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## PREDESTINATION, DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE, AND HUMAN FREEDOM

### HUMAN FREEDOM AND DIVINE PREDESTINATION

As a seventeen-year-old convert to a quite orthodox branch of Protestantism, the first theological problem to concern me was the question of divine predestination and human freedom. Somewhere I read the following line from the Westminster Confession: "God from all eternity did . . . freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass." In many ways I was attracted to this idea. It seemed to express the majesty and power of God over all that he had created. It also led me to take an optimistic view of events in my own life and the lives of others, events which struck me as bad or unfortunate. For I now viewed them as planned by God before the creation of the world—thus they must serve some good purpose unknown to me. My own conversion, I reasoned, must also have been ordained to happen, just as the failure of others to be converted must have been similarly ordained. But at this point in my reflections, I hit upon a difficulty, a difficulty that made me think harder than I ever had before in my life. For I also believed that I had chosen God out of my own free will, that each of us is responsible for choosing or rejecting God's way. But how could I be responsible for a choice which, from eternity, God had ordained I would make at that particular moment in my life? How can it be that those who reject God's way do so of their own free will, if God, from eternity, destined them to reject his way? The Westminster Confession itself seemed to recognize the difficulty. For its next line read: "Yet . . . thereby is no violence offered to the will of the creatures."

For a time I accepted both divine predestination and human freedom and responsibility. I felt that although I could not see how both could be true, they, nevertheless, might both be true, so I accepted them both on faith. But the longer I thought about it the more it seemed to me that they couldn't both be true. That is,

I came to the view, rightly or wrongly, that I not only could not see how both could be true, I *could* see that they could not both be true. Slowly I abandoned the belief that before eternity God ordained whatever comes to pass. I took the view, instead, that before eternity God knew whatever comes to pass, including our free choices and acts, but that those choices and acts were not determined in advance.

What I did not know in those early years was that the topics of predestination, divine foreknowledge, and human freedom had been the focus of philosophical and theological reflection for centuries. In this chapter we shall acquaint ourselves with the various views that have emerged from those centuries of intellectual endeavor, thus enlarging our understanding of the theistic concept of God and one of the problems that has emerged in connection with it.

### Freedom of Will or Choice

Perhaps it's best to begin with the idea of human freedom. For, as we shall see, there are two quite different ways in which this idea has been understood, and which way we follow makes a great deal of difference to the topic under consideration. According to the first idea, *acting freely consists in doing what you want or choose to do*. If you want to leave the room but are forcibly restrained from doing so, we certainly would agree that *staying in the room* is not something you do freely. You do not freely stay in the room because it is not what you choose or want to do, it happens against your will.

Suppose we accept this first idea of human freedom, whereby acting freely consists in doing what you want or choose to do. The problem of divine predestination and human freedom will then turn out to be not much of a problem at all. Why so? Well, to take the example of my youthful conversion, my conversion was free if it was something I wanted to do, chose to do, did not do against my will. Let's suppose, as I believe is true, that my conversion was something I chose to do, wanted to do. Is there any difficulty in believing also that before eternity God ordained that at that particular moment in my life I would be converted? It doesn't seem that there is. For God simply could have ordained also that at that particular moment in my life I would *want* to choose Christ, to follow God's way. If so, then, on our first idea of human freedom, my act of conversion was both a free act on my part and ordained by God from eternity. On our first idea of human freedom, then, there does not seem to be any real conflict between the doctrine of divine predestination and human freedom. Is our first idea of human freedom correct? One reason for thinking that it is not was provided by the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704). Locke asks us to suppose that a man is brought into a room while asleep. The door, which is the only way out of the room, is then securely bolted from the outside. The man does not know that the door is bolted, does not know, therefore, that he *cannot* leave the room. He awakens, finds himself in the room, looks about and notices that there are friendly people in the room with whom he would like to converse. Accordingly, he decides to stay in the room rather than leave.'

