

CONTRA HASKER:
WHY SIMPLE FOREKNOWLEDGE IS STILL USEFUL

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It is a dogma of open theism that the parts of the future the openist God does not know—namely, future contingents (including the future actions of libertarianly free agents)—would be providentially useless to God even if he *did* know them. It is easy to see why this dogma is important to open theists. If adding such knowledge to God's cognitive repertoire would by itself yield no providential benefits, it is easier to resist the charge that open theism is theologically deficient in rejecting such knowledge. At least it is easier to resist the charge when leveled by fellow Arminians. Calvinists, of course, will have their own reasons for regarding open theism as theologically defective. But the only way for fellow Arminians to enhance God's providential control, if simple foreknowledge will not do the trick, is to embrace Molinism, with its doctrine of divine middle knowledge.¹ Since middle knowledge is controversial on a number of grounds, the Molinist alternative will strike many Arminians as unacceptable. Such Arminians (the explanation continues) might as well become open theists; at least they should stop thinking that there is much at stake theologically between their position and that of the openists.

So it is easy to see why open theists would *like* it to be true that simple foreknowledge is providentially useless. What has always been harder to see is why one should think that it *is* true. At best, open theists have identified some *prima facie* puzzles for God's use of simple foreknowledge. But there are *prima facie* puzzles for *many* traditional theological positions. Why think that *these* puzzles are sufficiently serious to jeopardize commitment to simple foreknowledge?

There is even some *prima facie* reason to think that these puzzles are *merely prima facie*. After all, much of our own efforts to exercise "providential

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¹ For present purposes, "simple foreknowledge" should be understood as the view that God's foreknowledge is *exhaustive* (God knows *all* the future, and the future contains no truth-value gaps), *not inferred* from other things God knows (like the past, present, or God's own will), and *not supplemented* by *middle knowledge*. Middle knowledge (or "Molinism," after its founder Luis de Molina) is the view that there are contingent subjunctive conditional truths of the form, *Were condition C to obtain, agent X would freely perform action A*; God, being omniscient, knows these truths; they are true logically prior to God's decision to create a particular world; therefore they are available to God to guide his creative decision.

control” over our lives is directed toward *anticipating* what others will do. How much food should I buy for the party? That depends on how many people will show up. If only I knew! I will add an RSVP to the invitation, but we all know how well those work.² In the end, I will have to act in light of my best guess. But what if I do not *have* to guess, because I *know*? Would that not be better? And would not God, too, be better off if he could proceed with his immeasurably more important projects guided by *knowledge* of a contingent future rather than mere guesswork?

Open theists, it would seem, have some explaining to do. An article by John Sanders is typical of the sort of explanation that is offered.³ It begins with a confused (and confusing) characterization of simple foreknowledge, which Sanders then applies to seven areas in which simple foreknowledge might be expected to enhance God’s providential position. In each case Sanders suggests that there is a problem, but it is not always clear just what the problem is, and the cursory treatment allotted to each means that Sanders does not come close to showing that the problems are unsolvable and that we should therefore reject a doctrine that has been affirmed by every important Christian theologian before the nineteenth century.⁴

It was my critique of Sanders’s article that inspired William Hasker’s response in this *Journal*.⁵ Hasker’s approach is to present an *a priori* argument for why I cannot possibly be right, followed by rebuttals to various responses I might make to this argument. I will look at Hasker’s argument in a moment. But first I want to call attention to my central strategy, which Hasker passes over without mention.

Since the open theists are putting forward a universal claim—that simple foreknowledge provides God with *no* providential advantage *at all*—it is susceptible to refutation by a single counterexample. This is in fact how I proceeded. The lynchpin of my argument was a counterexample, developed at length and with great care. It involved a version of rock-paper-scissors played between God and Satan. In this version God first declares rock, paper, or scissors, but only mentally, without revealing it; Satan then makes a libertarian free decision to declare rock, paper, or scissors; finally, God reveals what he declared. I claimed that the open theist God, who lacks simple foreknowledge, might well lose this game: victory is not guaranteed. (No open theist would dispute this claim.) But it is equally clear that a God endowed with simple foreknowledge can always make the right declaration of rock,

² Of course I am from California, renowned for its flakiness—perhaps in other parts of the country RSVPs are universally honored!

³ “Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control than the Openness of God,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997) 26–40.

⁴ Open theists make much of an alleged proto-openist from the fourth century named Chalcidius, but this is an embarrassing exception on a number of grounds. See my “What Does God Know? The Problem of Open Theism,” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics* (ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig; Nashville: B&H, 2009) 265–82.

