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Divine Omniscience and Experience

A Reply to Alter

Abstract

According to one antitheist argument, the necessarily omniscient, necessarily omnipotent, and necessarily omnibenevolent Anselmian God does not exist, because if God is necessarily omnipotent it is impossible for Him to comprehend fully certain concepts, such as *fear*, *frustration* and *despair*, that an omniscient being needs to possess. Torin Alter examines this argument and provides three elaborate objections to it. I argue that theists would not accept any of them because they conflict with traditional Judaeo-Christian doctrines concerning divine attributes.

Torin Alter¹ attempts to undermine an argument against the Anselmian notion of God, according to which God is necessarily omniscient, necessarily omnipotent and necessarily omnibenevolent. The argument states that if God is necessarily omnipotent then He cannot be omniscient because such necessary omnipotence precludes Him from having the experiences that are needed to acquire certain concepts.² Alter provides three elaborate objections to this antitheist argument, all of which are, he claims, 'consistent with the principal divine attributes' (pp. 47, 48). However, in the following, I demonstrate that even if Alter's objections are cogent, they are inconsistent with attributes that are traditionally ascribed to God, and hence Judaeo-Christian theism is not saved.

1 The Antitheist Argument

The version of concept empiricism upon which the antitheist argument rests can be formulated as follows:

1. Torin Alter (2002), 'On Two Alleged Conflicts Between Divine Attributes', *Faith and Philosophy* 19, pp. 47–57.

2. This antitheist argument is most notably introduced in David Blumenfeld (1978), 'On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes', *Philosophical Studies* 34, pp. 91–103. Alter also examines another argument in the same vein: God cannot know what it is like to have an evil desire, because He, who is necessarily omnibenevolent, cannot have an evil desire. Since this argument is parallel to the argument at issue, I set it aside in the main text. Variations of these arguments are discussed in: Richard Francks (1979), 'Omniscience, Omnipotence and Pantheism', *Philosophy* 54, pp. 395–399, Patrick Grim (1983), 'Some Neglected Problems of Omniscience', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, pp. 265–276, Patrick Grim (1985), 'Against Omniscience: The Case from Essential Indexicals', *Noûs* 19, pp. 151–180, Patrick Grim (2000), 'The Being That Knew Too Much', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47, pp. 141–154, Norman Kretzmann (1966), 'Omniscience and Immutability', *Journal of Philosophy* 63, pp. 409–421, John Lachs (1963), 'Omniscience', *Dialogue* 1, pp. 400–402, John Lachs (1963), 'Professor Prior on Omniscience', *Philosophy* 37, pp. 361–364, William J. Mander (2002), 'Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?', *Heythrop Journal* 43, pp. 430–44, Yujin Nagasawa (2003), 'God's Point of View: A Reply to Mander', *The Heythrop Journal* 44, pp. 60–63, Yujin Nagasawa (forthcoming), 'Divine Omniscience and Knowledge *De Se*', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, and Marcel Sarot (1991), 'Omniscience and Experience', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 30, pp. 89–102.

(P) For any *s*, *s* fully comprehends the concepts *fear*, *frustration*, and *despair* only if *s* has actually experienced fear, frustration and despair.³

The antitheist argument uses (P) to derive the inconsistency between necessary omniscience and necessary omnipotence. If God is omniscient then He has to understand all concepts fully. However, given (P), one's full understanding of such concepts as *fear*, *frustration*, and *despair* requires one to experience fear, frustration and despair, respectively. However, God cannot have those experiences because, by definition, He is necessarily omnipotent and so could not fall prey to the weakness entailed by the having of such experiences. Therefore, the argument concludes, the Anselmian God does not exist. Notice that in order to establish the argument antitheists have to hold that (P) is a *necessary* truth. For, if (P) were merely contingently true then an omnipotent God could bring it about that (P) is false and the antitheist argument would immediately become unsound.⁴

3. In the second section of his paper Alter remarks that (P) seems to gain support from Frank Jackson's Knowledge Argument against the physicalist approach to phenomenal consciousness (p. 49–50). This remark is, however, perplexing because, as is shown by the passage from Jackson that Alter himself quotes in his paper (p. 53), Jackson explicitly rejects concept empiricism like (P) for the exact same reason that Alter does. Jackson thinks that concept empiricism is untenable because, as Alter argues in his third objection, one may understand such concepts as *fear*, *frustration* and *despair* without actually experiencing them if one acquires relevant false memory traces. See Frank Jackson (1998), 'Postscript on Qualia', in *Mind, Method, and Conditionals: Selected Essays*, New York, Routledge, pp. 76–79. See especially p. 77.

