

(Divine) Foreknowledge and (human) freedom

Introduction

At the last meeting the issue came up of whether someone could be blameworthy if God had foreknowledge of what they would do.

This brings up a knot of issues about God's foreknowledge, God's sovereignty, God's relationship to time and our understanding of free will. All of this also impacts on wider questions such as how various forms of Christianity are able to respond to the problem of evil.

I'm going to look at the philosophical issues here not at which position is most consistent with the bible.

First of all it's worth distinguishing two distinct philosophical views of free will:

- 1) Voluntarism – that free will simply means being able to act freely in accordance with our will, desires and preferences regardless of whether our will, preferences and desires are themselves determined by prior causes. This is the view of free will supported by compatibilists (i.e. people who think free will is compatible with a deterministic universe)
- 2) Libertarian Free will – that free will involves the ability to genuinely choose between options in way that is not determined by prior factors but rather involves a capacity for self-determination.

One of the theological problems that theists have grappled with is how human free will can fit into a picture of the world in which God is sovereign.

God's **sovereignty** is about the extent to which God exerts control over everything that happens in creation. His right to exercise his ruling power and the extent to which he chooses to use this.

Very different views on this exist within Christianity – some think God has absolute control while others believe God is self-limiting in the extent to which he exercises his control in order to allow room for human freedom. The two statements below illustrate this:

- The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) position is that: "God is the sovereign master of his plan. But to carry it out he also makes use of his creatures' co-operation. This use is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of almighty God's greatness and goodness. For God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, [...]"^[4]
- The Reformed position is described in the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#), which states, "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass."

I'm going to go into a bit more detail on four positions:

Calvinism

Calvinism is one of the three foremost traditions of protestant Christianity, often called the 'reformed tradition'. It is famous for its belief in pre-destination and God's meticulous sovereignty (i.e. that God has ordained all that happens). The sovereignty of God was Calvin's most central doctrine.

Calvinists adopt a voluntarist view of free will that is compatible with the theological determinism it embraces. Calvinists hold that God has determined the whole course of universal history in advance and this includes who is saved and who is damned. Some people are, according to Calvin predetermined to accept God's salvation while others are predetermined to reject it.

On this view there is no room for any type of libertarian freedom as this would limit God's sovereignty.

Isn't God then responsible for evil? Calvinists tend to respond to this by distinguishing primary and secondary causes and argue that the sin is still the responsibility of the person as the agent of the sin, God may be the primary cause of everything but humans acting freely (voluntaristic freedom) in accordance with their will are the secondary cause, and it is the secondary cause that is being judged. As they embrace a compatibilist view of free will they think humans act and sin in accordance with their will so are responsible for their sin, as to be a person is simply to be willing agent. There is no such thing as a morally neutral free agent (in the libertarian sense) so to be a person is to be a human with a sinful nature regardless of the fact that this itself is determined. Calvinists emphasised that human nature is depraved and sinful and that God's actions are always constraining on that, preventing evil by calling us to his will. God calls some people to salvation through his act of effectual grace which is irresistible, and it is by grace we are saved.

Calvinists tend to affirm that there is no meaningless evil even if we are incapable of understanding or seeing what the good result is – we don't have a God's eye view of the world. Nevertheless critics still emphasise that if God is in control of everything he is responsible for our depravity and fallen nature and as such is ultimately responsible for evil. He also chooses to pass over some people and leave them damned when he could have just as easily chosen to save them by grace. Critics say this adds weight to the evidential problem of evil – that there is so much suffering in the world that it seems implausible that God couldn't have achieved good outcomes without less of it. Calvinists don't have the resource of a free will theodicy to counter the problem of evil so are more likely to rely on a 'sceptical theism' type response (see Appendix). Calvinists also say God creates the world to glorify himself which he does by demonstrating the fullness of his nature including wisdom and justice as well as love, mercy and grace.

Other forms of Christianity including Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox Tradition, and the other two major branches of Protestantism: Lutheranism and Arminianism, all reject the idea of predestination. Catholicism views predestination as a heresy.

