“Restricted Omniscience and Ways of Knowing”

**Abstract:** Recently several philosophers have moved from a classical account of divine omniscience according to which God knows all truths to a restricted account of divine omniscience according to which God knows all knowable truths. But an important objection offered by Alexander Pruss threatens to show that if God knows all knowable truths God must also know all truths. In this paper, I show that there is a way out of Pruss’s objection for the advocate of restricted omniscience if she will define her view in terms of ways of knowing rather than in terms of logical possibilities.

Introduction

Recently several philosophers have moved from a classical account of divine omniscience according to which God knows all truths to a restricted account of divine omniscience according to which God knows all knowable truths.[[1]](#footnote-1) But an important objection offered by Alexander Pruss (2011) threatens to show that if God knows all knowable truths God must also know all truths. In this paper, I show that there is a way out of Pruss’s objection for the advocate of restricted omniscience if she will define her view in terms of ways of knowing rather than in terms of logical possibilities.

In section one, I articulate the restricted omniscience view in the way it has typically been developed using logical possibilities. I go on to explain how Pruss’s argument shows that this articulation of the restricted omniscience view entails classical omniscience. In section two, I develop an alternative articulation of the restricted omniscience view using ways of knowing. I show how an advocate of this articulation of the restricted omniscience view can arguably escape Pruss’s objection. Future discussion of this articulation of the restricted omniscience view will likely concern the concept of ways of knowing. Thus, I conclude the paper by briefly considering strategies the advocate of restricted omniscience might use to make this notion more precise in a way that yields results coherent with her view.

1 Restricted Omniscience, Logical Possibilities, and Pruss’s Objection

The advocate of restricted omniscience claims that God knows all knowable truths. Indeed, since she thinks that this restricted omniscience is an essential attribute of God’s, she claims that necessarily God knows all knowable truths. One initially attractive way of making this view precise—indeed, the way the view has typically been developed[[2]](#footnote-2)—is to explain it using logical possibilities, as follows:

(RO1) ∀p L[(p is true and ◊L(God knows p))→God knows p][[3]](#footnote-3)

In English, the view says that for all propositions p, it is logically necessary that if p is true and it is logically possible that God knows p, then God knows p. According to RO1, what it is for a proposition to be knowable for God is for it to be true and for it to be logically possible that God knows it. Using the apparatus of possible worlds, RO1 analyzes the claim that a proposition p is knowable for God as the claim that p is true and there is a possible world in which God knows p.

Pruss’s argument shows that if restricted omniscience is defined in this way, then God’s being restrictedly omniscient implies that he is classically omniscient—i.e., that he knows all truths *simpliciter*. “The basic problem with saying that a restrictedly omniscient being knows all knowable true propositions,” writes Pruss, “is that there are contingently true propositions q such that it is sometimes easy to know q when q is true and sometimes easy to know ~q when q is false, and then we can apply the restricted omniscience thesis to the disjunction of an arbitrary true proposition with ~q.” For example, the proposition <Obama is president> seems to be one such contingently true proposition which is easy to know when it is true and easy to know when it is false. But now, for any arbitrary true proposition p such as <Alex mows the lawn at t>, we can prove that God knows p, given the definition of restricted omniscience above. For, God knows <Obama is President>. And, in some possible world God knows <it is not the case that Obama is President>. But, since God is competent at deduction, it will then follow that in some possible world God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t>. This proposition, however, is true in the actual world, since <Alex mows the lawn at t> is true in the actual world. Thus, given the definition of restricted omniscience above, it will follow that God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in the actual world. And since we’ve already supposed that God knows <Obama is President> in the actual world and that God is competent at deduction, we can now conclude that God also knows <Alex mows the lawn at t> in the actual world. Further, since <Alex mows the lawn at t> was an arbitrarily selected true proposition, it will follow from the definition of restricted omniscience RO1 that God knows every true proposition, including any true propositions about what free creatures will do in the future.

Pruss’s argument can presented more formally using three suppositions. The first is RO1. The other two suppositions are as follows:

(Divine Deduction) L∀p,q,r[(God knows p & God knows q & r is a tautological consequence of (p&q))→God knows r]

(Contingency) ∃p [God knows p & ◊ (God knows ~p)]

Divine Deduction tells us that God’s knowledge is closed under tautological consequence. This supposition should be uncontroversial in the present context. Contingency tells us that there is a proposition that God knows which is such that it is logically possible that he knows its negation. This supposition is innocent, given that there are contingent claims which God knows which he could easily have known to be false if they had been false.

