

Against deliberation restrictions

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Abstract Many theists would affirm both that God is omniscient—that God knows all truths—and that it is impossible to deliberate while knowing what the result of that deliberation process will be. These claims, given reasonable background assumptions, seem to imply that we need some sort of deliberation restriction on the concept of omniscience: that we need to exclude certain truths about deliberative results from the set of truths known by an omniscient being. This deliberation restriction seems initially plausible, and for the most part has been taken for granted in the literature. Despite its initial plausibility, however, this restriction should not have been taken for granted. This is because, as I will argue, such a restriction is both irrelevant and unnecessary. I will show that, given a traditional picture of God and a standard model of deliberation, there is no time at which God needs to deliberate; thus the deliberation restriction is irrelevant. I will also show that, contrary to the second affirmation above, it is possible to deliberate while yet knowing the results of the deliberation process. So even if God does deliberate, it's possible for him to do so while knowing what the results of that very deliberation will be; thus the deliberation restriction is unnecessary. And because this possibility of deliberating despite knowing the results holds for deliberation in general, my argument provides useful (and perhaps surprising) results not only for discussions of the divine attributes, but also for broader discussions of deliberation itself.

1. Introduction: the deliberation restriction on omniscience

To be omniscient is, roughly speaking, to know all truths (and believe no falsehoods). But immediately questions arise. We should wonder not only whether God is in fact omniscient, but also whether it's even possible for someone to know all truths. Some have argued that it is not—that it is impossible for anyone, God or otherwise, to know truths about future contingents (assuming that there are such truths).¹ Others have drawn similar conclusions about truths containing indexicals.² When considering inconvenient truths such as these, one straightforward response is to restrict the concept of omniscience such that omniscience involves, not knowing all truths *simpliciter*, but knowing all truths that it is possible to know.³ Whether or not this

¹ See, for example: Hasker (1989), Prior (1962), Swinburne (1993), and van Inwagen (2008).

² See, for example, Grim (1985); and cf. Perry (1979), who provides a useful and relevant treatment of indexicals. For further treatment of the problem indexicals pose for divine omniscience, cf. Kvanvig (1986) and Wierenga (1989).

³ Compare the concept of omnipotence: The paradox of the stone (precipitated by the question, “Can God create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it?”) invites a straightforward response—namely that omnipotence does not require being able to do everything, but instead requires being able to do everything that it is logically possible to do.

straightforward response is ultimately successful,⁴ I argue below that there is one particular restriction on the concept of omniscience that should be rejected.

The restriction I have in mind is what I will call the *deliberation restriction*: the claim that we need to restrict the concept of omniscience by adding truths about the result of current deliberations to the set of truths not possibly known by God. The main support for this restriction comes from two assumptions: first, that God deliberates; and second, that it is not possible for anyone (including God) to deliberate while knowing what the result of that very deliberation will be. I will argue that the deliberation restriction is both irrelevant and unnecessary. It is irrelevant because God need not deliberate. It is unnecessary because even if God *does* deliberate, he can (because anyone can) in fact deliberate while knowing what the result of that very deliberation will be.⁵ Thus my argument provides useful (and perhaps surprising) results not only for discussions of the divine attributes, but also for contemporary discussions of deliberation more generally.

2. The deliberation restriction is irrelevant.

2.1. *The argument for the deliberation restriction*

Our question, then, is whether we need to restrict the concept of omniscience so as to exclude certain truths about deliberation from the set of truths known by an omniscient being.⁶ (And since the relevant omniscient being is usually God, I will take our question to be synonymous with the question of whether we need to restrict the set of truths known by God.) My answer is

⁴ Kvanvig (1989) appears to have refuted one of the main arguments in favor of the straightforward response, and thus provides reason to think that such a response is ultimately *not* successful.

⁵ I am following common practice in using the pronoun ‘he’ to refer to God, but this usage is not intended to imply that God has a gender.

