**8. Free Will and Providence**

by Kenny Boyce

Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims adhere to the following three claims: First, God has comprehensive knowledge of all that is, was, and will be. Second, God makes use of this knowledge in order to exercise providential control over the world. Third, human beings have free will. This combination of views raises philosophical puzzles. My aim in this chapter is to explore how historic Jewish reflection on these puzzles relates to treatment of them by contemporary analytic philosophers. I begin with an examination of the freedom-foreknowledge problem, as discussed by Moses ben Maimon (known as “Maimonides” to English-speaking audiences and “the Rambam” to Hebrew-speaking ones), the greatest medieval Jewish philosopher. This examination will eventually lead into a more general discussion of Jewish views concerning the relationships between divine knowledge, divine providence, and human freedom. Connections between these views and positions held among contemporary analytic philosophers will be explored throughout.

**The Puzzle of Freedom and Foreknowledge**

Maimonides (1138-1204 CE) presents (in *Eight Chapters* VII), as foil, a more or less standard sort of medieval argument for the incompatibility of human freedom and divine foreknowledge:

Does God know or does He not know that a certain individual will be good or bad? If thou sayest ‘He knows’, then it necessarily follows that man is compelled to act as God knew beforehand he would act, otherwise God’s knowledge would be imperfect. If thou sayest God does not know in advance, then great absurdities and destructive religious theories will result. (Maimonides 1912: 99-100)

A more contemporary formulation of such an incompatibility argument (inspired by Fischer, Todd, and Tognazzini’s (2009) discussion of Pike’s (1965) argument) might be given as follows:

(The Freedom-Foreknowledge Argument)

Consider some human agent, S, who, at time t, performs some action A.

(FF1) God knew prior to t that, at t, S would perform A. [*ex hypothesi*]

(FF2) If God knew prior to t that, at t, S would perform A, but S nonetheless has, at t, the ability to refrain from performing A, then S also has, at t, the ability to do something such that, were S to do it, either God would have believed differently prior to t than God in fact did, or God would have been mistaken. [obvious conditional]

(FF3) No human agent has the ability to do something such that were they to do it, either God would have believed differently at some prior time or God would have been mistaken. [on account of the fixity of the past and God’s essential infallibility]

(FF4) If S lacks the ability, at t, to refrain from performing A, then S is not free, at t, with respect to performing A. [because freedom requires the ability to do otherwise]

(FF5) So, S lacks the ability, at t, to refrain from performing A. [FF1-FF3]

(FF6) So, S is not free, at t, with respect to performing A. [FF4, FF5]

(FF7) Therefore, no human agent is free at any time with respect to performing any action. [FF6 via generalization from the arbitrary case]

The above argument takes for granted that God has perfect foreknowledge and argues from there that humans do not possess free will. The challenge it poses to those theists who do believe human beings possess free will is to explain just where this argument goes wrong.

**Maimonides’ Apophatic Solution**

According to Maimonides, those who put forward arguments like these fail to understand that “God does not know by means of knowledge” distinct from God. Rather, Maimonides holds, because God is an absolute unity, God and God’s knowledge are identical. Furthermore, Maimonides maintains, since God is incomprehensible, so is God’s knowledge. Accordingly, the question of just how it manages to be true that human beings have control over their actions in spite of the fact that God knows all they will do remains “beyond the reach of human ken” (Maimonides 1912: 102).

**The Boethian Solution**

Even if God’s knowledge is unlike creaturely knowledge, and is beyond our grasp, we might still wonder, however, just where arguments for the incompatibility of freedom and foreknowledge go wrong. But perhaps Maimonides offers some guidance here as well.

