Chapter 27

# Reflections on Divine Language & Attributes

## Three Conceptions of God in Contemporary Christian Philosophy?

*Stephen T. Davis**

**Introduction.** Nothing is more important in Christian philosophy than the concept of God. Christianity is essentially based on the notion of a God who creates and redeems us. But what is God like? What are God's attributes or properties? There is, among Christian philosophers, a great deal of agreement or overlap in their explanations of God's nature, but serious disagreement too. On the question of God's attributes, Christian philosophers have written a great deal.

There is a core concept of God that the vast majority of Christian philosophers and theologians affirm. They accept it because they believe that it is taught in scripture and in the Christian theological and confessional tradition.[1]

> *Core Concept*: God is ultimate reality; God necessarily exists;[2] and as the unique, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good creator of the heavens and the earth, God is worthy of our worship.

Obviously, the meanings of many of these terms can be and have been disputed, and there are Christian philosophers who deny some of them. But I believe that this core concept of God can be said to be common ground among most Christian philosophers today.[3]

But beyond this core concept, there are sharp differences among Christian philosophers on the concept of God. Those differences emerge mainly as a result of two factors. There are, for example, disagreements about how to interpret those passages in the Christian scriptures that talk about God. There are also different intuitions about the meaning and implications of such concepts as "ultimate reality," "perfect being," "worthy of worship," etc. In this essay I will focus on three views of God that are alive and well among Christian philosophers today.

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**Three views of God.** Here, then, are the three views of God that I want to discuss. We'll call them, respectively, the Classical Theism (CT), the Neo-classical Theism (NCT) and the Openness Theism (OT). My descriptions of them will be rough and incomplete but, I hope, reasonably accurate.

CT has been held by very many great Christian philosophers and theologians, notably Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. It is ably defended these days by Christian philosophers such as David Burrell, Brian Davies, Paul Helm, Brian Leftow, Ralph McInerny, and Eleonore Stump. CT can be defined roughly as follows:

> *CT*: God is the unique, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good creator of the heavens and the earth; God is a necessary being; and God is timeless, strongly immutable, impassible, and metaphysically simple.

Very roughly, let us say that a being is *timeless* if it is "outside of time," if it has no temporal location or temporal extension. On CT, it makes no sense to say, for example, that "God existed in AD 1529" or that "God existed during the entire time of the Cold War." Temporal terms such as these have no application to God. A being is *strongly immutable* if it is never true to say that at one point in time it has a certain property and at another point in time does not have it, except for purely relational changes like, "Is believed in by Augustine or by Charles Colson" (to pick examples of two famous people who were adult converts to Christianity). On CT, it makes no sense to say, for example, that God's attitude toward me after I repent is different from what it was before. A being is *impassible* if it never suffers pain or is changed in attitude, emotion, or behavior by causes external to it. On CT, it makes no sense to say, for example, that God suffers with us when we suffer. And a being is *metaphysically simple* if it consists of no composite parts, i.e., has no complexity of any kind, and is accordingly indivisible. It has no spatial parts, nor even a set of distinct properties or attributes. Of course believers in divine simplicity can say things like, "God is good and wise." But they deny that that means that God has two properties (goodness and wisdom). They say that God "just is" God's properties, which is a slightly paradoxical way of expressing the doctrine. They even sometimes say that God's goodness "just is" God's wisdom, and vice-versa.

NCT is the view of God that is held, I believe, by the majority of Christian philosophers who write about God today, including David Brown, William L. Craig, Alan Padgett, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. (The fact that a majority hold the theory does not make it true, of course.)

> *NCT*: God is the unique, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good creator of the heavens and the earth; God is a necessary being; and God is temporal, weakly immutable, passible, and not metaphysically simple.

Again very roughly, let us say that a being is *temporal* if there is a real past, present, and future for it, if it has both temporal location and temporal duration. This is not

to say, of course, that the being is temporally finite; defenders of NCT always insist that God is everlasting, has no beginning and no end. A being is *weakly immutable* if it changes in some ways but always retains its essential nature and character, is true to its word, keeps its promises, never wavers in its purposes, can always be relied upon, and is not fickle, mercurial, or moody. A being is *not metaphysically simple*, i.e., is metaphysically complex, if it consists of composite parts.

And OT is a view of God that has received considerable attention in Christian philosophical and theological circles in recent decades. Its hallmark is a denial of comprehensive divine foreknowledge; what God does not know about the future—so the most common version of the theory says—is the result of human free choices. What is called "Openness Theology" or the "Open View of God" is associated with people like David Basinger, Greg Boyd, William Hasker, Clark Pinnock, and John Sanders. OT can be briefly defined in this way:

> *OT*: God is the unique, omnipotent, omniscient (in the sense of knowing everything that can possibly be known), and perfectly good creator of the heavens and the earth; God is a necessary being; God is temporal, weakly immutable, passible, and not metaphysically simple; and God does not know the results of future human free decisions.

Accordingly, OT holds that God does not know the entire future.

Now there are two ways that defenders of OT can develop their theory.[4] The less radical version (call it RFOT for "Real Future Open Theology") affirms that there is a real future to be known but denies that God knows all of it. God certainly knows, on this view, what will happen in the future as a result of God's own firm intentions about what to do, but God does not know future contingents, i.e., events that may or may not occur in the future, especially what will or will not occur due to free human choices. Accordingly, God can be said to take risks and to be surprised. The future is open, not fixed by divine foreknowledge or by anything else. If I will be free tomorrow morning to put on my left shoe either before or after my right shoe, God does not know, and has never known, which I will do.

