

LIMITED OMNISCIENCE AND THE TEST FOR A PROPHET: A BRIEF PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Philosophers and theologians in the Christian tradition as well as those in other traditions have wrestled with the problem of omniscience and free will for as long as people have believed that their Scriptures teach both that God knows everything in the past, present and future and that human beings are free moral agents with the ability to make libertarian choices. Such belief, however, poses a well-known problem. If God has perfect knowledge of future events including human actions, and if God cannot be wrong about what he knows, then all human actions will turn out only one way. But if individuals can make libertarian choices that entail the ability to do otherwise, how can the Christian at the same time affirm that the future will turn out only one way?

Christians have tried to resolve the conflict in many ways,¹ including one that I believe is successful.² Some³ have tried to resolve the supposed conflict by denying that God knows the future, although they believe that he is nevertheless omniscient. What they mean by this is that God knows everything that can be known, but since the future is not actual and hence not a thing his not knowing it does not count against his omniscience. As Richard Swinburne puts it, omniscience is "knowledge of everything true which is logically possible to know."⁴ And since according to this view it is logically impossible for God to know the future, his not knowing it cannot count against his omniscience.

Such a view, often called limited omniscience, is held by a number of Christian philosophers and theologians, including Swinburne, Richard Rice and Clark Pinnock. Many of the same individuals believe that the Bible is their only standard for faith and practice and in fact argue in some places that their position is consistent with Scripture,⁵ which I believe is

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¹ A book that includes four major Christian views on this topic, including rebuttals by each representative of the others' positions, is *Predestination and Freewill* (ed. D. and R. Basinger; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987).

² A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 65-73; W. L. Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

³ R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977); R. Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Freewill* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985); C. Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," *Predestination and Freewill* 141-162.

⁴ Swinburne, *Coherence* 175.

⁵ See *ibid.* 177-178; Rice, *Foreknowledge* 75-82; Pinnock, "God Limits" 145-159.

clearly an incorrect exegesis of the text.⁶ In the present paper I will argue that if the defender of limited omniscience takes Scripture seriously a certain philosophical problem arises when one applies the view to the Bible's test for a prophet. Of course if one does not consider Scripture authoritative in shaping one's philosophical views, then my argument need not faze that person.

It is also important to realize what I will not try to do in this paper. I will not philosophically defend one particular view of the relationship between omniscience and free will, although I believe that one is correct. My chief concern is whether the limited omniscience view is logically consistent with the Biblical test for a prophet.

I. THE TEST FOR A PROPHET

One of the tests for a true prophet found in the Bible is in Deut 18:22 (JB): "When a prophet speaks in the name of Yahweh and the thing does not happen and the word is not fulfilled, then it has not been spoken by Yahweh. The prophet has spoken with presumption. You have nothing to fear." If this criterion is adequate for distinguishing spokespersons for God from nonspeakers, it must be true in every possible world. And since the future is open in the limited omniscience view, there must be a large number, possibly an infinite number, of possible past, present and future worlds (i.e. the past and present were at one time the future). Let us put this criterion in the form of a syllogism:

(A)

If X speaks for God about the future in any possible world, then necessarily in any possible world X is correct about the future when he speaks for God about the future.

It is not the case that X is correct about prophecy Y.

Therefore X does not speak for God.

Thus one of the necessary conditions for being a spokesperson for God is being correct about the future in every possible world. Consequently if this necessary condition is not present then the alleged spokesperson does not speak for God.

II. POSSIBLE WORLDS, THE TEST FOR A PROPHET, AND THE LIMITED OMNISCIENCE VIEW

Some limited omniscience Christian philosophers who believe that Biblical prophecy has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth argue that such prophetic fulfillment is not based on God's knowledge of the future but on "predictions based on God's exhaustive knowledge of the past

⁶ See F. J. Beckwith and S. E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1991) 119-120; Craig, *Only Wise* 21-48; R. Morey, *Battle of the Gods* (Southbridge: Crown, 1989) 229-241.

and present."⁷ But this means that it is within the realm of possibility that God could make a mistake about the future. In other words:

(a) In some possible world God makes a mistake in predicting the future.

