

**FREE WILL AND  
ESSENTIAL OMNISCIENCE**

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**June 2003**

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### ABSTRACT

The problem of the apparent incompatibility of divine omniscience and human free will seems most pressing when it is assumed that God is sempiternal, rather than atemporal, and essentially omniscient. William Alston suggests that God's knowledge is direct, intuitive awareness -- not a species of belief -- and claims that such a conception of divine knowledge provides a means of resolving its apparent incompatibility with free will. It is here argued that even if we accept Alston's proposal, the classic problem reappears, and that the least objectionable response is to abandon the traditional doctrine of essential omniscience. Necessary omniscience may nevertheless be attributed to God in a sense of 'necessary' which is related to the powers of agents.

# FREE WILL AND ESSENTIAL OMNISCIENCE

## I. THE PROBLEM

Among the venerable philosophical problems which have received fresh examination in recent years is the problem of the seeming incompatibility of divine omniscience and human free will. The problem was discussed by a series of notable philosophers in the medieval period, beginning with St. Augustine, and by others such as Jonathan Edwards in the intervening centuries. Among those who have contributed to the recent debate are Nelson Pike, Alvin Plantinga, William Alston and John Martin Fischer.

In the recent discussion, it has been acknowledged that the problem arises in its most challenging form when two vital assumptions are made. The first is the assumption that God is a sempiternal being, existing *in* time and *throughout* all time: this assumption contrasts with the approach which interprets God's eternal existence in an atemporal fashion, placing God outside time or at any rate outside the temporal order experienced by humans. The second assumption is that God is not simply omniscient *tout court* but is essentially omniscient -- that is to say, he is omniscient in every logically possible world in which he exists. The assumption of God's essential omniscience is seen in its strongest form when the term 'God' is taken, not as a "title term" specifying the criteria for a supreme being, but as a proper name rigidly designating a being whose essential characteristics are the characteristics of a supreme being.

Theologians are reluctant to abandon either of these assumptions -- and with good reason. The idea that God is not timeless but sempiternal accords well with the language of both the Old and the New Testament on the subject of God's existence "from everlasting to everlasting". There are, to be sure, some biblical passages which lend support to the idea of a timeless God; and it would not, perhaps, be impossible to interpret the passages which suggest a sempiternal God as primitive or figurative expressions of the concept of an atemporal deity. Nevertheless, it is far better not to be obliged to do so, but instead to retain the option of understanding God's eternity as infinitely extended temporal duration.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, there are strong reasons for retaining the idea that God possesses the divine attributes, not accidentally, but essentially. It certainly appears odd to suggest that the supreme being perhaps just *happens* to be omnipotent, omniscient and so forth. The logical doctrine of essentialism is not without its difficulties, but this seems to be the type of context in which the doctrine is most felicitously applied to express a point that is central to theology: God is a being whose essential nature is to be omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect . . . and so on for the rest of the divine attributes.

Given these two assumptions, there is then a powerful argument to the effect that if God exists, humans are never able to act otherwise than as they actually do. Take any human action which we would ordinarily take to be an exercise of free will, implying that the agent was able at the time, given the prevailing circumstances, to have done otherwise: Jones mowing his lawn at time *t*, William Alston

writing a paper, Hitler ordering the invasion of Poland in 1939. God, being sempiternal, would have existed in 1938; and being omniscient, would have known in 1938 that Hitler would invade Poland in 1939.

Furthermore, since God is *essentially* omniscient, there is no possible world in which God exists and in which his putative foreknowledge is falsified by the fact. This is a feature which distinguishes God from fallible human prophets. Was Hitler therefore able to *refrain* from invading Poland in 1939? It would seem that the answer has to be No. No human has the power to alter the past, and God's knowledge of Hitler's course of action in 1939 existed as foreknowledge in 1938. Neither would any human have the power to falsify an item of God's knowledge; that would be a *logical* impossibility, given God's essential omniscience. Still less would a human have the power to bring it about that God did not exist. But what goes for Hitler's action will apply to any human action, momentous or trivial. Conclusion: if God exists, there is no free will.<sup>2</sup>

