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What Does God Know? The Problems of Open Theism David P. Hunt

Introduction

Christians have traditionally understood God's omniscience to include complete knowledge of the past, present and future. This understanding is now under fire from a movement known as 'Open Theism' (or 'Openism' for short). Openists hold the classic Arminian position that human beings, despite the damage done by the Fall, are endowed with *genuine* free will (and not just some simulacrum of freedom that's compatible with causal or theological determinism), and they think of God as temporal, dynamic, venturesome, and genuinely responsive to creatures—a view that will also be acceptable to many Arminians, depending on how it is cashed out. Calvinists, of course, will reject both parts of this picture. But what should make Open Theism controversial for Christians of almost every theological stripe, whether Arminian or Calvinist, is the Openists' claim about what supposedly *follows* from this view of man and God: *that God does not have complete knowledge of the future*.

Openists allow that God knows a good deal about the future. What they deny is that He knows so-called "future contingents." A contingent event is one that doesn't have to occur; things could have turned out differently. Open Theists, like other Arminians, believe that the future contains such events. In particular, human agents sometimes choose between alternative courses of action, each of which is genuinely open to the agent. According to Openism, God does not know such choices in advance. In sum, when the future *can* go in more than one way (and it sometimes can), God doesn't know which way it *will* go.

This represents a significant departure from the "Classical Theist" understanding of divine knowledge. While not, in my judgment, *heretical*, it is certainly *heterodox*. It should therefore be subjected to careful scrutiny. There is even some urgency to this task: because Openism's denial of exhaustive foreknowledge is attached to a picture of God that many find appealing, its influence is growing, not only among ordinary believers but also among professional philosophers.¹ The crucial arguments for Open Theism are, in the end, philosophical in nature; identifying and responding to these arguments will therefore occupy much of our attention. But we must also look at the case for (and against) Open Theism from Scripture and theological tradition.

Open Theism and Divine Omniscience

Before beginning this examination, we need to get clearer about what exactly Open Theists are saying about divine foreknowledge. The obvious difficulty is that a God who is ignorant of future contingents knows *less* than a God who isn't so ignorant, making the Openist God appear less impressive and God-like than His more traditional rival. Some Openist efforts to clarify their position on this score are genuinely helpful while others are not. Let's look first at a couple that are not.

Gregory Boyd, a leading defender of Openism, attempts to turn the tables on the critic by claiming that the Openist God actually knows *more* than the God of Classical Theism (hereafter, the “Classical God”). What Boyd thinks the critic overlooks is all the possible ways the contingent future *might* go. Since these possible futures are all but infinite in number, this is a vast trove of knowledge and it’s available to the Openist God.

So far so good. What is puzzling is Boyd’s claim that the Openist God would therefore know *more* than the Classical God. This implies that the Classical God would *not* know these truths. But why suppose this? The future contingents known by the Classical God, being contingent, *can* happen otherwise—it’s just that they *won’t*. Unless Boyd can show why the Classical God would mistakenly regard the contingent future as *non-contingent*, this God must know not only how things *will* turn out but also all the possible ways they *might* have turned out if they hadn’t turned out *that* way.

Boyd also tries to shift attention away from God’s limited knowledge by reconceiving the problem. If God knows less, it’s because there’s less to be known, and there’s less to be known because *that’s the kind of world God chose to create*. God could have created a world in which the future is completely settled in advance and therefore completely knowable; instead, He chose to create a world in which the future is not completely settled and therefore not completely knowable. For this reason Boyd claims that the dispute between Openists and Classical Theists isn’t really about God’s *knowledge* but about the doctrine of *creation*.

But which dispute is Boyd talking about? The dispute over creation is with *Calvinists*. What is the nature of the dispute with traditional Arminians? The latter *agree* with Open Theists that God created a world with future contingents. They have no dispute with Openists over creation; theirs is clearly a dispute over *what God knows*.

