**Can God Repent?**

**Abstract**

Several passages in documents that have authority for religious believers, such as the Bible, suggest that God sometimes repents. Few philosophers and theologians, however, have embraced the thought that God repents. The primary reason for rejecting this idea seems to be that repenting conflicts with being perfectly good and being omniscient, properties that are characteristically ascribed to God. I suggest that the issue can well be approached in terms of a paradox: it seems simultaneously (i) that God repents (this is what the Bible suggest), (ii) that God is omnibenevolent, and (iii) that he is omniscient. I show that these three theses, on a traditional understanding of the divine attributes of omnibenevolence and omniscience, lead to a contradiction. I critically discuss two attempts to dissolve this paradox: open theism and Geachianism. Next, I propose a different approach: even though God has full knowledge of the future free actions of his creatures, he does not have full knowledge of all his own future free actions. I show how on this alternative line of thought, God can simultaneously be said to be omniscient, perfectly good, and a God who sometimes repents. Finally, I defend this account of divine repentance against several objections and show what some of the implications are.

**Keywords**

Geachianism – God – Omnibenevolence – Omniscience – Open Theism – Paradox – Repentance – Perfect Being Theology

**1. Introduction**

There are several passages in the Bible that, taken literally, say or imply that God sometimes repents. Philosophers and theologians, however, hardly ever accept the thesis that God sometimes repents. Philo of Alexandria, for instance, in commenting on a Bible passage in which it is said that God repents (Gen 6:5-7), claims that those who take this passage literally display an ever greater irreligion and impiety than those humans whose existence God is said to repent in the passage.[[1]](#footnote-1) There may be several reasons for denying that God could or does repent. The most important of them is that repenting seems to conflict with certain properties of God, namely his being perfectly good and his being omniscient. In other words, the idea that God repents is contradicted by or at least in tension with the classical Anselmian conception of God that we find in perfect being theology.

In this article, I discuss whether the idea of a repenting God is tenable. I do so by formulating the issue as a paradox, which I call the *Paradox of Divine Repentance*. First, as several passages in the Christian scriptures suggest, God sometimes repents. Second, God is omniscient. Third, God is omnibenevolent, that is, perfectly good. The aim of this paper is to show that we need not discard the idea that God sometimes repents, in order to maintain that God is omniscient and perfectly good. For the sake of argument, I will assume that there is indeed a God and that God has revealed himself in the Bible, as many theists believe.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I explain what I mean by ‘repentance’ and show that the Bible strongly suggests that God sometimes repents. (§ 2) Next, I demonstrate that the thesis that God repents, in conjunction with two theses that are crucial to perfect being theology, leads to a paradox. (§ 3) Subsequently, I critically discuss two ways of trying to dissolve the paradox. (§ 4) Next, I suggest that the paradox can be dissolved by acknowledging the possibility of God’s not foreseeing some of his own future free affections and some of the actions based on that, an idea that, I argue, need not conflict with divine omnibenevolence or omniscience. (§ 5) I defend this view against several objections (§ 6) and show what the major implications are. (§ 7)

**2. The Bible on God’s Repentance**

Before we consider what the Bible says about divine repentance, let us first ask what it is to repent. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to repent is “to feel sorry, self-reproachful, or contrite for past conduct; to regret or be conscience-stricken about a past action, attitude, etc.; to feel such sorrow for sin or fault as to be disposed to change one’s life for the better; to be penitent; to remember or regard with self-reproach or contrition; to feel sorry for; regret.”

Thus, one repents some event only if that event has already taken place—one cannot regret future events, although one might regret past events if they will inevitably lead to what one considers to be bad consequences in the future. The event may be a physical action or omission, but it may also be a mental event, such as an intention or a decision. Moreover, one normally repents some event only if one believes that one was involved in bringing it about in some way or other. I cannot repent what others do, unless I take it that I am somehow responsible for that.

Next, repentance seems to involve a negative emotion of some kind, such as self-reproach or contrition, and, at least usually, a belief that the past event – an action or forming an intention – was somehow bad or less than ideal. One may wonder whether repenting an action or decision does not imply something stronger, such as the belief that it was *wrong* rather than merely *bad* or *less than ideal* to perform the action or make the decision. I agree that it is typically the case that if one repents, one believes that one did something wrong, but I doubt whether it is necessary to hold such a belief in order for one to repent. If it *is* necessary, then, strictly speaking, God cannot repent, for God, on a traditional Anselmian understanding, cannot do something wrong. Something very close to it might be the case, though, namely that God could do something less than ideal. In what follows, I assume that it is *not* necessary for repenting some action or decision that one believes that that action or decision was wrong.

Finally, to truly repent is to have the disposition to do things otherwise if one had a chance of doing things otherwise or to have the disposition to make the harm undone, if one could. Putting this into a definition that seems to meet most of our linguistic intuitions about what it is to repent, we can say that:

REP: Some person *S* at some time *t\** repents the actualization of some state of affairs *Σ*[[2]](#footnote-2) iff (i) *Σ* was actualized at some prior point of time *t*, (ii) *Σ* was at least partly directly or indirectly actualized by *S* herself, (iii) *S* at *t\** deems the actualization of *Σ* overall bad or at least less than ideal and has a negative emotion towards the actualization of *Σ*, and (iv) *S* at *t\** is disposed to make any harm that the actualization of *Σ* might lead to undone.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Of course, there is more to be said about repentance. I think, however, that REP will give us enough grip on what it is to repent to see that there are several passages in the Bible that say or imply that God repents. Consider, for instance, a couple of passages from Hosea. First, God describes in some detail how he intends to punish Israel:

They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them in their fortresses. My people are bent on turning away from me; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it. (Hosea 11:5-7)[[4]](#footnote-4)

These words suggest that God intends to ruin Israel, to punish her for her sins by sending her into exile. But then, somewhat further on in the chapter, it seems that God repents. He changes his mind.[[5]](#footnote-5) Here is what he says:

How can I give you up, O E′phraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboi′im! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy E′phraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy. (Hosea 11:8-9)

It seems at least *prima facie* that this passage implies that God can decide or intend to do something, then have remorse, and consequently change his mind and do things differently from how he first intended to do them. Notice that the four conditions that we distinguished above are all satisfied in this passage from Hosea: (i) God intends that some state of affairs be actualized, (ii) he intends to actualize it himself, (iii) he then deems it bad to (intend to) do so and has a negative emotion towards his doing so or his intention to do so, and (iv) he decides *not* do so and, hence, has a disposition to act otherwise.

Not only do certain passages describe an action of God that seems best understood in terms of divine repentance, there are certain passages that say *expressis verbis* that God repents or that he is sorry. Here are some examples:

* And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Gen 6:6)
* And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people. (Ex 32:14)
* The word of the Lord came to Samuel:“I repent that I have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments.” (…) And the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel. (1 Sam 15:10-11, 35b)[[6]](#footnote-6)

For at least four reasons, it seems that God’s repentance is a prevalent theme in the Old Testament. First, as we saw, the Old Testament frequently says that God repents. He decides or intends to do something, subsequently changes his mind and somehow deems it bad, and then decides or intends *not* to do it. God’s repentance is no incident in Scripture. He sometimes even repents an accomplished act rather than merely an intention or decision (Gen 6:6-7; 1 Sam 15:11, 35). Second, many different biblical traditions say that God repents, such as the psalmody, the Jahwist and Elohist traditions, the Deuteronomic History, and the exilic prophecy.[[7]](#footnote-7) Third, God repents at key junctures in Israel’s history, such as the flood story, his revelation at Sinai, when he institutes the monarchy, and when the northern and southern kingdoms fall.[[8]](#footnote-8) Fourth, God’s repentance is mentioned in different literary genres in the Bible, such as in direct divine speech in prophecies (e.g. Jer 26:3), in theoretical statements about God (e.g. Jer 18:7-10), in historical passages (e.g. 1 Sam 15), and, most importantly, in creedal statements. These creedal statements make clear that, according to the Israelites, it belongs to God’s nature that he sometimes repents.[[9]](#footnote-9) Jonah, for instance, says: “I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil.” (Jonah 4:2; see also Joel 2:13b-14a) If you had asked a, say, sixth century (BC) Israelite who God is, she would have said that God is someone who is gracious, abounding in love, and someone who repents.

Taking the Christian scriptures at face value, then, we have good reason to think that God sometimes repents. This is not just my own interpretation of these texts. Several biblical scholars, especially during the last two decades or so, have emphasized that these texts are to be understood as implying that God does in fact sometimes change his mind. This view is defended, for instance, by Joachim Jeremias in his well-known book *The Repentance of God*,[[10]](#footnote-10) in several entries in theological dictionaries,[[11]](#footnote-11) and in various exegetical and biblical-theological articles.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**3. The Paradox of Divine Repentance**

The idea that God repents, however, leads to a paradox, at least if one adheres to *perfect being theology*, which takes it that God excels in every (good) respect in which a person could possibly excel. Thus, God does not merely know much, he is omniscient. And God is not merely very good, he is omnibenevolent. Apart from its intuitive support – e.g. it simply *seems true* that someone would not be God if he sometimes performed culpable actions – there are other good reasons, at least for theists, to accept perfect being theology. First, the holy Scriptures of the Abrahamic religions suggests that God is omniscient, perfectly good, and omnipotent, even if these concepts are not explicitly developed. One of the main ideas in Psalm 139, for instance, seems to be that God knows everything anyone could possibly know. Second, it is affirmed in many Christian creeds, such as the Belgic Confession, and it is part of the tradition of the church that God is omniscient and omnibenevolent.

There is a lot to be said about how precisely we should think of divine omniscience and divine omnibenevolence, but for our purposes the following rough definitions will do:

SCI: Some person *S* is omniscient iff for any proposition *p*, if it is possible to know that *p* or to know that *~p*, then *S* knows that *p* if *p* is true and *S* knows that ~*p* if *p* is false.[[13]](#footnote-13)

BEN: Some person *S* is omnibenevolent iff at any time at which *S* exists *S* actualizes what *S* believes to be the morally best option or one of the morally best options, if there is one, that is available to *S*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Thus, we have now found three propositions that ascribe a certain attribute to God which all seem plausible:

(1) God sometimes repents.

(2) God is omniscient.

(3) God is omnibenevolent.

However, it seems that (1) – (3) cannot all be true, since they lead to a contradiction. This can be shown as follows:

(4) God performs some action *A* at some time *t*. [ass.]

(5) God knows prior to *t* that doing *A* at *t* is the best option or one of the best options. [(2), (3), (4)]

(6) God at some time *t\** later than *t* repents doing *A* at *t*. [ass. from (1)]

(7) If one repents doing *A* at *t*, then one comes to believe that doing *A* at *t* was neither the best option nor one of the best options. [REP]

(8) God at *t\** knows that doing *A* at *t* was neither the best option nor one of the best options. [(2), (6), (7)]

(9) God knows both that doing *A* at *t* was the best option or one of the best options and that doing *A* at *t* was neither the best option nor one of the best options. [(5), (8)]

(10) Knowing that *p* entails that *p* is true. [ass.]

