

## OMNISCIENCE AND COGNITIVE POWER

Why is God thought of as omniscient rather than “omni-knowledgeable,” where the latter means roughly “being able to know whatever one wants to know whenever one wants to know it”? This is, after all, a pretty impressive property, and it’s not just obvious why God would be defective, even by Anselmian standards, if He were omni-knowledgeable rather than omniscient. Divine omnipotence, for example, does not require that God be always doing everything He can do. Why then ascribe to God a property requiring that He always be knowing everything He can know?

Various justifications for this asymmetry between divine knowing and doing can of course be offered, but it does not seem to me that the most obvious, at least, are very persuasive. One might argue, for example, that an all-doing God would be incompatible with the existence of creaturely libertarian agents; if this argument is sound, there is a positive reason not to require that God fully exercise His power with respect to doing things, and so to require nothing more than divine omnipotence. But of course there is a parallel argument to the effect that an all-*knowing* God is incompatible with the existence of creaturely libertarian agents; if *this* argument is sound, there is a positive reason not to require that God fully exercise His power with respect to knowing things, and so to require nothing more than divine omni-knowledgeability.<sup>1</sup>

My purpose in this paper is not to review and assess all the justifications that might be offered for insisting on full omniscience when it comes to divine knowing while tolerating “mere” omnipotence when it comes to divine doing. I shall instead assume that the parallel with omnipotence creates at least some presumption in favor of omni-knowledgeability over omniscience. What will occupy my attention in this paper is a rebuttal to this presumption which should carry some weight with traditional Christians. This is simply that the ascription to God of full omniscience is deeply entrenched in the tradition, and is therefore normative for Christian philosophy. My response to this rebuttal is not to dismiss it, but to argue that this may be one of those felicitous situations in which one can have one’s cake and eat it too. For God to be omni-knowledgeable, I shall maintain, *is* for God to be omniscient.

An omni-knowledgeable being who is fully exercising his power to know is omniscient on anyone’s account. The controversial claim I want to defend is that an omni-knowledgeable being who is *not* fully exercising his power to know can also count as omniscient. For such a being  $x$ , there are at least some truths  $p$  such that  $x$  has a disposition to believe that  $p$  (under certain conditions—e.g., the condition of wondering whether  $p$ ) but does not (yet) have a belief that  $p$ . The obvious problem for my thesis is that knowledge requires belief; since a mere disposition to believe is not (yet) a belief, it cannot count as knowledge, and so cannot contribute to omniscience.

How does belief differ from a (mere) disposition to believe? Not by being nondispositional: most human beliefs, for example, are dispositional rather than occurrent. A dispositional belief is itself a disposition to believe, and so satisfies the

general schema for such dispositions. Since this schema sets forth  $x$ 's counterfactual access to  $p$ , I shall call it

*The Access Condition.* Were circumstance  $C$  to obtain,  $x$  would occurrently believe at  $t$  that  $p$ .

( $C$  might be  $x$ 's considering whether  $p$ , or any number of other conditions.) But more than this is required for a disposition to believe to rise to the level of a (dispositional) belief. Alvin Goldman, commenting on the counterintuitive consequences of "simply defin[ing] a dispositional belief in terms of subjunctives or counterfactuals," suggests that what such a definition misses is the following necessary condition on any belief, occurrent or dispositional: "To say that a person believes proposition  $p$  at  $t$  is to say that  $p$  is somehow lodged in the mind at  $t$ —in memory if not in consciousness."<sup>2</sup> In holding that " $p$  is somehow lodged in the mind," Goldman presumably is not requiring that  $p$  itself be in the mind; it is surely sufficient (no more than this would even be intelligible) that  $p$  be *virtually* in the mind, in the form of a "representation." (This reading of Goldman's proposal has the added advantage of indemnifying it against Twin-Earth counterexamples: that  $p$  is represented in the head does not entail that its meaning is in the head.) Furthermore (though Goldman does not explicitly say this), if an inner representation of  $p$  is to be at all relevant to the dispositional belief that  $p$ , it must play a role in the exercise of the disposition to believe that  $p$ —in particular, a disposition to believe rises to the level of a (dispositional) belief only if it operates by "activating" or "accessing" an inner representation. This suggests a further condition by which (dispositional) belief may be distinguished from other dispositions to believe. I shall term this

*The Location Condition.* The mechanism by which the obtaining of  $C$  would lead to  $x$ 's occurrently believing that  $p$  involves  $x$ 's accessing at  $t$  a representation whose content is  $p$  and whose location at  $t$  is internal to  $x$ .