What are we to say of this man? *Is his act staying in the room* something he does freely? Well, according to our first idea of human freedom, it would seem that it is. For staying in the room is what he wants to do. He considers leaving,

not knowing that he cannot leave, but rejects it because he prefers to stay in the room and engage in friendly conversation. But can we really believe that staying in the room is something he does freely? After all, it is the only thing that can be done. He stays in the room *of necessity*, for leaving the room is something that is not in his power to do. What is the difference between him and a second man, similarly placed, who wants to leave, but being unable to leave, also stays in the room of necessity? Is the difference that the first man does something freely, whereas, the second man does not? Or is it, rather, that the first man is just more *fortunate* than the second? Each does what he does (stay in the room) of necessity, not freely, but the first man is more fortunate in that what he *must do tums* out to be the very thing that he wants to do. Locke concludes that the first man is not more free than the second, only more fortunate. For freedom, Locke contends, consists in more than simply doing what one wants or chooses, it also must be that *it was in one's power to do otherwise*. And the reason why the first man, no less than the second, did not stay in the room freely is because it was not in his power to do otherwise, to leave the room.

### The Power to Do Otherwise

The second idea of human freedom is that we do something freely only if, at the time just before we do it, it is in our power to do otherwise. And I think that on reflection we can see that the second idea is more adequate than the first. Consider, for example, growing old. This is something we do of necessity, not freely. The mere fact that someone prefers to grow old, wants to grow old, is not sufficient for it being true that she grows old freely—at best we might say that she grows old gracefully. Suppose, however, a process is discovered and made available whereby each of us has the power not to grow old in the sense of physical aging. Although time continues to pass, the aging process in our bodies can now be slowed enormously. Under these conditions it could be true that someone grows old freely, for one would not then grow old of necessity, it being in a person's power to do otherwise. The first idea of freedom must be abandoned in favor of the second, more adequate idea.

It is the second idea of freedom that appears to be in conflict with the idea of divine predestination. For if God has determined, from eternity, that I will be converted at a certain moment on a particular day, how can it be in my power just prior to that moment to refrain from being converted? To ascribe such a power to me is to ascribe to me the power to prevent from taking place something that God from eternity has ordained to take place. Surely if from eternity God has determined that something will happen it cannot be in some creature's power to prevent that thing from taking place. Therefore, if from eternity God did ordain whatever comes to pass, then there is nothing that happens which we could have prevented from happening. So, since whatever I do has been ordained by God to take place, it is never in my power to do otherwise. And if it is never in my power to do otherwise, then nothing I do is done freely. Human freedom, it seems, is inconsistent with divine predestination.

If the above argument is correct, as I'm inclined to believe it is, the theist must either abandon the belief in human freedom or the doctrine of divine

predestination. And it seems reasonable that between the two, the doctrine of divine predestination should be given its walking papers. That God has *ultimate control* over the destiny of his creation and that he *knows* in advance of its happening everything that will happen are ideas that preserve the majesty of God and provide for some degree of human optimism, without requiring that God has decreed to happen whatever does happen. And on the surface at least, it does not appear that the doctrine of divine foreknowledge conflicts with human freedom. So perhaps the reasonable thing to do is to reject the doctrine of divine predestination, while preserving the belief in human freedom and the doctrine of divine foreknowledge.

### THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HUMAN FREEDOM AND DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE

But if God has not ordained from eternity everything that will happen, how is it possible for him to have known from eternity everything that happens? Doesn't the doctrine of divine foreknowledge presuppose the doctrine of divine predestination? Having decreed that something will happen at a certain time would be a way in which God could know in advance that it will happen. But it is not the only way in which God might have possessed such knowledge. We possess telescopes, for example, that enable us to know what is happening at places some distance away, because by means of the telescope we can see them happening. Imagine that God has something like a *time* telescope, a telescope that enables one to see what is happening at times some distance away. By turning the lens one focuses on a certain time, say a thousand years from now, and sees the events that are occurring at that time. With some such image as this we might account for God's foreknowledge without supposing that his knowledge is derived from his prior decree that the events in question will occur. He knows in advance the events that will take place by *foreseeing* them, not by *foreordaining* them. The doctrine of divine foreknowledge, then, does not presuppose the doctrine of divine predestination. And, as we noted earlier, there does not appear to be any conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. For although God's *foreordaining* something makes that something happen, his *foreknowing* does not make it happen. Things occur not because God foreknows them; rather, he foreknows them because they occur.

