

T. Ryan Byerly: The mechanics of divine foreknowledge and providence: a time-ordering account

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One major aim of the book is to articulate a view of the mechanics of infallible divine foreknowledge that (i) avoids commitment to causal determinism, (ii) explains how infallible foreknowledge is compatible with human freedom, and (iii) explains how God's divine providence is compatible with human freedom and indeterministic events. The modest epistemic goal is to articulate a view that enjoys a *not very low epistemic status*. But even with such modest goals, I think the view cannot credibly be said to offer (ii) or (iii). In fact, at critical moments when (ii) and (iii) are in question, we find very little detailed discussion.

There is another epistemological goal in the book. It is to show that we are not in an epistemic position to know that causal determinism provides the basis for explaining how God knows the future and so (the author contends) we are not in a position to know that God's infallible foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom (p. 1). But if infallible foreknowledge does not depend on causal determinism, it certainly doesn't follow that the world is safe for human freedom. Infallible foreknowledge itself (quite apart from questions of causal determinism) might entail theological fatalism—as virtually everyone working in the area construes the problem of infallible foreknowledge—and there is not much reason to believe that theological fatalism depends on causal determinism.

In chapter 1, the author develops a version of the foreknowledge argument that is due to Linda Zagzebski (*The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, 1996). It is odd that the author develops the accidental necessity version of the argument rather than the causal necessity version, given the earnest contention that the argument depends on causal determinism. The author formulates the foreknowledge argument as a conditional proof, which generates some concerns about its validity. Conditional proofs

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require that all assumptions be discharged in the concluding conditional. But some highly contested premises in the argument are not discharged at all (for instance, PAP and the Fixity Principle), so conditional proof looks misemployed, and the argument looks invalid.

It is a perhaps a more serious concern that the modal premises in the argument are formulated in terms of logical necessity and logical possibility. It's clear that the argument cannot succeed with such a formulation. Contrary to the author's claims, it is not logically necessary that *all green things are colored* (p. 9). The argument needs to be formulated using metaphysical necessity throughout.

There are other concerns in the argument's formulation that I don't have time to discuss, such as the shift between the necessity of propositions and the necessity of states of affairs, which also renders the argument invalid, and the simple counterexamples to the transfer principle in premise 5 from fallible knowledge (p. 14).

Chapter 2 aims to show that divine infallible foreknowledge precludes human freedom only if foreknowledge requires causal determinism. The discussion begins with an attempt to rule out the incompatibility of God's mental states with human freedom. The author puzzlingly insists,

If the foreknowledge argument is sound, then the existence of divine foreknowledge requires something which explains why alternative possibilities required for free action are unavailable (p. 40).

It's a particularly odd claim given that we have just finished reviewing the relevant explanation. It goes roughly this way: if God infallibly knows at t that Liz sings at t_{100} , then it is accidentally necessary that Liz sings at t_{100} . And if it is accidentally necessary that Liz sings at t_{100} , then Liz does not freely sing at t_{100} . It is God's infallible foreknowledge that does the heavy lifting in undermining human freedom. There is no place in the book where the author bothers to consider whether this is so. There is, in fact, very little discussion of the role of infallible knowledge in this argument. In particular, there is no discussion of the *epistemic impossibility* of Liz failing to sing at t_{100} , given God's infallible knowledge and evidence at t . That is the explanation for why Liz can't do otherwise at t_{100} . But it is not even among the author's candidates for the explanation.

The author seems to take the position that infallible foreknowledge offers no explanation for the absence of human freedom. Rather, it is the source of infallible foreknowledge that is supposed to undermine human freedom. And this is because the best candidate for the source of infallible knowledge is, the author claims, causal determinism (p. 51). It's easy to get distracted by the implications of such a view, which include the fact that God would not have infallible foreknowledge in indeterministic worlds and the fact that the virtue of theological determinism is its independence from causal determinism or causal indeterminism.

But there is no reason to dwell on these implications. The argument for the view that God's infallible knowledge depends on causal determinism is too weak to be of much concern. The author offers an inductive argument for this claim based on the fact that all the foreknowledge we know about is based on knowledge of the past. It seems to go unnoticed that all of the foreknowledge we know about is also *fallible and inductive*. Consider this sort of inductive argument.

- (i) Every instance of foreknowledge we know about has been based on the past, inductive, and fallible.
- (ii) God's foreknowledge is an instance of foreknowledge that is neither inductive nor fallible.

The author concludes that (iii) is true.

- (iii) Therefore, God's foreknowledge is an instance of foreknowledge based on the past that is infallible and deductive.

But it does seem obvious, rather, that we should arrive at (iii'):

- (iii') Therefore, God's foreknowledge is an instance of foreknowledge that is not based on the past.

Compare: if every item ever taken from the bin has been spherical, heavy, and difficult to lift, why think that the cubed and light item taken from the bin must be difficult to lift? No light item we know of has ever been difficult to lift, just as no deductive and infallible foreknowledge we know of has ever been based on the past.

In chapter 3, the author advances a skeptical argument for the position that we are not in a position to know that the inductive argument in chapter 2 is correct. That is, we are not in a position to know that the explanation of God's infallible foreknowledge must appeal to causal determinism. The initial arguments aim to mirror the arguments for skeptical theism against the evidential argument from evil (p. 59). But there are disanalogies that threaten the very point of chapters 2 and 3. The evidential argument from evil states not merely that no reason we know of justifies God in permitting certain evils. The argument states rather that *no reason we can so much as imagine* does so. If there is a reason, it is totally beyond our ken.

