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## DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND SIMPLE FOREKNOWLEDGE

David P. Hunt

A mainstay of the traditional doctrine of divine omniscience is the assumption that foreknowledge can make an essential contribution to God's providential action in the world. The tendency in recent analyses, however, is to regard the providential use of foreknowledge as *self-stultifying*. I argue that this conclusion is premature: neither the "metaphysical" nor the "doxastic" objection employed by the critics is sufficient to nullify a significant providential appeal to foreknowledge. Thus there is no reason to embrace either of the "solutions" proposed by the critics: the rejection of foreknowledge, or its assimilation to middle knowledge.

While the scriptural evidence alone is doubtless subject to more than one interpretation, there are at least a couple of reasons why most theists have thought it important to attribute complete knowledge of the future to God. The first is simply that divine omniscience makes God *smarter* than He would be otherwise. This justification can be elaborated into an argument as follows: (i) God, as St. Anselm put it in a famous formula, is a "being than which none greater can be conceived;" but (ii) we can conceive a being possessing omniscience; (iii) such a being would be greater than one that lacked omniscience; therefore (iv) God cannot lack (and so must possess) omniscience. We might think of this first argument as setting forth the *ontological* basis for God's complete foreknowledge.

The other major argument for divine omniscience is that it is required by any adequate conception of divine *providence*. This point is less amenable than the first one to expression as a formal argument, but the basic idea can be set forth as follows. Belief in God loses much (if not all) of its point if the world makes no more sense in light of this belief than it does in its absence. Now if it is the mere *existence* of a world that is thought to require explanation, then nothing stronger than deism is needed for the job; but if God is also relied upon to make sense out of human history and the individual lives that make it up, then it is necessary to move from the remote *primum movens* of deism to the Heavenly Father of theism. Since the theistic God is called upon to guarantee the meaningfulness of life and the final triumph of good over evil, it looks like He will have to reserve to Himself ultimate control over the course of events. But divine control will be hamstrung and



God's purposes jeopardized if events can ever catch Him by *surprise*, or find Him *unprepared*, or force Him to *react* after the fact to patch things up. This means that God must have the ability to anticipate where events are headed. Since the world includes voluntary agents possessing the power to initiate new directions in the stream of events, the future cannot be anticipated simply by understanding the present tendencies of things. It would appear, then, that the kind of providential control expected of a theistic God is possible only on the assumption of foreknowledge.

Unfortunately, the ontological and providential arguments for divine foreknowledge are matched by powerful arguments on the other side. One kind of opposing argument maintains that foreknowledge is logically *impossible*, on the grounds that there are no truths about the future to be known; another holds that the attribution of foreknowledge to God, while innocent of logical incoherence, is nevertheless *too costly*, since it is incompatible with the existence of voluntary agents; and yet another, while granting both the possibility and affordability of divine omniscience, insists that foreknowledge is providentially *useless*, since a proper analysis of the providential appeal to foreknowledge shows such knowledge to be subversive of the very control it is supposed to be enhancing. Of course, logical impossibility and prohibitive costliness are far more compelling grounds for rejecting a divine attribute than is uselessness, and the attention paid to the first two arguments in the literature is a reflection of this. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the last argument is damaging enough: it would be a hollow victory indeed if the defenders of the traditional conception of God succeeded in establishing divine foreknowledge via the ontological argument only to find that such knowledge cannot be used by Him in the way presupposed by the providential argument.

It is the last of these challenges to foreknowledge—the practical challenge arising from objections to its providential utility—that I wish to examine in the pages ahead. The position that divine foreknowledge may contribute toward the providential governance of the world (which I shall refer to henceforth as 'the traditional view') seems to have fallen on hard times lately. Indeed, there appears to be something of a consensus forming around the idea that "there are [only] two accounts compatible with a libertarian view of freedom which stand a real chance of offering a coherent account of God's providential activity within the world": the "Molinist" account, according to which divine providence and foreknowledge are both dependent on God's middle knowledge, and the "Free-Will Theist" account, according to which both middle knowledge and foreknowledge are objectionable and God must therefore embark on providential endeavors without any precognitive guarantees.<sup>1</sup> If Molinism (which offers God even more providential control than the traditional view) and Free-Will Theism (which offers considerably less)

really are the only coherent positions, the middle ground occupied by the traditional view is excluded, and anyone seeking more providential control than can be found in Free-Will Theism must accept the fact that “Molinism is the only game in town.”<sup>2</sup> If this assessment is correct, however, the coherence of a robust doctrine of divine providence rests on a theory which itself has been widely rejected as incoherent. I will not add to that discussion here;<sup>3</sup> but I do wish to suggest that this dismissal of the traditional view from the playing field is premature. My purpose in the present paper is to make a case for resisting the new consensus on the providential uselessness of foreknowledge.

