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Experiential Knowledge without Experience:

A response to Cray

By: Mary Bobbitt

Abstract

This paper responds to Wesley Cray's article "Omniscience and Worthiness of Worship." According to Cray, "an omniscient being is one that instantiates all propositional and experiential knowledge," and no person can have that entire body knowledge. Contrary to Cray, this paper indicates that God's omniscience implies full propositional knowledge, but only experiential knowledge that is great-making and non-composite. The central argument this paper proposes is that experiential knowledge does not imply that one has had that experience; for God, experiential knowledge may come from a variety of avenues. This article concludes with alternative arguments against Cray's formulation of God.

Introduction

In Wesley Cray's article *Omniscience and Worthiness of Worship*, "an omniscient being is one that instantiates all propositional and experiential knowledge," and no person can have that entire body knowledge. Since God must be a person to be worthy of worship, God cannot both be omniscient and be worthy of worship.¹ Cray's argument is as follows:

1. Something is worthy of worship only if it is a person
2. Something is god only if it is worthy of worship
3. An agent can have experiential knowledge of what it is like to have a particular experience only if that agent has experienced it
4. No person can possess the full body of experiential knowledge
5. Something is a person only if it has proper psychological unity
6. An omniscient being is one that instantiates all propositional and experiential knowledge.
7. God is not a person (4 and 6)
8. Thus, God is not worthy of worship.²

There are two types of knowledge, experiential and propositional knowledge. According to Cray, propositional knowledge is knowledge of specific

¹ Wesley D. Cray, "Omniscience and Worthiness of Worship," *International Journal of Religious Philosophy* 70 (2011): 147-53. God, in this article, is the Christian God and many of the doctrines associated thereof.

² *Ibid.*, 150.

propositions.³ “The sun is yellow,” is a propositional statement; knowledge of that statement falls under propositional knowledge. On the other hand, an agent has experiential knowledge if that agent has had an experience and gains knowledge from the experience.⁴ For instance, knowing what it is like to watch the first Star Wars trilogy and then the second Star Wars trilogy. This paper will argue that omniscience does not necessitate that a being instantiates all propositional and experiential knowledge. Instead, omniscience requires maximal propositional knowledge, but only some experiential knowledge. Accordingly, premise six (6) of Cray’s argument is incorrect and God could be person with proper psychological unity.

The Classical View

The classical view of omniscience is that God has the property of having maximal propositional knowledge, but not experiential knowledge.⁵ While this is correct in that clearly God must have maximal propositional knowledge to have omniscience, there are two major issues with the view that God does not have experiential knowledge: the Biblical problem and the problem of suffering. In order to show that the classical view is inadequate, all one needs to prove is that

³ Cray, “Omniscience and Worthiness of Worship,” 148-150

⁴ Ibid., 150.

⁵ Matthew Frise, “What God Only Knows: a reply to Rob Lovering,” *Religious Studies* 50.2 (2014): 245-254.

omniscience requires at least one piece of experiential knowledge. The Biblical problem draws from the Bible and other Christian doctrines to show that God experiences emotions. The Bible says that God is ‘intimately acquainted’ with human suffering:⁶ “...then the Lord said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings.’” God *knows* their suffering; *how* they feel, not just *that* they feel.⁷ In fact, when one considers the New Testament, it becomes clear that God experiences suffering, human emotion and experiences by way of Jesus Christ. Christ experienced torture on the cross, love of his mother Mary, friendship, as well as many other emotions and experiences. These examples are types of experiential knowledge that cannot be communicated; for instance, one cannot communicate how pain feels to someone who does not feel pain.⁸ The entire concept of God becoming human assumes that God can have experiential knowledge.

The classical view is also upset by the problem of suffering. Many argue that God is required to know pain and to suffer; otherwise it would be morally unacceptable for Him to create the world.⁹ Otherwise God chose to create a

⁶ Exodus 3:7 as cited in Marcel Sarot, “Omniscience and Experience,” *Philosophy of Religion* 30 (1991): 89-102.

⁷ Sarot, “Omniscience and Experience,” 89.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁹ *Ibid.* 89-102.

world without the knowledge of one of the most painful and important human experiences.¹⁰ The problem of evil is one of the major problems that afflicts theism. For God to not know how suffering feels, or how His created beings would experience suffering, and still create magnifies the problem of evil. This is likely something the theist would not want to give more support to; a God that understands and experiences suffering is preferable. Certainly, a God that experiences suffering seems to have greater moral standing in creating evil than one who does not.

Additionally, there are also many times in the Bible where the Christian God experiences anger and pain. The prime example is Jesus *qua* God suffering and dying on the cross. Clearly, the Christian God's omniscience does not mandate zero experiential knowledge; there must be at least one proposition that God knows experientially. The question then becomes whether or not God must have maximal experiential knowledge.

