

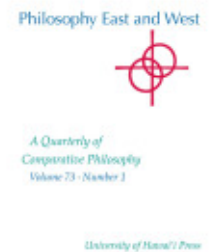


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Necessary Existence, Immutability, and God's Knowledge of
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- . 2020. “Does God Know that the Flower in My Hand Is Red? Avicenna and the Problem of God’s Perceptual Knowledge.” *Sophia* 59, no. 4:657–693.
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Necessary Existence, Immutability, and God’s Knowledge of Particulars: A Reply to Amirhossein Zadyousefi



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From the Qur’an, Surah Maryam:

(21) So she conceived him, and went in seclusion with him to a remote place.
(22) And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree: she cried (in her anguish): “Ah! would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!” (23) But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm tree): “Grieve not! for thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee;”
(24) “And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm tree: it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee.” (25) “So eat and drink and cool (thine) eye. And if thou dost see any man say ‘I have vowed a fast to (Allah) Most Gracious, and this day will I enter into no talk with any human being.’”

This Surah depicts a human being in unbearable pain. What makes the pain tolerable is the sympathy that God shows for Mary. Hearing her inner voice, understanding her suffering and her grief, God is moved to provide her with practical and substantive support to help her bear her agony. For me this story portrays a God who is active in the world, hears the supplications of humanity, and has empathy with the needy, the oppressed, and those who are suffering.

Yet I am concerned that our theological traditions in the Islamic world (as also in Christendom) have developed through the centuries such that God is now seen, by overwhelming theological consensus, as an immutable being, a being outside time who has determined our providence from the standpoint of eternity, who has foreknowledge of every free action of his creations and has designed all according to His plan for past and future events; who knows in advance even the timings and contents of our petitionary prayers and has decided already whether to answer them. Aloof

from the mundane world, He has predetermined when and where he will act or intervene in our world; and since He is perfect, the world He has created is the most perfect that could have been actualized. Everything that happened in the world is according to God's predetermined plan, and even our supplications are in His plan and so every event has a role and special place in the jigsaw puzzle of the best-designed world. God, in this picture, is transcendent from our dirty and intractable material world.

But when we read the text of the Qur'an free from such philosophical and theological doctrine, we are confronted with a God who is close to us, who has on occasion changed His verdicts (Q 2:106), who asks us to aid Him in order that He may aid us as well (Q 47:7), and who clearly and firmly introduces Himself as being close to us: "When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them); I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calls on Me" (Q 2:186).

Nevertheless, theology matters. Theology is not merely a system of beliefs about a transcendental world or our personal relationship with the sacred. As Carol Christ explains, theology matters since our ideas about divinity play an essential role in the way we make sense of our religious experiences, our personal experiences, and even our experience of the world.¹ The ethical implications of our theological views can and must be taken into consideration, because our understanding of divinity shapes our understanding of what is right, just, and wrong in the world. Theology matters because religious symbols not only articulate meaning, but also provide the grounds for our ethical decision-making, which in turn shapes our social-political order. Our understanding of the role of the state, the relation between I and Thou, family law, the constitutions of our societies—all of these depend to some extent on our theological backgrounds and views. Indeed, it is upon God that we would model our lives. As John Sanders writes: "The way God treats us is the way we should treat others. Thus, different types of Gods are going to produce different kinds of people."² A totalitarian, racist, sexist, and paternalistic state might claim legitimacy by referring to a god who is authoritarian, who governs the world from outside time and stands aloof from the mundane world, whose decrees are eternal, and who has no sense of our suffering and pain. His caliph would be a supreme man, but not a man who walks in the bazaar, who lives and sups among ordinary people. How could a God conceived as the embodiment of Good and Love also be a supporter of such an immoral socio-political order?

Seeking the roots of our traditional theological views, we come to the historic debate between Ghazālī and Avicenna on God's knowledge of particulars. This debate was so significant for Ghazālī that he eventually accused Avicenna of apostasy. In my essay "On the Incompatibility of God's Knowledge of Particulars and the Doctrine of Divine Immutability: Towards a Reform in Islamic Theology,"³ I claimed that Avicenna's theory of the

knowledge of particulars through universals is an attempt to save the doctrine of divine immutability. It seems that for Avicenna, as for almost every other Islamic philosopher, the immutability of God is more important for His perfection than attributing to Him knowledge of particular sensations and experiences. However, in Ghazālī's assessment, since Avicenna's theory cannot in the end accommodate God's knowledge of occurrent particulars and the phenomenal states of other minds, his theory of knowledge of particulars through universals is improper and even blasphemous. For Ghazālī, it seems, the denial of phenomenal knowledge to God is more dangerous than the denial of God's immutability, and thus he seeks to reject Avicenna's grounds for preferring the doctrine of divine immutability. But why should there be an incompatibility between the divine (phenomenal) knowledge of particulars, and divine immutability? First, let me define exactly what I mean by the divine immutability thesis.

