

## Modified Omniscience: A Study of Swinburne's Theory of Omniscience

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**Abstract:** “Omniscience” is an attribute of classical theism understanding which affects how other doctrines of classical theology – e.g. immutability, God’s free will, man’s free will, etc. – are understood. John Swinburne, the contemporary English philosopher of religion, argues that the classical notion of omniscience is not coherent, but incompatible with human free will, God’s free will, the first-person propositions, the Tense propositions, and ultimately the scripture; therefore, he has gone beyond the classical notion of “Omniscience” and has provided a more modified explanation of this concept. Swinburne believes that God’s worship is not diminished on grounds that the knowledge of God is limited, or because of logical rules, or plans that God has not yet decided on, or because God Himself has limited His knowledge. Yet Swinburne’s modified version of Omniscient theory does not seem to be compatible with other attributes of God, such as Creative. It seems that Swinburne has erred in stating that knowledge is limited to Propositional knowledge and considers knowledge of God to be of that type; because in addition to Propositional knowledge, intuitive knowledge can be obtained and God’s knowledge can be considered as such. Because Swinburne considers God to be temporal, when God has imposed this restriction on himself, there can be no preference to a specific time.

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**I**ntroduction: Omniscience is an attribute of God in Classical Theism. The classical theologians agreed that “God knows everything.” Comprehensive and complete knowledge was needed for a perfect, simple and immutable being, and it was always considered one of the attributes of God’s perfection. But this conception of omniscience in the classical theism was problematic, and recently the number of problems posed to it by theists or atheists has been increased. Some argue that the classical view of God’s omniscience is incompatible with his other attributes; for example, omniscience is incompatible with the immateriality of God, His moral perfection, immutability, omnipotence, and freewill. Some objections claim that this view of omniscience is in conflict with other classical doctrines of theism; for example, it contradicts the doctrine of human free will. Another

problem is that this doctrine is not compatible with theism at all, and the classical view of God’s omniscience leads to pantheism. Swinburne has also raised several objections to the classical conception of God’s omniscience. This survey tries to study Swinburne’s objections to the traditional understanding of omniscience.

**M**ethodology: In this survey first Swinburne’s objections are discussed, and then these objections are critiqued.

**F**indings: The incompatibility of omniscience with human free will as well as God’s will:

- If God is aware of the voluntary actions of human beings, then God must have three components of belief, truth and justification in order to obtain knowledge. Achieving the component of truth and justification is impossible. Therefore, God does not know about the voluntary actions of human beings.

- If God is aware of His voluntary actions, the three components of belief, truth, and justification must be present. But the two components of truth and justification are not possible to achieve. Therefore, God does not know about His voluntary actions and the classical view of omniscience is not correct. It seems that the interpretation of objections by Swinburne is due to limiting knowledge to propositional knowledge and neglecting intuitive knowledge. Therefore, it seems that Swinburne has erred in making knowledge limited to the propositional knowledge and considering the knowledge of God to be of that type; because in addition to the knowledge of propositions, one can find intuitive knowledge, and it seems that the knowledge of God is of that type. These objections of Swinburne are due to the separation of the attributes of God from one another in the sense that because he has considered the knowledge of

God as two separate things by his own free will, he has faced the problem that if God already knew his actions and choices, he would no longer be a free will agent. But it is clear that the attributes of God are all the same and of the same essence.

Incompatibility of omniscience with temporal propositions:

If God is omniscience, as is said in classical theology, He must always be aware of propositions whose truth value is limited to a particular time; but consequent is false, so the antecedent is also false. To overcome this challenge, we refer to Roland Nash's argument. Nash argues that in order to solve the problem that some propositions change the value of their truth and therefore such propositions cannot logically belong to the knowledge of God as before, a distinction must be made between the sentence, the proposition, and the state of affairs (Nash, 1983: 68).

The unavailability of first-person statements to others: If God is omniscient according to the classical view, then it is necessary for God to be aware of the truth of the first-person propositions; this would be possible if God is the only person existing. God is not the only person in the universe because it presupposes the existence of other persons. Therefore, the antecedent is also invalid. That is, God, in its classical sense, cannot be the omniscience.

These objections of Swinburne seem to be the right objections, and it is not possible for others to know each person's personal circumstances and feelings. No one else has the experience. We claim to understand other emotions simply by imitating them. Consequently, if we take God as a separate being from man and the world, as classical theology imagines, God's prior knowledge of the personal circumstances of His servants would be impossible unless we consider God to be

existentially united with His effects and provide a correct, ontological and philosophical explanation of God's closeness to man.

Swinburne's other argument for criticizing the classical conception of the omniscience of God is quoting biblical verses. He says that in the scriptures, especially in *The Old Testament*, God has special plans for human beings and through intermediaries he changes his plans. On Swinburne's argument based on the scriptures, it can be said that he has come to the conclusion that God's knowledge does not include the future actions of human beings in the scriptures. It has also been brought in favor of the omniscience of God. How should these phrases be treated?

In his theory of modified omniscience, Swinburne eventually claims that God has limited his knowledge to certain propositions. Although God's lack of knowledge of temporal and first-person

propositions can be explained by metaphysical and ontological limitations, limiting God's knowledge to voluntary actions of man and himself seems to be a voluntary limitation; that is, God decides to give up knowledge for the sake of some interests, which is to preserve the will of man and himself. It has no meaning other than God's antropomorphism.

Also, if God had omniscience before that time of limitation, then how does having knowledge turn into not having knowledge? Suppose, for example, that you have knowledge of something. Nothing can be done to destroy your knowledge. Even in material beings, forgetfulness is not the same as not having knowledge, and for an immaterial being, forgetfulness has no meaning. Swinburne's basic premise in presenting a modified reading of omniscience is to consider God as temporal. In fact, he considers the life of God to be

eternal in the sense that he has no beginning and no end; but he does not accept the timeless eternity of God. Hence, in many problems, considering God as temporal poses some problems to be considered by him as a classic. But the temporality of God leads to corrupt consequences. Swinburne's modified version of omniscience does not cohere with other classical theological doctrines because in classical theism, the knowledge of God is the cause of the creation of other beings, but in Swinburne's reading, the knowledge of God is subject to beings, and this is not compatible with God's creation.

### **D**iscussion and Conclusion:

It seems that the main reason for Swinburne's objections to God's omniscience is because of the presuppositions that he has in mind, such as 1) Monopoly of knowledge in propositional and neglecting intuitive knowledge, 2) temporality of God, 3)

Personality of God, 4) Confusion between proposition and sentence, and 5) Separating the attributes of God and acknowledging the lack of objectivity of the attributes of God. In addition to his incorrect assumptions, Swinburne's theory of modified omniscience is plagued by corrupt consequents such as incompatibility with the doctrine of God's creation, incompatibility with some other verses of the Bible and preference is not preferred. Finally, as a suggestion, it can be said that for a coherent explanation of the idea of omniscience, one can move from personal theism to another image.

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