When the future is open: On God's knowledge and credences in future contingents

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the problem of divine omniscience and human free will. The problem states that if God is omniscient and knows what every human will do in any given situation, does that not imply that humans do not have free will? If God, for instance, knows that Diana will do P next Tuesday, but Diana refrains from doing P next Tuesday, then Diana will bring about that God did not know that Diana will refrain from doing P next Tuesday and hence, God is not omniscient. But if God is omniscient, Diana cannot refrain from doing P next Tuesday, but if she cannot, then does that not mean that she does not have free will?

In this paper, I discuss how open theism, a modern view of God, solves the conflict between divine omniscience and human free will. I also argue that if open theism is correct and the future is open, then God has credences in propositions about the future, which addresses some challenges that open theism usually faces.

The Problem

In the traditional Abrahamic conception of God, God is the most perfect being—omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. Being omnipotent means that God can do anything that is possible; being omnibenevolent means that God is loving, just, merciful, and infinitely good; and being omniscient means that God knows everything—past, present, and future. Another fundamental belief is that humans have free will, allowing them to choose between good and evil, for which they are rewarded or punished. This means that John has free will to perform an action (e.g., mowing his lawn on November 7, 2078) or to refrain from doing so. However, if God knows

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everything that will happen, does that not mean God already knows whether John will mow his lawn on that date? If God knows this, how can John truly have the freedom to choose? If God knows John will mow his lawn, how can John choose not to? If he refrains, would that not mean God held a false belief? And if so, does that not contradict God's omniscience? This is the classic problem of divine foreknowledge and free will.

The focus here is on future propositions that are neither necessarily true nor necessarily false. A statement like:

Bachelors are unmarried

is necessarily true, whereas

John will mow his lawn on November 7, 2078

is neither necessarily true nor necessarily false. These types of statements are known as future contingents, as they refer to the future but are not deterministically true or false. This article deals exclusively with such propositions.

Many philosophers have explored this issue, including Nelson Pike (1965, 1966, 1977), Alvin Plantinga (1986), Michael Tooley (2000), Peter van Inwagen (2008), and Linda Zagzebski (1996, 2005). The argument, adopted from Pike's (1965, pp. 33–34), looks like this:

1. If God is omniscient, then God knows that John will do X at time T.
2. If John has the power to refrain from doing X at time T, then he can bring about that it is not the case that God knows that John will do X at T.
3. If John can bring about that it is not the case that God knows that John will do X at T, then it is not the case that God knows that John will do X at time T.
4. But God is omniscient.
5. Therefore, God knows that John will do X at time T (from (1) and (4).
6. Therefore, it is not the case that John can bring about that, it is not the case that God knows that John will do X at T. (from (3) and (5)).
7. Therefore, it is not the case that John has the power to refrain from doing X at time T (from (2) and (6)).
8. If it is not the case that John has the power to refrain from doing X at time T, then John does not have free will.
9. Therefore, John does not have free will (from (7) and (8)).

Here is the logical structure of the argument:

1. A→B
2. C→D
3. D→¬B
4. A
5. B (from 1 and 4)
6. ¬D (from 3 and 5)
7. ¬C (from 2 and 6)
8. ¬C→¬E
9. ¬E (from 7 and 8)

Pike's conclusion is that divine omniscience implies that human free will does not exist. If this is true, then, for example, a criminal had no choice but to commit their crime. If so, how can it be just for God to punish them? Likewise, someone who acts morally has no choice but to do so. Does this not mean God is unjust for not granting humans the free will to act otherwise? Many theologians and philosophers of religion reject this conclusion in various ways. One modern theistic model, known as open theism, provides an intriguing response to this problem, which will be the focus of this article.

Open theism: history and core ideas

While similar ideas had appeared earlier, open theism gained prominence with the publication of *The Openness of God* (Pinnock et al., 1994). Open theists differ from classical theists in their belief that the future is open and not predetermined. Notable proponents include David Basinger (1996), William Hasker (1985, 1989, 2008), Alan Rhoda (2007, 2008), Richard Rice (2004), John Sanders (1998), Richard Swinburne (2016), Patrick Todd (2014), and Dale Tuggy (2007). While there are variations within open theism, many adherents share key principles, which I summarise based on Rhoda's framework (Rhoda, 2024, pp. 5–8):

1. Causal openness of the future – Multiple causally possible futures exist at any given time *t*. These futures are merely possible ways in which the future can be but none of them is the actual future at *t*.
2. Ontic openness of the future – No single concrete (actual) future exists at *t*.
3. Alethic openness of the future – There is no uniquely true future at *t*.
4. Epistemic openness of the future – God does not infallibly know a unique, actual future at *t*.
5. Providential openness of the future – God has not chosen a specific, actual future at *t*.

