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DOES GOD HAVE BELIEFS?

Beliefs are freely attributed to God nowadays in Anglo-American philosophical theology.¹ This practice undoubtedly reflects the twentieth-century popularity of the view that knowledge consists of true justified belief (perhaps with some needed fourth component). (After all no one supposes that God has beliefs in addition to, or instead of knowledge.) The connection is frequently made explicit.² If knowledge is true justified belief then whatever God knows He believes. It would seem that much recent talk of divine beliefs stems from Nelson Pike's widely discussed article, 'Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action'.³ In this essay Pike develops a version of the classic argument for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will in terms of divine forebelief. He introduces this shift by premising that '*A* knows *X*' entails '*A* believes *X*'.⁴ As a result of all this, philosophers have increasingly been using the concept of belief in defining 'omniscience'.

... a being *B* is omniscient if and only if for every true proposition *p*,
B knows *p*; and for every false proposition *q*, *B* does not believe *q*.⁵

Indeed, in a later essay Pike goes so far as to define omniscience solely in terms of belief.

A being counts as omniscient just in case (1) that being believes all true propositions; and (2) that being believes no propositions that are false.⁶

Pike neglects to tell us what has happened to the other components of knowledge.

In this paper I shall present reasons for taking this practice of attributing beliefs to God to be misguided. Since, as just noted, no one thinks of God as having beliefs over and above His knowledge, the issue as to whether God has beliefs boils down to the question of whether beliefs are constituents of

¹ See, e.g. R. G. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974).

² Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 26; R. G. Swinburne, *op. cit.* p. 169.

³ *Philosophical Review*, LXXIV, 1 (Jan., 1965), pp. 27–46. All of the books we have cited contain discussions of Pike's article.

⁴ P. 28.

⁵ Stephen T. Davis, *op. cit.* p. 26. See also Plantinga, *op. cit.* p. 68.

⁶ 'Divine Foreknowledge, Human Freedom and Possible Worlds', *Philosophical Review*, LXXXVI (April 1977), 209.

divine knowledge. I shall argue that they are not, whichever position we take on a fundamental issue concerning divine knowledge. That issue concerns whether divine knowledge is properly represented as 'propositional' in the sense that it is made up of cases of *knowledge that p*, where what replaces *p* in each case is some declarative sentence that expresses a proposition. God is often spoken of as knowing *that so-and-so*, as knowing that the Israelites are worshipping idols, as knowing that Adam will sin, and so on. Unless such talk is accompanied by a codicil to the effect that it does not accurately represent the way it truly is with divine knowledge, it represents God's knowledge as "propositional" in character. Some thinkers, by contrast, have maintained that God's knowledge is not broken up into proposition-sized bits in this way, but rather constitutes a seamless whole, an undifferentiated intuition of all there is. In this paper I will not try to decide between these positions. Instead I will argue that on neither position is God properly thought of as having beliefs. I offer the reader a choice as to whether divine knowledge is propositional. Whichever way she will have it, divine beliefs must go.

I

First consider the position that God's knowledge is not propositional. St Thomas Aquinas provides a paradigmatic exposition of this view. According to Aquinas, God is pure act and absolutely simple. Hence there is no real distinction in God between his knowledge and its object. Thus what God knows is simply His knowledge, which itself is not really distinct from Himself.¹ This is not incompatible with God's knowing everything. Since the divine essence contains the likenesses of all things, God, in knowing Himself perfectly, thereby knows everything.² Now since God is absolutely simple His knowledge cannot involve any diversity. Of course what God knows in creation is diverse, but this diversity is not paralleled in the intrinsic being of His knowledge of it. Therefore 'God does not understand by composing and dividing'.³ His knowledge does not involve the complexity involved in propositional structure any more than it involves any other kind of complexity. God does not mentally distinguish subject and predicate and then unite them by a copula. He does not analyse reality into various separate facts, each of which is itself internally complex, and then organize them into some kind of a system.

... He knows each thing by simple intelligence, by understanding the essence of each thing; as if we, by the very fact that we understand what man is, were to understand all that can be predicated of man. This, however, does not happen in the case of our intellect, which proceeds from one thing to another, since the intelligible species represents one thing in such a way as not to represent another. Hence, when we

¹ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 1, ch. 48. *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q. 14, art. 2.

² *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 1, chs. 51–53. *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q. 14, arts. 5, 6.

³ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk 1, ch. 58.

understand what man is, we do not forthwith understand other things which belong to him, but we understand them one by one, according to a certain succession. On this account, the things we understand as separated we must reduce to one by way of composition or division, by forming an enunciation [proposition]. Now the species of the divine intellect, which is God's essence, suffices to manifest all things. Hence, by understanding His essence, God knows the essences of all things, and also whatever can be added to them.¹

But although God's knowledge, in itself, consists wholly of His simple intuition of His own essence, nevertheless He does not thereby miss anything, including whatever can be 'enunciated', i.e. formulated in propositions.

Now just as He knows material things immaterially, and composite things simply, so likewise He knows what can be enunciated, not after its manner, as if in His intellect there were composition or division of enunciations, but He knows each thing by simple intelligence, by understanding the essence of each thing...²

So although it is not strictly accurate to say that God knows that *Detroit won the 1984 World Series*, that does not imply that God is missing something cognitively, that God fails to make effective noetic contact with some aspect of reality, perhaps through lack of interest in baseball. He is in no state that embodies the complexity of the proposition that Detroit won the 1984 World Series. Nevertheless whatever is knowable in this fact, along with all else, is somehow contained in His simple intuition of His own essence.

