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ON THE COMPOSSIBILITY OF THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

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Credo quia ineptum

TERTULLIAN

Recent proponents of the ontological argument have learned an important lesson from Leibniz: the argument requires the assumption, or premise, that God is possible. In one form or another this premise appears in the versions of the argument endorsed by Hartshorne, Malcolm, and Plantinga.¹ But Leibniz's lesson has not been taken fully to heart by his modern followers. He thinks that to bring the argument to a triumphant conclusion one needs to *prove* that God is possible. For without this proof, we have no assurance that the idea of God is noncontradictory.² So Leibniz struggled – vainly I think – to produce two proofs of the possibility of God.³ His modern followers, however, have on the whole simply assumed the truth of the critical premise.⁴ The fact that there has been relatively little effort to show that the concept of God is not coherent probably contributes to whatever plausibility this procedure has.⁵ But, plausible or not, the procedure is mistaken. The concept of God is contradictory – as I shall argue shortly. Establishing this would have consequences that go beyond the ontological argument: the entire edifice of orthodox natural theology would fall at a stroke.⁶

In arguing that the idea of God is contradictory it is important to be clear about *what* idea of God I have in mind. My target is the standard Judeo-Christian theological conception of divinity, a being who is by definition absolutely perfect. 'Absolute perfection' is to be taken in a sense strong enough to involve the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, and complete moral goodness. The idea of an absolutely perfect being is that of one who knows all things, has unrestricted power, possesses the maximum amount of virtue, and is free of any sort of defect or limitation. There have been other accounts of deity, and the argument I am going to propose does not apply to all of them. One cannot refute, with a single argument, the existence of such diverse Gods as have been conceived. God has, for example, sometimes been said to be limited in his power, or finite in some other way.

Those who are content with such a deity need not be concerned with the present argument. God has also sometimes been identified with the universe (or at other times with 'Being Itself'). But it is, of course, not my aim to show that the idea of the universe contains a contradiction. My argument concerns nothing less than the greatest deity which has ever been conceived, and my purpose is to show that this deity has not been conceived coherently.

It will be instructive to ask, initially, what would be required if one were trying to prove the *possibility* of God. To accomplish this one would need to do two things. First, he would have to show that each perfection has an intrinsic maximum. It is supposed to be essential to divinity to be unsurpassably great. Therefore, to establish God's possibility one would need to show that there is no great-making characteristic which is such that for any amount of it one possessed, it would be logically possible to possess more. Second, one who sought to prove the possibility of God would have to show that all of the perfections -- in their maximum -- are compossible. Not only must there *be* a maximum of knowledge, power, goodness, and so on; there must be no contradiction in the idea of a single being's possessing these properties at once. These requirements suggest two corresponding avenues for proving the impossibility of God. One could show that there is some perfection which has no intrinsic maximum, or he could prove that there are perfections which could not be possessed, in the ultimate degree, by a single being. It is the latter strategy which I shall employ. I shall argue that maximal knowledge and power are not compossible. Since a critical point in the argument turns on the elucidation of the idea of omniscience, let me begin there.

I

Knowledge is a good thing, a perfection. There is no state of knowledge, which, *qua knowledge*, is bad or merely neutral in value. This is a thesis that has been held by most theological writers, and it is one which makes great sense. Apart from being intuitively appealing, however, it is a view which is basic to the traditional conception of God, and it cannot be given up without relinquishing that concept. If knowledge as such were not a good thing it would not follow from the nature of God as absolutely perfect being that he is omniscient. But what is an omniscient being? It is one who has unsurpassable knowledge. To have this degree of knowledge one would have

to have an utter and complete comprehension of the meaning of every significant proposition. If there were any significant proposition, any part of the meaning of which a being did not comprehend, his knowledge clearly could be greater. To enjoy a state of omniscience, however, one would have to know considerably more than just this. To be *all*-knowing one would have to know of every true proposition that it is true and of every false proposition that it is false. If a being fully understood the meaning of every proposition, but failed to know the truth value of even one of these propositions, his knowledge, again, clearly could be greater. But if there were a being who fully comprehended the meaning of every significant proposition and who also knew of the true that it is true, and the false that it is false, this being would surely possess an understanding unlimited in its scope. He would be omniscient.