In *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Chapter XX), Maimonides lists five ways in which God’s knowledge differs from human knowledge:

First, His knowledge is one, and yet embraces many different kinds of objects. Secondly, it is applied to things not in existence. Thirdly, it comprehends the infinite. Fourthly, it remains unchanged, though it comprises knowledge of changeable things … Fifthly, … God’s knowledge of one of two eventualities does not determine it, however certain that knowledge may be concerning the future occurrence of that one eventuality. (Maimonides 1919: 294)

The fourth and fifth items on the list have led some to posit that Maimonides adopts the solution to the freedom-foreknowledge problem championed by the early sixth century Christian philosopher Anicius Severinus Manlius Boethius (see Lebens 2011 for critical discussion of this interpretation).

Boethius maintained that God does not exist in time but in eternity. Accordingly, it is strictly speaking false that God has *foreknowledge* of *future* events. Rather, from God’s perspective, everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen occurs in a single specious present. Furthermore, God’s knowledge of events that are (from our perspective) in the future does not rob them of their contingency, no more than our present observations rob things of their contingency. In terms of responding to the freedom-foreknowledge argument, this “timelessness solution” lends itself to the denial of FF1. Since God’s knowledge is not located in time, it is strictly speaking false that God knows of the occurrence of any action temporally prior to when it takes place.

**The Ockhamist Solution**

If Maimonides had the Boethian view in mind, however, it is a bit puzzling that his proposed solution (if indeed that is what he aims to provide) leans so heavily on the mysterious character of God’s knowledge (rather than simply on the fact that it differs from ours in being eternal). This observation prompts exploration of an alternative interpretation.

Recall that according to Maimonides, God is identical to God’s knowledge. Maimonides maintains, furthermore, that God is immutable, and therefore does not undergo intrinsic change. It follows straightaway that God’s knowledge does not undergo intrinsic change – the fourth item on the above list. But as Maimonides himself suggests, this is puzzling, since the things to which God’s knowledge pertains do undergo change. If five minutes ago, Sam was praying to God, but presently, he is not, and at every time God knows all, how could it be that there was no change in God’s knowledge of Sam’s state? One answer is that we should distinguish between God’s knowledge itself (an intrinsic divine mental state) and the *contents* thereof (which are relational). While God’s knowledge has exactly the same intrinsic character now as it did five minutes ago, five minutes ago it included among its contents the proposition that Sam is praying, whereas presently it does not.

How does this help with the freedom-foreknowledge problem? First, it is certainly enigmatic how God’s knowledge could work this way. So appealing to this aspect of it is in keeping with Maimonides’ appeal to mystery. At the same time, if we identify the contents of God’s knowledge with the contents of God’s beliefs, then accepting God’s knowledge does work this way makes it much more plausible to deny FF3. It does so by making it more plausible to affirm that human beings have it within their power to do things such that, were they to do them, God would have believed differently in the past.

The kind of power over the past this proposal affords human beings is merely a power over the past’s temporal-relational character. Suppose for instance that it is now within my power to stop writing for the day even though I will continue writing for another hour. Because I will continue for another hour, it was true this morning when I sat down to write that I was beginning a four-hour writing session. But I also now have it within my power to make it so this was not true this morning. This sort of power over the temporal-relational past seems unproblematic. But if the content of God’s beliefs are temporal-relational (rather than intrinsic features of the divine mind), my power over the content of God’s past beliefs is of this sort.

This interpretation puts Maimonides’ solution in line with what is sometimes referred to in the contemporary literature as “Ockhamism” (named after William of Ockham, of Ockham’s-razor fame). According to that solution, facts about the past come in two categories, “hard facts,” which are part of the intrinsic character of the past, and “soft facts,” which are temporal-relational (pertaining, at least in part, to what happens in the present or future). Facts about God’s past beliefs, Ockhamists maintain, are among the latter, whereas our intuitions about the fixity of the past pertain to the former (see Adams 1967 for contemporary discussion).

