

I Know Who Holds Tomorrow
by Ira Stanphill

I don't know about tomorrow,
I just live from day to day.
I don't borrow from it's sunshine,
For it's skies may turn to gray.
I don't worry o'er the future,
For I know what Jesus said,
And today I'll walk beside Him,
For He knows what is ahead.

Refrain

Many things about tomorrow,
I don't seem to understand;
But I know Who holds tomorrow,
And I know Who holds my hand.

I Know Who Holds the Future, But Not the Future

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You may recognize the allusion to the gospel song “I Know Who Holds Tomorrow” in my title. While that song expresses the important concern for assurance in Christian experience, I have some reservations about what may be implied by the line that says, “For He knows what is ahead.” My hesitancy involves the implication that God knows the future in the same way that we know the present. The claim that God knows the future as we know the present seems to me to face a logical problem due to overlooking the ontological status of future events. Furthermore, this logical problem leads to theological problems with regard to the understanding of salvation, human involvement in God’s action in the world, and God’s ultimacy.

Logical Impossibility of Divine Knowledge of Future Events as Actual

Although open theists have frequently stated that it is logically impossible for God to know future events, I hope to show more fully why claims that God does know future events as actual are logically meaningless. Erickson¹ and Ware,² two influential defenders of God's foreknowledge, provide carefully developed explanations of God's knowledge of future events as actual. Both describe divine foreknowledge as exhaustive meaning that there is nothing that God does not know about the future, including the future decisions of free moral agents.³ The implication of divine foreknowledge as exhaustive is that reality is fixed and unchanging.⁴ If a future event differed from what God knew, God's knowledge would change and would not have been exhaustive. Likewise, there can be no additional knowledge because that too would mean that God's knowledge of the future would not have been exhaustive. Thus, the phrase, "exhaustive divine foreknowledge," implies that in knowing everything about the future, what God knows is fixed and does not include any indeterminacy.⁵

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It? The Current Controversy over Divine Foreknowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

² Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), and Bruce Ware, *Their God Is Too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003).

³ Erickson, 11, 12, and 13. Erickson distinguishes the traditional view from the open view by saying that the open view excludes knowledge of what free moral agents will choose. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 138-139.

⁴ Since God's foreknowledge of the present was known in the past and since all past events, including God's knowing a future event, are fixed, God's foreknowledge of the future is fixed. Fischer identifies Nelson Pike as formulating the fixed past constraint which holds that a person cannot causally influence the past. See John Martin Fischer, "Freedom and Foreknowledge," in John Martin Fischer, editor, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 88. Linda Zagzebski identifies the necessity of the past as both an ontological and modal difference between the past and the future. See Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 181.

⁵ Dan Speak brought to my attention the distinction between hard and soft facts that Ockhamists such as Marilyn Adams propose in the debate about the possibility of human

The understanding of divine foreknowledge as exhaustive has an initial plausibility because God has often been understood as eternal rather than temporal. If God is eternal, then God is not limited by temporal categories such as future, past, and present. Since God is not limited by time as we are limited by time, the argument is that God can know the future as though it were the present or the past. Because the present and the past can be known exhaustively by an omniscient being, God can know the future exhaustively. But, the initial plausibility of divine foreknowledge being exhaustive due to God's eternality as existence outside of time faces a major obstacle. An eternal God outside of time is unable to relate to humans in time.⁶ If God relates to humans in time, if the phrases "before Christ" and "after Pentecost" have significant meaning, temporal categories can be applied to God's activities.

The basic logical incoherency in the claim that God has exhaustive foreknowledge of the future as actual arises from misunderstanding the concept of the future. Popular understandings of the future and concepts of the future in both analytical and continental philosophical traditions support understanding the future as possibility. When people talk about the future they distinguish the future from the past and the present. Central to the idea of "future" is that something has not yet occurred.

freedom in relation to divine foreknowledge. Briefly, the distinction is between hard facts which are fixed because they are solely about the past while soft facts include future events and thus may change rather than being fixed. Marilyn Adams and others find that soft facts make it possible for God to know future free human acts without those acts being fixed. For further discussion of the validity of this distinction between hard and soft facts, see Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* and John Martin Fischer, editor, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). Even if this distinction can be defended, the advocates of exhaustive divine foreknowledge do not appear to make such a distinction.

⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton J. Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 181-203.

The basic distinction between “past,” “present,” and “future” is this distinction between what has happened, what is happening, and what has not yet happened. People do seek to prepare for the future by anticipating what will happen in the future. But even life insurance actuaries recognize that anticipation of the future is at best a generalization and that generalization bears a certain amount of risk, of uncertainty.⁷

Philosophically, Prior identified the future as having an openness to alternatives which the past does not have.⁸ More recently, Zagzebski continuing the development of the analytic tradition in philosophy distinguishes between necessity associated with the past and possibility associated with the future.⁹ In the continental tradition of deconstruction, Derrida emphasized this openness by talking about the future as other. While there is a sense in which the future will repeat what has already happened, more importantly the future is what is unknown and unknowable.¹⁰ The idea of indeterminacy involving newness rather than repetition of what has already happened is central to the philosophical understanding of the concept “future.”

The distinctive characteristic of the concept of the future is the newness or difference between the past and the future. Thus to claim that the future can be known exhaustively, as fixed, as actual, contradicts the crucial element of the concept of the

⁷ Teri Merrick pointed out to me that the epistemological significance of prediction depends upon future uncertainty. If the future were certain, prediction would have no value as a confirmation of theory.

⁸ Arthur N. Prior, “The Formalities of Omniscience,” in *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968), 43-44, cited by William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 174-175.

⁹ Zagzebski, 66, 181, 183.

¹⁰ “Derrida,” See also Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 64-65 and Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22-23, 133.

future.¹¹ To claim that God knows the future as actual is to claim a logical impossibility similar to the logical impossibility my eighth grade friend uttered in his panic in a plane geometry class when he defined a circle as a closed-curved straight line. Future events can be thought about as possibilities. Talking about knowing future possibilities does recognize the difference between the past and the future.

Definitions, for example definitions of “future,” depend upon understandings of ontological conditions. These ontological conditions can be summarized by metaphysical principles. The logical loss of meaning that occurs by understanding the future as exhaustively known arises from not acknowledging the ontological distinction between actuality and possibility. Commonly, people distinguish between what is actual and what is possible. The metaphysical principle that future events include some degree of indeterminacy expresses this distinction.

The distinction between actual events and possible events is basically the distinction between what is and what could be but is not now. The past and the present as completed events are actual. While new interpretations of past and present events may develop, those are new interpretations rather than the occurrence of an event that takes the place of the original, completed event. Future events as possible events can be known because of the relationships between past/present actual events and future possible events. There may even be a high degree of certainty associated with knowing future possible events that are the results of prior causal conditions. But future events cannot be known as actual events because their ontological status is that of possibility.

¹¹ Erickson, 255, indicates that “realism” about the future does not exclude the element of newness by using the metaphor of a “rough sketch” to describe God’s plan for the future. The point of a sketch is that it does not give all of the details but only the necessary details.

Until an event becomes actual there is always some possibility of difference, of novelty, of change. Future events have an ontological status that includes some degree of indeterminacy while the ontological nature of past and present events excludes any degree of indeterminacy.¹²

The logical problem with the meaningfulness of statements about God's knowledge of future events as actual results from overlooking the metaphysical principle that future events include indeterminacy while present and past events exclude indeterminacy. Different metaphysical principles describe different ontological characteristics of reality making possible a different set of logical principles. In relation to divine action, both metaphysical principles and logical principles describe how God acts rather than limiting God by causing God to be incapable of delivering from evil and sin. As descriptive, metaphysical principles and logical principles do not change God's status as Ultimate Reality. Metaphysical principles aid us in glorifying God by describing for us how God acts. For example, understanding God as acting in time results in praising God for God's actions in relation to our temporal existence rather than praising God for some abstract characteristic attributed to God apart from God's activities.¹³

Salvation Comes through Trust in God

People continue to hold to God's knowledge of the future as actual even though the difficulties with the meaning of that belief are well known. The

¹² The Greek philosophical attraction to the concept of the unchanging as real symbolized by Parmenides most clearly expresses the exclusion of indeterminacy from actuality.

