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### III. SOME NEGLECTED PROBLEMS OF OMNISCIENCE

PATRICK GRIM

EACH of the traditional attributes of God comes with its own set of standard problems. The standard problems of *omniscience* are the following: (1) the difficulty of reconciling divine omniscience with human freedom;<sup>1</sup> (2) questions closely related to (1) concerning truth and future contingents and God's knowledge and future contingents;<sup>2</sup> and, as a poor third, perhaps, (3) some difficulties apparently posed by temporal indexicals for the compossibility of omniscience and immutability.<sup>3</sup>

The problems of omniscience that I want to address here are more generally neglected than these. One set of neglected problems consists of paradoxes of omniscience clearly recognizable as forms of the Liar, and these I have never seen raised at all. Other neglected problems—although these are related to (3) above—are difficulties for omniscience posed by recent work on belief *de se* and essential indexicals.<sup>4</sup> These have not yet been given the attention they deserve.

My main purpose here is simply to introduce these *as* neglected problems—to make it clear that they *are* problems, and to suggest that they ought not be neglected. Let me add that I do regard these as *serious* challenges for doctrines of omniscience—problems of indexicals, for example, as indicated in a later section, seem clearly fatal to a notion of an *all-knowing* God. But I do not think that these difficulties show that absolutely anything recognizable as a notion of omniscience must be incoherent or impossible to define. A recognizable notion of omniscience and of an omniscient God *can* be salvaged despite such difficulties, though at a certain cost, and I will try to indicate how.

In a first section I hope to straighten up some definitional clutter so as to facilitate the more interesting work that follows. In a second section I

offer a series of paradoxes of omniscience, firmly in the tradition of the Liar, and in a third section I digress to consider similar paradoxes of possible worlds. In section IV, I present what I take to be the most plausible reply to these sets of paradoxes, and in section V, I consider some problems with that reply.

All of that is on Liar-like paradoxes. In two final sections I raise and discuss some quite different problems for omniscience posed by recent work on belief *de se* and essential indexicals.

#### I. PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONAL CLUTTER

What would it be to be omniscient? Quite often, being omniscient is glossed casually as being “all-knowing” or as “knowing everything.” Where somewhat more care is taken, the following is clearly the standard definition:

Df. 1.  $x$  is *omniscient* =<sub>df</sub> for all  $p$ ,  $p$  is true IFF  $x$  knows that  $p$ .

This is, for example, Geach's definition, and is equivalent to definitions offered by Prior, Swinburne, James F. Ross, William E. Mann, and others.<sup>5</sup>

Omniscience in this standard sense certainly will *not* do, however, at least without supplement, as an adequate characterization of a traditional God's knowledge. What none of the philosophers listed above seems to have recognized is that a being might be omniscient in the sense of Df. 1 and yet hold any number of *false* beliefs.

For consider a being  $B$  with false beliefs  $p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n$ . Since  $B$  cannot be said to *know* any of these, Df. 1 does not require that *these* beliefs of  $B$  be true. So as long as  $B$  also believes—and knows—all *truths*, he qualifies as omniscient on the standard definition despite his false beliefs.

What Df. 1 requires is that all truths be known by an omniscient being, and that all things known by such a being be true. Since falsehoods believed by such a being are neither truths nor things known by such a being, however, Df. 1 puts no effective restrictions on the false beliefs of an omniscient being.

In order to qualify as omniscient and yet hold false beliefs, of course, a being *B* would have to hold contradictory beliefs. Given any false belief  $p_k$ , *B* would also have to believe that “it is not the case that  $p_k$ ,” since *B* knows—and so of course believes—all truths. Since an omniscient being is required to know all truths, moreover, such a being would have to know that his beliefs were contradictory in such cases. But none of this shows that a being so flawed as to hold contradictory beliefs, or so flawed as to shamelessly recognize that he holds contradictory beliefs, would not qualify as omniscient in the sense of Df. 1. For nothing in that definition requires that an omniscient being avoid even blatantly obvious contradiction.

If we are to say that God is omniscient in the sense of Df. 1 above, then, we will at least have to say something more as well; we will have to add that God holds no false beliefs, or that He is not only omniscient but also “omnirational” in a sense which excludes that possibility of contradictory beliefs.