**The Freedom-Foreknowledge-Providence Problem**

Both Boethian and Ockhamist solutions pose difficulties, however, for any who would maintain that God’s knowledge of our future free actions is providentially useful. Suppose (to borrow an example from Peter van Inwagen) that sometime prior to t, God creates a “prophetic object” (say a tablet of stone engraved “by the finger of God” as it were) containing divine revelation reporting that S would perform A at t. If God’s foreknowledge or knowledge-in-eternity is providentially useful, God could do this. But if such an object were to exist, and S were to retain the ability to refrain from performing A, then S would have it within their power to bring it about that God issued a false proclamation, or the prophetic object in question was never created, or different words were etched into its stone. Such a result threatens either to rob S of their freedom or to attribute to S the very sort of problematic power over the past the Boethian and Ockhamist solutions were aiming to avoid.

What the above example illustrates is that even if there is nothing freedom-undermining about God’s *merely knowing* what we will do in the future, there may be something freedom undermining about God’s *ability to act* on that knowledge. Let’s say that God has “providentially useful advance knowledge” of some action just in the case that God is able to make providential decisions based on that knowledge whose effects are temporally prior to the occurrence of that action. Note that even if God is outside of time, God might still have “advance knowledge” of an action in this sense. We may now pose the question of whether God could have providentially useful advance knowledge of human free actions.

One argument in addition to the considerations raised above that God could not have such knowledge goes as follows: For any given human action, either God’s knowledge of that action is explanatorily posterior to the occurrence of that action or it is explanatorily prior. But if God’s knowledge is explanatorily posterior to the action, it comes “too late” in the order of explanation for God to act on it (in that case the fact the action occurs is already settled prior to God’s making any providential decisions concerning whether to bring it about). But if God’s knowledge is explanatorily prior to the action’s occurrence (say because God decreed that it would take place), then it seems the action could not be free (because in that case its occurrence is entailed by factors outside the agent’s control).

Thus the considerations raised in this section offer some reason to believe that even if God has knowledge of our future free actions, that knowledge lacks providential utility. But this is problematic for those religious theists who believe God not only has such knowledge but also acts on it. We thus have not only a freedom-foreknowledge problem, but a freedom-foreknowledge-providence problem.

A proper resolution to this problem would involve not only coming up with a religiously adequate response to the freedom-foreknowledge argument, but also a religiously adequate response to the arguments raised here against the claim that such knowledge could be providentially useful. Such a resolution will consist either in diagnosing where each of these arguments goes wrong in a manner that respects all relevant religious commitments, or explaining how the soundness of one or more of them is in fact compatible with those commitments. Of course, what constitutes a religiously adequate response will also depend on just which religious commitments are at issue.

**Interlude: Distinctively Jewish Views Concerning the Scope of Divine Providence**

There are two reasons to doubt that the freedom-foreknowledge-providence problem poses as much of a difficulty for Judaism as it does other monotheistic traditions. First, parts of the Jewish tradition already see the scope of God’s providence as being drastically limited. Second, certain Jewish views about how God’s decrees interact with free choices seem to blunt its force. I will take each of these in turn.

Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens (2022: 150), based on discussion of Leibowitz (2009), note that medieval Jewish thinkers commonly distinguished between “particular providence” and “general providence.” “Particular providence,” they explain, “is God governing (at least some of) the details of an individual’s life.” “General providence,” by contrast, “is God’s governing the life of a species.” If particular providence is always active in the life of an individual, then the specific things happening to that individual are under God’s direct providential control. But when only general providence is operative, God’s providence extends only to the fate of a given species, not to specific events involving its individual members.

Goldschmidt and Lebens also point to intramural debates among Jewish thinkers about the scope of God’s particular providence. Some, they note, maintain that God exercises particular providence over everything, others that God exercises particular providence only over human beings, others only over the righteous, and still others only over the land of Israel. In any case, the more restricted God’s particular providence turns out to be, one might think, the less it matters whether God has providentially useful advance knowledge of future free actions.

But there are wrinkles here. Even if God’s particular providence extends only to righteous individuals, for example, much of what happens to those individuals depends on the free actions of other human beings. If the events falling within the scope of God’s particular providence surrounding Joseph included, for instance, his brothers freely throwing him into a pit, then events involving the free actions of Joseph’s brothers also fell within the scope of God’s particular providence. And the arguments we have considered so far threaten the claim that God had providentially useful advance knowledge of those actions.

