

## ON TWO ALLEGED CONFLICTS BETWEEN DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

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**[ABSTRACT]** Some argue that God's omnipotence and moral perfection prevent God from being afraid and having evil desires and thus from understanding such states—which contradicts God's omniscience. But, I argue, God could acquire such understanding indirectly, either by (i) perceiving the mental states of imperfect creatures, (ii) imaginatively combining the components of mental states with which God could be acquainted, or (iii) having false memory traces of such states. (i)–(iii) are consistent with the principal divine attributes.

I wish to discuss two anti-theistic arguments, both of which use seemingly plausible empiricist principles to establish a conflict between divine attributes. One of the arguments, due to David Blumenfeld (1978), runs roughly as follows. An omniscient being would understand all concepts and all the facts of human psychology. But understanding fear, frustration, and despair requires having (at some time) mental states that no omnipotent and omniscient being could have, namely, fear, frustration, and despair. Therefore, no being could be both omniscient and omnipotent. The second argument, a variation of Blumenfeld's, runs roughly as follows. An omniscient being would know what it's like to have an evil desire. But such knowledge requires having an evil desire, which is incompatible with moral perfection. Therefore, no being could be both omniscient and morally perfect.<sup>1</sup> On the traditional, Anselmian conception of God, on

which God is by definition omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect—which I’ll assume throughout—it follows from either argument that God doesn’t exist.

The empiricist principles employed in the two anti-theistic arguments, which impose experiential constraints on grasping certain mental states and associated concepts, have considerable prima facie appeal. Further, the principles may seem to gain support from influential arguments in the philosophy of mind by Thomas Nagel (1974, 1986) and Frank Jackson (1982, 1986), as I’ll explain. But, I’ll argue, the principles are false. Reasonable empiricists should concede that understanding the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair doesn’t require being afraid, frustrated, and desperate, and that understanding what it’s like to have an evil desire doesn’t require having an evil desire. God could acquire such understanding indirectly, either by (i) perceiving the mental states of imperfect creatures, (ii) imaginatively combining the components of mental states with which God could be acquainted, or (iii) having false memory traces of such states. (i)–(iii) are consistent with the principal divine attributes.

In §1, I’ll present the anti-theistic arguments in more detail. In §2, I’ll explain why the empiricist principles on which they rely may seem to gain support from the Nagel-Jackson arguments. In §3, I’ll argue that the empiricist principles are false. In §4, I’ll address the concern that my arguments assume too much similarity between God’s mind and our minds, and I’ll summarize.<sup>2</sup>

### I. The Alleged Conflicts

Blumenfeld articulates the empiricist principle on which his argument relies as follows:

for some concepts, in order fully to comprehend them, one must have had the experience of an instance or exemplification of them. ...Take the concept of the sensation of red. Surely one could not fully grasp this notion if one had never had an experience of redness. (Blumenfeld 1978, p. 205)

Blumenfeld claims that his empiricist principle extends to the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair, thus generating a conflict between omniscience and omnipotence. He argues that God couldn't have fear, frustration, or despair, since that would require having beliefs that God couldn't have:

their occurrence depends logically on the subject's believing in the limitation of his power. ...To experience fear, a person would have to believe that he was in danger, that he might somehow be harmed. If he did not in any sense believe this, then no sensation he was having—no cold chill, no sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach—would count as fear. One's experiences would be mere sensations—and nothing more. Without the belief in danger, these states would have to be described in terms other than those which imply that the person is afraid. A similar account can be given of frustration and of despair. There could be no experience of frustration without the belief that one had been (was being, or might be) thwarted. There could be no sense of despair unless a person faced a

situation he took to be dire, and for which he believed he was very unlikely to find a remedy. (Blumenfeld 1978, pp. 206–7)

Because of God’s omnipotence and omniscience, God would realize that God is never in danger. Therefore, Blumenfeld concludes, God couldn’t believe that God is in danger.<sup>3</sup> Since Blumenfeld maintains that being afraid requires believing that one is in danger, he infers that God couldn’t be afraid. By his concept empiricism, it follows that God couldn’t fully understand the concept of fear or “[a]ny proposition involving this concept” (1978, p. 207). Since such understanding is implied by omniscience, he concludes that no being could be both omnipotent and omniscient, and thus that God doesn’t exist. Parallel reasoning applies to despair, which is “intimately tied to a belief in the hopelessness of one’s situation” (Blumenfeld 1978, p. 210), and to frustration, for similar reasons.