With RO1, Divine Deduction, and Contingency in hand, Pruss argues that every true proposition is known by God, as follows:

1. p is a true proposition [supposition for conditional proof]
2. God knows q & ◊ (God knows ~q) [by existential instantiation from Contingency]
3. ◊ (God knows ~q) [from (2)]
4. L[God knows ~q→ God knows (~q v p)] [from Divine Deduction]
5. ◊ [God knows (~q v p)] [from (3) and (4)]
6. (~q v p) is true [from (1)]
7. God knows (~q v p) [from (6), (5), and RO1]
8. God knows q [from (2)]
9. God knows p [from (7), (8) and Divine Deduction]
10. p is true → God knows p [from (1)-(9), conditional proof]

Since p was an arbitrarily selected proposition, the argument from (1)-(10) could be repeated for any true proposition p. Thus, the argument from (1)-(10), if sound, shows that ∀p (p is true → God knows p). In other words, if the argument from (1)-(10) is sound, then God is classically omniscient.

The argument from (1)-(10) depends crucially on the restricted omniscience view, RO1. For, this view is appealed to in order for (7) to be inferred from (6) and (5). The argument from (1)-(10) therefore shows that if God is restrictedly omniscient in the sense defined by RO1, then God is classically omniscient. Of course, the advocate of restricted omniscience wishes to claim that her view does *not* imply that God is classically omniscient. Thus, she is forced to find some way to resist Pruss’s argument, lest her position cease to be a distinct position in logical space entirely.

2 Restricted Omniscience, Ways of Knowing, and Pruss’s Objection

I do not dispute the soundness of Pruss’s argument in (1)-(10) in the previous section. I am willing to grant that if restricted omniscience is defined using RO1, then a restrictedly omniscient God must be classically omniscient. But I think that the lesson of Pruss’s argument is not that the advocate of restricted omniscience should abandon her view in favor of classical omniscience or that the restricted omniscience view is not a distinct view in logical space. Rather, the lesson is that the advocate of the restricted omniscience view should not define restricted omniscience using RO1.

There is a better way to define restricted omniscience, one which uses ways of knowing rather than logical possibilities. And when restricted omniscience is defined in this way, Pruss’s objection to restricted omniscience will lose its force.

I propose to define the restricted omniscience view as follows:

(RO2) ∀p L[(p is true[[4]](#footnote-4) and ∃w(w is a way of knowing[[5]](#footnote-5) p))→God knows p][[6]](#footnote-6)

In English, RO2 says that for every proposition p, if p is true and there is a w such that w is a way of knowing p, then God knows p. Rather than using logical possibilities to explain what it is for a claim to be knowable for God, RO2 uses ways of knowing to explain what it is for a claim to be knowable for God. According to RO2, that a claim is knowable for God means that the claim is true and there is a way to know it.

I will return to the topic of explaining ways of knowing is in the final section. But let me first show here why RO2 promises to provide the advocate of restricted omniscience with a way out of Pruss’s argument. It promises to provide a way out of Pruss’s argument because, unlike RO1, it arguably will not permit the inference from (6) and (5) to (7) in Pruss’s argument. Recall that this inference is from

(6) (~q v p) is true

and

(5) ◊ [God knows (~q v p)]

to

(7) God knows (~q v p).

To use the apparatus of possible worlds, the inference is from <(~q v p) is true> and <there is a possible world in which (~q v p) is known by God> to <God knows (~q v p)>. The inference is valid, given RO1. For, according to RO1, for any proposition p, if p is true and there is a possible world where God knows p, then God knows p. But the inference is arguably *not* valid given RO2. For, given RO2, it is arguably possible for it to be the case that <(~q v p) is true> and <there is a possible world in which (~q v p) is known by God> but for it not to be the case that <God knows (~q v p)>. More generally, it is arguably possible given RO2 for there to be a proposition p such that p is true and there is a possible world in which God knows p, but God does not know p. This is because it is arguably the case that the fact that there is a possible world in which p is known does not entail that in the actual world there is a way to know p. Indeed, we do not infrequently talk as if this is the case, saying that “there is no way to know” some proposition where this proposition surely could be known if the world were significantly different. We talk, then, as if there may be a way to know a proposition in some worlds but not in others—and it is this claim that is needed to resist the inference from (6) and (5) to (7).

