

Intentionality and God: A Review Essay of Scott Smith's *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*

By Paul Gould

Scott's book *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*¹ is a bold and sustained attack of naturalism and its ability to deliver us knowledge. His master argument is a kind of transcendental argument: *If philosophical naturalism is true, then we do not have knowledge of reality. We do have knowledge of reality, therefore it is not the case that philosophical naturalism is true.* The bulk of Scott's book (in fact, Chapters 1-8) is concerned with showing the inability of naturalism to ground knowledge. Finally, in Chapter 9, Scott begins to build a positive case for the kind of ontology required for knowledge. Mental properties are *sui generis*, irreducible to the physical; knowledge requires substance dualism; and the "natural affinity" exhibited between mind and world is best explained via a divine mind. Thus, the reality of knowledge entails theism and a decidedly theistic world. I think that Scott is right in his central positive assertions. I also think he moves a little too fast in setting out his case. In this essay, I propose to move more slowly and to consider in greater detail the ontological implications of Scott's central thesis by focusing on one mental phenomenon—the phenomenon of intentionality. As we shall see, Scott's treatment of intentionality has implications related to the platonism/nominalism debate in metaphysics, the conceptualist argument in philosophy of religion, and the doctrine of creation in philosophical theology. Thus, his work on intentionality specifically, and knowledge in general, provide many fruitful avenues of exploration on perennial issues of concern within the discipline of philosophy.

¹ R. Scott Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012). Hereafter, references will be cited in the text.

A Cumulative Case Argument for Platonism from Intentionality

Let's call Platonism the view that there are abstract objects. Such a Platonism is neutral with respect to "where" such abstracta are located (that is, Plato's Heaven or God's mind), their modal status, and whether or not they exist in virtue of their own nature or through another. The reality of intentional facts, as articulated by Smith, seems to establish Platonism.

Mental entities are intentional objects; they are *of* or *about* things. A question that quickly arises is this. In virtue of what does a mental entity (or state) possess intentionality at all? Smith's answer is that intentionality is a *property* of mental states: "if intentionality itself were a relation, then any time it is represented in an experience, the object it is of would have to exist" (49). But, we can and do think of non-existent objects, such as the unicorn Pegasus, and we can and do have hallucinations and other kinds of conceptual errors. Thus, Scott's road to Platonism begins with a claim about the nature of intentionality:

Fact 1: Intentionality is a property.²

A second observation, following Franz Brentano, is that intentionality is *the distinctive mark of the mental*. Mental states are intrinsically intentional, hence:

Fact 2: Intentionality is an essential property of mental states.³

Further, it seems that intentionality is multiply-instantiated: A mental representation of a double-stuffed Oreo cookie can be possessed by me variously in acts of thinking, liking, and desiring. Further, distinct individuals can be thinking about the same thing—say Socrates or Socrates wisdom. It seems that the intentional property had by these mental states exactly resemble. Plug

² At this point, all I mean by 'property' is "a monadic abstract object capable of being had or possessed by another." I do not take a stand on whether such objects admit of their own ontological category or are reducible to an entity in some other category. In next section, I shall suggest that such properties ought to be identified with concepts/ideas.

³ Or of many, if not all. Even if, as some contemporary philosophers of mind argue, intentionality is not the mark of *all* mental states, that is, if it is a sufficient but not necessary condition of the mental, the above fact would still stand, suitably restricted to mental states such as beliefs, likings, desires, intentions, and the like.

this resemblance fact into an One Over Many Argument and we have good reason to think that the resemblance of intentional properties is grounded in their identity, that is, intentionality is a universal. Hence,

Fact 3: Intentional properties are universals.

The question then is, what metaphysical theory best accounts for the above facts? Smith employs a divide and conquer strategy to establish Platonism as follows:

- (1) Mental properties are either physical or non-physical. [premise]
- (2) It is not the case that mental properties are physical. [premise]
- (3) \therefore Mental properties are non-physical. [from 1 and 2]
- (4) If mental properties are non-physical, they are either abstract or concrete. [premise]
- (5) It is not the case that mental properties are concrete. [premise]
- (6) \therefore Mental properties are abstract. [from 3, 4, and 5]

To say that some entity is either physical or non-physical, or alternatively, either abstract or concrete, is to specify two ways of carving the world into mutually exclusive categories. Of course, these two classifications are not co-extensive. Something could be non-physical yet concrete such as souls or thoughts, even if, arguably, nothing can be physical and abstract. Thus, premises (1) and (4) seem unobjectionable. All that remains are premises (2) and (5). The main burden of Smith's book is to establish the truth of premise (2). He argues repeatedly that there is no place within a physicalist/naturalistic view of reality to account for Facts 1 and 2. Without natures, without essences, knowledge disappears since there is no intrinsic intentionality. Hence, mental properties are *sui generis*, they are not reducible to the physical. What about premise (5)? On pages 158-163, Scott considers four main theories of properties, platonism, aristotelianism, trope theory, and austere nominalism, arguing that only platonism can preserve intrinsic intentionality. He argues for this claim indirectly, by showing the implausibility of any non-platonic theory of properties to preserve intrinsic intentionality (that is he focuses on considerations related to Facts 1 and 2).

