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Is God a Zombie?
Divine Consciousness and Omnipresence

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While nobody will ever know what it may be like to be God, there is a more basic question one may try to answer: does God have phenomenal consciousness, does He have experiences within a conscious point of view? Drawing on recent debates within philosophy of mind, I argue that He doesn't: if God exists, 'He' is not phenomenally conscious, at least in the sense that there is no 'divine subjectivity'. The paper aims at displaying an incompatibility between God's being truly omnipresent on the one hand, and God's having a genuine conscious point of view on the other. This is shown by introducing the concept of 'experiential location' to clarify what shall be meant by 'conscious point of view', then by exposing an inconsistency in the traditional concept of omnipresence, and finally by arguing that a consistent though weaker understanding of omnipresence is incompatible with God's having a conscious point of view. This paves the way for a 'processual' or computational conception of God, which may have its own metaphysical benefit.

Keywords: God, point of view, consciousness, omniscience, omnipresence

> That God is a person, yet one without a body, seems the most elementary claim of theism.
> R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*

> Man never realizes how anthropomorphic he is.
> J. W. von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*

What is it like to be God? This is a strange question, and most of us would humbly acknowledge that it cannot be answered[1]. Yet it is perhaps even stranger to ask *if* God has some genuine form of consciousness at all (under the hypothesis that God exists). Contrary to the former question, the latter only admits two definite answers: 'yes' or 'no'. I will try to show that we may have a reason, however paradoxical it sounds, to favor the negative over the positive answer.

Let us begin by considering the four following premises, which I take to be jointly inconsistent:

(1) *Divine Existence*. God exists.
(2) *Divine consciousness.* If God exists, He has a conscious point of view [POV], the so-called 'divine perspective' (there is, so to speak, 'something it is like' to be God).
(3) *Omnipresence.* If God exists, He is omnipresent.

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(4) *Conscious point of view.* Having a conscious POV entails experiencing a particular part of the world from a particular vantage point.

If God exists (1), then by (2) He has a conscious POV, and a correct understanding of divine omnipresence (3) implies that this POV is not limited to any particular 'standpoint' or 'location', which, as I will show, contradicts the definition of a conscious POV (4). Which premise should we reject? We might reject (1) and conclude that God does not exist. We might reject (2) and conclude that God doesn't have any kind of POV whatsoever, and that He is not phenomenally conscious. We might reject (3) and conclude that God is not omnipresent. Finally, we might reject (4) and conclude that having a conscious POV does not entail being limited to a particular spatiotemporal vantage point. Rejecting (1) seems to be a perfectly legitimate move. However, since I am here merely concerned with the *consequences* of some basic religious beliefs about a monotheistic God, and since we can quite safely take such beliefs to include God's existence, I shall grant that (1) is true for the sake of the argument[2]. I shall therefore consider successively the three remaining possibilities.

I. Phenomenal consciousness, points of view and subjectivity

For the sake of clarity, we may start this analysis with a bit of lexical and conceptual specification. 'Phenomenal consciousness', 'points of view' and 'subjectivity' are three notoriously controversial and ambiguous expressions; moreover, the extent to which their definitions relate to each other is still very debated. I cannot provide an extensive discussion of this matter; however, I shall try to give a concise account of how I think these expressions should indeed be defined and related. The so-called 'subjectivity of experience' is not only a central feature of phenomenal consciousness, but also one of its necessary conditions. One cannot be phenomenally conscious, i.e. consciously experience anything at all, without experiencing it *subjectively*. The very notion of an 'objective experiencer' is a contradiction in terms. However, such a criterion is not very helpful if we don't know what 'subjectivity' really stands for, and this is where the notion of POV comes into play. It is rather unfortunate that most of the literature on the subject does little to clarify what we should mean by 'POV' or 'perspective'[3]. Originally, the notion applies to the phenomenon of visual perception: vision is *perspectival* in the sense that for a scene to be seen, light rays must converge to a small and spatially located physical surface, the retina; consequently, a viewer always has a *limited* field of view: there is no such thing as real 'panoptical' vision. But this is still very different from what an *experiential* POV is; after all, cameras also have a limited field of 'view', even if they don't *experience* its content[4]. But we also use loosely 'POV' or 'perspective' in much broader senses, often in a very metaphorical way: we speak of someone's POV on a political matter to qualify her opinion, and we use the expression more generally to denote someone's personal network of beliefs. As John Biro puts it, "Talk of points of view is, in most ordinary contexts, somewhat metaphorical, and it typically refers to the beliefs, conceptual framework or even values of some subject or group[5]." Most philosophical attempts to give a more technical definition of what a POV is, however, are still a bit vague or rather uninformative. Adrian Moore, for instance, gives the following definition: "By a point of view I shall mean a location in the broadest possible sense. Hence points of view include points in space, points in time, frames of reference, historical and cultural contexts, different roles in personal relationships, points of

involvement of other kinds, and the sensory apparatuses of different species[6]." Rather than narrowing down the semantic extension of the expression, Moore insists on its polysemy for the sake of completeness. I think this strategy fails to get a grip on the specific concept of *experiential* POV, which is, arguably, key to a right understanding of the 'subjectivity of experience' (implicit self-awareness being another important aspect of it). Moore uses the term 'location'; putting the spatio-visual metaphor aside, we may follow his idea of a 'broad sense' of the term by distinguishing two kinds of location: the traditional concept of *physical* (spatiotemporal) location on the one hand, and a more abstract concept of *experiential* location on the other hand.

What is 'experiential location'? As I understand this concept, it may serve to account for a twofold phenomenon. First, experiential location does have a spatiotemporal aspect: a lot of our experiences are indeed *located* in the strict sense of the term (e.g. the pain I feel in my finger, or bodily proprioceptions in general). Moreover, if I perceive a cat on a carpet, I experience the cat as sitting *right there*, at a certain distance, in the present moment. Max Velmans sums up this aspect in the following way:

> "Tactile sensations, pains, and kinaesthetic sensations generally have a location and extension within the body or on the body surface. The sounds we hear and the many objects we see are generally experienced to be out in three-dimensional space. Taken together, our experiences comprise entire three-dimensional, phenomenal worlds, produced by a reflexive interaction of represented events (external or internal to our bodies) with our own perceptual and cognitive processes. Looked at in this way, what we normally think of as being the 'physical world' is *part of* what we experience. It is not *apart from* it[7]."

