

Divine Foreknowledge and the Biblical Support for Open Theism: An *Ad Baculum* Stratagem?

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A deeply personal theological dilemma of mine is one that I probably have in common with a majority of Christians. This dilemma has to do with the apparent incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and libertarian freedom. This dilemma is old, dating back to at least the time of Augustine, but it has recently come to fore in a hotly debated issue surrounding the proposal of *open theism* (also known as *open theology* and *openness of God*). This essay is primarily about one particular admonition related to the Biblical support for open theism, and why I perceive the use of this argument to involve an *ad baculum* stratagem.

First, let me provide a brief account of the theological dilemma at hand. It is a natural implication of God's *omniscience* that He knows everything, including everything about the future. This entails knowing what anybody will do at anytime in the future—what sins you or I will commit is part of this knowledge. But it does not take much to see that such divine foreknowledge also appears to undermine much of our day-to-day activities in having a personal relationship with God. For example, why pray if God already knows what I will ask? Also, if He already knows what will happen in the future, and what will happen is just simply inconsistent with what I ask, does that mean that God then *cannot* grant what I ask? Can God change the future, or is it “set in stone” because He already *knows* it?

More philosophically troubling is the apparent incompatibility between the fact that God knows that I will sin, and the supposed *libertarian freedom*¹ that I have in committing that sin. Indeed, if God already knows that I will sin, then I *will* sin. It would appear that I *cannot* then do otherwise—this means I have no libertarian freedom. But it seems to me that libertarian freedom is the basis for our moral culpability. If I have no choice but to sin, then why am I to be blamed for it?

This dilemma is difficult to resolve. Indeed, many views exist on how to deal theologically and philosophically with this predicament: open theism, simple foreknowledge, Arminianism, Molinism, and Augustinianism/Calvinism. It is fair to say that none of them completely resolves the issue.² However, one recent view has become a source of considerable debate. This view, open

¹Libertarian freedom is a model of free will that requires that whenever one makes a decision freely, one could equally well have chosen some other alternative. See <http://andstuff.org/LibertarianFreedom>.

²See, for example, *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, J. K. Beilby and P. R. Eddy, Eds. InterVarsity Press, 2001.

theism, holds that God in fact does *not* know all of what will take place in the future, because the future is *not exhaustively definite*.³ Why the future is not exhaustively definite is itself subject to at least two views.⁴

The open-theism position therefore overcomes the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge and libertarian freedom by limiting what is foreknowable to God. In particular, God cannot foreknow what free creatures will do in exercising their free will. It is easy to see the (at least superficial) appeal of open theism. In this essay, we need not concern ourselves with all the intricacies of open theism. My focus is simply on one support for open theism: Biblical prooftexting.⁵

Gregory Boyd is well-known proponent of open theism. Boyd is an articulate and careful defender of this view. Even Paul Helm, a critic of Boyd, says, “one cannot but admire the skill and the attention to detail with which Professor Boyd presents his case for a partially open creation.”⁶ Boyd is thus not easy to catch in overt acts of fallacious reasoning. It is therefore all the more surprising that (at least one of) his supporting arguments appear to be based on a questionable rhetoric, as I will now argue.

Boyd’s primary defense for open theism seems to be Biblical. In an essay outlining his position on open theism,⁷ he argues that the Bible is full of examples showing that God could not have known everything about the future:

God confronts the unexpected. (E.g., Isaiah 5:2–4; Jeremiah 3:6–7, 3:19–20, 19:5)

God experiences regret. (E.g., Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 13:13, 15:10, 15:35)

God expresses frustration. (E.g., Ezekiel 22:30–31; 2 Peter 3:9)

God speaks in conditional terms. (E.g., Exodus 4:1, 13:17; Ezekiel 12:3; Jeremiah 26:3; Matthew 26:39)

God tests people “to know” their character. (E.g., Genesis 22:12; 2 Chronicles 32:31; Deuteronomy 8:2, 8:21, 13:1–3; Judges 3:4)

³J. Sanders, “On Heffalumps and Heresies: Responses to Accusations Against Open Theism,” *Journal of Biblical Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, January–March 2002, <http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org/issue5.html>.

⁴Some, like Gregory Boyd and William Hasker, believe that part of the future is simply unknowable. Others, like Dallas Willard, argue that God has dispositional omnipotence and omniscience.