¹³ See Hasker, 185, citing Wolterstorff, 203.

continuation of this belief is significant. Examining the reason for continued belief points to a theological problem with that belief. The practical and experiential reason for this belief shows that it results in basing salvation upon knowledge changing the concept of salvation, reducing the significance of human participation in God's purposes, and shifting worship away from God as Ultimate. Ontological confusion leading to meaningless statements about God's knowledge of the future has important implications for Christian belief.

Both theologians and non-theologians have often expressed their concern about not holding that God knows the future as actual. This concern can be described generally as a concern for assurance about salvation. The stated, or often unstated, concern is that God will not be able to provide salvation if God does not know the future. Ware writes that the basis for confidence in God is in understanding God as one who can provide direction because of God's exhaustive knowledge of the future.¹⁴ At least one of the roles of belief that God knows the future as actual is to provide assurance with regard to the future, assurance that God will direct events in the future for the well-being of the world.

Basing the assurance of salvation upon divine foreknowledge of the future as actual shifts the basis of salvation. Trust in God's love and creative response to evil and sin becomes trust in God's control over events. Attributing knowledge of future events as actual to God results in understanding salvation as coming from security either due to divine control directly or as a result of divine knowledge. Basing security upon God's knowledge of the future as actual occurs because of the implications of the

¹⁴ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 177, 178, 214.

doctrine of exhaustive divine foreknowledge. God's knowledge of the future assures people that they are safe because God knows what will happen in the future. The basis for assurance becomes God's specific knowledge of what will happen. Ware illustrates this shift from trust in God's bringing new things to pass to trust in God's knowledge of the future. In his book, *God's Lesser Glory*, he expresses that God is known as God because God has brought to pass what has happened and declares new things that will come to be.¹⁵ Several pages later, he describes the logic of the biblical materials in Isaiah 40-48 as leading to the conclusion that "confidence in God is based on God's sure and certain grasp of all that occurs in history."¹⁶ Once assurance is identified with God's knowledge of the future, God's knowledge of the future often becomes simply knowledge of the future without concern for whose knowledge it is. If knowledge of the future is knowledge of actual events, then knowledge of those events may exist independently of the knower of those events. While Erickson and Ware do not deny the importance of the character of God as loving knower of exhaustive foreknowledge, their emphasis upon exhaustive foreknowledge makes possible an emphasis upon knowledge of the future as actual without connection to the nature of God. The doctrine of exhaustive divine foreknowledge opens up the possibility of salvation through knowledge of the future rather than through relationship with God.¹⁷

A number of consequences result from basing salvation upon God's knowledge. Trusting in God's knowledge of the future changes the biblical understanding of

¹⁵ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 105.

¹⁶ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 108. See also Ware, *Their God Is Too Small*, 125.

¹⁷ Hasker, 199, describes this process of attributing knowledge of the future as actual to God as metaphysical inflation in that the attribution of transcendence to God is broadened to include knowledge of impossibilities.

salvation. An important element in the biblical meaning of salvation is the understanding that God brings deliverance from present and past actual sins by bringing about a newness that is not hindered by the past. Perhaps the classic expression of this aspect of salvation is the promise that God will create a new heart in his people (Ezekiel, 36:26. See also Ezekiel 11:19 and Jeremiah 32:39 and 24:7). What is crucial in this creation of a new heart, in the provision of salvation, is God's presence rather than God's knowledge. God's presence is characterized by creativity in love rather than knowledge of the future. Although knowledge of the future is used in the Hebrew bible as a way to demonstrate the superiority of Yahweh over other gods, the key is that these coming events will be a demonstration of God's care for God's people rather than simply a manifestation of God's superior power of knowing. The superiority of God's knowledge helps God's people recognize that it is God who cares for them rather than the other gods. God's presence and care is salvation not God's knowledge of the future.

The prohibition in Hebrew religion against consulting mediums or using astrology confronted an attempt to base salvation upon knowledge. The prohibition of consulting mediums was not the result of a superior knowledge that recognized that mediums were hoaxes. Instead, the prohibition challenged the tendency of Israel to seek salvation in knowledge about future events rather than in reliance upon God. Salvation involves a relationship with God not just knowledge about God, or even God's knowledge about future realities. While salvation may require God's knowing what to do, salvation crucially involves God's presence in a situation.