(11) It is both true and false that doing *A* at *t* was the best option or one of the best options available to God at *t*. [(9), (10): RAA)

There is virtually no philosopher who denies that knowledge entails truth, so it is safe to assume (10). And apart from (10), I have only used my definitions of ‘repentance’, ‘omniscience’, and ‘omnibenevolence’, the three propositions (1) – (3), and basic principles of logic. Now, given that God, if he is omniscient, is *necessarily* omniscient and that God, if he is omnibenevolent, is *necessarily* omnibenevolent, we can only avoid the *reductio* by claiming that, necessarily, God does not repent. Thus, omniscience and omnibenevolence jointly seem to rule out not merely the *fact* that God repents, but also the *possibility* that God repents. As I argued above, however, the Bible provides us with good reason to think that God repents. It, therefore, seems justified to refer to this problem as the *Paradox of Divine Repentance*: each of (1) – (3) seems plausible, but they cannot all be true.

**4. Open Theism and Geachianism as Responses to the Paradox of Divine Repentance**

I can think of several responses to the Paradox of Divine Repentance. In this section, I briefly discuss two of them: open theism and Geachianism.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*1. First Response: Open Theism*

One might suggest that, even though God is perfectly good and sometimes repents and is even omniscient, his omniscience should not be taken to include knowledge of future free actions of the beings he created. This strategy has been adopted by adherents of *open theism*: the future is open to God. This would explain divine repentance in a natural way. For instance, God decides or intends to destroy Nineveh because of the sins of its inhabitants. Then, however, he discovers that the inhabitants of Nineveh repent, something he could not foresee, since the future is open to him. He subsequently changes his mind and, on the basis of his new knowledge about the repentance of the Nineveh’s inhabitants, decides not to destroy the city.

Thus, God truly repents[[16]](#footnote-16) and he does so because he has no foreknowledge of future free actions of his creatures.[[17]](#footnote-17) Of course, God has an infinitely good grasp of his creatures and can, therefore, often correctly predict what they will do.[[18]](#footnote-18) Prophecies that seem to suggest that God has perfect knowledge of free creaturely actions should be understood differently: they are (i) conditional on the actions of humans, (ii) predictions based on existing trends and tendencies, or (iii) announcements of what God himself intends to bring about.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Open theism is a detailed theory about God’s knowledge and it has been and still is extensively discussed in the literature. Here, I cannot do full justice to that discussion. Instead, I will give two reasons why many philosophers think that open theism is problematic. If they are right, then the search for an alternative solution to the Paradox of Divine Repentance is warranted. First, several passages in the Bible strongly suggest that God knows what particular human beings will do and knows what certain humans will *freely* do. God does not *force* Peter to deny Christ; he foresees that he will freely do so (see, for instance, Matt 26:33-35). And that is why Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him. If Jesus’ knowledge was not foreknowledge, but merely probabilistic knowledge based on his knowledge of Peter’s character, then Jesus’ prediction might have turned out to be false. That seems a problematic implication. Thus, some opponents of open theism argue, we have good reason to think that God has knowledge of the future free actions of his creatures. Second, if God could not foresee future free actions of his creatures, then there would be something in the universe, apart from himself, that God does not fully grasp, at least on those versions of open theism on which there are certain *truths* about what we freely will do in the future.[[20]](#footnote-20) This seems to contradict certain passages in the Bible. The main idea of Psalm 139, for instance, is that God fully grasps and knows everything about the created world. And the same idea is put forward in Heb 4:13: “And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” Again, these points have been and are being discussed in the literature. I merely want to mention two reasons that many philosophers find convincing for rejecting open theism. If they are right, it would be preferable if we could find an alternative response to the paradox that does not face these two problems.

*2. Second Response: Geachianism*

Another reply to the Paradox of Divine Repentance could be what Patrick Todd calls Geachianism. Geachianism says, roughly, that the future can change: it can be true now that I will go to work tomorrow, but if I get seriously wounded in a car accident it will no longer be true. I was going to work tomorrow, but my sudden car accident prevented that. Todd calls this view Geachianism, because Peter Geach has suggested something along these lines.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to Todd, who does not actually endorse Geachianism but has recently developed it and defended it against several objections, the view that the future can change makes sense of the biblical idea that God sometimes repents. After all, if the future is mutable, then God can truly believe that something will happen only to change his belief when something intervenes that prevents it from happening. Since the future can change, it follows that God’s repenting does not imply that he held a false belief about the future: it was true *then* that the future was going to be a certain way, so that he held a true belief about the future. When things change, the future is going to be different and God’s beliefs accurately track such changes about the future.[[22]](#footnote-22) On Geachianism, then, God sometimes *repents*, he is *omniscient* in that he knows every true proposition and does not believe any false proposition, and he is *omnibenevolent*.

There seem to be several problems with the idea that the future can change. Here, however, I will argue merely that Geachianism does not provide a solution to the Paradox of Divine Repentance. In order to see what the problem is, let us apply the theory to the story of Jonah. Let me be explicit that the following scenario would *not* fit Geachianism. Imagine that God sends Jonah to Nineveh and intends to destroy the city, because it is true that the inhabitants of Nineveh will *not* repent. However, the inhabitants of Nineveh then change their mind and in response to that, God repents his earlier decision to destroy the city. This cannot be the Geachian story, for the future that changes in this scenario is that God first intends to destroy the city and then intends *not* to destroy the city. But the very idea of the Geachian response to the paradox was that God repents *in response to* a changing future. Also, it raises the question of why God intended to destroy the city. After all, it was true all along that the inhabitants were going to repent. Before the inhabitants repented, there was no change such that, first, they were *not* going to repent and, then, they *were* going to repent.