But there is more to experiential location: it also conveys the peculiar sense of *phenomenological limitedness* that any phenomenal experience has. Indeed, we have an implicit feeling that our experience at a certain time doesn't range over *everything* nor *anything*, so to speak: it is limited – even if its phenomenological boundaries are fuzzy – because the amount of information about the world we can consciously process is itself limited, not to mention the fact that the input for such information is itself constrained by the finite capacity and proximate surrounding of our sensory organs. We may call the 'range' of one's phenomenal experiences, making a further analogy with vision, one's 'field of experience' (FOE). The 'depth' of the FOE may vary considerably depending on the individual's sensory and cognitive abilities, just as someone with impaired or diminished vision has a narrower field of view. Thus the feeling of the FOE's limitedness is an essential feature of experiential location.

These remarks should suffice to give a general idea of what I mean by 'experiential location', and how it ties in with our subject. To have an experiential POV is to be experientially located. Experiential POVs are individuated (a) by the quality of one's phenomenal experiences (i.e. one's *qualia*), and (b) by the 'depth' or 'limitedness' of one's FOE. We may argue that the latter is a structural property of the former, but I shall leave this question open. We now understand that the so-called 'subjectivity of experience' is a broad label, which serves to name in general (i) the fact that one has an experiential POV, and more specifically (ii) one's implicit feeling of mental and bodily self-awareness or sense of 'ownership'. Again, one may believe that (ii) is a necessary consequence of (i), since implicit self-awareness is closely related to one's feeling of the limitedness of one's experiences, but this is beyond our present issue. Lastly, I think that having an experiential POV is a necessary condition of having phenomenal experience.

This will have important consequences: if God is not experientially located, then He lacks a genuine experiential POV, and therefore is not phenomenally conscious (we shall later consider if God can be said to be conscious in some other sense).

We shall now turn to our three premises (2), (3), (4), and see how the concept of experiential location can shed light on their mutual inconsistency.

II. The ineffability of the divine perspective

What can be said of (4)? This is certainly the premise that most theists will want to challenge, since God's POV could be a very special one; indeed, it could be so different from ours that we wouldn't have any way to compare it to what we call a POV from our limited human perspective. This is quite typically what Émilie du Châtelet tells us, in a very Leibnizian fashion, in the following passage from her (relatively unknown) *Treatise on the existence of God*:

> The distinct representation of things is what constitutes understanding: the necessary being who had to represent to himself all the possible worlds before creating this one, is therefore an intelligent being whose understanding is infinite… Since succession is an imperfection tied to finiteness, there is no point of succession in the perceptions of God, who represents to himself all at once every possible world with every possible way they could change. And since there is in our ideas an infinity of confuse things that we cannot distinguish because of their multiplicity, God's ideas of things, being infinitely distinct, are infinitely different from ours – roughly as different as would be our idea of the moon from that of a man who would have lived on this planet for a long time. The way God sees and represents to himself every possible thing is therefore incomprehensible for us; thus we cannot form a distinct idea of divine understanding; it is, like creation, something we cannot possibly understand or negate[8].

According to the Marquise du Châtelet, we cannot hope to gain any knowledge of what it *is* like to be God, since we cannot even imagine, with our finite minds, what it *could* be like. Within our finite human POV (let me call it the 'H-POV'), we cannot gain any insight of God's infinite POV (the 'G-POV'). Fair enough; but does this rule out the possibility of reflecting on *whether or not* God is phenomenally conscious? If so, the argument seems to be the following:

(i) To know if some individual *x* is phenomenally conscious, we have to know what it is like to be *x*, or imagine what it would be like to be *x*.
(ii) We cannot know (nor imagine) what it is like to be God, because our understanding is far too limited.
(iii) Therefore, we cannot know if God is phenomenally conscious.

This argument (let us call it 'ineffability of the divine perspective', or IDP) is obviously question-begging: it is trivially true that we cannot know what it is like to be *x* if there is nothing it is like to be *x*. For instance, we cannot know what it is like to be a stone; but there is a very simple reason for that: stones lack phenomenal experiences[9]. If God is some sort of immaterial stone with very special properties[10], there is no mystery behind the fact that we cannot, *as a matter of fact*, know what it would be like to be Him.

Of course, even if this is the case, we are no more capable of *proving* that God lacks phenomenal consciousness than we are of proving that stones lack it. The former thesis may well be even harder to defend: in the case of stones, we can always argue that we observe a systematic empirical correlation between consciousness and a certain physical structure (let us call it the 'brain structure'), and that stones do not exemplify the brain structure. Moreover, stones do not display the typical behavioral signs displayed by conscious beings: they are completely inert. What about God? I suppose one could argue that even if God does not exemplify the brain structure (being immaterial), He does display behavioral signs of consciousness through 'divine interventions' such as miracles or punishment, not to speak of cases of divine communication found for instance in the *Old Testament*. However I shall set aside all 'scriptural evidence' of God's consciousness, since I'm only concerned, to paraphrase Pascal, with the God of philosophers and scientists rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
Let me briefly come back to IDP. To show its flaws, we could formulate a similar argument about the stone, supposed to demonstrate the ineffability of the stone's perspective (ISP). ISP could run like this:

(i) To know if there is something it is like to be *x*, we have to know what it is like to be *x*, or imagine what it would be like to be *x*.
(ii) We cannot know (nor imagine) what it is like to be this stone, because our understanding is far too different from this stone's.
(iii) Therefore, we cannot know if there is something it is like to this stone.