4. This statement is based on the assumption that God is omnipotent if and only if, roughly speaking, He can do everything that it is possible to do and He cannot do that which it is necessarily impossible to do. However, some philosophers argue that if God is truly omnipotent then He can do absolutely anything, including that which it is necessarily impossible to do. In this case the antitheist argument fails from the beginning. Many philosophers claim, for instance, that Descartes holds that an omnipotent God can do absolutely anything, including that which it is necessarily impossible to do. See Harry G. Frankfurt (1964), 'The Logic of Omnipotence', *Philosophical Review* 73, pp. 262–263, Harry G. Frankfurt (1977), 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', *Philosophical Review* 86, pp. 36–57, Peter Geach (1973), 'Omnipotence', *Philosophy* 48, pp. 7–20, Danny Goldstick (1990), 'Gould God Make a Contradiction True?', *Religious Studies* 26, pp. 377–387, Leonard G. Miller (1957), 'Descartes, Mathematics, and God', *Philosophical Review* 66, pp. 451–465, Alvin Plantinga (1980), *Does God Have a Nature?*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, Nick Trakakis (1997), 'The Absolute Theory of Omnipotence', *Sophia* 36, pp. 55–78. La Croix argues, however, that Descartes does not really mean to contend that God can turn necessary impossibilities into possibilities. See Richard R. La Croix (1984), 'Descartes on God's Ability to Do the Logically Impossible', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14, pp. 455–475. Other philosophers who endorse the doctrine of absolute omnipotence, according to which if God is omnipotent He has to be able to do everything, including that which it is necessarily impossible to do, include: Danny Goldstick, (1990) 'Could God Make a Contradiction True?', Earl Conee (1991), 'The Possibility of Power Beyond Possibility', in James Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives: 5 Philosophy of Religion*, Atascadero, California, Ridgeview Publishing Company, J. L. Mackie (1955), 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind* 65, pp. 200–212, John Ellis McTaggart (1906), *Some Dogmas of Religion*, London, Edward Arnold, Leon Shestov (1962), 'In Memory of a Great Philosopher: Edmund Husserl', George L. Kline (trans.), *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 22. In this paper I do not attempt to provide a rigorous definition of divine omnipotence. I assume, however, for the sake of argument, that an omnipotent God can do everything that it is possible to do and cannot do that which it is necessarily impossible to do. And in fact, this is what both proponents and opponents of the antitheists argument presuppose.

2 Alter's First Objection

As a first objection to the antitheist argument, Alter argues that even if God *Himself* cannot experience fear, frustration and despair there is no reason to conclude that He cannot possess concepts of them. For, according to Alter, God can possess such concepts by directly perceiving the 'contents of human consciousness' (p. 51). For instance, if someone – say, in a silent prayer – reflects vividly on her/his fear, Alter says, then God will be able to perceive this person's feeling and to come to understand fully what fear is.⁵

There are various difficulties with this reply.⁶ First, what Alter takes for granted, i.e., that God can perceive the contents of human consciousness, is controversial among theists. Most notably, early Christians formulated and defended the doctrine of divine impassibility, according to which God cannot perceive human feelings, in particular, human sufferings. This doctrine states that God, who transcends space and time, is not in a position to share human feelings. A number of contemporary theists endorse this doctrine.⁷

Second, even if the doctrine of divine impassibility is false and God can in fact perceive human pains and sufferings, Alter's objection is still untenable on two grounds: (i) it is unlikely that any attribute of God is *dependent* largely on the experience of humans. According to Judaeo-Christian theism God is an independent, self-existing being. That is, God is entirely self-sufficient, not dependent upon anything or anyone outside of Himself.⁸ Alter's claim that God's knowledge of fear, frustration and despair relies on the contents of human consciousness is inconsistent with this doctrine of divine independence. (ii) According to the Anselmian tradition, if God exists at all He is necessarily omniscient. However, if Alter's objection is right, God's omniscience is contingent at best, since it will largely depend upon *contingent* human experiences. Then Alter's objection entails that the Anselmian God, who is *necessarily* omniscient, does not in fact exist!

5. It might be a problem if no one were to reflect vividly upon their fears, but I ignore this point for the sake of simplicity.

6. One might claim that if Alter's first objection is right then God would not have been omniscient before His creatures experienced, say, fear for the first time. Alter argues that we can block this objection if we suppose that God 'created a creature experiencing fear at the instant the universe began' and that He was 'able to perceive the first instant of that creature's experience' (p. 51).

