

---

# THE HUMAN FREEDOM AND GOD FOREKNOWLEDGE A STUDY FROM THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY<sup>†</sup>

Constantin Popescu\*

*Theological School in Craiova, Pascani 9A, Craiova, Romania*

(Received 28 February 2013, revised 12 September 2013)

---

## Abstract

The debates between human freedom and God's foreknowledge are still in place. This article is an essay which tries to present the main arguments used by philosophers and theologians in these debates. The different opinions are analysed in terms of their various supporters, trying to clarify their points of view. However, this debate is far from being resolved and the space does not permit an extensive approach, the remaining issues requiring further clarifications.

*Keywords:* predestination, freewill, determinism, human free choice, omniscience

---

## 1. Introduction

One of the topics presented in the Philosophy of religion and the philosophical theology is the relationship between human freedom and God's foreknowledge. On this relationship have been accumulating many logical, semantic, epistemological, moral and, ultimately, ontological difficulties and questions. For those questions and difficulties were suggested different answers and solutions. The analysis of the relationship between human freedom and divine foreknowledge implicitly or explicitly assumes the research of different definitions and concepts on freedom, the way of understanding divine omniscience, the distinction between predestination and foreknowledge, the relationship between divine foreknowledge and human responsibilities, the way of understanding divine eternity etc.

## 2. Determinism, indeterminism, freewill and predestination

In the history of Philosophy, in general, and in the philosophical theology in particular, have been elaborated different concepts on the

---

<sup>†</sup> The Romanian version of this article was published in *Jurnalul Libertatii de Constiinta*, Editura Universitara, Bucharest, 2013.

\* E-mail: popcon1953@yahoo.com

relationship between determinism and human freedom or human free will. Hard determinism assumes that all the events, including human actions, are determined or caused by antecedent conditions. The present is determined by the past. If we know the natural laws and the antecedent conditions we could predict what would happen. People consider themselves free only because they are aware of many of their actions. But the presence or absence of consciousness in hard determinism is not related to human freedom. Hard determinism is presented as physical and psychological determinism. Physical determinism considers that any choice or decision is determined by certain mental states that depend on some states of the brain determined by antecedent physical factors. Psychological determinism considers that all psychical states and events are caused by antecedent psychical states and events. So, antecedent psychical acts along with psychical laws determine every thought, decision and act of a person. From the perspective of hard determinism not only each of our decisions and actions are the product of antecedent factors but also, in some ways, our mind, personality and character that determine emotions, feelings, values, needs etc. So, for the supporters of hard determinism, what we experiment like freedom is only an illusion. But hard determinism is rejected by many philosophers who consider that: "The solution to our belief that we have free will is consciousness in the sense of experience, as Searle describes it, of the intentional voluntary human action. It is not enough to show that we are able to reach toward a decision as a result of engaging in rational thought, there must be knowledge in the sense that we have the possibility of experiential alternative modes of action." [1] Believing that we are free to do something else, this is the source of our firm belief in our own freedom or free will.

Indeterminism considers that free will and determinism are incompatible, but it accepts free will as a reality and rejects determinism in human existence. Our actions could be influenced by physical and psychical conditions, but they are not predictable because we have the freedom to choose. Although the conditions could predispose us to do 'y', we can always do 'x'. But if we consider that any event is undetermined we cannot be free because we cannot predict with any of certitude and we are forced to live in absolute incertitude and so we could not be free because we cannot transform our actions in useful results, obtaining what we have intended. To be free means that I have the possibility to act or decide freely on what I will do and once I have decided on something, this decision has a predictable result. It follows that determinism is necessary in understanding the notions of freedom and responsibility. Determinism in itself does not challenge freedom, but only a certain type of causality. For an action to be free, it has to be caused or determined by a familiar psychical cause discovered in our desires, beliefs, fears and intentions. It is possible for us to offer a psychological explanation for all our actions, or they would not be our actions. Still, it seems weird to think that everything we do is determined by our circumstances and psychical conditions. To be responsible for our actions does not make any sense if they

are not determined. This is the perspective of soft determinism or compatibilism. So, the philosophers who support soft determinism consider that the argument by which free will and determinism are incompatible is based on a confusion related to what we understand when we say that we are free. Freedom is incompatible with fatalism, but not with determinism and universal causation because among the factors that determine our actions are our own desires and choices.

For hard determinism, human actions are not different from the events of the natural world which are explained with deductive necessity by subsuming them to the universal laws. Compatibilism is not denying, in general, the causality, but it rejects the mechanical causality. So, hard determinism accepts determinism but rejects free will, while indeterminism rejects determinism but accepts free will, and soft determinism or compatibilism accepts determinism and free will.

