

***Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will:
A Response to the Boethian Solution***

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The relationship between Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will has troubled philosophers and theologians for centuries. The problem arises from the apparent incompatibility of the two claims; it seems as though an omniscient God who knows all future actions and deliberations negates the possibility of an individual freely undertaking an action. The term Theological Fatalism describes the refutation of free will given an omniscient God. Before proceeding, it is necessary to provide a working definition of Free Will, as there is not a singular conception of this term upon which philosophers unanimously agree. From a theory-neutral perspective, and for the purposes of this paper, *Free Will* is defined as “the unique ability of persons to exercise control over their conduct in the manner necessary for moral responsibility.”¹ Additionally, the term *Divine Foreknowledge* will refer to God’s infallible knowledge of all future events. One could engage in a significant ontological debate about the nature of the future, but a reasonable minimum requirement is that it be ordered *subsequent* to an occurrence in question. Theological Fatalism poses a major problem for

Christians such as Boethius, as it presents two major axioms as incompatible. In his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius denies Theological Fatalism by arguing that God exists out of time and without any temporal properties, therefore rendering his absolute knowledge compatible with free human action. In this paper, I will assert why Boethius' solution to this problem is inadequate, focusing on how God's timelessness does *not* resolve the opposing necessity of a future action occurring.

In principle, the argument for Theological Fatalism is rather intuitive but contains some subtleties that are important and worth discussing in more detail. In the *Consolation*, this problem is proposed when the character Boethius notes that if God foresees all things and cannot be mistaken (a position taken for granted in the Christian conception of an omniscient God), everything that God has foreseen must necessarily happen. If events can end up transpiring differently than as they were foreseen by God, His foreknowledge ceases to be infallible. And, as Boethius notes, knowledge cannot have the characteristic of uncertainty, so there cannot be any room for individuals to change their action which was foreseen by God. From this base, Boethius states the problem that "if from eternity He foreknows not only what men will do, but also their designs and purposes, there can be no freedom of the will, seeing that nothing can be done, nor can any sort of purpose be entertained, save such as a Divine providence, incapable of being deceived, has perceived be-

forehand.”²² More generally, one could propose an argument for Theological Fatalism along the following lines. As a consequence of our definition of Divine Foreknowledge, God believed with certainty *in the past* that you will do action x. Because God’s foreknowledge is infallible, it is necessary that action x will occur. Therefore, you are unable to act in any other way besides performing action x. If you are unable to act differently, action x is not performed out of Free Will, and, accordingly, Free Will is not compatible with Divine Foreknowledge.

Lady Philosophy, who is Boethius’ partner in discourse in the *Consolation*, points out that perhaps foreknowledge does not necessarily preclude free choice, as it seems as though we can have knowledge of events that are about to occur without negating the freedom of their occurrence.² Aristotle discusses a solution to this problem in his sea-battle example in *De Interpretatione*, where he argues that it is impossible to determine the truth of a statement until the contingency is actualized.³ However, this solution is inadequate when applied to Divine Foreknowledge, as allowing room for events to be contingent seems to contradict the nature of infallible knowledge. Philosophy recognizes this problem and responds to her own claim by noting that “For here there seems to thee a contradiction, and, if they are foreseen, their necessity follows; whereas if there is no necessity, they can by no means be foreknown.”⁴ As articulated by Philosophy, the problem seems to be a logical contradiction resulting from

the tension between the concepts of necessity and knowledge. Some would argue that the necessity of an action does *not* preclude the possibility that it was undertaken freely.⁵ Though a strict compatibilist could accept that there is no option to act otherwise yet still call an action free, Boethius is attempting to reconcile the kind of Free Will where an individual has the ability to act otherwise with Divine Foreknowledge.⁶ If some indeterminacy were not necessary for free will, Boethius' argument would prove inconsequential. Yet Boethius himself notes that "rather than knowledge, it is opinion which is uncertain."⁷ Uncertainty is contrary to the essence of knowledge, yet certainty is contrary to the essence of (Boethius' conception of) Free Will. Consequently, the apparent incompatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will remains unresolved.

This argument presented a real problem for Boethius, as a Christian who believed steadfastly in both Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will. Ostensibly, a rejection of Divine Foreknowledge necessitates a rejection of the Christian conception of God, since Christianity teaches that God is both omnipotent and omniscient. Boethius affirms his belief in God's Divine Foreknowledge when he states "He who seeth all things from eternity beholdeth these things with the eyes of His providence, and assigneth to each what is predestined for it by its merits."⁸ Conversely, a rejection of Free Will creates a situation where many of the Church's most fundamental teachings lose their meaning. Lady Philosophy points out

a number of troubling consequences that would result from a world without free choice. She notes that without Free Will, there would be no way of assigning moral responsibility. A lack of Free Will would necessitate a world where prayer is rendered meaningless, as there would be no hope for changing the future from its predestined state. Additionally, without Free Will, God is the sole cause of man's evil and sin. Boethius concludes that these consequences are too intolerable for a Christian mind and that full freedom of will must exist.⁹ It's clear that in order to stay true to the principles of his faith, a Christian like Boethius is unable to reject either claim and must find a way of reconciling the two.

