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Would an Omniscient Mind Have Knowledge in Conceptual Form?

Prologue

It is noteworthy how casually Christians assume that their god, which they claim is omniscient, would have knowledge in the form of *concepts*, just as man does. This is most curious to me, and from my perspective it indicates not only the *ad hoc* nature of their god-beliefs and their intent to assimilate non-Christian ideas into the Christian worldview, but also their lack of understanding of the nature of concepts to begin with.

Many believers might think that, since Christianity teaches that man was created in the Christian god's image, man's thinking in the form of concepts would indicate that their god thinks in the form of concepts as well. But this only obscures the insidious reversal which lies at the base of the thesis that man was created in the image of the Christian god. The assumption that the Christian god has knowledge in the form of concepts in fact confirms the suspicion that the Christian god was concocted in the image of *man*, i.e., that believers have imagined their god in the image of man by

isolat[ing]... actual characteristics of man combined with the projection of impossible, irrational characteristics which do not arise from reality - such as omnipotence and omniscience. (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 148)

The problem is that, when we allow the imagination to inflate its concoctions beyond the scope of the real, many of our concepts lose the context they need to apply to reality in an objective fashion.

If it can be determined that an "omniscient" consciousness would *not* possess its knowledge in the form of concepts, this would have ruinous implications for the presuppositionalist approach to Christian apologetics which seeks to contrive aspects of man's cognitive experience as evidence for an omniscient being whose thinking serves as the model for man's mental abilities. It would not make sense to suppose that man's cognitive functions are patterned after a consciousness whose awareness is so vastly superior to or different from man's consciousness that it would have no use for the kinds of functions man's mind employs.

What Concepts Accomplish

To understand how erroneous it would be to assume that an omniscient, all-seeing and omnipresent consciousness would possess its knowledge in the form of concepts, we need to consider what concepts accomplish for man. And to understand what concepts do for man, we need to understand the essentials of his consciousness. Consciousness is consciousness of something, i.e., of an object(s). And man's consciousness begins with perception of the world around him. Perception does not give man awareness of concepts; it gives him awareness of particular entities, their attributes, actions, etc. Sense perception gives man awareness of these things in the form of *percepts*.

A percept is a group of sensations automatically retained and integrated by the brain of a living organism. It is in the form of percepts that man grasps the evidence of his senses and apprehends reality. (ITOE, p. 5)

But man can perceive only a limited number of existents at any moment, and his perceptual faculty can retain and integrate only a limited number of sensations at any moment. However, man can get "beyond" these limitations by means of conceptual integration. Conceptual integration allows him to expand his awareness beyond the objects of his immediate, perceptual awareness by combining them into classes which include not only the particular entities which he perceives in the "here and now," but also similar entities which he has perceived, may one day perceive and may never perceive. What makes this expansion of man's consciousness beyond the immediate inputs of sense perception possible, is the process of *abstraction*: integration of multiple units into categories by means of measurement-omission according to common isolated essentials. (The mechanics of this process are expounded in Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.)

Concepts thus allow man to treat *as a single whole* an unlimited series of existents which he has *not* observed or directly perceived, on the basis of those which he *has* observed or directly perceived. Concepts are therefore a kind of mental shorthand which he needs *because he does not have direct awareness of all members of a class*.

An Example of a Poor Understanding of Concepts in Apologetic Action

Christian apologists frequently expose their poor understanding of the nature of concepts when they try to assemble arguments for the existence of their god. Quite often theists expose their lack of understanding just in setting up their argument, flashing their ignorance before the world before their arguments even get off the ground. Attending believers, anxious to find anything to confirm their beliefs, nod in agreement regardless of whether or not they fully understand what is being endorsed.

Examples of misuse of conceptual issues are legion in the apologetic literature. But for present purposes, observe what Alvin Plantinga considers as the basis from which to mount an argument for the existence of his god (quoted from Welty [here](#)):

Suppose you find yourself convinced that (1) there are propositions, properties, and sets, (2) that the causal requirement is indeed true [that is, that there must be a causal connection between object of knowledge and knower], and (3) that (due to excessive number or excessive complexity or excessive size) propositions, properties, and sets can't be human thoughts, concepts, and collections. Then you have the materials for a theistic argument (*Warrant and Proper Function*, 121 fn. 25).

Actually, given Plantinga's conceptions (particularly his points (1) and (3)), what we have here is the makings of a gap into which theistic imaginations can be inserted. But the gap is contrived against the relief of a profound ignorance of the objective nature of concepts. For one thing, at the very least, propositions are not irreducible; they consist of concepts. To speak of propositions intelligently, we need to understand propositions, and to understand propositions, we first need to understand concepts. Also, as mathematical collections, sets concretize certain conceptual aspects - such as treating groups of objects as single wholes, but they too are not irreducible. Since sets consist of units, it is therefore the formation of the concept 'unit' which needs to be understood if we are to have a rational understanding of sets. In regard to properties, we need to clarify if by 'properties' we mean particular attributes which exist in specific measures (if so, which ones and which measures?), or the concepts which integrate particular attributes into mental units, in which case we're back to the need to understand the nature of concepts.

