

Perfection and Providence

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Abstract: I argue in two ways that perfect being theology does not imply any theory of providence. I argue in particular that it does not imply Molinism or its negation, and that our confidence in it should be independent of our confidence in open theism.

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I've been asked to discuss whether perfect being theology (PBT) should affect what theory of divine providence we believe is true, or whether our theory of divine providence should affect our view of PBT. I first set out some theories of providence, and introduce PBT. I then argue in two ways that PBT does not imply any theory of providence. I further argue that in particular, PBT implies neither Molinism nor its negation. I then argue that confidence in open theism should not affect our confidence in PBT—in which case equally, confidence in PBT should not affect our confidence in open theism.

Theories of Providence

For the Abrahamic religions, there continues to be a universe only if God conserves it in existence. Doing so constitutes a minimum level of providing for it, and so of providence over it. So for the Abrahamic religions, God exercises some level of providence just in case there continues to be a universe. Theories of providence concern

- whether God provides at all for the world and the creatures that make it up beyond this minimum,
- if He does, in how much detail He does so,
- if He does, how He does so, and
- if He does, with how much control He does so.

Divine determinist theories hold that God's providence determines all events in history—that He is fully responsible in some way for the full detail of history. But they differ over just how He determines these events, and so despite their agreement that God determines them all, divine determinist theories differ in how much overall control they afford God. Ranked from most to least control, three varieties of divine determinism are maximal occasionalism, non-Molinist predestinarianism, and standard Molinism.

On maximal occasionalism, God is the only genuine cause, even of our own volitions, intentions, etc. Maximal occasionalism gives God the greatest conceivable control. It goes beyond His determining what every event shall be, in all its details, to God directly and alone causing everything. On non-Molinist predestinarianism, God pre-ordains all of history, but pre-ordains *inter alia* that creatures cause some of it.¹ Even if a standard-predestinarian God fully causes every case of creaturely causation, maximal occasionalism gives God more control than standard predestinarianism does. Compare two toy-makers: one makes a wind-up toy, winds it up, and lets it run. The other makes a marionette that looks just like the wind-up toy, and pulls the strings so that the marionette does just what the wind-up toy does. The two equally fully determine how their toys move, and produce just the same movements. But intuitively, the puppet-maker has more control overall, because the puppet-maker's control is more direct. The wind-up toy in one sense is out of the toymaker's control once it starts to run; if the toymaker changes his/her mind about what to have it do, the toymaker must intervene to exert a further, hands-on sort of control over its movements. The marionette is never out of the puppet-maker's control, in that sense. If the puppet-maker starts to do one thing with the marionette, then decides to have it do something else, the puppet-maker already has hands-on control, and so can just make it happen at once—he puppet-maker already has the control that the toymaker must intervene to get.

Standard Molinism is a form of predestinarian divine determinism. On it too, God pre-ordains every detail of history. On standard Molinism, explanatorily and perhaps temporally prior to all divine choice, there are subjunctive conditional truths about every possible creaturely libertarian-free choice. For every possible creaturely free agent *S* and possible circumstance *C* in which *S* makes a libertarian-free choice, there is a truth of the form *were S in C, S would freely choose to do A*. The literature calls these counterfactuals of freedom, but this is bad terminology, and has stuck just because everyone is familiar with it. For

¹ E.g. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 19, 8.

“counterfactuals” suggests that the antecedent is counter to fact—that S in fact won’t be or isn’t in C. But when God is deciding how history will go, there is as yet no fact as to whether S will be in C, and once He decides, He might well decide that S will be in C. So I will instead call these Molinist conditionals.

On standard Molinism, God uses Molinist conditionals to control creaturely free action. If it is the case that were S in C, S would freely choose to do A, and God wants S freely to do A, He puts S in C or some other circumstance in which S freely would do A, and if God wants S not to do A, He prevents S’ being in C or any other A-doing circumstance. But on standard Molinism, God does not control which Molinist conditionals are true; there is nothing He can do about them. He must simply accept them. He finds rather than determines that they are true. So on standard Molinism, though God determines every event in history, God is not in full control of everything. He does not control the Molinist conditionals, even though they are (by hypothesis) contingent truths. Further, He is not in full control even of how history goes. If He prefers that things go in a way the Molinist conditionals rule out, He cannot bring this about. All He can do is the best the Molinist conditionals allow. He is in full control only of how things go given the conditionals there are.

Standard Molinism, again, holds that there is a Molinist conditional for every possible pairing of free creature and choice-situation. A non-standard Molinist could hold that there are some Molinist conditionals pre-creation, but not enough to let God use any set of them to completely pre-ordain a history as large and complex as ours. On such a view, if history is sufficiently large and complex, then even if God used all the conditionals there are to determine parts of it, He would have to deal with the rest of history in some other way. I acknowledge this by speaking hereafter of whether there are enough pre-creative Molinist conditionals (for the full standard Molinist story). But with one exception, I do not discuss partial Molinism; what I say about the standard version can be modified in unsurprising ways to cover partial versions.