But perhaps God’s particular providence regarding Joseph did not specifically include the fact that *his brothers* would throw him into a pit, but only that he would suffer a comparable ill fate. This suggestion reflects the historically commonly held Jewish view that the fulfilment of God’s decrees (for good or ill) concerning specific individuals do not counterfactually depend on the free actions of others. According to Saadia Gaon (892-942 CE), for example:

People ask: Is the murder of an individual to be ascribed to God? … We maintain that the death of the individual is an act of God, but the [element of] murder is the act of the wicked. Since God decreed death [for this individual], had the murderer not acted willfully and killed him, [the victim] would surely have died in another way. And the same is true regarding a thief … For since God decreed that the item should be lost, had the thief not stolen the item, it would have been lost in another way.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If God’s particular providential decrees concerning individuals are counterfactually robust in these ways, then while free actions affecting a certain individual may fall outside the scope of God’s particular providence, their practically significant results need not.

This suggestion does mitigate the force of the freedom-foreknowledge-providence problem. But it does not entirely dissolve it. It is part of the view here described that God sometimes deigns to fulfill the counterfactually robust aspects of his decrees through the free actions of certain individuals. But if God lacks providentially useful advance knowledge of free actions, this is not something God could definitively *plan* on doing. At best, God might see that certain agents are likely to act in ways that fulfill the decree, “wait” to see if they in fact do so, and prepare to implement a backup plan should they fail.

**Middle Knowledge Solutions**

Or perhaps not. There is one commonly proposed partial solution to the freedom-foreknowledge-providence problem according to which God *both* lacks providentially useful advance knowledge of future free actions *and yet* still possesses providentially useful knowledge concerning what free agents *would* do.

According to the doctrine of “middle knowledge” (most commonly associated with the Jesuit priest Luis de Molina), prior to creation, God possessed knowledge of what any possible creature he might create would freely do in any complete non-determining circumstance in which they could exist and be granted a free choice. And since this knowledge is of what agents would *freely* do, the doctrine also has it, it is both contingent and outside of God’s volitional control. Nevertheless, according to the doctrine, this knowledge informs God’s providential decisions concerning which creatures to create and in which circumstances to place them, thereby allowing God to knowingly bring about all that takes place. God does have foreknowledge (or perhaps timeless knowledge) according to this doctrine, but that knowledge lacks providential utility. It is instead an epiphenomenal artifact of God’s knowledge of which free agents God has chosen to create, the circumstances in which God has chosen to place them, and what those agents would do in those circumstances. “Middle knowledge” is so called because it is (in terms of explanatory priority) “in between” God’s knowledge of what is possible and God’s knowledge of what actually takes place.

Since the doctrine of middle knowledge posits somewhat complex relations of explanatory priority among items of God’s knowledge and God’s decrees, it pairs well with the view of providence described above, according to which God issues counterfactually robust decrees concerning the fates of specific individuals, while also allowing for God’s choosing the precise means by which those decrees are realized. Perhaps God did decree in advance, for example, that somehow Joseph would be sold into slavery, and “then” (in terms of explanatory priority) made use of middle knowledge in order to ensure that Joseph’s brothers would freely carry out the decree.

Given how well the doctrine of middle knowledge pairs with this understanding of providence, it is somewhat surprising not to find clear examples of it represented among historical Jewish thinkers. There are, perhaps, hints here and there. Berel Dov Lerner (2009) points out, for instance, that Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089/92-1164/67 CE) suggests (based on Exodus 13:17) that God did not have the Israelites pass through the land of the Philistines on their way to Canaan because “God … knew that they would reconsider if He led them by way of the land of the Philistines.” Such knowledge is plausibly construed as middle knowledge.

