Defining Omniscience: A Feminist Perspective

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In contemporary philosophy of religion, the doctrine of omniscience is typically rendered propositionally, as the claim that God knows all true propositions (and believes none that are false). But feminist work makes clear what even the analytic tradition sometimes confesses, namely, that propositional knowledge is quite limited in scope. The adequacy of propositional conceptions of omniscience is therefore in question. This paper draws on the work of feminist epistemologists to articulate alternative renderings of omniscience which remedy the deficiencies of the traditional formulation.

In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, the doctrine of omniscience is typically rendered propositionally as the claim that God knows all true propositions (and believes none that are false). There has been some tinkering with it as of late over concerns about *de re* and *de se* belief and knowledge, but the definition has by-and-large remained unchanged. Those who argue that this whole way of thinking about knowledge (and God’s knowledge in particular) is mostly or entirely wrong-headed are few and far between. And neither William Alston’s ‘intuitive’ model of omniscience nor Linda Zagzebski’s provocative remarks on divine ‘omnisubjectivity’ have gained, to my knowledge, any substantial traction in the literature.¹

The problems with the propositional version of the doctrine are real, however, and my aim in this paper is accordingly to further the case of the revisionist camp. Because particular formulations of the doctrine of omniscience can only start from particular accounts of ‘good knowing,’ an exploration of contemporary work in feminist epistemology, which forcefully challenges the heavily propositional focus of traditional analytic epistemology, may suggest fruitful alternatives for revising our understanding of God’s all-encompassing knowledge. I highlight three developments in feminist work that suggest different metaphors for divine knowledge. These insights can be synthesized, I shall argue, if we imaginatively reconnect omniscience with omnipresence. Some implications of this view are explored at the end of the essay.

As always, the purpose of revision can never be revision for revision’s sake. It must rather be revision for the sake of greater faithfulness to the

I

A central thesis of this essay is that the usual renderings of omniscience get things precisely backwards, starting with the propositions God supposedly knows, and only later (if at all), getting to the world described by those propositions, rather than the other way around. What better way to call attention to this oddity than with a brisk walk through some representative samples from the literature?

As *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* has it defined under ‘divine attributes,’ “Omniscience is unlimited knowledge. According to the most straightforward account, omniscience is knowledge of all true propositions.” In *Reason and Religious Belief*, the authors suggest that “The most immediately obvious way of expressing God’s omniscience is to say that God knows everything—or better (since only true propositions can be known), that God knows all true propositions.” Paul Helseth’s account is similar: “God’s knowledge is exhaustive . . . because he knows all true propositions about everything that has been, is, and will be, and he does so in a manner that extends to the minutiae of past, present, and future reality.” In John Martin Fischer’s words, “God is taken to be omniscient. A person is omniscient just in case he believes all and only true propositions.” Edward Wierenga’s definition is similar: “A being x is omniscient = df For every proposition p, if p is true then x knows p.” For Anthony Kenny, this is just common sense: “The doctrine of omniscience is easy to formulate precisely: it is the doctrine that for all p, if p, then God knows that p.” William Lane Craig thinks this is a bit too quick, and prefers: “S is omniscient = df For all p, if p, S knows that p and does not believe that ~p.” Thus, David Basinger summarizes the consensus nicely: “To say that God is omniscient, most philosophers and theologians agree, is to say that he knows all true propositions and none that are false.”

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What does this barrage of exclusively propositional renderings of omniscience tell us? Quite simply, that insofar as we ascribe to God only that which we find praiseworthy, propositional formulations of omniscience reflect the idealization of propositional knowledge in analytic epistemology. “It would be fatuously unjustified at best, and blasphemous at worst to attribute to [God] some second-rate mode of knowledge.”10 Indeed. The corollary is of course that, as our best understanding of ‘good knowledge’ evolves, so too should our conception of omniscience.

