



The Modal-Epistemic Argument Self-undermined

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Abstract

In a recent article, Emanuel Rutten defends his *Modal-Epistemic Argument* (MEA) for the existence of God against various objections that I raised against it. In this article, I observe that Rutten's defence fails for various reasons. Most notably though, the defence is self-undermining: the very claims that Rutten argues for in his defence yield novel counterexamples to the first premise of the MEA.

Keywords Modal-epistemic argument · God · Personal first cause · Rutten

Introduction

This article is about the Modal-Epistemic Argument for the existence of God, developed by Emanuel Rutten (2014), criticized by Wintein (2018) and defended against this critique by Rutten (2022). In this article I demonstrate that Rutten's defence fails for various reasons. Most notably though, the defence is *self-undermining*, as explained below. But let me first present the (valid) argument that is at stake.

The Modal-Epistemic Argument (MEA)

- P_1 For every FoCons proposition p that is true in some possible world w there is some possible world w' (such that p is true in w' and) such that there is a subject in w' that knows_R that p .
- P_2 It is not the case that there is a possible world in which there is a subject that knows_R that there is no personal first cause.
- P_3 The proposition that there is no personal first cause is a FoCons proposition.
- C In every possible world there is a personal first cause.

A *FoCons proposition* is a *first-order* proposition that is *consistently believable*. A first-order proposition only states something about the world itself and not about

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the propositional attitudes of a subject. For instance, ‘John went to Rotterdam’ is a first-order proposition whereas ‘John knows that he went to Rotterdam’ is not. Consistently believable propositions are propositions for which it is not self-contradictory to believe them. Propositions such as ‘There are no conscious beings’ or ‘Nothing exists’ are not consistently believable.

$Knowledge_R$ refers to the very demanding conception of knowledge that Rutten employs in the MEA and according to which a proposition can be known $_R$ only when it is (i) deductively proven, (ii) self-evident, (iii) grounded in indisputable sensory or inner experience (including indisputable memory), or (iv) based on indisputable testimony. To illustrate that the conditions on ‘knowing $_R$ that’ are very demanding and to contrast it with our colloquial use of ‘knowing that’, consider proposition (1).

The population of New York is larger than that of Amsterdam. (1)

Although I know that (1) is true, I do not know $_R$ that (1) is true. Nevertheless, (1) is $knowable_R$ as Rutten (2014) explains by considering a possible world with ‘an extra-terrestrial civilization whose members can observe an extensive geographical area on our planet with the same immediacy and resulting degree of certainty as we can observe our hands’. A member of this extra-terrestrial civilization can know $_R$ (1) on the basis of indisputable observation, i.e. on the basis of knowledge source (iii). Hence, (1) is $knowable_R$.

A *personal first cause* is a personal being that is a *first cause* (of reality). An entity x is a first cause iff x is the direct or originating cause of everything else besides x , whereas x itself is not caused. Note that it follows directly from its definition that if a first cause exists, then it is unique.

In Wintein (2018) I present various objections to the MEA. I argue (a) that premise P_1 is false, (b) that premise P_2 is false and (c) that the MEA is effectively equivalent to the *modal-epistemic Core argument*, the latter argument being clearly untenable. In addition, I presented (d) a parody argument to the Core argument, in order to vividly illustrate the Core argument’s flaws and, by extension, the flaws of the MEA.

Rutten (2022) defends the MEA by arguing that my objections (a), (b), (c) and (d) all fail. In this paper I demonstrate that Rutten’s defence against each of the four objections is wanting and that his replies to (b) and (c) are, in addition, *self-undermining*. That is, the very claims that Rutten is arguing for to rebut (b) and (c) can be turned against the MEA: they can be used to construct straightforward counterexamples to P_1 .

Rutten chooses to reply to (a), (b), (c), (d) in reverse order and I will respect Rutten’s order in this paper. Thus, the next four sections of this paper deal with (d), (c), (b) and (a) respectively, after which a final section concludes.

The Parody Argument

It is important to realize that, in premise P_1 of the MEA, it is $knowability_R$, i.e. $knowable_R$ by *some* subject in *some* possible world, that is at stake. As illustrated by our discussion of (1), the appeal to knowers $_R$ that exist in *some* possible world counterbalances the demanding conception of $knowlegde_R$ and secures the $knowability_R$

of lots of propositions. The knowability_R of some (possibly true FoCons) propositions, such as ‘there is a personal first cause’ or ‘the Flying Spaghetti Monster does not exist’ is, *prima facie*, controversial, but Rutten (2014) argues that these are knowable_R by a personal first cause. In fact, the knowledge_R possibilities for a personal first cause, as envisioned by Rutten, seem endless. In Wintein (2018), I argue that Rutten is effectively committed to (*):

- (*) A proposition p is knowable_R by some subject if and only if p is knowable_R by a personal first cause.

