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## *Divine Foreknowledge: Some Philosophical Issues*

**Robert R Cook**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout most of its history the Christian church has had no doubts that, being omniscient, God has complete knowledge of past, present **and future**. It was recognized that this assumption was foundational to any solid doctrine of providence, and it was also realized that scripture not only states that Yahweh is able to 'make known the end from the beginning' (Is 46:10) and that he, for example, foreknows the elect (Rom 8:28; 1 Pet 1:2) but also that he inspired the prophets to make some truly remarkable predictions.

Matters have changed dramatically in the wake of the anti-supernatural bias of higher criticism and two other theological trends which are less obviously connected. The first is that since the time of Hegel, theologians have tended to place God in some sense within the temporal process (witness the impact of process theology, liberation theology and the theology of hope) and consequently the concept of divine foreknowledge has come to be interpreted literally rather than just as eternal/timeless knowledge spoken of from a human perspective.

Second, there has been the tendency to confer upon man a certain autonomy and this for two reasons. Liberty has become one of the supreme goods with the ideal ruler providing parameters in which his subjects can develop their potential to flourish as human beings in dignity. The ideal of the despotic ruler, no matter how enlightened, is dead in the West. Along with it died the ideal of a cosmic monarch who controls all events with an iron hand. Such a being became a threat rather than a solace, leading philosophers like Nietzsche and Sartre to develop what has been called 'protest atheism' which assumes that either man as a significant being dies or God must die, for as Marx has pronounced, 'The more that man posits in God, the less he retains for himself.' In response, many theologians have insisted that it is only this despotic **concept** of God that must die. They assert that, in fact, the divine *kenosis* began at creation when God provided an ontological space for his creatures (and some would add, his inanimate creation of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and, more recently, Chaos Theory) to develop with unpredictable freedom.

Human autonomy has been stressed for another reason. In a century which has witnessed the unspeakable horrors of Hiroshima and Auschwitz there has been renewed pressure for apologists to produce a credible theodicy, and most would agree that this is only possible if the

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free will defence can be invoked which argues that God granted genuine freedom to man such that humanity is responsible for its own crimes. Now, when the concepts of human autonomy and divine temporality are combined, the notion of divine foreknowledge becomes philosophically problematic. It is not surprising, therefore, that the doctrine is dismissed by a

large number of philosophers of religion and theologians, including evangelicals like Clark Pinnock. In this paper it will be assumed that agent causation is a fact (*pace* Calvinism) and that God is everlasting rather than atemporal (*pace* Thomism) but it will be argued that these two beliefs **are** compatible with the conviction that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future.

The sceptic has two main problems with the idea of divine foreknowledge and these will now be thoroughly analysed and evaluated philosophically.

### **THE LOGICAL PROBLEM**

On closer scrutiny it will be observed that really there are two arguments here. The first is relatively easy to refute while the second is more subtle.

#### **The infallibility of God's foreknowledge entails fatalism**

This sort of argument received its classic formulation in the work of Boethius who wrote, 'If God foresees all things and cannot be mistaken in any way, what Providence has foreseen as a future event must happen.'<sup>1</sup> To escape the dilemma of omniscience or human freedom, Boethius, like Augustine before him and Aquinas and Maimonides after him, placed God beyond time but this solution, or rather dissolution of the problem (for God no longer possesses foreknowledge although he is timelessly cognizant of our future) has not commended itself to a number of recent philosophers who have pointed out that even if it is false that God knows now what I will do tomorrow (strictly speaking divine atemporality means that God knows nothing at any time; the eternal 'now' is analogical), nevertheless it is true that it is now the case that God (timelessly) knows what I will do tomorrow and therefore I must do it. Paul Helm is the most forceful proponent of this view and he concludes that all events must therefore be determined by God.<sup>2</sup>

It may be discerned that behind this argument lies a much older one which is unrelated to the theological issue. It is the argument which is found in Aristotle's *de Interpretatione* 9 where he ponders the view that if it is now true that a sea battle will take place tomorrow, then the battle must take place.<sup>3</sup> In other words, if future tense propositions possess truth-value (are either true or false) it seems that the future is fixed and fated. Aristotle's own response to the argument is subject to debate but

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contemporary philosophers have reacted variously. Some, like R Taylor, have accepted the fatalistic conclusion while others either deny the truth-value of future tense statements about contingent events or, like A N Prior, actually contend that they are necessarily false (because the future is indeterminate and therefore no precise statement can truly be made about it). But the strategy of denying their truth-value undoubtedly complicates logic in an awkward way by denying one of its canons, namely the law of excluded-middle whereby every unambiguous proposition must be either true or false and in fact there seems little reason to accept these

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<sup>1</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* bk 5; trans V E Watts (Middx: Penguin 1969) 150.

