

## God's omniscience and free human beings<sup>1</sup>

Can God know what we will do in the future? On a traditional Christian conception of God, God is the most perfect possible being. This is thought to include perfect knowledge - omniscience. The most obvious definition of omniscience is 'knowing everything' (Latin *omni*-, 'all'; *scient*, 'knowing'). But we need to remember that God is the most perfect *possible* being, and perhaps it is *impossible* to know everything. That then raises the question of whether, if human beings have free will, God knows what we will do in the future. In this handout, we discuss the tension between God's omniscience and our free will.

### THE PROBLEM

If God is eternal, existing outside time, the answer would seem to be 'yes, God knows what we will do in the future'. Being outside time, God's knowledge of all events is 'simultaneous'. Past, present and future are all the same to God. God knows what happens in that period of time which we call 'future', just as he knows what has happened in the past. We can argue that this is part of what it is for God to be omniscient.

But then if God knows what we will do in the future, are our actions free?

- P1. For me to do an action freely, I must be able to do it or refrain from doing it.
- P2. If God knows what I will do before I do it, then it must be true that I will do that action.
- C1. Therefore, it cannot be true that God knows what I will do before I do it and be true that I don't do that action.
- P3. If it is true that I will do that action, then nothing I can do can prevent it from coming true in the future that I am doing that action.
- C2. Therefore, if God knows what I will do before I do it, then I cannot refrain from doing that action in the future.
- C3. Therefore, if God knows what I will do before I do it, then that action is not free.

The argument does not claim that we aren't free. It claims that if God knows what we will do before we do it, then we aren't free. If God is omniscient, then the antecedent is true - God does know what we will do before we do it. In that case, the argument claims, the consequent follows - we aren't free.

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 48-54

We can also argue the other way around. If we are free, then this argument entails that God does not know what we will do before we do it. So there is something God does not know, and so God is not omniscient.

We could simply conclude that God is omniscient and we are not free. However, freedom - free will - is a great good that allows us to do good or evil and to enter willingly into a relationship with God or not. Without free will, we couldn't choose how to live or what kind of person to be, so our lives would not be meaningful or morally significant. As supremely good, God would want our lives to be morally significant and meaningful, so he would wish us to have free will. If we are not free, God is not supremely good.

Now it seems we have a dilemma concerning our concept of God. We are either free or we are not. If we are free, then God is not omniscient. If we are not free, then God is not good. So either God is omniscient or God is good, but not both. To avoid this conclusion, it seems that we need to understand how God's omniscience could be compatible with human free will. But is this possible?

### **THREE SOLUTIONS**

#### God is everlasting

One solution is to argue that God is not eternal, but everlasting. We can then argue that it is impossible, even for God, to know the future, because of the existence of free will. And so God's not knowing what we will do before we do it is not a restriction on God's knowledge, since omniscience only involves knowing what it is possible to know. God still knows everything it is possible to know at any given time.

This reply accepts the argument above, but claims that the argument does not show that God isn't omniscient. The solution makes God's omniscience compatible with human free will, but we can question, first, whether this is a satisfactory view of omniscience, and second, whether it is a satisfactory view of the relationship between God and time.

#### Compatibilism

A second solution is to argue that God knows what we will do before we do it, but this does not mean that we aren't free. (P2) is ambiguous. By definition, no one can know what is false, so it must be true that if God knows that I will do some action, then I will do that action. (The conditional is necessarily true.) However, while it is true that I will do that action, this doesn't mean that it must be true that I do that action. (The consequent is not necessarily true.) We can know lots of contingent truths, e.g. that Paris is the capital of France. Just because this is true doesn't mean that it must be true - the capital of France could have been some other city.

Likewise, just because I will do some action in the future doesn't mean that I must do that action. I won't refrain from doing it, but that doesn't mean that I can't refrain from doing it. So for God to know what I will do in the future, it only needs to be the case that I don't do something else. It doesn't mean that I can't. So God

can know what I will do, and I can still do what I do freely. So God's omniscience is compatible with free human beings.

