

## DIVINE OMNISCIENCE AND VOLUNTARY ACTION

**I**N Part V, Section III of his *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Boethius entertained (though he later rejected) the claim that if God is omniscient, no human action is voluntary. This claim seems intuitively false. Surely, given only a doctrine describing God's *knowledge*, nothing about the voluntary status of human actions will follow. Perhaps such a conclusion would follow from a doctrine of divine omnipotence or divine providence, but what connection could there be between the claim that God is *omniscient* and the claim that human actions are determined? Yet Boethius thought he saw a problem here. He thought that if one collected together just the right assumptions and principles regarding God's knowledge, one could derive the conclusion that if God exists, no human action is voluntary. Of course, Boethius did not think that all the assumptions and principles required to reach this conclusion are true (quite the contrary), but he thought it important to draw attention to them nonetheless. If a theologian is to construct a doctrine of God's knowledge which does not commit him to determinism, he must first understand that there is a way of thinking about God's knowledge which would so commit him.

In this paper, I shall argue that although his claim has a sharp counterintuitive ring, Boethius was right in thinking that there is a selection from among the various doctrines and principles clustering about the notions of knowledge, omniscience, and God which, when brought together, demand the conclusion that if God exists, no human action is voluntary. Boethius, I think, did not succeed in making explicit all of the ingredients in the problem. His suspicions were sound, but his discussion was incomplete. His argument needs to be developed. This is the task I shall undertake in the pages to follow. I should like to make clear at the outset that my purpose in rearguing this thesis is not to show that determinism is true, nor to show that God does not exist, nor to show that either determinism is true or God does not exist. Following Boethius, I shall not claim that the items needed to

generate the problem are either philosophically or theologically adequate. I want to concentrate attention on the implications of a certain set of assumptions. Whether the assumptions are themselves acceptable is a question I shall not consider.

## I

A. Many philosophers have held that if a statement of the form “*A* knows *X*” is true, then “*A* believes *X*” is true and “*X*” is true. As a first assumption, I shall take this partial analysis of “*A* knows *X*” to be correct. And I shall suppose that since this analysis holds for all knowledge claims, it will hold when speaking of God’s knowledge. “God knows *X*” entails “God believes *X*” and “‘*X*’ is true.”

Secondly, Boethius said that with respect to the matter of knowledge, God “cannot in anything be mistaken.”<sup>1</sup> I shall understand this doctrine as follows. Omniscient beings hold no false beliefs. Part of what is meant when we say that a person is omniscient is that the person in question believes nothing that is false. But, further, it is part of the “essence” of God to be omniscient. This is to say that any person who is not omniscient could not be the person we usually mean to be referring to when using the name “God.” To put this last point a little differently: if the person we usually mean to be referring to when using the name “God” were suddenly to lose the quality of omniscience (suppose, for example, He came to believe something false), the resulting person would no longer be God. Although we might call this second person “God” (I might call my cat “God”), the absence of the quality of omniscience would be sufficient to guarantee that the person referred to was not the same as the person formerly called by that name. From this last doctrine it follows that the statement “If a given person is God, that person is omniscient” is an a priori truth. From this we may conclude that the statement “If a given person is God, that person holds no false beliefs” is also an a priori truth. It would be conceptually im-

<sup>1</sup> *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Bk. V, sec. 3, par. 6.

possible for God to hold a false belief. “‘X’ is true” follows from “God believes X.” These are all ways of expressing the same principle—the principle expressed by Boethius in the formula “God cannot in anything be mistaken.”

A second principle usually associated with the notion of divine omniscience has to do with the scope or range of God’s intellectual gaze. To say that a being is omniscient is to say that he knows everything. “Everything” in this statement is usually taken to cover future, as well as present and past, events and circumstances. In fact, God is usually said to have had foreknowledge of everything that has ever happened. With respect to anything that was, is, or will be the case, God knew, *from eternity*, that it would be the case.

The doctrine of God’s knowing everything from eternity is very obscure. One particularly difficult question concerning this doctrine is whether it entails that with respect to everything that was, is, or will be the case, God knew *in advance* that it would be the case. In some traditional theological texts, we are told that God is *eternal* in the sense that He exists “outside of time,” that is, in the sense that He bears no temporal relations to the events or circumstances of the natural world.<sup>2</sup> In a theology of this sort, God could not be said to have known that a given natural event was going to happen before it happened. If God knew that a given natural event was going to occur *before* it occurred, at least one of God’s cognitions would then have occurred before some natural event. This, surely, would violate the idea that God bears no temporal relations to natural events.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in a considerable number of theological sources, we are told that God *has always* existed—that He existed long *before* the occurrence of any natural event. In a theology of this sort, to say that God is eternal is not to say that God exists “outside of time” (bears no temporal relations to natural events), it is to say, instead, God

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<sup>2</sup> This position is particularly well formulated in St. Anselm’s *Proslogium*, ch. xix and *Monologium*, chs. xxi-xxii; and in Frederick Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith*, Pt. I, sec. 2, par. 51. It is also explicit in Boethius, *op. cit.*, secs. 4-6, and in St. Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q. 10.

