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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 08, 2006

Attributes of God (VI): Omniscience



During the [discussion](#) following last week's post on omnipresence, it was insightfully noted that omnipresence and omniscience seem to blur together. God's presence to all things and his knowledge of all things are related features of his being. The connection is even stronger if we speak of omnipresence as all things being present to God (as suggested last week). According to such an understanding, **omnipresence and omniscience are very close indeed.**

So what's the difference? Well, its important to remember that **the difference between each of God's attributes are strictly *logical* differences.** If we learned anything from the attribute of [simplicity](#), it was that all God's attributes are unified within his one divine life. So God does knowing something today and become present to it tomorrow, nor is God righteous yesterday and gracious today. God is all his attributes all at once. We divide them up based on logical distinctions that make sense to us. It makes sense to distinguish between God's knowledge and God's presence because they are quite obviously distinct domains of activity.

Does this mean we should avoid making such distinctions entirely? I don't think so, because it is an act of faithfulness and obedience to use our minds as far as we able. Taking cues from Scriptural revelation, we ought to think carefully about how to talk about God intelligibly. We should be resist the temptation to throw up our hands and give up on God-talk. If we are to be faithful witnesses,

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then we should talk about God. Given that he has talked about himself, who are we to say we can't follow his lead and talk about him?

Enough preliminaries. We should say something about **omniscience**. Omni means all, and science means knowledge. Omniscience is thus God's all-knowing. I personally don't find this attribute to be that objectionable. Omniscience simply means that God knows all things. It would seem that this is exactly the kind of affirmation one would be inclined to make in light of God's dealings with us revealed in Scripture.

However, a **common objection** is raised that should at least be noted. Some have suggested that if God knows the future, then the future is determined, and therefore omniscience undermines human freedom.

In light of this objection, some have recommended an **alternative understanding of omniscience**. One could grant that since the future has not yet happened, then the future does not "exist" in the same sense as the past and present. Therefore, God can be said to know all there is to know without knowing the future.

I **personally do not think the above objection sticks**. Why would God's knowledge of the future determine it? Surely God knows things according to their nature, so that he knows which things are determined and which are not. Surely God can know something without controlling it. If I have missed the force of this objection, please let me know. But until I am convinced by it, I see no need to retreat to the alternative understanding of omniscience outlined above. Anyway, God knowing the future seems to be the "good news" about omniscience as a divine attribute.

My own beef with omniscience is not its classical definition but its **language**. As one of the OMNIs, it follows the *via eminentia* from the creation to the creator. I am suspicious of this line of reasoning. I would rather move from how the creator has engaged with us his creatures and learn from that how God is in himself. Omniscience sounds a lot like a human projection: we wish we knew more things (especially the future), and so we project this attribute onto God. The language of omniscience (and all the OMNIs) cannot easily escape this problem.

So what should we then say? How can we speak of God's knowledge? Scripture *does* speak of God's all-surpassing knowledge. The history of God with us hinges on God's gifts of promise and prophecy, both of which presuppose God's awareness of the future. The Bible repeatedly speaks of God's perception into the depths of the human soul, and it is such a perception as attributed to Jesus in the Gospels

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which signifies the deity of Christ. So we have every good reason to attribute something like omniscience to God. What linguistic alternative is there? I would recommend we reappropriate the language of **God's wisdom**. The wisdom of God in the Bible is not limited to God "knowing what is best for us" but also includes his knowledge of all things. God's providential care of the present in fact rests on his pre-eminent knowledge of the future. So God's wisdom seems to be an apt and sufficient alternative to the language of omniscience.

Any thoughts?

Does my mention of the unity of God's attributes help or hurt the sensibility of our God-talk?

Does my definition of omniscience ring true?

Do you feel the force of the objection discussed above? If so, why?

Is the language of God's wisdom a sufficient alternative to the language of omniscience? What is lost in the transition? What is gained?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 6:31 PM

[3 comments](#)

3 Comments:

At [10:52 PM, November 11, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

Of course I like the way you think, John. And as always love reading. As to what is lost in translation, certainly at least the OMNI is lost. :) If we simply speak of God's wisdom or all-surpassing knowledge we say that God knows more and is wiser than any other being. So, the omni is lost. I am not sure that is altogether bad. Perhaps that solves many problems actually. Wisdom seems to be more scriptural language and connected both in substance and form to the witness of both testaments.

I like it. I think I am just too ignorant to be confident of it. Is there a place in scriptures (forgive me for sounding more like a Biblical Studies guy...I know we all like specifics, references and theology folk speak in more synthetic generals usually) which would point to the necessity of an omni when speaking of God's knowledge?

More than enough for one comment. Thanks, prof...

At [1:24 AM, November 19, 2006](#), [Erin Crisp](#) said...

Your discussion of omniscience reminds me of a conversation I had with a man who explains that God's all-knowingness (past, present and future) is possible because he exists outside of our time and space dimensions. A being that exists outside of the constraints of time and space would be aware of the future without determining

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the outcome. Interesting. Thanks for posting your thoughts; I'm challenged as usual.

At [7:44 PM, November 23, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

I'm reminding of C.S. Lewis' explanation (and many other theologians as well) of the "continuous now." It sort of fits with the comment above me, but what is it to say that God knows the "future?" He holds time...he is larger than time...he is both outside it, and yet in it to a degree. To use time words to describe a God who holds the keys to time seems useless to me. I like Lewis' thoughts here. God sees everything as if it were in the continuous present.

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