

Boethius and the Causal Direction Strategy

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Attention to the work of Boethius generally focuses on the *Consolation of Philosophy* and especially book 5 where he confronts the alleged incompatibility between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. The interesting secondary literature on *CP* v 4-6, where the character Philosophy presents her diagnosis and solution to Boethius' concerns, fosters this attention. But forming an interpretation of the *Consolation* on this textual basis alone is problematic, for Boethius' own initial presentation of his concerns in *CP* v 3 establishes important interpretative constraints on what will follow. In particular, Boethius' presentation and dismissal of one solution to a problem in *CP* v 3 not only rules out an historically important strategy for preserving free-will, but also provides the springboard for specifying two challenges that are main sources of Boethius' concern that govern *CP* v 4-6. Failure adequately to grasp the role *CP* v 3 plays in the subsequent sections of the *Consolation* have led to misinterpretation of *CP* v 4-6.

I begin by providing an overview of *CP* v 3 to illustrate that text's importance for the rest of the *Consolation* particularly as it pertains to the problem of theological fatalism. Through that discussion I highlight an influential Peripatetic strategy for dissolving theological fatalism and then go on to show how Boethius' treatment of this strategy undermines several prevailing theses about *CP* v 3-6 while charting a new direction for interpreting *CP* v: specifically one that conceives of the core fatalistic threat in *CP* v as making no essential reference to temporality in generating freedom-damaging necessities. Thus, it is not *foreknowledge* nor any other temporally-conditioned knowledge that motivates Boethian concern but divine knowledge generally and its character.

I. *CP v 3* and the Initial Problem

CP v 3 finds the character 'Boethius' having completed a dialogue with Philosophy about providence and the problem of evil. Despite Philosophy's apparently successful consolation that both the wicked and the good receive their just deserts through the ordering of providence, Boethius becomes troubled by a new concern. This concern is a fatalistic worry, but not the one that we might expect given the preceding discussion. Rather than picking up a concern about the influence providence has on human wills - a problem that might be understood as a foreordaining problem - Boethius worries about a potential incompatibility between God's foreknowing all things and human free will:

For if God foresees all things and cannot be mistaken in any way, then that which providence has foreseen will be will come to be necessarily.¹ (*CP v 3.4*)

Independent of what will occur later in the passage, Boethius' worry simply seems to be this: God's act of foreseeing what will be makes those acts, events, or mental states necessary. For as Boethius reasons, it would be impossible for there to be any deed at all or any desire except what infallible divine providence perceives beforehand (*CP v 3.5*). To make matters simple we will call this concern 'theological fatalism'.

Two things are worth mentioning about the initial problem at *CP v 3.1-5*. First, it appears that perceiving something beforehand is assumed by the problem, as opposed to perceiving something after the fact or perceiving something simultaneously with its occurrence. Such an assumption may allow some kinds of divine perception to be freedom-preserving but not others. Second, the ability to foresee something by itself is insufficient for God's foreseeing, let alone God's foreknowing, because it does not consider

¹ Nam si cuncta prospicit deus neque falli ullo modo potest, evenire necesse est quod providentia futurum esse praeviderit. All translations are my own and based on the Moreschini 2005 text unless otherwise indicated.

the possibility that divine perception could be mistaken. The attribution of infallibility to God firmly rules out this possibility giving God's perception a modal status that is in keeping with the perfection of the divine. Taken together, these two considerations appear to set the stage for an argument that proceeds on both temporal and modal grounds. This argument, which I will call 'The Argument for Theological Fatalism', claims that

TF-1. God perceives all events prior to their coming about.

TF-2. It is impossible that God both perceives that an event will come about and that event fails to come about.

TF-3. So, all events perceived by God come to be of necessity.

Assuming that we take this presentation of the argument as representing the core argument for theological fatalism, Boethius would be left with the following alternatives,

The Revised Perception Thesis: He could deny that God perceives events before they occur, hence denying TF-1. One major variant of this thesis, titled '**The Boethian Solution**', is found in contemporary analytic discussions of divine foreknowledge: the view that God's perception and other cognitive states are outside of time so that God does not *foreknow* anything. (Stump and Kretzmann 1981: 442, n. 19; Spade 1985: Chapter 22; Craig 1988: 90-91; Hasker 1989: 6-8, Zagzebski 1991, 2002 and 2011, Kane 2005: 152-154.)

The Fallibility Thesis: Boethius could deny that God's perception is infallible, hence denying TF-2.

The Contingency Thesis: He could deny that events perceived as TF-1 and TF-2 specify come to be of necessity.

The Compatibility Thesis: Boethius could claim that despite events being necessitated in the way the argument states, this necessity is compatible with human freedom.²

² One difference between the Contingency and Compatibility Theses as I will construe them is that the Contingency Thesis would appear to deny the validity of the argument claiming that TF-3 does

The Defeat Thesis: He could admit defeat and give up on the prospect of human freedom.³

Following the lead of the character “Boethius” we will put aside the Defeat Thesis to examine how Boethius (the author) handles the alternatives through the dialogue with Philosophy. Following the lead of the author Boethius, we will not register a clear distinction between divine perception and divine knowledge, as it appears that Boethius thinks nothing substantial hangs on this distinction for the discussion.⁴ But before moving on it is worth noting that as stated we have an argument for theological fatalism that is reminiscent of a logical fatalist problem many commentators find in Aristotle’s treatment of a future sea battle in *De interpretatione* 9⁵ and that Boethius himself discusses in his two commentaries on that work. What appears to link the two problems is the common concern that future events are necessary when there is some temporally prior cognitive state or statement that veridically represent that future event. For example, if the sentence ‘a sea battle will occur tomorrow’ is true now or if a person knows (now) that a sea battle will occur tomorrow, then that future sea battle necessarily happens. However, as the *Consolation* proceeds it will become clear that the problems in the *Consolation* and *De Interpretatione* 9 are less closely allied than we might initially think. For as I will argue,

not follow from TF-1 and TF-2. The Compatibility Thesis, however, affirms the argument’s validity, yet finds the necessity present unproblematic.

