

Omniscience and worthiness of worship

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Abstract At first glance, the properties *being omniscient* and *being worthy of worship* might appear to be perfectly co-instantiable. (To say that some properties are *co-instantiable* is just to say that it is possible that some object instantiate all of them simultaneously. *Being entirely red* and *being a ball* are co-instantiable; *being entirely red* and *being entirely blue* are not). But there are reasons to be worried about this co-instantiability, as it turns out that, depending on our commitments with respect to certain kinds of knowledge and notions of personhood, it might be the case that no being—God included—could instantiate both. In this paper, I lay out and motivate this claim before going on to consider a variety of responses—some more plausible than others—that may be offered by the theist.

Keywords Experience · Omniscience · Personhood · Worship

Worthiness of worship

It is practically uncontroversial that if God exists, then God is worthy of worship. Here, I offer neither an account of worthiness nor an account of worship, though I do intend everything I say to be consistent with a wide range of accounts of both.¹ Instead, I'll just say that if a being is worthy of worship, then it is appropriate (and perhaps obligatory) for us to devote attention to and direct action toward it in a way that in some way glorifies it.

This brings us to our first claim:

¹ For more on the topic of worship, and some problems that might come along with it, see Bayne and Nagasawa (2006), Bayne and Nagasawa (2007), Brown and Nagasawa (2005), and Crowe (2007).

(1) Something is worthy of worship only if it is a person.

(1) seems true. Impersonal objects, even those of overwhelming beauty—particularly striking sunsets, particularly moving symphonies, etc.—fall short of being worthy of worship. Such objects might be worthy of some other kind of reverence, as it might be appropriate (though probably not obligatory) to stand in awe while watching a sunset, or to be rendered speechless by a symphony, but that reverence should fall short of actual worship. All sorts of objects, personal and impersonal, can inspire awe or render us speechless, but only those that are persons are such that it would be appropriate (and perhaps obligatory) for us to really worship them.

This brings us to our second claim:

(2) Something is God only if it is worthy of worship.

(2) seems true, as it seems that God is essentially worthy of worship, perhaps as a result of other attributes God is said to have essentially. If it's the case that an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being is such that it would be appropriate (and perhaps obligatory) for us to worship it, and God is essentially such a being, then God is essentially worthy of worship.

Omniscience and personhood

For now, let's replace all talk of God with talk of an *omniscient being*. To say that a being is omniscient, at first pass, is to say that it knows everything, or knows everything that it is possible to know. But, on the face of it, we can make distinctions between different types of knowledge, and that's where the problems come in.

Propositional knowledge is knowledge that p , where p is some proposition. One could have propositional knowledge that *Quine was a philosopher*, that $5 + 7 = 12$, etc. *Experiential knowledge*, by contrast, is knowledge of *what e is like*, where e is some experience. One could have experiential knowledge of *what it's like to ride a roller coaster*, *what it's like to be a bat* (cf. Nagel 1974), etc. This brings us to our third claim:

(3) An agent can have experiential knowledge of what it's like to have an experience e only if that agent has experienced e .

(3) seems true. After all, no mere description, no matter how detailed, will be sufficient for getting you to know what it's like to ride a roller coaster. In order to know what it's like to ride a roller coaster, you have to ride a roller coaster.²

I claim that no person could possess the full body of experiential knowledge. That is to say, if $e_1 \dots e_n$ are all of the possible experiences, no person could simultaneously possess experiential knowledge of $e_1 \dots e_n$. This is because, given (3), one can have experiential knowledge of, say, both e_1 and e_2 only if one experiences both e_1 and e_2 , and for some e_1 and e_2 , experiencing the former requires not having had experienced the latter. Some experiences, after all, are incompatible. Consider the experiences of,

² For discussion of (3), see, *inter alia*, Jackson (1982, 1985), Lewis (1988), Mellor (1993), and Nagasawa (2008).

on the one hand, seeing the first *Star Wars* trilogy (episodes 4–6) for the first time before seeing the second *Star Wars* trilogy (episodes 1–3) for the first time (let this be e_1) and, on the other, seeing the second trilogy for the first time before seeing the first trilogy for the first time (let this be e_2). If a person experiences e_1 , then, as a matter of necessity, that person cannot experience e_2 , and *vice versa*. So, if it is not possible to have all of the experiences, then, by (3), it is not possible to have all of the experiential knowledge.

