

## WHY SIMPLE FOREKNOWLEDGE IS STILL USELESS (IN SPITE OF DAVID HUNT AND ALEX PRUSS)

WILLIAM HASKER\*

### I. INTRODUCTION: THE FIRST ARGUMENT

The doctrine of simple divine foreknowledge (SF) is probably the most common way of understanding divine knowledge of the future among non-Calvinist evangelicals. Simple foreknowledge means that God has complete, exact, and certain knowledge of the actual future, including the future free actions of human beings, in contrast with the probabilistic knowledge of the future postulated by open theism. Simple foreknowledge is “simple” in that it affirms merely that God *knows* the future, but not that he *predetermines* it as is held by theological determinism (Calvinism). And simple foreknowledge implies that God knows the *actual* future, but not (as is asserted by the theory of divine middle knowledge, or Molinism) that he knows *hypothetical* futures, such as what actions *would be chosen* by free creatures under possible circumstances that never in fact occur.

Recently, however, simple foreknowledge has been criticized by arguing that it does not, in fact, afford the theological benefits it is commonly thought to offer.<sup>1</sup> Foreknowledge is often thought to be important because of its benefits for God’s providential government of the world. For instance, by knowing what is going to happen in the future, God is able to inspire prophets to foretell the future. He can also prearrange events and circumstances in the light of a foreknown future occurrence, so as better to achieve God’s purposes in the world. (An example: by foreknowing Saul’s disobedience and unfitness for the kingship, God was able to prearrange circumstances so as to facilitate the eventual elevation of David, such as by arranging David’s spectacular victory over Goliath.) The arguments mentioned above, however, claim to show that simple foreknowledge offers no such benefits: if God has simple foreknowledge, he is no better off in these respects than if he had

\* William Hasker is emeritus professor of philosophy at Huntington College, 2303 College Ave., Huntington, IN 46750.

<sup>1</sup> The arguments discussed here are distinct from the well-known and much-discussed claim that divine foreknowledge as such is incompatible with human free will. For purposes of the present discussion (and *only* for those purposes), it will be assumed that the two are compatible. For a sampling of these arguments, see David Basinger, “Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought,” *Religious Studies* 22 (1986) 407–22; William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989) chap. 3; and John Sanders, “Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control than the Openness of God,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997) 26–40.

only complete knowledge of past and present. To the extent that these arguments are successful, simple foreknowledge tends to be eliminated as a serious contender, and the debate about divine providence becomes a three-way discussion between Calvinists, Molinists, and open theists.<sup>2</sup>

The main objections to date against the arguments in question are those raised by philosopher David Hunt.<sup>3</sup> Hunt does not deny that both Calvinism and Molinism afford God more providential control than can be provided by simple foreknowledge. However, he has serious reservations about both of those doctrines, and he argues that simple foreknowledge does indeed allow God greater providential control than is possible with merely probabilistic knowledge of the future. In this paper I address the most recent article in which Hunt defends his claims.<sup>4</sup> I will show not only that he has not succeeded in demonstrating how simple foreknowledge is providentially useful, but that he cannot possibly succeed in showing this, given the understanding of divine foreknowledge with which he is working.<sup>5</sup>

My case against Hunt can be stated in the form of a simple, three-step argument:

(1) Simple foreknowledge is providentially useful if and only if God can determine, on the basis of his simple foreknowledge, how he shall act providentially in the world.

(2) If Hunt's view of foreknowledge is correct, God cannot determine, on the basis of his simple foreknowledge, how he shall act providentially in the world.

(3) Therefore, if Hunt's view of foreknowledge is correct, simple foreknowledge is not providentially useful.

These points, however, require further comment. Step (1) merely clarifies what is meant by the claim that foreknowledge is providentially useful. In order to be useful, it must enable God to act in the world, on the basis of his foreknowledge, in ways such as those described above—enabling prophets to predict the future, prearranging circumstances in the light of foreknown events, and the like. It should be particularly noted that simple foreknowledge needs to be of use to God in ways that *go beyond* what is possible for God on

<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, possible to hold that God *possesses* simple foreknowledge even if it offers no providential advantage. I judge, however, that only a comparatively small minority of philosophers and theologians would be satisfied with such a view. The arguments, if correct, apply also to divine timeless knowledge of the future, so long as this is not supplemented by either theological determinism or middle knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Also of interest is a recent article by Alexander R. Pruss, which will be discussed in Part II below: Alexander R. Pruss, "Prophecy Without Middle Knowledge," *Faith and Philosophy* 24/4 (2007).