Maximal Experiential Knowledge

Some argue that God must have maximal experiential knowledge because it is great making. We generally respect someone who knows from experience more than only knowing from theory.¹¹ If we are being taught to snowboard, we

¹⁰ Ibid., 90.

¹¹ Rob Lovering, "Does God Know What It's Like Not to Know?" *Religious Studies* 49.1 (2013): 85-99.

respect someone who has snowboarded more than someone who has only studied the theory of snowboarding. If we are to trust or worship God, it is easier to do so knowing that God experiences our suffering, our joy, etc. God knowing all experiences would therefore mean that God is justified in creating, for He experiences all that we, and all created beings, experience.

However, there are some problems with the view of maximal experiential knowledge. While maximal experiential knowledge may be great making, there are negative experiences and inessential pieces of knowledge that are not great making; additionally, maximal experiential knowledge isn't necessary for omniscience. First is the problem of negative emotions. God should not have to experience negative emotions. For example, it is not great-making for God to experience pleasure in pain.¹² Emotions can also be irrational and deceptive, leading to poor judgment.¹³ For God to experience these emotions would put His omniscience in conflict with His omnipotence and omnibenevolence.

Accordingly, some philosophers argue that God is impassible. When anger clouds one's judgment, when sorrow prevents someone from acting, these emotions stop being great-making properties. God should not have to experience those feelings or experiences that are not great making, such as feeling

¹² Sarot, "Omniscience and Experience." 91.

¹³ Anastasia Scrutton, "Divine Passibility: God and Emotion," *Philosophy Compass* 8.9 (2013): 866-874.

ignorance.¹⁴ Righteous anger or grief does not fall under the same category, neither do compassion nor love; God can experience, and should experience, these and still be great making. Feelings, in this sense, can provide a type of knowledge that can be obtained no other way.¹⁵ Yet there are clearly some emotions that can cloud judgment or that are sinful. Any experiential knowledge of this type is not experiential knowledge that God is required, or should be required, to have regardless of His omniscience.

The second major problem with this view of omniscience is that of inessential knowledge. There are some parts of experiential knowledge that are neither great-making nor necessary for omniscience. For example, God does not need to experience riding a bike.¹⁶ Cray uses the example of seeing the first Star Wars trilogy before the second and also seeing the second Star Wars trilogy before the first.¹⁷ Cray indicates that having experiential knowledge of both of these is a contradiction; God cannot experience both simultaneous because there is a temporal component to this knowledge. However, lacking this knowledge does not make God any lesser.¹⁸ This knowledge seems inessential for

¹⁴ Sarot, "Omniscience and Experience." 91.

¹⁵ Scrutton, "Divine Passibility," 870.

¹⁶ Frise, "What God Only Knows."

¹⁷ Cray, "Omniscience and Worthiness of Worship" 149-150.

¹⁸ Frise, "What God Only Knows."

omniscience; God need not necessarily have every experience, only those that are great-making. There is no reason that God knowing what it is like to see the second Star Wars trilogy before the first is essential.

Finally, maximal experiential knowledge isn't necessary. God can have experiential knowledge without having the *experience* that is usually necessary for experiential knowledge. In other words, God can have experiential knowledge of what it is to ride a bike or watch Star Wars without actually experiencing them. Even humans can have experiential knowledge without currently having an experience. Once my cancer is in remission, I cannot remember perfectly what it is like to have cancer. But I still know what it is like to have cancer without currently experiencing it. Therefore, having knowledge doesn't mean I currently have that experience. I just need to be able to recall a particular experience to mind.¹⁹

A Modified View

God has cognitive access to experiences through His access to human minds and experiences.²⁰ Through direct access to human conscience, God can recall from us what it is like to watch the first Star Wars trilogy before the second, and vice versa. Omniscience does not, imply omnisubjectivity. In fact, God could also have experiential knowledge of those emotions and experiences that are not

¹⁹ Sarot, "Omniscience and Experience," 92.

²⁰ Ibid., 89-102.

great-making. “God can have all the information we can gather by experience but without the hedonic content.”²¹ There is an important difference, therefore, between experiential knowledge and having experiences. God can have the former without the latter.

Additionally, God can have access to types of experiential knowledge or emotions without having access to every particular emotion. God can have direct knowledge to the components of experiential knowledge without having that knowledge itself. If God experiences both pleasure and pain, He can infer what it feels like to experience pleasure in pain. If God knows mild pain, He can know what it is like to experience major pain.²² God must at least have a limited number of experiences, or *some* experiential knowledge to perform this inference, but this means that maximal experiential knowledge is unnecessary for omniscience. God can share the psychological state of pleasure or pain, without experiencing the reason for that psychological state.²³ This would also answer Cray’s Star Wars example; God can extrapolate what it feels like to watch the first trilogy before the second and the second before the first. He has direct access to the components of certain emotions.

²¹ Ibid., 94.

²² Ibid., 96.

²³ Frise, “What God Only Knows.”

