

God knows: acquaintance and the nature of divine knowledge

TRAVIS M. DICKINSON

*Department of Philosophy, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001
W. Seminary Dr., Fort Worth, Texas, 76115, USA
e-mail: tdickinson@swbts.edu*

Abstract: Theists typically believe that God *knows* all truths. However, accounts of divine omniscience almost always focus on the *scope* of God's knowledge or perhaps on whether certain kinds of facts are there to be known by God, such as counterfactuals of creaturely freedom or future contingent facts. Very rarely do these accounts include for analysis the *nature* of God's knowledge. In this article, I develop an acquaintance theory of God's knowledge where acquaintance with an epistemic relation that guarantees that the truth of God's beliefs is necessary for knowledge. I argue that this view achieves an ideal way of knowing, worthy of the divine being.

Almost every theist agrees that God knows, and he knows a lot. Indeed, most theists think that God knows all truths. But what does it mean for God to know? What is the *nature* of his knowledge? In this article, I offer an acquaintance theory of God's knowledge. Crucial to such an acquaintance view, I argue, is God's being acquainted with an epistemic relation that holds between his beliefs (or thoughts) and facts that guarantee the truth of his beliefs (or thoughts). Understanding the nature of divine knowledge as God's standing in this relation of acquaintance allows for a truly ideal way of knowing, worthy of the divine being.

Over the last few decades, there has been no shortage of material on the issue of God's omniscience.¹ These accounts typically focus on the *scope* of God's knowledge or perhaps on whether certain kinds of facts are there to be known by God, such as counterfactuals of creaturely freedom or future contingent facts. Very rarely do these accounts include for analysis the *nature* of God's knowledge. For example, Richard Swinburne characterizes omniscience as 'a being is omniscient if he knows at each time all true propositions which it is logically possible that he entertain them'.² What is assumed at the outset of his account is that we have some grasp on what it means for God to know. He also assumes that divine knowledge is

propositional and even that God ‘entertains’ these propositions. This, as we’ll see shortly, is controversial. The real point, however, is that these are issues having to do with the nature of God’s knowledge and, in some ways, they seem more fundamental than issues of scope. That is, what we say about the nature of God’s knowledge may imply (or foreclose on) certain views about the scope of God’s knowledge. Unfortunately, this sort of silent treatment about the nature of God’s knowledge is all too common within the literature on divine omniscience.

Perhaps one reason for the paucity of material is that it is exceedingly difficult to know what it means for the divine being to know. Indeed some think it is impossible to say much at all about the nature of God’s knowledge.³ George Mavrodes makes the point that talking about God’s knowledge is an exercise in ‘speculative epistemology.’⁴ By this he does intend something like ‘theoretical’ but he also intends, as he says, the more colloquial use of the term ‘speculative’. Epistemology is a difficult subject. The epistemology of the divine is especially difficult. So my aim is relatively modest. I offer the following as a possible, even plausible, model of God’s knowledge that I argue achieves a cognitive ideal over views that share certain assumptions. However, while there may be other models of divine knowledge (that perhaps achieve other cognitive ideals), it won’t be part of this article to say who is right.⁵

There are two assumptions that characterize this model. The first is that God’s knowledge and human knowledge are not fundamentally different in nature. God’s knowledge is at least roughly analogous to human knowledge. Human knowledge is different (indeed, radically different) in scope and quality vis-à-vis God’s knowledge, but the assumption here is that they share the same basic nature. The second assumption is that any state we ascribe to God must be maximal and ideal. That is, God cannot suffer any imperfection or degradation. Whatever cognitive state he has, he has it ideally. These assumptions, in turn, provide a procedure for developing the model. If human knowledge has certain fundamental features, then this constitutes (at least, *prima facie*) reasons for thinking that God’s knowledge has those features as well. But, unlike the human case, God has those features maximally and ideally.

I begin by considering an influential view about the nature of God’s knowledge that seems implicitly to share these assumptions. I argue that this view does not achieve the ideal, and will offer amendments that will fill out an account of divine knowledge.

Alston: knowledge as immediate awareness

In a 1986 article, William Alston asserts that, unlike us, God does not have beliefs.⁶ Alston makes the case for what he calls an *intuitive conception* of God’s knowledge. He explicitly eschews any propositional attitudes since, for God, ‘knowledge of a fact is simply the immediate awareness of that fact.’⁷ He quotes approvingly H. H. Price’s formulation of this sort of view of knowledge as

‘simply the situation in which some entity of some fact is directly present to consciousness’.⁸

Alston’s thesis is that God’s knowledge is constituted entirely by his being immediately aware of all facts, without propositionally representing those facts in mind. He describes the state of immediate awareness as the following:

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.*⁹

Alston is clear that, for God, there is no mental representation of facts. One could perhaps think that God has some sort of a thought life apart from his knowledge states, but for Alston, no state of representation, beliefs, in particular, and thoughts, in general, figure into God’s knowledge states.¹⁰

Unfortunately, Alston does not say very much about how we should understand ‘immediate awareness’. He seems to have in mind what has classically been called ‘acquaintance’, though he doesn’t use the term.¹¹ We’ll have more to say about acquaintance below but, for now, it will do to take Alston’s notion of immediate awareness as a state of awareness completely devoid of any propositional attitude. There are no judgements, beliefs, thoughts, or mental representations. God’s knowledge is entirely constituted by God’s standing in a relation of direct and immediate awareness to all and only facts.

