

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 6 | Issue 2

Article 12

4-1-1989

Kvanving, THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ALL-KNOWING GOD

Joshua Hoffman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Hoffman, Joshua (1989) "Kvanving, THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ALL-KNOWING GOD," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol6/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

testimony to the resurrection.

Second, those like Habermas (and like me) who wish to defend a theologically traditional interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus find themselves arguing these days not only against those who deny that it happened at all but also against those who affirm the resurrection of Jesus but claim that it was a spiritual event. What was raised was not Jesus' body but rather—they vaguely say—his person, soul, or spirit. The only point I wish to make here is that contrary to what he says on pp. 26 - 27, Habermas' four core facts do not necessarily point in the direction of *bodily* resurrection. Nor (with the exception of the empty tomb, which Habermas recognizes is denied by some reputable scholars) does the larger set of twelve accepted facts. The appearances of Jesus after the resurrection—such interpreters of the resurrection will say—were spiritual rather than bodily appearances.

What this implies, I think, is that conservative interpreters of the resurrection must argue strongly in favor of both the empty tomb and of the claim that the resurrection appearances were bodily appearances. (As Pannenberg notes, this requires conjoining the empty tomb tradition with the appearance traditions.) Habermas of course recognizes that both must be argued for. I merely point out that they do not strictly follow from facts virtually all recognized scholars accept.

The Possibility of an All-Knowing God, by Jonathan Kvanvig. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. Pp. xvi and 181.

Reviewed by JOSHUA HOFFMAN, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The Possibility of an All-Knowing God is an essay on omniscience and divine omniscience, in which the author examines several salient issues relating to these concepts. The first such issue pertains to what the author calls the range of omniscience. The issue, in other words, is over the answer to the question, what must an omniscient being know? In considering this issue, Kvanvig takes up a pair of subsidiary ones, each having to do with knowledge of the future. He first discusses Geach's thesis that the future is unreal, rejects this thesis, and concludes that an omniscient being must know about the future, at least to some extent. The second subsidiary issue has to do with knowledge of the future actions of free individuals (other than the knower). R. Swinburne has argued that since it is impossible for any knower to know such actions, an omniscient being need not know them either. Kvanvig examines and disputes the two conclusions that comprise Swinburne's position: (a) that it's impossible for anyone to know the future actions of free individuals; and (b) that an omniscient being need not have this sort of knowledge. One might accept (a) and reject (b); in doing so, one would be committed to the impossibility of an omniscient being, at least given

the existence of other free agents. Swinburne's defense of (a) presupposes that human beings are free in a libertarian sense; if they are not, then his defense of (a) seems to collapse. Kvanvig disputes (a) on other grounds. One of the key assumptions in Kvanvig's reply to (a) is that human beings sometimes foreknow the free actions of other human agents. But if human beings really are free in a libertarian sense, then there are good reasons to suppose that *this* assumption is false. So I'm not sure that Kvanvig is entitled to this crucial assumption, and without it, his reply to (a) is blunted.

Kvanvig defends what he calls the traditional account of omniscience (TAO): x is omniscient =df. x knows all true propositions. Swinburne defends a weaker concept of being omniscient, not literally being all-knowing, but rather something like maximal knowledge. The same issue arises in the case of omnipotence: if there is some possible state of affairs which it's impossible for any agent to bring about, then are we to say that there cannot be an omnipotent agent, or are we to say that an omnipotent agent need not be able to do that? In part because he accepts (a), Swinburne holds that there are some truths that an omniscient being need not know, and he defends this position in part by pointing to what he regards to be the analogous case of omnipotence. Kvanvig rejects the analogy with omnipotence, arguing that just as an omnipotent agent must be able to bring about whatever is possible, so too is an omniscient being required to know everything true. Kvanvig remarks that "When, in the domain of power, there is an apparent limitation on what can be done, it is a limitation regarding the thing done . . ." (p. 23) I think that Swinburne is right here and Kvanvig wrong. There are many cases of possible states of affairs which even a maximally powerful being cannot bring about. For example, if Socrates has already walked, then no one can bring it about that Socrates walks for the first time, even though the latter is a possible state of affairs. Thus, insofar as the analogy with omnipotence is concerned, it supports a "limited" rather than the "traditional" analysis of omniscience. Of course, this does not completely settle the matter.