Lerner also argues that some of Maimonides’ remarks concerning repentance might lend themselves to a doctrine of middle knowledge (though Lerner himself ultimately rejects that interpretation). According to Maimonides, the penitent “must call … Him who knows all secrets to witness that he will never return to his sins again” (Laws of Repentance 2:2, translation from Maimonides 1965). Lerner points out that one plausible reading of what Maimonides is saying is that God must be called upon to witness not only to the claim that the penitent will never *in fact* sin again, but also *would not* sin in counterfactual circumstances.

Regardless, the doctrine of middle knowledge offers a partial solution to the freedom-foreknowledge-providence-problem. It does so by conceding that God lacks providentially useful advance knowledge of future free actions while maintaining that God does have providentially useful knowledge of what free agents would do. The doctrine fails, however, to provide a solution to the freedom-foreknowledge problem with which we began. Rather, as John Martin Fischer (2008) convincingly argues, it simply presupposes that there is already some answer to that problem. Furthermore, the doctrine of middle knowledge introduces yet another mysterious form of divine knowledge, raising additional questions about whether such knowledge is possible and whether God’s possessing it is compatible with human freedom. Perhaps these liabilities help explain why the view never found much traction among Jewish thinkers.

**Dependence Solutions**

According to dependence solutions to the freedom-foreknowledge puzzle, free agents do in fact have a kind of power over what God believed at previous times (contrary to premise FF3 of the freedom-foreknowledge argument) because the content of God’s past beliefs explanatorily depends on how those creatures behave at those times. We have already encountered one example of such a solution (the Ockhamist solution), but, as Philip Swenson (a contemporary proponent of this view) notes, those who endorse it need not appeal to anything like the Ockhamist’s distinction between hard and soft facts (Swenson 2016).

Dependence solutions find precedent among Jewish thinkers. Saadia Gaon (892-942 CE) denies, for instance, that God’s foreknowledge of our future free actions explains those actions, and (on some interpretations) holds that it is the other way around (*Doctrines and Opinions* IV).[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps a clearer instance of this view is found in the writing of Judah Halevi (1075-1141CE). Halevi clearly maintains that free human actions are not determined by prior causes and furthermore that God’s “knowledge of events to come is not the cause of their existence, just as is the case with the knowledge of things which have been” (Halevi 1964: 282)

Can such views also help account for how divine foreknowledge might be providentially useful? David Hunt (1993) and Dean Zimmerman (2012) each offer examples in which God’s foreknowing a certain decision “after” (in terms of explanatory order) it is made is nonetheless providentially useful. Suppose for instance (to craft our own example) that God’s providential purposes would be *best* served if Joseph’s brothers freely throw him into a pit, but that God has also decreed that Joseph is to wind up in a pit regardless. Suppose further that God must decide, at t1, whether to direct Joseph along a path toward his brothers (where he would not naturally fall into any pits) or along another path that has a hidden pit. Suppose that Joseph’s brothers are currently deliberating about whether to throw Joseph into a pit when they see him, but have not yet (as of t1) freely made up their minds. Certainly, under these conditions, it would be useful for God to foreknow the outcome of Joseph’s brothers’ deliberations.

But (as Hunt, Swenson, and Zimmerman all note) there is also an initial (though avoidable) danger that such examples of providentially useful foreknowledge will involve illicit explanatory circularities. It would not do, for instance, if the above story were told in such a way

that God’s decision to send Joseph toward his brothers was based on God’s foreknowledge that Joseph’s brothers would freely resolve to toss him into a pit, but also that this decision was caused in part by their being further enraged by Joseph’s approach. Zimmerman suggests that proponents of providentially useful simple foreknowledge can avoid such circularities by maintaining that God’s knowledge unfolds in explanatory stages, where explanatorily later stages depend on God’s providential decrees, which were in turn informed by what God foreknew at earlier stages. The explanatory order in which these stages unfolds need not correspond to the temporal order in which the foreknown events take place. But they must unfold in an order that avoids the sort of circularities just described.

