

The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom

Western monotheistic religions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) typically believe that God is a "3-O" God. That is, God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omnibenevolent (morally perfect), and omniscient (all-knowing).

1. The Problem: If God knows, then He knows EVERYTHING. But, then, God even knows what will happen tomorrow, or next year, or one thousand years from now. Furthermore, an omniscient being is never wrong. It follows that whatever God KNOWS will happen in the future WILL happen in the future. But, then, if God knows, say, that you will skip class next week, it follows that you WILL skip class next week. There is, in fact, no way that you could FAIL to skip class next week. God is never wrong. And this goes for ANY choice you will ever make. He knows in advance what choice you will make, so it follows that you WILL in fact make that choice. But, then, what room is there for free will?

We can express this worry in the form of an argument. Imagine Jones, who is thinking about mowing his lawn on Saturday. Imagine also that God knows in advance that Jones WILL in fact mow his lawn on Saturday. Will Jones's decision to mow be a free one? It seems that it will NOT be free:

1. God exists on Monday. (Since God is eternal, He exists at all times).
2. God believes Monday that <Jones will mow his lawn on Saturday>. (Since God is omniscient, He therefore knows the future).
3. If God believes X, then X must be true (i.e., God is never wrong).
4. Therefore, it is *true* on Monday that <Jones will mow his lawn on Saturday>.
5. The only way that Jones FREELY mows his lawn on Saturday is if he has the ability to NOT mow his lawn on Saturday (this is what it means to be free).
6. The only way that Jones could not mow his lawn on Saturday is if he brings it about that one of premises (1) – (3) is false.
That is, Jones must have the power to: (a) Make God not exist on Monday, (b) Make God not have that belief on Monday, or (c) Make God have a false belief on Monday.
7. But, Jones does not have the power to make any of premises (1) – (3) false.
*(a) Jones does not have the power to make it such that God didn't exist on Monday. (b) Nor does he have the power to make it such that God didn't hold the belief on Monday that he *did* in fact hold. (c) Nor does he have the power to make it such that an omniscient being held a false belief.*
8. Therefore, Jones does NOT freely mow his lawn on Saturday.

This is generalizable to any future free action. So, the conclusion is that Jones does not do ANYTHING freely—i.e., humans do not have free will.

NOTE: We will examine objections to several of these premises. But, here are the premises that we will NOT raise objections to:

Conclusion/Premise 1: One *could* just bite the bullet and embrace the conclusion, rejecting the belief that humans have free will. Similarly, one *could* just reject the existence of God—i.e., deny premise 1, which says that God exists.

There is no problem of divine foreknowledge vs. human freedom if we deny the existence of one of these two things. This puzzle is only a puzzle for those who believe that God exists AND that humans have free will.

Premise 3: The traditional theist will want to accept the idea that God is infallible. An omniscient, perfect God cannot be mistaken. So, if we say that God CAN be mistaken (i.e., if we reject premise 3), the problem goes away.

Premise 4: Premise 4 just follows from premises 1-3.

Premise 7: Premise 7 seems pretty uncontroversial as well. How could a human being have the power to make it the case that God, who DID exist, and have a true belief yesterday, suddenly did NOT exist, or did NOT have a true belief yesterday, or else did NOT actually believe something that He did in fact believe? This just seems absurd. We cannot make something that definitely happened suddenly not have happened.

2. The Compatibilist Solution: Denying Premise 5 & Re-Defining 'Free': It is typically thought that, in order to FREELY choose to do something, one must have the ability to DO OTHERWISE. But, we will see reason to reject this claim later in the semester.

Some philosophers believe that, even if you will DEFINITELY do X (i.e., there is no way for you to NOT do X), this is not incompatible with the claim that you do X freely. This view is called "compatibilism". It proposes that free will and a future that is "set in stone" are not mutually exclusive. They are, rather, compatible with one another.

Objection: Even if this philosophical view of freedom turns out to be true, it would still be a problem for theists. For, then, when God created the world, and the people in it, He knew in advance which future was "set in stone". In that case, He knew in advance that World War II was DEFINITELY going to happen. But, why would a morally perfect God create a world where He knew this was going to happen? Why wouldn't He intervene to stop it? Perhaps worse, imagine Sally, who is an atheist. God knows in advance that she is DEFINITELY going to reject the existence of God—and yet, He punishes her with eternal torment in hell *even though she could not have done otherwise*. Though some theists accept this result (e.g., Calvinists), most view this as a problem. Simply put, if we do not have the ability to do otherwise, there seems to be no room for justly praising or blaming people for their actions. We will discuss this issue in much more detail later.

3. The Boethian Solution: Denying Premise 2 By Re-Defining 'Eternal': Boethius (~500 AD) pointed out a problem with premise 3. Theists typically believe that God is ETERNAL. This does not mean means that God is immortal, existing at all times because He is IN time. Rather, it means that God exists *outside of time*.