Determinism, in general, and hard determinism in particular should be differentiated from fatalism and predestination. Fatalism is a doctrine by which some or probably all the events are irrevocably established and human action has no influence over them. Also, we should distinguish between determinism and predestination. The doctrine of predestination considers that everything that should happen was decided by God from the beginning, without taking into account the human choices. Different from fatalism and predestination, determinism involve a conditional assertion: 'If A, then B'. No event is inevitable. It depends on some antecedent conditions. Only then we can be sure that the event will take place.

Over the centuries, the relations between divine predestination and foreknowledge and human freedom and responsibility received different answers depending on how these concepts were understood. There are at least two models in understanding the concept or idea of human freedom. According to the first one, to act free means to do what you want or choose to do. Understanding freedom this way does not raise any problems regarding the relation between human freedom and divine predestination. In this case, there is no real conflict between the doctrine of divine predestination and human freedom. But this understanding of human freedom was rejected by English philosopher John Locke who gives us one as presented by William L. Rowe [2]. We could assume that a person has been moved into this room while he was sleeping. The door which is the only way out is firmly closed on the outside. The person does not know that the door is closed and he could not get out of the room. He wakes up in the room and finds some friendly individuals who would like to talk. Therefore he decides to stay in the room rather than leave it. The question which rises is if this man has been free in his decision to stay. All he wants is to stay in the room! He considers leaving the room and does not know that he could not leave, but he rejects this option because he prefers staying in the room and having friendly conversations with the individuals who are there. But few are thinking that staying in the room is something that he does freely. In fact, staying in the room it is the only thing

he could do. He is staying in the room from necessity, because it is not in his power to leave the room. For John Locke freedom is more than somebody doing what he wants or chooses to do [2]. An individual is free if he has the power to act different from what he chooses or wants to do. Human freedom, understood in this sense, means that we act freely if in the moment just before acting is in our power to act different. This idea on freedom comes into conflict with the idea of divine predestination. Surely, if God determined that something would happen from eternity, it will happen and it is not in the power of a creature to prevent it to happen. So, if God decided from eternity everything, then it nothing that occurs could be stopped from happening. This means that human freedom is incompatible with divine predestination. This is why some philosophers consider that we have to abandon either our belief in human freedom or the doctrine of divine predestination.

### **3. Human free will and divine omniscience**

Taking into account these reasons William L. Rowe shows that “God has ultimate control over the destiny of his creation and that he knows in advance of its happening, everything that will happen are ideas that preserve the majesty of God and provide for some degree of human optimism, without requiring that God has decreed to happen whatever does happen.” [2, p.165]

In that case it seems like the doctrine of divine foreknowledge is not in conflict with human freedom. So, the most reasonable solution is to reject the dogma of divine predestination and support human freedom and the doctrine on God’s foreknowledge. Of course, deciding or predestining that something would happen at a certain moment could be a way by which God knows what will happen but, Rowe argues, this is not the only way God could know beforehand that something would come to happen. God knows the future in advance through His foreknowledge, and not through predestination. In this case the doctrine on God’s foreknowledge does not include predestination. But it could be a problem if we related divine foreknowledge with human freedom and it is not surprising that a many theologians and philosophers suggest different ways of resolving this problem.

The analysis of the relation between divine foreknowledge and human freedom implies the research of the nature or attribute of God, His omniscience and His relation with time. Among the suggested solutions we mention the following:

- a. God is temporal, which means that He exists in time and thus He does not know the future because the future has not taken place yet. By accepting this solution the temporal God loses His omniscience and, in accordance with the definition accepted by many believers, He ceases being God.
- b. For other theologians God is timeless. Thomas Aquinas is one of those who support this idea and for him God’s omniscience is timeless, God knowing the past, the present and the future [3]. He knows the results of my free choices of the future but He does not determine them, He is not

their cause, thus God stays omniscient and I stay free. This looks like a coherent argument in spite of the fact that it includes some difficulties. Bryan Davies presents the conditions for our choices to be free if they are known by God [4]. In order to clarify this situation it is necessary to distinguish between the necessity *de dicto* and necessity *de re*. Based on this distinction we could state that the idea of God knowing our free actions does not imply any contradictions and there is no conflict between divine omniscience and human freedom.

- c. Another supported idea is that God has two natures: one nature is transcendent and thus timeless while the other one is immanent and thus temporal. S. Tyler and G. Read present this idea and they try to solve the apparent conflict [5]. The timeless God remains omniscient and, from a moral perspective, I could be free. A temporal God could probably interact with human beings, but He would be limited in knowing the past and the future.