In addition to his indirect argument for platonism, I think Smith could have arrived at this same conclusion directly, by focusing on Fact 3—the fact that intentional properties, as universals, are multiply instantiated. A direct argument could be advanced as follows:

- (7) If an object is multiply-instantiable, then it is abstract. [premise]
- (8) Intentional properties are multiply-instantiable. [from Fact 3]
- (9) \therefore Intentional properties are abstract. [from 7 & 8]

Premise (7) is in need of explication and defense. Recall that objects are either concrete or abstract. What would be involved then, in a concrete object being multiply-instantiable? Assume that a necessary and sufficient condition for a concrete object to be multiply-instantiable is that one and the same object would need to be multiply located (i.e., at different places at the same time). But this possibility is (to say the least) highly counter-intuitive. Rather, our everyday experience of concrete objects supports the following axiom, called the ‘axiom of localization’ by Reinhardt Grossmann: “No entity whatsoever can exist at different places at once or at interrupted time intervals.”⁴ Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that concrete objects are not multiply instantiated. But then, it follows that if an object is multiply-instantiable, it must be an abstract object. And if mental properties are abstract, then Platonism is true. Thus, Smith’s argument is not only that naturalism cannot sustain our knowledge of reality, but that nominalism cannot either. We ought to be Platonists, since we obviously do know things.

A Conceptualist Argument for God Given the Fact of Intentionality

Scott argues that the incredibly high degree of correlation between a mental representation and the object represented, indeed, the information present within mental acts is best explained if there is a non-natural designer (201-204). The fact of intentionality fits best within a broadly theistic framework. I think Scott is right; there is a designer argument in the

⁴ Reinhardt Grossmann, *The Existence of the World: An Introduction to Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1992), 13.

neighborhood that can be generated from the phenomenon of intentionality. I also think we can figure the phenomenon of intentionality into other kinds of theistic arguments for God.

Consider Quentin Smith's formulation of the conceptualist argument for God.⁵ The first premise asserts the philosophical doctrine known as actualism, the theory that possibilities are analyzed in terms of a subclass of actualities, namely propositions. "It is possible *that there is a red unicorn*" is analyzed as meaning "there exists the possibly true proposition that some unicorn is red." Since possibilities are possibly true propositions, it follows that,

(10) There exists propositions in every possible world.

A second premise involves a conceptualist thesis regarding propositions, the thesis that necessarily, every proposition is an effect of some mind. Hence,

(11) Propositions are effects of some mind.

From the actualist and conceptualist premise, (12) follows:

(12) ∴ there is some mind in every possible world.

Still, an additional premise is needed to get from (12) to our desired conclusion that God exists in every possible world. There are a number of possible premises that can be supplied here. Quentin suggests one the following:

(13) There exists at least one proposition that can be an effect only of a divine mind, namely, the infinitely complex conjunction of all true propositions that is the actual world.

or

(13*) It is impossible that there exists an x such that x is a necessarily existent mind and different than God.

And from (13) or (13*) our conclusion (14) follows:

(14) God exists in every possible world [that is, Anselmian Theism is true].

⁵ Quentin Smith, "The Conceptualist Argument for God's Existence," *Faith and Philosophy* vol. 11 (1984): 38-49.

Quentin Smith argues that the conceptualist argument is rationally acceptable to believe but not rationally compelling because the conceptualist premise (11) is not obviously true. It is a synthetic *a priori* truth or falsehood. Its truth or falsehood is not self-evident, nor can its truth-value be determined by supplying a rationally compelling proof.

I think that considerations related to intentionality, as articulated by Scott Smith, may help us push the conceptualist argument towards rational compulsion, instead of mere acceptability. Let's see now what we can apply from his discussion to strengthen the conceptualist premise. Recall the premise:

(11) Propositions are effects of some mind.

Can a valid and plausible argument be constructed with (11) as its conclusion? I think so. Observe that propositions are intentional objects; they are *of* or *about* something. This is an essential property of propositions; for if they lacked this property they could not possibly claim to represent anything, nor be the bearer of truth or falsehood. Thus,

(15) Propositions have intrinsic intentionality.