<sup>2</sup> P Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon 1988) ch 6.

<sup>3</sup> This connection was explicitly demonstrated in the important article: S Haak, 'On a Theological Argument for Fatalism' in *Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1974) 156-159.

views anyway, for in order for future-tense statements to be true it is not the case that one needs to be able to know **now** what their truth value is, nor even indeed does it require that they will be verified in the future, for there are numerous meaningful propositions which are in principle unverifiable (eg 'Ten minutes after the total extinction of the human race, the universe will vanish.'). Further, if a proposition describes a present state of affairs, it seems strange to assert that the same proposition in a future tense form was not true in the past. Certainly the non-existence of the future is no reason to deny their truth-value either, for the past is also non-existent yet no one supposes that past tense propositions lack truth-value. There is one further problem for the theologian as we find recognized in the medieval literature (Boethius himself was a translator and commentator of Aristotle and knew the sea-battle argument well) namely, unlike Aristotle's God who merely contemplates himself oblivious of cosmic events, the Christian deity is aware of the totality of human history and makes some of it known through his prophets; it seems absurd therefore to maintain that propositions about the future have an indeterminate truth-value.

The purpose of this digression into a purely philosophical problem is to demonstrate that the fatalist argument not only threatens the theist but anyone who maintains what seems to be self evident: that future tense statements are either true or false; the problem is much wider than the issue of divine foreknowledge. It is also unrelated to the notion of causation as some would maintain, for the fatalist argument neither requires that the future tense proposition **causes** the concomitant future event nor that God's precognition **causes** what it foresees (how can knowing something *ipso facto* cause it?!). What the argument does claim is that the future tense statement or God's foreknowledge provides **sufficient grounds** for the occurrence of the future event, and thus they are logically rather than causally related. In the sentence, 'Because God foresees that I will marry Alison, I shall marry her,' the word 'because' serves as a merely logical connective, just as it does, for instance, in 'Six is an even number because it is divisible by two.' Therefore, the fatalist must not be required to suggest a causal mechanism to lend credence to his argument.<sup>4</sup> The weakness of the

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fatalist argument which lies at the heart of the theological argument found in the work of N Pike and others is to be discovered elsewhere.

In an autobiographical note, the distinguished American philosopher A Plantinga describes the history of his relationship with a logical fallacy. His colleague Robert Sleight first spotted an instance of it in an article in *Mind* and very soon examples of what became known in the circle as 'Sleight's Fallacy' were discovered throughout the current philosophical literature. On reading G E Moore, Plantinga found to his chagrin that the fallacy was already known, under a different name of course, and he admits 'still later I discovered that awareness of Sleight's Fallacy was stock in trade for every thirteenth-century graduate student in philosophy'.<sup>5</sup> The crucial insight was the Medieval distinction between two kinds of necessity: *de re* and *de dicto*. Behind the fatalist argument lies Sleight's Fallacy. While the argument falsely claims that if the statement 'There will be a sea-battle tomorrow' is true today then there will necessarily be a sea-battle tomorrow, in fact it is only legitimate to assert the truism that necessarily 'If the statement "There will be a sea-battle tomorrow" is true

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately W L Craig overlooks this in his otherwise excellent *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1987) 68-69.

<sup>5</sup> J Tomberlin & P Van Inwagen (eds) *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D Reidel 1985) 25.

today, there will be a sea-battle tomorrow'. In other words there is no necessity attached to the occurrence of the sea-battle for although it can be said that it **will** happen, given that 'There will be a sea-battle tomorrow' is a true statement, it cannot be said that it **must** happen; the statement is a necessary truth (*de dicto*) but not the event (*de re*).

