Free will & divine foreknowledge

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Jonathan Edwards was an 18th century theologian and minister in New England. Unlike many religious believers, Edwards did not believe in the existence of human free will — at least, he did not believe in certain views about free will — and he thought that this notion could be shown to be based on a confusion by examination of divine foreknowledge.

We will consider Edwards's two main arguments for the incompatibility of free will with divine foreknowledge, both of which are contained in §II.xii of his essay, *Freedom of the Will.*

Both attempt to show that if God has knowledge of future events, then those events must be necessary. Sometimes, the view that future events are necessary is called *fatalism.* Edwards thinks that fatalism is inconsistent with some views of freedom of the will; therefore, he takes his arguments that divine foreknowledge entails fatalism to also be arguments that divine foreknowledge is inconsistent with freedom of the will (on a certain understanding of what freedom of the will is).

1 The argument from the necessity of the past

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:
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> 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 a series of steps 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').

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?

1.1 Reply 1: Aquinas on the eternity of God

In the passage in the coursepack, Aquinas says this about God's knowledge of temporal events:

> "Hence, whoever knows a contingent effect in its cause only, has merely a conjectural knowledge of it. Now God knows all contingent things not only as they are in their causes, but also as each one of them is actually in itself. And 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."

How the idea that God is outside the temporal order might provide a way of blocking the above argument by denying premise (2).

The idea that the argument can be reconstructed by rephrasing premises (1) and (2) to say that anything existing outside of time is necessary.

1.2 Reply 2: Theological fatalism and logical fatalism

Edwards is a what we can call a *theological fatalist*: he thinks that divine foreknowledge shows that all future events are necessary. But there is another, even older, form of fatalism: *logical fatalism*, which tries to show that all future events are necessary on the basis of logic alone. One way of putting an argument for logical fatalism is as follows:

1. The past is necessary. (Premise)
2. It was true yesterday that I will wake up on May 1, 2006 before noon. (Premise)
3. It is now necessary that yesterday it was true that I will wake up on May 1, 2006 before noon. (follows from 1,2)
4. Any necessary consequence of something necessary is itself necessary. (Premise)
5. For any proposition, it is a necessary consequence of the fact that the proposition was true yesterday that it is true today (and at any arbitrary future day). (Premise)
C. It is necessary that I will wake up before noon on May 1, 2006. (3,4,5)

Obviously, there is nothing special about me waking up before noon; this argument could be repeated for any future event, or any proposition about the future. So this argument seems to establish fatalism without relying on any assumptions about God or divine foreknowledge.

(Why think that premises like (2) are true? Can you argue that claims like (2) are true on the basis of the apparent fact that '*p* or not-*p*' is a logical truth? Can a claim of the form '*p* or not-*p*' be true without either '*p*' or 'not-*p*' being true?)

Some reason to doubt that this argument for logical fatalism could be sound.

If we are sure that the argument for logical fatalism is not sound, then we might try to show that the argument for theological fatalism is not sound, by trying to establish the conclusion that one argument is sound if and only if the other is. The following argument is attempt to establish this. (See Ted Warfield, "Divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible", *Nous* 31:1 for the original argument.)

The argument begins by noting that the following two propositions are consistent:

(a) I will freely eat a bag of potato chips tomorrow.

(b) It was true in 1980 that I would eat a bag of potato chips tomorrow.

(This assumes that the argument for logical fatalism is not convincing, and indeed that logical fatalism is false.)

Now note that if two propositions A and B are consistent, then, for if proposition C is equivalent to either of A or B, then it is consistent with the other one. (For our purposes, a proposition is *equivalent* to another just in case, necessarily, both are true or neither are true. Two propositions are *consistent* just in case it is possible that both be true. Given these definitions, can you see why the above principle is correct?)

One standard kind of view about God holds that God exists necessarily, and is omniscient. But if that is true, then the following two propositions are equivalent:

(b) It was true in 1980 that I would eat a bag of potato chips tomorrow.