No doubt, we are quite unable to envisage just *how* the full extent of reality can be known by, or in, God's intuition of His essence. And it is not just that we cannot work through all the details; it is not that we get stuck only on particularly tough cases like counterfactuals or modal facts. We cannot even make a start at seeing how it is brought off. We do not have any real understanding of how so simple a state of affairs as that *this rose is red* could be known by a subject without that subject's cognitive state somehow reflecting the complexity of that fact. Hence when we have occasion to speak of God's knowledge we are forced to represent it on the model of human knowledge, and speak of God as knowing, e.g. that the *Israelites were being held in slavery in Egypt*, even if we hold that this is not how God's knowledge is in itself. Aquinas would not dispute this. He would be quick to acknowledge, indeed to insist, that we have no real *understanding* of what God is like, or of what it would be like to be God. We can know that the divine knowledge is in accordance with the above characterization (remembering that this characterization is almost entirely negative). But we cannot grasp the way in which a knowledge of that sort could embrace all things. Aquinas would take this not as a defect of his account but as a recommendation. Why should we expect to attain any concrete understanding of the way God's knowledge works?

¹ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q. 24, art. 14, tr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed., Anton C. Pegis. *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 158.

² *Ibid.*

Without in any way wishing to deny our severe limitations in this regard we might spend a moment in the attempt to render this conception of divine knowledge less blankly incomprehensible. We might think of divine knowledge as like our initial visual perception of a scene, where we have not yet begun the job of extracting separately stateable facts, rather than like our propositional perceptual knowledge of the fact that the table is darker than the chair. To be sure, the trouble with this analogy is that it is controversial whether adult human percipients enjoy any perceptual awareness of the physical environment that is wholly free from propositional structuring. It has been widely maintained that I cannot see anything without taking it *as* something, e.g. as a house with trees in the background, even if I do not explicitly and consciously put this to myself in so many words. But even if this is so, we might be able to distinguish, within a particular complex of perceptual experience, an aspect of sheer givenness or sheer awareness of something, from the conceptual or judgemental activity of taking this given as such and such. It might further be speculated that in early stages of individual psychological development, and in relatively unorganized psychological conditions of adult subjects (just falling off to sleep or just waking up, for example) we have the bare awareness element without the conceptual structuring. Considerations like this may give us some sense of what a purely non-propositional knowledge would be like.

To be sure, this model suffers from the disability that it is a poorer, not a richer cognitive state than the propositional knowledge into which it develops. Whereas God's simple awareness of His essence is supposed to be richer in cognitive value than any possible propositional knowledge. This suggests that we might supplement our perceptual model by reference to F. H. Bradley's portrayal of the human cognitive condition. In a highly truncated version it goes something like this. At the base of our cognition is a condition of pure immediacy, a state of pure "feeling" in which there is no distinction of any kind between subject and object, or between different objects of knowledge. This condition scores high on unity and 'felt oneness' with the "object", but it scores very low on every other relevant dimension, including comprehensiveness, articulation, and understanding. In our drive to achieve these goals we shatter this primeval unity and build up ever more complex systems of propositional knowledge. But no matter how elaborate these become, and no matter how much we achieve in the way of logically articulated systems of explanation, we can never, by this route, reinstate that original condition of felt unity and immediacy; as a result, discursive thought will never be wholly satisfactory. All the relevant desiderata can be combined only by a "higher immediacy" that includes all the richness and articulation of the discursive stage in a unity that is as tight and satisfying as the initial stage. This is the ideal, the ultimate goal of thought, one which Bradley thought of as actually realized, not in any human being or other finite

subject, but in the Absolute.¹ Strangely enough, this bit of British Hegelianism serves rather well as a model for the Thomistic conception of divine knowledge and of the way in which it compares with human knowledge. Bradley too would recognize that we are incapable of forming any concrete idea of what this 'higher immediacy' is like. We can draw up its specifications only in the most general and abstract of terms. We can say what it must contain, but we cannot see how.

My task in this paper is not to recommend the Thomistic conception of divine knowledge, but only to lay it on the table and consider what implications it has for the question of whether God has beliefs. Nevertheless, I will just briefly consider how it might be supported. For Aquinas it is an immediate consequence of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Since propositional structure involves complexity it cannot be involved in the way God knows.² But the Thomistic doctrine of simplicity is a lot to swallow. Is there any more modest way of supporting the non-propositional view? Here is such a way. It seems plausible to suppose that the propositional character of human knowledge stems from our limitations. Why is our knowledge parcelled out in separate facts? For two reasons. First, we cannot grasp any concrete whole in its full concreteness; at most we cognize certain abstract features thereof, which we proceed to formulate in distinct propositions. Second, we need to isolate separate propositions in order to relate them logically, so as to be able to extend our knowledge inferentially. Both these reasons are lacking in the divine case. God can surely grasp any concrete whole fully, not just partial aspects thereof. And God has no need to extend His knowledge, inferentially or otherwise, since it is necessarily complete anyway. Hence there would be no point in God's carving up His intuition of reality into separate propositions. We have to represent divine knowledge as the knowledge of this or that particular fact; but this is only one of the ways in which we are forced to think of God's nature and doings in terms of our own imperfect approximations thereto.

Now we can turn to the implications of the non-propositional view for the issue of divine beliefs. The matter can be dealt with summarily. Whatever else a belief may be, it is obviously a *propositional* attitude, a psychological state that involves, either in itself or in its object or both, the structural complexity of some proposition. We have no inkling of how some psychological state could be a belief without being a belief that *p*, where *p* stands for a sentence that expresses a proposition. Hence a being whose knowledge involves no propositional structure or complexity has no beliefs as part of its knowledge. On the Thomistic conception of divine knowledge, and on any other non-propositional conception of divine knowledge, there can be no case for supposing that God's knowledge involves beliefs.

¹ *Appearance and Reality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987), chs. xiv, xv, xix, xxi.

² *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. i, ch. 58; *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q. 14, art. 14.