It is quite obvious that both IDP and ISP presuppose that there is something it is like to be, respectively, God or this stone. It should now be clear that neither the stone's existence nor God's imply this hypothesis. IDP and ISP also both postulate, in their second premise, that our phenomenal consciousness is radically different from, respectively, God's or the stone's. It is true that in God's case, this postulate is grounded in other postulates about divine attributes: an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent POV seems indeed really different from what we call 'consciousness' when we refer to the H-POV. But if we are privately acquainted with our own point of view, which is finite, spatiotemporally and experientially located, there is no way we can make sense of the notion of 'divine perspective' other than anthropomorphically. We simultaneously picture God's eye, so to speak, as seeing everything atemporally and as having a particular point of view – and we get caught in the tangle of our imperfect metaphors. To put it in a nutshell: if our human understanding of the notion of an experiential POV does not fit God because of His alleged attributes, it does not necessarily follow that there is such a mysterious thing as the G-POV, completely impenetrable for us; it might simply mean that the very concept of 'divine perspective' is inconsistent. But before returning to this claim, I shall consider some problems about omnipresence (our third premise).

III. Understanding real omnipresence

When asked what omnipresence means, one may hastily give the following definition:

(i) God is not spatiotemporally located.

But (i) is obviously ambiguous, since it could be interpreted in two ways:

(ii) God does not exist spatiotemporally (*nusquam et numquam*).
(iii) God exists at every time and place (*ubique et semper*).

Let us use 'L' as a relation such that 'L*xy*' means "*x* is spatiotemporally located at *y*" (where *y* can be intuitively thought as a spatiotemporal coordinate) and '*g*' as an individual constant referring to God. Omnipresence is defined by negating the proposition "God is spatiotemporally located" (*Q*). According to (ii), *Q* should be interpreted as '$\exists x$ L*gx*', whereas according to (iii), *Q* should be interpreted as '$\exists x$ (L*gx* & $\forall y$ (L*gy* $\rightarrow$ $x = y$))'. Therefore, (ii) and (iii) may be formalized in the following way[11]:

(ii) $\forall x \neg$L*gx*
(iii) $\forall x$ L*gx*

Since 'omnipresence' literally means the fact of being present everywhere 'at once', to be ubiquitous in both space and time, it appears that (iii) should be the correct definition of omnipresence (let us call it 'spatiotemporal omnilocation') This doesn't mean, as Anselm rightly pointed out in his *Monologion*, that God is *contained* in every place and time, but merely that He is *immaterially present* at every place and time. This choice of words interestingly bears on our issue, for the very notion of 'presence' also has a phenomenological connotation. Indeed, in his own discussion of omnipresence, Thomas Aquinas writes that "[God] is in all things by His presence in all things, inasmuch as all things are bare and open to His eyes" (*Summa Theologiae* I.8.3).

Cognitive scientists and philosophers have written a lot about the perceptual feeling of presence as the peculiar feeling, associated with most perceptions, that some things *are present* – and, correlatively, that I am myself present in the world. According to 'enactivists' such as Alva Noë, real presence is *achieved* in ordinary life through special perceptual and sensorimotor skills, as well as the adequate knowledge of how to use them in relation to one's environment[12]. Does God have such perceptual and sensorimotor skills? Unless He is fully embodied, this seems rather dubious: does it mean anything to say that God literally *moves*, *sees* or has any kind of bodily proprioception? In any case, the cognitive scientists' emphasis on the perceptual feeling of presence should lead us to reconsider our understanding of omnipresence.

Let us recall briefly how most contemporary theists define omnipresence to deal with this issue. At least since Aquinas, it has been commonplace to define omnipresence not by straightforward 'spatiotemporal omnilocation', which raises the problem of embodiment, but in reference to God's unrestricted causal power. God is omnipresent because he acts *everywhere*, at *all time*. This kind of solution is still prominent among theists; as Charles Taliaferro puts it, "Part of what it means for theists to claim that God is everywhere present in the cosmos is for God to know all parts and aspects of the cosmos, and to be able to exercise omnipotent power with respect to all such parts and aspects[13]." Thus God's being omnipresent would involve (a) God being able to exercise His causal power at all spatiotemporal coordinates of the universe, and (b) God knowing what is the case at all spatiotemporal coordinates of the universe. In other words, God's omnipresence would depend on His being omnipotent on the one hand, and omniscient on the other. Let us call this generic view 'supervenient omnipresence', since omnipresence thus construed can be said to superviene on the combination of omnipotence and omniscience.

Supervenient omnipresence. God is omnipotent and omniscient (meaning that His causal power and knowledge range over everything in space and time)

Richard Swinburne imagined a peculiar thought experiment to give an intuitive grip on such a characterization of omnipresence:

> Imagine yourself, for example, gradually ceasing to be affected by alcohol or drugs, your thinking being equally coherent however men mess about with your brain. Imagine too that you cease to feel any pains, aches, and thrills, although you remain aware of what is going on in what has been called your body. You gradually find yourself aware of what is going on in bodies other than your own and other material objects at any place in space—at any rate to the extent of being able to give invariably true answers to questions about these things... You also come to see things from any point of view which you choose, possibly simultaneously, possibly not. You remain able to talk and wave your hands about, but find yourself able to move directly anything which you choose, including the hands of other people… However, although you find yourself gaining these strange powers, you remain otherwise the same—capable of thinking, reasoning, and wanting, hoping and fearing… You would think and reason as men often do in words uttered to yourself. Surely anyone can thus conceive of himself becoming an omnipresent spirit. So it seems logically possible that there be such a being[14].

We can at least make two remarks on such a text. First, the question whether conceivability entails not only logical but *metaphysical* possibility is very controversial[15]. Second, it is far from obvious that one can successfully conceive of oneself as 'becoming omnipresent' in such a way. For instance, one may wonder what it is like to be aware of what is 'going on' in all material objects at any place and time, let alone all POVs. Indeed, it seems that we have no way to genuinely conceive the *phenomenology* of omnipresence (what it feels like to be omnipresent), precisely because we have to way to conceive the phenomenology of omnipotence and omniscience. This, however, doesn't rule out the hypothesis underlying the supervenient omnipresence thesis, i.e. that God is both omnipotent and omniscient. We now have to consider how such a hypothesis may hold.