II

There have been cracks in the foundation of the reductively propositional edifice from very early on, even if many have not found them to be threatening. Ludwig Wittgenstein for instance, once a pupil of one of the great godfathers of analytic philosophy, Bertrand Russell, offers the following caution. “When philosophers use a word—‘knowledge,’ ‘being,’ ‘object,’ ‘I,’ ‘proposition,’ ‘name’—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home?”11 His (well-founded) fear is that the systematic search for necessary and sufficient conditions may lead to philosophical myopia. The safeguard against such a condition can only be to remain attentive to the pluriformity of language. “Compare knowing and saying,” he says, “how many feet high Mont Blanc is; how the word ‘game’ is used; how a clarinet sounds. If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third.”12 His point, put simply, is that we commonly call ‘knowledge’ far more than what passes as such in philosophical circles (where it is assumed that what is known can be said—that knowledge is propositional). As a result, the philosopher must either argue that common attributions of knowledge are incorrect (or perhaps ‘merely analogous’) or that the assumed philosophical ‘analysis’ of knowledge has been near-sighted.

Likewise, Frank Jackson’s famous ‘Mary the neuroscientist’ thought-experiment highlights dimensions of what we commonly call knowledge that disappear from propositional accounts. Mary, to review, is a specialist in the neurophysiology of vision who works in a black and white room and investigates the world via a black and white television monitor. In spite of her constraints, she acquires ‘all the physical information’ about color perception. She knows, in other words, the truth-value of all propositions concerning human color perception. “What will happen,” wonders Jackson, “when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a colour television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? It seems

10Alston, “Does God Have Beliefs?” p. 298.
12Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §78.
just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it.”

His point is straightforward: even though Mary in one sense ‘knows all the facts’ about color perception before seeing (say) the color red, in an important sense, she also learns a new fact when she sees red for the first time. Without the experience of red, her knowledge about the human brain’s response to ‘red’ electro-magnetic wavelengths is incomplete. Or, we might say, she knows all the propositions, but doesn’t know everything there is to know.

If propositional analyses of knowledge fail to capture the full scope of human knowings, the question arises as to whether previous extrapolations to a doctrine of divine knowing might not also be problematic. The forms of knowledge mentioned briefly above are sometimes bracketed in traditional epistemology as concerning (merely) ‘procedural knowledge’ or ‘knowledge by acquaintance.’ But some disturbances have nevertheless made their way over to the philosophy of religion, focused rather technically on questions of whether knowledge $de$ $re$ (concerning a thing) and knowledge $de$ $se$ (concerning oneself, in the first person) can be reduced to knowledge $de$ $dicto$ (concerning a proposition).

For human beings, knowledge $de$ $dicto$ need not imply knowledge $de$ $re$, and vice-versa. One may know, for example, that the fat man in the doorway is a spy without knowing that the provost of the University is a spy, even though the fat man in the doorway is in fact the provost of the University (in this case one knows of the fat man, and thus of the provost, that he is a spy—knowledge $de$ $re$—without knowing that ‘the provost is a spy’—knowledge $de$ $dicto$).

Likewise, one may know that one ought to avoid poison ivy without knowing that one ought to avoid this plant here (knowledge $de$ $dicto$ but not $de$ $re$).

With respect to God’s knowledge, however, the consensus seems to be that this distinction is of little import. For Wierenga, knowledge $de$ $re$ is a species of knowledge $de$ $dicto$, which means that if God “knows all true propositions, then he will have all the $de$ $re$ knowledge there is.”

Kvanvig similarly argues that “the distinction between $de$ $re$ and $de$ $dicto$ beliefs does not present a problem for . . . the traditional account of omniscience.” For either belief $de$ $re$ is reducible to belief $de$ $dicto$, in which case there is no problem with the traditional account, or belief $de$ $re$ is not straightforwardly reducible to belief $de$ $dicto$, but there will nevertheless be nothing


\[\text{Zagzebski likewise uses Jackson’s argument to draw out deficiencies in an exclusively propositional rendering of omniscience in her essay on divine “Omnisubjectivity.”}\]

\[\text{The example comes from Wierenga, }\text{The Nature of God, pp. 41–45}\text{ (and there seems in part inspired by W. V. O. Quine).}\]

\[\text{Wierenga, }\text{The Nature of God, p. 45.}\]

\[\text{Jonathan L. Kvanvig, }\text{The Possibility of an All-Knowing God [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986], p. 46.}\]
lacking in the belief de dicto that is present in the belief de re.\textsuperscript{18} Because Kvanvig takes knowledge to be justified true belief, the criterion of justification ensures an appropriate measure of ‘epistemic intimacy’ with (at least parts of) the object of knowledge in the assertion of God’s knowing all true propositions. (Though any exploration of what divine epistemic intimacy with the world might look like is lacking.)\textsuperscript{19}