<sup>4</sup> David P. Hunt, "The Providential Advantage of Divine Foreknowledge," in Kevin Timpe, ed., *Arguing About Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009) 374–85. (Page numbers in this section refer to this paper by Hunt.) Hunt's arguments in this paper are directed against John Sanders, "Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control than the Openness of God," which is reprinted in the same volume.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of some earlier articles by Hunt, see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 337–38, n. 150; and William Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004) 188–93.

the basis of knowledge of the past and the present, plus probabilistic knowledge of the future such as is postulated by open theism.<sup>6</sup> So understood, I do not think (1) is open to serious challenge.

The remaining task, then, is to justify premise (2). In order to do this we need to explain a distinction, first made by John Sanders, between two ways of understanding simple foreknowledge. The first of these is termed "Complete Simple Foreknowledge" (CSF) and is explained by Sanders as follows: "even though he knows things will occur in sequence God does not acquire the knowledge in sequence. God simply sees the whole at once."<sup>7</sup> The other way of understanding simple foreknowledge is termed "Incremental Simple Foreknowledge" (ISF) in which God "timelessly accesses the future *in sequence or incrementally*."<sup>8</sup> (Here as elsewhere in this article, references to God knowing or deciding things sequentially should be understood as referring, not to temporal succession—which according to SF does not exist in God's knowing and deciding—but to the *logical or explanatory order* between different events. The key idea here is that events that are "later" in the explanatory order can happen *because of* events earlier in the order, but not vice versa.) The potential benefit of ISF is that after accessing one segment of the future God could then, on the basis of what he has accessed, make some decision concerning his own future actions before going on to access additional parts of the future.

Now, Sanders quickly dismisses CSF, and spends most of his article arguing that ISF is providentially useless. Hunt does not challenge the latter claim, but he thinks Sanders made a serious mistake in dismissing CSF. On the contrary, Hunt urges, CSF provides precisely the resources for divine providential action we have been looking for. I think it is not difficult to see that Hunt is mistaken about this. For consider: according to CSF, God "sees" the entire future all at once, in a single glance as it were, *including* God's own future actions *and the reasons for which God will perform those actions*.<sup>9</sup> Now, can we make any sense at all of the notion that God, on the basis of this knowledge of the future which *already contains* his own actions, *determines* what those actions shall be? I submit that we cannot. Those future actions are all already determined; they are spread out before him in his complete knowledge of the future. At this point, there is no "determining" left to be done! This can be stated as a formal argument, as follows:

(1) In order for God's decisions to be *made on the basis of* his foreknowledge they must be subsequent, in the logical and explanatory order, to that foreknowledge.

<sup>6</sup> Hunt puts it like this: "For divine foreknowledge to be useful, God must have some objective—call it 'O'—which his foreknowledge puts him in a better position to achieve than if he lacked that knowledge" (p. 375).

<sup>7</sup> Sanders, "Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control than the Openness of God" 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Sanders also discusses a version of CSF according to which God sees all of the future *except his own actions*. Hunt, Sanders, and I are agreed that CSF so understood is not a satisfactory view, and I shall say no more about it here.

(2) In order for God's decisions to be *included in* God's foreknowledge the decisions must be prior, in the logical and explanatory order, to that foreknowledge.

(3) Therefore, if God's decisions are included in God's foreknowledge (as they are according to CSF), those decisions cannot be made on the basis of his foreknowledge.

Once we have seen this, it is crystal clear that premise (2) of the argument given above is correct: God *cannot* determine, on the basis of his simple foreknowledge, how he shall act providentially in the world.