The more radical version of OT (call it POT for "Presentist Open Theology") is based primarily on a metaphysical conviction, viz., that the future is not real. What we call "the future" does not exist, and so logically cannot be known by God or anyone else, since there is literally nothing to know. What is real is the present, and that is all. But I will discuss this version of OT no further in the present paper, and for two reasons. The metaphysical reason is that Presentism (since it holds that the past is not real either) reduces reality ("the present") to nothing but an infinitely thin boundary line between the past and the future. And that cannot be the right way of looking at reality; what is real must amount to more than that. The biblical reason is that if there is now no fact of the matter about future events, then there is no fact of the matter about whether Jesus will return or whether God will win in the end. And that seems a hard conclusion for Christians to accept.

**How to think about God?** So which of these theories is true or closest to the truth? Although abstruse debates about God are rarely easy to settle, this will be the question that I will try to answer in the present essay. My own views will become clear as I progress, but let me announce here that I am deeply attracted to CT but in the end cannot make sense of it; I reject OT; and so NCT is the theory that I embrace.

Christian thinking about God—so it seems to me—must be done in tension, so to speak, between two opposite poles. God is *transcendent* and God is *immanent*. Christians must hold that both claims are true, and the neglect of one over the other leads to error. The claim that God is transcendent entails that God is infinitely greater than and superior to the whole of creation; we are quite unable to understand God or God's ways; God is not like a powerful and grand human being.[5] The claim that God is immanent follows from Christian notions like: we were created in God's image, so that in some ways we are like God (and since "being similar to" is a symmetrical relation, if we are in some ways like God then God is in some ways like us); God reveals himself to us and acts in the created order; and in the incarnation of Christ God became one of us. Indeed, God is a *person*—not, of course, in the same way in which we are persons, but at least in the sense of having a mental life that includes knowledge, desires, and intentions, as well as being an agent, as having the ability to bring those intentions to fruition.

Some theories of God go too far in one direction or the other. The danger of going too far in the immanence direction is *anthropomorphism*. This is the tendency to suppose that non-human things—in this case, God—are very much like human beings. The ancient Greek pantheon, for example, was anthropomorphic; gods like Zeus, Ares, and Athena were indeed far more powerful than human beings and did not have to die, but in most other ways they were similar to human beings. But it is possible to go too far in the transcendence direction too. The gods of the ancient Epicureans, for example, were ideal exemplars of *ataraxia* (calm, serenity, imperturbability), but they lived far away from the earth and had nothing to do with human affairs. The God of seventeenth century Deism, who creates the heavens and the earth and its natural laws and processes but never interferes thereafter, also seems too transcendent. So the danger of going too far in the transcendence direction is that we arrive at a God who has little to do with us and about whom we can know little.

**Problems with classical theism.** As noted, the two theories that I wish to criticize are CT and OT. In approaching CT, I think a good way to proceed is for me to list five reasons why I think many Christian philosophers today reject it. They are: scripture, human freedom, the origin of sin, apologetic concerns, and pastoral considerations.

*Scripture*. Many Christian philosophers have a hard time—as I do—reconciling the God depicted in the Bible with a God who is timeless, immutable, simple, and impassible. It seems that God does temporally interact with people, issuing

commands that they must obey in the future, judging them for things that they have done in the past, and forgiving them because of their acts of repentance. It also seems that God has different attributes that are not the same as each other, e.g., (as before) goodness and wisdom; moreover, Christians believe that in at least some sense of the word "part" (not physical parts like arms and legs), God has three parts, i.e., the Trinitarian persons. We know, of course, that there is anthropomorphism in the Bible, as well as very many literary genres. Moreover, we are aware of the exceedingly clever and nuanced attempts by medieval philosophers (especially Aquinas) and some of our contemporaries to achieve such a reconciliation between CT and the God of the Bible. Still, many of us are dubious that it can sensibly be done. This point constitutes a major impediment to accepting CT.

*Human freedom*. Those who accept CT are inevitably drawn to compatibilism vis-à-vis human freedom, and this is a theory that is unacceptable to many contemporary philosophers of religion, including me. (Compatibilism is the philosophical theory which says that human moral responsibility is compatible with determinism. In theology, compatibilism says that human moral responsibility is compatible with divine foreordination of all things.) That human beings are sometimes free in a libertarian sense is one of our deepest phenomenological convictions; that is, we think it is sometimes possible for a human being, under the same set of antecedent causes, to do a given act or not do it. Moreover, we do not find plausible the various efforts that have been made by defenders of CT and others to reconcile compatibilist freedom with moral responsibility. And the assertion that human beings are morally responsible for their sins is one of the most important principles of biblical religion. Again, we are aware of the thoughtful attempts in the tradition to reconcile compatibilist freedom and human moral responsibility, but we are unconvinced.

