

Fate,
foreknowledge,
&
free will

Last time, in our discussion of the problem of evil, we saw that a plausible case can be made that there is a close connection between the rationality of belief in God and our views about freedom of the will.

The free will defense — which seemed to be the most promising reply to Mackie's argument that our views about God involve a contradiction — relies on a few assumptions about free will.

1. Most obviously, that we have free will.
2. That free will is a (very) good thing.
3. Less obviously: that free will is incompatible with determinism. For it seems that if free will is compatible with determinism, then God could have made the initial conditions of the universe, and the laws of nature, such that they determined that everyone would always freely choose the good. But if God could have done this — as Mackie thinks — then it is hard to see why God chose our world, which brings with it the possibility of great evil. At least, if free will is compatible with determinism, it's clear that God didn't choose our world for the sake of free will — as Mackie points out, it seems like the obviously better choice would have been to make a world in which everyone always freely chooses the good.

These assumptions about freedom of the will — especially the first and the third — are relevant to the paradox we'll be discussing today. That is because this paradox is an attempt to show that certain views about God — in particular, the claim that God is omniscient, or all-knowing — are inconsistent with the claim that we have free will.

There is thus a sense in which you can think of the problem of evil, and the paradoxes of divine foreknowledge, as two sides of a single, complex paradox. The first side shows that if God exists, then assumptions 1-3 above must be true; the second side is an attempt to show that if God exists, then these assumptions cannot all be true.

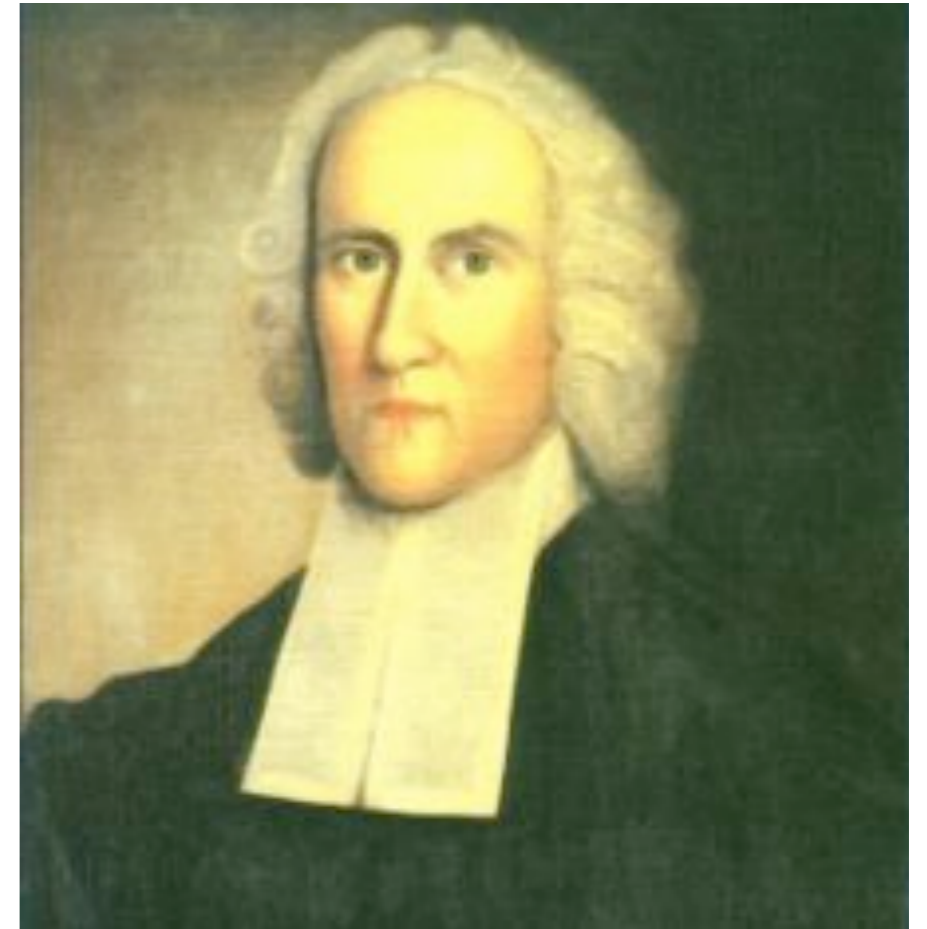
Why might one think that there is a conflict between God's omniscience and our having free will?

