

GOD'S POINT OF VIEW: A REPLY TO MANDER

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According to one antitheist argument, God cannot know what it is like to be me because He, who is necessarily unlimited and necessarily incorporeal, cannot have my point of view. In his recent article, William J. Mander tries to demonstrate that God can indeed have His own point of view *and* my point of view at the same time by providing examples that seem to motivate his claim. I argue that none of his examples succeeds in this task. I introduce a different objection to the antitheist argument that appeals to the Thomistic principle regarding divine attributes.

The difficulty of our knowing phenomenal, subjective aspects of a bat's experiences is vividly described in Thomas Nagel's renowned paper 'What Is It Like To Be a Bat?'¹ Nagel contends that, in order for us to know what it is like to be a bat, we must have a bat's point of view. However, according to Nagel, since we lack a bat's unique sensory apparatus, sonar, we cannot have a bat's point of view. Therefore, he concludes, we cannot know – or at least it is extremely difficult for us to know – what it is like to be a bat. In a recent issue of this *Journal*, William J. Mander² examines the antitheist argument in the same dialectic: In order for God to know what it is like to be me, He must have my point of view. However, since God is necessarily unlimited and necessarily incorporeal, while I am limited and corporeal, He cannot have my point of view. Therefore, God cannot know what it is like to be me.³

1. MANDER'S OBJECTION

Mander claims that the antitheist argument is fallacious because, according to him, God can in fact have His own point of view *and* my point of view at the same time:

To say that one cannot simultaneously hold two perspectives is not quite right; this *can* be done where one of them *includes* the other. For where a point of view includes another more restricted sub point of view as one of its parts or components, in holding the wider view one is simultaneously holding the narrower view which it contains. ... We may suggest that God knows what it is like to be us because his complete and unlimited perspective on the world includes as one of its parts our limited and imperfect perspective on the same.⁴

Mander cannot simply stipulate that God can have these two distinct points of view at the same time because that is the negation of the sub-conclusion of the antitheist argument. However, because of its speculative nature, neither can Mander *demonstrate* his claim. Thus, he tries to motivate it by providing five relevant examples⁵:

(1) *University and Colleges*: Individual colleges have their own points of view but the university as a whole has a point of view which includes those sub points of view.

(2) *Week and Days*: Last Sunday and next Friday are different points from which we can regard the passing of time, but both are included within the wider point of view of this week.

(3) *Europe and Britain*: Britain has its own point of view but, at the same time, it is a part of the European point of view.

(4) *Awareness and Senses*: Our visual, tactile or auditory senses have their own points of view but they are parts of the wider point of view of our complete conscious awareness.

(5) *Adults and Children*: Children's points of view are included in adults' point of view.

Now, in the following, I show that those examples fail to motivate Mander's objection to the antitheist argument.

(1), (2) and (3) are simply irrelevant to the antitheist argument. As those examples show, the word 'point of view' is often ascribed to many different objects like colleges, countries, and so on. However, the point of view with which Nagel and the antitheist argument—at least one version of the antitheist argument—are concerned is one in a much more limited sense.⁶ It is a point of view with which one's 'subjective phenomena is essentially connected'.⁷ This type of point of view cannot be taken by colleges, days or countries, but only by an agent, such as a bat or me, that can have phenomenal experiences.⁸

(4) and (5) involve, contrary to (1), (2) and (3), agents that can have phenomenal experiences. Do they then motivate Mander's objection to the antitheist argument? The answer is, unfortunately, no.

(4) says that while we have different forms of senses, each of which has its own point of view, they are parts of our complete conscious awareness. However, according to the restricted sense of a point of view noted above, senses *themselves* are not qualified to have points of view. For, again, they are not agents that can have phenomenal experiences. While it does make sense to say that I have my own point of view *through* those senses, it does not make sense to say that my visual sense *alone* or my tactile sense *alone* has its own point of view.

(5) seems more promising than the others because it involves only adults and children, both of whom can have points of view in the restricted sense; and, in fact, (5) seems to prove that one can have two points of view at the same time. Nevertheless, this

example does not support Mander's objection to the antitheist argument. For although adults are different from children, they are not as different from children as God is from me. The main thrust of the antitheist argument is that God cannot have my point of view because God and I are fundamentally distinct from each other. While God is necessarily unlimited and necessarily incorporeal, I am limited and corporeal. The antitheist argument derives the impossibility of God's knowing what it is like to be me by appealing to this fundamental difference between God and me. This sort of distinctiveness is not present in the example of adults and children. For, after all, adults are merely grownup children!

In order to motivate his objection to the antitheist argument Mander needs to provide an example in the following form: while $p1$ and $p2$ are fundamentally distinct, $p1$ can have $p1$'s and $p2$'s points of view—points of view in the restricted sense—simultaneously because $p1$'s point of view includes $p2$'s point of view. As we have seen, however, none of Mander's examples fits this form.

At this point Mander might argue that his examples are mere metaphors. That is, they are not supposed to *justify* the truth of his objection to the antitheist argument but merely to *illustrate* the relationship between God's point of view and my point of view. However, they are problematic even as metaphors. For those examples entail the exact opposite of what Mander needs to show for the purpose of defending his claim.

