

Providence,
predestination, &
foreknowledge

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The next passage in the Creed we'll discuss is the claim that Christ came down from heaven "for us men and for our salvation."

This passage raises two philosophical issues. The first is the more specific issue of how and why Christ's becoming man could be relevant to our salvation; we'll be turning to that topic in the next few weeks. The second is the more general issue of the extent to which God controls the world and, in so doing, provides for our salvation. This is the topic of the extent and nature of **divine providence**:

Creation has its own goodness and proper perfection, but it did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. ... We call "divine providence" the dispositions by which God guides his creation toward this perfection: By his providence God protects and governs all things which he has made ... For "all are open and laid bare to his eyes," even those things which are yet to come into existence through the free action of creatures. ... The witness of Scripture is unanimous that the solicitude of divine providence is concrete and immediate; God cares for all, from the least things to the great events of the world and its history. (§§303-4)

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What does divine providence involve? The passage from the Catechism suggests that it involves at least the following two things:

Foreknowledge: God knows what will happen in the future.

Control: God controls what will happen in the future.

The philosophical problem of providence is then, basically, to explain how these two conditions — Foreknowledge and Control — could obtain.

A good way into the difficulties to which this question leads is to look at some of the different — and apparently conflicting — things that Aquinas says on this topic.

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Moreover, this leads to surprising results regarding the nature of salvation. If it is true that some people after death go to heaven and some to hell, doesn't it follow from Aquinas' view that God determines that some people go to hell?

He orders all things, no matter how detailed they may appear; and whatever things perform any action, they act instrumentally, as moved by Him. And they obediently serve as His ministers in order to unfold in things the order of providence, which has been thought out, as I might say, from eternity. But, if all things able to act must serve as ministers to Him in their actions, it is impossible for any agent to block the execution of divine providence by acting in opposition to it. Nor is it possible for divine providence to be hindered by the defect of any agent or patient (*SCG 94*)

It might surprise you to learn that Aquinas' answer seems to be, simply, 'Yes':

Here Aquinas seems to be saying that everything that happens happens because of the will of God. And that apparently includes the actions of human agents. Human beings act "instrumentally", and our actions are "moved by" God – so it looks like we are caused to act as we do by God.

So, since we have shown that some men are directed by divine working to their ultimate end as aided by grace, while others who are deprived of the same help of grace fall short of their ultimate end ... the aforementioned differentiation of men must be ordered by God from eternity. According, then, as He has preordained some men from eternity, so that they are directed to their ultimate end, He is said to have predestined them. ... On the other hand, those to whom He has decided from eternity not to give His grace He is said to have reprobated or to have hated ... (*SCG 163*)

But, one might think, this leads to a problem. If all of our actions are caused by God, doesn't this deprive us of any real responsibility for our actions?

This seems to many to simply contradict the view that God is just. How could it be just to pre-ordain that certain people go to hell?

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We might sum up the view of providence we get from Aquinas in these passages as follows:

Determination: For every contingent state of affairs S , God causally determines that S obtains.

But, one might think, this leads to a problem. If all of our actions are caused by God, doesn't this deprive us of any real responsibility for our actions?

If Determination is true, this makes it easy to see how Foreknowledge and Control could be true. Determination just expresses a maximally strong way in which God might control the future; and if God brings about every contingent state of affairs, it is easy to see how God could know what will happen in the future: this is just a matter of God knowing what God will cause to happen.

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At other times, though, Aquinas seems to shy away from endorsing Determination; unsurprisingly, this happens most often when Aquinas is discussing issues pertaining to freedom of the will.

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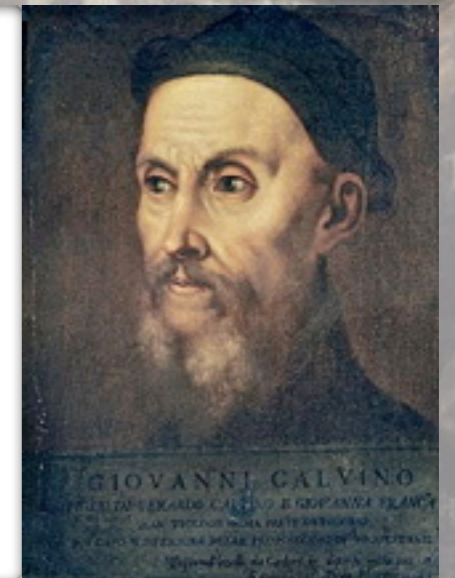
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But there certainly are passages supporting it in prominent members of the Catholic tradition like Aquinas and Augustine. Determination is also one of the distinctive tenets of Calvinist Protestantism; the 16th century theologian John Calvin put the doctrine like this:

Moreover, every sin stems from a defect in the proximate agent, and not from the influence of the primary agent ... But the proximate agent of human sin is the will. Therefore, the defect of sin comes from the will of man and not from God Who is the primary agent; from Him, however, comes whatever pertains to perfection of action in the sinful act. (*SCG 162*)

... what is called providence describes God, not as idly beholding from heaven the transactions which happen in the world, but as holding the helm of the universe, and regulating all events. Thus it belongs no less to his hands than to his eyes. (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ch. xvi)



Aquinas seems to say here that sinful action is “not from God.” But given that it is contingent fact that I perform some sinful action, this is hard to square with Determination.

