

Neoclassical Theism and the Problem of Foreknowledge and Passibility

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Abstract: Though it is often not recognized, there are multiple models of God being affirmed and debated throughout the history of philosophical theology. In contemporary discussion, we have developed labels for these models such as classical theism, neoclassical theism, open theism, panentheism, and pantheism. In this paper I want to discuss a unique problem that neoclassical theism faces. This is the Problem of Foreknowledge and Passibility. God is possible in that God is capable of being moved and influenced by creatures to some extent. God is capable of having a wide range of emotional responses to the world that are consistent with His perfect goodness and rationality. Also, God is capable of having maximal empathy with His creatures. Yet, there are some philosophers and theologians who think that divine passibility is inconsistent with exhaustive foreknowledge. As a neoclassical theist, I disagree. Before considering the inconsistency argument, I need to set the stage. In section 1, I shall articulate the neoclassical theistic model of God. In section 2, I will discuss some different issues related to omniscience, time, and emotions. These issues need to be developed in order to understand the objection to neoclassical theism. Then in section 3, I will develop two arguments against the compatibility of passibility and foreknowledge. There I will explain why the neoclassical theist has nothing to worry about from these objections.

Keywords: God, Eternity, Foreknowledge, Passibility, Impassibility

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capable of having a wide range of emotional responses to the world that are consistent with His perfect goodness and rationality. Also, God is capable of having maximal empathy with His creatures. Yet, there are some philosophers and theologians who think that divine passibility is inconsistent with exhaustive foreknowledge. As a neoclassical theist, I disagree. Before considering the inconsistency argument, I need to set the stage. In section 1, I shall articulate the neoclassical theistic model of God. In section 2, I will discuss some different issues related to omniscience, time, and emotions. These issues need to be developed in order to understand the objection to neoclassical theism. Then, in section 3, I will develop two arguments against the compatibility of passibility and foreknowledge. There, I will explain why the neoclassical theist has nothing to worry about from these objections.

1. Models of God and Neoclassical Theism

The first thing to discuss is the difference between the concept of God and a model of God.¹ The concept of God is that of a perfect being which is the single, ultimate foundation of reality. That is a fairly thin concept because it does not tell you much about what God is like. Yet most concepts are fairly thin, so there is nothing worrisome about that. Things get interesting when one considers various conceptions or models of God. A model of God is a unique articulation of what it means for God to be perfect, and what it means for God to be the ultimate foundation of reality. A model of God will identify which attributes explain why God is perfect. A model of God will also identify which theory of emanation or creation explains how God is the foundation of reality.

Before discussing different models of God, I need to say what a model of God is not. A model of God is not a systematic theology, nor is a model of God a philosophical worldview. A model of God is merely one piece of a system of thought. For example, Augustine, Maimonides, and Aquinas hold a classical theistic model of God. Yet each of these thinkers affirms different religious and philosophical systems. Augustine and Aquinas are Christians, whereas Maimonides is Jewish. Augustine has many Neoplatonic tendencies in his philosophy, whereas Aquinas tends to be more Aristotelian. With that clarification out of the way, I can discuss what the models of God have in common and where they disagree.

I distinguish between the contested and the uncontested attributes of God. The uncontested attributes of God are the attributes or great-making properties that pretty much everyone agrees upon. The contested attributes are the most

¹ For a more detailed philosophical and historical discussion of everything in this section, see (Mullins 2025).

controversial attributes that not all models of God agree upon. These are attributes like timelessness or temporality, simplicity or unity, impassibility or passibility. The uncontested attributes that I have in mind are great-making properties like necessary existence, aseity, eternality, maximal power, maximal knowledge, maximal goodness, perfect rationality, and perfect freedom. It is fairly standard to say that God cannot fail to exist, and that His existence is not dependent upon anything external. This entails that God exists without beginning and without end. I take omnipotence to be the most power-granting set of abilities, which excludes all liabilities. This entails maximal cognitive excellence which is a set of powers pertaining to beliefs, emotions, and reasons. God has the ability to infallibly know all there is to know about reality, and the ability to be appropriately responsive to reasons. In order to be perfectly free, God must act on the basis of objectively good reasons, and sometimes have the ability to do otherwise. Reasons for action are typically split between justifying reasons and decisive reasons. As the name suggests, justifying reasons justify an agent to perform an action, but the agent can be perfectly rational in refraining from acting. Decisive reasons give an agent compelling reasons to perform a particular action. The reasons are so strong that the agent would be irrational to refrain from performing the particular action. Most theists maintain that God is rarely presented with decisive reasons, though there are exceptions. (For example, panentheists sometimes say that there is a best possible world that God must create.)² Since God always acts on the basis of objectively good reasons, God is perfectly good. This is because moral facts are one set of reasons to act on, and God is always appropriately responsive to such reasons.