The fatalist argument fails, then, and since the case for theological fatalism rests upon it, the theological argument fails also. From God's knowledge of the future it follows that what he knows will in fact happen, but it does not follow that what he foresees must happen of necessity; it could happen otherwise but it simply will not. If, hypothetically, it were to happen otherwise, God's foreknowledge would have been different. Plantinga applied his rediscovered insight to Pike's argument for theological fatalism which contended that if I were truly free I could falsify God's infallible foreknowledge (a logical absurdity) and I could alter the contents of God's essentially omniscient knowledge (another logical nonsense); therefore if God is omniscient, I cannot be free. Plantinga responded by pointing out that it is not a matter of alteration but, using Pike's example of a fictional Jones,

...it was within Jones' power to do something such that if he had done it, then God would not have held a belief that in fact (in the actual world) He did hold. But by no stretch of the imagination does it follow that if Jones had done it, then it would have been true that God did hold a belief He didn't hold... It is not essential to Him to hold the beliefs He does hold; what is essential to him is the quite different property of holding only true beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

This response to fatalism which employs contrary-to-fact or subjunctive

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conditional statements 'does not express the ability to change or undo the past, but the ability to act such that the past would have been different than it is'.<sup>7</sup>

This crucial insight completely defuses many instances of fatalistic argumentation within theology, from H Bavinck<sup>8</sup> to M Erickson<sup>9</sup> and it should now be apparent what the error is in Pinnock's recent assertion 'If God now knows that tomorrow you will select A and not B, then your belief that you will be making a genuine choice is mistaken'.<sup>10</sup>

### **The necessity of God's foreknowledge entails fatalism**

Being one of Plantinga's model thirteenth-century graduates, Aquinas recognized the fallacy of any fatalism based on the infallibility of divine foreknowledge, but he was so impressed with the argument based on the necessity of the past that he thought to escape its clutches only by placing God beyond time.<sup>11</sup> Sorabji's version of the argument relies upon the unalterability of the past:

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<sup>6</sup> A Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1974) 71-72.

<sup>7</sup> W L Craig, review of R Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1985) 321.

<sup>8</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1977 [1st printed 1918]) 189-190.

<sup>9</sup> M L Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker 1983) 360.

<sup>10</sup> D & R Basinger (eds) *Predestination and Free-Will* (Downers Grove: IVP 1986) 156.

<sup>11</sup> T Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1A. 14.13.

The restriction of freedom arises not from God's infallibility alone, but from that coupled with the *irrevocability* of the past. If God's infallible knowledge of our doings exists in advance, then we are too late so to act that God will have had a different judgement about what we are going to do. His judgement exists *already*, and the past cannot be affected.<sup>12</sup>

Now, while it is worth recalling that the advocate of divine foreknowledge refuses to admit that human freedom requires that God's knowledge be revisable for it only insists that were one to have acted differently God as essentially omniscient would have known differently, nevertheless Sorabji is on to something. The insight is that if it can be demonstrated that God **necessarily** knows the future then fatalism does follow for the event is entailed by the foreknowledge and if the latter is necessary so is the former, and it does seem to follow that the past is in some sense necessary. But in what sense exactly? Sorabji maintains that it is irrevocable; the past is beyond alteration. But surely so is the future for 'what shall be, shall be' is just as much an uninteresting tautology as 'what has been, has been'. Does this suggest, then, that the future is also determined? Not at all, for as Kenny has pointed out, 'whatever changes of plan we may make, the future is whatever takes place after all the changes are made; what we alter is not the future but our plans; the real future can no more be altered than the past'.<sup>13</sup> The asymmetry between past and future is not to be found here. Perhaps it is that we can alter the truth-value of future tensed propositions (eg 'x will commit suicide' becomes false once x has killed himself), muses Kenny, but no, we can also alter the truth-value of past tensed ones, for example 'A Kenny has typed "elephant" backwards' remains false

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until he actually so types. Finally, Kenny wonders if the difference lies in the fact that I can bring about the future in a way that I cannot the past. But leaving aside the vexed issue of the possibility of reverse causation, he stresses that my connection with God's foreknowledge is relational and I can change the past in a relational sense, for example I can make my dead grandfather a great-grandfather by having my own son. 'So it is possible that it is precisely by telling a lie today that I bring it about that God knew yesterday that I would tell a lie today. Of course, I do not bring it about by today's lie that God yesterday believed that I would lie; but it is my current lie which makes his belief then true.'<sup>14</sup>

So the exact nature of the necessity of the past remains elusive. It is certainly clear that it is not a matter of logical necessity as Kenny again helpfully establishes:

If it is now necessary that Cesare Borgia was a bad man, it does not follow from this alone that it was, when he was born, necessary that he would be a bad man. For, according to Aristotle, necessity applies only to true past and present propositions, not to future propositions of contingent fact. But, when Cesare Borgia was born, the proposition 'Cesare Borgia will be a bad man' was a future-tensed proposition of contingent fact—as indeed it still is.<sup>15</sup>

Although the statement, 'what has been, has been' is a tautology and therefore logically necessary, the actual nature of what has been cannot be similarly necessary. Kenny concludes

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<sup>12</sup> R Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum* (London: Duckworth 1983) 255.