It seems to me that there are only five different ways that the limited omniscience defender may respond to (a): (1) It is false that (a) is the case; (2) it is the case that (a) is true, but we must learn to live with the fact that that is the nature of the God we serve; (3) there are no other possible worlds; (4) the test for a prophet applies only to human beings but not to God; (5) the Biblical text is misinterpreted. Let us evaluate each one of these possible responses.

1. *It is false that (a) is the case.* Suppose the limited omniscience defender claims that (a) is false and that:

(b) In every possible world God accurately predicts the future.

But this is certainly no option, for it is epistemologically equivalent to the traditional view of omniscience. That is to say, if it is the case that in every possible world God is perfectly accurate in predicting the future in its minutest detail, then this does not differ from the traditional view that in every possible world God has total knowledge of the future. It is a distinction without a difference. To put it another way: If it is necessarily true that God always accurately predicts the future, then God has justified true belief of the future in every possible world, which means that he has total knowledge of the future in every possible world.

Swinburne seems to realize that (1) is no option for his position when he writes: "As regards men, their choices are much influenced by circumstances and this makes it possible for a being [God] who knows all the circumstances to predict human behaviour correctly most of the time, but *always with the possibility that men may falsify those predictions.*"⁸

2. *It is the case that (a) is true, but we must learn to live with the fact that that is the nature of the God we serve.* This option, however, poses a more serious theological problem if the limited omniscience defender wants to maintain a high view of Scripture. Consider applying (a) to (A) by making it the second premise: ?

(A₁)

If X speaks for God about the future in any possible world, then necessarily in every possible world X is correct about the future.

In some possible world (Z), X is God and his prediction about the future is incorrect (which is a possible world for the limited omniscience defender).

Therefore in some possible world God does not speak for God.

⁷ See Rice, *Foreknowledge* 75–82; Pinnock, "God Limits" 157–159.

⁸ Swinburne, *Coherence* 176 (italics mine).

Since God is God, it would seem that any criterion for discerning divine inspiration that could exclude the divine himself is fundamentally flawed. One of course could admit his concept of the divine is flawed and the Bible's criterion is not. But this is no option for the limited omniscience defender, for it is tantamount to giving up his position altogether. Yet if the Bible is divinely inspired, as most of the limited omniscience defenders are willing to admit and earnestly defend, then we are quite sure that its test for a prophet is correct. Hence it would seem that the fault lies in the limited omniscience view and not in the Bible's test for a prophet. Consequently if the limited omniscience defender accepts the Bible's test for a prophet, he must deny that God is God. But this is absurd, so the limited omniscience view must be flawed.

3. *There are no other possible worlds.* Suppose the limited omniscience defender denies that there are possible worlds. She could argue that God is never wrong in every possible world simply because there are no other possible worlds except the actual world. But this is a rather bizarre option for someone who proposes the limited omniscience view in order to maintain a libertarian view of human freedom, which necessarily entails other possible worlds that human freedom can actualize. Without the possibility of other worlds being actualized, the future is not open and the limited omniscience view does not rescue human freedom, which it is intended to do by its proponents. Consequently the limited omniscience defender must hold to the possibility of other worlds and that this entails the possibility that "in some possible world some prediction of God about the future is incorrect." If she denies that God is incorrect about the future in at least one possible world, although there are other possible worlds, she is right back to the problems entailed by accepting (b) and affirms the traditional theistic view of God's omniscience.

4. *The test for a prophet applies only to human beings but not to God.* Just as certain moral precepts apply only to human beings but not to God (e.g. "Thou shalt not kill," because God is the giver and taker of life whereas man is not), some epistemological criteria may apply only to human beings and not to God. There are at least two problems with this argument.