To be sure, that is a very quick jaunt through the uncontested attributes, but I need to get on to other things. At this point I need to discuss divine foundationalism. All models of God agree that God is the ultimate foundation of reality, but there are many ways to unpack that basic concept. For example, one could affirm emanation. An emanation occurs when God's nature necessarily brings about the existence of other beings or perhaps whole universes. A creation occurs when God volitionally brings about other beings, a universe, or a multiverse. There are different theories of creation. Eternal creation says that God and the cosmos are co-eternal. There is no state of affairs where God exists without some created thing. God is eternally causing all sorts of created things. Perhaps God is causing one eternal universe to exist. Maybe God is causing an eternal series of successive universes to exist. On this view, no single universe is co-eternal with God, but God always exists with a universe of some sort. Panentheists typically affirm either emanation or eternal creation. For example, Avicenna affirms emanation, whereas Ibn Taymiyya and Thomas Jay Oord

² Cf. Mullins (2023).

affirm eternal creation. Others, like Gersonides, disagree with eternal creation and opt for a creation out of pre-existent matter. On this view, God and prime matter are co-eternal. Our universe has an absolute beginning because God creates it out of this pre-existent prime matter. Prior to the existence of our universe, there is God and this primordial matter that somehow has no properties, takes up no space, and has no mass yet all while still being material in some sense that I find ineffably mysterious.³ Finally, there is creation out of nothing. On this view, nothing is co-eternal with God. Prior to creation, there is God all alone. Then, for some reason, God creates our universe, or perhaps a multiverse out of no pre-existent material.

For the purposes of this paper, I will largely be ignoring panentheism and pantheism, and instead focusing on classical, neoclassical, and open theism. These three models of God agree that God creates the universe *ex nihilo*. They also agree on the uncontested divine attributes. It is important to emphasize that they agree on the basic concept of God, the uncontested attributes, and creation *ex nihilo*. It is important to emphasize this because some contemporary classical theists falsely claim that only classical theism affirms that God is perfect and the foundation of reality.⁴ It is one thing to say that only classical theism can consistently maintain such things, and it is another to falsely say that only classical theism uniquely affirms the perfection and ultimacy of God as a constraint on theorizing about God. According to Edward Feser, “The notion of God’s *ultimacy* has a regulative status in classical theism that it does not have in nonclassical forms of theism.”⁵ The number of neoclassical and open theists who have written extensively on God’s perfection and ultimacy as a regulative constraint on our theorizing is rather overwhelming.⁶ So it would be unfortunate for contemporary philosophical theologians to think that classical theism has some unique claim on perfection and ultimacy. With that being said, allow me to explain where these models of God disagree.

Classical theism claims that God has the contested attributes of timelessness, immutability, impassibility, and simplicity. Further, classical theists maintain that God has freely created a universe out of nothing. This is not any old kind of universe. This is a universe with a unique, settled timeline. I will have more to say about this below. For now, what matters is that God has created a universe where there is an exact way that history will unfold. God knows that He has created this particular universe, so He knows the future. In other words, God has exhaustive foreknowledge. There are different accounts of how exactly God gets

³ Gersonides (1999, 330, 338, 342).

⁴ E.g. Feser (2023).

⁵ Feser (2023, 11).

⁶ To just give a small sample of neoclassical and open theists on this topic consider (Morris 1991) (O'Connor 2012) (Leftow 2012) (Craig 2016) (Kvanvig 2021).

the foreknowledge. There are theological determinists, like Thomists and Calvinists.⁷ There are also Molinists. What matters is that classical theists affirm that God's omniscience extends to the future, so God has foreknowledge.

Neoclassical theists agree that God has created a universe with a settled timeline, so they agree that God has foreknowledge. Neoclassical theists also disagree over how exactly God gets the foreknowledge, be it theological determinism, Molinism, or something else.⁸ Where the neoclassical theist disagrees is over those four contested attributes. Neoclassical theists reject one or more of those controversial attributes. For example, Peter of Ireland rejects impassibility and immutability.⁹ Al-Ghazali and TJ Mawson reject divine simplicity. Jonathan Kvanvig rejects all four of those contested attributes. The view that I am interested in this paper is one which rejects at least impassibility, though personally I think one should reject all four of the classical theist's contested divine attributes.

Open theism is a step further away from classical and neoclassical theism. Open theists reject divine foreknowledge. They affirm that God has freely created a universe with an open future. Much of what will happen in the future is not settled. God knows which portions of the future are settled and which are not. Of the portions that are open, God knows the objective probability of which potential events might come about.¹⁰ Almost all open theists reject timelessness, immutability, simplicity, and impassibility. I say *almost all* since Gersonides is sometimes considered a proto-open theist, and he affirms those contested attributes.¹¹ It is certainly true that Gersonides affirms an open future, and thus denies that God has exhaustive foreknowledge.¹² However, Gersonides is also saying that God does not know the particulars of creation as particulars.¹³ This sounds more Aristotelian to me. Aristotle denied that God knows the contingencies of the cosmos and the particulars as particulars, and it seems to me that Gersonides is just following suit. Which is not something that your average open theist will be happy about since most open theists want to affirm that God knows all of the necessary and contingent facts about reality. In other words, open theists tend to think that Aristotle's God is not really omniscient.

⁷ I am aware that some Thomists do not like being labelled as theological determinists, but there are other Thomists who do admit to being theological determinists. For discussion, see (Furlong 2019).

⁸ For an overview of different theories of foreknowledge, see (Byerly 2014), (Vicens and Kittle 2019), and (Florio and Frigerio 2019).

⁹ Sermoneta (1969, 45).

¹⁰ For more details on open theism, see (Mullins and Sani 2021).

¹¹ Lebens (2020, 96).

¹² Gersonides (1987, 101–104, 118).

¹³ Gersonides (1987, 180).