With these red herrings out of the way, we can look at some genuine clarifications of the Openist position. *Pace* Boyd, the dispute *is* over God’s knowledge and it’s a dispute in which the Openist God *knows less*. How then do Openists explain their position so that their conception of God doesn’t seem inadequate or impoverished? There are basically three lines that Openists have endorsed on this question.

(1) There are no such truths to be known (Boyd, Sanders). That part of the future that is contingent does not yet have a fixed truth-value, so there is nothing yet there for knowledge to grasp. Failing to know future contingents, like failing to know the prime numbers between 13 and 17, is therefore a virtue in God, not a vice.²

This move preserves divine omniscience. An omniscient being is one who knows all truths. There may be fewer truths for God to know, but He does know *all* of them.

(2) There are such truths, but they are logically unknowable (Hasker, Basinger). Knowledge comes with conditions. A *lucky guess*, for example, may be true, but it can’t be credited to the believer as *knowledge*. The contingent future, because it is not yet fixed one way or the other, cannot be known by anyone, even God—perhaps *especially* by God, since His knowledge must be infallible.³

This move abandons omniscience. If there are truths that God doesn’t know, for whatever reason, then He isn’t omniscient—period. But perhaps this isn’t so serious. After all, if God’s *omnipotence* isn’t compromised by His inability to *do* what is logically impossible, perhaps His *cognitive power* isn’t compromised by His inability to *know* what is logically unknowable.

(3) There are such truths, God can know them, but He freely refrains from doing so, in order to secure the sorts of goods Openists think are at stake (Willard). If tomorrow Jones faces a significant fork in life's road, God *can* foreknow Jones's choice, but doing so would pre-settle the question of which way Jones will go. If it's important to God that this question *not* be pre-settled, because it's important that Jones have both directions genuinely open to him, then God might decline to know Jones's choice until it's made.⁴

This also abandons omniscience, but the parallel with omnipotence might again be invoked to argue that God's greatness is not thereby diminished. God still has unlimited cognitive power; He just chooses not to exercise it. We don't think God is less powerful because he refrains from exercising all the power he possesses, so why think he would be less knowledgeable just because he refrains from knowing all the things he can know?

In sum, Openists give different accounts of *why* God doesn't know future contingents, and this leads them to different conclusions about whether God is omniscient. What all three forms of Openism have in common, however, is that God *learns* things over time that He didn't know earlier: as time progresses, there are (1) more truths to be known, or (2) more truths that are knowable, or (3) more truths that God allows Himself to know. This common Openist view that God's body of knowledge *grows* over time is sometimes referred to as "dynamic omniscience."

What Do the Scriptures Teach?

For readers who assume that Classical Theism is securely grounded in Scripture, it may come as some surprise to learn that Openists regard this as their strong suit. On the one hand, the Bible is filled with passages depicting God as learning things (Gen. 22:12; 2 Chron. 32:31), changing His mind (Ex. 32:14; Num. 23:19; Jer. 18:10, 26:13), reacting with surprise and disappointment (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:10; Is. 5:2; Jer. 3:7), and in other respects behaving in just the ways one would expect if the Openists are right about His lacking exhaustive foreknowledge. On the other hand, passages invoked for Classical Theism often contain less than meets the eye: Isaiah 41:22-23 makes knowledge of the future the "mark of a prophet," but nowhere states that God's disclosures to true prophets include the *contingent* future, while Isaiah 46:9-10, where God "declare[s] the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done," is explicitly about His own future actions, *not* the contingent future. Perhaps the best extended "proof text" for the traditional view is the paean to God's incredible knowledge in Psalm 139, which contains a number of passages that are highly suggestive of exhaustive foreknowledge; still, these aren't sufficiently unambiguous to settle the issue, given all the passages that appear to point straightforwardly in the other direction.

Openists have a theory about why most Christians nevertheless believe that the Scriptures teach exhaustive foreknowledge: (1) Traditional non-Openists start out with an *a priori* criterion of what is worthy of God (*dignum deo*); (2) they then identify verses that are most sympathetic to this *a priori* conception of God, employing them as *control texts* for understanding other Biblical passages; (3) Openist-friendly passages are subjected to an *accommodationist hermeneutics* which assigns them a non-literal sense; (4) the result of this expedient is *strained exegesis*.