There is much in Alston’s view with which I agree. It seems that standing in a relation of direct awareness is often taken as a cognitive ideal and, thus, seems to be the right sort of notion for divine knowledge. But why think that immediate awareness with facts, by itself, sufficiently captures all that is needed in an account God’s knowledge? Alston offers two reasons for this thesis. The first is that God would be greater, indeed the greatest, for it. The second is that propositional attitudes are superfluous for God. Let’s take these in order.

Argument from perfection

In his first argument, he says that the intuitive conception of knowledge is a superior understanding of knowledge. The intuitive conception has only been rejected as a general account of knowledge, he thinks, because the discussions about knowledge focus on human knowers. In other words, if it is by standing in a relation of direct awareness that humans have knowledge, then there is precious little we as humans know, given the limited amount of which we are directly aware. But God has no such limitations and could be directly aware of all facts, and God is greater for it. Moreover, if God knows by standing in a relation of immediate awareness, then there is not even the possibility of falsity. He says: ‘knowledge, on this construal, is infallible in a strong sense; its inherent nature guarantees the reality of the object’.¹² For these reasons, Alston thinks this is a superior

account of knowledge. He says: '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.'¹³

Gregory Ganssle has, in a similar argument, concluded that 'absolute immediacy in knowledge is the cognitive ideal'.¹⁴ Thus, since the intuitive conception of knowledge is the highest form of knowledge (i.e. the cognitive ideal), God, as the maximally perfect being, must have this sort of knowledge.

One immediate worry here for Alston is that immediate awareness would not strictly speaking make one infallible, at least as infallibility is typically understood. Infallibility is usually taken to be a property of a believer such that the believer only has true beliefs and cannot possibly have a false belief. But, understood this way, the predicate only makes sense if we are talking about subjects that have beliefs or some sort of propositional attitudes. If God's knowledge is constituted entirely by his standing in an awareness relation to facts, then, by hypothesis, there is nothing with a truth value figuring into these states of awareness. That is, there is nothing there to be true (or false). Thus, a counterintuitive result of Alston's account is that God wouldn't know *all truths* (or any truths, for that matter), since there are no beliefs or propositional attitudes in view. God wouldn't be able to believe falsely, but this is because he has no beliefs to start with.¹⁵

Perhaps Alston would say this is not so bad because God doesn't need to bother with truths when he has the facts themselves directly before his consciousness. It may not be infallibility, strictly speaking, but God can't possibly fail to be directly aware of the facts themselves and surely this is something of an ideal. But it is not clear that merely having facts before one's consciousness is an ideal as it relates to *knowing* those facts. That is, it remains to be seen that the view, as an epistemological account, is superior to all contenders. It can't be thought superior only because typical humans can't satisfy the account. There are a variety of views whose conditions of satisfaction prove to be too unwieldy for humans to satisfy in ordinary cases of cognition. Indeed this is the well-rehearsed rejoinder to almost every classical internalist view of justification. There is, in this dialectic, typically some commendation for how great satisfying the internalist conditions would be for our relation to the world (after all, who wouldn't want to have incorrigible or indubitable beliefs?), but then there is a warm welcome to radical scepticism, since if the view is right, then there is almost nothing ordinary people know.

The burden of proof that Alston must shoulder is why think that the intuitive conception is superior to alternative views that also go well beyond human capabilities. More specifically, why think *mere* direct awareness of facts is superior to a view that includes direct awareness of facts *plus* propositional attitudes that correspond to these facts? This would be everything his view has and more still. The direct awareness with facts plus the corresponding propositional attitudes would seem, on its surface, to be a richer overall cognitive state for God.

Argument from the Superfluity Thesis

Though Alston doesn't bring up the preceding objection directly, he seems sensitive to the concern in his second argument for his account. He says, in effect, that if God is immediately aware of all facts, then belief states are, for God, out of a job. He thinks God's beliefs would be superfluous when there is direct awareness of facts. In Alston's words:

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 . . . But if one already has the facts themselves, what is the point of assenting to propositions? It would be a meaningless charade.¹⁶

He goes on to say:

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.¹⁷

His claim seems to be that beliefs would actually *degrade* God's cognitive states given that beliefs would be extra baggage when the facts are immediately before consciousness. The idea here is what we'll call the *superfluity thesis*.

Superfluity Thesis (ST hereafter): if one is directly aware of a fact x , then a propositional attitude about x is unnecessary for knowing x .

If ST is true, then beliefs would not add to God's already epistemically ideal situation and thus should be dropped from an account of the perfect being.

It seems clear that we often fail to be immediately aware of the facts in which we are interested, and, in these cases, we must represent these facts in thought. For example, if I have knowledge that my great-grandfather Johansen was Norwegian, this will have to involve a belief about him, since he passed away before I was born. It is also true that in forming beliefs all the possibilities of error creep in with which the sceptic makes hay. But is it true that when we come to be immediately aware of facts we 'fold away' our propositional attitudes in knowing these facts? Surely this is not obvious.

