



Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views

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The question of the nature of God's foreknowledge and how that relates to human freedom has been pondered and debated by Christian theologians at least since the time of Augustine. And the issue will not go away. More recently, the terms of the debate have shifted, and the issue has taken on new urgency with the theological proposal known as the openness of God. This view maintains that God's knowledge, while perfect, is limited regarding the future inasmuch as the future is "open" and not settled. *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* provides a venue for well-known proponents of four distinct views of divine foreknowledge to present their cases: Gregory A. Boyd of Bethel College presents the open-theism view, David Hunt of Whittier College weighs in on the simple-foreknowledge view, William Lane Craig of Talbot School of Theology takes the middle-knowledge view, and Paul Helm of Regent College, Vancouver, presents the Augustinian-Calvinist view. All four respond to each of the other essayists, noting points of agreement and disagreement. Editors James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy introduce the contemporary debate and also offer a conclusion that helps you evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of each view. The result is a unique opportunity to grapple with the issues and arguments and frame your own understanding of this important debate.

Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views Details

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From Reader Review Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views for online ebook

Zoe Scrivener says

I was thrilled when I first started this book, because it looked like it would be what I was looking for - exegesis and counterexegesis of the pertinent passages to each view. I was quickly disillusioned. While the first half of the first presentation uses Scripture extensively, the rest of the book was filled with philosophy and logic. And not anything easily understood by the layperson, either. One would need a couple college courses of logic before being able to decipher the arguments.

Kris Brewer says

While this was an interesting read, and sheds some light on the theology of the denominational world, I was quite disappointed in the lack of a scriptural approach by most of the authors (obviously the reason for the theological weakness in the denominational world). For most of the book, the authors simply ignored any scripture that disproved their theory, treating it as if it didn't exist. Often, those who addressed troublesome passages did so in an effort to discredit them, rather than adjusting their theory to rightly apply what the scriptures stated.

In the end, none of the 4 theories presented harmonize completely with what the scriptures actually say. There are, however, some interesting observations that can be gleaned from the topic, and the presentation of 4 different views of God's foreknowledge. One worth citing is the difficulty of understanding something that has not been made perfectly clear (what is God's relationship with time?) and how preconceived notions taint our assessment of a biblical topic (all 4 authors show these prejudices).

Hé Ré A says

Wrestling with the theological ideas of foreknowledge? Then this could be the book for you! It lays out 4 common theologies in simple, to understand ways. I read it at age 19 with no history of studying theology (was actually one of the first assignments for Theology 101) & found it easy to understand!

Jana Light says

What a perfect way to explore the question of God's omniscience. As a volume in the Spectrum Multiview Books Series, the book features four theologians, each defending a different view of God's omniscience: the Open-Theism view, the Simple Foreknowledge view, the Middle-Knowledge view, and the Augustinian-Calvinist view. Each theologian was also given a few pages to respond to the other three views, and this is where the strength of the book lies. It is really good to see the four views in conversation with one another, and while I do favor one over the others, I can't say it is impervious to criticism. None of them are. This format highlights how complex and possibly unanswerable some theological questions are (at least, to human understanding) and I think that is an important consideration when forming our own views and beliefs.

And now I am on a mission to collect all Spectrum Multiview Books.

Nile says

This book does a good job of laying out the differences between prominent views on divine foreknowledge. I found some of the explanations to be more philosophical and complicated than I would like, but it is a difficult concept. I would have liked to see more biblical exposition rather than if -> then type arguments.

Nice format though with four authors and rebuttal from each. I'd recommend it.

Tony says

I love this series. This volume (from 2001) partially revisits the 1986 volume on predestination and free will (and, in my view, is not quite as good). The four views presented here are these:

- Gregory A. Boyd (Senior Pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota) presents a Neo-Arminian/Open-Theist view in which God has only limited foreknowledge (Boyd takes literally passages in Scripture that suggest that God makes decisions which He later regrets). This is logically consistent, but paints a rather strange picture of a God who is mostly just stumbling around in the dark. It is also interesting that Boyd makes reference to modern physics, apparently without realising that special relativity implies a deterministic “block universe” view of time.
 - the late David Hunt (of “The Berean Call”) presents a non-Calvinist view that accepts foreknowledge but not predestination. I found this chapter a little confusing. Hunt tackles the logical incompatibility of foreknowledge and libertarian free will head on. After a lengthy discussion he denies compatibilism, quotes Augustine with approval, and finally arrives at a view that looks more or less like compatibilism anyway. I came away from the chapter with a feeling that Hunt hadn’t completely thought things through, and I was reminded of something that the 1911 Catholic Encyclopedia says (“The theologian who, following in the footsteps of the Pelagians, would limit the Divine activity to the eternal foreknowledge and exclude the Divine will, would at once fall into Deism, which asserts that God, having created all things, leaves man and the universe to their fate and refrains from all active interference.”)
 - William Lane Craig (Biola University/Houston Baptist University) presents a Neo-Molinist view. Molinism was the Jesuit view in the great Jesuit/Dominican disputes at the end of the 16th century, and provided a way of unifying predestination with almost-libertarian free will (you chose eggs for breakfast, but in an alternate universe that God might have created you chose bacon instead, so it was a free choice). Craig has famously taken this idea and run with it, but I was left a little confused about exactly where he’s taken it (or, indeed, what Molinism really does that compatibilism doesn’t).
 - Paul Helm (Highland Theological College, Scotland) defends the classical Calvinist/Thomist view (he has also debated Craig in person). This was interesting, but perhaps not the best defence of the Calvinist/Thomist view I’ve read.
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Chad Gibbons says

This book does a great job explaining the 4 positions as well as bringing up the problems that each one faces. This is a must-read for anyone interested in the options of reconciling freedom and foreknowledge.

BJ says

This book is heavily philosophical, and for that reason I think it is not as good as it could have been. I prefer an exegetical account of dealing with divine foreknowledge, free-will, sovereignty etc...however, I do realize that philosophy enters the tangles of theology because it helps untangle tensions in the Bible. Philosophy is important, and all of us are philosophers (even one's who supposedly hate it), but it must remain in service to biblical authority rather than having biblical authority serve our own philosophy. It is at that point when we speak from our own authority and not God's. Mainly this book is philosophy, so eat your heart out philosophers.

The book takes four views of divine foreknowledge by four different authors and let's each author present their case and then reply to each case presented by the other authors. The views are the open view of God, simple knowledge, middle knowledge, and the Augustinian-Calvinist position.

Here are some quick quotes:

Gregory Boyd (open view): "Within the parameters settled by God, there is an unsettled future, a 'perhaps.' God determines whatever he sees fit and leaves as much of the future open as he sees fit" (p. 19).

David Hunt (simple foreknowledge): In all honesty Mr. Hunt to me feels like he is agnostic to coming to a conclusion on divine foreknowledge, he just simply believes God knows the future, and wants to be open to the other views. He is the most irenic of the authors.

William Lane Craig (middle knowledge): "For by knowing how persons would freely choose in whatever circumstances they might be in, God can--by decreeing to place just those persons in just those circumstances--bring about his ultimate purposes through free creaturely decisions. Thus, by employing his counterfactual knowledge, God can plan a world down to the last detail and yet do so without annihilating creaturely freedom, since what people would freely do under various circumstances is already factored into the equation by God." (p. 122)

Paul Helm (Augustinian-Calvinist): "...a God who is essentially strongly omniscient positively governs all acts that occur except those which are evil, and he negatively governs evil acts by knowingly and willingly permitting them...God may knowingly and willingly permit an evil act. Indeed, for an evil act to occur--since God cannot perform an evil act--he must have willingly permitted it to do so; and if he is omniscient, he must have knowingly and willingly permitted it." (p. 178-179)

How is that on your brain?

Paul says

This book covers some of the hot topics that arise from thinking about God's foreknowledge. For instance, does God know the future free actions of human agents? If he does not, does that mean he is not omniscient? But what if it was logically inconsistent to claim that an indeterminate event could be known in advance, for there is nothing that grounds the truth of said event; moreover, infallible foreknowledge (or belief, which is entailed by knowing some proposition, *p*) would seem to "settle" the matter, thus removing any alternative possibilities to do otherwise and therefore falsify the knowledge, which is impossible (roughly: if some proposition, *p*, is known, then *p* is true, thus if it is true that a subject *S* knows that *p*, then *p* cannot be false, *S* cannot be mistaken). On this analysis, someone could claim that God is omniscient but doesn't know the future free actions of human beings since it is impossible to know such things, as they have no truth-value.

But if God does foreknow the future free actions of human beings, which is what the classical view of omniscience maintains, does this somehow rule out freedom? Well, it may rule out libertarian freedom (roughly: the view that freedom is incompatible with determinism, and we are indeed free (this qualification is required since some believe that the two are incompatible and we are *not* free, so they are not libertarians), but a compatibilistic freedom is still in play (roughly: compatibilism is the view that there is a freedom that is compatible with the free act being determined in some way).

In response to this, some object that compatibilist freedom is not enough to ground ascriptions of moral praise and/or blame to a human agent. Since the Bible clearly teaches we are morally responsible, then we need to look elsewhere other than compatibilism.