## II. NELSON PIKE ON DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

It is a commonplace to define omniscience thus:  $x$  is omniscient =<sub>df</sub> for any proposition  $p$ , if  $p$  is true,  $x$  knows that  $p$ . But some philosophers would qualify the definition to read as follows: "For any proposition  $p$ , if  $p$  is true and it is logically possible to know that  $p$ , then  $x$  knows that  $p$ ". Others would claim that propositions alluding to future contingencies, such as freely chosen human actions which lie in the future, are not objects of knowledge, and *a fortiori* cannot be known even by an omniscient being, because they lack determinate truth values. 'Hitler invades Poland in 1939', on such a view, was

neither true nor false in 1938; it *became* true upon the occurrence of the event which is its truth-maker (or perhaps at the point when there were causally sufficient conditions for the occurrence of the truth-making event).

The first suggested amendment of the definition is one which I feel able to accept with equanimity. To the second suggestion I would respond by pointing out that even fallible humans enjoy some limited success in predicting the future actions of other humans. If propositions about future contingencies have no truth value, this human capacity must be viewed as a gift for being able to say what propositions about future contingencies will *become* true at the appropriate time -- and not infrequently getting it right. God's omniscience would have to be regarded as including just such a capacity for saying what propositions about future contingencies will become true; and God always gets it right. We are thus back very much where we started. There may be merit in the idea that propositions about future contingencies are neither true nor false; but it will not provide an escape from the puzzle concerning omniscience and free will. I will therefore follow the lead of other scholars who have recently addressed the problem, and continue to work with the simple, traditional definition of omniscience.

Nelson Pike, in his well-known paper which touched off the recent re-examination of the problem of omniscience and free will, made use of the consensus amongst analytic philosophers to the effect that knowledge involves or entails true belief; thus 'x knows that *p*' entails 'x believes that *p*' and "'*p*' is true'. Pike takes this

point to apply to divine knowledge, so that 'God knows that  $p$ ' entails 'God believes  $p$  and " $p$ " is true'. He thus finds it possible to frame the problem of omniscience and free will in terms of God's beliefs. God's essential omniscience creates an "analytic connection" between belief and truth, so that 'God believes  $p$ ' entails " $p$  is true':

When truth is only factually connected with belief (as in [the case of a human observer who has prior knowledge of another person's behaviour]) one can have the power (though, by hypothesis, one will not exercise it) to do something that would make the belief false. But when truth is analytically connected with belief (as in God's belief) no one can have the power to do something which would render the belief false.<sup>3</sup>

Other philosophers have followed Pike in attributing beliefs to God and applying the analysis of knowledge as "true belief plus some further defining feature" to God's knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

### III. WILLIAM ALSTON AND THE "INTUITIVE" CONCEPTION OF DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

William Alston, on the other hand, has argued that the whole practice of attributing beliefs to God is misguided, and that a proper analysis of divine knowledge -- one that does not proceed by defining knowledge as a subclass of true belief -- will enable us to sidestep the problem of omniscience and free will.<sup>5</sup>

Alston considers two distinct accounts of God's knowledge: one, derived from Aquinas, which takes God's knowledge of facts in the

world to be non-propositional; and a second, more commonsensical account, which Alston refers to as the “intuitive” account of divine knowledge, according to which knowledge, although akin to perception, has a propositional structure in the sense that a knower always knows, or is aware, *that p*.

If we accept the non-propositional account of divine knowledge, then it can never be correct to speak of God’s having beliefs, since belief cannot be anything but a propositional attitude. Alston does not recommend such a view, but passes on to the “intuitive” account, according to which, although knowledge is knowledge *that p*, “knowledge of a fact is simply the immediate awareness of that fact”;<sup>6</sup> or, in H. H. Price’s words, knowledge “is simply the situation in which some entity or some fact is directly present to consciousness”.<sup>7</sup> Alston argues that, whatever the relative merits of the intuitive conception of knowledge and the “true belief+. . .” conception so far as the human case is concerned, the intuitive conception is plainly superior as a method of representing God’s knowledge.

