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Divine Foreknowledge and the Problem of Evil

Four Views

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Divine Foreknowledge and the Problem of Evil

Four Views

In America's modern Western context, people do not respect religion. In fact, many people openly mock and despise religion for its influence on society. However, most criticism of religion is directed toward Christianity, which has had the greatest influence on culture for the past 1,500 years. One reason why many atheists are too afraid to criticize Islam is fear of physical harm, but because Christianity promotes free speech and open discourse, they fearlessly attack what they perceive to be a "backward" mentality toward science. Another massive objection to Christianity is the "problem of evil," which proposes that if God is all-loving and all-powerful, then He wants and has the ability to stop evil. However, even though God is all-loving and all-powerful, there is a prevalent amount of evil throughout the world. Therefore, atheists claim that either God is not omnibenevolent, is impotent, or does not exist. Furthermore, Christians must also explain divine foreknowledge. If God knows the future, then why does He not stop these evil things from happening?

Over the past 1,500 years, theologians, philosophers, and pastors have adopted four primary stances regarding divine foreknowledge. Some people turn to Open Theism, a more recent development that emphasizes scriptures which seem to limit God's foreknowledge in order to help maintain human free will and answer the problem of evil. Others adopt Arminianism, which holds that God knows the future exhaustively but humans continue to have free will. A smaller group adheres to Molinism, which uses God's "middle knowledge" (i.e. His knowledge of how humans freely act in certain situations) as a defense against skeptics. Finally, a majority of people subscribe to Calvinism, which believes that God has already determined the outcome of world events for His glory and divine purposes. These four viewpoints each have

unique advantages for their proponents, and all four attempt to maintain the inerrancy of Scripture and defend orthodox Christian doctrine (i.e. God's omniscience, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, etc.). This paper will summarize each group's definition of divine foreknowledge and then explain how that view affects their answer to the problem of evil. The author will begin by discussing the most controversial position: Open Theism.

A common criticism of Open Theism is that it denies God's omniscience, and that it trades part of God's essential nature for a more relatable version of Him. However, Gregory Boyd disagrees with this notion. Open Theists agree with Arminians, Molinists, and Calvinists that God is omniscient. Boyd argues instead that, "the debate over God's foreknowledge is rather a debate over the *content of reality* that God perfectly knows."¹ Calvinists, Arminians, and Molinists say that the future is eternally settled, meaning that future events are eternally known as settled facts in God's mind. Conversely, Open Theists claim that the future contains both settled and open aspects. Boyd writes that God "knows the possible aspects as possible and knows the settled aspects as settled. ... the sovereign Creator settles whatever He wants to settle about the future ... He leaves open whatever He wants to leave open, and hence He perfectly foreknows the future as possible *to this extent*."²

Boyd claims that if God knows the future decisions of human beings, then humans do not have the actual ability to do otherwise, thereby eliminating our free will. Therefore, in order to maintain our freedom, God leaves the future open in regard to human choices. However, in cases like Jesus's crucifixion, God can decide to solidify the occurrence of future events. He knows the event will happen, but He does not know *who* will cause it to happen. The other positions will

1. Gregory A. Boyd, "The Open-Theism View", in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 13.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

criticize Open Theism at this point, claiming that scriptures like Matthew 26:33-35 contradict this view. In this passage, Jesus predicts that Peter will reject him three times before the rooster crows. Open Theists respond by emphasizing God's perfect knowledge of the past and present. Because Jesus perfectly knew Peter's character, and Peter had the character trait of "superficial boldness," Jesus was able to accurately predict that Peter would deny him.

