

DOES OMNIPOTENCE NECESSARILY ENTAIL OMNISCIENCE?

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In much of the Christian theological tradition "omnipotence" in God has been assumed to involve "omniscience"—that is, foreordination and even predestination. There are many reasons for this, but as a matter of fact, at least in the Protestant tradition, few of them come from the NT documents. It would be too complex, and actually unnecessary, to ask why each individual theologian opted to bind the world so closely to God (and God to the world). Our need is only to explore whether asserting God's unlimited power—that is, not limited by anything outside divinity itself—requires us to tie this to omniscience, to God's complete knowledge of all events, past and future.

In recent eras some (e.g. process theologians) have limited God's power in order to allow greater freedom to human beings so that their self-determination is not controlled by divine power. In a time of quite general agreement to stress and to offer the maximum amount of human freedom possible, such theological effort is admirable. The price that has been paid, however, is to restrict God's power to save. The problem is that the divine salvific offer in the life and work of Jesus has been central to Christianity since its beginning. Of course, at the time God's power was being restricted, human power, particularly scientific, was growing, so that perhaps for a century it seemed that the future needed no divine assistance in order to fulfill human potential.

But with growing disillusionment in our human power to "save" mankind as well as our growing pessimism over the fact that we are still our own worst source of destruction, Christians at least need to ask if it is still possible to assert God's ability to offer salvation, even to release us from death, without necessarily surrendering our human potential for freedom. (We say "potential" because we can bind ourselves to an inescapable necessity quite as tight as God's predestination.) To do this involves asking if we can separate omnipotence from omniscience in our characterization of the divine nature. In the tradition, human nature was often bound by necessity in order to preserve God's full power to save.

Is it possible for God to have the one without the other? The answer depends on how the divine attributes are conceived. Early in the origins of Greek philosophy (the source of much theological structuring of God)

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"nature" was taken to be fixed. If establishing the created order involved God in no contingency, the divine nature appeared just as fixed as the natural order. In fact for Aristotle, God (actually, the "Unmoved Mover") was a principle to insure the finality of knowledge, not a creator and determiner of the order of galaxies. Christian theology, however, has concerns that transcend securing the fixity of knowledge.

For Christians, God's nature and knowledge are only a means to insure the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of salvation. Thus we reverse the order of our concerns if we do not start with the requirements of salvation and work backward to conceive of God in ways that make this possible, since no one metaphysics is forced upon us. Alternative theories are possible (unless we want to assert that the outcome of human speculative construction is determined). We should build theories, all the while knowing our aims and the alternatives open to us. The gospels are not in themselves pieces of metaphysics, but they are documents that for Christians set the kind of metaphysics they need in order to underwrite their assertions.

God's power, the divine omnipotence, must be sufficient for creating actual natural orders from out of all that we know to be possible. Such power, since it is in itself not determined absolutely to one particular universe over another, has no need to bind itself to determinism. In fact a modern creator God who works with infinite possibilities is characterized by an openness of choice, a characteristic necessary to bring actuality out of a sheer possibility that in itself is incapable of actualization in any one form. Thus we know we must begin by protecting God's freedom and non-determination to create in the way divinity decides.

Still, as Christian theologians, if we know what we must accomplish in describing God, then in any move to protect the divine omnipotence, are we inevitably bound to assert the complete divine foreknowledge, God's omniscience? A majority of classical theologians have thought so. Could they have been mistaken? Or has our metaphysical situation changed in any significant way so as to allow us in a later era to explore options they could not have easily foreseen? Furthermore, has the continual demand to bind God's knowledge to necessity come as much from the human need for security and finality and actually less from the impossibility to protect the divine power in any other way?

One clue to an answer here is scientific theory's increasing stress on the lack of necessity in our natural order—the aspects of indeterminacy, of nonfinality, plus chaos theory—which makes predictability in absolute terms appear not to have been God's primary concern in establishing the order we inhabit and seek to know. Thus as humans have sought and sometimes attained freedom and self-determination in the social and political order, so God needs an even greater liberty and flexibility to bring a created, fully operational natural order out of sheer contingent possibility. Lack of determination is an asset to God in creation. Why should openness of the future not be a factor God also sought for deity and for humanity?