The first step in my argument is to show that there are certain concepts, a full and complete comprehension of which requires experience. I shall then go on to argue that in the case of at least some of these concepts the experience which is required is of a type which an omnipotent being could not possibly have. Since a being who did not fully comprehend the meaning of every significant proposition would not be omniscient, it will follow that omniscience and omnipotence are not properties which are compossible.

Now it is evident that there are concepts which one could not understand *completely* if he had never had experience of an instance or exemplification of the concept in question. This is a thesis which is sometimes labeled 'concept-empiricism' and it is important to see that I am going to rely on it in an extremely restricted form. The doctrine has been put forward in a variety of different degrees of strength and I believe that all but the most restricted is false. For example, one would be a concept-empiricist if he held the following view: for every concept, in order to comprehend it, one must have experienced an instance or exemplification of it. This doctrine is palpably false. One can surely understand the concept, *Aardvark*, without having had the pleasure of the acquaintance of the beast. A considerably more plausible version of concept-empiricism is this: for every concept, in order to comprehend it, one must have experienced an instance or exemplification of each of its 'elements'. The idea behind this view is familiar. To have the concept, *Aardvark*, without being acquainted with an actual Aardvark, it would be enough to have experienced (separately) something mammalian, something with an extensile tongue, something with sharp claws, a heavy tail, etc. Or, it would do to have

had the experience, not of these things, but of their elements. From the elements one could construct the concept, *Aardvark*, by appropriate mental operations. Now, I am inclined to think that this theory is mistaken too. But if anyone believes it is correct, that is so much the better for my argument, which requires a view that is considerably weaker than this one.

The thesis I rely on is this: for *some* concepts, in order to *fully* comprehend them, one must have had the experience of an instance or exemplification of them. This version of concept-empiricism seems to me to be as obviously true as it is obvious that the very strong version of it is false. There is a host of concepts which require experience for their complete comprehension. Take the concept of the sensation of red. Surely one could not fully grasp this notion if he had never had an experience of redness. I do not say that he needs to experience a red *object*. He might come to understand the concept by pushing his eyeball and getting the appropriate sensation in that way. But I do say that without any acquaintance with redness, one could not fully comprehend *the sensation of red*. The reason for this is that part of the meaning of the concept consists of a certain subjective experience. One who failed to fully understand what this experience is like would thus lack a perfect grasp of its concept. But there is only one way of fully understanding what an experience of redness is like and that is to have it. There is in principle no access which allows a complete comprehension of an experience except having the experience itself. It is, therefore, a necessary truth that if someone had never experienced redness, there would be at least one concept whose meaning he did not fully understand.

I am not denying that such a person could know a large number of true propositions about the sensation of red. He could know, for example, that it is produced under conditions *Q*, *R*, and *S*, that it is correlated with (or, on some views contingently identical to) brain states of types *X*, *Y*, and *Z*, and so on. Perhaps it could be said that this information would give him a partial grasp of *the sensation of red*. But he could not have an *absolutely complete* grasp of this concept without having had the sensation itself.

Many philosophers would maintain that God does not know by experience and that he does not have an acquaintance with sensuous contents such as red. One argument that has been offered is that God's perfection entails that he is immutable and that, as such, he is not subject to the changes involved in the process of experience. This thesis may be correct and though many have held it, few have been willing to draw from it the conclusion that God is not

omniscient.⁷ Yet this conclusion does follow from the thesis. For if it is true that God cannot have any experiences, then there are concepts (viz., those that *require* experience) whose full comprehension he is barred from having. But this line of argument would need considerable defense and I shall not rest my case upon it. I use the example of the sensation of red merely to support weak concept-empiricism. For my purposes it can be allowed that God can have this experience and hence that he can also have a full understanding of its concept.

