

Is It Coherent to suppose that there Exists an Omniscient Timeless Being?

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In the present paper I want to consider the plausibility of an argument against the doctrine of divine timelessness. The argument purports to show that if God is timeless, there are certain truths that he cannot know, so called temporal indexed truths. And if there are any truths that God cannot know, then God cannot be omniscient. So it cannot be the case that there exists a being that is both timeless and omniscient.

After considering two forms of this argument, I will argue that if either of the forms of argument is sound, then parallel arguments can be constructed to show that if God is a temporal being, he cannot be omniscient, for there will always be things even a temporal God cannot know. So whether God is temporal or timeless, he simply cannot be omniscient. In the second part of my paper, I will first consider a challenge to the soundness of the argument from indexicals. This is the possibility that all indexical expressions are reducible to non-indexical propositions, so that the former merely represent a special mode of access to truths which can be known at any (or no) time. After this I shall subject the doctrine of divine omniscience to closer scrutiny in the light of Anselmian perfect being theology. I will conclude that *it is coherent to suppose that there exists a maximally perfect, timelessly omniscient being.*

I. Can God a Timelessly Eternal God be Omniscient?

A. *The Argument From Indexicals Stated*

Where God's eternity is construed as timelessness, it would seem that whatever properties such a being might have, omniscience cannot be one of them. Consider the following set of propositions:

- (1) God is timeless.
- (2) God is omniscient.
- (3) There are some truths to whose expression "now" is essential.

(3), it is claimed, makes the conjunction of (1) and (2) inconsistent. To see the alleged inconsistency, we need to fill out the argument a bit, for there are several assumptions working in it.

First, the argument requires definitions of "timeless" and "omniscient."

(4) A timeless being S = Df. a being lacking all temporal extension and location.

(5) An Omniscient being S = Df. a being who knows every true proposition.

Secondly, there is a separate argument that has (3) as its conclusion. Knowledge of what is happening "now" is said to require a mental tokening of a proposition expressing what one knows. This in turn means that one must token a proposition expressing the fact that something *is* happening by using the indexical "now" (or alternatively some present tense verb). But all such indexical terms locate the person using them in time. Therefore, if a person is to know "it is raining now", one must exist at a distinct point in time. If the now is, say, 3:00 pm on Sunday, March 6, 1994 (call this time t_1), one must exist at t_1 , for "it is raining now" can only be true at t_1 and only known by a person who exists at t_1 . Wolterstorff (in *God Everlasting*) emphasizes that we cannot simply substitute a tense-indifferent proposition for one with temporal indexicals. Hence, for a person to know "it is raining now", though it is necessary that the knower exist at the time of the happening (3:00 pm, Sunday, March 6, 1994), knowing some non-indexical proposition of the form "it is raining at 3:00 pm, Sunday, March 6, 1994" is not to know "it is raining now." The latter is not entailed by the former. In sum: at each instant in time, there are innumerable instances of "X is happening now". So there are many such truths which if a person is to know them the person must be located in time. If God is to know them, then he must be in time. If God is omniscient, then he knows them. But if God is timeless he cannot know them. Hence, it is not the case that God is both omniscient and timeless.¹

The above argument has been called the *Semantic Timeless-Omniscience Argument*, an argument that should be distinguished from another that is similar though metaphysical in nature.² The *Metaphysical Timeless-Omniscience Argument* replaces (3) with the claim that

(6) time is tensed.

The first thing to note is that this line of reasoning is quite independent of the semantic approach, for as Brian Leftow (in *Time and Eternity*) points out it is possible that (6) is true and (3) is false, and it is possible that (6) is false and (3) is true. The metaphysical argument might be seen as a bit stronger, for one might respond to the semantic argument by affirming tense is only an eliminable feature of how human language users represent time. Hence, it is not correct to infer from this that there are truths that are irreducibly tensed. The metaphysical argument may be taken to argue that the irreducible character of tensed truths depends on a feature of the world itself, not a feature of how we represent it. But there are such irreducible tensed truths because time itself is tensed. The same conclusion follows: there are certain truths which if a person is to know them, the person must be located in time.

B. Can a Temporal God be Omniscient?

There are several possible responses to the soundness of the above arguments. For the moment I only want to draw attention to some apparent consequences if either of the arguments is sound.