7. For the contemporary debate on divine impassibility see Richard E. Creel (1986), *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Paul S. Fiddes (1992), *The Creative Suffering of God*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, J. K. Mozley (1926), *The Impassibility of God*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Marcel Sarot (1992), *God, Passibility, and Corporeality*, The Netherlands, Kok Pharos Publishing House, Marcel Sarot (2001), 'Does God Suffer?: A Critical Discussion of Thomas G. Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?*', *Ars Disputandi* 1 [<http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000018/index.html>], Thomas G. Weinandy (2000), *Does God Suffer?*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, and Thomas G. Weinandy (2002), 'Does God Suffer?', *Ars Disputandi* 2 [<http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000023/index.html>].

8. For example, the following passage in Scripture is said to describe God's independence: 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else' (Acts 17: 24–25).

This is, for theists, as unfavourable as the conclusion of the antitheist argument itself. Alter's first objection is not successful.

One might claim that God comprehends fully the concepts *fear*, *frustration* and *despair* by *imagining* or *inferring* what it would be like for a creature to have experiences pertaining to them, instead of directly perceiving the contents of human consciousness. This claim appears more compelling because in this case God's knowledge is not dependent on contingent human experiences. This idea leads to Alter's second objection to the antitheist argument.

3 Alter's Second Objection

As a second objection to the antitheist argument, Alter argues that even if God cannot be directly acquainted with fear, frustration and despair *themselves*, that may not preclude Him from fully understanding the concepts. For, God can be acquainted with 'components' of fear, frustration and despair and deduce what it would be like to combine those components into states of fear, frustration and despair without actually having the appropriate experiences (p. 52). In other words, according to this objection, God can fully comprehend the concepts *fear*, *frustration* and *despair* by imagining or inferring what it would be like for a creature to have fear, frustration and despair.

It is not clear what exactly Alter means by components of fear, frustration and despair.⁹ And, in any case, it is a matter of enormous controversy in the philosophy of mind whether mental states such as fear, frustration and despair are reducible to something else. Suppose though, for the sake argument, that they *are* composite states and it is possible for God to understand fully what fear, frustration and despair are by deducing what it would be like to combine their components. However, most theists would nevertheless disagree with Alter that God actually does so. For, according to the traditional doctrine of divine omniscience, God's knowledge is not discursive. Thomas Aquinas describes this doctrine as follows:

In the divine knowledge there is no discursiveness. . . . God sees all things in one thing alone, which is Himself. Therefore, God sees all things together, and not successively.¹⁰

Aquinas contends that God's knowledge does not involve any reasoning or imagination. Similarly, Alvin Plantinga writes, 'Of course God neither needs nor uses logic; that is, he never comes to know a proposition A by inferring it from proposition B.'¹¹ This means that God knows (if He knows at all) fear, frustration

9. As candidates for components of fear, frustration and despair, Alter suggests 'qualia that tend to accompany (or partially constitute) those mental states' (p. 52). But without a further argument it is hard to see how they could actually be components of fear, frustration and despair.

10. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 14. Thomas Aquinas (Anton C. Pegis ed.) (1997), *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas Volume One*, Indianapolis, Hackett, p. 416.

11. Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, p. 144. Mavrodes also writes, '[The doctrine according to which God's knowledge is discursive] has not been popular among Christian philosophers and theologians. I can think of no one who has positively defended this doctrine, and several seem to have explicitly denied it'. George I. Mavrodes (1988), 'How Does God Know the Things He Knows', in Thomas V. Morris ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, pp. 345–361, see especially p. 346.

and despair just as they are.

Thus, even if Alter can prove that *in principle* God can know discursively what fear, frustration and despair are, which, by itself, seems extremely difficult to do, that does not satisfy most Judaeo-Christian theists. Alter's second objection is not successful.

4 Alter's Third Objection

Alter's final objection to the antitheist argument is the following. Again, because of His omnipotence, God might not be able to experience fear, frustration and despair. However, He can come fully to comprehend the concepts *fear*, *frustration* and *despair* by creating false memory traces of relevant experiences. In order to motivate his claim Alter invites us to imagine the following scenario (p. 54). Suppose that I have never seen red, but one night, while I am asleep, a neurosurgeon operates on my brain so that it is in the state it would have been, had I seen red. Then, thanks to this false memory trace created by the neurosurgeon I know exactly what it is like to see red without actually having experienced red. Similarly, Alter contends, God can come fully to understand the concepts *fear*, *frustration* and *despair* by creating a false memory trace of relevant experiences for Himself without actually having those experiences.

