

BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE, AND OMNISCIENCE

Paul WEINGARTNER, *Omniscience. From a Logical Point of View*.
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General observations

In this book Paul Weingartner investigates what it means that God is omniscient and defends the coherence of this claim as he understands it. For this he relies on translating claims and arguments into the symbols of predicate logic. The structure of the book follows Thomas Aquinas's example: each chapter has a question as heading, then arguments for one answer are reported, then arguments for the other answer, then the author defends his own view. Although I found that some of the questions posed have an obvious answer and that Weingartner sometimes adds excursions which are not necessary for answering the question, this yields a clear line of thought and makes the book reader-friendly. Also with respect to the content the book follows Thomas Aquinas. In particular, it assumes that God is outside of time and that God has infallible foreknowledge of all future events, including free actions. But unlike some Thomist literature, it is not dependent on Aquinas's terminology and ontology, and is thus accessible also to non-Thomists. The book has some limited exchange with the vast contemporary literature about omniscience and with the contemporary philosophy of religion, but one may desire more.

That Weingartner wrote this book in English, although his mother-tongue is German, has the advantage that it increases the possible readership of the book, but a disadvantage is that the book is stylistically not as good as it would be in German. There are quite a few mistakes¹, some of which are consistently

1. Some examples of faulty sentences: 'Concerning terminology a singular truth is ...' (67); 'Jones acts at t that p' (64); 'There would be complete agreement under scientists that ...'; 'The main question is whether the antecedent is contradictory and then the premise would be true, but logically true or trivially true.' (64)

repeated, in particular the use of ‘what’ as a relative pronoun, which does not exist in English. The first heading in the table of contents contains a spelling mistake, a mistake in the word order, and ‘what’ as relative pronoun: ‘Whether Everything is True What God Knows’. Commas are often missing.

The typesetting of the book is deficient. There is no indentation of first lines of paragraphs (while there are no spaces between paragraphs); instead of quotation marks (“xyz”) primes ("xyz") are used; and, oddly, headings are double-spaced. Furthermore, there is no hyphenation at all! Even word processors can do these things.—But let us not allow this to detract us from the philosophical content of the book.

Belief and knowledge

The book does not begin with an explication of what is meant by ‘There is a God’, but starts directly with the question whether everything that God knows is true. Weingartner expresses this in symbols as

$$gKp \rightarrow p$$

Thus Weingartner assumes that the arrow correctly expresses here the link between divine knowledge and truth which is described by ‘Everything that God knows is true’, even without modal operator and even without universal quantifier. As it stands, the formula only means that it is not the case that ‘ gKp ’ as well as ‘ $\neg p$ ’ are true. Weingartner adds that the ‘question can also be expressed by asking whether God is infallible’. The same question? That God is infallible implies (a) that he has only true beliefs, and furthermore (b) that it is impossible that he has false beliefs. But ‘Everything that God knows is true’ does not even entail (a), because even if God had many false beliefs it would be true that everything he knows is true. It is even true that everything I know is true, although I have many false beliefs. The claim that Weingartner wants to defend is that God cannot have false beliefs. This claim is easily granted because it is part of the usual concept of God. But his arguments support only the analytic claim (KT) ‘If person a knows that p , then p is true’ and thus the claim that everything that God knows is true.

Weingartner seems to think that ‘knowledge’ implies a high degree of certainty or even infallibility. He assumes that if KT is true, then: if person a knows that p , then a is certain (or believes infallibly) that p . Weingartner calls a concept of knowledge which is compatible with (KT) a ‘strong’ concept of knowledge (4), and then says that if such a strong concept of knowledge is applicable to

man, 'all the more it must be applicable to God' (5). He clearly assumes that to say about someone that he knows that *p* implies that this person has very good evidence or is even infallible.

I see not the slightest reason for this assumption, which Weingartner does not defend. We often truly call beliefs 'knowledge' which are based on rather weak reasons or on rather fallible perceptual experiences. We know many things, but few, if any, instances of our knowledge are absolutely certain or infallible. It is true to say that Jones *knew* that the gardener committed the theft, because Jones saw the gardener taking the jewels, whilst Jones's belief is quite fallible because it had dawned already or because he did not see the gardener's face. (KT) only means that by saying that *a* knows that *p*, one also claims that *p* is true. It does not imply a certain degree of evidence.