II

Now let us consider the more commonsensical view that God's knowledge is propositional, that it is correctly represented as made up of components, each of which is a knowledge that p , and consider whether this knowledge involves beliefs. Of course, if divine propositional knowledge conforms to any kind of "true belief + ..." conception of knowledge – true *justified* belief, true *reliably formed* belief (perhaps with extra conditions to deal with Gettier problems) – then in knowing that p He will *ipso facto* believe that p . But that is just the question. Is His knowledge correctly thought of as true belief + ...? I shall argue that it is not. We shall see that this will require more extensive consideration than the exclusion of divine beliefs by the non-propositional conception of divine knowledge.

First I want to foreswear a cheap way of winning a victory, by taking belief to be exclusive of knowledge by conceptual necessity. It is sometimes supposed that part of what one is saying in saying 'S believes that p ' is that S does not know that p . This is suggested by dialogues like the following:

A (calling from the second floor). 'What's that noise in the kitchen?'

B (from the kitchen). 'I believe that the faucet is leaking.'

A. 'You *believe* it's leaking? Can't you see whether it is or not?'

A seems to be taking B's statement that she believes that p to imply that she does not know that p . And there is no doubt but that 'believe' is often used contrastively with 'know'. Clearly, if 'does not know that p ' is part of the meaning of 'believes that p ', then God has no beliefs; for God will never be in the position of having a belief that does not count as knowledge.¹

However, it is not necessary to admit that 'does not know' is part of what is meant by 'believes'. We can explain dialogues like the above by a Gricean "conversational rule", according to which one is not to make a weaker the stronger statement relevant. Where knowledge is relevant and I say 'I believe that p ' I thereby suggest that I do not know that p , not because 'not knowing' is part of what is meant by 'believing', but because if I do know I am violating the conversational rule in merely saying that I believe. But whether or not that is the correct explanation, and whether or not there is a familiar sense of 'believe' in which belief semantically excludes knowledge, it remains true that philosophers typically mean to be using 'believe' in a more neutral sense in which a belief may or may not count as knowledge. Without attempting anything like an analysis of such a sense, we may characterize it as follows. To believe that p , in this wide neutral sense, is to

¹ Note that this is an argument against construing *any* knowledge, not just God's knowledge as true belief + However, though it is an argument against that construal of human *knowledge*, it is not an argument against the existence of human beliefs; for we, unlike God, can and do believe something without knowing it.

“accept” the proposition that p , where the acceptance need not be a full dress, conscious proceeding. Such acceptance is typically manifested in, e.g. being disposed to assert that p when the occasion arises and being disposed to act as if it is true that p . I shall take it that there is such a neutral sense, and that those who speak of God’s beliefs are employing that sense. Hence I am blocked from taking this short cut to my conclusion.

The next shortest argument for my conclusion runs as follows. Even if we understand ‘believe’ in such a way that a belief may count as knowledge, still the point of attributing beliefs to a subject is that some of the propositional “acceptances” or “assents” of the subject *may* not qualify as knowledge. The concept of belief has a place in our conceptual scheme just because human beings sometimes take it that p without really knowing that p , either because it is false that p or because other conditions of knowledge are not satisfied. A human being, S , can be, and often is, in a state that is like knowledge in that S has a positive attitude toward a proposition, p (has a sense of conviction with respect to p , is disposed to assert that p , is disposed to act as if p is true), but nevertheless fails to know that p . Thus we need a term for this imperfect approximation to knowledge, and ‘believe’ fits the bill. Now consider a subject that never “accepts” a proposition without knowing it to be true; ‘believe’ would have no application to such a subject, since the whole point of attributing the term would have evaporated. This is still more the case if there is no *possibility* of this subject’s failing to know what it accepts. But God, Who is necessarily omniscient, is precisely such a subject. To accept a proposition without knowing it to be true, would be a cognitive imperfection and so not attributable to God. Therefore the distinction between belief and knowledge has no relevance to God, and it cannot be correct to think of God as believing that Jones will mow his lawn three weeks later.

But this line of argument may well be contested. Although we do not have the same reasons for using ‘believe’ with respect to God that we have with respect to human beings, that does not show that God does not have beliefs. After all, the conditions under which there is a point in saying that p often diverge from the conditions under which it is true that p . There may well be no point in my going around saying to people ‘I exist’, but it is true nonetheless. Where it is perfectly obvious to all concerned that I see you there is no point in my saying ‘I see you’, but still it is true that I see you. Here is a closer analogue. The point of distinguishing one’s purposes or intentions from what one actually does is that (a) sometimes one fails to achieve the purposes for which one does what one does, and (b) sometimes one fails to act on one’s intentions through sloth, fear, or weakness of will. Now God never fails to accomplish what he sets out to do, nor does He ever swerve from the carrying out of His intentions. Does it follow that He has no purposes, that He never does A in order to carry out His purpose to achieve

E? Hardly. Even if God is not subject to gaps between purpose and fulfilment, it can still be true that, e.g. God brought about the downfall of Jerusalem in order to carry out His purpose of punishing the Judaeans for their sins.

Thus, even if the divine case does not exhibit the same kind of contrast between belief and knowledge that we have in the human case, it does not follow that God does not have beliefs as components of His knowledge. We must dig deeper.

We might conduct a frontal assault on the application of the “true belief + . . .” conception of knowledge to God by considering what must be added to true belief to make knowledge and then arguing that this cannot be attributed to God. To carry this out we would have to survey all the plausible candidates for these extra conditions, and show the inapplicability to God in each case. Consider, for example, the idea that one thing that must be added to true belief to make knowledge is *justification* of the belief in a deontological sense of ‘justification’. In this sense to say that one is justified in believing that *p* is to say that one has not violated any of one’s intellectual obligations in believing that *p*. One is in no way subject to blame for having that belief; one is within one’s rights in so believing.¹ We might then seek to show that the concept of intellectual obligations does not apply to God. Such an argument might appeal, e.g. to the principle that a being is subject to obligations only if principles of obligations can play a governing or directive role with respect to that being. And this is possible only if that being has, or might have, some tendency to act in violation of those principles. But God, being necessarily perfectly good, could have no tendency to act in violation of principles of obligation. Hence God cannot be thought of as subject to obligations.