Granting this, however, there are without doubt *some* experiences which God is precluded from having. For certain experiences are possible only if the subject believes that he is limited in power. Since these experiences are required for a full grasp of a number of concepts, it follows that a being who is omnipotent cannot also be omniscient. To make this out, let us first consider some experiences which God could not have. Fear, frustration, and despair are a few examples. The reason I offer for denying that God ever could be subject to these states is not simply that they are experiences. It is rather that their occurrence depends logically on the subject's believing in the limitation of his power. It is important to observe that none of these states is a mere sensation (like an itch or a stinging pain), which could occur in the absence of certain special beliefs that one had. To experience fear, one would have to believe that he was in danger, that he might somehow be harmed. If one did not in any sense believe this, then no sensation he was having — no cold chill, no sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach — would count as fear. One's experiences would be mere sensations — and nothing more. Without the belief in danger these states would have to be described in terms other than those which imply that the person is afraid. A similar account can be given of frustration and of despair. There could be no experience of frustration without the belief that one had been (was being, or might be) thwarted. There could be no sense of despair unless one faced a situation he took to be dire and for which he believed he was very unlikely to find a remedy. Furthermore, one who has not undergone these states would not know what it is like to experience them. Consequently he would not have a full understanding of *fear*, *frustration*, and *despair*. One who had never experienced fear, for example, would lack a complete comprehension of *fear*, just as a man who was blind from birth would lack a full grasp of *the sensation of red*.

My point should now be clear. For what has an omnipotent being to fear? There is no destruction, no harm, nor the slightest diminution of his power

that could possibly befall him. In this case (since he knows the extent of his power) he could not believe himself to be endangered, and thus could not have the experience of fear. But if he could not have this experience, he lacks a full appreciation of *fear*. Any proposition involving this concept will be one, at least a part of whose meaning he does not comprehend. He is therefore not omniscient.

Similarly, how could an absolutely perfect and omnipotent being experience frustration? He is all-powerful and so there is no conceivable obstacle to his will. Whatever he wills, he accomplishes. There is nothing which could conceivably thwart him, or interfere with his divine plan. Since he knows this, there is nothing which could provide him with the occasion to feel frustration. But then he lacks a full comprehension of *frustration*, and so once again fails of omniscience.

The same can be said of despair. He who is incapable of being thwarted and who possesses the power to remedy any situation is of necessity beyond the experience of despair. And for this reason again there is something he cannot fully understand, something he cannot know.

The concepts I have mentioned are only a few in a large family of notions which an omnipotent being could not entirely understand. In general, for every experience whose occurrence presupposes a person's belief that he is lacking in power there is a concept of which God cannot have complete comprehension. *Embarrassment*, *apprehensiveness*, *forlornness*, and *regret* are all further notions of this type. In view of this there appears to be a great deal that an omnipotent being could not understand.

II

There are three possible strategies for attempting to refute my argument. First, one might deny that the kind of experience which God is barred from having is required for knowledge of the concepts I have mentioned. Second, he might concede that this experience is required, but deny that God must have a full grasp of every concept in order to be absolutely perfect. Third, he might give reasons for supposing God *can* have the kind of experience (and consequently the knowledge) which I have said is not open to him. I will take up each of these strategies in turn.

Let us look at the possibilities for developing the first one. If it were not necessary to have the experience of fear, frustration, and despair to have a

full comprehension of the concepts of these states my argument would fail. But, as I have already tried to show, the experience *is* required. One who had never felt afraid would necessarily lack what might be called an 'existential appreciation' of fear. Yet there is one venerable doctrine which denies that any such existential appreciation is even a partial component of knowledge: platonism. For the platonist, knowledge is purely intellectual (and not sensuous) apprehension. Whatever is known, is known by grasping abstract Ideas or Forms. Experience may stimulate us to recollect these Forms, but that is all. It is in no way essential to knowledge.

I concede that if platonism were true, this would destroy my position. But platonism (or at any rate the extreme version of it required here) is false. Because this theory has long since been reduced to a totally antique system of thought, I shall not treat it as a live option. Should anyone think that it is wrong to dismiss this view so cursorily I cannot attempt to satisfy him now. Ultimately, I should have to repeat arguments which have already been repeated for centuries, and which would be out of place to review in this context.