Thus, while experiential knowledge is important to omniscience, maximal experiential knowledge is not necessary for it. Even if maximal experiential knowledge is necessary for omniscience, God can have access to it via extrapolation and His cognitive access to human minds.²⁴ A modified view is preferable in which God has all experiential knowledge that is great-making. He would then have the experiential knowledge which is necessary to his other properties, such as experiencing suffering being necessary for his omnibenevolence in creating a world with suffering. God thus does not have to have every experience at the same time, only those which essential, non-composite, and are great-making.

There are some objections to this view. The first is that God's ability to have sympathy requires him having maximal experiential knowledge. Sympathy implies that one individual can experience, or at least understand, the emotions and/or situation of another individual. God must be able to relate to human beings. If sympathy is a great making properly, because it allows for growth and compassion, then God must have it. The argument then goes that to be able to sympathize with any particular situation humans are in, God must experience each of those situations.

²⁴ Some might argue that this leaves God's omniscience dependent on human agents because it is dependent on creation. However, if creation is a part of God's nature, omniscience is only dependent on himself. One could also go into a discussion of God's knowledge of possible worlds, if he had not created X situation or if X situation did not obtain, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Besides having access to human psychological states and inferences to have sympathy, there is no reason that God has to experience a psychological state to sympathize. Jesus experienced what it is like to be human; he experienced many emotions and situations. This should be sufficient for sympathy. Regardless, understanding the propositional counterpart to that experiential state should be sufficient. God can understand that we have experienced a certain emotion and understand *our feeling of that emotion* without *feeling it Himself*. God can know that I have a toothache and sympathize with that experience, without having had a toothache.

Additionally, one does not need to know exactly how another feels to have sympathy; this is even true of empathy, the more extreme of the two.²⁵ We don't hold human sympathy to the level of understanding the exact experience another individual is going through, holding God to an additional standard is unnecessary. There is also no reason that sympathy is a great making quality. God knows what it is like for us to grow and for us to change and feel; that is sufficient.²⁶ God does not need to grow and change, for which sympathy is critical, but God is unchangeable.

Final Question

²⁵ Scrutton, "Divine Passibility," 871.

²⁶ Lovering, "Does God Know."

The last question that arises in this view of omniscience is whether or not God knows what it is like knowing not to know. Does omniscience require the experiential knowledge of ignorance? According to Christianity, God knows what it is like to be estranged from people, to not be in communion with them.²⁷ However, not knowing is not an experiential state. It is coming to know a fact, or knowing something in a new way.²⁸ Ignorance isn't affirmative knowledge; it is the lack of knowledge. It is the privation of knowledge. In fact, as previously discussed, some knowledge it is better not to have.²⁹ God still has full propositional knowledge, but does not have those parts of experiential knowledge that are not great-making.

Thus, a modified view of omniscience in which God has maximal propositional knowledge and some experiential knowledge is preferable to either the classical view or Cray's view. This answers Cray's proposition six (6). Cray indicates that having maximal experiential knowledge would fracture God's psychological unity. God may retain this unity through having only that knowledge which is great making as well as having access to other types of knowledge through human experience. There is no reason his Star Wars example is essential or great making, and may be addressed through human cognitive

²⁷ Frise, "What God Only Knows."

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Frise, "What God Only Knows."

states. Thus, even if one accepts Cray's model of God's personhood and worthiness of worship, an omniscient God does not violate his criteria.

Yet, there is no reason to accept Cray's model of God's omniscience. This argument assumes that God is a person as humans are persons, in that psychological unity is necessary for God. God's 'personhood' is, however, in a different category than human personhood. God's omnipotence means that he has the power to both have psychological disunity, and hold the full body of experiential knowledge. In fact, in the Christian God decidedly does not have psychological unity, because God is a Trinitarian God.

Additionally, there is not a reason why non-persons are not worthy of worship. If God is a separate category of being, that particular category may be worthy of worship without being a person. Cray indicates that it is intuitively true that personhood is required for worthiness of worship. Objects, for instance, can't be worthy of worship. Sunsets also are not worthy of worship. However, God is neither an object nor a sunset. God is an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient deity. God's personhood could be argued to not be in the same category as human personhood.

Conclusion

God must have maximal propositional knowledge to be omniscient. The debate over the amount and type of experiential knowledge continues to wage within the philosophy of religion. Omniscience does not necessitate that God has

maximal experiential knowledge. Doing so would require God to experience certain non-great making emotions. God would have to experience sinful emotions. Additionally, many experiences are inessential; God can have direct access both to human consciousness and to the components of certain emotions. God only needs to have experiential knowledge of those experiences which are great-making, non-composite, and essential to his being. Further analysis could be conducted on what particular experiences would fall under those necessary for omniscience, but this endeavor is seemingly endless and with little conclusion in sight. God can thus retain psychological unity, even if psychological unity is necessary for God to be worthy of worship. The Christian does not need to accept a view of omniscience that requires maximal propositional and experiential knowledge.

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