However, I do not regard this as a promising way to establish that God’s knowledge is not true belief + . . . First, and most important, it would require us to survey all sufficiently plausible candidates for such conditions; and it is not at all clear just what and how many items should be put on such a list. Second, it may not be possible to show, for each such plausible candidate, that it could not be attributed to God. Hence I will employ a more positive approach. I will contend that there is another construal of divine knowledge that is superior to any true belief + . . . construal.

My candidate for this superior construal is the traditionally important “intuitive” conception of knowledge, as I shall call it. This is the view that knowledge of a fact is simply the immediate awareness of that fact. In H. H. Price’s felicitous formulation, knowledge “is simply the situation in which some entity or some fact is directly present to consciousness”.² Despite

¹ See my “Concepts of Epistemic Justification” (*The Monist*, LXVII, 1 January 1985, 57–89) and various references given there for an account of this and other concepts of justification.

² “Some Considerations About Belief”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XXXV (1934–35), 229. Price’s formulation is designed to handle knowledge of particulars as well as knowledge of facts, but we shall only be concerned with the latter.

the curious conviction of many contemporary Anglo-American epistemologists that the true-justified-belief conception of knowledge is "the traditional conception", the intuitive conception has been much more prominent historically. It was certainly the dominant conception in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, appearing in such guises as Descartes' conception of clear and distinct perception and Locke's definition of knowledge as the perception of the agreement and disagreement of ideas.¹ On this view, knowledge is quite a different psychological state from belief. Obviously I can believe that *p* without its being the case that *p*. But I cannot be in the state of knowledge that *p*, so construed, without its being the case that *p*; for that state just consists of the presence of that fact to my consciousness; without that fact there could be no such state. Knowledge is not a state that could be just what it is intrinsically without the actual existence of the object; it has no intrinsic character over and above the presence of that object to consciousness. Thus knowledge, on this construal, is infallible in a strong sense; its inherent nature guarantees the reality of the object. Whereas a belief that *p* is, by its very nature, a state that can be just what it is whether or not there is any such fact that *p*.² Intuitive theorists differ as to whether I can also believe (judge) that *p* at the same moment that I know that *p*; but they are united in affirming that knowledge is a different kind of psychological state from belief (judgement); it is not a belief that meets certain further conditions.³

Many philosophers, especially since Hegel, have argued that there can be no immediate awareness of facts that is free of any belief or judgemental element. They have typically held that the supposition of such an awareness is confused, incoherent, or worse.⁴ The usual line of argument goes something like this. The alleged immediate awareness of the fact that *x* is *P* will be, or at least involve, being aware of *x* as *P*. But I can be aware of *x* as having any property, *P*, only by applying the concept of *P* to *X*, only by *taking x* to be *P*. It is not as if the *fact that x is P* is just sitting out there awaiting my notice, the way in which *x* indeed may be. To achieve any sort of cognition

¹ For the latter, see *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. iv, ch. 1, section 2.

² We have to make an exception to this generalization for beliefs with certain special contents. For example, my belief that I believe something could not be the state it is (a belief of mine) unless its propositional object were true. (I owe this point to Robert Audi.) But this is because of the special character of that propositional object. It is still the case that, unlike knowledge on the intuitive conception, there is nothing about belief as such that prevents a belief from being the psychological state it is even if its propositional object is false.

³ See Price, *loc. cit.* In Descartes' *Meditation IV* it is the faculty of the understanding that achieves knowledge; the will is then faced with the task of forming judgements or beliefs in accordance with that. See also Locke, *op. cit.* bk. iv, chs. 5 and 14. In chapter 14 Locke clearly affirms that one judges that *p* only where one does not know that *p*; but in chapter 5 he seems to hold that one may also judge that *p* where one does know that *p*, though the knowledge is still distinct from the judgement.

⁴ See, e.g. F. H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), bk. II, pt. I, ch. vi; Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939), chs. I, II, xxv; Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 127-96; Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), ch. 2; Laurence Bonjour, "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, xv, 1 (Jan. 1978), 1-13.

that something is so-and-so, is of a certain sort, I must utilize my concept of that sort; I must utilize my capacity to class things as being of that sort. But to apply the concept of *P* to *x*, to take *x* to be *P*, is just to form the judgement or belief that *x* is *P*.¹ Hence the immediate awareness of a fact that was supposed to be belief-free turns out to contain a belief or judgement as an essential component. It is just a belief of a special sort, one that structures or organizes awareness in a certain way. Hence the idea that knowledge of *p* can be immediate awareness of *p*, rather than a true belief or judgement that *p* that satisfies certain further condition, is vitiated from the start. Its favoured candidate inevitably carries along with it that which it was designed to supplant.