Regarding knowledge de se, the concern is over propositions like “Daniel is thinking” and “I am thinking,” and whether they are different or the same (i.e., it is a puzzle concerning indexicals).\textsuperscript{20} For while God surely knows the former, it is controversial whether or not God knows the latter. If God fails to know that “I am thinking,” then does this call into question propositional renderings of omniscience? The shortest answer is typically the preferred one—namely, that if the propositions are actually different, omniscience does not require God to know the latter (“I am thinking”). And if they ultimately express the same proposition, then the question does not arise in the first place.\textsuperscript{21}

Through these and a variety of other maneuvers, the traditional propositional formulation of omniscience has been defended. Rather than quibble over details of the various defenses, my goal here is to take a step back, and to see whether the propositional account is worth defending in the first place. Has our understanding of ‘good’ or ‘perfect’ knowing evolved sufficiently that exclusively propositional renderings of omniscience have been superceded? I submit that this is so, and turn in what follows to recent work in feminist epistemology to make my case.

\textit{III}

Before moving on, however, I should note my fundamental assumption, already hinted at above. This assumption is simply that the doctrine of omniscience is formulated in such a way as to ascribe only the ‘best’ kind of knowledge to God. The form of knowledge taken to be paradigmatic or ‘best’ is inevitably tied to contingent historical and material circumstances, and understandably varies over time. This is not to say that all such accounts are equal, but only that change and progress are possible with increased attentiveness to the kinds of knowings from which current formulations of omniscience are derived. Alston’s turn to an ‘intuitive’ model of omniscience clearly follows this type of logic. Direct awareness of all facts, he argues, though it is “too high an aspiration for our [human]
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condition,” nevertheless “represents the fullest and most perfect realization of the cognitive ideal.”

From this he concludes that only this kind of knowing is properly ascribed to God. In a similar kind of move, Charles Taliaferro argues that omniscience should be reconnected with omnipotence, for “Traditionally the notion of God’s omniscience was conceived of as the exercise of God’s omnipotent power.”

The doctrine of God’s omniscience, then, is best thought of as “the claim that it is metaphysically impossible for there to be a being with greater cognitive power.”

This insight has been lost, Taliaferro says, “owing to the tendency of contemporary philosophical theology to analyze the different divine attributes in a piecemeal fashion.”

In a sense, these deviations from the propositional formulation of omniscience represent a search for more adequate metaphors for God as ‘perfect knower.’ Here, as elsewhere, the truth of Mark Johnson’s dictum that “philosophy is metaphor” is apparent. The mode of God’s knowing is not beamed down to us on a ray of light; rather, we conceptualize that knowing, as best we can, on analogy with human knowing—with the caveat, of course, that ‘we see through a glass darkly.’ The negative, critical moment of feminist work in epistemology lies in the contention that propositional ideals of human knowledge are a philosophical codification of the purportedly ‘scientific’ (and thus, in its historical origins, all-male) preference for textbook knowledge, to the exclusion of alternative knowings.

Thus, the positive, reconstructive moment of feminist work recovers forms of knowledge marginalized and maligned in traditional epistemology. If

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24 Taliaferro, “Divine Cognitive Power,” p. 135. (He adds also the condition that this maximal cognitive power be fully actualized.) Craig rejects Taliaferro’s proposal on rather strange grounds. Omniscience, he says, “means simply knowledge of all things and has no intrinsic connection with power” (Craig, Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom, p. 10). This strikes me more as assertion than argument.

25 Ibid., p. 135.

26 Mark Johnson, “Philosophy’s Debt to Metaphor,” in The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought, ed. R. W. Gibbs, Jr. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 44. His claim, which seems right to me, is that “Philosophical theories, like all theoretical constructions, are elaborations of conceptual metaphors.”