## I

In a story told by Richard Taylor, a character named ‘Osmo’ discovers a book recounting the future course of Osmo’s own life, including his death in the crash of an airplane flying to Fort Wayne. The unerring accuracy with which the book’s forecasts come true, one after the other, instills in Osmo a growing confidence in its pronouncements; indeed, it is soon clear that Osmo, through consulting the book, *knows* in advance what is going to happen to him. When events conspire to place him on the appointed flight at the appointed time, he desperately attempts to divert the plane away from Fort Wayne, only to have it crash as a result of those very efforts.<sup>4</sup>

Let us use the term ‘providential control’ simply to denote an agent’s capacity for affecting the future in an intentional way, thus disengaging the concept from any necessary connection with the Deity and ignoring for present purposes any normative connotations the term may have. Then Osmo is clearly engaging in an attempt at providential control—namely, control over the time and circumstances of his death—and this attempt is inspired by foreknowledge. The sorry results of his mid-air intervention appear to illustrate the problematic nature of the providential use of foreknowledge. But what exactly *are* the problems that this episode is supposed to illustrate?

One problem, it might be thought, is that Osmo’s appeal to foreknowledge is directed toward the logically incoherent task of changing a future that is unchangeable because it is fixed by the truth of the statements in the book. The first thing that needs to be said about this identification of the problem is that changing the future—that is, acting in such a way that something that will in fact happen does not in fact happen—is indeed incoherent. But this incoherence has nothing to do with whether the future is fixed or known (ignorance of the future would not make Osmo any more successful in changing it). If the future includes the predicted plane crash, Osmo’s actions on board the plane might help *bring about* this future event (as they do in the story), or they might have *no effect at all* on this future event; what is impossible is that they should *prevent* this future event.

It is a mistake, then, to make *changing the future* the criterion for providential success, and then identify the inevitability of failure under this criterion as the fundamental problem with the providential use of foreknowledge. Providential success, whether guided by foreknowledge or not, should be judged instead by whether one's actions help bring about a future that matches one's intentions. By this standard, Osmo could avoid failure through the simple expedient of changing his intentions (e.g., to acceptance of his impending death). Indeed, we can easily imagine other incidents from Osmo's life in which his providential employment of the foreknowledge available through the book is successful in just this sense. We might suppose, for example, that Osmo comes across the following sentence while reading chapter 28 of the book: "On May 8, while walking past 7th and Elm on his way to work, Osmo finds a lottery ticket bearing the winning numbers." Osmo rejoices at his pending good fortune, but reflects that he has never before taken that particular route to work. With the intention of finding the winning ticket, Osmo remembers as he leaves home on May 8 to follow a route that takes him by the corner of 7th and Elm; the ticket is there, and Osmo cashes it in for five million dollars. In this episode, unlike the one aboard the plane, Osmo makes successful use of the foreknowledge that is available to him through the book: it is *because* he foreknows his finding the ticket at 7th and Elm that he decides to take that route to work; it is *because* he decides to take that route to work that he finds the winning ticket; and his finding the ticket accords with his *intentions*.

Clarifying the notion of providential success does nothing to alleviate the other aspect of the problem, which stems from the apparent fixity of the predicted events; for if the plane crash and the discovery of the ticket are fixed, Osmo's actions (whether successful or not) can't make any difference to what happens. This worry really consists of two parts: (1) that there *is* nothing that would make a difference; and (2) that even if there is something that would make a difference, Osmo can't do it. But neither of these concerns has any foundation in the facts of Osmo's story. Regarding (1), an action presumably "makes a difference" if the results of performing that action would be different from the results of not performing it. But clearly, if Osmo does not board a plane that day, he will not die in a plane crash; and if he takes his usual route to work, he will not find the lottery ticket on the corner of 7th and Elm. There are no grounds, then, for maintaining that nothing could make a difference to what happens. As for (2), this concern seems to arise from the view that the plane crash and the discovery of the winning lottery ticket are "locked in" by Osmo's foreknowledge of them—since knowledge is never false, these events are bound to occur, and Osmo cannot do anything to prevent them from occurring (such as avoiding planes and keeping away from 7th and Elm). But this concern rests on a simple modal

fallacy endemic to arguments for fatalism. All that follows from the fact that Osmo will die on the plane, or win the lottery, is that he *won't* do anything to prevent these things; it does not follow that he *can't*. A world in which Osmo fails to walk by 7th and Elm on May 8 is not an impossible world containing a false knowledge-claim, but a possible world in which a belief that constitutes knowledge in the actual world does *not* constitute knowledge (because it is false).

Few critics of the providential use of foreknowledge would consciously make the mistakes embodied in this first statement of the problem. I have gone into them only because a fatalistic analysis of Osmo's situation is very seductive (Taylor himself being a notable victim), and we need to be on our guard against it. Once we have rejected this red herring it is easier to see where more credible threats to Osmo's use of foreknowledge might lie. Two of these are of particular importance.

The first of these problems presupposes a certain understanding of how Osmo's beliefs are connected to the future through the book. As Taylor tells the story, the connection begins with God's foreknowledge of events; God then conveys this information to a scribe who collects it in the book that later comes into Osmo's possession. Taylor says nothing about how God comes to have such knowledge, but it will be helpful in setting up this first problem if we suppose God to be equipped with what is called 'simple foreknowledge.' Simple foreknowledge is distinguished by its origin in a direct noninferential apprehension of the future. This capacity may be thought of as analogous to ordinary vision, except that its object lies in the future. The significance of this point is that "previsional" awareness, like ordinary vision, is *dependent* (counterfactually, at least) on its (future) object. Now if God's knowledge that Osmo will find the winning lottery ticket at 7th and Elm is of this type, then it is dependent on the actual future event which is Osmo's finding of the ticket; Osmo's belief, too, is dependent on this future event, since it is dependent on God's knowledge. But not only is Osmo's belief dependent on the discovery of the ticket—in the story, Osmo's decision to walk by 7th and Elm is dependent on his belief, and his discovery of the ticket in turn is dependent on his decision. It looks like Osmo's discovery of the ticket involves a circle of dependence in which his foreknowledge helps bring about the very future that he foreknows. But the assumption that such a metaphysical "loop" is possible might well be incoherent. The principle at stake—call it the 'Metaphysical Principle'—can be stated as follows:

(MP) It is impossible that a decision depend on a belief which depends on a future event which depends on the original decision.<sup>5</sup>

I shall call the conflict between the Metaphysical Principle and the providential use of foreknowledge the 'Metaphysical Problem.'

The second problem afflicting Osmo's providential use of foreknowledge

is this. Osmo has come to believe what the book says, and what the book says is that he *will* (unconditionally) find the winning lottery ticket—a considerably stronger claim than the conditional, “*If* Osmo walks by the corner of 7th and Elm on May 8, *then* he will find the winning ticket.” This unconditional belief is already in place when it comes time for Osmo to decide whether to deviate from his usual route to work on May 8. But this belief which precedes his decision is (in part) a belief about what he is going to decide. This conflicts with the maxim that “one cannot deliberate over what one already knows is going to happen,” or as I shall phrase it,

(DP) It is impossible to hold the belief that  $p$  while deciding to bring it about that  $p$ .

I shall call this the ‘Doxastic Principle,’ and the threat it poses to the providential use of foreknowledge the ‘Doxastic Problem.’ Osmo can escape the Doxastic Problem, despite his antecedent knowledge of what is going to happen, only if his walking by the corner of 7th and Elm is not the result of a decision, or if he forgets the information imparted to him by the book prior to his making the decision. In either case he would be escaping the problem only by failing to make providential use of his foreknowledge.

We have identified two distinct problems with Osmo’s exercise of providential control. Supposing for the moment that these problems are genuine, what implications do they have for providential control in general? More to the point, what implications do they have for the kind of control exercised by God?

The answer depends in part on the kind of foreknowledge that God possesses. Suppose God’s foreknowledge involves projections from present or past conditions (call this ‘projective foreknowledge’). Then it is not metaphysically dependent on future events, and the Metaphysical Problem does not arise. Neither does the Doxastic Problem. If God’s inference from past to future is based on a contingent connection between events, then His inference must always be accompanied by the proviso, “so long as I do nothing to interfere.” But then God cannot rely on the inference to yield foreknowledge unless He has already decided not to interfere; thus His decision not to interfere cannot be informed by His foreknowledge. If, on the other hand, God’s inference is based on a necessary connection which is beyond the scope of His omnipotence to contravene, the future event which He knows on the basis of this necessary connection cannot be an object of providential control. In either case, other problems with projective foreknowledge undermine its providential employment, so that the conditions triggering the Doxastic Problem never arise.

Another kind of foreknowledge is based on inferences from middle knowledge (call this ‘subjunctive foreknowledge’). Subjunctive foreknowledge clearly has the wrong parentage to trigger the Metaphysical Problem, and in

any event, there is no occasion for it ever to be used providentially. Since middle knowledge is a far more potent resource for providential control than foreknowledge,<sup>6</sup> a rational agent in command of this resource would surely base her providential decisions directly on middle knowledge, rather than first inferring subjunctive foreknowledge and then appealing to this inferior providential resource for guidance. Thus the beliefs that make up God's subjunctive foreknowledge would never stand to the objects of His providential decisions in the way required by the Doxastic Problem.

In sum, projective and subjunctive foreknowledge are providentially useless for reasons that have nothing to do with the Metaphysical and Doxastic Problems. This leaves simple foreknowledge as the only form of prescience that could contribute to divine providential control.<sup>7</sup> But since simple foreknowledge consists of beliefs that are dependent on future events and are available prior to providential decision-making, the possession of simple foreknowledge makes God's providential position at least potentially prone to both the Metaphysical and Doxastic Problems. For critics of the traditional view, God is in no better (if not an even worse) position for avoiding these problems than is Osmo. William Hasker, for example, claims that "simple foreknowledge is *entirely useless* for the doctrine of providence," and justifies this claim by appealing to a version of the Metaphysical Principle: "since the decision's *actually having been made* is presupposed by God's *knowledge* of the future," Hasker writes, "he cannot possibly *use* that knowledge in deciding how to *influence* that decision." He then adds: "In the logical order of dependence of events, one might say, by the 'time' God knows something will happen, it is 'too late' either to *bring about* its happening or to *prevent* it from happening."<sup>8</sup> And similarly strong claims are made on behalf of the Doxastic Problem by Richard Taylor, Richard La Croix, and Tomis Kapitan.<sup>9</sup>

Whether these critics are correct in implicating God along with Osmo in providential futility depends in part on what thesis about the providential use of foreknowledge they take themselves to be refuting. We must turn now to a consideration of these theses.

