

## ON ZIMMERMAN’S ‘THE PROVIDENTIAL USEFULNESS OF “SIMPLE FOREKNOWLEDGE”’\*

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The main argument of Dean Zimmerman’s paper is both forceful and significant. Zimmerman’s argument is significant, at least in part, because it threatens to squeeze out any middle-course between Open Theism and Molinism, a course which Simple Foreknowledge is supposed to navigate.<sup>1</sup> Its forcefulness notwithstanding, I will argue that Simple Foreknowledge can escape Zimmerman’s Squeeze.

Let ‘Simple Foreknowledge’ denote the thesis that God has complete foreknowledge but no middle-knowledge, i.e., no knowledge of subjunctive conditionals of freedom or of any other indeterministic outcomes. The main conclusion for which Zimmerman argues is that Simple Foreknowledge entails a “risky” view of divine providence, a view of providence according to which neither foreknowledge nor middle-knowledge informs God’s decision to create a world with free creatures.

I follow Zimmerman in assuming that Libertarianism is true, complete foreknowledge is compatible with human freedom, and God exists in time. I will put Zimmerman’s argument in terms of God’s decision, D, to create a universe leading up to some initial free creaturely choice(s); here is a bare-bones outline of that argument:

1. If Simple Foreknowledge is true and D is not “risky”, then there is an explanatory circle involving D—perhaps a circle such as God deciding upon D because he knows that he will decide upon D because well...um...he decided upon D.
2. There cannot be an explanatory circle involving D.

Therefore:

3. If Simple Foreknowledge is true, then D is “risky”—and so, a “risky” view of divine providence is true.

I will develop two lines of defense on behalf of Simple Foreknowledge. My first defense questions the acceptability of (1). The explanatory loops in Zimmerman’s paper all seem to involve God’s foreknowledge of decisions he makes. But it is not obvious that a proponent of Simple Foreknowledge is forced to say that God’s foreknowledge of D must inform D, must be among God’s reasons for deciding upon D. Suppose a proponent of Simple Foreknowledge says the following:

God’s deciding upon D could very well have been informed by and so explained (in part) by God’s knowing that Adam will freely tend the Garden of Eden at some future time  $t^*$ . So, if this were so and we ever had the chance to ask God why he made the universe the

way he did, God would answer in part by saying that he knew that Adam was going to freely tend the Garden of Eden at  $t^*$ . Now, God's deciding upon D is distinct from his acting upon D. Let  $t$  be the time at which God acted upon D. Then when  $t$  became present, God acted upon D and did so in part because he knew that Adam will freely tend the Garden of Eden at  $t^*$ . Later, when  $t^*$  became present, Adam freely tended the Garden of Eden, God then knew that Adam is freely tending the Garden of Eden, and that knowledge was explained (in part) by God's having acted upon D at  $t$ .

Now if (1) is true, then the story above must involve an explanatory circle. But pin-pointing the circle is not an easy task. Notice first that God's foreknowledge of D does not figure explicitly in the story above. Someone might try to tease out a circle by noting that the story entails the following claims:

- A. When  $t$  became present, God's acting upon D was explained (in part) by God's knowing that Adam will freely tend the Garden of Eden at  $t^*$ .
- B. When  $t^*$  became present, God's then knowing that Adam is freely tending the Garden of Eden was explained (in part) by God's having acted upon D at  $t$ .

Someone might then maintain that A and B entail C:

- C. When  $t$  became present, God's acting upon D was explained (in part) by God's having acted upon D at  $t$ .

Granting that C involves a problematic explanatory circle, there are at least two ways a proponent of Simple Foreknowledge can resist the entailment from A and B to C. First, it is not clear that 'explained (in part) by' expresses the same explanatory relation in A and B. In B, 'explained (in part) by' appears to express a causal explanatory relation—when  $t^*$  became present, God's having acted upon D at  $t$  was part of the *causal history* of God's knowing that Adam is freely tending the Garden of Eden. But A may not involve causal explanation. In A, 'explained (in part) by' expresses a reasons-for-action explanatory relation and such a relation may be non-causal. There are, after all, non-causal accounts of reasons for actions, e.g., agent-causal accounts and teleological accounts.

