

# IS REFORMED ORTHODOXY A POSSIBLE EXCEPTION TO MATT McCORMICK'S CRITIQUE OF CLASSICAL THEISM? AN EXPLORATION OF GOD'S PRESENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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**Abstract:** Matt McCormick argues that because a thinking mind must be able to make subject-object distinctions with objects outside of itself, and God is everywhere immediately present to all objects (according to a classical conception of omniscience), he cannot truly make this distinction and therefore cannot think. Here, I probe McCormick's Kantian notions of psychological representations and metaphysics and explore a version of classical theism that may evade his critique.

In his article "Why God Cannot Think: Kant, Omnipresence, & Consciousness,"<sup>1</sup> atheist philosopher Matt McCormick proposes an inconsistency in the classical conception of the divine attributes. McCormick seeks to demonstrate that the attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and self-awareness (commonly accepted among classical theists) are, according to a Kantian philosophy of mind, cognitively incompatible, thereby making the classical conception of God seem rather absurd. He calls the coexistence of omniscience, omnipresence, and self-awareness "omniconsciousness."

McCormick sets out to demonstrate this cognitive incompatibility by arguing that "1) omniconsciousness is not possible because in order to be conscious a being must be limited in ways that an omnipresent thing is not, and 2) since omnipresence has been attributed to God by a number of influential theologians and omnipresence is implied by omniscience, omnipotence, and perfection, God cannot have higher consciousness."<sup>2</sup> Essentially, McCormick is saying that because God is cognitively coextensive with all things and himself, and spatially coextensive with all things and himself, there is no mechanism of psychology or space by which God is able to predicate concerning external reality or himself on the basis of the subject-object

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distinction, thereby undermining his capacity for consciousness. In other words, because God is, by virtue of his omnipresence and omniscience, in some way identical with the objects of the universe, then we must either forfeit Newtonian physics (which, for the most part, according to McCormick, tells us that two objects [God and another object] cannot occupy the same space at the same time) in our conception of space-time in order to make room for God's real presence everywhere in the world, or we forfeit God's self-awareness in favor of positing his omnipresence.<sup>3</sup>

The thesis is intriguing. For the eclectic theologian or philosopher of religion, such a thesis bears little weight. When one assesses that they are able to pick and choose from the best of premodern, medieval, continental, and analytic philosophies, a self-consciously Kantian critique of classical theism stands little chance at being persuasive. But if a theologian or philosopher of religion stands in a tradition, or, is committed to a single coherent system of theistic thought, then McCormick's thesis should be dealt with, since he takes aim at one of the most vital pillars of cogency in theology: the self-awareness of God. It is precisely this brand of theologian that McCormick has in mind. For example, with reference to omnipresence, he cites Thomas Aquinas, who says,

It belongs therefore to a thing to be everywhere absolutely when, on any supposition, it must be everywhere; and this properly belongs to God alone. For whatever number of places be supposed, even if an infinite number be supposed besides what already exist, it would be necessary that God should be in all of them; for nothing can exist except by Him. Therefore to be everywhere primarily and absolutely belongs to God and is proper to Him: because whatever number of places be supposed to exist, God must be in all of them, not as to a part of Him, but as to His very self.<sup>4</sup>

He also cites John Wesley, who, in his assessment, follows Aquinas when he says, "In a word, there is no point of space, whether within or without the bounds of creation, where God is not."<sup>5</sup> He thus posits, "So the being in question is either semi-present and undeserving of the name God or it is omnipresent and mindless, incapable of judging or doing many of the things that God is commonly thought to be capable of doing."<sup>6</sup> And, in terms of McCormick's argument, he poses a criticism worthy of giving a sophisticated response, since any response must rely on a theology that has properly configured, not only God's spatial, but his psychological relationship to the objects of the universe.

One factor that makes McCormick's intriguing thesis difficult to maintain is the comprehensiveness of its scope. He posits a thesis about classical theism in general ("God cannot . . ."). All that is necessary to disprove McCormick's thesis is a single consistent classical theist to formulate a conception of God that includes omniscience, omnipotence, and self-awareness. One theist, Cornelius Van Til, proposes what he deems to be a coherent, systematic conception of God that includes these attributes. He labels his brand of theism "Reformed Orthodoxy," (henceforth RO) which, for him, is a theological tradition with its roots in the theology of John Calvin.<sup>7</sup> His

claim is that, in order to formulate a coherent doctrine of God without abdicating rationality, one must (1) begin with a category of consciousness that accommodates a mind that contains purely analytic, not syllogistic knowledge,<sup>8</sup> and (2) begin with God's self-contained nature (aseity) as the controlling attribute for one's consideration of omnipresence.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, RO will be used as a test case to see if it stands under McCormick's criticisms. If it does, the hope is that the aspects of RO that allow it to withstand McCormick's critique will bring to the surface those commonalities among other versions of classical theism that withstand his criticisms as well. In other words, our purpose here is not to prove that RO is a valid theological system, but that if it successfully and coherently concatenates God's omniscience, omnipresence, and self-awareness, then it undermines McCormick's thesis that a coherent formulation of the God of classical theism cannot be conceived.<sup>10</sup>