First, it would seem that it could be argued that even if God is a temporal being omniscience will require that he is also a *spatial* being--a being with spatial extension and location. The argument is generated by replacing (3) above with

(8) There are some truths to whose expression "here" and "there" are essential.

and conjoining (8) with

(7) God is a temporal being, and

(2) God is omniscient.

This argument from spatial indexicals maintains that as knowledge of things happening at a specific time (requiring temporal indexicals) entails being located in time (at the time of X's happening), knowledge of what is happening at some specific place entails being located in space (at the place of X's happening). Knowledge of what is happening "here" requires a mental tokening of a proposition expressing what one knows, but then one must token a proposition expressing the fact that something is happening by using the indexical "here" (or alternatively some other place designator). But all such indexical terms locate the person using them in space, at some specific place. Therefore, if a person is to know "it is raining here", one must exist at a distinct place. If the "here" is, say, Oxford, England (place $P_{o,e}$), then one must exist at $P_{o,e}$, for "it is raining here" can only be true at $P_{o,e}$ and only known by a person who exists at $P_{o,e}$. And as Wolterstorff emphasized that we cannot simply substitute a tense-indifferent proposition for one with temporal indexicals, we cannot substitute a place-indifferent proposition for one with spatial indexicals. Hence, for a person to know "it is raining here", though it is necessary that the knower exist at the place of the happening (Oxford, England), knowing some non-indexical proposition of the form "it is raining at the place of Oxford, England" is not to know "it is raining here." The latter is not entailed by the former. In sum: at each place, there are innumerable instances of "X is happening here". So there are many such truths which if a person is to know them, the person must be located in space. If God is to know them, then he must be in space. If God is omniscient, then he knows them. But if God is without spatial extension and location he cannot know them, whether timeless or temporal. Hence, it is not the case that a spaceless God is omniscient. A similar argument could be constructed on the metaphysical model. So what the argument against a timeless omniscient God seems to require is not merely that God not be timeless, but that he also be located in space.

But is even this enough to guarantee God's omniscience? I think not, for consider the following set of propositions:

- (2) God is omniscient
- (7) God is a temporal being
- (9) God is a spatial being.
- (10) There are some truths to whose expression "I" is essential.

(7) may allow for temporal indexical knowledge and (9) may allow for spatial indexical knowledge. But if God is omniscient (2), then for every true proposition p , God knows that p . (10), however, suggests that knowledge of what is happening "to me" requires a mental tokening of a proposition expressing what "I" know of "myself." But this in turn means that one must token a proposition expressing the fact that something *is* happening or is the case by using the indexical "I" (or alternatively some other self-referential indexical). But all such indexical terms are a person's reference to (something about) himself. Therefore, if a person named John is to know the proposition "I am a patient in the Radcliffe Infirmary", he (John) must be the person located in the Radcliffe Infirmary and he must know that "he" himself is a patient in the Infirmary. But (i) John knows that "he is a patient in the Radcliffe Infirmary" and (ii) John knows that "John is a patient in the Radcliffe Infirmary" are independent. Suppose that John has been a car crash and has amnesia, with several results not the least of which is that he no longer knows who he is. He knows he is a patient in the Radcliffe Infirmary, but he doesn't know that his name is John, so he doesn't know that John is a patient there. Similarly, the nurses who attend to John know that John is a patient in the Infirmary, but they do not know "I am a patient in the Infirmary." It follows from this that we cannot simply substitute a non-self-referential term (such as the person's name) for a personal indexical and have the same proposition. Neither one would entail the other. In sum: for every person who exists, there are innumerable instances of "I am X", truths about oneself which are predicated of oneself by oneself. So there are many such truths which if a person is to know them, no one else can know them, for they would have to be the same person. If God is to know personal indexical truths, then he must be identical with every person who thinks them. If God is omniscient, then God is identical with every mind in the universe.