What seems to underlie ST is the idea that mere direct awareness is sufficient for knowledge. This, I take it, is the point of saying that propositional attitudes are unnecessary for knowledge when one enjoys direct awareness of a fact. The mere direct awareness is sufficient all by itself. However, in response, it seems that we can imagine cases in which one enjoys direct awareness of a fact and yet one does not have knowledge of that fact. This would show that direct awareness is *not* sufficient for knowledge.

To see this, we should notice that we are all immediately aware of facts right now about which we have not formed any thoughts, about which we haven't conceptualized. One should consider a patch of colour in the periphery of one's visual field (or the buzzing of lights or of an electrical device), which one has not (until just now) noticed, though it has been there all along as an object of awareness.¹⁸ Though we were (by hypothesis) directly aware of them, these non-conceptualized facts were not plausibly objects of knowledge since we didn't even notice them or form any thoughts about them. It seems that it is in the forming of thoughts that these become possible objects of knowledge. For another example, newborn babies are aware of many features of the world for which they possess no concepts. The baby, it seems, is only aware in the direct sense since he or she does not yet have the conceptual resources to form thoughts about these features. Though the baby is immediately aware of certain facts, the mere awareness is not plausibly knowledge of those facts.

It seems we must conceptualize (or notice, or form thoughts about) the facts of which we are directly aware for them to become *epistemically relevant* to us.¹⁹ But this sort of conceptualization adds a cognitive element to the overall state, which is propositional in the sense that we represent the world as being some such way.²⁰ To be sure, this representation in thought happens very subtly, but without this representation, those objects before us are not plausibly objects of knowledge. Thus mere direct awareness is not sufficient for knowledge. If this is right, contrary to ST, propositional states are not superfluous and, I want to suggest, play a crucial role in our knowledge of the world, even when we enjoy immediate awareness.

One may wonder whether the awareness of patches of colour, buzzing of lights, and that had by newborn babies has much to do with God. After all, wouldn't God's awareness always be completely focused on all that's there? But this idea of 'focused awareness' is problematic. It sounds suspiciously as if one is smuggling something propositional into the account. When we are focused on some fact, we seem never to be merely aware of the fact. Rather we are noticing, reflecting on, or forming thoughts about various features, or even straightforwardly making judgements about, what's before us. Again, these propositional attitudes happen very subtly (i.e. we don't typically reflect on the fact that we are making judgements), but these seem to be what constitutes a state of focused awareness. On Alston's view, God certainly isn't focused in this way. He's merely aware without any kind of propositional attitudes.

Furthermore, we should notice that Alston construes his point as a general one. He seems to think that ST holds for any genuine instance of immediate and direct awareness. As long as there's any case of direct awareness that requires propositional attitudes for knowledge, then ST is false as a general consideration. Now, one might think that God stands in a unique state of immediate awareness that is completely different from human awareness. Thus, ST would be false as a general condition, but may hold in God's case. However, we should recall that we've limited the account by assuming that God's knowledge and human

knowledge are not fundamentally different. With this constraint, it strikes one as especially implausible that the mere direct awareness of facts constitutes knowledge of those facts, even if we are talking about God. The problem has to do not with the subject of the particular case (i.e. God or humans), but with saying that a subject who merely stands in a relation of immediate awareness has knowledge. It seems at least some sort of thought life is necessary for knowledge even when the awareness is immediate and direct.

On the basis of this, it seems Alston's knowledge as immediate awareness view is inadequate as an account of divine knowledge. Mere awareness is not a cognitive ideal as it relates to knowledge. Does God have beliefs? To avoid the problems above, it seems that God must have some sort of propositional attitude or the representation of facts in thought.

Acquaintance

Before developing what I think needs to be added to Alston's account to achieve the epistemic ideal, it will be important to get clearer on the notion of acquaintance. As mentioned above, Alston's notion of immediate awareness certainly seems similar to, if not extensionally equivalent with, what has traditionally been referred to as acquaintance. What then is acquaintance? Acquaintance, as a term of art, is meant to distinguish a specific sort of unmediated and direct awareness from states of awareness that are mediated by some other state, especially propositional attitudes. Acquaintance itself is not a propositional attitude, and standing in the relation of acquaintance does not require a propositional attitude or any mental representation whatsoever. Though we often form mental representations or propositional attitudes of those things with which we are acquainted, we don't need to in being acquainted. The acquaintance is mere and direct awareness.

Perhaps the least controversial example of an object of acquaintance is a mental state, such as the state of being in pain.²¹ When one is in searing pain, one is directly acquainted with the pain state. That is, one need not make any judgements to be aware of being in pain and, more generally, there does not seem to be any intermediary standing between the subject and the subject's pain. It's simply there before one's consciousness. Suppose my daughter were to stub her toe and scream out as a result of her pain. Let's say, on the basis of her behaviour, I judge correctly that she is in pain. Though it seems right to say, at least in some sense, I am aware of her being in pain, I am aware only in a way mediated by my judgements, probably in the form of assumptions and beliefs about typical pain behaviour. But, clearly, I am not acquainted with her being in pain. My relation to this fact is mediated by attitudes that are either true or false, and so long as these propositional attitudes mediate the relation, I remain at a distance from her pain. Unfortunately for her, my daughter would be, in this case, acquainted with the pain.