We might attempt, on the other hand, to revise the definition of omniscience itself so as to handle these difficulties. Df. 2, for example, might seem a simple but promising way of avoiding the danger of divine false beliefs:

Df. 2. *x* is omniscient =<sub>df</sub> for all  $p$ ,  $p$  is true IFF *x* believes that  $p$ .<sup>6</sup>

By replacing the “*x* knows” of Df. 1 with a mere “*x* believes,” Df. 2 would insure that an omniscient being will hold no false beliefs. Precisely because of that replacement, however, Df. 2 raises difficulties of its own. A being all of whose beliefs were acquired haphazardly or by chance, or on the basis of hearsay or rumor, and who continued to hold such beliefs out of mere whimsy or caprice, might nonetheless qualify as omniscient in the

sense of Df. 2. All that Df. 2 requires is that the beliefs of an omniscient being encompass all and only truths—nothing is said regarding the justification with which such beliefs are held or the grounds on which such beliefs are acquired, and nothing in Df. 2 strictly requires that an omniscient being actually know anything. Omniscience in the sense of Df. 2, then, despite elegantly circumventing the problem of false divine beliefs, brings us no closer to an adequate characterization of divine knowledge.

Here we might add a clause specifying *justified* belief:

Df. 3. *x* is omniscient =<sub>df</sub> for all  $p$ ,  $p$  is true IFF: *x* believes that  $p$  and *x* is justified in believing that  $p$ .

Here “for all  $p$ ” is a universal quantifier which binds all “ $p$ ’s” that follow it, and “IFF” rather than “and” is the main connective of the definiens.

An omniscient being in the sense of Df. 3 cannot hold false beliefs, and moreover cannot hold beliefs from mere caprice or without justification. If justified true belief were knowledge, Df. 3 would be the answer to our difficulties. But of course knowledge is not merely justified true belief. What Df. 3 leaves open, then, is the uncomfortable possibility that God, although justified in believing all and only true propositions, does not know them—just as the individuals of Gettier’s examples, although justified in believing certain propositions, cannot be said to know them.<sup>7</sup> Df. 3 guarantees only that God stands to true propositions in general as Gettier’s Smith stands to “Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona,” and that clearly will not do as an adequate account of the epistemic excellence of divinity.

Here I would suggest Df. 4:

Df. 4. *x* is omniscient =<sub>df</sub> for all  $p$ ,  $p$  is true IFF *x* believes that  $p$ , AND *x* believes that  $p$  IFF *x* knows that  $p$ .

The “for all  $p$ ” governs all that follows it, and the definiens is a conjunction of two biconditionals, with “AND” as its main connective.

Df. 4 succeeds, I think, where Df. 1 through Df. 3 did not. An omniscient being in the sense of Df.

4 holds no false beliefs and holds no beliefs in a manner which would not fully qualify as knowledge. A unified account of this sort, moreover, seems clearly preferable to a strategy of retaining unmodified a definition such as Df. 1 and inventing additional epistemic attributes in order to avoid difficulties of false or contradictory beliefs.

In what follows I will use "omniscient" in the sense of Df. 4. All that will be crucial for my use of the term, however, will be that an omniscient being believe all and only truths—a characteristic which would have to be attributed to a traditional God in any case, whether by means of a single term "omniscient" or by means of a conglomerate of epistemic attributes.

## II. PARADOXES OF OMNISCIENCE: GOD AND THE LIAR

It appears that there can be no omniscient being.

For suppose that some being—God, let us say—is omniscient. And consider:

1. God believes that (1) is false,<sup>8</sup>  
what we might call the Divine Liar.

At this juncture we might suppose either that (1) is true or that (1) is false, leaving more sophisticated suppositions to be dealt with in due course.

Suppose first, then, that (1) is true. On that supposition, as (1) maintains, God believes that (1) is false. But we are supposing that (1) is true. So if (1) is true, God holds a false belief, and thus is not omniscient in the sense carved out in the preceding section. If (1) is true, moreover, there must be a truth which God does not know. For if (1) is true, then God believes that (1) is false, and if God does not hold contradictory beliefs He cannot also believe that (1) is true. But our supposition is that (1) *is* true, so there is a truth—that (1) is true—which God does not believe and hence does not know. If (1) is true, God is not omniscient.

Suppose instead, then, that (1) is false. On this supposition, since (1) maintains that God believes that (1) is false, it is false that God believes that (1) is false. It is not the case, in other words, that God believes that (1) is false. But we have assumed that (1) *is* false, and thus there is a truth—that (1) is false—which God does not believe and hence does

not know. So if (1) is false God is not omniscient either.

If (1) is either true or false, God is not omniscient. But of course God is not alone in this respect; any being one might name can be shown to be less than omniscient simply by substituting the name of such a being for 'God' in the argument above. Thus there can be no omniscient being.

As will no doubt have occurred to the reader, one might attempt to escape the paradox by proposing that (1) is *neither* true nor false—a response clearly in the tradition of truth value gap treatments of the Liar.<sup>9</sup>

*Can* one escape the argument against omniscience by proposing that (1) is neither true nor false? It appears not. For if (1) is neither true nor false, then God—specified as omniscient—knows that (1) is neither true nor false. It cannot be, then, that God believes that (1) is false. But (1) specifies that God *does* believe that (1) is false. So (1) must be false. If (1) is false, however, then it is not the case that God believes that (1) is false. Here as before, then, there is a truth which escapes God's knowledge—that (1) is false. And here again we would have to conclude that God is not omniscient.