Usually it is assumed that '*a* knows that *p*' means (1) that *a* believes that *p*, (2) that *p* is true, and (3) that *a*'s belief that *p* is justified or not acquired just by luck. Condition (3) specifies a certain minimal degree of evidential support, but Weingartner seems to assume that condition (2) implies that the belief is well-supported or even infallible. That seems wrong to me. If the concept of knowledge consisted only of conditions (1) and (2), then a true belief that the person acquired through luck would be truly called knowledge. That shows that condition (2) does not make knowledge imply justification or infallibility. It is adequate to call a concept of knowledge that implies certainty a 'strong' concept, but it does not become strong in this respect through condition (2). So against Weingartner I suggest, first, that we call also some beliefs knowledge that are not very well supported, and, secondly, that condition (2) does not make knowledge imply justification or infallibility, but only means that by calling something knowledge we also claim its truth.

Weingartner introduces a helpful distinction between 'two different kinds of belief, a stronger and a weaker one: the stronger will be called knowledge-exclusive belief (abbreviated as G-belief) and the weaker will be called knowledge-inclusive belief (abbreviated as B-belief)' (7). By ascribing G-belief that *p* one implies that the person does not know that *p* (either because *p* is not true or because the person has no good reasons for his belief), whilst by ascribing B-belief that *p* one leaves open whether the person knows that *p*. The concept of G-belief captures the concept of belief that is used in the question 'Do you know it or do you believe it?' In my view this question can be understood without defining 'believe' as excluding knowing, by interpreting it as 'Do you know it, or do you not know but *just* believe it'. But of course already Plato used the concept of G-belief as the meaning of the word δόξα. This concept is more often used in German than in English. In English, in philosophy as well as in ordinary language, the word 'to believe' means just to take to be true. There is some

vagueness about the minimal strength of a belief. If someone finds it just a bit more probable than not that the theory of evolution is true, then we might be hesitant to say that he believes it. But one would not say that something is not a belief because it is too well supported or because it is knowledge. In German, on the other hand, the word 'glauben' is sometimes (but not always) used in this narrow sense (G-belief), in particular in situations where the speaker tries to be philosophical. Perhaps because of the influence of 'modern' philosophers like Descartes and Kant, who were so keen on certainty. The German word 'Überzeugung' is usually not used in this narrow sense and is therefore often the better translation of 'belief'.

The first example which Weingartner gives to illustrate the distinction is a mathematical hypothesis. He says that before it was proven the mathematician believed it, but after it was proven he 'didn't any more believe it, but knew' it (8). I am not convinced that we, or mathematicians, ordinarily say of a mathematical principle after it was proven that we do not believe it, or that we do not apply the German word 'glauben' any more, but maybe some do. Weingartner claims that in science in general in some sense 'there is' no B-belief:

In general we can say that scientific belief (belief in scientific hypotheses)—be it in mathematics or in natural science—is always G-belief: one does not yet have knowledge in the strong sense of KT.' (8)

This can mean two things: (A) The word 'believe' if applied to belief in a scientific hypothesis (by scientists or by everybody) always means G-belief; (B) Belief in a scientific hypothesis always falls under the concept of G-belief and thus there is no belief that is B-belief and not G-belief. (B) is obviously false, because whenever someone has some mathematical knowledge it falls under the concept of B-belief (knowledge-inclusive) and *not* under the concept of G-belief (knowledge-exclusive). Therefore I assume that Weingartner is affirming (A). But I do not see how one can hold this. Is it really contradictory to say that Jones believes in the theory of evolution and knows that it is true? Does one by saying 'I believe that the Earth is spherical' imply that one does not know it? To take a different kind of example: Is it really contradictory to say that I believe $F = Gm_1m_2/d^2$ (the law of gravity) and that I know this? Does one by saying 'Jones believes that $F = Gm_1m_2/d^2$ ' imply that he does not know this? That does not seem to be the case. On the contrary, only rarely do people use 'believe' meaning G-belief. One example, used in certain contexts, may be 'We do not believe in the theory of evolution, we *know* that it is true'. But that is an exception and a polemical or metaphorical usage, trying to emphasise that there is very much evidence.