<sup>3</sup> This point is explicit in Boethius, *op. cit.*, secs. 4-6.

has existed (and will continue to exist) at each moment.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of omniscience which goes with this second understanding of the notion of eternity is one in which it is affirmed that God *has always* known what was going to happen in the natural world. John Calvin wrote as follows:

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things have ever been and perpetually remain before, his eyes, so that to his knowledge nothing is future or past, but all things are present; and present in such manner, that he does not merely conceive of them from ideas formed in his mind, as things remembered by us appear to our minds, but really he holds and sees them as if (*tanquam*) actually placed before him.<sup>5</sup>

All things are “present” to God in the sense that He “sees” them as if (*tanquam*) they were actually before Him. Further, with respect to any given natural event, not only is that event “present” to God in the sense indicated, it has *ever been and has perpetually remained* “present” to Him in that sense. This latter is the point of special interest. Whatever one thinks of the idea that God “sees” things as if “actually placed before him,” Calvin would appear to be committed to the idea that God has *always known* what was going to happen in the natural world. Choose an event (*E*) and a time ( $T_2$ ) at which *E* occurred. For any time ( $T_1$ ) prior to  $T_2$  (say, five thousand, six hundred, or eighty years prior to  $T_2$ ), God knew at  $T_1$  that *E* would occur at  $T_2$ . It will follow from this doctrine, of course, that with respect to any human action, God knew well in advance of its performance that the action would be performed. Calvin says, “when God created man, He foresaw what would happen concerning him.” He adds, “little more than five thousand years have elapsed since the creation of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Calvin seems to have thought that God

<sup>4</sup> This position is particularly well expressed in William Paley’s *Natural Theology*, ch. xxiv. It is also involved in John Calvin’s discussion of predestination, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. III, ch. xxi; and in some formulations of the first cause argument for the existence of God, e.g., John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, ch. x.

<sup>5</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. III, ch. xxi; this passage trans. by John Allen (Philadelphia, 1813), II, 145.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

foresaw the outcome of every human action well over five thousand years ago.

In the discussion to follow, I shall work only with this second interpretation of God's knowing everything *from eternity*. I shall assume that if a person is omniscient, that person has always known what was going to happen in the natural world—and, in particular, has always known what human actions were going to be performed. Thus, as above, assuming that the attribute of omniscience is part of the “essence” of God, the statement “For any natural event (including human actions), if a given person is God, that person would always have known that that event was going to occur at the time it occurred” must be treated as an a priori truth. This is just another way of stating a point admirably put by St. Augustine when he said: “For to confess that God exists and at the same time to deny that He has foreknowledge of future things is the most manifest folly. . . . One who is not prescient of all future things is not God.”<sup>7</sup>

B. Last Saturday afternoon, Jones mowed his lawn. Assuming that God exists and is (essentially) omniscient in the sense outlined above, it follows that (let us say) eighty years prior to last Saturday afternoon, God knew (and thus believed) that Jones would mow his lawn at that time. But from this it follows, I think, that at the time of action (last Saturday afternoon) Jones was not *able*—that is, it was not *within Jones's power*—to refrain from mowing his lawn.<sup>8</sup> If at the time of action, Jones had been

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<sup>7</sup> *City of God*, Bk. V, sec. 9.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of someone being *able* to do something and the notion of something being *within one's power* are essentially the same. Traditional formulations of the problem of divine foreknowledge (e.g., those of Boethius and Augustine) made use of the notion of what is (and what is not) *within one's power*. But the problem is the same when framed in terms of what one is (and one is not) *able* to do. Thus, I shall treat the statements “Jones was able to do X,” “Jones had the ability to do X,” and “It was within Jones's power to do X” as equivalent. Richard Taylor, in “I Can,” *Philosophical Review*, LXIX (1960), 78-89, has argued that the notion of ability or power involved in these last three statements is incapable of philosophical analysis. Be this as it may, I shall not here attempt such an analysis. In what follows I shall, however, be careful to affirm only those statements about what is (or is not) within one's power that would have to be preserved on any analysis of this notion having even the most distant claim to adequacy.