Divine Immutability, as Brian Leftow helpfully defines it, is the thesis that God cannot undergo real or intrinsic change in any respect. The thesis implies, first, that since God really cannot change, then "nothing can so act on him as to change him, his actions do not change him, and no change in God could be the only event in a universe,"⁴ and, second, that since God cannot change intrinsically, then none of the intrinsic properties that are the properties of His states, like His knowledge and experience, can change. The doctrine of divine immutability thus entails that if there had been nothing other than God, there would have been no change at all.

Setting aside, for now, its political and social implications, I wonder how this petrified being could be the God of the Abrahamic religions who speaks, acts, and responds. Of course, with respect to his existence, God is indeed immutable, that is, He exists eternally and never ceases to exist. Furthermore, God's essential properties, the properties that make Him God, are also unchangeable and unalterable: otherwise He would be a different person in different possible worlds, and could not be a necessary existent.⁵ God is also immaterial in the sense that He does not have a body or any natural part consisting of atoms, nor does He live under physical laws. However, by distinguishing between divine essential properties and intrinsic properties, I seek to open up a space such that by denying divine immutability I deny only the unchangeability of God's intrinsic properties. Some of His intrinsic properties—regarding His knowledge, affection, and will—may indeed change.⁶ In other words, the denial of the doctrine of divine immutability is understood in a way that is consistent with the idea that God could change mentally—with respect to knowledge, affect, or will. Nevertheless, as Leftow insists, Scripture amply supports the claim that God is perfect in knowledge, affect, and will, and "[t]his perfection seems to rule out many sorts of mental change."⁷

Based on this general idea, Leftow offers an argument in support of the divine immutability thesis.⁸ The argument is as follows:

Argument 1: Argument from God's Omniscience to His Immutability

- 1.1 God is all-knowing.
- 1.2. If God learns something new, then before learning it, he was not all-knowing.
- 1.3. Something new happening is due either to free creaturely action or a contingent future event.
- 1.4. If God has foreknowledge even of free creaturely actions, then he always knows all tenseless facts.
- 1.5. To know the tensed contingent truths, it is enough for God to know their tenseless correlates.
- 1.6. Since God knows all tenseless facts and all tensed contingent truths then there is nothing new for God to know.
- 1.7. If God's knowledge is perfect and includes complete foreknowledge, then God's knowledge is complete and unchanging.
- 1.8. God's knowledge is unchanging.
- 1.9. God is immutable.

This argument rests on several controversial assumptions. For philosophers who believe that human beings have libertarian free will in the sense that neither causal factors nor subjective inclinations and psychological character can determine a truly free action to be done, it is difficult to see how God could have known our free actions without undermining our libertarian freedom. Molinists who try to reconcile libertarian free will with God's foreknowledge must face the challenge of finding a factual truth upon which God's foreknowledge is grounded.⁹ In this long-term philosophical debate I favor the side of incompatibilism—in other words that libertarian free will as a distinctive and privileged property of humankind is incompatible with any sort of necessarily safe and true foreknowledge. Since what grounds this safe foreknowledge would determine my action, then my action would not be free in a libertarian sense. So the antecedent of premise 1.4 is not cogent.

The other controversial assumption in the argument above is the view that every tensed report of an event can be translated into tenseless language. In other words, the B-theory of time in which time, like space, has no privileged point of reference, and in which the now-ness of time can be eliminated from tensed sentences and rephrased in tenseless form, is preferred over the A-theory of time in which the continuity of time is its essential property, and now-ness is a property of present time that cannot be reduced to tenseless sentences. But it seems that the sense that someone *now* has of seeing a seaview cannot be referred to as the sense of what tomorrow she refers to as her sense yesterday of seeing a seaview. The issue is not about the linguistic reduction of tensed sentences, however, but about our view of reality. In a temporal changing reality we can have attitudes like hope, wishing, faith,

expectation, trust, and love, all of which depend on our view of the stream of time and of the ever-changing reality. In the B-theory of time, reality is fixed and our hopes for the future are a phantasm. We live in the present time, working to build our future, and we believe that our attempts will hopefully reach the desired result in the future. This is a sort of stance toward time and reality that can make our world meaningful and valued.