Truth value gaps, then, do not appear to offer any escape. On the assumption that (1) is true, false, or neither true nor false, there can be no omniscient being.

We might get the same result by offering a variation of the argument in which (2) takes the place of (1):

2. God believes that (2) is not true.

(2) is to (1), of course, as the Strengthened Liar is to the Liar. If (2) is assumed either true or false, we get the same result as before: it cannot be that God is omniscient. Suppose then that (2) is neither true nor false. Will this offer an escape? No. For if (2) is neither true nor false, then of course it is not true. Since God is omniscient, He must believe all truths, and so must believe that (2) is not true. But that God believes that (2) is not true is precisely what (2) asserts, so it must be that (2) *is* true after all. But if (2) is true, God holds a false belief—for, as (2) maintains, he believes that (2) is *not* true.

There is also a truth that escapes God's knowledge—that (2) is true. Thus God is not omniscient.

Here, for good measure, is a third variation on the paradox of omniscience:

An omniscient being, as defined above, believes all and only truths. Let us suppose that there is such a being, and let us refer to his set of beliefs—the complete set of what he believes—as set *B*.

Now consider:

3. (3) is not a member of set *B*.

Is (3), or is it not, a member of the set *B* of beliefs of an omniscient being?

If (3) is not a member of the set, then it must be a member of the set. For if it is not a member of the set, then it is true—it asserts merely that it is not a member—and the beliefs *B* of an omniscient being include all truths.

If (3) *is* a member of the set, on the other hand, it cannot be. For if (3) is a member of the set of beliefs of an omniscient being, since an omniscient being believes only truths, (3) must be true. But (3) asserts that it is *not* a member of such a set, so if true, must *not* be a member. Another way of making the point is this. If (3) *is* a member of the set, then (3) is false, for it asserts the contrary. The set of beliefs of an omniscient being, however, contains only truths, and so (3) cannot be a member of that set.

The assumption of an omniscient being leads to contradiction, then, whether we assume (3) to be a member of set *B* or not. Thus there can be no omniscient being. Or so it appears.

### III. PARADOXES OF POSSIBLE WORLDS

It is perhaps worth noting that an argument quite similar to the third variation above can be offered against a common notion of possible worlds, and in particular against a common conception of an *actual* world.

Possible worlds are quite routinely introduced either as maximal consistent sets of propositions—proposition-saturated sets to which no further proposition can be added without precipitat-

ing inconsistency—or as some sort of fleshed-out correlates to such sets. The actual world, on such an account, is that maximal consistent set of propositions all members of which actually obtain—a maximal and consistent set of all and only (actual) truths—or is an appropriately fleshed out correlate to such a set.<sup>10</sup>

Let us refer to the maximal consistent set which belongs to the actual world, then—to our world—as *A*. And consider:

4. (4) is not a member of set *A*.

Is (4), or is it not, a member of set *A*?

If (4) is *not* a member of set *A*, then it must be. For in that case (4) is true, since (4) *asserts* that it is not a member, and *A* contains all (actual) truths.

If (4) *is* a member of set *A*, on the other hand, it must not be. For if (4) were a member of *A*, it would be false—(4) asserts that it is *not* a member. *A*, however, includes only truths, so it cannot be that it includes (4).

It seems, then, that there can be no “actual world,” either in the sense of a maximal consistent set *A* of all and only (actual) truths, or in the sense of something which somehow corresponds to such a set. For were there such a set, (4) would either be included as a member of it would not. Either supposition, however, appears to lead to contradiction.

The actual world is not the only victim here, however, for the notion of possible worlds in general seems susceptible to this type of paradox. Consider any possible world  $\delta$  and its corresponding maximal consistent set of propositions *D*—the set of all and only those propositions which would have obtained if  $\delta$  had been actual. And consider:

5. (5) is not a member of *D*.

Now is (5) a member of set *D*—of that set of propositions which would have obtained had  $\delta$  been actual—or is it not?

Suppose first that (5) *is* a member of *D*. Then it must not be, by the following reasoning. If (5) is a member of *D*, then had  $\delta$  been actual, (5) would have obtained. But in that case (5)—as (5) maintains—would *not* have been a member of *D*. So had  $\delta$  been actual, (5) would not have been a member of the set *D* of all propositions which ob-

tained. Had  $\delta$  been actual, in other words, (5) would not have obtained. Since  $D$  is the set of all and only propositions which would have obtained had  $\delta$  been actual, and since (5) would not have obtained had  $\delta$  been actual, it must be that (5) is not a member of  $D$ .