Imagine being on a train. If you are riding the train, you can only see a portion of the tracks at any given time. But, if you are OUTSIDE of the train—say on a nearby mountain overlooking the tracks—you see ALL of the tracks simultaneously. Boethius tells us that this is how God sees time.

As such, it is improper to speak of God's "fore"-knowledge. It's not quite right to say that, on Monday, God believes that Jones WILL mow his lawn this coming Saturday. For an eternal being, both Monday and Saturday occur simultaneously in a timeless present moment.

Objection: But, this can be easily remedied. If need be, we can just re-word the premise. Rather than say "God believes X on Monday..." we can instead say that "On Monday, it is true that God believes X." For, God does not need to be IN TIME in order for claims about Him to be true AT TIMES. For instance, presumably it was true on Wednesday that God is omnipotent, and true on Friday that He is morally perfect. And so on. Similarly, claims about what God knows can also be true AT times, even if God Himself is eternal in the way that Boethius describes.

4. The Aristotelian Solution: Denying Premise 2 By Re-Defining 'Omniscient': Note, however, that some theists DO reject the idea that God knows what will happen in the future, and yet maintain that God is omniscient. How do they do this? Answer: They suggest that, because we have free will, propositions about what we WILL do have no "truth value". Generally, it seems that propositions like, <Ripe tomatoes are red> or <A unicorn exists> are either true or false (in this case, the former is true, and the latter is false). But, there might be some propositions that are NEITHER true nor false. And perhaps propositions like <Jones will mow his lawn on Saturday> are examples of this. Taking this into account, we may re-define omniscience as:

Omniscience = Knowing the truth values of all of the propositions which have a truth value.

Note: Something similar to this claim has been endorsed by "Open Theists", who claim that the future is "open", and God does not know what is going to happen. He simply has to "wait and see" like the rest of us.

Objection: But, note that this is not only a watered down definition of omniscience, but it ALSO seems to pre-suppose that God (a) is IN TIME rather than outside of time—for if He WERE “eternal” (outside of time), then He would see ALL TIMES, including those that are still future TO US, and (b) God is not “immutable” (i.e., unchangeable), since it seems that He is continually LEARNING things (namely, as time unfolds).

Something like this was originally proposed by Aristotle. But, these implications of Aristotle’s suggestion for the nature of God are too radical for many traditional theists, who believe that God is (i) outside of time, (ii) unchangeable, and (iii) does know what will happen in the future. Let us acknowledge that it IS a potential solution to the problem, but continue to explore the question of whether we can solve the problem while maintaining the existence of the TRADITIONAL sort of God.

5. The Molinist Solution: Clarifying Premise 2 By Defining ‘Middle Knowledge’: Luis de Molina (1500’s AD) proposed that God has three kinds of knowledge:

- (i) God knows every single possibility (and every impossibility). For instance, He knows that unicorns could possibly exist, and that $<2+2=4>$ could not possibly be false.
- (ii) God knows His own will. For instance, He knows that He did not create unicorns.
- (iii) God knows what every single free creature would freely do in any given situation.

“in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each free will, God saw in His own essence what each such will would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this, or in that or, indeed, in infinitely many orders of things—even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite.” (*Concordia*, IV.52.9)

Molina calls knowledge of type-(iii) “middle knowledge”. It is knowledge of “the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom”, or knowledge of what free creatures would do with their freedom in every possible circumstance.

Objection: This doesn’t seem to be a solution at all. For, on this view, God supposedly knows something like, $<\text{If Jones is placed in a circumstance where he is home on a Saturday and his lawn is overgrown, then Jones will **freely** mow his lawn}>$.

Note that this isn’t knowledge of what Jones would PROBABLY do—but of what he would DEFINITELY do. So, how is Jones’ choice FREE? Molina insists that Jones really does still have the ability to do the opposite, even though he definitely won’t. But how do we make sense of this? It sure seems as if Jones CANNOT choose to not mow his lawn in such a situation, since God knows that he DEFINITELY will whenever he is placed in it. Apparently, it’s a mystery even for Molina, who merely tells us that God has a “profound and inscrutable comprehension of each free will.”

6. The Ockhamist Solution: Denying Premise 6 and Clarifying Premise 3: Alvin Plantinga takes issue with premise 6 in his article. Plantinga's solution is inspired by that of William of Ockham from the 13th century (of Ockham's Razor fame).