Turning to religious belief then Weingartner says:

Religious belief—like scientific belief—is always knowledge-exclusive, i.e. is always first of all G-belief. Since if one believes religiously—for instance that Christ came for the salvation of mankind or that there will be some kind of conscious life after death—one does not know it (and knows that one does not know it). And this holds for all religious beliefs [...]. (8f)

This claim too would require more defence. If the disciples saw the risen Jesus, they had thereby very strong evidence that Jesus was sent by God for the salvation of men. More precisely, it would be very likely that it was God who had raised Jesus from the dead; and that he did it in order to make it very clear to the disciples that Jesus was sent by God and that through him men could be saved. Surely their belief that Jesus came for the salvation of mankind would truly be called 'knowledge'. If that belief would not truly be called 'knowledge', then very few of our beliefs would truly be called 'knowledge'. But many of our beliefs truly are called 'knowledge'. If there is a God and if some of the arguments for the existence of God are successful, then at least for some people also belief in God is knowledge. Also the belief in God of those who had strong perceptual experiences of God would truly be called 'knowledge'. If the apostle Paul on the road of Damaskus saw Jesus as the New Testament claims, then his belief that Jesus was sent by God for the salvation of men was knowledge too.

In recent years there has been much debate in the philosophy of religion about religious belief that is knowledge. Alvin Plantinga has argued in his book *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) not only that sometimes religious belief is knowledge but that if Christian doctrine is true, then Christians' belief in Christian doctrine generally is knowledge. It would have been helpful to read here more about Weingartner's reasons for his claim that religious belief never is knowledge. Of course, religious *faith* is more than belief and also more than knowledge, but at least Christian faith requires some beliefs, and these beliefs can also be knowledge. Some understand faith as involving a certain kind of certitude. Others analyse it as belief (B-belief, in Weingartner's terminology) plus a certain kind of commitment. However, in either case a religious doctrine, if it is true, might be known.

Weingartner's next claim is that 'God does have neither B-belief nor G-belief'!
(9) He gives the following reason:

Since B-belief is a weaker consequence of knowledge, if he possesses knowledge [, then] he does not possess B-belief, except in an inclusive way in the sense that if he knows something he inclusively also thinks that it is true.

I cannot follow here, because two pages before Weingartner defined B-belief so that 'if someone knows something, he also believes it, but if he does not believe it, he also does not know it.' (7) It follows from this and God's omniscience that God has many B-beliefs; in fact, he B-believes every true proposition, and all these beliefs are knowledge. Weingartner's distinction between G-beliefs and B-beliefs seems to be made for making clear that God has many beliefs but no beliefs that are not knowledge. All that he believes, he also knows. But for some reason Weingartner says instead that God has no B-beliefs.

Survey

Let us move through the next chapters more swiftly. Chapter 2 argues that if God knows something, then he knows it necessarily. This amounts to the claim that God knows everything necessarily. Weingartner's point here is that God knowing *p* necessarily does not entail 'necessarily *p*'.

Chapter 3 argues that if God knows something, then he does not know it at some time. His knowing something does not take place at a certain time. Weingartner presupposes that God exists outside of time. He distinguishes carefully between the time of our universe and 'time as a chronological order' (29), which consists only in being earlier or later. Many philosophers of religion today (e.g. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1975) and Richard Swinburne (1993)) hold that God exists in time in this latter sense, which does not imply laws of nature and a metric of time. Weingartner rejects this simply by saying: 'Since God is eternal [in the sense of being outside of time] and a reasonable concept of eternity does not involve past and future, chronological time cannot be attributed to God.' (31)

Chapter 4 argues that God knows all past and present events. Few would disagree.

Chapter 5 argues that 'God's knowledge exceeds his power' (41). By this Weingartner means that God knows but cannot bring about states of affairs in his own essence and in logic and mathematics. Weingartner defines omnipotence as follows:

God is omnipotent iff

- (1) Whatever God wills is realised and
- (2) God can cause (can will, can make) every state of affairs (events) which
 - (a) is self consistent and
 - (b) is compatible with God's essence and
 - (c) is conditionally compatible with God's providence and
 - (d) is compatible with God's commands. (43)

Let me mention two possible objections. (1) is true but it is objectionable to list it as a condition for omnipotence. If someone wills on Friday that it does not rain on the Monday before, then that this willing is not realised does not contradict this person's being omnipotent. To be able to change the past (or any other impossible action) is not a condition for being omnipotent in a useful sense, and in the sense which Weingartner defines through condition (2). Therefore it is not a condition for being omnipotent that whatever one wills is realised. Because of God's other perfections it is impossible that he would ever will to change the past or will some other impossible action, but the question is whether (1) is a condition for omnipotence.