But this suggestion invites a further question: If the explanatory order of God’s foreknowledge need not correspond to the temporal order of events, just what does determine that order? Zimmerman (2012: 194) suggests proponents of this view should maintain that (at least to some extent) the order is up to God’s own free decisions. And perhaps that is so. But Jewish views according to which the scope of divine providence is limited might also provide further insight into the bases God has for making such decisions. If, for instance, God’s particular providence concerns itself only with the righteous, then God might leverage foreknowledge concerning how the unrighteous will behave for the benefit of the righteous, while at the same time being more judicious about leaving open providential options concerning the righteous themselves.

**Deterministic Solutions**

An alternative solution to the freedom-foreknowledge-providence problem, however, is to maintain that God’s knowledge of how free creatures will behave is explanatorily posterior to God’s decrees because those decrees *determine* all that will take place. The main challenge for such a solution, however, is to satisfy the demand of religious adequacy. The mainstream traditions of all three major monotheistic religions portray God as issuing commands, justly rewarding obedience to those commands, and justly punishing disobedience. Judaism in particular assigns a central role to the importance of Torah observance. But if theological determinism is true, what is the point of issuing commands to beings that cannot act otherwise than how they were determined to act? And how could God be just in rewarding or punishing human beings for actions that were ultimately caused by factors outside of their control?

Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410/11 CE), the medieval Jewish thinker most prominently associated with theological determinism, answers these questions as follows in his *Light of the Lord* II.V. The fact that our actions are determined, he maintains, does not render the commandments pointless. On the contrary, the commandments serve as a *means* by which God causes good outcomes. Furthermore, the justice of God’s rewarding and punishing on the basis of our obedience or disobedience is explained in two ways. First, for at least some commandments, the “punishments” associated with following them are not externally imposed sanctions but rather mere natural consequences. Second, when God does externally impose positive or negative consequences, they serve not to furnish people with what they deserve, but as a system of incentives designed to motivate the will toward good outcomes.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Crescas’s answers here reveal that he is not what contemporary analytic philosophers would call a “compatibilist” either about free will or responsibility. That is, he does not believe that our actions being determined is compatible with their being free or with our being morally responsible for them. As Aaron Segal (2022) points out, had Crescas held a compatibilist view, he could have simply maintained that God justly punishes us because we are responsible for what we do.

Crescas does go out of his way to argue that while acts of the will are “necessary in respect of their causes” they are “possible in respect of themselves” (Crescas 2018: 194). He also maintains that it is the mark of a voluntary action that one exhibits positive emotion toward it. Indeed he even goes as far to say that what makes it fitting for God to reward acts of obedience is “the love and joy one takes in them” (201-202). However, Segal convincingly argues that the point of Crescas’ discussion of these matters is not to establish that the will is in some sense free in spite of being determined, but rather that it often serves as a non-redundant element in the deterministic causal chain leading to the good outcome.

**Open Theist Solutions**

The previous solutions have all held on to the idea that God has exhaustive knowledge of all that is, was, and will be.[[4]](#footnote-4) A popular view among many contemporary analytic philosophers of religion denies this. According to *open theism*, God does not know future contingent propositions. Future contingent propositions are (at least roughly) propositions pertaining to the future that are not entailed by any propositions solely about the past or present (or the conjunction of any such propositions with the laws of nature). Propositions pertaining to future free acts, furthermore, are often held to be paradigmatic examples of future contingents (given the assumption that free will is incompatible with determinism). Some open theists maintain that while there are in fact true future contingents, they are inherently unknowable, even for a cognitively perfect being. Others maintain the reason God does not know them is that none of them are true.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The latter position appears to be represented by Abraham Ibn Daud (1110-1180 CE). According to Ibn Daud, there are two senses in which a thing might be said to be “possible”. In one sense, a thing might be said to be “possible” on account of ignorance, as when it is unknown by the people of Spain whether a foreign king is currently alive or dead. But in another sense, a thing might be said to be “possible” because it has been created so as to genuinely admit of contrary attributes. It is in this latter sense, according to Ibn Daud, that it is possible that human beings will perform certain free acts or refrain from performing them. And because these things are possible, God knows them as such.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is sometimes said that Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105 CE), also known by the acronym “Rashi”, held the position that future contingents are neither true nor false. Such a view would commit Rashi to denying the principle of bivalence (as many contemporary open theists do). Eli Hirsch (2006) maintains, however, that Rashi held to the principle of bivalence. Rashi’s view, according to Hirsch, was that future contingents are indeed either true or false, but it is indeterminate just which truth value they have. Hirsch argues that this view succeeds in reconciling the claim that the future is open with both the principle of bivalence and the denial of the claim that all future contingent propositions are false. If Hirsch is right about this, then Rashi’s view represents a distinctive sort of open futurist view that has yet to be thoroughly explored in the contemporary literature.

