

## THE PROBLEM OF GOD'S EXISTENCE: IN DEFENCE OF SCEPTICISM

IRENEUSZ ZIEMIŃSKI

*University of Szczecin*

**Abstract.** There are four main positions in the argument about whether God exists: atheism (God does not exist), theism (God exists), agnosticism (it is impossible to know whether God exists or not), and scepticism (at the moment we do not know whether God exists or not). From an epistemological standpoint, scepticism is the most rational; even if a decisive argument which would settle the debate has not been discovered yet, one cannot exclude the possibility of finding it eventually. Agnosticism is too radical (and even incoherent), but theism and atheism exceed the available data. However, from a practical standpoint, choosing theism or atheism seems to be more rational than scepticism (not to mention agnosticism); one of them is bound to be right, because there are only two possibilities, one of which has to be true: either God exists or not.

The main thesis I am going to defend<sup>1</sup> is that currently the question of whether God exists remains unanswered because the available data does not enable us to settle it. It does not mean that there is no possible evidence which could settle the dispute about the existence of God or that we will never be able to discover it; still, even if such evidence exists, we do not know it at the moment. In other words, this will be an attempt to justify the thesis that the most adequate standpoint on the matter of whether God exists is *scepticism*. First I will present my main assumptions, mainly concerning the concept of God (point 1), next I will outline the main standpoints on the matter and show the difficulties of

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was presented during the international conference 'Epistemology of Atheism', organized by Professor Roger Pouivet in Nancy (France) in June 2013. I am indebted to all participants for their useful comments to the first version of the paper. The paper was translated into English by Agnieszka Ziemińska.

theism (point 2), atheism (point 3), and agnosticism (point 4). Finally, in the last (and most important part), I will move on to the explication and attempt to justify scepticism (point 5).

### I. ASSUMPTIONS

The main assumption is the belief that a rational discussion about the existence of God is possible. This means that the question whether God exists (and even more – what we know about God's existence) is rational. Regardless of whether there is a way of solving it, the problem is not senseless. On one hand, we know what we are talking about when talking about God's existence, on the other hand we understand what the possible solutions to the problem are (that is the different answers to the question: does God exist?). I therefore assume that, despite some opinions (mostly defended by such philosophers as A. J. Ayer, Ninian Smart, Paul Edwards, Kai Nielsen or Anthony Flew before his conversion), sentences like 'God exists', 'God does not exist' or 'we do not (and never will) know whether God exists or not' make sense.

I also assume that it is possible to discuss the problem of God's existence on a philosophical level. I will therefore try to avoid discussing the problem on a religious or common-sense base, treating the problem of God's existence as a theoretical question. Statements like 'God exists' or 'God does not exist' will be treated not as religious or nonreligious expressions but as metaphysical beliefs.

The next assumption concerns the concept of God I will be using. It is not an empirical concept (at least in the sense of a sense experience or its necessary connection with a sense experience); still it may be given an understandable meaning. The fundamental elements of this concept correspond with how God is understood by the monotheistic religions. Therefore it is neither a finite nor limited being (like Zeus); it also is not part of the world (it is not the entire world or an arrangement of finite things). It is a transcendent being in relation to the world (not in a dimensional, but ontic sense, resulting from a different way of existing). God has to be an independent being; that is, in His existence He does not depend on anything, having the foundation of His being in Himself (*ens a se*). God has to be a necessary being both existentially and essentially; this means that if He does exist, then He necessarily exists (God cannot be a random being that only happened to exist), and has to be necessarily entitled to all His attributes (which do not accidentally result from His

nature). God also has to be able to take action, be almighty (as in being able to do what is logically possible to do).<sup>2</sup> It would seem that He should also be an infinite being when it comes to the quantity as well as quality of attributes; that is, God should have an infinite number of attributes on a maximal level. However, since the concept of infinity (especially quantitative) leads to paradoxes, the attribute of infinity should be negatively defined as a lack of any ontic or axiological limits. It would mean that God is a flawless being and therefore deserves the appellation of an absolute being. Defined like this, God has to be a unique being; for if it were possible to think of two absolute beings, they would have to somehow be different and therefore at least one of them would not meet the criteria of an absolute being (one would have to have at least one deficiency or shortage). That is why the concept of God rules out being multitude.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, God – as a being able to take action – should have the attributes of a person (at least the ability to experience and evaluate different actions and choose between them). However, as almighty, He does not need a body but could effectively act by direct effectiveness of the will.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the adduced attributes, the concept of God is fundamentally negative since we could say more about what God is not than about what God really is. Still, He should not be treated as an Absolute Mystery (because this concept, if understood literally, is incoherent; it suggests that even though God is inscrutable, we do know about His inscrutability).

