

OMNISCIENCE AND FREEDOM: A CASE FOR THE OPPOSITION

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[Note from Revival Theology Resources: This paper is presented as an example both of the logical basis for the denial of absolute foreknowledge as well as the damage that the classical definition of Omniscience causes among thinking people. When presented with the proposition that one must either believe in free will OR an Omniscient God, one is forced either to reject faith in God or the plain conclusions of reason. Is it any wonder that modern evangelical Christianity, in it's populist form, is becoming increasing anti-intellectual and irrational?]

Introduction

This piece is intended as a thought-provoking challenge, both conceptual and logical. In Part I the case is argued that the existence of an all-knowing (omniscient) God is logically incompatible with that of a **free** human agent. Specifically, it is shown that if an omniscient God exists, then no human being is **free**; equivalently, if anyone is **free**, then an all-knowing God cannot exist. Part II is meant to address anticipated objections. Clearly, not all objections are dealt with, and additional attempted refutations are invited.

Part I: The Case for the Incompatibility of God's Omniscience and **Free** Action Let us assume that the concept of God implies that God is omniscient. That is, for any true state of affairs, past, present, and future, described by some proposition p , if God exists then it is true at all times to say that God knows that p . Further assume that to know something, p , implies that p is true; knowledge entails truth, in other words. Now for the argument.

Suppose that, for example, Dr. Santas performs some action-- -say, that he comes to his Philosophy 308 class on Thursday, Feb. 3, 1994.(Or use any example you wish.) Given this supposition, the following proposition is thus true:

(1) Dr. Santas comes to his Philosophy 308 class on Thursday, Feb.3,1994.

Now, if one further assumes that an all-knowing God exists, then, given the above characterization of God as omniscient, it thus follows that

(2) At all times God knows that (1) is the case.*

Further, since knowledge implies truth, it thus follows that

(3) At all times (1) is true.

Since (1) is thus true at all times, it follows that, for example,

(4) (1) is true in 1000 B.C.

***"At all times" expresses from our perspective---not necessarily God's---the truth of God's knowing that (1) is the case. Contrast (2) with (2a) "God knows, at all times, that (1) is the case." (2a) places God in time, and invites a host of issues I mean to avoid.**

Any proposition whose truth is fixed or established beforehand, that is, prior to its described event's occurrence, let us say, is a proposition whose truth determines the event; for to say otherwise would be to deny that the truth was in fact established beforehand. And we have already proven that proposition (4) is established, based on the assumption that its truth is known by God. So it follows that:

(5) Dr. Santas' coming to class was determined beforehand.

But (5) implies

(6) Dr. Santas was not actually **free** to do otherwise than to come to class, since what is determined to be beforehand rules out **free** choice, genuine options, and the like. Generalizing from the above, then, it looks as if **free** choice and **free** action--- where one actually has options, presumably, and elects one over the other---are logically incompatible with the assumption that an omniscient God exists. Thus, we can conclude:

(7) If an omniscient God exists, then nobody is **free**; and, equivalently, if anyone can perform a **free** action, then God does not exist.

Q.E.D.

Part II: Objections and Replies

Objection 1: "Although God knows in advance that Dr. Santas would come to class (since God knows everything), it doesn't follow that God caused Dr. S. to come to class. This being the case, Dr. S.'s coming to class was not forced, and thus he came to class freely."

Reply: Admittedly, foreknowledge doesn't imply that what was known was caused to happen by the knower. But this is irrelevant, since there are examples of determinism other than causal determinism. Logical determinism is such an example: Santas wasn't **free** not because he was physically compelled by God to come to class, but simply because he was logically bound to attend, given that his attending was known (and thus

established as true) beforehand, if an omniscient God exists. On the other hand, if he wasn't so bound, his freedom was due, in part, to the fact that no foreknowledge and truth of his impending action existed beforehand---i.e. because there is no omniscient God.

Objection 2: "Suppose I grant that Dr. S.'s action, if known to happen, in advance, could be said to be 'determined' in that sense; however, he is still **free**, in that he did what he wanted to do, what he decided or chose to do. What more do you need to establish **free** action than to show that an action is done in accord with one's purposes, goals, desires, beliefs and the like?." accordance with his purposes, etc. Yet I submit that these features of one's action are but necessary conditions for freedom, and are not themselves sufficient. What is needed for actual freedom, but missing in the current case? The ability to do otherwise than to come to class! The point of the argument is that, given an omniscient God, Dr. S.'s action could not have been helped or avoided, and in this clear sense he was bound to do what he did, and thus he was not **free**. Satisfied perhaps; not bothered by or troubled by his fate, perhaps. But **free**? No. Moreover, I suspect that his feeling of freedom can be explained purely psychologically: he was ignorant of his determined fate, and thus carried to it a sense (false, though) of having options and the like. In fact, he is deluded.