27 For a compelling historical example and analysis, see Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff, “Are ‘Old Wives’ Tales’ Justified?” in Feminist Epistemologies, ed. L. Alcoff and E. Potter (London: Routledge, 1993). They chronicle “the triumph of propositional knowledge over practical knowledge” (p. 223) in the Western world during the rise of the all-male universities. The dismissal of midwives’ practical knowledge as mere “old wives’ tales” in the beginnings of modern medicine was problematic to say the least (and historically lethal on a number of fronts). Those disinclined to believe in a connection between the idealization of propositions in epistemology and the social idealization of ‘textbook knowledge’ may benefit from meditating on how natural it is for Plantinga to speak about ‘books’ of propositions describing worlds (Alvin Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity [New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], p. 45ff). The point is not to put the blame for the epistemic marginalization of women on philosophers, but rather to re-emphasize the dialogical relationship between philosophy and popular culture. Patriarchy and prejudice flow too easily from one to the other.
these alternatives are more adequate in their description of human knowledge, perhaps they can inspire better metaphors for divine knowledge as well. I shall argue, then, that feminist work has the potential to free us from the mental image of omniscience as “the deity reading off all the propositions about the world in his mental encyclopedia.”

IV

In her “Taking Subjectivity into Account,” Lorraine Code critiques what she calls traditional ‘S knows that p’ epistemologies. The critique is directed both at the propositional focus of these epistemologies (where propositional knowledge is taken as the paradigm for knowledge as such) and at the assumption encouraged by the symbolic codification of subjectivity (the particular knower becomes merely ‘S’), namely, that knowers are interchangeable. Both dimensions merit careful attention, although I focus in what follows only on the former.

Code argues, “If epistemologists require paradigms or other less formal exemplary knowledge claims, knowing other people in personal relationships is at least as worthy a contender as knowledge of everyday objects.” That is, in taking the ‘S knows that p’ model of knowledge as their paradigmatic instance of human knowing, traditional epistemologies make primary the knowledge of objects one ‘comes across’—knowledge of “cups, spoons, chairs, trees, and flowers”—things we mostly know facts about. But, though this is clearly one important form of human knowing, it is not obviously emblematic of knowledge as such. “[W]hen one considers how basic and crucial knowing other people is in the production of human subjectivity, paradigms and objectivity take on a different aspect.” For a child “learns to respond cognitively to the people who are a vital part of and provide access to her or his environment long before she or he can recognize the simplest physical objects.” Code’s point is that the form of knowledge emphasized in traditional epistemologies presupposes the knowing subject’s pre-existing healthy knowledge of other people—of whom to trust, whom to listen to, whom to obey, and so forth (children learn about trees and cups and tables from the adults with whom they are already in relationship, and on whom they have been epistemically dependent all along).

31Ibid.
32The first lines of Robert Audi’s introduction to his epistemology textbook provide a telling example: “Before me is a grassy field. It has a line of trees at its far edge and is punctuated by a spruce on its left side and a maple on its right. . . . I reach for a tall glass of iced tea, still cold to the touch and flavored by fresh mint” (Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge, 2nd edition [New York: Routledge, 2003], p. 1).
She suggests, as a result, that we explore what we might call ‘S knows S’ epistemologies. Knowledge of other persons, after all, appears to be more basic and more all-encompassing than mere propositional knowledge. One “can know that Alice is clever and not know her very well at all in a ‘thicker’ sense. Knowing ‘facts’ (the standard S-knows-that-\( p \) substitutions) is part of such knowing, but the knowledge involved is more than and different from its propositional parts.”34

Consider what an application of such ‘knowing other persons’ epistemologies might look like in the philosophy of religion. In the introduction to his The Possibility of an All-Knowing God, Jonathan Kvanvig motivates the doctrine of omniscience by quoting Psalm 139:1–4, as follows.