able to refrain from mowing his lawn, then (the most obvious conclusion would seem to be) at the time of action, Jones was able to do something which would have brought it about that God held a false belief eighty years earlier. But God cannot in anything be mistaken. It is not possible that some belief of His was false. Thus, last Saturday afternoon, Jones was not able to do something which would have brought it about that God held a false belief eighty years ago. To suppose that it would be to suppose that, at the time of action, Jones was able to do something having a conceptually incoherent description, namely something that would have brought it about that one of God's beliefs was false. Hence, given that God believed eighty years ago that Jones would mow his lawn on Saturday, if we are to assign Jones the power on Saturday to refrain from mowing his lawn, this power must not be described as the power to do something that would have rendered one of God's beliefs false. How then should we describe it vis-à-vis God and His belief? So far as I can see, there are only two other alternatives. First, we might try describing it as the power to do something that would have brought it about that God believed otherwise than He did eighty years ago; or, secondly, we might try describing it as the power to do something that would have brought it about that God (Who, by hypothesis, existed eighty years earlier) did not exist eighty years earlier—that is, as the power to do something that would have brought it about that any person who believed eighty years ago that Jones would mow his lawn on Saturday (one of whom was, by hypothesis, God) held a false belief, and thus was not God. But again, neither of these latter can be accepted. Last Saturday afternoon, Jones was not able to do something that would have brought it about that God believed otherwise than He did eighty years ago. Even if we suppose (as was suggested by Calvin) that eighty years ago God knew Jones would mow his lawn on Saturday in the sense that He “saw” Jones mowing his lawn as if this action were occurring before Him, the fact remains that God knew (and thus believed) eighty years prior to Saturday that Jones would mow his lawn. And if God held such a belief eighty years prior to Saturday, Jones did not have the power on Saturday to do something that would have made it the case that

God did not hold this belief eighty years earlier. No action performed at a given time can alter the fact that a given person held a certain belief at a time prior to the time in question. This last seems to be an a priori truth. For similar reasons, the last of the above alternatives must also be rejected. On the assumption that God existed eighty years prior to Saturday, Jones on Saturday was not able to do something that would have brought it about that God did not exist eighty years prior to that time. No action performed at a given time can alter the fact that a certain person existed at a time prior to the time in question. This, too, seems to me to be an a priori truth. But if these observations are correct, then, given that Jones mowed his lawn on Saturday, and given that God exists and is (essentially) omniscient, it seems to follow that at the time of action, Jones did not have the power to refrain from mowing his lawn. The upshot of these reflections would appear to be that Jones's mowing his lawn last Saturday cannot be counted as a voluntary action. Although I do not have an analysis of what it is for an action to be *voluntary*, it seems to me that a situation in which it would be wrong to assign Jones the *ability or power* to do *other* than he did would be a situation in which it would also be wrong to speak of his action as voluntary. As a general remark, if God exists and is (essentially) omniscient in the sense specified above, no human action is voluntary.<sup>9</sup>

As the argument just presented is somewhat complex, perhaps the following schematic representation of it will be of some use.

1. "God existed at  $T_1$ " entails "If Jones did  $X$  at  $T_2$ , God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ ."
2. "God believes  $X$ " entails "' $X$ ' is true."

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<sup>9</sup> In Bk. II, ch xxi, secs. 8-11 of the *Essay*, John Locke says that an agent is not *free* with respect to a given action (i.e., that an action is done "under necessity") when it is not within the agent's power to do otherwise. Locke allows a special kind of case, however, in which an action may be *voluntary* though done under necessity. If a man chooses to do something without knowing that it is not within his power to do otherwise (e.g., if a man chooses to stay in a room without knowing that the room is locked), his action may be voluntary though he is not free to forbear it. If Locke is right in this (and I shall not argue the point one way or the other), replace "voluntary" with (let us say) "free" in the above paragraph and throughout the remainder of this paper.

3. It is not within one's power at a given time to do something having a description that is logically contradictory.
4. It is not within one's power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that someone who held a certain belief at a time prior to the time in question did not hold that belief at the time prior to the time in question.
5. It is not within one's power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that a person who existed at an earlier time did not exist at that earlier time.
6. If God existed at  $T_1$  and if God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , then if it was within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ , then (1) it was within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at  $T_1$ , or (2) it was within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to do something which would have brought it about that God did not hold the belief He held at  $T_1$ , or (3) it was within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to do something that would have brought it about that any person who believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$  (one of whom was, by hypothesis, God) held a false belief and thus was not God—that is, that God (who by hypothesis existed at  $T_1$ ) did not exist at  $T_1$ .
7. Alternative 1 in the consequent of item 6 is false (from 2 and 3).
8. Alternative 2 in the consequent of item 6 is false (from 4).
9. Alternative 3 in the consequent of item 6 is false (from 5).
10. Therefore, if God existed at  $T_1$  and if God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , then it was not within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$  (from 6 through 9).
11. Therefore, if God existed at  $T_1$ , and if Jones did  $X$  at  $T_2$ , it was not within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$  (from 1 and 10).