6. The incompatibility of epistemic determinacy and causal openness – The future cannot be both epistemically determined and causally open.

In short, open theism asserts that multiple possible futures exist, none of which are predetermined. There is no single, fixed future that God knows or has chosen; the future remains open.

This view contrasts sharply with classical theism. Classical theists argue that God knows everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen—including whether John will mow his lawn on November 7, 2078. Open theists, however, maintain that God cannot know the future because there is no actual, settled future to know. Moreover, classical theists uphold the doctrine of divine simplicity—God is unchangeable and unaffected by anything (e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1a, 3).[1] Open theists reject this and argue that God changes over time. Since God does not know the future, God learns new things, such as whether John mows his lawn. This means that God changes and interacts with human decisions which is inconsistent with the doctrine of divine simplicity.

How do open theists reconcile free will with God's omniscience? They argue that humans possess free will and that God is omniscient—but with a different definition of omniscience than classical theists. Open theists assert that God knows everything that is logically possible to know, but since the future is open, God does not know it as a fixed reality. This follows from the principles (1)–(4). Like classical theists, they affirm God's omniscience, but they reject the assumption that omniscience includes knowledge of a singular, actual future.

For classical theists, God knows the truth values of all future contingents. Open theists deny this and argue that it is metaphysically impossible since the future is not yet determined. Consider the statement:

John will mow his lawn on November 7, 2078.

A classical theist would claim that God knows whether this statement is true or false. But open theists argue that such knowledge is impossible. If the proposition is true, but God does not know it, does this not undermine God's omniscience? Open theists counter that God knows all true propositions, but statements about the future are not true or false in a determinate sense. Some,

[1] For comments on what Thomas Aquinas meant, see e.g., Davies, 2011, 47–49.

like Rhoda, argue that both of the following propositions are false (Rhoda et al., 2006; see also Todd, 2016):

John will mow his lawn on November 7, 2078.
John will not mow his lawn on November 7, 2078.

By this, they preserve the principle of bivalence.[2] In this case, God's omniscience is not compromised because there are no true future propositions. Others, such as Tuggy (2007), argue that future contingents lack truth values altogether, which implies that God cannot know them—again, safeguarding God's omniscience.

Credences

Having clarified the position of open theism, I argue here that, given an open future, God has credences. A credence is one's confidence in a proposition, ranging between 0 and 1, where 1 means absolute certainty that the proposition is true, and 0 means absolute certainty that it is false. For instance, one's credence that "bachelors are unmarried" is close to 1, while one's credence that "John will mow his lawn tomorrow" might be around 0.7 (for discussion of what a credence is and how it relates to belief, see e.g. Jackson (2019; 2020), Moon (2019), Moon and Jackson (2020), Schupbach (2018)). It is usually argued that God has beliefs. But does God have credences? Consider the proposition:

John will mow his lawn on November 7, 2078.

Does God have a credence in this proposition? In other words, does God have confidence that the above proposition is true? If the future is open, then this proposition is not true now (2025). But even so, some propositions are more likely to be true than others. For instance, Vincent has more confidence that his colleague will show up to work tomorrow than that he will not. Vincent knows that his colleague enjoys his job and has important tasks to complete, but he also recognizes that unforeseen circumstances could arise.

Or consider Jessica, who has an interview a week later. She is confident that she will perform well but acknowledges the possibility of an unexpected question she might struggle to answer. Nonetheless, she is more certain that she will do well than that she will not.

[2] The principle of bivalence states that a proposition is either true or false.

Since the future is open and some events are more likely to occur than others, it seems likely that God has credences in future contingents. Consider again:

John will mow his lawn on November 7, 2078.

God does not know whether John will mow his lawn on that date. However, God knows all the relevant factors that would contribute to John making that choice—John's habits, his past behaviour, and countless other conditions. Since God is omniscient, God possesses knowledge of the conditions under which John would or would not mow his lawn. Given this, it follows that God's credences in future contingents would be more precise than ours. If humans, with our limited knowledge, recognise that some future events are more probable than others, it stands to reason that God, with perfect knowledge, would also recognise this—and with far greater precision.

Let us now consider the following biblical example. According to Mark 14:30 (NRSV), Jesus says to Peter:

> "…Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

Did Jesus know Peter would deny him? Open theists offer different interpretations. One possibility is that the statement itself was false. But if so, did Jesus hold a false belief? If Jesus is divine, as the Son of God and part of the Trinity, how could He be mistaken? Would this not contradict divine omniscience? Critics like William Lane Craig argue that open theism allows for God to have false beliefs, thereby undermining omniscience (Boyd et al., 2009, pp. 55–56).