We can assume that this description of God is apparently coherent and therefore God is a possible being (or at least there are no arguments to assume that He is an impossible being). Proving the possibility of God is not necessary, because for the purpose of our discussion the thesis that His possibility is not out of the question is enough.<sup>5</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to such a definition we can omit the stone's paradox, formulated in modern terminology by C. W. Savage in his article 'The Paradox of the Stone', *Philosophical Review* (1967), pp. 74-79. This new and careful concept of omnipotence is recently defended by Richard Swinburne. See, for example, his book *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> The most important defence of the uniqueness of the absolute being is, of course, Spinoza's *Ethics* (part one: 'Of God').

<sup>4</sup> We could find this concept in the Jewish Bible. According to me, it is possible to understand in such a way the metaphor of the word by which God has created the world.

<sup>5</sup> An excellent defence of the coherence of God is Swinburne's book *The Coherence of Theism*.

even if a correct proof of the possibility of God were not possible, it still would not prove that God is impossible, because we have no proof of the incoherency of the concept of God. Meanwhile it is difficult to decide who bears the burden of proof. Usually it is the duty of whoever formulates a more radical thesis, however in the dispute over whether the concept of God is coherent or not (and if it is possible to prove it) we do not know (nor can we settle in a neutral manner) which thesis is more radical. That is why we can consider the concept of God coherent and God as a possible being (at least until it is proven otherwise).

The main problem is the question of whether God exists, that is, if the outlined concept has an exemplification in reality. I assume that when raising the question of God's existence we do not only want to believe that He does or does not exist but know *about* Him (or at least have conclusive arguments for our belief or disbelief). I understand demanding knowledge as demanding certainty (or at least a probability higher than the probability of potential opposing hypotheses). I also assume the realist (correspondent) concept of truth, so the statement 'God exists' is true if God does actually exist, and false if He does not.

## II. THE MAIN STANDPOINTS

There are four main standpoints on the issue of whether God exists: theism, atheism, agnosticism, and scepticism. Theism is a belief that God exists (the statement 'God exists' is true) and that we are able to justify it by rational argumentation.

Atheism is a belief that God does not exist (the statement 'God exists' is false whereas 'God does not exist' is true) and that we are able to justify it by rational argumentation. Atheism is not just a simple negation of theism (or a refusal to acknowledge the truthfulness of the statement 'God exists'), but a positive claim that God does not exist (it is not only the lack of conviction that God exists, but a conviction that He does not).<sup>6</sup>

Agnosticism is a belief that we do not know and never will whether God does or does not exist (this lack of knowledge is not relative to time

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<sup>6</sup> This means that I understand atheism in the traditional metaphysical way, which is different from the new concept of atheism (a-theism), defended by John Schellenberg. Schellenberg defines atheism as the negation of a personal God. See John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993); *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995).

or circumstances but essential and irremovable). Agnosticism is not only refusing to acknowledge the truthfulness of theism or atheism but is a positive claim that it is impossible to settle the dispute over God's existence.<sup>7</sup>

Scepticism is a belief that we do not know if God does exist or not, but unlike agnosticism, it does not claim that we will never know the answer (although a lack of knowledge is our current situation, it is not necessarily impossible to overcome). Scepticism on the issue of God's existence is not only a suspension of judgment (a lack of acceptance for theism, atheism, or agnosticism) but, just like the three previously presented standpoints, is a positive claim, that we currently do not know if God exists or not. Scepticism does not deny the possibility of settling the dispute in the future (e.g. by discovering data which would prove the truthfulness of theism, atheism, or agnosticism). Scepticism does not claim that any of the three other standpoints are false, but that we currently do not know which (if any) is true or false. Understood like this, scepticism is not a total lack of knowledge (ignorance about one's own ignorance), but it is limited to not knowing whether God exists.

Besides the four mentioned standpoints, one more could be singled out: radical scepticism, which is understood as a complete suspension of judgment about the existence of God; however this standpoint rules out the possibility of any discussion and therefore will not be considered.

As I said before, this paper is an attempt to justify the thesis that among the highlighted standpoints on the issue of whether God exists, scepticism is the most adequate one. Meanwhile theism, atheism, and agnosticism (understood as theoretical standpoints) go beyond the available data. From a practical point of view it may be different – scepticism might turn out to be the least desirable (and even the least rational); however as a theoretical standpoint it is the most credible (and the most rational, if by rationality we mean the correlation between the level of acceptance for a statement and the arguments on behalf of its truthfulness).

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<sup>7</sup> My definition of agnosticism is, of course, connected with Kantian epistemology; I do not identify agnosticism with disbelieving in God because of lack of proof of His existence (as some philosophers do), but with our lack of knowledge about God's existence.