Given (*), the MEA is equivalent to *the (modal-epistemic) Core argument*, which is obtained from the MEA by replacing ‘subject that knows_R’ with ‘personal first cause that knows_R’ throughout. The Core argument is clearly untenable. In Wintein (2018), I put forward the following parody argument to the Core argument in order to openly lay bare its flaw.

Parody Argument

- K_1 All possibly true FolKri propositions are knowable_R by Saul Kripke.
 K_2 The proposition that Saul Kripke does not exist is not knowable_R by Saul Kripke.
 K_3 The proposition that Saul Kripke does not exist is a FolKri proposition.
 C_K The proposition that Saul Kripke exists is necessarily true.

Here, a *FolKri proposition* is any proposition that is expressible by a sentence of a first-order predicate language with identity, without any predicate or function symbols and with a single constant symbol κ that refers to Saul Kripke. Thus the proposition that everything is self-identical, which can be expressed as ‘ $\forall x(x = x)$ ’ is a true FolKri proposition. The proposition that not everything is identical to Saul Kripke, ‘ $\neg\forall x(x = \kappa)$ ’ is another true FolKri proposition. Now ‘Saul Kripke does not exist’, i.e. $\neg\exists x(x = \kappa)$, is a FolKri proposition which is possibly true¹ but clearly not knowable_R by Saul Kripke. Indeed, the whole point of the Parody argument is that K_1 is trivially false, as this vividly illustrates that the same holds true for the first premise of the Core argument.

Rutten (2022, p. 778) argues that the Parody argument is unsuccessful as a parody argument to the Core argument and claims that, ‘contrary to premise P_1 , premise K_1 is obviously false’. To do so, Rutten correctly observes that for each natural number n , the proposition which states that there are exactly n objects, call this proposition *World(n)*, is a FolKri proposition. For example:

$$\text{World}(2) := \exists x\exists y\forall z\neg(x = y) \wedge (z = x \vee z = y)$$

¹The Parody argument may be formally represented using the vocabulary of quantified modal logic. The natural, *Kripke semantics* for quantified modal logic is *free*, meaning that constants need not have a referent in each possible world. As such, $\neg\exists x(x = \kappa)$ is a possible truth according to Kripke semantics for quantified modal logic.

Rutten then claims that:

There are many sufficiently large natural numbers n such that the FolKri proposition $\text{World}(n)$ is possibly true and yet unknowable_R by Saul Kripke. I conclude that Wintein's parody argument is not a successful parody argument against the modal-epistemic core argument. Rutten (2022, p. 778)

So in particular, Rutten claims that for sufficiently large numbers n , $\text{World}(n)$ is possibly true. However, now consider the following proposition, which is also known as *Euclid's theorem*:

There are infinitely many prime numbers. (2)

According to a compelling view, mathematical propositions are *necessarily* true, i.e. true in every possible world. One can argue that the (necessary) truth of (2) renders any $\text{World}(n)$ proposition (necessarily) false: when there are infinitely many prime numbers, it is false that there are exactly n objects, so that any $\text{World}(n)$ proposition is false. In a similar vein, one can argue that $\text{World}(n)$ propositions are necessarily false by pointing to the necessary truth of a proposition like (3):

There are infinitely many propositions. (3)

If $\text{World}(n)$ propositions are necessarily false, Rutten's objection to the Parody argument completely fails. I believe, for the reasons just given, that $\text{World}(n)$ propositions *are* necessarily false. Now, Rutten may reject those reasons. That is, he can deny that propositions such as (2) and (3) are necessarily true. Or, he can deny that (2) and (3) commit one to acknowledge the existence of infinitely many objects. But then, the above considerations reveal that Rutten's attempt to discredit the Parody argument forces him to embrace anti-realism about numbers, propositions, sets, and the like. This is a high price to pay and I am not sure whether it is a price that Rutten *can* pay: is anti-realism about numbers and propositions compatible with other philosophical commitments that a proponent of the MEA has to take on? I will not pursue this question as it can be side-stepped: a slight variation of the Parody argument will serve my purposes equally well and is immune to Rutten's 'objection from $\text{World}(n)$ propositions'.