Not every doctrine which would undercut my position is antique, however. Modern philosophical behaviorism is at odds with it too. According to this theory there is no such thing as the *experience* of fear, frustration, and despair over and above a set of complex dispositions to behave in certain ways. But to fully comprehend a disposition to behave, one need not have had this disposition himself. So, to fully comprehend fear, God need not be afraid. Nor need he ever be frustrated or despairing in order to understand the concepts of these states. If the behaviorist account is correct, one can have a purely intellectual understanding of all psychological concepts.

Now I grant that the behaviorist will not be impressed by my proof of the impossibility of God. But this fact can be of no comfort to the theist, since behaviorism itself provides a proof of the impossibility of God. If this theory were true, then to have any thoughts, or other mental states, God would have to have a body. On the behaviorist view, the notion of a pure spirit is every bit as much an absurdity as the idea of a purely subjective experience. In accepting behaviorism, then, one surrenders the right to believe in the immateriality of God. As traditionally conceived, however, the absolute perfection of God requires that he be immaterial. For God's perfection is taken to exclude even the logically possibility of deterioration — a feature which is essential to material things. Thus behaviorism provides a way of

denying a premise of my argument, but not of evading its conclusion. It is not a theory which leaves the concept of God intact.⁸

Another way of trying to get around my argument is through the doctrine of analogy. This theory cautions us not to suppose that God possesses the traits of knowledge, power, and goodness in the same sense as we do. Since God has these traits only in an analogical sense, there is no license to infer that his knowledge has such and such features from the fact that knowledge as we commonly understand it has these features. Yet didn't I make just this sort of inference? I said that in order to understand *despair*, God would have to be despairing. And I based this on the claim that we humans cannot fully comprehend this concept in any other way.

In fact, however, this rebuttal misrepresents my argument. I did not make an inference from the limits of our knowledge to the limits of God's knowledge. I argued, rather, that it is in principle impossible for anyone — human or divine — to fully grasp *despair* without having had an experience of despair. And, I tried to show that God could not have this experience, since he is precluded from having the beliefs on which it is predicated. The theist cannot counter this merely by asserting that God knows things in a way which is different from, but analogous to, ours. To refute my argument he must explicate the analogy, making clear how God can fully appreciate *despair*, etc., without ever being despairing.

The first suggestion that comes to mind is that God gains this appreciation by having an experience which is analogous to the ones we are discussing. As we have seen, however, the experience of despair requires the belief that one faces a situation that he cannot remedy. Is it the case that God comprehends *despair* by having a belief which is analogous to this one? What would such a belief be? If it were of the same sort as ours it would be false: God can remedy any situation. In that case we seem forced to conclude that God has a belief which is analogous to a false one. Yet it is not clear that any sense can be attached to this idea. For what would a belief be which did not have the property, *being false*, but instead had the property, *being analogous to being false*?

Perhaps this is not the correct way of constructing the analogy. Possibly the idea is that God is in a state which is like despair but which involves no beliefs. The concept of despair, however, is so intimately tied to a belief in the hopelessness of one's situation that it is not obvious what to make of this suggestion either. And, even if we could make sense of it, the problem

would remain that the experience of despair is a sign of imperfection. We should then apparently have to suppose that God knows *despair* by being in a condition analogous to something imperfect. Yet only pure perfections can be attributed to God and so it is not evident how this would be possible.

Another alternative is that God does not know *despair* through an experience, but through something analogous to an experience. This suggestion, however, is no easier to understand than the ones that have preceded it. It is altogether obscure how an experience could be analogous to a non-experience. Although further problems could be enumerated, I think the ones already at hand strongly suggest the unlikelihood of our constructing a clear analogy here at all.

III

The second strategy is to argue that although the experience of states like fear is necessary for a comprehension of their correlative concepts, it is not required that God have the concepts in order to be absolutely perfect. An argument in behalf of this thesis is as follows. I have claimed that one who knows that he is all-powerful cannot be afraid and for that reason cannot have a full grasp of concepts such as *fear*. If this argument is correct, however, it follows that anyone who has a full grasp of *fear*, etc., is less than absolutely perfect. But then, it seems, the possession of such concepts cannot be a necessary condition of one's being absolutely perfect. For surely it cannot be a necessary condition of one's *being perfect* that he be in a state which would guarantee that he is less than perfect. Consequently, there is no reason to suppose that God must have a full grasp of the concepts on which I have based my case.