Let us suppose then that (5) is *not* a member of  $D$ . If so, then had  $\delta$  been actual, (5) would not have obtained, since all propositions which *would* have obtained had  $\delta$  been actual *are* members of  $D$ . If  $\delta$  had been actual, then, (5) would not have been a member of the set  $D$  of propositions which then obtained. But what (5) *maintains* is that it is not a member of  $D$ , so had  $\delta$  been actual, (5) would have been *true*—(5) would have obtained. Since  $D$  includes all propositions which would have obtained had  $\delta$  been actual, it must be that (5) *is* a member of  $D$  after all.

Either supposition, then—that (5) is or is not a member of  $D$ —leads to contradiction on the assumption that there is a possible world  $\delta$ . But  $\delta$  was introduced as any arbitrary possible world. Thus it appears that there can be no possible worlds.

It should not come as too much of a surprise that the “actual world” (or possible worlds in general) may face difficulties similar to those that can be raised against omniscience. These are, after all, largely correlative notions. That which would be known in omniscience is that which would obtain in the actual world—omniscience is the epistemic correlate to a metaphysical notion of the actual world. Viewed from the other side, the actual world would be the metaphysical instantiation of all that exists epistemically in omniscience. For every  $p$ ,  $p$  would be a member of set  $A$ —would obtain in the actual world—if and only if it were also a member of set  $B$ —were it among the beliefs of an omniscient being.

There can be no actual world just as there can be no omniscient being, then, and for much the same reasons. Or so it appears.

#### IV. THE OBVIOUS REPLY?

The paradoxes of omniscience and of possible

worlds presented above are clearly close relatives of the paradox of the Liar. A quite plausible reply in each case—perhaps the *obvious* reply—is appropriately borrowed from replies to the Liar.

The most common approach to the Liar is an attempt to formulate adequate constraints on the range of sentences over which values of “true” and “false,” or these and some third value, will be allowed to apply.<sup>11</sup> The challenge facing such attempts is effectively to exclude as unacceptable the Liar sentence and all its troublesome variations, and yet at the same time *not* to exclude apparently innocuous cases of self-reference or fundamental theorems of, say, set theory and recursion theory.<sup>12</sup> The standard sorrow of such attempts is that they either exclude the unforgivable or tend to fall victim to some overlooked form of the Liar, often a variation cooked up in terms of their own categories.<sup>13</sup>

There is another approach to the Liar that I want to draw on here, however, an approach less beloved of sentential logicians but perhaps more appealing to philosophers of language of a certain stripe. This second approach is to insist that it is not *sentences* which bear truth values at all, but rather *propositions*—those ghostly quasi-linguistic somethings mysteriously participated in, or represented by, or expressed in ordinary sentences.<sup>14</sup>

Consider the virtues of a propositional approach to the Liar. The standard Liar sentence is (6):

6. (6) is false.

The Strengthened Liar is (7):

7. (7) is not true.

To claim that (6) is either true or false, of course, seems to lead to contradiction. To claim that (7) is true, false, or *neither* true nor false seems to lead to the same unfortunate result.

What a propositional account allows one to say, however, is that neither (6) nor (7) expresses a proposition. And this seems to be enough to stop effectively the line of argument crucial to presentations of the Liar and its variations.

Consider (7), for example. As long as one sticks to one’s guns in maintaining that (7) expresses no proposition, one can resist going on to say—as

standard presentations require—that (7) then does have a truth value after all because of what “it says.” If (7) expresses no proposition, there simply *is* nothing that (7) “says,” or “asserts,” or maintains to be the case. So it is not the case that “(7) is true because *it says* it is not true, and since it expresses no proposition it is neither true nor false,” nor is it the case that “since (7) is true, and *says* it is not true, it is not true,” etc. All such patterns of argument can be rejected. On a propositional approach there is nothing which (6) or (7) or any other Liar-like sentence *says*, and thus all presentations of Liar-like paradoxes which rely at any point on a claim as to what the sentence at issue *says*—and that appears to include them all—are effectively blocked.

A propositional approach to the Liar is not without its difficulties, some of which will be considered in the next section. What I want to point out here, however, is that a similar propositional line might be taken in attempting to save a doctrine of omniscience and of an omniscient God.

The basic definition of omniscience with which we have been working throughout, it will be remembered, is Df. 4:

Df. 4.  $x$  is *omniscient* =  $\forall p, p$  is true IFF  $x$  believes that  $p$ , AND  $x$  believes that  $p$  IFF  $x$  knows that  $p$ .

A propositional account of omniscience of the sort I have in mind simply insists—as some have insisted anyway—that the “for all  $p$ ” of Df. 4 be read as “for all *propositions*  $p$ .” The supposed abstractness, otherworldliness, or even ghostliness of propositions, after all, hold few terrors for one already committed to a traditional God.