However, if my argument above is correct, then this critique is not adequate. If God has credences in future contingents, then some are more certain than others. Open theists can respond by arguing that Jesus did not *know* Peter would deny him but rather had a very high credence that he would. Jesus knew Peter's character, past behaviour, and the pressures of the moment. When Jesus predicted Peter's denial, he was not making a declaration about a predetermined future; rather, he expressed a high–confidence expectation based on his knowledge of Peter's tendencies and the situation he would face.

But what about the cock's crowing twice? Did Jesus really have a credence that the cock would crow twice? This need not be an issue since many theists—both open theists and classical theists—argue that God at times directly intervenes in the world. If needed, God could have ensured that the cock crowed twice after Peter's third denial.

> Take another example: According to Mark 10:33 (NRSV), Jesus says: "…Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death…"

Did Jesus know what was going to happen to him? Open theists can argue that he did not have absolute certainty but rather had a high credence that this would occur. He knew it was likely that he would be captured, tried, and condemned, given his knowledge of the relevant factors. Thus, his prediction does not contradict open theism but aligns with it.

This framework also explains other biblical predictions—many of which are probabilistic rather than deterministic. If my argument is sound, then open theism does not face an insurmountable objection from biblical prophecy. On the contrary, the idea that God has credences in future contingents provides a coherent explanation for divine predictions, supporting rather than refuting the open view of the future.

Objections

Let us examine some possible objections to open theism and how open theists might respond to these challenges. While there are other objections that might be raised, I only consider those that are usually raised against open theism.

- ***The Most Perfect Being***

One common objection to open theism is that it appears to limit God's attributes. In Perfect Being Theology, God is conceived as the greatest possible being, characterised by "great–making" attributes such as necessary existence, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, omniscience, and wisdom (see Nagasawa, 2017). If one conception of God ($b1$) is inferior to another ($b2$), then $b1$ cannot be correct, as God must be the most perfect being possible.

The challenge for open theism is that it seemingly restricts God's attributes. According to classical theism, God must be simple, immutable, and independent of anything external. However, in open theism, God does not know future events with certainty. For example, God does not know whether the statement *"John will mow his lawn on November 7, 2078"* is true or false. This means that, like everyone else, God must wait until that date to find out. As a result, God acquires new knowledge, implying change, which contradicts Perfect Being Theology and poses a problem for open theists.

Open theists may respond by arguing that change is not inherently problematic and that immutability is not necessarily a "great–making" attribute. In this view, God remains the greatest possible being, and change is

simply part of God's nature. However, classical theists might counter by questioning whether such a being is truly the greatest possible. Could there not be a being with all the same attributes as the open theist's God, but also possessing complete knowledge of the future? Since there seems to be no metaphysical contradiction in such a conception, it remains a plausible alternative. Open theists, however, reject this, arguing that foreknowledge of the future is impossible because the future is not yet settled. Instead, they claim that the classical theist's conception of God is internally inconsistent, as it attributes to God something that is metaphysically impossible.[3]

- ***The Issue of Risk***

Another objection to open theism is that their position implies that God takes risks. Some (e.g., Flint, 1990, pp. 113–114; Grössl et al., 2014, pp. 478–480) argue that an omnipotent and maximally good God should not take the kinds of risks that open theism suggests. The issue arises because, in open theism, God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge of future events. When God created human beings with free will, God took a significant risk—humans could act so wickedly that the world might become unlivable. Such a world, dominated by evil, seems incompatible with God's perfect goodness. The problem extends beyond moral risks to natural risks as well. A natural disaster might occur at a future time unknown to God. If God cannot guarantee that creation will not be destroyed by such an event, this introduces a level of uncertainty that appears inconsistent with Perfect Being Theology. The idea that God is "playing dice" with the world challenges the notion of divine perfection.

However, I think this objection is not that adequate. Consider a situation where we could gain a certain utility by betting on the right number between 1 and 100. But there are more than one right number and the utility would be gained if we bet on any of these numbers. Assume we have to bet half of our savings to gain it back 10 times more if we bet on the right number. Further, assume that the winning numbers are 1–85. Our chances of winning would be 85%. Would such odds not be desirable and worth betting on?