In so labeling this condition, I mean to underscore its function in distinguishing cases where exercising a disposition to believe that  $p$  involves accessing an *internal* representation of  $p$  (e.g., a configuration of long-term memory) from cases where exercising a disposition to believe that  $p$  involves accessing an *external* representation of  $p$  (e.g., a configuration of print on the pages of an encyclopaedia which  $x$  would read were she to wonder whether  $p$ ). It is the internal representations alone which are supposed to support  $x$ 's claim to a (dispositional) belief that  $p$ .

My strategy in defense of omni-knowledgeability is to argue that the unexercised dispositions to believe of an omni-knowledgeable being can be assimilated to dispositional belief; if successful, this strategy would defeat the only ground for denying that an omni-knowledgeable being is omniscient, namely, that such a being doesn't really *believe* all true propositions. The foregoing analysis of dispositional belief shows what is *prima facie* problematic about this strategy. Given that analysis, (1) a disposition to believe, if it is to count as a dispositional belief, must satisfy the Location Condition; but (2) there is nothing in the concept of an omni-knowledgeable being to suggest that his

dispositions to believe would all satisfy the Location Condition. If (1) and (2) are accepted, it follows that an omni-knowledgeable being (at least one whose power to know is not fully exercised) does not actually believe all true propositions, and consequently does not count as omniscient. My task is to show that both these premises are dubious, especially (but not only) when the knower is God.

Regarding premise (1), a serious problem with the Location Condition is that there appear to be clear cases of knowledge which fail to satisfy this condition. Suppose that I am not occurrently thinking that today is Monday, but that were I to consider what day it is I would form the occurrent belief that it is Monday. This counterfactual might be true because (a) the closest nonactual world in which I consider what day it is, is a world in which I *remember* that it is Monday; but another way it might be true is if (b) the closest nonactual world in which I consider what day it is, is a world in which I *find out* that it is Monday (e.g., by checking today's newspaper). The Location Condition rightly excludes (b) while including (a) as a case of (dispositionally) believing that today is Monday. So far so good. But there are other cases as well; indeed, most of the time when I (nonoccurrently) know that it is Monday, I do so in virtue of neither (a) nor (b) but because (c) the closest nonactual world in which I consider what day it is, is a world in which I *figure out* that it is Monday: I think back to what I did earlier (yesterday, this morning), attempt to match what I did with the days on which I would do such things, and arrive at the present by inference. Here there is preoccurrent knowledge that today is Monday without this propositional content being represented in a memory trace or other mental state which satisfies the Location Condition.

Goldman's own response to such examples is to stick with the Location Condition and deny the knowledge-claim;<sup>3</sup> but I expect few will feel comparably devoted to a theory which entails (among other dubious consequences) that we seldom know what day it is. Another response, made by Joseph Margolis, is to stick with the Location Condition, *accept* the knowledge-claim, but deny the corresponding *belief-claim*;<sup>4</sup> but again one must ask whether the Location Condition is worth the cost (in this case, abandoning the principle that knowledge entails belief). A third response, which retains the Location Condition as the ultimate arbiter while accepting both the knowledge- *and* beliefs-claims, is to hold that *x* has at *t* a dispositional belief that *p* only if the Location Condition is satisfied by *p* or by some set of propositions from which *x* might infer that *p*. This response gets around Daniel Dennett's objection that, my dispositional beliefs being "apparently infinite," to require each belief to satisfy the Location Condition "means their storage, however miniaturized, will take up more room than there is in the brain."<sup>5</sup> But this disjunctive version of the Location Condition, while it provides the right answer for (a)-(c), lacks an independent rationale. If internal location is intuitively necessary for belief, what justifies waiving the requirement when it comes to inferable beliefs like (c)? And if it is waived in such cases, what justifies continued confidence in the original intuition?