An approach of this sort has much to recommend it. Consider again (1):

1. God believes that (1) is false.

If we insist that (1) expresses no proposition, we can resist the claim—a claim crucial to the paradoxes above—that (1) is either true or false because of what it “says,” “asserts,” or maintains to be the case. If we insist that omniscience be defined along the lines of Df. 4 with an emphasis on propositions, moreover, it appears that the possibility of omniscience and of an omniscient God will be safe from any problems posed by (1).

Omniscience will also be safe from any problems posed by (3):

3. (3) is not a member of set  $B$ .

Set  $B$ , it will be remembered, is taken as designating the set of all beliefs of an omniscient being. If we insist that omniscience be understood in terms of propositions, and if we insist that (3) expresses no proposition, then (3) will pose no more of a threat for the possibility of omniscience than did (1). Because (3) is not itself a proposition, and does not express a proposition, neither (3) nor anything it expresses is a member of the set  $B$  of propositions believed by an omniscient being. But it does not follow, as the paradoxical argument would have it, that (3) must then be *true*, “because it *says* that it is not a member of  $B$ .” If (3) expresses no proposition, then there *is* nothing it *says*, or *asserts*, or *maintains*, and so here again a crucial step in the paradoxical argument is effectively blocked.

A similar emphasis on propositions can be used, of course, to defend a notion of possible worlds, and of the actual world, against the paradoxes of possible worlds presented above.

Here is was (4) and (5) that caused the trouble;

4. (4) is not a member of set  $A$ ,

5. (5) is not a member of set  $D$ ,

where set  $A$  was understood as the maximal consistent set associated with the actual world and set  $D$  was understood as a maximal consistent set associated with a possible world  $\delta$ .

If it is emphasized that possible worlds are to be understood as maximal consistent sets of *propositions*, however, or as fleshed-out correlates to sets of *propositions*, and if we also insist that (4) and (5) express no propositions, these will cease to be a threat. (4) and (5) are not members of sets  $A$  and  $D$  because  $A$  and  $D$  are sets exclusively of propositions. But since (4) and (5) express no propositions, it does not follow from this that they somehow obtain or would obtain, or are or would be members of  $A$  or  $D$ , because of what they *say*. Since (4) and (5) express no propositions, there is nothing that they *say*.

But propositional approaches also have a few problems.

## V. PROBLEMS WITH PROPOSITIONS

A propositional approach to the Liar faces a number of difficulties of its own, and these can be expected to carry over to a similar propositional strategy with regard to omniscience. I do not think that these difficulties are decisive in either case—a propositional approach seems to me the most plausible concerning either the Liar or the paradoxes of omniscience. But such difficulties certainly do deserve to be taken into account.

The most obvious difficulty of a propositional account, in any context, is the inevitable obscurity and perhaps the dubious intelligibility of a notion of “propositions.” What could propositions *be*? And how are such things, if things they be, to be either identified or individuated?

A second difficulty is that a propositional approach is in some ways too *easy* a reply to the Liar and similar paradoxes, at least with regard to some of the questions that many who have taken on the Liar have tried to answer. Surely it is not enough merely to *say* that (1) or (3) or (4) or (5) does not express a proposition, for we will also want to know *why*. What is it about such sentences that keeps them from expressing a proposition, or that deprives them of a proposition to express? A propositional account alone gives us no general theory of *why* certain sentences fail to express propositions, and any supplementary theory designed to fill this need, it appears, would require all the complexities and would face all the difficulties of the sentential approach mentioned at the beginning of the preceding section.<sup>15</sup>

Both of these are serious problems. But they are not problems of as serious a *type* as they might be. A propositional approach leaves plenty of embarrassing questions unanswered, and this doesn't say much for an appeal to propositions. But the alternatives to a propositional account seem to face even *worse* difficulties. Sentential approaches, for example, regularly run aground on some overlooked Liar-like sentence, often concocted in terms of the categories of that particular approach, for which no appropriate value can be

assigned without contradiction. If the alternative is paradox and contradiction, surely, the embarrassing questions of a propositional approach are to be preferred.

Consider also another difficulty for propositional approaches—that of the Propositional Liar: 8. (8) expresses no true proposition.

Is (8) true or false? If true, one might argue, it is false, for (8) itself maintains that it is *not* true. If false, it appears, it is true—for then, as (8) maintains, it expresses no true proposition. We might propose, as a third alternative, that (8) is neither true nor false. If it is neither true nor false, however, it is in particular not true—it expresses no true proposition. But all that (8) *says* is that it expresses no true proposition, so it must be true after all. But if (8) is true, as already argued, it must be false....

A propositional approach to (8), of course, will attempt to block the pattern of reasoning common to all of these options by insisting simply that (8) expresses no proposition.

Such a position at least *looks* awkward with respect to the Propositional Liar, however. If (8) expresses no proposition, then it of course expresses no true proposition. The partisan of propositions must hold, then, that (9) is true:

9. (8) expresses no true proposition.