Of course, what the preceding argument really shows is an incoherence in the notion of an omniscient person in a world consisting of more than one person. For theism, it has the additional consequence that God could have been omniscient in a world without other persons, for in such a world the only self-referential truths would be ones about God Himself. God's act of creating was thus an act that entailed that he could no longer be omniscient.³

So we seem to have come to the following dilemma of omniscience:

- (A) If God is timeless, then God cannot know temporally indexed truths.
- (B) If God is temporal, then he cannot know spatially indexed truths and personally indexed truths.⁴
- (C) Either God is temporal or timeless.
- (D) Therefore, either God does not know temporally indexed truths or God does not know spatially and/or personally indexed truths. (from (A)-(C) by constructive dilemma)
- (E) Therefore, God cannot be omniscient. (from (D))

What is true is not merely that (3) makes (1) and (2) inconsistent, but (3) seems to be based on an argument that also entails claims about various indexical truths (there are truths to whose expression "the indexical" is essential), such that (2) is itself incoherent (in any world which consists of either time, space, or other minds). So, if it is incoherent to suppose that a timeless God is omniscient, then it is incoherent to suppose that a temporal God is omniscient. What this may suggest is a rethinking of either the soundness of the above arguments or the concept of omniscience. To these I now turn.

II. THE PROBLEM OF OMNISCIENCE ANALYZED

A. The Plausibility of the Argument From Indexicals

The consequences generated by indexical knowledge may lead us to think that perhaps something has gone wrong with the above arguments, that (3) and the argument which supports it have just missed something altogether. The basic question on which the argument rests is whether sentences that employ indexicals have non-indexical equivalents. The argument works out only if this is *not* the case, but there are good reasons to think that, even if there are *sentences* or *utterances* to which indexicals are essential, such sentences or utterances express non-indexical *propositions* or *truths*.⁵ In other terms, by distinguishing between sentences and/or utterances and propositions (where propositions are the only truth-bearers), one can deny that there are any special truths that require indexicals. Indexical expressions represent a *special mode of access* to (the same) truth (capable of being) stated in non-indexical form. Hence, "it is raining now" and "it is raining at 3:00 pm, Sunday, March 6, 1994) are two different sentences which express the same proposition. Hence, the lack of access of the former does not entail any lack of access to truths. Similarly, when John knows that "I am a patient in the Radcliffe Infirmary" and the nurse knows that "John is a patient in the Radcliffe infirmary" both individuals know the same truth, though they know it in two distinct ways or through two different modes of access.

This has several implications for divine knowledge. First, it entails that even if God cannot express his knowledge in terms of temporal indexical sentences, he can still know the same truth that a person who knows that "X is happening now" knows. He does not know it in the same way, but he knows it nonetheless. And the same holds for sentences with spatial and personal indexicals. God cannot utter "there is kettle boiling here" but he can know the truth it expresses by knowing the proposition "there is a kettle boiling in staircase 29, room 1 of Oriol College." And as the occupant of that room sips his tea at 2:30 am and knows "I am drinking tea," God knows that "Michael L. Sudduth-Czapkay is drinking tea at 2:30 am in staircase 29, room 1 of Oriol College." The upshot of this may be succinctly stated. God doesn't need to be *who* I am to know what I know, to be *where* I am to know what is happening in the place I am, nor to exist *when* I exist to know what is happening at any time when I exist. This is true even though the mode in which I come to know these things will be quite different from God's mode of knowing them.

B. What Does a Maximally Perfect Being Have to Know?

But what if indexical expressions are irreducible indexical truths? And what if time is irreducibly tensed? I believe that there are two ways God's timeless omniscience can still be salvaged.

First, the initial argument assumed that God's knowledge should be understood as: given any true proposition *p*, God knows that *p*. The argument construes omniscience propositionally. But there is another way to take divine omniscience that will affect the argument against a timeless omniscient being. In addition to *propositional omniscience* PO, there is what we can call *factual omniscience* FO: given every true proposition *p*, God knows the fact that the truth expresses. Now, a being that has PO has FO, but not the converse. If, for every truth, God knows the fact that makes the proposition true, it doesn't follow that God knows every truth about every fact.⁶ But if we construe divine omniscience in terms of FO, then the semantic argument no longer carries any force, for it is simply irrelevant. We would then only be left with the metaphysical argument and the claim that there are essentially tensed facts, and we would have to argue that God could know such facts without being a temporal being (as Anselm, Stump, and Kretzmann seem to have done by arguing that God could be directly presented with all essentially tensed facts of all temporal frames of reference). By parity of reasoning, if there are essentially spaced facts and essentially self-referential facts, we would have to argue that God could somehow know such facts without being in space and without being a person (other than himself) for whom certain personal facts obtain. Now, although I believe that such arguments could be constructed, I want to take another line of approach at this point.