I shall not directly discuss omnipotence, since it has no direct connection to the problem of phenomenal consciousness; I will focus instead on omniscience, and how it relates to a consistent definition of omnipresence, before going back to the supervenience thesis. Here is a basic definition of this attribute:

Omniscience. God knows everything that was, is, will or could be the case.

One can read this general definition, with Swinburne's text in mind, in two ways – that is according to a restricted or unrestricted interpretation:

Propositional omniscience. God knows every true proposition.

Phenomenal omniscience. God knows every true proposition *and* the (non-propositional) content of every conscious POV.

What kind of omniscience is required for supervenient omnipresence? Is propositional omniscience sufficient, or do we need the stronger claim of phenomenal omniscience? According to Swinburne, an important aspect of God's omnipresence is His ability to 'see' things from any POV, possibly simultaneously, which suggests that he does have in mind something more than mere proposition omniscience. The phenomenal content of consciousness is not propositional: my experience of this rose's redness, i.e. what it is like for me to see this red rose, can't be spelled out propositionally, or at least can't be reduced to propositional knowledge. In order for God to really know what I feel when I see the rose, He has to know more than propositions describing physical facts about my neural processes, such as 'The Z-fiber is stimulated' or 'Neurons α, β, γ are firing' – assuming that physicalism is false. Does God have such knowledge? Drawing on the 'knowledge argument' in philosophy of mind[16], several authors have questioned this in recent years. Their global strategy aims at showing that there are special kinds of facts which, in virtue of their very nature, cannot be known by God, at least if He has such attributes as omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Following Nagasawa[17], we can distinguish the argument from concept possession and the argument from knowledge *de se*.

The argument from concept possession stems from influential discussions about the 'bat argument' of Nagel (*art. cit.*) and the 'Mary argument' of Jackson[18]. It can be generically formulated in the following way:

(1) Knowledge of phenomenal concepts (concepts about *what it is like* to have such and such phenomenal experiences) cannot be implied by knowledge of objective physical facts[19].
(2) Therefore, in order to be really omniscient, God must have all the phenomenal concepts any finite conscious being, such as you and me, may have.
(3) God's acquisition of the phenomenal concept *A* (which he must have in order to be omniscient) contradicts His attribute *Φ*.

Different versions of the argument from concept acquisition can be found in recent literature[20]. The argument from knowledge *de se* stems from the theme of 'the essential indexical' introduced by Perry[21]. Perry suggests the following thought experiment: suppose I am shopping in a supermarket, and come to notice that there is a trail of sugar on the ground; I wonder who is making this mess and start to look angrily for the careless shopper. Suddenly, I realize that *my* bag has a hole through which sugar is leaking, and I utter with astonishment: "I am making the mess!" (*P*). According to Perry, the first-person indexical in *P* is 'essential', meaning that it couldn't be replaced by any non-indexical term *salva fide*. Therefore, *P* expresses a different belief than "RM is making a mess" (*P'*). Accordingly, Grim[22] argues that God couldn't know *P*, but only *P'*.

If knowledge arguments are correct, then *phenomenal omniscience* is impossible and we are left with *propositional omniscience*. But restricting omniscience is not the only way to deal with these arguments within an antireductionist ontology: one could simply claim that those arguments are not sound. Maybe, after all, God *can* know what it is like to have such and such phenomenal experiences or essentially indexical beliefs without violating some of His divine attributes. I will present a few strategies that have been advanced to achieve this goal, and argue that if they successfully solve the issue of the knowledge arguments, we might worry that they undermine the premise (2) about God's

POV. The first strategy consists in giving a mereological account of God's POV, such that all particular subjective POVs are *embedded* in His[23]. William Mander thus writes:

> We may suggest that God knows what it is like to be us because his complete and unlimited perspective on the world includes as one of its part our limited and imperfect perspective on the same[24].

According to Mander, this phenomenal embeddedness would allow God to know all phenomenal concepts – and probably all essentially indexical beliefs, even if Mander does not address explicitly this problem – without having to strictly *have* them: he could know what being afraid is like without having to be afraid. Mander draws this conclusion by appealing to a principle according to which what is attributable to the part is not necessarily attributable to the whole; God does know what I know as part of an embedded POV, but in the infinitely wider and richer context of His total POV this knowledge doesn't require him to *feel* exactly what we, finite beings, feel.

Another strategy, adopted by Linda Zagzebski[25], bases its solution to the knowledge arguments on a special divine attribute entailed by omniscience, 'omnisubjectivity', which is "the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness the first-person perspective of every conscious being." (*art. cit.*, p. 232). This attribute is precisely the target of the divine knowledge arguments, and Zagzebski tries to provide a sound explanation of God's ability to be consistently omnisubjective. According to her, God can truly know what it is like to be me (or anyone) by nothing more than *empathy*; however, divine empathy has to be a perfect empathy (or 'total empathy' as she calls it). She argues that a perfectly empathetic God could be omnisubjective (and thus really omniscient) without falling prey to knowledge arguments:

> When an omnisubjective being acquires a representation of Mary's conscious state of seeing red, he sees red as if he sees through Mary's eyes, but since he is aware of that state as a copy of Mary's state, there is no problem that he would be led to make judgments of the world from his own perspective based on conscious states that are copies of Mary's perspective… I suggest that when God empathizes with a human being's emotion of fear, anger, hatred, or jealousy, God consciously represents each of those emotions from the human's point of view, but since having a copy of an emotion with an intentional object does not include adopting that intentional object as one's own, omnisubjectivity does not have the unwanted consequence that God fears, hates, or is angry at the things we fear, hate, or are angry at. (*Ibid.* pp. 242-43)