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An answer to this question can be found in our reading today, from Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards was an 18th century American philosopher, theologian and preacher, perhaps best known now for his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God."

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.

Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

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1. We have no choice about past events.

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.

What is Edwards saying here?

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2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

Premises 1 and 2 of Edwards' argument obviously imply a further claim about the status of God's foreknowledge of our actions.

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1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

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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 Edwards' point here looks very similar to one of the key premises in the consequence argument for the incompatibilism of free will and determinism: the no choice principle.

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

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There is one more premise in Edwards' argument which needs discussion.

Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

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3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

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. An indissoluble connection is one that cannot be broken - i.e., a connection which is impossible to break. Another way to put this is to say that the connection between something being known and its being true is a necessary one.

For our purposes, what is important is that **if something is a necessary truth, it is not something that we have any choice about**. We don't, for example, have any choice about the fact that there are no round squares — and this is precisely because it is impossible for there to be any round squares. And this is just another way of saying that it is a necessary truth that there aren't any.

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So let's suppose we grant Edwards' claim that

Necessarily, if someone knows that p, then p.

It seems to follow from this, given what we have just said, that the following is also true:

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

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But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

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But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

Premise 3 mentions something that we have no choice about.

Premise 5 says that if we have no choice about that thing, then we have no choice about our future actions.

Premise 4 says that if both those things are the case, then we also have no choice about our future actions.

Therefore, it seems to follow from premises 3-5 that:

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform some future action.

But of course, if this is true, then we have no free will.

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C. We have no choice about whether we will perform some future action.

This argument is similar in form to the consequence argument. In that argument we assumed that determinism is true and derived the result that we have no choice about future actions. That argument, if successful, established the conditional claim that **if** determinism is true, **then** we have no free will.

In **this** argument we assume not that determinism is true, but rather that God knows what actions we will perform in the future. From this assumption we derived the result that we have no choice about future actions. **So this argument, if successful, establishes the conditional claim that if God knows of our future actions, then we have no free will.**

Most traditional Christian views, as well as the views of many other religions, hold both that we have free will, and that God knows in advance what we are going to do. To defend this view, one needs to find a flaw in Edwards' argument.

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On the face of it, there are four premises which one might reject: 1, 2, 4, and 5. But it is worth noting at the outset that there is an immediate problem, from the point of view of the religious believer, with rejecting premise 4.

One of the important aspects of free will, from the point of religious belief, is that it promises to explain the existence of certain sorts of evil in the world. But, as we noted in our discussion above, this sort of explanation only makes sense if free will is incompatible with determinism.

The problem which arises is that premise 4 is a crucial premise in the main argument for incompatibilism. So if the religious believer tries to solve the problem created by Edwards' argument by rejecting premise 4 of that argument, she also weakens substantially the case for incompatibilism, and thereby weakens substantially the free will defense as a reply to the problem of evil.

In fact, something slightly stronger is true. It seems very likely that if premise 4 is false, then so is incompatibilism. If the fact that an action can be determined, of necessity, by factors outside of my control is no barrier to that action being free, then why wouldn't free will be compatible with determinism?

In what follows, I will therefore just suppose that premise 4 is true. How else might one reply to Edwards' argument?

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One main problem with Aquinas' response to this argument is not that what Aquinas says about God existing outside of time is false, but that, even if he is right, there seems to be a way to reformulate Edwards' argument and still show the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge.

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One assumption of the argument is that God knew **in the past** what we will do; and this seems to imply that God exists in time. This view of the relationship between God and time was denied by Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas on time and foreknowledge

"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."

If Aquinas is right about this, then it looks like premise 2 of Edwards' argument is false.