First, it does not solve the problem for the limited omniscience view. It just pushes it back one level. That is to say, all true prophets are spokespersons of God, which means that the source of their information is God. Thus it follows from the limited omniscience view that even a true prophet of God may not speak for God. Consider the following argument:

(B)

If X is incorrect about the future in any possible world when claiming to speak for God, then necessarily X does not speak for God.

X is incorrect about the future in some possible world (Z) when claiming to speak for God.

Therefore X does not speak for God.

Argument B is consistent with Deut 18:22 and poses no problem for the traditionalist. But if the future is open, as the limited omniscience view entails, then the conclusion of the following argument must also be true:

(B₁)

If X speaks for God about the future in any possible world, then necessarily in any possible world X is correct about the future when he speaks for God about the future.

In possible world Z, X speaks for God but is incorrect about the future (which is a possible world for the limited omniscience defender).

Therefore in possible world Z, X both speaks for God and does not speak for God.

But this argument is just as absurd as A₁, which concluded that in some possible world God does not speak for God. Being correct about the future cannot be a necessary condition for being a prophet of God and at the same time not a necessary condition for being a prophet of God. In any event, saying that the test for a prophet only applies to alleged prophets but not to God does not solve the problem but merely pushes it back one level.

Second, this objection entails that human beings must abide by a higher epistemological standard than God. In other words, alleged human prophets must be absolutely accurate to be considered divinely inspired, whereas the Being from which they are supposedly receiving their information need not be absolutely accurate. This is absurd, since one cannot expect greater accuracy from the receiver of information than from his source of information. Thus this objection is also incoherent.

5. *The Biblical text is misinterpreted.* Suppose the limited omniscience defender denies the legitimacy of our interpretation of the Biblical text. She may argue that our interpretation of the text is predicated upon a western view of epistemological accuracy (i.e. truth) of which the ancient Israelites were unaware.

There are at least two problems with this argument. First, this is an unusual argument for the limited omniscience defender to make, since it is he who often accuses the traditionalist of ignoring the plain meaning of the Biblical text and allegedly reading back into it Greek philosophical concepts.⁹ It is the limited omniscience defender who ordinarily argues that his position is more consistent with a more literal reading of the Scriptures than is the traditionalist's. Yet in the case under question a more literal reading seems to indicate that a sufficient condition for being a false prophet is making incorrect predictions about the future.

⁹ E.g., Pinnock writes: "We need to read the Bible more literally. . . . If we are going to preach the Bible and relate to people's needs effectively, then it is imperative that we highlight God's loving relativity to a changing world and diminish our commitment to the changeless divinity implied in Greek philosophy" ("God Limits" 158). For an exegetical response to this argument see Beckwith and Parrish, *Mormon* 109–128; Morey, *Battle* 121–247.

Second, this argument rests on the dubious assumption that "unfulfilled prophecy" has a meaning other than "false prediction." If it does, it is unknown to the numerous exegetical scholars in Church history, both conservative and liberal, who have written scores of commentaries that deal with the text in question. After all, if the text does not assume the law of noncontradiction (which the terms "false prediction" and "unfulfilled prophecy" seem to presuppose), how is it possible for anyone to get anything out of the Bible except gibberish? It seems then that the burden of proof is on the limited omniscience defender to show why the plain meaning of the text should be overturned. To cite a possible alternative reading with no exegetical evidence is to argue from silence (*argumentum ad ignorantum*).

III. CONCLUSION

In summary, the limited omniscience position is inconsistent with the Biblical test for a prophet, for when they are juxtaposed the following conclusion is drawn: God is not God. But this is absurd. Furthermore the five possible ways of avoiding this conclusion do not seem to work. Hence unless one wants to give up a high view of Scripture the limited omniscience position is logically untenable and ought to be rejected. Consequently Christian philosophers should work more rigorously on defending the traditional view of God's omniscience.