Unfortunately, things are not so simple as that. There is a serious problem about divine foreknowledge and human freedom. And although we may not be able to solve this problem, it will be instructive to try to understand the problem and see what the various "solutions" are that have been advanced by important philosophers and theologians. Perhaps the best way to start is by stating the problem in the form of an argument, an argument that begins with the doctrine of divine foreknowledge and ends with the denial of human freedom. Once we understand the major premises of the argument, as well as the reasons given in support of them, we will have come to an understanding of one of the major problems theologians have wrestled with for almost two thousand years: the problem of reconciling the doctrine of divine foreknowledge with the belief in human freedom.

1. God knows before we are born everything we will do.
2. If God knows before we are born everything we will do, then it is never in our power to do otherwise.
3. If it is never in our power to do otherwise, then there is no human freedom.

Therefore,

4. There is no human freedom.

The first premise of the argument expresses an apparent implication of the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. The third premise simply states an implication of the second idea of freedom we considered earlier. According to that idea, we do something freely only if, at the time just before we do it, it is in our power to do otherwise. Thus, we concluded that the act of staying in the room was freely done only if, at the time of the decision to stay in the room, it was in the person's power to do otherwise, that is, to leave the room. Since the door was securely bolted from the outside, we concluded that he did not freely stay in the room. Now premise 3 merely draws the logical conclusion from this second idea of freedom: if it is never in our (any human being's) power to do otherwise, then there is no human freedom. Since the argument is clearly valid, the remaining question concerns premise 2: if God knows before we are born everything we will do then it is never in our power to do otherwise. Why should we accept this premise? Clearly if we replaced the word *knows* with the word *ordains* the statement would be true. But the whole point of abandoning divine predestination in favor of divine foreknowledge was that although

- a) If God *ordains* before we are born everything we will do, then it is never in our power to do otherwise,

seems surely true, it does not seem to be true that

- b) If God *knows* before we are born everything we will do, then it is never in our power to do otherwise.

Since premise 2 is the same as b why should we now accept it as true? What is the reasoning by which the proponent of this argument hopes to convince us that 2 is true?

The reasoning in support of 2 is complex, so it will be best to develop it by means of an example. Let's suppose it is 2:00 P.M. on a particular Tuesday and that you have a class in philosophy of religion that meets at 2:30. Your friends ask you to go with them to an afternoon movie, but, after considering the proposal, you somehow manage to resist temptation, and elect to attend class instead. It is now 2:45 and your instructor is carrying on about foreknowledge and free will. Somewhat bored, you now wish that you had gone to the movie instead of coming to class. You realize, however, that although you now regret your decision there is nothing that you can do about it. Of course, you could get up from your seat and rush off to see what is left of the movie. But you cannot now, at 2:45, bring it about that you did not go to class at 2:30, you cannot *now* bring it about that you actually

went to the movie instead. You can regret what you did and resolve never to make that mistake again, but, like it or not, you are stuck with the fact that instead of going to the movie you went to class at 2:30. You are stuck with it because it is a *fact about the past* and the past is not in our power. Our inability to alter the past is enshrined in the colloquialism, "There's no use crying over spilt milk." Within limits, however, the future seems open, pliable; we can make it to be one way or another. You believe, for example, that on Thursday, when the class meets again, it will be in your power to go to class and it will be in your power to go to a movie instead. But the past is not open, it is closed, solid like granite, and in no way within your power to alter. As Aristotle observed:

**No one deliberates about the past but only about what is future and capable of being otherwise, while what is past is not capable of not having taken place; hence Agathon is right in saying: "For this alone is lacking, even in God, to make undone things that have once been done."**<sup>2</sup>

There are, of course, a large number of facts about the past relative to 2:45 on Tuesday. In addition to the fact that at 2:30 you came to class, there is the fact of your birth, the fact that you became a college student, the fact that two world wars occurred in the twentieth century, indeed, all the facts of past history. And what you now know is that at 2:45 it is not in your power to affect *any* of them. There is nothing that is now in your power to do such that were you to do it, any of these facts about the past would not have been facts about the past. Pondering your powerlessness over the past, you notice that your instructor has written on the board another fact about the past:

- F. Before you were born God knew that you would come to class at 2:30 this Tuesday.