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Because of passages like this, it is unclear whether Aquinas really endorses Determination.

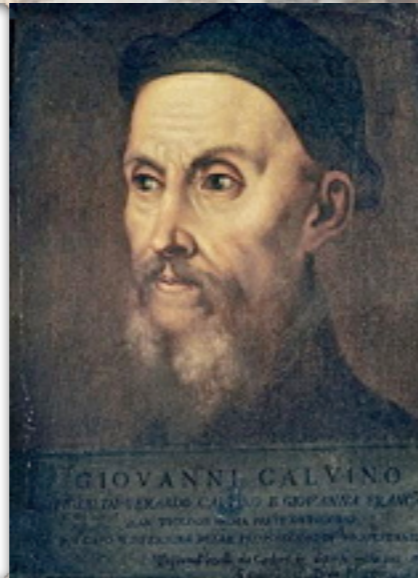
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This is a point of difference with Augustine and Aquinas; but one might reasonably wonder whether this is due to Calvin, but not Augustine and Aquinas, being consistent. After all, it certainly seems like Determination is inconsistent with free will; and this is because something like the following principle seems quite plausible:

Choice: If X causally determines that I will do A, and I have no choice about X, then I am not free to do A.

But Determination plus Choice implies – given that God's actions are not under my control – implies that I have no freedom of the will.

This might motivate us to look for a view of divine providence which does not entail Determination.

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An alternative view is traceable to the writings of the 16th century Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Molina, and is called, after him, **Molinism**.

One can think of Determination as emerging from the following picture. First, we divide all of the states of affairs which obtain into two categories: the contingent ones, and the necessary ones.

Next, we divide God's relationship to states of affairs into two categories: those of which he has natural knowledge, and those of which he has free knowledge. God's natural knowledge is the knowledge that God has by his nature, or essence. God's free knowledge is knowledge that God has via his free action.

Finally, we argue that these two distinctions coincide.



Contingent truths

Necessary truths

Free knowledge

Natural knowledge

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It seems plausible that necessary truth and natural knowledge must coincide, since if God knows something essentially, God must know it necessarily – which means that it must be necessarily true.

Now think about the contingent truths. These are all of the truths which could have been otherwise. Hence, one might think, it is up to God which of these contingent truths come to be, and God's knowledge of them is free knowledge.

This last step is where Molinists depart from the picture given by Determination. According to the Molinist, this categorization leaves something out: there are some contingent truths which are not a part of God's free knowledge.



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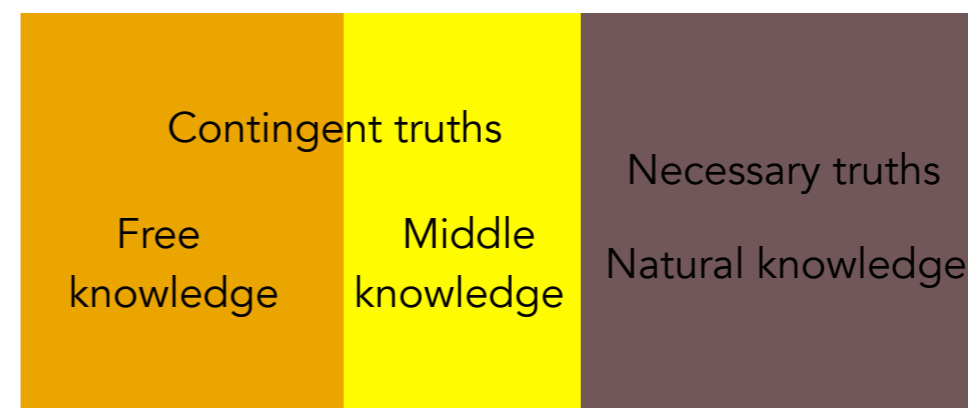
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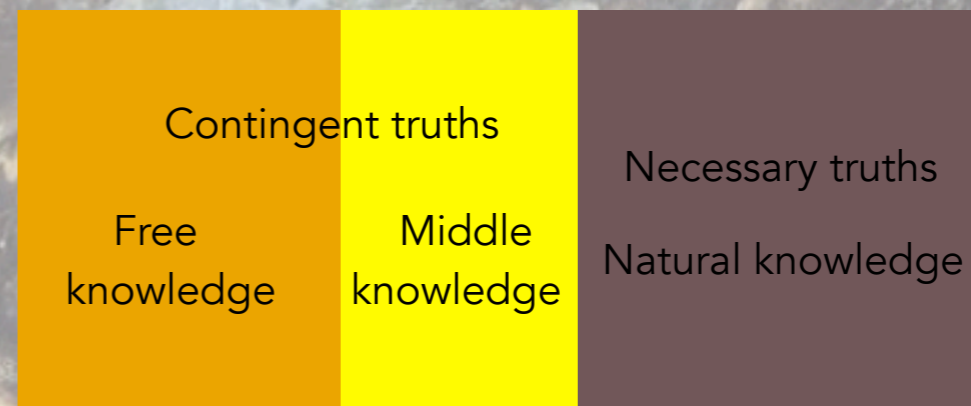
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God's middle knowledge is of **counterfactuals of freedom**, which are claims of the following sort:

[CF] **If** Jeff were in North Dining Hall, and very hungry, and his only two choices were stir fry and beef stroganoff, **then** Jeff would freely choose the stroganoff.