Various questions might be raised about these claims, even as applied to the human condition; but on the whole I find the argument sound in that application, and so I shall refrain from quibbles. Instead I shall contend that even if belief-free immediate awareness of a fact is not a possibility for us, it does not follow that God is similarly limited. To make this point I need not challenge the application to God of the thesis that to be aware of the fact that *x* is *P* (of *x*'s being *P*, of *x* as *P*) one must possess and deploy the concept of *P*, must be utilizing one's capacity to recognize something as being *P*. No doubt, what it is for God to possess and to utilize such a capacity is radically different from what all that comes to in the case of a human being, but that is not our present concern. My contention will be that what the argument infers from this for the human case fails to follow for the divine case. Even if it is true for us that to apply the concept of *P* to *x* is, or necessarily involves, *believing* that *x* is *p*, in a sense of 'belief' in which a belief is the sort of thing that may or may not be true, no such conclusion can be drawn for the divine case. Since God is necessarily infallible, even if, in being aware of the fact that *x* is *P*, God is applying a concept of *P* to *x*, it does not follow that God is thereby *judging* or *believing* that *p*, where that claim commits us to holding that God possesses a belief that is intrinsically capable of being false. God's necessary infallibility protects us from the requirement of any such admission. Hence we are not constrained to concede that God's immediate awareness of the fact that *p* can constitute knowledge that *p* only by way of involving a belief that *p*. We are, so far as the above line of argument is concerned, free to hold that God's immediate awareness of *p* is itself His knowledge that *p*, without any belief being involved.

With this defence of the legitimacy of an intuitive conception of knowledge, at least in application to God, let us move on to the question of whether God's knowledge is best construed as intuitive. In the human case, even if the intuitive conception does have a possible application, contrary to the above argument, there are conclusive reasons for denying that it gives us an adequate account of human knowledge; but none of these reasons applies

¹ For purposes of this discussion I will not distinguish between judgement and belief.

to the divine case. For one thing, the intuitive conception is too episodic for our condition. It limits knowledge that *p* to those moments at which I am directly aware of the fact that *p*; but that is intolerably restrictive. I am capable, at best, of having one or two facts present to my consciousness at a time. But surely there are many things that I know right now. And equally surely there are many things that I know continuously over a long period of time. I have known that $2 + 2 = 4$ for many years now, and not just at odd moments during those years; but at most I am only infrequently aware of that fact. Hence the intuitive conception fails to bring out the way in which I know what I know when my conscious attention is not on it. A suitably dispositionalized concept of belief is just what is needed to bring out this largely 'latent' character of human knowledge. If my knowledge is a true belief that meets further conditions, I can be said to have this knowledge at times when it is not occupying my attention. However God is not limited in this way. He could be directly aware of all facts at every moment, or aware of all facts timelessly if that is the mode of His existence.

The second reason for denying that the intuitive conception captures the character of human knowledge is this. If I know anywhere near as much as I ordinarily suppose myself to know, then I know much more than can ever be directly present to my consciousness. How can I know anything about history or the contemporary character of distant lands on this conception of knowledge? How can facts concerning the micro-structure of matter be directly present to my consciousness? But again these considerations have no relevance to the divine situation. Nothing could prevent God from being directly aware of facts of every sort.

This may suffice to show that God's knowledge could be of the intuitive rather than of the *true belief* + variety; but we have not yet argued that it is better construed as intuitive. I shall now proceed to do so. The basic point is that the intuitive conception represents the fullest and most perfect realization of the cognitive ideal. We reject the intuitive account for human knowledge, not because we suppose ourselves to have something better, but because it represents too high an aspiration for our condition. If we could be continuously directly aware of every fact of which we have knowledge, that would be splendid; but we must settle for something more modest. Immediate awareness of facts is the highest form of knowledge just because it is a direct and foolproof way of mirroring the reality to be known. There is no potentially distorting medium in the way, no possibly unreliable witnesses, no fallible signs or indications. The fact known is "bodily" present in the knowledge. The state of knowledge is constituted by the presence of the fact known. This is the ideal way of "registering" a fact and assimilating it into the subject's system of cognition and action guidance. Hence this is the best way to think of God's knowledge. Since God is absolutely perfect, cognitively as well as otherwise, His knowledge will be of this most perfect

form. It would be fatuously unjustified at best, and blasphemous at worst, to attribute to Him some second-rate mode of knowledge, one that is of value only for limited creatures that can do no better.

III

I take the argument of section II to be conclusive. God can have beliefs only as components of knowledge. But God knows what He knows in a way that does not involve any beliefs. Hence God has no beliefs. Nevertheless it may be illuminating to approach the issue from a different perspective. Without considering whether beliefs figure in knowledge, we can consider various fundamental features of beliefs and ask what bearing each of these has on the question of whether beliefs are attributable to God. In raising these questions I will be relying on the conclusions of section II.

What fundamental features beliefs have depends, of course, on what sorts of entities beliefs are. Following H. H. Price's admirable book-length treatment,¹ we can distinguish between "occurrent" and "dispositional" accounts of the nature of belief. ". . . in the traditional Occurrence Analysis of belief, attention is concentrated on a special sort of mental occurrence or mental act, which may be called assenting".² This is to be construed as the taking up of a certain attitude to a proposition. Whatever is to be further said about this mental act, the basic point to be made in the present connection is simply a different application of a point made in section II, to the effect that higher forms of cognition in God exclude lower forms. In its present guise the point is that if God is immediately aware of all facts, there is no point to His *assenting* to propositions. Such activity has a point only when one does not already have effective access to the facts. If one's best shot at reality is to pick out those propositions that, so far as one can tell, have the best chance of being true and assenting to them, well and good. But if one already has the facts themselves, what is the point of *assenting* to propositions? It would be a meaningless charade.

On the dispositional analysis, a belief is essentially a complex disposition. A full-blown version of this, as in Robert Audi's "The Concept of Believing",³ will cite dispositions to a variety of manifestations – cognitive and affective as well as behavioural; but for this abbreviated discussion we can restrict ourselves to dispositions to actions. Let us think of a belief that *p* as, at least in part, a complex of dispositions to act, in appropriate situations, in ways that are appropriate to its being the case that *p*, given the subject's aims, desires, standards, and so on. Thus to believe that my Aunt Jennifer is coming for a visit tomorrow is, *inter alia*, to be disposed to get the guest room ready. Now we might argue against the attribution of dispositions of any sort to God

¹ *Belief* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969).