<sup>13</sup> A Kenny (ed) *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan 1969) 267.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 268.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 265-266.

his article on Aquinas' problem with divine foreknowledge by stating that his worries were unfounded; the argument which bothered Aquinas lacks cogency.

However, ten years later Kenny finds himself in agreement with Aquinas that foreknowledge does entail fatalism! What has happened in the meantime? It is not easy to discover because he makes no critical remarks on the earlier essay, but in the light of Pike's contribution to the debate and on consideration of Jonathan Edwards' fatalist argument, Kenny seems to feel that he dismissed too readily the view that one cannot bring about the past in a significant way with regard to God's foreknowledge.<sup>16</sup> He is impressed with Pike's insight that omniscient belief is tantamount to omniscient knowledge and God's past knowledge, being past, is beyond modification; his knowledge is necessarily true because it is beyond anyone's power to alter. However, as has already been observed, the astute advocate of foreknowledge and freedom wants neither to affirm that my act changes God's belief into knowledge, nor that I may falsify God's belief (it is logically impossible to falsify knowledge). Rather, he wants to say that if I were (subjunctive) to have chosen differently, God would have (subjunctive) known differently. God's actual knowledge guarantees that I will choose a specific act but not that I must of necessity so choose. This is such an

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important point, and Craig explains it so well, that it is worth quoting him at length.

Temporality *per se* has little to do with the necessity of events. Rather the issue is the logical priority of one event to another. If some event x is logically prior to another event y in such a way that we can formulate a contrary to fact conditional: 'If it were the case that x, then it would be the case that y', in which y is a consequence of x, then y is not necessary before the occurrence of x. This is so even if y is past and x is future. From the pastness of y we know that x will occur; but it would be incorrect to say x *must* occur. For x may be causally contingent and could possibly fail to occur. But if it were to fail to occur, then y would not have happened. The occurrence of y is therefore not necessary, since it is dependent on the occurrence of a contingent event.<sup>17</sup>

Craig seems to be echoing some insights of Ockham here, and this may be an opportune moment to examine Ockham and his influence on the current debate.

Ockham has proved very useful in illuminating in what sense the past may be deemed to be necessary. His relevant treatise, *Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents* was published in its first English translation in 1983<sup>18</sup> and subsequently Plantinga has produced an important explication and sympathetic discussion.<sup>19</sup> Ockham's argument is that all propositions, including future ones like 'there will be a sea-battle tomorrow' have truth-value and God knows what they are. Now once what the proposition refers to has in fact occurred, the proposition becomes necessary, that is temporally necessary or what Ockham calls necessary *per accidens*. Thus all future tense propositions are temporally contingent but Ockham claims, so are some present and past ones because they are only **verbally** past or present since they really concern future states of affairs; for example, 'x correctly believes it

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<sup>16</sup> A Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon 1979) 56, 83.

<sup>17</sup> W L Craig, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1985) 321-322.18

<sup>18</sup> W Ockham, *Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents*, trans M M Adams & N Kretzmann (Indianapolis: Hackett 1983).

<sup>19</sup> A Plantinga, 'On Ockham's Way Out' in *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986) 235-269.

will rain tomorrow' will not become necessary until tomorrow provided that it does so rain. To use Ockham's useful terminology, such a proposition is a *soft* fact today whereas 'it is raining today' is a *hard* fact, assuming that it is raining.

As Plantinga has demonstrated, it is possible to disarm the Edwards type argument using Ockham's distinctions. Edwards maintains that what is entailed by a proposition shares its necessity and, since God's foreknowledge is past and therefore necessary, that which is foreknown must also be necessary. But Ockham has shown that the contents of God's foreknowledge only becomes necessary *per accidens* once that which is foreknown in fact occurs; that is, foreknowledge consists of soft facts. Since God's foreknowledge is contingent, no necessity should be attached to what is foreknown.

Although, as Plantinga is all too aware and as critics are quick to

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remind him,<sup>20</sup> there are serious difficulties in specifying which propositions are hard facts (eg 'Paul played tennis yesterday' seems a hard fact but is it strictly about the past when it entails, for instance, 'Paul will not play tennis for the first time tomorrow'?) the rediscovery of Ockham's position is nevertheless a significant development in the struggle to refute not only Edwards but such highly influential modern philosophers as Kenny by insisting that items of foreknowledge are soft facts.