Let's admit that God infallibly knows the future. It would seem that such knowledge, considers Linda Zagzebski, would be enough to deprive human beings of free will according to the following simple 'fatalist theological' argument:

1. Suppose that a hundred years ago God infallibly believed that university courses will begin next fall on day x.
2. Necessarily (inevitably), if a hundred years ago God thought that classes would begin on day x, the courses begin on x.
3. It is inevitable that a hundred years ago God thought that classes would begin on day x.
4. If it is inevitable and necessarily that p (if p then q), then it is inevitable that courses begin on day x.
5. So it is inevitable that courses begin on day x.
6. If it is inevitable that courses begin on day x, the moment when courses begin is not a free human choice.
7. So the beginning of the courses is not a free human choice [6].

The premise (2) results from the assumption (1) that God believes in an infallible way. This means that one's faith or belief that is necessarily infallible is true. So if anyone is infallible then necessarily, if he has a belief, that belief constitutes knowledge. The premise (3) shows Linda Zagzebski, is a form of the principle of the necessity of the past which allows to transfer the principle of inevitability, as shown by the premise (4). The notion of inevitability is somewhat vague but it has the same meaning when we say that both the past and the future are inevitable. We do not have more power over the future than we have over the past. Thus, we have no freedom or free will in the sense of including the power to choose between alternative events.

Thinkers who support the incompatibility between the infallible foreknowledge and human freedom will consider that this argument shows that either God has no infallible foreknowledge or human beings have no freedom or free will. The argument is rejected by the supporters of compatibilism but,

as this argument is valid in terms of formal logic, the compatibilists must show that at least one of the premises is false.

We find one of the answers offered by the supporters of compatibilism at Boethius and Thomas Aquinas who claim that because God is timeless He does not know *ad litteram* nothing from the past, so the premise (1) is false. God knows everything that is to be known, including anything from our past, present and future and God knows infallible, but God did not know it a hundred years ago.

So, the dilemma of divine foreknowledge and human freedom receives different solutions based on our understanding of God's eternity. God's eternity can be understood as being a temporal infinity in both directions, past and future, or it can be understood as timelessness, meaning that the divine being exists outside of time, independent from the fundamental law of time, according to which the life of any being, even that of an eternal being is divided into temporal fragments. But according to Thomas Aquinas and other theologians and philosophers who say that God is timeless, nothing happens without being known by God [3]. God's knowledge on what we consider to be past and future is similar to our knowledge regarding something that takes place in the present. By being above time, God has an overall picture of the time, just like we, who are in time, can watch something that takes place in the present. Presenting the problem of God's foreknowledge, Boethius says: "... His knowledge, also transcending all movement of time, dwells in the simplicity of its own changeless present, and, embracing the whole infinite sweep of the past and of the future, contemplates all that falls within its simple cognition as if it were now taking place. And therefore, if thou wilt carefully consider that immediate presentment whereby it discriminates all things, thou wilt more rightly deem it not foreknowledge as of something future, but knowledge of a moment that never passes. For this cause the name chosen to describe it is not prevision, but providence, because, since utterly removed in nature from things mean and trivial, its outlook embraces all things as from some lofty height." [7]

According to Boethius, God does not foresee because He is not in a position to know something before it appears. And yet, God knows everything that has existed, exists and will exist. But God knows whatever has happened, happens and will happen just how we know what happens in the present. For a better understanding of the concept of Boethius, Rowe considers necessary to distinguish two meanings of foreknowledge: foreknowledge (1) and foreknowledge (2) [2]. A being foreknows an event  $x$  only if  $x$  occurs and at that moment he knows that  $x$  will occur at a later time. If God is timeless He cannot have such foreknowledge because He does not exist at some point in time, but He is outside of time. A being foreknows (2) an event  $x$  only if  $x$  is present for that person, but only if its occurrence is at a later time than the moment at which we (who are in time) *now* exist (in present). Since God is timeless he cannot have foreknowledge (1) to any event, but this does not

exclude the possibility that God may have a foreknowledge (2) of all events that should yet to pass in terms of their existence in time.

So premise (1) is false regarding God's relationship with time and God's infallibility. Linda Zagzebski believes that this answer transforms the dilemma of foreknowledge and human free will in the dilemma of timeless knowledge and free will. In this case, assumption (3) should be reformulated as follows: (3') it is inevitable for God to timelessly think that classes begin on day  $x$  [6, p. 267].

If the past is beyond our control then much more timelessness is beyond our control. We cannot prevent past to be what it was. Also, we cannot prevent timelessness from being what it is, timeless.