³ With the exception of the Defeat Thesis, two (or more) theses could be combined to arrive at a solution to the problem presented by the Argument for Theological Fatalism. However, as a solution to that specific argument, as opposed to a solution to several distinct problems, such an approach would be inelegant.

⁴ As Marenbon notes, “Boethius habitually uses a variety of words when describing God’s foreknowing. For instance, in [the opening lines of *CP* v 3] there are *prospicit* («foresees»), *praeviderit* («has foreseen»), *praenoscit* («foreknows»), *praesenserit* («has ... foreseen»), *provisa sunt* («have been foreseen»), *praescientia* («foreknowledge»). I do not believe that he intends to make any semantic distinction, but is merely elegantly varying his vocabulary,” Marenbon 2013, 11 note 4.

⁵ The interpretation is by no means unanimous but has often been taken as the traditional interpretation. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to Aristotle’s fatalistic concern as being exhausted by the traditional interpretation. See Weidemann 2007 for one way of articulating the traditional interpretation.

unlike the fatalist concern in *DI* 9, Boethius' considered problem in *CP* v makes no essential reference to temporal space and location of divine knowledge or the potentially damaging theses that depend upon them; rather the concern is about divine knowledge *simpliciter* and what it entails. If the argument is sound an ironic result is that Boethius does not adopt the Boethian solution many commentators claim for him.

2. Boethius and the Causal Direction Strategy [CDS]

How is it that Boethius develops the Argument for Theological Fatalism in a way that it makes no essential reference to temporality in generating freedom-damaging necessities? After all, it is foreknowledge or foresight that appears to be the threat to human freedom. The answer begins with Boethius taking on an historically important response to theological fatalism and refuting it to start the process of finding an alternative to the Defeat Thesis. This historically important response is what I will henceforth call the **Causal Direction Strategy** or [CDS]. The strategy at first appears to adopt the Revised Perception Thesis by having us reconsider the relationship between divine knowledge and the objects of that knowledge so that, as the Revised Perception Thesis suggests, God does not perceive events before they occur.

The Causal Direction Strategy is introduced by Boethius in this way:

For they [the proponents of CDS] deny the claim that something is going to happen (*eventurum*) because providence has foreseen that it will be (*futurum*), but to the contrary, [they affirm that] since something will be (*futurum*) it cannot be concealed from divine providence, and in this way the necessity shifts to the opposite side. For they say, it is not necessary that what is foreseen will come to be, but that it is necessary that what will be (*futurum*) is foreseen.⁶ (*CP* v 3.8-9)

⁶ Aiunt enim non ideo quid esse eventurum, quoniam id providentia futurum esse prospexerit, sed e contrario potius, quoniam quid futurum est, id divinam providentiam latere non posse eoque modo necessarium hoc in contrariam relabi partem. Neque enim necesse esse contingere quae providentur, sed necesse esse quae futura sunt provideri:...

It would appear that, according to the Causal Direction Strategy, the problematic claim in the Argument for Theological Fatalism is TF-1: that God perceives events before they come about. At stake in *CP* v 3.8-9 is the issue over whether to affirm either (a) that in foreseeing what will be, God, through divine providence, necessitates future state of affairs, or (b) that what will be (i.e. a future state of affairs) necessitates God's perception of those states of affairs. Consider, if it turns out that (a) is in fact true, TF-1 can be retained and the fatalistic threat still looms: it is God's knowledge that is the source of (damaging) necessity. On the other hand, if (b) is the case, TF-1 is false as future events are in some way prior to God's knowledge (perception) of them. Reading the relation this way would appear to make God's knowledge of future events irrelevant to the contingency or necessity of those events and support the Revised Perception Thesis.

While it may be clear that the proponent of the Causal Direction Strategy urges us to prefer (b), what is not so clear is the kind of relationship that [CDS] envisages as holding between God and the object(s) of divine perception. The initial formulation of the Argument for Theological Fatalism seemed to suggest that the issue was temporal priority: either God perceives some event as a temporal antecedent to the event's coming about, or vice versa. But at *CP* v 3.8-9 we receive an important clue that Boethius intends more. There we discover an account of foreseeing that includes a statement about the causal ordering between the knower and what is known, one that tracks important assumptions in Peripatetic and neo-Platonic controversies over divine knowledge. This more robust understanding sees the priority relation as involving either the act of foreseeing being *causally* prior to what is foreseen, or what is foreseen being *causally* prior to the act of foreseeing. Taken literally, causal priority may mean nothing more than an act, event or state of affairs being earlier in the causal order than some other act, event or

state of affairs, much like the fall of Rome's being causally prior to the rise of Mussolini.⁷ But to Boethius and the proponents of [CDS], the relationship in ll. 8-9ff means more than mere causal priority; it also means causal production in the sense of *bringing-into-being*. The fatalist problem that is emerging now no longer seems to be a dispute about what happens before what, but what brings-into-being what. More light can be shed by looking at the literature that Boethius' discussion presupposes.

As Boethius himself notes in ll. 8-9ff the dispute over alternative accounts of causal production is nothing new in divine epistemology. The source of the Causal Direction Strategy traces at least to a disagreement between Peripatetics, represented by Alexander of Aphrodisias, and neo-Platonists, the most notable of which is Proclus. Regardless of whether Boethius was referencing Alexander⁸ or Proclus directly⁹, it is clear that the options he examines represents the Alexandrian position and what neo-Platonists like Proclus believed. The neo-Platonistic position affirms alternative (a), the idea that divine knowledge necessitates what is known. Consider, this passage from Proclus:

The gods themselves know what is generated without generation, and what is extended without extension, and what is divided without division, and what is in

⁷ In the Mussolini example, the ordering involves both temporal priority and the fact that the fall of Rome is a (remote) causal antecedent of Mussolini's rise to power. In the relation between God and what is known, all that is asserted if we take this example as a guide is that God causally antecedes what is foreknown by God.

⁸ Whether Boethius himself knew of this dispute from a direct reading of Alexander is debatable. However, Boethius would have known Alexander's positions at least from Porphyry, as we can see in Boethius 1998b. See Sharples 1978 and Chadwick 1981: 246.