## II

At a minimum, the position that foreknowledge can be providentially useful should entail that there are at least some conceivable cases in which the addition of simple foreknowledge to an agent's pool of knowledge would result in an incremental gain in the agent's providential control. Let us call this the '*Weak Thesis*,' and state it thus:

(WT) It is possible for *some* foreknowledge to contribute to *more* providential control than would be available with *no* foreknowledge.

Assuming for the moment the essential correctness of our analysis of Osmo's endeavors to make providential use of his foreknowledge, can we conclude

that the Weak Thesis is unacceptable? We cannot. A striking fact about Osmo's encounters with death and the lottery is that the state of affairs over which he was endeavoring to exercise providential control was precisely the state of affairs foreknowledge of which was supposed to be contributing to that control. This feature of the cases is essential to generating the incoherence brought out in our analysis; but it is surely not a feature that is essential to the providential use of foreknowledge in general.

Suppose that I exercise control over my future liberty by *fleeing the country today* because I have precognized that *a warrant will be issued for my arrest on Monday*. Here I utilize knowledge of the future to decide how to act in the present so as to bring about a certain result in the future, and thus employ foreknowledge in the exercise of providential control. But because my exercise of control (in this case, fleeing the country) neither involves, nor is believed by me to involve, the prevention or bringing about of any future state of affairs (in this case, the issuing of the warrant) which either contributes, or is believed by me to contribute, to my decision to exercise providential control, neither the Metaphysical nor the Doxastic Problem appears to have a foothold in this case.

That this is so may be clearest with respect to the Doxastic Problem. What is significant about the Weak Thesis is that it permits different objects for foreknowledge and providential decision-making. This helps against the Doxastic Problem in the following way. Since the Weak Thesis requires only that I have knowledge of *some* future events, it allows me to be ignorant of *others*, and there is no reason why my decision and its consequences may not be among the future events of which I am ignorant at the time that I am making my decision. The possibility of different objects for foreknowledge and providential decision-making is not sufficient to ward off the Metaphysical Problem, however, since this problem may be triggered by distinct objects if they are connected in the right way. In particular, since the event which is the object of foreknowledge is later in time than any providential intervention based on that foreknowledge, this may raise the worry that it stands in the causal flow emanating from the intervention. For example, as soon as I respond to my foreknowledge of the pending arrest warrant with appropriate actions, such as purchasing a plane ticket, making large withdrawals from my savings accounts, etc., this can potentially affect the foreknown event—e.g., my suspicious activities might then be noticed by the authorities, who pick me up sooner than planned. The worry, in short, is that my decision, which assumes a future event, may in turn affect that event, thus undermining the original assumption.

This worry appears to be a version of the idea that, unless my actions are simply impotent, I should be able to change the future. This idea, as we saw, is confused. If I correctly foresee some event, then that foreseen event is a

product of any interventions leading up to it, including any interventions I might make on the basis of my foreknowledge; those interventions won't *change* the event, whatever that might mean. Even if I inject into the causal stream an action which would ordinarily conduce to the quashing of the warrant, my action is nevertheless *logically* compatible with the issuance of the warrant (since they are distinct events). Thus the most that can be said is that the future might contain a miracle preventing my action from having an adverse effect on the issuance of the warrant. This, of course, is nowhere near the logical (or metaphysical) contradiction needed if the Metaphysical Problem is to refute the Weak Thesis.

It appears, then, that there is no good reason to reject the Weak Thesis. A more difficult question concerns the relevance of the Weak Thesis to divine providence. The critic might argue that, while there may be cases of the providential appeal to foreknowledge which work out better than Osmo's, it doesn't follow that any of these include God. Let us consider briefly three ways the critic might endeavor to flesh out this concern. None of them is very compelling.

The first objection is this. The Weak Thesis is satisfied even if only a minimal amount of foreknowledge is making only a minimal contribution to providential control. But on the traditional doctrine, God's foreknowledge and providential control are far from minimal—indeed, God is supposed to exercise *substantial* providential control on the basis of *complete* foreknowledge. This is precisely what generates the problem to which the critic wishes to direct our attention. In sum, the Weak Thesis is theologically irrelevant because it doesn't capture those features of the divine situation that make the providential use of foreknowledge problematic. These require a stronger thesis to bring out.

In reply to this first objection, it must be admitted that the traditional doctrine *does* ask for more than the Weak Thesis delivers; it is incumbent on us, then, to examine some stronger theses as well. But the truth of the Weak Thesis is nevertheless relevant to divine providence, since it reminds us that there is a large middle ground between the providential aspirations of the traditionalist and the deflationary challenges of the critic. Should the critic succeed in undermining some stronger thesis to which the traditionalist is committed, the Weak Thesis at least offers a place to stop before falling all the way back to zero. The traditionalist would surely want to hold onto the *most* foreknowledge and providential control possible. The success of the Weak Thesis shows that this is more than none.

A second objection is implicit in an article by David Basinger, in which he examines the adequacy of various forms of knowledge (present knowledge, middle knowledge, and simple foreknowledge) for the classical doctrine of divine providence. The crucial question that Basinger asks of each candidate

is this: "Can [God] be assured...that his decisions concerning future states of affairs involving free choices will have the desired results? Or must he...gamble to some extent?"<sup>10</sup> It is clear that for Basinger any account of divine knowledge on which God ends up a "cosmic gambler" is to be rejected. Since God will undertake a providential intervention only when He knows that it will be successful, knowledge of the actual consequences of His action is itself a condition of His acting. This means that God makes providential use of simple foreknowledge only under conditions stronger than those set forth in the Weak Thesis.

