

## The Omniscience of Brahman-God in Indian and Western Thought–II

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Omniscience and omnipotence are essential and necessary properties of a maximally perfect Being that have always existed and cannot be destroyed. This means it is not possible for It to be non-omniscient. It is always omniscient and does not acquire any new knowledge.

In F. H. Bradley's (1846-1924) system of thought, the Absolute being omniscient comprehends the totality of existence harmoniously, without contradictions between any Its components or internal relations within Its total system of beliefs. Every belief in the coherent system of ideas entails all the others. It is all-comprehensive and all-inclusive without any external restrictions. Meaning it is infinite in the sense that it is not bounded by anything else. As the totality, the Absolute is not a separate limited being among other beings.<sup>26</sup> It is a coherent system of eternally existing finite members, embracing them in an all-inclusive harmony. Thus, there is a perfect unity of all Its aspects. Being a substantial totality beyond all relations, It is not the sum of things but a unity that transcends and yet contains every manifold entity. Its phenomenal members are less comprehensive (incomplete) and less coherent than the Whole (Absolute). Consequently, the Absolute is a higher experience above the distinctions that It includes. Each phenomenal member contributes, and is an essential and necessary factor for the unity of the Whole.<sup>27</sup>

The knowledge of omniscient Brahman-God has at least the following five

characteristics: correspondence, coherence, consistency, comprehensiveness, and connectedness. First, Its knowledge must correspond to reality, being objective, truthful, and veridical. Next, coherent meaning rational and comprehensible. It is logically consistent with no possible contradictions whatsoever. Comprehensiveness means it is a complete system with maximum meaningfulness. Finally, there must be a complete inner-connectedness between every idea.

Historically commentators state that Brahman-God's omniscient (like omnipresence and omnipotence) is infinite. Is it infinite (unlimited) or finite (limited)? Do intelligence, power, happiness, and love have an upper limit? If the number of possible ideas is finite with an upper limit, and the number of combinations of these ideas is also finite, then omniscience is finite. Is it possible to be omniscient possessing infinite knowledge, since knowledge by its very nature is a finite form of limitation?

From the Nondualistic perspective, Brahman-God is Knowledge (and Existence and Power) Itself, which means It is identical with knowledge and does not participate in it to various degrees as humans do. It is the omnipresent ground of Reality that both transcends and is the immanent source of all existence, knowledge, and power.

From the Qualified Nondualists (Transcendental Pantheism) standpoint, Brahman-God is omniscient because It is the sum total of all minds in the universe. Likewise, It is omnipotent being the sum

total of all power and omnipresent of all existence in the universe. Swami Vivekananda relates, 'The mind is universal. Your mind, my mind, all these little minds, are fragments of that Universal Mind, little waves in the ocean.' 'There is only one mass of mind. Different [states] of that mind have different names. [They are] different little whirlpools in this ocean of mind. We are universal and individual at the same time... Mind is something [which is] neither force nor matter, yet begetting force and matter all the time. In the long run, mind is begetting all force, and that is what is meant by the Universal Mind, the sum total of all minds. Everyone is creating, and [in] the sum total of all these creations you have the universe—unity in diversity. It is one and it is many at the same time.'<sup>28</sup> 'What is called your mind is only a bit of this Mahat [Cosmic Mind] caught in the trap of the brain, and the sum total of all minds caught in the meshes of brains is what you call *Samashti*, the aggregate, the universal.... mind is matter, only finer. The body is gross, and behind the body is what we call the *Sukshma Sharira* [Subtle Body], the fine body, or mind.'<sup>29</sup>

Since Brahman-God is omnipresent, It exists within every person's consciousness, but is hidden from most people. Existing within their consciousness It knows all of their thoughts. Brahman-God is spatially omnipresent at every location, and therefore Its actions are not limited by the speed of light (a problem for quantum theory). According to Albert Einstein's 'Special Theory of Relativity' (1905) there is no universal present, since observers in different frames of reference can have different ideas as to whether a pair of events happened at the same time or at different times. There is no physical basis for preferring one frame over another. This poses no problem for Brahman-God since It is omnipresent, located at every reference point.<sup>30</sup>

In the Divine world, because Brahman-God is omnipresent, It is within the consciousness of all of Its inhabitants. At the same moment It reacts differently to different people. The *Avatār* is ubiquitously present in religious shrines throughout the world.