⁶ Although I think the way I have structured the topic—i.e., as involving the question of whether we should restrict the concept of omniscience—is a natural and plausible way to approach the relevant issues, there are other approaches. For example, Yujin Nagasawa (2008) has defended a “maximal God” thesis, according to which the best possible being (i.e., the perfect being in the Anselmian sense) might not be omniscient. On this type of approach, the question would not be whether we need to restrict the concept of omniscience, but instead whether omniscience is part of the set of attributes possessed by the best possible being. In other words, I am assuming that even the theist who says that God doesn’t know the results of his deliberation will still claim that God is omniscient. The proponent of a maximal God approach might deny this assumption, and argue as follows: The best possible being is a deliberator; deliberation is incompatible with omniscience; therefore the best possible being is not omniscient. (Thanks to Patrick Todd for emphasizing this point in personal correspondence.)

that we do not need such a restriction, because it seems plausible that there are no such truths; and even if there are, they can still be known. To focus the discussion, let us consider a representative argument from Peterson, et al. (2009, p. 81), who argue in favor of a deliberation restriction on God's knowledge. We'll begin with a simplifying assumption that is presumably endorsed by most proponents of the deliberation restriction, namely that God makes decisions in time.⁷ We can now reconstruct their argument as follows:

- (1) If God knows all true propositions at a given time, then at that time he will know the truth about the result of his deliberations.
- (2) God makes decisions.
- (3) If God makes decisions, then there will be some time t during which he deliberates about some decision.
- (4) There will be some time t during which God deliberates about some decision. (2, 3)
- (5) It is impossible for anyone, including God, to deliberate about some decision while knowing what the result of that deliberation will be.
- (6) There will be some time t during which God does not know some true propositions (namely, those involving the results of his deliberation at t). (4, 5)
- (7) Therefore, there will be some time t during which God does not know all true propositions. (1, 6)

This argument appears to provide compelling reason—at least for someone who is committed to a relatively traditional version of theism⁸—to restrict the concept of omniscience such that a being can count as omniscient even without knowing any truths about the results of

⁷ If, contrary to the assumption, God were atemporal, then we would need to dispense with talk of *times* during which he deliberates and instead formulate the argument in terms of non-temporal *phases* or *points* “during” which he deliberates.

⁸ Below (in §3) I will say something in response to those who are willing to jettison the thesis that God is omniscient (cf. also note 6 above).

deliberation (at least while that deliberation is underway).⁹ I will argue, however, that appearances here are deceiving. More specifically, I will argue that we should reject both the fourth and fifth premises. Let us begin with the fourth.

2.2. *Non-deliberative divine behavior*

The argument for the deliberation restriction depends on the claim that God deliberates, which is captured in (4) above. But if (4) is false, then (5), even if true, is irrelevant—and so is the corresponding deliberation restriction on the concept of omniscience. And one reason for thinking that (4) is false is the claim that deliberation is an inappropriate activity to be attributing to God in the first place. Bruce Reichenbach (1984) takes this line when he argues that God can act intentionally without deliberating. David Basinger (1986) offers the only direct response to this maneuver, in which he argues that removing deliberative activity from God’s intentional repertoire has unorthodox (or at least unsettling) consequences.¹⁰ His response emphasizes one apparently troublesome implication of Reichenbach’s view:

Troublesome Implication: All divine intentional actions are (or could be) the result of non-deliberative decisions. (Basinger 1986, p. 170)

Basinger then claims that most theists would reject this implication—i.e., would not endorse the idea of a God who has never engaged in deliberative decision-making. Although it is not immediately clear why most theists would reject a non-deliberative God, Basinger does support this contention with two representative examples of divine behavior: the act of creation and response to prayer. I will consider response to prayer first.

⁹ Strictly speaking, the restriction here is not a restriction on the concept of omniscience itself, but on the class of things that it is logically possible to know. The definition of omniscience given by Peterson et al. (2009, p. 81) is as follows: “At any time, God knows all propositions which are true at that time and are such that God’s knowing them at that time is logically possible, and God never believes anything that is false.” Thus, assuming that the “straightforward response” is viable (but cf. note 4 above), I am not rejecting their definition but rather what they take it to exclude. Either way, though, the dispute is about what sort of limitations we need to place on an omniscient knower and thus I will continue to refer to the deliberation restriction as a restriction on the concept of omniscience.

¹⁰ For a treatment of the broader concerns with respect to divine deliberation and intentional action, see the exchange in *Religious Studies* comprising Kapitan (1991), Hunt (1992), Kapitan (1994), and Hunt (1996).