Why suppose that God should know what we know? More specifically, why suppose that the perfection of God's knowledge requires it? In fact, perhaps the perfection of God's being and knowledge entails that he cannot know certain things. Let me unpack this paradoxical suggestion.

The Anselmian argues that God is "that than which no greater can be conceived." In contemporary analytic jargon: God necessarily exemplifies the maximally perfect compossible set of great making properties (where a great making property is a property it is intrinsically better to have than to lack). On this way of looking at things (and perhaps in the theist tradition in general), God's omnipotence has been maintained, though it has been subject to certain constraints. First, there are the *logical constraints*. God can only do those things that are doable. It is no flaw in God's power that he cannot make a square circle. But in addition to these logical constraints, there have been what I will call *divine-attribute constraints*. Some theists have held that there are some things doable in the broadly logical sense, but which are not doable for God. Here the prominent view is that God cannot sin because he is morally perfect. To this we can add, God cannot walk through Oriol Square or toss a football, for he has no feet or hands. God cannot do these things. And yet (Professor Geach's "almighty thesis" notwithstanding) it is still said that God is omnipotent. An important point here is that a theist, especially one in the Anselmian tradition, will view God's nature as a delimiter of the range of genuine or real possibilities.⁷ If God exists, exists necessarily, and is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and good, then there are many states of affairs which are, strictly speaking, *impossible* in the strongest sense, though by the standard tests of logic they represent possibilities in the broadly logical sense. Now, if this is true, then *if* God is (necessarily) timeless, then it may well be that he cannot know temporal indexed truths or facts. But when viewed from the perspective of perfect being

theology, this is not a problem. Cognitive perfection need not entail the greatest conceivable range of knowledge. We must distinguish between "the maximal conceivable degree of knowledge" and "the knowledge appropriate to an over all perfect being." As Leftow says: "Perhaps God is omniscient although there are things he is too perfect to be able to know, as He is omnipotent though there are tasks He is too perfect to be able to do."⁸

We want a maximally perfect compossible *set* of great making properties. Therefore, what is crucial to omniscience is not that God can or does know every truth there is, but that his range of knowledge is sufficiently suitable for inclusion in a set of divine attributes which *in toto* constitute "that than which no greater can be conceived." Here I would suggest that God's lacking temporally (or otherwise) indexical knowledge is no flaw on his knowledge. He may not know "I am doing writing a paper now," but he knows that "Michael L. Sudduth-Czapkay is writing a paper for Hugh Rice on a Saturday, March 5, 1994." Moreover, If God is timeless, and a plausible case can be made for foreknowledge on that model, it would seem that God also knows future events. He also knows past events. He also can be said to know modal reality. And perhaps this is what really matters--that God knows the important matters. Here, it seems that those analytic philosophers who have advocated the semantic and metaphysical arguments against God's timeless omniscience have simply missed the mark. Ordinary Christians haven't thought that it is important for God to know "those bits of indexical" knowledge. And a theologian might also be somewhat amazed at the seriousness with which such arguments could be treated. After all, the big things--providence, incarnation, redemption, consummation--seem unaffected by such arguments. As Leftow has said: "God does not need to know which events have present-actuality to answer prayer or to act providentially or salvifically."⁹

Suppose that I am on the 14th floor of a building in San Jose, California on August 16, 1994 around 9:15 am. I am told at 9:30 am that a there is an insane gun man on the 12th floor who has shot several people, and that he's on his way to the 14th floor and he's mad as hell. At 9:31 am I pray to be spared from the impending massacre. God timelessly knows that "Michael L. Sudduth-Czapkay, located on the 14th floor of a building (God will also know its name) in San Jose, California on August 16, 1994 prays at 9:31 to be spared from the impending massacre." God doesn't need to know "I am praying to God for," nor does he need to know "Michael prays here now" to bring it about that I am spared. Since God timelessly knows the complex proposition stated above, he insures (if it is his will) that I will be spared. These cases of God's providential rule are not in the least compromised if God cannot know indexical truths, for what God does know in each case is epistemically sufficient for him to act as theists would want, in a manner appropriate to God as Omnipotent Creator, Omnisapient Sustainer, Omnibenevolent Providential Ruler, and Omniagapic Saviour.