Thus God’s determinist providential options. Divine indeterminism denies that God pre-ordains or in any other way determines all events. On such theories, God in some cases does not decide whether it shall be the case that P or that not-P, and lets creatures settle that. One type of divine indeterminism leaves some of the settling wholly up to creaturely libertarian-free choice. This and Molinism (if Molinism is possible) are God’s sole created-libertarian-freedom providential options. For if God allows created libertarian freedom to operate, either He does not fully control any of its operation or He does. Only Molinism even claims to provide a way for God fully to control libertarian-free creaturely action.

The indeterminist theory of providence granting God the minimum of control would be a maximal deism. Deists hold that God makes the world and then steps back, conserving it but directly controlling no creaturely event at all. Historical deism tended to grant God an indirect control, because it tended to see Him as having imposed deterministic laws. If God sets determinist laws in place, then if He also establishes the universe's initial conditions, He determines all that follows, and so counts as controlling it even though He no longer takes a direct hand in events.

Maximal deism denies the determinism. Suppose that a deist God puts indeterminist laws in place. Then if the laws are indeterminist enough and time lasts long enough, even if God establishes the initial conditions, eventually, so much randomness may pop up and affect what comes afterwards that He no longer counts even as having indirectly caused events in nature. Once this happens, He has lost even indirect control over Creation, save for His directly controlling whether it continues to exist. The more indeterminist the laws—i.e. the wider the expanse of possible outcomes they allow for situations they govern—the faster this point is likely to arrive. One sort of deism would say that God made a universe with a first instant, and made the laws so completely indeterminist that at every later instant, God does not count as even indirectly controlling what occurs. This would look like God's creating an uncontrolled chaos. The absolute minimum of divine control would get rid of that first instant, and say that before every (say) minute of random creaturely history, there was another minute, equally uncontrolled by God.

Perfect Being Theology

I now introduce PBT. PBT is first and foremost a method of deriving divine attributes; some also transfer the label “perfect being theology” to a picture of God to which (they claim) PBT leads most perfect-being thinkers. PBT as a method may proceed entirely *a priori*, constructing a picture of God by purely philosophical means—as in Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. On the other hand, one may use PBT to fill out the details of a picture whose main lines are given by revelation. Either way, PBT supposes that God would be a perfect being, and tries to make progress in theology by reasoning out what a perfect being would be like.

PBT boils down to one rule: “pick the best.” If deciding what attributes God has, pick the best. If deciding what degree of an attribute God has, pick the best. In either case, if the best is not compatible with other divine attributes, the rule is to pick the best that is compatible. If an attribute comes out best in a comparison

with its rivals (e.g. omnipotence beats all lesser degrees of power), and having it is compatible with having all the rest of the bests, then that attribute is a final output of PBT: PBT judges that God will have it. This is another “pick the best,” for it is picking the best total set of divine attributes. If bests in different categories are incompatible—some allege, for instance, that the best in power (omnipotence) is incompatible with the best in moral goodness (moral perfection)²—PBT says, “pick the best of the conflicting bests if there is one.” If there is no best, or a tie for best, or it is not clear what the best is, PBT can’t decide the matter. I defend PBT from a variety of criticisms elsewhere.³ Here I merely discuss what it does and does not yield, whether or not it is ultimately a viable way to do philosophical theology.

PBT and the Essentiality Problem

I show elsewhere that PBT can select only God’s essential attributes.⁴ If it can do only that, then PBT can correctly conclude that a theory of providence is true only if it is essential to God to decide that if He makes and runs a universe, He will run it as that theory describes. This leads directly to an argument that PBT cannot correctly conclude that a theory of providence is true. For if it can, then assuming S5 (as all the right-minded do), PBT yields that in every possible world in which God makes a universe, God runs it as that theory describes. So PBT yields that only one of the theories just surveyed is possibly true—the one that holds in all worlds in which God makes a universe. But it strongly seems that more than one of the theories above is possibly true. In particular, it strongly seems both that God could make a determinist universe and that God could make an indeterminist universe. Surely an omnipotent God would have both sorts of option. But He does not have both sorts if PBT can correctly conclude that a theory of providence is true, and so tell us that He essentially picks one particular way of running the universe. So PBT does not settle that.

How PBT Would Affect Theory Choice

Still, suppose that I’m wrong that PBT can select only essential attributes. In that case, PBT dictates a theory of divine providence only if PBT delivers actual divine attributes that dictate one particular actual divine choice of how to run the

² E.g. Pike (1969, 208–16).