Now a propositionalist is *not* forced at this point to say that (8) is true after all, on the supposed grounds that (9) is true and “says just what (8) says.” The consistent propositionalist will maintain instead that, despite appearances, there is all the difference in the world between (8) and (9). (8) expresses no proposition, and so of course carries no truth value. (9), on the other hand—although identical to (8) word for word and different only in its numbering—*does* express a proposition and, moreover, expresses a truth.

This is not an inconsistent position. But it must be admitted that it *is* at least a somewhat uncomfortable one—it does not seem, at least initially, that there should be as great a difference between (8) and (9) as the partisan of propositions is forced to claim.

The propositionalist defender of omniscience



will offer a similar account for (10), with a similarly uncomfortable result:

10. God believes that (10) expresses no true proposition.

Unless it is stopped, the claims that (10) is true, false, or neither true nor false will lead to paradox just as did (1) and (3). The propositionalist defender of omniscience, of course, will avoid the paradox by claiming that (10) expresses no proposition. If so, however, (10) expresses no true proposition, and God—since He believes all truths—will believe that (10) expresses no true proposition.

The propositional defender of omniscience must hold, in other words, that (11) is true:

11. God believes that (10) expresses no true proposition.

But he must also hold that (10)—identical to (11) word for word, and different only in its numbering—expresses no proposition at all, much less a true one.

A propositional defense of omniscience, then, like a propositional response to the Liar, is at least to some extent an awkward or uncomfortable strategy. But the alternatives may be seriously worse. Despite the difficulties noted, then, a propositional approach may be the best available response to the Liar and the best option open to a defender of omniscience.

## VI. ESSENTIAL INDEXICALS AND OMNISCIENCE

Let me now raise a set of problems for omniscience, and concerning propositions, which are *not* related to the Liar.

Consider a case borrowed from John Perry:<sup>16</sup>

I follow a trail of spilled sugar around and around a tall aisle in the supermarket, in search of the shopper who is making a mess. Suddenly I realize that the trail of sugar I have been following is spilling from a torn sack in *my* cart, and that *I* am the culprit—*I* am making a mess.

What it is that I come to know at that point—what I know when I come to know that

12. I am making a mess

—is traditional regarded as the *proposition* that I am making a mess. The proposition thus known, moreover, is traditionally regarded as the same proposition as that expressed by:

13. Patrick Grim is making a mess.<sup>17</sup>

There *is* the following difference between (12) and (13) on the traditional view. *I* can express the proposition at issue in (12) and (13) by using (12), with its indexical “I.” Other cannot, and are forced instead to use some mode of reference such as the “Patrick Grim” of (13). But this is hardly a crucial difference. On the traditional view the same proposition is expressed in each case, and what I know or express in knowing or expressing (12) is just what others know or express in knowing or expressing (13).

As Perry, David Lewis, and Roderick Chisholm have argued, however, this seems to be much too simple an account of objects of knowledge, and in particular of what it is that I know in knowing (12). Contrary to the traditional view, it appears, the “I” of (12) is an *essential* indexical—essential to what it is that I know in knowing (12).

The argument is as follows: When I stop myself short in the supermarket, gather up my broken sack, and start to tidy up, this may be quite fully explained by saying that I realized (or came to believe, or came to know) that I was making a mess—what I express by (12). But it cannot be fully explained, or at least *as* fully explained, by saying that I realized that Patrick Grim was making a mess—what is expressed by (13). In order to give the realization that Patrick Grim was making a mess the full explanatory force of the realization that *I* was making a mess, in fact, we would have to add that I know that *I* am Patrick Grim. And that, of course, is to reintroduce the indexical.

It thus appears that what I come to know when I come to know (12) is not what I or anyone else might know in knowing (13). For my knowledge of (12) has an explanatory power that my knowledge of (13) does not.

Let us apply all this to questions of omniscience.

If God, in being omniscient or all-knowing, is to know all that is known or all that can be known,

He must know what I know in knowing (12):

12. I am making a mess.

But this, it appears, God cannot know. As argued above, the indexical "I" is essential to what I know in knowing (12). But only I can use that "I" to index me.

God *can*, of course, know (13):

13. Patrick Grim is making a mess.

But this does not amount to what I know in knowing (12).

It should be noted that no appeal to *de re* belief will be of help to omniscience here.<sup>18</sup> For what I know, or come to know, in knowing (12),

12. I am making a mess,  
is not what I or others would know in knowing, say (14) *de re* of me:

14. *He* is making a mess.

Consider, for example, a case in which I see myself and my messy trail of sugar in a fish-eye mirror at the end of an aisle. I might then come to believe (14) *de re* of the man in the mirror—of myself, as it happens—just as anyone else viewing me might come to believe (14) *de re* of me. But I would not thereby know what I know in knowing (12), for I still might not realize that it was *me* in the mirror. A knowledge *de re* of me and my mess, then, still falls short of what I know in knowing (12) *de se*.