Before moving on, I should make a quick note about labels and history. It is common for some contemporary classical theists to falsely accuse other models of God to be modern revisions and reactions to the classical view that everyone throughout Western history affirmed. For example, Feser says that these “neo-theist” rivals are recent reactions to classical theism.¹⁴ This could not be further from the truth. As noted already, Peter of Ireland rejected immutability and impassibility. Peter of Ireland was one of Thomas Aquinas’ childhood teachers, so there is nothing modern about this view. Unless Aquinas wrote an early draft of the *Summa* when he was a child, I think it is safe to say that Peter was not reacting to Thomism.

The rejection of divine simplicity has been the majority view among Islamic theologians for quite some time. Shahrastānī was already documenting this in the 1100’s.¹⁵ One of the most famous and influential Muslim theologians who rejects simplicity is the 10th Century thinker al-Maturidi.¹⁶ Thinkers like al-Maturidi reject simplicity and affirm the Attributionist view which says that God’s attributes are distinct in reality, not just in the mind. What is rarely discussed is that the early Thomas Aquinas and his student Peter of Tarentaise affirmed that God’s attributes were distinct in reality, and not just in the mind. It was only after being questioned by the Dominican authorities that Aquinas began to say that God’s attributes are distinct in the mind, and not in reality.¹⁷ Perhaps the young Aquinas was a “neo-theist” reacting to his own forthcoming work. Alternatively, there is no such thing as Feser’s “neo-theism.”

Divine timelessness has been rejected at various points throughout history. The 9th Century group called the Karrāmīs affirmed divine temporality. As did 12th Century thinkers like Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī and Abū Barakāt al-Bagdādī.¹⁸ Some scholars say that divine temporality was the majority view at Oxford in the early 14th Century.¹⁹ Rene Descartes and William of Ockham are often considered to affirm divine temporality.²⁰ Then of course, thinkers like Isaac Newton and Samuel Clarke are ardent proponents of divine temporality, as were most during the Scientific Revolution in the English-speaking world.²¹

Affirming an open future is not new either. I have already mentioned Gersonides, but there are many other examples. The denial of divine foreknowledge became a heated debate topic at various points. Pope Sixtus IV

¹⁴ Feser (2023, 19).

¹⁵ Renard (2014, 138).

¹⁶ For more on al-Maturidi, see (Harvey 2021). Cf. Al-Maturidi (2019).

¹⁷ Ventimiglia (1997, 327–336), Ventimiglia (2020, 242–243). Thanks to David Anzalone for help with these references, and translating the Italian.

¹⁸ Hoover (2022, 94–95).

¹⁹ Dales (1990, 199).

²⁰ Gorham (2008), Cross (2014, 201).

²¹ For more on these thinkers, see Thomas (2018).

condemned the denial of foreknowledge in 1473.²² I am assuming that the pope did not get an advanced copy of the 1994 book, *The Openness of God*. About a hundred years after the pope's condemnation, Laelius Socinus and Faustus Socinus became famous for forming a group called the Socinians. They explicitly denied that God knows the future because they thought that divine knowledge of future contingents entails no human free will, would undermine the justice of God, and would destroy morality.²³ Their views were hotly debated by many subsequent generations of Christian theologians. A similar debate takes place in the 1700's between Samuel Fancourt and John Norman. Fancourt denies that God's knowledge extends to the future because the future is genuinely open, whereas Norman sought to defend God's exhaustive foreknowledge.²⁴

Many more examples could be given, but I hope that my point is clear. It is demonstrably false that neoclassical theism and open theism are modern revisions to the doctrine of God. This is partly because of the actual history of ideas, but also partly because there is no such thing as "the traditional" view of God. All of the models of God being debated today have a long history across the world's religions, and better debates can be had once we get past modern day Thomist talking points and accusations of new-fangled revisionism. For example, a better debate is to be had by focusing on the alleged inconsistency between foreknowledge and divine passibility.

In the arguments that I consider below, one will see classical theists and open theists objecting to neoclassical theism. One can find both camps saying that a neoclassical theist cannot consistently affirm divine foreknowledge and passibility. Before getting into the argument, I need to say more about omniscience, time, and emotions. This is because all of the existent versions of the objections that I know of offer a woefully underdeveloped account of the assumptions at play.

2. Omniscience, Time, and Emotion

The objections that I will be considering focus on an alleged incompatibility between foreknowledge and passibility. I need to set the stage because the different arguments claim that there is something incoherent about the emotional life of a being with infallible knowledge of the future. The arguments have many different unspoken assumptions that need to be brought to the surface. I will start with passibility and then turn to omniscience.

A person is passible if her beliefs, emotions, and actions are moved, caused, or influenced by things external to herself. I say that God is passible because God's

²² Cross (2014, 219–220).

²³ Rees (1818, 332ff).

²⁴ Fancourt (1730), Norman (1729).

beliefs, emotions, and actions are influenced by things external to Himself. I take this to be obvious. God's belief that you are sinning is influenced by the fact that you are sinning. God's anger at your sin is also influenced by the fact that you are sinning. God's act to punish you is influenced by the fact that you are sinning. Only someone corrupted by the history of Christian theology could think that it is impossible for God's beliefs, emotions, and actions to be influenced by external things.²⁵

Earlier I explained that God has maximal cognitive power. This entails the ability to infallibly know all the facts there are, as well as the ability to have perfect rationality, maximal empathy, and experiential knowledge.²⁶ My account of God's cognitive perfection is richer than standard accounts of omniscience. On standard accounts of omniscience, God is said to know of the truthvalues of all propositions. For any proposition p , God knows that it has a truthvalue of true or false. Standard accounts of omniscience are purely propositional. They do not typically include the distinct category of experiential or phenomenal knowledge such as knowledge of what it is like to have certain kinds of experiences. Experiential knowledge is not reducible to propositional knowledge. This is because you can know that something is the case without knowing what it is like to experience it. For example, I can know that the rain in Spain falls mostly on the plain. This is distinct from knowing what it is like to experience the rain in Spain falling on the plain.

