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Divine Knowledge and Human Freedom

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The problem of divine knowledge and free will is one of the most difficult and perhaps the most voluminously debated of all philosophical problems. The concept of freedom is vitally connected with that of moral responsibility. Individuals may be morally responsible for only those acts which they perform freely. At the same time, Theology requires to preserve divine providence and human freedom. Theology assumes that God is eternal, immutable, on the one hand, and that God has knowledge of the tensed facts on the other. For this reason, there is a problem about how unchangeable God has knowledge changing things.

Philosophers and theologians understand divine eternity in two different meanings. All theists claim that God is eternal. That is to say, what all theists agree upon is that there is nothing temporary about God. At the same time, by the claim that God is eternal, many theists mean that God is *everlasting*. While affirming that God is eternal, they understand his eternality as His being temporally everlasting. According to this conception, God never began to exist and he will never cease to exist. God's existence is temporally infinite in duration, unbounded in the past and future. God does, however, experience temporal succession. There is in the life of God a past, present and future, as in the life of His creatures. But unlike any of his creatures, God is everlasting, and necessarily so. This means that God exists necessarily God has all the distinctive divine attributes essentially and God exists in time.

Although for many theists are common about God's necessarily existence, most of them does not accept that God exists in time. For them God's relationship with the temporally existing universe causes unacceptable changes in God. Because they believe that this conception of God damages the simplicity and immutability of God.

Such theists as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Aquinas have insisted on the unchangeable knowledge of God. Theirs is a conception of *timeless* or *atemporal fullness of being*. According to them, God does not in any way exist in time. There is no temporal location or duration in the life of God. He undergoes no temporal succession whatsoever. There is no past, present and future in God's own unique form of existence, or within the divine experience. On this point of view, God does not exist throughout the entirety of time; he exists completely outside of time. If God is atemporal, after all, he does not foreknow anything. His knowledge of any event is not itself temporally located. If it is not temporally located, it is not located prior to the free choice in question. As he transcends space, he also transcends time. Because of the lack of temporal duration, the life of God suffers no deficiency. Rather, these theists claim, His atemporality or timelessness provides for the most exalted mode of existence imaginable. God's eternal present provides the most exalted and the only adequate, conception of the ultimacy of God's being.¹ While the atemporalists' proposal seems to offer a good strategy, at least one significant problem remains: God's knowledge of future free acts, then, might not be secured by thinking of God as atemporal.

If God is in time, then this entails that He has *states* that are ordered by the *temporal relations* of *earlier than*, *later than*, and *simultaneous with*. Moreover, according to traditional theologians, if God is in time, then he has states with the *temporal properties* of *present*, *past*, and *future*. Temporal properties of this kind are *transient*. For example, if I say now I will go to Istanbul tomorrow, tomorrow I will say I am in Istanbul and next day I will say I was in Istanbul. According to this view, future will be present and then past.

By contrast, if one state is earlier than, later than, or simultaneous with another, then the relationship in question can never alter. (For example, insofar as the presidential election of 2001 is earlier than the election of 2005, this relationship can never change.) In this sense, the temporal relations of earlier than, later than, and simultaneous with are *fixed*.² If God is outside of time, then this entails that He does not have states that involve temporal relations; that is, if God is not in time, then He does not have states ordered by the relations of earlier than or later than. This has a further consequence that an atemporal God does not have states with the transient properties of the past, present, or future. Nevertheless, according to theologians such as Ibn Sina, since an atemporally eternal God does not have

states that are ordered by temporal relations, there is a sense in which all of His states are *present to him* and *simultaneous for him*.³ Ibn Sina says:

Furthermore, it must be known that when it is said of the First, "intellect," it is said in the simple sense that you have known in the Psychology, that in Him there is no variety of forms arranged and differing, such as there is in the [human] soul, in the sense previously [discussed] in the Psychology. For this reason He intellectually apprehends things **all at once**, without being rendered multiple by them in His substance, or their becoming conceived in their forms in the reality of His essence. Rather, their forms emanate from Him as intelligibles. He is more worthy to be an intellect than the forms that emanate from His intellectuality. Because He intellectually apprehends His essence, and that He is the principle of all things, He apprehends [by] His essence all things.⁴

Ibn Sina does not accept temporal successiveness about God's knowledge. According to his metaphysical approach, God is unchanging and His knowledge is identical with His essence and since God cannot know things sequentially as human being, He preserves his absolute simplicity and immutability. Otherwise, if God would change, that means that God would not be the same God.