I deny that these four points give Open Theists the advantage.

(1) Openists have their own conception of what is *dignum deo*, and they don't hesitate to draw on it when the Scriptures are silent. For example, if the Openists are right that the Bible doesn't clearly teach exhaustive omniscience with respect to the future, it's no less true that it doesn't clearly teach exhaustive omniscience with respect to the *past and present*; yet Openists accept the latter. Why? Presumably because ignorance of any detail of the past and present would not be *dignum deo*.

(2) Classical Theists have control texts in terms of which they can read the Openists' favorite passages; but Openists have their own control texts for reading the Classical Theists' favorite passages. What alternative is there when the Scriptures pull in different directions? The question is not *whether to use control texts*; it's *which* control texts, and *why*.

(3) It would be astonishing if God *didn't* accommodate himself to our condition in the Bible. If this exegesis can be abused, the lesson is not to abuse it. Moreover, the Openists themselves must allow for anthropomorphisms (various Biblical passages attribute to God eyes, ears, mouth, face, hands, arm, backside). Why do they draw the line where they do?

(4) The charge of "strained exegesis" is overblown; moreover, Openists have their own problems with strained exegesis. Since Openists rest so much of their case on their superior exegetical position, let's look at some examples. I'll begin with a couple of Openist-friendly passages that Classical Theists can supposedly evade only through "strained exegesis."

(a) In Isaiah 5:4 we are told that the Lord expected (domesticated) grapes from a vineyard that instead yielded wild grapes. Gregory Boyd cites this as a case in which God didn't know beforehand what would happen. But how exactly does the fact that God *expected* grapes support Boyd's claim? If I tell a group of grade-school boys that I *expect* them to behave, does this show that I *believe* they will behave? Not at all. I may, at the same time as I *expect* them to obey, also believe that they will fall short of my expectations. (I've had experience with this particular group before!) If God expected grapes *in this sense*, his expectation provides no evidence whatsoever that he didn't also foreknow that the vineyard would yield wild grapes instead. To support Boyd's claim, God's expectation of grapes must be a *belief* that the vineyard would yield grapes. But in that case, God not only didn't know what the future held in store; he held a *false belief* about the future. No Open Theist, however, would accept such a conclusion. Open Theists, then, should join Classical Theists in seeking a plausible reading of this passage in which God's expectation of grapes is not construed as a *belief* about the future. But that means the passage is useless as a proof-text for Openism.

(b) John Sanders believes that "conditional prophecies" undermine the doctrine of exhaustive foreknowledge: "How can a conditional promise, say to Saul (1 Sam. 13:13), be genuine if God already foreknows the human response and so foreknows that God will, in fact, never fulfill his promise?"⁵ What exactly is the problem here? Suppose it's true that if a certain nation does evil, God will destroy it, and if it turns from evil, God will spare it (Jer. 18:7-10). Suppose further, as Classical Theists suppose, that God already knows what He will do, and that what He knows is that He will destroy it. Sanders doesn't see how God could reveal the second conditional (that if it turns from evil, God will spare it) while knowing this unconditional truth about the future (that He will *not* spare it, but will in fact destroy it). But why? These are both *truths*, so God

wouldn't be lying. Sanders thinks it would nevertheless be *disingenuous*: it's only if God does not know what will actually ensue that He can be "sincere when uttering conditional statements." But I'm not sure why. The destruction of this nation is a bad result; God wants it to be spared (and so should we). Then it's important that we know: if you repent, I spare! if you don't repent, I destroy! This is *motivating* knowledge. And why not *also* reveal that destruction, rather than mercy, is what will in fact occur? Here's a reason. Since we are prone to fatalistic fallacies, we are strongly tempted to reason like this: it's no use trying to turn from our evil (thereby securing mercy rather than destruction), since destruction (alas!) is what *will* occur. That's *unmotivating* knowledge for irrational (fatalist-susceptible) creatures like ourselves, and God wisely declines to reveal it.