Why think that [CF] is contingent?

Here's the idea: given that my choosing the stroganoff was free, it must be possible for the part in blue to be true – i.e., for me to be in NDH, be hungry, and be presented with those two choices – **and** for me to not choose the stroganoff. Otherwise we would have a violation of the principle discussed above.

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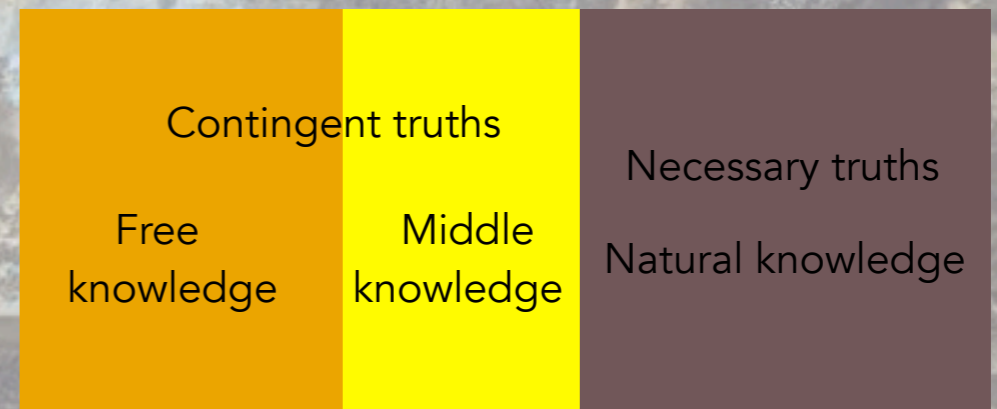
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Given their contingency, we know that God's knowledge of counterfactuals of freedom cannot be a part of God's natural knowledge.

So might they be part of God's free knowledge?



Molinists think not. If they were part of God's free knowledge, then God would know them to be true by knowing what he was going to bring about. But, Molinists think, God could not bring about a truth like [CF] — since God bringing it about that I choose the stroganoff is inconsistent with that being a free choice.

So counterfactuals of freedom — truths like [CF] — are true independent of God's will. And yet they are possibly false. Could these go together?

The Molinist thinks of the situation like this: God has knowledge of which worlds are possible. So, in particular, God knows that the following are possible situations:

- [1] I'm in NDH and freely eat the stroganoff.
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But God also knows that God cannot make either of these true, since God's doing so would preclude the freedom of my action.

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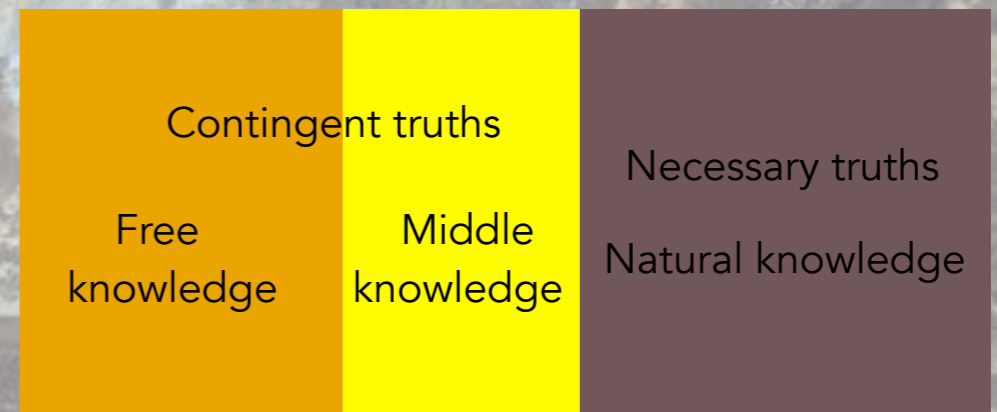
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But God also knows that God cannot make either of these true, since God's doing so would preclude the freedom of my action.

But surely, one might think, some claims like [CF] **are** true. But now recall the two parts of our doctrine of divine providence:



Given Foreknowledge, God must know the truth of claims like [CF]. So there appears to be a class of contingent truths, which are independent of God's will, and which God knows. This is God's middle knowledge.