The Geachian, then, should construe the scenario as follows. God, prior to deciding to send Jonah to Nineveh, truly believes that Nineveh is going to be destroyed, because he foresees that they will not repent. Then, however, he decides that he will send Jonah to Nineveh and foresees that, as a result of that, they *will* repent. God then repents his earlier intention to destroy the city and decides that he will *not* destroy the city, given that the inhabitants of Nineveh will repent. God thus responds to a change in the future. There are two problems here, though.

First, whether or not the inhabitants repent depends on whether or not God sends Jonah to the city. But when God decides to send Jonah to the city, he has *not* acquired any new knowledge or information about the situation. But then why did God first decide not to send anyone and then decide to send Jonah? *Not* because the future changed, because the future changes rather *as a consequence* of God’s decision to send Jonah. If God’s knowledge has not changed, then it seems he would have no good reason to change his mind. It seems that this construal of the scenario would make some of God’s decisions utterly capricious, for it would follow that God can change his mind without having any good reason to do so.

Second and even more importantly, it is not clear that in this scenario God truly *repents.* After all, when God decided to destroy Nineveh it was *true* that the inhabitants were *not* going to repent. And when God decided that he would *not* destroy the city it was true that the inhabitants *were* going to repent. If God is perfectly good, then it was morally alright to destroy the city if the inhabitants were *not* going to repent. Since, on Geachianism, the future itself has changed, it is not clear that there is anything God should repent. But this means that the paradox has not been solved, for it has not been shown that (1) – (3) are compatible. In the next section, therefore, I provide an alternative solution to the paradox.

**5. A New Response to the Paradox of Divine Repentance**

On the alternative response that I would like to defend, God is perfectly good in that he never does and never could do anything culpable or blameworthy, but always does what he deems the best or one of the best options. He is also omniscient in that he knows everything, including future free acts of his creatures, that could possibly be known. And, finally, God also sometimes repents. All this is possible because, for all we know, there is someone of whom God does not always foresee what he will do: *God himself*.

What I would like to suggest is that God postpones certain decisions because he does not foresee how certain free actions of his creatures that he foresees, will affect him and, hence, does not foresee what decision he will take. Let us, again, take the story of Nineveh as an example. I think the following is a plausible interpretation of what happens.

God tells Jonah that he has decided to destroy Nineveh. He has noticed the horrible sins of its inhabitants and, therefore, sincerely intends to destroy it. It is Jonah’s task to bring Nineveh’s inhabitants this message. Given God’s perfect knowledge of his creation, including its free agents, he knows that the inhabitants of Nineveh will repent their sins once Jonah tells them that they should repent. He thinks that, even though they will repent, the city still deserves to be destroyed (in the Bible, human repentance does not always lead to divine mercy). So, he intends to destroy the city. However, when Jonah brings the terrible message to the inhabitants of Nineveh and they actually repent, God is deeply emotionally affected by what he sees. On that basis, that is, on the basis of his mercy, he changes his mind and decides *not* to destroy the city. God knows his creatures perfectly, so he did foresee that they would repent. But God does not foresee that he himself would be deeply affected and would change his mind because of that.

Let me explain how we should interpret this from a more systematic point of view. In accordance with what several scriptural passages seem to imply, this account maintains that God can repent, that God knows everything anyone could possibly know, and that God is perfectly good. God’s knowledge increases by leaps as time progresses or, more specifically, each time he makes a decision that he had postponed making. Thus, God learns more about himself in the course of history. This does not mean that God does not foresee certain free actions of himself in the future. For there may be certain actions that God has already decided that he will perform, no matter what he will feel and decide on certain occasions in the time period before those actions. For instance, God may have already decided that one day, he will return in glory, no matter what happens in the meanwhile. God may foresee certain of his own actions, because he knows that it will be right to perform them, no matter how he is affected by the circumstances. Or he may know that he could only have a specific set of affections and that none of those affections would make a difference to whether or not it is right to perform the action in question.

Therefore, religious believers can be sure that the promises God has made, such as his promise to return in glory and to renew the world, are reliable: he will do those things. We also find this idea in Scripture: the fact that God sometimes repents does not imply that he can repent *any decision*. Thus, Psalm 110:4 says: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchiz′edek.”” (cf. Heb 7:21) Here, the idea is clearly that God does not change his mind when it comes to the priesthood of the subject in question (whoever precisely the subject is). God can change his mind, but he will not change his mind on this issue. Similarly, in Rom 11:29 Paul says that God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable (*hametamelèta*, literally: without repentance). Thus, the fact that God can change his mind does not imply that believers need to be in constant fear or that God is unreliable or capricious, because there are certain things, such as our salvation and other promises to his people, that God will not change his mind about.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This view entails that God is in time and that, at least since creating the cosmos, he is *everlasting*[[24]](#footnote-24) (temporal, but without beginning or end) rather than *eternal*[[25]](#footnote-25)(beyond time or outside time, so that all moments in time are equally present to him). Thus, it entails that there is a present, a past, and a future for God. This view, it seems to me, squares well with the biblical testimonies concerning God’s relation to time. Here, I will not be able to deal with the arguments for and against the idea that God is in time, but, given the fact that there are many philosophers and theologians nowadays who believe that God is in time, I do not take it to count against my view that it entails that God is everlasting rather than eternal.