Let us look a little closer at this notion of "excessive number." What quantity constitutes an "excessive number" in this respect? How does one determine which number is "excessive," thus warranting the conclusion that whatever exists in this quantity must not be human or graspable by the human mind? And how would such a conclusion follow? If Plantinga can quantify it, then obviously it is a number that man's mind can grasp, which would undercut his claim that an "excessive number" of "propositions, properties and sets can't be human thoughts, concepts, and collections." Indeed, what number can the human mind *not* grasp? Concepts allow us to bring an "excessive number" of any type of units into the range of human consciousness by means of unit-economy, that is, by condensing it into a single unit which the human mind can easily retain and integrate into the sum of his knowledge. Thus by quantifying them, Plantinga would demonstrate that whatever he is quantifying is within the grasp of his mind.

If, however, Plantinga does not know how many propositions, properties and sets there are, then how could he claim that there is an "excessive number" of them, such that they "can't be human thoughts, concepts, and collections"? How could he know, as it were, that the quantity of propositions, properties and/or sets has exceeded the magic number? Plantinga's own personal ignorance of how many "propositions, properties and sets" there are, may be a fact that he has to live with, but such ignorance is not hardly a credible platform from which to argue for the existence of a god. Similarly with "excessive complexity or excessive size." Either way you slice it, such a procedure is self-defeating.

Notice how theism often attempts to exploit the limitations of man's mind - whether actual or inflated - to validate the existence of something beyond his ability to perceive and understand, and yet we're expected to accept this as knowledge. What Plantinga's "materials for a theistic argument" indicate is his own poor understanding of the nature of concepts. Plantinga himself uses concepts to identify what he is talking about, concepts which the average human thinker can grasp, and yet claims that what these concepts cannot be human concepts. This ignores the fact that it is the task of concepts to reduce an "excessive number or excessive complexity or excessive size"

of things (be they “propositions, properties, and sets,” or anything else), to the range of man’s consciousness. Even indefinite descriptors, such as Plantinga uses to state the supposed problem, reduce what he is talking about to something easily grasped by the human mind. In this way, concepts enable man to work extremely efficiently within the limitations of his consciousness rather than being incapacitated by them and held hostage to the intellectual permafrost of mysticism.

Man’s Conceptual Faculty

Leonard Peikoff explains how concepts bring that which is beyond the reach of man’s senses (including things existing in “excessive number or excessive complexity or excessive size”) into the reach of man’s overall awareness:

Consciousness, any consciousness, is finite. A is A. Only a limited number of units can be discriminated from one another and held in the focus of awareness at a given time. Beyond this number, the content becomes an unretainable indeterminate blur or spread, like this: //

For a consciousness to extend its grasp beyond a mere handful of concretes, therefore - for it to be able to deal with an enormous totality, like all tables, or all men, or the universe as a whole - one capacity is indispensable. It must have the capacity to compress its content, i.e., to *economize the units* required to convey that content. This is the basic function of concepts. Their function, in Ayn Rand’s words, is “to reduce a vast amount of information to a minimal number of units...”

A concept integrates and thus condenses a group of percepts into a single mental whole. It reduces an unlimited number of perceptual units to one new unit, which subsumes them all. It thereby expands profoundly the amount of material that a person can retain and deal with cognitively. Once the term “man” is defined and automatized in your consciousness, for example, the vast sum of its referents is available to you instantly; it is available in a single frame of awareness, without the need of your trying to visualize or describe and then somehow hold in mind all the individual men that are, have been, or will be. One mental unit has taken place of an endless series, and you can proceed to discover an unlimited knowledge about the entity. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 106)

As should be clear from the foregoing, concepts are vital to man’s cognition because they expand his awareness beyond the immediate reach of his senses. Concepts thus allow man to reach beyond what he is directly aware of by giving him the ability to manage a vast amount of information in the form of a single unit, even though he does not directly perceive all the information which that single unit integrates at any one moment. Concepts make it so that he can speak about *all men*, for instance, whether they exist now, will exist, or existed in the past, without having seen all men; in fact, he never will see all men. In such a way, concepts universalize classes from the small number of units which an individual does perceive directly, which is the essential process of induction. Thus concept-formation provides a working model or blueprint for inductive generalization.

It should be noted here that conceptual integration holds the key to debunking the staid objections against empiricism that are all too commonplace in presuppositional apologetics. (See for instance Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, pp. 181-182, or Michael Butler’s [The Pulling Down of Strongholds: The Power of Presuppositional Apologetics](#).) If the human mind can form open-ended classes of existents on the basis of the limited input of the senses, then there is no reason to suppose that all of one’s knowledge cannot be ultimately grounded in sense perception. After all, the content of one’s knowledge had to be acquired somehow, and those who contend that all knowledge is not grounded in sense experience do not identify an alternative to sense experience which can work without the operation of the senses. Besides, an objective theory of abstraction settles both the standard and the more refined objections that are commonly raised against perceptually-based cognition.

