

## DIVINE COGNITIVE POWER

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Standard analyses of omniscience are advanced in terms of a being's knowing the truth value of propositions. For example, Kenny writes that 'The doctrine of omniscience is easy to formulate precisely: it is the doctrine that for all  $p$ , then God knows that  $p$ '.<sup>1</sup> Richard Swinburne proposes that 'To say of a person  $P$  that he is omniscient at time  $t$  is to say that at  $t$   $P$  knows of every true proposition that it is true'.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes such standard accounts are modified to avoid the problem of supposing a being knows future contingencies, namely propositions concerning what a free being will do in the future. Hence Swinburne identifies limited or modified omniscience as: 'A person  $P$  is omniscient at time  $t$  if and only if he knows of every true proposition about  $t$  or an earlier time that it is true and also he knows of every true proposition about a time later than  $t$ , such that what it reports is physically necessitated by some cause at  $t$  or earlier, that it is true'.<sup>3</sup> One also finds modified accounts of omniscience that avoid claiming God knows the truth value of propositions containing ostensible indexical properties like 'now' or 'being me' as used by a different subject. In what follows I argue that none of the standard analyses or their modifications identify sufficient conditions for being omniscient. Some version of the standard account may be essential to identifying the scope of an omniscient being's knowledge, but I believe that the standard account fails because it does not identify the omniscient being's requisite cognitive power. Even if my argument does not establish unequivocally that the standard analyses are insufficient in characterizing omniscience *per se*, I believe the considerations I raise at least provide good reason for rejecting the standard versions as sufficient accounts of the omniscience attributed to God in classic theism.

I suggest that the classic theistic claim that God is omniscient involves the claim that it is metaphysically impossible for there to be a being with greater cognitive power. The notion of cognitive power can be readily illustrated. When I know certain things to be the case, say that I now see something green or I am hearing music, I am exercising cognitive power or ability. I have certain cognitive powers with respect to my sensory states so that I can grasp truths about the world, or at least truths about my sensory and perceptual states themselves. When I know  $2 + 2 = 4$  I am exercising my cognitive power to grasp the truth value of a neces-

sary proposition. I believe that the traditional theistic understanding of God's omniscience includes attributing to God unsurpassable cognitive power. The disparity between standard analyses of omniscience and the view I am defending can be brought to light in the following thought experiment. For ease of exposition, I identify the standard view as claiming a being is omniscient if and only if it knows the truth value of all propositions. The force of the thought experiment is not diminished by substituting other versions of what I am calling the standard view.

Imagine there are two beings, Christopher and Dennis. Both know the truth value of all propositions, but they differ in the following respect. Christopher knows the truth value of all propositions in virtue of exercising his own cognitive power. He knows all true propositions incorrigibly and infallibly. Imagine that Christopher does not need to consult evidence of any sort to know truths about the world, but that the mere occurrence of some state of affairs (its snowing in Chicago) is sufficient for his knowing the state of affairs occurs. In order to know it is snowing in Chicago he does not need to undertake numerous observations, examining cloud formations and atmospheric conditions from a variety of angles. Dennis, on the other hand, only knows the truth value of all propositions by virtue of Christopher informing him of their truth value. Imagine that Christopher either creates him with this knowledge or that Dennis is appropriately linked to Christopher such that Dennis' knowledge claims register true and false values for all propositions, all of which Dennis notes and can properly claim to know. Christopher informs him, for example, whether Taliaferro's thesis is correct, but Dennis does not know this because of an ability to discover the truth of the matter on his own. Imagine that Dennis is even essentially such that he could not have Christopher's extraordinary cognitive power. Dennis is epistemically dependent in that he must rely on another being's epistemic work if he is to have knowledge of the world. Dennis does not lack all cognitive power for he can appropriately grasp Christopher's instructions and know them to be reliable. But his knowledge of the world is invariably mediated by Christopher. Were Christopher to be less courteous or well disposed, Dennis would be completely ignorant of the world.