But recall, according to Scott Smith, any object *O* that has intrinsic intentionality is mental in nature from which it follows that propositions are mental in nature. Hence,

(16) Propositions are mental objects. [from Fact 2 and (15)]

As Quentin Smith would put it, "every proposition is an accusative of some propositional attitude."⁶ Still, the fact that propositions are had by minds doesn't entail (11). We still are in need of an additional premise. Since propositions exist, we may ask, where should they be located in our ontology? One popular and natural answer is that they belong to the category of thought. Propositions simply are thoughts of some kind. If so, then

⁶ Quentin Smith, "The Conceptualist Argument For God's Existence," 39.

(17) Propositions are thoughts.

And if propositions are identified with thoughts, then we might quickly deduce that they are the product of intellectual activity, after all, it is reasonable to think that thoughts are the product of thinkers, hence,

(18) If propositions are thoughts, they are effects of some mind.

From which (11) follows from (17) and (18) by modus ponens.

But perhaps (17) is false. Another promising option is to allow propositions their own higher-level ontological category and to specify its intentional parts in virtue of which propositions possess (derivative) intentionality. Scott Smith's own account is suggestive of this line, for he states, "the mental act's own *intrinsic* parts and properties *alone* determine what its object is and *how* that object is presented before the act" (188). One plausible candidate for such fundamental intentional mental objects is that of ideas/concepts. The proposition that *Socrates is wise* is about Socrates because the proposition has, as constituents, the concepts/ideas <Socrates> and <wisdom>. Strictly speaking, while the ideas/concepts <Socrates> and <wisdom> are intentional objects, they don't represent. Rather, it is the complex whole, the proposition *Socrates is wise* that is a representative truthbearer. As Scott states, "[a] proposition is a whole with its meaning, and that meaning is more than just the aggregate of the parts" (203). Thus, a proposition is far more than an unrelated list of items, its parts are arranged such that they represent a determinate ordered state of affairs.⁷ But what explains this arrangement of ideas? One idea, advocated by Thomas Aquinas is that "Every composition...needs some composer. For, if there is composition, it is made up of a plurality, and a plurality cannot be

⁷ See Richard Brian Davis, "God and the Platonic Horde: A Defense of Limited Conceptualism," *Philosophia Christi* vol. 13 No. 2 (2011), 297.

lifted into a unity except by some composer.”⁸ Given this principle of composition and the fact that propositions have metaphysical parts, it follows propositions need a composer, hence:

(17*) Propositions are composites of concepts/ideas,

and

(18*) If propositions are compositions of concepts/ideas, they are effects of some mind.

From which, again, (11) follows from (17*) and (18*) by modus ponens. Thus, from considerations related to the intrinsic intentionality of propositions (whether fundamental or derived) we find promising avenues of exploration for strengthening the conceptualist premise regarding propositions. If so, we have reason to think that conceptualism is rationally preferable to platonism (at least with respect to propositions) and thus, a rationally compelling argument for the Anselmian God.

Implications in Philosophical Theology

We have seen that intentional objects are mental objects. They belong to the category of ideas/concepts and/or thoughts. Next question: whose ideas/concepts? Whose thoughts? It is plausible to think that propositions (and other intentional objects) are not reducible to *our* thoughts (yours and mine). If they were, they would suffer from a deplorable fragility. Further, there simply are not enough of us to think up all the propositions associated with, say, the natural numbers. It is natural to think of propositions as objective and necessary—even if we had not existed, they would have been none the worse off for it. The way to go here is to assert that while propositions are independent of human minds, they are not independent of the divine mind. Concepts/ideas are divine ideas; propositions are divine thoughts. Pushing Smith’s general thesis

⁸ Quoted in *ibid*, 298.

in this direction opens up a number of fruitful avenues of exploration in the area of philosophical theology. I shall briefly consider three.

A. Intentionality and the “Mystery Objection”

As mental representations, Smith insists that a mental “act’s intentional property with its nature is ‘together with’ the object’s *intensional* properties due to their natures, or, alternatively, their ‘natural affinity’ for each other” (190). But *why* is there a ‘natural affinity’ between a mental representation and its object? And is such a picture even possible? Hilary Putnam, for example, has argued that no representation could be connected to its object in the way Smith’s view suggests:⁹

What is important to realize is that what goes for physical pictures also goes for mental images, and for mental representations in general; mental representations no more have a necessary connection with what they represent than physical representations do. The contrary supposition is a survival of magical thinking...Thought words and mental pictures do not *intrinsically* represent what they are about.