² P. 204.

³ *The Personalist*, LIII, 1 (1972), 43–62.

on the grounds that God, as pure act, excludes all potentiality and hence all dispositions. It could never be true that God is disposed to do something that He is not already doing. Again, it could be argued that God can have no dispositions because His mode of existence is timeless rather than temporal; and a disposition can be attributed to a being only if it is possible for that being to be doing something at some future time that it is not doing now, viz., the action to which it is disposed. A disposition that could not exist unactualized is hardly worthy of the name. But I need not go into all that for present purposes. Let us agree that God does have various dispositions to action. He is disposed, let us say, to forgive any sinful human being who turns to Him with true repentance.

So if God has action dispositions of the sort that are ingredient in belief, why should we not attribute beliefs to Him? (We may assume for purposes of this discussion that the other sorts of dispositions that are constitutive of belief can also be attributed to God.) Let us consider a disposition that might be thought to constitute a good part of a belief. Take the disposition to send plagues on Egypt if the Pharaoh does not release the Israelites. This disposition might be thought to be partly constitutive of the belief that the Israelites are being forcibly detained in Egypt. If we are prepared to hold that God had that disposition prior to the Exodus, why should we abstain from crediting Him with the corresponding belief? The answer is, of course, that since God has unlimited intuitive knowledge, that suffices for the action guidance function and serves to ground such behavioural dispositions as He possesses. It is because God *knew* that Israel was enslaved in Egypt that he was disposed to inflict plagues on the Egyptians if that were necessary to get the Israelites released. Having perfect knowledge He has no need of mere beliefs to guide His behaviour. His dispositions to act in one way rather than another stem from His knowledge of the situation. Again the better drives out the worse. (Here theology displays its superiority to economics.) The action guidance aspect of cognition does not distinguish between belief and knowledge; they share in it equally. Hence it can serve as no basis for the attribution of belief rather than, or in addition to, knowledge.

Finally let us consider the plausible view that a belief involves some inner mental representation of what is believed. If this inner representation aspect is essential to belief, it provides yet another reason why beliefs are not to be attributed to God. A creature in our condition needs inner representations in order to be able to think about absent states of affairs, since the facts are rarely if ever directly present to our consciousness. But since God enjoys the highest form of knowledge He is never in that position, and so He has no need for inner representations that He can "carry around with Him" for use when the facts are absent. The facts are never absent from His awareness; thus it would be fatuous to attribute to Him any such mental map. When we have arrived at our destination we can fold the map away.

IV

Why all the fuss over whether God has beliefs? Even if the arguments of this paper are cogent and it is quite unjustifiable to think of God as believing this or that, what is the importance of this point? What harm is there in thinking of God's knowledge as true belief + ..., even if, strictly speaking, that is not the way it is?

One answer to this last question is, of course, that we suffer the harm of thinking about something in a less adequate way than we are capable of. And, furthermore, this is not just something or other, but God. If we are going to try to think reflectively and carefully about the nature and activity of God, it surely behoves us to do as good a job of this as is within our powers.

But perhaps this answer misses the intent of the question. Perhaps the questioner was really concerned with what bearing our conception of divine knowledge has on other matters. Are there other areas in which our thought about God, or other reactions to Him, are seriously thrown off course by thinking of divine knowledge as involving belief? Will using this conception of divine knowledge do us any harm over and above its own inadequacy?

I believe that an affirmative answer must be given to this question. It can be shown that thinking of divine knowledge as involving beliefs does have deleterious consequences in more than one area of our thought about God. I shall now provide two cases in point. These concern the two difficulties over divine omniscience that are most prominent in recent Anglo-American philosophical theology: divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and divine omniscience and immutability.

From ancient times Christian thinkers have been worried about the *prima facie* incompatibility of divine foreknowledge of human actions and the freedom of those actions. If God is omniscient then He has known from all eternity that I would be writing these lines at this moment. But then how can I have any choice in the matter? How can it be within my power to do something else instead? Recent discussion of this issue has centred on Nelson Pike's "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action", referred to in footnote 3. Pike, assuming that knowledge entails true belief, takes God to believe all true propositions and takes divine omniscience to entail that God has no false beliefs. He also assumes that omniscience is an essential property of God, one that He possesses in every possible world in which He exists. Again, he assumes that God is temporal, that He lives through a succession of moments. He then presents a version of the traditional argument in terms of divine forebelief. Here is a simplified version of that argument. (We assume that Jones mowed his lawn at time *t*.)

- (1) One day prior to *t* God believed that Jones would mow his lawn at *t*.
- (2) If Jones had the power at *t* to refrain from mowing his lawn at *t*, then

Jones had the power at t either (a) to do something such that if he had done it God would not have existed one day before t , or (b) to do something such that if he had done it God would have had a false belief one day before t , or (c) to do something such that if he had done it God would have believed something other than what in fact He did believe one day before t .

(3) Jones could not have any of the three powers, (a), (b), and (c).

(4) Therefore, Jones does not have the power at t to refrain from mowing his lawn at t .