It can be concluded that both forms of fatalism reviewed in this paper are corrigible. It is logically possible to accept both divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

## THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM

### Clarification of concepts

#### *Time and the future*

The epistemological question of how God could know the future collapses into the ontological question of where is the future to be known? To begin to answer this, one needs to understand the nature of time, and yet even to define 'time' has proved so notoriously difficult that it is tempting to doubt whether one can do any better than the man who said that it is 'one damn thing after another'! McTaggart introduced to the philosophical community the useful distinction between what is generally held as two distinct concepts of time which are called the A Series (the common sense view that time is a succession of events from earlier to later), and the B Series (space-time is a static 4-dimensional reality). In the wake of relativity theory, many a scientist prefers the latter view, dismissing the former with the pejorative phrase: 'myth of passage' and arguing that change language can be obviated by replacing 'before and after' statements with 'earlier and later' ones; thus 'the Falklands War happened (*past tense*) after World War 2' becomes 'the Falklands War is (*tenseless*) later than World War 2'. This view is also appealing to theologians who believe that God is beyond time and created the whole time-space continuum and can view the whole thing at a glance, but the B Series has had its staunch critics whose arguments are worth examining.

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<sup>20</sup> P Helm, *Eternal God*, 133-140.

Geach remains unimpressed that the scientific hypothesis is built on the fact that a space-time diagram can be constructed with its diagonal 'world lines' for, as he points out, a similar graph could be constructed with temperature as one axis and time as the other and to and behold one would have a temperature-time continuum! 'Obviously the two axes of a graph, though themselves magnitudes of the same sort, may represent quite heterogeneous magnitudes.'<sup>21</sup> But unfortunately Geach is overlooking the scientific evidence for the inter-relationship between

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space and time. For example as light-speed is approached, time is compressed and space is dilated; no such reciprocity can be found for temperature and time. This is not to say that there is a logical connection between time and space such that the one is a function of the other in every possible world for if that were the case, then a sempiternal God would also be necessarily spatial. Even in this universe, minds are candidates for temporal but non-spatial entities.

Another false objection that is often raised is that if all events are laid out on a space-time panorama, the future is fixed and determined.<sup>22</sup> But this is another version of the fatalist argument already critiqued. Certainly the B Series theory entails that what will be will be, but as already observed, this is a fatuous tautology. However, it remains an open question what sort of causes the world lines have. As one scientist who advocates the B Series has written, 'Events are marked as points on the map—some events are linked by causal relations to prior events, others, like the decay of a radioactive nucleus, are labelled "spontaneous". It's all *there*, whether the causal links are incorporated or not.'<sup>23</sup> Or to quote a colourful philosopher, 'It makes no difference to our theory whether we are locked in an ice pack of fate, or whirled in a tornado of chance, or are firm footed makers of destiny.'<sup>24</sup> This point is worth labouring because it is common for theological scholarship to confuse the blue-print picture of history where God determines every event, with the idea that history in its entirety is knowable. They falsely conclude that for the future to be truly open, prophecy as foreknowledge of a contingent future must be impossible and therefore they need to introduce devices like *vaticinia ex eventu* to explain it away.

Nevertheless, the B Series view must be finally rejected because of its inability to comprehend one of our deepest intuitions: the passage of time. To use Polkinghorne's phrase, 'Spacetime diagrams are great chunks of frozen history', but history is not static. Paul Davies, the scientist recently quoted, tries to dismiss the intuition of the passage of time as a psychological quirk, a sort of mental dizziness,<sup>25</sup> but this will not do as O'Hear explains,

...the idea that time is unreal is self-refuting, for even if we chose to regard ourselves as space-time worms extended through certain points of space and time, there is no denying that our experience is of ourselves moving and changing through the world, and not simply extended in it. To adopt a metaphor of Dummett's, regarding life histories as

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<sup>21</sup> P T Geach, *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Blackwell 1972) 303.

<sup>22</sup> Eg R P Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* (London: SCM 1979) 30.

<sup>23</sup> P Davies, *God and the New Physics* (London: Dent 1983) 132.

<sup>24</sup> R M Gale (ed) *The Philosophy of Time* (London: Macmillan 1968) 115.