What this objection by Putnam amounts to is this. Smith’s account makes the relation between mind and the world mysterious or magical by refusing to explain the intentionality of representation in terms of something other than the intrinsic properties of representational states. Call this the ‘Mystery Objection’.¹⁰ Smith is suggestive, but mostly silent in response to the ‘Mystery Objection’. Scott argues that humans have been designed by God in such a way that our mental representations will in fact match up in the way they do, but that is as far as he goes.

However, if we understand intentional objects in terms of divine ideas and thoughts, we find further resources to address the ‘Mystery Objection’. A venerable tradition in philosophical theology, divine exemplarism could be employed to explain the ‘natural affinity’ between mental

⁹ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3-5.

¹⁰ See also Jeff Brower & Susan Brower-Toland, “Aquinas on Mental Representation: Concepts and Intentionality,” *The Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 193-243.

representations and the world. God creates according to exemplars, that is, according to his divine ideas. A concept of a cat has a ‘natural affinity’ or likeness with cats because God creates it in the likeness of its divine exemplar. Thus, the connection between mind and world is as tight as the creator-creature relation itself. Just as we find natural classes of objects in the world that motivate realism as a solution to the problem of universals, so too we find ‘natural affinities’ between mind and world which motivate divine exemplarism as a way to explain the otherwise mysterious connection. And if, as I suggest, divine ideas are already on our ontological books, we might as well employ them to solve philosophical problems.

B. Divine Ideas and the Rationality of Creation

As a personal being worthy of worship, God’s act of creation is rational. This desideratum of the doctrine of creation has led, historically to a *deliberative* model of God’s creative activity. The model is a familiar one: logically prior to creating, God surveys all possible worlds or possible individuals and chooses to create or actualize the world (or individuals) consonant with his will and purposes. Recently, the deliberative model of creation has come under attack. For example, Hugh McCann argues that¹¹

[I]f God truly creates the universe, then there is no plan from which it is created. If there were, his activity in producing the world would be reduced to rote, plodding execution, lacking both spontaneity and the instinctive grasp of how things should go that characterizes true creation.

The idea is that true creation involves creating the plan as well as the end product, and on the standard deliberative model, the set of prior plans from which God chooses is a brute given independent of God’s creative activity. God is the ultimate ‘window shopper’ who surveys all the possible worlds and chooses one in which to actualize.

¹¹ Hugh McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 172.

If however, possible worlds are propositions, and propositions are God's thoughts, we may be able to avoid McCann's charge. For now, since God produces his thoughts, God can be understood as the creator of the plan as well as the end product of creation. But, this version of theistic activism does not satisfy McCann:¹²

[T]he generation of possible worlds is on this model nothing but a mechanical chore—a trivial exercise in concept-crunching that charity itself can only describe as infinitely boring....There is nothing of inspiration, nothing of spontaneity, nothing of art—and without those things, it is unworthy of God.

Contrary to McCann, to me, such a process hardly seems infinity boring, or a mechanical chore. Setting this aside however, it could be argued that the deliberative model is to be preferred over the spontaneous model because it alone secures the rationality of the creative act. Scott Smith argues “rationality...involves [determinate] awareness...of the essential structures of particular means-to-ends states of affairs” (133). If so, then prior beliefs and conceptualizations of possible worlds or individuals would be necessary conditions of a rational creation. Or again, if concepts play an essential role in rationality (as Smith seems to think), then the deliberative model is to be preferred over the spontaneous model of creation. At any rate, what should be clear is that Smith's discussion of the necessary ontology for knowledge and rationality has important implications related to the ontology of creation in philosophical theology.

C. God's Relationship to Abstract Objects

One final implication of Smith's treatment of intentionality is this. It helps the philosophical theologian make progress in understanding God's relationship to abstract objects. For, there exists a class of abstract objects that are irreducibly mental. Thus, a limited conceptualism, even theistic activism seems in order. One need not go all the way down the activist road and identify all properties and relations with mental effects however. It can

¹² Ibid.

reasonably be maintained that there are at least two kinds of properties—intentional properties, which I say are reducible to divine concepts/ideas, and structural properties—properties that make up the structure of the mind-independent world. Such structural properties, that is, properties exemplified by concrete objects, can and perhaps should be understood as existing in Plato’s Heaven—a mind-independent realm of abstracta. If so, then we arrive at a kind of modified theistic activism. Granted, such a position has its own set of problems to overcome—the bootstrapping worry, questions about God’s ability to create abstracta, and concerns over theoretical simplicity—but Smith has provided motivation for the philosophical theologian to think such problems can be overcome.