The above remarks also call into question whether the priority relation operative in Zimmerman's discussion of stages in God's knowledge adequately models the explanatory relation that a proponent of Simple Foreknowledge says can hold between D and some of God's foreknowledge. After all, a reasons-for-action explanatory relation holds between knowledge and actions, not between different items of knowledge. But then separate items of knowledge are not comparable with respect to reasons-for-action explanatory priority. Put differently, reasons-for-action explanatory priority orders knowledge and actions not separate items of knowledge. Consequently, reasons-for-action explanatory priority is not adequately modeled by the relation of priority in Zimmerman's account of stages.

Here is the second way a proponent of Simple Foreknowledge can block the entailment from A and B to C. Even if there is a univocal sense of 'explained (in part) by' according to which A and B are true, C still does not follow. For if A is true, then the items of explanatory dependence are *God's acting upon D* and *God's knowing that Adam will freely tend the Garden*

of Eden at  $t^*$  and the former was explained by the latter when  $t$  became present. However, if B is true, then the items of explanatory dependence are *God's knowing that Adam is freely tending the Garden of Eden* and *God's having acted upon D at t* and the former was explained by the latter when  $t^*$  became present. And since *God's knowing that Adam will freely tend the Garden of Eden at  $t^*$*  is distinct from *God's knowing that Adam is freely tending the Garden of Eden*, C does not follow from A and B.

The argument above presupposes presentism or, at the very least, that the truth values of some propositions change over time. For instance, the argument assumes that the proposition *that Adam is freely tending the Garden of Eden* has not always been true—that proposition, before  $t^*$  became present, was false. So, it also has not always been true that God knows *that Adam is freely tending the Garden of Eden*. In the present context, presentism seems a safe enough assumption. Not only does Zimmerman accept presentism, but so does Plantinga! Who could object to assuming  $p$  in a volume honoring someone who accepts  $p$ ? However, if you cannot subdue your hostility to presentism, perhaps you can be mollified by noting that this conditional, if true, would still be interesting: If presentism is true, then Simple Foreknowledge is compatible with God's initial creative decision being informed by some of his foreknowledge without entailing nasty explanatory loops. I conclude that a proponent of Simple Foreknowledge can plausibly question the truth of (1). In case this first defense fails, however, I offer the following second defense of Simple Foreknowledge.

Suppose Zimmerman's argument is cogent. How bad would that be for a proponent of Simple Foreknowledge? Not so bad, or so I will argue. Notice that the truth of (3) does not impugn Simple Foreknowledge *per se* but rather only Simple Foreknowledge coupled with a non-“risky” view of divine providence. This is a distinction without a difference only if accepting Simple Foreknowledge is *wholly* unmotivated apart from a non-“risky” view of divine providence. But “Risky” Simple Foreknowledge, as we might call it, is not wholly unmotivated. One way to see this is to note that “Risky” Simple Foreknowledge retains certain advantages over Open Theism. Let me put the following speech in the mouth of an imaginary proponent of Simple Foreknowledge to express some of these advantages:

God, being maximally great, is omniscient and thereby knows every true proposition including true propositions about what creatures will freely do. But given Open Theism either God fails to be omniscient or there are no true propositions about what creatures will freely do.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, if Simple Foreknowledge is true, then God is never surprised or caught off guard by any future event nor is God in any danger of say losing a bet about what will happen in the future. But given Open Theism, God will be surprised by some outcomes and could very well lose bets about what will happen.

Whatever one thinks of the admittedly incomplete reasoning above it would be a harsh critic, I think, who labeled it ‘wholly unmotivated’, and yet the statement does not appeal to a non-“risky” view of providence.

But there's more. For Simple Foreknowledge can be seen to enjoy another even more significant advantage over Open Theism. It will be useful to recall the model of stages in God's knowledge Zimmerman labels ‘Many-Stages Simple Foreknowledge’:

There are many stages in God's knowledge. Stage 1 contains just necessary truths. Stage 2 adds all the contingent facts about creation prior to the introduction of any free

creatures. 1 and 2 are separated by God's decision to create a world with such-and-such initial segment leading up to free creatures. Stage 2 *also* contains God's foreknowledge about what initial free choices are made. After 2, God decides what the world should be like up until their next free choices, which generates Stage 3. And so on. (xxx-xxx)

Suppose *Many-Stages Simple Foreknowledge* is best way to model stages in God's knowledge given Simple Foreknowledge. What is important to note is that at what we might call 'the broadly logical end' of the stages in this model, not only does God have complete foreknowledge but God has also made a *complete* creative decision, i.e., God has made a decision about what creation should be like in detail leading up to the initial free choices faced by his creatures as well as what creation should be like in detail in between those and all other subsequent free choices faced by his creatures. And even though this complete creative decision is at the broadly logical end of the stages in God's knowledge, the decision has always been made by God and so, it has been made long before God acts upon it. That God can make a complete creative decision given Simple Foreknowledge constitutes a significant advantage that Simple Foreknowledge has over Open Theism. Let me explain.