Bertrand Russell characterizes acquaintance this way: 'We shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.'²² In his *Problems of Philosophy*, Russell makes the distinction between 'knowledge of truths' and 'knowledge of things'. Now this distinction is notoriously difficult to make clear, but by knowledge of truths, he seemed to be referring to what we nowadays mean by *propositional knowledge* - 'knowing that p', where 'that p' picks out a proposition. It is a knowledge of *truths* since it is only true propositions (i.e. truths) that can be known. Propositional knowledge is, in this way, *factive*.²³ Knowledge of things, for Russell, doesn't involve propositions, and so there is nothing with a truth value figuring into the state. It is a direct awareness of things themselves. Standing in a relation of acquaintance is precisely of this sort. My daughter will very quickly make judgements about her pain in most cases, but the point is that her standing in a relation of acquaintance to the pain typically precedes her making these judgements, even if ever so briefly, and they are thus clearly logically distinct states. So my daughter could plausibly be described as being *directly* and *immediately* acquainted with her pain, since it is not mediated by anything, especially anything with a truth value.

Acquaintance, as I've already alluded, should be placed categorially as a relation. This relation holds between one's self or mind and a fact or facts. Acquaintance should not be understood as some sort of intentional state. Richard Fumerton says:

[Acquaintance] is not an intentional state, at least if we understand intentional states as those that can be 'directed' at objects that 'do not exist' (as we can fear ghosts, hope for an inheritance that never comes, seem to remember having put one's keys on the table when one didn't, and so on). Acquaintance is a real relation that requires *relata*.²⁴

So when one is acquainted with a fact, then that fact is there directly before one's consciousness. Thus, standing in the relation of acquaintance is also a *factive* state in the strongest of senses, since one could not be acquainted with a fact without that fact being, well, a fact.

For our purposes, we should understand 'fact' in a broadly construed sense and basically synonymous with states of affair. Facts are the truthmakers that stand in a relation of correspondence to the propositions (or whatever one takes to be the truthbearer) that represent those facts. Facts, on my view, are propositionally structured things in the sense that they can stand in this relation of correspondence to propositional attitudes. However, facts are not themselves propositional in the sense that, *qua* fact, they are neither true nor false.²⁵ Facts, as mere states of affairs, have no truth value. Indeed they are what make propositions true when a proposition stands in the appropriate relation to the appropriate fact. It would be a category error to predicate of facts, *qua* facts, truth or falsity.²⁶

Humans of course do not enjoy acquaintance with *all* facts, as our consciousness is exceedingly narrow. Humans also have various limitations which preclude standing in a relation of acquaintance to certain kinds of facts. It is controversial

just where the divide is, but, as we said above, most acquaintance theorists think we are minimally acquainted with states like pain and the immediate character of (or, what we might call, the raw data of) our sense experiences. It also seems that we are acquainted with the content of at least some of our cognitive attitudes, doxastic or otherwise. I am aware of my belief that God exists in the direct sense in that I don't have to make judgements about the content of my beliefs in order to be aware of that content.²⁷ Are we acquainted with physical objects? If one thinks that our awareness of physical objects is mediated by our awareness of phenomenal properties (or perhaps being appeared to ϕ -ly), then the answer is no, since one is acquainted with the phenomenal properties had in the experience and not the properties of the physical object. But this is a matter of some controversy.²⁸ We also seem to be acquainted with facts known *a priori*. This may include basic mathematical, conceptual, and logical facts (and perhaps moral facts too). This is not meant to be an exhaustive inventory of the objects of acquaintance but simply to point at some of the items that are in the conversation.

God is of course not limited in the ways that we are. It is important to keep in mind that, for us, a large part of our empirical knowledge of the world comes as a result of sense experience. It seems that God's knowledge should not be understood as perceptually based, since, on virtually all views, God has no genuine sense organs or perceptual faculties.²⁹ God's knowledge seems much better described as *a priori* or as intuitive knowledge, perhaps analogous to the way in which we know things *a priori* or on the basis of intuition. So God, on this view, knows even empirical facts, not on the basis of perception the way most of our empirical knowledge is based, but rather on the basis of something akin to *a priori* intuition.³⁰

An account of God's knowledge

I argued above that knowledge as immediate awareness is not sufficient as an account of divine knowledge. The reason for this is that, without propositional states, the account fails to achieve the ideal, worthy of God's perfection. Furthermore, the mere acquaintance with a fact does not, by itself, constitute knowledge.

We now ask: is acquaintance with (all) facts and the representation of those facts in thought sufficient as an account of the nature of divine knowledge?³¹ The answer is no, not yet. To say only this leaves an important point undeveloped. The account would be especially inadequate were God to have acquaintance only with the facts of, say, the created world (e.g. facts about the universe and human history) and have the corresponding thoughts that represent these facts in the divine mind. It is important to emphasize that there are facts about the *relations* which hold between thoughts and the facts with which God must also be acquainted (e.g. the correspondence relation). Acquaintance with these epistemic relations, I will argue, is necessary for an adequate account of God's knowledge.