In this argument, items 1 and 2 make explicit the doctrine of God's (essential) omniscience with which I am working. Items 3, 4, and 5 express what I take to be part of the logic of the concept of ability or power as it applies to human beings. Item 6 is offered



as an analytic truth. If one assigns Jones the power to refrain from doing  $X$  at  $T_2$  (given that God believed at  $T_1$  that he would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ ), so far as I can see, one would have to describe this power in one of the three ways listed in the consequent of item 6. I do not know how to argue that these are the only alternatives, but I have been unable to find another. Item 11, when generalized for all agents and actions, and when taken together with what seems to me to be a minimal condition for the application of “voluntary action,” yields the conclusion that if God exists (and is essentially omniscient in the way I have described) no human action is voluntary.

C. It is important to notice that the argument given in the preceding paragraphs avoids use of two concepts that are often prominent in discussions of determinism.

In the first place, the argument makes no mention of the *causes* of Jones’s action. Say (for example, with St. Thomas)<sup>10</sup> that God’s foreknowledge of Jones’s action was, itself, the cause of the action (though I am really not sure what this means). Say, instead, that natural events or circumstances caused Jones to act. Even say that Jones’s action had no cause at all. The argument outlined above remains unaffected. If eighty years prior to Saturday, God believed that Jones would mow his lawn at that time, it was not within Jones’s power at the time of action to refrain from mowing his lawn. The reasoning that justifies this assertion makes no mention of a causal series preceding Jones’s action.

Secondly, consider the following line of thinking. Suppose Jones mowed his lawn last Saturday. It was then *true* eighty years ago that Jones would mow his lawn at that time. Hence, on Saturday, Jones was not able to refrain from mowing his lawn. To suppose that he was would be to suppose that he was able on Saturday to do something that would have made false a proposition that was *already true* eighty years earlier. This general kind of argument for determinism is usually associated with Leibniz, although it was anticipated in Chapter IX of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*. It has been used since, with some modification,

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<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q. 14, a. 8.

in Richard Taylor's article, "Fatalism."<sup>11</sup> This argument, like the one I have offered above, makes no use of the notion of causation. It turns, instead, on the notion of its being *true eighty years ago* that Jones would mow his lawn on Saturday.

I must confess that I share the misgivings of those contemporary philosophers who have wondered what (if any) sense can be attached to a statement of the form "It was true at  $T_1$  that  $E$  would occur at  $T_2$ ."<sup>12</sup> Does this statement mean that had someone believed, guessed, or asserted at  $T_1$  that  $E$  would occur at  $T_2$ , he would have been right?<sup>13</sup> (I shall have something to say about this form of determinism later in this paper.) Perhaps it means that at  $T_1$  there was sufficient evidence upon which to predict that  $E$  would occur at  $T_2$ .<sup>14</sup> Maybe it means neither of these. Maybe it means nothing at all.<sup>15</sup> The argument presented above presupposes that it makes straightforward sense to suppose that God (or just anyone) held a true belief eighty years prior to Saturday. But this is not to suppose that *what* God believed *was true eighty years prior to Saturday*. Whether (or in what sense) it was true eighty years ago that Jones would mow his lawn on Saturday is a question I shall not discuss. As far as I can see, the argument in which I am interested requires nothing in the way of a decision on this issue.

<sup>11</sup> *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), 56-66. Taylor argues that if an event  $E$  fails to occur at  $T_2$ , then at  $T_1$  it was true that  $E$  would fail to occur at  $T_2$ . Thus, at  $T_1$ , a necessary condition of anyone's performing an action sufficient for the occurrence of  $E$  at  $T_2$  is missing. Thus at  $T_1$ , no one could have the power to perform an action that would be sufficient for the occurrence of  $E$  at  $T_2$ . Hence, no one has the power at  $T_1$  to do something sufficient for the occurrence of an event at  $T_2$  that is not going to happen. The parallel between this argument and the one recited above can be seen very clearly if one reformulates Taylor's argument, pushing back the time at which it was true that  $E$  would not occur at  $T_2$ .

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful discussion of difficulties involved here, see Rogers Albritton's "Present Truth and Future Contingency," a reply to Richard Taylor's "The Problem of Future Contingency," both in the *Philosophical Review*, LXVI (1957), 1-28.

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Ryle interprets it this way. See "It Was To Be," *Dilemmas* (Cambridge, 1954).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Gale suggests this interpretation in "Endorsing Predictions," *Philosophical Review*, LXX (1961), 378-385.