⁹ John Magee advises "it ought to be obvious that even firm textual parallels would not amount to stringent proof that Boethius copied from Proclus or Ammonius; but the worrisome point is that so little in the way of convincing analogues has been brought into consideration in the first place. This is not to say that Boethius did not consult Proclus or Plotinus, only that it has yet to be demonstrated that he did; in the absence of any such demonstration it seems best to withhold assent," (805). This suggestion is in sharp contrast with Chadwick's claim that "Although Proclus is never mentioned by name, Boethius' direct familiarity with many of his extant writings is easily demonstrated. He may also have known some of Ammonius' expositions of Aristotle and of Porphyry's *Isagoge*; but the case for asserting immediate dependence is not coercive as it is for Proclus" (20). It is hard to resist the conclusion that Boethius was aware of the discussions about divine prescience that find their source in Proclus; but following Magee's suggestion, whether these ideas come directly to Boethius from Proclus or through some other source is worth holding open. Magee 2010: 788-812. See also Chadwick 1981: 129.

time eternally, and what is contingent necessarily. For by the very act of thinking (*noein*) they produce all things and what they produce they produce from the undivided and eternal and immaterial forms; so that they also think them in this way. For let us not suppose that knowings are characterised by the natures of the things known, nor yet that what is not fixed is fixed among the gods, as the philosopher Porphyry says,[...]but the manner of knowing becomes different through the differences in the knowers. (Proclus 2005: 73)

As will be evident in later sections of the *Consolation*, Boethius goes on to endorse many of the claims in this passage from Proclus, with the last – sometimes referred to as the Iamblichus Principle – being a critical piece of Philosophy's considered solution to The Argument for Theological Fatalism (Chadwick 1981, Spade 1985, Lloyd 1990, Marenbon 2003a, Evans 2004, Sharples 2009, Marenbon 2013). But pay special attention to what the Iamblichus Principle states: the character of an epistemic agent's cognition does not depend on the object of cognition but instead depends upon the powers of the agent herself. The Principle is quite jarring to modern ears, yet becomes more palatable once we see that it receives justification from a thesis much like (a); the thesis that divine knowledge necessitates what is known. Proclus' justification is this: the reason the Iamblichus Principle is true is that the very act of divine thinking produces or causes all created things. On that understanding TF-1 makes a surprising statement that is not obvious from its surface meaning: on the assumption that a perceiver is divine, the act of perceiving x brings x into being.

In contrast to the Proclean position that is initially asserted in l. 8, the Causal Direction Strategy involves the claim that the contingency of the future, and by association free will, can be preserved if we reverse the order of causal priority and production. Thus, instead of asserting with Proclus that the direction of the causal relationship proceeds from the knower to the known, the proponent of [CDS] places priority on the fact that since

something will be (*futurum*), it cannot be hidden from divine providence. What results is a shift in causal ordering. As Boethius puts it:

For they say, it is not necessary that what is foreseen will come to be, but that it is necessary that what will be (*futurum*) is foreseen.¹⁰

While this text may not immediately suggest that future things cause divine foreknowledge, the implication becomes clear when examining the lines that follow it. Boethius characterizes the proponent of the Causal Direction Strategy as one who interprets our task:

as if our work were to determine which is the cause of which: [God's] foreknowledge [as the cause of] the necessity of future things, or future things [as the cause of] necessary foreknowledge.¹¹

Like Alexander of Aphrodisias' own view of foreknowledge, [CDS] opts for the second alternative, grounding divine foreknowledge in future states of affairs and makes them the cause of God's knowledge (*De fato* 200.12ff. in Alexander of Aphrodisias 1983). This means that not only does the Causal Direction Strategy change the causal direction between divine knowledge and (future) states-of-affairs, but that the character of God's knowledge is determined by the nature of the future state of affairs themselves.

The result is that [CDS] neutralizes TF-1 but does so in an ambiguous way. On the one hand it may adopt the Revised Perception Thesis on the basis that future events must happen before God has any cognitive grasp of them or at least that God's knowledge does not temporally antecedent what is known. If this variant in either of its forms is embraced, [CDS] as the Revised Perception Thesis suggests would deny that God possesses

¹⁰ Neque enim necesse esse contingere quae providentur, sed necesse esse quae futura sunt provideri, *CP* v 3.9.

¹¹ Continuing l. 9 following the colon, "[...]:quasi vero quae cuius rei causa sit praescientiane futurorum necessitatis an futurorum necessitas providentiae, laboretur[...]" *CP.V.3.9*. I have chosen to substitute 'foreknowledge' for 'foresight' given that the range of meanings of 'providentia' is narrowed by the occurrence of 'praescientia' in the passage.

foreknowledge. Alternatively, the proponent of [CDS] need not adopt the Revised Perception Thesis to avoid defeat, thus preserving divine *foreknowledge*, so long as she is willing to endorse the Contingency Thesis. This reading affirms both premises of the Argument for Theological Fatalism countenancing both God's infallible perception (TF-2) and the view that what God perceives beforehand will come about, but insists that future events are contingent. Consider that from a human standpoint if God foreknows something, what is foreknown must *occur* later than the act of foreknowing. [CDS] can accommodate this temporal ordering but claim that there is a more fundamental ontological ordering independent of temporal ordering that privileges a future state of affairs over knowledge of that state of affairs. In appealing to this fundamental ontological layer, [CDS] could resist the Revised Perception Strategy as a way of preserving the contingency of the future.¹²

So why does Boethius spurn the Causal Direction Strategy? The basis for his answer is this:

as if indeed our work were to discover which is the cause of which, foreknowledge of future things' necessity (*futurorum*), or future things' (*futurorum*) necessity of providence, and as if we were not striving to show this, that whatever the state of the ordering of causes, the outcome (*eventum*) of things foreknown is necessary, even if that foreknowledge were not to seem to confer on future things (*futuris*) the necessity of occurring.¹³

¹² The proponent of [CDS] could claim that while the premises of the Argument for Theological Fatalism are true, they are true only when the term 'prior' is understood as temporal priority. Since it is not temporal but causal priority that is necessity producing, the proponent can both affirm the argument's premises but deny its validity (as the Contingency Thesis suggests). Whether any historical proponent of [CDS] in fact employed the Contingency Thesis is debatable. A close examination of Alexander's own position suggests that he prefers a variant of the Revised Perception Thesis that denies knowledge of the future to the gods (cf. §3.2 below).