If either the 'mereological perspective theory' or the 'total empathy theory' – as we may call them – is correct, then God can have *phenomenal omniscience*. However, even if we grant that both theories solve the knowledge arguments, I think they give an inconsistent view of God's own POV. The mereological perspective theory, roughly stated, conceives God's POV as the maximal mereological sum of all subjective POVs (*plus* the knowledge of all true propositions); to put it in Mander's own words, "we would be parts of God." (Mander, *art. cit.*, p. 442) But how the 'wider' perspective of God interacts with all the embedded perspectives is far from clear, and Mander tries to have it both ways when he states that properties of the parts are not properties of the whole, whereas God can nonetheless fully know phenomenal concepts. Regardless of the concept-acquisition problem and how it bears on omniscience, we need an appropriate account of the divine perspective, giving a sound explanation of how God could be

conscious. There seems to be two possibilities in Mander's proposal: either God's POV is literally the sum of all POVs, and God's consciousness is the 'same-order' consciousness of all POVs; or God's POV *contains* all POVs as parts of its contents, and God's consciousness is some kind of higher-order consciousness. The first case is clearly inconsistent: the very notion of 'same-order consciousness', applied to a myriad of subjective perspectives, makes no sense. Indeed, there can be no such thing as a same-order consciousness of billions of independent subjective POVs, and if we mean by this the streams of consciousness associated with each particular POV, I fail to see how a bundle of streams of consciousness could itself be individually conscious. Mander's choice of words does lean toward the second interpretation, but problems arise as well in this case. First, the very notion of perspectival embeddedness is utterly mysterious and, as far as I am concerned, unintelligible. Second, as Nagasawa rightly pointed out, Mander's metaphors are very misleading[26].

What about the empathy theory? It seems a more seducing option, since it appeals to a very common phenomenon we all are familiar with. It is nonetheless difficult to see exactly how the move from human empathy to total (perfect) empathy is any less mysterious than Mander's idea of nested POVs. Empathy is a special cognitive feature of imagination, by which conscious beings may imperfectly simulate the emotions of another. Zagzebski's idea of a divine 'total empathy' generalizes the usual form of empathy to the simulation of all sorts of mental states. Thus total empathy seems quite close to what social cognitivists call 'mindreading': the capacity of ascribing such and such mental states to another being. Suppose that God is a perfect mind reader, as Zagzebski suggests; this doesn't mean that he could know what it is like to be me. We can grant that he may know, if His imagination is perfect and infinite, what it could be like to experience fear – this would require nothing more for Him than perfectly imagining that He is afraid, for instance when empathizing with a frightened creature. But He wouldn't know in this way what it is like *for the frightened creature* to be afraid. We may have a better understanding of this difficulty by drawing a parallel with cognitive ethology. Cognitive ethologists aim at inferring conclusions about the conscious experiences of living organisms from biological and behavioral observations: they can thus determine to what extent an organism is conscious, but not what it is like for it to be conscious. As Allen and Bekoff put it:

> Even if one cannot know what it is like to be another organism, an empirical investigation of the *distribution* of conscious experience among the members of different species is not ruled out… The ethological objective of understanding the distribution and the biological functions of consciousness can be pursued while remaining neutral about Nagel's pessimistic conclusion. This is because justified belief *that* an experience is conscious is possible even if one does not know *what it is like* to have that experience[27].

If we picture a totally empathic God as the absolute cognitive ethologist, we can say, in Allen's words, that He knows the exact distribution of conscious experience among His creatures; maybe He could also perfectly imagine phenomenal concepts from His own point of view, as an ethologist may, to a certain extent, vividly imagine the experience of panic when observing a frightened rat in a cage. But He would not be able to know by mere empathy – however total and perfect it is – what it is like *for a particular creature* to have a particular phenomenal experience.

I think there is a more general conclusion to be drawn about the attempts to account for God's ability to know phenomenal concepts (and essentially indexical beliefs): either (α) God has a privileged epistemic access to our deepest thoughts and phenomenal experiences, or (β) He indirectly infers them by a special feature of His imagination. The first possibility seems to lie at the core of the 'perspectival embeddedness' theory, whereas the second underlies the 'total empathy' theory as I understand it. If (β) is true, then as I already argued God cannot really know what it is like for a particular creature to have a particular experience. If (α) is true, I think the resulting view of God's point of view is inconsistent. As Knight independently observed:

> Furthermore, given the huge number of creatures and finite experiences, God's complete knowledge of all of these would, it seem, require a humongous splintering of the Godhead. Perhaps one can make sense of the unity of God's mind among such splintering, but it is not immediately obvious how this could be done. (Here we have the imaginative correlate not of a single incarnation, but a fully pantheistic, or panentheistic, deity – a theological notion somewhat at variance with the classical conception of God.)[28]

Mander himself makes a similar observation[29]. If God really is omniscient, then He must know all at once what it is like to be in billions of different streams of consciousness, and this seems straightforwardly impossible, in virtue of the definition of a POV. We may have a better understanding of this problem by going back to our concepts of *experiential location* and *field of experience* (FOE). I have called the literal interpretation of God's omnipresence 'spatiotemporal omnilocation'; in a similar way, we may call the idea underlying phenomenal omnipresence, especially according to Mander's and Zagzebski's views, 'experiential omnilocation':

> *Experiential omnilocation.* God's POV has the FOE of all POVs.