As I see things, omniscience is not the fundamental perfection. Instead, maximal cognitive power is the perfection, and this entails omniscience, but it also entails the ability to have experiential knowledge. This will be important to know as it will come up in the objection to my view.

Say you are a neoclassical theist like me, and you affirm that God has an exhaustive knowledge of the future. Say you are also like me and you are uncertain if you should affirm theological determinism or Molinism. What exactly are you saying about God's foreknowledge?

As I mentioned before, foreknowledge depends upon God creating a particular kind of universe with a settled future. The future is settled in the sense that there are propositions that describe what will happen. Foreknowledge concerns a certain set of temporal propositions about the future. Yet there are allegedly two kinds of temporal propositions to consider. These are tensed and tenseless facts.

A tensed fact is a temporal fact that is described using tensed propositions. Tensed propositions describe the world by using statements with *past*, *present*, and *future* tenses. In particular, tensed propositions attempt to describe reality by

²⁵ For more on the debate between impassibility and passibility, see (Mullins 2020).

²⁶ For more see Mullins (2024a).

referring to an objective present moment of time, or the now. For example, consider the tensed propositions <It is now raining>, <It was raining>, and <It will rain>. A tenseless fact describes the world using tenseless propositions. Tenseless propositions describe the world by ordering moments of time in relations of earlier-than, later-than, and simultaneous-with. Tenseless propositions do not describe reality by referring to an objective present moment of time. For example, consider the tenseless propositions <It rains at 2pm on 21 July, 2025> and <21 July 2025 is earlier-than 22 July 2025>.

Tensed and tenseless propositions are not reducible to each other because they offer different descriptions of the world. There was a period in the late 1900's where philosophers attempted to reduce tensed propositions to tenseless propositions. This is sometimes known as the detensing project. That is a long and boring story, but most philosophers have concluded that tensed and tenseless propositions cannot be reduced to one another. Today, we are left with a debate over which temporal propositions are needed to give an ideal description of the world.

If you want to give an exhaustive description of temporal reality, which kinds of temporal propositions would you need to use? A tensed theory of time says that an ideal description of the world utilizes both tensed and tenseless propositions, whereas a tenseless theory of time says that an ideal description of the world only utilizes tenseless propositions.²⁷

This debate has had an impact on contemporary understandings of divine foreknowledge, though I think it is greatly misguided. Those who affirm that God is timeless regularly rely on the tenseless theory of time in order to avoid having God's knowledge change. One of the features of tensed propositions is that they change their truthvalue depending on what is happening right now. Things are said to be different with tenseless propositions which allegedly do not change their truthvalue. A common claim is that the tenseless theory of time is a theological advantage to any view that affirms divine timelessness. To illustrate this point, consider the following example.

Take the tensed propositions <Ryan is sitting on Arthur's Seat> and <Ryan will sit on Arthur's Seat>. When I wake up in the morning, the proposition <Ryan is sitting on Arthur's Seat> is false. That is not what I am doing at present. At present, I am lying in my bed contemplating the tragedy of having to wake up in the morning. At this point in the day, the proposition <Ryan will sit on Arthur's Seat> is true. Yet, as the day goes on, I walk up to Arthur's Seat, sit down, and take in the marvelous view of Edinburgh. The proposition <Ryan will sit on Arthur's Seat> is no longer true. That proposition is now false. The proposition

²⁷ Pearson (2018, 16).

<Ryan is sitting on Arthur's Seat> becomes true. These temporal propositions change their truthvalues in accordance to the way the world is at present.

Tenseless propositions allegedly do not change their truthvalue. Consider the proposition <Ryan sits on Arthur's Seat at 2pm on 18 May 2025>. Now think about the previous story. When I wake up in my bed on the morning of 18 May 2025, that proposition is true. When I later sit on top of Arthur's Seat, that proposition does not become true because it already is true. As I walk down the mountain back to my home, the proposition remains true. The standard claim is that for all eternity, the proposition <Ryan sits on Arthur's Seat at 2pm on 18 May 2025> is true. The truthvalue of this proposition does not change because it makes no reference to the way the world is at present.

If you affirm the tenseless theory of time, you are saying that the only temporal propositions you need to fully describe the world are tenseless propositions. If you are like me, and you affirm the tensed theory of time, you will be saying that a full description of the temporal world cannot be captured by tenseless propositions alone. A full description of the temporal world must also include tensed propositions as well. There are several reasons for thinking that the tensed theory is true. I will mention four. The first reason is one that I have never seen discussed before. The other three reasons are commonly discussed, but important for understanding the argument against foreknowledge and passibility.

