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# On Omniscience

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Traditionally, omniscience has been taken to imply knowing all true propositions. Recently, it has been suggested that there are some true propositions that God cannot possibly know. There may well be propositional content in certain knowledge of "what it is like." For instance, we may be able to fill in the blank in 'Being ignorant is like _____' so that this expresses a true proposition. Selmer Bringsjord has considered certain assumptions about what is required in order to have such knowledge, and has suggested that having this knowledge is not logically possible for God. Paralleling revised definitions of omnipotence, he suggests re-defining omniscience in terms of what God can possibly know. I argue that on the assumptions he considers, this new definition will still require that God do what it is logically impossible that God do. I suggest that the assumptions be questioned.

A current line of thought about omniscience goes as follows. To be omniscient should not be defined as to know all true propositions, since there seem to be some true propositions which it is not logically possible that God know. For example, it may very well be that the blank in 'Being ignorant is like _____' can be filled in so that the whole expresses a true proposition that God could not possibly know. And, we should not require that God do what it is logically impossible that God do.

Allowing that these assumptions may be true, Selmer Bringsjord has suggested the following revised definition:

(D) s is omniscient =df ⊃p ($\Diamond K_s p \equiv K_s p$).[1]

I believe we should interpret this as restricting 'p' to true propositions. Otherwise it implies that an omniscient being must know all propositions that it can possibly know. But, while it is possible that I know that my pen is red all over now, and it is also possible that I know that my pen is blue all over now, it is not possible to know both.

We can make the qualification to true propositions explicit by changing the definition to

(D') s is omniscient =df ⊃p [$K_s p \equiv (\Diamond K_s p \ \& \ Tp$].

Now we have made explicit the idea that to be omniscient is to know all and only those true propositions that it is possible for the individual to know.

Since this definition is not his primary concern, Bringsjord does not go into

detail about the motivating assumptions concerning knowledge of "what it is like." In particular, he does not say how we might fill in the blank to produce a true proposition, and he does not say why God could not know such truths. But we can get some idea of his view from the articles he cites by Frank Jackson and Earl Conee.[2]

The issue between Jackson and Conee is whether there is non-physical information that is known in sensation or perceptual experience, knowledge of qualia (special properties of these mental states). Jackson believes so, but while Conee agrees there is special information gotten from the experience, he argues that it is physical information. Jackson does not say that having the experience is necessary for acquiring the knowledge, but Conee does. This is probably the relevant point for Bringsjord. He must be thinking that God would have to experience ignorance, to actually be ignorant, in order to know what it is like, but cannot possibly do so. He would be taking 'perceptual experience' broadly, to include direct experience of aspects of one's mental state. He is particularly interested in our experience of aspects associated with our finite perspective.

Conee argues that the special knowledge gained in perceptual experience can be expressed using the adverb 'thusly.' This suggests that one way to fill in our blank would be to assert *that ignorance is experienced thusly*, referring to our own immediate mental state. Or we could assert *that being ignorant is like this*, where, again, 'this' refers to our immediate mental state. And Bringsjord is right that this may very well express propositional content. Advocates of the purely referential proposition would analyze the content differently than descriptionists.

If there is propositional content here, and experiencing ignorance were required to know these truths but God could not experience ignorance, then God's omniscience could not be knowledge of all truths. And we might be tempted to consider D'.

I want to suggest that omniscience definers should challenge the assumption that having the experience is necessary for knowing what it is like, or the assumption that God could not have such experiences, or the assumption that there is propositional content in knowledge of "what it is like." There is no use accepting the assumptions and turning to D' for help, because D' would still require God to do what God cannot possibly do.

Suppose we grant the assumptions. Presumably, Christians will want to say that it is logically possible that God know what it is like always to have favored Abel's offering over Cain's. But since this preference is seemingly not necessary, it should be equally logically possible that God know what it is like always to have favored Cain's offering over Abel's. If there is propositional content here, then there are (at least) two true propositions, each of which is such that it is possibly known by God. Then, by D', God must know

both. But, by assumption, it is impossible that God know both propositions since knowing them entails being in the states to which they refer, and it is not logically possible to be in both of those states. So, by the original assumptions, D' requires that God do something that is logically impossible.

It might be suggested that this example is flawed since God cannot actually favor an offering. Perhaps, though, I will eventually be able to think of an example consistent with generally acceptable theological restrictions. But why should we have to? Shouldn't we be able to define omniscience without recourse to special theological considerations?