*The origin of evil*. Those who defend CT always insist that the reason that God perfectly foreknows the future is that the future will be what it will be because, in some sense, God wills or foreordains what it will be.[6] It is crucial to CT that all of God's aims or purposes will be accomplished. And the obvious problem here is that this seems to make God the author of evil, both natural and moral. How can God, who is perfectly morally good, foreordain people to sin? How can God, who is perfectly just, condemn foreordained sinners to hell? Defenders of CT of course respond to this charge. But despite the subtle distinctions that defenders of CT make at this point, many contemporary Christian philosophers see nothing but paradox in affirming both divine foreordination of all events and human responsibility for their sins.[7]

*Apologetic issues*. People who are committed to CT often insist that it makes no sense for Christians to try to argue that God is "morally good," in some sense similar to the way in which respected and honored human beings are morally good. Now I too wish strongly to affirm that God's goodness far transcends even the best of human goodness. Still, apologetic issues come into play here whenever we try to reply to Mackie-like objections to the problem of evil.[8] Atheists certainly do pose

questions about God's moral integrity. I once met a man—a veteran of World War II—who said to me, "I have seen things with my own eyes that God would never permit if God existed." In order to answer people who say things like that (more frequent, perhaps, are comments like, "I will not believe in a God who allows x, y, and z"), Christian philosophers have felt constrained to argue that God can still be perfectly morally good despite the occurrence of events like x, y, and z. I regard that as a perfectly understandable and acceptable reaction. Does God need our apologetic interventions? Of course not. But some people apparently need them. Such folk need to be told where their thinking has led them astray. So this point constitutes a reason to question CT as an adequate view of God if CT holds—as it normally does—that all human attempts to show that God is "morally good" cannot get off the ground.

*Pastoral considerations*. A closely related point: when I was a young assistant pastor just out of theological seminary, a member of my parish was diagnosed with lupus, a disease of which there was then (and so far as I know, still is) no known cure. I spoke with him, and with his wife, on several occasions. A metal worker without much education, he in effect asked me the question, "Why did this happen to me?" His wife was even more deeply troubled. I was faced with a pastoral situation where a believer, i.e., the wife, was calling into question God's moral integrity. I saw it as my pastoral responsibility to let her express her pain and anger, to suffer with her (usually in silence), and occasionally to try to get her to see that God was good and could be praised for his goodness despite what had happened to her husband. Had I been a strict defender of CT, I would not have been able to comfort either the husband or the wife, unless they found it comforting to be told, "Get used to it: God causes every event that occurs, and we must love and honor God nevertheless."[9]

What about CT's doctrine of divine impassibility? The classical theorist's objection to passibility is this: If God were to feel sorrow when we suffer, that would make God's emotional state depend on us, and so God would not be wholly independent of us in God's existence and nature. Now despite this argument, in the past one hundred years, not just most philosophers of religion, but virtually the entire Christian theological world (with the exception of those who embrace CT), has moved to the notion that God *qua* God suffers.[10] It is now a virtual commonplace. (Again, that does not make it true.) The point that defenders of NCT or OT often make is this: Once God creates human beings, reveals himself to them, and makes covenants with them, God gives up being *wholly* independent of the creatures. Of course God does not depend in any sense on us for God's existence and essential nature. But God does respond to what we do, as literally hundreds of biblical passages imply.

In various ways, the defenders of CT want to increase the distance between God and human beings. For example, defenders of CT sometimes deny that God is a moral agent.[11] And I agree that God is not a moral agent in the same sense in which we are moral agents (i.e., morally responsible to a higher agent). But I would

have thought that God becomes a moral agent of a sort the moment God issues moral commands to human beings or makes covenants with them. Indeed, the moment God does that, God makes us part of God's moral community.

What about the notion of divine simplicity? This is a part of CT that I confess I only dimly understand. One obvious problem is this: two attributes are obviously distinct from each other if it is logically possible for a substance to possess one of them but not the other. Thus *red* is not the same attribute as *tall* because it is possible for something to have one but not the other. So anything that is both red and tall is not metaphysically simple. But surely it is logically possible for a being to be *the creator of the heavens and the earth* without being *perfectly good*. Some religions have suggested this very thing. Thus if God possesses both these properties—as Christianity insists—God is not metaphysically simple.[12]

I do not think the arguments usually advanced in favor of divine simplicity are convincing. For example, it is sometimes said that whatever has parts that are distinct from it depends on them for its existence and nature.[13] But I would reply that if God is a necessary being and if God's parts are essential to God, this does not follow. No necessary being depends on *anything* for its existence. Another argument: Paul Helm claims that composite things must be caused to exist. Everything composite, he says, "is subsequent to its components and depends on them."[14] But I am unsure what "subsequent to" means in this context. Am I "subsequent to" my left foot? I certainly in some sense depend on it, but if God is composite, God cannot be separated from his parts, as I can, and so is not dependent on them in any theologically untoward way. A similar argument: James Ross claims that denying divine simplicity entails "God's incompleteness and dependence on things *ad extra*."[15] But I do not think this notion entails God's incompleteness at all since God's parts are obviously going to be essential parts of God, who is a necessary being. God's parts are related to each other and to God because they cannot not be so related. Accordingly, it does not entail God's dependence on anything external to God. Nor, if God is a necessary being, is any explanation required of why the parts of God are related to each other as they are. It is simply an essential aspect of reality that God's parts are related to each other as they are.