In the above thought experiment Christopher possesses unsurpassable cognitive power. Such an upper limit is absolute and is not analogous to identifying some greatest possible number. A being could not have greater cognitive power than to be such that it knows the truth value of all propositions without evidential mediation. Dennis may not be epistemically stained in his failing to know the truth value of any proposition, but he lacks (even essentially lacks) the maximal cognitive power attributed to Christopher. Far from being on a par epistemically, Dennis lacks the supreme cognitive virtue or perfection which Christopher enjoys.

I believe the standard analyses of omniscience are unable to satisfactorily identify the epistemically important difference between Dennis and Christopher. According to the standard views, both beings are omniscient. This is not entirely implausible, moreover there may be contexts when it is useful to at least stipulate that omniscience be defined in accord with the standard view. After all, typical analyses of certainty and knowledge do not distinguish between varying degrees

such that two subjects may be said to be certain of the same proposition and yet one of them has a higher level of certitude than the other. Proponents of the standard view may simply differentiate Christopher and Dennis by claiming that while both are omniscient, they attain this omniscience in different ways. However, I find this strategy unsatisfactory as it ignores the classic notion that knowledge involves a kind of power and it is possible to distinguish degrees of such power. To put the matter fancifully, while the standard analyses emphasize an omniscient being's *knowing all* where the concern is to identify the scope of a being's knowing, I do not wish to ignore what it means to claim a being is *all knowing*, taking into account the scope of a being's cognitive power. The old maxim 'Knowledge is power' is right according to my view, not because *ceteris paribus* a knower is able to use knowledge in life's practical affairs, but because knowing something to be the case involves the exercise of cognitive power. When attributing knowledge to any subject, we attribute to it a certain power. A being whose knowledge of the world must be derived and gleaned from the work of another epistemic agent is surely less powerful cognitively than a being whose knowledge of the world is un-derived and direct. Just as it is counter-intuitive (or incoherent) to suppose a being is omnipotent and yet there could be a being with greater power, I believe it is counter-intuitive to suppose there is an omniscient being and yet there could be a being with greater cognitive power. I am inclined to hold that Christopher is omniscient and Dennis is not.

The view I am defending receives some support from considering the traditional understanding of the relationship between omnipotence and omniscience. When maximal power is attributed to a being such power is not delimited to exclude cognitive power. Traditionally the notion of God's omniscience was conceived of as the exercise of God's omnipotent power. God's maximal power was understood to include maximal cognitive power so that it would be incoherent to suppose that a being had maximal power *per se*, but lacked cognitive power. I do not wish to argue, of course, that if a being is omniscient it must also be omnipotent, for perhaps there could be a being that had unsurpassable cognitive power and yet could do everything an omnipotent being could do except make a tulip. Nonetheless, the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience were seen to be intimately related so that omniscience was within the scope of divine omnipotence. I believe this is often ignored owing to the tendency of contemporary philosophical theology to analyze the different divine attributes in a piecemeal fashion.

If we allow the condition I have identified to serve as a necessary condition for being omniscient we are able to distinguish readily the epistemically important difference between Christopher and Dennis. To put my view in the form of a maxim, when it comes to omniscience, it is not just a matter of *what* a subject knows, but *how* a subject knows it. In contrast, the standard view has no obvious way to preclude there being an indefinite series of epistemically dependent beings like Dennis. Imagine the first Dennis derives all his knowledge from Christopher and then passes on the appropriate information to the second Dennis, and so on to the thousandth Dennis. The standard view entails that so long as the thousandth

Dennis is such that he knows the truth value of all propositions he is omniscient. *Ex hypothesi*, Christopher does not know the truth value of any proposition that the thousandth Dennis does not know.