A complete creative decision is a complete detailed plan every element of which God is able to exercise direct control over. Of course, the complete detailed plan does not include God exercising direct control over what a creature freely does, which would be impossible given the assumption of Libertarianism. Nevertheless, God's complete detailed plan does enable him to bring about a creation in which he exercises direct control over much of what will happen with *complete knowledge* of how everything else—i.e. everything over which God does not exercise direct control—is going to unfold. Given these remarks about what a complete creative decision involves, I submit that *if God has made a complete creative decision about how creation should go before acting upon it, then God is able to exercise more control over that creation than he would be able to exercise if he was not able to make a complete creative decision before acting upon it.* As already noted, God can make a complete creative decision before acting upon it given "Risky" Simple Foreknowledge. However, God cannot make a complete creative decision before acting upon it given Open Theism. Hence, Simple Foreknowledge—even of the "risky" variety—allows for God to exercise more control over creation than does Open Theism. This, in turn, implies that the notion of providence in Zimmerman's argument does not adequately categorize views according to what they say about the nature and extent of control that God is able to exercise over creation. For "Risky" Simple Foreknowledge and Open Theism are on a par with respect to Zimmerman's notion of "risky"/non-"risky" providence but they differ with respect to the nature and extent of control God is able to exercise over creation. I conclude that even if Zimmerman's argument is cogent, Simple Foreknowledge remains a live option among competing views of divine foreknowledge and providence.

Shifting gears somewhat, I will close by considering this question: Does my second defense of Simple Foreknowledge result in a squeeze in a different direction by undermining a motivation for Molinism? Someone might offer an affirmative answer to this question as follows:

Perhaps your second defense of Simple Foreknowledge is sound. But if it is, then Molinism loses a primary motivation. For God being able to make a complete creative decision not only gives God more control over creation than he would have given Open Theism, but it also gives God as much control over creation as he could possibly have. In

order to exercise as much control over creation as possible, what more would God need to do than make a complete creative decision? But, as you say, God can make a complete creative decision given Simple Foreknowledge. Molinism, then, is not required for holding as strong a view as possible about the amount of control that God is able to exercise over a creation that includes free creatures; so, Molinism enjoys no advantage over Simple Foreknowledge on that score.

What should we make of this answer? I suspect a molinist will reply by saying that not all complete creative decisions are created equal. For, a molinist will say, the manner in which a complete creative decision is made—or perhaps better, the explanatory structure that a complete creative decision exhibits—is relevant to how much control God is able to exercise over creation when he comes to act upon his complete creative decision. And, a molinist will continue, middle-knowledge is required for God’s complete creative decision to exhibit an explanatory structure that allows for the maximum amount of control that can be exercised over a creation with free creatures. Whether what I suspect the molinist will say is plausible is another matter, one that I cannot address here. However, perhaps these brief concluding remarks suggest that further exploration of the differences between different models of the explanatory structure of God’s complete creative decision is warranted; perhaps such exploration would prove useful for pinpointing the relative strengths and weaknesses of Simple Foreknowledge and Molinism.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hunt, the premiere contemporary defender of Simple Foreknowledge, makes this motivation for pursuing the viability of Simple Foreknowledge quite clear in his “Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge”, *Faith and Philosophy*, 1993, 3: 394-414.

<sup>2</sup> I am assuming here a “classical” account of omniscience. There are open theists who accept non-“classical” accounts of omniscience. See, for instance, Peter van Inwagen’s “What Does an Omniscient Being Know about the Future?”, *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, 2008, 1: 216-230. In my view, it is an advantage of Simple Foreknowledge that it can combine a “classical” account of omniscience with the truth of some propositions about what creatures will freely do.