Let a *Fol^x Kri proposition* be any proposition that is expressible by a sentence of a first-order predicate language with 1 variable x , with identity, without any predicate or function symbols and with a single constant symbol κ that refers to Saul Kripke. Let the *Parody^x argument* be obtained from the Parody argument by replacing 'FolKri proposition(s)' with 'Fol^xKri proposition(s)' throughout. The Parody^x argument is immune to Rutten's objection from $\text{World}(n)$ propositions and fulfils the dialectical role of the (original) Parody argument equally well: it vividly illustrates that the modal-epistemic *Core argument* is untenable.

The Core Argument

The Parody argument illustrates the untenability of the Core argument, not of the MEA. However, if (*) is true, the MEA is equivalent to the Core argument so that the

MEA is shown to be untenable by the Parody argument as well. Rutten (2022) argues that (*) is false by providing two types of counterexamples to (*): *counterfactuals of libertarian freedom* and *what it is like to be propositions*. I will show that Rutten's arguments for both cases are unsuccessful and that, in addition, his arguments pertaining to the first case are self-undermining.

Counterfactuals of Libertarian Freedom

A counterfactual of (libertarian) freedom (CLF) is a proposition of the form 'Agent *S* would (libertarianly) freely do action *A* in circumstances *C*'. With respect to CLFs, Rutten correctly remarks that:

Counterfactuals of (libertarian) freedom for creaturely beings constitute a counterexample to (*) in case they are knowable_R by a (libertarian) creaturely free agent but unknowable_R by a personal first cause. Rutten (2022, p. 780)

Indeed, these are the conditions under which CLFs constitute counterexamples to (*). Rutten, however, hardly provides an argument for the claim that these conditions are fulfilled. He does refer to a debate, in the philosophy of religion, about whether God knows CLFs and how such knowledge squares with God's providence². According to one position in the debate, called *Molinism*³, God knows all CLFs. Thus, according to Molinists, CLFs do *not* constitute counterexamples to (*). Rutten (2022, p. 780) remarks that '[Molinist] accounts are problematic to say the least' and from this sole remark he infers that 'it might very well be that CLFs are not knowable_R by a personal first cause'. So, Rutten's defence against my objections to the MEA involves a rejection of Molinism. This very fact will, for quite a few theists, seriously diminish the MEA's attractiveness.

But even if Molinism is mistaken and its failure would entail that CLFs are unknowable_R by a personal first cause, it does not follow that (*) is false. For, to argue that CLFs constitute counterexamples to (*), one also needs to argue that CLFs are knowable_R by some subject. Although Rutten (2022, p. 780) suggests that a CLF might be knowable_R by the (libertarian) creaturely free agent *S* that is the subject of the CLF, no argument for this claim is to be found in Rutten (2022) at all. And yet such an argument is clearly needed. For, the knowability_R by *S* of the proposition that *S* would (libertarianly) freely do *A* in *C* seems to contradict, at least *prima facie*, with the (libertarian) freedom of *S*. Indeed, if *S* knows_R in advance what he would do when in *C*, it seems that *S* cannot be (libertarian) free to do as he sees fit once in *C*. Rutten does not discuss this tension between the knowability_R of CLFs and libertarian freedom at all, let alone give any suggestion as to how to overcome it. Yet without an argument that resolves this tension, Rutten's remarks that CLFs constitute counterexamples to (*) are futile.

²Note that the meaning of 'God' and 'knowledge' that figure in the debate alluded to differ from that of 'personal first cause' and 'knowledge_R'.

³Molinism is defended by a.o. Craig (1991), Flint (1998) and Plantinga (1959).

More importantly, let us now suppose that CLFs actually *do* constitute counterexamples to (*). In particular, suppose that for some action A and circumstances C , proposition (4) is knowable_R by Saul Kripke but not by a personal first cause.

Kripke would (libertarianly) freely do action A in circumstances C . (4)

Recall from §2 that Kripke exists, but not necessarily so, so that (5) is a possible truth.

Kripke does not exist. (5)

As the truth value of CLFs about Kripke does not depend on his (actual) existence, the conjunction of (4) and (5), which I'll denote as (4.5), is a possible truth as well. So then, as we are working under the assumption that (4) is only knowable_R by Saul Kripke, (4.5), is unknowable_R by any subject. Hence, if (4.5), is a FoCons proposition, it is a counterexample to P_1 . But clearly, (4.5), *is* a FoCons proposition. For one, I can consistently *believe* (4.5). For another, (5) is clearly a first-order proposition and Rutten (2022, p. 781) explicitly argues that CLFs are first-order propositions. Hence, arguing that CLFs are counterexamples to (*) in order to defend the MEA is self-undermining: if successful, it yields counterexamples to P_1 .