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Here is one way such a reformulation might work. We might restate premises 1 and 2 so as still to derive 3. From there, the argument could go as above:

- 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 God's having knowledge of our future actions. (1*,2*)

Are premises 1* and 2* as plausible as the original premises 1 and 2? If so, then Aquinas' view shifts the problem of free will and foreknowledge, but does not solve it.

How might Aquinas argue that 1*, unlike 1, is false?

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Aquinas' objection focuses on premise 2 of Edwards' argument. A quite different reply focuses on premise 1 of Edwards' argument.

This reply to the problem of free will and foreknowledge is often associated with William of Ockham, an English philosopher and theologian who was born about 15 years after Aquinas' death, in 1288.



The denial of premise 1 might, at first glance, seem ridiculous. Absent time machines, how can we have power over the past?

To see why this might not be ridiculous, consider the overlooked philosophical problem of the incompatibility of free will and roommate foreknowledge.

It seems that sometimes, your roommate can know what you will do; for example, the following might be true:

As 10 am today, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now imagine that at noon you are in the dining hall, about to grab a hamburger, when you are suddenly overcome with an unlikely desire for a fish sandwich. Do you have a choice about whether you will choose the hamburger or the fish sandwich? It seems that you do. But then it also seems that you have a choice about whether your roommate, at 10 am, knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch. After all, if you had chosen the fish sandwich, your roommate's belief that you would eat a hamburger would have been false, and hence **not** a piece of knowledge.

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But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Another question you may want to consider: do you have a choice about whether, at 10 am, it was **true** that you would eat a hamburger for lunch? If so, how would this affect the Master Argument for fatalism?

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But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now can you imagine a variant of the case in which you have a choice about whether your roommate even *believed* that you would eat a hamburger for lunch?

This does not seem possible: it seems that while you do have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past knew something about your behavior, you do not have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past believed something about your behavior. This might lead you to think that there are some past events that we do have a choice about, and some that we do not. This is what Ockham thought. One might express this idea by saying that some facts about the past are **hard facts** -- facts about which we have no choice -- whereas other facts about the past are **soft facts** -- facts about which we do have a choice.

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Let's grant that there is such a distinction between hard and soft facts. For Ockham's reply to this argument to work, we need more than the idea that there is such a distinction: we also need to assume that facts about what God knows are soft facts.

At first, this might seem very plausible: after all, we have already seen that facts about what your roommate knows are soft facts. Why not then also facts about what God knows?

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But think for a moment about why you had some control over whether, two hours ago, your roommate knew what you would do: this was because you had the power to do something which is such that, if you did that thing, your roommate's belief would have been false, and hence would not have been knowledge. But do we have the power to do something which is such that, if we did that thing we would have made one of God's beliefs false? This seems unlikely; it does not seem to be within our power to make God less than omniscient.

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So why might facts about what God knew 1000 years ago be soft facts, rather than hard facts? This is the key question which defenders of Ockham's solution to this problem must answer. That is, they must explain why it is the case that

Even though it is impossible for me to change the past, it is now in my power to perform some action which is such that, if I performed that action, God would have had different beliefs 1000 years ago.

The difficulty for the defender of this solution is, that is, to explain how what God believed 1000 years ago is not something which is now completely out of my control.

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Here's one way to press this problem a step further. Imagine that we have a person who receives direct communication from God, whom we can call Prophet.

Suppose that 1000 years ago, Prophet was told by God that I would end class at 2:44 today. Prophet then asserted, in the year 1012, that Jeff Speaks will end class on this date at 2:44.

Surely it is not now up to me **what** Prophet asserted in the year 1012: this seems clearly to be one of those facts about the past which is not now up to me. It is plainly a "hard fact."

But it seems like facts about what Prophet asserts (when directly inspired by God) pose just the same problem for free will as God's beliefs. After all, it is surely not in my power to falsify the Prophet's assertion; this would be to falsify a claim made by God, since Prophet is merely relaying God's claims to the world.

It is also worth noting that, if this is a problem for the Ockhamist, it is equally a problem for Aquinas' view; for, even if God is outside of time, Prophet is not.

Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

1. We have no choice about past events.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.
5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform some future action.