Some defenders of CT strongly deny that God is "an item in the universe."[16] In my view, the answer to the question whether that is true depends on what is meant by "the universe." Perhaps the term refers to the huge aggregate of all creatures, i.e., to all the contingent things that have ever existed, now exist, or will ever exist. On that understanding of the term, God is not an item in the universe. God is not a contingent thing. But if by the term "the universe" we mean the set of all real or existing things, then—or so I would hold—God is indeed an item in the universe. Does it necessarily demean God's transcendence and sovereignty to affirm as much? I do not see why. One can still be quite clear about all the ways in which God differs from the creatures.

Some theologians and philosophers of religion have denied that God is a "being." But I have always thought that the English term "being" is almost infinite

in what it ranges over. A "being" is just anything whose name or referring term can appear in the subject position of a coherent sentence, is a property bearer, and has an identity apart from other things. Is God a being *like* other beings? Of course not. Is God a being *among* others beings? Of course (or so I would say).

What clinches God's membership in the set of existing beings, in my opinion, is the fact of revelation. Apart from God's revealing himself to us, we would know nothing of God. Thus Psalm 28:1: "To you, O Lord, I call; my rock, do not refuse to hear me, for if you are silent to me, I shall be like those who go down to the pit." If God were silent, some sort of Epicureanism or Deism would be believable. But, as the prophet Amos affirms, God does speak to us: "For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, *reveals his thoughts to mortals*, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—The Lord, the God of hosts is his name!" (Amos 4:13, italics added). If God reveals himself to us, and even becomes one of us in the incarnation, it is hard for me to see how sensibly to deny the claim that God is an item in the universe. Certainly, as just noted, God is not an item *like all the other items*, but that is another matter.

**Problems with open theism.** It is time to turn to OT. It is important to note that one central issue in relation to OT is philosophical in nature. Defenders of OT are convinced that: (1) the future is open (reality is such that much of the future is not settled), (2) human beings are sometimes free in a libertarian sense in the decisions that they make and the things that they do, and (3) complete divine foreknowledge is logically incompatible with human libertarian freedom. So God always knows everything that logically can be known, and as noted knows his own intentions about what to do in the future, as well as future events that can be inferred from past and present events. But results of future free decisions simply cannot be known. (Defenders of NCT, on the other hand, accept (1) and (2) but not (3).) According to OT, much of what God knows about the future is limited to possibilities. So God is in a sense vulnerable in that God must take risks in order to accomplish things that involve human beings and their free decisions; God will occasionally be surprised, and so must be flexible and tactically astute. God's will is going to be frustrated on occasion, and God will experience regret and disappointment; God must adapt and change in order to accomplish God's goals.

Despite the fact that I reject OT, it must be admitted that the theory has two strong points. First, it is indeed difficult to see how divine foreknowledge and human libertarian freedom can be consistent. (I will address that issue below.) Second, OT seems to have ready answers to questions like: Why would God create and bestow libertarian freedom on those human beings who would become moral monsters like Hitler or Charles Manson? and Why would God create and bestow freedom on those human beings whom he foreknew would end up condemned in hell? Their obvious answer is that God was not able to foreknow those sorts of outcomes.

Although one central issue here is philosophical, there is no denying that there are important biblical and theological ramifications of OT. Biblically, defenders of

OT tend to emphasize and interpret literally those biblical texts that have God ignorant of the future, changing his mind, or reworking his plans in response to human decisions and actions. For example, at the outset of the story of the great flood, Genesis 6:5-6 says: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." Open theologians will interpret these words as implying that when God originally made human beings, God did not know how rampant evil would become, and that God caused the great flood to occur as a way of dealing with his regret for having created human beings, and as an effort to find a new way to achieve his ends for humankind. Whether this is the correct way to interpret this text, and others like it, is a matter of considerable dispute, but it is a debate that we can enter into here only briefly.

Suffice it to say that opponents of OT argue that the Bible is largely a collection of texts about God's actions in human history as seen from a human perspective; that it is not a textbook in theology or the philosophy of religion; and that an understandable degree of anthropomorphism affects many such biblical texts. Accordingly, the fact that God is sometimes depicted as being ignorant of how things will turn out and as later regretful when they turn out badly is a function of how God's actions appeared to human observers of the events in question or how they seemed to the biblical writers at the time that they wrote. Such texts do not describe God's inner life, nor (in my opinion) are they meant to do so.[17] Since they describe God's actions in the world, they describe not God as he is in himself but God as seen in his work.[18]

Let me raise three objections to OT (again, we are speaking here only of RFOT). *What did God know at creation*? I would personally find it repugnant to admit, as Open theists must, that at the moment of creation, God did not know whether even a single human being would ever freely respond positively to God's call and thus eventually enter heaven.[19] Of course defenders of OT can insist that God could have made probability judgments about how many people would decide freely to love and obey God and how many would refuse to do so. Still, it is hard to resist the feeling that we are now dealing with a God who, so far as knowledge is concerned, has been *demoted*. I would suggest that even if (contrary to what I will argue below) we cannot adequately solve the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge with human libertarian freedom, it would be better to affirm them both, and admit the paradox, than to embrace OT.[20]

