



Divine Omniscience

Overview

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- Introduction

- Boethius

- Aquinas

Is religious faith rational, or can it be?

- It is difficult to talk about God (perhaps we can, by analogy)
- What does it take a belief to be rational? Does it need sufficient evidence? If yes, what counts as sufficient evidence? If not, can we believe what we will?
 - Arguments for God's existence: ontological, cosmological, design, ... – if these work, that would count as sufficient evidence
- Maybe it is rational to believe in God even if we cannot demonstrate his existence, and even then this belief would not be completely arbitrary
- Or maybe: religious belief is irrational if it leads to absurdities.
 - or that evil negates God's existence
 - e.g., you may think that divine foreknowledge leads to denying human freedom

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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

So, what's the problem?

- 1 Suppose you will eat pizza for dinner tonight.
 - 2 If you eat pizza for dinner tonight, God knows (and has known from eternity) that you will eat pizza for dinner tonight.
 - 3 Therefore, God knows (and has known from eternity) that you will eat pizza for dinner tonight. [1,2]
 - 4 If God knows something, it cannot be otherwise. [obvious]
 - 5 Therefore, your eating pizza for dinner tonight cannot be otherwise. [3,5]
- ∴ You necessarily eat pizza for dinner tonight.

If this argument is sound, it can be run for every single human action → you do everything necessarily!

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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.”

- Aristotle could say that future propositions don’t have truth values.

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Problem of Foreknowledge

If the argument is sound, it can be run for every single human action → you do everything necessarily!

So, what can we do?

- 1 You can use it as an argument against divine foreknowledge and in turn against God's existence. (If God exists, he is omniscient; if God is omniscient, he knows the future; if God knows the future, then we do everything necessarily; but we do *not* do everything necessarily, therefore, God does not exist.)
- 2 Perhaps you can deny that omniscience implies knowledge of the future.
- 3 You can deny that foreknowledge implies necessity – **reconciliatory attempts**

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Reconciliatory Attempts

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.
- **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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Necessity and Foreknowledge

Boethius is aware of the Sea-Battle passage and the argument:

- 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.

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- “All that is known is known. . . through the nature of those who apprehend it.” (Consolations, V.6)
- God's eternity is the “total and perfect possession of life without end” (ibid.), in which everything is present.
- Thus, God knows everything as being present.
- The fact that I know that Peter is sitting right now, does not mean that Peter is sitting necessarily right now.
- Similarly, the fact that God knows that you'll eat pizza for dinner tonight, does not mean that you will eat pizza necessarily tonight.

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Cf. Aquinas: our knowledge and God's knowledge differ; a mind contained in time relates differently to temporal things than a mind outside time.

In Peri Herm., 281–282.

“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.”

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God's knowledge

In Peri Herm., 282

“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.”



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- Both Boethius and Aquinas think that the mode of knowing depends on the *knower* and not on the object known – is this plausible?
- We know things as temporal, but God knows them as eternal – does this solve the problem?
- Is Boethius (or Aquinas) presupposing a particular theory of time? If so, what, and is that theory plausible?

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