This heavy reliance on free will is Open Theism's main response to the problem of evil. In the Open Theist mindset, love and freedom necessarily go together. Boyd proclaims that "God's anthropological purpose in creating the world was to express His eternal nature by sharing His eternal, other-oriented triune love with us."³ Because love is the goal of creation, Boyd argues that humans must have free will. Genuine love does not coerce another individual, so "we can only conclude that God gave us the capacity freely to reject His loving will *because it was necessary for love*."⁴ However, Boyd accepts that our actions are affected by natural forces, other human beings, or even our own desires. He concedes that "as important as free will is to the open model of providence, it does not naïvely deny that the scope of free will is significantly restricted."⁵

How does God deal with natural disasters, disease, and other harmful events outside of human responsibility? Open Theists say that God plans ahead of time how He will respond to any possible event. Boyd claims that God knows counterfactuals of divine freedom, meaning God knows what He would do in any circumstance. Boyd explains the implications of this in his essay: "God can anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility as effectively as if it was a

3. Gregory A. Boyd, "God Limits His Control," in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, eds. Stanley N. Gundry and Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 188.

4. *Ibid.*, 190.

5. *Ibid.*, 192.

certainty. ... While not everything happens *for* a divine purpose ... everything happens *with* a divine purpose, for God has from eternity been preparing a response to each and every possible event in case it takes place.”⁶ Even though God does not actually know the outcome of future events, Open Theists believe Christians can still be confident that He will bring about the best possible world for us.

Next, Arminianism claims that God has complete and infallible knowledge of the future. Unlike Open Theism, Arminians claim that God knows the future actions of human beings, but this does not eliminate our ability to have libertarian freedom. In his essay, David Hunt answers two critiques of the Arminian view: The Problem of Human Freedom and the Problem of Divine Agency. The Problem of Human Freedom states that God’s infallible foreknowledge eliminates our ability to have genuine free will. Hunt responds by echoing the words of St. Augustine:

It is true that God’s foreknowing Adam’s action, like His causing Adam’s action, leaves Adam with no alternatives ... But the mere absence of alternate possibilities is irrelevant. Causing, forcing or coercing someone interferes with that person’s agency; simply knowing what the person will do is not an interference of any sort, and its implications for free agency are benign.⁷

The Problem of Divine Agency says that if God knows everything that will happen, then He cannot decide or intend to do anything, and thus remains impotent. However, Hunt offers two criticisms of this argument. First, God does not need to acquire an intention to do something. Hunt insists that “Whatever intentions God has, He presumably has them from eternity, just as He has His knowledge from eternity. So there is no time at which God knows what He is going to do but hasn’t yet formed the intention to do so.”⁸ Second, the argument fails to make a

6. Ibid., 206-207.

7. David Hunt, “The Simple-Foreknowledge View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 88.

8. Ibid., 93.

distinction between propositional beliefs, which are about what will happen, and practical beliefs, which are about what someone decides to do. Hunt argues that “What makes God *or anyone* an agent is the power to decide *what to do*. God’s omniscience does not deprive him of this power, since it determines only his propositional beliefs, leaving his practical beliefs—the ones open to agency—wide open.”⁹

Because Arminians find no contradiction between God’s complete foreknowledge and human freedom, they have to provide answers to the problem of evil that Open Theists can avoid. Nevertheless, Arminians have four main responses to the problem of evil.¹⁰ First and foremost, Arminians support the Free Will theodicy. Similar to Boyd’s defense, Arminians claim that humans need free will to genuinely love or trust one another. However, once they have free will, humans also have the opportunity to do evil. Despite this, because God loves us, He allows us to have free will. Second, Arminians appeal to the Laws of Nature theodicy. The physical laws that govern the universe are crucial to our understanding of the world. However, these same physical laws cause suffering as well as good: The same water that refreshes us can drown us, or the same nerves that give us pleasure can cause pain. Therefore, in order to have the good of regular laws, the possibility of harmful effects from these laws is required.

Third, Arminians appeal to the Soul-Making theodicy. Virtues such as endurance, courage, faithfulness, and patience make humanity better persons. In order to obtain these virtues, humanity often must engage in conflict and temptation. God could not have given humans these virtues, for their value is in the struggle of obtaining of them and not simply having them. However, the existence of an environment which will help humanity obtain these

9. Ibid., 95-96.

10. These responses come from a lecture given by Mark Foreman at Liberty University in April 2015 titled “Introduction to Philosophy: Apologetics—The Problem of Evil.”

virtues will also result in failures and real loss. Fourth, Arminians appeal to the purpose of suffering. Although we may not know the purpose behind each individual period of suffering, the reality of a purpose is still possible. We do know that suffering does fulfill some good that would probably not come about without suffering. These include warning us of greater suffering, keeping us from self-destruction, or helping us defeat other evils. These four responses provide Arminianism with a worthy arsenal of intellectual defenses against the problem of evil.