The intuitive idea that there can be a way to know a proposition in some worlds but not in others is in fact nicely illustrated by Pruss’s example of the proposition <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t>. For, the advocate of RO1 may admit that <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> is known by God in some possible world, since there is a possible world w in which God knows this proposition by deducing it from the proposition <it is not the case that Obama is President> which is known by God in w. But, plausibly, the way whereby God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w is not a way of knowing <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in the actual world. For, plausibly, the way God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w is by deducing it from the proposition <it is not the case that Obama is President> which is also known by him.[[7]](#footnote-7) But, nobody can know <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in the actual world by deducing this proposition from the proposition <it is not the case that Obama is President> which he also knows. For, <it is not the case that Obama is President> is not *true* in the actual world! So, arguably, there is a way to know <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w but not in the actual world. Thus, the advocate of RO2 can coherently maintain that the fact that a true proposition p is known in a possible world does not entail that there is a way to know that proposition in the actual world. And so she can maintain that there are propositions p which are true and which are known by God in some possible world, but which are not known by God. In other words, her view does not render valid the inference from (6) and (5) to (7). Advocating RO2, then, appears to offer the advocate of restricted omniscience a way out of Pruss’s argument.

3 What are ways of knowing?

RO2 provides the advocate of restricted omniscience with a promising way out of Pruss’s argument even if she is not prepared to say anything more precise about ways of knowing. For, all the advocate of RO2 needs to show in order to escape Pruss’s argument is that it is plausible that the way whereby God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w is not a way of knowing that proposition in the actual world. And, regardless of exactly how ways of knowing are to be explained, this claim is attractive.

Nevertheless, it would be a productive research project for advocates of the restricted omniscience view to say more about what ways of knowing are in a way that coheres well with their view. For, future discussion and debate about RO2 is likely to focus on the ontology and identity conditions of ways of knowing. For example, opponents of the restricted omniscience view might attempt to defend claims about the identity conditions of ways of knowing according to which the way God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w *is* a way of knowing that proposition in the actual world.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similarly, opponents of the restricted omniscience view might object that ways of knowing are abstract entities and as such all ways of knowing must exist in all possible worlds—there couldn’t be a way of knowing in w that didn’t exist in the actual world.[[9]](#footnote-9) Accordingly, in order to help guide future debate concerning how an advocate of RO2 might respond to such charges, I offer some brief comments here about both the identity conditions of ways of knowing and the ontology of ways of knowing. First, I offer a proposal about the ontology of ways of knowing according to which not all ways of knowing exist in all possible worlds. Second, I canvass two approaches to explaining the identity conditions of ways of knowing—one especially attractive from the perspective of epistemological internalists and the other especially attractive from the perspective of epistemological externalists.[[10]](#footnote-10) Each of the approaches can be employed to support the claim, important for defending RO2, that the way of knowing <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> plausibly used by God in w is not a way of knowing <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in the actual world.

First, it would be helpful if the advocate of RO2 had a way to explain the ontology of ways of knowing that would permit her to defend the idea that not all ways of knowing exist in all possible worlds. In particular, she would like to be able to defend the idea that there is a way of knowing <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w but not in the actual world. Though there may be other approaches which can succeed equally well at this, I propose here that the advocate of RO2 explain ways of knowing using epistemic powers in something like the following way: there is a way for an epistemic agent to know a proposition p just in case she has a set of epistemic powers whose exercise would result in knowledge of p. If ways of knowing are thought of in this way, then arguably not all ways of knowing exist in all possible worlds. For example, it is arguably the case that if a well-positioned epistemic agent exercised ordinary sensory powers together with deductive powers in w, then she would know <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t>, yet, the advocate of RO2 might propose that there simply aren’t any epistemic powers such that were they exercised in the actual world, <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> would be known. Accordingly, if ways of knowing are explained in this way in terms of epistemic powers, then arguably not all ways of knowing exist in all possible worlds.