*Is anything left of omniscience*? As we saw above, the claim that God is all-knowing is part of Christianity's core concept of God. Defenders of OT insist that the God they envision is omniscient because at all times God knows everything that can possibly be known; future contingents—so they say—logically *cannot* be known. Now this claim must mean that Open theists hold that propositions about future contingent states of affairs do not now have a truth value, i.e., are (for now) neither true nor false. It does not seem possible that there could be truths that are

not knowable. Take the statement, "Tomorrow Stephen Davis will freely decide to wear a blue shirt." If that statement now has a truth value, surely an omniscient being must know it, i.e., must know whether it is true or false. So the defenders of OT must hold that such propositions are now neither true nor false (as philosophers say, they must deny the principle of bivalence).[21]

This is fair enough: although I am not prepared to grant that future contingent propositions have no truth value, I agree that, *if* they are neither true nor false, they cannot be known, and so it is no problem for omniscience if God does not know them. But there remains a thorny problem for defenders of OT. Let's think further about how defenders of OT analyze those stories in the Bible where God appears to be surprised or disappointed by what people do. In such cases, it appears that, before the event actually occurred, God held a false belief (e.g., that the people would respond as God desired). For example, it appears that (at least on the literalist hermeneutic that defenders of OT deploy in such cases) before the flood, God held the erroneous belief that the people would not descend into evil to the degree that they in fact did. But certainly anyone who holds a false belief is not omniscient, does not "know everything that can be known." It surely seems that mental states like surprise and disappointment could have been present in God only if prior to the surprising or disappointing event, God had an expectation that in the end was not met. Now beliefs are not the same things as expectations, but it is hard to see how someone can have an expectation that an event will occur without having some sort of belief (however strongly held) that it will occur. Accordingly, if God was surprised and disappointed at what eventually occurred, then before the event occurred, God had a false belief.[22] It will hardly do for defenders of OT to insist that the surprise and disappointment that God exhibits in these texts do not really represent God's mental states; that would violate the literalist hermeneutic that defenders of OT typically deploy in such cases.

If we consistently follow that hermeneutic, it seems that we will be led to hold that God has spatial location (he walked in the Garden of Eden at the time of the evening breeze—Genesis 3:8), is forgetful (he "remembered" Noah in his ark—Genesis 8:1; and he needed a reminder for himself [the rainbow] of his promise not to destroy all flesh again by flood—Genesis 9:11-17), is impatient (Exodus 32:7-14), and is sardonic, vengeful, and full of rage (Deuteronomy 29:28). Now defenders of CT and NCT have hermeneutically powerful ways of understanding these texts, but there appears to be little room for anthropomorphism or even accommodation among the defenders of OT. So it would be interesting to see what exegesis they would provide for such texts.

*Does God's knowledge grow as time passes?* Defenders of OT will want to argue that God's knowledge grows as time passes, and that eventually, in the eschaton, there will be no more future contingents for God to be ignorant of. At that point, God will know everything. But there is a problem with this picture. It seems that God's degree of ignorance about the future must grow as time passes. God must be unaware not only of the result of future human free decisions but of all the multitudes of effects resulting from them.

Note also that as more and more time passes, human knowledge also grows, as does human technology. We are now able to do things (fly airplanes, communicate instantly with people thousands of miles away, send space ships to Mars) that earlier generations could only dream of. And in one sense, this might mean that God knows *less and less* as time passes. In other words, in comparing the twenty-first century with, say, the Pleistocene Age, far more of what occurs in the world now depends on free human choices than previously. Perhaps one day human beings will possess the technical ability to destroy the entire solar system, just as we now have the ability to destroy human life on earth. Does God now know that human life will survive the twenty-second century? Of course, the God of OT always knows what people are presently doing, and so could presumably interfere—at the last moment, so to speak—to prevent the manufacture or use of a bomb that could destroy the solar system. Still, the point is that as long as God does not intervene, perhaps God knows less and less about the future rather than more and more. Maybe some day virtually every future event in the solar system will be unknown to God because virtually all of them will depend on human free choices.

Accordingly, my own view is that OT proposes a view of God that errs too much on the immanence side. Its God is insufficiently transcendent and insufficiently sovereign. In the end, I reject OT because (1) I believe that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible and (2) because I believe that the Bible teaches both that human beings are free and morally responsible before God and that God has complete foreknowledge of all future events.

**Neo-classical theism.** Therefore, since I reject both CT and OT, I accept NCT almost by default. But one important point remains to be considered: both defenders of CT and defenders of OT agree that complete divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human libertarian freedom. If I am to defend NCT, I must try to refute that claim. So I will try to show, in two quite distinct ways, that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible. My first argument will concern what is called "simple foreknowledge." The second will concern what is called "middle knowledge."

*Simple foreknowledge* is the claim that God knows or "sees" the future just as we experience or see the present. No defender of this theory claims to know *how* God foresees future events, but of course there is much that Christians believe God does or has done that we do not understand—how God created the heavens and the earth, for example, or how he raised Jesus from the dead. But the essential claim is that God has complete and infallible knowledge of everything that will occur in the future, including future contingents.

While it is clear that divine fore*ordination* of all future events (causing them to occur) would be incompatible with human libertarian freedom, defenders of simple foreknowledge argue that the same need not be true of divine fore*knowledge* of all future events. They point out that foreknowledge is not a species of causation. Suppose that today I know, of a certain person, that she will wear shoes tomorrow.