⁵ David P. Hunt, “The Providential Advantage of Divine Foreknowledge,” in *Arguing about Religion* (ed. Kevin Timpe; New York: Routledge, 2009) 374–85.

paper, or scissors, based on his foreknowledge of what Satan will freely declare. So if God's objective is to win this game against Satan, simple foreknowledge gives him a clear providential advantage. The open theists' universal claim to the contrary is false.

A couple of comments are in order before moving to the argument in Hasker's essay. First, my rock-paper-scissors case is admittedly artificial (and apocryphal!). But it is clear, and that is the point. If this is a case in which a God equipped with simple foreknowledge has a providential advantage over a God with past and present knowledge alone, then (1) the open theists must withdraw their claim that there are *no* such cases; and (2) it is now an open question how many *less* artificial scenarios might also embody the providential utility of simple foreknowledge, because open theists can no longer hide behind the sweeping generalization that there are *no cases whatsoever*. Second, in response to a counterexample such as the one I offered in my article, it is not enough just to repeat the argument the counterexample is designed to refute; one must show what is wrong with the counterexample. This Hasker does not do (since he ignores the counterexample altogether). But if my counterexample is successful, it follows that there must be something wrong with Hasker's argument.

If it is not enough just to repeat an argument without engaging a proffered counterexample to it, it is also not enough just to cite a counterexample without trying to identify the flaw in the argument it rebuts. Let us turn, then, to Hasker's argument against me. He formulates it 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.

(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 [Complete Simple Foreknowledge]), those decisions cannot be made on the basis of his foreknowledge.

Assuming that nothing can be both logically/explanatorily prior to and logically/explanatorily subsequent to something else, Hasker concludes that "God *cannot* determine, on the basis of his simple foreknowledge, how he shall act providentially in the world."⁶ So simple foreknowledge is providentially useless.

Hasker claims that this conclusion is "crystal clear," but in fact it is thoroughly opaque. Consider this parallel argument:

1. In order for John to be someone's father, he must be born earlier than that person.

2. In order for John to be someone's son, he must be born later than that person.

3. Therefore, if John is someone's son, he cannot be someone's father.

⁶ William Hasker, "Why Simple Foreknowledge is Still Useless (In Spite of David Hunt and Alex Pruss)," *JETS* 52 (2009) 540.

Assuming that nothing can be both born earlier than *and* born later than something else, this conclusion would appear to follow. But of course it does not, and it is rather easy to diagnose why. The argument assumes that “that person” in steps 1 and 2 is *the same person*, but it is clearly not. Likewise Hasker’s argument assumes that “that foreknowledge” in steps 1 and 2 is *the same foreknowledge*, and it is clearly not.

Hasker should have heeded my warning when John Sanders raised a similar difficulty for my position: “But this ‘problem’ is wholly an artifact of the careless way in which Sanders refers to ‘the foreknowledge’ and ‘the actions.’ Which foreknowledge, and which actions?”⁷ This is one place where attention to my counterexample might have saved Hasker from confusion. Consider a round in which God declares rock and Satan declares scissors. Then the first two steps of Hasker’s argument, on the basis of which it is supposed to be “crystal clear” that simple foreknowledge is providentially useless, would go like this:

(1) In order for God’s decision *to declare rock* to be *made on the basis of his foreknowledge that Satan will declare scissors* it must be subsequent, in the logical and explanatory order, to that foreknowledge [that Satan will declare scissors].

(2) In order for God’s decision *to declare rock* to be *included in his foreknowledge that God will decide to declare rock* the decision must be prior, in the logical and explanatory order, to that foreknowledge [that God will decide to declare rock].

But now Hasker’s conclusion will not follow: God’s decision to declare rock is logically/explanatorily subsequent to one thing (his foreknowledge that Satan will declare scissors) and logically/explanatorily prior to something else (his foreknowledge that he will decide to declare rock), and there is nothing objectionable about that.

Hasker thinks it is nonetheless impossible for someone to decide to do something if the person already knows that he will do it; in terms of my counterexample, the fact that God foreknows his declaration of rock undermines any future decision to declare rock. But why? Hasker’s example involves God’s providentially reasoning as follows: “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.” Notice that Hasker’s example, unlike my rock-paper-scissors example, does *not* involve the providential employment of *foreknowledge*. So if Hasker is right that it “makes no sense” to suppose God engaging in such reasoning “while fully aware that he is going to arrange for David to defeat Goliath,”⁸ then a God with simple foreknowledge is not only no better off than the God of open theism—he is actually *worse off*, because the latter *could* engage in this reasoning.