Given this explanation of ways of knowing, an omniscient being will be one that knows everything that would be known by a being who exercised every epistemic power. Defining omniscience in this way offers a unique way of viewing the debate between advocates of classical omniscience and defenders of more revisionary views about the scope of God’s knowledge. They agree that an omniscient being has every epistemic power. What they disagree about is whether there is a set of epistemic powers whose exercise would result in knowledge of certain truths, such as truths about the future free actions of creatures.

An advocate of RO2 would also benefit from an account of the identity conditions of ways of knowing according to which the way whereby knowledge of <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> is achieved in w is not a way whereby knowledge of this proposition can be achieved in the actual world. I offer two such approaches to explaining the identity conditions of ways of knowing here, though again others may be worthy of exploration.

A first approach to articulating the identity conditions of ways of knowing, especially attractive from the perspective of epistemological internalists, is to specify them using bases for belief. On this view, for any proposition p, way w of knowing p = way w\* of knowing p just in case there is some q such that for both w and w\*, p is known on the basis of q. Depending upon one’s views concerning the relata of the basing relation, q might be a proposition, a mental state, or a state of information.[[11]](#footnote-11) According to this proposal for understanding ways of knowing, it is plausible that the way whereby <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> is known by God in w is not a way whereby <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> can be known in the actual world. For, in w, God plausibly knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> *on the basis of* either <it is not the case that Obama is President> or God’s belief in this proposition. But, in the actual world, <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> plausibly cannot be known by God on the basis of either <it is not the case that Obama is President> or God’s belief in this proposition. For, both proposals would require that God *believes* < it is not the case that Obama is President>, and so would require that God has a false belief in the actual world. Thus, this first approach to ways of knowing is one which might profitably be pursued by advocates of RO2.

A second approach to explaining the identity conditions of ways of knowing is to define them in terms of processes.[[12]](#footnote-12) On this approach, for any proposition p, way w of knowing p = way w\* of knowing p just in case there is some process r such that for both w and w\*, p is known via process r. This way of individuating ways of knowing will of course face the generality problem of explaining which kinds of processes are the relevant kinds. But, whether one individuates processes more fine-grainedly or more course-grainedly, it is again plausible that the way whereby God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w will not be a way to know <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in the actual world. For example, one might specify the process whereby God knows <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w fine-grainedly as the process of drawing an inference from a disjunction which is made true by the proposition <it is not the case that Obama is President>. Or, one might specify the process more course-grainedly as the process of competent deduction. In either case, the advocate of RO2 can defend the idea that the way of knowing constituted by the process in question is not a way of knowing <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in the actual world. The fine-grained proposal plausibly does not offer a way of knowing this proposition in the actual world because there is no disjunction made true in the actual world by <it is not the case that Obama is President> from which <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> can be known via inference. And, arguably, neither does the course-grained proposal, since any proposition from which <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> can be knowingly deduced will be one knowledge of which would presuppose knowledge of the claim <Alex mows the lawn at t>.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, the present externalist-friendly proposal concerning the identity conditions of ways of knowing should also be attractive to advocates of RO2.

Finally, in response to the objection that all ways of knowing must exist in all possible worlds, I propose that the advocate of RO2 explain ways of knowing as epistemic powers. There is a way for someone to know p only if she has the power to know p. Given this kind of account of the ontology of ways of knowing, it can arguably be the case that there is a way to know a claim p in some worlds but not others. For example, God may have the power to know <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t> in w since in w God has the epistemic powers necessary to know that Obama is not President and the power of competent deduction, but in the actual world these powers will not provide God with the power to know <either it is not the case that Obama is President or Alex mows the lawn at t>.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that Alexander Pruss’s recent objection that restricted omniscience views collapse into classical omniscience views succeeds only when the restricted omniscience view is articulated in a certain way. I articulated a novel version of the restricted omniscience view here which escapes his objection, and pointed a way forward for developing the view with greater specificity. According to the approach developed here, the advocate of the restricted omniscience view should say that God knows every proposition there is a way to know. One cannot argue that such a view collapses into the classical omniscience view without defending the contentious thesis that there is a way to know every true proposition.

References

Adams, Robert W. 1977. “Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (2): 109-117.

Alston, William. 1986. “Does God have Beliefs?” *Religious Studies* 22: 287-306.