If God exists and the doctrine of divine foreknowledge is true, F is certainly a fact about the past, and it has been a fact about the past at every moment of your life. It is a fact about the past *now*-at 2:45 on Tuesday-it was a fact about the past *yesterday*, and it will be a fact about the past *tomorrow*. At this point your instructor turns and asks: "Was it in your power at 2:00 to have refrained from coming to class today?" You certainly think that it was-indeed, you now regret that you did not exercise that power-so the instructor writes on the board:

- A. It was in your power at 2:00 to do something other than come to class at 2:30 this Tuesday.

But now let's think for a bit about F and A. At 2:00, F was a fact about the past. But according to A, it was in your power at 2:00 to do something (go to a movie, say) such that had you done it, what is a fact about the past (F) would not have been a fact about the past. For, clearly, if you had exercised your power to refrain from coming to class at 2:30 what God would have known before you were born is not what he in fact knew, that you would come to class this Tuesday, but something quite different, that you would do something else. And this in turn

means that if F is a fact about the past—as it surely is if the doctrine of divine foreknowledge is true—and if A is true, then it was in your power at 2:00 this Tuesday to affect the past; it was in your power to do something (go to a movie) such that had you done it, what is a fact about the past (F) would not have been a fact about the past. If then, the *past is never in our power*, it cannot be both that F was a fact about the past and also that it was in your power at 2:00 to refrain from coming to class at 2:30 this Tuesday.

What we have just seen is that given the doctrine of divine foreknowledge and the claim that it is in our power to have done something we did not do, it follows that the past is in our power. For given the doctrine of divine foreknowledge it follows that *before* you were *born* God knew that you would come to class at 2:30 this Tuesday. And if we now claim that *at 2:00* it was in your power to have done otherwise, we imply that at 2:00 it was in your power so to act that before you were born God would not have known that you would come to class at 2:30. But we earlier concluded that facts about the past are not within our power. If we keep to this conviction—as it seems we must—then we must conclude that if God did know before you were born that you would be in class at 2:30 (this Tuesday) then it was not in your power at 2:00 to do otherwise. And generalizing from this particular example, we can conclude that if the past is never in our power, then if God knows before we are born everything we will do, it is never in our power to do otherwise.

We have worked our way through the rather complex reasoning that can be used to support premise 2 of the argument designed to show a conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. That premise, as you recall, says that if God knows before we are born everything we will do, then it is never in our power to do otherwise. Reduced to its simplest terms, the reasoning given in support of 2 consists in arguing that if 2 is not true, then we have power over the past. But since the past is not within our power, 2 must be true. From

- (i) God knows before we are born everything we will do and,
- (ii) It is sometimes in our power to do otherwise

it follows, so the reasoning goes, that it is sometimes in our power to determine the past. Since it is never in our power to determine the past, premises (i) and (ii) can't both be true. Hence, if (i) is true then (ii) is false. But to say that (ii) is false is just to say that it is *never* in our power to do otherwise. So if (i) is true then it is *never* in our power to do otherwise—and this is exactly what premise 2 says.

### SOME SOLUTIONS TO THE CONFLICT

We've had a look at perhaps the strongest argument for the view that the doctrine of divine foreknowledge, no less than the doctrine of divine predestination, is in fundamental conflict with the belief in human freedom, an argument that has troubled philosophers and theologians for centuries. It is now time to consider the various “solutions” that have been offered and to assess their strengths and weaknesses.