Hunt, however, wants to resist this conclusion. He writes, "Certainly God couldn't make foreknowledge of his *own* action A the 'basis' for that very action A; but there's no reason why he couldn't use foreknowledge of *other* events as the basis for A" (p. 378). Now, the first part of what Hunt says here is undoubtedly correct. It makes no sense to picture God as saying to himself, "I know that I will arrange for David to defeat Goliath, and for that reason, I now decide that I will arrange for David to defeat Goliath." But what is the alternative? According to Hunt, what we should suppose is that God, while fully aware that he is going to arrange for David to defeat Goliath, *ignores* that fact and reasons thus: "I desire the eventual elevation of David to the kingship, and for that reason I now decide that I will arrange for David to defeat Goliath." But this makes no sense either! The only reasonable conclusion is that because God already knows all about the fact that he will arrange for David to defeat Goliath, as well as the reasons for which he will do that, *there is no more decision to be made* concerning that matter. But this conclusion is fatal to Hunt's argument.

Hunt, however, still wants to resist, and in order to do this he argues that God's *knowing* what he is going to do does not preclude his subsequently (in the explanatory order) *deciding* to do that very thing. He invokes a subtle distinction here, roughly the distinction between *knowing* that one will perform a certain action, and *willing* to do that thing—or, one might say, *endorsing* the action in question. He gives the example of a time traveler who, traveling into the future, sees himself committing suicide.<sup>10</sup> He knows that he will perform this act, but he may not (at this point) *will* or *endorse* the action in question. (He may actually be horrified to see what his future self is doing.) So, Hunt reasons, God's *knowing* that he will perform some providential action in no way precludes God's subsequently *deciding* to do that very thing.

There are at least two reasons why this example does not help to save Hunt's position. First of all, the time traveler knows the *fact* about what he will do, but he may not understand the *reasons* why he will do it. And even if he does know the reasons he may not yet *appreciate* the reasons in such a way that they lead him to endorse the decision. In order to fully appreciate

<sup>10</sup> There are serious philosophical doubts about the coherence of time travel stories, and this tends to call into question arguments using time travel examples. I share those doubts, but I will not on this occasion object to Hunt's example. Instead, I will grant him the example and try to see what follows from it.

them, he may need to live through the intervening life history up to the moment of suicide. But it is out of the question that God, in contemplating his own future actions, should be unaware of his reasons for those actions or should fail to fully appreciate those reasons. So the example, even if successful on its own terms, fails to throw any light on the alleged providential usefulness of simple foreknowledge.

But the example does not even succeed on its own terms. The time traveler does not, after seeing himself commit suicide, *determine* that he is going to perform this action. He may “decide” to perform it, in the sense that he decides to “go along with the inevitable” and do what it is already unavoidable that he should do. But the *determination* has “already”<sup>11</sup> been made, by his future self; at most he can decide to ratify that already-made determination.

Given CSF, the conclusion is clear: God *cannot* determine, on the basis of his simple foreknowledge, how he shall act providentially. The determination in question has *already been made* prior to God’s accessing his foreknowledge, which *already contains the actions in question*. God is no more able to determine what action he will take than the time traveler is able to determine that he will commit suicide.<sup>12</sup> Premise (2) is secure, and simple foreknowledge as conceived by Hunt is useless.

## II. A SECOND ARGUMENT

At this point we turn to the somewhat different argument put forward by Alexander Pruss.<sup>13</sup> Pruss’s specific concern is with prophecy, and his goal is to show that simple foreknowledge does indeed provide resources for divine prophecy—something that we have argued is not the case on David Hunt’s view of foreknowledge. Can Pruss succeed where Hunt has failed?

It is initially encouraging to see that Pruss is aware of some of the logical problems that are inherent in such an endeavor. He recognizes that were he to have complete knowledge of the future, including his own future actions, “then not only this knowledge would not help me make a free decision but, it seems, would undercut the very possibility of my making a free decision” (p. 435). We have seen exactly this problem in Hunt’s view of foreknowledge,

<sup>11</sup> That is to say: the determination is in the past in relation to the calendar time at which the time traveler sees the suicide taking place, though it remains in the future in relation to the time traveler’s personal life history. This sort of complication cannot be avoided if we are going to take time travel seriously.

<sup>12</sup> And now the question becomes pressing: How did those determinations get made? My answer: I have no idea, but it is not my problem. The problem is generated by Hunt’s own assertions, so he is the one who is obligated to provide an answer.

