

Et Tu, Zimmerman? Is Foreknowledge Useful After All?

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Abstract: Dean Zimmerman is an open theist. However, he has constructed an argument to the effect that, if simple foreknowledge (foreknowledge without middle knowledge) did exist, this knowledge would be providentially useful to God. I show that his argument fails: if simple foreknowledge did exist, it would be providentially useless.

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One interesting feature of Dean Zimmerman’s philosophical work is that he sometimes devotes considerable effort and ingenuity to constructing (partial) defenses for positions he ultimately rejects. Queried about this, Zimmerman replied, “Yes, in retrospect, I see that, several times, I’ve done a good deal of work to develop views that I in fact don’t accept. I guess that’s because I think these views are, ultimately, defensible, even though I can’t myself believe them.”¹ Perhaps the best-known example is his “falling elevator model” (1999), an explanation of how a materialist can provide a possible explanation for survival after death and a bodily resurrection—even though Zimmerman, who is a dualist, does not need such a model. But there are other examples.² The topic of the present essay is his defense of the providential usefulness of simple foreknowledge (2012).

There has been a lengthy, and well-known, controversy about the compatibility of comprehensive divine foreknowledge with libertarian free will for human beings. There have been numerous attempts to defend this compatibility, but open theists (a group which includes both Zimmerman and the present author) believe all of the

¹ From an e-mail.

² Zimmerman mentions an essay (now in progress) combining the timelessness of God with presentism for temporal things, as well as his essay “‘Personal Identity and the Survival of Death’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Death* [which] contains a long development of Mark Johnston’s ‘proteanism’ about persons on the assumption of the doctrine of temporal parts (which I reject).”

defenses fail and the incompatibility is real.³ Since they are firmly committed to libertarian free will, open theists conclude that divine foreknowledge does not amount to complete and certain knowledge of everything in the future.

In addition to the main controversy, which will not be pursued here, considerable effort has been devoted to a further question: Supposing foreknowledge did exist, and was compatible with free will, would such foreknowledge be useful to God in God's providential governance of the universe? Perhaps counter-intuitively, the answer that has emerged is No: divine foreknowledge, if it existed, would be providentially useless.

Now, one might think that this question would be of little concern to open theists. If, as they hold, comprehensive divine foreknowledge is inconsistent with free will, what is the additional importance of the question whether, if such foreknowledge did exist, it would be providentially useful to God? This however would be a mistake, given the currently existing dialectical situation concerning these topics. While open theism has made considerable headway in recent years, many philosophers have by now made up their minds on the compatibility question, and it might also be fair to say that a considerable amount of philosophical scar tissue has developed around the issue. Either these philosophers have settled on one of the existing defenses, or in some cases they may be content to hope that some fully adequate defense may yet be discovered, even if those presently available are lacking. The question concerning the usefulness of foreknowledge, on the other hand, is more likely to break new ground, and may provide an avenue to engage those who would not otherwise be interested. Furthermore, there is no doubt that for many, if not for all, the working assumption has been that divine foreknowledge is indeed useful and valuable in God's providential governance; the possibility that this might not be the case then becomes a "wedge issue" to reopen the entire topic. The prospect then emerges that, in debating theories of divine providence, the viable alternatives are reduced to theological determinism, divine middle knowledge or Molinism, and open theism. Since the theory of "simple foreknowledge" offers no advantages for providence, it tends to disappear as a distinct option. And this shift is decidedly to the advantage of open theism. To be sure, theological determinism and Molinism do offer resources for the divine control of worldly events, but these views come with philosophical and theological costs that need to be weighed against the benefits.

³ For a brief summary of some of the more prominent responses, see William Hasker (2001).

In view of these considerations, the conclusion that “simple foreknowledge” — divine foreknowledge without either determinism or middle knowledge—is providentially useless is of some importance to open theists. And they may very well be taken aback to find one of their own number, Dean Zimmerman, coming to the aid of the simple foreknowledge doctrine in this respect. Thus, the title of this essay.

Would simple foreknowledge be providentially useful? To be precise, would simple foreknowledge be useful in God’s decision between possible courses of action, in a way that is superior to what is provided for God according to open theism? Notice, first of all, that we need to allow for a kind of logical sequence both in divine knowledge and in divine decisions. According to the doctrine of simple foreknowledge, there is no temporal succession either in divine decisions or in divine knowledge. At any arbitrarily chosen time, God has already decided everything God will ever decide, and God already knows everything God will ever know.⁴ Still, there remains a logical sequence between different items. To take one of Zimmerman’s own examples, God’s decision to allow Adam to be tested in the Garden of Eden logically precedes God’s decision to expel Adam from the Garden. This sequence must of necessity obtain, because the latter decision presupposes not only God’s decision to test Adam, but the fact that Adam succumbs to the temptation. There are innumerable other examples.