An open theist view is sometimes also attributed to Levi ben Gershom (1288-1344 CE), also known as “Gersonides” or “the Ralbag”. As we will see in the next section, though, Gersonides held a much more radical position. There is, however, a significant problem for the religious adequacy of open theism concerning which Gersonides offers some help. The issue pertains to prophecy. Some prophecies reported in Scripture seem to predict or presuppose certain free choices on the part of human beings. But if open theism is true, such choices cannot be foreknown and therefore cannot be infallibly predicted. Might then divinely issued prophecies turn out not to be fulfilled?

Gersonides makes two moves in order to address this problem.[[7]](#footnote-7) First, he maintains that the scope of human freedom is quite limited. Nearly everything, according to Gersonides is determined by way of natural influences (especially astrological ones). Human beings do possess free will, which sometimes enables them to act contrary to these influences, but only with great difficulty. So the future is in fact quite predictable in spite of the fact that human free actions cannot themselves be foreseen with certainty (*Wars* II.2). Second, prophecies about the future often should not be construed as absolute statements about what will occur, but rather as conditional statements about what will occur given certain antecedents. E.g. a prophecy of coming disaster is often conditioned on the assumption that people will not take the required measures to avert it (*Wars* III.5). In this respect, Gersonides’ view regarding prophecy is similar to that of many contemporary open theists (see Hasker 1989: 194-96).

**General Knowledge Solutions**

While some of Gersonides’ remarks are of use to open theists, however, Gersonides himself holds a far more radical position. His own view is that God possesses merely general knowledge of universals and the regularities governing their instantiation. God knows particulars, Gersonides maintains, only by way of being familiar with the universals of which they are instances. So while God, according to Gersonides, knows of all dogs that they are mammals, that non-disabled specimens of them are four-legged, etc., God does not know of the existence or accidental characteristics of particular dogs. E.g. God does not know of *Rover* that he exists and is brown. Nevertheless, this limitation in God’s knowledge is not, according to Gersonides, a defect. That is because, on Gersonides’ view, the only way knowledge of particulars comes about is through sensory knowledge, which is itself a defective way of knowing (*Wars* III.4, see especially Gersonides 1987: 121)). In all of this Gersonides is influenced by Averroes’ monotheistic appropriation of Aristotle (see Rudavsky 1983).

Obviously, Gersonides’ view does not generate a freedom-foreknowledge problem. On his view, God does not even know that I exist, let alone what I am going to do tomorrow. But does his view leave us with a religiously adequate view of providence? How could God be said to guide the course of human events when God does not even so much as know about their particular details? Gersonides’ answer is that God is constantly emanating information about general regularities. Agents who are appropriately sensitive to these emanations are able to pick up that information and apply it to the particularities of their own situation. Prophets, according to Gersonides, are individuals who are especially adept at receiving and applying this information (*Wars* II.6). Perhaps this suggestion does mitigate objections to the religious adequacy of Gersonides’ position. Nevertheless, it remains an outlier within Judaism.