³ “Perfect Beings and Killer Ghosts,” (forthcoming), (2024, 38–64), (2023, 164–83); (2021, 262–73).

⁴ (2023, 164–83), (2021, 262–73).

world—e.g. PBT delivers perfect wisdom, and only one way to run the world is perfectly wise, or PBT delivers that God must pick the best of competing alternatives, and one way to run the world is best. The method of PBT can affect which theory of providence we judge correct only by delivering attributes that affect our judgment on this.

Thus to address fully how PBT's outputs should affect our opinion of how God runs the world, I would have to survey the main claimed deliverances of PBT, and all of their possible combinations. This would take a book, not an article. Nor can I consider whether there is some set of attributes that PBT includes in every possible set of outputs that completely characterizes God's nature, and whether that set dictates a theory of providence. For that too would require doing more PBT than I can squeeze into one article which is not about PBT, but instead about its bearing on another issue. What I can do is consider a few arguments based on one or two attributes.

PBT and the theories

I now consider how PBT would approach theories of providence. Suppose for argument's sake that there is a best way for God to run the world. Ignore for now just how we might judge being best—if there is a best, that is grist for PBT's mill. Suppose that X is the best way. Then it is a perfection for God to be able to exercise providence the X way. So that property will be a *prima facie* candidate for ascription to God via PBT. It will wind up ascribed to God unless some other *prima facie* perfection(s) is (are) incompatible with it and clearly better to have, or else a necessary part of a better combination of attributes to have.

Suppose now that there is no best way to run a universe. Then *prima facie*, it would be a perfection to be able to exercise providence in as many ways as are good, and so this property will be a candidate PBT considers. This property will also be a candidate if one way is best, but it would be best to have the option of running the world in other ways. These providence properties are not a distinctive issue for PBT. They feed into it just as any other candidate perfections do. So far, then, our judgment about which if any is the best way to run a universe should not affect our view of PBT.

I now consider whether PBT might affect our view of which theory of providence is correct. Since PBT is about God, not the world, we must come at this *a priori*. We are not asking whether the world looks determinist. We are asking whether PBT tells us that something about God dictates that (say) He impose determinism. Since it is up to God how He runs the world, PBT will affect

which theory we think is correct just in case it yields a picture of God that decisively favors His choosing one theory.

One question that arises here is: two choices or one? We could see God as first choosing which theory of providence to follow, then choosing a particular plan of that kind, or we could see God as just choosing a plan, which will be of a sort some theory of providence describes. I think we can just pass this over. Either way, if His attributes decisively favor one kind of theory, that will filter His options. To simplify discussion, I will speak as if there are two choices, and focus on the choice of theory, but I make no commitment on whether this really is how God's mind works.

There are just three ways God might choose a theory of providence to implement. Either He will prefer what is best and choose accordingly, or He will choose in accord with some other preference, or He will not follow a preference, but instead make an arbitrary pick. If PBT tells us that God would make an arbitrary pick, then PBT will not tell us which theory of providence is correct. For PBT cannot tell us what God arbitrarily picks. If any attribute PBT selects dictated God's pick, the pick would not be arbitrary. There would be a reason for it, in His having that attribute. Further, He would at least know that reason, and likely be acting on it. PBT would say "an omnipotent being should choose X, due to its omnipotence." God would know that He is omnipotent, and also see the connection PBT sees between omnipotence and X. If what PBT says really is true, then, God would choose X due to His knowledge and omnipotence. There would be no arbitrariness about this.

Next, suppose that PBT tells us that God would follow some preference other than one for the best—hereafter, some personal preference. PBT then could tell us which theory He picked only if it could tell us what His relevant personal preferences are. It could tell us that only if some relevant personal preferences were the best to have. Note that personal preferences would not include such things as preference for moral virtue over neutrality or vice. These fall under preferences for the best. Rather, divine personal preferences would be most like tastes. Thus I submit that there is no best set of divine personal preferences. It is not best to prefer chocolate to vanilla, or to prefer vanilla to chocolate. Perhaps there are best constraints on God's personal preferences, e.g. that they be compatible with moral perfection and perfect love. If there are, PBT might select these. But such constraints seem likely to underdetermine God's personal preferences. They do not seem likely to dictate liking chocolate better.

Suppose, finally, that PBT tells us that God will choose the best if there is one. Then PBT will imply that one theory of providence is true just if one way of

providentially running a world really is best. If so, PBT alone cannot tell us how God runs the world; other sorts of premise are needed. Further, even with those other sorts of premise, PBT can't really tell us. Suppose that (say) indeterminist plans are the best kind of plan in general. Still, some particular determinist plan might be better than any indeterminist plan. Because this could happen, God could wind up choosing a worst kind of plan—a determinist plan. So once again, PBT will not tell us which theory of providence is correct. Nor will it tell us by way of telling us that some (say) determinist plan is better than any indeterminist plan, because that is not something PBT deals with, and quite probably is beyond human capacity to judge.