First, the tenseless theory is inconsistent with Calvinism and Molinism. Recall that the truthvalues of tenseless propositions do not change. That is the standard claim about tenseless propositions within the philosophy of time. This is why many theologians who affirm timelessness and immutability wish to affirm the tenseless theory of time. They think that it will allow them to affirm that God changelessly knows all of the temporal facts about reality. What all contemporary theologians seem to have overlooked is the inconsistency of this with the standard claims from Calvinism and Molinism. Listen to what the Calvinist William Shedd says: "The Divine decree is the necessary condition of the Divine foreknowledge. If God does not first decide what shall come to pass, he cannot know what will come to pass."²⁸ As I have discussed elsewhere, on both Calvinism and Molinism, God initially faces an open future.²⁹ At the so-called moment of natural knowledge, God does not know what will happen in the future because God has not yet decided to create or not create. At the moment of natural knowledge there is no fact of the matter about whether or not God will even create anything at all, let alone any facts about what in particular God would create. If the standard description of God's moment of natural knowledge is accurate, then God faces an open future. If God faces an open future, then

²⁸ Shedd (1888, 396–397).

²⁹ My paper Mullins (2024b).

tenseless propositions like <Ryan sits on Arthur's Seat at 2pm on 18 May 2025> are not eternally true. Those propositions only become true subsequent to God's decision to create in general, and subsequent to God's decision to create a particular universe with a settled future. That is not consistent with the tenseless theory's claim that tenseless propositions do not change their truthvalue.

I anticipate that many Calvinists and Molinists who affirm divine timelessness will not like this. They will say, "Those tenseless propositions are not true, but only from the logical moment of natural knowledge. They are eternally true at the logical moment of free knowledge, so they never switch their truthvalue." I find this to be confused. This is what these people are saying. From all eternity that proposition is both true and false. From God's single timeless moment, it is true that <Ryan sits on Arthur's Seat at 2pm on 18 May 2025>, but somehow it is also false from some logical moment embedded within God's single timeless moment. That is incredibly difficult to make sense of. I strongly suspect that this is nothing but playing with words. In fact, the history of Christian theology is rather interesting on this point. Various theologians have used these logical moments embedded within God's timeless moment in an attempt to solve different theological puzzles. When they are challenged about these logical moments, it is standard to see these theologians say that this talk of logical moments is nothing more than notions in our heads. It is just a way of talking that helps us make sense of theology, but it does not actually describe anything true about God. For example, when Moses Amyraut was questioned about his particular logical order of God's decrees, he said that the order of decrees is only a distinction within human reason. In God, the decree is one eternal moment without succession of thought, order, priority, or posteriority. In other words, the decree is one eternal act in God without distinction.³⁰ If that is the case, then all of this talk about logical moments in the life of God is nothing more than a fiction, the use of which is questionable at best. Either way, nothing here helps to show compatibility between the tenseless theory of time and traditional doctrines of providence.

There is a second reason for thinking that the tenseless theory of time is false. The tenseless theory of time leaves us with an incomplete description of the temporal world. I affirm a very traditional view on the ontology of time called presentism. I think that presentism is obviously true. The present moment of time is the only moment that is real. Past moments no longer exist, and future moments do not yet exist. No description of the temporal world can be complete without mentioning what is happening at the present. The tenseless theory of time avoids mentioning the present, thus leaving us with an incomplete description of reality.

³⁰ Amyraut (2017, 167).

Third, the tenseless theory of time makes the practicalities of daily life wildly impractical.³¹ This is because practical decision making consistently relies on tensed facts. To see this, consider the following. Imagine I dare you to live like a consistent tenseless theorist for a day. You are only allowed to rely on tenseless propositions to navigate your way throughout your daily business. Can you consistently pull this off without relying on any tensed propositions? If I were a betting man, I would put good money on you failing miserably. To see why, consider a few obstacles that one might face. Imagine that you wake up in the morning knowing that you have a meeting at 10:30am. You also know that you need to leave your house at precisely 9:30am in order to get to the meeting on time. Here is the first obstacle you will have to face. You will need to know what time it is right now to figure out if you should leave your house sooner than later. The problem is that you are not allowed to rely on tensed facts like what time it is right now. You need to figure out when to leave without relying on tensed facts. That is going to be difficult to say the least. Here is another challenge. Imagine that your partner says to you, "What are you doing right now?" You are going to have to respond with something like, "Darling, I have explained to you before, there are no tensed facts in the world. Could you rephrase the question without any tenses?" If your partner is inclined to indulge your philosophical proclivities, they might reply, "Sorry. Can you explain to me what you are doing simultaneously with the utterance of this question?" If your partner is not inclined to indulge your philosophical proclivities, I would imagine that the response will be more colorful. The more colorful response accurately tracks the implausibility of the tenseless theory of time.

Fourth, the tenseless theory is inconsistent with the rationality of emotions. This point is going to be important for the argument that I will be considering in later sections, so I will discuss this issue in more detail. An emotion is a felt evaluation of a situation. Emotions are cognitive in that they represent the situation as having certain values or disvalues. Emotions can be rational or irrational. It depends on how well an emotion tracks the values in the world in terms of the appropriateness of the emotion type and the fittingness of the intensity of the emotion. For example, if a stranger is not paying attention and bumps into you on the sidewalk, certain emotion types seem fitting. Perhaps annoyance or anger would be appropriate. It depends on how hard they bumped you. Say that the bump is sufficient to justify the emotion of anger, but it is insufficient to justify a fit of rage. The intensity of the anger needs to be appropriate to the offense.