¹³ The translation is S.J. Tester's. I have chosen to use it since it highlights the contrast between the two major approaches to the problem at hand better than alternative English translations.

What is problematic about [CDS] is suggested by the parallel structure "as if indeed our work were" with "and as if we were not striving to show." [CDS] fails to detect the fundamental problem issuing from divine foreknowledge. Despite his fear that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are incompatible, Boethius is not troubled about the order of causes but by the simple fact that foreknowledge *occurs at all*. This interpretation is confirmed by the use of an example of someone's sitting that directly follows Boethius' preliminary findings.

For indeed if someone sits, the opinion that concludes that he is sitting must be true; and conversely, if the opinion that someone sits is true, he must be sitting. Therefore there is a necessity present in each, in [the case] of sitting, but also in the other [case], the truth [of someone's sitting].¹⁴ (ll. 10-11)

The Sitting Example indicates the presence of a *common* necessity in opinions and the things they are about; one that poses a threat to free-will regardless of the ordering of causes.¹⁵ Based on the text of *CP* v 3.10-11, this common necessity can be expressed by two claims that Boethius affirms:

- S1. If 'Socrates is sitting' is true then Socrates sits of necessity.
- S2. If Socrates is sitting then the statement 'Socrates is sitting' is true of necessity.

If we accept these claims at face value then it would appear that the Causal Direction Strategy won't defeat the Argument for Theological Fatalism after all. S1 and S2 reveal a necessity that holds between two things, the truth of a statement (opinion) and its corresponding state of affairs. The common necessity Boethius claims to hold between someone's sitting and the opinion that he sits, yields the result that if one obtains (or is

¹⁴ Etenim si quispiam sedeat, opinionem quae eum sedere coniectat veram esse necesse est; atque e converso rursus, si de quopiam vera sit opinio quoniam sedet, eum sedere necesse est. In utroque igitur necessitas inest, in hoc quidem sedendi, at vero in altero veritatis.

¹⁵ The lines following this passage make the idea of a common necessity clear: "Ita cum causa veritas veritatis ex altera parte procedat, inest tamen communis in utraque necessitas", *CP* v 3.13.

true), both necessary, where the necessity in question is inalterability: a state of affairs where something cannot be changed.^{16 17} To see this, note that, as S1 claims, one cannot change that someone is sitting if the opinion that she sits is true; nor, as S2 claims, can one alter the truth of the opinion that someone sits if they are sitting. This result enables Boethius to show the impotence of the Causal Direction Strategy as a solution to the Argument from Theological Fatalism by extending the Sitting Example from the situation where Socrates is presently sitting to one where Socrates will sit. Boethius asks us to consider what we should conclude about human freedom if [CDS] is correct in stating that because Socrates will sit, God foresees that he will sit? Just as in the original sitting case, it is apparent that there is a common necessity holding between God's foreseeing that Socrates will sit and Socrates' future sitting being the case. Even conceding that causal priority should be given to the future state of affairs of Socrates' sitting, Socrates lacks freedom over his future act of sitting. For note, this future act does not escape God's foresight; in fact God's foresight is a necessary consequence according to [CDS] (following the example of S1), meaning that God's "opinion" that Socrates will sit is inalterably true. But since the truth of God's "opinion" cannot be changed, it follows (given what was established in S2) that Socrates can do nothing other than sit at that future moment. Thus,

¹⁶ Boethius uses the terms 'nequeat evitari' and 'inevitabiliter' to describe the kind of necessity damaging free-will in the discussion following the Sitting Example, *CP* v 3.54-55 and *CP* v 3.67.

¹⁷ This idea of Boethian necessity as inalterability follows from language used in the *Consolation* text and discussions of conditional statements in *De topicis differentiis* and *De hypotheticis syllogismis*. In the latter two texts, Boethius understands the truth of conditional statements as a relation of inseparability between antecedent and consequent. A conditional statement, like those made in the Sitting Example, should be understood as making the claim that 'it is impossible that both A (the antecedent) is true and B (the consequent) false'. So, S1 should be interpreted as 'It is impossible that both the statement 'Socrates is sitting' is true and Socrates is not sitting'. The resulting account of necessity is one of inalterability: the idea that something cannot be changed. To see the plausibility of this interpretation think about what inseparability is at bottom: the claim that the relation existing in the conditional statement cannot be altered without threat to the truth of the conditional. For simple statements, like 'Socrates is sitting', necessity would govern the state of affairs that the statement represents. That is, if 'Socrates is sitting' is necessary, then nothing can change the fact that Socrates sits. See *De topicis differentiis* 1177B and *De hypotheticis syllogismis* 1.9.5-1.9.6. For a richer treatment of conditional statements in Boethius see Martin 1991 and Martin 2009; Ashworth 1989, while brief, is also illuminating.

contrary to the Causal Direction Strategy providing a cure for fatalism, it actually confirms Boethius' pessimistic diagnosis: even if we admitted that human actions cause divine foreknowledge of them, human beings would not be free!

Two results emerge from the discussion of the Sitting Example so far. First, no appeal to the direction of the causal ordering (understood as the direction of causal production) holding for God's foreknowledge and future states of affairs will satisfy Boethius. If the Argument for Theological Fatalism is to be refuted it will require some other strategy. Second, and more importantly, causal ordering and causal relationships make no difference to the concern that Boethius has articulated in *CP* v 3. As the Sitting Example indicates, the very fact that 'Socrates will sit' is known by God suffices for the future state of affairs of Socrates sitting to be necessary. Granted this, we must admit that it is not some variant of causal determinism that is troubling Boethius as some commentators have claimed¹⁸; instead the threat is produced by the simple fact that God's (fore)knowledge of the future determines that future.¹⁹

3. Disarming the Causal Direction Strategy

Having shown that the Causal Direction Strategy cannot save human freedom from divine foreknowledge, Boethius argues that [CDS] is mistaken independent of its inability to alleviate his fatalistic worry.