The radical alternative is to reject the Location Condition altogether. This line is taken, e.g., by Alan White. Responding to the objection that it is "because we already have our knowledge stored somewhere, say in our mind or in our memory, that we are

able to produce it on demand,” White notes that “not everything that can be produced is some kind of entity which must have existed somewhere before its production. All that we need have is the ability to produce it; and abilities are not located anywhere.” Knowledge, White concludes, is just such an ability: “to know that  $p$  is to be able to give an answer, namely that  $p$ , which is in fact the correct answer to a possible question.”<sup>6</sup> Now if this represents nothing more than a retreat to the Access Condition it will of course be unsatisfactory, since that condition tolerates cases like (b) which should not count as beliefs. But White’s reference to an “ability” to produce the requisite belief “on demand” suggests a version of the Access Condition considerably less promiscuous than my deliberately open-ended formulation of it. To believe that  $p$  is not just to have access to  $p$ , but to be in command of  $p$ —to have access to  $p$  “at will,” free (within limits) from frustration of delay. Let us call this vague requirement the ‘*Secure Access Condition*.’ The fact that “secure access” is vague and a matter of degree is not a serious problem for present purposes, since ‘belief’ is also vague and plausibly a matter of degree. In any event, the case that most concerns us does not appear to require any fine distinctions of degree or meaning: an omni-knowledgeable God, for whom considering whether  $p$  would be sufficient for knowing whether  $p$ , would have maximally secure access to all truths on *any* construal of ‘secure access.’

There are at least two respects in which the Secure Access Condition has a marked advantage over the Location Condition. In the first place, the former (unlike the latter) gives the intuitively right answer for all of our test cases: (a) and (c)—the two cases of (dispositional) belief—exhibit relatively secure access to the relevant information, while (b)—the case of non-belief—makes access to this information *insecure*, inasmuch as it is dependent on the chance that there is a newspaper nearby, that it is today’s newspaper, that the copy editor caught any misprints in its date, that a power outage has not dimmed the lights by which to read it, and so on. In the second place, even in those cases where the Secure Access Condition and Location Condition give the same answer, the latter appears parasitic on the former. The Location Condition requires (i) an inner (ii) representation of  $p$ . Regarding (i), a special problem arises when applying the Location Condition to cases of nonoccurrent as well as occurrent belief. For what makes it the case that an unconscious state can be said to be lodged in the *mind*? Presumably nothing but the fact that the activation of this state plays a key role in the exercise of the disposition to believe that  $p$ . A representation satisfies the Location Condition, then, not in virtue of its meeting some independent criterion for “internalness,” but in virtue of its contribution to  $p$ ’s accessibility. So it is the Access Condition (Secure or otherwise) that is fundamental. Regarding (ii), what makes an inner state a representation of  $p$  (and not of  $q$ )? A representational state does not possess its meaning inherently and in isolation, but in virtue of its functional relations with other states. Even if we suppose a mental language in which representations are encoded, what confers upon a particular configuration of “mentalese” the meaning  $p$  is presumably the way this configuration functions in producing an occurrent belief that  $p$ . This makes the Access Condition again fundamental.

There is no doubt that the Location Condition exercises a certain intuitive pull. But this may simply reflect the fact that having  $p$  lodged in the mind, as in (a), is one way

to secure access to *p*. Even if the human condition is such that there is a strong correlation between internal location and the degree of access required by belief, the correlation is not a necessary one, as (c) demonstrates; nor is there reason to regard it as other than a human peculiarity with no essential application to God.

It is not, however, necessary for my defense of omni-knowledgeability that I secure the Secure Access Condition. It is enough that the Location Condition be discredited, and this has already been done. Nevertheless, discredited theories often return in new guises. It is therefore worth noting that even if the Location Condition were somehow rehabilitated, the case against omni-knowledgeability would still not go through, since premise (2) is just as dubious as premise (1).