The argument itself limits the number of possible solutions that can be advanced to the following four:

- I. *Rejection of premise 3*: denies that we do something freely only if it is in our power to do otherwise
- II. *Rejection of premise 2*: denies that divine foreknowledge implies that it is never in our power to do otherwise
- III. *Rejection of premise 1*: denies that God has foreknowledge of future events
- IV. *Acceptance of the conclusion 4*: denies that we have human freedom

Solutions III and IV are “radical” solutions since they amount to a denial either of the doctrine of divine foreknowledge or of human freedom. No theist seriously proposes IV, so we may safely dismiss it. Solution III, however, as we shall see, is the solution preferred by a number of important theologians, including Boethius and St. Thomas Aquinas. Let's consider, then, the first three solutions to this perplexing problem.

### The Definition of Freedom

The first solution rejects premise 3 of the argument, charging that 3 expresses a mistaken idea of human freedom. As we saw earlier, there are two different ideas of freedom. According to the first idea, acting freely consists in no more than doing what you want or choose to do; freedom does not require the power to do otherwise. Those who accept this idea of human freedom rightly see no conflict between it and divine foreknowledge. Indeed, as we noted earlier, there is no conflict between this idea of human freedom and the doctrine of divine predestination. A solution along these lines was developed most fully by the American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). The adequacy of this solution depends entirely on whether its idea of what human freedom consists in can be defended against the criticisms philosophers have advanced against it.<sup>3</sup> However, having rejected this idea of freedom in favor of the second idea—the idea that we do something freely only if it is in our power to do otherwise—we shall not pursue further this first solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. For given the second idea of human freedom, premise 3 must be accepted as true.

### Power Over the Past

The second major solution rejects premise 2, thereby denying that divine foreknowledge implies that it is never in our power to do otherwise. Actually, what this solution shows, if successful, is not that 2 is false, but that the reasoning given in support of it is mistaken. What is that reasoning? Well, reduced to its briefest terms, the reasoning is that if 2 is not true then it is in our power to determine the past—facts about what God knew before we were even born. But, so the reasoning goes, it is never in anyone's power to determine the past, therefore 2 must be true. The second solution challenges the claim that it is never in our power to determine the past, arguing that we do have the power to determine certain facts about the past, including certain facts about what God knew before we were even born. This solution was suggested by the most influential philosopher of the fourteenth century, William of Ockham (1285-1349).

The basic point on which the second solution rests involves a **distinction** between two types of facts about the past: facts which are *simply* about the past, and facts which are *not* simply about the past. To illustrate this distinction, let's consider two facts about the past, facts about the year 1941.

$f_1$ : In 1941 Japan attacks Pearl Harbor.

$f_2$ : In 1941 a war begins between Japan and the United States that lasts five years.

Relative to the twenty-first century,  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  are both simply about the past. But suppose we consider the year 1943. Relative to 1943,  $f_1$  is a fact that is simply about the past, but  $f_2$  is not simply about the past. It is a fact about the past relative to 1943, for  $f_2$  is, in part, a fact about 1941, and 1941 lies in 1943's past. But  $f_2$ , unlike  $f_1$ , implies a certain fact about 1944; namely,

$f_3$ : In 1944 Japan and the United States are at war.

Since  $f_2$  implies  $f_3$ , a fact about the future relative to 1943, we can say that relative to 1943  $f_2$  is a fact about the past, but not simply a fact about the past. We have then three facts,  $f_1$ ,  $f_2$ , and  $f_3$ , about which we can say that relative to the twenty-first century each is a fact simply about the past. Relative to 1943, however, only  $f_1$  is simply about the past— $f_2$  is about the past but not simply about the past, and  $f_3$  is not about the past at all.