How does Weingartner's definition of omnipotence exclude being able to change the past, being able to make Jones freely do p , and other impossible actions from what is required for being omnipotent? Weingartner must think that condition (2a) excludes all this. This presupposes the empiricist assumption that if something is impossible, then it (or its description) is inconsistent. My own view is that this is not true, unless 'inconsistent' is simply defined as being impossible. There is arguably no contradiction in 'Jones made it on Friday that on Monday before it did not rain', 'This is green and red all over', 'This tone has no pitch', 'This has spin $\frac{1}{2}$ and is jealous', and in 'This has mass and no charge'. Yet these phrases describe something impossible. Another example of something impossible that is consistent is 'This is water and not H_2O '. One does not have to say that 'Necessarily water is H_2O ' is meaningful and true, but many today would.

Chapter 6 argues that God does not cause everything he knows. Few would disagree, because the reason why many hold that foreknowledge is incompatible with free will is not that God's knowing something causes it. Here Weingartner defends also the more controversial claim that infallible divine foreknowledge of all future events is compatible with the existence of free actions. More on this later.

Chapter 7 argues that God also knows singular truths. Few would disagree.

Chapter 8 argues that God's knowing singular truths implies that he changes. The author defends this on the assumption that God is outside of time and that his knowing something does not occur at a certain time.

Chapter 9 argues that 'God knows what is not'. This claim seems trivial to me. Why should anyone hold that in some sense God does not know what is not? Weingartner says himself: 'It would be rather absurd to claim of a perfect being that he would not know what is impossible according to the laws of logic [...] Why should a most perfect being not know what states of affairs cannot obtain because they are logically impossible?' Yes, why? Weingartner makes in this chapter detailed distinctions between several kinds of non-obtaining

states of affairs or false statements, but the purpose of this did not become clear to me.

Chapter 10 claims that ‘neither truth nor knowledge can change the status of a state of affairs which is expressed by a statement or proposition’ (98). What does Weingartner mean by a state of affairs? That it can be ‘expressed by a statement’ implies that it is the meaning of a sentence. Many philosophers mean by a state of affairs not something which is ‘expressed’ but something which is described by a statement and is its truthmaker. For David Armstrong (1997), for example, every thing is a state of affairs, and also that stone’s being 3 kg in mass. Also Adolf Reinach (1911) meant by a state of affairs not the meaning but the object and truthmaker of a statement or belief. But Weingartner means by a state of affairs clearly a statement or a proposition. He lists 17 different ‘status’ of states of affairs: logical necessity, mathematical necessity, natural necessity, contingency, etc. (99–102) So by ‘status’ he means modal status. What then does the question ‘Can truth or knowledge change the status of a state of affairs’ mean? Can someone’s knowing p or p ’s being true change p from being contingent to being necessary? To affirm this seems as absurd as saying that my knowing that the Earth is spherical makes the Earth flat. Yet Weingartner makes the effort to defend the claim carefully. For example: A logically necessary proposition like $p \rightarrow p$ is ‘valid in a timeless way’ (102). ‘Since a change requires a different state of affairs at a different time, there cannot be such a change of the state of affairs corresponding to such valid propositions.’ That must mean, I think, that a change of the status of the state of affairs corresponding to the proposition would require that the proposition corresponds at one time to one state of affairs and at another time to another one, or that the state of affairs undergoes a change. Both is excluded because neither the proposition nor its truth value changes. Therefore the truth of a logically necessary proposition cannot change the status of the state of affairs. That seems trivial to me, but perhaps I have missed something.