Basinger offers two models of how God might respond to prayer. On the first model, God's responses resemble that of a father who, when asked by his son for a glass of water, complies without deliberating over the matter. On the second model, God's responses are instead the end result of a serious weighing of alternatives. Basinger (1986, p. 171) claims that it is the latter, deliberative model that most closely approximates the thinking of most theists. Although I disagree with Basinger on this point (and will attempt to show that the non-deliberative model turns out to be superior), his description of the deliberative model does suggest a first (perhaps a zeroth) approximation of an account of deliberation. On this model, deliberation is any genuine consideration of alternatives so as to determine the best course of action. In other words, this model suggests at least two necessary conditions on deliberation: available alternatives and a genuine weighing of those alternatives.¹¹

In the case of prayer, God certainly has alternative responses available to him;¹² but does he weigh them seriously (or at all)? In our own case, the only reason to weigh alternatives is in order to determine which course of action will most effectively realize our goals.¹³ Deliberation, e.g., over whether or not to have an additional cup of coffee comes about as a result of uncertainty regarding which answer is best, all things considered. Since God is not similarly ignorant as to which of the alternatives available to him is (or are) most effective for realizing his ends, the activity by which he realizes those ends does not exhibit at least one of the necessary conditions for deliberation. Thus it would be inapt to attribute deliberation to him, and the non-deliberative model is to be preferred. Contrary to Basinger's reading of the average theist, *this* model is the one that seems like it should be more satisfying to the theist, insofar as a cognitively perfect being should not have to weigh alternatives in order to discern which one is superior.¹⁴

Let us now examine the other example of divine behavior. Basinger asks:

¹¹ See below (§3) for additional discussion of proposed requirements on deliberation.

¹² God has alternative responses available to him, that is, on the twin assumptions that he has at least some free choices open to him, and that a free choice requires alternative possibilities. If someone denies either of these assumptions, then presumably she will already be open to the possibility of a non-deliberative God.

¹³ I suppose one could deliberate as an exercise, or perhaps as a test to see whether one is able to; but I'll ignore those possibilities here.

¹⁴ This discussion is, of course, taking place within the context of a broadly Anselmian perfect-being theology. Someone who rejects the perfect-being approach will presumably not be as interested in whether or in what sense God is omniscient.

Would most theists be willing to grant that God *never* deliberates about which creative option to actualize? Many theists do believe that God's primary creative decisions do not occur in time (or at the time they are put into action). But I know of no theist who has ever granted that God's creative activity solely involved the initiation or implementation of a set of creative goals which were *never* formulated as the result of any sort of temporal or timeless deliberation on his part. (1986, p. 171, emphasis in original)

Basinger apparently thinks that the answer to the question posed in the first sentence is clearly "No." But, as we saw above, deliberation about which creative option to actualize implies uncertainty as to which option is best; and presumably God is not subject to such uncertainty. Thus, whether or not most theists *would* grant that God never deliberates about which creative option to actualize, they *should*.

Perhaps, however, I have conflated two distinct phases of God's creation activity. Perhaps God doesn't need to deliberate while implementing his goals for creation, but does need to deliberate while *forming* those goals. As far as I can see, the only line of reasoning that supports this claim runs as follows. We want to say that God chooses freely, but we can only say that if there is some point during (or at) which he deliberates. This deliberation might occur while God is forming his goals, or while he's implementing the goals formed. And since we have seen that God doesn't deliberate while implementing his goals, he must deliberate while forming them. As I explain in the next section, I think this line of reasoning goes wrong at the first step.

2.3. *Non-deliberative divine freedom*

God, as we have seen, does not need to deliberate in order to create or in order to effectively answer prayer. Perhaps the need for divine deliberation is not related to God's interactions with his creation, but instead is required for him to remain free in his choices. This is Basinger's second problem with the Troublesome Implication, namely that it appears to be inconsistent with the "common theistic contention that God's actions are free in an indeterministic sense" (1986, p. 171). In motivating this particular rejoinder to the notion that all divine actions are the result of non-deliberative decisions, Basinger argues that if God has never deliberated over a decision then "there has never been a time when two creative options were still equally plausible alternatives in his mind," and thus he has never chosen freely. (1986, p. 171)

The argument here seems to be something like the following:

- (8) If God doesn't deliberate, then there is no time at which two options are equally preferable alternatives in his mind.¹⁵
- (9) If there is no time at which two options are equally preferable alternatives in God's mind, then he doesn't choose freely.
- (10) Therefore, if God doesn't deliberate, then he doesn't choose freely.