Surely, my knowing today that she will wear shoes tomorrow does not *cause* her to wear shoes tomorrow (although it is logically incompatible with her not wearing shoes tomorrow). I am unable to argue the point fully here,[23] but the basic idea is this: while no one can change the past, it is perfectly possible that what God knew a million years ago about what I will freely (via libertarian freedom) decide to eat for lunch tomorrow logically depends on what I will freely decide to eat for lunch tomorrow. People often argue that if God knows that event E is going to happen at some time in the future, then since no one can know something that is not true, it follows that E will necessarily happen. And if E necessarily happens, I am not libertarianly free.

But this argument, in my opinion, rests on a fallacy. All that follows is something about which there is no dispute whatsoever, viz. that E *will* occur. But of course the fact that E will occur does not rule out the possibility that I will, at the relevant moment, have it fully within my power not to do E. Now we know that that power or ability is a power that I will not in fact exercise, but at virtually every moment we have powers that we do not exercise, and that fact does not rule out our freedom. It is within my power to insert a line of gibberish into the text at this point in the essay, but I will not do it. From God's knowledge that I will do E, what follows is not that I *must* do E but only that I *will* do E. Moreover, it seems perfectly possible that this statement is true:

> A: What God knew yesterday is contingent upon what I will freely decide to do tomorrow.

Suppose it is true, say, that I am free to decide whether or not to wear a blue shirt tomorrow; if so, then both my wearing a blue shirt and my not wearing a blue shirt are (as we might say) real options for me. That is, both are within my power; it is up to me which I will do. Then whichever option I choose, God will have known yesterday (and indeed from all eternity) which I will do.

But three objections lie close at hand. First, suppose God believed yesterday that I will not in fact choose to wear a blue shirt tomorrow, and suppose it will be within my power to wear a blue shirt tomorrow. Then (so the objection goes) it will be within my power to make it such that God had a false belief yesterday (and so is not omniscient).[24] And that surely is an unacceptable consequence. But this is too hasty. What follows is not that God held a false belief, but that it will be within my power tomorrow to do something such that if I exercise that power, then a belief that God did in fact have would have been false. But, obviously, the defender of simple foreknowledge will insist that if I will in fact exercise my power tomorrow to choose to wear a blue shirt, *that* will be what God will have believed yesterday.[25] Since God is omniscient, we can be sure, on these assumptions, that "Davis will wear a blue shirt tomorrow" is what God will have believed yesterday.

The crucial point here is this: it is obvious that "Davis *will not* wear a blue shirt tomorrow" and "Davis *cannot* wear a blue shirt tomorrow" are quite different state-

ments. But it is the first statement, not the second, that is entailed by *God knew yesterday that Davis will not wear a blue shirt tomorrow*. Accordingly, even if God knew yesterday or a million years ago that I will not wear a blue shirt tomorrow, I might still have it within my power tomorrow either to wear a blue shirt or not wear a blue shirt. Of course, if God knows that I will not wear a blue shirt tomorrow, then I will not do so (as noted, there is no dispute about that). But I might still be free to decide to wear a blue shirt (although I will not in fact exercise that power).

The second objection to the line of argument that I have been pursuing has to do with causality. It seems to some that this argument allows or even entails that an event can be caused by something that happens after it. That is, it seems to imply that *what God knew yesterday* can be caused by *what I will freely do tomorrow*. But this notion is incoherent; as Hume claimed and as all our intuitions confirm, a cause must be temporally prior to its effect.

But the objection does not succeed. The argument that I have been pursuing does not claim or entail that what I will freely do tomorrow causes God to know something yesterday. The claim is that it is God's ability to foreknow, exercised yesterday, that caused God yesterday to know what I will do tomorrow. But even if this is so, the critic will change the criticism slightly and claim that my argument must hold that *God's exercising yesterday his ability to foreknow* is caused by *what I will freely do tomorrow*. And that looks like a violation of the principle that causes must antedate their effects.

But the answer to this is that my argument is that what God foreknew yesterday *is contingent upon* (not is caused by) what I will freely decide to do tomorrow. (I have in mind here a purely logical notion of contingency, the sort involved in saying that in the famous syllogism, the truth of "Socrates is mortal" is contingent upon the truth of "All men are mortal" and "Socrates is a man.") And Hume's principle that causes must come before their effects does not apply to the logical relation "is contingent upon." Earlier events or states of affairs certainly can be logically contingent upon later ones. Take the state of affairs of "Stephen Davis being a great-grandfather" or rather the statement, "Stephen Davis will be, during his lifetime, a great-grandfather." I believe this statement is now either true or false. It might be true and it might be false, but its truth value is now unknown to me and, I believe, all non-omniscient knowers. But whichever truth value it now has is clearly contingent upon certain events that will or will not occur in the future.[26]

The third objection is this: "If in fact I will eat the cookie tomorrow, it follows (given comprehensive divine foreknowledge) that God knew a million years ago that I will eat the cookie tomorrow. But then my eating the cookie tomorrow is and always was inevitable in a really strong sense—it is logically entailed by things (either past or eternal facts) that neither I nor anyone else had any control over; ergo, I will not be free in choosing to eat the cookie." But this does not follow: on my view when tomorrow arrives I will, in my free decision, have control over what will have been true, and thus known by God, a million years ago. What was then known to be then will have been logically dependent upon what I will freely decide tomorrow.