When the intellect apprehends things that have (temporal) priority and posteriority, it conceives time with them necessarily. This it conceives, however; not in time, but in a 'now.' Indeed, the intellect conceives time in a 'now.' When the intellect constructs the syllogism and the definition (it is true), this takes place in time. But its conception of the conclusion and the things defined takes place **instantaneously** (*daf'atan*).⁵

To say that God knows the temporal events by "one" knowledge is in part the same thing as saying that His knowledge of these things is changeless and eternal. Ibn Sina apparently insists that God's knowledge does not consist of a series of concepts corresponding to the objects of knowledge that succeed each other in time. Ibn Sina appears to say that future contingent singular propositions are not certainly knowable to be true or false. If God were in time, He could not know for certain the truth of such propositions. But in His eternity, the events of the future are present to Him and, hence, propositions about them can be certainly known to be true or false. But at this point, there may be some argument against timeless eternity. Ibn Sina's conception of eternity gives rise to some unacceptable understanding of philosophy of time. I believe that Kenny's objection to Aquinas about atemporal eternity holds also valid for Ibn Sina. As Kenny neatly summarizes:

Indeed, the whole concept of a timeless eternity, the whole of which is simultaneous with every part of time, seems to be radically incoherent. For simul-

taneity as ordinarily understood is a transitive relation. If A happens at the same time as B, and B happens at the same time as C, then A happens at the same time as C. If BBC programme and the ITV programme both start when Big Ben strikes ten, then they both start at the same time. But, on St. Thomas' view, my typing of this paper is simultaneous with the whole eternity. Again, on his view, the great fire of Rome is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Therefore, while I type these very words, Nero fiddles heartlessly on.⁶

II.

In addition to this view, it has been recently attacked that a timeless being could not be person and timelessness and is not compatible with central attributes of God's omniscience. It is generally agreed that 'omniscience' means 'all-knowing' and that God has all propositional knowledge and perfect acquaintance with all things. But God's omniscience can be interpreted in different ways. The first is the view that God is timeless, namely, God timelessly knows all that was, is and will be in the future. Tensed sentences are then eliminated by replacing them with tenseless sentences that retain their truth values because they explicitly mention the dates to which they apply. As we have said, this approach presupposes static/relational time. If God is outside of time, then this entails that he does not have temporal relations. B-relation is basic future of time. Ibn Sina presupposes that God cannot have knowledge about tensed facts. If it is accepted that He has knowledge about this, this means that God's knowledge changes, so does the essence. Ibn Sina claims:

If, however, you introduce time into this, whereby at a given time you know that that eclipse does not exist and then at another time that it exists, then your (former) knowledge ceases when [the eclipse] but a new knowledge comes to be. There will then be in you the change to which we have referred. And it would not be true that you are [in the same state] at the time of the clearing [of the eclipse] as you were before [its] clearing. This [applies to you] who are temporal and exist in moments of time. But the First, who does not enter time and its governance, is remote from a making a judgment in terms of this time and that time by way of His being in it and by way of this [involving] a new judgement on His part and a new knowledge.⁷

Temporal flux cannot be accepted by Ibn Sina because of God's simplicity. As we have said, his metaphysical approach appears to support B-relation, namely, static theory of time. There are many philosophers who reject this approach on the grounds that God can know all of the non-indexical propositions and still not know what is happening now. This kind of objection raises the second approach to the question of an atemporal God's knowledge. A. N. Prior argues that when we say "Thank goodness that's over!", we certainly do not mean "Thank goodness the date of that thing's conclusion is June, 1954. Prior's point is that such attitudes cannot concern tenseless facts but are about tensed facts. The indexical element

of tensed language cannot be eliminated by tenseless propositions. For when one says "Thank goodness that's over!" it is absurd to suppose that one is thanking goodness that the date of the event's conclusion is (tenselessly) before the date of the utterance.⁸ Tensed sentences do not, judge about neither themselves, nor do they seem to use tenseless verbs. While they may not assert that their content is simultaneous with their utterance, tensed sentences do have a use in natural languages, and that simultaneity functions as a rule for their use. This circumstance constrains but cannot eliminate the indexical element in the tense. No combination of sentences without an indexical element can entail a sentence containing one. For example, the sentence "It is now 2008" does not mean the same as "the sentence 'It is now 2008' occurs in 2008", since the latter is true at any time while the former is true in 2008, but not otherwise. The truth values of tensed sentence types vary with their temporal positions. We use tensed language for practical purposes to communicate systematically related temporal perspectives and to coordinate our actions. Tensed sentences often function to tell someone what time it is. Tenseless sentences, like "E occurs in 2008," cannot do this.

William Lane Craig offers an argument against the static conception of time based on a theological doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. He argues that a static conception of time is unacceptable and therefore *creatio ex nihilo* requires a dynamic theory of time. According to Craig, eternal creation requires B theory of time. He claims that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is strongly supported by the Big Bang theory for the origin of the universe. The Kalam cosmological argument tries to argue for the existence in time, that is, it argues against the idea of an infinitely long causal series stretching back into the past. The main feature of the Kalam cosmological argument is that it demonstrates that actual infinite is impossible and that the universe must have had a beginning. In other words, the universe must therefore be finite in time.