What It Is Like to Be Propositions

What it is like to be a bat (cf. Nagel, 1974) refers to the subjective character or quality of the first-person experience of being a bat. Rutten argues that (*) is false as a personal first cause cannot know_R what it is like to be a bat. More precisely:

Further, it seems to me plausibly true that (at least part of) what it is like to be a bat can be expressed by a (complex) proposition q . But then proposition q is a counterexample to the left-to-right direction of (*). For q is possibly true and knowable_R by a bat, but unknowable_R by a personal first cause. So (*) is false.

Rutten (2022, p. 779)

Rutten does not provide any argument for the claims that (part of) what it is like to be a bat is *propositionally* expressible or that bats are capable of having *propositional* knowledge_R. Rather, he presupposes these claims to formulate an argument (Rutten, 2022, p. 779) against (*) that can be phrased as follows:

- B_1 Only (beings sufficiently similar to) bats can know_R q .
- B_2 A personal first cause is not (sufficiently similar to) a bat.
- \therefore q is unknowable_R by a personal first cause.

Rutten takes it for granted that B_1 and B_2 are true. But plausibly, both premisses of his *Bat* argument are false, as I will now demonstrate.

As for B_2 , Rutten's *conception* of a personal first cause may very well be sufficiently dissimilar from that of a bat. However, the dissimilarity between a personal first cause and a bat does not follow from the *definition* of a personal first cause. To illustrate this, note that bats, on Rutten's account, are receptive to his four knowlegde_R sources and capable of propositional knowledge_R: bats are subjects. Now, consider a possible world w that is populated only by bats and bat-like creatures. It seems perfectly possible that this world w has a personal first cause who

created ‘all bats in his image’. Such a personal first cause then, would arguably be sufficiently similar to a bat. Such a personal cause would know_R q . It might sound odd to assert that the personal first cause of the *actual* world, if it exists, is sufficiently similar to a bat. But such is irrelevant, as it is knowability_R of q by a personal first cause that is at stake, not the knowability_R of q by the personal first cause of the actual world.

As for B_1 , Rutten simply postulates that ‘being sufficiently similar to a bat’ is a necessary condition for a being to be able to know_R q . However, this condition seems rather implausible when it is the knowability_R of q by a *personal first cause* that is at stake. For a personal first cause, who ‘sits at the ultimate root of all reality’ as Rutten (2022, p. 784) puts it, is indeed a rather special being. In particular a personal first cause is the cause, or creator, of all bats. But, as a brief glimpse at the actual world reveals, a personal first cause may be the cause of so much more than just bats. Indeed, a personal first cause may be completely dissimilar to a bat as it *is* so much more than a bat. But exactly because it is so much more than a bat, a personal first cause may, in contrast to fish, birds, humans and other beings that are dissimilar to bats, know_R q . Indeed, a personal first cause may know_R q on the basis of its unique, indisputable bat-creating experience or intuition. Relatedly, Linda Zagzebski has argued⁴ that God is *omnisubjective*, i.e. that, as Zagzebski (2016, p. 435) puts it, God has ‘the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature’s own perspective, a perspective that is unique’. Indeed, Rutten’s blunt assumption that B_1 is true is dialectically inappropriate.

So then, Rutten’s appeal to q to argue against (*) is, like his appeal to CLFs, unsuccessful. As, in Rutten’s argumentative strategy, q plays a role similar to that of CLFs, one wonders whether this appeal is also self-undermining. *Prima facie* the appeal is, indeed, self-undermining as q is unknowable_R whenever (6) is true.

There are no bats or bat-like creatures (6)

Although the conjunction of q and (6), which I’ll denote as $(q.6)$, is an unknowable_R possible truth, $(q.6)$ is a counterexample P_1 only if it is a FoCons proposition. Now, Rutten *might* argue that only bats and bat-like creatures can have cognitive access to q so that without bats, or bat-like creatures, no subject can believe q , know_R q or have any other propositional attitude to q . If so, $(q.6)$ is not consistently believable because it is not believable at all. An argument along the above lines *might* save Rutten from the charge that appealing to q is self-undermining.