Notice something important about this example. The emotion here is a response to a tensed fact. It is a response to something that is happening right

³¹ Cf. Pearson (2018, 146–147).

now. The emotion is also justified by a tensed fact. What explains the rationality of the emotion in this case is what is happening right now. The reality is that most of our emotions are about tensed facts. Our emotions concern our present situation, and our present situation is embedded with all sorts of tensed facts about what is happening right now, what has happened, and what will happen. To give some more examples, someone might be grieving because of the recent loss of a loved one. Another person will be happy because of their recent acceptance into university. A different person will be anxious about an upcoming exam. These are emotions about tensed facts embedded in our present situation. These emotions are justified by the existence of tensed facts.

This is a serious problem for the tenseless theory of time because the tenseless theory says that there are no tensed facts. Thus, the tenseless theory of time cannot capture the rationality of emotions because most of our emotions are justified by tensed facts. As Olley Pearson points out,

many emotions have a temporal orientation. Relief is oriented towards the past. It is appropriate to be relieved that a discomfort *has ended* but it is inappropriate to be relieved that a discomfort *will end*. In a connected manner, it is inappropriate to have a tenseless emotion of relief because in such tenseless relief one will not know whether or not the discomfort has ended.³²

Think of the problem this way. Have you ever had a justified emotion about a tensed fact? Perhaps you have relief that a painful doctor's visit is over. If you have ever had a justified emotion about a tensed fact like that, the tenseless theory of time is false. It is false because the tenseless theory says that there are no tensed facts to justify your emotions. Since I think it is obvious that you have had justified emotions about tensed facts, I think it is obvious that the tenseless theory of time is false.

It would be good to summarize what I have just discussed. There are four takeaways from this discussion that will be helpful to keep in mind as I consider different problems for the compatibility of foreknowledge and passibility. First, God is passible in that God's beliefs, emotions, and actions are influenced by things external to Himself. Second, God's omniscience concerns propositions, but that God's cognitive perfection extends beyond that to include experiential knowledge. Third, God's foreknowledge concerns tensed propositions about what will happen in the future. Fourth, emotions are rationally justified by tensed facts.

³² Pearson (2018, 28).

3. Two Problems for Passibility and Foreknowledge

There are two kinds of problems that I want to consider for the neoclassical theist. Both center around the alleged incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and passibility. First, why would God create anything at all? Second, why would God feel anything at all? Both of these problems are often posed by the open theist against anyone who affirms that God has exhaustive foreknowledge of the future.

With regard to the first problem, the neoclassical theist John Feinberg puts the objection like this:

a God who has planned everything in advance must be very bored with history. Since he already has planned and knows what will happen, why even bother playing out the script? Only when there is uncertainty because things are not set in advance can our history be of any real interest to God.³³

Feinberg has a ready reply to this objection. He writes,

Why would God want to go through history with us as it unfolds when he already knows everything he and we will do? For the same reason that the person who meticulously plans every detail of a business meeting or a worship service still wants to attend. For the same reason that someone who knows all the lines of every actor in a play still wants to experience the live performance. Knowing intellectually the blueprint for what will happen cannot take the place of experiencing the actual occurring of everything that is planned. As we saw in nuancing the divine attribute of omniscience, there is a difference between propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge. God's knowing propositionally everything that will occur because he has foreordained it cannot take the place of experiencing history's flow as it passes. Knowing that I will seek his help in time of trial and that he will respond cannot take the place of actually hearing me pray and then responding to my need. No, the "doing" of history is not boring for the king who has planned each moment of it.³⁴

This reply seems right to me, and I will elaborate the point further. When it comes to God's decree, God's decree seems to be doing several different things. First, it settles truthvalues for tensed propositions about the universe that God is going to create. The decree contains a set of tensed propositions that describe exactly how everything happens at specific moments of time that are subsequent to God's act of creating that universe. Second, the decree sets in place a particular set of tensed propositions that will change their truthvalues as history progresses.

³³ Feinberg (2001, 801).

³⁴ Feinberg (2001, 801–802).

For example, prior to the act of creation, God's decree would settle the truthvalues for propositions like <God the Son will become incarnate>. Once God the Son becomes incarnate, that proposition will no longer be true. Instead, the tensed proposition <God the Son is incarnate> becomes true. Third, the decree seems to settle which emotions God will undergo, yet I am uncertain to what extent the decree can do so.³⁵ At the very least, the decree does not give God those experiences immediately.

Some open theists will push back at this point. They might say that prior to creation God can imagine or simulate exactly what it will be like to experience those future events. So when God issues a decree, He does in fact have that experiential knowledge in advance.³⁶

I disagree. A cognitively perfect God will know the difference between what it is like to experience a simulation of an event, and what it is like to experience the actual event. One's cognitive abilities are rather limited if one cannot tell the difference between a simulation and the real thing. Prior to creating a universe, God can simulate what it might be like to create a universe, but this is not the same kind of knowledge that one has of actually creating a universe. God's decree to create a particular universe does not give God knowledge of what it is actually like to create a universe. Only creating a universe will give God such experiential knowledge. So why create? One of the many reasons is in order to gain the experiential knowledge of actually creating a universe.³⁷ The same goes for God's knowledge of what will take place in history. God's decree only establishes that certain events will take place. This does not provide God with the experiential knowledge of what it is actually like to become incarnate, to respond to human prayers, to rejoice when humans repent, and so on. That kind of knowledge can only be had by actually creating a universe, and providentially interacting with it.