This means either that God has a single FOE including the contents of all FOEs, or that God's POV has multiple FOEs, and both readings are contradictory. To see why, let us go back to our analogy with vision. An eye can indeed encompass within its field of view (FOV) the objects that multiple eyes (or multiple experiencers) see in their own field of view; this may be the case, for instance, if an eagle flies over several preys, and acutely sees all objects (rocks, trees, etc.) that each individual prey sees. However, the bird's FOV does *not* encompass the FOV of each prey: despite the common illusion that a 'view from above', just because it may be more *informative* about what is happening on the ground, is more *objective* than a view from the ground, the eagle's view is limited by its own perspective on things, and does not see the trees in the peculiar way they appear to each prey. The eagle's FOV is just as *perspectival* as any FOV, precisely because, as we've already noted, there is no such thing as real panoptical vision (a 'view from nowhere'). And it is equally impossible to argue that a supernatural material being could be able to have multiple FOVs, that is, simultaneously seeing things from different and incompatible perspectives (e.g. seeing a tree both from above and from behind, except in a trivial sense if one uses mirrors). Similarly, thinking of God's FOE as embedding several FOEs, and thinking of God's POV has having itself multiple FOEs, are both impossible. If God has a POV, He is experientially located, meaning that He has a single FOE. We may want the divine FOE to be excessively 'wide', just as the bird's eye view

encompasses more objects than the mouse's view, but this alone does not grant Him *phenomenal omniscience*. There are things that God cannot know about His creatures.

We may now ask again if *supervenient omnipresence* requires *phenomenal omniscience*. First of all, let us remark that phenomenal omniscience is probably the only way to truly account for the idea that God knows *everything*: if there are things (such as the particular phenomenal content of my POV) that God cannot know, then He is not genuinely omniscient in the literal sense of the word. As Patrick Grim notes, restricting omniscience to knowledge of all true propositions "calls for an understanding of omniscience in something other than the traditional sense of being literally all-knowing: of knowing all that is or could be know." (*art. cit.*, p. 174). Moreover, there are plenty of religious texts about God's privileged epistemic access to the mental states of His creatures, and most of them suggest that He does know their phenomenal concepts and essentially indexical beliefs. Pettazzoni[30] offers a nice ethnological overview of this topic:

> Divine omniscience has another field of activity; besides the deeds and besides the words of mankind, it examines even their inmost thoughts and secret intents. In the prophecies of Jeremiah we are told that the Lord tries 'the reins and the heart' (Jer. Xi, 20). The same thought is found among many other peoples, savage and civilized. Karai Kasang, the Kachin Supreme Being, 'sees' even what men think. The Haida say that everything we think is known to Sins sganagwa. The Great Manitu of the Ankara knows everything, including the most secret thoughts. Tezcatlipoca knows men's heart; Temaukel, the Supreme Being of the Ona-Selknam, knows even our thoughts and most private intentions. In Babylonia, the god Enlil knows the hearts of gods and men, and Shamash sees to the bottom of the human heart. Zeus likewise knows every man's thought and soul. (*art. cit.*, p. 20)

If God can transparently read our minds, it seems legitimate to believe that He can not only know our non-indexicals beliefs, but also the essentially indexical ones, as well as our non-propositional phenomenal concepts: if I am in pain, a truly omniscient God should know not only that RM is in pain, but also *what it is like* for RM to be in pain and the content of my belief that I am in pain. The restriction of omniscience to propositional knowledge thus seems at least very debatable, if not arbitrary. But this does not, by itself, suffice to show that supervenient omnipresence should require phenomenal omniscience.

The thesis of supervenient omnipresence is grounded in the idea that 'divine omnipresence' is a twofold phenomenon, denoting both (a) the 'omnipresence' of God's causal power, so to speak, i.e. the fact that it applies *everywhere* at *all time*, and (b) God's awareness of all things in all space and time. The specification of (a) and (b) should *explain* how God can be omnipresent. But simply paraphrasing (b) as God's knowledge of all true propositions seems inadequate to qualify this aspect of omnipresence. Indeed, it seems illegitimate to disconnect omnipresence from all *phenomenological* aspects of (finite) presence. This is why, in the end, the second aspect of supervenient omnipresence is more adequately qualified as a matter of 'awareness' rather than just 'knowledge'. To be present somewhere is to have some kind of awareness of one's environment and one's dynamic situation in this environment. Taliaferro acknowledges this point: "A person's presence at a given place is realized in part by her awareness of what occurs around her." (*op. cit.*, p. 283). This kind of enactive awareness is entirely absent from propositional knowledge; in fact, one may go so far as arguing that merely propositional knowledge doesn't even require phenomenal consciousness (in this sense, a supercomputer may be

able to 'know' which propositions are true or false simply as information stored in his system). Drawing on Alva Noë's characterization of 'real presence' (*art. cit.*), we may thus speak of 'real omnipresence'. As Anselm thought and as we've already argued, it seems absurd to say that God is spatiotemporally located, meaning that He is *physically* ubiquitous or embodied. But being omnipresent is still a matter of being *present* everywhere at every time, in some deeper sense. Being simply omnipotent is not really being omnipresent: if God is immaterially present at x (if x is a spatiotemporal coordinate), He is not only causally efficient at x, but there must also be a sense in which He is *really there* (immaterially). But simply knowing some or all true propositions about what is or happens at x also seems insufficient. Imagine a soldier controlling, from a military station in Texas, a drone flying in a remote spot called 'ABC' on the other side of the planet. Despite the considerable distance between him and the aircraft, he has a real (though limited) causal power over what happens in ABC: he can change the altitude or direction of the drone, send a missile, kill people, or even crash the drone. Moreover, he is able to see in considerable details what happens there, thanks to a very advanced multidirectional camera mounted on the aircraft; this way, he may come to know true propositions about states of affairs in ABC: that a man is walking, that a red car is moving, and so on. If we now think of God in a similar way (except that He would have the same abilities with respect to every time and location in the universe) it seems rather obvious that He is not *really* omnipresent: He can witness things and events at a distance, causally interact with them, but remains 'away' from them. Even if we admitted the possibility of phenomenal omniscience, we may wonder whether supervenient omnipresence is real omnipresence; I think reflecting on this thought experiment suggests the contrary, in which case the general concept of immaterial omnipresence would be altogether meaningless, but this is a difficult question that I will leave open. However, what this example intends to show is that something stronger than propositional omniscience is required if we define divine omnipresence by the combination of omnipotence and omniscience. A second thought experiment may serve to clarify this point. Imagine a supercomputer physically located in Texas, and connected by a wireless network to multiple super-satellites, such that (a) it would have access to all possible information about all physical processes going on in the whole universe, being even able to predict future states of the universe based on its previous states, and (b) it could causally act on everything in the universe in every possible way, using futuristic devices able to manipulate matter at the subatomic level on any scale (for instance, it could instantaneously destroy a distant galaxy, or transform it into a giant rabbit, or change the hair color of a thousand Russians, etc.). Imagine now that I am playing soccer with my son in Paris, having a wonderful time, and thus experiencing a peculiar *feeling* of joy and contentedness on which the supercomputer would be unable to gain any information. Would it make sense to say that the supercomputer is immaterially present with me on such an occasion? Sure, it could physically act on me or make the list of all true propositions about my body. But this is not enough for it to be *really* present, in a non material way, with me; my POV would remain to it an impenetrable fortress, as it wouldn't be able to share it with me, to experience what I experience: it would fail to be immaterially present where I am myself, so to speak, immaterially present – that is in my inmost feelings, thoughts and phenomenal experiences. The same analysis can be applied to the supercomputer's *omnipresence*, hence to God's, if He is to be viewed as an omnipotent and propositionally omniscient being.