However, in order for such an argument to work, the least that Rutten owes us is an account of his rather unorthodox notion of a *proposition* that allows him to assert that q is a proposition that is only believable by bats. For unorthodox a notion it is. For instance, in their Stanford Encyclopaedia article *Propositions*, McGrath and Frank (2020) acknowledge that there are many different ways in which *proposition* is understood. They then propose that the best way to proceed is to ‘stipulate

⁴I thank an anonymous referee of this journal for drawing my attention to Zagzebski’s interesting work.

a definition [of proposition] and proceed with caution, making sure not to close off any substantive issues by definitional fiat', which they do as follows:

Propositions, we shall say, are the sharable objects of the attitudes and the primary bearers of truth and falsity. This stipulation rules out certain candidates for propositions, including thought- and utterance-tokens, which presumably are not sharable, and concrete events or facts, which presumably cannot be false. These consequences fit well with contemporary usage. Our definition leaves open many of the questions dividing propositionalists: which additional roles are propositions fit to play? would propositions have to be mind-independent or abstract? what individuation conditions would they have? how would they relate to facts?

In order for Rutten's appeal to q to be non self-undermining, propositional attitudes to q must be exclusively reserved for bats. But then q is, in an important sense, non-sharable. Thus, one wonders how the notion of *proposition* that figures so prominently in the MEA ought to be understood. Without such understanding, it is hard to properly evaluate whether appealing to *proposition* q is self-undermining.

The Case Against P_2

Premise P_2 of the MEA states that the proposition that there is no personal first cause is unknowable_R. Rutten (2014) argues that the proposition that there *is* a personal first cause, which can be restated as (7), is knowable_R:

There is exactly 1 personal uncaused cause that created the world. (7)

Indeed, Rutten argues that a personal first cause can know_R (7) on the basis of intuition or the experience of creating the world. In Wintein (2018) I argue that if a personal first cause can know_R (7), then the co-creators mentioned in (ii), call them A and B , can similarly know_R (ii):

(ii) There are exactly 2 personal uncaused causes that co-created the world.

But then, if A can know_R (ii), A can deduce, and hence know_R, that there is no (unique) personal first cause. Hence premise P_2 is false.

Rutten (2022, p. 782) objects that my argument 'fails because there is a significant difference between both cases' and seeks to demonstrate that, although a personal first cause can know_R (7), A cannot know_R (ii). To me, Rutten's defence comes across as applying double standards of knowability_R.

But at any rate, Rutten's defence is self-undermining. To see this, assume that Rutten's (2022) argument for the unknowability_R of (ii) by A succeeds. Then, as A cannot know_R (ii), it seems rather plausible that proposition (ii) must be unknowable_R *tout court*. For, as being a co-creator of the world is not sufficient for knowing_R (ii), and as (ii) implies that there is no personal first cause, it seems that no subject can know_R (ii). But then (ii) is an unknowable_R possible truth so that (ii)—which clearly is a FoCons proposition—is a counterexample to P_1 and Rutten's defence against my objection to P_2 is self-undermining. But now suppose

that⁵ whereas A (nor B) can't know_R (ii) there still is *some* creature who can. Even this move will not help Rutten. For if it is possible for such a creature to know_R (ii) then, as (ii) implies that there is no personal first cause, it is possible for such a creature to deduce that there is no personal first cause. But then it's possible for there to be a creature who *knows*_R that there is no personal first cause, which establishes that P_2 is false.

So, Rutten's objection to my argument for the falsity of P_2 in terms of (ii) is self-undermining. One last resort for Rutten might be to object to my argument in a rather different manner: Rutten *might* seek to establish that proposition (ii) is, in fact, necessarily false. If so, he faces the following challenge, which I explained in Wintein (2018, p. 318):

Indeed, given the notion of metaphysical im(possibility) to which Rutten appeals, (ii), must be considered as a possible truth. Or if not, Rutten would have to explain why (ii) is necessarily false whereas he regards [proposition (7)] as possibly (in fact necessarily) true.

To my mind, this challenge is insurmountable. But at any rate, an attempt to overcome this challenge by Rutten will force him to take up further philosophical commitments. It may very well be that these further commitments can also be shown to be self-undermining.

The Case Against P_1

Possibility and Conceivability

In Wintein (2018) I invoked the following FoCons proposition to establish that P_1 is false:

- (i) The only conscious beings are naturally evolved animals and humans.