(c) God knew in 1980 that I would eat a bag of potato chips tomorrow.

After all, for any proposition p, the following will, given that God exists necessarily and is necessarily omniscient, be equivalent:

p is true.

God knows p (at every time).

But if these (b) and (c) are equivalent, then it follows from the fact that (a) and (b) are consistent that (a) and (c) are consistent too. So the following two propositions are consistent:

(a) I will freely eat a bag of potato chips tomorrow.

(c) God knew in 1980 that I would eat a bag of potato chips tomorrow.

But then divine foreknowledge and free will are consistent, which means that theological fatalism must be false.

Is this argument convincing? Is it possible to still be a theological fatalist without being a logical fatalist? If so, how?

2 The argument from the impossibility of certain knowledge of future contingents

Immediately following the argument from the necessity of the past, Edwards presents a second argument which assumes divine foreknowledge, and tries to show on this basis that free will is impossible. He presents the argument as follows:

> "That no future event can be certainly foreknown, whose existence is contingent, and without all necessity, may be proved thus; it is impossible for a thing to be certainly known to any intellect without evidence. To suppose otherwise, implies a contradiction: because for a thing to be certainly known to any understanding, is for it to be evident to that understanding. For a thing to be evident to any understanding is the same thing, as for that understanding to see evidence of it. But no understanding, created or uncreated, can see evidence where there is none; for that is the same thing, as to see that to be which is not. And therefore, if there be any truth which is absolutely without evidence, that truth is absolutely unknowable, insomuch that it implies a contradiction to suppose that it is known.
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> But if there be any future event, whose existence is contingent, without all necessity, the future existence of the event is absolutely without evidence. If there be any evidence of it, it must be one of these two sorts, either self-evidence or proof; an evident thing must be either evident in itself; or evident in something else: that is, evident by connection with something else. But a future thing, whose existence is without all necessity, can have neither of these sorts of evidence. It cannot be self-evident: for if it be, it may be now known, by what is now to be seen in the thing itself; its present existence, or the necessity of its nature: but both these are contrary to the supposition. It is supposed, both that the thing has no present existence to be seen; and also that it is not of such a nature as to be necessarily existent for the future: so that its future existence is not self-evident. Secondly, neither is there any proof, or evidence in anything else, or evidence of connection with something else that is evident; for this is also contrary to the supposition. It is supposed that there is now nothing existent, with which the future existence of the contingent event is connected. For such a connection destroys its contingence, and supposes necessity. Thus, it is demonstrated that there is, in the nature of things, absolutely no evidence at all of the future existence of that event, which is contingent, without all necessity (if any such event there be), neither

> self-evidence nor proof. Therefore the thing in reality is not evident; and so cannot be seen to be evident, or, which is the same thing, cannot be known."

This argument has the same theme as the argument from the necessity of the past: the fact of divine foreknowledge shows that future events are not contingent, but necessary. The argument may be broken down as follows:

1. If an event is certainly known, then either there is a proof of it, or it is self-evident.
2. God has certain knowledge of future events.
3. Future events are either self-evident, or there is a proof of them. (1,2)
4. Things which are self-evident are either presently existing or exist necessarily.
5. Future events are not presently existing.
6. If future events are self-evident, they are necessary. (4,5)
7. If there is a proof of something, then it has a necessary connection to something which is self-evident.
8. If there is a proof of something, then it has a necessary connection to something which is either presently existing or exists necessarily. (7,4)
9. Anything which has a necessary connection to something which is either presently existing or exists necessarily is itself necessary.
10. If there is a proof of something, then it is necessary. (8,9)
11. If there is a proof of future events, they are necessary. (10)

C. Future events are necessary. (3,6,11)

Is this argument valid? What's the nature of the logical transition from premises (3), (6), and (11) to the conclusion?

The transition from this argument to the conclusion that if God has certain knowledge of future events, then they are necessary. Conditional proof.

Aquinas on timelessness.