

DIVINE OMNISCIENCE & HUMAN FREEDOM

This essay will dissect the argument for atheism of the logical problem of divine omniscience and human freedom in three parts. First, we will reconstruct a simplified version of the argument suggested by Nelson Pike¹ and reformulate it as a logical inconsistency. Second, we will do our best to find solutions to the apparent logical inconsistency. Third, we will weight the evidence for and against the argument to evaluate how successful our solutions were at refuting the initial argument.

RECONSTRUCTING THE ARGUMENT

The most straight forward way to understand the basis of an argument is often to start with a concrete example. In class, we used the example of Calvin, from Calvin and Hobbes, shoveling snow in his driveway to illustrate Pike's argument². It goes something like this. Calvin shovels snow on January 1, 2022. God is all-knowing (including knowledge of the future). God existed before January 1, 2022. Thus, God knew that Calvin was going to shovel the snow on January 1, 2022. Saying that God knows something is equivalent to saying that God believes something, and that this thing is true (because God cannot believe false things). Or as Pike says that "any statement of the form 'A knows X' entails a statement of the form 'A believes X' as well as a statement of the form 'X is true'"³. Given that God knew that Calvin was going to shovel the snow and that

¹ Michael Peterson and Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 144-148.

² Melissa Frankel, *Divine Omniscience and Human Freedom*, Carleton University, Philosophy of Religion Lecture, winter semester 2022.

³ Michael Peterson and Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 144-148, 147.

knowledge implies truth, then Calvin couldn't have avoided shovelling the snow. In other words, Calvin was not free, in the Libertarian sense⁴, to do otherwise.

We could generalize this example to all events in the future by replacing the agents and dates by arbitrary placeholders. However, a cleaner way to express Pike's argument is to lay it out as a logical inconsistency between the following three claims:

1. God knows everything (omniscience) including the future (foreknowledge).
2. To know X means that X is true (i.e., knowledge entails truth).
3. Human actions are free in the sense that they could have been otherwise (libertarian free will).

The three claims above being logically inconsistent implies that they cannot all be true at the same time. At least one of the three claims must be false. There are two general approaches to tackling a logical inconsistency⁵. The first is to argue that the inconsistency is not genuine and that the claims can in fact co-exist. The second is to accept the logical inconsistency and drop or modify at least one of the claims.

A proper example of using the first approach is to say that God's apparent hiddenness is reconcilable with God's omnibenevolence by arguing that it might be a necessary condition for us to develop virtues. In our case, Pike's argument makes a strong case for the validity of the logical inconsistency. It appears to be difficult to argue against the logic that if God knows X is going to happen and knowledge entails truth, then X must happen, and it could not have been otherwise.

⁴ Melissa Frankel, *Theodicy and Divine Freedom*, Carleton University, Philosophy of Religion Lecture, winter semester 2022.

⁵ Melissa Frankel, *The Logical Problem Of Evil: Theodicy*, Carleton University, Philosophy of Religion Lecture, winter semester 2022.

Thus, the only viable option to resolve the genuine logical inconsistency is to drop or modify at least one of the three claims.

Knowledge implies truth (claim 2) seems to be true by definition (a priori) and therefore can be assumed to hold for the rest of our analysis. The claim that God is all-knowing (claim 1) is one of the three main divine attributes (along with omnipotence and omnibenevolence)⁶. Omniscience and the other divine attributes can be derived from Descartes' notion of God as a "supremely perfect being."⁷ Perfection in this case is roughly defined as a quality that is better to have than not to have⁸. According to Descartes, having more knowledge is good. As a result, a supremely perfect being must have maximal knowledge (including knowledge of the future). It appears that the first two claims are solid if you accept the existence of God (which theists do by definition). As a result, the third claim is to be dropped or modified for theists to resolve the logical inconsistency.

Giving up libertarian freedom (claim 3) is problematic for most theists because it challenges the notion of divine justice. If human actions are pre-determined (could not have done otherwise), then it would be unjust for God to differentially reward some unfree agents and punish others. It appears unjust that some people go to heaven while others go to jail given that they all lacked the ability to deviate from their destiny. This lack of divine justice seems non-compossible with God's omnibenevolence. This poses a serious problem for theists.