Instead of humans, consider God who is omniscient (in the open theistic sense). I argued above that if God has credences, then God's predictions would be easily explained. If God has credences, then it is probable that God, when creating the world, had credence that the world would be overall a good place. While there are people who do morally wicked things, many others do morally good things. While there are natural disasters, there is goodness (food,

[3] For objections against the thesis that God is simple, see, e. g., Mullins, (2013, 2016); Schmid (2022).

clothings, etc…) and beauty gained from nature. God would have seen how creating the world is a good bet and most of the odds are on its side. In this case, risk–taking is neither inherently good nor bad; rather, it should be evaluated in terms of the goals it serves. A risk may be justified if it enables a greater good. This reasoning parallels Plantinga's free will defense against the problem of evil (Plantinga, 1978), where he argues that God cannot create a world with both free will and the absolute absence of evil. Similarly, open theists can contend that without risk, God could not bring about a truly good world. It is, in other words, impossible to create a world where a greater good would be gained without taking a risk. Now consider the case where, despite God's confidence in the creation, something goes wrong (for instance, an unexpected moral evil starts to emerge or a great natural catastrophe is about to occur). While conflicting with God's initial confidence, God can intervene in the world and stop this natural or moral evil from happening.

- **Biblical objections**

Although we are interested in the philosophical discussion of omniscience, some purely exegetical objections need to be addressed. I consider some possible objections rooted in the biblical tradition with possible responses to them.

One objection raised by Craig, somewhat similar to the previous objection, is that there are sinful acts in the Bible and since they are sinful, they could not have been caused by God. This means that God took a large risk when creating the world, on the open theistic view. On the molinist view of omniscience (Craig's view),[4] God knows exactly how the future will turn out if humans have free will, which means that the sinful acts were not caused by God but by agents with free will (Boyd et al., 2009, pp. 57–58).

However, this objection does not seem to be a problem for open theism. As explained earlier, God can always intervene in the world to stop horrendous evil if such evil arises. The open theist can argue that, while in some cases God has a high confidence that someone would act sinfully in a given situation, God waits to see whether this actually happens or not and then, God can intervene accordingly. In fact, Craig's objection can turn against him in the following manner: suppose God knows that an agent with free will would commit a sinful act in a given situation. Would it not be the case that God is responsible for putting that agent in that specific situation, in which the agent would commit

[4] Since molinism is not the concern of this paper, I do not address it here. But simply put, Molinism is the view that God knows exactly what every agent with a free will would do in any given situation. God planned the future with great details, which makes God know what every agent would do in the future, which implies that God knows the truth–value of every future contingent.

a sinful act? God could have put the agent in another situation where the agent would have committed a sin–free act instead.

A second objection, raised by David Hunt and Craig (Boyd et al., 2009, pp. 50–51; 58–59) is that there is no biblical support for the open theistic view. While there are passages that seem to show that God is ignorant about the future (or the present) (see, e. g., Genesis 3:9–11; Jeremiah 19:5) these passages, according to the critics, are not supposed to be taken literally but somewhat figuratively. These books are written by humans about God and should be read accordingly. To read them in an open theistic way, according to the critics, is to misread these passages and to misunderstand their point.

The critics of open theism often choose to read the passages, that seem to imply that God has knowledge about the future, literally, and the passages that seem to imply that God does not have knowledge about the future, figuratively. However, the open theist could equally choose to read a passage, that seems to imply that God has knowledge of the future, figuratively; for instance, the open theist could say that such a passage only shows that God has a high level of credence, instead of knowledge (for instance, Mark 10:33; Mark 14:30.) If we do not assume anything about God's knowledge of the future, we cannot know what passages to read literally and what passages to read figuratively. Therefore, for this objection against open theism to work, it has to beg the question against open theism.

A third possible objection is that open theism is not rooted in orthodoxy. There is, in other words, no historical support for that claim. For instance, it seems that none of the apostolic fathers or church fathers advanced a similar view. Open theism diverges from historical Christian beliefs. Therefore, we should be sceptical of this theory.

It seems true that open theism lacks a strong traditional support, however, it is hard to see why this should be a challenge. Not all Christians rely on tradition for their religious commitment and even those who do that diverge in their views; for instance, Molinism does not have historical support either. This is not to say that Molinism is false but rather, a historical support is not vital for Molinism to be true. Consider how Catholicism cares about historical support more than Protestantism. But this does not mean that Protestantism is worse off; it just means that historical support is not a vital part for the truth of that view (see e. g., Rhoda, 2024, pp. 56–61.) The open theist can argue that historical support is not relevant here; they can say that as long as the biblical tradition supports open theism, a historical support is not needed for the validity of open theism.

Conclusion

I have discussed the problem of free will's compatibility with divine omniscience. I presented open theism and its core assumptions, particularly its claim that the future is open and indeterminate, meaning that God does not possess foreknowledge of future events. This follows from the idea that God knows all true propositions, but that propositions about the future are not true. Thus, open theists argue that God *cannot* know the future because there is nothing yet to know. I also argued that, provided that the future is open, God has credences in future contingents, which addresses some problems that usually are raised against open theism. Finally, I considered some key objections to open theism and explored possible responses from the open theist perspective.

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