The problem with this argument is that Basinger has given us no reason to think that (9) is true. Notice that (9) is equivalent to the following necessary condition on divine freedom: God chooses freely only if there is at least one situation in which there are equally preferable alternatives in his mind. Is this condition on divine freedom an instantiation of a more general requirement for choosing freely, or is it a requirement that applies to God but not other agents? I can't see any reason why such a requirement would apply to God alone, so I will assume that Basinger intends for (9) to follow from a more general requirement for choosing freely. Call it the Equal Preferability Requirement:

Equal Preferability Requirement: An agent chooses freely (in a given context) only if there is at least one situation (suitably related to the context in question) in which there are equally preferable alternatives in the agent's mind.

Although several philosophers have defended a version of the Equal Preferability Requirement,¹⁶ it is at best a controversial claim.¹⁷ And I would argue that it is not just controversial, but false; for it implies that slight changes in the reasons favoring an alternative can make the difference between a free choice and an unfree choice. Consider a situation in

¹⁵ I have substituted "preferable" for "plausible" because I don't think alternatives can be aptly described as plausible or implausible. (Those terms are more appropriately applied to the *reasons* in favor of or against a particular alternative.)

¹⁶ Both van Inwagen (1989; cf. 2004) and Kane (1996, ch. 8) endorse views that include something like the Equal Preferability Requirement. For example, van Inwagen (2004, p. 217) says that the only "occasions on which we make a free choice" are those occasions "on which one is choosing between alternatives and it does not seem to one that (once all the purely factual questions have been settled) the reasons that favor either alternative are clearly the stronger."

¹⁷ For a representative sample of criticisms of (something like) the Equal Preferability Requirement, see Fischer (1995, ch. 3), Pettit (2002), and Nahmias (2006).

which an agent, Silas, is fully exercising his rational and agential capacities in order to make a choice between two alternatives—between, say, having that extra cup of coffee or drinking water instead. We'll stipulate that both alternatives are equally preferable, and that there are no factors (such as coercion or manipulation) that would undermine Silas's freedom. Suppose that Silas chooses the coffee. Now alter the situation ever so slightly, such that the available reasons favor, but just barely, having the coffee. According to the Equal Preferability Requirement, we now have a situation in which Silas's choice—which, remember, otherwise manifests all of his rational and agential capacities—is not free. And this fact about Silas's choice has nothing to do with his abilities or capacities, or with external forces or states of affairs that are typically thought to influence whether a choice is free. Instead, this fact is simply a fact about the relative strength of his preferences. This result strikes me as highly implausible, and a good reason to reject the Equal Preferability Requirement.

To recap: (9) is true only if the Equal Preferability Requirement is true, and the Equal Preferability Requirement is arguably false. (It is at best a contentious claim.) Thus I conclude that, absent some additional argumentation in its favor, (9) is not a firm foundation on which to build an argument that deliberation is required for divine freedom.

Of course, even if the above argument fails to establish the necessity of deliberation for divine freedom, there may be other arguments for that conclusion. Thus a complete defense of the possibility of a God who is free and yet does not deliberate would require showing that no such arguments are available. I won't attempt to show that here, but here are two quick gestures in that direction.

First, consider one plausible conception of divine freedom, according to which God is free if and only if “no external cause influences which purposes God forms: God acts only in so far as he sees reason for acting.”¹⁸ To the extent that this conception of God's freedom is a satisfying one, the deliberation requirement is too strict. But even apart from any particular conception of God's freedom, it seems that it is not the actual weighing of options, but rather the

¹⁸ See Swinburne (1996, p. 43). This conception of divine freedom, of course, might not suffice (and may not even be necessary) for *human* freedom.

ability to weigh options that is desirable as an aspect of freedom. And I am not proposing that God is *not able* to weigh options, but merely that as a matter of fact he does not do so.¹⁹

Here's another reason to think that no argument for the necessity of deliberation for divine freedom can succeed.²⁰ It is plausible to claim that an agent has a will if she has some power by which she has decisive control over her behavior. There is a further question about what it means to have decisive control over one's behavior, but it's hard to see why deliberation would be required for such control. (As above, the *ability* to deliberate might—but only might—be required for having a will, but it doesn't seem that actual deliberation is required.) If this is right, then having a will doesn't require deliberation. Moreover, it's not clear why we would need to add deliberation in order to get from merely having a will to having a *free* will. Perhaps turning a will into a free will requires that *something* additional be true of the agent (e.g., that she has certain rational or normative capacities), or true of the world (e.g., that it's indeterministic), but in neither case is deliberation relevant.²¹

To sum up: I have shown that one limitation on omniscience—the deliberation restriction—is unnecessary because God, perhaps surprisingly, does not (or at least need not) deliberate. Nothing about God's creation of the world, or his interaction with it, or his exhaustive knowledge of the truths it contains, requires deliberation. Thus we can maintain that God is omniscient in a robust sense even if omniscience and deliberation are incompatible.