But besides all of this is the question of *how* God knows the future, especially the future free actions of some of his creation. Does he know it because he planned it? Does he know it because he is timelessly viewing everything at one (like you would view an entire parade from a distance, seeing the beginning, middle, and end all at the same time)? Does he know it because he knows all of the counterfactuals of human freedom, and so what he human would freely do in any circumstance? These are some of the issues broached in this book styled after the "*n* views" format, where each author present their case and the other authors have a chance to respond.

In this book there are four views (hence the four in the title!) on divine foreknowledge. There is the Open Theist view (the view that God does not know the future free actions of libertarianly free human agents) presented and defended by Greg Boyd. There is the simple foreknowledge view (God foreknows, this removes alternative possibilities, yet man has libertarian freedom) presented and defended by Dave Hunt. There is the middle knowledge view (God foreknows all the counterfactuals of freedom, i.e., what any given human would do in any given circumstance). And there is the Augustinian/Calvinist view (God foreknows all the future free actions of human beings by consulting his decree) presented and defended by Paul Helm.

Hunt's is probably the most interesting since he is a minority (I don't know what his ethnicity is, I just mean he holds a minority position). He holds that God foreknows future free actions, that this removes alternative possibilities, but we still have libertarian freedom. He says since these things are so sure arguments that seek to undermine one or both of the Scriptural desiderata cannot be correct, and we only need wait to spot the fallacy (he likens it to Zeno's paradoxes about motion, claiming we know motion is real and Achilles will overtake the tortoise, so there has to be a problem with Zeno's argument, even if we can't pin point it. He therefore goes against the libertarian grain by denying PAP (principle of alternative possibilities). He also critiques all the major arguments that libertarians have used to try and show how foreknowledge and freedom are compatible. So he is helpful in this respect, for a Calvinist like myself.

Boyd is also helpful since he critiques libertarian attempts to reconcile freedom and foreknowledge. Many have claimed that Open Theism is the logical implication of Arminianism. If Boyd's arguments are correct, that is the case. However, I thought Boyd *arguments* were the weakest of the bunch.

William Lane Craig's essay was, of course, well done. He defends Molinism. This view claims to let us have our cake and eat it too. Man is still libertarianly free, and meticulous providence can be maintained since God instantiated the world where all the creatures freely did just what would bring about his plan. He offers some critiques of the other views, but I don't think they work. Another problem is that I just don't see how his view isn't a form of determinism. And, of course, the "grounding objection" was brought up. Craig addressed one version of that objection in his essay, but Hunt raised his hand and said um. Well, he said more than that, he said that there were better versions of the grounding objection, like this one . . . (read the book, no spoilers here!).

Paul Helm presented and defended the position I hold to. I thought he did a good job. Good, not great. He makes a distinction between positive and negative governing to rebut the charges that God decreeing all that comes to pass makes him the author of sin (I just wonder why people think a *metaphor* stands in for an argument). he also does a good job pointing out that God's interaction with and ordering and governing of his creation is sui generis, so it's not really fair to judge him by the yard stick of determinisms we know about ala physicalism, behaviorism, &c. He also argues that the biblical picture of man's plight is that man is in such a deplorable state that libertarianism just can't get the job done. God must turn the sinner's heart toward himself, and compatibilism best explains this.

Overall this is a good book for those who want to jump head first into the fascinating topic of God's foreknowledge and how it works with people who are supposed to be free. It's a bit dated, but solid enough to whet your appetite for more and send you to the next book or article with enough understanding that you'll be able to fend for yourself in deeper waters (it even includes a glossary of key terms used in this discussion). I don't think Boyd was the best representative for his side. Perhaps a Hasker or a Rhoda would be better. I don't think Helm used the best arguments for his side and against libertarianism. Craig, for all his sophistication, ultimately didn't present a compelling case, left too many unanswered questions, and dealt with a weak version of *the main* objection to Molinism. Hunt was cool and I wonder why he just doesn't bite the bullet and affirm compatibilism. Ultimately his appeal to Zeno's paradox as a good analogy for why he didn't need to show any reconciliation fell flat. Helm pointed out that the analogy is terribly weak. I don't know if you'll read this book, but God does (apologies to Boyd). If God knows you will, does this mean you've been "fated" to read it? That you can't do anything about it? I guess you'll have to read the book to see how best you want to answer those questions.

Josh says

A good summary of several views on foreknowledge, but a bit too technically philosophical for my tastes. I recommend "Predestination and Free Will: Four Views" on my book list instead.