Arminianism

Arminianism is a branch of Protestantism initiated in the early 16th century, based on the theological ideas of the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius and puts significant emphasis on libertarian free will. They believe that God is not in any way the author of evil, even in a secondary way. Men and angels are rather responsible for evil by their free choices. They hold that sinners who hear the gospel have the free will to accept or reject God's offer of saving grace and that nobody is excluded by God from the possibility of salvation except those who freely exclude themselves. They have a more self-limited view of God's providence (that is his control over all that happens). This means that

God purposely exercises his sovereignty in ways that do not illustrate the full extent of his omnipotence. He chooses to allow his creation libertarian freedom to choose their actions. Nevertheless they also believe God has perfect foreknowledge of the future including everyone who will freely chose to be saved. For them there is a 'predestination of the elect by foreknowledge' that doesn't contradict libertarian free will.

Arminianism usually harmonises these things due to the fact it holds to a 'classical theist' model of God. (In fact most of Christian have historically held this model). Classical theism states that God is simple, immutable, impassable and timeless (see Appendix), The timeless bit is important as it often sees God as outside time and not having any temporal succession in his being – rather he exists in a single timeless moment of immutable and perfect bliss. From this perspective God sees the whole of human history from an outside point so he knows the future, including people's free choices, without this compromising their freedom. Therefore God does not predetermine the future, but he does know it.

On this view there will be pointless evils in the world that do not achieve a particular good, but rather are allowed to happen to enable the greater good of instantiating genuinely free individuals who are capable of freely entering into loving relationship with him.

Open Theism (also called Free-Will Theology and openness theology)

The ideas behind open theism have surfaced at various points throughout Christian history, including some statements from the Church fathers, however it has come to a head as a popular movement in modern Christianity since the term 'Open Theism' was coined by Richard Rice in his 1980 book "The Openness of God". Since then this has sparked a heated controversy in Christianity as Open Theism has been embraced by some evangelicals as well as liberal Christians. Its proponents include prominent Christian Philosophers such as William Hasker, Richard Swinburne, Dean Zimmerman and Keith Ward as well as Roman Catholic Vincent Brummer (among many others). By contrast some Calvinists have stated they consider it not only wrong but a heresy.

Like Arminianism, open theists believe human beings have libertarian free will however they also embrace a substantive view of time, in which time is a real phenomenon that really passes. God interacts with the temporal world and is actively responsive to people's choices and actions as they unfold, so his knowledge is dynamic and his providence is flexible. God experiences temporal succession and is passible; he is actively moved by events in creation and has responsive loving relationships with his creatures. In this way they reject the Classical Theism model of God.

There are varieties of open theism but the key idea is that as time really passes the future doesn't exist yet and as some creatures have genuine free will then their choices cannot be known in advance. For this reason the future is 'open.' God knows all the possible trajectories the future could go, but he doesn't know which trajectory will be actualised in advance of free choices being made. In this sense both the future and God's knowledge of it is open. This doesn't contradict God's omniscience, as omniscience to open theists means God knows everything there is to know; however as the future doesn't exist there are no facts to be known yet, only possibilities.

Open theism sees the act of creation unfolding as a collaboration between God and free creatures, although he can at times insatiate special divine actions (interventions in human history) such as his incarnation. God never wills evil and is not responsible for it, but he allows it as a consequence of free actions (and the conditions necessary for free actions such as the need for predictable natural laws without which free choices would be meaningless as without them free agents would be devoid of any ability to assess consequences).

Critics think open theism unacceptably undercuts God's sovereignty over creation and also embraces an anthropomorphic view of God.

Molinism

Molinism is named after the 16th-century Spanish Jesuit priest and Roman Catholic theologian Luis de Molina. Molina was responding to Calvinism and wanted to find a way to harmonise the sovereignty of God with the idea of libertarian free will so that God is not in any way the author of evil. It's worth noting that although Molina was a Catholic priest, Molinism today has also been embraced by many Protestants. For example, the American Protestant evangelical philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig is one of the world's foremost proponents of Molinism. By contrast some Catholic orders (e.g. The Dominican order) strongly oppose it.