### III. THEISM

As mentioned before, theism comes down to the thesis that God exists (the statement 'God exists' is true whereas 'God does not exist' is false). According to theists, this claim can be proven with certainty or at least with a high (higher than other hypotheses) probability. This means that the truthfulness of the statement 'God exists' is absolutely true (excluding the possibility of it turning out to be false) or at least more probable (with the accessible data) than the truthfulness of atheism, agnosticism, or scepticism.

Usually two types of arguments are made for theism: *a priori* arguments (referring to the content of the concept of God) and *a posteriori* arguments (supposed to prove the existence of God based on the empirical evidence). Some arguments are considered certain while others are treated as ways of proving theism to be probable. This distinction does not overlap with the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments since among the first group some are merely attempts at making theism probable while some in the second group are attempting to prove the certainty of theism. *A priori* arguments are usually called ontological arguments whereas typical examples of an *a posteriori* argument are different versions of the cosmological argument.

The meaning of ontological arguments (regardless of how they are formulated in details) comes down to the claim that the existence of God results from the content of the name 'God' (it is impossible to think of God without at the same time thinking of His actual existence). This means that the statement 'God does not exist' is not only false but also self-contradictory.

There is no need to present all the criticism in the history of philosophy against the ontological argument.<sup>8</sup> It is however worth noticing that the main argument which was usually treated as a way of effectively refuting the ontological argument – the inability to treat existence as a predicate – is wrong (or at least there is not enough proof to treat it as right). Without going into details, it could be argued that even if existence is not a predicate (which in itself is doubtful) then possible existence, real existence, or necessary existence certainly is.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, we also do not

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<sup>8</sup> These problems are discussed in detail by Graham Oppy in his book *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> The thesis was defended by Norman Malcolm in his article 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *Philosophical Review* (1960), pp. 41-62.

know whether real existence is a predicate which should be attributed to God as an absolute being since there is no guarantee that real existence is a perfection. Regardless of the axiological discussion about the (positive or negative) value of existence, the ontological argument presents a different, more serious difficulty concerning the inability to prove the existence of God as a being radically transcendent towards the world. Even if we agree that the ontological argument is an effective mean of proving the necessity of the existence of *some* being, then it is still useless in proving the existence of a *specific* being (especially one transcendent to the world). The only existential statement which can be proved *a priori* is the statement 'something exists'.<sup>10</sup> Its trustfulness seems absolutely certain, since there are no possible conditions in which it would be false; 'something exists' can never turn out to be false – in an extreme situation at least the statement itself will exist (if it were to be false, then it would not be able to exist). The negation of the statement ('it is not true that something exists' or expressed differently – 'nothing exists') is clearly false, because there are no possible conditions in which it could be true. If 'nothing exists' were to be true, then it would be impossible for the statement to exist. Therefore the statement 'something exists' is not only a truth but a logically necessary truth. The problem is, however, that 'something exists' is a formula with one variable so it can be treated as a short version of 'at least one *x* exists'; but this formula does not prove *specifically which x* exists. If the word 'something' is replaced by any other name (God, chair, number, beauty) then none of the new sentences is necessarily true (its negation may be true). This means that even if something has to exist it does not mean that a specific being has to exist (even if this being was to be God). That is why the ontological argument cannot be acknowledged as conclusive.

Cosmological arguments (without going into the differences between specific formulations) are usually based on two main assumptions: the first one being a claim about the ontological (especially existential) contingency of the world, the other the thesis that the existence and structure of the world must have reason and explanation. These assumptions however, being the only way to justify the existence of

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<sup>10</sup> M. K. Munitz says that we could say also that the sentence 'the Universe exists' is a necessary truth. See his books *The Mystery of Existence: An Essay in Philosophical Cosmology* (New York: New York University Press, 1974); *The Ways of Philosophy* (New York; London: Macmillan, 1979).

God in an empirical way, also cause every cosmological argument to get caught in a vicious circle. Claiming that the world (and all its elements) is contingent may be true only if we assume it was created by an absolute and necessary being; since the contingency we are talking about is existential, the contingency of the world means that it is created every moment by a being which is the only adequate reason for its existence. The assumption about the contingency of the world understood like this is necessary because only a radically dependent creature (essentially dependent, consecutive, endangered by a constant possibility of collapsing into nothingness) may be a basis for a claim that there is a necessary being keeping the world in existence. So if we do not ascribe contingency to the world, we will not have adequate data for the thesis about the existence of its metaphysical and transcendent cause. At the same time, however, we can only say that the world is contingent when we state its dependence on the necessary being (that is, we assume the existence of God as the world's reason in the premises).

The second foundation of the cosmological arguments – the rule of sufficient reason – brings a similar difficulty. If the world must have an adequate reason for its existence (and nature), and this reason (because of the contingency of the world) cannot be immanent, then it can only be a transcendent necessary being. However assuming the metaphysical contingency of the world and the necessity of the reason of the world we beg the question, proclaiming the existence of a necessary being (excluding *a priori* other possibilities like the hypothesis of a world without any ultimate ontic reason or the hypothesis of the necessity of the world) as true. Thereby we can accept the premises of the cosmological argument as true only if we have already assumed its conclusion.