This account of divine repentance also implies that God knows his creatures perfectly and even foresees their free actions, as Scripture suggests at several junctures, at least if those actions are not dependent on a decision of his that he has not taken yet. For example, before deciding not to destroy Nineveh, God does not foresee that one of its inhabitants will freely buy a piece of land the next day, because whether or not that person will buy that piece of land depends on whether or not God destroys the city. Thus, even though it is perfectly compatible with my account that God has perfect middle knowledge, so that he knows what every creature would freely do in any specific total circumstances, it also implies that God’s knowledge of the actual free actions of his creatures increases in the course of time. It further implies that God does not always foresee his own future free actions.[[26]](#footnote-26) This might be counterintuitive for some people, but what reason do we actually have to think that God perfectly foresees all of his own emotions, decisions, and actions? Scripture gives us no reason to think so. And I, like many of the people I talked to on the issue, have no intuitions at all on this point. What if one *does* have the intuition that if God is to be perfect, he should know every truth about himself? Let me provide two reasons for those having such an intuition not to rely on that intuition.

First, as I have argued elsewhere,[[27]](#footnote-27) sin has deeply affected and still deeply affects our beliefs and intuitions about God. If we want to know who God is, we have to rely for an important part on special revelation, primarily that provided in the Christian scriptures. By that, I do not mean that I deem perfect being theology problematic. On the contrary, since the main ideas that we find in perfect being theology are supported by Scripture, I find it largely unproblematic. What I *do* find problematic, for the reason I just gave, is intuitions about God that find no direct or indirect support in Scripture. Given that sin has strongly affected our knowledge of God, I would be hesitant to embrace such intuitions. The intuition that God perfectly knows himself seems to be one of those intuitions.

Second, as Peter van Inwagen has argued,[[28]](#footnote-28) we should treat our modal intuitions about remote scenarios – remote in the sense that we do not encounter them in everyday life – with scepticism. Since our modal intuitions, that is, our intuitions concerning what is possible and what is necessary, have been and are shaped by what we encounter in daily life, we should be skeptical about our intuitions concerning scenarios that we have no acquaintance with and that do not significantly resemble scenarios that we have acquaintance with. Now, our intuitions about whether God foresees all of his own future emotions and all of his future free actions are not exactly *modal* intuitions (although one might think that they are partly intuitions about what it is *possible* for God to know), but, like the modal intuitions that Van Inwagen refers to, they are intuitions about scenarios that we do not encounter in daily life and that do not resemble the scenarios we encounter in daily life. Thus, even if our intuitions concerning God have not been deeply affected by sin, we, as finite beings, should be skeptical about our intuitions concerning scenarios that are remote from our everyday life experience, especially if those scenarios involve an infinite being like God.

Of course, God knows certain things about himself, such as that he exists, that he is triune, and that he is a loving God. But we have no reason to think that God perfectly knows everything about himself.[[29]](#footnote-29) In response to this, one may wonder what God knows about himself and what he does *not* know about himself. I have to admit that I have no detailed ideas about this. However, I would like to stress that I do not need to have such detailed ideas. Scripture gives us reason to think that on the one hand there are things that God knows about himself, such as that he exists and that he is perfectly good, and that on the other hand there are certain things that God does *not* know about himself, such as how precisely he will be affected in particular circumstances. That is all I need; where precisely the line is to be drawn is a matter of philosophical and theological discussion (or maybe speculation) that I need not go into here.

If this picture is correct, then God sometimes repents. He is omniscient in that he knows every truth that anyone could possibly know. Naturally, if my account is correct, then it is *not* the case that he knows every truth at any time. My account *does* imply, though, that God knows every truth at *some* point in time. In that regard, it differs from those versions of classical theism that claim that God knows every truth at *any* time. However, given that, on my account, there is not and could not be anyone else who would know those truths about God, it seems right to say that God knows anything anyone could possible know. We have good reason, on my account, then, to affirm not only that God repents and that he is omnibenevolent, but also that he is omniscient. Thus, if this approach is convincing, we have dissolved the Paradox of Divine Repentance.

**6. Objections and Replies**

I realize, of course, that this account will be controversial in several respects. Let me, therefore, defend it against what seem to me some major objections that might be levelled against it.

*Objection 1*. First, one might object that intending to *φ* entails believing that one will *φ*. Hence, if God repents and decides not to *φ*, it follows that he had a false belief, namely the belief that he would *φ*. But it seems that a being with false beliefs could not be God, for a being with false beliefs would not be omniscient. In response, I would like to question whether intending to *φ* entails believing that one will *φ*. I know that I change my mind every now and then. It seems that I can sincerely intend to *φ* while I know that I might change my mind about *φ*-ing. If I know that there is a non-negligible chance that I change my mind about *φ*-ing, I might suspend judgement about whether I will *φ* while, as things stand, still sincerely intending to *φ*. This is especially true if God knows that he can change his mind about things, as I have suggested. If he knows that he can, then he will adjust his beliefs accordingly with respect to those situations of which he knows that he might change his mind once he is in them. It seems that this does not prevent God from forming intentions about what to do in those circumstances. And, of course, God can form such closely related beliefs as that it is *likely* or *probable* that he will do such and such in those circumstances. Those beliefs can be true, even if he will in fact act otherwise.

*Objection 2*. Second, one may object that we should not rely on the Christian scriptures when they suggest or imply that God repents, since there are also several passages in the Bible that suggest or imply that God does *not* repent. More precisely, there seem to be three texts that are relevant when it comes to this point:

* God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. (Num 23:19)
* “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent.” (1 Sam 15:29)
* Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (Jas 1:17)

Upon further consideration and some careful exegesis, however, it soon becomes clear that these texts do not imply that God never repents. As biblical theologians stress, in Num 23 and 1 Sam 15, the point is rather that God never lies, that he is reliable. It does not follow that he does not repent if, as a result of an increase in knowledge, he finds out that he should do something else than what he intended to do. The point of Jas 1 is clearly that believers can rely on God, that he is not like the lights of heaven that change in brightness. God is always there and he will always seek our good.[[30]](#footnote-30) These texts just deny that God repents in the way humans often repent, namely capriciously, unreliably, and as a result of culpability and sin.[[31]](#footnote-31) Again, this squares well with what I said, since on my account as well God is omnibenevolent.

