A complete knowledge of the nominatum

Frege writes, “A complete knowledge of the nominatum would require that we could tell immediately in the case of any given sense whether it belongs to the nominatum. This we shall never be able to do.”

Let $x$ be the nominatum, and let $P$ be any sentence. Then the sense of the following description ‘belongs to the nominatum’ (as Frege puts it) $x$ if and only if $P$ is true:

$$z ((z = x \land P) \lor (\neg z = z \land \neg P))$$

Note that when $P$ is true, the description has $x$ as its nominatum, and when $P$ is false, the description has no nominatum.

So in order to know whether the description picks out $x$, one must know whether $P$ is true. But since we can construct such a description for any $P$, to know for any such description whether it picks out $x$, one must be omniscient.

This argument uses an idea of Alonzo Church.