We deal with a similar situation in cases of different attempts of theistic arguments, for example referring to religious experiences or a supernatural Revelation (as a source of knowledge about the existence of God). If a specific experience is defined as a religious experience (as experiencing the direct presence of God) then the problem of God's existence is solved at the beginning by treating a religious experience as credible. However, the criteria of authenticity for religious experiences are inevitably subjective; just because some people think they experienced the presence of God does not mean God actually exists (or that He was subject to someone's religious perception). In all cases of such an experience, there is the possibility of illusion.



There are similar difficulties when attempting to justify theism based on a supernatural Revelation, miracles, or common belief in God during human history. This situation persuades us to conclude that (at least for now) we do not have a conclusive argument settling the dispute about the existence of God in favour of theism.

Showing the incorrectness (non-conclusiveness) of arguments supposed to justify the hypothesis that God exists by no means proves theism to be false. It does however show, that with the available data, the theistic hypothesis goes too far beyond the evidence, which was supposed to be in favour of God's existence. Precisely, this evidence can only be treated as credible arguments justifying theism if we understand it in the context of the previously assumed theistic thesis. In other words, recognizing specific data as evidence for theism is only possible if it is seen as the results of the actual existence of God (that is, by assuming theism is true).

#### IV. ATHEISM

Atheism is a standpoint claiming that God does not exist, that is, the statement 'God does not exist' is true and can be proved by rational argumentation. The truthfulness of the statement 'God does not exist' is certain or at least more probable than other hypotheses (especially theism). One of the attempts to justify the truthfulness of atheism is by referencing the non-conclusiveness of all theistic arguments (the fact that the arguments in favour of God's existence are non-conclusive is considered as an argument for the truthfulness of atheism). However this justification is not enough, since disproving the arguments in favour of the truthfulness of the statement 'God exists' does not in any way prove the truthfulness of 'God does not exist'; atheism, as a positive conviction needs stronger arguments. Usually they are *a priori* arguments which are supposed to prove the contradictory nature of the concept of God (also called ontological anti-arguments) and *a posteriori* arguments which are supposed to show it is impossible to reconcile the existence of God with some facts in the world.

When it comes to the first type of argumentation, the most common form is the attempt to prove that the concept of God as a being existentially necessary is self-contradictory (or even nonsensical). If God necessarily

exists then the statement 'God exists' must be an analytically true whereas the statement 'God does not exist' analytically false. However if the negation of any fact is not self-contradictory then any existence (also the existence of God) must be completely contingent. In that case, the concept of a necessary existing being has to be considered nonsensical (analogically to the concept of a square circle or a mountain without a valley), and thus God cannot exist.<sup>11</sup>

This objection is not conclusive, since it could be argued that the concept of a necessary being is rational (and not self-contradictory) and not only as an independent being but also as a being entitled to the predicate of a necessary being; even then the statement 'God (a necessary being) exists' would not have to be understood as an analytical and necessary truth. While the statement 'God exists' could indeed be an analytical truth for an absolute mind, but does not necessarily have to be such for a finite, human mind. Apart from all that, it could be noticed that the argument referring to the absurdity of the concept of God as an argument in favour of atheism (understood as a claim that theism is not just false, but it is absurd) has an undesirable consequence for atheism itself; if the statement 'God exists' is absurd then 'God does not exist' should be considered just as an absurd as well.

Other attempts to prove the contradictory nature of the concept of God (and therefore the impossibility of its exemplification), referencing paradoxes supposed to be connected to some attributes ascribed to God, are just as non-conclusive. One of the paradoxes is the sometimes suggested contradiction of the concept of omnipotence (if God is almighty then He can create a stone He would not be able to carry, and that falsifies the thesis about his omnipotence). If God is not almighty then He is a limited being and therefore does not deserve the name of an absolute (perfect) being. It is sometimes attempted in a similar manner to ascertain the impossibility of reconciling infinite mercy with infinite justice or God's immutability/constancy with His consciousness. However, all these (and similar to them) arguments are based on arbitrary (and uncertain) definitions of God's attributes. Nevertheless, nothing stands in the way of assuming such limitations of God's omnipotence or justice which would allow us to avoid the mentioned paradoxes. Moreover, even if there is a problem with the correct articulation of the

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<sup>11</sup> This argument was defended by Bertrand Russell, Paul Edwards, and in more sophisticated form by J. N. Findlay in his famous proof of God's nonexistence.

actual meaning of God's attributes, it still does not decide about His nonexistence (and even more about the impossibility of His existence). Therefore all attempts to prove the nonexistence of God by referring to the alleged inconsistency of His concept should be considered too weak to justify atheism.