However, someone might insist that God *must* deliberate—not for the sake of freedom, or genuine interaction with the world and the people in it, but simply because he is an agent, and the best possible being, and it's better to be an agent that deliberates than an agent that doesn't

¹⁹ Here the following objection, which I owe to Patrick Todd, could be raised: Any reason for thinking that God doesn't deliberate is also a reason for thinking that *necessarily*, God doesn't deliberate—which is just to say that he *can't* deliberate. Thus, says the objector, you are after all committed to saying that God isn't able to weigh options. But even if it is a necessary truth that God doesn't deliberate, it doesn't follow that God doesn't have the *ability* to deliberate. That only follows if it's impossible to have an ability that is necessarily never exercised, and I don't see why that would be impossible (especially for a necessary being).

²⁰ Thanks to Paul Hoffman for helping me with this point.

²¹ For those who are uncomfortable with talk of the will as something we can have, a parallel line of reasoning could be formulated in terms of acting and acting freely: merely acting doesn't require deliberation, and adding deliberation to mere action doesn't turn it into free action.

deliberate. If this line of reasoning is correct, and the argument above is sound, then the proper response is not to revise the claim that God is omniscient, but simply to abandon it.²²

I don't think that line of reasoning is correct. But I can accommodate it nonetheless, because the argument for the incompatibility of omniscience and deliberation is flawed in more than one way. In particular, it is flawed when it claims that it is impossible to deliberate about some decision while knowing what the result of that deliberation will be. Thus, as I argue in the next section, even if we assume that God *does* deliberate, we still do not need to revise the concept of omniscience (much less abandon it entirely).

3. The deliberation restriction is unnecessary.

3.1. The difference between practical settling and epistemic settling

I have argued that the deliberation restriction is irrelevant because God does not deliberate (and thus that (4) in the argument above is false). But even if we grant that (4) is true, the argument for the deliberation restriction on omniscience still fails. That is because, as I argue in this section, (5) is false.

Many philosophers have assumed, along the lines of premise (5) above, that it is impossible to deliberate while knowing the results of that very deliberation. And while there have been numerous recent endorsements of this supposition, it traces back at least as far as Richard Taylor (1964), who claims that deliberation presupposes ignorance; without ignorance, deliberation is a sham. Seemingly deviant statements such as a governor's saying, "I am, as a result of my forthcoming deliberations, going to reprieve Smith" illustrate this point, for it seems clear that in this case knowledge of the future reprieve precludes deliberation (cf. Taylor 1964, p. 73). Taylor also offers a more elaborate example (1964, p. 75) in which a groom (let's call him Gavin) observes the various trappings of his imminent wedding. If such trappings are considered by him to be reliable indicators of the fact that he is about to be married, then he is unable to deliberate about what to do. On the other hand, if he is deliberating over whether to get married, then he cannot view the signs of his approaching wedding as reliable. Taylor is, in short,

²² See note 6 for a brief discussion of the type of approach that might lead someone, in the context of the current discussion, to deny that God is omniscient.

highlighting an essential difference between *practical deliberation* about what to *do* and *theoretical deliberation* about what to *believe*. To bring one's practical deliberations to a close is to settle the matter, practically speaking, by forming an intention to act (or refrain from acting). To bring one's theoretical deliberations to a close is also to settle the matter, but in an epistemic sense.²³

Although Taylor highlights the difference between practical deliberation and theoretical deliberation in support of his claim that deliberation requires a certain kind of ignorance, the distinction between the two kinds of deliberation actually supports the opposing point. Since they are different kinds of deliberation, the default view should be that they could on occasion come apart, such that one kind concludes while the other kind continues. To reject this default view, we would need an argument that the two kinds *cannot* come apart—not just an example (as above) in which they don't. On the other hand, if we can construct a case in which they do come apart, then we can infer that no such argument is in the offing. Here is such a case.