O Lord, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O Lord. (NIV)

In this text, Kvanvig argues, “it is difficult to avoid seeing a clear statement . . . that God knows all there is to know.”35 And yet in spite of the multiplicity of knowledges ascribed to God in this psalm, which clearly transcend the merely propositional, Kvanvig is “convinced that [the traditional] construal remains the proper construal of the doctrine.”36 Might not Code’s knowing-other-persons model help retain the richness of the psalmist’s praise? For God is not said to know propositions about the psalmist; she is said to know the psalmist. God is ‘familiar with’ all the psalmist’s ways—a locution intelligible if God’s knowledge is of the psalmist, but which is obscured when it is reduced to knowledge of propositions about him. Further, the dynamic of immanence and transcendence present in the text (‘you have searched me,’ ‘you perceive my thoughts from afar’) is erased and flattened—to the benefit of simple transcendence—when God’s thorough knowledge of the psalmist is reduced to knowledge of ‘facts’ about him. In brief, propositional reductions of omniscience effect a rejection of immanent metaphors for God, a rejection which can be undone by deploying Code’s ‘knowing other persons’ model for knowledge.

Another resource for revitalizing the doctrine of divine omniscience in response to its propositional reductions comes from the work of Vrinda

34Ibid., p. 34. This should not be thought of as knowledge de re, unless the latter is taken in its dimension of ‘epistemic immediacy.’ Even then, however, knowledge of another person seems to differ substantially in nature from knowledge of an inanimate object. Notice also that, in one’s knowledge of a person, it is very difficult to separate the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of knowledge.

35Kvanvig, The Possibility of an All-Knowing God, p. ix.

36Ibid., p. xii.
Dalmiya. In expanding on the work of Ernest Sosa, Alvin Goldman and Linda Zagzebski in virtue epistemology, Dalmiya emphasizes the centrality of care both in the process of inquiry and as a characteristic of the inquirer. “The heart of the cognitive moment,” she argues, “lies in selflessness (what is sometimes termed ‘objectivity’)—where we, along with our biases and expectations, recede so that the object of knowledge can present itself. Reflection and inquiry,” on her view, “are a constant examination of whether this submission to the object is complete.” The notion of submission to the object of knowledge here is crucial, for it points to the centrality of the acknowledgment of the otherness of the object of knowledge (person or thing) essential to knowing the other as it, she, or he is. The significance of emphasizing care in epistemic exchanges lies in the affirmation of the object of knowledge’s autonomy from the knowing subject. It must be approached and known as other.

The affirmation of the known’s independence from the knower should not be taken as the claim that true knowledge is possible only with a total erasure of the knowing subject, for this is of course not possible (nor does it seem desirable). Just as it is a mistake to require the object of knowledge’s conformity to the knower in the production of knowledge, so also it would be a mistake to require the knower’s total conformity to the object of knowledge. Rather, knowledge is produced at the intersection of subject and object. Attentive to this connection, Dalmiya argues that “Caring as an adjective of the knower is relevant for all knowledge because it signals an effort necessary for both knowledge of things and of selves.” This effort, this caring about knowing the object of knowledge as it is, or ‘care-knowing’ of the object, is lost on accounts of omniscience which encourage portrayals of God as reading off a list of facts about us. In the struggle against “quintessential embodiment[s] of the solitary ruling male ego, above the fray,” Dalmiya’s emphasis on care-knowing motivates a picture of God as engaged with the objects of her knowledge, in an engagement that neither overwhelms nor reduces them. (Thus, instead of saying, as Alston does, that “The state of knowledge is constituted by the presence of the fact known [to the knower],” the point is perhaps better put as ‘knowledge is constituted in and by presence of the knower to the person or thing known.’)

A final resource to which we will look for the task laid out lies in Alison Jaggar’s recovery of the cognitive dimensions of emotion. She contends that, in its various redefinitions of rationality, modernity simultaneously effected a redefinition of emotion. Thus emotions, because they were not ‘reason’ (ever the pinnacle of stability, certitude and cognitive

38Dalmiya, “Why Should a Knower Care?” p. 47.
perfection), were portrayed “as non-rational and often irrational urges that regularly swept the body, rather as a storm sweeps over the land,” and as ‘passions’ “imposed upon an individual, something she suffered rather than something she did.”41 The epistemological consequence of this construction, she notes, is a thoroughgoing mistrust of affectivity. The feminist recovery and reconstruction of rationality thus requires a reconstruction of emotion as well, particularly in its cognitive and epistemic aspects.