The problem with this argument is that it begs the question. To infer that God need not possess certain concepts from the fact that their possession signifies a defect assumes that their possession could not also be required for absolute perfection. It assumes, in other words, that God is possible. After all, if the lack of these concepts signified a defect too, then God would be imperfect in either case. And this is precisely what the argument I gave was designed to show: imperfection of one kind or another follows whether God has concepts like *fear* or lacks them.

What would have to be established to make the present line of response work is that while God's possession of the critical concepts would imply a

defect in him, his failure to possess them would not. Within the limits of the current strategy, however, there is no way to argue this effectively. The second strategy — unlike the first — concedes that experience of a sort which God cannot have is required for the full possession of certain concepts. But if knowledge *per se* is a perfection, then anything less than full comprehension of every concept constitutes an epistemic defect in a being.

Of course, it might conceivably be denied that knowledge *per se* is a perfection. This would allow one to maintain that a perfect being need not have a complete grasp of every concept, and on this basis one might argue that God's perfection does not require that he fully understand the notions which are in dispute. As I noted earlier, however, this would have the undesirable consequence of robbing God of his essential omniscience. If knowledge *per se* were not a perfection, God's total and complete knowledge would not follow from his definition as absolutely perfect being.⁹

A remaining option is to argue that a being is *better*, all in all, if he is omnipotent, and thus lacks certain concepts, than he would be if he had a full grasp of every concept, but were to some extent impotent. This might be thought to show that the most perfect being does not need to have a full understanding of every concept. Now I do not know what good reason could be offered for ranking power over knowledge in the scale of perfection. But in any case it is clear that this particular ploy is flawed in the same way as the last. Even if power were better than knowledge the maneuver would divest God of his omniscience, thus leaving us without the traditional notion of deity.

IV

The third way of attacking my position is to argue that God actually can have the sorts of experiences which I have said are precluded by his perfect nature. The reason that I offered for thinking that God could not have the experience of fear, etc., is that his power is absolute, and knowing this, he would be incapable of having the beliefs on which this experience is founded. One might hope to undo my argument by showing that God is capable of having the requisite beliefs after all. The problem, however, is that the presence of these beliefs is itself indicative of imperfection; if God is omnipotent, the beliefs are *false*. So, there seems to be no way of imagining God's having these beliefs without being tainted by the imperfection that accompanies them.

It might seem more promising to attack the contention that a belief in one's own vulnerability or weakness is required for experiences like fear, frustration, and despair. Perhaps it will be said that, although these experiences are normally accompanied by such beliefs, the beliefs are not logically presupposed by the experiences. Fear might be thought to be a good case in point. Normally one feels afraid only if he believes himself to be in danger. But occasionally, it seems, one experiences fear even when he does not believe himself to be in danger, when in fact, he knows he is completely safe. For example, I may be terribly afraid when I ride the ferris wheel, though I know perfectly well that there is no real danger. Or, sometimes when I am alone at night, I may feel a sudden uneasiness, a sense of fear without any apparent reason. I know that I am not in danger, for I am at home snug in bed. The doors are bolted and the neighborhood is a very safe one. I am aware that no harm is imminent, and yet I am afraid. These examples seem to indicate that we can on occasion be afraid without believing in the existence of danger. If this is possible in our case, then an omnipotent being should also be able to experience fear without being subject to the false belief that he is danger.