There is, to begin with, a general problem in determining location with respect to the mind. Our concept of the mind's spatial boundaries is even fuzzier than our concept of its temporal boundaries. Consider a prosthetic memory-device, programmed with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which can be strapped to one's head. Does such a device provide one with (dispositional) belief in the contents of the encyclopaedia, or merely with a disposition to believe in those contents? Would the answer be any different if the encyclopaedia were instead stored in a black box, and the prosthesis were only a transmitter-receiver wired to the short-term memory center of the brain and connected to the box by radio waves? If we take the Location Condition as our guide, such questions are to be answered by determining whether the device's memory-states are "internally located." But it's not clear how this criterion is to be applied in such cases.

This general problem becomes particularly acute when the mind belongs to God. Two attributes of God are chiefly responsible for this situation. One is divine *omnipresence*. On a straightforward reading of this attribute, nothing is external to God; so any state which plays for God the role of representation in the activation of His disposition to believe would appear to constitute an *internal* representation. (This includes the limit case where representational state and represented state collapse, as when God activates His disposition to believe that Jones is mowing his lawn by directly accessing Jones's lawn-mowing activity.) The other attribute is the traditional conception of God as a *nonspatial spirit*. On a straightforward reading of *this* attribute, God lacks spatial location altogether; so it is hard to see how the internal-external distinction is to be applied to Him at all. Between them, these two attributes render the crucial distinction between internal and external even fuzzier than it normally is, making it prohibitively difficult for the critic to demonstrate that omni-knowledgeability involves a complete and decisive failure of internalness.

The critic, however, might balk at the use that has just been made of these two attributes. Omnipresence entails that God is in some sense everywhere, while nonspatiality entails that God is in some (presumably different) sense nowhere.<sup>7</sup> But then these attributes are relevant to God's status with respect to the Location Condition only if this condition is understood narrowly as a matter of *spatial* location. There is, however, good reason to reject this interpretation of Goldman's "internal lodgement" requirement. This is because the intuitions supporting the Location Condition, such as they are, do not

appear to be in any way dependent on whether we view our *own* minds as (essentially) nonphysical and nonspatial: the Location Condition is really just a way of ensuring that the relevant representation is a state *of x*, and this requirement of “metaphysical” internalness (as we might call it) continues to make perfect sense when *x* is nonspatial.

Given this understanding of the Location Condition, the claims made two paragraphs earlier collapse. The first claim was that God might not fail the Location Condition after all, since He is omnipresent, and everything (including whatever states function for Him as representations) is arguably internal to an omnipresent being. But the fact that a particular representational state is (in this sense) spatially internal to God does not entail that it is metaphysically internal as well; so if it is the latter which the Location Condition requires, divine omnipresence provides no reason to believe that an omni-knowledgeable God satisfies this condition. (What *would* provide reason to believe that an omni-knowledgeable God’s representations are not just spatially but metaphysically internal to Him is *pantheism*; but this goes considerably beyond the mandate of omnipresence, and is generally regarded as inconsistent with theism.<sup>8</sup>) The second claim was that a nonspatial God is not even subject to the Location Condition. But now that this condition has been understood metaphysically rather than spatially, God’s nonspatiality clearly earns Him no exemption.

The requirement that representations be metaphysically internal to the believer is enough to turn back this first attempt to defend the omni-knowledge God’s theistic credential vis-à-vis the Location Condition. But this reverse simply opens the way for a second and more successful attempt. Most who regard the human mind as a nonspatial thing are mind-body dualists. But for dualists like Descartes it is primarily consciousness (i.e., occurrent episodes of belief, doubt, fear, desire) that requires a nonspatial locus, while such unconscious states as nonoccurrent memory are assigned to the extended stuff of the body (brain).<sup>9</sup> When a Cartesian dualist assents to the Location Condition, then, the “mind” or “self” with respect to which the representation of *p* must be internal will be understood to include not only *x*’s nonphysical mind but some parts of *x*’s body as well. It is difficult to say just how to specify the relevant parts of the body; but doing so is at least no more difficult for the dualist than for the materialist, who must also distinguish a representation in the brain’s memory-storage from a representation tattooed on one’s forearm. Goldman suggests a functional account according to which a dispositional state “has a ‘site’ outside of consciousness, such that its contents can, under suitable circumstances, be drawn into consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> To ensure the exclusion of tattoos and such, let us add to Goldman’s account the vague proviso that any site outside of consciousness which is to count as internal to *x* for purposes of the Location Condition must stand in an appropriately intimate (if not direct or immediate) relation to consciousness.

