

Connections in Religious Studies

- the concept of free will and determinism in relation to the nature of an omniscient God
- issues of the extent to which God can be held to know the future, and the implications of this for human responsibility

"If God knows what I am going to do, the determinist is right. It follows from this that I have no free will."

There may be many explanations of how God can know what I am going to do. It might be argued that God knows my genetic make-up and therefore can predict with complete accuracy how my genes will influence my actions. God might have a complete understanding of my complex psychological make-up, influenced by my upbringing and events in my childhood, and know what I am bound to choose to do. He might, like La Place's demon, know the exact location of every physical particle and the laws that govern them, and therefore be able to predict what every atom in my body was going to do. Being aware of all causes, God would be able to predict every effect. Some would even argue that as the first cause, God was not merely aware of what would happen, but in control of it and responsible for it. Spinoza argued that we think ourselves free merely because we don't know the causes of our actions.

Any of these responses could be made in support of the first part of the statement above. However, they seem to contradict one another – are my atoms controlled by the laws of physics or psychology? A libertarian could attack each of these responses, arguing that genes have an influence but do not control our behaviour (notably in the case of identical twins); that the 'laws' of psychology might explain our inclinations, but we can act against our inclinations; that scientists have rejected the notion of 'universal laws of physics' that allow for the universe to be theoretically predictable.

If God is outside space and time and knows the future, this doesn't necessarily have any relation to my freedom. A group of people involved in a televised

debate are unlikely to be concerned that someone watching the debate will later watch it again on video, fully aware of what each participant will say and do. Knowing exactly what will happen isn't the same thing as having any control over it. If God is merely a spectator sitting outside time and space, the libertarian might argue that He is no threat whatsoever to the concept of free will.

Some might agree with the first part of the quotation and use it to argue that God cannot know the future. If we accept that God created us and gave us free will, and if we agree with the statement that free will is not compatible with God knowing the future, it would follow that God cannot know the future. Open theologians might say this was because the future hasn't happened yet – it is unknowable. God knows everything, but the future isn't a 'thing' yet. A more radical response is to let go of the belief that God is omniscient and claim that there are things that God doesn't know.

Soft determinists might agree with the first sentence but reject the second one. They might agree that God knows everything that I am going to do, but disagree that this means I am not free. For the soft-determinist, free will and determinism are compatible. A soft determinist would argue that all of my behaviour is caused, but that some of the causes are internal – in other words, some of my actions are caused by me. If God understood me well enough to know what I would and wouldn't do, I would still be acting freely when I did those things.

The statement above makes too many assumptions. It suggests that God knows what I am going to do, which many theologians would question. It then assumes that if God knows what I am going to do, I am determined. This doesn't necessarily follow. It finally claims that if I am determined, I have no free will, a claim rejected by Soft Determinists.