



Divine Omniscience

# Overview

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Foreknowledge

Boethius

Aquinas

- It is difficult to talk about God, but maybe we can, by analogy
- Arguments for God's existence: ontological, cosmological, design, ...
- Maybe it is rational to believe in God even if we cannot demonstrate his existence
- **But then:** what can we say about God? What is God like?
  - God does not have composition
  - **God is omniscient**

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Is there knowledge in God?

- ① God has knowledge because God is perfect
  - a perfection is valuable
  - being knowledgeable is more valuable than not being knowledgeable
- ② God has knowledge because he acts freely and intelligently
- ③ God has knowledge because he is immaterial
  - knowledge is shareable and shared, so must be immaterial; knowledge and immateriality go together

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# How Does God Know?

- cannot know by sense experience
- his knowledge can't be acquired knowledge at all (unchangeable!)
- God's knowledge can't be distinguished from God
- Aquinas: God's knowledge is similar to how we have knowledge of *ourselves*: God knows himself, so knows what he is doing, and since everything is a consequence of that, he knows all other things.

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# What Does God Know?

- Can God know that it is raining *here*?
- Can God know that it is raining *now*?
- Does God know all possibilities as well, and all possible existents?
- Does God know future contingents?

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# Problem of Foreknowledge

How can God foreknow that I do *A* tomorrow and I do *A* freely tomorrow?

- **Augustine**: if God knows that I do *A* freely tomorrow, that means that I do *A* *freely* tomorrow.
- **Boethius**: God does not *foreknow* that I do *A* tomorrow; God's eternity is "simultaneously whole, all at once". Just as the knowledge of the present does not make the present necessary, God's knowledge of the future (*qua* present) does not make it necessary either.
- **Aquinas**: heavily relying on Boethius.
- **Molina**: God knows what individuals would freely do in various circumstances (*middle knowledge*)
- Open theism: God doesn't know the future, but that's okay, because the future is not knowable.

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# Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. 475–525?)

- Roman aristocrat family
- 500 Boethius enters Theodoric's service
- 503 *Rules of Arithmetic, Rules of Music*
- 510 Consul; *On Division*
- 521 *Hebdomads, On the Trinity*
- 522 Master of Offices; his sons serve as Consuls
- 523 Imprisoned; charged with treason and magic
- 523 *The Consolation of Philosophy*
- 524/5 Executed



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# The Consolation of Philosophy

A death-row dialogue with Lady Philosophy.  
Basic question: Why do bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people?

## Outline:

- 1 Boethius's problem: life is miserable
- 2 The nature of happiness
- 3 Solves the problem: providence
- 4 Addresses the problem of foreknowledge



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# Preliminaries: Chance

**Objection:** if things happen by chance, they don't happen according to providence. If they happen necessarily, then there's no free will.

**Response:**

- chance is not a random motion (since there isn't such in a well-ordered universe)
- cf. Aristotle; it is an unexpected outcome, arising from confluent causes (e.g., running into a friend in a crowded market). – This is not opposed to providence!



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## Aristotle, *Hermeneutics* 9 (tr. Ackrill)

“[I]f every affirmation or negation is true or false it is necessary for everything either to be the case or not to be the case. For if one person says that something will be and another denies this same thing, it is clearly necessary for one of them to be saying what is true; for both will not be the case together. . . . What is, necessarily is, when it is; and what is not, necessarily is not, when it is not. . . . Everything necessarily is or is not, and will be or will not be; but one cannot divide and say that one or the other’s necessary. I mean, for example: it is necessary for there to be or not be a sea-battle tomorrow; but it is not necessary for a sea-battle to take place tomorrow, nor for one not to take place.”

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# Necessity and Foreknowledge

- 1 God knows that there will be a sea-battle tomorrow. [assumption]
- 2 When someone knows  $A$  will happen, then  $A$  will happen. [self-evident]
- 3 (2) is true as a matter of necessity; it is impossible to know that which is not the case. [self-evident]
- 4 If God knows that there will be a sea-battle tomorrow, necessarily there will be a sea-battle tomorrow [2,3]
- 5 There will be a sea-battle tomorrow necessarily. [1,4]

The same argument can be run about every single contingent event or free choice; the result is that everything happens necessarily!

Boethius wants to resist this conclusion; he thinks that free will is opposed to necessity, and all rational creatures have it. He resists it by analogy with knowing the present.

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“Just as God’s existence embraces in its power everything else that exists in any way whatever. . . so too God’s understanding and what he understands embraces all knowledge and all things that can be known, and God’s will and what he wills embraces all desiring and all good things that can be desired. So that by the very fact that something is knowable he knows it, and by the very fact that something is good he wills it, just as by the very fact that something exists it is subject to his active influence” (*In Peri Herm.*, p. 281.)

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# The Problem

“But if God’s providence is the cause of everything that happens in the world. . . it seems that everything *must* happen the way it does: firstly, because he knows it and his knowledge cannot be mistaken, so what he knows must necessarily happen; and secondly, because he wills it and his will can’t be ineffective, so everything he wills, it seems, must necessarily happen.” (*In Peri Herm.*, 281)

2 problems instead of 1: foreknowledge *and* providence

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# Our knowledge vs. God's knowledge

Solution: A mind contained in time relates differently to temporal things than a mind outside time.

“If we imagine many people travelling a road, all those travelling will have knowledge of the people in front and behind them, according to their beforeness and afterness in space. . . . But if someone is outside the whole travelling situation, standing in some high tower, for example, from which he can see the whole road, then he will have a bird's-eye view of every traveller.”  
(*In Peri Herm.*, 281–282.)

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# God's knowledge

“God's knowing. . . is altogether outside time, as if he stands on the summit of eternity where everything exists together, looking down in a single simple glance on the whole course of time.” (*In Peri Herm.*, 282)



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# God's Knowledge and Contingency

“[God] sees things altogether eternally, each as it exists in its own time, just as our own human eye sees John sitting there himself, not just as something determined by causes. Nor does our seeing John sitting there stop it being an event that might not have been when regarded just in relation to its causes. . . . In this way then God knows everything that happens in time with certainty and without doubt, and yet things that happen in time are not things that must exist . . . but things that might or might not be.” (*In Peri Herm.*, 282)

Both Boethius and Aquinas thinks that the mode of knowing depends on the *knower* and not on the object known.

- we know things as temporal
- God knows things as from outside of time
- Does this solve the problem?

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