One must ask, however, why God would require a guarantee of success before acting. Consider, for example, the providential arrangement of an *opportunity* which a person can either accept or decline. If it is ever the case that God would arrange such an opportunity even though He knew that it would be declined (and His will go unfulfilled), Basinger's requirement of a providential guarantee is too strong. It may also be unattainable, if the Metaphysical Problem is genuine and the only source of a guarantee is simple foreknowledge. For Basinger, the ideal of guaranteed success makes sense because there is another source from which it can derive, namely, divine middle knowledge (if God brings about the antecedent of a true counterfactual of freedom, it is guaranteed that the consequent will occur).<sup>11</sup> But given the controversy surrounding this putative cognitive capacity, it is surely legitimate (and imperative) to explore how much divine providence can be purchased without drawing on the suspect currency of middle knowledge.

The third objection to the theological relevance of the Weak Thesis comes from a recent book by William Hasker. Hasker, as we have seen, takes a hard line against the providential use of foreknowledge; moreover, he clearly intends to extend this line to the Weak Thesis, since he formulates the position he is arguing against as one according to which "God, because he foreknows that a certain event will occur, may prearrange *other* factors in the situation in such a way as to produce the best overall result"<sup>12</sup>—the very scenario which is supposed to save the Weak Thesis from Osmo-like gridlock. Hasker gives the following example of such a case: God foreknows the Allied encirclement at Dunkirk and begins arranging weather patterns so that the encirclement will coincide with heavy fog and calm seas, preventing the Luftwaffe from bombing and allowing the Allies to escape across the English Channel with minimal casualties. The reason this is incoherent, according to Hasker, is that the simple foreknowledge the traditionalist attributes to God must be a knowledge of concrete events rather than mere propositions, and concrete events presuppose "the entirety of the causally relevant past history of the universe,"<sup>13</sup> including any attempts at divine intervention. Since the concrete future event which is the Allied encirclement at Dunkirk is made up of innumerable lesser events (sentries peering into the night, planes returning to hangars, generals poring over maps), and the character of these events is

influenced by the weather, God is basing his meteorological intervention on foreknowledge of a concrete event which is itself partly a product of that intervention. What Hasker appears to be arguing is that, once we grasp what divine simple foreknowledge really involves (namely, knowledge of concrete events rather than propositions), we will realize that God cannot satisfy the conditions of the Weak Thesis without also satisfying the conditions of some stronger thesis that triggers either the Metaphysical or Doxastic Problem (or both).

This objection is not convincing, however. In the first place, just because God *has* detailed concrete knowledge does not mean that these concrete details are providentially relevant. God intervenes to help the Allies, not because of a concrete event, but because of an abstraction from that event: the fact that the event constitutes *the encirclement of the Allies*. In the second place, Hasker has chosen for his example the kind of intervention that might not only contribute to the Allied escape but also affect the details of the encirclement. Not every intervention has this feature. Suppose instead that God, endowed with simple foreknowledge of the Allied encirclement, responds by accelerating the spoilage of a consignment of sausage which is scheduled to be served to the German troops on the eve of the evacuation, with the result that the entire Luftwaffe is immobilized with food poisoning the following morning. It's not clear how Hasker's argument would work against a case like this; and if it doesn't, the Weak Thesis survives.

Finally, even if Hasker's argument is successful, the traditionalist might respond by retaining divine prescience but rejecting Hasker's account of it (perhaps denying that God's vision of concrete future events is 20/20, or that foreknowledge of one event presupposes knowledge of the entire causally relevant past history of the universe). This may lead to a weaker thesis regarding the providential use of foreknowledge than the traditionalist may have hoped for, but partial foreknowledge combined with partial providential control is surely better than nothing. It is precisely because the Weak Thesis is better than nothing that it is theologically significant.

### III

The Weak Thesis, then, appears to be immune to the kinds of problems that afflict Osmo's attempts to avoid death and win the lottery, and also to be theologically significant in case no stronger thesis is sustainable. But the traditionalist would surely *like* more than the Weak Thesis offers, if he can get it. The next question we must consider, then, is how far the Weak Thesis could be strengthened before generating either the Metaphysical or the Doxastic Problem. Since the apparent moral of the story of Osmo is that the providential use of foreknowledge is subject to failure when the object of foreknowledge and the object of providential control coincide, the critic needs to show that defenders of the traditional doctrine are committed to a thesis that entails the coincidence of these objects.

One way to guarantee at least some coincidence in the objects of foreknowledge and of providential control is to add to the Weak Thesis the requirement that *either* foreknowledge *or* providential control be *complete*. If it is foreknowledge that is complete, then any consequence of any act of providential control is already known; and if it is providential control that is complete, then any foreknown event will be an object of providential control. Either way, any case satisfying the modified thesis would have to involve at least some Osmo-like attempt at providential control over an event whose occurrence (or the consequences of whose occurrence) is foreknown. Few defenders of the providential utility of foreknowledge, however, would endorse a thesis that requires divine control over every event, since this is generally thought to be incompatible with the existence of voluntary agents other than God. If the critic is to catch anything more than straw men (or hyper-Calvinists) in his net, he would be advised to forego an attack on this modification of the Weak Thesis and instead focus on the version that requires complete foreknowledge. This new thesis can be stated as follows:

(ST) It is possible for *complete* foreknowledge to contribute to *more* providential control than would be available with *no* foreknowledge.

