

Free will and foreknowledge

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April 17, 2014

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Last time we talked about the role that free will might play in resolving the problem of evil, and in responding to Mackie's argument against the existence of God. This leads to another problem: can free will exist in a world with an omniscient God? If not, then this leaves us without a solution to the problem of evil.

1. AUGUSTINE ON THE COMPATIBILITY OF FREE WILL AND FOREKNOWLEDGE

The intuitive tension between the claim that we have free will and the claim that God knows what we are going to do.

Augustine asks:

“Why do you think that our free choice is inconsistent with God's foreknowledge? Because it's foreknowledge, or because it's *God's* foreknowledge?”

His interlocutor eventually concedes that it is just that it is foreknowledge: anyone knowing what he was going to do would be inconsistent with that action being free. Then Augustine replies as follows:

“Unless I am mistaken, you do not force someone to sin just because you know that he is going to sin. Nor does your foreknowledge force him to sin ... [just so,] God forces no one to sin, even though he foresees those who are going to sin by their own will.

Is this convincing?

2. EDWARDS ON THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF FREE WILL AND FOREKNOWLEDGE

Edwards begins by presenting evidence from scripture that he takes to show that we must regard God as having certain and infallible foreknowledge of future events. Given this premise, he then argues as follows:

“It is very evident, that, with regard to a thing whose existence is infallibly and indissolubly connected with something, which already has, or has had existence, the existence of that thing is necessary. Here may be noted the following particulars:

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 the thing has existed.
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 now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise, than that this foreknowledge should be or should have been.
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: it would be in effect to say, that the connection was indissoluble, and yet was not so, but might be broken. If that, the existence of which is indissolubly connected with something whose existence is now necessary, is itself not necessary, then it may possibly not exist, notwithstanding that indissoluble connection of its existence. Whether the absurdity be not glaring, let the reader judge.
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 connection between those events and that foreknowledge; and that therefore, by the preceding observations, those events are necessary events; being infallibly and indissolubly connected with that, whose existence already is, and so is now necessary, and cannot but have been.”

This argument can be laid out in premise/conclusion form as follows:

1. The past is necessary. (Premise, §1)
2. It was true in the past that God knew of events which are in the future.
(Premise, §2)
3. It is now necessary that God knew of events which are in the future. (follows from 1, 2)
4. Any necessary consequence of something necessary is itself necessary. (Premise, §3)
5. For any event x, it is a necessary consequence of the fact that it is known that x will obtain that x will obtain. (Premise)

C. Future events are all now necessary. (3,4,5)

But, the line of argument goes, if it is now necessary that such-and-such will occur, then it is not up to us whether such-and-such will occur; and so we cannot have free choice about whether it will occur. So divine foreknowledge entails that all future events are necessary, and that we do not have free will (at least under a certain understanding of 'free will').

This is a form of argument known as *conditional proof*. We assume something — in this case, that God foreknows our action — and then derive the result that our actions are not free. The conclusion is the conditional claim that if God foreknows our actions, then they are not free.

What does 'necessary' mean in this argument? Is it the same sense of the word that is operative when we say that $2+2=4$ is a necessary truth? Does it make sense to say that something is now necessary, which previously was not?

One good interpretation of Edwards is that when he says that something is 'necessary', what he means is roughly that the events are 'out of our control.' We could restate the argument in these more intuitive terms as follows:

1. The past is out of our control. (Premise, §1)
2. It was true in the past that God knew of events which are in the future.
(Premise, §2)
3. It is now out of our control that God knew of events which are in the future.
(follows from 1, 2)
4. If it is out of our control that P, and out of our control that if P, then Q, it is out of our control that Q. (Premise, §3)
5. For any event x, it is out of our control that, if it is known that x will obtain, then x will obtain. (Premise)

C. Future events are all now out of our control. (3,4,5)

Can one respond to Edwards along the lines suggested by Augustine, by saying that foreknowing an action does not involve causing it? How should Edwards respond to this objection?

3. RESPONSE 1: IDENTIFY A FLAW IN EDWARDS' ARGUMENT

Let's consider a few ways of responding to Edwards' argument, and trying to defend the compatibility of free will and foreknowledge.

One response is to follow Aquinas in rejecting premise 2:

“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.”

What is Aquinas saying here? How might Edwards reformulate his argument to avoid this objection?

A second response is to (following the medieval philosopher William of Ockham) reject premise 1.

This can sound crazy — one way to make it sound less crazy is by considering the example of the kind of foreknowledge your roommate, or a parent, might have of you, and the sort of control you seem to have about whether in the past they knew what you would do now. A problem with applying the model of roommate foreknowledge to God.

4. RESPONSE 2: ACCEPT THAT FREE WILL AND FOREKNOWLEDGE ARE INCOMPATIBLE

A quite different response is to accept Edwards’ conclusion that free will and foreknowledge are incompatible. We then have two options: either deny that we have free will, or deny that God foreknows our actions.

The first leads to trouble with the problem of evil, and is anyways hard to accept.

There are two problems with the second option. The first is that it seems to involve denying God’s omniscience.

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.”

Would this be enough to preserve God’s omniscience?

The second problem is that the claim that God does not foreknow our actions seems to conflict with various claims made about God in various religious traditions. 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’s not clear whether this way out is always available.)