Chapter 11 argues that God knows all future states of affairs. To defend this, Weingartner introduces Thomas Aquinas’s distinction between knowing future states of affairs ‘in their causes’, i.e. knowing them through knowing their causes, and knowing them ‘in their actuality’, i.e. knowing them directly (117). He claims that God can even know future states of affairs that are ruled by ‘statistical laws’ in their causes. This is surprising because one should think that if A caused B indeterministically, then the occurrence of A also could have led to another event (even without any intervention), with a probability that is described by the statistical laws, and therefore knowing A would not entail knowing B . Weingartner’s explanation is this:

In the case of statistical laws, an earlier microstate will be called the cause of later microstates, which result statistically in a macrostate, even if not every individual element of them is thereby determined [...]. (118)

Presumably Weingartner here is assuming the view there are valid statistical laws although there are no indeterministic processes. That view may be true, but the question is whether God can know, through the causes, future events which are the result of indeterministic processes. I think that it is obvious that he cannot, and I cannot find an argument against this in the book.

Further, Weingartner claims that God also knows future free actions through their causes. His reasons are this: (a) A free action is one 'without compulsion from outside' (120). God knows all possibilities of compulsion. (b) God knows the rational deliberations leading to an action. (c) God knows all moral reasons. (d) God knows all counterfactuals of freedom (truths of the type 'If x were to occur, Jones would do y').

Of course, if God knows all counterfactuals of freedom and knows all future situations into which agents will get, then he knows all future free actions. But if the agents have libertarian free will, then the actions do not have deterministic causes and thus God cannot know them *through their causes*. Perhaps Weingartner assumes that there are no, or cannot be, agents with libertarian free will, and that man has compatibilist free will. Of course, God knows all future compatibilist free actions in their causes. But I find in the book no reason for assuming that God also knows future libertarian free actions in their causes.

According to Weingartner, God knows all future states of affairs not only through their causes but 'God might have a possibility to know future states of affairs in their actual states' (122). He quotes Thomas Aquinas's argument for this. It presupposes that God is outside of time. It is a part of this doctrine that all events are, in some sense, 'present' to God.

Chapter 12 defends the claim that God knows everything that is true against the objection that there is no set of all truth.

The final chapter 13 presents 'a theory of omniscience', by which Weingartner means a formal axiomatic system. His aim is to show the consistency of his claims about divine omniscience.

The compatibility between divine foreknowledge and free will

Let me return to Weingartner's claim that infallible divine foreknowledge of all future events is compatible with the existence of free will. In chapter 11 Weingartner refutes the objection that if God foreknows an action, then the action

occurs with necessity and thus is not free. The stronger standard objection he discusses in chapter 6. Let me summarise Weingartner's interpretation of Nelson Pike's (1965) argument for the incompatibility between complete infallible divine foreknowledge (CIF) and human free will:

1. If God has CIF and Jones does p at time t_2 , then God believes at time t_1 that Jones will do p at t_2 . (Nelson Pike put it thus: 'If Jones did X at T_2 , God believed at T_1 that Jones would do X at T_2 .' (Pike 1965, 33))
2. 'If God believes that p , then p '. (54)
3. 'If God believes at t_1 that Jones acts at t_2 that p [this means 'Jones does p at t_2 '], then, under the condition that Jones *can* act at t_2 that non- p , one of the following three conditions [...] are satisfied ...' These say that God had a false belief, that Jones changed the past, or that Jones abolished God.
4. If God is omniscient, then all three conditions are false.

Conclusion: 'If God is omniscient and exists at t_1 , then, under the condition that Jones acts at t_2 that p , it is not the case that Jones *can* act at t_2 that non- p .' (54) He adds: 'Thus it seems that God, believing that Jones acts at t_2 that p causes John to act this way.'

Also in a footnote Weingartner claims that 'the conclusion of the argument is interpreted by Pike as saying that Jones's action at t_2 cannot be free, but is determined by God's foreknowledge, i.e. God causes by his foreknowledge.' (54) But it is not true that Pike concludes that God's foreknowledge would *cause* actions. Pike explicitly states:

[T]he argument makes no mention of the *causes* of Jones's action. Say (for example, with St. Thomas) that God's foreknowledge of Jones's action was, itself, the cause of the action (though I am really not sure what this means). (Pike 1970, 35)

Weingartner's objection against Pike's argument is, briefly put, this: All the conclusion says is that if Jones did p at t_2 , then he did at t_2 not any more have the power not to do p . But that is trivial and compatible with the action being free.