Let's now look at a couple of Classical Theist-friendly passages and the Openist response to them.

(c) The night following Jesus' betrayal, Peter came to three forks in the road at which he could either avow or deny his affiliation with Christ, and each time he took the road of denial. Jesus' prediction earlier that evening that Peter would deny him three times is therefore a *prima facie* example of divine foreknowledge of future contingents. What resources can Openists bring to bear on this and similar examples?⁶ In the first place, it might be a *disguised conditional*: if you don't straighten up, Peter, this is how it will play out (exactly three times!). Secondly, Christ might not have been expressing a definite belief about the future but only an assessment of the *probabilities* of the predicted event occurring, given His knowledge of the past and present. Or thirdly, Jesus might have known that God intended to *ensure* that things turn out this way, so that (as Boyd speculates) "three times Peter's true character was squeezed out of him."⁷ Besides the individual problems to which each of these is prone, there's the overarching problem that none of these is even remotely a "straightforward" reading of the texts rather than a wholly speculative account driven simply by the requirements of the Openist position on foreknowledge.

(d) In John 18:4 we read, "Then Jesus came forward and asked them, 'Whom are you looking for?'" This is just the sort of passage which Openists cite on behalf of their position. If Jesus knew whom they were seeking, he wouldn't have asked; since he did ask, he didn't know. Anyone whose Christology requires that Jesus already knew the answer will have to engage in "strained exegesis" to explain how he could ask such a question without being disingenuous. For example, they might claim that Christ is not asking the question *for His own sake* (e.g., to find out something of which He's ignorant), but *for their sake*—it's an accommodation to the mob's ignorance of the fact that He already knows, rather than a reflection of His own ignorance.

Is it possible to determine whether such charges of "strained exegesis" are just, and to do so in a neutral way, without a prior commitment to one side or the other? I believe that it is. Discerning readers may have noticed that this was supposed to be an example of a Classical Theist-friendly text; even more discerning readers may have noticed that I misquoted the text. It actually reads: "Then Jesus, *knowing all that was to happen to him*, came forward and asked them, 'Whom are you looking for?'" So Jesus did the very thing that Openists would ordinarily regard as demonstrating His ignorance, while in fact "knowing all!" If this doesn't settle the case definitively in Classical

Theism's favor, it at least shows that the Scriptures themselves approve of the very exegesis that Openists label "strained."

Who's got the Bible on their side is a big topic which can hardly be settled from just four texts. I believe, however, that the lessons just learned from these texts would be borne out by other texts we could have examined with sufficient time. Classical Theists should admit that there are passages whose straightforward reading favors Open Theism. But that's as far as the concessions should go. The alternative Classical reading of these texts is *not* strained, and it's the Openist reading of certain *other* texts that *is* truly strained. When all the Scriptural data are taken into account, the Openists' charge of "strained exegesis" bounces back on them.

What about the Tradition?

Before getting to the philosophical debate, I want to comment briefly on another touchstone: the theological tradition. Not all readers can be expected to care, or care to the same degree, about what the tradition has to say on the matter. I find that I do care; certainly the Openists care.

The Tradition is important to Openists in two respects. In the first place, Openists need to explain the tradition's endorsement of exhaustive foreknowledge, despite what they take to be the plain teaching of Scripture. They do this by alleging that the tradition was corrupted by pagan thought. Openists therefore look to the tradition for evidence of this corruption. In the second place (and running somewhat at cross-purposes with the first point), Openists hope to uncover early Openist voices—a "pilgrim church" of Open Theists who remained faithful to Biblical Openism. If successful, this move might dampen criticism that Openism is a theological innovation.⁸

Regarding the first point, it is beyond dispute that the Fathers were, to varying degrees, *influenced* by the pagan philosophical heritage. (For anyone who doubts this, I suggest reading a few treatises from Plotinus's *Enneads*, followed by Augustine's *Confessions*.) Whether this influence amounts to corruption depends on whether, owing to this influence, the Church Fathers reached the *wrong conclusions*. This point, then, depends on the success of the Openists' Scriptural arguments (which we've already covered) and philosophical arguments (which we'll come to next).