Boethius' solution to the problem is to deny God's existence in time, thus rendering statements about his temporal beliefs illogical and invalid. This argument is perhaps Boethius' most important contribution to contemporary philosophy, and it strongly influenced St. Thomas Aquinas' views on the matter.¹⁰ In the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy responds to the character Boethius' statement of the problem by arguing that God's "knowledge, also transcending all movement of time, dwells in the simplicity of its own changeless present, and, embracing the whole infinite sweep of the past and of the future, contemplates all that falls within its simple cognition as if it were now taking place." Philosophy's (and henceforth Boethius') position here is to deny the premise that God believed with certainty *yesterday* that you will do an action x -- a temporal distinction crucial to Aristotle's

sea-battle argument. Boethius argues that God's knowledge has no temporal properties, as the nature of God's being places him outside of any temporal constraints. God does not conceive time; He infinitely conceives all of eternity. Thus, according to Boethius, it is a mistake to say that God believed yesterday that something will occur tomorrow. Consequently, God's knowledge of future events implies only that they are conditionally necessitated by God's knowledge, not that they are actually necessitated by their nature.

Boethius' solution rests on a couple of key claims about the kinds of necessity and knowledge that we are dealing with. The first key distinction Boethius raises is the distinction between conditional and actual necessity. As explained in *Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius* from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,¹¹ *actual necessities* are events that are necessary due to physical realities and the laws of nature, such as the mortality of human beings. *Conditional necessities*, on the other hand, are necessities that are contingent on knowledge, such as "if you know that someone is walking, he must necessarily be walking." Boethius' principle claim is that "from this conditional necessity it does not follow that it is simply necessary that I am walking."¹² The second key ingredient, as discussed in detail by Robert Sharpley in his *Fate, Prescience and Free Will*, is the principle that "the nature of knowledge is determined by the nature of the knower rather than by that of the thing known." Boethius defends this claim by using the example of sense perception and

universals; the senses perceive particulars, but we are able to use this sense perception in a way that “transcends their own nature” to identify universals (whose existence Boethius takes as a given).¹³ The final piece to Boethius’ solution is the difference in the way time unfolds to God. He writes that people are mistaken when they use Plato’s description of the universe as “eternal” as reason that its eternity is the same as God’s. Rather, God has knowledge of all events (which we perceive as present, past, and future) concurrently. He argues that “to grasp simultaneously the whole of unending life in the present; this is plainly a peculiar property of the mind of God.”¹⁴ With these three ingredients established, we can now see how Boethius logically combines them to piece together his argument. He argues that the combination of the nature of knowledge and the “eternal present” allow God to know about future actions in a way that necessitates them conditionally, but not actually. Future events necessarily happen in the way that present events must be happening, but this necessity is not a constraining one. There is nothing constricting individuals from acting otherwise, yet because God has infallible timeless knowledge of their actions they will always be acting in a way that is coherent with God’s beliefs about how they will act. Thus, according to Boethius, God has complete knowledge over all future occurrences, yet this knowledge does not restrict the freedom of individuals to choose their own action.

The first thing to note when examining Boethius’ solution

is that it does not truly reconcile the problem of foreknowledge and Free Will. What Boethius has done is separate the ideas of foreknowledge and *Divine Foreknowledge* in a way that makes the two entirely different. What his claim about Divine Foreknowledge presupposes is actually a repudiation of God having foreknowledge at all. Because of God's existence outside of time, his Divine Foreknowledge exists in a way that makes it *not* foreknowledge in a temporal sense, as the temporal nature of his knowledge has been explicitly removed by this claim. If time does not pass at all for the agent with whom we are concerned, it seems impossible to ascribe any sort of temporal properties to the agent's knowledge. So, Boethius' solution has not solved the problem of the compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge (when treated as infallible foreknowledge) and Free Will, as he offers no evidence that contradicts the previous charges of the logical incompatibility of the two concepts. However, the question of whether Boethius' solution allows for the compatibility of Free will and Divine Foreknowledge, when it is treated as a special type of knowledge that is not, as Boethius argues, foreknowledge at all, remains open. Initially, one would assume that if foreknowledge could be proven compatible with free will, Divine Foreknowledge would follow suit, and vice versa. Given Boethius' explicit distinction between the two, however, it seems that the discussion must focus on his concept of Divine Foreknowledge specifically, and whether it has enough distinguishing characteristics that allow it to still be characterized as knowledge while leaving open the possi-

bility of Free Will.