Now the author will examine Molinism, which claims that God has “middle knowledge.” In order to explain what “middle knowledge” is, terms must be defined. First, we must define the types of knowledge God has. God has natural knowledge, which is all necessary truths, including possible worlds, and free knowledge, which is contingent truths about the actual world. Next, “counterfactuals” are conditional statements in the subjunctive mood (e.g. “If I were tall, I would play basketball.”) All Christian theologians have agreed that God’s omniscience includes counterfactual knowledge, but they disagree about where this occurs in the logical order of God’s creative decree. Dominicans believed God’s counterfactual knowledge was subsequent to God’s decree, whereby God declares what counterfactuals are true. Conversely, Jesuits, including Luis de Molina (after whom Molinism is named), believed God’s counterfactual knowledge was prior to His decree. William Lane Craig explains why this is so important:

Thus, by employing His counterfactual knowledge, God can plan a world down to the last detail and yet do so without annihilating creaturely freedom, since what people would freely do under various circumstances is already factored into the equation by God. Since God’s counterfactual knowledge lies logically in between his natural knowledge and his free knowledge, Molinists called it God’s *middle knowledge*.¹¹

However, Craig also makes a necessary distinction between himself and Gregory Boyd. While Boyd claims that God knows counterfactuals of divine freedom but leaves open counterfactuals

11. William Lane Craig, “The Middle-Knowledge View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 122.

of human freedom, Craig claims the opposite. Craig believes that God knows counterfactuals of human freedom, but if God knew what He would do in any situation, it would limit His own sovereignty. Therefore, he proposes that counterfactuals of divine freedom obtain truth-value at the same moment as God's creative decree.¹²

So how does "middle knowledge" affect the Molinist response to the problem of evil?¹³ It gives Molinists a unique form of the Free Will defense. Some skeptics maintain that it is logically impossible for God and evil to coexist. However, this claim contains a hidden assumption: If God is all-powerful, He can create any world He wants. However, this is not true, and Craig proves this by differentiating between logically possible worlds and feasible worlds. There is an infinite number of logically possible worlds. For instance, it is logically possible that Adam would not have sinned in the Garden of Eden. By contrast, feasible worlds are worlds God can actualize given the free actions of humans. Therefore, because God knew Adam would freely choose to sin, the logically possible world where Adam did not sin became unfeasible. The idea of feasible worlds allows Molinists to maintain that this is the best world God could create.

Craig also deals with the Probabilistic Problem of Evil, where the statement "God is all-powerful and all-loving" seems improbable relative to the statement, "Evil exists." He first responds by saying that due to our limited knowledge as finite persons, we are not in the position to claim that God lacks good reasons for permitting evil. Furthermore, relative to the *full* evidence, God's existence is probable. Here he offers several arguments for the existence of God: The Ontological Argument, which argues that God necessarily exists based upon His being;

12. William Lane Craig, "God Directs All Things," in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, eds. Stanley N. Gundry and Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 82 n. 1.

13. This page draws from a lecture by William Lane Craig at Aalborg University on April 17, 2012 titled "The Problem of Suffering and Evil."

The Kalam Cosmological Argument, which argues that the universe must have a cause, and that cause must be God; and The Moral Argument, which argues that objective moral values and duties can only be grounded in God. Finally, Craig says that Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the co-existence of God and suffering. The view that the chief purpose of life is not happiness, but rather that the knowledge of God is an “incommensurable good,” allows us to withstand suffering while maintaining faith in Christ.