Immediate awareness of facts is the highest form of knowledge just because it is a direct and foolproof way of mirroring the reality to be known. . . . The state of knowledge is constituted by the presence of the fact known. . . . Hence this is the best way to think of God’s knowledge. Since God is absolutely perfect, cognitively as well as otherwise, His knowledge will be of this most perfect form.<sup>8</sup>

Hence "God's immediate awareness of  $p$  is itself His knowledge that  $p$ , without any belief being involved".<sup>9</sup> Hence God does not have beliefs.

How does this bear upon the problem of divine omniscience and human free will? Alston contends that if we adopt the "intuitive" picture of God's knowledge of future contingents, the problem cannot arise, because God's knowledge, in 1938, of what Hitler would do in 1939 was a "soft" fact about 1938, not a "hard" fact. The distinction between "hard" and "soft" facts has been used by Ockhamists to help get a grip on the very problem we have been concerned with. A "hard" fact about a time  $t$  is one which is, in a certain way, complete, or over and done with, at  $t$ , whereas a "soft" fact about  $t$  is a fact which is characterized in such a way that it is not complete at  $t$ , and could still be made not to be a fact by events occurring later than  $t$ . For instance, the fact that a baby girl was born in Vancouver in 1947 and named Avril Phaedra Douglas Campbell is a hard fact about 1947. But the fact that a baby girl who would become the first female Prime Minister of Canada was born in Vancouver in 1947 is not a hard fact about 1947; it did not "harden", or become completely factual, until Kim Campbell became Prime Minister in 1993. Kim Campbell could have prevented it from becoming a fact by choosing not to run for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative party. This brings us to the point which makes the distinction between hard and soft facts a significant one for our purposes. It is only the hard facts about the past which humans are totally unable to change; insofar as we have

the power to influence the course of events at all, we have the power to alter the corresponding soft facts about the past.

That is the key to the escape route Alston claims to offer from the problem of omniscience and free will:

Suppose that God knew yesterday that I would be working on this paper at this moment? Is it within my power at this moment to do something else, e.g. read a magazine, so that if I had exercised that power and read a magazine at this moment God would have known something different about me from what He in fact did know? Well, why not? On any reasonable conception of knowledge the fact known is a constituent of the knowledge. In the true-justified-belief conception this is because the truth of the proposition is one of the necessary conditions of knowledge. In the intuitive conception it is because the fact known is a constituent of the psychological state that constitutes the knowledge. Where that fact is temporally posterior to the knowledge this means that the knowledge has what we might call a trans-temporal character. Where God knew yesterday what I do at noon today, that knowledge includes in its constitution my doing what I do at noon today. Thus the fact that God knew this yesterday is at least in part a fact concerning noon today, more particularly, concerning what I do at noon today. Hence this bit of God's knowledge is intimately dependent for its constitution on what I do at noon today. By doing what I do at noon today I determine the object of this bit of knowledge, what is known therein.

Hence it is not at all impossible for me to have the power to do something such that if I should have done it God would have known something different than what He did in fact know.<sup>10</sup>

Alston seems inclined to agree that in general, a belief held by a person at time  $t_1$  concerning what would happen at a later time  $t_2$  is a hard fact about  $t_1$ , whereas someone's knowing at  $t_1$  what would occur at  $t_2$  is a soft fact about  $t_1$ , because it has as one of its constituents the truth-making state of affairs which does not come to pass until  $t_2$ . He notes that the hardness of *divine* belief has been called into question just because it has been taken to be logically impossible for God to hold a false belief. His aim, however, is to escape from that controversy altogether.

If we are right in denying that divine knowledge involves belief at all, and in denying that God has beliefs, the way is blocked [to arguing from the premise that God's beliefs are hard facts about the times at which God entertains those beliefs]. We are forced back to the version [of the argument from God's omniscience to the impossibility of free will] in terms of divine foreknowledge, a version that is decisively refuted by the point that foreknowledge is only a soft fact.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. A CRITIQUE OF ALSTON'S POSITION

Very well. We will eschew speaking of God as having beliefs, and with that forgo any use of the "true belief+. . ." conception as a way of representing divine knowledge. God's knowledge of future contingencies will thus be, not a forebelief, but an intuition of what

is to come, an almost literal foreseeing of future states of affairs. Such a conception certainly has a distinguished history. John Calvin, for example, wrote:

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things have ever been and perpetually remain before his eyes, so that to his knowledge nothing is future or past, but all things are present; and present in such manner, that he does not merely conceive of them from ideas formed in his mind, as things remembered by us appear to our minds, but really he holds and sees them as if (*tanquam*) actually placed before him.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin is plainly expressing a version of the intuitive conception of divine knowledge. Curiously enough, this very passage was cited by Nelson Pike in the article which was the target of Alston's criticism. Pike merely used the quotation to show that Calvin believed God had *always* known what was going to be happening now: "all things have ever been before his eyes". Pike apparently saw no contradiction between Calvin's doctrine, which he seemed to endorse, and the analysis of divine knowledge in terms of belief, to which he then turned.

One thing that is evident in the passage from Calvin's *Institutes* is that Calvin took God to be a being who endures through time. It would have made no sense, otherwise, to speak of things "perpetually remaining" before his eyes.<sup>13</sup> Calvin's saying that to God's knowledge "nothing is future or past, but all things are present" is not, therefore, to be read as implying that God is a timeless being; merely

that he enjoys an intuitive knowledge, akin to direct perception, of the whole spatio-temporal order.

Have we now escaped from the problem of omniscience and free will? I think not. I will argue that the problem will raise its head once again within the framework of the intuitive theory of divine knowledge.

To see this, it is helpful to focus on Alston's claim that "[o]n any reasonable conception of knowledge the fact known is a constituent of the knowledge", and that when the fact known is temporally posterior to the act of knowing "this means that the knowledge has . . . a trans-temporal character".<sup>14</sup> This, as Alston realizes, makes foreknowledge at  $t_1$  of what will come to pass at a later time  $t_2$  a soft fact about  $t_1$ . But despite Alston's contention that this is a feature of "any reasonable conception of knowledge", other philosophers have taken a contrary view. Jonathan Edwards, for instance, wrote:

If there be any such thing as a divine foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that foreknowledge, by the supposition, is a thing which already *has*, and long ago *had* existence; and so, now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise, than that this foreknowledge should be, or should have been.<sup>15</sup>

Edwards evidently thought of foreknowledge at  $t_1$  of what will occur at  $t_2$  as a *hard* fact about  $t_1$ .

Alston has succeeded, I think, in showing that, given the intuitive account of divine knowledge, God's foreknowledge at  $t_1$  of what will occur at  $t_2$  is a soft fact about  $t_1$ . Still there is something to be said for Edwards' view of the matter. It stems from the fact that in virtually every case in which we have a soft or future-infected fact about a time  $t_1$  which is not completed until the occurrence of one of its components at a later time  $t_2$ , we can find a way of logically detaching the later component and describing what happens at  $t_1$  in terms which pick out only hard facts about  $t_1$ . Given the fact that in 1947 a baby girl was born who would become Prime Minister in 1993 -- a soft fact about 1947 -- we have no trouble distinguishing the elements of the situation which were the hard facts about 1947: the Campbells had a baby girl.

The same is true in those uncanny cases when a fallible human knower has an apparent precognition of a later event, such as a prophetic dream which subsequently comes true. The dream or vision is over and done with, and has a certain character and content, at the time it occurs. Its occurrence, then, is a hard fact about that time. Later comes the truth-making event which allows us to call it a precognition (or perhaps merely suspect that it was). We may think of precognition as a trans-temporal state of affairs, including as constituents both the subject's cognitive state at  $t_1$  and the truth-making circumstance which comes to pass at  $t_2$ ; but that is no obstacle to breaking it down and distinguishing those elements in it which are hard facts about  $t_1$ .

Indeed, it seems to be an essential feature of a thing's having a temporal existence that it go through a series of states which are distinguishable from one another simply by virtue of not being simultaneous. One may choose to describe an event which occurs at  $t_1$  in a way which is future-infected, and makes reference to a state of affairs that obtains at a later time  $t_2$ ; one has then described a soft fact about  $t_1$ . But any such soft fact is necessarily complex, and may be broken down into those elements which are hard facts about  $t_1$  and those which do not come to pass until  $t_2$ .