Special theological restrictions aside, it would seem to be logically possible, for an omniscient being s, that s know what it is like always to have loved poetry, and it would also seem to be logically possible that s know what it is like never to have loved poetry. The original assumptions imply that there are (at least) two true propositions here, each of which is such that it is possibly known by an omniscient being. But the assumptions also make it impossible to know both, since no being can have always loved poetry and also have never loved poetry. Therefore, on the original assumptions, since D' requires knowing both of these propositions, it requires that an omniscient being do something that is logically impossible.

In light of these examples, it seems that anyone who accepts the original assumptions should conclude that an omniscient being should not be required to meet the conditions of D', either. This result parallels problems for defining omnipotence that were raised in 1967 by James Cargile.[3]

At this point we could reevaluate the assumptions. Perhaps it is not logically necessary, in order to know what it is like to be ____, that one be ____ at some time. In that case, the move to D/D' might not have been needed, since perhaps God could remain God and know what it is like to be ignorant. Or, perhaps we are mistaken in thinking there is propositional content in our examples.

Let us suppose that there is propositional content in the examples and focus on alternative ways of knowing it. In the case of omnipotence, it was suggested that for any power it is possible to have—including the power to build a rock too heavy for the builder to lift, and other such problematic powers—there is some power that it is possible for God to have that is the same as the first power (see note 3, Cargile, 1967). To create a rock too heavy for me to lift, the only power I really have to exercise is the power to create that rock. The rest follows merely by virtue of my being weak. But God can have this power.

Similarly, it may be that when I know what it is like to be ignorant, I just know certain things about my human perspective that God could know. Perhaps it is just to know that my perspective contains certain knowledge but lacks other knowledge. God might even be able to be acquainted with a

qualitative duplicate of my perspective to know what I know of this, as long as there were infinitely more than that to God. In the case of Spinoza's God, the whole is not rendered imperfect by the inadequate ideas it contains.

These are, of course, only the beginnings of clear speculations. But, it is not my intention here to define omniscience. I do hope to have shown how the assumptions behind one current attempt should be taken by anyone who accepts them to undermine that attempt.

Bringsjord's definition of omniscience has also been challenged by Patrick Grim.[4] Grim argues that a traditional account of propositional omniscience may fail due to Cantorian problems for the possibility of a set of all truths, or even a set of all truths that it is possible for an omniscient being to know. However, Grim admits that there are unsettled issues regarding these matters that may yet provide an escape route.

The Cantorian discussion aside, Grim sees other difficulties for D and D'. First, both definitions allow that an omniscient being might hold false beliefs, and thereby be inconsistent. Secondly, they allow any being who is essentially ignorant (Grim's example, named Necessary McIg, is supposed to be essentially such that it knows only that it is conscious), as well as any being that is essentially non-conscious (Grim mentions tomato juice), to qualify as omniscient.

The first problem is easily overcome simply by adding to D' that s holds no false beliefs.

The second objection is based on a highly suspect notion. Anyone who recognizes metaphysical necessity and possibility should have grave doubts about the possibility of Necessary McIg. How could a mind be metaphysically necessarily such that it knows only that it is conscious? It seems possible, for any finite mind at least, that it could change with respect to its knowledge. As for tomato juice, setting aside somewhat more obscure worries over the possibility of a metaphysically necessarily non-conscious being, once again we need only restrict D', this time to beings capable of consciousness, to avoid the issue.

But even after D' is thus modified, and even if the Cantorian discussion eventually goes against Grim, if I have been correct I have shown that on the other assumptions Bringsjord has considered, D' would still ask too much of an omniscient being—that it be able to do what it cannot possibly do. It would not be logically possible that God know everything that it is logically possible for God to know. My suggestion is that we look more closely at those assumptions, specifically at what is involved in knowing what it is like to be ignorant, etc.

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## NOTES

1. Bringsjord, Selmer, "Grim On Logic And Omniscience," *Analysis*, Volume 49, Number 4 (October 1989).

2. Jackson, Frank, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1982, pp. 127-32. Conee, Earl, "Physicalism and Phenomenal Properties," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1986, pp. 296-302.

3. James Cargile, 'On Omnipotence,' *Nous* (May 1967). Defining omnipotence as the ability to do whatever is possible was said to be inadequate in light of such abilities as the ability to create a person not created by God. But, further restricting the definition to that which it is logically possible that God do is still inadequate, since, barring special theological considerations about God, it is logically possible that God create a chicken that was created by a person who never at any time had the power to create a duck, and also logically possible that God create a duck that was created by a person who never at any time had the power to create a chicken. But, it is not possible for any being to have both of these powers.

4. Patrick Grim, "On Omniscience and a 'Set of all Truths': A Reply to Bringsjord," *Analysis*, Volume 50, Number 4 (October 1990).