<sup>25</sup> P Davies, *op cit*.

worms extended in space and time is like seeing the road without seeing the traveller move down it.<sup>26</sup>

And as Geach has observed, even if our temporal perceptions are an illusion, they are experienced one after the other and are therefore **temporal** illusions! If the B Series hypothesis is untenable, observing the future again becomes highly problematic for, as Geach goes on to

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stress, 'it is not the travelling that raises the real difficulty, but the destination'.<sup>27</sup>

### *Foreknowledge*

According to the remaining A Series view, the future does not exist now to be observed; how then can it be known, even by God? Certainly it cannot be, if God's mode of the acquisition of knowledge is a kind of perception as terms like 'foresight' paralleled with the palmist's 'second sight' which is purported to be a form of extra sensory perception, and words like 'providence' (*providentia*) suggest. Boethius and Aquinas did not help matters with their analogy of surveying the landscape from a lofty height. One cannot observe what does not exist to be perceived. If anything, God's relationship to the temporal series is not so much like Aquinas' favoured image of the centre of a circle to its circumference (while no event on the circumference is simultaneous with any other, eternity is simultaneously present to all events in the series), it is more like a radar screen where the circling cursor constantly highlights new events.

Others seem to assume that the only conceivable means by which the future might be known is by prediction.<sup>28</sup> If God cannot know it directly, he must deduce it inferentially; therefore any advocate of divine foreknowledge must be a determinist. And since determinism must be false, they argue, so must the traditional understanding of omniscience. But, in fact, two other options are open to the advocate of foreknowledge: there are still those who prefer the crystal ball perceptual picture<sup>29</sup> and who tend to be adherents of the B Series' view, and then there are those who feel the analogy of memory is the most fruitful one.

The connection between the memory of an undetermined past and foreknowledge of an open future goes back at least to Augustine who wrote, 'Just as you do not compel past events to happen by your memory of them, so God does not compel events of the future to take place by his knowledge of them.'<sup>30</sup> Now an accurate memory of an event requires neither that the knowledge is inferred from present causes, nor that it is perceived with the senses. Just as memory is cognition of what no longer exists, precognition is knowledge of what does not yet exist. To be true foreknowledge, the cognition does not require that the known future event exist now, it merely requires that it will one day exist. It may be worth stressing yet again that fatalism is an inadmissible conclusion from this hypothesis. Jantzen is wrong when she writes, 'if God "remembered" the future—then the events of the future must be as unchangeable as the past... if the future is just like the past to God then it too is absolutely

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<sup>26</sup> A O'Hear, *What Philosophy Is* (Middx: Penguin 1985) 73.

<sup>27</sup> P T Geach, *op cit*, 308.

<sup>28</sup> Eg M Langford, *Providence* (London: SCM 1981) 102.

<sup>29</sup> Eg S T Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (London: Macmillan 1983) 66.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio* 3.4.11. in *The Fathers of the Church* vol 59 trans R P Russel (Washington: Catholic University of America Press 1968) 175.

rigid'.<sup>31</sup> 'Rigid' in the sense of certain, yes, but not in the sense of necessary. Of course the future is unchangeable for it is analytically necessary that what will be, will be but no fatalist

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conclusion need follow. Memory does seem to provide the most fruitful analogy for divine foreknowledge and thus it may be worthwhile coining the neologism 'preremembering' as the obverse of 'remembering'.

### Reverse causation

Throughout the history of philosophy there have been two competing epistemologies: rationalism with its conviction that significant knowledge is ultimately innate and to be acquired through rational reflection, and empiricism with its contention that knowledge is always derived from sensory input. Undoubtedly the latter position is dominant today so that the question of how God obtains his knowledge of the future becomes particularly pressing. How can a non-existent future event cause God's prior knowledge? The two problems of non-existent causal agency and backward causation are obviated on the B Series theory of time which maintains that the future **does** exist so that God would merely have to 'glance ahead' to see what is going to happen. But this solution is not available since, as has been noted, the theory is untenable. Working with the A Series view, the non-existence of the future does not present a problem so long as the prememory model is assumed, for the remembered past no more needs to exist than does the preremembered future. As for reverse causation, given that the future event causes God's prior knowledge even though he is pure spirit without sensory organs, it remains unproven that the concept is incoherent.

