

Free will and God's omniscience

Does God know what we will choose to do in the future? If I could choose this or that, how can God *know* what I will choose before I've chosen? If God does know, somehow, does this mean that we don't have free will? On the other hand, if God doesn't know what we will choose in the future, does that mean that there is something God doesn't know, i.e. that God doesn't know everything? To understand the puzzle better, we need to think about what it means to say God is omniscient, and whether, if God knows our future choices, this implies that some kind of determinism is true.

OMNISCIENCE AND THE FUTURE

God's knowledge is said to be 'perfect'. Perfect knowledge is usually taken to mean 'omniscience'. The most obvious definition of omniscience is 'knowing everything'. But philosophers usually say that God is the most perfect *possible* being, and perhaps it is impossible to know *everything*. So being omniscient, God knows all the truths that *it is possible to know*. This qualification may make room for free will. If we have free will, then perhaps it is not possible to know what we will do in the future.

However, this would only seem to work if God exists *in time*, i.e. that there is a 'future' even from God's perspective. Is this compatible with saying God is omniscient? Not only is there something – our future choices – that God doesn't know, but as the future unfolds, God would gain new knowledge. But as the most perfect possible being, God is unchanging. And if God gains knowledge, he knows more than he did, so he wasn't previously omniscient.

We may reply that if God does not know the future, this may not be a *restriction* on or *lack* in God's knowledge. If it is *impossible* to know the future, e.g. because of the existence of free will, God not knowing the future is no failure; God still knows everything it is possible to know *at any given time*. And God's gaining knowledge as time passes is consistent with God being omniscient: God always knows everything it is possible to know. It is just that *what* it is possible to know changes over time.

If God exists outside time, the problem doesn't seem to arise. God never gains new knowledge, and God already knows what happens in the (our) future. Although this is a coherent view of omniscience, it appears to conflict with the idea that we have free will. If God is 'outside' time, then surely he knows all moments in time *in the same way*. Past, present and future are all the same to God. It is hard for us to understand how God can know the future in the same way as the past unless the future is fixed just as the past is. Has the future 'already happened', from God's perspective? This doesn't make sense, since it makes the future into the 'past' – but God being outside time shouldn't be understood as all time being 'past' to God. Nevertheless, if God already knows the future, in what sense is the future 'open'? All the facts about it, including our choices, must already be 'set' if God knows what they are – mustn't they?

GOD'S FOREKNOWLEDGE AND PREDICTION

One suggestion to try to resolve the conflict notes that simply being able to predict what someone is going to do is not enough to undermine freedom. For example, you may simply know that if you offer someone prawns or meat, they will choose meat because they don't like prawns. Similarly, you can predict that a friend of yours will help this old lady across the street, because he is a kind person, in a good mood, and has just said that this is what he will do. This shows that actions are predictable, but still apparently free.

But does God know our future choices on this basis? This kind of prediction is fallible. It is different if we could predict an action with total certainty: the prediction is not simply reliable, but *infallible*. Some philosophers have argued God knows what we will do because he knows us – our characters – incredibly well. If we knew what God knows, we would be able to predict actions in principle. But this suggests that psychological determinism is true: my character determines my choices. So are my choices really free, then? If God *knows* what we will do, and God can never be wrong, then in what sense are we free to do something else?

Furthermore, knowing someone's character enables knowledge of the general shape of their choices and actions, but not every minute detail. If God knows now what I will be doing on May 23rd, 2022, this can't simply be because he knows my character well! For a start, God must know whether I will be alive then, and could only know that if the future is fixed in some way, e.g. by physical determinism.

Whether God is inside or outside time, it seems that saying God knows our future choices implies some form of determinism – either physical or psychological. But is determinism incompatible with free will?