I shall call this the '*Strong Thesis*.'

Let us first consider the Strong Thesis in light of the Metaphysical Problem. This shouldn't detain us for long. If we were correct in concluding that the Weak Thesis avoids the Metaphysical Problem, the Strong Thesis must avoid it as well. The reason is that the Strong Thesis adds only the *possession* of complete foreknowledge to the provisions of the Weak Thesis; but the Metaphysical Problem depends on how foreknowledge is *used*, not on how much is *possessed*. Consider, for example, its use in the case where I flee the country because I precognize the issuance of a warrant for my arrest—a use which we have seen to be innocent of any Osmo-like problems. Now imagine the range of my precognition to increase until complete foreknowledge is achieved. What is there in this increase in knowledge that could trigger the Metaphysical Problem? Most of what I learn along the way, such as the figures for next year's wheat harvest in the Ukraine and the name of the next Western to win an Academy Award, will be patently irrelevant to my attempts to stay out of jail. Of course, complete foreknowledge will include more relevant items as well: not only the issuance of the warrant (which was so providentially useful when I possessed only partial foreknowledge), but also the fact that next Tuesday I will be in Brazil. But so long as I don't base my decision to flee the country on my knowledge of where I will be next Tuesday, the Metaphysical Problem has no purchase on the situation. Since there is nothing in the Strong Thesis to require the providential *use* of an item of foreknowledge which happens to coincide with the object of providential control, the Strong Thesis should be no more objectionable than the Weak when it comes to the Metaphysical Problem.

The Strong Thesis may still seem pretty weak, since it does not include any requirement that the amount of providential control exceed a certain minimum. But it's not clear how any (plausible) strengthening of the providential component of the Strong Thesis would make it any easier for the critic to implicate it in the Metaphysical Problem. Consider, for example, the *Stronger Thesis*:

(ST+) It is possible for *complete* foreknowledge to contribute to *more* providential control than would be available with only *some* foreknowledge.

There is a problem specifying which bodies of partial foreknowledge must be providentially inferior to complete foreknowledge for the thesis to be true; but it clearly *cannot* be true unless at least some of the marginal gain from complete foreknowledge is *used*, not merely *possessed*. There is no basis in the Metaphysical Problem, however, for supposing that more providential control will not result from more foreknowledge. What the Metaphysical Problem reveals is the danger of using simple foreknowledge in such a way that circles of dependence are generated. But additional foreknowledge simply gives an agent greater flexibility to combine actions with precognitive grounds for action in ways that do not generate circles. Thus the Metaphysical Problem provides no reason for rejecting the Stronger Thesis. Nor is it even clear what threat it poses to the *Strongest Thesis*:

(ST++) It is possible for *complete* foreknowledge to contribute to *maximal* providential control.

(‘Maximal providential control’ refers here to the strongest control compatible with there being free agents other than God.) What the critic has to show is that there is no way to set up the dependence-relations required by the Strongest Thesis without generating a circle. But since maximal providential control does not encompass all foreknown events (in particular, it excludes events which are exercises of free will), this leaves open the possibility that foreknowledge of these uncontrolled events might be utilized in the production of maximal providential control in such a way that circularity is avoided—at least it is very difficult to see how the critic would go about proving the contrary.

So none of these theses—the Strong, the Stronger, or the Strongest—appears to force the Metaphysical Problem. This doesn't mean that we can't construct theses about God's providential use of foreknowledge that *would* generate this problem. Consider, for example, the theses that would result from adding the following conditions to the Strong Thesis:

(C<sub>1</sub>) that God must utilize *all* of His complete foreknowledge in every exercise of providential control that He undertakes (entailing that any providential act and its consequences will be not only foreknown but *used* by God in deciding to act in that way);

- (C<sub>2</sub>) that every item in God's complete foreknowledge must be used for some exercise of providential control or another (entailing that every future event is such that some providential act is metaphysically dependent upon it);
- (C<sub>3</sub>) that every future event is the object of some exercise of the providential use of foreknowledge (entailing that every future event is metaphysically dependent on some providential act).<sup>14</sup>

But (C<sub>1</sub>)-(C<sub>3</sub>) are obviously absurd conditions to attach to the providential use of foreknowledge, and no theist ought to accept them. Thus their involvement in the Metaphysical Problem has no implications for the traditional position on divine omnipresence.

The Metaphysical Problem does broach issues that are worth discussing further. For example, I have left the notion of *metaphysical dependence* vague, and have refrained from questioning the Metaphysical Principle itself. Pursuing such questions might undercut the Metaphysical Problem even further. David Lewis, for one, maintains that causal loops, while *inexplicable*, are nevertheless *possible*.<sup>15</sup> If he is right, the Metaphysical Principle would have to be reformulated in terms of inexplicability rather than impossibility, and it's not clear what would be left of the Metaphysical Problem at that point. Nevertheless, enough has been said to warrant dismissing the Metaphysical Problem as a serious threat to the providential use of foreknowledge.