Blake says

Quite easily the most widely accessible, philosophically competent book on divine foreknowledge, it is difficult to find a more engaging dialogical work on this topic.

Four authors defend their own perspectives: Paul Helm, the Augustinian/Calvinist view; David Hunt, the Simple Foreknowledge view; William Lane Craig, the Middle-Knowledge view; and Gregory Boyd, the Open Theist view. Each other defends his view with significant rigor and sophistication.

Despite being of a Molinist persuasion, I found Hunt's defense of simple foreknowledge theoretically rich. His discussion of Ockhamism in particular was quite easily the clearest I've yet seen, and his utilization of Frankfurt-style counterexamples, though perhaps more at home in an Augustinian tradition, is worth considering without fully embracing an Augustinian view. And despite being a firm critic of open theism, I found Boyd's chapter rich with biblical defense. In particular Boyd's response to Helm's defense of anthropomorphic readings of scripture is cutting: if God wanted to reveal himself as sometimes genuinely surprised, shouldn't we expect many biblical passages to represent him in just that way?

Craig's explication of Molinism is, I think, often better than his defense of it. (For superb defenses of Molinism, see Flint 1998 and Freddoso 1988.) Still, it is difficult to find a clearer explication of the Molinist perspective than from Craig. This praise is equally applicable to Paul Helm's defense of the Augustinian/Calvinist view, in which Helm offers clear and thoughtful motivation for adopting his position.

Jonathan says

A great analysis for 4 competing systems pertaining to Divine Foreknowledge and Providence. Interesting interaction between the presenters, although there are no follow-up comments to the presenter's rebuttals. Craig's chapter on Molinism is one of the best descriptions of that position in print.

Amanda says

I'm hovering between giving this book 3 and 4 stars, but I went with 3. There were things I liked and things I didn't like. I loved how the book was structured; each section was written by a theologian who held a different viewpoint regarding Divine Foreknowledge. Then, the other three theologians would write a response to the other's essay. So since there were four different writing styles, I liked some better than others. The Open-Theism chapter was by far my favorite. He based his viewpoint upon scripture (which I'm familiar with) whereas the other theologians based their essays on complex logic formulas (which were much more difficult for me to understand). The Augustinian-Calvanism chapter was also written in more biblically-based style, so I enjoyed that one as well. But the Simple Foreknowledge chapter and the Middle Foreknowledgeable chapter were very different.

Overall, the book accomplished what I wanted. I wanted to be able to firm what I thought about divine foreknowledge so that I could explain it to others. I just wish that I had enjoyed every chapter as much as I did the open-theism one.

E says

Solid effort looking at God's knowledge of the future. Found myself wishing it was more theological and biblical, less philosophical and theoretical. Greg Boyd represents the open theism view. Thankfully, I think this view has already peaked and is receding in prominence. It takes the "God changes his mind/regrets" texts in Scripture literalistically instead of anthropomorphically. David Hunt keeps his cards close to his chest in the "simple foreknowledge view" chapter. He believes that God knows the future, but declines to address how or why. William L. Craig is the best-known modern defender of "Molinism" or "middle knowledge." This holds, in short, that God considered all possible worlds, and the decisions that humans would have made in each of those worlds (of which there are obviously trillions and trillions), and choose the world that turned out like he wanted. This purports to maintain human's libertarian freedom, as well as God's control of the future. Never mind the fact that it finds no support in Scripture, is unnecessarily complicated, and defends a tenet that isn't Biblical anyway (man's libertarian freedom).

Paul Helms defends the "Augustinian-Calvinist view," or "Biblical view," for short. He gives three reasons: the Biblical view is the only one that makes sense of salvific grace; the only one that makes sense of divine perfection and providence; and the only one that properly understands the limits of human freedom. This book was about divine foreknowledge only--not providence (although how do you separate the two?)--so the topic was a little narrower than I would have preferred. I think it would have been more helpful if they had stuck to the text, rather than pursuing their esoteric flights of fancy.

new words

serried--pressed together or compacted, as soldiers in rows

enthymeme--a syllogism or other argument in which a premise or the conclusion is unexpressed

Jacob O'connor says

Proverbs 18/17 says "The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him". It's this very reason why I enjoy debates and books like this so much. Divine Foreknowledge hosts 4 theologians, an open theist, a classical Arminianist, a Molinist, and finally a Calvinist. Each has a go at cashing out his position. Most surprising was the open theist. I don't typically think of this view as scholarly, but Gregory Boyd does well. Ultimately I feel Craig's Molinism is the right one. Someday someone is going to challenge me on that, and I'll have to actually defend it. Maybe today?