But this is certainly not true for divine foreknowledge. It is not as though there is no explanation for how God might know the future that we can so much as imagine. There are plenty we can imagine. There are many that, for all we know, are perfectly accurate. So there is no genuine reason for a skeptical argument here. No one is really tempted to think that God would know the future in the way the rest of us do.

The chapter closes with a discussion of conciliatory stories that offer explanations for how God knows the future without causal determinism. The stories do not presume to be true or worthy of belief. They serve only to mitigate the reasons in favor of the inductive inference in the argument of chapter 2. The conciliatory stories aim to explain how God might foreknow that Liz sings at t_{100} , and Liz freely sings at t_{100} . At one point, the author informs us that his conciliatory stories must give us reason to believe that P (Elizabeth sings a love sonnet at t_{100} /omniscience) is higher than one might expect. But of course that's not what must be shown; God's omniscience does not diminish the probability of that at all. What must be shown, sticking with this little example, is that, given the conciliatory stories, P (Elizabeth *freely* sings a love sonnet at t_{100} /omniscience) is higher than one might expect (p. 67). So, given the conciliatory stories, God's omniscience does not disconfirm (much) the probability that she freely acted.

In chapter 4, we get the author's preferred conciliatory story, the time-ordering account of foreknowledge. According to the author, the time-ordering story is not

unlikely given theism; further, it offers an explanation of how God infallibly knows future contingents, and it is consistent with human freedom and PAP (p. 76).

We are asked to think of times as, effectively, world-stages or cross-sections of possible worlds. But the time-ordering story, as it is stated, is not obviously coherent. A time t is an abstract representation, a near-maximal conjunction of propositions. Think of those propositions as the ones that would be true, were t actualized. We are told that God's role is to order times by the *earlier than* relation. And somehow, simply by ordering times, God makes the conjunctions of propositions true in that order. But the account is puzzling in a number of ways. Primarily, how could the simple ordering of times make the relevant propositions true in any order at all?

Times t and t' are ordered in each possible world, W . The ordering of times in a world does not make t and t' true in that world, and it certainly does not make t and t' true simpliciter. Consider that possible worlds exist necessarily, so W exists right here in the actual world. But the fact that God has ordered the times in W , and that W exists, does not entail that W obtains. And so it does not entail that t or t' is true in any order at all.

To make the times (i.e. conjunctions of propositions) true in W , God must create the objects and actualize the states of affairs (choose the ontology you prefer) in W that make t and t' true there. It is true in t_{100} in W that Liz sings a song just in case God has created Liz in a time or stage of W and strongly actualized the state of affairs in W in which she sings. But to make it true simpliciter that Liz sings in t_{100} , God must actualize W . That is, God must actually create Liz and strongly actualize the state of affairs in which she sings.

But how is this consistent with human freedom and the freedom to do otherwise? Here the author says this.

Suppose that, at time t , S wills to do A . Thus, t includes $\langle S$ wills to do $A \rangle$. Could S have done otherwise? Well, if S 's willing consists in his exercising his will, and if his will is essentially a two-way power, then yes; S could have willed not to do A . In other words $\langle S$ has the power not to do $A \rangle$ is also a conjunct of t . I see no incoherence here. Thus, I conclude that on at least one conception of alternative possibilities which should be attractive to theists, the time-ordering story can satisfy the Alternative Possibilities conditions (p. 117).

Note that there is not so much as a mention of powers in the foreknowledge argument or in any discussion of PAP in the book hitherto. But setting that aside, there are really only two ways to understand this passage. First, perhaps God weakly actualizes the state of affairs of Liz's singing at t_{100} . If God does so, then God creates Liz with a sort of libertarian freedom to sing at t_{100} , but he does not cause her to sing at t_{100} . In this case, Liz does have an alternative to singing at t_{100} . But this account cannot be right. It runs directly counter to what the author claims is needed for infallible foreknowledge. Second, perhaps God strongly actualizes the state of affairs of Liz's singing at t_{100} . This is consistent with the time-ordering account of infallible knowledge. And this account explains how, necessarily, God can actualize a morally perfect world.

What the objection gets right is that, given the time-ordering story, it is possible for God to create a world containing free actions without there being evils (p. 118).

And it also explains how God has stochastic knowledge, knowledge of “indeterministic” events.

Suppose, for instance, that at a time t_0 a radium atom A is in a state which is such that neither its decaying nor its not decaying at a subsequent time is entailed by the total physical facts about it at t_0 together with the physical laws. Suppose in accordance with the theory of providence presented in the previous chapter [sic], that God orders a time t_1 later than t_0 ; and according to t_1 atom A decays. Thus, by ordering t_1 later than t_0 God is able to exercise providence over whether or not A decays (p. 93).

What God does is strongly actualize t_1 after t_0 in world W, and thereby exert providential control over the “indeterministic” occurrences in that world. And what God does (or can do) is to strongly actualize only those states of affairs in which moral agents go right. In this way, he makes true only those times or world-stages in which moral agents always go right. God might even create these moral agents with a constantly finked power to go wrong. But it ought to be evident that he does not create them as free moral agents in any recognizably incompatibilist sense of “free.”

A major aim of the book is to show that the time-ordering story (i) avoids commitment to causal determinism, (ii) explains how infallible foreknowledge is compatible with human freedom, and (iii) explains how God’s divine providence is compatible with human freedom and indeterministic events. But God’s time-ordering, as stated, does not offer an explanation of any of these. And once the time-ordering story is sufficiently spelled out, it’s pretty clear that it does not offer an explanation of either (ii) or (iii).