Having illustrated the distinction between a fact which, relative to a certain time  $t$ , is simply about the past and a fact which, relative to  $t$ , is not simply about the past, we are now in a position to appreciate its importance. Think of 1943 and the groups of persons then in power in both Japan and the United States. Neither group had it in its power to do anything about  $f_1$ . Both groups may have regretted the actions which brought it about that  $f_1$  is a fact about the past. But it is abundantly clear that among all the things which, in 1943, it was in their power to do, none is such that, had they done it,  $f_1$  would not have been a fact about the past. It makes no sense to look back upon 1943 and say that if only one of these groups had *then* done such-and-such,  $f_1$  would never have been a fact about the past. It makes no sense precisely because, relative to 1943,  $f_1$  is a fact *simply* about the past. Nothing that could have been done by anyone in 1943 would have in any way affected the fact that in 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

But what about  $f_2$ , the fact that in 1941 a war begins between Japan and the United States that lasts five years. We know that in 1943 neither group did anything that affected this fact about 1941. The question, however, is whether there were things that were not done in 1943, things which, nevertheless, were in the power of one or both of the groups to do, and which, had they been done, a certain fact about 1941,  $f_2$ , would not have been a fact at all. Perhaps there were not. Perhaps the momentum of the war was such that neither group had the power to bring it to an end in 1943. Most of us, I suppose, think otherwise. We think that there probably were certain actions that were not, but could have been, taken by one or both of the groups in 1943, actions which, had they been taken, would have brought the war to an end in 1943. If what we think to be so is so, then it

was in the power of one or both of the groups in 1943 to determine a fact about the past; it was in their power in 1943 to do something such that, had they done it, a certain fact about 1941,  $f_1$ , would not have been a fact about 1941. The basic reason why in 1943  $f_2$  may have been in their power, whereas  $f_1$  certainly was not, is that, unlike  $f_1$ ,  $f_2$  is not simply about the past relative to 1943, for  $f_2$  implies a certain fact about 1944, that in 1944, Japan and the United States are at war ( $f_3$ ).

What the above reasoning suggests is that our conviction that the past is beyond our power to affect is certainly true, so far as facts which are simply about the past are concerned. Facts which are about the past, but not simply about the past, may not, however, be beyond our power to affect. And what Ockham saw is that the facts about divine foreknowledge which are used as the basis for denying human freedom are facts about the past, but *not simply* about the past. Consider again the fact that before you were born, God knew that you would be in class at 2:30 this Tuesday. We want to believe that at 2:00 it was in your power to do otherwise, to refrain from coming to class at 2:30. To ascribe this power to you implies that it was in your power at 2:00 to affect a fact about the past, the fact that before you were born God knew that you would be in class at 2:30. This fact about the past, however, is not, relative to 2:00, a fact simply about the past. For it implies a fact about the future relative to 2:00, namely, that at 2:30 you are in class. And the solution we are exploring holds that such a fact about the past was in your power to affect if it was in your power at 2:00, as we believe it was, to have gone to a movie instead of coming to class. For it was then in your power to have done something such that, had you done it, what is a fact about a time before you were born *would not have been* a fact at all—instead it would have been a fact that before you were born God knew that you would not be in class at 2:30. Of course, there will still be many facts about God's foreknowledge that are not in your power: all those facts, for example, that relative to the time you are at, are facts simply about the past. The very fact which may have been in your power at 2:00—the fact that before you were born God knew you would be in class at 2:30—is, at 2:45 when you are sitting in class regretting that you did not go to a movie, a fact that cannot *then* (at 2:45) be in your power, because at 2:45 it is a fact simply about the past. And there are many facts involving divine foreknowledge that are not simply about the past, which, nevertheless, are not in your power to affect, for the facts that they imply about the future do not fall within the scope of your power. For example, God knew before you were born that the sun would rise tomorrow. This fact about the past is not simply about the past because it implies a fact about tomorrow, that the sun will rise. It is nevertheless, a fact which is not in your power to affect.

We have been considering the second solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. As we saw, this solution consists in denying the reasoning supporting the second premise of the argument by means of which the problem was developed, the premise stating that if God knows before we are born everything we will do, it is never in our power to do otherwise. According to the reasoning in support of this premise, given divine foreknowledge, it is in our power to do otherwise only if it is in our power to affect some fact about the past, a fact about **what** God knew before we were born. The solution we have been considering accepts this point in the reasoning given in support of premise 2,

but denies the next point: that the past is never in our power. The solution argues that some facts about the past are not simply about the past, that some such facts may be within our power, and that the facts about divine foreknowledge used in the reasoning for premise 2 are examples of such facts. So according to the second major solution, we have no good reasons for accepting the second premise of the argument leading from divine foreknowledge to the denial of human freedom. And without such reasons, it has yet to be shown that there is any real difficulty in holding both that God knows before we are born everything we will do and that we sometimes have the power to do otherwise.