So it seems that simple foreknowledge is a coherent notion. Divine foreknowledge can be compatible with human libertarian freedom.

**Molinism.** But there is another, quite different, way of arguing that divine foreknowledge and human libertarian freedom are logically compatible. Molinism[27] is the doctrine that God possesses and uses "middle knowledge." Molina's view was that at the moment of creation, God knew three sorts of things. First, God's natural knowledge consists of everything that God knew prior to creating: all of the pure possibilities (knowledge of what *could possibly* be) like "It is possible that the word will have no people" or "It is possible for Steve Davis to be eight feet tall," and all necessary truths (knowledge of what *must* be) like "All triangles are three sided" and "No rocks are rational." Second, God's free knowledge obtained (knowledge of what *will* be). Accordingly, via his foreknowledge, God also knew all future actualities like "Stephen Davis will be a professor in Claremont" and "There will never exist any unicorns." Third, Molina reasoned that between God's natural knowledge (of the possible and the necessary) and his free knowledge (of the actual) lies God's middle knowledge (knowledge of what *would* be under various conditions and circumstances). Indeed, God had this knowledge logically prior to creating or issuing decrees.

Middle knowledge is also called counterfactual knowledge. It is knowledge of what would be the case if certain things that are not true were in fact true. Counterfactuals are quite common in human conversation: "If O'Neal had not been injured, the Lakers would have won the game"; "If you had offered Davis a chocolate chip cookie, he would have accepted." Applied to persons, middle-knowledge is knowledge of *what they would do* in various non-actual situations.[28]

Counterfactuals can be true or false.[29] According to the standard Lewis/Stalnaker theory, we test a counterfactual like "If O'Neal had not been injured, the Lakers would have won the game" by asking whether the Lakers do win the game in the closest possible world to the actual world in which O'Neal is not injured. This analysis is somewhat controversial among logicians, and matters very quickly get more complex than this. But the point is that there are procedures for deciding the truth value of counterfactual statements.

Suppose we use the word *character* to mean the sum total of all the attributes or properties that make persons who they are and what they do in various circumstances. God then presumably foreknows the characters of all soon-to-be-actual persons even before they are born. Indeed, God knows the characters of all (what I will call) *possible persons*, which are simply coherent combinations of attributes of persons that may or may not ever actually exist. (Those possible persons that do at some time exist are also *actual persons*.) Presumably, then, God's middle knowledge allows God to know precisely what any possible person would do (would, in the various possible cases, freely decide to do) in any possible circumstance in which that person could be placed.

The point then is that human beings can be libertarianly free and God can nevertheless know, via middle knowledge, what any possible person would freely decide to do in any possible situation. Accordingly, again, divine foreknowledge and human free will are logically compatible. One advantage that middle knowledge has over simple foreknowledge is that defenders of it do not have to plead ignorance when asked how God achieves it. We have no idea how God could foresee the future, but we can understand how an omniscient being can know the character of each possible being so intimately as to be sure what he or she would do in any possible circumstance.

But it might be objected that middle knowledge after all ends up denying human libertarian freedom. Suppose there were a true counterfactual that involves libertarian freedom to the effect that

> (J) *"If Steve Davis is offered a chocolate chip cookie in situation S* [where S is suitably spelled out], *Davis will accept.*

Now why is this statement true (instead of, *"If Steve Davis is offered a chocolate chip cookie in situation S, Davis will refuse"*)? The answer is that (J) is true because in every possible world in which Davis is offered the cookie and everything else is as much as possible like the actual world, Davis accepts the cookie.

But—so it might be argued—this is inconsistent with Davis being free in a libertarian sense. Davis would only be libertarianly free in this case if the conclusion were that in situation S it is causally open to Davis to reject the cookie. Or to make the point more theologically, if God via middle knowledge knows precisely what Davis would do in any given circumstance, the very fact that God knows that Davis will exist, will exist in situation S, and will accept the cookie compromises Davis' libertarian freedom. He *will* accept the cookie.

But this argument is surely confused. Even if there logically can be no such thing as middle knowledge, it is still the case that any human being who is libertarianly free in a certain situation will, in the end, make a choice. So even if God has no middle knowledge, Davis, exercising his libertarian freedom, will choose either to accept or reject the cookie. Suppose he freely chooses to accept it. Then it could be argued with equal cogency (equally cogent, that is, to the objection that we are considering) that Davis is no longer libertarianly free because, tautologically, he *will* accept the cookie. I believe the two arguments are exactly analogous. So the objection to middle knowledge that we are considering goes nowhere. It reduces to the triviality that Davis *will* make a choice.