<sup>15</sup> This view is held by John Turk Saunders in "Sea Fight Tomorrow?," *Philosophical Review*, LXVII (1958), 367-378.

II

I now want to consider three comments on the problem of divine foreknowledge which seem to be instructively incorrect.

A. Leibniz analyzed the problem as follows:

They say that what is foreseen cannot fail to exist and they say so truly; but it follows not that what is foreseen is necessary. For necessary truth is that whereof the contrary is impossible or implies a contradiction. Now the truth which states that I shall write tomorrow is not of that nature, it is not necessary. Yet, supposing that God foresees it, it is necessary that it come to pass, that is, the consequence is necessary, namely that it exist, since it has been foreseen; for God is infallible. This is what is termed a *hypothetical necessity*. But our concern is not this necessity; it is an *absolute* necessity that is required, to be able to say that an action is necessary, that it is not contingent, that it is not the effect of free choice.<sup>16</sup>

The statement “God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ ” (where the interval between  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  is, for example, eighty years) does not entail “‘Jones did  $X$  at  $T_2$ ’ is necessary.” Leibniz is surely right about this. All that will follow from the first of these statements concerning “Jones did  $X$  at  $T_2$ ” is that the latter is *true*, not that it is *necessarily true*. But this observation has no real bearing on the issue at hand. The following passage from St. Augustine’s formulation of the problem may help to make this point clear.

Your trouble is this. You wonder how it can be that these two propositions are not contradictory and incompatible, namely that God has foreknowledge of all future events, and that we sin voluntarily and not by necessity. For if, you say, God foreknows that a man will sin, he must necessarily sin. But if there is necessity there is no voluntary choice of sinning, but rather fixed and unavoidable necessity.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Théodicée*, Pt. I, sec. 37. This passage trans. by E. M. Huggard (New Haven, 1952), p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> *De Libero Arbitrio*, Bk. III. This passage trans. by J. H. S. Burleigh, *Augustine’s Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia, 1955).

In this passage, the term “necessity” (or the phrase “by necessity”) is not used to express a modal-logical concept. The term “necessity” is here used in contrast with the term “voluntary,” not (as in Leibniz) in contrast with the term “contingent.” If one’s action is necessary (or by necessity), this is to say that one’s action is not voluntary. Augustine says that if God has foreknowledge of human actions, the actions are necessary. But the form of this conditional is “ $P$  implies  $Q$ ,” not “ $P$  implies  $N(Q)$ .” “ $Q$ ” in the consequent of this conditional is the claim that human actions are not voluntary—that is, that one is not able, or does not have the power, to do other than he does.

Perhaps I can make this point clearer by reformulating the original problem in such a way as to make explicit the modal operators working within it. Let it be *contingently* true that Jones did  $X$  at  $T_2$ . Since God holds a belief about the outcome of each human action well in advance of its performance, it is then *contingently* true that God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . But it follows from this that it is *contingently* true that at  $T_2$  Jones was not able to refrain from doing  $X$ . Had he been (contingently) able to refrain from doing  $X$  at  $T_2$ , then either he was (contingently) able to do something at  $T_2$  that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at  $T_1$ , or he was (contingently) able to do something at  $T_2$  that would have brought it about that God believed otherwise than He did at  $T_1$ , or he was (contingently) able to do something at  $T_2$  that would have brought it about that God did not exist at  $T_1$ . None of these latter is an acceptable alternative.

B. In *Concordia Liberi Arbitrii*, Luis de Molina wrote as follows:

It was not that since He foreknew what would happen from those things which depend on the created will that it would happen; but, on the contrary, it was because such things would happen through the freedom of the will, that He foreknew it; and that He would foreknow the opposite if the opposite was to happen.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> This passage trans. by John Mourant, *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 1954), p. 426.

Remarks similar to this one can be found in a great many traditional and contemporary theological texts. In fact, Molina assures us that the view expressed in this passage has always been “above controversy”—a matter of “common opinion” and “unanimous consent”—not only among the Church fathers, but also, as he says, “among all catholic men.”

One claim made in the above passage seems to me to be truly “above controversy.” With respect to any given action foreknown by God, God would have foreknown the opposite if the opposite was to happen. If we assume the notion of omniscience outlined in the first section of this paper, and if we agree that omniscience is part of the “essence” of God, this statement is a conceptual truth. I doubt if anyone would be inclined to dispute it. Also involved in this passage, however, is at least the suggestion of a doctrine that cannot be taken as an item of “common opinion” among *all* catholic men. Molina says it is not because God foreknows what He foreknows that men act as they do: it is because men act as they do that God foreknows what He foreknows. Some theologians have rejected this claim. It seems to entail that men’s actions determine God’s cognitions. And this latter, I think, has been taken by some theologians to be a violation of the notion of God as self-sufficient and incapable of being affected by events of the natural world.<sup>19</sup> But I shall not develop this point further. Where the view put forward in the above passage seems to me to go wrong in an interesting and important way is in Molina’s claim that God can have foreknowledge of things that will happen “through the freedom of the will.” It is this claim that I here want to examine with care.