Now consider Stump-Kretzman's view, according to which all times are present from the eternal point of view, in other words Eternally Simultaneous. Or consider the more sophisticated alternative of the B-theory espoused by Leftow, according to which whatever is occurring in the eternal world is simultaneous with our temporal world, which can be conceived of as being A-theoretic, while there is a point in the B-theoretic eternal world of events that indicates what is now occurring in the temporal world.

None of the above-mentioned accounts can accommodate the sense of now-ness, or of our experiencing and living in the present time as a ground for our efforts at changing the coming future through our actions.¹⁰ The constitutive role of living human activity in this view is reduced to the predetermined and fixed role of a robot in a factory. From a theological perspective, someone who thinks that by creating free creatures and by offering His love to them God hopes for their response cannot accept such a view about time and reality.

Nevertheless, Leftow claims that "If perfect in knowledge, God is all-knowing. If God learns something new, then before learning it, he was not all-knowing. Even if the new fact could not have been foreknown, if He did not know it, He did not know all."¹¹ But why we should deny that God is omniscient on the grounds that he did not know a new fact that could not have been foreknown? If we accept libertarian free will for human beings, then although they are created by the omniscient God, even God cannot foreknow their free actions. In the same manner, despite his omnipotence, God cannot make "2 + 2 = 5" true.

Nor is there any cogency to the Platonic argument that God, since He is already the best possible, cannot change for the better. For it is not the case that any change is bound to make one better (or worse): consider someone whose knowledge of time is constantly changing. If God's knowledge, considered as His intrinsic property, changes, this is neither better nor worse for God. However, if God knows what time it is now despite this intrinsic change, He can keep His perfection of knowledge indefinitely.

Avicenna's argument for divine immutability has most recently been studied by Zadyousefi.¹² According to Zadyousefi, Avicenna believes in an incompatibility between God's necessary existence and the denial of divine immutability, resulting in an argument that can be formulated as follows:

Argument 2: Argument from God's Necessary Existence to His Immutability

- 2.1. God is a necessary existent.
- 2.2. A necessary being possesses its attributes necessarily (the principle of 'The Necessity of a Necessary Being's Attributes').
- 2.3. If God has a certain knowledge-set, then He has it necessarily.
[From 2.2]
- 2.4. A necessary existent exists in all possible worlds and at all times.
- 2.5. In all possible worlds God has a certain fixed knowledge-set.
- 2.6. Thus, what God knows at w1 (in a possible world w1 or in time t1 in the actual world) is the same as what God knows at w2 (or t2).
- 2.7. God is immutable.

While the argument is valid, it is not sound. Premise 2.2 commits a fallacy of equivocation. It is obvious that a necessary being has its essential properties necessarily: the number 2 is even in all possible worlds, since the evenness of 2 is an essential property, but it is contingent that I have two coins in my pocket. So the property of 2 that in the actual world, at time t, 2 is that the number of coins in my pocket is a contingent property of a necessary being. So it is clearly false that all of a necessary being's properties are possessed in all possible worlds and times. So step 2.3 cannot be deduced from 2.2, since God's knowledge-set is an intrinsic property of God and is not among His essential properties. The attribute of knowledge is essential for God in the sense that God knows all truths, facts, and states of affairs of the world that can be known; however, God can have a different knowledge-set in different possible worlds or through time and yet continue to be the perfect knower as such. Of course a thing's identity can be retained through a change in its intrinsic properties: hence it is possible that some unforeknowable facts can be known by God through the passage of time and yet that God continue always to be omniscience.

By alluding to the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity, Zadyousefi can claim that for God His intrinsic properties are the same as His essential properties. According to the doctrine of divine simplicity "there is no real distinction between God as subject of his attributes and his attributes. God is thus in some sense identical to each of his attributes, which implies that each attribute is identical to every other one."¹³ If God is a necessary being in the sense that there is no change in His essential properties, then since He is simple in the sense that all His attributes are the same as each other, then there is no change in His intrinsic properties as well. Therefore, He is immutable. Through this line of argument Zadyousefi can save the doctrine of divine immutability: but the acceptance of the ontological doctrine of divine simplicity, namely that there is nothing intrinsic to God that is distinct from His essence, leads to a denial of libertarian free will for human agents,

if we accept the incompatibility between libertarian free will and divine foreknowledge. The argument runs as follows:

Argument 3: Argument from Divine Simplicity to Denial of Human Libertarian Free Will

- 3.1. God is ontologically simple.
- 3.2. There is nothing intrinsic to God that is distinct from God's essence.
[From 3.1]
- 3.3. God's knowledge of creaturely free actions is among His intrinsic properties.
- 3.4. In all possible worlds and in all times God knows creaturely free actions. [From 3.2 and 3.3]
- 3.5. God foreknows all creaturely free actions.
- 3.6. Libertarian free action is incompatible with divine foreknowledge.
- 3.7. Therefore, human actions are not free in a libertarian sense.

Perhaps for Avicenna, and following him Zadyousefi, there is no problem in the denial of the libertarian free will of human persons, and his preference is saving the doctrine (or, as I prefer, the dogma) of divine immutability. For me, however, libertarian free will is an essential prerequisite of the love relationship expressed by I-Thou and I-God, and this is what makes our world meaningful, beautiful, and alive.

Notes

I express my thanks to Amirhossein Zadyousefi for his subtle criticism of my ideas and also to Frank Perkins for giving me the opportunity to publish my reply to Amirhossein in this issue of *Philosophy East and West*.

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- 1 – [Christ and Plaskow 2016](#). See also [Christ 2019](#). *Thealogy* is a term she dedicates to studying the Goddess rather than God.
- 2 – [Sanders 2020](#), chap. 4.
- 3 – [Azadegan 2020](#), 2022.
- 4 – [Leftow 2014](#).
- 5 – This is a point that Zadyousefi mentions in his 2023 response in this issue of *Philosophy East and West*, and I thank him for prompting me to redefine and refine my idea.
- 6 – Zadyousefi, following Avicenna, thinks that there is an intimate relation between changeability and materiality or corporeality. Of course, every

material being is constantly changing but it is not the case that every change in intrinsic properties requires materiality. Consider your soul, where almost all Muslim philosophers including Avicenna believe in its immateriality: the soul's intrinsic properties such as its phenomenal knowledge may change even while my personal identity conditions persist.

7 – [Leftow 2014](#).

8 – Ibid.

9 – Thomas Flint and William Hasker, among many others, have famously debated the pros and cons of Molinism. For a through account see Perszyk 2012.

10 – For all of these views and recent controversies on God and Time, see [Deng 2018](#). Deng also mentions Robert Pasnau's position: Pasnau sees God as enduring through time while being wholly present without any change in all times. According to him God is atemporal, immutable, and enduring. I wonder how these accounts can accommodate God's action in the world here and now. Their answer is that God eternally has decided what to do and how to act here and now—but this is a Deistic view of God, not a Theistic one. In theism, as I understand it, God does not allow the world to run on autopilot.

11 – [Leftow 2014](#).

12 – See [Zadyousefi 2023](#).

13 – [Valicella 2019](#).

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Hylomorphism, Change, and God's Mutability: A Rejoinder to Ebrahim Azadegan



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In "A Long Way to God's Mutability: A Response to Ebrahim Azadegan"¹ I tried to challenge what Azadegan says in his "On the Incompatibility of God's Knowledge of Particulars and the Doctrine of Divine Immutability: Towards a Reform in Islamic Theology."² Then, in his "Necessary Existence, Immutability, and God's Knowledge of Particulars: A Reply to Amirhossein Zadyousefi,"³ Azadegan replies to my response. In my response to Azadegan, I discussed many points, and Azadegan did not deal with all of them in his reply. So, in this short rejoinder, I will deal with what Azadegan has said about some of my criticisms. Before proceeding, I should say that in my response to Azadegan I remained neutral on whether God is mutable or not. All I have done there is to show that Azadegan's *path* to God's mutability by adopting Sadra's knowledge-by-presence theory is not as easy as it initially seems. Also, I have tried to show that Avicenna does not adopt the *dogma* of God's immutability. Rather, he has some *reasons* for adopting this view. I understand that one might challenge Avicenna's *reasons* for God's immutability. But, as I insisted in my first response to Azadegan, we should be careful not to conflate *having a dogma* with *having a bad reason*.

In his reply to my response, Azadegan states that "according to Zadyousefi, Avicenna believes in an incompatibility between God's necessary existence and the denial of divine immutability." Then, he presents the following argument that he calls "Argument from God's Necessary Existence to His Immutability":