**Conclusion.** It appears, then, that NCT can be defended. Both simple foreknowledge and middle knowledge are possible and allow us to answer the most important objection to NCT. But since CT and OT are open to damaging criticisms, NCT is the view of God that ought to be recommended to theists.[30]

## Notes

1. For a good introduction to the Christian understanding of God, see Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1998).
2. Let us define a "necessary being" as a being that (a) cannot not exist and (b) depends for its existence on no other being. This entails, of course, that it is also (c) everlasting (there is no time when it does not exist). Some people hold that (b) is considered a separate attribute called "aseity" and that (a) alone defines a necessary being. But I prefer to say that a necessary being has both (a) and (b).
3. Process philosophers, who deny omnipotence (as least as standardly understood in the tradition), are an exception to this point. I will not discuss Process views of God in the present essay.
4. See Dale Tuggy, "Three Roads to Open Theism," forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*.
5. Cf. Isaiah 45:15: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself." On God's incomprehensibility and unlikeness to human beings, see Numbers 23:19; I Samuel 15:29; Isaiah 46:5; 55:8-9; and Hosea 11:9.
6. Thus the Westminister Confession declares: "God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy council of his own will freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass."
7. Some defenders of CT are prepared to admit the paradoxical nature of their position at this point. See Paul Helm, "The Augustinian-Calvinist View," in James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (eds.), *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 165-66, 169, 177.
8. See J.L Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964). Mackie argued that theists hold to a logically inconsistent position because three of their core beliefs—God is all-powerful; God is perfectly good; and Evil exists—form an inconsistent triad. That is, for purely logical reasons, any two of the three may be true, but not all three.
9. I recognize that my point about pastoral considerations does not amount to a refutation of CT. It is at best a reason why I find the theory rationally indefensible.
10. The expression "God *qua* God" here simply means "God apart from the incarnation." It is important to add this phrase because everybody—even the strictest defenders of CT—is prepared to admit that the Son of God suffered in his humiliation, e.g., in the Garden of Gethsemane.
11. Cf. Brian Davies, "Is God a Moral Agent?" (unpublished).
12. A defender of divine simplicity might reply that all I have shown is that our *concepts* of goodness and wisdom are distinct, but not that the *properties* themselves are distinct; that is, our human limitations prevent us from seeing reali-

ty as God does; if we were to see things correctly we would see that it is logically impossible for God to possess one and lack the other. But my question would then be whether there is any good reason to hold such an obscure view.

13. See Brian Leftow, "God, concepts of," in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 6.
14. See Paul Helm in *op. cit.*
15. See James Ross in *ibid.*
16. Cf. David Burrell in *ibid.*
17. Moreover, the Bible itself seems to me rather clearly to deny that God changes his mind. See Numbers 23:19 and I Samuel 15:29.
18. Moreover, there are texts in the Bible whose plain sense seems to imply divine foreknowledge of what look to be free human decisions. See, for example, Exodus 3:19; Deuteronomy 31:16; Psalms 139:16; Isaiah 44:28; John 6:70-71; and Acts 2:23. It would be interesting to know how defenders of OT would exegete these texts; perhaps they will say that the Bible only reports beliefs that God had about future human decisions that were, before those decisions were made, not true beliefs but only very probably true beliefs.
19. This especially in the light of texts like Revelation 13:8, which seem to imply that God knew in advance precisely who would be saved and who would not, and indeed wrote the names of the blessed in the Lamb's Book of Life. See also Ephesians 1:4, where the text affirms that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world."
20. As is the position of J.L. Packer in his *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), pp. 21-23.
21. In the following two paragraphs, I am largely following William L. Craig. See Beilby, pp. 55-57.
22. Note such texts as Jeremiah 3:7, 19-20 and especially Jeremiah 19:5, where God complains that the children of Israel built altars to Baal and burned their children on them "which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind." If at a certain point in time the thought that the children of Israel would do these terrible deeds had not entered God's mind, it surely seems that at that time God had a false belief. Moreover, if some of God's plans backfire and fail to come to fruition because of God's ignorance of future contingents, that calls into question God's perfect wisdom as well as God's omniscience.
23. I have tried to do so in my "Divine Omniscience and Human Freedom," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September, 1979).
24. This is the argument (on the assumption that God is essentially omniscient) of Nelson Pike. See his, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Steven Cahn (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 68-88.
25. This argument essentially follows Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 69-73.
26. It is true that one event being contingent upon another is not a purely logical

relationship. But I am not talking about events, because I believe that "God knowing what I will freely do tomorrow" is everlasting and so is not an "event." What God foreknew yesterday is not an event in the mind of God.

27. Molinism is named after the Spanish Jesuit philosopher Luis Molina (1535-1600). Alvin Plantinga introduced middle knowledge into the contemporary discussion among philosophers of religion. See his *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 34-57. The foremost contemporary defenders of Molinism are Thomas P. Flint and William Lane Craig. See Flint's *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). In his various writings to date, Craig has fruitfully applied middle knowledge to several different problems in theology and the philosophy of religion.
28. I should mention that a certain philosophical objection to the very idea of middle knowledge has been much discussed of late. It is called "the grounding objection." I do not myself find the objection convincing, and so will not consider it here. For a brief discussion of it by Craig, see James K. Beilby and Paul Eddy (eds.), *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 140-43. For a sensible assessment of the arguments, see Edward Wierenga, "Providence, Middle Knowledge, and the Grounding Objection," *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, Volume 3, No. 2 (2001), pp. 447-54.
29. See David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) and Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).
30. I would like to thank Kelly James Clark, David Hunt, Alan Padgett, Susan Peppers-Bates, and Dale Tuggy for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. They do not agree with everything I've said here.

## Discussion

1. What does NCT borrow from CT and from OT?
2. Why does Davis reject OT's view of omniscience?
3. What is Davis's basic defense of simple foreknowledge?
4. Put Molinism (middle knowledge) in your own words.