Human response to God's salvation becomes unnecessary when the basis of salvation shifts to God's knowledge. If all of reality is known in God's plan, then response to God is not important because that response is already known by God. Even if response is important for human existence, the response is limited to intellectual recognition or affirmation since no change in events will occur as a result of the response. On the other hand, understanding salvation as God responding in a new way to a situation involves humans in creating newness through working toward the new situation that God makes possible. God's creation of newness requires human trust in what the gracious newness can be. If there is no trust, no novelty or deliverance from the past will occur. Because trusting God involves a human response to God, humans become involved in bringing into existence the possibilities that God presents to humans. Being involved in God's activities calls humans to be creative as God is creative rather than responding by seeking to control because of understanding divine sovereignty as control.

Finally, basing salvation upon knowledge shifts worship away from God as Ultimate. If God is Ultimate, trust responds to God's Ultimacy more adequately than worshipping God because God knows the future as actual. Trusting God rather than God's knowledge of the future as actual relies upon God's nature rather than on knowing what will happen in the future. Our claims to know what God knows frequently attempt to use God's knowledge for our own purposes. Trusting God to make possible newness that exceeds our knowledge acknowledges God's transcendence. If God does not know the future as actual, knowledge of the future cannot become

transcendent over time and take the place of God.¹⁸ Thus, God's transcendence is more significant in an understanding of God that acknowledges that God does not know the future as actual.

The gospel song "I Know Who Holds the Future" expresses a heartfelt desire in a somewhat ambiguous manner. (show slide with words only) While it contains the phrase "For he knows what is ahead", the repetition of "I know who holds my hand" in the refrain emphasizes trust in God rather than God's knowledge. Perhaps this ambiguity even in a text that appears to advocate the certainty of God's knowledge as the basis for facing uncertainties about the future indicates that the basis of confidence in God comes through trusting God not God's knowledge of the future.

Deleted from p. 8 after: Metaphysical principles aid us in glorifying God by describing for us how God acts. For example, understanding God as acting in time results in praising God for God's actions in relation to our temporal existence rather than praising God for some abstract characteristic attributed to God apart from God's activities

¹⁸ See Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapters 1-4 for an explanation of how knowledge transcends the individual which enables the individual who knows that knowledge to transcend the individual transcendent.

The metaphysical principle of future indeterminacy possesses at least some initial plausibility. Biblical evidence is important in a Christian theological context. While I cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of biblical materials, there are some indications that biblical materials recognized an element of indeterminacy in future events although they did not describe it in that way. For example, Samuel's anointing of David to be king in place of Saul (I Samuel 16:1-13) was a surprise to all involved. The author of the first epistle of John talks about a future existence as not yet being apparent to us (I John 3:2). This still might be understood as being only apparent novelty in that the newness exists only in human understandings of the events. But there are also passages that indicate that God is not limited to what has been in the past but will bring about something new. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is one of the more dramatic examples of the expectation that God will bring about something new (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Even more importantly, God in creating brought about a new reality and in bringing salvation to the Hebrew people and to individuals brings about a new reality.

Human experience provides another type of evidence. Human experience seems to include experiences of freedom. The experience of making decisions that are significant and not completely explainable in terms of prior events appears to be at least an occasional experience identified as freedom. While explanations have been given for this experience of freedom that deny there is any indeterminacy involved, the continuing understanding of these experiences as involving choices that make a difference indicates that the intuition of indeterminacy in future events is difficult to override. The second aspect of human existence indicating that future events include indeterminacy is the experience of moral responsibility. A sense of moral responsibility

ordinarily involves a sense of having had the ability to act differently. While it may be possible to retain moral responsibility without having a sense of an ability to act differently,¹⁹ this can be done only in unusual circumstances and assumes actions by other agents. If God is considered one of the other agents, God cannot cause the action because then the action is God's responsibility. But that means that an agent other than God or the person doing the action bears responsibility for what happens. Such a conclusion challenges divine sovereignty more significantly than claiming that God does not know the future as actual. Indeterminacy in physics and mutation in biology may also provide evidence that the future contains some degree of indeterminacy, but their significance for human freedom is not yet clear.

¹⁹ Dan Speak pointed out to me the rejection of the necessity of alternatives for human moral responsibility. See David Widerker and Michael McKenna, eds., *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities: Essays on the Importance of Alternative Possibilities* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003) for an extensive discussion of this position.