For present purposes let us take it for granted that Jones could not have powers (a) and (b) and concentrate on (c), the alternative on which most of the discussion of Pike's paper has centred. To get an appreciation of the point of presenting the argument in terms of divine forebelief rather than in terms of divine foreknowledge, let us see what happens when we substitute knowledge for belief in the argument. (b) now drops out, since it makes no sense to speak of false knowledge, but the rest can be retained. Now consider (c) in this new version. Suppose that God knew yesterday that I would be working on this paper at this moment? Is it within my power at this moment to do something else, e.g. read a magazine, so that if I had exercised that power and read a magazine at this moment God would have known something different about me from what He in fact did know? Well, why not? On any reasonable conception of knowledge the fact known is a constituent of the knowledge. In the true-justified-belief conception this is because the truth of the proposition is one of the necessary conditions of knowledge. In the intuitive conception it is because the fact known is a constituent of the psychological state that constitutes the knowledge. Where that fact is temporally posterior to the knowledge this means that the knowledge has what we might call a trans-temporal character. Where God knew yesterday what I do at noon today, that knowledge includes in its constitution my doing what I do at noon today. Thus the fact that God knew this yesterday is at least in part a fact concerning noon today, more particularly, concerning what I do at noon today. Hence this bit of God's knowledge is intimately dependent for its constitution on what I do at noon today. By doing what I do at noon today I determine the object of this bit of knowledge, what is known therein. Hence it is not at all impossible for me to have the power to do something such that if I should have done it God would have known something different than what He did in fact know.

Let us put this in a different way. It seems that God's knowing in advance what I will do at t prevents me from having any real choice at t , just because it is logically impossible that God (or anyone else) should know that I do A at t and I do not do A at t . Anyone's knowing that p logically implies that p . When that knowledge is contemporaneous with or later than the fact known it obviously makes no problems for freedom. If you see me writing

this paper while I am doing it, the fact that you know that I am writing the paper has no tendency to show that I was not free to do something else instead.¹ Again, if I or someone else knows tomorrow that I am writing this paper at noon today, that has no appearance of implying that I do not have any real choice at noon today as to what to do. But if someone knew yesterday that I would be writing this paper at noon today, that seems quite different. For that seems to imply that something that was the case yesterday is incompatible with my doing anything else at noon today than write this paper. And in that case, it would seem, I have no say in the matter. My writing the paper at noon today is determined by something that was already in place yesterday; so how can it be up to me at noon today whether I do that or something else? But we have just seen the flaw in this reasoning. The reasoning depends on assuming that the fact that *S* knew yesterday that I would be doing *A* at noon today is a fact that is wholly constituted by what is temporally located on the previous day. It is only on this assumption that the foreknowledge could be thought to have determined in advance what I would do at noon today. But what we have seen is that this knowledge is partly constituted by what I do at noon today. In particular, what it is knowledge of is determined by my making my choice and carrying it out. Hence the foreknowledge is only a paper tiger. Since the determination of what will be known awaits my choice as to what I will do, the citation of that foreknowledge can have no tendency to show that I have no choice in the matter. If anything the (at least partial) determination runs in the other direction. By choosing what to do now I determine what it is that that foreknower knows, rather than the foreknower determining what I do.²

The point I have been making about knowledge is a particular application of the recently popular Ockhamist distinction between "hard" and "soft" facts.³ Roughly speaking, a dated fact is a "hard" fact about the time in question if it is wholly about that time, if it is completely over and done with when that time is over. Otherwise it is a "soft" fact about that time. Thus the fact that I was offered the job at *t* is a hard fact about *t*; it embodies only what was going on then and is fully constituted by the state of the world at *t*. On the other hand, the fact that I was offered the job two weeks before declining it is not a hard fact about *t*, even if *t* is when I was offered the job.

¹ This point has been exploited by many thinkers to defuse the problem. If God does not exist in time, but rather in an "eternal now", then God never knows "in advance" what happens. All of His knowledge is strictly contemporary with what is known, since God is all at once contemporary with all of time. Hence His perfect knowledge of all our actions is not more incompatible with our freedom to do otherwise than is the contemporary knowledge of another human being as to what I am doing at a given moment. See, e.g. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, Q. 14, art. 13. In order to generate a problem of divine omniscience and human freedom we need to think of God as temporal, as living through a succession of moments, so that He will know *in advance* what I do at a given moment.

² This diagnosis of the situation may, of course, be contested, but for the purposes of this discussion I only need to display its plausibility.

³ See Marilyn Adams, 'Is the Existence of God a Hard Fact?', *Philosophical Review*, LXXVI (Oct., 1967), 209-16; John Fischer, 'Freedom and Foreknowledge', *op. cit.* xcii (1983), 67-79; Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, 'Hard and Soft Facts', *op. cit.* xciii (July 1984).

That fact is not fully constituted until two weeks past t , when I decline the job. In these terms, R 's knowledge at t that S will do A at a later time, u , is not a hard fact about t , since it is not fully constituted by what occurs at t .

And now we can see the point of framing the argument for the incompatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom in terms of divine beliefs. The argument does not work for divine knowledge just because knowledge at t of a later event, not being a hard fact about t , does not place any real constraint on what happens at that later time. But beliefs would seem to be a different matter. Surely the fact that R believes at t that S will do A at a later time, u , is a hard fact about t . How could S ' belief be even partially constituted by what happens later? A belief seems completely self-enclosed at the time of possession in a way that knowledge is not. Hence if God's believing at t that I would do A at a later time, u , should entail that I do A at U , this would seem unequivocally to rule out freedom of choice. Since a belief held at t is a hard fact about t , we cannot dispose of this argument in the way we disposed of the argument from divine foreknowledge. But if God is essentially omniscient and temporal and if divine knowledge involves belief, then for every action I perform God does believe in advance that I will do it, and it is logically impossible that any of these beliefs is false. Hence, given those assumptions, every action of mine is necessitated by a prior fact that is to no extent constituted by my action; my action is necessitated by a past fact that is what it is apart from my decision to perform the action. This argument from divine forebelief would seem to succeed, given its assumptions, where the argument from divine foreknowledge fails.