To see this, let's look again at the human case. It seems that one could be acquainted with a fact and have the corresponding thought and still not be said to know that fact. Suppose one is walking down a street and comes upon a building whose facing, windowless side has a mural of modern art. Let's imagine that it is filled with discrete spots randomly placed and of various sizes covering the entirety of the side of the building.³² Let's suppose that there are exactly 1,242 spots on the facing side of the building and one's vantage point is such that the entirety of the side and each individual spot is in clear view. Though, in this case, we are acquainted with there being 1,242 spots (or being appeared to 1,242 spottedly), there are simply too many and the grouping is too chaotic for us to know that there are 1,242 spots on the facing side. Let's further suppose that one comes to believe that there are 1,242 spots on the facing side of this building.³³ Notice that one is aware of the *fact* of there being 1,242 spots, and one now has the *true belief* that there are 1,242 spots. But this doesn't seem to be an instance of knowledge. Even though one has a true belief, one would not typically be aware of what the belief has going for it or whether a slightly different belief (e.g. that there are 1,243 spots) is true despite being acquainted with the corresponding fact. This is because the fact is so very complex. Even though one has a true belief and is acquainted with the corresponding fact, this does not seem to be an instance of knowledge. I argued above that Alston's mere acquaintance view was inadequate for knowledge. But it seems here that acquaintance plus belief also does not necessarily put one in a positive epistemic situation.

Now suppose one comes upon a similar building but this time it only has three large spots in clear view. Just as before, one would be acquainted with the fact that there are three spots, and let's say that one forms the true belief that there are three spots. Unlike the first example, this seems to be (or at least could be) a clear case of knowledge for a competent human knower.

What's the difference in these two cases? In both cases, one is, by hypothesis, acquainted with the fact that corresponds to one's belief. It seems that, in the latter case, one is acquainted with something else that makes an epistemic difference. I'd like to suggest that when there are just three giant spots on the side of a building, the fact with which one is acquainted is simple and straightforward enough such that one would typically also be acquainted with *the truth* of one's belief. That is, one would be acquainted with the correspondence relation itself that holds between the belief and the fact. It is important to note that we do not typically conceptualize or form thoughts about this relation. But, nonetheless, we seem to be aware of clear cases of correspondence (as in the case under discussion).³⁴ In the former case, there would be too many spots and it would be too chaotic an ordering for a typical person to be aware of the correspondence. Even if one had a true (i.e. corresponding) belief in the former case, a typical person would be completely unaware of its correspondence. Surely one could guess correctly but, given its complexity, one would be unaware of the fact that the guess is correct. However, in the latter case, what makes it an instance of

knowledge is that one would be acquainted with the correspondence relation itself that holds between one's belief (that there are three spots) and the fact (of there being three spots). One is necessarily in a positive epistemic state. Indeed, one is in an *ideal* epistemic state, at least in terms of the relevant fact.³⁵

So, it won't do merely to predicate all true beliefs along with the acquaintance of all facts to God to achieve the ideal epistemic state. There's a cognitive state that's greater still. God must also have acquaintance with the correspondence that holds between his thoughts and the facts that make his thoughts true. If God is also acquainted with the correspondence relation, it seems that his cognitive state couldn't get any better, in an epistemic sense.

The most common objection to this sort of view is that humans so rarely satisfy this sort of pristine condition. We are only acquainted with the correspondence relation, at best, for very simple beliefs about our environment and perhaps (also very simple) *a priori* truths. For most of the things we believe, we are not acquainted with the truthmaker of our belief, much less the relation of correspondence that holds between our beliefs and the facts that make them true. For the internalist, the epistemic ground of our beliefs is often *evidence* that only, at best, makes likely the truth of our beliefs. Thus acquaintance with the correspondence relation is, for us, elusive. But again, this limitation is no problem for God and I would like to suggest provides a genuine cognitive ideal.

Thus, we now have God standing in three relations of acquaintance:

God knows that p if and only if (1) God is acquainted with his thought that p , (2) God is acquainted with a fact's being p ,³⁶ and (3) God is acquainted with the correspondence that holds between the thought that p and the fact p .³⁷

To illustrate this, let's make p the proposition that Smith has, precisely at time t , x number of hairs on his head. God knows this fact if and only if (1) God is acquainted with his thought that Smith has x number of hairs on his head at t , (2) God is acquainted with the fact of Smith's having x number of hairs on his head at t , and (3) God is acquainted with the correspondence that holds between his thought and this fact. Here it doesn't seem that God's epistemic situation could get any better with respect to knowing the hairs on Smith's head. God doesn't merely have a true belief and God doesn't merely have acquaintance with the fact. God is also acquainted with the very truth of this belief.

God and time

Though, it seems, that we have arrived at a cognitive ideal, the model has a certain limitation as it is thus far stated. To see this, we should recall that acquaintance is a real relation such that the relata of the relation must exist. That is, one cannot be acquainted with a non-existent fact. The acquaintance account offered above requires that, for any proposition p that God knows, p must describe

a fact that exists. If God knows propositions about the past, present, and future, then this entails that all facts of past, present, and future must exist for God (that is, eternalism is true).³⁸ However, if one holds to some version of presentism, the idea that only the present moment exists, then one cannot endorse this view. William Hasker has stated the problem this way: ‘Temporal entities may indeed be immediately, ‘bodily’ present in God’s awareness. But they can only be so present at the times when they exist to be present! But of course, God’s knowledge of such realities cannot be so limited.’³⁹ If only the present moment exists, then God would be constantly learning future facts, as they become present, and forgetting past facts, as they recede from his acquaintance with the present. But this is clearly unworthy of the divine being since he would fail to know everything but the relatively small amount of facts that obtain at the present moment. It’s certainly beyond the scope of this article to settle the issue about God’s relation to time. But it would be nice if the epistemological model could be stated more generally to accommodate a variety of theories of time. Doing so will require us to posit other facts beyond the truthmaking facts as the epistemic grounds of God’s beliefs.