As for the second point, the effort to identify a "pilgrim church" of Openists is embarrassingly short on results. Exhibit A in the Openist case is Chalcidius, who wrote that God "knows necessary truths necessarily and future contingent truths contingently." A number of comments are in order here.

(1) *That's it*: there is no Exhibit B (at least until the 19th century). There are many early figures who qualify as proto-Arminians, but none who rejects exhaustive foreknowledge.

(2) Chalcidius, c. 400, is a rather late witness to Open Theism: much too late to represent an early, uncorrupted, pre-heretical church. (Think how many heresies emerged to confuse believers during the first four centuries.)

(3) We just don't know very much about him; though probably a Christian, even this isn't certain.

(4) Interpreting Chalcidius as a proto-Openist may also involve wishful exegesis: it's not at all clear that the phrase quoted above means what the Openists want it to mean. Any Arminian, believing that God has knowledge of future contingents, should agree that

God has this knowledge contingently. If the foreknown event is contingent, it might not have been true; if it might not have been true, God might not have known it; and if God might not have known it, the fact that he *does* know it is a *contingent* fact.

(5) The strangest thing about the Openist love-affair with Chalcidius is that he's supposed to be someone who—unlike such theological giants as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and so on—had the discernment to resist the corrupting effects of pagan philosophy. This is strange because the little we know about Chalcidius implicates him thoroughly in pagan philosophy. Chalcidius was a Platonist; he translated Plato's *Timaeus* and wrote a treatise engaging Stoic arguments on fate. If the Fathers were touched by Platonism, this alleged Openist was thoroughly implicated in it! Exhibit A is a bust.

Conclusion: The Tradition goes decisively against Open Theism. Openists should frankly acknowledge that their position on divine foreknowledge is a theological innovation, and focus on arguing that it's an innovation whose time has come.

Four (Bad) Philosophical Arguments for Open Theism

While the tradition is hardly sacrosanct, one should at least have *good reasons* for departing from it. I have argued that Scripture does *not* provide good reasons for departing from the traditional doctrine of divine foreknowledge. At the same time, I don't believe that the Scriptures alone absolutely require the classical position. If there were strong non-scriptural reasons for rejecting Classical Theism—say, if Classical Theism just *didn't make sense*—then I don't believe there would be insuperable obstacles to reading the Scriptures as Openists propose. I do think that the case for Openism comes down to reasons for thinking that Classical Theism, in one way or another, just doesn't make sense; that is, it comes down to *philosophical* objections to Classical Theism. There are four that are particularly important.⁹ I cannot hope to do justice to all four in this brief chapter, but I can perhaps say enough about each to persuade the reader that the traditional Christian commitment to exhaustive divine foreknowledge is not in serious jeopardy.

1. God Can't Know the Contingent Future Because It's Not Yet True

Statements about future contingent events aren't true until the events occur; since the occurrence of these events isn't *true* in advance, God can't *know* them in advance.

This reason for embracing Openism flies in the face of both logic and common usage. Let's begin with logic. Either I will call my mother tomorrow, or I won't call my mother tomorrow. One or the other of these statements about the future must be true. The principle that either a given statement or its denial is true is called the "Law of Excluded Middle." But this first brief on behalf of Openism requires that this law be abrogated. That's a heavy cost, and the vast majority of logicians would decline to pay it.

Ordinary usage and common sense also reject it. We make claims about the contingent future all the time, and we assume that such claims are sometimes true. Consider the following:

- (1) This coin will land heads on the next toss.
- (2) My wife will vote for candidate X in tomorrow's election.
- (3) The U.S. will elect its first female president in 2016.

The Openist may object to taking such claims at face value, on the grounds that the future is *not yet real* and that claims about it are therefore *not yet true*. But this objection would

be received with bemusement by anyone engaged in the actual practice of making claims about the future. If I bet that this coin will land heads and it does land heads, then *I was right*; you can't take my money on the grounds that there are no true future contingents, I bet on one, and so *I was wrong*.