Furthermore, as Connie Rosati points out

How we experiences things ...depends upon the order in which we experience them. Poverty after wealth is experienced differently than poverty after near poverty or wealth after poverty. ... So the process of fully informing a person will need in some way to offset the effects of experiential ordering, by requiring, for instance, that a person experience all lives (or whatever is necessary for her to appreciate what those lives would be like for her as the self who lives them) in all possible orders. (Rosati 1995, p. 309).

No normal person could experience all possible lives in all possible orders. Let's restrict our scope for a moment. In order for a person to experience seeing the first trilogy for the first time before seeing the second trilogy for the first time *and* experience seeing the second trilogy for the first time before seeing the first trilogy for the first time, and not have the first experience influence the second, that person would have to either experience both from different perspectives or selectively forget previous experiences when having new ones.³

If one experiences from different perspectives, one would be able to experience those experiences experienced under one perspective without having those experiences influence the experience of experiences experienced under the other. These perspectives would be incompatible, of course, in the sense that no normal person could coherently and simultaneously adopt any more than one of them.⁴ Instead, our person would have a fractured psyche, simultaneously adopting many incompatible perspectives. She could have experiential knowledge of both e_1 and e_2 , but only at the cost of losing a unified perspective.

If one selectively forgets previous experiences when having new ones, one would be able to “hide” certain experiences, thus blocking those experiences from influencing the experiencing of new experiences (cf. Sobel 1994, p. 805). Such a person would group experiences into coherent strands, and be such that she could rotate the focus of her attention from one coherent strand to another, focusing on one at a time to the exclusive of all others. She could experience e_1 in one strand and e_2 in another, but there would be no strand in which she retains her memories of her experiences of both. If, to have experiential knowledge of e at a time t , one must, in some perhaps minimal sense, remember e at t ,⁵ then our person can never have experiential knowledge

³ See, for example, the discussion of controllable amnesia in Sobel (1994).

⁴ Of course, this probably just amounts to saying that these are *genuinely* different perspectives.

⁵ If we come to know what it's like to see red after experiencing seeing red, and then get knocked on the head and forget all of our experiences of seeing red, it seems plausible to say that we no longer know what it's like to see red (though we might regain that knowledge, perhaps through memory-jogging exercises).

of both e_1 and e_2 from the same perspective. Our person has many potential unified perspectives that she can shift through at will, but she can adopt only one of them at a time. In order for her to have experiential knowledge of both e_1 and e_2 , she would have to transcend these unified perspectives into a “metaperspective” made up of each of these strands collectively. This, however, comes at the cost of consistency, and it looks like this strategy then bottoms out into the first one.

If the second strategy collapses into the first, then, on either of them, our omniscient person is very strange insofar as she has a fractured psyche. And even if it doesn't, then the first strategy retains that strangeness while the second becomes strange insofar as we are positing a person that can shift at will through various incompatible yet coherent perspectives. However, if we've been convinced by Derek Parfit (1971), we might want to accept the following claim.

(4) Something is a person only if it has proper psychological unity.

(4) seems true. To be a person, according to (4), is at least to have the right sort of unified consciousness, and it is very plausible to think that part of having unified consciousness is having a single, coherent and unified perspective. If this is the case, given (4), the “person” we have been discussing so far turns out to not really be a person at all.