I argued that (i) is logically consistent and conceivable, that Rutten is committed to the view that logical consistency and conceivability conjointly guarantee metaphysical possibility and that (i) is unknowable_R. It then follows that (i) is a counterexample to P_1 .

Rutten (2022, p. 785) accepts that logical consistency and conceivability are conjointly sufficient for metaphysical possibility but adds that not any notion of conceivability serves as a criterion for metaphysical possibility. A suitable notion of conceivability requires that, in order for a proposition to be conceivable, we need an explanation of how that proposition can be true. The conceivability of (i) then

⁵Perhaps, as a referee suggested, the co-creators create the world 'with unmistakable marks of their existence and status as co-creators of the world, such that some creature in their creation has exceedingly advanced intellectual and deductive apparatuses and, upon directly observing such unmistakable marks—comes to deduce with justified certainty (ii)'.

requires an explanation of how matter could generate consciousness. And such an explanation is lacking:

The fact is that we do not even have the beginning of a compelling model, mechanism or account that renders (i) conceivable [...]. Rutten (2022, p. 786)

In particular, so Rutten argues, neither the neuroscientific literature nor the philosophy of mind harbours the beginning of the required explanation: *the hard problem of consciousness*, i.e. to explain how matter could generate subjective inner experience, is very hard indeed⁶.

So in a nutshell, Rutten objects that he is not committed to accept (i) as a possible truth as it is inconceivable how matter could generate consciousness. Now Rutten is well aware that the claim that it is inconceivable how matter could generate consciousness invites the rejoinder that it is likewise inconceivable how consciousness could generate matter. However, he thinks that this rejoinder does not affect the status of the MEA:

For I do not appeal to a possible world in which matter arises from consciousness in order to defend the [MEA's] premises or to refute objections against the [MEA].
Rutten (2022, p. 787)

Now it may very well be that, *thus far*, Rutten has not appealed to possible worlds in which matter arises from consciousness in order to defend the MEA. The relevant question, however, is whether the MEA *as such* is defensible without appeal to such worlds. And the answer to that question is 'no'. To see this, consider the following proposition⁷:

There is exactly 1 material object. (8)

Clearly, Rutten has to accept (8) as a possible truth. According to P_1 then, (8) must be knowable_R. But, as the notion of knowability_R is very demanding indeed, one wonders how (8) could be known_R. How can a subject know_R that there is exactly 1 material object? That is, how can a subject know_R that there is 1 material object while ruling out the possibility that there are more such objects? To answer this question, we take our cue from Rutten's (2014) discussion of the knowability_R of (9):

A flying Spaghetti Monster does not exist. (9)

In general, it is very hard to know_R that something does *not* exist. In particular, in order to ensure the knowability_R of (9), we need a very strong knower_R. Rutten (2014, p. 396) appeals to 'a possible world in which [a personal first cause] exists and decides not to create anything'. In this world, the personal first cause knows_R that a Spaghetti Monster does not exist as the first cause knows_R that he did not create such a Monster. Hence, (9) is knowable_R.

Similarly, it is very hard to know_R that more than 1 material object does not exist. But in order to ensure the knowability_R of (8), we may appeal a possible world in which a personal first cause exists and decides to create exactly 1 material object.

⁶See David Chalmers (1995)

⁷Note that (8) does not preclude that there are other types of objects such as subjects or abstract objects.

In this world, the personal first cause knows_R that there is exactly 1 material object in virtue of its experience of creating exactly 1 such object. Hence, (8) is knowable_R.

So to ensure the knowability_R of propositions such as (8), we are bound to appeal to a personal first cause who decides to create (exactly 1) material object(s). Hence, *pace* Rutten, a cogent defence of the MEA's premisses needs to appeal to possible worlds in which matter arises from consciousness.

Rutten (2022, p. 788) seems to anticipate the above objection when he writes that 'for the sake of argument assume that I need to provide a reasonable model of how matter could arise from consciousness'. He then seeks to provide such a reasonable model in terms of the following story:

God created initially no concrete objects. In the beginning God formed abstract objects from his thoughts. Afterwards God reified or hypostatized these thoughts as separately existing abstract objects. These abstracta were subsequently transformed by God into non-substantive concrete particulars (e.g. one or more singularities, space-times having radius zero or virtual particles having mass and charge zero). From these non-substantive concrete particulars, God brought substantive concrete simple objects into being. These substantive concreta evolved over a long period of time into the world of concrete composite substances as we know it.