In response to this implication of Boethius' claims, I will argue that Boethius is unable to establish his conception of Divine Foreknowledge as a concept that both classifies as true knowledge *and* allows for a true concept of Free Will. In his book, *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, Alvin Plantinga proposes a refutation of Boethius' position that is quite compelling. He postulates an individual named Paul mowing his lawn in 2005. Boethius' conception of Divine Foreknowledge lends itself to claims of knowledge such as "God eternally knows that Paul will mow his lawn in 2005." This claim, as Boethius intended it to be understood, means that God's infallible belief exists outside of time. However, Plantinga argues "That proposition, furthermore, was true eighty years ago; the proposition *God knows (eternally) that Paul mows in 2005* not only *is true now*, but *was true then*." He then points out that if it were true eighty years ago that Paul mows in 2005, it's logically necessary that Paul mows in 2005. By inventing a concept of God's time, Boethius is evading the question of what God knew about Paul's future actions eighty years ago. However, Plantinga submits that avoiding this question is impossible, and "the claim that God is outside of time is essentially irrelevant."¹⁵

Plantinga's argument is simple but persuasive. While Boethius argues that God exists outside of time, the problem hinges on the fact that human actions and experience exist inside

of a temporal structure. Returning to Plantinga's example of Paul mowing his lawn, the key question is "eighty years ago, did God believe or not believe that Paul would mow his lawn in 2005?" If the answer to this question is yes, we have returned to the original problem of the incompatibility of foreknowledge and Free Will, to which Boethius has not presented an adequate refutation. If the answer to the question is no, and God did not believe eighty years ago that Paul would mow his lawn in 2005, then there are multiple significant problems for our conception of God. First, if God did not believe that Paul would mow his lawn, it seems as though God can no longer be characterized as omnipotent. I assume that a Christian like Boethius would be deeply unsettled by such a conclusion, though it doesn't necessarily preclude the possibility of God having foreknowledge at some point prior to the event. More troubling, however, is the conclusion that if God did not have foreknowledge of Paul mowing his lawn eighty years ago, it seems as though he will never be able to acquire this knowledge before the event occurs without restricting the freedom of Paul's action. If God develops this infallible belief at all prior to Paul mowing his lawn, we return to the problem of the incompatibility of foreknowledge and Free Will. Yet if God does not develop this belief prior to the occurrence of the event, it seems He does not have any prior knowledge of the event, and God's Divine Foreknowledge could not, in fact, be characterized as knowledge at all.

Again, Boethius' defenders would attempt to exempt God

from holding beliefs at specific moments in time. Assuming time does indeed exist for human beings, then at a minimum, events have to be ordered, even if there is not a metaphysically privileged “present.”¹⁶ And if time is ordered, then time changes, at least in a “relative, perspectival sense. Each time is present at itself, just like each spatial location is here relative to itself.”¹⁷ Since God is omniscient, God knows what time it is, and since time changes, God’s beliefs must change. Since God’s beliefs change, God changes, and God cannot be entirely atemporal. The conclusion here is that even if one rejects that there are true tensed facts, God still cannot exist entirely outside of the logical ordering of time.¹⁸ If God does not hold a belief at all about Paul’s future actions prior to when he performs them, the only logical conclusion we can reach is that Boethius’ conception of Divine Foreknowledge is not really knowledge at all. By placing God outside of time and introducing a blanket “conditional necessity” over the result of His knowledge, Boethius does not prove that claims about God and His knowledge are *incorrect* at a given time.

A defender of Boethius’ solution, of course, would be deeply unsatisfied with this argument. In *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, L.T. Zagzebski responds to Plantinga’s claims by arguing that “The concept of accidental necessity does not make it now necessary that 80 years ago a certain proposition was true.” *Accidental necessity* refers to the special kind of necessity attributed to past events. Zagzebski