Another form of justifying atheism are *a posteriori* arguments, mostly the problem of evil (the undeniable fact of evil existing in the world is supposed to rule out the existence of God). To cut it short, evil is treated as impossible to reconcile with God's goodness (as infinitely good, God should want to eliminate evil) and His omnipotence (as almighty God should be able to eradicate evil) therefore if evil exists, God cannot (being both infinitely good and almighty).

Supporters of the argument from evil sometimes add that any theodicy attempting to define evil not as directly *caused* by God but merely *allowed* by Him for certain reasons is illusory since in the case of an absolute being, creating something and allowing something to exist is the same action. Occasionally atheists declare that they respect God more than theists since by trusting that God (if He existed) would not permit any evil in the world, they prefer to negate His existence rather than hold Him responsible for the nightmare of unnecessary evil causing people (and other creatures capable of feeling) to suffer. This means that an atheist does not blame God whereas a theist, when trying to justify the existence of evil in the world, has to admit that the almighty and infinitely merciful God is (at least partially) responsible for it. This argument is based on the assumption that a theist commits blasphemy against God (blaming Him for evil and trying to defend Him) while an atheist by denying God's existence in the face of evil, does not ascribe any negative traits to God which would be in conflict with God's essence. Moreover, according to an atheist any arguments provided by the theist justifying why evil should exist in the world rather than not, are insufficient. They are all based on a anthropomorphic picture of God, ascribing to Him motives characteristic for people and not for an absolute being.

Without going into details of the argument about the presence of evil in the world one has to conclude that at least three arguments seem important to reconcile theistic position with the reality of evil. Firstly, the hypothesis of the greater good, claiming that without some types of evil some types of good could not exist (without suffering there would

be no compassion or helping the suffering).<sup>12</sup> The second argument is the thesis that facing the impossibility to create another absolute being, whatever He decides to create will be ontologically less perfect than God (evil as a form of imperfection is therefore a structural element of beings created as such). The third argument is the impossibility of excluding the truthfulness of the hypothesis of eschatological redemption in a cosmic universal salvation. This is why the argument about evil cannot be treated as a sufficient justification of atheism.

When it comes to the charge of having an anthropomorphic picture of God (inevitable in any theodicy) it should be stated that nobody trying to discuss God is free of this problem (also an atheist, agnostic, and sceptic). The thesis that all we know and experience, we know and experience as human beings (even if we constantly make the effort for it to be non-relativist, accurate). It is also difficult to treat the argument of the possible lack of respect for God shown by the theist who tries to defend Him and justify evil in the world, seriously. The case of supposed respect for God or lack of it is irrelevant in a theoretical discussion about the existence of God. This discussion does not concern how we are supposed to address God, but whether God actually exists. Atheism may come from really great respect for the being God would be if He existed, whereas theism may be connected with hostility towards God (or at least rebelling against Him). However, these attitudes are irrelevant to settling the metaphysical dispute about whether God exists, because they do not affect the logical value of both the theists' and atheists' claims.

These remarks show that also atheism (analogically to theism) should be considered a position going beyond the original testimonies supposed to justify it. This means that the evidence upon which an atheistic argumentation is based may only be considered adequate in justifying the statement 'God does not exist' if we earlier assume that God indeed does not exist and understand the available evidence (like evil) and concepts used to describe God's attributes (infinite mercy and almightiness) in the context of this assumption.

## V. AGNOSTICISM

The indicated problems with attempting to justify theism and atheism may incline one to assume the agnostic position in the discussion about

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<sup>12</sup> For more about this argument, see Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

God's existence. Agnosticism is a belief that we do not and never will know the answer to the question whether God exists or not. The first argument in favour of agnosticism is the fact that theistic and atheistic argumentations are inconclusive. Since the fact that none of the theistic arguments is conclusive does not prove the truthfulness of atheism just like the inconclusiveness of atheistic arguments does not prove theism right, this could point towards the impossibility of settling the matter of God's existence. Despite being able to formulate multiple inconclusive arguments in favour of theism or atheism, no multiplication of them will make one claim more probable than the other. The difficulties of theism (evil in the world, troubles with an adequate description of God's attributes) or atheism (rationality of the world and at the same time none of its elements being unnecessary) are not enough to prove the opposite standpoint is true. What's more, it would be difficult to pinpoint a neutral criterion by which we could judge the importance and meaning of specific theistic and atheistic arguments (individually or collectively). After all, it is hard to agree that religious experiences are more important evidence than evil, or that the contingency of the world is a more adequate description of the world than its existential autonomy. We also cannot agree that despite the sometimes formulated arguments one of the hypotheses (theism or atheism) should be considered true because of its simplicity.<sup>13</sup> For on one hand the rule of simplicity may be a fruitful methodological rule in science but does not necessarily have to be an obvious metaphysical rule, on the other it is impossible to decide which of the competing hypotheses is simpler (the only difference between them is that theism is an affirmation whereas atheism a negation of the existence of a specific being).