Given all of this, I think that this particular open theist objection is unsuccessful. However, there is another open theist objection worth considering. Open theists like Richard Rice and William Hasker argue that if God knows the future, then it makes no sense to speak of God having various emotions predicated of Him in scripture like anticipation, sadness, anger, grief, or happiness. One might even try to argue that foreknowledge calls into question the intelligibility of God's passibility as a whole. If Rice and Hasker are right, this is a problem for the neoclassical theist.

What exactly is the argument? According to Rice,

³⁵ As several philosophers of emotion have told me, content essentialism for phenomenal knowledge is a controversial position. However, I am uncertain what to say about this issue.

³⁶ Thanks to Alan Rhoda for pushing this objection. Cf. (Zagzebski 2023) for a defense of this position.

³⁷ I explore God's reasons to create further in (Mullins 2024a).

The traditional view of divine foreknowledge collapses any distinction between anticipation and realization. According to the classical view, God's knowledge of the future is exhaustive: God knows the entire future, the future in all its detail. If so, then God not only knows exactly what will occur, God also knows every aspect of his own response to what will occur, and to know that, in effect, is to have the experience already. If God foreknows all, then God's experience already includes all. Actual occurrences contribute nothing new.³⁸

There is an oddity here in Rice's argument that is worth pointing out. Rice, like most open theists, affirms that God develops an exhaustive contingency plan prior to creation in order to guarantee the success of His most central purposes for creation.³⁹ On Rice's view, God plans out in every detail exactly how He will respond to every possible situation that might arise. God would know every aspect of His own response with an exhaustive plan like that. On Rice's reasoning, this would mean that God has the experience of responding already. Yet surely that cannot be right.

To see why this cannot be right, consider the following. Rice's argument ignores the distinction between propositional and phenomenal knowledge that most people want to make. God's foreknowledge is merely propositional. God can only experience what presently exists. Future events do not yet exist for God to experience. Nothing about knowing that God will respond to certain future events will give God knowledge of what it is like to actually respond. God can only have that experiential knowledge by actually experiencing the response when it happens. For example, God can know that He will respond to repentant sinners with joy. Nothing about foreknowing this response includes the actual experience of joy because those damned sinners have not yet repented. It would be irrational for God to already be experiencing joy when those wretches have yet to even ask for forgiveness. Since God is perfectly rational, His emotions will perfectly track the values in His present situation. God's present situation does not include all future events. God's present situation only includes all present events.

Since this particular open theist argument is not going to be a problem for the neoclassical theist, let's consider another one. Hasker offers a different version of the argument. Hasker explicitly takes aim at anyone who wishes to affirm divine passibility and foreknowledge. His goal is to persuade the passibilist to affirm the open theistic view that God does not have definite exhaustive foreknowledge.⁴⁰ Hasker says,

³⁸ Rice (2020, 135).

³⁹ Rice (2020, 47).

⁴⁰ Hasker (2004, 105).

if, like me, you think God really does have an emotional life, then you may also feel you have some stake in being able to say that the emotions attributed to God in Scripture are emotions he really experiences. If that is what you want, the open view of God can give it to you—and so far as I can see, it is the only view that can.⁴¹

Hasker says that there are 2 characteristics to the biblical description of God's emotional life.

- 1) The emotion ascribed to God is concerned with, and appropriate to, the particular situation of the human beings to whom God is related.
- 2) The emotion would be profoundly different if we assumed it to be informed by a definite prior knowledge of the situation's outcome.⁴²

As it stands, the argument is underdeveloped and does not seem to get Hasker to the conclusion that he wants. Remember, Hasker said that open theism is the only view that can maintain divine passibility. I do not see how (1) and (2) can lead to an incompatibility between divine foreknowledge and divine passibility. In what follows, I will offer several reasons for thinking that (1) and (2) cannot lead to any inconsistency between divine foreknowledge and divine passibility.

The first reason for thinking that there is no inconsistency is to recall the basic definitions of passibility and foreknowledge. Again, to be passible is for God to have His beliefs, emotions, and actions influenced by things external to Himself. God has foreknowledge if God knows of the truthvalues of the tensed propositions concerning the future. Say that God knows that you will repent of your sins and ask for forgiveness on 8 January 2026 at 2:17pm EST.⁴³ Also, say that God knows that He will immediately offer forgiveness after you have successfully repented. Also, as the Bible tells us repeatedly, God will rejoice whenever a sinner repents. When that event arrives, God's belief that you are asking for repentance will be influenced by you presently asking for repentance. God's subsequent action of forgiving you will be influenced by your request for forgiveness. Finally, God's emotion of rejoice is justified by your actual present repentance. That is a passible deity through and through. Nothing about divine foreknowledge undermines passibility.

⁴¹ Hasker (2004, 106). I can imagine some contemporary Calvinists trying to dismiss this argument by asserting that it assumes a univocal theory of religious language. For some theologians, the doctrine of univocity is practically the same as idolatry. Such a dismissal is mistaken for at least two reasons. First, Hasker affirms the doctrine of analogy, as do many open theists (Hasker 2022). Second, the doctrine of univocity is true and salutary (Williams 2005).

⁴² Hasker (2004, 106).

⁴³ For those outside of the United States of America, EST officially stands for Eastern Standard Time. Unofficially, EST stands for God's preferred time zone.