Rather than think of God's omniscience (propositional or factual) as a matter of possessing the maximal range of knowledge, God's knowledge

could instead be a multi-faceted thing involving the necessary possession (say) of maximally continent doxastic habits, of the best possible grounds to justify any belief one does form, of the greatest actual range of knowledge, of the greatest possible range of knowledge of many important sorts (e.g., truths of ethics, mathematics, or future history), of all the knowledge it is possible that he have (given that He can have a suitably large range of knowledge), and/or of the greatest range of knowledge any single individual can have.¹⁰

So, I judge that it is not incoherent to suppose that there exists a timeless omniscient being, for omniscience may be construed both propositionally and factually in such a way that it compatible with a maximally perfect timeless knower.

III. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to show that the argument against divine timelessness based on the alleged impossibility of a timeless being knowing certain truths--temporal indexed truths--is a quite weak argument.

In the first part of the paper I assumed that the indexical argument (in both its semantic and metaphysical forms) was sound. I claimed, however, that its soundness entailed that even a temporal God couldn't know certain truths--spatial and personal indexical truths. Moreover, in a world containing more than one knower, there can simply be no propositionally omniscient being. And if it is thus a logical impossibility, it is no flaw on God's knowledge that he lacks it, and the semantic and metaphysical arguments are undercut.

In the second part of the paper, I argued that there are good reasons to doubt the soundness of the semantic argument, since it is quite plausible to distinguish between sentences and/or utterances and propositions. On this way of looking at things, there are indexed and non-indexed modes of knowing the same truth. God may therefore know what we know, though he does not know it in the manner we know it. On the other hand, if this is not correct (and there is a genuine epistemic difference between indexical and non-indexical expressions), then given that a single fact can make true a vary large body of propositions, it is plausible to hold that there are facts accessible at all (or no) times and that the mode of access to such facts generates distinctive truths that can only be known at certain times. I, therefore, considered the relevance of the distinction between propositional and factual omniscience. On this way of viewing the problem God could know, for every truth, the fact that makes it true.

Giving due thought to the possible limitations of this move (since there could be irreducible tensed facts a timeless being could not know), my final suggestion was that we re-evaluate the concept of omniscience in the light of perfect being theology. Here I concluded that cognitive perfection does not entail the greatest conceivable range of knowledge, but whatever knowledge is suitable for a wholly perfect being. Several suggestions were made as to of what this knowledge could consist. The overall theory leaves us with a being whose knowledge is compatible with a maximally perfect being who is characterized not only by cognitive perfection, but who also acts in the world in ways relevant to who He is. Such a God can be mindful of the sparrow, me, analytic philosophers, and the rest of the world, not to mention a quite broad range of philosophical problems, not the least of which is the problem of the essential indexical.

NOTES

¹ The argument has appeared in several forms in A. Prior, "Formalities of Omniscience" (*Philosophy*, 37 (1962)), pp. 114-29; N. Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability" (*Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (1966)), pp. 409-21; A. Kenny, *God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting" in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Cahn and Shatz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 77-98).

² For the nature of this distinction, see B. Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), ch. 13-14.

³ The argument here also goes for temporal indexicals. If God does not create the spatio-temporal manifold, there no expressions with either temporal or spatial indexicals. In such a possible world, a timeless, spaceless God is omniscient. Again, by the act of creation God limits his knowledge.

⁴ Qualified, of course, if God is spatial, he can know spatial indexical truths, and if he is another person for whom "I am X" is true, then he can know personal indexical truths.

⁵ This point is argued in various ways by H.N. Castenada, "Omniscience and Indexical Reference" (*Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1967)), pp. 203-210; J. Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical" (*Nous*, 13 (1979)), pp 3-21; N. Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London, 1970); Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 162-67; P. Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), ch. 5; and J. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All Knowing God* (London, 1986).

⁶ Leftow points out that, though Aquinas takes himself to be establishing God's propositionally omniscience, he has only established God's factual omniscience. According to Aquinas God certainly knows all the truths which propositions can state, but he knows them not by knowing propositions, but by some kind of direct intuitive insight--He know them by knowing His own will. See Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, p. 319.

⁷ This point is made by T.V. Morris in his *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 48-49.

⁸ *Time and Eternity*, p. 323.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 324-25.