Now, why should God be any different? If God is a being who endures through time, and enjoys foreknowledge that has a trans-temporal character, it is only natural to suppose that the same logical considerations will apply. In that case, God's cognitive state at an earlier time  $t_1$  will be distinguishable from any circumstance that obtains at a later time  $t_2$  -- including the circumstance which is the truth-maker for the cognitive state he experiences at  $t_1$ . The two will be, in Hume's memorable words, "distinct existences".

It is important to find the right word to describe God's cognitive state at  $t_1$ , building in the insight expressed in the "intuitive" conception of divine knowledge: important, but not at all easy. 'Belief', Alston has argued, is inappropriate. 'Knowledge' we have agreed to reserve for the trans-temporal state of affairs which includes as a constituent the truth-making circumstance that occurs at  $t_2$ . 'Foresight' would be a candidate; but better yet, perhaps, is 'foreperception', since in contemporary English it is not considered to be a contradiction in terms to speak of a false or misleading

perception. I will use 'foreperception' in what follows; the reader should feel free to substitute another word if that should appear to be preferable. Whatever word one uses to express it, the concept I have in mind is such that (1) a foreperception experienced at  $t_1$  concerning an event which is to occur at a later time  $t_2$  is a hard fact about  $t_1$ , and (2) it is logically possible for a foreperception to be mistaken, i.e., it is possible that the foreperception should occur at  $t_1$  and the truth-making event fail to occur at  $t_2$ .

If anyone were to say that it is logically impossible for *God's* foreperception to be mistaken, that would be because, and only because, they had adopted the view that God is essentially omniscient. And if they were to defend such a stance by maintaining that God's foreperceptions cannot be hard facts about the times when they occur, because they are logically inseparable from the events which are their truth-makers, then they would be applying a non-standard logic to facts concerned with divine foreknowledge. They would be insisting that in some special way, God's cognitive states and the facts that are known to him in and through those states, while separated in time, are nevertheless *not* "distinct existences".

I appreciate well the desire to stress the perfection and immediacy of God's knowledge; but I find that to the very extent I concentrate on that, I am drawn towards the view that God is not a temporal being at all, so there is no temporal gap separating his cognitive states from the objects of his awareness. We cannot, I think, have it both ways, i.e., represent God's cognitive states as both separate in time and yet logically inseparable from the states of

affairs he is cognizing. It is clear enough that we cannot do any such thing so long as we continue to apply the standard logical notions that are employed to deal with temporal sequences, and hard and soft facts, in other contexts. The onus is on those who wish to apply a set of special non-standard logical notions to the case of divine foreknowledge to show that it is illegitimate to regard God's foreperceptions as "distinct existences" from the circumstances which make them true.

It should now be plain that, barring the use of some special non-standard logic, the problem of omniscience and free will has been reconstituted within the setting of an intuitive conception of divine knowledge. If God exists, and is a temporal being, and has already had a foreperception of what I will do today, and that foreperception is a hard fact about the past, and there is no possible world in which God's foreperceptions are falsified, then whatever I do today, I must do; it is impossible for me to do otherwise.

#### V. IS GOD ESSENTIALLY OMNISCIENT?

I see no way out of the problem so long as we retain all of the assumptions from which it was derived. I think that by far the most sensible response to the dilemma is to abandon the assumption that God is essentially omniscient.

The assumption is one which is open to certain telling objections, in relation to future contingencies, quite apart from its role in generating the problem about free will. Just suppose that there are such things as future contingencies -- that is, states of affairs which

will come about in the future, and which it would be logically possible to predict (if you are an ordinary human predictor) or foreperceive (if you have an intuitive type of foresight of what is to come, such as we have been attributing to God), but which are such that no hard fact about the present is either logically or causally sufficient for their occurrence. They are not yet “present in their causes”; the present state of the world is consistent with their eventually coming to pass and also with their never coming to pass. If the physical world is a “quantum world” containing events and processes that are subject to quantum uncertainty, or if humans possess free will of a kind which accords with the libertarian conception of freedom, then the real world will in fact contain such future contingencies. So long as the idea of them is not an outright contradiction in terms, it would at any rate have been within the powers of an omnipotent God to create a world in which some of them are to be found.