Even if I am incorrect in claiming that the standard view fails to characterize sufficient conditions for being omniscient *per se*, I believe the above thought experiments bring to light the inadequacy of the standard views in characterizing the cognitive power theists have traditionally wished to attribute to God. The additional condition I have sought to identify closely accords with an Anselmian conception of God. In the *Proslogium VI* Anselm notes that God cognizes all things to the highest degree. My claim that an omniscient being is such that it is metaphysically impossible for there to be a being with greater cognitive power is akin to the claim that the cognitive power of an omniscient being is such that a being with greater cognitive power cannot be conceived.

Could it be that the standard view of omniscience is not even a necessary condition for omniscience? Perhaps, though I believe that something akin to the standard view is required for us to identify the full exercise of an omniscient being's cognitive power. If we held simply that a being is omniscient if and only if it is metaphysically impossible for there to be a being with greater cognitive power then the following problem would arise. Perhaps Christopher could have unsurpassable cognitive power and yet refuse to exercise it for any but the most trivial purposes, say only in his knowing general propositions about his epistemic ability; or maybe Christopher decides to not use his power at all and knows no propositions whatever. I do not think Christopher then be properly regarded as omniscient. To attribute omniscience to a being includes both attributing unsurpassable cognitive power as well as attributing the exercise of such power such that some version of the standard view is also satisfied. I suggest the following necessary and sufficient conditions for being omniscient. X is omniscient if and only if it is metaphysically impossible for there to be a being with greater cognitive power and this power is fully exercised. But as I concede above, such an analysis may require an appeal to the standard analysis to spell out the scope of such full exercise of power. In support of my proposed analysis it can be noted that it has the versatility of being compatible with abandoning standard conditions construing divine knowledge in a *de dicto* fashion, and instead construing it in terms of knowledge *de re*, an omniscient being correctly ascribing properties and attributes to things. My characterization of omniscience can accommodate St. Thomas' nonpropositional account of divine knowledge (see *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk I, Ch. 58).

I will now reply to four objections.

*Objection one.* The thought experiment is unconvincing because of a time delay factor. There would be some time delay between Christopher's grasp of the truth value of a proposition and Dennis' grasp of the same proposition owing to the time involved in Christopher's communicating its truth value to Dennis. Were this the case, at no time would both Christopher and Dennis be on a par as far as the standard analysis of omniscience is concerned, each knowing all true propositions.

*Reply.* I note three ways to reply to this objection. (i) Classic theism includes a rich philosophical tradition of conceiving of God as being nontemporally extended or eternal. The thought experiment could be construed as pertaining to two nontemporally extended beings. As such, there would be no conceivable time lag in which Christopher knows the truth value of P at time t and Dennis only comes to know of the truth value of P at t2. (ii) Even if 'i' is rejected because of the ostensibly problematic nature of being temporally unextended, perhaps Christopher could be construed as being such that at any given time he knows the truth value of all propositions. For example, some theists believe God to be omniscient, temporally extended, and such that He does not gain an increasing amount of knowledge daily. If we envision Christopher occupying God's role, it is not a matter of Christopher having to continuously feed more and more information to Dennis day by day to keep him abreast of Christopher's knowledge of the world. Rather, at any given time, Christopher knows the truth value of all propositions. Imagining Christopher to be omnipotent, one might well hold that it is metaphysically possible for him to create Dennis with the requisite cognitive apparatus to receive *tout court* the information about the truth value of all propositions. (iii) Perhaps the objector holds that 'ii' is unsatisfactory because a temporally extended omniscient being's knowledge would grow continuously. Someone could argue à la A.N. Prior that God now knows it is midnight, May first, but God did not know *that* before midnight, May first. Alternatively, the objector may hold that certain propositions about future free acts are neither true nor false. God only comes to know that someone does a particular act freely at the time the action is done. Likewise, Christopher may be imagined to be omniscient and yet come to know indefinitely many things over time, thus allowing for a time delay between his knowing P and Dennis' receipt of the information that P. I believe one may plausibly deny the two rationales for a time delay, but even if such rationales are acceptable, it is by no means obvious that there would be a *pernicious* time delay between Christopher's grasp of P and Dennis' grasp of P even in a case where both are temporally extended and have knowledge about a world of enduring free creatures. If Richard Taylor and others are correct, then causal relations are such that the cause and effect may be simultaneous (*cf.* Taylor's *Action and Purpose*).<sup>4</sup> There is no reason to believe Hume was correct that a cause must be temporally prior to its effect. There need be no delay such that Christopher's gaining knowledge that P temporally precedes his successful 'communication' of it to Dennis. If Christopher were conceived to be omnipotent, would it be metaphysically impossible for him to will that Dennis know the truth value of all propositions at t which Christopher knows at t? It is not obvious that this is impossible.

