

## What is the best way of conceiving of God's relation to time?

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In this essay I am going to examine God's relation to time according to the following two schools of thought: (1) (Atemporalists) who believe that God is outside time, and (2) (Temporalists) who claim that He is inside time but everlasting<sup>1</sup>. I am going to explore the implications these two scenarios would have for God's foreknowledge, His sovereignty, whether or not He answers our prayers and whether we have free will. I will explain how Middle Knowledge can solve these dilemmas, and finally show how we indeed ought to understand God's relation to time.

So how can these differing views on God's relation to time affect His supposed foreknowledge? Well: if God is outside of time, He can know infallibly everything that will happen and everything that we will do in what is, according to our experience, the future. Of course it isn't the future in God's experience because in the Atemporalist scenario, God is outside of time. God has full foreknowledge, so what's the problem? Well, firstly God could not answer our prayers, because He could not change his mind and do something He had not intended to do, in response to interactions with His Devotee. In order to carry that out He would have to be inside time. Only temporal things can change. To change means to be in a particular condition at a particular time, and then to be in a different condition at a later time. For a being who is outside time that would be impossible. So let's change to the Temporalist view. Now God can be affected by our interactions with Him. He can change His mind and answer our prayers. So what's the problem? God cannot have complete foreknowledge about the future if He is within time. Suppose God plans to give you either a son or a daughter, depending on which you ask for. You ask for a son and He gives you a son. So his mind has changed from the plan to give you either a son or a daughter, to the plan to give you a son. What's the problem? God can't have infallibly known you would ask for a son, because that doesn't make sense with Him having the plan to give you either a son or a daughter, depending on which you ask for. On the other hand, if God had infallibly known you would ask for a son, He would have had to have only the plan to give you a son. So your asking Him for a son would have had no effect on what He planned to do.

So, if God has complete infallible foreknowledge (Atemporal), He can't answer prayers. If He can answer our prayers, then He cannot infallibly know every thing that will happen in the future (Temporal but everlasting). So if, despite the unanswered prayers, we go for the God with total foreknowledge, are there any other problems? Well: if God has infallible foreknowledge, He will know everything that we will do in, what is for us, the future, (not future for Him as He is outside time). If God has infallible foreknowledge that you will ask for a son, He cannot be wrong about that, so you have to ask for a son. You have no free will. If God believed you would ask for a son, and you could exercise your free will and instead ask for a daughter, then you would have the power to make God's belief that you would ask for a son, to be a mistake on His part, and that does seem to be disconcertingly possible under Temporalism. Or, in order to keep your free will to ask for a daughter, and for God's belief to be correct, you would need to be able to change the past, so that God had believed you would ask for a daughter, and, as the past cannot be changed, that really is impossible. If we go for the Temporalist's God who answers our prayers, we get to keep our free will, but then of course God will not have infallible foreknowledge about everything that will happen in the future. So what's the problem? Well, if God answered your prayers, He would want to do what is best for you, but without complete foreknowledge of the future, He

may make a make a wrong decision, which will not bring about the good result He would have wanted, so His sovereignty would be compromised, and His action may not be completely beneficial. He may know the 'odds' and be able to take the decision most likely to give a good result. But things may change in an unexpected way. For example, boys may begin to have a very difficult life, and it would have been better for God to give you a daughter, which He would have been able to choose to do, had He had infallible foreknowledge and sovereignty.

So which would be best: the Atemporalist's God, who does not answer prayer, but who infallibly knows everything that will happen in our (not His) future, and so will always make the right decision and be competent to do what is best for us, because His sovereignty is total, although we will have no free will: or the Temporalist God, who doesn't infallibly know all the future actions of free agents (we would have free will), who will also try to do His best for us and answer our prayers, but not knowing the future (both His and ours as He is within time), may get things wrong, and not be able to bring about the good he would like to do for us?

'Molinism'<sup>2</sup> resolves the dilemma. According to Molinism God has three different moments of knowledge: (1). Natural Knowledge is '... *God's knowledge of all necessary and all possible truths ...*'. (2). Middle Knowledge is '... *God's knowledge of what a free creature would do in any given circumstance ...*'. (3). Free Knowledge is '... *His knowledge of the actual world as it is ...*'.

The objects of Middle Knowledge are so-called counterfactuals of freedom<sup>3</sup>: If person *S* were in circumstances *C*, *S* would freely do *X*.

What about God's sovereignty<sup>4</sup>? Middle knowledge explains how God has foreknowledge of the future with regards to the free actions of free agents. Prior to God's decision to create the world, God knows how any free creature would freely choose to act in any circumstances in which God might place him, so by choosing to create certain circumstances, and put certain creatures in them, God has total foreknowledge and total sovereignty. This also allows for free will on our part.

Middle knowledge shows how it is that God can plan a universe, which will ultimately fulfil His purposes through the free decisions of creatures. Middle Knowledge explains how God can have providential control over human history without limiting human freedom.

Under middle knowledge can God answer our prayers<sup>5</sup>? William Lane Craig says that He can, because God's foreknowledge already takes our prayers into account in His providential plan of creation. He says that God could place us in circumstances in which He knew that we would freely pray for those same things that He wants to bring about, so that there would be, '...*harmony between what we pray for and what He wills to occur...*'.

So, to get back to God's relation to time: how is it that God can have on the one hand complete foreknowledge and sovereignty (as under Atemporalism), and on the other hand answer our prayers and grant us free will (as under Temporalism)? This is because, before He created the universe God was Atemporal, totally sovereign and with complete foreknowledge. Now having created the universe He is Temporal, able to interact with us, answering our prayers and granting us free will. As William Lane Craig says<sup>6</sup>: '... *the*

*proper understanding of God, time, and eternity would be that God exists changelessly and timelessly prior to creation and in time after creation ...'.*

### **Endnotes**

- (1). Mawson, 2005, pp 36-52.
- (2). [www.gotquestions.org/molism.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/molism.html)
- (3). Source: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/#2.4>
- (4). (See: Foreknowledge – How could God Know the Future (Part 2 of 2) William Lane Craig- CloserToTruth Video).
- (5). <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/middle-knowledge-and-prayer#ixzz2DMD6Qvsl>
- (6). <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/god-time-and-eternity>

### **References**

- (1). Mawson T.J. (2005). *Belief in God; An Introduction To The Philosophy Of Religion*. OXFORD: CLARENDON PRESS.