### The Denial of Foreknowledge

The third and final solution we shall consider rejects premise 1 of the argument, thereby denying that God has foreknowledge of future events. Earlier I called this a “radical” solution since, unlike the first two solutions, instead of trying to reconcile divine foreknowledge with human freedom, it appears to deny that there is any foreknowledge at all. But, as we shall see, this was the solution preferred by a number of important theologians within the western religious tradition.

There are two different forms of the third solution. According to the first form, statements about certain events in the future, events which might or might not happen, are neither true nor false; they become true (false) when the events they are about actually occur (don’t occur). For example, the statement, “You will attend class at a certain hour on a certain day next week” is, on the view we are considering, not now true, nor is it false. When next week comes and the hour of that particular day occurs, then the statement will become true if you attend class, and false if you do not. This view concerning statements about the future, a view often ascribed to Aristotle, has the consequence that God does not now know whether or not you will attend class at that hour next week, that God does not have foreknowledge of such future events. For knowledge is of what is *true*, and if statements about the future are neither true nor false, they cannot then be known.

The more widely accepted form of the third solution rests upon the idea that God is “eternal” in the second of the two senses introduced in Chapter 1. There we noted that to be eternal in the first sense is to have infinite duration in both temporal directions. To be eternal in the second sense, however, is to exist outside of time and, therefore, independent of the fundamental law of time according to which every being in time, even an everlasting being, has its life divided into temporal parts. As Boethius wrote:

For whatever lives in time lives in the present, proceeding from past to future, and nothing is so constituted in time that it can embrace the whole span of its life at once. It has not yet arrived at tomorrow, and it has already lost yesterday; even the life of this day is lived only in each moving, passing moment.\*

In contrast to things in time, God is viewed as having his infinite, endless life wholly present to himself, all at once. As such, God must be outside of time altogether. For, as we’ve just seen, whatever is in time has its life divided into temporal parts, only one of which can be present to it at any one time.

The idea that God is eternal in the sense of being outside of time has a direct bearing on the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. For the notion of foreknowledge naturally suggests that a being *located* at one point in time knows something that is to take place at some later point in time. Thus we speak of God knowing *at a time before you were born* what you would do at 2:30 this Tuesday. But if God is outside of time then we cannot say that he has a foreknowledge of future events, if to do so implies he is located at some point in time and at that point knows what will take place at some *later* point in time. According to Boethius, Aquinas, and a number of other theologians who hold that God is eternal in the second sense, there is nothing that happens in time that is unknown to God. Every moment *in time is ever present* to God in just the way that what is happening at this particular moment within the field of our vision is present to us. God’s knowledge of what to us is past and future is just like the knowledge that we may have of something that is happening in the present. Being above time, God takes in *all* time with one glance just as we who are in time may with a glance take in something that is happening in the present. Speaking of God’s knowledge of what takes place in time, Boethius tells us:

It encompasses the infinite sweep of past and future, and regards all things in its simple comprehension as if they were now taking place. Thus, if you will think about the foreknowledge by which God distinguishes all things, you will rightly consider it to be not a foreknowledge of future events, but knowledge of a never changing present. For this reason, divine foreknowledge is called providence, rather than prevision, because it resides above all inferior things and looks out on all things from their summit.<sup>5</sup>

According to Boethius, God does not, strictly speaking, have foreknowledge, for he is not in the position of knowing that something will occur *in advance* of its occurring. And yet God knows everything that has occurred, is occurring, and will occur. But he knows them in the way in which we know what occurs in the present. Perhaps we can clarify his position if we distinguish two senses of *foreknowledge*, foreknowledge, and foreknowledge. A being foreknows, some event *x*, we shall say, provided that the being exists at a certain time *earlier* than when *x* occurs and knows at that time that *x* will occur at some later time. This is the sort of foreknowledge which God cannot have if he is eternal in the second sense, for he will not then exist at a certain moment of time, but will be completely outside of time. A being foreknows, some event *x*, we shall say, provided that the occurrence of *x* is *present* to that being but is such that its occurrence is at a moment later than the moment at which we (who are in time) *now* exist. Given that God is eternal in the second sense he cannot have foreknowledge, of any event, but this does not preclude his having a complete foreknowledge, of all those events which, from the position of those who exist in time, are yet to come.