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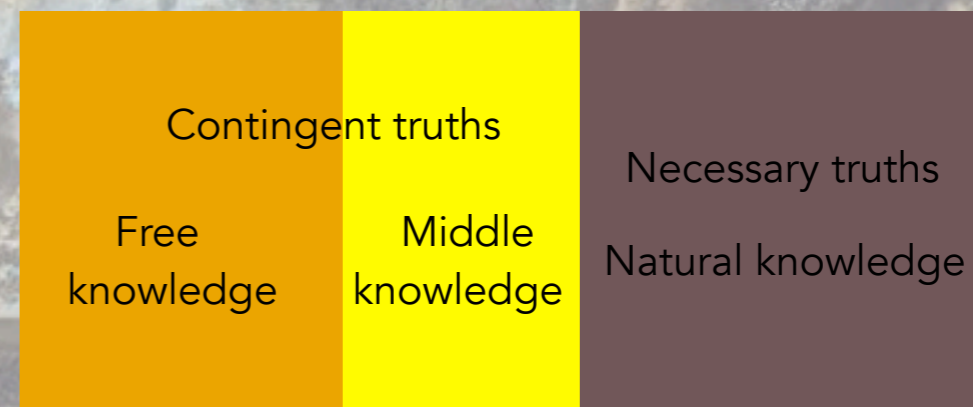
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In what sense, on this picture, does God have control over the future? The idea is roughly that if God knows all of the true counterfactuals of freedom, he can decide which free actions will be performed simply by setting the world up in such a way that certain circumstances do or do not obtain. For example, if [CF] is true, and God wants me not to freely choose the stroganoff, he can set up the world in such a way that it never happens that I am in NDH, hungry, and presented with just those two choices.



Many have thought that this Molinist view of counterfactuals of freedom – as known but as independent of God's will – also provides a way of explaining the existence of evil in the world. For maybe things were like this: given the counterfactuals of freedom that just happen to be true, there is no way of 'setting up the world' which both contains significant moral good and contains no moral evil.

But others have found both middle knowledge, and the idea that there could be true counterfactuals of freedom, puzzling.

1. How can God know counterfactuals of freedom?
2. How can counterfactuals of freedom be true?
3. How can they be true prior to God's decision of what world to create?

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One way to see why middle knowledge can seem problematic is to ask: If God does not know counterfactuals of freedom by his free knowledge, how does God know them?

It seems that all knowledge is either a posteriori — known on the basis of experience — or a priori — known independently of experience. But — at least if all a priori knowledge is knowledge of necessary truths — middle knowledge seems not to fit into either category.

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One might also wonder how counterfactuals of freedom could be true. If my choice of the stroganoff is really free, then it looks like the following must be true:

If Jeff were in North Dining Hall, and very hungry, and his only two choices were stir fry and beef stroganoff, then he might not choose the stroganoff.

But this implies:

If Jeff were in North Dining Hall, and very hungry, and his only two choices were stir fry and beef stroganoff, then he might not freely choose the stroganoff.

But this seems to contradict [CF].

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Finally, note that counterfactuals of freedom are supposed to be contingent. That means that whether or not they are true depends on how the actual world is.

But God is supposed to know counterfactuals of freedom prior to his decision about which world to create. (That, at least, is how the Molinist explains the truth of our principles of Foreknowledge and Control.) But how could these both be true?

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One might also wonder whether this Molinist view is open to some of the same worries that we found with the proponent of Determination. There we wondered how a just God could causally determine that people sin and therefore causally determine that they go to hell.