For truly, it is preposterous [i.e. getting things backwards] when it is said that the occurrence of temporal things is the cause of eternal foreknowledge! But what else is

¹⁸ This view is defended in Davies 1989, where the determinism in The Argument for Theological Fatalism is represented by God's knowledge entailing that the state of the world prior to some future action determines what God foreknows. Linda Zagzebski may come close to this position as well, see Zagzebski 1991: Chapter Two and specifically p. 39.

¹⁹ The determination relation implies only that one thing necessitates another such that if A determines B then at least B follows as a necessary consequence of A; it need not mean that A is sufficient for B's being necessary (B's being a necessary *consequent*) nor involve any essential reference to time. In the present context, however, the determination relation would seem to appeal to temporality given that God is being characterized as *foreknowing* some future action and as applying to the consequent of the conditional statement if A then B.

it to think that God foresees future things because they will come to be, than to think that things which happened previously are the cause of highest providence?²⁰

[CDS], in upholding the Alexandrian position that states-of-affairs determine the presence and quality of the epistemic state of the agent, makes a critical blunder: divine agents are not sufficiently similar to human agents with respect to their epistemic powers, the content of their cognition, or their existence. While we could concede that human knowledge (of contingent matters) is of a sort that it requires those things known to have happened, it is, to paraphrase Boethius, simply preposterous that temporal events could be the cause of eternal foreknowledge. For that would require that God eternally foreknow something once that something had occurred, thereby obliterating the eternal foreknowledge unique to divine beings. Instead, in the tradition of Iamblichus and Proclus, priority must be placed on the act of (eternal) foreknowing over what is foreknown. The result appears to be that the chief concern that has motivated Boethius' concern from the beginning of *CP* v 3 is what we thought it was: God's foreknowing the future and that foreknowledge producing necessary outcomes.

But an unexpected thing happens when Boethius goes on to articulate the concerns posed by the Argument for Theological Fatalism. It turns out that the problem posed by the Argument for Theological Fatalism fails to adequately capture Boethius' worry since he is actually troubled about two difficulties rather than what appeared to be a single problem. And though the two problems stem from the same major premise about divine knowledge, this premise looks different from what we would have expected given the opening of *CP* v 3: that is, while God's perception of events still threatens human freedom, TF-1 as it stands is not an essential part of either problem.

²⁰ *Iam vero quam praeposterum est ut aeternae praescientiae temporalium rerum eventus causa esse dicatur! Quid est autem aliud arbitrari ideo deum futura, quoniam sunt eventura, providere, quam putare quae olim acciderunt causam summae illius esse providentiae?, CP v 3.15-16.*

3.1 The Unavoidability Problem

The two problems that replace the Argument for Theological Fatalism are articulated in *CP* v 3.17-28: one that is specifically about the unavoidability of known future events and the other about the certain nature of anything known by God. The first problem is stated succinctly in l. 17:

Furthermore, just as when I know that something is, that it is must be, so when I know that something will be, that it will be must be. Thus it follows that the happening of a foreknown thing (*res*) cannot be avoided.²¹

Boethius is plainly troubled that foreknowledge will make the coming about of future things unavoidable (or inalterable). But this is the conclusion of an argument based on a premise about knowledge in general not anything peculiar about foreknowledge. Boethius is clear that my knowledge that something is the case produces a kind of necessity regarding the states of affairs known, and this necessity begins with instances of knowing things that presently are the case (*quid esse scio*) and then extended to knowing things that will be (*quid futurum novi*). There is nothing peculiar about *foreknowledge* that produces Boethius' worry in these lines; *rather the issue is with a general thesis about any knowledge of any state of affairs*. The reason that we pay careful attention to cases of foreknowledge is that this knowledge is about future outcomes.²² Consider that the necessity of unavoidability²³ present in knowledge does not bother us when what is

²¹ Ad haec, sicuti cum quid esse scio, id ipsum esse necesse est, ita cum quid futurum novi, id ipsum futurum esse necesse est; sic fit igitur ut eventus praescitae rei nequeat evitari.

²² Marenbon 2013 uses Boethius 1998a and Boethius 1998b to show the importance of intuitions about the openness of the future to show how God's knowledge would threaten human freedom. To the extent that his account focuses on the issue of contingency and the nature of free-will it aligns with the arguments given here. However, Marenbon does seem to hold that specific theses adopted in Boethius 1998a and Boethius 1998b are present and essential to the problems in CP.V.3. See particularly pp. 13-14.

²³ Generally the necessity of unavoidability and inalterability will be used interchangeably throughout the discussion of Boethius' two problems. Boethius himself gives us no reason to

known is a past or present state of affairs.²⁴ It only matters to us when the state of affairs in question is future, for it is those states of affairs that we believe are ones that can be avoided or altered. And the easiest way of signaling this concern is often not through cumbersome talk of knowledge of future contingents, but of foreknowledge. So it is not TF-1 – God perceives all events prior to their coming about – that is present as the real concern behind Boethius' worry after all. Rather the concern is simply knowledge and its consequences.

We can formalize this first problem, which henceforth will be called the **Unavoidability Problem** as follows:

The Unavoidability Problem

U1. For any x, God knows x.

U2. So, God knows all future things.

U3. If S knows x then x is inalterable (necessary).

U4. But if x is inalterable, humans have no free-will with respect to x.

U5. Therefore, humans have no free-will with respect to anything in the future.

One important result of recognizing Boethius' substitution of The Unavoidability Problem for TF-1 is that it significantly undermines the plausibility of one common interpretation of Boethius, namely

[T] Boethius' concern in Book 5 is a problem about God's *foreseeing* or *foreknowing* future states of affairs, since this very act's temporal priority makes future states of affairs necessary in a way incompatible with free-will.²⁵

believe these concepts are importantly different other than to express the fact, in the case of unavoidability, that we are talking about a future state of affairs. The necessity of inalterability holds for all states of affairs meaning that the set of unavoidable states of affairs is a subset of the inalterable state of affairs. U4 of the Unavoidability Problem specifies this relationship.