## 1. DISTINGUISHING HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS FROM LOWER CONSCIOUSNESS

McCormick argues that omniconsciousness is impossible, because God's unlimitedness, as manifested in his omnipresence, precludes his possession of "higher consciousness," which therefore makes the concept of omniconsciousness incoherent. For McCormick, "higher consciousness" (henceforth HC) has two characteristics: (1) "the capacity to . . . draw a distinction between one's representations and the thing being represented"<sup>11</sup> and (2) "the capacity to form judgments about objects, identifying and attributing properties to them."<sup>12</sup> Conversely, a "lower consciousness" (henceforth LC) cannot distinguish between the representation it perceives and the object that the perception represents. Explicating the primary functional difference between HC and LC, McCormick says, "The merely representational and associative consciousness is acted upon by the world, but the being that is aware that its stimuli serve as representations of the world locates itself and its subjective experience in relationship to the world."<sup>13</sup>

An example of this difference is a dog, on the one hand, who barks at his reflection in the mirror because he "is not aware of the image *as an image*"<sup>14</sup> in juxtaposition to a human, on the other, who is able to identify his reflection as a representation of himself. McCormick then argues that if a being has HC, that being must be able to distinguish between self and not-self; and because an omnipresent being "occupies or is present in all places, far or near, in all times, past, present, or future," there is no external object for that omnipresent being to identify as "not-self." Since the empirical immediacy of such a lack of identifications requires the absence of representations, then HC is precluded and therefore omniconsciousness, also.

## 2. INTRODUCING HIGHEST CONSCIOUSNESS

McCormick is not correct in saying that omniconsciousness is impossible; to have an immediately exhaustive knowledge of every object *does* preclude

representational knowledge by its nature, but only in one sense. RO would propose that because God retains for himself a distinct kind of consciousness, God would occupy, if we may take creative liberty with McCormick's model, a third level on McCormick's metaphorical hierarchical spectrum, and can be called "highest consciousness." The distinctives of "highest consciousness" (henceforth HSC) are that (1) God does have direct and immediate knowledge of every object but *also* that (2) it functions representationally in a way that no human consciousness could ever function.<sup>15</sup> That is, God is able to make the distinction between objects and representations, but unlike human knowledge, in which the existence of the object precedes the conception of the representation, for God, the conception of the representation eternally precedes, causes, and determines the existence of the object.<sup>16</sup> This may be called, for the purpose of contrasting RO's notion of omniconsciousness with McCormick's Kantian category of human representational consciousness, "prophenomenological knowledge" (henceforth PK). This knowledge representatively and functionally precedes the existing phenomena of "created" reality (The existence of this function presupposes, for RO, an ontological distinction between the creator and creature which has been cleared of any univocal notion of being).<sup>17</sup> In this category of knowledge, to use Kantian vocabulary once more, from the perspective of the divine psychology, God's phenomenal realm (i.e., the divine psychological experience) precedes and patterns the noumenal realm (i.e., created reality as it really is), which humans then experience in terms of the human phenomenal realm (i.e., created reality as limited humans experience it).

With this category of consciousness, one is able to formulate a coherent belief in a God who possesses omnipresence *and* HC, but only as a consequence of HSC. That is, for RO, God's possession of HSC fully realizes the lesser characteristics of HC in that God (in McCormick's terms) (1) not only has the capacity to "draw a distinction between one's representations and the thing being represented" but also ordains the distinction itself and (2) has the capacity not simply to "form judgments about objects, identifying and attributing properties to them" but has prescriptively identified and attributed those properties thereto. Therefore, omniconsciousness is conceivable as a coherent attribute of God. Furthermore, for RO, it is necessary for God to possess HSC for it to be possible for McCormick to possess HC, since HSC functions not only as the mechanism of God's self-awareness, but also as an epistemic typeset for the objects that all beings with HC perceive. For RO, God's knowledge is the architectonic pattern for the framework of perceived reality.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. CONNECTING HIGHEST CONSCIOUSNESS WITH HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS

RO would also advocate the notion that a being's HC functions representationally primarily as it is representative of the HSC of God and secondarily as a cognitive mechanism constituted by perceptions that are representative of external objects. That is, the phenomenon of cognitive representational

production is, for RO, an epistemic analogue of God's PK. In McCormick's critique of omniconsciousness based on a Kantian philosophy of cognitive representation, he fails to take into account the relationship between the divine and human consciousnesses, which is that a being's consciousness functions in this corresponding, analogous way to the mind of God and can therefore only think representatively because he exists representatively, as Van Til would argue. Above, McCormick equated God's inability to distinguish between self and not-self with a dog who barks at his own image in the mirror.<sup>19</sup> RO would reply that McCormick's own confusion about God's consciousness is a product of his lack of awareness that his consciousness is a created image of God's consciousness (Gen. 1:27; Rom. 1:18–32), and by virtue of this imaging relationship derives his ability to predicate concerning the phenomena of the universe successfully.<sup>20</sup>

McCormick provides a helpful example for how this principle manifests itself in his argument. He raises a point about the nature of propositional knowledge, namely, that propositional knowledge is constituted by properties that are shared by other objects and can therefore be said to exist as part of the material world in a way that is similar to the way those other objects exist. Conversely, McCormick purports, the omniscient mind would only understand each object "directly, as it is in itself, not be means of its crude resemblance to other objects."<sup>21</sup> Having formulated a new category of representational consciousness (HCS), this statement has little traction for the God of RO. It is because McCormick does not adequately define *why* or *how* God could be omniscient that his critique of omniconsciousness does not hold across all versions of classical theism. His definitions of omniscience, omnipotence, and self-awareness do not accommodate the definitions within RO.<sup>22</sup> In this strand of Christianity, God, who created the entire material world, does not have an alienated knowledge of each item singularly. Rather, conceived as the creator of the entire material world, and therefore of all of the constituent identifying concepts and properties therein, God has PK, not only of each material object but also of the superstructure of coherence which governs its understandability, and consequently its ability to be understood by beings with HC.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. DIVINE ASEITY AND THE CREATED BEING

McCormick then argues for the incompatibility of omnipresence and HC with a particular emphasis on the epistemological implications of omnipresence. He attempts to articulate a robust formulation of omnipresence by first saying that "Being omnipresent precludes the possibility of there being any objects external to that being as well as the possibility of that being's accurately *thinking of* objects as external."<sup>24</sup> This concept, that God's omnipresence limits him to the material world, sets the agenda for the rest of McCormick's understanding of God's omnipresence, both in his understanding of how it relates to (1) omnipotence, when he says "So on Aquinas' account omnipotence implies omnipresence. Having the power to do any-

thing to any object entails having perfect, immediate presence in all things,” (2) perfection, when he says “A being that does not exist in all times or places would be limited, hence it would lack perfection. Nothing can be separate from a being that is perfect,”<sup>25</sup> and (3) omniscience, on which there is detailed treatment below.

McCormick is again incorrect when he says that God’s omnipresence precludes his possession of HC, since McCormick imports a truncated notion of consciousness-in-general, in his critique of omniconsciousness (as demonstrated above), and of omnipresence also.<sup>26</sup> As is telling from McCormick’s remark that “omnipresence precludes the possibility of there being any objects external to that being,” his critique has in view a God who omnipresently exists *within* being. For RO, the inverse is true, namely, that being comprehensively exists *within* God.<sup>27</sup> The consideration of God’s aseity must precede that of all other attributes, and it is the oversight of this precedence that causes McCormick to be limited in his postulation of the constraints of omnipresence upon the being of God (Col. 1:17 says “He is before all things [πρὸ πάντων], and in him all things [τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ] hold together.”).<sup>28</sup> He makes the same oversight again in his treatment of omnipotence. He speaks of omnipotence as God “having the power to do anything to any object,” which speaks of God’s power as an abstract piece inside of him (thus removing the relevance of his argument for those who hold to the classical doctrine of divine simplicity, which many in the Christian tradition do), and not as qualified by his person, nature, and character (as good, consistent, pure act, the sustainer of the universe, etc.). Furthermore, the definition of “omnipotence” as unreserved power to do anything to any object puts God, by definition, into an absurd category, to which I am sure almost no orthodox Christians would concede.<sup>29</sup> This definition of omnipotence removes RO from the scope of McCormick’s critique, since for RO there are many things that God cannot do to certain objects, like make a created thing God, or make himself a created thing.