Are there facts other than God’s being acquainted with the truthmaker that would still put God in an ideal epistemic state? Since we now have beliefs in view (contra Alston’s account), it seems that the epistemic state must amount to infallibility. Notice, in satisfying the account above, it is not possible that God believe falsely because one of the conditions is acquaintance with correspondence truth itself. Being so acquainted, God’s belief would necessarily be true. God’s standing in this relation of acquaintance would *entail* the truth of God’s belief. This relation of entailment, as I’m conceiving of it, seems to be a more general epistemic relation of the sort we are after.

Now entailment is a relation that is typically said to hold between two propositions and holds even when the propositions which stand in this relation are false. However, the entailment I have in mind here, call it entailment*, is a more complicated state since it has truths and the corresponding facts involved. This is not the logician’s use of ‘entail’ but it seems to be a sensible use of the term. For example, we might say that Jones is in the room, *qua*, entails* that ‘someone is in the room’, *qua* proposition. That is, given the fact that Jones is in the room, this guarantees the truth that someone is in the room. One way to understand this is as abbreviating the more complicated situation where the proposition ‘Smith is in the room’ is made true by the fact of Smith’s being in the room. And this true proposition in turn entails the true proposition ‘someone is in the room’. It simplifies things by simply saying the fact of Smith’s being in the room entails* the truth of ‘that someone is in the room’.

Again, just as before, God couldn’t merely be acquainted with a fact that entails* the truth of God’s belief that *p*, but would also have to be acquainted with the relation of entailment* itself. Here then is the generalized version of the account:

God knows that *p* if and only if (1) God is acquainted with his thought that *p*, (2) God is acquainted with a fact that entails* the truth of *p*, and (3) God is acquainted with the relation of entailment* that holds between the thought that *p* and the fact that entails* the truth of that *p*.

What facts, other than truthmakers, entail* the truth of God's beliefs? It will be tempting think that it is facts about God himself that entail* the truth of God's beliefs when the truthmakers are not there to be acquainted with. One could argue that God is acquainted with his own perfection and his perfection entails* the truth of his beliefs. Here God knows that Smith has *x* number of hairs on his head at, say, some future time *t* insofar as (1) he is acquainted with his thought that Smith has *x* number of hairs on his head at *t*.⁴⁰ And (2) God is acquainted with the fact that God is perfect and this fact entails* the truth of the belief that Smith has *x* number of hairs on his head at *t*. The truth of his belief is guaranteed by his perfection because, given his perfection, he necessarily believes all and only truths. And (3) God is acquainted with the entailment* relation that holds between his thought and this fact. Even though this fact will obtain in the future and is, thus, not there to be acquainted with, God is still in an ideal epistemic state with respect to this belief. That is, God knows perfectly and infallibly the precise number of hairs on Smith's head at *t*.

Gettier?

Accounts of knowledge have faltered due to a famous sort of counterexample, known as Gettier cases.⁴¹ These are cases in which a believing subject has a justified true belief that nevertheless fails to be knowledge. Typically, this is due to some element of accident or luck in coming to have the belief that intuitively suggests that the belief is not knowledge. Suppose I look up at a broken clock that perpetually reads 12:00 and I happen to do so precisely at noon. If I don't know that the clock is broken, then I would probably believe, for what seems like good reason, that it is noon. Notice that this looks to be a justified true belief, but intuitively it is not knowledge. After all, I'm looking at a broken clock and it was a wild stroke of luck that I looked at the clock at precisely the right time. Thus, my justified true belief is not knowledge. I've been Gettiered!

God, on the view defended above, would not, however, be subject to Gettier-style counterexamples that plague other accounts. Linda Zagzebski has made the point that Gettier problems will always arise so long as justification falls short of guaranteeing truth. She says:

Almost every contemporary theory of justification or warrant aims only to give the conditions for putting the believer in the best position for getting the truth. The best position is assumed to be very good, but imperfect, for such is life . . . As long as the truth is never assured by the conditions which make the state justified, there will be situations in which a false belief is justified.⁴²

Given this ‘common, almost universal assumption’, she delineates something of a two-step formula for being Gettiered. According to Zagzebski, one may have bad luck surrounding how the belief comes to be justified but then good luck in the fact that the belief happens to be true.⁴³ These two accidental features seem to be necessary for every Gettier case. We should notice that God’s perfection forecloses on the possibility of these dual accidental features since the gap between justification and truth is effectively closed, on the above account. Such, it seems, is life for God.