Again, there are a number of problems with this objection. The first, obvious problem is that the case of false memory trace makes sense only if the agent at issue has a physical body, because the case of false memory trace is based on the assumption that one's mental states are at least correlated with her/his physical states; in particular, brain states. However, according to traditional Judaeo-Christian theism God is incorporeal. That is, unlike us, God does not have relevant physical states at all.¹² The above brain surgery case is plausible because we can suppose that counterfactually, I have seen red and that a neurosurgeon can, in principle, bring about the brain state that I would have been in had I seen red by operating on my brain. However, in the case of God, opponents of the antitheist argument, like Alter, are not allowed simply to make a parallel supposition that counterfactually, God has been in fear, frustration and despair; because that is the very thesis that the antitheist argument denies. Stipulating this thesis begs the question against the antitheist argument.

At this point one might contend that Alter is not suggesting that God creates false memory trace in the way neurosurgeon creates it, but merely that the conceivability of our false memory trace case opens up a possibility that God can also comprehend fully the concept *fear*, *frustration* and *despair* without having relevant experiences. However, rejecting the antitheist argument in this way is very weak. For this is equivalent to rejecting, on the grounds of mere speculation, the thesis of concept empiricism on which the antitheist argument is based, without

12. One might argue that this is not a problem for theists because God can incarnate. However, it is still difficult to think that God's incarnation is a *necessary condition* for His full understanding of such concepts as *fear*, *frustration* and *despair*. Even if God can know, in principle, what fear, frustration and despair are by incarnating that cannot be the way He in fact comes to know them.

specifying exactly *how* God can fully comprehend the concepts with no relevant experiences.

Second, having a false memory trace seems to entail having a false belief about a past experience, but it is widely agreed that God does not have false beliefs.¹³ The thrust of the doctrine of divine omniscience is that God knows, roughly speaking, everything (or everything knowable). However, it is important to note that this doctrine comes with the proviso that God does not have false beliefs. If God is omniscient then surely it has to be the case that He has such a true belief as, say, a triangle is three-sided, but it also has to be the case that God does not have such a *false* belief as, say, a triangle is five-sided; for otherwise God would have such an inconsistent belief as that a triangle is both three-sided and *not* three-sided. Hence, it is a mistake to think that God has a number of false beliefs about past experiences for the purpose of possessing concepts like *fear*, *frustration* and *despair*. Alter's third objection is, again, unsuccessful.

One might reject my objection by claiming that Alter's argument does not require God to have false beliefs about His past experiences, for it is perfectly possible that while God has false memory traces regarding His past experiences He nevertheless knows that they are *false*.¹⁴ There are two points to be made here. First, even if God is aware that His memory traces are false it does not follow that God does not have false beliefs on which false memory traces are based. For having false beliefs is one thing and knowing that these beliefs are false is another thing. One can believe falsely that *p* while knowing that *p* is false. Second, moreover, it is not entirely clear that one can have false memory traces without having a single false belief. In order to vindicate Alter's third objection, one needs to show that false memory traces do not involve false beliefs at all.

5 Conclusion

Alter argues that his objections 'are consistent with the principal divine attributes' (pp. 47, 48). However, I have shown the contrary. His first objection is inconsistent with the doctrines of divine impassibility and divine independence. His second objection is inconsistent with the doctrine of divine omniscience. His third objection is inconsistent with the doctrines of divine incorporeality and divine omniscience.

The simplest way for Alter to undercut my criticisms is to reject those doctrines. However, given that they have widely been accepted among Judaeo-Christian theists for hundreds of years, or more, Alter faces an uphill struggle.¹⁵

13. For instance, Patrick Grim contends that the following simple definition of omniscience is insufficient because it allows God to have 'any number of *false* beliefs': *x* is omniscient =df for all *p*, *p* is true IFF *x* knows that *p*. Patrick Grim (1983), 'Some Neglected Problems of Omniscience', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, 265–276. See especially p. 265. Similarly, Richard Gale defines an omniscient being as one 'who knows all and believes only true propositions'. Richard M. Gale (1991), *On the Nature of Existence of God*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 57.

14. In fact Alter himself writes, '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-experience' (p. 54).

15. I would like to thank Torin Alter, William Hasker, Daniel Stoljar and an anonymous referee for *Ars Disputandi* for their helpful comments.