PHYSICAL DETERMINISM

Physical determinism is the view that everything that happens in the physical universe is causally determined by the state of the universe and the laws of nature. For example, if I help an old lady across the road, immediately before I do this, my brain is in a particular state – the chemicals and neuronal connections are all a particular way. When I decide to act, my brain is in another state. Physical determinism claims that the state of my brain when I decided to help the old lady is causally determined by the state of my brain (and other aspects of the physical world) immediately before the decision. And that earlier state of my brain is determined by still earlier states of my brain and the world, and so on.

Physical determinism would make everything predictable in principle – if I knew where every particle in the universe is at one moment, and all the laws of nature, I would be able to predict where all the particles in the universe would be at any later point. This means I would be able to predict every movement of your body at any time for the rest of your life. God could have this kind of knowledge.

'Hard determinists' and 'libertarians' agree that if physical determinism is true, we cannot be free to do anything except what we actually end up doing. Hard determinists say that physical determinism is true; so we aren't free. Libertarians say we are free, so physical determinism is not true.

SOFT DETERMINISM

Some philosophers, such as G. E. Moore, have argued that determinism does not make our ethical actions unfree. There are many arguments for this view. Here is just one: for my action to be free, then *if* I had chosen to act differently, then I would have acted differently. And this does not conflict with determinism.

But is this really what it is to act freely? Philosophers who argue that determinism and freedom are incompatible say that you cannot act freely unless you choose to act freely. For example, if I am addicted to smoking, there may be times when I feel I have to have a cigarette – I can't choose not to. But it would still be true, that *if* I did choose not to, then I wouldn't. But I'm not free to choose not to have a cigarette. Surely, then, I do not smoke that cigarette freely. Physical determinism implies that I cannot choose differently from how I actually choose. So if the reason why actions are predictable in principle is because they are physically determined, then perhaps they cannot be genuinely free.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

Unlike physical determinism, psychological determinism comes in different strengths. The strongest form is just like physical determinism: every action we do is determined by preceding psychological states and laws of psychology; and those psychological states are determined by still earlier psychological states, and so on. In this strong form, it seems quite implausible – psychology has discovered very few strict laws, precisely because people seem to be able to do what is unpredictable or out of the ordinary. However, if it was true, then we would be able to predict, in principle, exactly what someone was going to do, if only we knew all about their psychology. Again, God could have this knowledge.

A weaker form claims that, in many important ways, the patterns of our lives and actions are determined by psychological states, and these psychological states are determined by our earlier experiences. For example, on any particular occasion, you might be able to choose to eat fruit rather than cake, because you don't want to gain weight. But you may always love fattening foods and really struggle with issues about food because you feel low self-esteem. And you cannot simply 'choose' not to feel low self-esteem.

This form of psychological determinism says, in effect, that our character is determined, and it determines many of the actions that we choose to do. On the basis of knowing someone's character, we may well be able to predict what they are going to do. Does character determinism mean that people are unfree? Of course, people can act 'out of character', but are only these actions free actions? Very often, it is only in extraordinary and demanding situations that people act out of character. People often seem to be most free, certainly most 'themselves', when they are acting in character. But these are also the times when they are most predictable.

This form of psychological determinism – if it really is a form of 'determinism' – seems compatible with free will. It would be very strange to say that people can only be free if they don't have a character! But it doesn't solve the problem of God's knowledge of our future choices, because we said earlier that knowing someone's character doesn't give you knowledge of everything they will do in the future.

CONCLUSION

There are three solutions that we can propose from the discussion above:

1. God is outside time, and so knows what we will do in the future, but we still have free will, because determinism is false. We should not think that God's knowledge means that the future is 'fixed'. As yet we don't know how to make sense of what it is for God to be 'outside time', so we can't understand *how* God knows the future if it isn't fixed, but we need to try again to describe this.
2. God is inside time, we have free will, and determinism is false, so God only knows those future choices that can be predicted from our characters. This doesn't mean that God is not omniscient, because God still knows everything it is possible to know at any time.
3. Soft determinism is true: whether God is inside or outside time, because determinism is true, God knows the future completely. However, determinism is not incompatible with free will.