References

- ALSTON, WILLIAM (1986) ‘Does God have beliefs?’, *Religious Studies*, **22**, 287–306.
- ALSTON, WILLIAM (1989) *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press).
- ARNOLD, ALEXANDER (2015) ‘Knowledge first and Ockhamism’, in Jonathan Kvanvig (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, VI (New York: Oxford University Press), 1–20.
- BONJOUR, LAWRENCE (2004) ‘In search of direct realism’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **69**, 349–367.
- CRAIG, WILLIAM (1988) *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (Leiden: E. J. Brill).
- CRAIG, WILLIAM (1999) *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers).
- FUMERTON, RICHARD (1995) *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield).
- FUMERTON, RICHARD (2002) *Realism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield).
- GANSSE, GREGORY (2001) ‘Direct awareness and God’s experience of a temporal now’, in Gregory Gansse & David Woodruff (eds) *God and Time: Essays on Divine Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press), 165–181.
- GETTIER, EDMUND (1963) ‘Is justified true belief knowledge?’, *Analysis*, **23**, 121–123.
- HASAN, ALI & FUMERTON, RICHARD (2014) ‘Knowledge by acquaintance vs. description’, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/knowledge-acquaintandescr/>>.
- HASKER, WILLIAM (1988) ‘Yes, God Has Beliefs!’, *Religious Studies*, **24**, 385–394.
- HASKER, WILLIAM (1989) *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press).
- HASKER, WILLIAM (2004) *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (New York: Routledge).
- JACKSON, FRANK (1977) *Perception: A Representative Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- MAVRODES, GEORGE (1988) ‘How does God know the things that he knows?’, in Thomas Morris (ed.) *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 345–361.
- MOSER, PAUL (1985) *Empirical justification* (Dordrecht: Reidel).
- PIKE, NELSON (1965) ‘Divine omniscience and voluntary action’, *The Philosophical Review*, **74**, 27–46.
- PIKE, NELSON (1970) *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge).
- PINNOCK, CLARK (1994) *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press).
- PLANTINGA, ALVIN (1993) ‘Divine knowledge’, in C. Stephen Evans & Merold Westphal (eds) *Christian Perspectives on Religious Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 40–66.
- PRICE, H. H. (1934) ‘Some considerations about belief’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **35**, 229.
- RUSSELL, BERTRAND (1911) ‘Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **11**, 108–128.
- RUSSELL, BERTRAND (1959) *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- SELLARS, WILFRID (1963) *Science, Perception and Reality* (Atascadero CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company).
- SOSA, ERNEST & BONJOUR, LAWRENCE (2003) *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Malden MA: Blackwell).
- STUMP, ELEONORE (2003) *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge).
- SWINBURNE, RICHARD (1993) *Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- WAINWRIGHT, W. (2010) ‘Omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence’, in Charles Taliaferro & Chad Meister (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 46–65.

- WIERENGA, EDWARD (1989) *The Nature of God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press).
- WIERENGA, EDWARD (2001) 'Timelessness out of mind: on the alleged incoherence of divine timelessness', in Gregory Ganssle & David Woodruff (eds) *God and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 153–164.
- WIERENGA, EDWARD (2009) 'Omniscience', in Thomas Flint & Michael Rea (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press), 129–144.
- WILLIAMSON, TIMOTHY (2000) *Knowledge and its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- ZAGZEBSKI, LINDA (2007) 'Omniscience', in Chad Meister & Paul Copan (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Routledge), 261–269.
- ZAGZEBSKI, LINDA (2008) 'The inescapability of Gettier problems', in Ernest Sosa, Jaegwon Kim, Jeremy Fantl, & Matthew McGrath (eds) *Epistemology: An Anthology* (New York: Blackwell), 207–212.

Notes

1. Craig (1988), (1999); Hasker (1989), (2004); Pike (1965), (1970); Pinnock (1994); Wainwright (2010); Wierenga (1989), (2001), (2009); Zagzebski (2007).
2. Swinburne (1993), 172.
3. For example, Plantinga says: 'For we don't really see how God knows any of the things he knows; all we know is that necessarily, for any proposition p, p is true if and only if God believes it' (Plantinga (1993), 65).
4. Mavrodes (1988), 345.
5. Two alternative models bear mentioning. The first is Arnold (2015) and is a defence of a 'Knowledge First' approach to the nature of God's knowledge. The second is the Thomistic view of God's knowledge. See Stump (2003), 159–187.
6. Alston (1986). Though Alston thinks that God does not have beliefs, he still seems to share the assumption that God's knowledge and human knowledge are of the same basic nature. That is, humans do know *some things* in this immediate way. However, for Alston, God *only* knows in the immediate way.
7. *Ibid.*, 294.
8. Price (1934), 35. Cited by Alston (1986), 294.
9. Alston (1986), 295. Italics are mine.
10. Alston did think of his account as an account of propositional knowledge. But given what he says, it is difficult to see where a proposition figures into God's states given that there is no mental representation of facts.
11. The notion of acquaintance is most commonly associated with Bertrand Russell, who made his famous (perhaps infamous) distinction between 'knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge by description'. There are difficulties that attend to his distinction that I will not address here. It is enough for our purposes to ask how we should understand acquaintance *per se* rather than knowledge by acquaintance. See Russell (1959) and also Russell (1911). See also Hasan & Fumerton (2014) for a discussion of Russell's distinction.
12. Alston (1986), 295.
13. *Ibid.*, 297.
14. Ganssle (2001), 167.
15. In Alston's original article, he called the intuitive conception of knowledge an account of propositional knowledge even though there were no propositions figuring into the account. See Alston (1986), 305. The article was reprinted in Alston (1989) and he included a note addressing why he called it propositional knowledge. He says that facts have a 'propositional structure' and, for this reason, he sees this as an account of propositional knowledge. A fact's being propositionally structured just means that it can stand in the appropriate truthmaking relation with a proposition. It does not mean that it is representational or has a truth value. So he may call this an account of propositional knowledge, but his account does not involve propositions and, thus, infallibility, as defined, does not apply. See Alston (1989), 193.
16. Alston (1986), 298.
17. *Ibid.*, 299.
18. Ernest Sosa calls this 'experiential awareness'. This is when one is aware just in virtue of having an experience. See Sosa & BonJour (2003), 120.
19. Sosa calls this 'noticing awareness', which involves constituent belief states. See *ibid.*
20. Wilfrid Sellars seemed to make a similar claim against a foundationalist epistemology. He thought that the 'given', those features of experience of which one is directly acquainted, couldn't be epistemically relevant unless they were conceived of. This sets up the so-called Sellarsian dilemma since he thought conceptualized facts are not then foundational. Alston's view is even stronger than the foundationalist. Alston thinks that the