Axiological and pragmatic arguments also cannot settle the dispute. On occasion atheists argue that their life is more heroic since it lacks the final fundament and guidance (at the same time free from egoistic morality, aiming at an afterlife prize), whereas theists try to argue that their life is based on unshakable and absolutely certain rules. However these types of arguments are entirely subjective and cannot be taken into account when trying to settle the theoretical dispute about God's existence. They may of course be relevant to the question of how to live, they can also have various persuasive or therapeutic purposes (giving a sense of, say, our participation in God creating the world or awakening

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<sup>13</sup> This is the idea defended by Richard Swinburne.

awareness of being responsible in the world whose fate is entirely up to humans), but are totally irrelevant to the question of whether God exists. This does not mean that theistic and atheistic arguments have no cognitive value. They can bring our attention to certain aspects of the world which we did not notice earlier or did not understand their importance (the argument from evil exposes the world's multiple flaws, whereas the argument from Revelation its dimensions, hard to explain in the frames of radical naturalism); however these arguments are either heuristic or persuasive<sup>14</sup> but they are not conclusive. Both atheist and theist cannot know if God exists or not, but they can only believe in His existence or nonexistence. So it could be concluded that in this situation agnosticism, as a belief that we do not know (and never will) whether God does exist or not, appears to be the most reasonable position.

When you put it like this, agnosticism is not a justified position. Despite the remarks about the inconclusiveness of all theistic and atheistic arguments being accurate, they are not enough to settle the dispute about the existence of God in favour of agnosticism. Theistic and atheistic arguments being incorrect (and also impossible to compare to each other as John Hick said) is not enough to prove that knowledge about the existence of God is out of the question. Agnosticism is right in claiming that we do not know whether God exists, but goes beyond the available evidence by saying that we will never know the answer. By stating the fundamental impossibility of having knowledge about the existence of God, an agnostic basically makes an additional assumption about the inscrutability of God's existence/non-existence. This statement however does not hold up, at least when understood literally since it is self-contradictory; if we claim that we cannot know anything about the existence/non-existence of God we in fact assume that we know at least one truth about His existence (that we do not know nothing about it). Moreover, assuming the absolute inscrutability of God's existence/non-existence would make it impossible to even formulate the question (we would not know what we are talking about). In that case it is crucial to assume some sort of restriction to agnosticism; this viewpoint does not mean that we know *nothing* about the existence/non-existence of God, but that the problem is *insolvable*; but in declaring the problem of God's existence/non-existence insolvable we really say that we know something about the problem (that it is insolvable).

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<sup>14</sup> They are called 'the situations of disclosure' by Ian Ramsey.

However, even this restriction to agnosticism is not enough to acknowledge this position as legitimate since the insolubility of the question whether God exists can be understood either objectively or subjectively. In the first case the insolubility would come from within God's nature; this means that if God did not exist, no subject would be able to know it (which seems to be a coherent thesis). Still, if God did indeed exist no subject, even God himself, could know it; but this conclusion is absurd, because, if God is supposed to be God and He does exist, then at least He has to know about it. In that case the thesis that the question of whether God does exist or not is insoluble is unacceptable.

The claim that the insolubility of this problem comes from the limitations of the human mind is similarly difficult to agree with. The only argument in favour of this claim is the fact that until this day the question about God's existence still has not been answered (or that we still do not know what evidence could help us to solve the problem). However, the current lack of knowledge is not enough to justify the impossibility of knowing. Moreover, it is difficult to assume that we have an insight into the nature of our minds which would allow us to determine the limitations of our knowledge (the limits between what we can and cannot find out). We therefore have to agree that agnosticism also goes beyond the available data concerning the existence of God. This means it should be considered to be as inconclusive as theism and atheism. This could make one speak in favour of scepticism, in case of God's existence, as the most moderate standpoint.

## VI. SCEPTICISM

Scepticism claims that we currently do not know whether God exists or not (but it does not exclude the possibility of solving the problem in the future). Three previously discussed standpoints came down to a choice: acknowledging one of the statements: 'God exists', 'God does not exist', 'it is not possible for us to know whether God does or does not exist' as true, despite none of the arguments supposedly in favour of theism, atheism, or agnosticism being sufficient to warrant this acknowledgment. Speaking in favour of scepticism is also a choice since it is not a conclusion of reasoning but a decision motivated by the lack of sufficient evidence in favour of the three mentioned standpoints. Choosing scepticism, however, seems to be the most rational decision,

because we really do not know not only whether God exists or not but even what could be a neutral argument that would allow us to settle which of three standpoints is true.