We may object that this doesn't solve the problem. If I can refrain from doing what God knows I will do, then I can change what God knows (even if I don't). But, it seems, God already knows what I will do. So changing what God knows I will do means changing the past. And that's not something I can do. (Alternatively, if I can refrain from doing what God knows I will do, I can make God's belief false, and so not knowledge at all. But this means that I can make God not omniscient. And that's not something I can do.)

We can press the objection by asking how it is that God knows what I will do. Start by thinking about how we know what each other will do. For instance, perhaps you can accurately predict that a friend of yours will help this old lady across the street, because he is a kind person, in a good mood, and has just said that this is what he will do. In this instance, your belief is not only true, but justified as well, so we are happy to say that you know what your friend will do. Or again, if your beliefs about what your friend does are generally reliable, then you know what he will do. Clearly, simply having a true belief that someone will do something doesn't mean that they are not free.

But we cannot suppose that God's knowledge of what I will do is like this. Because God is omniscient, his beliefs are not merely reliable, but complete and infallible. How can there be complete and infallible knowledge of what someone will choose to do if that choice is not already determined in some way? The justifications we offered above, e.g. knowing someone's character, might give you knowledge of the general shape of their choices and actions, but not every minute detail. And it certainly won't be enough for knowledge of what they will be doing in the distant future. If God knows now what I will be doing on 23 May 2026, this can't simply be because he knows my character well! For a start, God must know whether I will be alive then, and he could only know that if the future is fixed in some way. But if the future is fixed, can we act freely?

### Understanding eternity

Our third solution argues that the discussion so far has misunderstood what it is for God to be eternal. Once we understand this correctly, and we understand the implications for what it means to say that God knows what we will do, we will see that God's omniscience is compatible with human freedom. The rest of this handout follows the handout 'God and eternity'. You will need to read that handout first.

In their discussion of the nature of God's existence as eternal, Stump and Kretzmann also discuss a number of implications of their view. One of those concerns God's omniscience and human free will.

Because God's existence is atemporal, all of God's life, including all events in time, is 'present' to God, part of the eternal 'now'. Every moment in time is 'ET-simultaneous' with God, i.e. every moment in time is experienced as temporally present and simultaneous with God's eternal present. This means that some event in the future to us is present to God. This isn't to say that the future 'pre-exists',

as though the future was now in time, but simply that God is ET-simultaneous with both today and any date in our future. Both days are present to an eternal being, but in the sense of the eternal present, not the temporal present. God is atemporally aware of both 'at once'.

If we don't understand this correctly, then it can appear to lead to contradictions. For instance, take a future date after my death. God knows that I am 'now' alive and that I am 'now' dead. But how can I be both at once?? The answer is that 'now' and 'at once' are ambiguous, between the temporal now and the eternal now. I am alive in the temporal present, but will be dead in the temporal future. So I am not both alive and dead in time. But nor am I both alive and dead in the eternal present. As a temporal being, I am only alive and dead in time. I am not a being that exists in the eternal present. However, both my life and my death are ET-simultaneous with the eternal present.

About God's knowledge, we should say this: God knows future events because all temporal events are present to God. But what this means is not that God knows now (in time) what will happen in the future. God's knowledge is not in time. God can't know anything 'now' in the temporal sense. God's knowledge is in the eternal, atemporal now. So God cannot foresee future events, i.e. God does not know about events in time before they happen. There is no 'before' for God. God's knowledge of events in time is ET-simultaneous with when they happen. In other words, God only ever knows what is happening as it is happening. God is aware of all events in time in the (eternal) present.

Once we understand this, we can see that (P2) contains a confusion. In talking about God knowing what we will do before we do it, it supposes God's knowledge is in time. But God can't know what we will do before we do it, since God's knowledge is not 'before' anything. God's omniscience consists in God knowing what we do, but God knows this ET-simultaneously with our doing it.

This doesn't cause any obvious difficulty for human free will. We and other people know what we are doing when we are doing it - our knowledge is T-simultaneous with our actions. But this doesn't stop those actions being free. The same can be said of God's knowledge of what we do.