Einstein's theory emphasizes the interrelatedness of space and time, particularly as one approaches the speed of light. Omnipresence enables Brahman-God to know all events that are taking place (omniscience) and to act everywhere with direct control over every aspect of the universe (omnipotence). There is no location where Brahman-God's knowledge and power do not exist. It is conceptually omnipresent, existing simultaneously in every area of mental space, possessing direct and total understanding, which does not require inferential reason that directs the mind from one idea to another. That is, It has every conceivable thought at the same time. It is omnipresent because It exists in all phases of life including the mental, physical, and emotional; in all aspects of nature, in every stage of the causal process, in all concepts and theories, and temporally in all events (Omnipresent Brahman-God).<sup>31</sup> Only at a lower ontological level of manifestation, would Brahman-God's mind be localized at one place in conceptual space, yet omniscient because It could instantly navigate to any other location in the world of ideas (Localized Brahman-God).

An Omniscient Being is changeless in the sense that Its knowledge neither increases nor decreases. It is not timeless, since omniscient Brahman-God has to have perfect understanding of every temporal sequence. A spatially and temporally omnipresent Being need not change in order to know the events of a changing space-time world. It is omniscient because It exists at every place in space and simultaneously at every moment of time.

To be totally omniscient Brahman-God would have to be omnipresent in every spatial location, within the consciousness of every living being. A fully omniscient being is omnipresent in every temporal location, with full knowledge of all prior, present, and future events. The Divine Mind is connected with the subtle matter-energy of the past and of the future, and like humans with the gross matter-energy of the present. It has to be located in the present moment of time to know that a meeting is starting now.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, physically we are limited to a single spatial location (our own self and immediate environment), and temporal location (the present), though we can think of other places and times. Our minds are located at one place in conceptual space, depending on what we are thinking of at the time, but we can navigate to a limited number of ideas in our mind. Some thinkers hold to the Block Universe idea that past, present, and future time like space, already exist. Future events are already there just as other places are already there, meaning there is no objective flow of time.<sup>33</sup> By analogy we might think of the needle of a record that is playing the music at a certain location, though all of the music already exists.

According to the 'Principle of Divine Plenitude,' Brahman-God is both formless (*Nirākāra*) and with form (*Rupa*), essence and manifestation, simple and divided, infinite and finite, eternal and temporal, one and many, transcendent and immanent. Based on his spiritual experiences, in the nineteenth century Sri Ramakrishna told his disciples, 'God is with form, without form and also transcending all these. He alone knows who and what He is.'

In the Intrinsic Attribute aspect (What Brahman-God is), It is simple, uncaused, immutable (changeless), timelessly eternal, and infinite without parts, transcending omniscience and omnipotence. Only when It externalizes and objectifies does It become

complex, reactive, mutable, eternal within time, and infinite with parts. In the Extrinsic Attribute aspect (What Brahman-God is and does), It becomes omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. In the ontological creation, Brahman-God possesses both of these aspects at the same time. The Intrinsic and Extrinsic Attributes are related to each other either as two equal aspects or as a higher and lower ontological level of existence. In Indian thought, *Nirguna* Brahman transcends time and space and is beyond all forms of knowledge. *Saguna* Brahman (Personal God) is omniscient, but does It have a timeless, immutable, and simple aspect?

Brahman-God is the first cause of all things including knowledge. Augustine (354-430) wrote, 'Not because they are, does God know all creatures spiritual and temporal, but because He knows them, therefore they are' and Aquinas, 'The knowledge of God is the cause of things.'<sup>34</sup> Brahman-God does not react to a pre-existent perceived objects or ideas like we do, but Its own nature causes them to come into existence. Its knowledge is first-hand and ours is second-hand. It is omniscient because through Its omnipotence It projects all forms of knowledge. Due to Brahman-God's aseity, Its knowledge of contingent states of affairs is not dependent on some outside source. We are consumers of pre-existing knowledge concerning the world, while Brahman-God in contrast precedes knowledge as its producer. The ordinary causal flow of perceptual understanding from object to subject is reversed in Brahman-God's case from knowing subject to known object. Its awareness of an object is not caused by the thing that It perceives; rather Its power and knowledge cause the object to exist which It understands. We perceive an object and then as a reaction know it. Our knowledge is dependent on the nature of the object. Conversely, Brahman-God either knows the

object before it is created, or the act of creating and knowing occur at the same time. In both the ontological or chronological beginning of existence, nothing exists not even empty space, and Brahman-God creates the object directly from Its own Being, e.g., a projection from the Divine Mind. For Brahman-God the omnipotent willing of an event and omniscient knowledge of it occur simultaneously. It is like we purposely think of a house in our mind, whereby we concurrently both create it through our will and have knowledge of it through our intellect simultaneously.

