

Commentary on Reading 6.1 Boethius' Solution to the Problem of Reconciling Divine Foreknowledge with Human Freedom, Consolation of Philosophy. Book 5.

NOTE: The key letters in the commentary correspond to those in the margin of the reading in the Coursebook.

Boethius (485-524 AD) *The Consolation of Philosophy*,

In *The Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius describes himself in prison despairing at his condition and in particular the fact that good men often suffer while bad men flourish. He is visited there by a vision of Philosophy as woman who proceeds to argue that he should reconcile himself to his situation.

At the end of Book 4 Boethius raises the problem of reconciling determinism and freedom. Here is a brief summary of the discussion followed by detailed notes on the Reading 6 part 1.

It is very important here to understand the distinction between:

(A) **Divine Providence** = God's plan for the history of the world, in accordance with which every event take place.

(B) **Divine Foreknowledge** = God's knowledge of what will happen in the future.

Book 4 [Not included in the reading]

[4.5] Boethius complains about the inequity of the way in which the world is ordered - the good suffer and the bad flourish. Philosophy counters this by claiming that everything is in order but that Boethius, and humans in general, simply can't see the overall order of the world.

[4.6] Philosophy notes six related issues that should be dealt with in fully answering Boethius' questions:

(P1) The simplicity of providence.

(P2) The temporal series of Fate.

(P3) The nature of chance.

(P4) The possibility of knowledge (of the future).

(P5) The character of divine predestination.

(P6) The possibility of free will.

Philosophy begins by distinguishing between providence and fate.

(i) **Providence** (the providential plan) corresponds to (is identical with) the simplicity of divine mind. The providential plan is divine reason itself - located outside of space and time.

(ii) **Fate** is the providential plan realised in space and time.

(a) The providential plan is entirely inflexible. In whatever way it is realised as fate - the sequence of events in time which is the history of the world past, present, and future - it is inflexible.

(b) The only way to escape fate is to embrace providence - that is, to escape from time - and somehow to approach closer to divinity. Boethius offers the analogy of the moving to the still centre of a rotating circle from the moving periphery.

Reading 6:

[5.1] Boethius notes that Philosophy has said that question of providence is bound up with many others. He now raises some of these:

(i) **P3** What if anything is chance? Philosophy rejects the suggestion that chance is randomness. She offers what she claims is Aristotle's definition: 'Whenever anything is done with one intention, but something else, other than what was intended, results from certain causes.' This coincidence is determined by the fatalistic expression of providence.

[5.2] (ii) **P6** Does freedom of choice exist. [Note it is agreed that fate is series of causes which are bound together indissolubly.]

(iii) Philosophy argues there is freedom of choice since otherwise there could not be rational natures - since there is rationality if and only if there is free choice. Note how Philosophy at the end of Prose 2 invokes providence and the universal determination of fate.

[5.3 (iv) **P4** The problem of foreknowledge.

Note that this isn't the problem of the reconciling of providence and freedom. Philosophy seems to suppose that that problem is resolved by showing that rationality requires freedom.

(a) God = providence foresees all

(b) From eternity God / Providence has known deeds and plans of men - so it seems to follow that there is no free choice.

(c) Since things could come about otherwise God would have only uncertain opinion. Which is impossible.

(d) Against the theory that has it that divine foreknowledge does not determine the outcome but rather outcome is foreknown because it is going to occur:

(e) That theory accepts that future events are necessary.

(f) And it makes God depend on these future events rather than the events on God.

(g) As an aside Philosophy states the *correspondence* of truth and belief ('opinion' in the text) and fact in terms of necessity: 'If *X* is the case, then the belief that that *X* is the case is necessarily true' and 'if the belief that *X* is the case is true, then *X* is necessarily the case'.

The point is that either way necessity is mentioned.

(h) But the fact explains the opinion rather than vice versa.

[Note that this is the form of the argument that Boethius is rejecting.]

So the point of the argument is that if there is foreknowledge, things must be as foreknown, if they are foreknown then they cannot be otherwise. But it is the fact of the matter which explains the foreknowledge and not the foreknowledge which explains the fact.

(i) The supporting argument is rejected since it puts things prior to God.

(v) The problem stated again: God knows the future, whatever God knows is certain; therefore the future is certain. The argument that follows parallels Aristotle's argument in *de Interpretatione* 9.

(a) The problem is that free choice requires an uncertain future. But future could not be known if it were uncertain.

(b) God's foreknowledge cannot be simply of the truth of the disjunction that either things will be so or they will not be so.

(c) So there is no freedom for humans to act and plan since the divine mind constrains everything to a single outcome.

(d) So reward, punishment etc. make no sense.

[5.4] (vi) Philosophy's reply: 'This is an old complaint about providence raised by Cicero in *de Divinatione*.' [Note that she says that its about providence, but it's really about foreknowledge rather than providence]

(a) Humans have failed to solve it because human reasoning cannot grasp divine simplicity.