What exactly are we saying when we say that God can know in advance what will happen *through the freedom of the will*? I think that what Molina has in mind is this. God can know in advance that a given man is going to *choose* to perform a certain action sometime in the future. With respect to the case of Jones mowing his lawn, God knew at  $T_1$  that Jones would *freely decide* to mow his lawn at  $T_2$ . Not only did God know at  $T_1$  that Jones would mow

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Boethius’ *Consolatio*, Bk. V, sec. 3, par. 2.

his lawn at  $T_2$ . He also knew at  $T_1$  that this action would be performed *freely*. In the words of Emil Brunner, "God knows that which will take place in freedom in the future as something which happens in freedom."<sup>20</sup> What God knew at  $T_1$  is that Jones would *freely* mow his lawn at  $T_2$ .

I think that this doctrine is incoherent. If God knew (and thus believed) at  $T_1$  that Jones would *do X* at  $T_2$ ,<sup>21</sup> I think it follows that Jones was not able to do other than *X* at  $T_2$  (for reasons already given). Thus, if God knew (and thus believed) at  $T_1$  that Jones would *do X* at  $T_2$ , it would follow that Jones did *X* at  $T_2$ , but *not freely*. It does not seem to be possible that God could have believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would freely *do X* at  $T_2$ . If God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would *do X* at  $T_2$ , Jones's action at  $T_2$  was not free; and if God *also* believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would freely act at  $T_2$ , it follows that God held a false belief at  $T_1$ —which is absurd.

C. Frederick Schleiermacher commented on the problem of divine foreknowledge as follows:

In the same way, we estimate the intimacy between two persons by the foreknowledge one has of the actions of the other, without supposing that in either case, the one or the other's freedom is thereby endangered. So even the divine foreknowledge cannot endanger freedom.<sup>22</sup>

St. Augustine made this same point in *De Libero Arbitrio*. He said:

Unless I am mistaken, you would not directly compel the man to sin, though you knew beforehand that he was going to sin. Nor does your prescience in itself compel him to sin even though he was certainly going to sin, as we must assume if you have real prescience. So there is no contradiction here. Simply you know beforehand what another is going to do with his own will. Similarly God compels no man to sin, though he sees beforehand those who are going to sin by their own will.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 262.

<sup>21</sup> Note: no comment here about *freely* doing *X*.

<sup>22</sup> *The Christian Faith*, Pt. I, sec. 2, par. 55. This passage trans. by W. R. Matthews (Edinburgh, 1928), p. 228.

<sup>23</sup> *Loc. cit.*

If we suppose (with Schleiermacher and Augustine) that the case of an intimate friend having foreknowledge of another's action has the same implications for determinism as the case of God's foreknowledge of human actions, I can imagine two positions which might then be taken. First, one might hold (with Schleiermacher and Augustine) that God's foreknowledge of human actions cannot entail determinism—since it is clear that an intimate friend can have foreknowledge of another's voluntary actions. Or, secondly, one might hold that an intimate friend cannot have foreknowledge of another's voluntary actions—since it is clear that God cannot have foreknowledge of such actions. This second position could take either of two forms. One might hold that since an intimate friend *can* have foreknowledge of another's actions, the actions in question cannot be voluntary. Or, alternatively, one might hold that since the other's actions *are* voluntary, the intimate friend cannot have foreknowledge of them.<sup>24</sup> But what I propose to argue in the remaining pages of this paper is that Schleiermacher and Augustine were mistaken in supposing that the case of an intimate friend having foreknowledge of other's actions has the same implications for determinism as the case of God's foreknowledge of human actions. What I want to suggest is that the argument I used above to show that God cannot have foreknowledge of voluntary actions cannot be used to show that an intimate friend cannot have foreknowledge of another's actions. Even if one holds that an intimate friend *can* have foreknowledge of another's voluntary actions, one ought not to think that the case is the same when dealing with the problem of divine foreknowledge.