argues that it is incorrect to assign accidental necessity to the truth of a past proposition, as its truth is settled by something that occurs at a point in time. So, according to Zagzebski, eighty years ago this truth had not yet been settled, so it's wrong to necessitate that God's belief eighty years ago must have been true. She uses this reasoning to conclude that despite Plantinga's argument, Boethius' point of timelessness 'is not thereby threatened.'¹⁹ This solution is appealing to a defender of Boethius, as Zagzebski is proposing a way out of the necessity of God having a belief at all in temporal reality. By claiming that it's incorrect to even look for the truth of a future proposition, Zagzebski argues that God's beliefs about future actions needn't have a truth value at all, once again avoiding the question of what God believed about Paul's actions in 2005 eighty years ago. However, while it may be true that it is not necessary for a proposition about today to be true eighty years ago, a lack of certainty at that time about the proposition in question still equates to an absence of Divine Foreknowledge. The problem still remains that while God may exist "out of time," if he *didn't* have a belief 80 years ago that Paul would mow his lawn, it seems we have to deny God's knowledge of the event and His omniscience. Conversely, if He did have this infallible belief, it would seem that we cannot say that Paul's action was done freely. What Boethius and his defenders would like to say is that by professing God's timelessness, they can avoid making a claim as to what His beliefs were at a past point in time. However, I maintain that having no belief about fu-

ture action is logically the same in this context as having a false belief: either God had a true belief that Paul would eat mow his lawn in 2005, or he did not. If the truth of this belief was not yet actualized prior to the event, as Zagzebski would claim, that does leave open the possibility for Paul to freely choose his actions. However, the truth being indeterminate at the time once again means that God does not actually have knowledge of the situation. If God's knowledge of Paul's future actions were truly infallible, the truth of his belief would not be indeterminate, because it would be a logical contradiction if Paul did not end up mowing his lawn. Consequently, God must have a true, infallible belief for his Divine Foreknowledge to truly be knowledge, yet if he has such a belief an action cannot be performed freely as there is no alternative course of action. Thus, while Zagzebski presents an interesting argument, in the end it fails to reconcile the key problems with Boethius' solution.

Boethius' solution to the problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will has been incredibly influential to philosophical and Christian theological thought throughout the centuries, and his argument retains its authority in the debate that continues to this day. Other notable responses in this debate include those by Aristotle, William of Ockham, Luis de Molina, and Harry Frankfurt.²⁰ In this paper I have not explicitly examined whether Divine Foreknowledge truly is compatible with Free Will; I have only argued that Boethius' argument is insufficient to demonstrate that the two are

logically compatible. This paper has also avoided the debate over whether determinism, which has a strong relationship to foreknowledge, is compatible with Free Will, opting to take their incompatibility as a given without sufficient argument from Boethius to suggest otherwise. If it can be convincingly demonstrated that these two are compatible, as argued by Harry Frankfurt, then Boethius' argument would become logically acceptable (though its necessity and importance would be seemingly eliminated in this case). Regardless, Boethius' degree of influence over Christian thought on such an important piece of the Church's doctrine makes his arguments worth examining in great detail, and it is my hope that this paper adds a productive voice to the discussion.

Notes

1. D. Justin Coates and Michael McKenna, "Compatibilism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, no. 1 (Winter 2018).
2. Boethius, A.M.S. *The Consolation of Philosophy*: Translation by H. R. James. e-artnow, 2017. Book V, Chapter III. <https://books.google.com/books?id=u05ODwAAQBAJ>.
3. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, "Foreknowledge and Free Will," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2017).
4. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Chapter IV.
5. Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility." *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 833.
6. For an argument for how an action could be considered free without the possibility to act otherwise, see Harry Frankfurt's *Alternate Possi-*

bilities and Moral Responsibility. The question of Free Will's compatibility with determinism is a separate but related issue to its compatibility with (Divine) Foreknowledge. In this paper I take for granted that free will requires the ability to do otherwise. If one disputes this claim and subscribes to compatibilism as argued by Frankfurt, Boethius' solution addresses a nonexistent problem from the beginning.

7. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Chapter IV.

8. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Chapter II.

9. *Ibid.*, Book V, Chapter III.

10. Zagzebski, "Foreknowledge and Free Will."

11. John Marenbon, "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, no. 1 (Winter 2016).

12. *Ibid.*

13. Robert Sharples, "Fate, Prescience and Free Will" in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

14. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Chapter II.

15. Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out" in *Philosophy of Religion: a Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig and Kevin Meeker (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 240.

16. J. Ellis McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," *Mind*, New Series, 17, no. 68 (1908).

17. Natalja Deng, "Eternity in Christian Thought," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, no. 1 (Spring 2018).

18. This paper does not explicitly go into the distinctions between an A and B theory of time, but this argument essentially affirms that even in a B-theory of time, what God knows must change, so God still cannot

be entirely outside of time. For a more detailed explanation of this argument, see Natalja Deng's *Eternity in Christian Thought*.

19. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 46.

20. Zagzebski, "Foreknowledge and Free Will", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Summer 2017).

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