Finally, the author will examine Calvinism, which states that God determines what will happen in the future. Paul Helm views God’s foreknowledge in primarily two senses. First, he sees God’s knowledge as the cause of all things: “On this view there would appear to be no distinction between what God causes and what he permits, because, on Aquinas’s view, since God foreknows all events, he must cause them all.”¹⁴ Second, he sees God’s foreknowledge as logically subsequent to His creative decree: “On this view God’s decree is all embracing, and his foreknowledge is simply his knowledge of what he has decreed before that decree takes effect in time.”¹⁵ Based upon these two views, Calvinists agree that God determines the actions of all humans, but that they still maintain responsibility for their actions. This view of human freedom is called “compatibilism.”

Helm offers three separate arguments for the Calvinist view of divine foreknowledge and compatibilist freedom. First, he argues from the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace. The argument can be formulated like this: Irresistible grace is efficacious, while incompatibilism and resistible grace find no need for efficacious grace. But only efficacious grace ensures the salvation of a person, so incompatibilist freedom directly contradicts a central Christian doctrine.

14. Paul Helm, “The Augustinian-Calvinist View,” in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 163.

15. *Ibid.*

Therefore, Christians need compatibilism to support efficacious grace. Second, God's knowledge of all past, present, and future events is most at home with compatibilism. Third, Helm draws upon temporal necessity.

If there is something in the past that entails something in the future and if what is past is necessary—accidentally or historically necessary—then what is entailed is similarly accidentally or historically necessary . . . If this is so, then someone's free act must necessarily occur and therefore cannot be free. But if this is so, then divine omniscience is inconsistent with human incompatibilist freedom.¹⁶

If God determines all things, including human actions, then how does God not become the author of evil? Helm offers a response by saying God does not cause, but willingly permits evil actions to occur:

God foreknows future evil by knowingly and willingly permitting particular evil actions. . . . God does not and cannot will evil actions, but he may nevertheless know that they will occur and be willing for them to occur. In permitting evil in this way God acts for the highest and holiest reasons even though the detail of such reasons may be at present hidden from us.¹⁷

Helm defines willing permission this way: “for action A to be the action of someone other than X; for X to foreknow the occurrence of A and to have been able to prevent A; and for A not to be against X's overall plan.”¹⁸ Helm holds that if an evil action is committed by a human, and God permits it to happen for some larger purpose, then He is not responsible for the evil that occurred. Likewise, Turretin appeals to the mysterious nature of God's sovereignty and human freedom:

That God on the one hand by his providence not only decreed but most certainly secures the event of all things, whether free or contingent; on the other hand, however, man is always free in acting and many effects are contingent. Although I cannot understand how these can be mutually connected together, yet (on account of ignorance of the mode) the

16. Helm, “The Augustinian-Calvinist View,” 185-186.

17. *Ibid.*, 176.

18. *Ibid.*

thing itself is (which is certain from another source, i.e., from the word) not either to be called in question or wholly denied.¹⁹

The Calvinist must faithfully believe that God cannot cause evil, even if they do not understand.

As the author has quickly examined the views of Open Theism, Arminianism, Molinism, and Calvinism, he hopes the reader has seen how each theological position uniquely approaches the subject of divine foreknowledge and the problem of evil. However, each of these views has weaknesses and, depending on the reader's opinion, fatal flaws. For instance, Hunt criticizes Open Theism by saying that it reduces God to making probability estimates. Furthermore, it seems implausible for Jesus to exactly predict Peter's three denials from a character trait. Similarly, Arminians are criticized for hastily generalizing Scripture and misreading Augustine's argument in *Freedom of the Will*; Molinists are criticized for improperly characterizing the Calvinist position and failing to provide evidence for counterfactuals of creaturely freedom; and Calvinists are criticized for leaving God as the author of evil and denying human responsibility by invoking universal, divine determinism. Basically, we find that every stance regarding divine foreknowledge and the problem of evil is debatable. Nevertheless, whatever position they subscribe to, all Christians must agree that there are answers to these tough questions. Peter exhorts us to "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."²⁰ No matter our theological persuasion, we must unite under the cross of Christ and spread the truth of the gospel.

19. Turretin, quoted by Paul Kjoss Helseth, "God Causes All Things," in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, eds. Stanley N. Gundry and Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 41.

20. 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB).

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