“Just as values presuppose emotions,” Jaggar argues, “so emotions presuppose values”42— the two are conceptually connected (she points us to emotional-evaluative terms to illustrate this connection: ‘desirable,’ ‘admirable,’ ‘contemptible,’ ‘despicable,’ ‘respectable,’ and so on”).43 Thus, if we take seriously a valuing of beauty, goodness, and justice, then we may not speak of ‘seeing’ or ‘knowing’ these in the world apart from emotional engagement. Your knowledge that a friend of yours is kind, for example, is part and parcel of your being emotionally disposed toward him in a particular way. Your knowledge that a military group or corporation has perpetrated an injustice is, again, part and parcel of the indignation, anger, and action it elicits from you (here again we see the intersection of knower and known).44 And so, “rather than repressing emotion in epistemology it is necessary to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and construct conceptual models that demonstrate the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between [them].”45

The implications of Jaggar’s work for the doctrine of omniscience are, I hope, fairly clear. Traditional propositional construals of God’s knowledge say nothing about God’s emotional engagement with her Creation. “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt,” reads the account of the Exodus; “Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians” (Exodus 2:7–8, NRSV). The compassion of God, which plays such a central role in the Exodus story, disappears in propositional renderings of God’s knowledge. “I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from me” (Hosea 5:3, NRSV) — “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1, NRSV). Jaggar’s emphasis on the interconnectedness of knowledge and emotion, I submit, helps us to make sense of these affirmations in a way traditional formulations of omniscience never could.

43 Ibid., p. 160.
44 Jaggar is careful to note that “Although our emotions are epistemologically indispensable, they are not epistemologically indisputable” (p. 169). That is, just as with our other epistemic faculties, proper training and habituation are crucial in the accurate and veridical functioning of human emotion.
V

Drawing from the work of Code, Dalmiya and Jaggar, I have suggested that an epistemology centered around knowing persons, caring for the object of knowledge as autonomous other, and knowing both with ‘heart’ and ‘head’ might inform alternative renderings of the doctrine of omniscience, renderings which avoid the pitfalls of the traditional propositional formulation. The time has come to explore a possible synthesis of these insights.

I hinted above at the idea that propositional formulations of omniscience suppress metaphors of immanence for divine being and divine knowing. While the central importance of God’s transcendence must be affirmed, that affirmation must be balanced. These two dimensions of divine being and acting should not be dichotomized in an either/or. The proper approach is both/and. For this reason, I propose to remedy the deficiencies of the traditional definition of omniscience by grounding omniscience in omnipresence.

Elizabeth Johnson notes that “To even the casual observer it is obvious that the Christian community ordinarily speaks about God on the model of the ruling male human being.” Propositional versions of omniscience support this model by isolating God in metaphor from the interpersonal, other-respecting and affective dimensions of knowledge. The cumulative effect of these isolations is a split between God’s epistemic access to Creation and God’s providential activity in Creation (which appears quite odd in light of the tradition’s emphasis on divine simplicity). Better resources for ‘naming towards God,’ then, are provided when we imaginatively reconnect God’s knowledge and presence. God knows all, on this model, because she is present in all.

E. J. Khamara has addressed (and dismissed) models of omniscience which portray God as an ‘omniperceiver’—an idea akin to the one just suggested—in his “Eternity and Omniscience.” He argues for the conceptual independence of omniscience from affirmations of divine presence in space or time, and suggests that a ‘perceptual’ model of omniscience is “inappropriate because it assimilate[s] God’s knowledge of his own creation to that of a mere spectator.” However, it is unclear to me how a propositional conception of omniscience fully deflects this charge. More to the point, Khamara’s rejection of ‘mere’ perception presupposes and requires a sharp distinction between sensing (conceived as a form of passivity) and cognizing (conceived as a form of activity). But just as human cognition does not occur in a realm of Platonic Forms and human