In chapter 2 of his book, Kvanvig confronts a series of challenges to his version of TAO, which says that x is omniscient =df. x justifiably believes a proposition p if and only if p is true. Some of these objections consist in denying that all knowledge is propositional, for example the argument that *de re* knowledge is not propositional. Another objection to TAO arises from the claim that if *de se* beliefs are propositional, then they give rise to private propositions. This claim provides a challenge to TAO by implying that no one can grasp another's *de se* belief. If so, since knowing entails grasping, Kvanvig's TAO entails that there is no omniscient being if there are other beings with *de se* beliefs. Kvanvig proposes to block this implication by embracing the following quartet of propositions: (1) there are *de se* beliefs which are propositional in content; (2) such beliefs include individual essences or haecceities; (3) no one else can *directly*

grasp one's haecceity; (4) some one else can *indirectly* grasp one's haecceity. Kvanvig accepts the principle that necessarily, if x *directly* grasps the haecceity of (person) y , then $x=y$. On the other hand, he wants to allow for the possibility of God's knowing all true propositions. His solution is (4), which implies that God can *indirectly* grasp the haecceity of another person.

As I see it, there is a dilemma-like objection to this attempt to solve the privacy problem. First, it's far from clear what it is to indirectly grasp a property. "Grasping" it in terms of a description won't do, for then one hasn't grasped it at all. Kvanvig attempts an elucidation of indirectly grasping a property (pp. 68-70), but I find it of no help. On the other hand, if there is such a thing as indirectly grasping a property, then Kvanvig faces a different problem: it's difficult to see how if I even indirectly grasp your haecceity, I am not adopting a *de se* belief about you, which is absurd. Hence, for one reason or another, Kvanvig's solution of the privacy problem appears to fail.

In his third chapter, Kvanvig takes up the thorny issue of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom (of the libertarian sort), an issue much discussed in the recent literature. He is most concerned with incompatibility arguments based on the accidental necessity of the past. Kvanvig defends compatibility by (i) arguing that God's foreknowings are soft, not hard, facts about the past; and by (ii) arguing that God's foreknowings are parasitic on certain hard facts other than certain of God's particular beliefs. The latter argument is intended to satisfy John Fischer's requirement on soft facts while not yielding to incompatibilism. God's knowing that g , Kvanvig argues, is parasitic on the hard fact, God believes the truth. But surely, God's believing the truth is just God's believing p & believing q , etc., for all truths. This conjunctive state of God's mind is a soft fact, not a hard one, about the time of the believing. Hence, Fischer's requirement is not met. Later, Kvanvig argues that this requirement is not justified anyhow, because there are soft facts which don't depend on any hard fact (p. 114). His example is the proposition, it was the case yesterday that it will rain tomorrow. This is said to be a soft fact about today which rests on no hard fact about today. Kvanvig appears to be correct about this example, but it also appears that Fischer can formulate his requirement more narrowly, as follows: any soft fact about t which is in part a hard fact about t must depend on a hard fact about t . Since the soft fact about t , God's knowing at t that Jones will do x at t^* , is (it seems) in part a hard fact about t , this more narrow requirement appears to apply to that soft fact.

Kvanvig not unjustly thinks that the possibility of foreknowledge of the free actions of other persons is in need of elucidation. He attempts to provide this in his fourth chapter. There he defends the Molinist account of divine foreknowledge, according to which what God knows in order to know what future actions free persons will perform, are "counter-factuals of freedom." Kvanvig attempts to defend

the coherence of counter-factuals of freedom and to answer the objections of the many critics of that notion, but as far as I can tell, he does not succeed. The problem is that if Jones were in *C* at *t*, then in some worlds which are identical up to *t*, he would do one thing freely, and in other such worlds he would do other things freely. Doesn't this follow from the assumption that Jones is free in the libertarian sense? How then can God know what Jones would do if he were in *C*, without specifying which possible world Jones is in? But how can God specify what world Jones is in unless He already knows what Jones will do?

In a final chapter, Kvanvig discusses the relation between the kind of omniscience he is defending and the doctrines of divine timelessness and immutability. He offers a "limited defense" of the compatibility of these attributes, and argues that if they were incompatible, then it is omniscience which is more central to our understanding of God.

As I have indicated, I have several serious disagreements with Kvanvig on matters of substance. On the other hand, his book has many virtues. It is well-organized and for the most part clearly written. The author displays a wide-ranging knowledge of many difficult issues in metaphysics and epistemology, and offers a comprehensive survey of the issues surrounding omniscience. He knows where an argument is going and how to try to shore one up. His method is analytic, and he frequently resorts to the use of formal definitions (which I consider a virtue). Unfortunately, he is not always as careful with these definitions as he should be. To take a few examples, his P3 (p. 67) says that if *x* directly or indirectly grasps *y*, then *y* is a proposition. This seems incorrect, for people also grasp properties and other abstract entities other than propositions. P4 (*ibid.*) says that if *x* directly grasps proposition *y*, then *y* includes *x*'s essence. But surely I can directly grasp a purely qualitative proposition such as that some flowers are blue, where that proposition does not include my essence. Finally, D2 (p. 122) offers a definition of an individual essence whose definiens does not provide a sufficient condition.