*Objection 3*. Third, one might worry that emotions or feelings are not a good reason to change one’s mind, not even for God. Whether one should *φ* does not depend on what one feels about *φ*-ing, but on whether it is a good or a bad thing to *φ*. One might think that the account of divine repentance that I have sketched so far would make God irrational. Prior to the conversion of the inhabitants of Nineveh, God already has all the information he needs. Hence, there is no reason for him to postpone his decision as to whether or not he should destroy Nineveh and also no reason to change his mind when the inhabitants of Nineveh actually repent.

I do not find this argument convincing. It may well be that God’s emotions and feelings sometimes play a crucial role in determining whether *φ*-ing is overall good or not. Of course, it will not be the *only* thing God needs to consider. For instance, God also needs to consider what the inhabitants of Nineveh will freely do if he spares the city. But his own feelings might play *a* role in determining whether or not it is good to destroy the city. It may be that *φ*-ing is overall good if God experiences an emotion *E* and not overall good if he experiences another emotion *E\** in doing *A*, or sufficiently good if he experiences *E* to degree *D* and not sufficiently good if he experiences *E* to another degree *D\**. Maybe the inhabitants of Nineveh deserved the punishment that God intended to inflict on them, even though they would repent. And maybe it would be wrong for God to act against his feeling of compassion. What God feels or experiences, then, may well make a difference to whether or not the relevant action is morally permissible for God. But can God still intend to *φ* if he knows that he might feel an emotion *E* and that it would be wrong to *φ* if he felt *E*? I think that is quite possible. We can perfectly well intend to do things while knowing that we might change our mind if we feel differently. As long as we do not actually feel differently, it seems possible to form such an intention.

*Objection. 4*. Next, one may worry that perfect foreknowledge of creatures’ free actions would be enough for the relevant emotions to arise in God. Of course, foresight often fails to give rise to certain emotions in *us*, humans, but then we do not have the perfect foreknowledge that God has. If God foresees all free actions of his creatures, then he will already experience the relevant emotions and need not wait for those free actions actually to be performed.

In response, let me point out that it seems to me that *actuality*, by which I mean something’s happening *now*, often makes a crucial difference to our emotions and feelings. Imagine we perfectly foresee that some friend will beg us to do something. Thus, we foresee what she will say, how she will look at us, and the way she cries. It will still be true in that scenario that we also know that these things are not yet *actual*: our friend is not looking at us, she is not crying, and she is not speaking to us. Imagine that, in fact, she is playing basketball. Will this arouse certain emotions in us? I doubt it, or at least I doubt whether it will give rise to the exact same emotions with the same strength as when those things *actually* happen. You might compare it to food. I know perfectly well what a good pizza Quattro Fromaggi looks like and what it smells like and believe that I will not take a slice of this pizza. But I might take a different decision from the one I expect to take when I am *actually* confronted with a good pizza Quattro Fromaggi. For all we know, God perfectly foresees what his creatures will freely do, but still does not know exactly how *he* will respond to that.

*Objection 5*: Fifth, would not it be an imperfection in God if there were truths he did not know, truths about himself? It is the very idea that God is perfect in all regards that has led many philosophers to think that God has to know every truth, as George Mavrodes rightly notices.[[32]](#footnote-32) My response is threefold. First, as I suggested above,[[33]](#footnote-33) the idea that there are certain truths about God that he does not know is just one route one can take here. One could also say that prior to such divine feelings and divine actions, it is false or neither true nor false that God will have such feelings or that he will perform such actions. Second, on my account God knows every truth about himself. Only, he does not know all truths about himself at *any* time; certain truths about himself he only knows from a certain point in time onwards. If time is without end, then there will be no point in time at which God knows every truth (unless, of course, something like presentism is true). However, for every truth there is, there will be some point in time at which God knows that truth. Third, I agree that God would in some sense be imperfect if there is or could be someone else who knows or could know things God does not or could not know. On my account, however, there is not and, presumably, could not be such a person. For, surely, if God does not fully know his future self, then who else would be able to fully know and understand God’s future self? But if God knows every truth that anyone could possibly know, then God’s knowledge seems perfect, even if there are truths that God does not know at every time in history. Hence, even though my account implies that God does not know every truth at any point in time, this is no imperfection in God, for on my account God still knows anything anyone could possibly know.

I have not been able to discuss all objections that one might level against my account. Every argument that has been put forward in favour of divine impassibility will also constitute an objection to my account of divine repentance. And it seems that if theological determinism is true – that is, roughly, if God is all controlling, if everything that happens has been determined by God to happen – then my account of divine repentance is false, but I have not discussed the arguments in favour of theological determinism. There is much more work to be done, then. In this section I have only tried to show that the account of divine repentance that I have offered is more robust than one might initially think. I leave the discussion of further objections for another occasion.

**7.** **Implications**

Let me draw out some implications of the view that I have defended. If my account is correct, so that God sometimes repents, then what does that imply? Here, I will mention four implications.