Let us look at Weingartner's formalisation of the argument. He renders premise (3) as

$$gB_{t_1}(jA_{t_2}p) \rightarrow [jCA_{t_2}\neg p \rightarrow (i \vee ii \vee iii)]$$

and the conclusion as

$$(OSg \ \& \ E!g_{t_2}) \rightarrow (jA_{t_2}p \rightarrow \neg jCA_{t_2}\neg p)$$

Weingartner writes about premise 3:

The main question is whether the antecedent is contradictory and then the premise would be true, but logically true or trivially (or empty) true.

It is unfortunate that such grammatical mistakes were not eliminated before the book went into print. Besides that I do not understand why the antecedent, $gB_{t_1}(jA_{t_2}p)$, should be contradictory. However, Weingartner's point is that ' $jA_{t_2}p \ \& \ jCA_{t_2}\neg p$ ' is self-contradictory because 'It is just an impossibility to both act at t_2 that p and have the power (or ability) at t_2 to act at t_2 that non- p . Such a kind of "power" nobody can have[,] not even God, since it would mean an inconsistency.' (64) Then the book continues with the following (ungrammatical) passage:

Therefore with the help of premise 2 it follows from premise 3 that the above contradiction implies $(i) \vee (ii) \vee (iii)$ which is also logically true: $(jA_{t_2}p \ \& \ jCA_{t_2}\neg p) \rightarrow (i) \vee (ii) \vee (iii)$. Thus it does not matter that $(i) \vee (ii) \vee (iii)$ is itself contradictory. And so premise 4 is correct of course because it is logically true. (64)

Weingartner assumes that ' $(i) \vee (ii) \vee (iii)$ ' is contradictory because it is contradictory that someone abolishes God, that someone makes God have a false belief, or that someone changes the past. He summarises:

[E]ven with free (voluntary) actions it holds that if the event (action) takes place (at t_2) it cannot not take place (at t_2). But from this one cannot conclude that the action (at t_2) is necessary or not voluntary, or not free or not contingent. (64)

On Weingartner's interpretation ' $jA_{t_2}p \ \& \ jCA_{t_2}\neg p$ ' is self-contradictory and therefore the conclusion is trivially true. I suggest that this just shows that the formalisation does not capture the point of the argument. The real argument for the incompatibility between CIF and libertarian free will, briefly put, is this: Assume that Jones has libertarian free will and that at time t_2 he did p . If

God has complete infallible divine foreknowledge, then at the earlier time t_1 he believed that Jones will do p at t_2 . If Jones has libertarian free will, then he had the power to refrain from doing p (and it was after t_1 still possible that he would refrain from doing p). This would amount to the power to make God's belief false. Thus it is incompatible that God has complete infallible foreknowledge and that Jones has libertarian free will.

Pike's phrase 'if it was within Jones's power at T_2 to refrain from doing X ' means that Jones did X freely and could have refrained from doing it. Of course, he could have refrained from doing X only *instead of* doing X . Weingartner interprets the expression 'at T_2 ' in Pike's statement in a way that makes it incompatible with Jones's doing X . To exclude this interpretation, Pike could have simply said 'if it was within Jones's power to refrain from doing X at T_2 '. The conclusion then is:

If God existed at T_1 , and if Jones did X at T_2 , it was not within Jones's power to refrain from doing X at T_2 .

As 'Jones did X at T_2 ' does not contradict 'It was within Jones's power to refrain from doing X at T_2 ', this conclusion is not trivial. It means that CIF is incompatible with libertarian free will.

Another option is to formulate the argument with the phrase 'it could have happened instead that': Assume that Jones has libertarian free will and that at time t_2 he did p . If God has complete infallible divine foreknowledge, then at the earlier time t_1 he believed that Jones will do p at t_2 . If Jones has libertarian free will, then it could have happened that instead he did not do p at t_2 . Thus it could have happened that God has a false belief. Thus it is incompatible that God has complete infallible foreknowledge and that Jones has libertarian free will. I conclude that Weingartner has not defeated the argument for the incompatibility between complete infallible divine foreknowledge and human free will.

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