness (1977, p. 472). See Patrick Grim (1983), pp. 265 and 275. Obviously, this is not a complete, comprehensive definition of omniscience because, for example, it does not say whether an omniscient being has foreknowledge. However, it is good enough for the purpose of advancing my arguments.

⁹ Authoritative self-knowledge can also be construed as another form of omniscience with respect to a specific kind of proposition, for the doctrine of authoritative self-knowledge can be construed as claiming that we are omniscient with respect to propositions about our own mental states. Brie Gertler (2003) writes, for instance, ‘The strongest epistemic claims on behalf of self-knowledge are infallibility and omniscience. If self-knowledge is infallible, one cannot have a false belief to the effect that one is in a certain mental state. One is omniscient about one’s own states only if being in a mental state suffices for knowing that one is in that state.’

¹⁰ Apart from knowledge *de se* and knowledge of what something is like, I set aside in this work other forms of so-called nonpropositional knowledge. Hence, I leave open, for example, (a) whether knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge-how are really nonpropositional and (b) whether or not they are subsumed by physical omniscience. For the issue of knowledge by acquaintance, see John Bigelow and Robert Pargetter (1990), Earl Conee (1994), and Richard Fumerton (2004). For the issue of knowledge-how, see Alter (2001), Jason Beyer (2004, 2006), Fred Dretske (1988), William Lycan (1996), Nagasawa (2006, 2007a), John Perry (2001), Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson (2001), and Alan R. White (1982).

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ultimate constituents and (b) propositions that are nonvacuously entailed *a priori*, by such propositions.¹¹ Although it is highly controversial whether the relevant entailment is only *a priori*, I accept it for the sake of argument because it is accepted by both Nagel and Jackson, the proponents of the knowledge arguments in the philosophy of mind that I discuss in this work.

By adopting the notions of omniscience *simpliciter* and physical omniscience, the physical knowledge thesis, according to which complete physical knowledge is complete knowledge *simpliciter*, can be restated as follows:

Physical Omniscience Thesis: Physical omniscience is omniscience *simpliciter*.

We can construe the Mary argument and the bat argument as attempts to refute physicalism by deriving the falsity of the physical omniscience thesis. Hence, for example, Jackson's formulation of the Mary argument can be simplified, without changing its soundness, as follows:

- (4) Mary (before her release) is physically omniscient.
- (5) Mary (before her release) is not omniscient *simpliciter* (because she *learns* something on her release).

Therefore,

- (6) Physical omniscience is not omniscience *simpliciter*.

Obviously, we can also reformulate the bat argument in a similar manner, as I explain in Chapter 5.

Again, the premisses of the Mary argument and the bat argument are concerned only with epistemological facts. The premisses of the Mary argument, for instance, say that she is physically omniscient but that she is not omniscient *simpliciter*. On the face of it, at least, each of these premisses seems completely innocuous. However, once we accept them simultaneously, we cannot but give up the physicalist ontology. For the gap between omniscience *simpliciter* and Mary's physical omniscience entails the incompleteness of physicalism.

From these observations, it is possible to formulate the following definition of a knowledge argument:

A knowledge argument is an argument that derives, nontrivially, an ontological conclusion from a set of epistemological premisses that jointly entail a thesis in the following form: omniscience about a relevant subject matter is not omniscience *simpliciter*.

¹¹ The term 'nonvacuously' is necessary here because otherwise all necessarily true *a priori* propositions immediately qualify as physical propositions. For instance, the proposition that Fermat's last theorem is true is vacuously entailed *a priori* by any proposition, in particular, any physical propositions, because it is necessarily true and *a priori*. However, this cannot be the reason why the proposition that Fermat's last theorem is true is a physical proposition (if it is a physical proposition at all). I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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According to this definition, the Mary argument and the bat argument are rightly regarded as knowledge arguments because they derive, nontrivially, the ontological conclusion that physicalism is false from a set of epistemological premisses that jointly entail that physical omniscience is not omniscience *simpliciter*.

It is important to emphasise that, as the above definition says, the derivation of the conclusion has to be nontrivial in a knowledge argument. For if it is not, such an insignificant argument as the following has to be labelled as a knowledge argument, too:

(7) I know that there is a tree in front of me.

Therefore,

(8) There is a tree in front of me.

Given that knowing that *p* entails *p*, we can, from the epistemological premiss that I know that there is a tree in front of me, derive validly the ontological conclusion that there is a tree in front of me. And if I know that there is a tree in front of me, then we *could* say that I am omniscient with respect to the proposition that there is a tree in front of me. However, this argument is not regarded as a knowledge argument because the derivation is trivial.

I.5. THE ARGUMENT FROM CONCEPT POSSESSION

As we have seen, the Mary argument and the bat argument are both concerned with physicalism in the philosophy of mind. However, the scope of knowledge arguments does not need to be confined to the philosophy of mind. Although it has almost never been recognised explicitly, it is also possible to find knowledge arguments in the philosophy of religion.¹² Interestingly enough, some of these arguments are even older than the Mary argument and the bat argument. In this work, I discuss two knowledge arguments against the existence of God: the argument from concept possession and Grim's argument from knowledge *de se*.