We can now see how Boethius and Aquinas solve the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. As we saw, the problem is that to assert both implies that it is sometimes in our power to affect a fact about the past, a fact about what God knew at a time before we were born. If we hold that it is never in our power to affect any fact about the past, it seems we must deny either divine foreknowledge or human freedom. What Boethius and Aquinas point out is that this is a genuine problem only if it is foreknowledge<sub>1</sub> that is being ascribed

to God. For if God has foreknowledge, there will be facts about some past time which, if we have human freedom, would have to be within our power to affect. But according to them, we cannot ascribe foreknowledge, to God, for such ascription implies that God exists in time. God has foreknowledge, of everything that is yet to come to pass. But foreknowledge, does not imply that there is some fact about some past time. For God does not exist in time at all. His foreknowledge, of some event in time is really no different from the knowledge that your instructor had at 2:30 on Tuesday when she saw you entering the classroom. No one thinks that the knowledge obtained by seeing you come into the classroom takes away the power you had earlier to have done something else. Similarly God's foreknowledge, since it looks down from above time and sees what is future *in time*, but *present* from God's vantage point, imposes no necessity on what it sees. For there is no *past fact* involving God's knowledge which would have to be in your power if you were free to do otherwise.

In this chapter we have studied one of the ageless problems for theism, the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and considered in detail the principal solutions which have emerged in the centuries of reflection on the problem. Of the three solutions we've considered, only the last two are tenable if, as I've suggested, the first rests on an inadequate idea of human freedom. The last solution, based as it is on the idea that God exists outside of time, will suffer from any defects associated with that idea. Some philosophers have thought that the idea itself is incoherent, and others have argued that while the idea may be coherent, any being that is eternal in the sense of existing outside of time could never *act within time*, and, therefore, could not create a world or bring about a miracle-activities generally ascribed to the theistic God. We cannot, however, pursue these matters here.<sup>6</sup>

The second solution fits well with the idea that God is eternal in the first sense introduced in Chapter 1, eternal in the sense of being everlasting, having infinite duration in both temporal directions. On this view, foreknowledge is ascribed to God, but it is argued that insofar as we act freely we do have the power to affect some facts about the past. If both the second and third solutions are successful, then, whether God is held to be eternal in the first or second sense, the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is not an insoluble problem for theism.

## Notes

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. II, chap. XXI, par. 10, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 238.
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 2. 1139<sup>b</sup>, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).
3. For a brilliant defense of the first idea of freedom, as well as a response to the objections raised against it, see Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. A. S. Kaufman and W. K. Frankena (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969).
4. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, prose VI, tr. Richard Green (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962).
5. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, prose VI.
6. For an excellent study of these problems see Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1970).

## Topics for Review

1. Explain the two different ideas of human freedom. Which idea is more adequate? Why?
2. What is the problem about divine foreknowledge and human freedom?
3. Explain the basic reasoning given in support of the claim that if God knows before we are born everything we will do, then it is never in our power to do otherwise.
4. Explain the various solutions that have been given to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.
5. How is the idea that God is eternal used by Boethius and Aquinas in the solution they favor?

## Topics for Further Study

6. Discuss the following argument:  
If God is eternal in the sense of existing outside of time, then he could never *act*, for all action takes place in time. But if God could never act, he could never create anything, forgive anyone, answer any prayer, or perform any of the acts commonly attributed to him. Therefore, if we think of God as creating, forgiving, and so forth, we cannot consistently believe that he exists outside of time.
7. Of the various solutions to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, pick the one that you think is the best and explain your reasons for regarding it as better than the other proposed solutions.