## 5. CONNECTING OMNISCIENCE AND OMNIPRESENCE IN ASEITY

Regarding his analysis of the relationship between the perfection and the omnipresence of God, McCormick is correct in saying that, for classical theists, the perfection of God requires his omnipresence. However, he ignores the question of *why* perfection requires omnipresence in the theistic system. Why is omnipresence a perfection? Because it is a function of his aseity—that is, because creation is dependent on God, who is not dependent on anything outside of himself, God is omnipresent. His being everywhere is a function of his sustaining everything (Heb. 1:3 says that the Son “upholds the universe [τὰ πάντα] by the word of his power”). “All things are in him and through him and to him,” (Rom. 11:36) not in a univocal sense in which God and creation are conflated together into an ontological monism, but in an analogical sense, in which God’s indivisible presence is immediate to every object that exists besides him.<sup>30</sup>

McCormick then investigates the relationship between omniscience and omnipresence. He says, "In order to have flawless and complete knowledge of all things, past, present, and future, a being would need to be present in all things at all times. First, an omniscient being must have access to every object to possess all knowledge."<sup>31</sup> McCormick makes the same systematic-theological oversight here that he did earlier. It is only a half-truth to say that God "must have access to every object" to be omniscient. Much like his point about God's perfection, he does not investigate the theological foundations of God's omniscience. For RO, God does not have exhaustive knowledge of every object because he has gained that knowledge through access, but rather, God has exhaustive knowledge of every created object because he has exhaustive knowledge of himself, and he created every object.<sup>32</sup> McCormick concludes his assessment of omniscience by positing that

In order to have omniscient access to every truth about every object, there cannot be any object or any part of an object that is not exhaustively present to that being. While it is possible to know some of the truths about an object without being present in that object, exhaustive and perfect knowledge of that thing is not possible for a being that remains separate from it; the mind of the omniscient being must be immediately and completely unified with the objects of its knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

McCormick truthfully states, "In order to have omniscient access to every truth about every object, there cannot be any object or any part of an object that is not exhaustively present to that being." However, it does not follow that in order for God to have omniscience, he must not have aseity. For RO, the fact that God created all of being and its constituent parts implies both his omniscience and his self-existence, and the burden of proof still rests on McCormick until he can formulate his critique in a way that accommodates the conception of God in RO. McCormick also says "the mind of the omniscient being must be immediately and completely unified with the objects of its knowledge." What he does not seem to allow for, however, is that since, for some, God is conceived as self-existent, and the objects of knowledge as dependent in their existence, the metaphysical burden remains on the *object* to be immediately and completely unified with God for its existence, and not the other way around.

## 6. MCCORMICK'S ANTICIPATED RESPONSES

**The Self-Referential Consciousness Response.** Much like he does with HC, McCormick himself provides an example to help demonstrate how exactly God justifies being. He does this in his rejoinder to an anticipated response to his assertion that God possess HC. The anticipated response is that God might be able to distinguish between his HC and the material world in the same way that a human consciousness can distinguish between its consciousness and a physical part of the human's body, such as its hand. That is, the hand is part of the self, and yet it is distinct from the mind. Is it not therefore conceivable for a mind to be self-referentially conscious and therefore

God to be conscious of things that are external, yet immediate to him?

More important than the response itself is McCormick's rejoinder to it, which demonstrates his definition of God as one who does not possess aseity (once again, removing RO from the scope of his critique). McCormick's error is adopting the terms of the response. He manifests an inconsistency between required presuppositions of his original thesis (God must not possess self-existence in order for omniconsciousness to be impossible) and the nature of the argument (demonstrating the incompatibility of omniscience, omnipresence, and self-awareness) when he consistently speaks as though God were *contained by* being. He says, "I cannot be aware of these hands as mine . . . unless I can distinguish between them and *other things in the world* that are not me," and "A necessary condition of being conscious of any object . . . is being able to judge that *the world* is occupied with objects, *some of which are not me.*"<sup>34</sup>

The shortcoming of McCormick's thesis is that, for RO, God is not an ontological correlative of the universe. Instead, he exists wholly outside of it as an independent being and through condescension creates metaphysically dependent entities.<sup>35</sup> The point is that the distinction between God's being and created being does not merely denote a distinction but denotes the priority and preeminence of God's being and thereby the dependence and inferiority of created being. God's intra-ontic status (as *a se*) logically precedes his inter-ontic function (his interaction with the universe, conceived as a different, dependent metaphysical *genre* than the metaphysics of God's aseity). In other words, a proper consideration of God's essence *in himself* must govern our consideration of his relationship to other essences. In light of this reality, McCormick's inclination to think of metaphysical-justificatory priority in a way that precludes versions of theism (RO, in particular) is clearly seen. It is manifested in his consistent formulation of God's access to the world as though the world existed without him or that there was a time when (or place where) there was an object in existence that did not find its metaphysical constitution and psychological accessibility with ultimate dependence on God's own being and mind.