Another solution to get out of this situation was given by Ockham. He considered that what we consider to be past is not as clear as we might think. Many sentences are literally about the past, but they are partly about future. For example, when the logical fatalist argued that the truth about the contingent future implies the necessity of the future, a crucial prerequisite is that we cannot do anything about the past true past of the sentence. Classes will start on day  $x$  because we cannot do anything about the past. But the fact that that something would happen in the future was true in the past is not a fact in the hard past. It is a fact that is partly in the past and partly in the future. This happens because the actual beginning of courses in a given day in the future constitutes the proof that a particular sentence was true in the past. In this sense, something that happens in the future influences or affects something that is true in the past. Similarly to Ockham, the fact that God infallibly believed in the past that the courses will begin in a certain day in the future is a fact that is partly of the future [8].

So, Ockham distinguishes between two kinds of facts related to the past: facts about the past and facts not simply about the past. For a better understanding of this distinction we will use the following example of Rowe.

“Let us consider two facts about the past, facts about 1941.

$f_1$ : In 1941 Japan attacks Pearl Harbor.

$f_2$ : In 1941 a war begins between Japan and United States that lasts four years.

Relative to the twenty-first century,  $f_1$  and  $f_2$  are both *simply*, about the past. But suppose we consider the year 1943. Relative to 1943,  $f_1$  is a fact that is simply about the past, but  $f_2$  is not simply about the past. It is a fact about the past relative to 1943, for  $f_2$  is, in part, a fact about 1941, and 1941 lies in 1943's past. But  $f_2$  unlike  $f_1$  implies a certain fact about 1944 – namely,

$f_3$ : In 1944 Japan and United states are at war.

Since  $f_2$  implies  $f_3$ , a fact about the future relative to 1943 we can say that relative to 1943  $f_2$  is a fact about the past but not simply about the past. We have then three facts,  $f_1$ ,  $f_2$  and  $f_3$ , about we can say that relative to the twenty-first century each is a fact simply about the past. Relative to 1943, however, only  $f_1$  is simply about the past;  $f_2$  is about the past but not simply about the past, and  $f_3$  is not about the past at all.

Having illustrated the distinction between a fact which relative to a certain time  $t$ , is simply about the past and the fact which, relative to  $t$ , is not simply about the past, we are now in the position to appreciate its importance. Let us think of 1943 and the groups of persons then in power in both Japan and the United States. Neither group had it in its power to do anything about  $f_1$ . Both groups may have regretted the actions which brought it about that  $f_1$  is in fact about the past. But it is abundantly clear that among all the things which, in 1943, it was in their power to do, none is such that, had they done it,  $f_1$  would not have been the fact about the past. It makes no sense to look back upon 1943 and say that if only one of these groups had *then* done such-and-such,  $f_1$  would never have been a fact about the past. It makes no sense precisely because relative to 1943  $f_1$  is a fact *simply* about the past. Nothing that could have been done by anyone in 1943 would have in any way affected the fact that in 1943 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.” [2, p. 171-172]

The example mentioned shows that our belief that the past is beyond our power of influence is certainly true, but only regarding the facts simply about the past. Facts that are about the past, but not simply about the past may not be beyond our power to influence. And what Ockham said is that the facts about God’s foreknowledge used in denying human freedom are facts about the past, but not simply about the past.

Therefore it could be argued that if (1) human beings can influence the fact that a sentence was true in the past and (2)  $p$  being true in the past is a necessary condition for God to infallibly believe  $p$  in the past, then (3) human forces can influence the fact that God infallibly  $p$  in the past. Both past truth and past infallible faith are not entirely past, which means they are not hard past.

But many philosophers do not accept this approach because it tries to accurately distinguish hard past from soft past and because such an approach is intuitively strange. A better approach would be to interpret the *inevitable* in the premise (3) as a necessity of the past which applies to God’s past beliefs and to the principle of the transfer valid of its form (4). Another objection concerns the assumption (6) that it considers to be false. Other thinkers believe that we can argue God’s omniscience even if we reject the infallible foreknowledge. But if God does not have an infallible foreknowledge then He is not omniscient, although God may still be omniscient. The doctrine of omniscience must be understood as meaning that an omniscient being knows not only all true sentences but it also knows what is true about any kind of creature and even about every individual creature. However, in considering omniscience we must include the idea that God knows counterfactual sentences like (CF). If  $C$  would be in circumstances  $S$ , then  $C$  would be free to do  $X$ . There are this kind of true counterfactuals for every possible free creature and every possible circumstance that creature could find itself in. If there are true sentences like (CF), then a divine being will know them. Some philosophers argue that such knowledge may be more important for God’s providence than for His foreknowledge.