Whatever treatment is offered for the paradoxes of omniscience proposed in earlier sections, then, a doctrine of omniscience or of an omniscient God cannot be defended against essential indexicals. If there is some self-conscious being other than God, what that being knows *de se* cannot be known by God, and thus it cannot be that God is omniscient. Or so it seems.

## VII. PROPOSITIONAL OMNISCIENCE AND ESSENTIAL INDEXICALS

How much of a problem do essential indexicals really pose for omniscience?

Consider again the examples appealed to above. What I know in knowing (12),

12. I am making a mess,

it was argued, does not amount to what God or anyone else knows in knowing (13), or even (14) *de re* of me:

13. Patrick Grim is making a mess.

14. *He* is making a mess.

Even if we accept that something different is known in these cases, however, how much of a threat this poses for omniscience still depends on precisely what it is that we take to be known in each case. It also depends on what further refinements we might choose to make in a notion of omniscience.

We might treat all that is known in knowing (12), (13), and (14) as a matter of propositional knowledge. All that I know in knowing (12), on such a view, is a particular proposition. All that others know in knowing (13) or (14), given the argument of the preceding section, is some *different* proposition. This is of course to abandon the traditional claim that the same proposition is at stake in, say, (12) and (13). On this view I alone could know or express the proposition I express by means of (12), and on this view essential indexicals such as "I" would quite generally indicate propositions to which the speaker alone has expressive or epistemic access.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps more plausibly, however, we might choose instead to allow for an element of *non-propositional* knowledge. We might choose to retain the traditional claim that the same proposition is known in knowing, say, (12) and (13), but propose that there is also something *more* that is known in the case of (12)—some additional *non-propositional* element above and beyond the proposition that (12) and (13) have in common.

If we adopt the first view, and hold that I know a different proposition in knowing (12) than is known in knowing (13) or (14)—or if we hold that what is known *de se* in (12) is some additional *proposition* to which I alone have access—then clearly neither God nor any other being distinct from me knows all propositions. On this view *propositional omniscience* would have to be rejected, for on this view, in any world in which there is more than one self-conscious being, there will be propositions unknown and unknowable by

any proposed being: those propositions known or knowable only *de se* by some other being. If propositional omniscience is rejected, moreover, it is unclear what is left for "omniscience" to amount to. This first view, then, can hardly be recommended to the traditional theist or to the defender of omniscience.

The alternative, as outlined above, is to maintain that the difference between what is known in knowing (12) and (13), or in knowing (12) and (14), is not a *propositional* difference. If one adopts the view that what I know in knowing (12) that is not known in knowing (13) or (14) is something *non-propositional*, above and beyond the proposition they have in common, then one *can* maintain the possibility of a propositionally omniscient God.<sup>20</sup> There will still be something that I know in knowing (12) that God cannot know. But that something will on this view be *non-propositional*, and so will pose no threat to God's propositional omniscience.

But there is still a price to pay. On this view God, although propositionally omniscient, clearly could not be said to be *all-knowing*. If there is more to be known in heaven and earth than propositions, then propositional omniscience by no means guarantees that its possessor knows all that is or can be known. Some of what is known, moreover, is what is known *de se* by me and by other finite creatures. Since no being distinct from other finite creatures can know what they know *de se*, there clearly is no all-knowing being.<sup>21</sup>

Essential indexicals do not pose a fatal difficulty for omniscience or for an omniscient God, then, at least if one is careful to limit one's claims

to *propositional* omniscience and if examples of knowledge *de se* are dealt with in terms of *non-propositional* knowledge.<sup>22</sup> But essential indexicals do seem to show the impossibility of defending an *all-knowing* God.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

I have tried above to call attention to two sets of difficulties regarding omniscience that have generally been overlooked: Liar-like paradoxes of omniscience, and problems of essential indexicals.

I regard these as serious problems, and consider their neglect to have been undeserved. But I have not shown, and have not attempted to show, that these are somehow *fatal* difficulties for a notion of omniscience or of an omniscient God. Indeed I think they are not. Both sets of difficulties can be avoided by careful adherence to a notion of mere *propositional* omniscience, together with important auxiliary claims in other areas: that certain Liar-like sentences express no propositions, for example, and that knowledge *de se* is non-propositional in important respects. Such a position is still not without its costs, but then few philosophical positions are.

Mere propositional omniscience is perhaps a more guarded claim concerning divine knowledge than is traditional.<sup>23</sup> But it *is* in the tradition of attributing omniscience of at least *some* sort to God, and has the distinct advantage of escaping, however narrowly, the neglected but important problems posed above.