(b) What is wrong with the solution proposed in (iv)(d) above that since foreknowledge does not cause the what is known, it does not remove free choice by imposing necessity?

(c) If we suppose that there is no foreknowledge we will not accept the necessity of the future; but what difference can the addition of foreknowledge make. In general:

(1) suppose that when X not known to anyone it has 'metaphysical' feature F ;

(2) that fact that X is known cannot cause it not to have 'metaphysical' feature F ;

Therefore (3) X can be known and have the feature F .

[Where being necessary or contingent are 'metaphysical features'.]

(d) Objection - even if it is granted that foreknowledge does not cause, nevertheless it is a sign that the outcome is necessary.

(e) Reply - signs do not necessitate. Rather they simply show how things are. We will have to show first that what will be so will necessarily be so independently of foreknowledge. But we have agreed that this is not so.

(f) No proof is available that things will necessarily be as they will be since, though all things are going to come about as foreknown, they are not going to come about necessarily on account of their nature. The point presumably is that they will not come about necessarily in the required sense of necessity - i.e. natural necessity within the world-history.

(g) But then the problem is how there could be foreknowledge of what is not going to come about by natural necessity.

(h) How can there be certain knowledge of what is not certain.

(i) The mistake here is to suppose that *epistemic modality* is determined by *metaphysical modality* - and more particularly to suppose that the degree to which something may be understood is determined by the thing and not by the cognitive powers agent who understands it. The reverse is true. The character of knowledge depends on the nature of the knower and not upon the nature of what is known. This is sometimes known as **Iamblichus' Principle** after the neo-Platonist philosopher Iamblichus who first stated it. He died about 325 AD.

(j) Important principle: A superior power of comprehension includes all inferior powers of comprehension.

(k) [Poem 4] [The Stoic¹ theory of knowledge.] Philosophy argues that the mind as active - against the Stoic theory of passive reception - the suggestion seems to be that the mind is able to compare the information received through the senses with whatever 'higher things' it has access to. This argument is needed to show that the manner of cognition depends on the cogniser and not upon the cognised.

¹The philosophy known as Stoicism first appeared around 310 BC.

[5.5] (l) This is all now applied to the difference between human and divine cognition of future events.

(m) Important: The problem is that reason is apparently able to prove that if events do not occur necessarily, they cannot be certainly foreknown. But the limitations of reason do not hold of the divine mind. Note: this can be read as the claim that there can be no rational solution to the problem.

[5.6] (vii) (P5) So to deal with the problem we have to establish the character of divine being so that we can understand the character of divine cognition.

(a) [A very famous definition of eternity] God is eternal where *eternity is the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of illimitable life*. [Compare Aristotle in *Metaphysics*, 12]

(b) And the simultaneous grasp by providence of everything guarantees foreknowledge - or rather that God has present knowledge of what is future for us.

(c) Note that Boethius seems to accept the eternity of the world. God is prior in nature to the world.

(d) Having established God's nature we can apply Iamblichus' Principle

(e) So far, then, we've established that (i) God knows the whole of history as present. So (ii) the necessity which can attributed to the future in virtue of God's knowledge is the same as that which we attribute to the present on account of our knowing it. This does not touch on what necessity it might have in virtue of being providentially ordered. So we now need to go on to analyse the character of this necessity which something has in virtue of being known by God.

Note - there are two distinct arguments here. (i) the general argument for the plausibility of Iamblichus' principle which places divine cognition above reason; (ii) the application of Iamblichus' principle to God - the modality of divine being is eternal presence so the modality of divine cognition must correspond to this.

(f) Boethius characterises providence (in Latin '*providentia*') as foreseeing (in Latin '*praevidentia*').

(g) The claim is that human observation of something does not change its nature. So if it is not already necessary, then it is not made necessary by being observed. But we have agreed that if something is observed to be so, then it cannot not be so, though before it came to be so it was not necessarily going to be so. The solution will be that God's knowledge of the whole of history does not necessitate it by knowing it.

(h) Human knowledge does not alter the character of what is known. That Socrates is walking, for example, or that the sun is rising is not affected by the fact that someone knows it to be so. Likewise divine knowledge does not alter the character of what is known.

'So the divine gaze considering the whole does not disturb the quality of things at all - things which are present to him but future in time.'

(i) But this is still ambiguous - we need to distinguish various senses of necessity - e.g. the necessity with which necessary beings exist, the necessity of cause and effect, logical necessity, the necessity with which something is so if it is, simply because it is now so. This latter corresponds to what later mediaevals call 'as-of-now' necessity - the necessity with which we can say what is now the case cannot now not be the case.

(j) Very Important: Philosophy acknowledges that the necessity which something has in the providential scheme is such that it cannot not be - so it is necessary in a sense - it is necessary as- of-now where the 'now' is the eternal now

Philosophy's reply - the same future is necessary when referred to divine cognition but in itself free

Philosophy distinguishes *simple necessity* from *conditioned necessity*. This could be what we call a distinction of scope, that is a distinction between what 'necessary' applies to, the whole claim or only part of it : 'it is necessary that (every human is an animal)' versus 'if you know that Socrates is walking, then it is necessary that he is walking'. But it is much more plausibly read as the contrast between the necessities of nature, that

go, for example, with being human and the as-of-now necessity with which 'all that is, when it is, is necessarily'.