Blumenfeld’s argument may be summarized as follows:

1. God must understand the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair.  
[Implication of God’s omniscience]
2. Such understanding requires (at some time) being afraid, frustrated, and desperate. [Application of empiricism to the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair]
3. God couldn’t be afraid, frustrated, or desperate. [Implication of Blumenfeld’s belief requirement and God’s omniscience and omnipotence]

4. Therefore, God couldn't understand the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair. [From 2 and 3]
5. Therefore, God doesn't exist. [From 1 and 4]

The second anti-theistic argument concerns evil desires and moral perfection, and I'll henceforth call it the argument from evil desires. It runs as follows. An omniscient being would know everything about human psychology, including what it's like to have evil desires. Such knowledge requires having an evil desire. Having an evil desire is incompatible with moral perfection. Therefore, no being could be both omniscient and morally perfect, and thus God doesn't exist.<sup>4</sup> In numbered steps:

1. God must know what it's like to have evil desires. [Implication of God's omniscience]
2. Such knowledge requires (at some time) having an evil desire. [Application of empiricism to knowing what it's like to have evil desires]
3. God couldn't have an evil desire. [Implication of God's moral perfection]
4. Therefore, God couldn't know what it's like to have evil desires. [From 2 and 3]
5. Therefore, God doesn't exist. [From 1 and 4]

## II. The Nagel-Jackson Arguments and Empiricism

The core idea of the two anti-theistic arguments is that God's omniscience would require God's having mental states that are excluded by God's other attributes. Underlying that idea is a form of empiricism that Blumenfeld describes as "evident" (1978, p. 204). Further, the empiricism may seem to gain support from widely discussed arguments by Nagel and Jackson, as I'll now explain.

Consider the famous case of Mary, which Jackson uses in his Knowledge Argument against physicalism. Mary is a brilliant scientist who spends her life in a black-and-white room watching lectures on black-and-white television. She thereby learns the completed science of human color vision. Then she leaves the room and has color experiences for the first time. Intuitively, when she leaves the room, she learns something: she learns what it's like to see in color.

There has been much discussion of what to make of Mary's alleged gain in knowledge. Some argue that she gains no information, but rather abilities (Nemirow 1980, Lewis 1988, Mellor 1993) or acquaintance-knowledge (Conee 1994). Others argue that she gains no new information but only new ways to represent information she already knew (Churchland 1985, Tye 1986, Loar 1990, Lycan 1990, Pereboom 1994). Finally, others concede that she gains new information, but question Jackson's claim that if she gains new information then physicalism is false (Horgan 1984, Flanagan 1992, Searle 1992, Alter 1998).

We needn't settle these disputes. The relevant claim for us is one that most concede and I'll grant for the sake of argument: that when Mary leaves the room, she learns what it's like to see in color.<sup>5</sup> That claim may seem to entail that one must have color experiences to know what they're like.

Jackson writes, “Clearly the same style of Knowledge argument could be deployed for taste, hearing, the bodily sensations and generally speaking for the various mental states which are said to have (as it is variously put) raw feels, phenomenal features or qualia” (1982, p. 130). That claim is plausible. For auditory experiences, we can replace the black-and-white room with a silent room; for olfactory experiences, an odorless room; for pain, a pain-free environment; and so on. The resulting arguments have the same persuasive force as the argument based on the Mary case. Nagel’s (1974) discussion of bat-echolocation experiences may seem to suggest a similar result. He argues that the bat’s experiences are so alien to us that we can’t imagine what it’s like to be such a creature. Some take that point to show that having bat-echolocation experiences is required for understanding what it’s like to have such experiences, or for understanding the relevant concepts.<sup>6</sup>

Fear, frustration, despair, and evil desires involve qualia (or so I’ll assume for the sake of argument). Therefore, the epistemic moral of the Nagel-Jackson arguments may seem to extend to those mental states. We can imagine a Mary-counterpart who, for example, learns everything one can learn about fear without experiencing fear. Were she then to experience fear, wouldn’t she learn something, just as Mary learns something about color experiences when she leaves the black-and-white room? And wouldn’t parallel reasoning apply to frustration, despair, and evil desires? If so, this would confirm the empiricism that drives the two anti-theistic arguments; understanding fear, frustration, despair, and what it’s like to have an evil desire seems to require having those mental states.