Let us imagine that Gavin (the indecision of the wedding now behind him) is one of the plaintiffs in a knockdown class-action lawsuit.²⁴ The defendants, anxious to get this business behind them, invite each of the plaintiffs, in turn, to consider a now-or-never settlement offer. As it happens, Gavin is the last to receive the offer, and as such is able to benefit from his knowledge of the choices of the previous plaintiffs. Oddly enough, each and every individual before him accepts the settlement (though they are bound by oath not to disclose the terms). Gavin, who is not particularly interested in the details of the case or even the amount of money at stake, has no reason to believe that his response will be any different than the numerous other plaintiffs who have gone before. Hence, Gavin eventually comes by the knowledge that he, too, will accept the offer of settlement. Now consider him in the negotiating room: upon receiving the offer, will he still be able to deliberate about what to do? It seems that he will indeed. There is no real barrier to him weighing the relevant alternatives (accept the settlement, or reject it) while at the same time retaining his knowledge that he will in fact accept the settlement.

²³ The conclusion of theoretical deliberation with respect to some proposition can be acceptance of that proposition, rejection of that proposition, or a withholding of judgment. I take no stand here on whether or to what extent the belief that results from theoretical deliberation is within the deliberator's control.

²⁴ I owe this example to David Hunt.

If this is correct, then why does a view like Taylor's initially seem so plausible? (Why do statements such as the governor's "I am, as a result of my forthcoming deliberations, going to reprieve Smith" seem so deviant?) The simple answer is that in the vast majority of cases, the way we come to know what we're going to do is by forming an intention, on the basis of deliberation, about what to do. Epistemic settling typically follows immediately after practical settling. Thus, when we're considering a situation involving deliberation, it's usually safe to assume that the deliberator will come to know what she's going to do in the typical way. But, as noted above (and as elaborated on below), epistemic settling is not by itself a barrier to deliberation and there can be unusual cases in which the epistemic settling occurs first.

There are, of course, alternative ways to explain what's happening in Gavin's case. For example, someone could resist my characterization of the case by claiming that Gavin knows he will accept the offer but is not deliberating about *whether* to accept; instead he is seeking an explanation of *why* he will accept. On this view Gavin can examine alternatives, but not in order to choose between them: at most he can examine them in order to figure out why he chose the way he did. The problem with this way of looking at the case is that it implies an overly strong connection between evidence (in favor of a proposition) and choice (of action on the basis of the apparent truth of that proposition). If Gavin's examination of the alternatives can at most provide an explanation of why he chose the way he did, then his choice must have occurred at some point before he was made aware of the details of the settlement. This strikes me as an odd thing to have to say. There are certainly some cases in which an accumulation of evidence produces a decision indirectly (perhaps even without us being aware of the decision), but to say that this must happen in all such cases is implausible. In some cases there will be less than complete overlap between the set of facts that is essential for deliberation (which in Gavin's case would be the set of facts including the terms of the legal settlement), and the set of facts that constitutes potential evidence for the truth of a proposition describing the results of the deliberation process. When the overlap between these two sets is only partial, then it's possible that the deliberator could acquire evidence that is strong enough to give him knowledge of the results of the deliberation process, even though that process cannot start until the essential facts become available.

Or consider a variation on the case.²⁵ This time Gavin doesn't know what the others in the plaintiff class have decided, and he has been given 24 hours to think about whether he wants to accept the settlement offer. He shares the terms with his wife (to whom he's been married for some years now), and she, in some ways knowing him better than he knows himself, tells him that he will accept the offer. He thus comes to know, on the basis of testimony, that he will accept the settlement. And yet, again, it does not seem as though any sort of barrier has been erected that now prevents him from (practically) deliberating. The issue may have been settled epistemically (through his coming to know what he will do), but this is different from practically settling the issue.

Thus, with the distinction between practical settling and epistemic settling firmly in hand, we can see our way clear to separating the practical question of whether Gavin *should* accept the settlement from the epistemic question of whether he *will* accept it. While it would indeed be impossible for him to genuinely wonder whether or not he will accept the settlement (since he already knows that he will), nothing about his knowledge of that acceptance precludes him from genuinely weighing the alternatives so as to determine the best course of action.²⁶ It's possible, of course, that there are other necessary conditions on deliberation that are not satisfied in the example—but I'm not aware of any proposals in the literature involving a condition that is both necessary for deliberation and not satisfied in the cases described above.