Rutten (2022, p. 789)

I do not have any qualms with a demanding notion of conceivability according to which neither neuroscience nor the philosophy of mind harbour reasonable models that render it conceivable how consciousness could arise from matter. However, *given* such a demanding notion of conceivability, the short story told by Rutten neither counts as a reasonable model that renders it conceivable how matter could arise from consciousness. To assert that it does is applying double standards of conceivability.

Another Modal-Epistemic Argument

Rutten (2022, p. 789) further claims that even without a model which explains how matter could arise from consciousness, 'the MEA would not be defeated' by proposition (i). The claim that Rutten advances, however, pertains to the following argument:

The Actualized Modal-Epistemic Argument (MEA[@])

- $P_1^@$ For every FoCons proposition p that is true in the actual world $w_@$ there is some possible world w' (such that p is true in w' and) such that there is a subject in w' that knows_R that p .
- P_2 It is not the case that there is a possible world in which there is a subject that knows_R that there is no personal first cause.
- P_3 The proposition that there is no personal first cause is a FoCons proposition.
- $C^@$ In the actual world $w_@$ there is a personal first cause.

So the MEA[@] relies on $P_1^@$ which, in contrast to P_1 , only claims that all *actual* propositions are knowable_R. Correspondingly, the conclusion of the MEA[@] reports the *actual*, in contrast to the *necessary*, existence of a personal first cause.

Rutten (2022, p. 789) remarks that whereas (i) may be counterexample to premise P_1 of the MEA, it would be dialectically inappropriate to claim that (i) is a counterexample to $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$. For, in order to do so, one must assert that (i) is not just *possibly* true, but *actually* true., which is question-begging in the present context, so that ...

... we still have a modal-epistemic argument for God's *actual* existence [i.e. the MEA[ⓐ]] even though it now no longer follows that God exists in all possible worlds.
Rutten (2022, p. 789)

Indeed, the MEA[ⓐ] is *another* argument than the MEA, arguing for *another*, weaker, conclusion. But let me conclude this paper on the MEA by making some remarks on the MEA[ⓐ].

It is, indeed, much harder to present counterexamples to $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ than it is to present counterexamples to P_1 . For in order to present some proposition p as a counterexample to $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ one must assert that p is actually true while unknowable_R. Now, I do not want to assert that (i), which is a counterexample to P_1 , is *actually* true. To do so would be improper, as plausibly,⁸ it is proper to assert that p (is actually true) only if one knows that p . And surely, I do not *know* (i). So effectively, a convincing counterexample to $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ must be a proposition that is known to be true yet unknowable_R. And such propositions seem hard to come by. For if one knows p , isn't there always *some* possible world which harbours *some* subject, say a personal first cause, who can be said to know_R p ?

Not always. Or, at least not when we buy into Rutten's account of CLFs. To see this, consider any subject, say Gödel, that is deceased. Let CLF_G be any (actually) true CLF specifying that Gödel would, when in circumstances C , (libertarianly) freely perform action A . According to Rutten, Gödel knows_R CLF_G in possible worlds in which he is alive and kicking, whereas CLF_G is unknowable_R for subjects other than Gödel. As Gödel is deceased, the conjunction of CLF_G with the proposition that Gödel is deceased is an actual truth. Yet clearly it is unknowable_R, as neither a deceased Gödel nor anyone else can know this conjunction. Hence, $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ is false.

To be sure, the counterexample to $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ that I presented is a contrived one and fully depends on Rutten's controversial and self-undermining account of CLFs. In order to get rid of the presented counterexample to $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$, Rutten could simply give up his account of CLFs. Or, Rutten could further restrict his first premise by excluding CLFs from its scope. That is, he could trade in $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ for a premise which says that all first-order, consistently believable, non-CLF involving⁹ propositions that are actually true are knowable_R. What about the resulting, amended version of the MEA[ⓐ]? Should we accept the actual existence of a personal first cause on the basis of this argument? Well, as the MEA[ⓐ] exploits the false P_2 and is still subject to the problems discussed in the 'The Parody Argument' and 'The Core Argument' sections, we clearly

⁸Indeed, the *knowledge account of assertion* (Williamson, 2000) exactly states that knowledge is the norm of assertion.

⁹E.g. the conjunction of CLF_G with 'Gödel is deceased' is not a CLF but *involves* a CLF as it contains a CLF as one of its sub-propositions.

shouldn't. But even if, 'for the sake of argument', we neglect all these problems we shouldn't, as I will now demonstrate.