⁵Biblical prooftexting, commonly used in defense of theological positions, is tricky business indeed. See Gregory Koukl’s article on “The Perils of Prooftexting and How to Avoid Them,” *Stand To Reason*, September/October, 1999, http://www.str.org/free/solid_ground/SG9909.htm, and M. E. Eidenmuller, “The rhetoric of meaning, truth, and authority in contemporary evangelicals’ use of biblical Scripture: ‘Prooftexting’ vs. the ‘Scriptural implant,’” presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Religious Communication Association*, Chicago, IL, 1999, <http://www.uttyler.edu/meidenmuller/scholarship/scripturalimplant.htm>.

⁶P. Helm, “Openness Theology: A Response to Gregory Boyd,” presented at a colloquium organized by the *Association of Confessing Evangelicals*, Colorado Springs, Colorado, in June 2000. Available at http://www.elib.org.uk/articles/open_theism.html.

⁷Chapter 1 of *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, J. K. Beilby and P. R. Eddy, Eds. InterVarsity Press, 2001. Henceforth referred to as DFFV.

God changes His mind. (E.g., Jeremiah 18; Joel 2:12–13; Jonah 4:2)

In defending his views based on Biblical passages, Boyd admonishes his audience that “exegesis should always drive our philosophy, instead of the other way around.”⁸ So, if scriptural support for open theism is so abundant, what is the controversy all about?

It strikes me that Boyd’s remark on (Biblical) “exegesis driving our philosophy” is, at best, naive and, at worst, an instance of sophist rhetoric, bordering on committing the fallacy of *argumentum ad baculum*. This stratagem is common among Christians because it can be used to pressurize the Christian listener into going along with the argument, lest he or she be accused of abandoning the Bible and succumbing to secular philosophy. But the force of the stratagem does not flow from the truth of the position it supports. Worse, as the admonisher Boyd appears to be putting himself above his admonition, when he apparently does not have any justification to do so. As Paul Helm observes in his critique of Boyd’s essay, “Boyd himself cannot avoid philosophical preconceptions and preferences in constructing his open position.”⁹ The issue confronting us when we consider the passages above is what the *appropriate* exegesis to apply is, not simply that exegesis should come before philosophy. Indeed, David Hunt in his critique of Boyd’s essay points out that, “we disagree about divine foreknowledge not because some of us resist while others succumb to the temptations of a philosophically driven exegesis, but because we make different inferences from a philosophical presupposition (itself grounded in but not entailed by Scripture) that we all share.”¹⁰ William Lane Craig, in his critique of Boyd’s essay, goes further to say that Boyd’s “philosophical naiveté hampers his exegesis.”¹¹ Finally, Helm observes that, “because the difference between open theism and classical theism is a fundamental difference of interpretation of what Scripture has to say about God, Boyd cannot settle the matter simply by appealing to Scripture.”¹²

So, what *is* the appropriate exegesis to apply? The classical understanding of these passages is that they are *anthropomorphic*. Indeed, as Craig points out, “it is hard to exaggerate how pervasive in Scripture anthropomorphic portrayals of God are.”¹³ It is impossible to avoid talking about God using human terms. What other kind of terms do we really have? If human terms are used to describe God and his actions, it is clearly fallacious to draw conclusions about God based on such terms. (This fallacy goes by the name *weak analogy*.¹⁴) In fact, Craig argues that “a consistent application of Boyd’s hermeneutic leads to a defective concept of God.”¹⁵

Does this argument refute open theism? Probably not—much more can be said about the

⁸DFFV, p. 14.

⁹DFFV, p. 63.

¹⁰DFFV, p. 50.

¹¹DFFV, p. 57.

¹²DFFV, p. 61.

¹³DFFV, p. 59.

¹⁴See D. H. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. Harper & Row, 1970, Chapter IX: “Fallacies of False Analogy.” Also <http://gncurtis.home.texas.net/wanalogy.html>.

¹⁵DFFV, p. 58.

issue.¹⁶ For example, other Biblical references provide *prima facie* incompatibilities with the open-theism view. Moreover, open theism appears to suffer from serious philosophical deficiencies. I will not explore these in this essay. Suffice it to say that open theism does not resolve my dilemma. Indeed, no currently existing view of divine foreknowledge resolves it completely. For now, I am left to hold opposing but apparently valid positions in tension.

¹⁶See, e.g., James Patrick Holding, "Wide Open Theism: A Broadside Critique of Open Theism/Neotheism," *Tektonitron, Encyclopedia Apologetica*, <http://www.tektonics.org/opentheism01.html>, and Craig W. Thompson, "The Jesus Who Never Knew: Free-Will Theism and the Incarnation," <http://www.bible.org/docs/soapbox/scholars/freewilltheism.htm>.