The strategies of Aquinas and Ockham are each ways of trying to show that free will and divine foreknowledge are **compatible**. But one might, of course, also simply accept Edwards' argument, and say that divine foreknowledge and free will are **incompatible**.

Defenders of this position must, then, either deny that we have free will, or deny that God knows in advance what we are going to do. We have already considered some of the problems with denying the existence of free will; let's consider whether it is plausible to deny the existence of divine foreknowledge. (We're asking, of course, whether it is plausible for a religious believer to deny divine foreknowledge; atheists of course deny that there is any such thing.)

Like Aquinas, defenders of this position reply to Edwards' argument by denying its second premise. Unlike Aquinas, defenders of this position don't say that God timelessly knows that we are going to do in the future. On their view, God doesn't know the future.

An initial problem facing this strategy is to explain why this is not simply a denial of the thesis that God is omniscient.

Here I think that one who denies divine foreknowledge should say something like this:

“To say that God is omniscient is to say that God knows all the facts. To deny that God is omniscient, then, is to say that there is at least one fact that God does not know. But I am not saying that. I am not saying that because, while I **am** saying that God does not know whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song, I am **not** saying that there is a fact about whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song. I don't think that there are such facts; indeed, I don't think that there are any facts (yet) about which free actions I will and will not perform. So, I don't think that there are any facts that God does not know.”

Is this a sufficient reply to the objection?

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How is this related to the Master Argument, and to our discussion of the A- and B-theories of time?

Suppose one thinks that there are truths about the future. Could one still deny premise 2, and say that God does not know these truths, and yet do so without denying God’s omniscience?

Perhaps. But to do so, we need to revise our definition of omniscience. One would have thought that omniscience was just “knowing all the facts” or “knowing all the truths.” But if we think that there are truths which an omniscient being could fail to know, this is a contradiction.

Maybe we could get some help here from our discussions of omnipotence. Recall that, in response to Mackie’s argument that God could have made it the case that everyone freely chose the good on every occasion, one response was to say that there are possible situations that even an omnipotent being could not bring about. This suggests a view of omnipotence according to which omnipotence is not “able to do anything” or even “able to do anything possible” but rather something more like “the ability to bring about any situation which is such that it is possible that I bring it about.”

One idea would then be that we could say parallel things about omniscience. Perhaps omniscience is not “knowing every truth”, but simply “knowing every truth which it is possible for me to know.” And perhaps truths about future free actions are not knowable by God — or any other being which necessarily has only true beliefs — since that knowledge would, by Edwards’ argument, make them unfree.

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But there are worries with this way of going. For one thing, it just seems weird that there could be facts — out there in the world — which are beyond God’s knowledge.

Here’s something else weird about this view. Recall the problem of roommate foreknowledge. We saw that is problem had an easy answer: there is no puzzle about how it can now be up to me whether you knew something yesterday about what I will do, because I might now have the power to make the belief you formed yesterday false. This was why roommate foreknowledge did not pose the problems posed by divine foreknowledge.

But what this means is that while it is impossible for God to know things about what I will freely do in the future, it is possible for my wife to know things about what I will freely do in the future. And that means that my wife knows some things that God doesn’t.

Despite my enormous respect for my wife, this seems like an unacceptable result.

So maybe, in the end, the best way to deny God’s knowledge of future free actions is simply to deny that there are any truths about what people will freely do in the future.

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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 both the Old and New Testaments seem to imply the existence of divine foreknowledge. Consider, for example 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.”

One who denies divine foreknowledge seems forced into saying either that Jesus did not really know what he said to be true, or that Peter's denial was not free.

Neither option seems attractive: it does not seem that Jesus was merely guessing, and we think that Peter was morally responsible for his action, which suggests that it must have been free.

Perhaps there's a way out. One might say that Peter's decision was free, but that the relevant choice had already been freely made prior to Jesus's saying this — so that the choice was free despite the action being determined at the time of Jesus's statement.

It is debatable, however, whether this way of reconciling Biblical passages to the denial of God's knowledge of future free actions is always available.