Objection 3: "But what if Dr. S. hadn't come to class? Wouldn't his absence in that case be equally determined, in precisely the same manner as reasoned above? But if both his coming and his absence were possible, then neither is determined, and thus his doing either would be **free**."

Reply: Two points need to be made. First, it is simply assumed in the objection that Santas might have been absent instead of attending; but that begs the entire question against the argument. The objector needs to show that, as a matter of fact, Santas could have been absent. The argument under review argues that he could not have done otherwise than to attend class, if God exists. If the argument is judged to be flawed, then argue against it; don't simply assume, without convincing reasons, the contrary in order to reject it. Second, 'What if?' questions often appear as if they have obvious legitimacy, but in this case we need to be very critical of the alleged possibilities we assume for sake of argument.

Objection 4: "Nothing about the future is fixed or established in the past. The future is open, like forks in a road. One road leads one direction, another in a different direction, etc. Thus, until a future event actually occurs (or fails to occur), it is incorrect to say that it will (or will not) happen. Santas' coming to class is such an event; so it was not determined beforehand, and thus he was **free**."

Reply: This objection amounts to giving up the assumption that an omniscient God could exist, doesn't it? For consider: If one assumes that such a God exists, then it was shown that something about the future indeed was fixed; namely, knowledge of what will be, and thus the truth that it will be that way! Hence, the objection doesn't refute the incompatibility argument presented; in fact, it seems to agree with the argument, but goes

on to purchase freedom at the expense of an omniscient God, thus missing the point of the argument that foreknowledge and freedom are inconsistent notions.

(Note from RTR: This point assumes the definition of *Omniscience* must include all imaginable knowledge, i.e. the future free choices of moral agents. While it is agreed that the point of the argument is that absolute, exhaustive foreknowledge of future free will choices is self-contradictory, this is not the same as denying the Omniscience of God. In the same way that we might say God's Omnipotence does not extend to the intrinsically impossible [e.g. God cannot cause Himself to cease to exist; He cannot create a square circle or cause $1 + 2 = 5$], we may also argue that His Omniscience does not extend to the intrinsically unknowable. For example, we do not deny God's Omniscience because He does not know what is NOT, i.e. that the sky is green when it is blue, that the world is a cube when it is a sphere, etc. God knows all FACTS. The future, in so far as it is not caused by events in the past and present, is not yet FACT. Thus, we are giving up nothing of substance when we declare that God is Omniscient yet the future is open and not exhaustively foreknown by God.)

Objection 5: "If the argument is sound, then it would follow that all matters are determined by God's foreknowledge, not just human actions, and that everything that happens must happen in just that way and in no other way. But this is absurd, for everything would be predestined through God's foreknowledge."

Reply: Perhaps this extension of the argument is correct, and all is determined by God's foreknowledge (if God exists). But to call it absurd is too strong. Moreover, the argument presented doesn't claim that all is fixed, or even that Santas' action was fixed; what it shows is that if there's an all-knowing God, then such is determined beforehand. This objection is similar to Objection 4, in that each seems to miss a critical point in the incompatibility argument.

Objection 6: "Suppose that we grant that the argument is sound. But what difference does it make whether Dr. Santas, or anyone or anything else, is determined by God's foreknowledge? As long as he is not forced, or caused, or unhappy, or constrained, or thwarted in his intentions or plans, he's **free** in every relevant sense of the word, isn't he? And isn't that enough to render the argument irrelevant, if not unreasonable?"

Reply: The difference made is the difference made by truth: it's true that, given an omniscient God, Santas, or anyone else, can't avoid doing what he, or they, do, or does; and that fact should be troubling to all who subscribe to freedom in any relevant sense, and yet who also wish to maintain the existence of an omniscient God. I willingly admit, however, that some---out of sheer intellectual stubbornness, if not unconscious prejudice---won't be bothered in the least by the purported soundness of the argument. But the piece was intended as a challenge to those who are sensitive to the genuine problems posed, and not as a message for the intellectually lazy. Postscript Consider a version of the argument, put differently. Think of the world---its constituent members, events and the like---as the sum totality of the facts that make it up; the world is a vast set of facts, as it

were. Some of these facts we call past facts, relative to our present, and others we refer to as present and future facts, relative to our present scheme of reference. Now we, not being all-knowing, are limited by our perspective in time: we clearly don't have access to the future, nor to most past or present facts, for that matter. So things appear to us quite unlike they would to an omniscient God, who would have access to all knowable facts, be they in our past, in our present, or in our future. Such a God would be outside of time in this respect, not bound by the temporal constraints placed on us. Through God's knowledge of the truth as our past is considered as established through our knowledge and truth regarding it. So, to say that we cannot (i.e. we are not **free** to) undo our past, since its truth, once established, is determined to remain so, would be akin to saying that we cannot help but do what the future has in store, since its truth, established by God's complete knowledge and implied truth, would be determined to be so. In short, such a world would be devoid of freedom, if overseen by an all-knowing God. To believe otherwise would be to engage in sheer illusion or folly.