The strongest case against the Strong Thesis derives from the Doxastic Problem. The Metaphysical Problem requires that foreknowledge be *used* in quite specific ways, but we have failed to turn up any feature of God's providential situation that would force Him to comply with this requirement. The Doxastic Problem, on the other hand, requires only that foreknowledge (forebelief) be *possessed*. Thus the Strong Thesis, in positing the possession of complete foreknowledge, goes beyond the Weak Thesis in a way that is relevant to the Doxastic Problem.

Let us take a closer look at the effect the Doxastic Problem would have on the providential use of foreknowledge, assuming that the problem is genuine. The critic who admits the possibility of cases in which foreknowledge can improve the degree of one's providential control (e.g., my fleeing the country in light of advance intelligence that I am to be arrested) might still insist that foreknowledge can work in this case only because certain other facts about the future (e.g., that I actually will flee the country, and any other truths from which this one could be inferred) are excluded from the decision-process—*foreknowledge* about some things requires *foreignance* about other things if it is to be providentially useful. This relation between knowledge and ignorance can be clarified by distinguishing two factors relevant to judging the degree of an agent's providential control: one factor is how well-informed the agent is when deliberating over what to do (call this the *quality* of control); the other is the range of states of affairs over which the agent can

exercise control (call this the *quantity* of control). Foreknowledge, like knowledge in general, makes its providential contribution by increasing the quality of an agent's control. But every future state of affairs that enters into the agent's foreknowledge is a state of affairs over which the agent can no longer exercise providential control, on pain of generating the Doxastic Problem. Thus every increase in quality means a decrease in quantity. Perhaps initially the loss in quantity will be eclipsed by the sharp rise in the quality of providential control made possible by foreknowledge, and the overall degree of providential control (some product of quantity x quality) will go up; but sooner or later the arc of control must flatten out and begin a steep plummet as the agent is left with fewer and fewer decisions about the future to which her awesome foreknowledge can contribute. At the end, endowed with total foreknowledge, the agent is equipped to make maximally informed decisions—but there is nothing left open to be decided. Providential control ends up stultified by too much knowledge. And, one might add, this is precisely the situation of an omniprescient God.<sup>16</sup>

This is a plausible picture, and its implications for the traditional view are devastating, since it shows that the possession of complete foreknowledge would not merely stymie all providential control *based on foreknowledge* (as under the Metaphysical Problem), but would stymie all providential control *simpliciter*, thus leaving the erstwhile controller even worse off than with no foreknowledge at all (since at least some providential control is available even without foreknowledge). This picture does, however, give further point to the earlier discussion of a fallback position for the traditionalist in case she is driven out of her favored position on divine providence. The rejection of complete foreknowledge, if it is warranted by the Doxastic Problem, should lead the theist to search for some optimal combination of (partial) foreknowledge with (partial) providential control. Such an optimal combination might plausibly be identified as the high point of the curve discussed in the preceding paragraph; and this high point, which corresponds to the maximum providential control available without middle knowledge, involves *some foreknowledge*.

Of course, the idea that the traditionalist might have to accept partial foreknowledge combined with partial providential control assumes that the picture just presented is correct. There are grounds for doubting this, however.

#### IV

In discussing the Metaphysical Problem, I simply accepted the Metaphysical Principle and challenged instead the critic's claim that it conflicts with any thesis the traditionalist might be supposed to endorse regarding God's providential use of foreknowledge. A different strategy will have to be pursued as we examine the Doxastic Problem, however, since the principle at work here clearly *is* in conflict with the Strong Thesis. It appears that the only way to

prevent the Doxastic Problem from jeopardizing any minimally robust version of the traditional doctrine is to challenge the Doxastic Principle itself.

One way to do this is to examine the kind of knowledge that is supposed to be incompatible with decision-making. As Aristotle recognized, the person who is even now correctly identifying the most famous student of Socrates and the person who hasn't a clue occupy the endpoints of a wide cognitive spectrum. Between them lie, e.g., the person who knows but isn't thinking about it at the moment (this is the usual context for knowledge-attribution); the person who has learned the answer and still retains it, but is having trouble recalling it ("Come on, you know the answer!" we might say); the person who once knew, has since forgotten, but can still be reminded by some external stimulus; and the person who doesn't have the answer, but at least knows how to get it. Adopting a computer model, we might say that knowledge can exist in either an *accessed* or (as in the examples just cited) an *unaccessed* form. But the Doxastic Principle almost certainly requires accessed knowledge if it is to be at all plausible; thus the Strong Thesis can evade this problem *if* unaccessed beliefs may be counted in determining the extent of an agent's foreknowledge.

While the traditionalist may have reason to reject this conception of divine omnipresence, the existence of this alternative shows that criticisms based on the Doxastic Problem need to be supplemented by some discussion of God's cognitive structure if they are to have any chance of success. Moreover, this model can be used to strengthen the "optimal combination" proposal from the previous section. That proposal raises the question of how God could come by *some* foreknowledge without possessing *all* foreknowledge—in particular, how He could come by just those items of foreknowledge (and no others) that would optimize His providential control. But these questions can be answered by assuming the computer model, since God would then possess complete unaccessed foreknowledge and simply access whatever would maximize providential control without stultification. For example, suppose that God, wishing to aid the Allies, decides that the quality of His control will increase dramatically if He knows what Hitler will decide on a certain day. He then (and only then) accesses that knowledge. This limits God's actions in certain ways (e.g., He cannot know what Hitler will decide and then prevent Hitler from making that decision), but this loss is outweighed by the quality of control God can exercise over other future events.