But then the creator of that world, if he were also omniscient, and sempiternal rather than timeless, would know right now that some such future states are going to come about, *and* that they are contingent; that they are not yet present in their causes. He would know that there is a possible world in which they fail to come about, despite the present having been exactly as it is. But that would be a world in which his foreperception of those future events is falsified. Lo and behold! he would realize that he himself is not *necessarily* or *essentially* omniscient. To insist that such an outcome is out of the

question is, in effect, to deny the capacity of an omnipotent and sempiternal God to create a world containing future contingencies.

The conclusion to be drawn is simply a transposed version of the gloomy and implausible conclusion about free will. The conclusion may, however, be broadened to take in future contingencies which are not related to the choices of free agents. It will then go as follows: if there are contingencies -- that is to say, events or states of affairs for which, at some earlier time, sufficient conditions are lacking -- then there cannot be a sempiternal being who is essentially omniscient.

It would appear, then, that theologians, and monotheistic believers generally, find themselves tempted to believe both of two mutually contradictory propositions, viz., that God is essentially omniscient, and that the world contains contingencies. It is not hard to understand the feelings which prompt people to cling to a belief in God's essential omniscience. A person who believes in God will naturally wish to think of God as being unshakably secure in his possession of those attributes which constitute divinity. Virtue that is logically untouchable seems to be preferable to that which is not beyond the possibility of failing; and nothing but the best will be fit to be attributed to the Almighty. Not only does it appear to be a way of doing honour to God to portray his qualities as inhering in him necessarily and essentially; it is reassuring to the believer, since it removes what might seem to be a suggestion of uncertainty in our affirmations of God's greatness.

Now it is a platitude of modal logic that every necessity excludes some possibilities: “necessarily  $p$ ” is equivalent to “it is not possible that not- $p$ ”. But it is all too easy, when we are affirming “necessarily  $p$ ”, to lose track of the possibilities we are excluding. The value of the argument from God’s essential omniscience to the illusoriness of human free will is precisely that it makes it very clear what possibilities are being excluded by the assertion that God’s omniscience is something he possesses of necessity. The possibilities being excluded are the very ones which constitute the contingency of contingent states of affairs.

What, after all, does it mean to call a certain state of affairs contingent? That it might possibly not come to pass. In the usual case, this in turn means that there is a possible world, very similar to the actual world in almost every respect, in which that state of affairs does not obtain. It is, for instance, a contingent matter that I am working on this paper at noon today; like William Alston, I have it in my power to set my paper aside and read a magazine instead, or go for lunch early. Of the possible worlds in which I follow one of those alternative courses of action, some are very similar to the actual world in very many respects. In particular, there are some in which all the hard facts about the past up to this moment are the same -- including God’s foreperceptions (assuming that God exists in the actual world). Hence it is within my power to do something which is such that, if I were to do it, one of the foreperceptions entertained by God in the actual world would be falsified.

Of course it does not follow from this that I am able to bring it about that one of God's foreperceptions *is* falsified. If I had in fact chosen to go for lunch early today, then God, being omniscient, would have foreseen from all eternity that I would do so. That last counterfactual conditional is interpreted, in the "possible worlds" idiom, as asserting that of the possible worlds in which I go for lunch early today, the ones which are *closest* to the actual world are worlds in which the hard facts about the past are *not* the same as in the actual world: they are worlds in which God has had foreperceptions different from those he has had in the actual world. That is what it means to say that God is omniscient in the actual world and in any world which you and I make actual by the exercise of our various abilities.

Nevertheless, if you and I have free will, then God is not omniscient in all the possible worlds in which he exists. In *some* of the non-actual worlds in which we exercise those abilities which in the actual world we leave unexercised, certain of God's foreperceptions are falsified. Unexercised abilities, elusive and insubstantial though they may seem to be, are the very stuff of our freedom; the non-actual worlds in which we exercise them must be taken seriously as possibilities. But when we do take them seriously, we find ourselves calling God's essential omniscience into question.