Now if the materially-stored memories of a Cartesian mind satisfy the Location Condition (as they must if that condition is to be at all credible as a general stricture on belief), then so do the states of affairs that the omni-knowledgeable God would access were He to exercise His disposition to believe that *p*. This is because God stands to the world in much the same relation that a nonspatial mind stands to the memory-traces in its

brain. The traditional view of this relation, as Richard Swinburne describes it, is that “God controls all things directly and knows about all things without the information coming to him through some causal chain.”<sup>11</sup> It is for this reason that the world has sometimes been characterized as God’s *body*.<sup>12</sup> More germane to present purposes is the idea that the world functions as God’s prosthetic mind, and space (in Newton’s phrase) as His sensorium.<sup>13</sup> This is not pantheism; it is simply the traditional doctrine of divine *omnipresence*, whose main ingredients Aquinas unpacks as follows: “God is in all things by His power, inasmuch as all things are subject to His power; He is by His presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to His eyes; He is in all things by His essence, inasmuch as He is present to all as the cause of their being.”<sup>14</sup> This is enough to ensure that all states of affairs will be “lodged in” the Divine Mind in at least as intimate a way as some brain-states are “lodged in” a Cartesian mind.

One moral that some have drawn from arguments for “wide content” is that “the world enters constitutively into the individuation of states of mind; mind and world are not . . . metaphysically independent categories, sliding smoothly past each other.”<sup>15</sup> Whatever one thinks about this thesis as applied to human minds, God’s existence as a nonspatial spirit, coupled with a standard conception of divine omnipresence, makes it a particularly compelling view to take of the Divine Mind, and ensures an omni-knowledgeable God’s satisfaction of the neutral (and least implausible) version of the Location Condition.

I have argued that the Location Condition itself is suspect, but that in any case an omni-knowledgeable being arguably satisfies this condition for all truths. I conclude that traditional commitment to the doctrine of divine omniscience should not prevent Christian philosophers from considering the virtues of omni-knowledgeability as an alternative to the standard assumption that God’s cognitive power must be fully exercised.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *locus classicus* for contemporary discussion of the threat to human freedom posed by divine omniscience is Nelson Pike’s “Divine Foreknowledge and Voluntary Action,” *Philosophical Review* 74 (January 1965), pp. 27-46.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin I. Goldman, “Epistemology and the Psychology of Belief,” *Monist* 61 (October 1978), p. 526.

<sup>3</sup> Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Margolis, “Knowledge, Belief, and Thought,” *Ratio* 14 (June 1972), pp. 74-82.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, “Brain Writing and Mind Reading,” in *Brainstorms* (Montgomery, Vt.: Bradford Books, 1978), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Alan R. White, *The Nature of Knowledge*, APQ Library of Philosophy, ed. Nicholas Rescher (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), pp. 116, 119-20.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Aquinas, what permits a nonspatial being to be located everywhere is that “[i]ncorporeal things are in place not by contact of dimensive quantity, as bodies are, but by contact of power” (*Summa Theologica*, q.8 a.2).

<sup>8</sup> For a minority report, see Robert Oakes, “Does Traditional Theism Entail Pantheism?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (January 1983), pp. 105-112.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Descartes’ *The Passions of the Soul*, article 42.

<sup>10</sup> “Epistemology and the Psychology of Belief,” p. 526.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see William J. Wainwright, “God’s Body,” in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 72-87.

<sup>13</sup> Isaac Newton, *Optics*, Query 28.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q.8 a.3.

<sup>15</sup> Colin McGinn, *Mental Content* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of some of these virtues, see my “Dispositional Omniscience,” *Philosophical Studies* 80 (December 1995), pp. 243-78.