In the end, this analysis amounts to a simple claim: to be immaterially present does not require being spatiotemporally embodied, but still requires being experientially located; accordingly, to be *really* omnipresent requires being experientially omnilocated. However, experiential omnilocation is contradictory. Therefore, real omnipresence is impossible.

IV. Processual omnipresence and God's (un)consciousness

Is there another sense of omniscience compatible with God having phenomenal consciousness? Indeed, one could still try to defend a weaker version of omnipresence, which wouldn't be 'real omnipresence', but simply the combination of omnipotence and *propositional* omniscience. I have given arguments to show that this traditional definition of supervenient omnipresence is not a genuine kind of omnipresence, but rather refers to 'omnipresence' in a metaphorical way: God would be 'omnipresent' in much the same way that a universal process – a process taking place in all space and time (e.g. a physical law) – is 'omnipresent'. Let us call this metaphorical definition 'processual omnipresence':

> *Processual omnipresence*. God's causal power extends over all space and time, and God knows every true proposition.

I don't think processual omnipresence is compatible with God's having a conscious POV. There is indeed a problem with the association of propositional omniscience and phenomenal consciousness, which has already been noted by Husserl in the first volume of his *Ideen*. God's propositional omniscience implies that He must know every objective fact; but if He has a conscious POV, He must have such knowledge *perspectivally*:

> God, the subject possessing an absolutely perfect knowledge and therefore possessing every possible adequate perception, naturally has that adequate perception of the very physical thing itself which is denied to us finite beings. But this view is a countersense. It implies that there is no *essential difference* between something transcendent and something immanent, that, in the postulated divine intuition, a spatial physical thing is present as a really inherent constituent, that it is therefore itself a mental process also belonging to the divine stream of consciousness and divine mental processes generally[31].

In other words, if God is omniscient, he has to know perspectivally what is a-perspectival, the physical world as it is in itself; we may worry that such an 'absolute knowledge' is not *consciously knowable* – that is knowable by a particular knower. However, I have already suggested that one may put forward a different sense of 'knowledge', according to which a computer might (unconsciously) know propositions. Building on this idea, we may put forward a new definition of omniscience:

> *Unconscious omniscience*. X is unconsciously omniscient if X is able to store and compute information about all physical processes (i.e. if X is able to logically

deduce, based on the stored information, an exhaustive list of complete descriptions of every physical process in space and time).

Therefore, one may argue that God is processually omnipresent if one means that (a) God is omnipotent and (b) God is unconsciously omniscient. This is quite similar to the kind of omnipresence exemplified by our previous thought experiment about the supercomputer, except that while this extraordinary machine was still spatiotemporally located (it was built at a certain time in Texas), a processually omnipresent God would be both immaterial and unconscious. This requires a bit of clarification. By calling God 'unconscious' in this way, I mean that He is not *phenomenally* conscious. In other words, He has no phenomenal experience, and His knowledge and causal power require no *phenomenology*: there is nothing it is like for Him to be both omnipotent and omniscient. For him to be omniscient is only to (immaterially) compute information, with an infinite computational power (meaning that divine computations are not extended in time). One may still want to say that such a God is 'conscious' in a weaker sense, just as one may say that a very sophisticated robot or computer is; but this is just a way to speak of computations devoid of POV. A processually omnipresent God is not experientially located, meaning that He has no POV.

In a sense, a non-conscious, computational God would be a philosophical zombie of a special kind. A zombie, in the philosophical sense, is a creature that looks and behaves exactly in the same way conscious beings do, but lacks phenomenal experiences: there is nothing it is like to be a zombie. However, zombies are traditionally associated, within philosophy of mind, with physicalism. But God, if He (or rather It) exists, is not physical; the possibility we are considering is that of an *immaterial zombie* – an immaterial being lacking phenomenal consciousness but causally efficient and unconsciously omniscient. Calling It a 'zombie' is a little unorthodox, but justified by the fact that even if an immaterial being obviously doesn't have an external appearance, such a God could well seem to 'behave' exactly as a conscious deity would 'behave'. In fact, It could appear to be, for instance, phenomenally omniscient or omnibenevolent, even if It has neither of these traditional attributes.

I think this view has interesting consequences on some classical theological problems, notably issues of theodicy: it makes no sense to 'blame' a non-conscious God for the existence of evil in the world (nor does it make sense to be grateful for the good). It would also be pointless to try to 'please' God, or ask for Its forgiveness. In other words, endorsing this view means relinquishing what Richard Swinburne has dubbed "the most elementary claim of theism" (*op. cit.*, p. 101) – that God is a person. One may see this as an improvement for theism as an ontological thesis: considering God as a person seems to exemplify a basic anthropomorphic tendency (the common theological mistake that Kant names 'demonology' in his *Critic of Judgement*), and adds no evident credit to the postulation of an immaterial being as an ontological hypothesis[32].