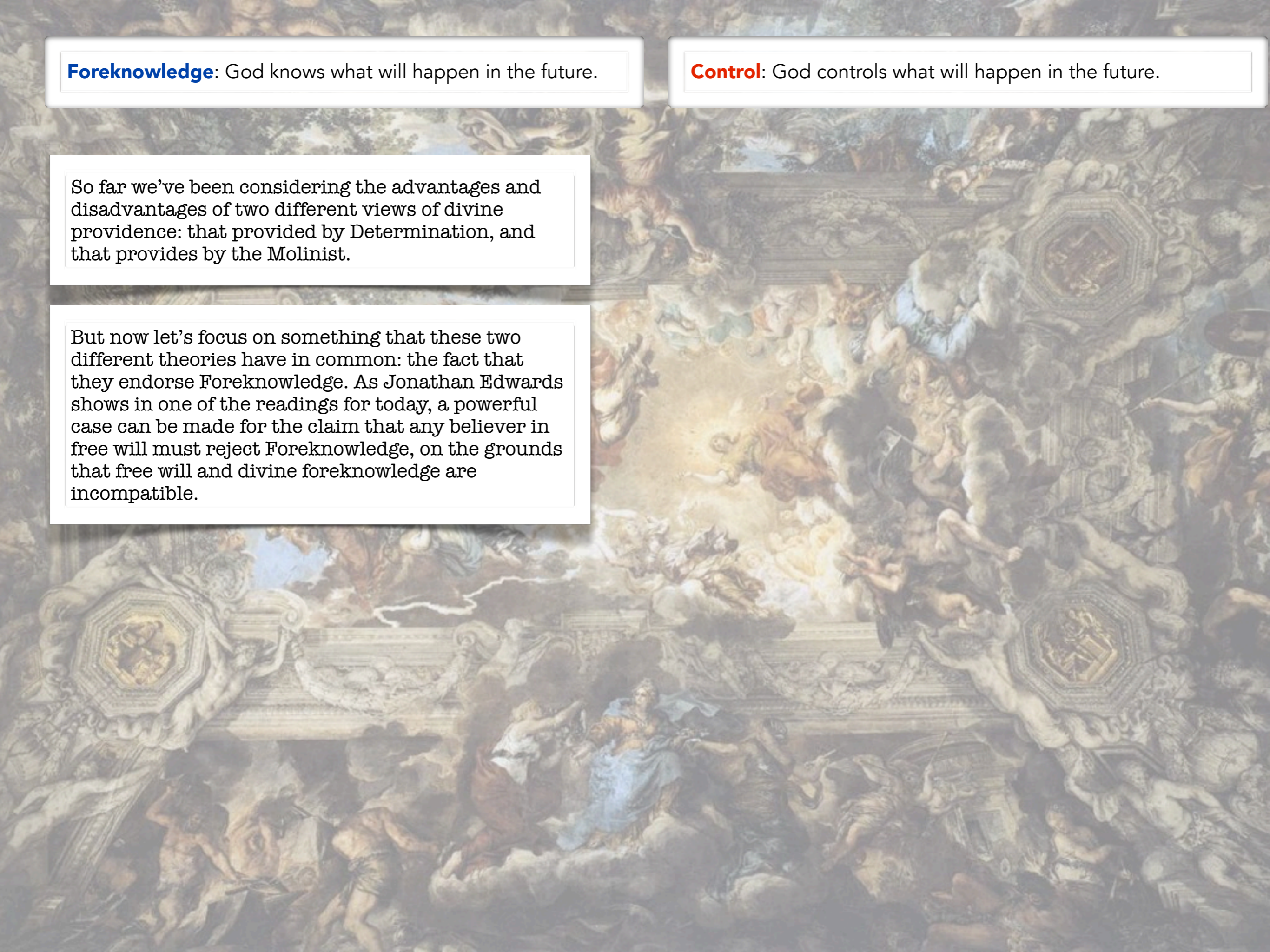
Molinists don't say that God causally determines people to freely sin; which counterfactuals of freedom are true is, Molinists think, not something which God determines. But consider some agent, Fred, and all of the counterfactuals of freedom which are true of him. It seems plausible that there are some ways of setting the world up in which Fred faces choices which he will make correctly, an other ways of setting the world up in which he faces choices that will lead him to sin and, eventually, to hell. So even if God is not causally determining that certain counterfactuals of freedom are true, still, God's choice of which world to make actual decides Fred's fate. One then wonders how a just God could decide to create a world in which Fred goes to hell, if there are others in which he does not.

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So far we've been considering the advantages and disadvantages of two different views of divine providence: that provided by Determination, and that provided by the Molinist.

But now let's focus on something that these two different theories have in common: the fact that they endorse Foreknowledge. As Jonathan Edwards shows in one of the readings for today, a powerful case can be made for the claim that any believer in free will must reject Foreknowledge, on the grounds that free will and divine foreknowledge are incompatible.



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Edwards was an 18th century American philosopher, theologian and preacher, perhaps best known now for his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God."

Edwards lays out his argument in four numbered paragraphs, each of which corresponds to a premise in his argument. The first is this one:

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 that thing has existed.

In other words:

1. We have no choice about past events.



Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

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1. We have no choice about past events.

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 so, now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise than that this foreknowledge should be, or should have been.

What is Edwards saying here?

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

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Premises 1 and 2 of Edwards' argument obviously imply a further claim about the status of God's foreknowledge of our actions.

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2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action.

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3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

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:

As elsewhere, Edwards is using "necessary" to mean, in part "beyond our control" or "something we don't have any choice about." If we focus on this, then Edwards' point here looks very similar to our principle of Choice, which we discussed last time.

4. If we have no choice about p , and no choice about the fact that if p , then q , then we have no choice about q .

Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

There is one more premise in Edwards' argument which needs discussion.

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 connexion between those events and that foreknowledge; and that therefore, by the preceding observations, those events are necessary events;

Edwards is saying that there is an **indissoluble** connection between something being known, and its being true. An indissoluble connection is one that cannot be broken - i.e., a connection which is impossible to break. Another way to put this is to say that the connection between something being known and its being true is a **necessary** one.

For our purposes, what is important is that **if something is a necessary truth, it is not something that we have any choice about**. We don't, for example, have any choice about the fact that there are no round squares – and this is precisely because it is impossible for there to be any round squares. And this is just another way of saying that it is a necessary truth that there aren't any.

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So let's suppose we grant Edwards' claim that

Necessarily, if someone knows that p, then p.

It seems to follow from this, given what we have just said, that the following is also true:

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

Premise 3 mentions something that we have no choice about.