But is Hasker right? There seem to be two complaints underlying Hasker’s claim. The first complaint is that God, in order to engage in this reasoning, would have to *ignore* his foreknowledge that he will arrange for David to

⁷ “The Providential Advantage of Divine Foreknowledge” 378.

⁸ Hasker, “Why Simple Foreknowledge is Still Useless” 540.

defeat Goliath. But it is unclear why this observation constitutes a *complaint*. Hasker agrees that “[i]t 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.’”⁹ Since God’s foreknowledge that he will arrange David’s defeat of Goliath, unlike God’s desire that David be eventually elevated to the kingship, is not a *reason* for him to arrange David’s defeat of Goliath, it seems that God *should* ignore it, just as I should ignore the knowledge that my house keys are now in my left pocket when deciding whether to spend a few days in Prague following my upcoming conference in Poland. This complaint is a real puzzler.

The second complaint is that, if “God already knows . . . that he will arrange for David to defeat Goliath, . . . *there is no more decision to be made concerning that matter.*”¹⁰ So far as I can see, this is just an assertion. Hasker acknowledges my distinction between *knowing* and *endorsing* a future action; since these are distinct, I maintained that one could have the former without yet having the latter, and I illustrated this possibility with the example of a time traveler who witnesses his future suicide and carries that knowledge back to a present in which he has yet to decide to kill himself. Hasker offers “two reasons why this example does not help to save Hunt’s position.”¹¹

The first is that the time traveler, unlike God, does not foreknow (and appreciate) the *reasons* for his future action. Well, suppose he does; suppose the time traveler not only witnesses his own suicide, but also observes (and cannot fail to appreciate) the series of tragic blows in the days leading up to the suicide that will provide the reasons why he kills himself. What exactly is the problem? The logical or explanatory order is still this: certain events occur (the loss of his job, the death of his child, etc.); it is because these events occur that he comes to *know* that they have occurred; it is because he knows they have occurred that they can constitute *reasons* for him; it is because of these reasons that he *decides* to kill himself; and it is because he makes this decision that he *does* kill himself. The fact that the time traveler traverses this sequence in a chronological order that is different from its logical or explanatory order is irrelevant; or if it is relevant, Hasker needs to explain why.

The second reason is that the time traveler cannot, “after seeing himself commit suicide, *determine* that he is going to perform this action,” because “the *determination* has ‘already’ been made, by his future self.” Perhaps he can “ratify” or “go along with” this already-made determination, Hasker allows, but he can no longer engage in *bona fide* decision-making.¹² But if Hasker’s reason is simply that the knowledge the time traveler brings back with him presupposes his future suicide which presupposes his decision to commit suicide, his conclusion does not follow. It is certainly true that, *in the logical or explanatory order*, “once” the time-traveler foreknows that he will kill himself, the decision to do so is “already” in place and he cannot “then”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hasker, “Why Simple Foreknowledge is Still Useless” 540.

¹² Ibid. 541.

decide to bring about the very thing he foreknows. But no defender of simple foreknowledge should say otherwise. The “fore” in “foreknowledge” involves *chronological* precedence; whether it also allows for *explanatory* precedence depends on *what* is being explained by *what* foreknowledge. In my rock-paper-scissors example, God foreknows his own future decisions in the game, just as he foreknows everything else. But his foreknowledge that he will declare rock precedes his decision to declare rock *chronologically*; it does not precede it *explanatorily*. What precedes his decision to declare rock in the logical or explanatory order is his foreknowledge that Satan will declare scissors, and it is *this* foreknowledge—foreknowledge that cannot pre-empt divine decision-making because it is about *Satan’s* future decision, not God’s—that provides him a providential advantage over the God of open theism.¹³

I conclude that if there is a clinching argument against the providential advantage of simple foreknowledge, Hasker (with or without Sanders) has failed to find it.

¹³ Like Sanders, Hasker is not always clear about the position he is attacking. A good example of this confusion is when he imagines me resisting his conclusion by arguing “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” (ibid. 540). But of course there is nothing in simple foreknowledge to suggest that God’s decision to do something would be *explanatorily* subsequent to his foreknowing that he will do it, and everything to suggest the opposite. My position is that God’s knowing what he is going to do does not preclude his subsequently *in the chronological order* deciding to do it.