It may be less obvious that there needs to be a distinction within God’s knowledge, between those items that are, and those that are not, available in God’s making certain divine decisions. To see why this is necessary, suppose that God is deliberating, with regard to some moment in time, what God’s course of action should be at the time in question as well as in the future. In so deliberating, God has, so to speak, all of time and history spread out before him in his foreknowledge. How, we wonder, does this knowledge assist God in deciding what he shall best do? A little reflection reveals that the answer is, not at all! In fact, in that situation God is completely unable to make any decisions whatsoever concerning God’s future actions. For the entirety of the future, including all of God’s own actions, is already there, present in God’s comprehensive foreknowledge; it is completely impossible that God should at that point decide to do anything different, which would mean that his infallible foreknowledge was not in fact infallible after all. There might be some things that God would wish might be different, but it is “always already too late” for any change to be made.

⁴ This of course excludes knowledge which essentially involves temporal indexicals, such as “It is *now* the case that x is occurring.”

Suppose, on the other hand, that the knowledge available to God as God makes his decisions is limited to knowledge concerning the state of the world up until the then-present moment. The other knowledge, concerning the future, is somehow “there,” but for some reason it is not available in God’s process of deliberation. (David Hunt, the philosopher who, before Zimmerman, has been most active in defending the providential usefulness of foreknowledge, compares this to “dispositional” knowledge as it exists among human beings, as opposed to “occurrent” knowledge that is consciously accessed. Zimmerman, on the other hand, supposes that this knowledge is somehow “screened off” from the process of deliberation, though God may still be somehow aware of it.) In this situation, we need not worry about God’s deliberations being forestalled by his already existing knowledge concerning what he will decide to do. But by the same token, the foreknowledge God possesses is of *no use whatsoever* to God in his process of deliberation; God has available all and only the kinds of knowledge concerning the future that is available to him according to open theism.

It now becomes apparent that the simple foreknowledge proponent is forced to walk a fine line, if she is to justify the claim that her view affords God advantages as compared with open theism. Affirming either that all of God’s foreknowledge is available as he makes his decisions, or that none of it is available, has the same result: simple foreknowledge is providentially useless. So if the usefulness of foreknowledge is to be defended, the view must be that *some* of God’s foreknowledge is of use in his deliberations, and some of it is not available to God in those deliberations. And this is exactly what we find to be the case, both for Hunt⁵ and for Zimmerman.

We can conceive of the situation, as viewed by Zimmerman, something like this: With respect to any given time t , God must decide on his providential actions and refrainings at that time. This *divine providential decision concerning t* (DPD_t) will be informed by the *available divine knowledge with respect to t* (ADK_t). The DPD_t , along with whatever else occurs at t , is then incorporated into ADK_{t+1} , and God then proceeds to make the decision DPD_{t+1} —and so on.⁶ The question now arises, what is included in the available divine knowledge, viz. ADK_t ?

The ordinary, default assumption is that the available divine knowledge is equivalent to the knowledge that would be available to God at t according to open

⁵ Hunt’s writings on this subject are extensive; Zimmerman gives a listing in fn. 5 of his article. A good example may be found in the discussion between Hunt, Tomis Kapitan, and David Basinger in *Faith and Philosophy* (1993).

⁶ In reality, the entire process would be continuous, but for clarity of exposition it is helpful to break it up into distinct stages. Nothing of fundamental importance will be altered by this.

theism—knowledge, that is, of the entire state of the universe up until t , together with everything that is entailed by this history and with all of the propensities of the various items therein and all of the probabilities concerning future developments. In other words, we have the equivalent of the second situation developed above, where God's foreknowledge is not available to him in his decision-making. However, situations can arise in which it would be advantageous for God to have available knowledge of certain aspects of the future relative to t , as he makes his decision DPD_t . These, then, are the situations in which foreknowledge becomes providentially useful.