I suggest that if we are forced to choose between God's essential omniscience and the unexercised abilities of ourselves and other agents, then we should go on believing in our abilities and abandon the doctrine of essential omniscience. Why? Because despite their

admitted elusiveness, our unexercised abilities are something which common experience gives us good reason to believe in. Our experience of choosing between options, and discovering the range and the limits of what we can do, gives us evidential grounds for attributing abilities to ourselves and others even at times when those abilities are not being exercised. But there is no *evidence* to support belief in God's essential omniscience. Even those who take religious experiences to be evidence for God's existence could not cite experiential backing for the claim that God is omniscient in every logically possible world in which he exists. The case for adhering to the doctrine rests entirely upon the preferences of religious believers for certain ways of conceiving of the object of their belief and worship. It is one thing to treat those preferences with the respect which the sentiments of pious hearts always deserve; to view them, indeed, as a source of wisdom concerning God's nature. It is quite another to allow ourselves to entertain beliefs that are contrary to experience.

But do we, in fact, face a forced choice between the essential omniscience of God and the unexercised abilities of agents? I see no way of avoiding such a choice so long as we cling to the traditional definition of necessary or essential omniscience as omniscience in all logically possible worlds. There are, however, many other degrees and criteria of necessity and possibility -- the causal or physical modalities being perhaps the ones most discussed by philosophers. One sense of 'necessity' seems to me to lend itself well to the interpretation, or re-interpretation, of the doctrine of necessary

omniscience. It is a sense related to the powers of agents in the universe.

No agent could ever overpower a being who was omnipotent; hence, in any world in which there is an omnipotent being, what is possible to other agents -- i.e., what is within their power -- will be whatever the omnipotent being will allow. Anything which the omnipotent one did not allow would be impossible from the perspective of all the other agents that there might be. Bearing in mind that 'necessarily  $p$ ' means 'it is impossible that not- $p$ ', we could say that anything the omnipotent one chose to bring about would be necessary from the point of view of other agents. Now if God exists, and is omnipotent, and chooses to remain omniscient, then his omniscience is certainly necessary in the sense I have just defined. No power in the universe could deprive him of his omniscience.

Although the necessity of God's omniscience, in this newly defined sense of 'necessity', follows directly from his omnipotence, it is by no means a trivial result. Moreover, it speaks directly to the needs and concerns of religious believers. That God's omniscience should be, in the actual world, absolutely unassailable, is both a reason for praising him and a reason for his followers to feel reassured.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On these points see Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), esp. pp. 180-7 and the "Concluding Comment", pp. 189-90. Pike's conclusion is that despite the widespread acceptance that the idea of a timeless God has enjoyed amongst Christian intellectuals who have been influenced by classical Greek philosophy, it is not an idea for which there is much foundation in Scripture. For Pike it remains an open question whether the doctrine of God's timelessness should have a place in a system of Christian theology.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed explanation of the argument and its variant forms, see John Martin Fischer's Introduction to *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, ed. John Martin Fischer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 3-12.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action", *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 27-46. Reprinted in *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, ed. John Martin Fischer, pp. 57-73. This quotation is from p. 72 of the Fischer anthology.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 68, and Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> William P. Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?", *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), 287-306.

<sup>6</sup> Alston, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup> H. H. Price, "Some Considerations About Belief", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 35 (1934-35), 229. Quoted by Alston, p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> Alston, pp. 297-8.

<sup>9</sup> Alston, p. 296.

<sup>10</sup> Alston, p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> Alston, pp. 303-4.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, ch. xxi, section 5, trans.

John Allen (Philadelphia, 1813), Vol. II, p. 145. Quoted by Pike in *God and Timelessness*, p. 55, and in *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin often applies temporal language to God, for example when he claims that God chose the elect for salvation *before* they were born (*Institutes*, Book III, ch. xxii, section 2). So far as I am aware, he never suggests that such language should not be taken literally, or should be regarded as a metaphor for the actions of a timeless being.

<sup>14</sup> Alston, p. 301.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, Part II, section 12 (Boston, 1754; rpt., ed. Paul Ramsey, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> A shortened version of this paper was presented at the Gifford Bequest International Conference "Natural Theology: Problems and Prospects" at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, in May 2000.