**The Dualist Response.** Again McCormick displays the limited scope of his thesis with his understanding of *how* God is omnipresent by responding to the dualist critique that God may be spiritually, and not physically, omnipresent (which would, in the supposed theist's view, seem to allow for God to possess HC). In McCormick's formulation, God must be considered omnipresent in categorically the same way that the thing (the universe) that God is immediately present with is considered. In other words, we must not equivocate when we speak of the presence of God and the presence of any given thing. In order for this line of reasoning to work, the universe and God must both be considered as independently nonrelated entities, with God filling creation. For RO, the material world is always exhaustively covenantally related to and dependent on God, who is the *metaphysical* foundation for the *material* world<sup>36</sup>; and it is because God metaphysically founds the material world that he is able to be omnipresent within and throughout

that world without materially *constituting* it. In other words, God is conceived as the one who comprehensively justifies and upholds the being of the material world, and so therefore, in fully exhausting the larger theoretical spectrum of being in which the material world exists, is consequently metaphysically immediate to the material world.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Three things have thus been demonstrated: (1) the conceptions of God that McCormick presupposes in his argument do not accommodate the definitions and theological system out of which RO formulates its doctrine of God, (2) the conception of God in RO evades McCormick's critique of classical theism on account of the relationship between the proposed metaphysics of God's self-existence in contradistinction to the metaphysics of the universe, and (3) omnisciousness remains a possibility within the system of RO as long as a sharp metaphysical and psychological distinction between God and the universe is maintained.

## NOTES

1. Matthew McCormick, "Why God Cannot Think: Kant, Omnipresence, & Consciousness," in *The Impossibility of God*, ed. Michael Martin & Ricki Monnier (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003), 258–273.

2. McCormick, "Why God Cannot Think," *Impossibility*, 258–259.

3. Contemporary philosophers of science, however, do not read Newton so materialistically. In fact, Edward Slowik argues that, because Newton rejects a rigid ontological distinction between corporeal and incorporeal substances, Newton's own natural philosophy allows for the prudent acknowledgement of incorporeal local causes as an explanation for material phenomena. In fact, Newton himself makes room for God in his philosophy of space, saying, "Space is an affection of a being just as a being. No being exists or can exist which is not related to space in some way. God is everywhere, created minds are somewhere, and body is in the space that it occupies; and whatever is neither everywhere nor anywhere does not exist. And hence it follows that space is an emanative effect of the first existing being, for if any being whatsoever is posited, space is posited. And the same may be asserted of duration: for certainly both are affections or attributes of a being according to which the quantity of any thing's existence is individuated to the degree that the size of its presence and persistence is specified. So the quantity of the existence of God is eternal in relation to duration, and infinite in relation to the space in which he is present; and the quantity of the existence of a created thing is as great in relation to duration as the duration since the beginning of its existence, and in relation to the size of its presence, it is as great as the space in which it is present" (*De Gravitatione*, 25–26). Slowik explains, "In effect, Newton is arguing that, *since* God's extension is infinite, and *since* the other beings reside in this infinite space, 'hence it follows that space is an emanative effect of the first existing being, for if any being whatsoever is posited, space is posited'—or, put differently, space must be the emanative effect of an unlimited, omnipresent being ('the first existing being') because all being is extended (via the *ens quatenus ens* hypothesis: 'for if any being whatsoever is posited, space is posited'). That is, the remaining finite beings *require* an infinitely extended being to ground the existence of the infinite space in which they reside, which, as disclosed in the final two sentences, also applies to the existence of lesser beings in time." Edward Slowik, "Newton's Metaphysics of Space: A 'Tertium Quid' Betwixt Substantivalism and Relationism, or Merely a 'God of the (Rational Mechanical) Gaps'?" *Perspective on Science* 17 (4): 429–456. For his translation of Newton, he cites Isaac Newton, *De gravitatione et aequipondio fluidorum*, in *Unpublished Scientific Papers of Isaac*

*Newton*, trans. and ed. A. R. Hall and M. B. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962). Yet the point here is merely that McCormick cannot conscript “Newtonian space” in service of his criticism of omnipresence without dealing with the fact that Newton himself would disagree. This, however, does not undo McCormick’s philosophical objection on the basis of a commonly accepted law in purely materialistic physics.

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 1, question 8, articles 1–4, trans. Father of the English Dominican Province (Benzinger, 1947). He cites Thomas elsewhere also, saying, “God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works. For an agent must be joined to that wherein it acts immediately and touch it by its power . . . as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being.” Part 1, question 8, article 1.

5. John Wesley, “On the Omnipresence of God,” sermon 111 text from the 1872 edition, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-111-on-the-omnipresence-of-god/>

6. McCormick, “Why God Cannot Think,” 268.

7. It may seem rather pretentious to label one’s version of the theology of the Reformation “Reformed Orthodoxy.” Indeed, there are many competing forms of self-donned Reformed theology, from Post-Reformation Reformed scholastics, to Neo-orthodoxy, claiming to champion Calvin (for the most part). However, Van Til’s version, which is in the Dutch Reformed tradition (thereby having more sympathies with the Post-Reformation Reformed scholastic tradition *via* Herman Bavinck), will be referred to as “Reformed Orthodoxy” simply because this was the language that he used. The term “orthodoxy” does not carry much pretention; it only signifies that Van Til’s theological system is self-consciously tailored to the Westminster Standards. Contemporary usage of the term “Reformed Orthodoxy” is vastly diffuse.