1. A beginningless series of events in time is an actual infinite.
2. No actual infinite can exist.
3. Therefore, there can be no beginningless series of events in time.
4. Therefore, the universe began to exist at some past point in time.

According to Craig, to suppose a beginning to the universe in time means that time must be understood as A-theory of time, that is, the tensed theory. Contemporary Big Bang theory supports the beginning of time more than the beginningless of universe.⁹

III.

Ibn Sina addresses the difficulty of compatibility between divine knowledge and free will by employing the medieval distinction between necessity *de re* (applied to the thing referred to) and *de dicto* (applied to the proposition). *De dicto* neces-

sity is usually attributed to a proposition, whereas *de re* necessity is attributed to a thing.¹⁰ Thus, the infallibility of God's knowledge is grounded on a conditional necessity, which preserves the contingency and free will. The proposition "whatever is known by God must necessarily be" is, if understood as *de re*, false; for example "Socrates' sitting down must necessarily be." However, understood as *de dicto*, the proposition is true: "Necessarily, whatever is known by God exists." Here modal operator involves the whole conditional proposition. This secures the contingent nature of the free will.

Accordingly, the condition on the basis of which He acts depends not on the categorical syllogism but on the hypothetical syllogism. If He wishes to act, therefore, He will act. And if He does not wish to act, He will not act.¹¹

We can understand from this passage that God's knowledge about the world does not include metaphysical necessity but hypothetical necessity. Thus Ibn Sina maintains that world must not be understood as a necessity *per se* or analytical, but contingent, *per accident*.

Thus, if the Necessary Existent desires to act, It acts, and if It does not desire to do so, It will not act. The realization of each action depends on a condition. And if one states, 'if it may not desire' one makes a judgment about the future by asserting the realization of that state which is realized only after a duration of time. But the Necessary Existent cannot change Its will and cannot, therefore, have a new will as we explained previously. We can refute this prediction about the future in two ways. (1) This judgment assumes that the premise of the conditional judgment is not true and cannot be true. We have refuted this view in an earlier chapter. (2) We could reply that the expressions 'if', 'it does not want', 'did not will', and here asserted in figurative manner. Hence, it is necessary to assert that whatever is willed by the Necessary Existent will be. And whatever is not willed will not be.¹²

In any true conditional proposition, if the antecedent is necessarily true, then the consequent is also necessarily true. 'If it has come to God's knowledge that such and such a thing will happen, then such and such a thing will happen' is a necessary truth. The antecedent, if true, is necessarily true. Therefore, the consequent is also a necessary truth; so the future thing, whatever it is, will happen of necessity. But if this is true, that means that we have no freedom. If it must be the case that, for example, I will buy a car; then I am not free not to buy a car; and conversely, if I am free not to buy a car; the God cannot know that I will buy a car even if I will do so. For Ibn Sina, knowledge must include necessity. If it doesn't include, it becomes belief instead of knowledge.¹³ But in spite of the difficulty, Ibn Sina believes that there is an escaping route from the theological fatalism.¹⁴ There is not a metaphysical or logical necessity; on the contrary, it is better to understand this as a hypothetical necessity. If it is now necessary that I will buy a new car tomor-

row, it does not follow from this alone that it is, until I will buy, necessary that I will buy a new car. There is a gap between now and future; and before the occurrence of the future, there is a logical possibility of the future not to occur. This principle comes from Ibn Sina's distinction between contingency and necessity. Contingent existence, although not necessary in itself (*per se*), is necessary through or by another.¹⁵

On the basis of these metaphysical approaches, what is willed by conditional necessity does not violate human freedom, since what is willed is conditioned on human beings' freely choosing it. What is willed antecedently is not willed absolutely but conditionally. Only the consequent that is willed is willed absolutely in view of all the circumstances. Of course, God wills some things through secondary causes. And first causes are sometimes hindered through defects in secondary causes. The movement of the body is hindered by a bad leg. Likewise, God's antecedent will is sometimes hindered by a defect in a secondary cause. But His consequent will is never frustrated. But it must not be forgotten that for Ibn Sina God's will is eternal and necessary. So in a conditional proposition, if the content of the antecedent is eternal and necessary, the consequent is also necessary. Thus there is no another possibility for the consequent and whatever will be must be so.

Another important feature of Ibn Sina's philosophy is the idea of eternal creation. Ibn Sina accepts the notion of eternal creation and denies that the created things' having started in time. The universe is necessary because God is necessary in all respects, which implies God's eternity and immutability and His being fully in act. The Necessary Existent has created this world and He had no option to create another world. God's having only one option means that this world would not have been another world, namely another possible world. And so, both of these features of Ibn Sina's philosophy is very problematic if free will is to be understood without alternative possibilities.