²⁴ Boethius will exploit this fact using his charioteer example in *CP* v 4.15ff to resolve the Unavoidability Problem.

²⁵ Held by J. Martin 1989: 203-212, cf. particularly p. 203; Craig 1988: 90-97; Hasker 1989: 6-8; Leftow 1991: Chapter Eight; Zagzebski 1991, 2002 and 2011; Kane 2005: 152-154. Sorabji 1980 may also be committed to this view, cf. p. 125.

As indicated, The Unavoidability Problem makes no special commitment to the temporal relationship holding between God's act of knowing and future states of affairs. If [T] were correct, we should expect Boethius' problems as they are articulated throughout Book V to clearly specify their temporal commitments in such a way that *the temporal priority of God's act of foreknowledge* is what undermines free-will. The fact that this does not happen is quite telling, suggesting that temporality is not the fundamental source of Boethius' concern. For as the Unavoidability Problem shows with premise U3, past, present and future states of affairs are equally inalterable not because of the temporal position or spacing between things and God's cognition of them, but because of the simple fact that God knows them.

If this is correct it would also appear to strike down an alleged solution Boethius offers to counteract theological fatalism: what we titled 'the Boethian solution' at the beginning of the essay. The Boethian solution, you may recall, uses the Revised Perception Thesis to undermine theological fatalism by asserting that there is no point in time at which God knew a future something *temporally prior* to that something's coming about. Instead, God exists outside of time with a knowledge of the future that preserves that future thing's contingency, much in the same way that a present event maintains its contingency despite the fact that it is observed by someone. However, the difficulty with attributing this solution to Boethius himself is that God's atemporal knowledge still falls prey to Unavoidability Problem, as each premise of the argument is satisfied by a god who knows all things atemporally. If this is not bad enough, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that an atemporal state of affairs is an example *par excellence* of an inalterable state of affairs. While this may not be enough to rule out interpretations of Boethius that view the

divine as being outside of time²⁶, it does remove a common motivation for it: to dissolve a fatalistic problem presented by *foreknowledge*. The ironic result is that Boethius does not adopt the Boethian solution to theological fatalism!

3.2 *The Certainty Problem*

CP v 3.56-81 states Boethius' second fatalistic problem and does so in much more detail than the first. The second problem restricts its preliminary focus to the nature of knowledge by affirming an Alexandrian thesis: that knowledge of something requires that something to be determinate or fixed. In his famous discussion of foreknowledge in *De Fato* 30, Alexander applies this claim about the determinacy of knowledge to known states of affairs, resulting in a dilemma: either the things known by God are necessary because they are determinate or if things are in themselves indeterminate (contingent) then they cannot be known by God. This dilemma would appear to stem from adopting the Causal Direction Strategy and its idea that states of affairs produce the epistemic state of the agent apprehending them. And assuming it is not a false dilemma, Alexander would force us to choose between the Revised Perception Thesis (i.e. the variant that denies any knowledge of future contingents to God), or the Defeat Thesis. So what are we to make of the second problem? Is Boethius illicitly assuming the Causal Direction Strategy to construct his argument? Or is it a mistake to interpret Boethius as embracing the Alexandrian dilemma?

²⁶ There is a plausible case to be made for divine atemporality based on Boethius' doctrine of divine simplicity; a doctrine present both in the *Consolation* and in his most developed theological works. Unfortunately for proponents of the Boethian solution, the doctrine is well-known to the character Boethius prior to Book V, i.e. *CP* iii 9.4, *CP* iii 9 (verse), *CP* iii 12.30ff., and is used to justify a key component of Boethius' actual solution: the Iamblichus Principle. See Nash-Marshall 2000: 113, 220-221; Micaelli 2004: 181-202, particularly p. 196; Chadwick 1981: 190-222. Discussion of divine simplicity in Boethius' theological work occurs most notably in *De Trinitate* III-IV, and to a lesser degree *De Fide Catholica* 53-62 and *Quomodo Substantiae*, all of which are included in Boethius 2005. See Micaelli 2004: 190-196; Nash-Marshall 2004; Bradshaw 2009. Claudio Moreschini traces Boethius' views on divine simplicity (and other matters) back to his neo-Platonist predecessors in Moreschini 1980: 297-310, cf. 305ff.

In answer to these questions Boethius emphasizes that the crux of his problem is not that temporal events produce God's eternal foreknowledge; [CDS] is well and truly dead as an operative thesis. Instead Boethius affirms the Alexandrian thesis that God cannot know things other than as they are, with the following proviso: God's knowledge is the determinant of the state-of-affairs known.²⁷ Accepting the amended Alexandrian thesis allows Boethius to construct a new argument that exploits a tension between the contingency of future events and knowledge of those events without making temporality an irreducible feature of divine knowledge or existence. And like the Unavoidability Argument, this new argument proceeds from theses that we recognize as holding for human knowledge.

The argument goes as follows. Boethius asks his audience to reflect on the situation where a person holds a belief that characterizes something in a way other than it is. In this situation, the person holds a mistaken belief, and in virtue of that mistake fails to have knowledge. But what should we say about the future and how it could be known? "Boethius" (the character's) response is that if the future is not certain or necessary, then it could be otherwise than a person believes it to be. But like any other belief we have, if some future event, desire or state of affairs (or to use Boethius' own terminology '*res*') could be otherwise than the person believes it to be, then that individual does not have knowledge of it. The preliminary conclusion of the argument is this: to the extent that an agent, human or divine, knows something, that something is certain or necessary. However, unlike human beings, God knows all things including the future. So any future *res* is certain or necessary, and hence eliminates human freedom. Since this new fatalistic

²⁷ Quodsi apud illum rerum omnium certissimum fontem nihil incerti esse potest, certus eorum est eventus quae futura firmiter ille praescierit, *CP* v 3.27.

argument generates a threat from the character of divine cognition, we will call this argument the **Certainty Problem**.²⁸

To further dispel the appearance that Boethius has assumed the Causal Direction Strategy in articulating the Certainty Problem, we should examine the claim that a (future) *res* impacts the epistemic state of an agent. While we must admit that Boethius does construct his problem by examining the relationship between *res* and an agent's cognitive state, he does not make any commitment to the temporal status of those *res*. Much like the Unavoidability Problem, Boethius is adopting a general thesis that applies to any *res* regardless of its temporal position. Thus, we should view the Certainty Problem as stemming from a claim about the occurrence of a *res* generally, not from future *res*. Nonetheless, this does not yet get Boethius off the hook since it still seems as if the occurrence of a *res* causes one's knowledge. What must be added to defeat the appearance of [CDS] is an interpretation that does not involve understanding the premises of the Certainty Problem as making causal statements.