Referring to well-known thinkers in the history of philosophy of religion we find that Saint Augustine says there is no incompatibility between God's omniscience and human free will, arguing that what God knows before is that we will act freely [9]. God knows what choices and decisions we make, but He does not determine those decisions. Although God is omniscient, the punishment He gives to those who err is given precisely because they are responsible for their actions. Boethius, interpreting the divine eternity as timelessness, shows how we must understand the concept of foreknowledge [7].

Levi Gersonide considers that God is omniscient, knowing all things as they are [10]. According to Gersonide God knows the general laws governing the world, but he also admits that some future events, notably, human choices - are contingent that they may occur or may not occur. God does not know, as some authors claim, the choices we will make because they are unknowable, but he is still omniscient because God knows everything that can be known. Alvin Plantinga emphasizes Ockham's merit in distinguishing between the acts of the hard past and soft past and arguing this distinction in understanding human freedom and responsibility for our actions [8, p. 25].

#### **4. Conclusions**

From those already mentioned different solutions on the relationship between divine knowledge and human freedom have been advanced both in the past and in the present. From a theistic perspective, no thinker denies the doctrine on foreknowledge or the doctrine on human freedom. But some theist thinkers, as we have seen, deny that God foresees future events, especially regarding free human choices. The solution given through divine foreknowledge does not imply that it is never in our power to act different, corresponding to the understanding on God's eternity as being temporal infinite in two directions, the past and the future. In this case, God knows in advance, but as far as we act freely, we do not have the power to influence some facts about the past. If we consider that God's foreknowledge does not imply that it is never in our power to do something different and that God does not foresee future events, then whether we hold that God is timeless or temporal infinite in both directions, the problem of the relation between divine foreknowledge and human freedom is not unsolvable for theism [2].

In the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, God tells Israel: "I call Heaven and Earth ... that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life that both you and your descendants may live". (Deuteronomy 30.19)

Steven M. Cahn wonders if God knew what the people of Israel would choose [11]. God, giving them a genuine choice, seems to not know what the people would choose. Cahn considers that this argument is convincing, but many thinkers believed it to be wrong. Cahn answers objections to this method of reasoning brought by Saint Augustine, Boethius, Maimonides, etc. Taking

into consideration or giving an answer to Cahn's conclusions, if we accept that God is omniscient it means that God knows the entire physical structure of the universe, but He is not aware of the outcome of free will. Levi Gersonide shows that: "...the fact that God does not have the knowledge of which possible outcome will be realized does not imply any defect in God (missing). For perfect knowledge of something is the knowledge of what that thing is in reality. Hence, God knows these things in the best manner possible..." [10]

In other words, when God offered to the people of Israel both life and death, though God is omniscient, He did not know what choice the people would make. God has seen all that is to be known, or cognoscible about the whole truth, but the whole truth is that choosing life or death is up to the people of Israel. The people were responsible for their decision. God had been waited but He could not predict the result of their exercise of freedom [11, p. 19].

Cahn admits that some passages from the Bible may suggest the opposite of what he has argued – that God knows the future and not all its details, including the outcome of our future free choices. If such textual evidence were presented, we could answer: "When the Torah interpreted literally seems to be in conflict with the doctrines determined by reason, we ought to interpret these passages in accordance with the philosophical understanding so that none of the fundamental principles of the Torah is destroyed" [10, p. 15].

## References

- [1] S.B. Greetham, *Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, 244.
- [2] W.L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion, an Introduction*, Thomson Wadsworth, Belmont, 2007, 163.
- [3] T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Christian Classics, Westminster, 1981, 132.
- [4] B. Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, 33.
- [5] S.K. Tyler and G. Reid, *Religious Studies*, Philip Allan Updates, Deddington, 2008, 200.
- [6] L. Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, 266.
- [7] A. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy. Book 5. Prose 6*, English translation, New York Library of Liberal Art, New York, 1962, 116, online at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/boethius/consolation/book5.html>.
- [8] A. Plantinga, *On Ockham's Way Out*, in *Philosophy of Religion. The Big Questions*, E.S. & M.J. Murray (eds.), Blackwell, Oxford, 2006, 13.
- [9] Saint Augustine, *God's Foreknowledge and Free will*, in *Exploring Philosophy of Religion*, S.M. Cahn (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, 11.
- [10] L. Ghersonides, *God's Omniscience and Contingent Events*, in *Exploring Philosophy of Religion*, S.M. Cahn (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, 14.
- [11] S. M. Cahn, *Does God Know the Future?*, in *Exploring Philosophy of Religion*, S.M. Cahn (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, 16.