Let Smith be an ordinary man and an intimate friend of Jones. Now, let us start by supposing that Smith believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . We make no assumption concerning the truth or falsity of Smith's belief, but assume only that Smith held it. Given only this much, there appears to be no difficulty in supposing that at  $T_2$  Jones was able to do  $X$  and that at  $T_2$  Jones was able to do not- $X$ . So far as the above description of the case is con-

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<sup>24</sup> This last seems to be the position defended by Richard Taylor in "Deliberation and Foreknowledge," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I (1964).

cerned, it might well have been within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to do something (namely,  $X$ ) which would have brought it about that Smith held a true belief at  $T_1$ , and it might well have been within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to do something (namely, not- $X$ ) which would have brought it about that Smith held a false belief at  $T_1$ . So much seems apparent.

Now let us suppose that Smith *knew* at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . This is to suppose that Smith correctly believed (with evidence) at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . It follows, to be sure, that Jones *did*  $X$  at  $T_2$ . But now let us inquire about what Jones was *able* to do at  $T_2$ . I submit that there is nothing in the description of this case that requires the conclusion that it was not within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ . By hypothesis, the belief held by Smith at  $T_1$  was true. Thus, by hypothesis, Jones *did*  $X$  at  $T_2$ . But even if we assume that the belief held by Smith at  $T_1$  was *in fact* true, we can add that the belief held by Smith at  $T_1$  *might have* turned out to be false.<sup>25</sup> Thus, even if we say that Jones *in fact* did  $X$  at  $T_2$ , we can add that Jones *might not* have done  $X$  at  $T_2$ —meaning by this that it was within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ . Smith held a true belief which might have turned out to be false, and, correspondingly, Jones performed an action which he was able to refrain from performing. Given that Smith correctly believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , we can still assign Jones the *power* at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ . All we need add is that the power in question is one which Jones *did not exercise*.

These last reflections have no application, however, when dealing with God's foreknowledge. Assume that God (being essentially omniscient) existed at  $T_1$ , and assume that He believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . It follows, again, that Jones *did*  $X$  at  $T_2$ . God's beliefs are true. But now, as above, let us inquire into what Jones was *able* to do at  $T_2$ . We cannot claim now, as in the Smith case, that the belief held by God at  $T_1$  was *in*

<sup>25</sup> The phrase "might have" as it occurs in this sentence does not express mere *logical* possibility. I am not sure how to analyze the notion of possibility involved here, but I think it is roughly the same notion as is involved when we say, "Jones might have been killed in the accident (had it not been for the fact that at the last minute he decided not to go)."



*fact* true but *might have* turned out to be false. No sense of “might have” has application here. It is a conceptual truth that God’s beliefs are true. Thus, we cannot claim, as in the Smith case, that Jones *in fact* acted in accordance with God’s beliefs but had the *ability* to refrain from so doing. The ability to refrain from acting in accordance with one of God’s beliefs would be the ability to do something that would bring it about that one of God’s beliefs was false. And no one could have an ability of this description. Thus, in the case of God’s foreknowledge of Jones’s action at  $T_2$ , if we are to assign Jones the ability at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ , we must understand this ability in some way other than the way we understood it when dealing with Smith’s foreknowledge. In this case, either we must say that it was the ability at  $T_2$  to bring it about that God believed otherwise than He did at  $T_1$ ; or we must say that it was the ability at  $T_2$  to bring it about that any person who believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$  (one of whom was, by hypothesis, God) held a false belief and thus was not God. But, as pointed out earlier, neither of these last alternatives can be accepted.

The important thing to be learned from the study of Smith’s foreknowledge of Jones’s action is that the problem of divine foreknowledge has as one of its pillars the claim that truth is *analytically* connected with God’s *beliefs*. No problem of determinism arises when dealing with human knowledge of future actions. This is because truth is not analytically connected with human belief even when (as in the case of human knowledge) truth is contingently conjoined to belief. If we suppose that Smith knows at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , what we are supposing is that Smith believes at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$  and (as an additional, contingent, fact) that the belief in question is true. Thus having supposed that Smith knows at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , when we turn to a consideration of the situation of  $T_2$  we can infer (1) that Jones *will* do  $X$  at  $T_2$  (since Smith’s belief is true), and (2) that Jones does not have the power at  $T_2$  to do something that would bring it about that Jones did not *believe* as he did at  $T_1$ . But paradoxical though it may seem (and it seems paradoxical only at first sight), Jones can have the power at  $T_2$  to do something that would bring it about that Smith did