I do not think this objection is correct. Consider again the examples that were offered in support of the idea that there can be fear without belief in danger. In both of these the suggestion was made that since I know that I am not in danger, and yet experience fear, there can be fear without a belief in danger. The reasoning is that it follows from the fact that I know that I am not in danger that I believe that I am not in danger. This much is correct. But it does not follow from the fact that I believe that I am not in danger that I do not *also* believe (in some way, or at some level) that I *am* in danger. If someone who rides with me on the ferris wheel tries to calm me with the assurance that there is no danger, I would be very likely to respond, "I know I won't be hurt, but I just can't shake the idea that I might fall". Similarly, my belief in the safety of my home does not rule out the possibility of my having a concurrent belief in my endangered position. Indeed, in both cases, if we do not make the assumption that I harbor such a belief, we will be left without the necessary grounds for describing my experience as fear. My belief in danger may not be my 'official' belief, or one which I would take to be well founded. It may not be one which I can easily discern or readily avow. But it is one I must have, if I am to be afraid.

The answer to the objection then is this: we can be afraid even though

we know we are in no danger because it is possible for us to have inconsistent beliefs. But obviously there is no similar option for explaining how God can be afraid. A being with an absolutely perfect intellect must be incapable of having any false beliefs. *A fortiori*, he must be incapable of having inconsistent beliefs.

Another reply to my argument is that an infinite being can experience all of the states which I deny. He has only to become finite, as God did in Christ. Through the incarnation God achieved a full grasp of all the concepts involving finitude. This reply, however, presupposes the coherence of faith and does not supply an argument in its behalf. Judged as an answer rather than as a defiant expression of belief, it has no merit. If God is incapable of limitation, then he cannot become finite. To suggest that he *has* done so, without any explanation of the possibility of the miraculous act is not to advance the case in any way.¹⁰ In response it is sometimes said that while we cannot comprehend how the infinite makes itself finite, we can comprehend that there is no contradiction involved in the idea. But this, again, is assertion without substantiation. Is it the very same being who is at once both finite and infinite, limited in his powers and infinite? Or is it a different being? If it is a different being, the problem is not resolved. If it is the same being, the contradiction is apparent. It is sometimes said that there is no contradiction in the same being's (i.e., substance's) having two natures or essences. Perhaps not, provided that these two natures are logically compatible. But where the natures are such that one entails that the substance is omnipotent and infinite, while the other entails that it is limited in its power and finite, the situation is altogether different.

It seems to me, then, that there is a very strong case for supposing that the traditional concept of God is contradictory. Unless someone can show that there is something wrong with the argument I have given, I think it is fair to say that orthodox theists have a rather serious problem on their hands.¹¹

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NOTES

¹ Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God* (Chicago, 1941), Ch. IX. Norman Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review* LXIX (1960), 41–62. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974), Ch. X.

² E.g., *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, trans. by A. G. Langley (LaSalle, 1949), p. 504, and *The Philosophical Works of Leibnitz*, trans. by G. M. Duncan (New Haven, 1890), pp. 50–51 and 140–45.

³ Langley, p. 714, and Duncan, pp. 145–46.

⁴ This is true of Malcolm and Plantinga, but not of Hartshorne, who has given an elaborate defense of the coherence of his own conception of God. His notion of deity differs from the one attacked in this essay, however. References listed in Note 1.

⁵ Some exceptions should be noted. For example, see J. N. Findlay, 'Can God's Existence Be Disproved?', *Mind* 57 (1948), 108–18, and Norman Kretzmann, 'Omniscience and Immutability', *The Journal of Philosophy* LXIII (1966), 409–21. Charles Hartshorne has also argued at numerous places that the classical conception of God is contradictory.

⁶ The qualification 'orthodox' is important here. Heterodox natural theology – including variants of the ontological argument – would remain possible.

⁷ Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, does draw this conclusion, though his reasons are quite different from the ones offered here.

⁸ It is of interest to note that the platonist and the behaviorist reject my position for opposite reasons. For the behaviorist subjective experience is too ethereal to be real. For the platonist it is insufficiently ethereal to be *fully* real, or to constitute any part of true knowledge.

⁹ This maneuver would also place the theist in the following embarrassing position: it would force him to admit that in creating this world – which contains abundant amounts of fear, frustration, and the like – God did not fully understand what he was doing.

¹⁰ The present strategy also involves the theist in heresy. If God can only fully comprehend *fear*, etc., by becoming finite, then the incarnation was not an act of grace. It was logically required to secure divine omniscience.

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