⁶ Melissa Frankel, *Attributes and Negative Theology*, Carleton University, Philosophy of Religion Lecture, winter semester 2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Melissa Frankel, *Ontological Arguments*, Carleton University, Philosophy of Religion Lecture, winter semester 2022.

OBJECTIONS

If we accept Pike's argument and take the problem of divine omniscience and human freedom as a genuine logical inconsistency, then we must challenge the truth of at least one of the claims. Starting with claim 3, we can redefine human freedom as the ability to "will" the actions that we take instead of being able to do otherwise. With this new definition, a human is said to act freely when they want to do, choose to do, or will a specific action. That is to say that humans are free to interpret their actions as they wish. This new restriction on human freedom doesn't seem to solve the logical inconsistency given God's foreknowledge. Following Pike's logic, God knows everything in the future including one's thoughts. God would know in advance what one's chooses to will and how one interprets a given behaviour. Thus, we would not be free to have willed differently than what resided in God's foreknowledge prior to the event.

Alternatively, one can pick at claim 2 and say that God's foreknowledge of an event is different from God being the cause of the event. For example, we might have foreknowledge (with high likelihood at least) that the sun is going to rise tomorrow without being the cause of the sun rise. This approach attempts to link human freedom to the ability to cause one's actions. Causation doesn't appear to be a sufficient condition for freedom. The moon might cause the tides to "go in and go out"⁹ but it isn't satisfactory to say that the moon is free given it seems to strictly obey the laws of physics. Likewise, human beings appear to obey the laws of physics without the ability to deviate from their unfolding. Nelson Pike foresaw this criticism and said that "the argument makes no mention of the causes" and that "the argument outlined above remains unaffected"¹⁰.

⁹ Melissa Frankel, *Cosmological Arguments*, Carleton University, Philosophy of Religion Lecture, winter semester 2022.

¹⁰ Michael Peterson and Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 144-148, 146.

We can also target claim 1 and try to redefine omniscience to solve to logical problem. We can restrict omniscience to knowing all the knowable facts. Perhaps there are no knowable facts about the future. In this view, God would still be omniscient although God can't predict the future. This would allow for human actions to be free in the libertarian sense since we could do something other than God's predictions. God may only know the underlying probabilities of events occurring without knowing the definite outcome. For example, we know the long-term probability that a dice will land on any given side, but we can't predict the outcome of an individual role. Similarly, God may have complete knowledge of the underlying laws of physics without being able to predict the future given the true randomness built in the fabric of reality.

WEIGHTING THE EVIDENCE

In my opinion, restricting God's omniscience to knowing all the knowable things is the best objection to the logical problem of divine omniscience and human freedom. It is a similar solution to Thomas Aquinas' restriction on omnipotence offered in response to the riddle of logic and mathematics¹¹. This restriction on omniscience relies on the future being unknowable. This certainly seems to be true given our human perspective and our current inability to accurately predict the weather for more than a few days in advance. According to Pike, it "would be a mistake to think that commitment to determinism is an unavoidable implication of the Christian concept of divine omniscience"¹². However, the fact that the future may be unknowable doesn't automatically imply that human consciousness can break the laws of physics. Sure, Calvin may or may not shovel the snow on January 1, 2022, but the outcome could be purely determined by the laws of physics just like the motion of the moon. Why is it that we consider Calvin in this case as

¹¹ Melissa Frankel, *Divine Omnipotence*, Carleton University, Philosophy of Religion Lecture, winter semester 2022.

¹² Michael Peterson and Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 144-148, 148.

a free individual and the moon as an unfree entity strictly obeying the laws of physics? Perhaps we think of Calvin and the moon as separate given our subjective sense of being able to decide and influence the course of our lives. Giving up God's foreknowledge may make room for events to unfold randomly, but it doesn't guarantee that what have the same level of agency that is often implied by libertarian free will.

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