8. Indeed, there continues to be extensive debate concerning the relationship between God’s knowledge and the laws of logic. Most recently, see James N. Anderson and Greg Welty, “The Lord of Noncontradiction: An Argument for God from Logic,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 no. 2 (2011): 321–338, and Nathan D. Shannon, “Necessity, Univocism, and the Triune God: A Response to Anderson and Welty,” 1–14, available at [http://epsociety.org/userfiles/Shannon%20\(Response\\_to\\_Anderson\\_and\\_Welty-final\).pdf](http://epsociety.org/userfiles/Shannon%20(Response_to_Anderson_and_Welty-final).pdf).

9. By “self-contained,” we mean that God is the sole metaphysical rationale for himself. Surely, in one sense, all entities have “self-contained” natures. Yet Van Til uses the phrase, not in terms of particular realities, but universal realities. In other words, while any entity may be conceived as “self-contained” in some limited sense, ultimately, they are contained by being, thereby making their most ultimate metaphysical rationale existence itself, broadly and abstractly conceived. For Van Til, when he spoke of God as “self-contained,” it was in distinction from this way in which creatures are self-contained (i.e., by a higher metaphysical order). Therefore, by referring to God as “self-contained,” Van Til only means to denote that God’s essence is the highest metaphysical descriptor of his reality, and nothing above Him. For example, Van Til uses this phrase to describe the relationship between God, necessity, and contingency: “Before the world was, God existed from all eternity as a self-contained and self-sufficient being. From the Christian point of view, it is impossible to think of the nonexistence of God. It is very well possible to think of the nonexistence of the world. In fact, we believe that the world once upon a time did not exist; it was created by God out of nothing.” Van Til then logically connects the two starting points we have mentioned above, God’s knowledge being analytic and his aseity, “Man’s inability to comprehend God is founded on the very fact that God is *completely self-comprehensive*. God is absolute rationality. He was and is the only self-contained whole, the system of absolute truth. God’s knowledge is, therefore, exclusively *analytic*, that is, self-dependent. There never were any facts existing independent of God that he had to investigate. God is the one and only ultimate Fact. In him, i.e., with respect to his own being, apart from the world, fact and interpretation of fact are coterminous.” Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1974), 29, 30.

10. For a more exhaustive exposition of Reformed epistemology, see “Scripture as Word of God and *principium cognoscendi theologiae*” in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 2 Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand

Rapids: Baker, 1993), 149–230. When the Bible is cited throughout this piece, it is strictly for the purpose of aiding the presentation of RO as a theological system.

11. McCormick, "Why God Cannot Think," 259.

12. *Ibid.*, 262.

13. *Ibid.*, 261.

14. *Ibid.*, italics in original.

15. Linda Zagzebski makes the intriguing proposal that God not only knows all objects but also experiences each person's subjective experience of those objects as an extension of his omniscience and omnipresence. Zagzebski labels this divine activity "omnisubjectivity." She explains, "Omnisubjectivity is, roughly, the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness the first-person perspective of every conscious being." Linda Zagzebski, "Omnisubjectivity," *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, Volume 1*, ed. Jon Kvanvig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 232. Such a thesis would likely cohere well with Van Til's theology of God's psychological experience as *a se*. Zagzebski points out the theological-methodological error that McCormick utilizes in his discussion of God when she says, "If we think of God as like ourselves, only better, we fall into the error of thinking that the limits of human imagination are the limits of the possible. But it is very difficult to avoid this error if we also think of God as personal. Omnisubjectivity is an attribute that is distinctively personal, yet incomprehensibly immense. To me that is an advantage. I am speculating, of course, but I think omnisubjectivity makes more sense as a model of how an omniscient being knows his creatures than the model of the deity reading off all the propositions about the world in his mental encyclopedia." *Ibid.*, 246.

16. "As human beings we must know or interpret the facts after we look at the facts, after they are there and perhaps after they have operated for some time. In the case of God, on the other hand, God's knowledge of the facts come first. God knows or interprets the facts before they are facts. It is God's plan or his comprehensive interpretation of the facts that makes the facts what they are." Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th edition (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1955), 32.