<sup>13</sup> “Prophecy Without Middle Knowledge” (page references in this section are to this article). It should be stated that Pruss’s discussion is not situated in the context of the debate about the uselessness of simple foreknowledge. Instead, Pruss is in dialogue with the work of Thomas Flint (see his *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998], chap. 5) concerning prophecy in the context of divine middle knowledge. Pruss’s primary objective is to show that simple foreknowledge offers resources for prophecy that are comparable to those afforded by middle knowledge.

so we will need to see how Pruss avoids it. Again, in speaking of Christ's prophecy that Peter will deny him, he says,

God's belief that Peter will deny him must be responsive to Peter's choice. What explains why God believes that Peter will deny him is God's omniscience together with Peter's actual future denial. But God's belief is explanatorily prior to God's decision to speak to Peter.<sup>14</sup> And God's speaking to Peter is explanatorily prior to Peter's decision, it seems, since it is a part of what formed the character that Peter had while making the decision. This means that we have a vicious circularity in the order of explanation.<sup>15</sup>

Once again, it is encouraging to see that Pruss is aware of the problem. Furthermore, he lays out his strategy—or rather, two possible strategies—for avoiding these problems when he says the response must be “that God is in effect *bracketing* this categorical knowledge [of the future] when making the decision or that God's knowledge of the future is posterior *in the order of explanation*, but not in the temporal order, to the decision about what future to actualize” (435; emphasis original). So we need to see how Pruss implements these strategies.

In order to solve these problems, Pruss needs to find something God's decision can be based on, other than merely God's foreknowledge of what will actually happen. In order to do this, he postulates, as a necessary truth, a “relevant similarity principle” which states that differences in circumstances do not matter for what Peter will do, so long as these differences are “invisible to the agent”—that is, they make no difference in the situation that the agent is able to detect. Pruss, however, is not fully satisfied with this, so he stakes a claim for an even broader relevant similarity principle:

The principle that invisible differences between circumstances do not matter might be part of a wider principle that all that matters in the circumstances is the time, the character of the agent, the subjective mental state, external causal influence on the agent, and maybe the history of previous choices.<sup>16</sup>

We might wonder what benefit is derived from these principles. Here is the answer: Pruss sees that it will not do to picture God as reasoning thus: “I know by my foreknowledge that I will tell Peter he will deny Jesus. Therefore, I decide that I will tell Peter that he will deny Jesus.” As he rightly sees, that sort of divine thought process would undercut the possibility of God's making a genuine decision to say this to Peter. So, there must be *some other* reason, other than the mere fact that God knows he will say this to Peter, which is reason for his saying this. And the relevant similarity principles give him a way of getting this other reason. For example, very possibly, God knows that, at the time when he is questioned by various persons in the

<sup>14</sup> Pruss throughout his discussion conflates “Jesus speaks to Peter” with “God speaks to Peter,” and we shall follow him in this.

<sup>15</sup> The quote is from p. 436. Explanatory circles of this sort played an important role in the earlier stages of my discussion with Hunt; see the materials referenced in notes 2 and 7.

<sup>16</sup> The quote is from p. 450. The final clause is included as a “sop to those who accept a metaphysics on which we have an intimate connection even with our past actions” (p. 454); Pruss does not himself regard it as necessary.

high priest's courtyard, Peter will have forgotten (temporarily) what Jesus said to him. And this means (according to Pruss) that Peter's character, his subjective mental state, the external causal influences on him, and so on would be exactly the same, whether or not Jesus told Peter that Peter would deny him. So God knows the following concerning Peter:

(PD) If Peter is in such-and-such circumstances in the courtyard, then, *regardless of whether or not Jesus tells Peter that Peter will deny him*, Peter will in fact deny Jesus.

Based on this knowledge, God issues the prophecy to Peter. And since the reason for the prophecy is *not* the fact that God *knows* that he will issue the prophecy, God's ability to make a free choice is not impeded and circularity of explanation is avoided. Or so Pruss supposes.

By this time, however, things have gone seriously wrong. First of all, Pruss's relevant similarity principle, which he posits as a necessary truth, is very likely false. Notice that the principle makes no mention of the subject's neurological state: it does not matter what that may be, so long as the difference is not introspectively perceptible to the agent. Now, in the light of contemporary neuroscience, this is highly implausible. One need not be a materialist, nor need one embrace neurological determinism, to think it very likely that one's neurological state can have a major influence on one's decisions, even in cases where the differences in neurological state are subjectively undetectable. (Note that Peter's neurological state was certainly affected in a significant way by what Jesus had said; this is shown by the fact that, immediately after the threefold denial, he remembered Jesus' words to him.)