This attempt to renege on a bet, like the Openists' denial of truth-values to future contingents, rests on a misunderstanding of what future-tense statements are all about. This misunderstanding is perhaps best exposed by comparing the future tense with the past tense. If statements about the future are not yet true because the future is *not yet real*, then statements about the past should be no longer true because the past is *no longer real*. But that's nonsense. Consider the following:

(4) Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C.

(5) In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

(6) Yesterday I promised my wife I'd wash the car.

These statements are true in virtue of what happened in 44 B.C., 1492 A.D., and yesterday; none is true in virtue of anything that is happening now (if Caesar were being assassinated now, then he *wasn't* assassinated in 44 B.C.). Yet each of these is true *now*. (Imagine trying to get out of washing the car on the grounds that (6), because it's past, is no longer true!) These statements are *about* the past (not the present), but are being *made* now. That's the nature of statements about the past. Likewise, supposing that my wife does vote for candidate X tomorrow, it is *now true* that she will vote for X tomorrow. This obviously does not mean that she is now voting for X—the polls haven't opened yet! This statement is *about* the future (not the present), but it is being made *now*. That's the nature of statements about the future.¹⁰

There is one important difference between statements about the past and statements about the future. The contingent future can only rarely be *known* by human beings, and even when it can be known (as I might know whom my wife will vote for tomorrow), it cannot be known with certainty. But this is simply irrelevant to the question whether there are future-contingent *truths*. “This coin will land heads on the next toss” is true just in case that's what happens; its truth does not depend in any way on whether anyone can also *know* this truth in advance. If God can't know these truths, it must be for some reason *other* than the absence of any truths there to be known. But what could that reason be, given that God is unexcellably great?

2. God Can't Know the Contingent Future Because Then It Wouldn't Be *Contingent*

A contingent event is one that can go either way; but if God already knows which way it will go, it *can't* go the other way, because *God can't be mistaken*. So this foreknown event is not contingent after all; nor can any infallibly foreknown event be contingent. Consider my wife's vote tomorrow. God knew before she was even born whether (and if so, how) she would vote. When tomorrow arrives, can she do anything other than exactly what God has always believed she would do? Of course not. But then she's not free in what she does.

Entire books have been written about this problem and I don't think that anything I could say within the space available to me here would be adequate. I will therefore restrict myself to two *inadequate* points—inadequate in that they don't pretend to show *what* is wrong with this argument, only *that* there is something wrong with it.

In the first place, readers should know that the vast majority of Christian philosophers, past and present, have rejected this argument. Openists are in a minority

here. That doesn't mean they're wrong—the truth isn't determined by majority vote—but it does mean that readers ill-equipped to follow the abstruse twists and turns of the philosophical debate shouldn't endorse the Openist position just because an Openist apologist claims that it's a good argument.

There is no consensus, among the majority who reject the argument, over the exact point at which the argument goes wrong. I have my own favorite response to the argument, which follows Augustine's analysis of the problem in his *On Free Choice of the Will*.¹¹ But discussion of the argument over the centuries has turned up *many* different points at which it can be challenged. Defenders of traditional foreknowledge can regard this as an embarrassment of riches. What are the chances that *all* of these challenges are mistaken? A further point concerns the historical figures most closely associated with these various critiques. They include Aristotle, Augustine, Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Jonathan Edwards. What is interesting about this list is that all of these figures are Christians, except Aristotle. And which step does Aristotle reject? The very step that most Openists reject: that there are future-contingent truths. This is at least ironic, given the Openist charge that Classical Theists are the ones corrupted by pagan philosophy!

The second reason I think readers should distrust this argument as a ground for Open Theism has to do with the fact that we are sometimes justified in thinking that a position is mistaken even when we don't know *how*. An example is Zeno's paradoxes. One of the more famous of these is a "proof" that Achilles cannot win a footrace against a tortoise if the tortoise is given a head start, no matter how small. We *know* that this can't be right—we see faster things passing slower things all the time—but Zeno gives a clever argument for his conclusion, and it's actually quite hard to refute. In the face of this argument, one is perfectly within one's rights in saying: "I know that argument is mistaken even though I don't see *how*."