*Objection two.* The thought experiment is unconvincing because Dennis would not be sufficiently grounded evidentially in order to properly know the truth value of all propositions. After all, is not Dennis simply relying upon Christopher's testimony? How can testimonial evidence be sufficiently strong to warrant knowledge?

*Reply.* One may respond to this objection in three ways. (i) Testimony is suf-

ficiently strong to warrant the relevant knowledge claims. (ii) The thought experiment may be altered. Imagine Christopher and Dennis are linked so that Christopher's conveying the truth value of all propositions is not testimony *per se*. Perhaps the truth value of all propositions simply become registered in Dennis in virtue of some secure causal connection between the two and Dennis can rightly know the relevant connection to be reliable. Dennis' knowing P remains epistemically dependent upon Christopher's epistemic valor. (iii) If replies 'i' and 'ii' are unconvincing, the thought experiment can be altered again. An objector might be unsatisfied by 'i' and 'ii' because the imagined thought experiment provides us with little reason for thinking there could be a Dennis with the requisite phenomenology for knowing the truth value of all propositions. After all, are we to imagine him having a proper grasp of all propositions, only awaiting Christopher's signal of their truth value? Surely there are some nonpropositional states which are at least involved in knowing certain propositions. How can we imagine Dennis having a full phenomenal relations sufficient to properly know all we are imagining he knows? Some traditional theists would give little weight to this objection as they deny God's knowledge of the world is obtained in virtue of any phenomenal, experiential undergoings. But there is no need to take such an Anselmian highroad to reply to this objection. Grant that some phenomenal undergoings are essential for a being to know the world's states and imagine Dennis is such that he is undergoing indefinitely many phenomenal experiences, only some of which correctly disclose states of the world. Without Christopher's flagging the appropriate phenomenal experiences Dennis would be a moderate sceptic, uncertain of which phenomenal patterns are truth disclosing.

*Objection three.* It is illegitimate to speak of Christopher as having nonevidentially mediated knowledge. In order to properly know something to be the case, this knowledge must be based upon evidence.

*Reply.* The thought experiment can be conducted in a variety of ways to avoid this objection. For example, one could introduce the notion of being directly evident to characterize Christopher's epistemic status. Christopher is such that the truth value of all propositions is directly evident; his grasp of their truth does not rest upon evidential warrant derived from his grasp of other propositions. The thought experiment could thus be designed to contrast the difference between the cognitive power of a being for whom the truth value of all propositions is directly evident as against a being that knows the truth value of all propositions but whose knowledge rests (for the most part) upon another being's epistemic work. I introduce the rider 'for the most part' as the thought experiment need not deny that Dennis grasps some things directly.<sup>5</sup>

*Objection four.* Why think that Dennis is inferior to Christopher *qua* knower? After all, *ex hypothesi*, they both know the truth value of all propositions. It seems that they are equally powerful with respect to knowledge. Perhaps the only reason we think Christopher has greater cognitive power than Dennis is because it is noted that Dennis knows the truth value of all propositions in virtue of Christopher's courtesy. Let us alter the thought experiment. Imagine Dennis and

Christopher are linked in such a way that it is necessarily the case that if a proposition is true, then they both know it. Dennis knows it because of Christopher, but if there is no possible world in which Christopher knows the truth value of a proposition which Dennis does not know, it seems that both are on an equal footing epistemically. One is not mere excellent than the other as far as knowledge is concerned and both are duly regarded as omniscient.