Predictable Theistic Denials

The theist will most likely want to deny the first statement in Peikoff’s explanation, which is a universal statement characterizing all consciousness. Christians imagine in their god an allegedly *infinite* consciousness. They will thus deny that their god could discriminate “only a limited number of units... from one another,” that it holds in the focus of its awareness at all times *everything* that exists, has existed and will exist for all eternity, for such “all-knowingness” is the basis of its “plan” for mankind and the universe. It is, given such imaginations, not limited

to discriminated awareness of only a small number of units at any time.

But such denials will only play into my point, namely that the “knowledge” which Christians claim on behalf of their god could not be *conceptual* in nature. Since its awareness is not limited to only a small number of units at any given time, it would not possess its knowledge in a form which omits specific measurements in order “to extend its grasp beyond a mere handful of concretes.” Such a method of cognition would actually *destroy* its omniscience, for it would obliterate its immediate awareness of all the details belonging to everything that exists save for a statistically insignificant few.

Bahnsen confirms the essence of this point when he writes:

Van Til makes the point that in nothing that God knows is He utterly passive and receptive; He has no “percepts” from which He constructs His knowledge. Rather, by His own original and constructive (creative) concepts, God determines the nature of reality and all the facts of history. (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 353n. 180)

Since, according to this view, the Christian god “has no ‘percepts’ from which He constructs His knowledge,” it would have no need for a faculty which “integrates and thus condenses a group of percepts into a single mental whole” in knowing its objects. In other words, it would have no need for concepts. It could hold in its immediate awareness every detail of every existent that exists, ever existed or will exist, without any need to condense that mass into measurement-omitting units that a non-omniscient consciousness such as man has requires.

Notice how, in spite of these points, Bahnsen errs by proceeding to affirm that such a being would have its knowledge in the form of concepts as well as explicitly affirming a view which entails the primacy of consciousness (see specifically [Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#)). Because an omniscient and all-seeing consciousness would be conscious of absolutely everything at all times for all eternity, the Christian god, if it were omniscient and all-seeing, would have no use for a faculty which “reduces an unlimited number of perceptual units to one new unit, which subsumes them all.” Since its awareness is already absolutely maximal and all-encompassing, it would have no use for a faculty which expands its cognition beyond what it perceives at any moment, for if it perceives at all, it perceives maximally already; there would be nothing beyond its perception to expand to. Thus the theist’s use of the concept ‘concept’, when applied to his god which is supposedly omniscient and all-seeing, becomes a [stolen concept](#), for it is affirmed while denying or ignoring its genetic roots. This is clear the moment the theist denies Peikoff’s claim that “any consciousness, is finite.” The theist will deny this because he does not want to allow it to apply to the god he imagines.

And yes, I say *imagines* here, because imagination is the faculty by which the believer conceives of such a being. For instance, we can of course *imagine* a being which is not saddled with the kinds of limitations that man has. But this is merely imagination. We can imagine a being, which we might call *Wod*, which “sees all” and “knows all,” from whose voyeuristic awareness nothing can escape. Such an entity, being omniscient and all-seeing, would not need to reduce the vast information it supposedly possesses to a minimal number of units. As an omniscient and all-seeing being, it would be able to hold all that information, however much there may be, in its eternal awareness. If it did not, it would not be omniscient and all-seeing. Although we will always be capable of imagining beyond what is real, the problem for the theist is that the imaginary is not real.

In a Nutshell

Quite simply, one would not need concepts if he knew everything and contained everything that exists in his immediate awareness eternally. Concepts are how a “finite mind” economizes the enormous amount of data that it *discovers* in the world throughout its life. Concepts are a form of mental shorthand that allows a “finite mind” to treat as a single unit a massive and ever-growing volume of information collected from its awareness of a limited number of particular units bearing similar attributes in various specific measurements.

An omniscient mind, on the other hand, would not need such a shorthand method of organizing the objects of its awareness, because it could retain all the specific information about each particular at all times in its present awareness, and it would know each particular in terms of its uniqueness - i.e., specifically - rather than having to lump particulars into generalized or *universal* classes which omit the particular measurements of the units they subsume.

We (“finite minds”) omit measurements in order to condense specific particulars into the form of general classes

because we cannot retain the enormous amount of data in our memory. It is, then, from a theistic point of view, a *deficiency* (cf. “finiteness”) which necessitates conceptualization. An “infinite mind” (i.e., a mind that is not hampered by the limitations that our human minds have) would not have such deficiencies (e.g., it would be able to hold every detail of every particular regardless of when it exists in its present and eternal consciousness), and thus would not need a form of knowledge which is geared to *condensing* that information in order to compensate for such deficiencies.

Concepts, then, imply non-omniscience because they imply the finiteness of non-divine minds. Thus it is incoherent to expect that an appeal to a so-called “infinite mind” would explain the conceptual order that characterizes the form in which man acquires, validates and holds his knowledge. Consequently, the presuppositionalist argument that knowledge as man possesses it implies the existence of an “infinite mind” - such as that allegedly belonging to the Christian god of presuppositionalism - simply backfires: their own god would not possess its knowledge in the form of concepts, so we must look elsewhere for an explanation of the relationship between the one and the many, the conceptual and the particular. The solution, then, lies in an understanding of how the human mind retains the data it discovers in the form of concepts.

by Dawson Bethrick

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