### III. Three Objections

In this section I'll present three objections to the empiricism driving the two anti-theistic arguments (i.e., to premise 2 of each). First, however, let me clarify one issue about the terms of the debate.

One might wonder whether failing to understand the feelings associated with the concepts of fear, etc., are really defects for a maximally great being. Perhaps God's omniscience should be construed in a way that doesn't entail knowing exactly how each finite creature subjectively feels. After all, lacking such knowledge wouldn't necessarily prevent God from identifying which creatures experience fear and which don't. At issue here, however, is the Anselmian conception on which God is omniscient in an unrestricted sense: by definition, such a God must know the nature of the feelings in question, since there's manifestly something there to be known. Whether there are better conceptions of God, on which God need not know exactly how each finite creature feels, is beside the point. (Whether the traditional conception is really Anselm's is also beside the point.)

Objection 1. Consider silent prayer. If God exists, then presumably God has direct cognitive access to the minds of those who pray. Suppose someone reflects vividly on her own fears and evil desires, and prays to God to help her rid herself of them. Why couldn't God perceive accurately what that person is feeling? Perhaps we can know about the feelings of others only through inferences from observations of their behavior (or observations of their brain activity, if we knew enough about neurobiology). But God's access to our mental states need not be

similarly limited. There may be reason to doubt that God could be afraid or have evil desires. But I see no reason to doubt that God could directly perceive the contents of human consciousness—by telepathy.

Michael Beaty and Charles Taliaferro (1990) criticize Blumenfeld's argument on grounds similar to mine. They rightly ask, "Why could not God fully appreciate despair, fear, et al., without being in those states by experiencing directly or indirectly the despair and fear of creatures like us?" (1990, p. 100). However, they present the objection reluctantly (and in passing). They explain the basis for their reluctance as follows: "It would be odd to suppose God qua omniscient being did not fully grasp fear until some creature was afraid and God had experienced her fear" (1990, p. 100). Their concern isn't, I take it, that God must wait for some creature to be afraid in order to fully grasp fear; God could create frightened creatures anytime God wants to. Their concern is rather that experiencing fear takes time, and so God would fail to understand fear before the first creature's experience of fear was complete. That's a genuine problem; that there should be a time at which God fails to know something is inconsistent with God's existence (given the traditional Anselmian conception).

Yet God might have created a creature experiencing fear at the instant the universe began. (If there was no such instant, then we may suppose that there were always creatures undergoing such experiences.) God would have been able to perceive the first instant of that creature's experience. Perhaps in that same instant God deduced what it's like to experience ordinary (non-instantaneous) fear. If so, then there wouldn't have been a time before which God failed to understand fear.

Blumenfeld might respond by disputing the possibility of deducing the nature of ordinary fear based on perceiving the first instant of the experience. I see no compelling grounds for doubting that possibility, but perhaps such a response is defensible.<sup>7</sup> Even so, that such a defense is needed shows something important: the problem Blumenfeld raises isn't restricted to knowledge of fear, despair, etc.—experiences that seem incompatible with possessing the Anselmian divine attributes. Rather, the problem is to explain how God could understand anything that requires experience to understand. The problem could be formulated equally well in terms of love, which God could presumably experience. If understanding fear requires experiencing fear, then understanding love requires experiencing love. But love takes time if fear does, and so we have the same problem: before anyone (including God) experiences love, isn't God's knowledge incomplete? So, objection 1 accomplishes at least one thing: it reveals that there's no special problem for God's understanding experiences that contradict God's omnipotence or moral perfection.<sup>8</sup>

Objection 2. Even if God were not directly acquainted with fear, frustration, despair, and evil desires, God might be acquainted with their components, such as the qualia that tend to accompany (or partly constitute) those mental states. If so, then God could deduce what it would be like to combine those components into states of fear, frustration, despair, and evil desires, without becoming afraid, frustrated, or desperate, and without having evil desires. Such a deduction would provide God with the knowledge that Blumenfeld and the advocate of the argument from evil desires claim God couldn't have.