Zimmerman imagines one such situation like this: God has decided to allow Adam and Eve to be tested in the Garden of Eden, much as is recounted in Genesis. But in this scenario each will be tested separately, at the same instant but in widely separated parts of the Garden. Now, it would be advantageous for God to know how Adam responds to his temptation, in order to make a certain decision regarding Eve's temptation. (For reasons we don't need to go into, this decision concerns the kind of fruit offered to Eve in her temptation.) God therefore decides to access his foreknowledge of how Adam responds to temptation, and in view of what he thus learns he makes his decision regarding Eve's temptation. God has, then, gained a perhaps minor but nevertheless real benefit from his foreknowledge: Without the foreknowledge, he would have needed to rely on probabilities with regard to what Adam would choose to do, but given foreknowledge he knows the answer to that question with certainty. To be sure, God might equally well have accessed his foreknowledge concerning whether Eve would succumb to temptation, before making some decision with regard to Adam's temptation. What God cannot do, however, is to make his decisions with regard to both Adam and Eve dependent upon the other's response to their own temptation; this would generate an explanatory circularity which must be avoided.

Readers familiar with Zimmerman's work will not be surprised to learn that his expositions of these and related matters involve many carefully worked out "bells and whistles" that are not captured in my rough and simple portrayal of the issues. Nevertheless, I am confident that the two presentations are broadly equivalent, and that the problems that I will point out with regard to my own version will apply also to his more elaborately developed approach.

Questions with regard to possible circularity readily emerge when discussing the usefulness of foreknowledge. Some of these questions concern "doxastic principles," such as

(DP₁) Once one knows that *p*, it is too late to deliberate whether to make it the case that *p*; and, if it is too late to deliberate, it is too late to choose whether to make it the case that *p*.

While (DP₁) may be initially plausible, Zimmerman agrees with Hunt in finding it “not terribly compelling.” As applied to human beings, exceptions may easily be found in cases where someone knows that *p* but at a later point either has forgotten, or fails to recollect, that one knows this. And we have already seen that Zimmerman considers a situation where some of God’s knowledge is “screened off” from the process of deliberation.

A more plausible objection to the usefulness of simple foreknowledge is posed by what Hunt terms the “Metaphysical Principle”:

(MP) It is impossible that a decision depends on a belief which depends on a future event which depends on the initial decision.

Zimmerman accepts (MP), and he conjectures that Hunt would also accept it as applied to God’s decisions and beliefs. Because of this principle, the cases in which simple foreknowledge is claimed to be useful need to be carefully chosen and described. Zimmerman’s Garden of Eden scenario is an example of this. The decision concerning Eve’s temptation does, to be sure, depend on a future event, namely Adam’s response to his own temptation. But Adam’s response to his own temptation does not depend, in any meaningful way, on God’s decision concerning Eve’s temptation, so a violation of (MP) is apparently avoided. If on the other hand God made decisions concerning both the temptation of Adam and that of Eve, and if each of these decisions were the result of the responses of both Adam and Eve to their own temptations, the circularity would be apparent and (MP) would in fact be violated.

(MP), then, has the effect of circumscribing the situations in which foreknowledge could be providentially useful, but does not eliminate such situations entirely. Nevertheless, I believe that objections to the usefulness of foreknowledge based on metaphysical circularity are more compelling than we have seen so far; indeed, I claim that these objections are in the end inescapable. In order to support this claim, I now introduce an “enhanced metaphysical principle,” stated as follows:

(EMP) It is impossible that any logically contingent event depends on a future event which itself depends on the original event.

(EMP) is in essence a generalized form of the original (MP), one which omits the specific reference to decisions and beliefs as elements in the objectionable circularity. It is hard to see how someone who accepts (MP) can plausibly cavil at (EMP).

However, in order to demonstrate the circularity I have in mind we need a further, perhaps less obvious, metaphysical principle, a principle that has been expounded and defended by David Alexander in a recent article (2019). This is the principle Robert Koons has labelled

Generalized Origin Essentialism (GOE): For a class of entities, if E is an entity from that class, and if C is causally upstream of E , then C 's existence or occurrence was logically necessary for the existence or occurrence of E . (Alexander 2019, 72)

While GOE applies to entities of all classes, Alexander is especially interested in its application to events, and he regards it as more plausible as applied to events than as applied to other classes of entities, such as objects or organisms. More briefly summarized, (GOE) says that "the token present necessitates the token past": that is, that "this very present implies this very past" (2019, 72). Alexander presents several arguments in support of (GOE), and also cites several philosophers who appeal to (GOE) or something similar to it, including Koons, Chad Vance, Robert Adams, and me. Particularly striking is a quotation from Adams, who points out that presentism is compatible "with the view that the actual present metaphysically entails the actual past, in all its details. Indeed, that view would facilitate the metaphysical construction of the actual past from the actual present" (1989, 74). In this way, (GOE) eliminates what might otherwise be a somewhat worrying problem for presentism: How can presentism maintain that there are truths about the past, when the past events that are the truthmakers for those truths no longer exist? The answer can be given that the existence of the present is sufficient as a truthmaker; given the actual present, the actual past must have been exactly as it in fact was.