IV.

It is plausible to suppose that persons are responsible for their actions so that they deserve praise and reward when they do good and blame and punishment when they do evil. And this judgment can only be true if it is also correct that human beings are free in the acts as they perform, so that the action is not necessitated by anything other than the person's own choice.

Theism accepts that we have free will when we view ourselves as agents capable of influencing the world in various ways. It is extremely natural and plausible to think that the typical adult human being has freedom in the sense that we often (although perhaps not always) have the freedom to choose or refrain from choosing a particular course of action. Open alternatives or alternative possibilities seem to lie before us. What do we mean by "free will"? A person has free will if and only if he or she is free with regard to some actions, and a person is free with regard

to some action A if and only if she has it "within his or her power" to perform A and he or she has it "within her power" to refrain from performing A. We reason and deliberate from an array of alternative possibilities. We think that it is "up to us" what we choose and how we act. This means that we could have chosen or acted otherwise. This "up-to-us-ness" also suggests that the ultimate sources of actions lie in us and not outside us in factors beyond our control. Theological determinism is the religious view that all events in the world were pre-ordained by God. If determinism is true, then every event is "necessary," and this gives rise to the impression that it is incompatible with human freedom. For the words "necessarily determined" suggest that the cause compels or forces the effect to occur whether one wants it to occur or not. There are no real alternatives; everything takes place of necessity and is fixed.

For Ibn Sina, whatever exists is related to the Necessary Existent, since all things come necessarily from It. All things are due to the Necessary Existent and become necessary through their relation with It. Consequently, all things are known by It.¹⁶

According to this view, it is possible that human beings are free and responsible for their actions, even though these actions are causally determined. This does not deny the free will, but, on the other hand, does accept casual chain governed by God. Thus, this view is corroborated by two important features of religion: God's absolute perfection and human responsibility. Theological determinism implies that human action is free if it exhibits the following characteristics: it is not caused by compulsion or by the states of affairs external to the agent and if the agent's power had wanted to do differently, he would have done so.

The criteria of free will set forth by Ibn Sina are certainly significant, but it seems to me that they are not sufficient to guarantee freedom of the will. It is very difficult to maintain that in this view, free will does include alternative possibilities required by human freedom. For this reason, when asked, "how could he wanted something other than what he did want?", a possible answer may be that he could have, if he had acted differently on some earlier occasion or cause. So the causal chain does not stop at agent itself. It goes beyond it. For example, I make some ordinary choice A at t_2 . If Ibn Sina's view is correct, then the total state of the universe at t_1 together with the necessary will of God entails that I make A at t_2 . Thus, it was a necessary condition of my making a different choice at t_2 that the state of the universe at t_1 be different from what it actually was. But, I cannot -do not have it in my power- at any time to so behave that the past would have been different from the way it actually was, because of God's necessary knowledge and will. And the past and God's eternal and necessary knowledge are "fixed" and not "up to me." Consequently, it seems to follow from the above that I could not have chosen otherwise than doing A at t_2 .

In sum, we can say that the idea of atemporal eternity can be criticized by various approaches. First of all, atemporal eternity presupposes unacceptable view of time. There is another problem with it, which is that the tensed theory of time cannot be translated by tenseless theory of time without the loss of the original meaning. Lastly, eternal creation, conditional necessity does not include alternative possibilities required by free will. On the basis of these theses, we cannot say that atemporal eternity is the preferable option for a reasonable religious perspective.

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- ¹⁰ Loux, Michael J., *Metaphysics, A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge, New York and London, 2006, p. 159-162.
- ¹¹ *Metaphysica of Avicenna*, p. 69.
- ¹² *Metaphysica of Avicenna*, p. 70.
- ¹³ *Metaphysica of Avicenna*, p. 63 "Consequently, it is possible to know this contingency from aspect that it is a necessity. One should also know that no entity exists that is not a necessity. Therefore, for whatever is, there is a cause. But since the causes of things are not completely known us, their being a necessity is not known to us either; and our knowledge of some of them is an opinion rather than certitude."
- ¹⁴ I understand by fatalism that all events in the history of the world, and, in particular; the actions and incidents which make up the story of each individual life are determined by God.
- ¹⁵ *Metaphysica of Avicenna*, p. 77. "Although it is not a necessity that whose existence comes as unity from the Necessary Existent has two aspects with respect to itself. One aspect implies that its state is a contingency, since its existence is accidental considered by itself-qua-itself, and another suggests (*hukm*) that its state is a necessary with respect to the primordial. In view of the existence of the Necessary Existent, its existence is necessary."
- ¹⁶ *Metaphysica of Avicenna*, p. 32