From another standpoint, Brahman-God knows all things in the universe because they participate in (or imitate) Its perfection to varying imperfect degrees. Since It is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, It understands lesser manifestations of these virtues.

In a sense there are two forms of omniscience. Through 'Creative Omniscience' Brahman-God knows an object or event because It has created it. This is emphasized by both Western and Indian religious philosophers. At a lower ontological level, there is 'Reactive Omniscience' where the Personal Brahman-God as part of the temporal process perceives objects that exists apart from It, and is cognizant of the past, present, and future sequence of events.

According to many Theists-Dualists, Brahman-God has maximum knowledge, but is different from it. From another perspective, Brahman-God and knowledge (including reason, the *Vedas* the transcendental religious scriptures, Eternal Truths and the Platonic Forms) are one and the same entity. One reason is that if knowledge were separate from Brahman-God, It would participate in it, and would be influenced by it and thus not fully independent. Its understanding would be subject to change, progressing from a

condition of potential to actual knowledge. If Brahman-God learned about things separate from Itself, then It would not be the first cause and creator of those events.

#### **Possible limitations of Divine omniscience**

As part of a scientific world, modern philosophers of religion tend to be critical and challenge traditional religious ideas more than the philosophers of the Middle Ages did. Concerning omniscience they ask the following three challenging questions: a) Are Divine foreknowledge and freewill compatible? b) Can a timeless Being comprehend events within time? c) How can Brahman-God understand negative feelings like hate and misery?

a) There are two opposing schools concerning the possibility of both Divine foreknowledge and human freedom, the Compatibilists and the Incompatibilists. The latter believe that if Brahman-God being essentially and necessarily omniscient, has infallible foreknowledge of future human events, then those happenings must be determined and people have no freewill choices concerning their actions. To be fully omniscient, the Divine Mind must at all times have perfect foreknowledge of future events. The Compatibilist view receives support from three different ideas.

First is that Brahman-God lives in the 'Eternal Now,' a temporal singularity where all time is condensed into a single moment without succession. A timeless Brahman-God has no temporal restrictions concerning what for us is foreknowledge, since It is contemporaneous with every temporal event. Transcending time and space, It knows all things at once by a single cognition. This is especially the case if Brahman-God is the cause of time.

Secondly, temporally omnipresent Brahman-God always occupies every possible location in time: the past, present, and future. It is not time-bound with a single

temporal location the way we are. If It gained new knowledge as new events occur, Its prior knowledge would have been incomplete. Brahman-God and Divine causation pervade light, which they created and ontologically precede. Consequently, It can travel faster than the speed of light and are everywhere at once. If quantum event causation or thought pervades light at a more subtle level, they would not be bound by the speed of light.

Third, Brahman-God can instantaneously move from the present to the past or future. It can look into the future ( $t_2$ ), see what is happening concerning freewill activity and then instantly return to the present ( $t_1$ ) with Its foreknowledge.<sup>35</sup> At times people have accurate clairvoyant experiences of future events. They might not be able to bring about these experiences at will, but on rare occasions accurate insight of future events come to them. According to Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms*, an advanced yogi can gain limited foreknowledge but not of everything, and at a more advanced state can become omnipotent and omniscient.<sup>36</sup> We might think of a person travelling on a road who does not see those at a distance from him, while a person on top of the hill sees all at once all those traveling on it.<sup>37</sup> Another example, it takes about 8 minutes for the sunlight to reach the earth moving at the speed of light. So if there were an observer on the sun, it would see this event 8 minutes before we do on earth.

An all-knowing Being can know the future in detail because Brahman-God has complete comprehension of these events that follow the law-like principles of Divine reason. This assumes the Indian Sāṅkhya idea of *Satkāryavāda* (or *Parināmavāda*) of the pre-existence of the effect in the cause, in a potential form before its manifestation. The effect exists prior to its modification in a latent state in the cause and in that sense is

not an emergent. In a way, it is like an astronomer who understands the laws of planetary motion and knows where these heavenly bodies will be positioned in the future.<sup>38</sup>

Omniscience requires that Brahman-God knows not only what will occur in the future, but also possesses counterfactual knowledge of what would have occurred if another event that didn't had taken place. For example in 1939, an omniscient being not only had foreknowledge what would occur during World War II, but also the understanding of what would have occurred in the following years if there had been no war.