Let me put the point in a slightly different way. Nagel writes, “Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited” (1974, p. 169). Here Nagel is referring to human imagination, and one may reasonably doubt that his claim generalizes to supernatural beings like God. But let’s put such doubts aside and assume that God’s imagination is limited by the material provided by God’s experience. Even so, I see no good grounds for denying that God could have experiences that would provide the requisite material for imagining fear, frustration, despair, and having evil desires.

This objection applies most forcefully to the argument from evil desires. Let’s reconsider the case of evil desires, in connection to a variation of Jackson’s Mary case. Suppose that John never has an evil desire. He learns everything that can be learned about evil desires without having them, including the completed science of human emotions. Then he has evil desires for the first time—an event I’ll call his corruption. At the time of his corruption, does he learn what it’s like to have evil desires?<sup>9</sup>

I doubt it. Perhaps desires have phenomenal features that distinguish them from beliefs, intentions, and other mental states. But the pre-corrupt John has non-evil desires—desires that are consistent with moral perfection. So, he’s familiar with the phenomenal features of desiring; he knows what it’s like to have a desire. And it seems doubtful that evil desires have distinctive phenomenal features—phenomenal features that distinguish them from non-evil desires. If evil desires lack such distinctive features, then, since the pre-corrupt John knows everything about non-evil desires, there’s nothing about what it’s like to have evil desires that he fails to know.

Suppose, however, that there were some phenomenal feature E that all evil desires have and all non-evil desires lack. It’s hard to see how E could be anything more than a way of telling

whether a given desire is evil or not. In particular, it's doubtful that possessing E could be what makes a desire evil. What makes a desire evil is its content, or the combination of its content and the circumstances (broadly construed) in which one possesses it. For example, there may be nothing evil in wanting Smith to die soon, if Smith is known to be suffering unbearable, incapacitating pain that will only get worse. A desire with the same propositional content (that Smith die soon) might be evil if the agent has malicious reasons for wanting Smith to die soon. Such factors, and not how a desire feels subjectively, determine whether a given desire is evil.

Consider another example: the evil desire that all innocent children should be tortured. There is, I'll assume, something it's like to have that particular desire. Having a similar desire doesn't feel the same as having that particular desire. Nor does believing that all innocent children should be tortured feel the same as desiring that same state of affairs. But I see no reason why the pre-corrupt John wouldn't be able to deduce what it's like to have the desire in question, based solely on the knowledge he possesses. He would understand the propositional content of the relevant desire. And, again, he knows what it's like to have a desire. Therefore, he should be able to combine those two items of knowledge and thereby come to understand what it's like to have the desire in question.

Thus, the empiricist principle on which the argument from evil desires relies gains no support from the Nagel-Jackson arguments. On the contrary, close scrutiny of the evil-desire counterpart of the Mary case reveals problems with that principle. While it's plausible that color experiences have phenomenal features the nature of which can't be deduced from Mary's pre-release knowledge, evil desires don't have phenomenal features the nature of which can't be

deduced from John's pre-corruption knowledge. Thus, even if a morally perfect being couldn't directly perceive the evil desires of human beings, the argument from evil desires fails.<sup>10</sup>

I said earlier that objection 2 applies most forcefully to the argument from evil desires. It may also undermine Blumenfeld's argument, concerning fear, frustration, and despair. But there's an important difference: while evil desires are analyzable into components that God would understand, the parallel point about fear, frustration, and despair is less obvious. Therefore, I can't conclude with confidence that objection 2 undermines Blumenfeld's argument, in addition to the argument from evil desires.

Objection 3. I've been emphasizing the possibility of God's understanding the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair, and what it's like to have an evil desire by having experiences that are consistent with God's omnipotence and moral perfection. But there's reason to doubt that such understanding requires having any particular sort of experience. One might have false memory traces of seeing red, which may be sufficient for knowing what it's like to see red. Jackson makes this point clearly in a recent article:

Seeing red and feeling pain impact on us, leaving a memory trace which sustains our knowledge of what it's like to see red and feel pain on the many occasions where we are neither seeing red nor feeling pain. This is why it was always a mistake to say that someone could not know what seeing red and feeling pain [are] like unless they had actually experienced them: false 'memory' traces are enough. (Jackson 1998, p. 77)

The same point applies to fear, frustration, despair, and having evil desires. Having false memory traces of those states is sufficient for understanding them. And having such traces doesn't conflict with omnipotence, moral perfection, or omniscience (since God may know that the memory traces aren't genuine). Therefore, God could understand the states that God couldn't have independently of having any experiences.