not have *knowledge* at  $T_1$ . This is simply to say that Jones can have the *power* at  $T_2$  to do something that would bring it about that the belief held by Smith at  $T_1$  (which was, in fact, true) was (instead) false. We are required only to add that since Smith's belief was in fact true (that is, was knowledge) Jones *did not* (in fact) *exercise* that power. But when we turn to a consideration of God's foreknowledge of Jones's action at  $T_2$  the elbowroom between belief and truth disappears and, with it, the possibility of assigning Jones even the *power* of doing other than he does at  $T_2$ . We begin by supposing that God *knows* at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . As above, this is to suppose that God believes at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , and it is to suppose that this belief is true. But it is *not* an additional, contingent fact that the belief held by God is true. "God believes  $X$ " entails " $X$  is true." Thus, having supposed that God knows (and thus believes) at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , we can infer (1) that Jones *will do*  $X$  at  $T_2$  (since God's belief is true); (2) that Jones does not have the power at  $T_2$  to do something that would bring it about that God did not hold the belief He held at  $T_1$ , and (3) that Jones does not have the power at  $T_2$  to do something that would bring it about that the belief held by God at  $T_1$  was false. This last is what we could *not* infer when truth and belief were only factually connected—as in the case of Smith's knowledge. To be sure, "Smith knows at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ " and "God knows at  $T_1$  that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ " both entail "Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ " ("A knows  $X$ " entails " $X$  is true"). But this similarity between "Smith knows  $X$ " and "God knows  $X$ " is not a point of any special interest in the present discussion. As Schleiermacher and Augustine rightly insisted (and as we discovered in our study of Smith's foreknowledge) the mere fact that someone knows in advance how another will act in the future is not enough to yield a problem of the sort we have been discussing. We begin to get a glimmer of the knot involved in the problem of divine foreknowledge when we shift attention away from the *similarities* between "Smith knows  $X$ " and "God knows  $X$ " (in particular, that they both entail " $X$  is true") and concentrate instead on the logical *differences* which obtain between Smith's knowledge and God's knowledge. We get to the difference which makes the difference when, after

analyzing the notion of knowledge as true belief (supported by evidence) we discover the radically dissimilar relations between truth and belief in the two cases. When truth is only factually connected with belief (as in Smith's knowledge) one can have the power (though, by hypothesis, one will not exercise it) to do something that would make the belief false. But when truth is analytically connected with belief (as in God's belief) no one can have the power to do something which would render the belief false.

To conclude: I have assumed that any statement of the form "*A* knows *X*" entails a statement of the form "*A* believes *X*" as well as a statement of the form "*X* is true." I have then supposed (as an analytic truth) that if a given person is omniscient, that person (1) holds no false beliefs, and (2) holds beliefs about the outcome of human actions in advance of their performance. In addition, I have assumed that the statement "If a given person is God that person is omniscient" is an a priori statement. (This last I have labeled the doctrine of God's essential omniscience.) Given these items (plus some premises concerning what is and what is not within one's power), I have argued that if God exists, it is not within one's power to do other than he does. I have inferred from this that if God exists, no human action is voluntary.

As emphasized earlier, I do not want to claim that the assumptions underpinning the argument are acceptable. In fact, it seems to me that a theologian interested in claiming both that God is omniscient and that men have free will could deny any one (or more) of them. For example, a theologian might deny that a statement of the form "*A* knows *X*" entails a statement of the form "*A* believes *X*" (some contemporary philosophers have denied this) or, alternatively, he might claim that this entailment holds in the case of human knowledge but fails in the case of God's knowledge. This latter would be to claim that when knowledge is attributed to God, the term "knowledge" bears a sense other than the one it has when knowledge is attributed to human beings. Then again, a theologian might object to the analysis of "omniscience" with which I have been working. Although I doubt if any Christian theologian would allow that an omniscient

being could believe something false, he might claim that a given person could be omniscient although he did not hold beliefs about the outcome of human actions *in advance* of their performance. (This latter is the way Boethius escaped the problem.) Still again, a theologian might deny the doctrine of God's essential omniscience. He might admit that if a given person is God that person is omniscient, but he might deny that this statement formulates an a priori truth. This would be to say that although God is omniscient, He is not *essentially* omniscient. So far as I can see, within the conceptual framework of theology employing any one of these adjustments, the problem of divine foreknowledge outlined in this paper could not be formulated. There thus appears to be a rather wide range of alternatives open to the theologian at this point. It would be a mistake to think that commitment to determinism is an unavoidable implication of the Christian concept of divine omniscience.

But having arrived at this understanding, the importance of the preceding deliberations ought not to be overlooked. There is a pitfall in the doctrine of divine omniscience. That knowing involves believing (truly) is surely a tempting philosophical view (witness the many contemporary philosophers who have affirmed it). And the idea that God's attributes (including omniscience) are essentially connected to His nature, together with the idea that an omniscient being would hold no false beliefs and would hold beliefs about the outcome of human actions in advance of their performance, might be taken by some theologians as obvious candidates for inclusion in a finished Christian theology. Yet the theologian must approach these items critically. If they are embraced together, then if one affirms the existence of God, one is committed to the view that no human action is voluntary.

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