Recall finally that PBT tells us only about God's essential properties.⁵ So if it tells us that He is a best-chooser, then in every possible world, He chooses the best kind of plan if there is one. Whether a kind of plan is best doesn't seem likely to change across possible worlds. So if PBT tells us that God is a best-chooser, and there is a best kind of plan, other kinds of plan turn out impossible. We are back to the essentiality argument.

Finally, to me, all that I've said on the supposition that God is a best-chooser is moot. For I argue elsewhere that PBT does not make God out to be a best-chooser. Instead, I think, the best picture of divine choice gives God the capacity to choose against the best.⁶ So as I see it, for yet another reason, PBT has no implications for our view of how God chooses to run the world.

I now turn to how PBT interacts with two theories of providence. I pick these two due to their considerable current popularity.

PBT and Molinist Conditionals

Some might suggest that PBT rules against standard Molinism.⁷ For on standard Molinism, Molinist conditionals are truths God finds, rather than determines. If they are, then either they are ungrounded contingent truths independent of God, or they have contingent truthmakers that exist independent of Him and are beyond His sway. Either way, God has an environment He must simply adjust to.⁸ But plausibly, being an ultimate reality is a perfection, and if God is an

⁵ (2023, 164–83); (2021, 262–73).

⁶ See my “Two Pictures of Divine Choice” (2017, 152–72).

⁷ So Johannes Grossl, conversation.

⁸ One might suggest a third view here, that Molinist conditionals are indeterministically grounded in God Himself (so a referee). But if the grounding is indeterministic, God does not control what comes out as grounded: things could have been just as they are in Him, and different

ultimate reality, He has no more ultimate environment to which He must simply adjust.

Again, if Molinist conditionals have contingent truthmakers that exist independent of God, then God is not the source of all reality outside Him. But plausibly, being by nature the source of all reality outside Him is a perfection.

Again, Molinist conditionals limit what God can actually do in His circumstances. There are possible worlds with other Molinist conditionals, but God cannot actualize these worlds. They are only worlds He could have been able to actualize, had the Molinist conditionals differed. One might think that this strips Him of His omnipotence. Plausibly, omnipotence is a perfection.

Being an ultimate reality, being the source of all reality outside Him, and being omnipotent are *prima facie* perfections, best attributes in a certain category. The first two clearly do not conflict with other candidate perfections PBT might deliver. I think the third does not either, but I cannot get into that discussion here. *Prima facie* perfections not in conflict with other *prima facie* perfections get promoted to the set of PBT's final outputs. So it seems that PBT will deliver the first two attributes, and quite possibly the third. They all seem to rule against standard Molinism. So it can seem that PBT rules against standard Molinism.

However, those who take PBT's deliverances as reasons to reject standard Molinism, take them as reason to reject either the claim that there are enough Molinist conditionals before Creation for God to use to run the world, or the claim that God would use them to run the world. I now argue that those who reason this way must take them as reason to reject the first—that they must grant that if enough Molinist conditionals are there, God would use them to run the world.

Either there are no libertarian-free creatures, or there are libertarian-free creatures who never act freely, or there are libertarian-free creatures who sometimes act freely. If enough Molinist conditionals are there, then when creatures act freely, they act as Molinist conditionals dictate. So if enough Molinist conditionals are there, God has only the options of not making libertarian-free creatures, or making such creatures but never letting them act freely, or letting such creatures sometimes act as Molinist conditionals dictate. If PBT dictates that God is personal, or accepts that God is personal from revelation, then PBT dictates

truths could have come out grounded upon Him. If God does not control the results, they are still in a way truths He finds rather than determines: as it were, He has to wait and see how the grounding comes out, to know what conditionals He has to work with. Further, in this story, the conditionals still in a way constitute an environment to which He must adjust. One can still imagine Him ruefully wishing the counterfactuals permitted a better world than they do—only in this case, He has to add “and it's partly my fault!”

that God is all-knowing.⁹ So PBT dictates that God knows all Molinist conditionals. Again, if PBT's God is personal, PBT dictates that God is perfectly wise. As perfectly wise, God does not ignore the Molinist conditionals in thinking about how to run the world, since they will (so to speak) take over if He makes free creatures and lets them act freely, whether He wants them to or not. Thus if God is all-knowing, then given enough Molinist conditionals, He is aware and willing to make practical use of the fact that He has only the three options above.