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46 Johnson, She Who Is, p. 33.
49 Ibid., p. 209.
50 Ibid., p. 216.
sensing does not entail pure passivity, so also there is no need to imagine
divine cognition of the world occurring apart from providential activity,
and yes, ‘experience,’ in the world.\footnote{For more on this theme, see Zagzebski’s “Omnisubjectivity” on God’s ‘perfect total empathy.’} Because Khamara endorses a sharp
distinction between rational knowing and perceiving, God of course cannot be ‘just’ a perceiver. But on this point, Jaggar helpfully reminds us of
the “necessity for and interdependence of faculties that our culture has
abstracted and separated from each other: emotion and reason, evaluation
and perception, observation and action.”\footnote{Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” p. 171.}

The crux of the matter, I submit, is the traditional model’s unwilling-
ness to grant the important point that veridical knowledge of a person
or object requires the would-be knower’s openness to and engagement
with said person or object. This is true for human beings. It’s unclear
why it shouldn’t be true for God as well. Exclusively propositional ac-
counts struggle with this real-world meshing of the ‘content’ and mode
of knowledge. By artificially isolating the ‘what’ from the ‘how,’ and by
sweeping the ‘how’ under the rug (or ignoring it altogether), we estab-
lish God’s epistemic independence from the world; but the cost of such
a move is high, and the resulting picture rather problematic. Is not the
scandal of Creation \textit{ex nihilo} precisely the mystery that God would cre-
ate a world that is not-God, and that she would therefore have to \textit{relate}
to it—be epistemically dependent on it—as \textit{other}? Against the epistemic
and providential ‘monergism’ urged upon us by the tradition, I propose a
metaphor of epistemic and providential \textit{synergism}, one in which we work
alongside of and are known by God, just as she works alongside of and is
known by human beings.\footnote{One of the referees pointed out that “a sizable number of philosophers who define omni-
science propositionally don’t reject immanent metaphors of God, don’t deny God’s emo-
tional engagement with her Creation, don’t believe God to be in total control, and/or do
believe that we work alongside of God and that God is in a relationship of interdependence
with us.” Quite so. The key question is whether or not these philosophers’ acceptance of
propositional definitions of omniscience is in line with their preferred model for God. In
light of their synergism, I submit that they would be more consistent to reject (or suitably
qualify) such definitions.}

\textbf{VI}

Before bringing this essay to a close, it may be well worth addressing two
objections that have not been dealt with in the foregoing. The first objec-
tion I need to address concerns the question of precision in philosophical
inquiry. Does my analysis not strip the philosopher of religion of his or
her tools for progress on the philosophical and theological puzzles sur-
rounding divine knowledge? How can one be precise with metaphors like
‘knowing other persons,’ ‘care-knowing,’ or ‘emotionally engaging with
the object of knowledge’?
For my answer to this question, I can afford to be brief. In the timeless words of Aristotle, “Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions.” I am suggesting, in other words, that the ‘precision’ of traditional propositional renderings of omniscience is an artificial precision; and, at the end of the day, artificial precision is imprecision. Thus we ought to return to the rough ground(s) of Scripture, reason and experience (and in particular to the interpreted experience of women and other marginalized persons), which provides a helpful corrective to a tradition that has become partially calcified in its insistence on imagining God in only one way. This is not a call to imprecise thinking, but rather a simple reminder of our limited ability to pin down, once and for all, our great Mother and Maker.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, have I made the elementary mistake of confusing propositions with sentences? For while sentences may be ‘secondary,’ and inessential to knowledge as such, what is meant by ‘proposition’ is the deep world-matching structure of a coherent sentence. And surely God must know this!

I do not know if I have confused sentences and propositions because it is unclear to me whether or not propositions can be divorced from the world they describe. If propositions are ‘necessary beings’ as Plantinga and Craig believe, then the dubious ontology is well worth rejecting. Why imagine God’s knowledge of the world as mediated through pre-existent propositions in the first place? If on the other hand propositions are just ‘states of affairs’ (or perhaps, even more vaguely, ‘facts’), then propositional formulations of omniscience may be bland but perhaps adequate or useful ways of describing God’s all-encompassing knowledge.