**Idealist Solutions**

The last position we will consider is one that Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens (2022) label “radical Hassidic idealism.” They attribute this view to the early Hassidic masters (including the founder of Hassidism, Israel ben Eliezer 1698-1760 CE). According to this view, the only things that exist, fundamentally speaking, are God and God’s ideas. Our non-fundamental reality, furthermore, consists in something like a divine daydream, or a divinely written story. Since it is true in the divine story, of course, that we exist, the view also has it that there are things that are true at the most fundamental level of reality that are not true at our level and *vice versa*

As Goldschmidt and Lebens point out, on the one hand, this view lends itself toward an extreme form of theological determinism. Our actions are determined by God in the manner that an author determines the actions of their characters. On the other hand, they note, such a view is also consistent with the falsity of theological determinism within the context of the story. Authors can appear as characters in their own story, and what is true of the author as a character in the story need not be true of the author outside the story.

Thus, Goldschmidt and Lebens conclude, radical Hassidic idealism affords a way of reconciling an extreme form of theological determinism with views according to which not all of our actions are divinely determined. One just has to make sure one keeps track of which level of reality one describes. Indeed, the point generalizes. As Goldschmidt and Lebens point out, this view provides a strategy for reconciling an extreme form of divine determinism with any of the views of providence considered above.

**Conclusion**

The rich diversity of Jewish thought concerning the philosophical puzzles surrounding freedom, foreknowledge, and providence anticipates much of the same diversity found in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. It also brings some distinctive and underexplored resources to those puzzles. Contemporary philosophers would do well to further mine those resources.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Related Topics**

Negative Theology, The Problem of Evil, Prophecy, Medieval Jewish Philosophy, Analytic Jewish Philosophy

**Works Cited**

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**Further Reading**

For analysis and later development of a number of views discussed in this chapter, see William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), and Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University

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For a contemporary development of the Boethian view, see Stump and Kretzmann (1981) “Eternity” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 78, pp. 429-458.

For a defense of Open Theism (as well as critiques of some of the other views in this chapter), see Peter Van Inwagen “What Does an Omniscient Being Know about the Future?” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion Volume* *1*, edited by Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 216-230.

A helpful overview of Molinism can be found in Freddoso’s introduction to his edition of Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the “Concordia”* translated by

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For more detailed discussion of Molinism, see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

1. From *The Book of* *Beliefs and Opinions* (4:5). This quotation and translation is given in (Leibowitz 2009: 118). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sacks (1982: 7) interprets him in this way for example. However, what Saadia explicitly says is that “God knows man’s ultimate action such as it will be … after all his planning; for God knows man’s nature” (2002: 123). This quote fits well with a reading according to which human actions are not caused by God’s knowledge, but are determined by human nature (though not in a way that is freedom undermining). This would make Saadia’s proposal a kind of deterministic solution (albeit a compatibilist one) of the sort discussed in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My summary of Crescas’s view in this paragraph is greatly indebted to (Segal 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. At least to a first approximation, we may say that God has exhaustive knowledge of all that is, was, and will be, when there are no tenseless (or omni-tensed) propositions that are true, or at least may someday be true, that God does not know. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On some accounts, bivalence fails for future contingents, which are neither true nor false (e.g. Tuggy 2007). On others, future contingents are all false (see Todd 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This paragraph summarizes the discussion of Ibn Daud’s view found in (Eran and Fontaine 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gersonides outlines his conception of prophecy primarily in his *The Wars of the Lord* Book II and elaborates on his theory of divine knowledge in Book III. My discussion (in this and the next section) of Gersonides’ views was greatly aided by (Rudavsky 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In preparing this chapter, I greatly benefited from the historical overview of Jewish thinking surrounding the puzzles of freedom, foreknowledge, and providence found in (Bednarsh 2018: lessons 1-8). I would also like to thank Andrew D. Bassford, Gabriel Citron, Tyron Goldschmidt, Shai Held, Paul Manata, Aaron Segal, and Dwight Stanislaw for helpful guidance pertaining to Jewish sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)