There are at least two more reasons for thinking that Hasker's argument cannot show the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and divine passibility. First, (2) seems false. Second, (2) seems perfectly consistent with everyday passible creatures, so we have no reason to think that it is inconsistent with a divine passible being.

I will start with a reason for thinking that (2) is false. Pearson argues that emotions can be appropriate or inappropriate independent of the appropriate beliefs involved. The argument from Rice and Hasker seems to overlook this point. Pearson says,

If I learn that a loved one will die on a particular date in the distant future, it is inappropriate for me to at that time to grieve the death. That is, it is inappropriate to have grief where the belief element involved is the belief 'x will die at t' or the tenseless belief 'x dies at t.' Such grief would be inappropriate despite the belief it involves being true and appropriate.⁴⁴

I find this statement plausible. Imagine that a psychic doctor helps deliver your firstborn child. The doctor hands you your baby and says to you, "I have seen the future. Your child will die in 100 years." What kind of emotion will you have? I cannot really speak for you, but my guess is that grief will not be the emotion that arises. You might feel excited that your child will have a long life. You might be annoyed at the doctor for bringing up a far off death at this moment. Grieving the forthcoming death of your child in that situation seems inappropriate despite the fact that your belief about the child's death is true. This is because there are more salient tensed facts that ought to motivate you to have certain emotions. A far off death is not the most pressing tensed fact.

Here is another example of this. In Matthew 9:14-17, several people notice that John's disciples and the Pharisees are fasting. Jesus' disciples are not fasting. This seems to have rankled these people, so they ask Jesus why His disciples are not fasting. Jesus says to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." Jesus knows that His death is forthcoming, yet He does not think that it is appropriate for His disciples to fast and mourn just yet. Why? Because there will be plenty of time to mourn later. At the moment, there are more pressing facts that should be motivating the disciples to have certain emotions and actions.

As I see it, (2) is just plain false in certain cases. Yet I also think that (2) is irrelevant to whether or not someone is passible. Again, emotions are justified by the present tensed facts. Some of the present tensed facts are about what will take place in the future. Merely knowing what will happen in the future will certainly

⁴⁴ Pearson (2018, 212–213).

temper my present emotions, but it in no way undermines the fact that I have emotions. Nor does it undermine the fact that I am a passible being. Basically, all (2) is doing is pointing out very common emotional experiences that all passible humans have.

Consider the classic example from A.N. Prior's "thank goodness that is over" argument for the tensed theory of time. Prior says that he is anxious about an upcoming exam. He knows that the exam *will* take place on Monday. And he knows that after the exam he *will* feel a great sense of relief. But knowing that he will eventually feel relief does not get rid of Prior's present anxiety. Why? Because it would be irrational to feel relief when the exam has not yet taken place. The present facts are that the exam is upcoming, and that justifies Prior's emotion of anxiety. You can probably say that Prior's anxiety is tempered by his knowledge that the exam will eventually finish, but that does not undermine his entirely justified anxiety.

Consider the case of Jesus Christ. He predicted that he would suffer and die on a cross and be raised three days later. The night before He was crucified, He prayed that the Father might spare Him from this forthcoming crucifixion. Jesus has already stated that He will in fact be resurrected in three days, but for some reason this knowledge about what will happen in the future does not seem to get rid of His anxiety about His upcoming crucifixion. Why? Because Jesus' anxiety is an appropriate response to the present facts. The present facts are that He will be undergoing an immense suffering very soon. It would be irrational for Jesus to have an emotional response like "thank goodness that is over" when the crucifixion has yet to take place. To be sure, I guess one can say that Jesus' knowledge of His forthcoming resurrection tempered His anxiety in that moment. But Jesus still got so anxious that He sweat blood (Luke 22:44). If Jesus is justified in having emotional responses like that whilst still knowing something about the future, then I find myself unpersuaded that there is some deep conflict between passibility and foreknowledge.

Again, what all of these examples show is that we all have the very common experience of having our present emotions tempered by what we know will take place in the future. Nothing about this common experience of passible beings shows that foreknowledge is inconsistent with passibility.

Tyler McNabb and Michael DeVito offer a different take on the argument. They do not try to establish that foreknowledge and passibility are incompatible. They make a much weaker claim than Hasker and Rice. Their claim is that if God has exhaustive foreknowledge, then God does not seem to be as emotional as passibilists typically say.⁴⁵ Surely if God knows that He will have ultimate victory

⁴⁵ DeVito and McNabb (2022).

over sin, sickness, and death, then God's emotions should be sensitive to that knowledge.

I reply that God's emotions are sensitive to this knowledge, but that this is not news to the passibilist. The open theist Keith Ward has written on this in several places.⁴⁶ He claims that there are certain emotions that God cannot fully grasp because He cannot experience them Himself. The standard example is utter hopelessness. The claim is that God can understand what it is like for you to feel utterly hopeless, but that God can never feel utter hopelessness Himself. Why? Because God knows that His plan for creation will ultimately be successful.

Conclusion

In this paper I have articulated the conceptual machinery needed to understand the neoclassical theistic account of divine providence, foreknowledge, and passibility. I have considered several objections to the consistency of divine foreknowledge and passibility, and argued that the neoclassical view is consistent. If there is some inconsistency that I have not foreseen, I invite others to point it out at a later date.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ E.g. Ward (2001, 2017).

⁴⁷ This article is an output of the Project "Providence and Free Will in the Models of Classical Theism and Analytic Theism" (PID2021-122633NB-100), funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain.

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