Let me explain. Although I'm not presently perceiving anything red, I presently understand what it's like to see red. Why? Because I have the relevant memory traces in my brain. Such memory traces might be present in my brain even if they don't originate in experiences of seeing red. Suppose that I've never seen red, but last night while I was asleep a neurosurgeon operated on my brain. As a result, my brain is in a state it would have been in had I seen red many times (and it functions normally in all other relevant respects). What the neurosurgeon gave me is an example of a false memory trace. Thus, false memory traces are just like true memory traces, except that the "remembered" events didn't actually happen (at least, the events didn't happen to the person with the false memory traces). In my case, the trace doesn't derive causally from experiences of seeing red.

On Jackson's view, having such false memory traces would suffice for knowing what it's like to see red. Thus, in order to learn what it's like to see red, Mary needn't have color experiences: she might instead have neurosurgery in which she's given false memory traces. Likewise, one needn't have experienced fear in order to understand fear, because one might have a false memory trace of fear. If that's correct, then a human being can possess the relevant knowledge—that which is known to those who understand what it's like to experience fear—in a

form that doesn't require experiencing fear. If so, then presumably God can, too. Thus, God could understand fear without experiencing fear. In the case of God, the label "false memory trace" is potentially misleading, since God would be fully aware that the relevant "memories" don't trace back to fear-experiences. But the label is unimportant. The key idea is that phenomenal knowledge can be possessed in a way that doesn't require the possessor to have had the corresponding experiences, even though those who possess such knowledge typically have had the corresponding experiences. Again, if such a thing is possible for humans, then presumably it's possible for God.

#### IV. Conclusion

Before summarizing, let me briefly address a general concern. In presenting objections 1–3, I described God as perceiving, imagining, etc. One may wonder whether divine cognition is similar enough to human cognition to warrant such attributions. Perhaps divine cognition is so different from the forms of thought with which we're familiar that such descriptions are grossly inaccurate. But the empiricism driving the two anti-theistic arguments has no plausibility without the assumption that God's mind is to some degree similar to familiar minds—similar enough to warrant describing God as imagining, perceiving, etc. If we reject that assumption, then the anti-theistic arguments don't get off the ground. So, it would be unreasonable for my opponents to dismiss my objections on the grounds that they assume too much similarity between human and divine cognition. For what I assume, they assume too.

Blumenfeld claims to have demonstrated a conflict between omniscience and omnipotence, and the argument from evil desires claims to establish a conflict between omniscience and moral perfection. I presented three objections. First, I argued that God could understand the mental states in question by telepathically perceiving the minds of imperfect creatures like us. Second, I argued that God could know what it's like to have evil desires by imaginatively combining their components. Similar imaginative combination might also enable God to understand the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair. Finally, I argued that false memory traces might enable God to comprehend fear, frustration, despair, and evil desires.

Objection 1 turned out to depend on the claim that God could instantaneously deduce how fear, etc., feel from an instantaneous perception of such experiences. Even if that claim is false, the objection reveals that there's no special problem for God's understanding experiences God can't have; the same problem arises for understanding emotions that aren't ruled out by the divine attributes. The second and third objections are less problematic than the first, although the second may undermine only the argument from evil desires and not Blumenfeld's argument. Taken together, the three arguments have at least enough strength to shift the burden of proof on those who wish to defend Blumenfeld's argument or the argument from evil desires.<sup>11, 12</sup>

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hestevold (N.D.) presents an argument along these lines. I should note that his version (i) was developed independently of Blumenfeld's argument, (ii) differs (at least in presentation) from the version I consider here, and (iii) therefore may not be subject to my criticisms.

<sup>2</sup> [Footnote added after publication: Yujin Nagasawa (2003) argues convincingly that my arguments are inconsistent with some attributes that are traditionally ascribed to God. See Nagasawa's 'Divine Omniscience and Experience: A Reply to Alter', *Ars Disputandi* 3, 2003.]