3.2. *Alternative constraints on deliberation*

The examples above deliver a surprising result: It is after all possible for someone to deliberate while knowing how that deliberation will turn out. In other words, (5) is false and thus we have no reason (at least no reason stemming from considerations about deliberation) to accept (6):

²⁵ The gist of this variation comes from Randy Clarke (personal conversation, but cf. his (1992, p. 108)).

²⁶ Nelkin (2011, ch. 6) argues for a similar conclusion, and offers the following example (pp. 126–127):

Consider ... a situation in which you are engaged in a long-anticipated activity (for example, watching an overtime period of a championship basketball game, attending a concert, taking a once-in-a-lifetime trek). You receive a call from a friend who desperately needs to talk to someone about the sudden and unexpected death of a family member. In the past, you have always deliberated about what to do in situations of this sort and have always resolved things in favor of talking to your friend; indeed, this is the kind of person you are. Based on these considerations, and perhaps others, you know you will decide the same way today. However, you haven't deliberated and decided to do so yet. But you can and do.

- (6) There will be some time t in God's life during which he does not know some true propositions (namely, those involving the results of his deliberation at t).

And since (6) is an essential component of the argument for the deliberation restriction on omniscience, that restriction is unmotivated.

But perhaps the defender of the deliberation restriction can motivate it a different way, by reformulating the constraint on deliberation suggested in (5). For example, even if knowledge of the results doesn't preclude deliberation, perhaps *certainty* about the results does.²⁷ This might be a promising strategy—and there has been quite a bit of interesting recent work on the question of what exactly deliberation requires and involves²⁸—but it needs further development. The initial steps seem plausible: Assume some fallibilist account of knowledge, and then point out that the examples above are all cases in which the deliberator knows the results of his deliberation, but is not certain of them. Claim that if he were certain of the results, he would not be able to deliberate. And then argue that whereas human knowledge rarely (if ever) involves certainty, God's knowledge always does.

The problem with this suggestion is that replacing “knowledge” with “certainty” doesn't make the proposed deliberation constraint any more viable. If it really is possible to acquire knowledge about the results of deliberation on the basis of induction, or testimony, or some other generally reliable process, and yet still be able to deliberate, then it's hard to see how changing the process by which that knowledge is acquired (or the strength of the justification for the belief involved) changes anything about the relevant agent's capacity for deliberation. There are some things about which we're certain, and with respect to which we cannot deliberate; but I would argue that these are all things over which we have no control. It is that fact that precludes deliberation, and not anything about the strength of our justification for the relevant belief.

²⁷ Nelkin (2011, pp. 126–132) discusses this and other alternative constraints on deliberation.

²⁸ See, for example, Coffman and Warfield (2005), Nelkin (2004) and (2011), and Pereboom (2001) and (2008).

3.3. *Barriers to deliberation*

To elaborate on the previous point (and in further support of this idea that epistemic settling does not entail practical settling), consider some of the genuine barriers to deliberation: ignorance, impossibility, and inefficacy.²⁹ Certain kinds of ignorance, for example, preclude deliberation: if I'm not aware of an alternative, then I cannot consider it. (If I'm not aware that there's an elevator nearby, then I can't deliberate about whether to take the elevator or the stairs.) So does impossibility: if some state of affairs is impossible (and I'm aware that it's impossible), then I cannot deliberate about whether to bring it about or prevent it. (If it's impossible for anything to travel faster than the speed of light, then I cannot deliberate about whether to make something travel faster than the speed of light.) And finally, if my deliberation would not be effective in producing a decision (and I'm aware of this inefficacy), then I cannot deliberate about whether to make that decision. (If I'm aware that an evil neuroscientist will force me to vote for a particular presidential candidate, then I cannot deliberate about which candidate to vote for.³⁰)

There may also be psychological barriers to deliberation. Someone who's in the throes of drug addiction may not be able to deliberate about whether to take the drug. Alternatively, I don't think anyone in normal circumstances could deliberate about whether to kill a loved one in exchange for a dollar. (I will admit that I'm not confident about this last example; perhaps deliberation remains possible even when all of the alternatives are what we would otherwise describe as unthinkable.)