Choosing scepticism, that is believing the statement 'at the moment we do not know whether God does exist or not' to be true, is epistemologically justified. While theism, atheism and agnosticism are inconclusive, scepticism turns out to be free from this difficulty, because it does not go beyond the available evidence.

Moreover, scepticism is also free from the paradoxes the other standpoints have to face. One of the problems with theism is that God's existence is not obvious. If God is the only being which cannot be thought about as non-existing, then a question arises: why is it so difficult to discover His existence, or at least prove it?<sup>15</sup> Another difficulty theism has to face is the evident evil in the world; this does not disprove the theistic thesis but is a big problem that a theist has to face.

The world having a complicated (and at the same time organized and rational) structure is surely a problem for atheism. In every object we notice on one hand it being unnecessary (every object's non-existence is at least possible), on the other its rational structure composed into a consistent system of other objects. This is why the world as an organized system of ontologically unnecessary objects naturally forces on a human mind the idea of a transcendent mind which designed it and keeps it in existence. This means that existence and the rational structure of the world can barely be explained in just a naturalistic fashion (they may not prove the existence of a necessary being but can still be treated as its traces or signs). This is why atheism must exclude the possibility of interpreting the world as a trace of God (or at least prove its very low probability).

In the case of agnosticism we come across the impossibility of expressing it without contradicting ourselves. Claiming that knowledge about God's existence/non-existence leads to either a paradox, that even God himself could not know about His own existence, or to the incoherent thesis that we know the strict limitations of the human knowledge (separating what we can find out from what is impossible for us to get to know).

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<sup>15</sup> This problem was broadly discussed by John Schellenberg in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.



The agnostic's position seems to be the worst since he/she has to express his/her view in such a way as to avoid contradiction. However the theist and atheist also have to admit that the above mentioned problems with their standpoints are troublesome. Apart from all that, there is no neutral criterion which would help us to settle which of the mentioned problems are of greater importance. In that case, if agnosticism, theism, and atheism go beyond the available evidence risking additional difficulties, we have the right to choose scepticism as the least problematic viewpoint in the dispute about God's existence. Scepticism also often faces serious charges but it is possible to at least weaken them if not refute.

One of the elementary counterarguments is ascribing an absurd position of suspending judgment to the sceptic; this position, no different really than remaining completely silent, is supposed to make any discussion impossible so it is often ignored as quite irrational. This charge does not however apply to the version of scepticism defended in this paper. Scepticism about God's existence is not a negative suspension of judgment but a *positive* judgment claiming that at the moment we do not know whether God exists or not.

On occasion scepticism is charged with leaving an incredibly important (perhaps even the most important) matter for the human life in suspension. It is suggested that in the case of God's existence/non-existence (understood as an absolutely unique matter deciding about the shape of our entire life) one has to have a specific standpoint even if it is not a certain or even probable conclusion. This would mean that in the case of God's existence one is obliged to make a specific, positive choice (preferably choosing theism or atheism and in extreme cases agnosticism). Meanwhile scepticism is the least rational because it suspends our entire life in a void (or in an absurd waiting for the potential settling of the matter in the future).

This charge does not seem to be accurate because one can argue that choosing between the existence and nonexistence of God is not necessary from the practical point of view; a person is capable of making the most crucial decisions affecting their life without espousing the truthfulness of either theism, atheism, or agnosticism. The potential necessity to settle the discussed matter could only appear in the case of people feeling a strong desire to be certain about the existence or non-existence of God. Such necessity is relative and subjective because it depends on specific life circumstances or a person's character traits. Of course in the case of such a person, choosing theism or atheism rather than scepticism

may be more rational (in a pragmatic sense); such a solution however cannot resolve the theoretical discussion about whether God actually exists. Despite theism and atheism being more rational pragmatically (or more significant existentially), scepticism is still more rational epistemologically.

Another strategy to bring down scepticism is trying to prove it can never be consequently abided. This means that – no matter what our theoretical beliefs are – what we actually think about something is shown by our actions. So, even if we declare to be sceptics and at the same time take part in religious practices, then we are essentially theists; whereas if we claim to be sceptics and do not take part in any religious practices, then we are atheists. Since it is impossible to at the same time take and not take part in religious practices, any position we take will be a negation of scepticism.

This charge is not decisive if we make a distinction between faith as a religious or non-religious position and a theoretical stance on the matter of God's existence. On a theoretical level, scepticism is clearly described as a claim about our current lack of knowledge about the existence/non-existence of God whereas on the basis of faith (or religious practices) there may be a different solution. There is no contradiction between the belief that we currently do not know whether God exists or not and at the same time having faith that He does (and participating in appropriate religious practices) or believing He does not (and not taking part in religious practices). Despite such position might be rare, or even a sort of disparity between theoretical beliefs and religious faith, but it is certainly not impossible.