A non-causal interpretation of the Certainty Problem is the one that most naturally suggests itself when we examine all of the premises together. Remember that the Certainty Problem presents us with theses about the nature of knowledge: knowledge requires certainty; if something is certain then it cannot be other than how it is known. In his discussion, Boethius is not claiming that *res* are responsible for cognitive states, but instead shows that things that are not certain cannot be known. So faced with (i) a causal interpretation that claims that the (modal) status of a *res* causes the agent's cognitive state

²⁸ The Certainty Problem can be formalized as: C1. If x could be otherwise than S thinks it to be, then S does not know x. C2. If the occurrence of x is not certain or necessary, then x could be otherwise than S thinks it to be. C3. So, if x is not certain or necessary, then S does not know x. C4. So, if S knows x, then x is certain or necessary. C5. For any x, God knows x. C6. Therefore, x is certain or necessary.

or (ii) the cognitive state of the agent governs the (modal) status of the *res* known, (ii) is the most plausible reading.

From what we have seen so far, it should be evident that the Certainty Problem and the Unavoidability Problem are distinct problems. The former constructs a problem for human free-will by appealing to the thesis that knowledge requires certainty in one's cognitive state and in the *res* known. The latter problem makes no such commitment, as it is silent about the conditions for having knowledge, limiting our focus to what can and cannot be avoided or altered based upon the fact that God knows what will happen. But despite Boethius presenting us with distinct problems, they are obviously related. One place of overlap between both arguments is in the intermediate conclusion of the Certainty Problem where Boethius links knowledge with certainty or necessity, and the major premise of the Unavoidability Problem U3, 'If S knows x then x is inalterable (necessary)', assuming that we persist with our earlier conclusion that Boethian necessities should be understood in terms of inalterability. If we do so, we should conclude that the two arguments share a common thesis about knowledge and its relation to necessity, which would open several interesting interpretative options. For example, Boethius might be read as using the Unavoidability Problem not as a distinct argument from the Certainty Problem, but rather as one specification of the Certainty Problem: the Certainty Problem restricted to divine knowledge of future states of affairs.²⁹ Whether he intended the problems as distinct fatalistic arguments or not, the text indicates that Boethius has two separate but related worries in *CP* v 3 rather than the single problem suggested at the outset by The Argument from Theological Fatalism. The recognition of these two worries and their common basis offers additional evidence to believe that [T]

²⁹ As opposed to divine knowledge of any state of affairs, or only present states of affairs, or strictly atemporal states of affairs.

and the Boethian solution are false.³⁰ For when we look closely at each argument, what threatens human freedom is not *foreknowledge*, a past or present state of the world, or a relationship holding between God and *res* that derives its force from the irreducible temporality of its constituents. Instead the problems stem from divine knowledge generally, or better generically. Thus, the Unavoidability Problem and the Certainty Problem should be understood as arguments that make no specific metaphysical commitments about temporality (e.g. irreducibly temporal properties), though ones which can be refashioned to take those commitments on as the case may be.

This result undermines a second influential approach to interpreting Boethius, if it is used to characterize the fatalist threat issuing from *CP* v 3,

[T2] Boethius holds that if *p* is true at time *t* then *p* is necessary at *t*.³¹

This new interpretative thesis is attractive as it captures an intuition that appears to drive the problems Boethius discusses in his earlier work on fatalism in his commentaries on *De interpretatione* (Boethius 1998a and Boethius 1998b). On [T2]'s suggested reading of the

³⁰ This conclusion is reinforced by the preliminary discussion in *CP* v 4. One piece of evidence from *CP* v 4 is the examination of the objection "Boethius" (the character) raises that foreknowledge is a sign of what is foreknown, such that those (future) *res* are necessary regardless of whether they are foreknown or not. This objection shows that it is not foreknowledge that is the issue but rather that this knowledge, like any sign, is an indication that the *res* it represents is fixed not a precipitator of its fixity. Hence: "omne etenim signum tantum quid sit ostendit, non vero efficit quod designat", *CP* v 4.11.

³¹ Knuuttila 1993: 45-62; Marenbon 2003a: 141-142; Sharples 2009. Each of the authors supports [T2] as a critical thesis in Boethius' thought, though is often used as an interpretation to articulate Boethius' analysis of the difference between simple and conditional necessities in *CP* v 6. But one should reasonably ask: if [T2] is used as a thesis to interpret one of Boethius' solutions to the Certainty and/or Unavoidability Problem(s), would it not also be implicit in the problems formulation? If it is not, then an account must be given for why [T2] is necessary when a less controversial interpretation would do. Marenbon 2013 sees the discussion in *CP.V.3-4* following closely his earlier discussions of fatalism in Boethius 1998a and Boethius 1998b, where [T2] is most often defended, and would likely cite Boethius' dependence on that work as the reason for introducing [T2]. But this assumes two things: first the presence of [T2] as Boethius' own solution to problems in the *Commentaries* and second that Boethius' views have not changed in the ten year (or so) gap between the writing of Boethius 1998b and the *Consolation*, despite Philosophy's implication that they have in *CV.P.4*.

Consolation, the fatalist problem is this: suppose it is true now that God knows that Socrates will sit. Then it would follow that Socrates' future sitting is necessary in the sense that his future sitting is fixed. But if that's the case then Socrates can do nothing now or in the future to prevent himself from sitting.