Premise 5 says that we have no choice about the fact that if that thing occurs, then we will perform some action in the future.

Premise 4 says that if both those things are the case, then we also have no choice about that future actions.

Therefore, it seems to follow from premises 3-5 that:

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

But of course, if this is true, then we have no free will.

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

But of course, if this is true, then we have no free will.

Recall our thesis of Determination, discussed above:

Determination: For every contingent state of affairs S , God causally determines that S obtains.

We noted that there seems to be some sort of conflict between this thesis and the claim that we have free will. The interesting thing about Edwards' argument is that it does **not** assume anything like Determination, but only that God knows in advance what we are going to do.

It is natural then to reply to Edwards' argument by saying something like this:

“Look, there is a conflict between God making us do something and us doing that thing freely; but there couldn't possibly be any conflict between God just knowing what we will do, without causing us to do it.”

If you think that something like this is right — as many do — then your challenge is clear: you have to find a response to Edwards' argument. Since the argument is valid, this means that one needs to identify a false premise.

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

4. If we have no choice about p , and no choice about the fact that if p , then q , then we have no choice about q .

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If you think that something like this is right – as many do – then your challenge is clear: you have to find a response to Edwards' argument. Since the argument is valid, this means that one needs to identify a false premise.

There are four premises we might reject.

(4) and (5) look hard to deny; and (4) in particular is tough to reject if one is a proponent of the free will defense.

So attention focuses on (1) and (2); let's begin by thinking about whether (2) might be false.

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

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C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

So attention focuses on (1) and (2); let's begin by thinking about whether (2) might be false.

There are two different reasons one might have for rejecting (2). On the one hand, one might simply deny that God knows what we are doing to do; on the other, we might deny that God had this knowledge **in the past**.

On one plausible reading, Aquinas would have rejected (2) for this second reason.

Aquinas on time and foreknowledge

“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.”

What is Aquinas saying here?

If Aquinas is right, it looks like (2) is false.

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

If Aquinas is right, it looks like (2) is false.

One main problem with Aquinas' response to this argument is not that what Aquinas says about God existing outside of time is false, but that, even if he is right, there seems to be a way to reformulate Edwards' argument and still show the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge.

Here is one way such a reformulation might work. We might restate premises 1 and 2 so as still to derive 3. From there, the argument could go as above:

- 1*. We have no choice about things which are outside of time.
- 2*. God's knowledge of our future actions is outside of time.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1*,2*)

Are premises 1* and 2* as plausible as the original premises 1 and 2? If so, then Aquinas' view shifts the problem of free will and foreknowledge, but does not solve it.

How might Aquinas argue that 1*, unlike 1, is false?

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2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

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C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

If Aquinas is right, it looks like (2) is false.

Aquinas' objection focuses on premise 2 of Edwards' argument. A quite different reply focuses on premise 1 of Edwards' argument.

This reply to the problem of free will and foreknowledge is often associated with William of Ockham, an English philosopher and theologian who was born about 15 years after Aquinas' death, in 1288.



The denial of premise 1 might, at first glance, seem ridiculous. Absent time machines, how can we have power over the past?

To see why this might not be ridiculous, consider the overlooked philosophical problem of the incompatibility of free will and roommate foreknowledge.

It seems that sometimes, your roommate can know what you will do; for example, the following might be true:

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

At 10 am today, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

It seems that sometimes, your roommate can know what you will do; for example, the following might be true:

At 10 am today, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now imagine that at noon you are in the dining hall, about to grab a hamburger, when you are suddenly overcome with an unlikely desire for a fish sandwich. Do you have a choice about whether you will choose the hamburger or the fish sandwich? It seems that you do. But then it also seems that you have a choice about whether your roommate, at 10 am, knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch. After all, if you had chosen the fish sandwich, your roommate's belief that you would eat a hamburger would have been false, and hence not a piece of knowledge.

But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now can you imagine a variant of the case in which you have a choice about whether your roommate even **believed** that you would eat a hamburger for lunch?

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

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But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now can you imagine a variant of the case in which you have a choice about whether your roommate even **believed** that you would eat a hamburger for lunch?

This does not seem possible: it seems that while you do have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past knew something about your behavior, you do not have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past believed something about your behavior. This might lead you to think that there are some past events that we do have a choice about, and some that we do not. This is what Ockham thought. One might express this idea by saying that some facts about the past are **hard facts** -- facts about which we have no choice -- whereas other facts about the past are **soft facts** -- facts about which we do have a choice.

Let's grant that there is such a distinction between hard and soft facts. For Ockham's reply to this argument to work, we need more than the idea that there is such a distinction: we also need to assume that facts about what God knows are soft facts.

At first, this might seem very plausible: after all, we have already seen that facts about what your roommate knows are soft facts. Why not then also facts about what God knows?

1. We have no choice about past events.

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The problem with extending the analogy with roommate foreknowledge in this way is that God and your roommate differ in a crucial respect: your roommate is fallible, and hence can have false beliefs. This is the source of your ability to choose whether your roommate knew something in the past: you have a choice about something which could make one of their past beliefs false.