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Notes

[1] According to Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?", we have no way to know or even imagine what it would be like to be a bat – and I am inclined to believe that I am still closer to a bat (biologically or ontologically speaking) than I am to God.
[2] Let me add on a personal note that as a non-believer, I do favor the rejection of (1); but this is not relevant to the present discussion. Of course, if one takes (2) and (3) to express necessary attributes of God, then rejecting one or both of these premises would amount to denying the existence of God; but I don't think this is quite true, as I shall argue.
[3] For instance, Nagel, *art. cit.*, simply assumes that an individual X has a POV iff there is 'something it is like' to be X – though this is a rather ambiguous formula.
[4] Galin, "Separating first-personness from the other problems of consciousness or 'you had to have been there!'", insists on the danger of this spatio-visual metaphor when we speak of the *experiential* POV.
[5] Biro, "Consciousness and Subjectivity", 117.
[6] Moore, *Points of View*, 6.
[7] Velmans, *Understanding Consciousness*, 179.
[8] Du Châtelet, *De l'existence de Dieu*, 322 (my translation).
[9] Unless, of course, one endorses the strong form of panpsychism sometimes labeled 'panexperientialism' (the thesis that *everything* has conscious experiences). I shall not consider this possibility, my point being that even if panexperientialism is true and there is something it is like to be anything, the fact that I cannot know what it is like to be *x could* at least in principle be explained by the fact that there is *nothing* it is like to be *x*. If the later hypothesis was true, the impossibility to know what it is like to be *x* would be a *metaphysical* (or *physical*) rather than *epistemic* impossibility: there would simply be *nothing* to know.
[10] I shall come back later to the problem of the ontological status of such a strange nonconscious God (or 'Zombie-God').
[11] Strictly speaking, "God exists at every time and place" is not the negation of "God exists only at one location". We should consider, as Anselm does, the possibility that God exists at more than one place/time without existing at all places and times. But as Anselm himself remarks, this idea is absurd: if we concede that God can exist at more than one location, there is no reason to deny that God, as a perfect being, could not exist at *every* location.
[12] See Noë, "Real Presence".
[13] Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God*, 472.
[14] Swinburne, *The coherence of theism*, 106-107.
[15] For an overview of this debate, see Gendler and Hawthorne (eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility*.
[16] This parallel has been thoroughly analyzed by Nagasawa, *God and Phenomenal Consciousness*. I will generically call those theological derivatives of the knowledge argument the 'divine knowledge arguments'.
[17] Nagasawa, *op. cit*.
[18] Jackson, "What Mary Didn't Know".
[19] This is the core thesis of the famous 'knowledge argument' against physicalism originally found in Nagel and Jackson, *art. cit.*
[20] See Blumenfeld, "On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes"; Alter, "On Two Alleged Conflicts between Divine Attributes"; Mander, "Does God know what it is like to be me?". Blumenfeld argues that God's knowledge of the phenomenal concepts of *fear* and *frustration* contradicts His omnipotence. Alter examines a similar argument, according to which if God is morally perfect, then He cannot know what it is like to have an evil desire. Mander further distinguishes two varieties of the problem of concept acquisition: the acquisition of concepts of embodiment and the acquisition of concepts of limitation (contradicting respectively God's incorporeality and the unlimitedness of God's mental faculties). The general problem was already noticed by Laird, *Mind and Deity*, 129.
[21] Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical".
[22] Grim, "Against Omniscience: The Case from Essential Indexicals".
[23] An even more radical version of this mereological account can be found in Laycock, *Foundations for a Phenomenological Theology*.
[24] Mander, *art. cit.*, 439.
[25] Zagzebski, "Omnisubjectivity".
[26] Nagasawa, "God's point of view: a reply to Mander". These examples are the following: the point of view of an individual college is included in the point of view of the university, the point of view of a particular day of the week is included in the point of view of the whole week, the point of view of Britain is included

in the point of view of Europe, the point of view of one of our senses is included in the global point of view of our sensory awareness, and the point of view of the child we used to be is included in our adult point of view. All of these examples, as Nagasawa observes, benefit of the polysemy of 'point of view' and 'perspective', and tell us nothing about the genuine possibility of nested perspectives (in the right sense of 'perspective', associated with a conscious vantage point).

[27] Allen and Bekoff, *Species of mind: The philosophy and biology of cognitive ethology*, 142.

[28] Knight, "The theological significance of subjectivity", 9. See also p. 233: "But it is not obvious that this is possible. The particular conscious space each of us inhabits may not be shareable, and it may be necessarily such that it is non-shareable."

[29] Mander, *art. cit.*, 438: "The point is that distinct perspectives on reality exclude each other. Clearly, where perspectives are only partial (the right and left sides of our visual field, the higher and lower regions of musical pitch) or in wholly different media (the worlds of sight and sound, the worlds of thought and sensation) combination may be possible; but where the points of view differ, where they offer varying perspectives on the same thing, combination is impossible. You can't occupy more than one at the same time."

[30] Pettazzoni, "On the attributes of God". The Psalm 139 also says: "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." For a psychological analysis of the evolutionary benefits of this dogma, see Bering and Johnson, "'O Lord… You Perceive my Thoughts from Afar': Recursiveness and the Evolution of Supernatural Agency". See also Gericke, "What is it like to be a god? A philosophical clarification of instances of divine suffering in the Psalter", for an analysis of divine emotions and suffering in the Psalter.

[31] Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 92.

[32] As Farnell writes in *The Attributes of God*, 21 : "Starting then with personality as a basis of the divine attributes, we discern that a personal God must also be a conscious God… Moreover, as we realize that the ideas of personality and consciousness are derived from our consciousness of ourselves, we may be convinced that all personal theism is in a sense anthropomorphic."

Note on the Contributor

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