I believe that the argument that God's knowledge of the future would render the future non-contingent is another case of this sort. Here's why. Take an action that satisfies to the highest degree *your* favorite criteria for free action, whatever they may be. If *anything* is a free action, *that* is. Now *add* an infallible foreknower to the scenario. How can the introduction of this foreknower, just by itself, change the status of the action so that it is no longer free? There are conditions that clearly *would* warrant such a reassessment—for example, if it were added that the agent was acting under post-hypnotic suggestion, or was being controlled like a marionette by tiny invisible wires. But the idea that the mere presence of an infallible foreknower could make this kind of difference is utterly implausible. Readers therefore have good reason to be confident that this argument goes wrong, even if they're unable to determine exactly *where* it goes wrong.¹²

3. Even If God Knew the Future, Such Knowledge Could Not *Help* Him

Many supporters of traditional foreknowledge may fear that abandoning this doctrine would disable God in some way, depriving Him of a crucial providential resource. Openists hold that this fear is baseless. "The doctrine of divine foreknowledge . . . is of no importance whatever for the religiously significant concerns about prayer, providence, and prophecy," William Hasker writes.¹³ "If simple foreknowledge [of future contingents] did exist, it would be useless."¹⁴ There is therefore no real theological cost to giving up the traditional doctrine.

Note that there would still be one significant theological advantage to exhaustive foreknowledge, even if Hasker and other Openists are right about its uselessness: it would make God *smarter*, and thus *greater*, than if He lacked it. But leave this to one side. If God already knows what's going to happen, how can He *use* that knowledge to enhance His providential oversight? He couldn't use it to *change* the future, because the future would then be different than He "knew" it would be—and that's clearly impossible. So what good is it to know the future? Wouldn't such knowledge turn God into a passive spectator of events rather than an active agent?

To refute a universal claim, it is enough to provide a single counterinstance. Suppose then that a warrant will be issued next week for the arrest of an underground church leader. The Classical God knows about this decision by the authorities well in advance; the Openist God does not. It's also clear that this gives the Classical God an *advantage*. This fact can be obscured if one looks for this advantage to God's ability to prevent the authorities from issuing the warrant in the first place. God can, of course, prevent the issuance of the warrant; but then His foreknowledge would not have included its issuance! Given that He foresaw the warrant being issued, He can't *use that* knowledge to bring it about that the warrant *isn't* issued. What He *can* do, however, is just what *you* would do if you knew about the arrest order in advance and wanted to help the underground church leader: He can warn him. And this is something that the Openist God, who lacks knowledge of future contingents, cannot do.

There are a number of questions that can be raised about this case. For example, mightn't God's intervention and the church leader's response to it, coming before the foreknown event, *interfere* with it in some way? Answer: Whether or not it can, it *won't*. Since what God foreknows is what *will in fact* happen and is consequently the result of everything leading up to it, if God's warning to the underground leader results in his taking action that leads the authorities to act sooner, then their acting sooner is precisely what God foresaw in the first place. It remains the case that whatever God foresaw happening (and what He foresaw is what *will in fact* happen, given everything leading up to it), He can use that knowledge in ways not available to the Openist God.

This is all I can do with the short space available. But I trust this is enough to convince the reader that the prospects for the providential usefulness of divine foreknowledge are more promising than they may have appeared.¹⁵

4. If God Knew the Future, the Problem of Evil Would Be Harder To Resolve

The problem of evil is tough enough as it is; we shouldn't take theological positions that make it even tougher. But that's just what the traditional doctrine of exhaustive foreknowledge does. It's harder to explain and justify evils God knows about *in advance*. John Sanders, for example, speaks movingly of the death of his brother in an auto accident, and the false comfort of Christians who assured him that it was all part of God's providential plan. By denying divine foreknowledge, one can avoid making this problem even harder than it has to be.