To most philosophers, the logic of reverse causation seems unproblematic since the suggestion is not that a present cause could **alter** the past (it being logically necessary that what has happened, has occurred), but that it could **bring about** the past, an idea which, although admittedly counter-intuitive, actually breaks no canons of logic. As I wrote in an earlier article, 'Reverse causation is not a metaphysical impossibility, it is just empirically highly unlikely. Normally, causal priority operates, but this is a contingent, rather than a logical fact.'<sup>32</sup>

There are those that, while admitting that backward causation is logically possible, nevertheless maintain that it is actually, or ontologically, impossible. For example Craig writes,

Since future events in no sense exist, to claim that an event is caused by a future event is to assert that something can come from nothing. For at the time the effect is produced, the future cause is quite literally nothing. And it is ontologically impossible that something should come into existence out of nothing.<sup>33</sup>

But Craig's reasoning is unconvincing for it is clear that, strictly speaking, a past cause is similarly non-existent now; it also is 'quite literally nothing'. Craig would presumably argue that the important

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<sup>31</sup> G M Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1984) 65.

<sup>32</sup> R R Cook, 'God, Time and Freedom' in *Religious Studies* 23 (1987) 90.

<sup>33</sup> W L Craig, *op cit*, 80.

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difference is that, nevertheless, the effect had a tangible cause in the past whereas this is not the case with reverse causation. But this self-evident assertion simply begs the question of whether an as yet nonexistent future event cannot also bring about a present one. It is not the case that to be a cause the future event must exist now, which anyway surely looks like a logical contradiction for if indeed it exists now, it cannot be future!

It would seem, therefore, that one should remain at least agnostic about the ontological possibility of reverse causation. L Zagzebski notes that this debate is like many others which can go in either direction (eg 'An all-good and omnipotent God would not permit evil therefore God doesn't exist' and 'an all-powerful and omnipotent God exists therefore he must have a good reason to permit evil').

The choice of which way to argue depends upon the level of prior certainty of the different premises. Analogously, we could argue either that because there is precognition of a free will act there must be backwards causation, or we could say that since there is no backwards causation there must be no precognition of contingent events. Since a full account of causation is still wanting, it is not fair to opt for the second approach without independent reasons for thinking that a premise that there is no backwards causation is more plausible than a premise that says precognition of free acts is possible.<sup>34</sup>

For those then, who accept divine foreknowledge on the testimony of the Christian scriptures and who are also impressed perhaps by the evidence for precognition uncovered by psychic research,<sup>35</sup> the concept of reverse causation must be embraced, that is unless innate knowledge is found more tenable.

### **Innate knowledge**

It was a scholastic axiom that God's mode of knowing was not empirical but a purely intuitive introspection. Stemming ultimately from Neoplatonism, this view still lives on amongst traditionally minded theologians; for instance C Henry writes, 'It is a direct spiritual comprehension, a single act of cognition, independent of insight conditioned on space-time realities.'<sup>36</sup> But, whereas from Henry's Reformed theological perspective there is no problem reconciling this position with human free-will since the latter is understood in a soft-determinist sense and history is seen as the outworking of a detailed divine blueprint, for anyone keen to preserve libertarian freedom the concept of innate knowledge seems a distinct liability. Of course, a number of medieval theologians like Aquinas did seek to preserve both divine innate knowledge and significant human freedom, but it is

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commonly reckoned that they failed. Yet still there are advocates, particularly those sympathetic to the concept of middle knowledge. Craig is one of these and it will be profitable to look at his argument in a little detail.

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<sup>34</sup> L Zagzebski, 'Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will' in *Religious Studies* 21 (1985) 292.

<sup>35</sup> The relevant evidence is not only of putative precognition but also of reverse causation. For an intriguing example of the latter, see: C Wilson, *Beyond the Occult* (London: Bantam 1988) 170.

<sup>36</sup> C F H Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* vol 5 (Waco: Word 1982) 270.

Craig stresses that the relationship between divine foreknowledge and the foreseen act is one not of effect and cause but consequent and ground; the act is not causally but logically prior. The reader may recall the useful analogy of how my dead grandfather can become a great-grandfather through my having a child. Craig contends that the attribute of omniscience ensures that God knows all true propositions, and since future tense propositions do possess truth value, God knows them. 'God never learned or acquired his knowledge, but has eternally known an innate store of only and all true statements.'<sup>37</sup> This includes knowledge of free acts. Craig, therefore, strongly denies that all knowledge is empirically based and he claims that even in the human domain there are items of knowledge such as moral insights and other minds which are intuitively derived. He challenges that it is up to the sceptic to articulate exactly why the notion of innate knowledge of free acts is incoherent.