Suppose that God rejects the first option—He decides to make free creatures. Presumably, then, He will let them act freely unless the consequences of letting them do so would be too bad (however He would measure that). For He will want to let them express themselves, want to give their being free a point, and want them to realize the distinctive values free actions realize. Plausibly these values weigh greatly in His reasons to make free creatures. If the consequences of letting them act freely would be too bad, God might still want free creatures—perhaps He intensely wants to live with you and I, and being capable of libertarian free actions is essential to us, so that He can only have us if we are capable of such action. But if the consequences would be too bad, God would make libertarian-free creatures, but so run the world as to prevent all libertarian-free action. Thus even once He decides to make free creatures, God has a decision to make: whether to let His free creatures run free, or stop them from using their freedom. His knowledge of Molinist conditionals is the basis of this decision. So whichever way He decides, He uses this knowledge to run the world. Thus those who take PBT's deliverances as reasons to reject standard Molinism must grant that if enough Molinist conditionals are there, God would use them to run the world.

If God decides not to let His creatures run free, then this is the only way He uses the conditionals. If God does let His creatures act freely, He knows that the conditionals will take over. It would be completely irrational to know this, and (so to speak) not look at them when deciding how history will go. For it would be ignoring a factor that could frustrate His plans—it would be unbelievable, extremely unlikely good luck if He (as it were) forgot the conditionals, made a plan, and the conditionals did not turn out to frustrate any part of it. So God would look to the conditionals in planning. Further, if His plan includes creaturely free action, the only way He could assure its success would be to plan

⁹ Some perfect being thinkers disagree, e.g. Aristotle. So too, some reject omnipotence (e.g. Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (1984)). This is why I said above that I would argue from what “the vast majority of perfect being thinkers believe.” That is the best one can do without going into the perfect being case for and against each attribute I discuss, because unanimity is as rare here as it is elsewhere in philosophy.

that things go as the conditionals dictate. So if God lets His creatures run free, the Molinist conditionals become part of His plan—He uses them to drive it forward. Thus again, if God makes free creatures, He must use the Molinist conditionals in deciding how the world shall go.

If PBT tells us that God is all-knowing, fully rational, and perfectly wise, it implies that if God wants to make free creatures and enough Molinist conditionals are there, God will use His knowledge of the Molinist conditionals in running the world. So if we take PBT's deliverances as reasons to reject standard Molinism, we can only take them as reason to deny that there were enough pre-Creation Molinist conditionals.

However, if we take PBT's deliverances as reason to deny that, we in effect reason that since God would be more perfect if there were not enough, there were in fact not enough. To me, this puts the cart before the horse. God would be more perfect if He were just as He is, save that He could also make contradictions true, since His omnipotence would encompass more. But *pace* Descartes, we know that God is not that perfect, because we know (*pace* paraconsistent logicians) that contradictions cannot be true. Further, we know that it is not sound procedure to settle one's logic (paraconsistent) by doing a priori theology. instead, the sound procedure is to constrain our judgments about what goes into being perfect by what we find apart from PBT to be and not be possible. Now plausibly, Molinism is true only if it is necessarily true, and in any case, a priori arguments are highly relevant to it. So are arguments from the contents of revelation ("Scripture teaches both free will and predestination, and only Molinism lets us treat both as full-strength"), and contents of revelation are relevant to the perfect-being project of filling out the details of Scripture's picture of God. So in PBT's deliberations, one factor to take account of are arguments for and against Molinism. If they tell us, on balance, that enough Molinist conditionals are there, then PBT must just content itself with the best possible God compatible with this, just as it must content itself with the best possible God who cannot make round squares. PBT does not rule out standard Molinism.

On the other hand, if we follow PBT and grant that there are enough Molinist conditionals, it does not follow that we should be standard Molinists. Standard Molinists hold that God builds the conditionals into His providential plan. We have already seen that God could refrain from doing that—if the consequences of creaturely freedom were just too bad, He would make a plan in which creatures did not use their freedom, and so a plan in which the conditionals play no role. Again, there could be Molinist conditionals even if no creature could have libertarian freedom. The Molinist conditionals would then be a variety of

counterpossible. If creatures can have libertarian freedom, and enough Molinist conditionals are there, and we follow PBT, we could infer standard Molinism only if we could guarantee that the results of letting us act freely were good enough that God used the conditionals to guide His detailed providence, rather than as a reason to negate all creaturely freedom. I do not know how we could do that; certainly it is not an obvious conclusion from the facts of history. Again, Molinism is true only if creatures have libertarian freedom. So if PBT implied Molinism, it would imply that creatures have libertarian freedom. But surely PBT does not imply that. Thus PBT does not entail that standard Molinism is true or that it is false.¹⁰