At first glance, [T2] may seem to be a variant of [T] since both appear to identify the major concern driving Boethius' problem as the relationship between time and necessity. However, the appearance is largely false. [T] specifies the relation of God's act of foreknowing some *res* as *being-prior-to* that *res* coming about as the issue; [T2] does no such thing. Not only does [T2] make no commitment about a relation between knower and the known, it also makes no claim about temporal ordering. What [T2] does instead is make a claim about the fixity of the truth of a proposition at a time³². Hence, unlike [T], [T2] can be developed to cover a wide range of fatalistic problems.

Yet [T2] is equally problematic and for two reasons. First, it adopts a controversial thesis in modal logic (i.e. truth-at-a-time entails necessity-at-that-time) and attributes it to Boethius, when that thesis is unnecessary for understanding Boethius' concern as we have shown. For even if God's knowledge or a claim about it is indexed to a specific point in time this poses no new threat to human freedom that is not already contained in God's knowledge *simpliciter* given that it produces unavoidability and certainty. Second, the problem generated by [T2] is not rooted in God's knowledge of the future but in a fact about how the present state of the world settles the future; God's knowledge is merely incidental to what is a larger problem. To see this, consider that human knowledge about

³² Knuutila 1993 (and those following his interpretation, e.g. Marenbon 2003) broadens [T2]'s application to cover non-linguistic items, like states of affairs, allowing that if something obtains at *t*, it is necessary at *t*. This extension would allow a reformulation of the fatalist problem as a problem about God's knowledge at a time, rather than the truth of a time-indexed claim about God's knowledge. While this broadening may neutralize some of the objections raised above, it still suffers from making the fatalist problem an essentially temporal one; one which we would have expected Boethius to have discharged by using the Boethian solution.

a future *res* if possessed at a time prior to that *res*, or simply the fact that a statement about the future is true now, would pose an equal threat. But an interpretation of CP.V.3 that makes God's knowledge merely incidental, as [T2] would have it, would require a radical reinterpretation of the text; one for which there is scant textual evidence. For these reasons and those adduced above, [T], [T2] and other interpretations of Boethius that make essential reference to temporality in generating freedom-damaging necessities, fail to provide an adequate interpretation of the foundational problems in the *Consolation* text.

3.3 Divine Knowledge and the Moral of the Causal Direction Strategy

Having made the case for a set of fatalistic problems in the *Consolation* that maintain a kind of temporal neutrality, it is worth commenting on the account of divine knowledge that has arisen out of the discussion in CP v 3 and the importance of Boethius' rejection of the Causal Direction Strategy as an interpretative constraint. With respect to the later, while the rejection of [CDS] makes a case against causal and temporal determination, and temporality as essential to fatalistic arguments in CP v 3, this does not mean that Boethius is unconcerned about temporality or the future. Appealing to God's temporal position with respect to the future, while unnecessary for stating the fatalistic challenge, is a good marketing strategy, not to mention one potential application of the fundamental problems mentioned in §3.1 and §3.2. How better to prime a reading audience for a discussion of fatalism than to lead with a problem that worries nearly everyone: the impact of foreknowledge and a settled future on freedom? Had Boethius lead with generic claims about knowledge by stating the Certainty Problem first, rather than framing the initial problem as one about foreknowledge, we *qua* audience would be the worse for it. For not only might theological fatalism seem less compelling, but Boethius would be unable to express the depth of the confusion he sees as preventing his readers from grasping the

truth about human beings and their relationship to the divine; a truth he spends the rest of Book V trying to establish: that the existence and cognition of divine agents are fundamentally different from that of human beings.

Introducing the problem of theological fatalism through the use of the Argument for Theological Fatalism is the mechanism by which Philosophy slowly peels away the false beliefs that mask a clear understanding of divine and human existence. We see this as Philosophy guides “Boethius” past the Argument for Theological Fatalism towards the two central problems, and then on to the remedies in *CP* v 4-6. The only place where Philosophy is willing to accommodate “Boethius” thinking is in *CP* v 3 where the author Boethius makes a parallel between human knowledge and divine knowledge. The parallel requires that the objects of knowledge for human and divine agents both be themselves certain or necessary, such that a variant of TF-2 holds: It is impossible that both S knows (rather than merely perceives) that x and x is not the case. Interestingly and importantly, this is the only major commonality between divine knowledge and human knowledge in *CP* v 3.³³ Where human beings depend upon *res* to produce their knowledge of them, such that [CDS] could potentially be deployed in cases of human (fore)knowledge, the dependence relationship is reversed for God, as will be confirmed in later chapters of *CP.V*. From this general neo-Platonic dependence principle and the variant of TF-2, as well as Boethius’ earlier work on fatalistic problems in his two commentaries on *De Interpretatione* 9, we would expect that human foreknowledge must be based on necessary states-of-affairs (*res*); ones that in some sense are already fixed and as such are inalterable. If contingent states-of-affairs are truly grounded in the future, humans would have no knowledge of them; the “foreknowledge” had would just be reasoned prediction.

³³ Though Philosophy will make an important analogy between human perception of present events and God’s *providentia* in *CP* v 4, cf. Sharples 2009: 218-220.

The point of these final comments is to show the direction Boethius is heading in the rest of the *Consolation*. At CP.V.3, Boethius the character has not fully absorbed the moral of rejecting the Causal Direction Strategy that divine ways of knowing are importantly different from that of human beings, despite eliminating two potential solutions to theological fatalism: the Fallibility Thesis and variants of the Revised Perception Thesis that deny knowledge of the future to God. It is only once he adopts the Iamblichus Principle in CP.V.4ff that the difference between the epistemic powers of the divine and the human are fully realized, and that a solution to his two Problems in CP v 3 can be given so that the neo-Platonist position advanced by Iamblichus and Proclus triumphs over the Alexandrian. Whether this solution involves the adoption of the Contingency Thesis or the Compatibility Thesis as the primary weapon to defeat Boethius' fatalistic worries must await an analysis of CP v 4ff.³⁴

³⁴ I am grateful to Jason Eberl, John Marenbon, Peter Murphy, and an anonymous referee for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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