But this is really a secondary point. For, even given the relevant similarity principle, how is it that God is able to know (PD)? The answer Pruss gives is, because of his foreknowledge. That is to say, God knows that Peter will deny Jesus in the *actual* circumstances, in which Jesus has said to Peter that Peter will betray him. And by combining this knowledge with the (supposedly) necessarily true relevant similarity principle, God arrives at the truth of (PD). And by using (PD) *instead of* his foreknowledge as the reason for telling Peter that he will betray Jesus, this account avoids the problems noted by Pruss and referenced above.

But this just will not work. Explanation is a transitive relation: If A explains B, and B explains C, then A explains C. (That is to say, A is *part of* the explanation why C is the case; at each step, the factor indicated may not be the *complete* explanation.) If God's knowledge that Peter will deny Jesus is the explanation for God's knowledge of (PD), and God's knowledge of (PD) is the explanation for God's issuing the prophecy, then God's knowledge of Peter's denial is the explanation for God's issuing the prophecy. So far, Pruss would not disagree. But here is the key point: Does the prophecy not constitute a part of the explanation for Peter's denial? Pruss, I think, wants to answer the question "No," because (by hypothesis) Peter would have denied Christ with or without the prophecy. But that, I contend, is a mistake. God's knowledge of Peter's denial is not to be thought of as knowledge of the bare proposition "Peter will deny Jesus." It must, rather, be understood as a complete

grasp of the *concrete event* of Peter's denial, including *all* relevant facts about Peter at the time of the denial. And these facts will undoubtedly be different in many details as a result of Jesus' prophetic words to Peter. (Again, recall that just moments after his denial, Peter is able to recall what Jesus had said to him.) So the prophecy is (in part) the explanation for Peter's state when he denies Christ, and the explanatory circle has not been avoided. It is still the case that *the prophecy to Peter is explained (in part) by Peter's total state in denying Christ, and Peter's state in denying Christ is explained (in part) by the prophecy*. None of Pruss's elaborate and ingenious maneuvering has succeeded in avoiding this explanatory circle. But as Pruss agrees, such explanatory circles are unacceptable; therefore his account fails.

Nor does Pruss escape the difficulty that God's foreknowledge of how Peter acts *under the circumstances in which he has been told by Jesus that he will betray Jesus* actually *prevents* God from making a free decision to issue the prophecy. Admittedly, Pruss is less explicit than David Hunt on the question of Complete Simple Foreknowledge vs. Incremental Simple Foreknowledge. Matters are clarified, however, if we recall Pruss's proposal that "God is in effect *bracketing* this categorical knowledge [of the future] when making the decision." If the knowledge is bracketed, then it is "there" in his foreknowledge, even if it is not, as such, being used to make the decision. So we are in the same situation we imagined in Hunt's case where, as we saw, "God, while fully aware that he is going to arrange for David to defeat Goliath, *ignores* that fact and reasons thus: 'I desire the eventual elevation of David to the kingship, and for that reason I now decide that I will arrange for David to defeat Goliath.'" And as we observed before, this makes no sense. If the knowledge the God will issue the prophecy is included in God's foreknowledge, then the decision to issue the prophecy is explanatorily prior to that foreknowledge. But if the decision is made *on the basis of* the foreknowledge (which we have seen is the case on Pruss's scenario), then the foreknowledge is explanatorily prior to the decision. The contradiction is palpable, and it has not been avoided by all of Pruss's skillful maneuvering.

I am afraid that for some readers the more technical nature of this discussion of Pruss's work may pose a problem. I can only say in extenuation that Pruss's actual discussion is a great deal longer and *more* technical than anything I have said about it here! What is striking, however, is that in spite of his admirable ingenuity he has not, in the end, succeeded in evading the same problems that we found in Hunt's simpler and more straightforward presentation. To be sure, the discussion of this topic is still relatively young, and it may be premature to conclude that there will be no further twists and turns in the debate. But the fact that two extremely capable philosophers, working independently and using different approaches, still leave us with the same intractable problems should caution us against undue optimism. For now, the most reasonable conclusion to draw is that *simple foreknowledge is still useless*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> My thanks to John Sanders for his assistance in preparing this article, and to the editor and a referee for *JETS* for a valuable suggestion.