*Reply.* The above objection does not endeavour to eliminate the dependency of Dennis upon Christopher, but seeks to render the dependency benign as far as assessing each being's credentials as a knower. It is charged that one is not more excellent than the other, despite the fact that the one's knowledge is obtained by virtue of the other's activity. The objector may go on to claim that the only reason we tend to denigrate 'epistemic dependency' is because we tend to think that (*ceteris paribus*) the dependent being is more prone to error than the epistemic independent being. In the amended thought experiment the ability to err is eliminated.

One reply to the above objection would be to simply reiterate the claim that knowing certain things to be the case involves the exercise of cognitive power and that the defect of the above revised version of omniscience is precisely its ignoring such power. The dependency of Dennis upon Christopher remains no less real and interesting, notwithstanding the fact that there may be no possible world in which Christopher knows P, and Dennis does not. The objector does not deny that the one being has a cognitive power that the other lacks. The two beings remains in a relation of asymmetric dependency across all possible worlds, Dennis always relying upon Christopher epistemically, but not *vice versa*. The link between the two remains such that for Dennis to know P, he must be informed of P's truth value by Christopher. Dennis' justification for believing P is, as it were, doglegged; P is not directly evident to him. Evidential doglegging is not on a par with knowing in a directly evident way. In so arguing, I am not denying God could create an omniscient being. This may or may not be possible. My point is that if God should create an omniscient being, the being would not lack supreme epistemic excellence.

Perhaps the force of the analysis in terms of cognitive power is enhanced by the second thought experiment in this paper which involved positing a thousand epistemic dependent beings. If we follow Anselmian intuitions, does it not appear to be more excellent to have the cognitive power of Christopher than the thousandth Dennis who is epistemically dependent upon the nine hundred and ninety ninth Dennis, and so on? Even if it is necessarily the case that the thousandth Dennis has all the knowledge of Christopher, Christopher's status as an epistemic agent, and thus as a knower, seems the greatest. To employ a popular idiom, the doxastic decision procedure of Dennis the thousandth consists in scrutinizing the nine hundred and ninety ninth's doxastic decisions who, in turn, attends to his neighbor's, and so on. Such good neighbor epistemology may result in the final Dennis' unswerving commitment to an impeccable list of true propositions, but he is not an epistemic peer with the Christopher who initiates this good Samaritan series. An analogous argument with regard to omnipotence may be of some help.

Consider a relatively simple analysis of omnipotence: X is omnipotent if and only if X can bring about every metaphysically possible state of affairs. Imagine two beings, A and B, can bring about every metaphysically possible state of affairs, but that B can do so only in virtue of A's assistance. Their wills are such that they cannot conflict. Both might seem to satisfy a plausible analysis of omnipotence, yet it would appear that A is more powerful than B. B's power is derived whereas A's is not. I am inclined to accept an analysis of omnipotence which takes into account whether the ostensibly omnipotent being's power is underived and I likewise seek to take into account epistemic independence and dependence in an analysis of omniscience.<sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 10.
2. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 162.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
4. Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1966).
5. There are substantial philosophical puzzles dealing with the characterization of the nature of God's knowledge of the world, or the world's states being directly evident to him which are outside the scope of this paper. For example, can God know about the world's sensory states (how objects look, smell, feel, taste and sound to creatures) without himself undergoing any sensory states? I address some of these issues in "The Incorporeality of God", *Modern Theology* and "The Art of Creation and Conservation", *New Blackfriars*, both forthcoming.
6. See "The Magnitude of Omnipotence", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1983), Vol. 14, pp. 99–106. I am indebted to members of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, especially Thomas Morris, Thomas Flint, and Michael DePaul.