PBT and Open Theism

Molinism is the only determinist theory of providence which even claims to be compatible with creaturely libertarian freedom. If Molinism doesn't work, libertarian freedom is possible only if God runs the world indeterministically. The most popular current theory of indeterminist providence is called open theism. According to Alan Rhoda, generic open theism holds that at all times t ,

1. "there are multiple causally possible futures relative to t ,"¹¹
2. "no unique concrete future" of t exists, where "exists" expresses the most unrestricted quantifier,¹²
3. no proposition asserting a complete history of all time after t is or will be true,¹³
4. no-one infallibly knows any such proposition to be true,¹⁴

¹⁰ A referee suggests that PBT might incline one against standard Molinism, if one were otherwise unsure or agnostic about whether standard Molinism is true. One might in that circumstance (says the referee) reason that God would be greater were He the sole ultimate reality, and on Molinism, God is not the sole ultimate reality, (The conditionals are as ultimate as He is, on standard Molinism; they are "just there," *ab initio*, as He is.) One might therefore incline against or even tentatively reject Molinism on perfect-being grounds. But if that is true, PBT might equally incline one toward standard Molinism; one might think, "God would be greater if He could have complete control over history and yet allow genuine free will, so PBT is a reason to think that Molinism is true." So even at the level of inclination within agnosticism about Molinism, PBT is a wash. It pushes equally easily in either direction. Further, for what it's worth, even this sort of move seems to me to put the cart before the horse.

¹¹ Rhoda, *Open Theism* (2024, 5).

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

5. no-one has selected any such proposition to be true,¹⁵
and also that
6. (1) entails (4).¹⁶

I now take up the relation between PBT and open theism. Again, the method of PBT can interact with a theory of providence only by generating purported divine attributes that do. Some think that PBT yields divine causal impassibility, i.e. immunity to causal influence.¹⁷ Some think it yields this by implying the Thomist claim that God is “purely actual,” since being purely actual excludes passive potentiality, the ability to “receive” from without. I doubt that PBT really yields divine impassibility, and I do not find it an attractive doctrine. However, if PBT does yield it, this creates a *prima facie* conflict with open theism. On open theism, God does not foreordain our actions. Instead, we determine them, and He then learns what they are. This leads to an apparent dilemma for PBT. If the open theist story entails that we cause some of His cognitive states, God is not causally impassible. But if we do not cause them, and He does not fore-ordain them (and thereby know what they will be), then it seems to follow that He never knows what we do. This denies Him omniscience, an attribute PBT surely does yield. So if PBT yields impassibility and omniscience, it seems that open theists cannot also be perfect being theologians: the method seems to conflict with open theism.

The dilemma supposes that God knows what we do only if there is some causal connection between the relevant divine cognitive states and what we do. I now suggest a way between the dilemma’s horns: perhaps God could have the relevant knowledge without any causal connection. I now offer two stories with this feature. I do not think that either is the way God’s knowledge actually works. I offer them only to suggest that this third approach to divine knowledge might be viable.

Divine impassibility as it were seals God in a room with no doors or windows: no outside influence can make its way to Him. If God is omnipotent, He has tools to affect what goes on outside the room, but open theism suggests that God voluntarily does not use them in some cases, to allow creaturely libertarian-free action. The question is whether God, thus locked in, can know what creatures are freely doing or will freely do. If I were locked in such a room, I could at least guess at what was going on outside. Perhaps God can too. Some might say that a

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ E.g. Anselm, *Proslogion* 5. The passage quickly derives from PBT the entire picture of God the *Monologion* constructed, which includes causal impassibility.

cognitively perfect being cannot guess, because guesses are fallible means of forming beliefs, and so yield fallible beliefs, but God's infallibility prevents His having any fallible belief. But an impassible God who chooses open theism voluntarily is in a position where guessing (or the like) is all that is open to Him. If it is a perfection to be able to run the world the open theist way, and to be able to act on the laudable motives that might lead God to do so, then perfect being thinkers have reason to grant God the ability to guess. Guessing can yield true beliefs, and it is better to have true beliefs than to have no beliefs, particularly where the subject is important. Further, while our guesses are fallible, and so yield fallible beliefs, it is not clear that God's guesses must also be fallible.

It is part of God's nature to be infallible. One could take perfect infallibility to include (as it were) perfect cognitive luck—more carefully, to include that necessarily, if God makes a guess, His guess will be correct. Why not? Further, if God knows His own nature, He knows that He is infallible. So if this includes His being an infallible guesser, He knows this about His guesses¹⁸—and so His self-knowledge becomes an internally available justification for His belief in the propositions He guesses to be true, one fit to satisfy “internalists” about knowledge. Again, if He is an infallible guesser by nature, His guessing will be a completely reliable way to form beliefs about free actions—it is not even possible that He get one wrong. Thus His guess-based beliefs will be well on the way to counting as knowledge by externalist and reliabilist standards. Again, if it is His nature that guarantees all this, His beliefs, even though based on guesses, are not true by luck, and so satisfy any anti-luck condition one incorporates in an analysis of knowledge. (Note that my “perfect cognitive luck” was within the scope of an “as it were”—I was not asserting that God literally does form lucky beliefs.)

