

# How to Expand God's Sight

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One day while in graduate school, I was pondering God's relationship to infinity. I began by thinking about numbers. I wondered, "Does God see each and every number?" Numbers are infinite. That seems like so much to see.

But numbers are only the beginning. There are infinitely many truths about *each* number. For example, for any number  $n$ , it is true that  $n$  is a number, that  $n$  is less than  $n + 1$ , that  $n$  is less than  $n + 2$ , and so on. It gets wilder: for every single mathematical truth, there are infinitely many *more* truths about all its implications. Infinities spawn more and more infinities, to no end.

I wondered how God could see so many infinities.

As I pondered the matter, it occurred to me that I could try asking God about it. Why not? So I prayed, "God, how do you see so many infinities?"

Instantly, I experienced a thought that surprised me. Within my mind, I heard a voice say, "I leave some things open for discovery."

I didn't believe it. My view at the time was that God sees everything that exists. So God can't leave some mathematical truths to discovery. He already sees them all.

Still, I didn't disregard the idea that God leaves things open for discovery. I just didn't know what to make of it.

The idea that God leaves math open to discovery is radical: if God leaves things open for discovery, then there is a dynamic edge to God's knowledge. Moreover, God doesn't see things that someone *could* see right now. Could this be?

A few years later, I encountered a series of experiences that transformed my thinking about God's mind. This time my experiences were not with a voice of revelation, but with the voice of reason.

It all began as I was thinking about "self-reference" paradoxes about God's knowledge. Reflection on these paradoxes transformed me: I began to believe that God not only *could* leave things open for discovery, but God *must*. Logic requires it.

I'll share why. First, I'll describe the paradox. Then I'll show how a dynamic model of God's mind—where God leaves things open for discovery—solves the paradox.

Here's the paradox. Suppose God knows everything. Then God knows God's own knowledge. This knowledge is self-referential: it includes itself. However, it is paradoxical how self-referential knowledge could exist.

We can draw out the paradox by comparing it with Bertrand Russell's famous paradox of *sets*. A set "packages" things together. For example, a set of three oranges packages three oranges into

a single set. Russell discovered a problem with thinking that sets package everything, including themselves.

Here is a quick, technical summary of the problem. Consider this paradoxical set: *the set that includes all and only sets that don't include themselves*. With some reflection, you can see that this set is contradictory: by its definition, it must include itself just if it does not include itself—a contradiction. To see this, consider first the case where this set doesn't include itself. Then by definition, it is among the sets it includes. Next, go the other way: suppose this set does include itself. Well, then by its definition, it is *not* among the sets it includes (for it only includes the self-including ones). Either way, then, this set entails a contradiction.

To solve the problem, Russell shaves away self-including sets. This solution requires that we deny that there is set of everything.

There is a similar paradox of God's knowledge. Suppose God's knowledge *includes* everything, including itself. Then God has a paradoxical item of knowledge: God knows all and only God's knowledge that is *not* self-including. Call this item of knowledge, *Quirky*. With some reflection, you can see that Quirky is like Russell's paradoxical set. It is contradictory: by its definition, it must include itself just if it does not include itself—a contradiction. The contradiction is deducible in precisely the same as in the case of the paradoxical set.

We can summarize the result as follows:

1. Suppose God's knowledge automatically includes everything.
2. Then God's knowledge includes a contradictory item of knowledge, Quirky.
3. God's knowledge cannot include a contradictory item of knowledge.
4. Therefore, God's knowledge doesn't automatically include everything.

What shall we make of this argument?

Over the last five years, I've talked with many philosophers about this argument to see what they might say. I've received many responses, some quite clever. However, I've seen no response that removes the problem.

Here's the best response I've seen. Perhaps God just sees everything in a single act of awareness. This single act isn't divisible into distinct items of knowledge. So God's awareness is not divisible into parts that can include other parts. On this model, there is no prospect of paradoxical self-reference. Problem solved?

I don't think so. The root of the problem remains. For even if God sees in a single act of awareness, this act is itself *self-referring*. Self-reference is the root of the problem. To be clear, the problem here is not with self-awareness. I think God can be self-aware by focusing on God's self. The problem, rather, is with act of awareness itself focusing on itself. Self-referencing awareness is a like a mouth that eats itself. There is a conceptual problem here.

Russell's self-reference paradox brings this problem into brighter light. Even if God's awareness is simple, we can still deduce the same problem in terms of facts about God's awareness. Here is how. Suppose God is automatically aware of everything, including God's own awareness. Then

there are self-including awareness facts. For example, there is the fact that God is aware of all facts about awareness, including that same fact. It follows that there is this paradoxical fact: the fact that God is aware of the awareness facts that are *not* self-including. As before, this fact is self-including just if it isn't—a contradiction. Therefore, the original problem remains.

Fortunately, there is a solution. Here it is: accept that God leaves things open to discovery.

I will now draw out a model of how God might leave things open for discovery. I call this model, “the dynamic-knowledge” model. According to the dynamic-knowledge model, God is not required to see things all the way out. For example, when God sees a flower, God is not thereby required to *also* see Himself seeing that very act of seeing, *and* to see Himself seeing Himself seeing that act of seeing, and so on out to infinity. That's more sight than necessary for seeing a flower.

Instead, God has the power to focus his attention on things. God can “draw near” to you, for example, by drawing more awareness to you. This awareness is not automatic or required. It is voluntary.

Time for an objection. One might think that if God leave things open for discovery, then God doesn't have all knowledge. If God doesn't have all-knowledge, then God has a limited mind. And if God has a limited mind, then God is imperfect. Does the dynamic-knowledge model deplete God's perfection?

I don't think so. Consider, first, that God still has completely unrestricted and maximal power of awareness. There is nothing God *can't* see. God can see any implication of any mathematical truth. God can do this instantly and effortlessly.

Second, the dynamic-knowledge model *removes* a limit. In particular, on the dynamic-model, God has the power to leave things open for discovery. On static-models, by contrast, God lacks that power. In this respect, then, the dynamic-knowledge model displays God's perfection.

I offer the dynamic-knowledge model, then, as a proposal worth serious consideration. It has an important theoretical advantage: it solves the self-reference paradox. Thus, God can be aware of a flower, for example, without this same act of awareness pointing back to itself. The dynamic-knowledge model shaves off these self-referencing acts of awareness and so escapes the problems with self-reference.

I'll close with a note of application. The dynamic-knowledge model of God implies a special way that we can partner with God. If the dynamic-knowledge model is true, then God leaves things open for discovery. We can discover new mathematical theorems. We can discover new things about each other. Perhaps God sees many of these things already, but perhaps some of them he leaves to us to discovery first. If so, then we can partner with God in the discovery of new things.

**BIO:**

Joshua Rasmussen is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Azusa Pacific University. He works on questions about the fundamental nature of minds and existence. Rasmussen is author of five books (including *How Reason Can Lead to God*) and founder of the *Worldview Design Training Center* ([worldview-design.com](http://worldview-design.com)) and Worldview Design YouTube channel, which help people have insights about the things that matter most.

Tagline: God leaves some things open for discovery.

Question: Is it possible for God to learn something from us?