Moreover, one has to stress the fundamental independency of potential religious practices (or desisting from them) from theoretical beliefs; it is not the fact of fulfilling rituals that is important but the motivation behind it. One can be a theist (believe the statement 'God exists' to be true) at the same time believing none of the religions to be an appropriate form of worshipping God; one can be an atheist, agnostic, or sceptic and still ardently fulfil specific religious rituals hoping they will either strengthen us in our convictions or allow us to break free from them, giving us a chance to discover previously unknown truths about God (nothing stands in the way of an atheist participating in religious practices searching either for a confirmation of the thesis that God does not exist or for data which would allow him to reject atheism). No matter what the motivations are to fulfil (or not) religious practices, they

in themselves have no means to solve the theoretical dispute about the existence/non-existence of God.

Sometimes the contradiction of scepticism is not seen as a gap between theory and practice but within the theory itself (considered to be incoherent). If scepticism means declaring current lack of knowledge about something then it is contradictory because by proclaiming our lack of knowledge we already assume that we at least know about our lack of knowledge.

This charge, however, does not concern scepticism in the matter of God's existence/non-existence since it is not global scepticism (claiming that we do not know anything about any matter), but local scepticism claiming only that the dispute about God's existence is at the moment unsettled. Moreover, scepticism is not a claim that we know nothing about the existence of God (we then would not be able to even state the question) but simply that currently we do not know whether God does or does not exist.

Sometimes another charge against scepticism is formulated. According to critics, only the claim that at the moment there is no evidence enabling us to settle the matter of God's existence could justify scepticism. Sceptics, however, cannot know, that there is no evidence for the existence or nonexistence of God; such claim would go beyond available data. Sceptics can only say that he/she does not see evidence which could settle the dispute.

In answering, sceptics should accept that the statement 'at the moment there is no evidence allowing us to settle the dispute about God's existence' is too strong. According to me it is true, that we do not know such data, but we cannot say that such evidence does not exist. So we must say that we do not recognize evidence supporting either the existence or nonexistence of God.

There is, however, a more important charge, which seems to be the main argument against scepticism. This is the claim that if we are sceptics we are not able to recognise any evidence of His existence or nonexistence. This means that even if we see the God himself (or other quite obvious evidence of His existence), we could say that it is (or could be) simple illusion. Analogically, even if we see quite obvious evidence disproving God's existence, we could say that it is (or could be) illusion. So scepticism is the position which we could not override in any rational way but only in irrational illumination or dark faith.

This charge seems to me important and too difficult to answer. I hope, however, that this charge is not more difficult than counterarguments posed against theism, atheism, and agnosticism. According to some thinkers, if a sceptic sees God and hears His voice, s/he would accept God's existence. This is the position held by Norwood Russell Hanson: 'I'm not a stubborn guy. I would be a theist under some conditions. I'm open-minded. ... Okay. Okay. The conditions are these: Suppose, next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this world are knocked to our knees by a persuasive and ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls, leaves drop from trees, the earth heaves and buckles, buildings topple, and towers tumble. The sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light, and just then, as all of the people of this world look up, the heavens open, and the clouds pull apart, revealing an unbelievably radiant and immense Zeus-like figure towering over us like a hundreds Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays over the features of his Michelangeloid face, and then he points down, *at me*, and explains for every man, woman and child to hear: 'I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic chopping and world-watching in matters of theology. Be assured Norwood Russell Hanson, that I do most certainly exist!'<sup>16</sup>

I am not sure if this story is plausible, because I can imagine a sceptic who sees God and hears His voice but still thinks that the figure or voice are illusions. So, the main difficulty in the sceptic's position is that s/he could neither recognise any evidence as the evidence of God's existence, nor recognise any evidence as the evidence of God's nonexistence. In other words, if you are a sceptic, you will probably be a sceptic forever.

## CONCLUSION

The result is rather depressing, because I should say that I do not know which theory is true – theism, atheism, agnosticism, or scepticism. I can say, however, that scepticism, as the least radical position, has the best justification, and that theism, atheism, and agnosticism go beyond the evidence. However, scepticism is not a good position from the practical point of view, because some humans cannot live without belief in God's existence or nonexistence. I am afraid, however, that our choice could only be practical and axiological; so, it could not settle the question on

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<sup>16</sup> N. R. Hanson, 'What I Don't Believe', in Stephen Toulmin, Harry Woolf (eds), *What I Do Not Believe, and Other Essays* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972), pp. 309-31 (p. 322).

the theoretical level. We can believe that God exists or believe that He does not, but *we do not know which belief is true*. Both atheist and theist are in a good position, because they have a fifty percent chance of having made the right choice. This means that both theist and atheist are in much better position than a person who hopes to win in the gambling of even one dollar.