First, if what I have argued is correct, then one important attribute needs to be added to the list of divine attributes. Of course, what I have said above was rather sketchy on certain points and a lot more philosophical work can and needs to be done on the attribute of divine repentance. Moreover, other divine attributes might have to be reconsidered, especially divine omnibenevolence and divine omniscience. Does God’s omnibenevolence merely mean that God always does something good or praiseworthy rather than something blameworthy, or does it (also) mean that God always does the best or one of the best things? Does God’s omniscience entail that God always knows even every truth about himself? And are God’s omnibenevolence and God’s omniscience in some way dependent on each other? For instance, does a particular view on God’s omniscience imply a particular account of God’s omnibenevolence? If my account is correct and God sometimes repents, then these are all issues that need to be (re)considered.

Second, an account of divine repentance helps us to keep or get the primary attributes of God in focus. More specifically, it is brought more sharply into focus in what sense and in which regards God is immutable or unchangeable if we spell out in what sense and with regard to which things God *does* repent. God’s immutability on the one hand and God’s responsiveness to humans are better understood if we pay attention to the circumstances in which and the things about which God repents and the circumstances in which and the things about which God does *not* repent.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Third, my account of God’s repentance implies that God and humans are more alike than many philosophers and theologians have thought. According to Christian doctrine, God has created man *in his image*. That image of God has traditionally been taken to include rational thought, free will, the ability to act, the capacity to distinguish good from evil, and so forth. If what I have argued is correct, then being created in the image of God may also include the ability to repent: both God and humans are beings who sometimes change their minds and regret an earlier act, decision, or intention. The ability to repent is something that humans and God have in common and that distinguishes humans from (other) animals.

Finally, if God sometimes repents, then religious believers have an additional reason for petitionary prayer. They may ask God to do something even if they have good reason to think that God intends to do otherwise, because they have good reason to think that God can change his mind. Some philosophers of religion believe that prayer makes a difference to what God does, because in deciding whether or not to do *A* God considers whether people will ask him in prayer to do *A*. But if God can repent, then something stronger is true: God may actually *change* his decision instead of merely *making* his decision on the basis of human prayer. This means that believers may have a stronger influence on God than would be the case if God could not repent. If God can repent, then there is an important and neglected phenomenon in the relation between God and humans, namely our ability to *change* rather than *affect* God’s decisions and intentions. I do not deny that if God cannot repent, prayer can still be relevant for God’s decisions. God may still take the prayers of believers into account, foreknowing what they will pray and basing his decisions partly on that. But if my account of divine repentance is correct, it is true that one (or a group of people together) might be able to *now* make a difference to what God does *now* and that clearly makes a difference to our picture of our relation to God. Moreover, I would say it also fits better with the way religious believers perform and experience petitionary prayer, given that many of them seem to believe that God will listen to them when they pray and that God will make or change his decisions partly on the basis of their prayer *when they pray*.

**8. Conclusion**

Let me draw the threads of this paper together. I have argued that there are three theses each of which is plausible but that, it seems at least at first sight, cannot all be true. First, God sometimes repents. Second, God is omniscient. Third, God is omnibenevolent. It seems to me that there are three major ways to dissolve this paradox. First, one could say that God perfectly knows everything, including himself, that he perfectly knows his creatures, but that he does not repent. Maybe this is the *classical* position, the position that most philosophers and theologians have taken when they thought about the issue. Second, one could say that God knows himself perfectly, that he sometimes repents, but that he does not know his creatures perfectly (or at least not their future free actions), since they have free will. This position is taken by adherents of *open theism*. Finally, one could say that God knows his creatures perfectly, that he sometimes repents, but that he does not know his own future self perfectly. This is the position I have taken and defended against some of the major objections that one could level against it.

Each of these positions has two elements that virtually all philosophers and theologians agree on and one more controversial element. The classical view has the controversial element that it denies divine repentance; several scripture passages strongly suggest the opposite. Open theism has the controversial element that it denies that God knows his creatures’ future free actions, and, according to many, this seems to be contradicted by several scripture passages. My view implies that God does not fully know and understand his own future self. Upon further consideration, though, it turns out that we have little reason to think that God *does* fully know and understand his own future self: scripture does not say so, I suspect that many of us have no intuitions on this, and even if we do, it is not clear at all why we should think that those intuitions are reliable. Hence, taking into account the difficulties that the alternatives face, it seems to me that the position I have advocated in this paper, which implies that God sometimes repents, is the most promising. Even if this is not the case, though, I hope to have shown that there is a theoretical contender that has been overlooked in the debate and that needs to be taken seriously.[[35]](#footnote-35)

**References**

Basinger, David. (1994). “Practical Implications”, in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (eds.), *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press), 155-176.

Butterworth, Mike. (1996). Art. “*nācham*”, in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and* Exegesis, Vol. 3 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press), 81-83.

Fretheim, Terence E. (1988). “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk”, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10, 47-70.

Geach, Peter T. (1977). *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Hasker, William. (1994). “A Philosophical Perspective”, in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (eds.), *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press), 126-154.

Jeremias, Jörg. (1997). *Die Reue Gottes: Aspekte alttestamentlicher Gottesvorstellung*, 2nd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag).

Kuyper, Lester J. (1965) “The Repentance of God”, *The Reformed Review* 18, 3-16.

Kuyper, Lester J. (1969). “The Suffering and Repentance of God”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22, 257-277.

Mavrodes, George I. (1997). “Omniscience”, in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell), 236-242.

Philo of Alexandria. (1963). *Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis*, Les Oeuvres de Philon D’Alexandrie 8, transl. by A. Mosès (Paris: Éditions du Cerf).

Pinnock, Clark H. (1994). “Systematic Theology”, in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (eds.), *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press), 101-125.