Further, God's beliefs so formed will be “sensitive”: for all such p , were it not the case that p , God would not believe that p . They will also satisfy a “safety” condition: for all such p , in all nearby worlds in which God believes that p , it is true that p . Further, God's guesses coupled with His self-knowledge will enable Him to rule out all relevant alternatives to p . Finally, God's guessing will produce apt beliefs: He has the skill of guessing right, and His coming to believe what He

¹⁸ A referee wonders what “guess” can mean in this context. Well, imagine that God asks Himself, “what will Leftow have for breakfast tomorrow?” He might then say, “I have no idea, but the options are cereal, toast, and eggs, and I find myself inclined to pick eggs. So I'll guess ‘eggs.’” Or He might just find the belief “it's eggs” forming in Himself for no reason at all, and decide to go with that. The core of these stories is that God finds Himself with groundless inclinations to form certain beliefs He has no reason (or at any rate not enough reason) to consider true, and accedes to these inclinations.

does issues from an exercise of this skill. Thus God's beliefs so formed bid fair to satisfy a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge. Epistemologists will recognize that I have briefly run through the core ideas of most kinds of analysis of knowledge offered in the last 80 years. In each case, it seems—surprisingly—that an infallibly guessing God with sufficient self-knowledge to know that He is infallible could know what we will do without having any cognitive state that either causes or is caused by our free actions. This is foreknowledge compatible with both open theism and impassibility.

Here is another model or image of this.¹⁹ Imagine that God has in mind an infinitely large grey computer screen, on which there appear glowing white English sentences expressing every proposition. God envisions this, and wills "let all sentences expressing true propositions turn blue." Some sentences then turn blue. He notes this, and thereby forms true beliefs *inter alia* our future actions. Now God's omnipotence is able to bring about any contingent state of affairs whose being brought about by God does not entail an impossibility. There is no impossibility in the screen displaying in blue all and only the truth-expressing sentences. Nor does God's bringing this about in the manner described entail any impossibility.

This story does not require that God know which sentences state truths prior to His willing. All that matters is that the resulting state of affairs—that there is a particular distribution of blue on the screen—be within the scope of omnipotence. Some might suggest that God could not bring this distribution about without knowing in advance which ones will turn blue, and deliberately intending that this sentence and not that shall turn blue. But this is just wrong. God is perfectly able to will "let P or Q be true, but not both," without deciding in advance, let alone deciding in advance based on some knowledge, whether it shall be P or be Q.²⁰ In the computer screen story, God has in effect willed a disjunction without willing any particular disjunct. The disjuncts are all the possible distributions of blue among the sentences on the screen. If God understands the setup, and understands His own nature—what His omnipotence can do, that it is a perfectly reliable cause of its effects, etc.—then His inner awareness of the screen can qualify as knowledge in much the ways His guesses did on my first model. That is, it can qualify no matter how we analyze knowledge. Should knowledge lack an analysis, as knowledge-firsters claim, the fact that this story yields knowledge

¹⁹ This story is indebted to discussion with Ethan Muse, Oliver Wolf, and Avi Sommer.

²⁰ I owe this point to Peter van Inwagen's "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," (1988, 42–65).

on so many analyses makes it a non-arbitrary, non-ad-hoc claim that God knows in the knowledge-first way what we do.

Now I do not claim that God really guesses or really knows by an exercise of His omnipotence on His own mind. The point of these models is that there may be some way for God to know what creatures do without causal connection of the wrong sort to their actions. To the extent that the two models just suggested make this option plausible, impassibility and open theism appear compatible. At the very least, then, those claiming that open theism and impassibility are incompatible have to rule out such third-option models. Till they do, it will appear that even if PBT does lead us to divine impassibility—a claim I do not believe, and have worked with only for argument’s sake—that does not render pursuing PBT incompatible with holding open theism.

I now pass to a second claimed conflict. Some think that PBT and open theism conflict because they think that PBT places God outside time, while open theism requires that He be in it. But the method of PBT conflicts with open theism only if the method does yield that God is atemporal. That it does is not universally agreed. Temporalist theists have called themselves perfect being thinkers—e.g. Charles Hartshorne.²¹ Other temporalist theists have been perfect being thinkers in practice without adopting the label, e.g. Richard Swinburne. Anyone who draws conclusions about how God is *inter alia* from how it would be better for God to be is doing perfect being theology, at least just then. Temporalist and non-temporalist agree on PBT as a method, but disagree about what it takes to be perfect.