But God is essentially infallible, so that it is not possible for God to have a false belief. Hence God's knowledge can't be a 'soft fact' for the same reason that your roommate's knowledge is.

So why might facts about what God knew 1000 years ago be soft facts, rather than hard facts? This is the key question which defenders of Ockham's solution to this problem must answer. That is, they must explain why it is the case that

Even though it is impossible for me to change the past, it is now in my power to perform some action which is such that, if I performed that action, God would have had different beliefs 1000 years ago.

The difficulty for the defender of this solution is, that is, to explain how what God believed 1000 years ago is not something which is now completely out of my control.

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Here's one way to press this problem a step further. Imagine that we have a person who receives direct communication from God, whom we can call Prophet.

Suppose that 1000 years ago, Prophet was told by God that I would end class at 1:19 today. Prophet then asserted, in the year 1013, that Jeff Speaks will end class on this date at 1:19.

Surely it is not now up to me what Prophet asserted in the year 1012: this seems clearly to be one of those facts about the past which is not now up to me. It is plainly a "hard fact."

But it seems like facts about what Prophet asserts (when directly inspired by God) pose just the same problem for free will as God's beliefs. After all, it is surely not in my power to falsify the Prophet's assertion; this would be to falsify a claim made by God, since Prophet is merely relaying God's claims to the world.

It is also worth noting that, if this is a problem for the Ockhamist, it is equally a problem for Aquinas' view; for, even if God is outside of time, Prophet is not.

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The strategies of Aquinas and Ockham are each ways of trying to show that free will and divine foreknowledge are compatible. But one might, of course, also simply accept Edwards' argument, and say that divine foreknowledge and free will are incompatible.

Defenders of this position must, then, either deny that we have free will, or deny that God knows in advance what we are going to do. We have already considered some of the problems with denying the existence of free will; let's consider whether it is plausible to deny the existence of divine foreknowledge. (We're asking, of course, whether it is plausible for a religious believer to deny divine foreknowledge; atheists of course deny that there is any such thing.)

This position is sometimes called **open theism**.

Like Aquinas, defenders of this position reply to Edwards' argument by denying its second premise. Unlike Aquinas, defenders of this position don't say that God timelessly knows that we are going to do in the future. On their view, God doesn't know the future.

An initial problem facing this strategy is to explain why this is not simply a denial of the thesis that God is omniscient.

Here I think that one who denies divine foreknowledge should say something like this:

"To say that God is omniscient is to say that God knows all the facts. To deny that God is omniscient, then, is to say that there is at least one fact that God does not know. But I am not saying that. I am not saying that because, while I **am** saying that God does not know whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song, I am **not** saying that there is a fact about whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song. I don't think that there are such facts; indeed, I don't think that there are any facts (yet) about which free actions I will and will not perform. So, I don't think that there are any facts that God does not know."

Suppose one thinks that there are truths about the future. Could one still deny premise 2, and say that God does not know these truths, and yet do so without denying God's omniscience?

Perhaps. But to do so, we need to revise our definition of omniscience. One would have thought that omniscience was just "knowing all the facts" or "knowing all the truths." But if we think that there are truths which an omniscient being could fail to know, this is a contradiction.

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Maybe we could get some help here from our discussions of omnipotence. Recall that, in response to Mackie's argument that God could have made it the case that everyone freely chose the good on every occasion, one response was to say that there are possible situations that even an omnipotent being could not bring about. This suggests a view of omnipotence according to which omnipotence is not “able to do anything” or even “able to do anything possible” but rather something more like “the ability to bring about any situation which is such that it is possible that I bring it about.”

One idea would then be that we could say parallel things about omniscience. Perhaps omniscience is not “knowing every truth”, but simply “knowing every truth which it is possible for me to know.” And perhaps truths about future free actions are not knowable by God – or any other being which necessarily has only true beliefs – since that knowledge would, by Edwards' argument, make them unfree.

But there are worries with this way of going. For one thing, it just seems weird that there could be facts – out there in the world – which are beyond God's knowledge.

Here's something else weird about this view. Recall the problem of roommate foreknowledge. We saw that is problem had an easy answer: there is no puzzle about how it can now be up to me whether you knew something yesterday about what I will do, because I might now have the power to make the belief you formed yesterday false. This was why roommate foreknowledge did not pose the problems for freedom of the will which are posed by divine foreknowledge.