While the sceptic may have no decisive response to the challenge, he might reasonably question Craig's analogies. Moral intuitions are a far cry from specific information about empirical reality, and as for other minds being neither immediately perceived nor causally inferred, while this is strictly true, nevertheless our imputation of minds into things is influenced by empirical factors so that our early assumptions that, say, dolls and flowers have feelings is modified in the light of evolving experience. Other minds might not be observed or inductively inferred but they are unconsciously assumed as the best explanatory hypothesis for much of what we discover in the world. It is difficult to accept an ancient theological view of this type which rests on a pre-Kantian fudging of *a priori* and *a posteriori* truths. Nevertheless, Craig's caution that God's ways are higher than ours is well taken although a God who only knows propositions about us would seem to lack an important intimacy. Surely it is not only we who are unhappy with 'inferred friends' to borrow Cook-Wilson's phrase. Perhaps, however, divine knowledge could be seen as a combination of knowledge **that** before the event and knowledge **of** during the event. Or to use the Scottish terminology revived by Geach,<sup>38</sup> God can say 'I wot the future but ken the present.'

At best, then, one can only feel unease about the suggestion that God's knowledge is innate. A credible analogy would help considerably but the ones offered tend to deny genuine autonomy, for example for Leibniz 'God... achieves knowledge not by experience but always by a pure exercise of his understanding, in the same way as we come to know necessary truths',<sup>39</sup> and for Aquinas the picture is of someone knowing his own actions for *scientia dei causa rerum*.

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## CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that fatalist arguments based on divine foreknowledge are flawed and, while more difficult to assess, the epistemological argument is answerable either by postulating reverse causation or the more problematic innate knowledge. There are, therefore, no overwhelming philosophical reasons why one should not believe in both divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

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<sup>37</sup> W L Craig, *op cit*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> See P T Geach, *Logic Matters*, 323-324.

<sup>39</sup> E J Khamara, 'Eternity and Omniscience' in *Philosophical Quarterly* (1974) 218.

## APPENDIX: THE OEDIPUS EFFECT OF PROPHECY

If foreknowledge per se does not necessarily entail fatalism, surely it does once the infallible knowledge becomes public in the form of prophecy, for the declaration becomes the decisive causal factor in the outcome. To put the problem another way, just as it is impossible to observe sub-atomic particles without disturbing their activity, so it is impossible to inject a description of the future into history without altering the history which the prediction describes. Tantalizing causal loops are set up which are sometimes described by precognition subjects. For example E G Moore relates a dream in which he entered a specific room and looked into a potato-bin, at which moment the cook entered and uttered a particular statement. Recalling the dream the next day, he thought to check the bin to see if any more potatoes were needed from the garden and at the exact time he lifted the lid, the cook came in and spoke the same words as in the dream, so that as he comments 'to some extent, the dream seems to have contributed to its own fulfilment.'<sup>40</sup> This kind of incident raises numerous fascinating philosophical issues, but let us focus on the core problem of whether prophecy deprives man of free will.

The simplest way to escape the dilemma is to reject one of its horns. Thus one could adhere to a basically libertarian view of human freedom while contending that this liberty is suspended while the event prophesied occurs. This strategy would only present a problem if there was an attempt to hold the person accountable for his part in the event or if that event was intrinsically evil, God being its orchestrator. Alternatively, one could stress that prophecy does not provide information of an inevitable future for its purpose is to challenge, and thus affect what comes about. The fact of the matter seems to be that some scriptural prophecy seeks to warn, and thus is effective if its prediction is falsified, while other prophecies serve as evidence that Yahweh is God and these can only be effective so long as they are verified.

Regarding infallible prophecies, how can an involved agent remain free? Well, his freedom would not be jeopardized if he were personally ignorant of the prophecy or could not understand it (and many biblical prophecies are enigmatic in the extreme). He would also be free if

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events were so engineered that, no matter how he decided, the forecast would prove accurate, as with the case of Oedipus himself. Or finally, he would remain responsible even though his choice be completely predictable, so long as a previous free decision resulted in an entrenched character disposition; it is frighteningly possible to use one's freedom in order to lose it in a certain area.

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<sup>40</sup> G E Moore, *Believe It Or Not* (Oxford: Mowbray 1977) 13-14.

Robert R. Cook, "Divine Foreknowledge: Some Philosophical Issues," *Vox Evangelica* 20 (1990): 57-72.

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