For Taliaferro, omniscience needs to be reconnected to omnipotence. We need, on his view, to recover the metaphor of ‘cognitive power.’ But if the foregoing is of any worth, then good knowledge requires not just that a knower be cognitively well-endowed, but rather also and especially that that knower be in relationship. We know best in relationship, and it would be a shame to drop that insight when articulating conceptions of God’s knowledge. As Charles Taylor notes, contemporary epistemological theories “are framed as theories elaborated by an observer about an object observed but not participated in.” The more fundamental recovery to be made then, in my estimation, is less the connection between knowledge and power than it is the connection between knowledge and presence.

Though I believe this move is a fruitful one, it might appear dangerous to some. If the all-knowing God’s object of knowledge is not ‘books’ of propositions but rather the world itself and the people in it, how then do we maintain traditional conceptions of providence? For these precisely


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seem to require some secret, mysterious, or transcendent knowledge in God, such that the world-historical process is, in spite of appearances, ‘risk-free’ from her perspective. In short, I do not believe a formulation of omniscience revised in the way that I have proposed can ultimately be reconciled with so-called ‘meticulous’ conceptions of providential control. Neither Alston nor Zagzebski would follow me on this point, to be sure, but a growing number of Bible scholars, theologians and philosophers have questioned the biblical grounding, theological viability and philosophical consistency of such traditional notions of providence. The debate, I am sure, will rage on. I simply note this possible implication of my argument for those concerned with how we are to speak of God’s control over the world. Perhaps some will take it as a further argument in favor of risky models of providence, and others still will take it as a counter argument to all of the foregoing. Both options may be justifiable.

My patient reader may wonder if any ‘proper’ definition of omniscience will at this point be given. If I do not define omniscience as God’s knowing all and only true propositions, how do I define it? Taking Wittgenstein’s warning seriously, so far as I can tell, means resisting this urge to make tidy, reductive definitions basic. Such definitions may have a limited place in philosophical inquiry, but if our aim is to give a broad account of omniscience, then it is the psalmist’s delightfully rich and personal ‘definition’ which should be taken as exemplary. “You hem me in,” he says, “behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to

56This kind of logic is clearly at work in Molinism, where God’s foreknowledge of future contingents is made possible by the existence of so-called ‘counterfactuals of freedom’—informatively bivalent propositions about future free choices. On this view, the future (insofar as it is dependent on free choices) is in itself indeterminate because undetermined; propositions about the future, however, are (conveniently) subject to the ‘Law of Bivalence.’ “The future may therefore be regarded as determinate, though not determined” (Craig, Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom, p. 227). Even a non-propositional formulation of Molinist claims, insofar as it would depend on God’s knowledge of individual (unchanging?) ‘essences’ or some such thing, must posit (so far as I can tell) entities—objects of knowledge for God—over and above the physical world, without which the future could not be truthfully regarded as determinate.

57Alston does claim, however, that any part of God’s knowledge about my action as a free agent (for example, what I do at noon today) “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” (Alston, “Does God Have Beliefs?”, 301, my emphasis). Though Alston intends to defend traditional conceptions of God’s exhaustive foreknowledge, calling God’s knowledge ‘trans-temporal,’ I fail to see how this is possible in light of the dependence of God’s knowledge on the actual occurrence of this or that free act (cf. William Hasker, God, Time, and Knowledge [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989], pp. 59–63).

58See, for example, Terence Fretheim’s The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

59See, for example, John Sanders’s The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence, 2nd revised ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007).

60See, for example, Hasker’s God, Time, and Knowledge.

61Cf. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §116, quoted above in section II.
the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Psalm 139:5–8, NIV).

A comment of N. T. Wright’s will do quite nicely in bringing this essay to its conclusion. Truly Christian accounts of knowing, he argues, “should follow the great philosopher Bernard Lonergan and take love as the basic mode of knowing, with the love of God as the highest and fullest sort of knowing that there is, and should work, so to speak, down from there.”

An all-loving God—this is a God who can be said to know all things, all persons, and to be present everywhere. This is a God whose knowledge constitutes a different kind of power from that of the ruling male. This God is vulnerable in her transcendence; this God is empathic in her objectivity; this God is present, though indeed, she is wholly Other. In the arms of the all-loving God, we know and are known. Our hope, then, lies in this. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (I Corinthians 13:12, NRSV).

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