The key aspect of Molinism is the idea that God not only has perfect knowledge of the actual future, he also has 'middle knowledge'. This is to say that God knows *what we would freely choose to do (by our libertarian choices) in any possible world and possible circumstance*. He then instantiates the world in which he achieves his ultimate goals. In other words God uses his 'middle knowledge' to set up conditions so that what we would freely choose to do brings about his ultimate aims. Nevertheless, God does not decree our choices – these are our choices and our responsibility. He doesn't want us ever to do evil acts but he knows that in some circumstances we will freely choose to do evil. He nevertheless uses our free choices including choices to do evil to ultimately achieve his (wholly good) aims.

Another way to say this is that, according to Molinists, God has knowledge not only of necessary truths, but also of counterfactuals. A counterfactual is a statement of the form:

"If it were the case that A, it would be the case that B".

e.g.

"If Mark went to the Ibiza he would spend the first day sunbathing rather than site seeing".

This counterfactual "middle knowledge" is distinct from his foreknowledge.

God used this knowledge to survey all possible worlds and then actualised a particular one. God's middle knowledge of counterfactuals would play an integral part in this "choosing" of a particular world.

Molinists say the logical ordering of events for creation would be as follows:

1. God's natural knowledge of necessary truths.
2. God's middle knowledge, (including counterfactuals).

---Creation of the World---

3. God's free knowledge (the actual ontology of the world).

The possible worlds surveyed involve the libertarian free choices of free creatures, which are referred to as "counterfactuals of creaturely freedom."

Molinists argue their view accounts for God's sovereignty over all that happens, his total foreknowledge and also allows for a robust libertarian human freedom. God will know who will be saved prior to the beginning of the world because he uses his middle knowledge to know who will freely respond to his offer of salvation.

A prominent objection to Molinism is called the 'grounding problem' This says there are no 'truth-makers' to ground counterfactuals so God can't know them in advance. The objection states that knowledge is not merely a matter of conceiving a proposition and correctly

believing it to be true. It requires justification: one must have good reasons for believing. If an act is truly free then it can't be known in advance of it being actualised. If God hasn't decreed the act and the person hasn't done the act yet, there is no way even God can know it.

Molinists deny the 'truth-maker' theory of truth behind this objection.

The criticism hinges on your view that if a free choice can be observed prior to it being actualised, is it actually a free choice?

Reference Appendix

Attributes of God in Classical Theism:

1. All Good – morally perfect, all-benevolent and perfectly loving.
2. Timeless – God is not in time and does not experience temporal change.
3. Simplicity – God has no parts, none of his attributes are distinct from his being.
4. Immutability – Can cannot change in any respect.
5. Impassibility. God cannot be affected by anything outside himself.
6. Omnipresent – God is everywhere, or more precisely all things find their location in God
7. Omniscience – God has perfect knowledge, knowing absolutely everything.
8. Omnipotent – God can do anything and is not limited by external forces.

Neo-classical theism would deny at least one (and possible all) of points 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Two (incompatible) Christian responses to the problem of evil

1. **Theodicy** – Provides an explanation of why God would allow evil/suffering to exist to the extent that it does.

Common versions include the Free Will Theodicy (God sees the creation of a genuine free creatures who can freely love and enter relation with him a great good, but the existence of genuinely free creatures requires that they can choose evil and that the consequences of that evil are real for them to understand. It also requires predictable laws of nature which mean creatures can predictably evaluate the likely consequences of their choices.

Another is the Irenaean/Soul making theodicy – that evil is necessary to allow the character building of free moral agents.

2. **Sceptical Theism** – is the view that we should remain sceptical of our ability to discern whether our perceptions about evil should be considered good evidence against God's existence. It wouldn't be surprising that an infinitely intelligent and knowledgeable being would have reasons for permitting evil that are beyond our comprehension. We are not in an epistemic place to be able to make the judgement that any instance of evil is gratuitous.