Ignorance, impossibility, and inefficacy (together with certain psychological barriers) thus represent the kind of factors that preclude deliberation—that preclude practical settling. Notice, however, that none of these factors need be present in a case in which someone knows what the results of his deliberation will be. It should be clear, in other words, that knowledge of what one is going to do does not produce anything resembling the most common and uncontroversial barriers to deliberation. (This is another reason why the attempt to rescue the deliberation constraint by shifting from knowledge of the results to certainty about the results fails. Adding certainty to the equation doesn't introduce any factors that resemble barriers to

²⁹ Impossibility and inefficacy may be barriers that apply only to fully (or at least mostly) rational agents. For the purposes of this paper I will restrict my consideration to such agents.

³⁰ This example comes from Nelkin (2011, p. 129) and is based on the extensively discussed Frankfurt-style counterexamples. (For a recent example of such discussion, see Fischer (2006).)

deliberation.) Thus I conclude that it is possible to deliberate while knowing what the results of that very deliberation will be.

3.4. *Divine deliberation*

There remains, however, the question of whether these findings apply to God. For even if it's possible for *us* to deliberate while knowing the results, the same may not be true of God. Thus someone might object to my argument by claiming that even though epistemic settling and practical settling may come apart for cognitively limited, fallible beings, they would never come apart for an omniscient being.³¹ Recall some of the salient features of the above cases: There is some set of facts that is essential for deliberation (i.e., the set of facts including the terms of the legal settlement), but those facts are not yet available. And while the deliberator is waiting for those facts, he becomes aware of some evidence that is strong enough to give him knowledge of the results of the deliberation process (which nevertheless cannot start until the essential facts become available). Can these features be present in a case that involves God? Well, that depends on which view of God we're operating with. But either way, the results are not good for the advocate of the deliberation restriction on omniscience.

According to the traditional assumptions of perfect-being theology, there are no facts that are not yet available to God. Thus there are no cases that involve God and which share the salient features of the cases above. But recall one of the results of §2: according to these traditional assumptions, there is no sense in which God needs to weigh alternatives in order to determine which one of them will most effectively realize his goals, and thus no sense in which he needs to deliberate. So the objection, at least on traditional assumptions, does nothing to vindicate the deliberation restriction.

However, if we reject some of these traditional assumptions, then there may turn out to be *some* truths about the future that God does not know. So it might be possible to construct a case in which God has to wait for some fact(s) to become available before he can deliberate. Such a case would feature an omniscient being who is capable of deliberating, and whose deliberations sometimes have to wait until certain facts become available. But now it seems that

³¹ Thanks to John Fischer for pressing me on this point in private correspondence.

the case is parallel to the cases above, involving a human deliberator, and so the question is whether the switch from human deliberator to divine deliberator has changed the structure of the case such that practical settling necessarily coincides with epistemic settling. If the switch does result in that change, then God, unlike us, would not be able to deliberate while knowing the results. But I see no reason why the switch from human being to omniscient being would make it so that the deliberator in question could not come to know the results of some deliberative process that is on hold until certain facts become available. Thus, even if there are some truths about the future that God doesn't (cannot) know, these unknowable truths don't include truths about the results of his deliberation.

In abstract terms, then, the response to the objection is this: If epistemic settling and practical settling don't come apart for an omniscient being, then that being need not deliberate. (There will be no need for that being to weigh alternatives or otherwise discover the best course of action.) If, on the other hand, an omniscient being does deliberate, then epistemic and practical settling come apart for that being. (The characteristics of an omniscient deliberator will be similar enough to the characteristics of human deliberators that epistemic and practical settling will come apart in both cases.) Either way, the objection does not offer any benefit to the defender of the deliberation restriction.

4. Conclusion

As we have examined a representative argument for a deliberation restriction on the concept of omniscience, we have seen that intuitive appeals to the need for God's deliberation are unsuccessful. This makes a non-deliberative God very much a live option. Moreover, in light of scenarios in which human deliberators are able to deliberate while nevertheless knowing the outcome of those deliberations, we have also seen that if God *does* deliberate, then he is able to do so without temporarily forfeiting some small number of known truths. Thus it is clear that whatever restrictions need to be placed on the concept of omniscience, the deliberation restriction is not one of them.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Ben Arbour, John Martin Fischer, Derk Pereboom, and Patrick Todd for helpful comments in private correspondence and discussion.

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