Whoever sets the frame of nature out of chaos and indeterminacy must retain the power to alter that structure for reasons just as cogent as the

original need to establish a natural order. One such pressing reason surely would be to save humanity from self-destruction, if in fact at least some do not deserve utterly to perish. The same concerns that brought our actual order into existence can one day operate to alter that structure and open it to a new alternative, the "second big-bang" theory. There is no logical reason why what happened once cannot happen again.

Eschatology is simply the counterpart of creation theory. Theologians have reason to work to preserve whatever divine power is necessary to bring off a created order and to allow that order to be reconstituted in the same way divinity deemed establishing a created order necessary in the first place. The power needed for "first things" is equally available for "last things," provided of course that we have not seen fit to strip God of creative powers. But the systematic question remains: Does God's full power to assert or to regain control necessitate that every future event be fixed in the divine omniscience? The key to answer this question in our modern times may be to consider how the natural order came to be fixed in its present form in the first place.

If we have in fact grown away from the early conviction that our particular natural order is necessary in the exact form in which we find it, if in fact possibility and contingency have come to characterize our approach to nature rather than necessity and fixity, then the determinative consideration in fixing our picture of the divine nature hinges on the question: What order of power is necessary to bring infinite, disorganized possibility into a natural order, to enable it to function as a universe? That power must be unlimited (omnipotent), except as it is bound by its choices once made in order not to be quixotic, since this is an aspect the natural order does not exhibit.

Such a God, then, need not know the future in detail or with fixity, because that divine creative power was not set on a single course in the constitution of nature, except as the result of its constitutive decision. Thus the God who creates out of sheer possibility cannot fix the future in detail, lest divinity contradict its own nature and make God appear to be out of harmony with nature and particularly with the immensity of the decisive power needed to accomplish creation. Of course a God of such creative power could have fixed nature and human nature irrevocably in detail, but to do that would be false to the divine Being itself, particularly to the immensity and the uncertainty of the project of creation.

If God's power is reserved without compromise, such a divinity has no need to fix the operation and decisions of men and women in advance. Power like that is fully capable of restraining its determining power in order to allow freedom to events. It can also insure itself the ability to control, to reconstitute nature, when the moment seems appropriate, just as the instant of creation became appropriate at one time, or at the beginning of our known time. Ironically, weak gods (and people) attempt rigid control. Those who are secure in their power can allow others freedom without feeling threatened in their being. Jesus, as a representative of

God's nature and intent, seemed secure in allowing us freedom of decision on our part.

For example, Jesus could have tried to control both the behavior and the thought of his disciples, as many messianic candidates and church leaders have attempted to do. But the gospels record the fact of the disciples' disorientation and of Jesus' lack of effort to determine their thought and action. Could Peter, destined to be Jesus' major apostle, not have been trained in doctrine and steered in his behavior so that at least he would not have denied his Lord three times? If the universe and human behavior is programmed, it is perhaps the strangest piece of behavior on God's part not to determine from eternity what one can think.

If we can separate omnipotence and omniscience, and if we do so primarily to preserve the divine contingent creative power and to make sense of our feeling for contingency in nature, what must God know in order not to seem "stupid"—that is, to know less than we know? Obviously God must know every possibility open to human option, just as deity had to know every option open to it in order to constitute our natural order out of all that was possible. To know all in nature and in human action that is possible is of course to know certain tendencies toward actualization, certain odds (as Las Vegas would say) for various actualizations to result.

God is not startled and is never struck dumb as the future unfolds, but an element of surprise embraces the divine knowledge just as it does ours, even when we think our predictive powers are at their height. Were you a god, would you not find it dull to fix the future irrevocably from eternity, particularly if you retained the power to deal with any eventuality in order effectively to accomplish the divine intent? As the modern world's hoped-for finality in theory passes away, does the world not look to you as if it were designed by a god who liked uncertainty and risk? At times we wish for a little less risk and a little more control. But God's advantage over us—that is, possessing unlimited power—is the prime differentiating quality between deity and humanity.