Goldman, Alvin. “What is Justified Belief?” In *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George Pappas. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Hasker, William. 1989. *God, Time and Knowledge*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Korcz, Keith Allen. 2010. “The Epistemic Basing Relation.” In *Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/basing-epistemic/>

Nagasawa, Yujin. 2007. “A New Defense of Anselmian Theism.” *Philosophical Quarterly* 58: 577-96.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *God and Phenomenal Consciousness: A Novel Approach to Knowledge Arguments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pappas, George. 2005. “Internalist vs Externalist Conceptions of Epistemic Justification.” In *Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Available from [http://plato.stanford.edu/ entries/basing-epistemic/](http://plato.stanford.edu/%20entries/basing-epistemic/)

Pruss, Alexander. 2011. “From Restricted to Full Omniscience.” *Religious Studies* 47: 257-64.

Swinburne, Richard. 1977. *The Coherence of Theism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Inwagen, Peter. 2008. “What Does an Omniscient Being Know about the Future?” In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, I*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig, 216-230. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. Among them are (Hasker 1989) and (van Inwagen 2008). Similar strategies are evident in (Nagasawa 2007 and 2008) and (Swinburne 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, Pruss (2011, p.258) makes it clear that that this articulation of the view, which he takes to be representative of the view generally, is his target. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One way to modify RO1 is to add temporal qualifiers replacing “p is true” and/or “God knows p” with “p is true *at t*” and/or “God knows p *at t*,” respectively. This modification will not make a major difference in the discussion which follows; so, I leave it out to avoid unnecessary complication. But, see notes 6 and 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Strictly speaking, this first conjunct is redundant, since arguably there is a way to know p only if p is true. I include the conjunct here because it facilitates discussion. But, a more economical version of our proposal is simply this: ∀p L [∃w (w is a way of knowing p) → God knows p]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here I propose the view that if there is any way of knowing a proposition p at all, then God knows p. Some advocates of the restricted omniscience view, such as van Inwagen (2008), will happily accept this, because they are happy to accept that all knowable propositions are knowable *by God*. However, there are others for whom a more nuanced proposal may be more attractive, because they think that certain knowable propositions are not knowable by God, such as propositions containing indexicals referring to creatures [e.g., (Nagasawa 2007 and 2008)]. According to this more nuanced proposal, God knows every proposition for which there is a way *for God* to know it. Formally, the view would say: ∀p L[(p is true and ∃w(w is a way for God to know p))→God knows p]. Someone attracted to this proposal could defend it in a way that straightforwardly mimics the way I defend RO2 in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Again, as with RO1 (see note 3 above), one alternative modification to RO2 will employ temporal qualifiers. Such temporal qualifiers will be important if one is inclined toward eternalism, since there are arguably ways of knowing propositions about the future available at future times which are not available prior to those times. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. First, this is exactly how Pruss sets up the example himself. And, second, if, following notes 3 and 6, we define restricted omniscience using temporal qualifiers, making it clear that time “t” when Alex mows is a future time relative to the time at which God knows the proposition in question, then for Pruss to insist contrary to his original description of the case that God knows this proposition by knowing its *second* disjunct, his argument would then beg the question against the advocate of restricted omniscience in a way he wishes to avoid. For, one class of propositions proponents of this view explicitly wish to claim are *not* knowable are claims about what free creatures will do in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One proposal along these lines would be to argue that there is only one way whereby God knows what he knows—e.g., through some sort of intuitive vision or awareness of the whole of reality. (cf. Alston 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to consider this possibility and the topic of the ontology of ways of knowing more carefully. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the distinction between internalism and externalism, see (Pappas 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a helpful overview of the basing relation including a discussion of its relata, see (Korcz 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I am thinking here of approaches stemming from (Goldman 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. To see why this is plausible, consider the approaches typically proposed by advocates of exhaustive foreknowledge whereby this foreknowledge is achieved—Theological Determinism and Molinism. On the former approach, claims about the future are deducible because they are entailed by claims about the past and laws of nature. But, the advocate of RO2 will deny that claims about what free creatures do are entailed by the past and laws of nature. On the latter approach, claims about what creatures will do are deducible from subjunctive conditionals specifying what free creatures would do in certain circumstances together with claims that those circumstances obtain. But, notoriously, it is objected against this view [e.g., by Adams (1977)] that knowledge of the relevant conditionals presupposed knowledge of their consequents. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)