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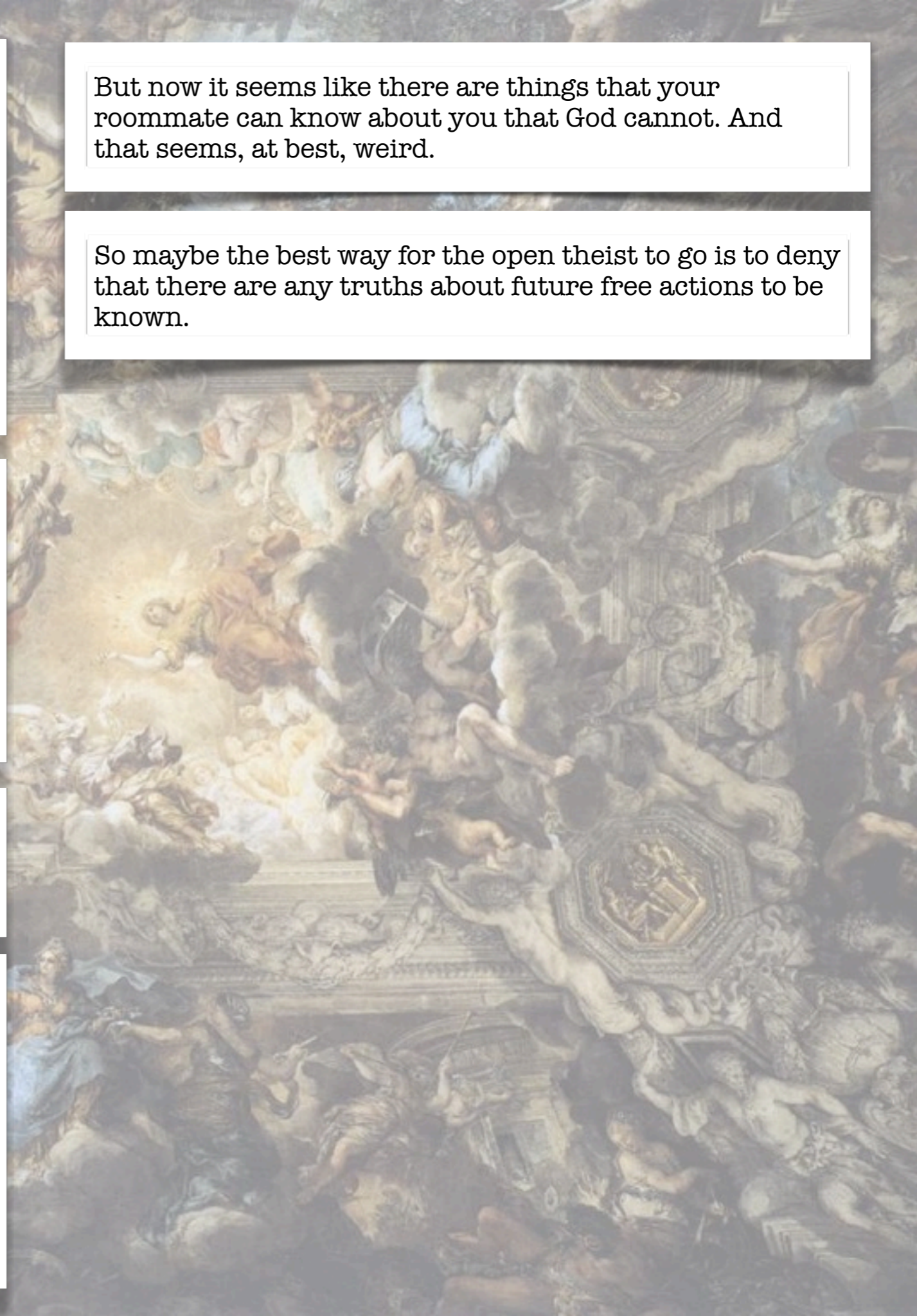
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But now it seems like there are things that your roommate can know about you that God cannot. And that seems, at best, weird.

So maybe the best way for the open theist to go is to deny that there are any truths about future free actions to be known.



A second kind of worry about the denial of divine foreknowledge comes from some of the more specific claims that are made about God in scripture.

Various passages in both the Old and New Testaments seem to imply the existence of divine foreknowledge. Consider, for example the following well-known passage from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is speaking to Peter:

“Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”

One who denies divine foreknowledge seems forced into saying either that Jesus did not really know what he said to be true, or that Peter’s denial was not free.

Neither option seems attractive: it does not seem that Jesus was merely guessing, and we think that Peter was morally responsible for his action, which suggests that it must have been free.

Perhaps there’s a way out. One might say that Peter’s decision was free, but that the relevant choice had already been freely made prior to Jesus’s saying this — so that the choice was free despite the action being determined at the time of Jesus’s statement.

It is debatable, however, whether this way of reconciling Biblical passages to the denial of God’s knowledge of future free actions is always available.

Determination and Molinism provide two relatively orthodox ways of holding to the traditional doctrine of divine providence. Remember that we thought of that doctrine as including the following two claims:

Foreknowledge: God knows what will happen in the future.

Control: God controls what will happen in the future.

The open theist, of course, does not accept the traditional doctrine of divine providence, since she denies Foreknowledge. Can she still maintain belief in Control?

It seems that she certainly ought to want to. For God makes various promises in scripture — for example, about some human beings being saved — and it is hard to know how a perfectly good being could make such promises unless that being was in a position to deliver on them. And how could God be in such a position unless God has some control over the future?