- acquaintance with facts just is knowledge for God. It seems Sellars would also think that mere acquaintance with facts is not itself knowledge, otherwise the given could serve the purpose the foundationalist desired. The given would just be knowledge. But this is implausible for the reasons I give here. See Sellars (1963), 129–131.
21. One need not think that all mental states are objects of awareness. There seem to be many mental states that even guide our actions at times (e.g. a fear of failure) of which we may fail to be aware.
 22. Russell (1959), 46.
 23. The term ‘factive’ is often associated with the work of Timothy Williamson. He describes a *factive attitude* as ‘one knows p only if p is true . . . other factive attitudes include perceiving that something is so, remembering that it is so, and regretting that [sic] is so’ (Williamson (2000), 21).
 24. Fumerton (2016), 241.
 25. One can of course be acquainted with a propositional attitude (e.g. the belief that p) that, in one sense, does have a truth value. But, *qua* object of acquaintance, it can be the truthmaker of the higher-order belief that ‘one has the belief that p ’ irrespective of whether the belief ‘that p ’ is true. And so even when one is acquainted with a propositional attitude (e.g. the belief that p), it is, in this sense, also a factive state.
 26. Admittedly, many of these metaphysical notions are extremely controversial. Some of them may be understood differently with less philosophical baggage. One may, for example, understand the term ‘proposition’ in a variety of ways so long as it makes reference to the content of thoughts and beliefs. I use the term primarily for ease of reference, given that it can become rather cumbersome to make use of a more specific description. A specific defence of correspondence can be found in Fumerton (2002).
 27. To think so would generate a vicious infinite regress. If being aware of the belief that P (call this P_1) required that I believe that I am believing that P_1 (call this higher order belief P_2), then I couldn’t know whether or not I believe P_2 without forming a still further belief P_3 , and so on. To be aware of any belief at all, one would have to form an infinite number of beliefs.
 28. Even if one does not think we are acquainted with physical objects, one need not embrace scepticism about the external world, since one may think that acquaintance with phenomenal properties along with the relation that holds between the phenomenal properties and physical objects justifies one’s beliefs about physical objects. But again this is a long story. For a defence of indirect realism, see Russell (1959), Jackson (1977), Moser (1985), and Bonjour (2004).
 29. Though theists often talk this way, attributions of God’s having perceptual faculties should be understood as anthropomorphic language.
 30. This is perhaps why Alston referred to his account of God’s knowledge as an *intuitive* conception.
 31. The more general state of representing in thought (of which the belief that p is a species) is meant to capture all propositional attitudes of assent.
 32. This is a version of the so-called speckled hen problem.
 33. We could also add that the experience spontaneously causes the belief to capture the idea that the belief is causally based on the experience. Since a belief can be based on an experience without one knowing that the belief is so based, it will still be that one has a true belief even though one has no idea what the belief has going for it.
 34. This is to say that one need not have the concept of correspondence to be acquainted with it. No-one but philosophers talks about the concept of correspondence. But even young children make claims about their surroundings and plausibly can, at times, be aware of the belief’s correspondence.
 35. This should not be understood as a generalized account of knowledge, since it is rare that we are acquainted with correspondence. The foregoing has been simply to indicate what seems to be an ideal state of knowledge. However, this leaves room for there to be knowledge in less than ideal states.
 36. In using the term ‘the fact’s being p ’ I merely intend that this fact corresponds to the thought that p . I don’t mean that the fact is itself propositional.
 37. This is an application of Richard Fumerton’s epistemological account. See Fumerton (1995), 73–79.
 38. See Ganssle (2001) for a defence of an argument of this sort.
 39. Hasker (1988), 391.
 40. There are many ways in which God could come to have this thought. It could be because God has sovereignly caused Smith to have x number of hairs on his head and this is the causal explanation of this fact. Or it could be simply in virtue of God’s perfection that God has thoughts about all facts past, present, and future.
 41. Gettier (1963).
 42. Zagzebski (2008), 212.
 43. *Ibid.*, 208.