If Brahman-God knows in advance everything that will occur in the future, then It might have acted at a previous time in the light of that knowledge. In this case future action of a person would effect Brahman-God's prior activity, ie, the future events would effect the past.<sup>39</sup>

b) According to Thomas Aquinas, from a timeless eternity, God knows in a durationless instant everything in their minutest detail about the past, present, and future. A perfect and omniscient Brahman-God must know absolutely, necessarily, unchangingly, and infinitely all that there is to be known. Having no temporal location, no phase of Its life is prior to any other phase of it. Being both timeless and immutable, a sequence of events is known simultaneously all at once, not in succession (*tota simul*).<sup>40</sup>

In response to Aquinas' views, modern religious philosophers ask the question, how is it possible for a timeless, immutable, and simple Brahman-God to be omniscient?<sup>41</sup> Not being a part of the temporal process, can It have a perfect comprehension of the time-sequence and understanding of different temporal perspectives? How can a timeless Being have any idea what time is, that temporal events occur sequentially one after another, or know the difference between the

past, present, and future? Can Brahman-God know the difference between before and after, or between 5 and 6 o'clock without some understanding of time? How can a timeless Brahman-God work within the world of time? Can a changeless Brahman-God produce or have a perfect understanding of what change is? Since knowledge changes over time, does Brahman-God have to change to be the knower?<sup>42</sup> Does It know temporal things timelessly, the changeable unchangeably, the material immaterially, the composite simply, and propositions nonpropositionally? Can It understand time and change the way we do?<sup>43</sup>

In addition, can a timeless immutable Being have any thoughts whatsoever? The act of knowing requires time to manifest. Certainly human thought is impossible without duration. Can a timeless Being remember, anticipate, or deliberate, all of which require time? Our idea of knowledge involves complexity, change, time, and parts. For all this to be possible the mode of understanding of a timeless-immutable Brahman-God would have to be totally different from ours.

An alternative view is that it is *Nirguna* Brahman, the Essence of Brahman-God that is timeless and *Saguna* Brahman, the Manifestation of Brahman-God that is omniscient and omnipotent within the realm of space and time. These are two different realms and the characteristics of one are different from those of the other. A Simple Being cannot be omniscient since It has no thoughts that have diversified conceptual parts.

c) Another question is: Does a perfect Brahman-God have a perfect understanding of imperfect negative subjective experiences? A paradox of the Divine Mind's omniscience is how can a blissful, benevolent, all-knowing, and all-powerful Being, experience and have a perfect understanding of intense pain, sadistic evil,

ignorance, and fear that are the result of a limitation of power? One who knows everything must also know the false, errors, and the unfavourable. While our memory of extreme pain, etc. are imperfect, it is always perfect for an omniscient Being. To be omniscient and fully understand an insane person, does Brahman-God think and feel exactly as that person does? In these examples omniscience implies a contradiction. Is this knowledge impersonal and objective or personal and subjective? Is there a distinction between feeling someone else's feelings and having those feelings as one's own? We can remember the pain of a burning sensation without feeling any misery, since our memory is but a faint copy of the original experience. But we must have first felt the burning sensation to know what it is like.<sup>44</sup> The Divine Mind would not be burdened by these contradictions if it is 'Wholly Other' and operates in a manner that is incomprehensible to us. In this case, Its mode of knowing is so radically different from ours, we cannot conceive of how It would operate.

One might define omniscience in a limited manner. Three forms of omniscience are Conceptual Omniscient of all concepts, propositions, and ideas, a complete intellectual understanding of everything; Perceptual Omniscience of all external events in the universe and of thoughts; and Feeling Omniscience of every possible feeling and emotional state of every living being. A qualified or limited definition of omniscience could include one or two of these, but not all three.

Another limited view of omniscience is that Brahman-God knows everything which is logically possible to know. Most Western thinkers (with the exception of Rene Descartes) believe that an omnipotent Brahman-God cannot violate the Law of Non-contradiction. That is It cannot change the past like erasing the Second World War

from history; cannot create a round square on a two-dimensional surface; cannot create a Being greater than Itself, etc. This leads to the question: Are there any logical limits to the Divine Mind's omniscience as there are for omnipotence? Some religious philosophers believe the Divine Mind cannot know future events or every personalized subjective experiences of every individual.

Being omniscient means the Divine Mind knows everything. If we have a problem, to seek a solution we should make an effort to approach Brahman-God who has

full knowledge of our circumstances. Instead we do everything but that to alleviate the problem. Human reason cannot always know the Lord's intentions for us, since reason is based on a limited number of variables-information-ideas with restricted knowledge of the future. Divine omniscience on the other hand is composed of unlimited variables-information-ideas to work with and has perfect knowledge of the future, and therefore might come out with a different solution to solve our problems than we would make. ■

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