Plantinga points out that the mistake of premise 6 really rests on a mis-understanding about the nature of necessity assumed in premise 3 ("If God believes X, then X must be true"). This sentiment of premise 3 is captured by Evodius in Augustine's dialogue:

If God therefore foreknew that a good man would sin . . . *the sin was committed of necessity*, because God foreknew that it would happen. *How then could there be free will when there is such inevitable necessity?*

But, in what sense will I do something "of necessity" if God foreknows that I will? Consider two similar, but distinct interpretations of premise 3:

- (a) Necessarily, if God believes X, then X is true.
- (b) If God believes X, then, necessarily, X is true.

These may seem like the same claim, but they are in fact very different. Claim (a) is just a claim about what is entailed by God's perfection: Namely, if a being who is never wrong believes something, then it is definitely true. But, claim (b) is much stronger. It claims that, if God believes something, then what He believes is a NECESSARY truth—i.e., something that could not possibly have been false.

To understand this difference, consider the following two claims:

- (a) Necessarily, if <You are a bachelor> is true, then <You are single> is true.
- (b) If <You are a bachelor> is true, then, <Necessarily, you are single> is true.

The first claim, (a), says something so trivial it is almost a tautology. It merely says that it is impossible for it to be true that you are a bachelor, without it also being true that you are single. The former just entails the latter.

But, (b) says something much stronger—something that even seems clearly false. It says that, if it is true that <You are a bachelor>, then it is IMPOSSIBLE for you to ever be anything but single! (i.e., you are *necessarily* a bachelor!)

The problem at hand is a question about what sort of necessity is involved when God has *knowledge*. As further illustration, here are two more claims:

(a) Necessarily, if I know that <Obama exists>, then <Obama exists> is true.

(b) If I know that <Obama exists>, then, <Necessarily, Obama exists> is true.

The first claim, (a), just follows from the definition of what it is to know something. But, the second claim, (b), says that, because I know that <Obama exists> is true, it follows that <Obama exists> is a NECESSARY TRUTH. In other words, it is IMPOSSIBLE for Obama to have not existed. But, that is false. Obama is not a necessary being. Surely, it is possible that he never existed. His parents might never have met, and he might never have been born, for instance. In short, the claims above can be paraphrased as follows:

(a) It must be the case that, if <Obama exists> is true, then Obama exists. (**TRUE**)

(b) If <Obama exists> is true, then Obama could not have failed to exist. (**FALSE**)

Plantinga's claim: The only sort of necessity entailed by God's foreknowledge is the innocuous sort expressed in (a). But, the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom requires the sort of necessity expressed (b). So, there is no problem.

Implications: We have said that <You chose to attend W&M> is fixed and unalterable. But, nevertheless, you COULD HAVE chosen to do something else. And, in that case, there would have been some OTHER fact about the past that would have been fixed and unalterable; maybe something like, <You chose to attend UVA>.

Similarly, God knows that <Jones will mow the lawn on Saturday>, and this is fixed and unalterable, but only because Jones will in fact freely choose to mow the lawn. But, he COULD choose to NOT mow the lawn—in which case, some OTHER fact about the future would have been fixed and unalterable; namely, <Jones will NOT mow the lawn on Saturday>, and THIS is what God would have foreknown all along, had this been what Jones would freely choose to do.

This is NOT the power to deceive God by making Him have a false belief. Consider:

Imagine I am watching Jones as he holds up a single fruit, selected from a whole bunch of fruits. Jones freely chooses to hold up an apple. I form the belief, <Jones is holding an apple>. Yet, he COULD HAVE held up a banana instead, right?

What if someone objects: "A-ha! Then you're admitting that Jones had the power to deceive you. Because you've just admitted that it's possible for you to have believed that Jones is holding an apple while he is actually holding a banana!"

How would you reply? Likely: "No, you're confused. For, if he had done THAT, then I would have formed a DIFFERENT belief—namely, <Jones is holding a banana>."

The objector persists: "A-ha! Then you're admitting that Jones had the power to erase the past. For in fact, you DID form the belief that he is holding an apple. But, Jones could have erased that belief and replaced it with a different one—namely, the belief that he is actually holding a banana!"

Your reply? "Again, you're confused. If Jones had held up a banana, and I formed the belief that <Jones is holding a banana>, he wouldn't be ERASING my past belief that <Jones is holding an apple>. Rather, I just never would have formed the latter belief in the first place!"

So, in some sense, Jones DOES have the power to make premise 2 false—or rather, he has the power to have made premise 2 different all along. For, if Jones freely chooses to mow his lawn on Saturday, then God has always and forever believed this on Monday.

If, on the other hand, Jones freely chooses to NOT mow his law on Saturday, then God has always and forever believed this on Monday instead. So, Jones doesn't have the ability to CHANGE the past. Rather, he has only the ability to make it such that God would have ALL ALONG believed something different.

Short Version: In short, Plantinga is saying that God's knowledge of what is true about the future does not necessitate our future choices. Rather, it's the other way around. Our free choices and actions in the future necessitate what God knows to be true.