Suppose that the property of *being omniscient* is such that a being instantiates it just in case that being has all propositional and experiential knowledge.⁶ If what has been said so far is correct, then no person could be omniscient, since the possession of all experiential knowledge would preclude proper psychological unity, and thereby, by (4), personhood. By (1), then, an omniscient being cannot be worthy of worship.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the property of *being omniscient* is such that a being instantiates it just in case that being has all propositional knowledge (cf. Geach 1977). Now, experiential knowledge either reduces to propositional knowledge, or it doesn't. If experiential knowledge reduces to propositional knowledge, and no person could have all of the experiential knowledge, then no person could have all of the propositional knowledge. If experiential knowledge does not reduce to propositional knowledge,⁷ then there could be a wealth of experiential knowledge that a being lacks while still qualifying as omniscient. An omniscient being without a body, for example, cannot have experiential knowledge of what it's like to watch *Star Wars* or see red. So, if having all propositional knowledge is sufficient for being omniscient, and if experiential knowledge reduces to propositional knowledge, then an omniscient being cannot be a person. If having all propositional knowledge is sufficient for being omniscient, and if experiential knowledge doesn't reduce to propositional knowledge, then an omniscient being, depending on the omniscient being, might not know a lot of the things that we non-omniscient beings know.

⁶ For arguments in favor of this view, see Sarot (1991).

⁷ For an argument that it does *not*, see again Sarot (1991).

Consequences for the theist

Most theists⁸ accept

(5) God is essentially omniscient.

Suppose that the theist also accepts claims (1) through (4). Then, if a being is omniscient just in case that being has all propositional and experiential knowledge, then, by (4), an omniscient being cannot be a person, so, by (1), an omniscient being cannot be worthy of worship, so by (2), an omniscient being cannot be God.⁹ But then, by (5), God cannot exist.

If a being is omniscient just in case that being has all the propositional knowledge, and experiential knowledge is reducible to propositional knowledge, and we are still assuming claims (1)–(5), then, by similar reasoning, God cannot exist.

If a being is omniscient just in case that being has all the propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge is not reducible to propositional knowledge, and we are still assuming claims (1)–(5), then God, who lacks a body, is omniscient despite not knowing much of what we non-omniscient, embodied beings know.¹⁰

What about the steadfast theist who wants to hold on to the claim that God knows all of what we know?¹¹ Such a theist (henceforth, *the theist*) has options, but, unfortunately, it's not clear that any of these options are all that attractive.

The theist could deny (1) and accept that, while God is not a person, God is still worthy of worship.¹² This would be to accept that it is permissible (and perhaps obligatory) that we devote attention to and direct action toward at least one impersonal object in a way that in some way glorifies that object. I imagine that many theists will be uncomfortable with this strategy.¹³

⁸ I am using 'theist' in this discussion in a restricted sense, to denote the believer in God as God is traditionally conceived of in Western religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, though I take it that my conclusions will apply to those who believe in any being that is essentially both omniscient and worthy of worship.

⁹ Strictly speaking, the Christian God is *three* persons, not one, so would regardless lack the appropriate psychological unity required for being a person. *Being omniscient*, however, is a property that I take it is not typically ascribed to the Trinity *collectively*, but distributively, to members of the Trinity. As such, no member of the Trinity will qualify as a person. Thanks to Steven Brown and Cruz Davis for discussion.

¹⁰ God, lacking eyes, would not be able to know what it's like to *see* red. In making this claim, I am admittedly putting aside the possibility (if, in fact, it is one) that there was an Incarnation event and that the incarnated being (Jesus, perhaps) experienced the experiences necessary for obtaining certain experiential knowledge (such as the knowledge of what red looks like), and then *transferred* this knowledge to the (in some sense identical, in some sense distinct) unincarnated being. For discussion on this point, see Sarot (1991, pp. 97–98).

¹¹ Here I am setting aside discussion of whether God knows what we know *de se*. See, *inter alia*, Grim (1983).

¹² I mean to use 'person' univocally throughout this discussion. The theist could introduce a new notion of personhood such that something can count as a person (under that notion) despite lacking proper psychological unity, thereby allowing God to still count as a person (under that notion). In order to avoid being *ad hoc*, the theist would then have to further justify this purported polysemy.

¹³ Though cases of *deferred worship*, in which one worships a person indirectly by worshipping an impersonal object, might be fine. I have in mind cases in which Christians are told to "worship the cross." The worship of God as an impersonal object, however, does not seem to be such that it could be plausibly taken as a case of such deferred worship. Thanks again to Steven Brown for discussion.

