

Free will and foreknowledge

Remember that the free will defense given in reply to the argument from evil requires an incompatibilist, rather than a compatibilist, view of free will. In this sense, there is a close connection between the main argument against the existence of God and the topic of free will.

But there's also another connection between free will and discussions of the existence and nature of God. This connection comes not from the existence of evil, but rather from a traditional attribute of God: God's omniscience and, in particular, God's foreknowledge of future events.

The selection we read for today, from Jonathan Edwards, can be seen as an attempt to show that there is a kind of conflict between divine foreknowledge and our having free will.

Edwards lays out his argument in four numbered paragraphs, each of which corresponds to a premise in his argument. The first is this one:

1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect: it is now impossible that it should be otherwise than true that that thing has existed.

In other words:

1. We have no choice about past events.

He states his second premise as follows:

2. If there be any such thing as a divine foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that foreknowledge, by the supposition, is a thing which already has, and long ago had, existence; and so, now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise than that this foreknowledge should be, or should have been.

So we can add a second premise to our argument, which together with (1) implies (3):

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about whether God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)

His next premise is stated in the following passage:

3. It is also very manifest, that those things which are indissolubly connected with other things that are necessary, are themselves necessary. As that proposition whose truth is necessarily connected with another proposition, which is necessarily true, is itself necessarily true. To say otherwise, would be a contradiction:

As elsewhere, Edwards is using “necessary” to mean, in part “beyond our control” or “something we don’t have any choice about.” If we focus on this, then it looks like we can state what he is saying in the above passage as premise (4) below:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.

(This should remind you of a premise in the consequence argument for incompatibilism.)

The last key assumption of the argument is contained in the following:

4. It is no less evident, that if there be a full, certain, and infallible foreknowledge of the future existence of the volitions of moral agents, then there is a certain infallible and indissoluble connexion between those events and that foreknowledge; and that therefore, by the preceding observations, those events are necessary events;

Edwards is saying that there is an **indissoluble** connection between something being known, and its being true. It is a necessary truth that if x is known, x must be true. Since we can't do anything to change necessary truths -- they are, by definition, what can't fail to be the case -- we can add premise (5), and also premise (6), to our argument:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about whether God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.
5. Necessarily, if x is known, then x is true.
6. We have no choice about the fact that if x is known, then x is true. (5)

But (3), (4), and (6) are enough to give us our conclusion:

(C) We have no choice about our future actions. (3,4,6)

Let's examine this argument:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.
5. Necessarily, if x is known, then x is true.
6. We have no choice about the fact that if x is known, then x is true. (5)

(C) We have no choice about our future actions. (3,4,6)

As noted, this bears a close resemblance to the consequence argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge. But this puts the proponent of the free will defense who believes in divine foreknowledge in a difficult position. It seems like pretty much the same argument which helps to show that evil can coexist with an all-good and omnipotent God also shows that free will can't coexist with an omniscient God.

Someone who wants to endorse both the free will defense and divine foreknowledge of human actions therefore might like to find a flaw in Edwards' argument which is not a flaw in the consequence argument.

One sort of response is suggested by Aquinas' discussion of divine foreknowledge. Here is what he says:

“although contingent things become actual successively, nevertheless God knows contingent things not successively, as they are in their own being, as we do but simultaneously. The reason is because His knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also His being; and eternity being simultaneously whole comprises all time, as said above ...Hence all things that are in time are present to God from eternity, not only because He has the types of things present within Him, as some say; but because His glance is carried from eternity over all things as they are in their presentiality. Hence it is manifest that contingent things are infallibly known by God, inasmuch as they are subject to the divine sight in their presentiality; yet they are future contingent things in relation to their own causes.”

The view Aquinas has in mind here is often stated with the slogan that “God is outside of time.” Part of what is meant by this is that even though events in the world are past and future relative to each other, God's knowledge is not past or future at all. So, strictly speaking, it is false to say that “God had foreknowledge of our future actions in the past.” But this is premise (2) of Edwards' argument; so, denying this claim gives us a way to maintain belief in both divine foreknowledge of our actions and in our own free will.

However, this reply to Edwards faces a problem. Recall Edwards' argument:

1. We have no choice about the past.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has foreknowledge of our future actions. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about the truth of x, and no choice about the fact that if x is true then y must be true, then we have no choice about the fact that y is true.
5. Necessarily, if x is known, then x is true.
6. We have no choice about the fact that if x is known, then x is true. (5)

(C) We have no choice about our future actions. (3,4,6)

The suggestion we are considering is that we reject (2). But (2) is only used in the argument to get to (3); and perhaps we can get to (3) without assuming that God's knowledge is, strictly speaking, something which happens in time. Here's one suggestion about how to change premises (1) and (2) of the argument to do this:

- 1*. We have no choice about things which are outside of time.
- 2*. God's knowledge of our future actions is outside of time.
3. We have no choice about the fact that God has knowledge of our future actions. (1*,2*)

From here, the argument could run as before. Can Aquinas' objection be revised so as to respond to this version of the argument? Is premise (1*) as plausible as premise (1)?

This worry about Aquinas' reply to Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge makes it reasonable to consider a few other replies to that argument. We will consider two such replies.

Aquinas denied that God knew in the past about our future actions; William of Ockham, a rough contemporary of Aquinas, accepted that God knew in the past about our future actions, but denied that this makes facts about what God knows things about which we have no choice.

One way to explain his view is by a distinction between *hard* and *soft* facts about the past. An example of a hard fact might be

In 2004, George Bush was elected for a second term as president.

About this sort of past fact, we really have no choice. No one now has a choice about whether in 2004, Bush was elected. But not all past facts are like this. Some past facts are partly about the future. For example,

In 2004, it was true that I will refrain from singing the fight song at 2:45 this afternoon.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I will so refrain. Then it looks like the above statement is true: it really was true in 2004 that I would so refrain. (If someone had said in 2004, "JS will refrain from singing ...", they would have said something true.) So this is a fact about the past. But it is surely not, on that account, something about which I have no choice. This is what a defender of Ockham's solution would call a *soft* fact about the past: it is a fact about the past, but it is one about which I have a choice. If I decide to sing the fight song, then this will not be a fact about the past.

Now consider the following fact about the past:

In 2004, God knew that I will refrain from singing the fight song at 2:45 this afternoon.

Is this a soft fact or a hard fact about the past? If it is a soft fact, how would that help resolve the apparent incompatibility between free will and divine foreknowledge?

A final response to Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge is a very simple one: give up the idea that God knows what actions we will perform. (This is sort of analogous to the position of the libertarian, who gives up the idea that the world is deterministic in response to the consequence argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism.)

It is obvious how this is a response to Edwards' argument: it is a rejection of premise (2) (and premise (2*) in the revised argument). The question is: is this response one which a theist can accept?

One argument that it is not is as follows: if God does not know what actions we will perform, God is not omniscient; but no being which is not omniscient could be God. How could the theist reply to this objection?

Could omniscience be 'qualified' in something like the same way we qualified omnipotence?

A second kind of worry about the denial of divine foreknowledge comes specific views which are a part of the beliefs of various religions. In the case of Christianity, for example, various passages in the New Testament seem to imply the existence of divine foreknowledge, such as the following well-known passage from the gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is speaking to Peter:

“Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”

In this sort of case, there is an apparent conflict between a philosophical view about the knowledge of God and the face-value interpretation of certain parts of what Christians regard as a divinely revealed text.