(k) What is known by someone cannot be other than it is known to be but this does not entail its simple necessity

(l) So future actions which proceed from free choice are seen by God as present - these become as-of-now, conditionally, necessary when they are related to divine cognition. But considered in themselves, they do not deviate from the complete freedom of their nature.

(m) The point is that the conditioned necessity introduced by God's knowledge does not affect the modality of the event within a world-history. So God foreknows both that the sun will rise and that Socrates will walk, both are necessary with respect to divine knowledge but only the former is necessary within the world history - there is no appropriately similar world history in which it does not occur.

(n) Important: Philosophy claims that there is no objection to saying that things are necessary when referred to divine knowledge, but considered in themselves free from necessity. Just as everything clear to the senses is universal if referred to reason, singular in itself.

(o) Thus, Philosophy claims, we are free to act otherwise but if we choose to do so providence will foreknow this.

Notes on Reading 6.2 Aquinas' Development of Boethius' Solution

Summa Theologica, Ia, q. 14, Article 13:

Does God have knowledge of future contingents?

It seems not. Since whatever God knows is necessary - three proofs:

1. Necessity of cause entails necessity of effect and divine knowledge is the cause of future events.
2. 'The Consequence argument' :

Let ' P ' be some truth about the future

If God knows that a proposition ' P ' is true, then P

For every truth, ' X will occur' about the future God knows that ' X will occur' is true

Therefore X will occur

The antecedent ('God knows that " X will occur" is true') is absolutely necessary, therefore so is the consequent ' X will occur'.

3. [Aristotle's argument from *Interpretatione*, 9] - what is known is necessary.

To the contrary: Scripture: God knows all the works of men but the works of men are free

Aquinas's Response: God knows contingents truths about the future.

Proof: Something contingent may be known to be so in two different ways:

- (a) as present - infallibly known to sense of sight by the (*knowledge of vision*)
- (b) In its cause = with respect to its cause (as future) but not yet determined one way or the other.

Note that the translation in the Coursebook has 'something can be thought of as contingent in two senses', which is a bit misleading. The point is that something contingent, like the fact that Socrates is sitting at time t_1 may be known to be so by either at t_1 seeing Socrates sitting or at an earlier time t_0 knowing enough about the world to know that it is such as to cause Socrates will be sitting at the later time t_1 .

But God knows everything in both way (a) and (b).

God does not cognise things successively - as we do.

So future contingents are infallibly known to God but are future contingent with respect their proximate cause.

Replies To Arguments

To 1. Though the primary cause is necessary the ultimate effect may be contingent.

To 2. (a) Some people claim that, for example, 'God knew that Socrates will sit' is not a genuine claim about the past but really about the future. Aquinas rejects this though it is not really clear what his argument is and this position will, indeed, be that later held by William of Ockham.

(b) Others claim that in general 'God knows *that p*' is contingent since it contains a contingent component, the *dictum* '*that p*'. Aquinas rejects this pointing out that the character of an embedded *dictum* does not necessarily determine the character of the proposition in which it is embedded. Thus 'that a human being is an ass' is false, but the proposition "It is false *that a human being is an ass*' is true.

(c) Some claim that the consequent ('*X* will occur') of the conditional 'if God knows that *X* will occur, then *X* will occur' is not necessary because antecedent ('God knows that *X* will occur') is only its remote cause. Aquinas rejects this pointing out that if the antecedent were true and the consequent false, then the conditional would be false, but it is agreed to be true.

So Aquinas has to offer his own solution:

When the antecedent refers to a mental act, the consequent has to be understood as it exists in the mind, not as in reality.

How is this supposed to work?

If God knows that something will be, then that will be.

If God knows that something will be, then that thing is present to God.

The future for us is present to God and necessary with respect to God's knowledge of it as present

To 3. Things successive for us are cognised by God all at once - in eternity not in time. Aquinas offers the metaphor of the overview of the journey.

What is known by God is necessary with respect to divine cognition. For 'everything known by God is necessary'

We must distinguish the *de re*, or *divided*, reading of the assertion: 'if something is known by God, the necessarily it is so' from the *de dicto* reading.

To understand this distinction consider the claim 'something white is possibly black'. This may be read *de re* as claiming that there is some white thing that has the potential to be black, which may well be true. Alternatively it may be read *de dicto* as claiming 'that some white thing is black' is possibly true, which is false, since nothing can be black and white at the same time

The *de dicto*, or *composite*, reading of our claim as 'necessarily (if something is known by God, then it is so) (i.e the whole 'if..., then ...' proposition, is necessarily true, but harmless. The *de re*, or *divided*, reading of the conditional as 'if some thing is known by God then it, *i.e. that very fact*, is necessarily so' is false.