Above, we discussed that, owing to the shift to the knowability_R of *actual* truths, it becomes rather hard to present uncontroversial counterexamples to $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$. However, a further consequence of the shift to actual truths is that, in order to defend $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$, one no longer needs a personal first cause to ensure the knowability_R of propositions such as (7) or (8). Indeed, it would be improper to assert that (7) or (8) are *actually* true so that a proponent of $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ has no duty to account for the knowability_R of propositions such as (7) or (8) in the first place. Indeed, a proponent of $P_1^{\textcircled{a}}$ only has to account for the knowability_R of *actual* truths. And the knowability_R of such truths does not require such a strong knower_R as a personal first cause.

I claim that all actual truths are knowable_R by a flying Spaghetti Monster. As a first example, consider a mundane actual truth such as (1). As discussed in §1, Rutten claims that (1) is (not knowable but) knowable_R by appealing to a possible world in which there is 'an extra-terrestrial civilization whose members can observe an extensive geographical area on our planet with the same immediacy and resulting degree of certainty as we can observe our hands'. Surely then, there is also a possible world with a flying Spaghetti Monster who has similar abilities and who can know_R (1). Indeed, the epistemological_R possibilities for a flying Spaghetti Monster may vary widely across possible worlds so that, plausibly, each *actual* truth is knowable_R by *some* flying Spaghetti Monster in *some* possible world. This observation suggests the following argument.

The Spaghetti[ⓐ] Argument

- S_1 For every (non-CLF involving) FoCons proposition p that is true in the actual world $w_{\textcircled{a}}$ there is some possible world w' (such that p is true in w' and) such that there is a flying Spaghetti Monster in w' who knows_R that p .
- S_2 It is not the case that there is a possible world in which there is a flying Spaghetti Monster who knows_R that there is no flying Spaghetti Monster.
- S_3 The proposition that there is no flying Spaghetti Monster is a FoCons proposition.
- C_S In the actual world $w_{\textcircled{a}}$ there is a flying Spaghetti Monster.

The Spaghetti[ⓐ] argument clearly is valid. Its second premise is a tautology and its third premise is trivially true. So the soundness of the Spaghetti argument all boils down to its first premise.¹⁰

Let us discuss a couple of instantiations of S_1 . The proposition that there are no flying objects may not be knowable_R by a flying Spaghetti Monster but, as birds testify, neither is it actually true. The proposition that there is, or is not, a personal first cause may not be knowable_R by a flying Spaghetti Monster. But to suggest that

¹⁰If one thinks that *what it is like to be* propositions give rise to counterexamples to S_1 simply add one further restriction: let S_1 range over all non-CLF involving and non-*what it is like to be* involving FoCons propositions.

these propositions are counterexamples to S_1 is inappropriate. For to assert that there actually is, or is not, a personal first cause, is only appropriate if one *knows* this to be the case. Finally, to assert that the proposition that there is no flying Spaghetti Monster is a counterexample to S_1 is dialectically inappropriate. For this assertion boils down to a blunt denial of the conclusion of the Spaghetti[@] argument.

Indeed, dialectically appropriate counterexamples to S_1 are very hard to come by. The large epistemic_R potential of a flying Spaghetti Monster ensures that all propositions of which it is dialectically appropriate to assert that they are actually true, are knowable_R by such a Monster. But then, as S_2 and S_3 are uncontroversial, it ‘follows’ that a flying Spaghetti Monster actually exists. Still, it is odd to accept the actual existence of a flying Spaghetti Monster on the basis of the Spaghetti[@] argument. Similarly, it is odd to accept the actual existence of a personal first cause on the basis of the MEA[@].

Concluding Remarks

In Wintein (2018) I presented various objections to Rutten’s (2014) Modal-Epistemic Argument (MEA) for the existence of God. Rutten (2022) has defended his argument against my objections but, as I showed in this paper, Rutten’s defence against each of my objections is wanting while two of his replies are, in addition, *self-undermining*. Indeed, the very claims that Rutten is arguing for to rebut my objections can be used to construct straightforward counterexamples to the first premise of the MEA.

At the end of his paper, Rutten (2022) suggests that my objections to the MEA do not carry over to the MEA[@], an argument which has the *actual* (instead of the necessary, as the MEA has it) existence of God as its conclusion. At the end of this paper, I presented the Spaghetti[@] argument, whose argumentative and rhetorical structure mirrors that of the MEA[@]. The conclusion of the Spaghetti[@] argument is that a flying Spaghetti Monster actually exists.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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