While there are a number of different forms of the argument from concept possession, the most standard form can be presented as follows.¹³ According to traditional theism, God is such that if He¹⁴ exists, He is necessarily omniscient, necessarily omnipotent, and necessarily omnibenevolent. However, the

¹² One of the very few philosophers who recognises the similarities between the knowledge arguments in the philosophy of mind and in the philosophy of religion is Alter (2002b).

¹³ The argument from concept possession has been introduced and defended by the following philosophers: David Blumenfeld (1978), Selmer Bringsjord (1989), John Lachs (1963a, 1963b), and Michael Martin (1970, 1974, 1990, 2000). See Chapter 3 for the history of the argument.

¹⁴ In this work, following the common practice, I use the word 'He' to refer to God. However, this should not be taken to imply that God has a gender.

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argument says, God's very omnipotence undermines His omniscience. Given that God is necessarily omnipotent, it is impossible for Him to have a fearful experience. If it is impossible for Him to have a fearful experience, then He cannot comprehend the concept *fear* fully. However, if He cannot comprehend the concept *fear* fully, He cannot be omniscient. Hence, if God is necessarily omnipotent, then He is not omniscient. Therefore, an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God does not exist.

1.6. GRIM'S ARGUMENT FROM KNOWLEDGE *DE SE*

Grim's argument from knowledge *de se* (1983, 1985, 2000, 2007) also aims to show that God does not exist. To accomplish his aim, Grim appeals to John Perry's famous example (1979) in the philosophy of language. Suppose that I find a trail of spilled sugar on the floor in a supermarket. I wonder which shopper is making this terrible mess all around the aisles and I decide to search for the one responsible. Suddenly, however, I realise there is a hole in the bag of sugar in *my own* shopping cart. *I* am the one who is making the mess! I can express what I come to know as:

(9) I am making the mess.

According to Grim, while I can know what is expressed as (9), God cannot. God can only know what is expressed as follows:

(10) Yujin Nagasawa is making the mess.

What I know in knowing (9) is, however, different from what I know, or God knows, in knowing (10) because I can know (9) without knowing (10) or *vice versa*. If God knows everything knowable, then, according to Grim, He must know what I know in knowing (9) as well as what I know in knowing (10). However, no one but I can know what I know in knowing (9). Grim says, hence, that God cannot be omniscient. Therefore, Grim concludes, an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God does not exist.

1.7. WHY THEY ARE KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENTS

The argument from concept possession and the argument from knowledge *de se* have premisses and conclusions radically different from those of the Mary argument and the bat argument. However, these arguments are also rightly regarded as knowledge arguments.

I have claimed that the Mary argument and the bat argument purport to defeat physicalism by refuting the physical omniscience thesis, according to which physical omniscience is omniscience *simpliciter*. Similarly, the argument from concept possession and the argument from knowledge *de se* purport to defeat traditional theism by refuting the following thesis:

Divine Omniscience Thesis: Divine omniscience is omniscience *simpliciter*.

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Divine omniscience is, as the term suggests, God's omniscience. More precisely, it is formulated as follows:

Divine Omniscience: For any x and for any proposition p , the knowing of which is consistent with God's other attributes, such as necessary omnipotence and necessary omnibenevolence, x is divinely omniscient if and only if if it is true that p , then x knows that p .¹⁵

Although the above formulation is universally quantified, it is consistent with the idea that only God is divinely omniscient.

By adopting the notion of divine omniscience, the argument from concept possession can be expressed as follows: if God exists, then He is necessarily omniscient, necessarily omnipotent, and necessarily omnibenevolent. However, no omnipotent being can be omniscient *simpliciter* because it cannot possess the concept of *fear*. Hence, God's omniscience, that is, divine omniscience, is not omniscience *simpliciter*. Therefore, God does not exist.

Unlike the argument from concept possession, the argument from knowledge *de se* does not refer to any attribute of God other than His omniscience. However, it can be construed in a similar manner as follows: if God exists, then He is necessarily omniscient. However, God's omniscience, that is, divine omniscience, is not omniscience *simpliciter* because it misses what I know in knowing that *I* am making the mess. Hence, divine omniscience is not omniscience *simpliciter*. Therefore, God does not exist.

It is also possible to construe the argument from concept possession and the argument from knowledge *de se* as attempts to refute traditional theism by deriving the falsity of the divine omniscience thesis. On this construal these arguments can be simplified, without changing their soundness, as follows:

- (11) God is divinely omniscient.
- (12) God is not omniscient *simpliciter*.

Therefore,

- (13) Divine omniscience is not omniscience *simpliciter*.

This formulation shows that these knowledge arguments in the philosophy of religion are structurally parallel to the knowledge arguments in the philosophy of mind (compare the set of (11), (12), and (13) with the set of (4), (5), and (6)).

I have defined a knowledge argument as an argument that derives, nontrivially, an ontological conclusion from a set of epistemological premisses that jointly entail a thesis in the following form: omniscience about a relevant subject matter is not omniscience *simpliciter*. The argument from concept

¹⁵ Here I specify, for the sake of simplicity, only necessary omnipotence and necessary omnibenevolence as God's attributes. I am aware that according to traditional theism God has further attributes, such as omnipresence, immutability, and simplicity.