To be sure, statements of (GOE)-like principles have often been stated with some flexibility built in. An example comes from Chad Vance:

For all worlds u , and for all worlds v , organism x -in- u is identical to organism y -in- z in and only if both x -in- u and y -in- z originated (i) from (roughly) the same matter, (ii) with (roughly) the same initial configuration, (iii) at (approximately) the same space-time location. (2016, 4)

This flexibility is allowed in order to keep events, etc., from being too “modally fragile.” The problem Alexander finds with this is, that if such flexibility is accepted,

we can show that in a nearby possible world two distinct organisms have equal claim to being identical to the original organism. For example, there is a possible world where the matter that originally composed you gets recycled a few minutes or hours later and originally composes another individual. Given the modal flexibility stated above, both individuals have equal claim to being you. (2019, 73)

Alexander’s judgment, with which I concur, is that “The best response to the recycling problem for events . . . is to deny that they are modally flexible” (2019, 73).

In order to show how all this impacts the usefulness of simple foreknowledge, I introduce here an actual example which has previously been discussed between Hunt and myself. In May of 1940, early in World War II, a British and French force was encircled by German troops at Dunkirk in northern France. The military situation made it seem likely that almost all of those Allied troops would be killed or captured. In view of this, a flotilla of ships and boats was assembled in order to attempt an evacuation. Unusually calm weather, combined with heavy fog that inhibited dive bombing by the Luftwaffe, resulted in the evacuation being carried out with far fewer losses than had been anticipated. A great many people interpreted this as divine providence: God, desiring an Allied victory in the war, arranged the weather precisely in order to make possible a successful outcome.

A way of understanding this in terms of providential simple foreknowledge would be this: God, in view of his foreknowledge of the encirclement of the Allied forces, acted at an earlier time to ensure that the weather on the day of the evacuation would be as favorable as possible. However, I objected to this that the state of the weather leading up to the encirclement and the evacuation would inevitably affect many of the details concerning the troop movements, and so on, at the time of the encirclement. Thus, God’s decision concerning the weather would depend on God’s belief concerning a future event which is itself, in many of its features, dependent on that very decision. (MP) is clearly violated.

Hunt has several responses to this; one of the more interesting is the suggestion that, in case God’s affecting the weather would generate an unacceptable circularity, there are other ways God could act that would not have this result.

Suppose instead that God, endowed with simple foreknowledge of the Allied encirclement, responds by accelerating the spoilage of a consignment of sausage which is scheduled to be served to the German troops on the eve of the evacuation,

with the result that the entire Luftwaffe is immobilized with food poisoning the following morning. (1993, 404)

It is not immediately clear how this suggestion is able to avoid circularity. Will God's foreknowledge of the encirclement not include the facts that the Luftwaffe either has been served, or is about to be served, with a consignment of spoiled sausage? Let us, however, suppose that God's foreknowledge reveals to him the state of the forces in the field at a time just before the affected sausage has been delivered, so that the situation has not as yet been modified, in any obvious way, by that earlier decision. (This raises the separate question as to how God decides just which segment of the future to access in his providential decision-making, so as to avoid all circularity. But let that pass for now.)

This scenario brings to mind an interesting and important point: Securing the complete causal insulation of one process from another is a more difficult matter than our "sausage scenario" has supposed. Take the well-known case of those butterflies, who by flapping their wings in the Brazilian jungle, cause a hurricane in the Caribbean. Perhaps in real life they don't cause an actual hurricane, but undoubtedly they cause *something*; at a minimum, they cause certain movements of air molecules, and there is in principle no limit to what further changes might be triggered by those molecular movements. The spoiling of the Luftwaffe's sausage will release certain gas molecules into the air, and will also lead to the emission of heat, and who knows what that can lead to? Won't some of those molecules, or some of that heat energy, be diffused into the region God accesses with his foreknowledge? There simply is no way to guarantee that the spoiling of the sausage will *in no way* affect anything occurring in the space-time region God learns about as he accesses the encirclement of the Allied forces. But a guarantee is what is needed; the avoidance of circularity can't be left to luck, nor do we want to introduce a troop of "circularity police," to prevent this, like the "time police" that in some science fiction stories are charged with preventing improper alterations of the timeline. It begins to look as though the only sure way to prevent any possible circularity is to specify that the earlier event which God performs should lie outside the past light-cone of the later event God accesses through his foreknowledge. Examples of this sort, however, are irrelevant to the problem of the providential usefulness of foreknowledge.