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#### NOTES

1. Recent discussions of note include chap. 3 of Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977); section II of Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); and chapter 10 of Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

2. In addition to Geach, Kenny, and Swinburne, see esp. Robert Merrihew Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 14 (1977), pp. 109-17.

3. The important pieces here are A. N. Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy*, Vol. 37 (1962), pp. 114-29; Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 63 (1966), pp. 409-21; and Hector-Neri Castañeda, "Omniscience and Indexical Reference," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 64 (1967), pp. 203-10. All of these are reprinted in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Baruch Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), and are discussed in Kenny and Swinburne.
4. See David Lewis, "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 88 (1979), pp. 513-43, and John Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," *Nous*, Vol. 13 (1979), pp. 3-21. Both of these are reprinted in *The Philosopher's Annual*, Vol. III, ed. by David L. Boyer, Patrick Grim, and John T. Sanders (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Pub. Co., 1980). See also Roderick Chisholm, *The First Person* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1981).
5. Geach, pp. 40, 43; Prior, p. 115; Swinburne, p. 162; James F. Ross, *Philosophical Theology* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 214; William E. Mann, "The Divine Attributes," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 12 (1975), pp. 151-59, see 153-54. See also Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 91, and James E. Tomberlin and Frank McGuinness, "God, Evil, and the Free Will Defense," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 13 (1977), pp. 455-75, see 472. Some of the definitions offered vary stylistically, but on closer examination amount to no more than Df. 1.
6. Nelson Pike offers a somewhat different definition in terms of belief in *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 54. Pike's account is "N(x)(P)(if x is omniscient, then if P, x believes that P)," which uses only a conditional rather than a biconditional. Pike's definition is thus not equivalent to Df. 2, and fails to exclude the possibility of an omniscient being holding false beliefs.
7. This reference is of course to Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," *Analysis*, Vol. 23 (1963), pp. 121-23.
8. "Personal paradoxes" such as (1) were first pointed out to me years ago by David Boyer.
9. See esp. Brian Skyrms, "Return of the Liar: Three-Valued Logic and the Concept of Truth," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 7 (1970), pp. 153-61, and the excellent collection *The Paradox of the Liar*, ed. by Robert L. Martin (Reseda, Calif.: Ridgeview Pub. Co., 1978). Susan Haack offers a very sound discussion of Russell's, Tarski's, and Kripke's approaches in *Philosophy of Logics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 135-51.
10. See for example Plantinga's treatment of worlds in terms of "books" in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 35-44, and *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 44-69.
11. This general type of approach has resulted in some intricate and impressive proposals. See esp. Bas C. van Fraassen, "Truth and Paradoxical Consequences," in Robert L. Martin, pp. 13-23.
12. See John F. Post, "Shades of the Liar," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, Vol. 2 (1973), 370-85, and "Propositions, Possible Languages, and the Liar's Revenge," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 25 (1974), pp. 223-34.
13. See esp. Alan Ross Anderson, "St. Paul's Epistle to Titus," in Robert L. Martin, pp. 1-11.
14. See esp. Newton Garver, "The Range of Truth and Falsity," in Robert L. Martin, pp. 121-26. A further bibliography of this position is given in Susan Haack, p. 140.
15. This difficulty for propositional approaches to the Liar is well put in Robert L. Martin's "Reply to Donnellan and Garver," in Robert L. Martin, pp. 127-34. See also Susan Haack, p. 140.
16. "The Problem of the Essential Indexical." See also David Lewis, "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*" and Roderick Chisholm, *The First Person*.
17. Kenny refers to propositions in this traditional sense as "items of information," and reserves the term "proposition" for something quite different—something counted by counting synonymous sentences, such that "I am tired" and "You are tired" must express different "propositions" (pp. 44-45). Susan Haack employs a similar usage (pp. 75-78).
18. On a view such as Frege's, *de re* belief itself causes difficulties for a propositional account. See Perry, pp. 161-65.
19. Such a view is evidently held by Frege in "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry," tr. by A. M. and Marcelle Quinton, *Mind*, Vol. 65 (1956), pp. 289-311, reprinted in *Philosophical Logic*, ed. by P. F. Strawson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 17-38. This view is explicitly discussed by Perry.
20. This seems to be the view taken by Lewis concerning what is known in cases such as (13) and concerning omniscience. See Lewis, pp. 520-21.
21. There may also be other and simpler reasons to reject the notion of an *all-knowing* being, however. See for example Michael

Martin, "A Disproof of God's Existence," *Darshana International*, Vol. 10 (1970), pp. 22-26.

22. Propositional omniscience cannot be taken as an *adequate* characterization of divine knowledge, however; God must have some appropriately excellent degree of *non*-propositional knowledge as well.

23. It is clearly much more guarded than the claims for divine knowledge that appear in Aquinas, for example.