<sup>3</sup> Blumenfeld's inference relies on the tacit assumption that God couldn't believe something God knows to be false, even through an act of will. That assumption is plausible but not trivial.

<sup>4</sup> So formulated, the argument from evil desires doesn't concern understanding mental-state concepts, but rather knowing what it's like to have a certain sort of mental state. But Blumenfeld also uses the "knowing what it's like" terminology. The passage I quoted above from pages 206–7 of his article continues as follows: "Furthermore, a person who has not undergone these states wouldn't know what it's like to experience them. Consequently he wouldn't have a full understanding of fear, frustration, and despair. A man who had never experienced fear, for example, would lack a complete comprehension of fear, just as a man who was blind from birth would lack a full grasp of the sensation of red."

<sup>5</sup> Jackson (1998) now denies that claim. So does Daniel Dennett (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Nagel implies that, among bats, only the microchiroptera rely on echolocation (1974, p. 168). That isn't quite right. Colin Allen and Marc Bekoff note that the bats that use echolocation include "about 30 species from the genus Rousettus in the suborder Megachiroptera, and all of the approximately 660 species in the suborder Microchiroptera..." (1997, p. 155). Bats

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echolocate in at least three different ways: constant frequency, frequency sweep, and short burst. Therefore, as Allen and Bekoff conclude, “Presumably there is no one thing it is ‘like to be a bat,’ any more than there is one thing it is ‘like to be a primate.’” Obviously, these details don’t undermine Nagel’s philosophical claims.

<sup>7</sup> Also, the line of argument I’ve suggested isn’t available to those who hold (e.g. on biblical grounds) that God didn’t create a fearful creature at the instant the universe began.

<sup>8</sup> Beaty and Taliaferro argue that, “...God knows the concept of fear, not because God experiences fear, either in itself or in some other fearful creature, but because God is the causal author of all concepts, including the concept of fear” (1990, p. 104). However, they never explain how being the “causal author of all concepts” would provide God with a full understanding of the concepts God authors. On the face of it, one could be causally responsible for the existence of a concept and yet fail to understand all of its dimensions, just as one could be causally responsible for the existence of a theory or artifact without completely understanding the nature of that theory or artifact. Further, Beaty and Taliaferro seem to assume that God first created the concept of fear and only then created experiences of fear. But that assumption isn’t obviously true, and it isn’t clear that they are entitled to it in the context of criticizing Blumenfeld’s argument. I should remark, however, that I am generally sympathetic with Beaty and Taliaferro’s paper, and that the majority of their arguments compliment those I make here.

<sup>9</sup> I assume that the very idea of an evil desire is coherent. If not, then the argument from evil desires doesn’t get off the ground.

<sup>10</sup> This point wouldn’t comfort those who believe that God can’t have desires, whether non-evil or evil. Likewise, my first objection would be unacceptable to those who deny that God is

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capable of anything like sensory experience (because, for example, God is immutable or atemporal). But whether God can have desires or sensory experience is a topic for another occasion.

<sup>11</sup> Blumenfeld discusses a variety of objections to his argument, but he fails to consider those I've raised. He does consider the objection that God could understand fear, frustration, and despair by drawing analogies from experiences that are consistent with God's omnipotence and omniscience (1978, pp. 209–211). He finds such analogical reasoning unsatisfactory. But my first objection was that God could understand the concepts of fear, frustration, and despair, not by analogy, but by direct acquaintance with the experiences of human beings. And my second objection was that God could understand the mental states in question by deducing their nature from their components. I see no reason why the deduction would have to involve analogical reasoning, except in the broad sense described in the first paragraph of section IV. Thus, Blumenfeld's misgivings about analogical reasoning don't seem to undermine my first two objections. Nothing he says in his article addresses my third objection.

<sup>12</sup> This paper began as a response to H. Scott Hestevold's interesting paper on the topic. I'm indebted to him for kindly showing me his paper and for helpful discussions. I also thank Stuart Rachels for excellent criticisms on multiple drafts. Finally, I thank Editor William Hasker and two anonymous referees from Faith and Philosophy for helpful criticisms.