17. There is a heated debate involving Duns Scotus and the semantics of the univocity of being that we do not have time to engage at a deep level. Richard Cross and Thomas Williams advocate a version of Scotus's univocity, arguing that it is largely compatible with Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of analogy. However, the debate is largely a historical one. That is, Cross and Williams do not advocate a crass univocity of being between God and creation, but rather offer a rereading of Scotus that highlights an apophatic aspect in his theology, and frames his univocity strictly in terms of defending the ability to predicate meaningfully of God. The fundamental problem with the relevance of this interesting debate for us is that it is held in terms of the age-old war between Scotists and Thomists. Thus, arguments by Cross and Williams for univocity are in such deep conversation with Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of analogy (which many Thomists have claimed may not even exist) that it would require an article in and of itself to explain its relevance for McCormick's critique of theism and the RO Response. See Richard Cross, "Where Angels Fear to Tread: Duns Scotus and Radical Orthodoxy," *Anoniamum* Annus 56 Fasc. 1 (January-March, 2001), 7–41, and Thomas Williams, "The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutary," *Modern Theology* 21:4 (October 2005), 575–585. Interestingly, although Thomas's doctrine of analogy is the true centerpoint of the conversation, "Aquinas is perhaps best known for his theory of analogy. On closer inspection it turns out that he never had one." David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1979), 55. Van Til says, "God had from all eternity the idea of a universe. Spinoza would conclude from this that therefore the universe has existed from all eternity. It is thus that he would apply his principle of identification of all reality, including God and the universe, and all rationality. In complete contradistinction from this we, as Christians, hold to the notion of creation into nothing. We distinctly affirm that God's eternal idea of the universe did not imply the eternal creation of the universe." *Ibid.*, 61.

18. In other words, God knows created reality *through* his eternal act of knowing himself, and it is man's correspondence or non-correspondence to this knowledge on the created level that makes perception true or false. "If one does not make human knowledge wholly dependent upon the original self-knowledge and consequent revelation of God to man, then man will

have to seek knowledge within himself as the final reference point. Then he will have to seek an exhaustive understanding of reality. Then he will have to hold that if he cannot attain to such an exhaustive understanding of reality, he has no true knowledge of anything at all. Either man must then know everything or he knows nothing. This is the dilemma that confronts every form of non-Christian epistemology." Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 17 (italics original).

19. McCormick, "Why God Cannot Think," *Impossibility*, 261.

20. Now, surely McCormick wouldn't concede the point that humans are made in the image of God. But, again, our task is not to prove the validity of the system of RO, but to provide a system in which McCormick's critique of classical theism does not stand. In this case, being in the image of God (i.e., reflecting God's knowledge of creation through his eternal act of self-knowledge in our limited version of knowing the world) is a part of that system. We are not assessing the truthfulness of RO here, as much as we are evaluating its explanatory power.

21. McCormick gives a fuller explanation of his reason for believing that omniscience precludes the knowing of propositions: "All propositional information about [the world] must be in terms of properties that the object shares with others. And only a mind that lacks perfect resolution in its apprehension of objects can grasp similarities." *Ibid.*, 271.

22. "The finite mind cannot thus, if we are to reason theistically, be made the standard of what is possible and what is impossible. It is the divine mind that is determinative of the possible. We conclude then that God's knowledge of the universe is also analytical. God's knowledge of the universe depends upon God's knowledge of himself. . . . His knowledge of that which now takes place in the universe is logically dependent upon what he has from eternity decided with respect to the universe." Van Til, *Defense*, 62.

23. Historically, this distinction between the data that constitutes PK and the data that constitutes HC (if we may speak in purely informational terms) has been labeled "archetypal" and "ectypal," respectively. For more on this distinction, see Willem K. van Asselt, "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 319–335, and Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Volume 1: Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 229–238. Van Til explains further, "Because he is a creature, man must, in his thinking, his feeling and his willing, be representative of God. There is no other way open for him. He could, in the nature of the case, think nothing at all unless he thought God's thoughts after him, and this is representational thinking. Thus man's thought is representative of God's thought, but not exhaustively representative." Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 78–79.

24. McCormick, "Why God Cannot Think," *Impossibility*, 264.

25. *Ibid.*, 266.

26. In fact, many theologians do not even define God's omnipresence in terms of space-time, but as an extension of his omniscience. For instance, Charles Taliaferro asks, "Could God be said to be more present to one place in the cosmos than another? . . . [T]he answer would be negative in that God's supreme cognitive power takes within its compass all regions of the cosmos and no part of the cosmos can exist without God's creative conservation." *Consciousness and the Mind of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 339–340. If such a view were accepted, it would undo McCormick's undefended presupposition that God would have to be "completely unified" with every object of his knowledge (discussed below). Edward R. Wierenga combats McCormick's version of omnipresence, held by Charles Hartshorne and Richard Swinburne, that, if God is truly omnipresent, the created world must function as his body, in "Omnipresence," *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* Blackwell Companions to Philosophy, ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 258–262.