Forget about a point of view in the restricted sense and consider again the example of Europe and Britain. Europe's point of view includes Britain's point of view. That is why Britain can have both the British point of view and the European point of view at the same time. Consider, again, the example of a university and colleges. The University of London's point of view includes Heythrop College's point of view. That is why

Heythrop College can have both Heythrop College's point of view and the University of London's point of view at the same time. Thus those examples seem successfully to support Mander's claim: 'To say that one cannot simultaneously hold two perspectives is not quite right; this *can* be done where one of them *includes* the other'.⁹ However, given Mander's assumptions that Europe and the University of London correspond to God and that Britain and Heythrop College correspond to me, what those examples actually show is not that God can know what it is like to be me but that *I can know what it is like to be God!* This is the exact opposite of what Mander needs to show.

In what follows, I provide a new objection to the antitheist argument. I demonstrate that even if the antitheist argument successfully shows that God cannot know what it is like to be me, that does not by any means undermine His divinity.

2. A NEW OBJECTION

According to traditional theism, God is necessarily omnipotent. That is, God is a being such that He is necessarily maximally powerful. However, ever since Aquinas it has been widely agreed that the doctrine of divine omnipotence does not entail that God can do *absolutely anything*.¹⁰ Many, if not most, theologians and philosophers accept the following Thomistic principle:

Thomistic Principle: The fact that God cannot do what it is necessarily impossible to do does not undermine His omnipotence.¹¹

So, according to this principle, even if God cannot draw a square circle or create a married bachelor, it does not follow that God is not omnipotent.

As we have seen, the antitheist argument attempts to show that because of His very necessary perfection God cannot know what it is like to be me. While knowing what it is

like to be me requires that God be limited and corporeal, it is necessarily impossible for Him to be limited and corporeal while retaining His divine nature. However, according to the Thomistic principle, God does not have to be able to do what it is necessarily impossible to do in order to complete His omnipotence.¹² Therefore, given the Thomistic principle, the antitheist argument fails to undermine God's omnipotence.

Now, proponents of the antitheist argument might claim that even if God does not have to be able to know what it is like to be me *for His omnipotence*, He still needs to know it for His other divine attributes, such as divine omniscience. However, this is not true. The doctrine of divine omnipotence subsumes all the powers that God has to have and actually has. Thus, if the power to know what it is like to be me is outside the scope of the doctrine of divine omnipotence then His inability to know it does not by any means undermine His divinity.

As Mander contends, there seems no good reason to think that God cannot know what it is like to be me. However, given the Thomistic principle, *even if* God cannot know what it is like to be me, for the reason to which the antitheist argument appeals, the divinity of God is not undermined at all.

¹ Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', *Philosophical Review* LXXXIII (1974), pp. 435-450.

² William J. Mander, 'Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?', *Heythrop Journal* 43 (2002), pp. 430-443.

³ Variations of this argument are found in David Blumenfeld, 'On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes', *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978), pp. 91-103, Richard Francks, 'Omniscience, Omnipotence and Pantheism', *Philosophy* 54 (1979), pp. 395-399, Patrick Grim, 'Some Neglected Problems of Omniscience', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983), pp. 265-276, Patrick Grim, 'Against Omniscience: The Case from Essential Indexicals', *Noûs* 19 (1985), pp. 151-180, Patrick Grim, 'The Being That Knew Too Much', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47 (2000), pp. 141-154, Norman Kretzmann, 'Omniscience and

Immutability', *Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1966), pp. 409-421, and John Lachs, 'Omniscience', *Dialogue* 1 (1963), pp. 400-402.

⁴ Mander, 'Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?', p. 439. Mander uses the words 'point of view' and 'perspective' interchangeably. I use only 'point of view' throughout this paper for the sake of uniformity.

⁵ Mander, 'Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?', p. 439.

⁶ Mander himself admits, 'My use of the words 'perspective' and 'point of view' is a broad one, comparable to that found in T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), or A. W. Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)'. Mander, 'Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?', ft. 14. As I claim in the main text, this makes Mander's argument particularly weak because the concerns of Nagel's and the antitheist arguments are not a point of view in such a broad sense.

⁷ Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', p. 437.

⁸ If panpsychism is true then perhaps any physical object can have a point of view. I shall set aside this issue because the cogency or otherwise of panpsychism is not directly relevant to the current discussion.

⁹ Mander, 'Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?', p. 439.

¹⁰ Trakakis writes, for example, 'No matter how much controversy and debate may currently surround the extraordinary attribute of divine omnipotence, there is a virtually complete consensus amongst philosophers and theologians that Aquinas is correct in saying that "anything that implies a contradiction does not fall under God's omnipotence ... "'. Nick Trakakis, 'The Absolute Theory of Omnipotence', *Sophia*, 36 (1997), pp. 55.

¹¹ For applications of the Thomistic principle see George I. Mavrodes, 'Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence', *Philosophical Review*, LXXII (1963), pp. 221-223, and Yujin Nagasawa, 'Divine Omniscience and Knowledge *De Se*' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (forthcoming).

¹² Mander himself seems to be aware of the necessary impossibility at issue. He writes, '[A] man [cannot] know what it is like to be a dog, for even if he could become one, no dog can know what it is like to be a man. ... You can't occupy more than one [point of view] at the same time. We may become adept at flitting from one [being] to another but we can no more hold two such perspectives in our mind together than we can simultaneously see both a duck and a rabbit in the famous duck-rabbit illustration from Gestalt Psychology'. Mander, 'Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?', p. 438.