Or, the theist could deny (2) and accept that God, while essentially omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, etc., is not essentially worthy of worship, or worthy of worship at all. I imagine that many theists will likewise be uncomfortable with this strategy.

Or, the theist could deny (3) and accept that experiential knowledge can be had despite lacking the apparently requisite experiences. If she goes this way, however, the theist will have to answer the question of whether only God is exempt from this requirement, or whether all agents are. In order to say that only God is exempt, and to avoid being *ad hoc*, she'd have to give an account of why God is an exception to this otherwise intuitive and seemingly theoretically justified requirement.¹⁴ If she says that all agents are exempt, she finds herself in an uphill battle in epistemology and the philosophy of mind—one in which the hill is rather steep.^{15, 16}

Or, the theist could deny (4) and accept that psychological unity is not required for personhood. If she goes this way, however, she will have to answer questions very similar to those raised above: is only God exempt, or are all persons? If the former, she runs the risk of being *ad hoc*, and if the latter, she finds herself again in a steep uphill battle, this time with respect to the metaphysics of personhood and synchronic personal identity.

Or, the theist could deny (5) and accept that God is not omniscient. This move is, again, uncomfortable for the theist, but if she takes Geach's (1973) rejection of the claim that God is omnipotent as a precedent, it is perhaps not as bad as it initially might seem.

Taking stock, we see that the theist has options. She can either (a) accept that God is not worthy of worship, (b) accept that some impersonal objects are worthy of worship, (c) deny that the experience requirement for experiential knowledge holds for God, (d) deny that the experience requirement for experiential knowledge holds for any agent, (e) deny that the psychological unity requirement for personhood holds for God, (f) deny that the psychological unity requirement for personhood holds for any agent, (g) accept that God lacks much of the knowledge that we non-omniscient beings have, or (h) accept that God is not omniscient. Options (a) and (b) seem unacceptable;

¹⁴ See Alter (2002) for arguments along these lines. For a response, see Nagasawa (2003). See also Nagasawa (2008).

¹⁵ Our theist could introduce a notion of knowledge *as-if*, according to which an agent can know what it's like as if she had experienced *e* without having actually experienced *e*. It's not clear, however, how this is any different from granting experiential knowledge while denying (3). Thanks to Joshua Smith for discussion.

¹⁶ Though one might be inclined to reject (3) for independent reasons. Consider a case in which Mary (as described in Jackson (1985)) leaves her room and sees a red apple, putting her in mental state *M*. Still in the room is Mary*, who, up until Mary left the room, was in the same situation as Mary. Mary's mental state is scanned and Mary* has her mental state altered accordingly so that she is now also in *M*. Mary* now seems to know what it is like to see red, even though she herself has never experienced seeing red. This might seem to be a counterexample to (3). If it is, then rejecting (3) is obviously the way to go for the theist, and what we've learned is that the theist has an additional reason to reject what she should have been rejecting all along. I am inclined to think, however, that this is *not* a counterexample to (3); the advocate of (3) could simply hold on to the claim that, despite being in *M*, Mary* still does not know what it's like to see red, perhaps because she came to be in *M* as the result of a deviant causal chain. If I am right, and this is not a counterexample to (3), the theist is not off the hook yet. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.

(h) might be as well. Much work would need to be done to defend (d) or (f), and additional, non-*ad hoc* motivations would have to be given for (c) and (e). If the theist is willing to bite a somewhat counterintuitive and perhaps uncomfortable bullet, (g) might be a good way to go.¹⁷ Regardless, it would be good for the theist to get clear on her commitments.

Of course, the theist has another option: admit that, given these considerations, no omniscient being could be a person, so no omniscient being could be worthy of worship, so no omniscient being could be God, and so, if God is essentially omniscient, there is no God. In other words, in light of these considerations, the theist could simply revise her beliefs and accept atheism instead.

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¹⁷ Though for reasons to be suspicious of this strategy, see Sarot (1991, p. 96) and Ward (1982, p. 132.)