27. By the language of "within," I do not mean what panentheists mean, namely, that created being exists within God's essence, properly speaking, but only mean to convey that, rather than God having to play by the rules of being-in-general in his interaction with creation, it is being-in-general that is exhaustively dependent on, determined by, and governed by God's essence. Van Til explains, "It is of the greatest moment to make clear that the ultimate subject of our predication is not the Universe, Reality, or Being in general in

which God is the universal, and historical facts are the particulars. If such were the case, God and the universe would be correlative to one another. And it is precisely in order to set off the Christian position against such correlativism that the equal ultimacy of the one and the many within the Godhead, prior to and independent of its relation to the created universe, must be presupposed. As Christians, we hold that in this universe we deal with a derivative one and many, which can be brought into fruitful relation with one another because, back of both, we have in God the original One and Many. If we are to have coherence in our experience, there must be a correspondence of our experience to the eternally coherent experience of God. Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition." Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 59.

28. Some may take issue with this, arguing that other attributes should precede aseity, such as the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) in Thomas Aquinas. However, even Thomists admit that the usefulness of the DDS is only as good as its function as a metaphysical descriptor of God's aseity. James Dolezal, for instance, says that aseity "is the sufficient ontological condition for regarding God as a *se*" and "the strong theological support for divine simplicity derives from the doctrine of aseity." *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 71, 68. Cited in Nathan D. Shannon's review of *God without Parts* in *Philosophia Christi* (forthcoming). "First and foremost among the attributes, we therefore mention the independence or self-existence of God (*autarkia*, *omnisufficientia*). . . . Everything we have said about God so far has laid stress upon the self-contained character of God." Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 327.

29. For recent Christian refutations of such absurdism, see C. Anthony Anderson, "Divine Omnipotence and Impossible Tasks: An Intentional Analysis," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984): 109–124; Andrew Loke, "Divine omnipotence and moral perfection," *Religious Studies* 46 (2010): 525–538; Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power" in *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113; Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 96–114; Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 92–98; John Martin Fischer, "Recent Work on God and Freedom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (April 1992): 91–109.

30. Some might object that the univocist could affirm this doctrine of omnipresence, but this objection would bring us, once again, back to God's sustaining activity. Surely God functions as the metaphysical sufficiency for objects in creation (as stated above), and he is also self-sufficient. However, to posit univocism, or, in terms of Hebrews 1:3, to insert God's very essence into "the universe" (τὰ πάντα) is metaphysically incompatible with Christianity.

31. McCormick, "Why God Cannot Think," *Impossibility*, 266.

32. Van Til says, "God is self-sufficient or self-contained in his being. He therefore knows himself and all created existence by a single internal act of intuition." Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003), 27. Furthermore, "This world has meaning *not in spite of*, but *because of*, the self-completeness of the ontological Trinity. This God is the foundation of the created universe and therefore is far above it. If he were defined only as the negation of the universe, without first being thought of as its foundation, we would have an *absolute otherness* of God. But this 'absolute otherness' would in the end become an aspect of reality as a whole, when brought into relation with the temporal universe at all." Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 227.

33. McCormick, "Why God Cannot Think," *Impossibility*, 266. By "completely unified," McCormick does not mean that God must be numerically identical to the objects of his knowledge or that they form a single composite entity. Rather, as stated above, he simply means to say that, because God is both cognitively and spatially coterminous with every object of his knowledge, there is no mechanism of psychology or space by which God is able to predicate about external reality or himself, since he cannot truly make the subject-object distinction. McCormick is not seeking to explain the metaphysics of how God is "completely unified" with the objects of his knowledge, yet he does not necessarily have to. His only point is that omnipotence and omniscience, combined, on the basis of Kantian cognitive philosophy, remove all known mechanisms for predicating on the

basis of self-awareness. Our point in this paper is to make the case that, in RO's system, God's omniscience and omnipotence are configured, in relation to reality, in a way that *does* provide God a mechanism for retaining omniscience, omnipotence, and self-awareness.

34. *Ibid.*, 267.

35. The philosophical issues involved in considering the metaphysics of absoluteness and condescension, as ideas, cannot be discussed here due to the constraints of space. However, for an appropriation of Van Til's theology applied to these issues, see K. Scott Oliphint, *God With Us* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), ch. 4–5.

36. "Since, then, God created the world, it would be impossible that this created world should ever furnish an element of reality on a par with him. . . . The creation doctrine is implied in the God concept of Christianity; deny the creation doctrine and you have denied the Christian concept of God. . . . If one believes in the creation doctrine at all, one has to say that the novelty element of the universe is subordinate to the eternal place on God." Van Til, *Systematic Theology*, 32–33.