Again, the method conflicts with open theism only if open theism really does entail divine temporality. Now if Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover were God, all of (1)-(6) would be true, and yet God would be atemporal. Further, Aristotle arrives at his picture of an Unmoved Mover by doing PBT (not very well, by my lights, but he did do it). That God is just as Aristotle said is at least a tenable metaphysical hypothesis. So it is at least a tenable metaphysical hypothesis that (1)-(6) do not jointly entail that God is in time.

Abrahamic theists think that God is more than Aristotle lets Him be. Suppose that a standard Abrahamic God is atemporal. Then part of the picture is that time is something He creates, and it is possible for Him to refrain from creating it. Suppose that He does. Then (1)-(5) are all vacuously true, for lack of times for the “t” quantifier to range over. Thus if it is possible that a standard Abrahamic God be atemporal, it is also possible that God be atemporal and all of (1)-(5) be true. If

²¹ See e.g. Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947).

(1)-(5) constitute most of generic open theism, then, divine atemporality and most of generic open theism are compatible. Most atemporalists will not grant (6), because an atemporal God who does not make time, nonetheless could make time. If He did, (1) would be true, but (4) would be false.

Now let's make things harder: suppose that God is atemporal and time exists: what then? (1) could be true even if (2) and (3) were false, and instead eternalism were the truth about time, i.e. the whole of time were just tenselessly there. That is, it could be the case that there is actually the single 4D block, but at each time in the block, there causally-could have been other later parts instead of the parts that are actually there. Many have argued that divine atemporality entails eternalism. Even if it did, it would be compatible with (1).

Many have argued or supposed that because divine atemporality entails eternalism, God's being outside time is incompatible with (2) and (3). I argue at length elsewhere that divine atemporality does not entail eternalism.²² As I see it, then, divine atemporality is compatible with (1)-(3). It is also compatible with (5): an atemporal God could simply refrain from selecting a unique complete future for the world, instead willing only a disjunction of possible futures.

If God is atemporal, He could foreknow future free creaturely action in the standard Boethian way. If He did, (4) and (6) would be false. So if God is atemporal, God is Boethian, and non-eternalist time exists, as (2) and (3) entail, then (4) and (6) are false. Note that even at this crunch point, it's not that open theism and divine atemporality are incompatible. It's that these plus a particular conception of what God's omniscience includes are jointly inconsistent. Some atemporalists—e.g. Avicenna, Gersonides, Plotinus—have been willing to accept (4), and so could accept (6), because they were willing to deny that conception of divine omniscience, or that God is omniscient at all. However, if God is atemporal, God is Boethian, and time is not eternalist, there is no motivation for (4) and (6) at all. So they are no real loss to generic open theism, on these assumptions.

Still, suppose that PBT dictates a timeless God, PBT dictates an omniscience that includes knowledge of future free creaturely actions, open theism (*per* (4)) denies that sort of omniscience, open theism requires a temporal God, and further, that we think that open theism is the best theory of providence. If all this is true, that might seem reason to doubt that our intuitions about perfection are good enough for PBT to yield truth reliably. But it is equally reason to doubt our intuitions about what makes for the best theory of providence. It shows at most

²² "Presentism, Atemporality and Time's Way," *Faith and Philosophy* 35 (2018), 173–94.

that at least one sort of intuition can mislead, but it is not obvious that more suspicion should fall on intuitions about perfection—that would need to be argued.

Suppose further that a good argument for more mistrust of our intuitions about perfection crops up, and is not defeated. Even so, I think, this should not affect our confidence in PBT. For PBT grants going in that human intuitions about perfection are fallible. So the worst case I just set up should not lower our confidence in PBT, because that should have factored in the fallibility of our intuitions from the start. This worst case would not be a reason to think that our perfection intuitions were significantly more fallible than we had thought unless we had a very unrealistic initial confidence in them. So even in the worst case, then, the truth of open theism should not lower our confidence in the claim that PBT is a proper method for theology. If that is correct, then for familiar probabilistic reasons, the latter claim should not lower our confidence in the former either.

Here, then, are my results. PBT does not on its own entail a theory of providence. It should be clear that equally, no theory of providence entails on its own that PBT is a good or a bad method for theology. PBT does not entail on its own that standard Molinism is true or that it is false. It should be clear that equally, standard Molinism has no implications about PBT's being a good or bad method. Finally, some elements of open theism clash with some outputs of PBT given certain auxiliary assumptions, but even if this is so, open theism is in the respect just shown independent of the claim that PBT is a legitimate method for theology.²³

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