Rhoda, Alan R. (2008). “Generic Open Theism and Some Varieties Thereof”, *Religious Studies* 44, 225-234.

Rice, Richard. (1994). “Biblical Support for a New Perspective”, in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger (eds.), *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press), 11-58.

Simian-Yofre, H. (1986). Art. “*nācham*”, in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (eds.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Vol. V (Berlin: W. Kohlhammer), 366-384.

Stoebe, H.J. Art. (1976). Art. “*nācham*”, in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (eds.), *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Vol. II (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag), 59-66.

Todd, Patrick. (2010). “Geachianism”, in Jonathan L. Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 222-251.

Van Inwagen, Peter. (2001). “Modal Epistemology”, in *Ontology, Identity, and Modality: Essays in Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 253-258.

Van Inwagen, Peter. (2008). “What Does an Omniscient Being Know about the Future?”, in Jonathan L. Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 216-230.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. (1975). “God Everlasting”, in Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (eds.), *God and the Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 181-203.

Zagzebski, Linda. (2008). “Omnisubjectivity”, Jonathan L. Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 231-247.

The primary concern is the account of omniscience with which it begins.  On such accounts, if radical skepticism is true, everything is omniscient.  Moreover, the only motivation for such views is an analogy with omnipotence (OP doesn't require ability to do everything, just everything possible), but that analogy doesn't support this account but rather the traditional account in terms of knowledge of all truths.  These issues are in the literature, especially in the work of Kvanvig(!).

1. See Philo of Alexandria 1963, 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Where *Σ* might also be the state of affairs of *intending* or *deciding* to (not) do something. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a similar definition, see Fretheim 1988, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bible quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1952). I have chosen for this translation because it consistently renders the relevant verbs (Qal *nācham* and Niphal *sjūv*) with ‘to repent’. Certain other Bible translations, such as the *King James Version* and the *New American Standard Bible*, also translate the relevant Hebrew verbs with ‘to repent’ and ‘to change one’s mind’. Still other translations, however, such as the *New International Version*, prefer to render the relevant Hebrew verbs with ‘to relent’—presumably because they find the very idea of God’s repenting problematic. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I take it that repenting is sufficient, but not necessary for changing one’s mind. One repents something only if one takes it that something bad or less than ideal occurred. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Among the many other passages that mention God’s repentance are 2 Sam 24:16a; 1 Chron 21:15; Jer 18:8-10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Amos 7:3,6; Jonah 3:9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As Fretheim 1988, 54 rightly points out. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thus also Fretheim 1988, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thus also Rice 1994, 26-27. In all but four or five occurrences in the Bible, God himself is the subject of the act of repentance (as Buttersworth 1996, 82 rightly points out), some thirty five times. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Jeremias 1997, 119, 149-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for instance, Buttersworth 1996, 81-3; Simian-Yofre 1986, 368-76; Stoebe 1976, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Fretheim 1988; Kuyper 1965; 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a similar definition of omniscience, see Van Inwagen 2008, 221-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. What if he knows that there is no best option or no set of best options, e.g. because for every option there is a better option? Then, it seems, a perfectly good being would perform what he believes to be a good action or maybe a very good action. At least, he would not perform what he believes to be a bad action. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Three other options that I can think of are (1) interpreting the relevant passages purely *metaphorically*, (2) claiming that the biblical authors simply *falsely believed* that God sometimes repents, and (3) suggesting that the relevant passages are instances of *divine* *accommodation*. I find each of these options unconvincing, but, for reasons of brevity, I leave discussion of them for another occasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Pinnock 1994, 117-8, 122; Rice 1994, 22-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Basinger 1994, 156, 163; Hasker 1994, 151-4; Pinnock 1994, 121-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is also the view of Zagzebski 2008, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thus Hasker 1994, 153; Rice 1994, 54-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As Rhoda 2008, 229, rightly points out, two other options would be to say that there are no truths or falsehoods about what creatures will freely do, and that all propositions about what creatures will freely do are false. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Geach 1977, 47-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thus Todd 2010, 245-247. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Also, God’s repentance is usually for the good: God turns from judgement to grace or, at least, from judgement to more restricted judgement, as rightly pointed out by Joachim Jeremias and Lester Kuyper (Jeremias 1997, 149-57; Kuyper 1965, 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For an account of God’s temporality, see Wolterstorff 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This is, for instance, clearly the view of Philo of Alexandria; see Philo 1963, 76-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On the view I propose, then, the future is open to God. If this is all open theism requires (in addition to theism), then my view would count as a variety of open theism. It seems, however, that most open theists believe that the future is open to God because of creaturely libertarian freedom and that is a thesis I have rejected. On Alan Rhoda’s account of generic open theism, for instance, my view would *not* count as a variety of open theism (see Rhoda 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See author’s paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Van Inwagen 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Thus, I assume that there are certain truths about what God will feel and do in certain total circumstances. Other options are, as for the open theist, to say that propositions about what God will feel and do in certain total circumstances are all false or neither true nor false. Those views as well would save God’s omniscience. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Thus also Fretheim 1988, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Thus also Kuyper 1969, 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Mavrodes 1997, 236-237. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. In footnote 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Thus also Fretheim 1988, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I would like to thank William de Boer, Mariska Bosschaert, Govert Buijs, Jeroen de Ridder, Thomas Flint, Gerrit Glas, Perry Huesmann, Frans Koopmans, Matthijs Kronemeijer, Eric Peels, Herman Philipse, Henk Reitsema, Alan Rhoda, Emad Thabet, Patrick Todd, Gijsbert van den Brink, René van Woudenberg, and Jordan Wessling. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)