To be sure, the hardness of *divine* belief has been contested. It has been argued that just because it is logically impossible for a divine belief to be mistaken, the fact that God believes that p logically entails that p , just as the fact that anyone knows that p logically entails that p ; and hence *divine* belief about the future is as much a soft fact about the time at which it occurs as anyone's knowledge about the future, and for basically the same reason.¹ The hardness of divine belief has, in turn, been defended in the face of these allegations.² I will not have time to go into those controversies. Suffice it to say that belief, even divine belief, is not so clearly or as uncontroversially a soft fact as is knowledge. Hence, at the very least, the argument for the incompatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom is in a significantly stronger position when put in terms of divine beliefs.

And now at last we are in a position to see the way in which our contentions concerning divine knowledge have a bearing on this issue. If we are right in denying that divine knowledge involves belief at all, and in denying that

¹ See Adams, *op. cit.*; Alfred J. Freddoso, "Accidental Necessity and Logical Determinism", *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXX (May 1983), 257–78; Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way out", *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 3, no. 3 (July 1986), 235–269.

² See Fischer, *op. cit.*

God has beliefs, the way is blocked to Pike's strengthening of the argument. We are forced back to the version in terms of divine foreknowledge, a version that is decisively refuted by the point that foreknowledge is only a soft fact.¹ Hence the position of this paper has the effect of blunting what could be a serious threat to the compatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom.

Now for the problem of the relation between omniscience and immutability (and/or timelessness). In a widely discussed article Norman Kretzmann contended that immutability is incompatible with omniscience.² His argument may be paraphrased as follows. Facts of the form 'X is going on now' change from moment to moment. I am writing on this paper now. But two hours ago a proposition of that form was false and instead a proposition of the form 'I am eating lunch now' was true. Thus if at each moment God knows what is going on then, His knowledge must change from moment to moment and He cannot be immutable. But if He is omniscient He surely must know, with respect to each moment, what is going on then. Hence He cannot be both omniscient and immutable.

A similar argument for the incompatibility of omniscience and timelessness would run as follows. If God is to know what is going on now He must be positioned at the present moment of time. Otherwise He could not refer to this moment as 'now'. But if He is timeless He never exists at some moment of time. Therefore....

It is clear that these arguments assume that, in addition to all the relational temporal facts as to how various moments, events, and so on are temporally related to each other as earlier, later than, or simultaneous with, there are also facts as to "where the world process is *now*", what stage of that process we are actually undergoing. Moreover it assumes that these facts as to what is present, past, and future do not just hold relative to a certain position in the network of temporal relations but hold absolutely. It is a fully objective fact that American hostages are now being held by Shi'ite Moslems in Lebanon, while it is no longer the case that American hostages are being held in Iran; the latter is in the past, over and done with. The world process is now at the Shi'ite Moslem hostage stage; that is what is actually going on now. No description of the world in terms of the temporal interrelations of all events could be complete without adding a specification of which of those events are occurring now. If this assumption were not made there would be nothing lacking to the knowledge of a timeless or immutable deity, since such a being clearly could have complete knowledge of all the ways in which temporal events are related to each other. Hence one way to contest Kretzmann's argument is to deny this assumption and claim that objective

¹ In the next to last paragraph of his article (p. 45) Pike acknowledges that his argument will not go through if divine knowledge does not involve belief.

² "Omniscience and Immutability", *Journal of Philosophy*, LXIII (July 1966), 409-21.

temporal facts are exhausted by facts concerning the temporal relations of events. I doubt very much that any such manoeuvre can succeed. In any event, my present interest is in demonstrating the relevance of my contentions about divine knowledge to this issue.

We can see that relevance as follows. If divine knowledge is propositional in character, then omniscience will involve knowledge of all true propositions (alternatively, of all facts). In these terms Kretzmann's claim is that there are distinctively indexical temporal propositions (facts) that are inaccessible to an immutable or timeless being. For to know any of these indexical facts, e.g. the fact that the sun is shining *now*, one must be involved in the temporal process, successively occupy different temporal perspectives; and an immutable or timeless being cannot do that. The opponent who takes the line mentioned near the end of the last paragraph will deny that there are any distinctively indexical propositions. He will maintain that the proposition that the hostages are being held now is just the same proposition as the proposition that the hostages are being held at *t*, where the dating device '*t*' is determined by the place of this moment in the network of temporal relationships. As I say, I am not inclined to think that this view of the individuation of temporal propositions is a viable one, but it is a complex and difficult issue. My present point is that if we adopt the radical position of section IV, to the effect that divine knowledge is not in any way propositional, we can sidestep this issue about propositional identity. If God's knowledge simply consists in an intuition of one or more concrete realities, and does not involve a segregation of these realities into distinct abstract propositions, this issue does not arise. I see the sun shining and register this fact by assenting to the indexical proposition that the sun is shining here and now. If the knowledge of a timeless or immutable deity is propositionally structured, we have to ask whether that deity knows just the proposition that I expressed by the words 'The sun is shining now'. And that will lead us into the question of whether some non-indexical proposition which that deity can know is the same proposition as the one I just expressed. But on the non-propositional account of divine knowledge the question is as to whether an immutable or timeless deity can have an intuition of the same concrete reality that I registered one abstract aspect of by assenting to the proposition 'The sun is shining now'. And there would seem to be no problem about that. What is there in that concrete hunk of space-time that would be unavailable to an immutable or timeless deity? If God is not confronted with the task of analysing the reality into distinguishable propositions He will have no traffic with either indexical or non-indexical propositions concerning the current state of affairs. That being the case, we cannot specify some bit of knowledge that is unavailable to Him by focusing on indexical propositions. A deity that enjoys a direct intuition of the concrete reality has slipped through this net.

Thus the position we have taken in this paper on the nature of divine knowledge has distinctive implications for some prominent issues concerning divine omniscience.¹

¹ This paper has greatly benefited from comments by Robert Audi, Jonathan Bennett, Norman Kretzmann, Nelson Pike, Alvin Plantinga, Eleonore Stump, and Peter van Inwagen.