Hunt, however, has another suggestion that may serve to evade this problem. He states,

just because God *has* detailed concrete knowledge does not mean that these concrete details are providentially relevant. God intervenes to help the Allies, not because of a concrete event, but because of an abstraction from that event: the fact that the event constitutes *the encirclement of the Allies*. (1993, 404)

In the light of GOE, however, this can't work. Whether or not God's knowledge of the concrete event is itself accessed in his providential decision, this knowledge is assuredly "causally upstream" of that decision, so it can't be denied that a "logically contingent event," (God's providential decision), depends on a "future event" (God's awareness of the concrete event of the encirclement) "which itself depends on the original event." The circularity is inescapable. This result is, however, somewhat ironic. Alexander's appeal to GOE was intended as a means to create a difficulty for open theism. But now it turns out that the principle is of help to open theism in its debate over the usefulness of simple foreknowledge!⁷

Now, however, we come to what I regard as the clearest (because it does not involve potentially controversial principles such as GOE), and therefore the most important, objection to Zimmerman's approach. The solution advocated by both Zimmerman and Hunt involves what I will describe as "God's peeking between God's fingers." (At one point I considered this as a title for the present essay.) The image comes from the child's game of "hide and seek." In this game, the child who is "It" is supposed to cover her eyes so as not to see where the other children are hiding. However, it can happen that "It" peeks between her fingers, so as to get a glimpse of where the others are going, which will be an advantage to her as she goes to look for them. Now, in Zimmerman's version of simple foreknowledge, God "peeks between his fingers" so as to get a glimpse of the future relative to the time under consideration, thus giving God an advantage in making his providential decision concerning that time. (Of course there is no thought here that God is blameworthy for thus "peeking.") God, to be sure, gets only a very partial glimpse of that future. If God were to view the whole future, as we have seen, the purpose of his making a decision concerning the future would be forestalled.

⁷ Alexander's argument goes like this: According to open theism, portions of the future that are determined by the past and present are known with certainty by God. These foreknown future events, however, will have free actions among their causal antecedents. Given GOE, God will know those free actions whose existence is implied by the future event. Thus, God can know future free actions. The answer to this argument is that God, in knowing future events as specified, knows the propositions which assert that such events will occur. God does not, however, know the concrete events, which do not yet exist to be known. So no actual future events are causally upstream of God's beliefs concerning the future.

Here is an additional parallel between the two cases: In the game of hide and seek, the peeking done by “It” does nothing to change the actions of the other children. They go on in their process of hiding, just as though “It” had kept her eyes closed the whole time and knew nothing about what they were doing. But what about God’s foreknowledge? Here is what we need to keep in mind: *Even though God (for purposes of his decision with regard to t) is unaware of most of his knowledge of the future, that knowledge does exist. And the existence of that knowledge entails that the future is ontologically determinate, even though many future events are not implied or necessitated by facts about the past and present of the world up until t .* But this fact defeats the entire purpose of the position being defended. For part of that ontologically determinate future is precisely the future actions with respect to t that God is supposed to make in the light of his foreknowledge. The fact that God’s knowledge concerning these actions is not accessed in making those decisions has no bearing on the fact that those decisions are ontologically determinate, and are so determinate *prior to the logical moment in which God makes his decisions*. The conclusion is inescapable: *God has no open options*, and the project of showing the providential usefulness of foreknowledge has ended in failure.

It is possible, to be sure, that Zimmerman will succeed in pulling a rabbit from the hat, and will provide an answer to my argument, so that the question of the usefulness of foreknowledge remains open after all. If not, I predict that his response will be ambivalent: he will no doubt be disappointed with the failure of his argument, but on the other hand he should be pleased that open theism, which he embraces, has repelled the counterattack from simple foreknowledge. And it should, on balance, be a matter of satisfaction that, by providing this defense, he has assisted the simple foreknowledge view to put up a stout resistance, even if it is ultimately unavailing.

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