There are a number of things wrong with this move, in my estimation. For one thing, if this were an acceptable way to address the problem of evil, why stop with foreknowledge? Why not reduce God's power and goodness as well? Replace Jehovah with Zeus and the problem of evil might disappear altogether.

More importantly, I don't believe that the problem of evil is made any easier by denying traditional foreknowledge. (It's an easier problem for Zeus, but that's for

reasons other than Zeus's lack of exhaustive foreknowledge!) Many of the concrete cases that try believers' faith, like the death of Sanders' brother or the cancer death of my one-year-old nephew, are not explained by denying divine foreknowledge. The Openist God, omniscient with respect to the past and present, had more than enough knowledge to save my nephew, but He didn't do so. Foreknowledge plays no role in generating this puzzle, and adding foreknowledge does not make the puzzle harder.

Why did God allow my nephew, or Sanders' brother, to die? I just don't know, and I don't know anyone who does. Since I don't know what the reason is, I'm in no position to say that it's a reason that would be available on the assumption that God lacks exhaustive foreknowledge but *unavailable* on the assumption that God's omniscience encompasses future contingents. No Open Theist, to my knowledge, has even begun the task of showing this. Solving the problem of evil for the God of Open Theism is already so difficult that any solution, supposing one to exist, might turn out to be adequate for the God of Classical Theism as well—in which case evil would provide no ground for preferring the former over the latter.

Conclusion

I conclude that there is no good reason for Christians to embrace Open Theism. The Openists' claim to a clear-cut exegetical advantage is a chimera. Openism *is* an innovation, ungrounded in the tradition. And the philosophical arguments that are supposed to give Open Theism a logical edge over Classical Theism are highly dubious.

¹ The movement's manifesto, which brought it to the attention of the larger Christian community, is *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), co-written by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. Controversy has dogged the movement ever since. In 1999 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution against Open Theism, and in 2001, at its annual meeting, the Evangelical Theological Society did the same; two years later a move to expel two of its members for advocating Open Theism narrowly failed. A measure of its growing support in philosophical circles is the Open Theism and Science Conference hosted by Azusa Pacific University in April 2008.

² This is at least implicit in Gregory Boyd's contribution to *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby & Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); it is explicit in Alan R. Rhoda, Gregory A. Boyd, and Thomas G. Belt, "Open Theism, Omniscience, and the Nature of the Future," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (October 2006), pp. 432-459. This position also seems to fit best with the various things John Sanders says—e.g., in *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), ch. 6.

³ William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chapter 10; David Basinger, "Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God's Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?" *Christian Scholar's Review* 25 (1995), pp. 133-45.

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), pp. 244-253.

⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 133.

⁶ The three resources that follow are the ones Sanders summarizes on pp. 138-39 of *The God Who Risks*.

⁷ *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, p. 21.

⁸ Both sorts of interest in the tradition are on display in Sanders' contribution to *The Openness of God* and in chapter 5 of his *The God Who Risks*.

⁹ Actually there are five, by my count, that are particularly important, but space considerations compelled me to drop the one that is least prominent in Openist literature. The essence of the objection is this: the

more of the future one knows, the less of the future is open to one's agency ("one cannot deliberate over what one already knows is going to happen"); this is no less true of God than of human agents; but then maximal foreknowledge would render God maximally impotent. For more on this objection and my own suggestion for how to handle it, see pp. 91-96 of my contribution to *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*.

¹⁰ For a clear discussion of why truth should not be denied to future contingents, see William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God*, ch. 4.

¹¹ Augustine's analysis appears in Book III, chapter 4. I argue on behalf of Augustine's solution in my "On Augustine's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (January 1999), pp. 1-26.

¹² Readers interested in pursuing this objection further and thinking hard about some of the argument's premises, while avoiding the technicalities of an article or book written for an audience of professional philosophers, may find what they are looking for in my contribution to *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, especially pp. 72-91.

¹³ *God, Time and Knowledge*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 104.

¹⁵ I go into these matters in more detail in my "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (July 1993), pp. 396-416, and in my contribution to *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, pp. 96-101.