We have seen how an appeal to "unaccessed" knowledge might be used to defend the Strong Thesis (assuming that unaccessed knowledge can count toward divine omnipresence), and also to consolidate an attractive fallback position for the traditionalist if the Strong Thesis proves untenable. But we can do better than this, since the Doxastic Principle itself is false. This principle, I believe, owes its almost universal acceptance to thought-experiments in which one attempts to violate it. Let us look at one of these.

Suppose that a young lady named Sally is being pressed to choose between two importuning suitors, Lester and Chester. She seeks advice from a fortune-teller. Instead of advice, however, she gets a prediction: "You will marry Chester." On the one hand, Sally's natural credulity in the presence of fortune-tellers inclines her to believe what she is told; on the other hand, the identity of her future spouse depends on what she decides, and she has not yet decided. Is it possible in these circumstances for her to believe first and decide later? Apparently not. If she yields to her credulity, she thereby pre-empts any decision she might have made. In the wake of her belief that she will marry Chester, there is simply nothing left to be decided.

If the response to this case is correct, we should be able to find something in the Doxastic Principle to explain *why* it can't be violated. What is the connection between deciding and believing that renders it impossible to believe that  $p$  while deciding to bring it about that  $p$ ? If deciding were simply one way of *coming to believe*, this would give us the desired connection, since one can't *come to believe* if one *already* believes.<sup>17</sup> But this account of deciding must be rejected. There are other things involved in deciding, beyond simply coming to believe, and it is perfectly possible that someone who already knows what the decision will be might nevertheless persevere in deliberating in order to achieve some of these other things—for example, to secure a reassurance about the decision that comes from possessing good reasons.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, while foreknowledge and decision-making both lead to beliefs, what one comes to believe as a result of foreknowledge is a *propositional* belief about *what will happen*, whereas what one comes to believe as a result of deciding is a *practical* belief about *what to do*. The former does not entail the latter; even if the propositional belief is acquired first, it may still be necessary to go through the actual process of decision-making in order to achieve the practical belief.<sup>19</sup> Other critics have found the link between deciding and believing in the principle that deciding presupposes *believing that the future is open*, a presupposition that is violated when one holds a belief about how the future will turn out.<sup>20</sup> But why must Sally's belief that she will marry Chester undermine her belief in an open future? She has no grounds for supposing that she *must* marry Chester, or that she *can't* pursue another course of action. If she nevertheless looks upon her future as closed, it only proves that she is as credulous about fatalism as she is about fortune-tellers.

Once the fundamental weakness in the Doxastic Principle is exposed, it is easy to think of cases for which the principle seems false. Suppose that Sally, torn between Lester and Chester, looks in frustration for a coin to flip. "Heads it's Lester, tails it's Chester," she says. The fortune-teller, in whom Sally has absolute confidence, lends her a coin, predicting that she will decide in favor of Chester. Sally believes her. It is clear that Sally's belief *need not* abort the decision-process that she has initiated. She flips the coin, believing that it will come up tails (as entailed by her choice of decision-procedure together

with her credence in the fortune-teller's prediction). Note that, if the coin *were* to come up heads, she would decide in favor of Lester. Thus the decision-procedure is not merely "idling." This is perfectly compatible with Sally holding a (corrigible) belief about the outcome of that procedure.

One objection, from an article by Tomis Kapitan, merits special comment here.<sup>21</sup> Kapitan's objection comes in reply to the following example offered by Philip Quinn: Smith knows that, if White invites him to a concert, he will decide to attend; he then learns that White will in fact invite him, and infers that he will decide to attend.<sup>22</sup> Kapitan argues in response that the real decision is made when Smith decides *to attend if invited*, and this decision *precedes* Smith's knowledge that he will attend—thus it does not violate the Doxastic Principle. According to Kapitan, Smith does not decide anything when the invitation actually arrives; he merely *implements* a decision taken earlier. Presumably Kapitan would offer a similar analysis of Sally's choice between suitors: the real decision is made when she decides to settle the matter by flipping a coin; the actual toss of the coin is merely the implementation of this prior decision.

While there is some initial plausibility to Kapitan's analysis (it is true, after all, that Smith and Sally have each made an important decision which *precedes* their foreknowledge), his conclusion should nevertheless be resisted. If one's assent to attend a concert does not count as a decision if one has already formulated the conditional decision *to attend if invited*, there may be few if any decisions *ever* made.

At the risk of oversimplifying, let us divide decisions into those based on *criteria* and those that are not. Take a very simple decision of the first sort—whether or not to take an umbrella—which is to be settled according to the criterion: the presence or imminent threat of rain. To employ this criterion in a particular case means that I have *already* made the following conditional decision: if rain is falling or about to fall, I will take an umbrella. Now suppose that, on the basis of this criterion, I exit with an umbrella. If Kapitan's analysis is correct, I do not *decide* anything as I pass the umbrella rack on my way to the door—I merely implement a decision that I made some time ago when I chose a certain criterion, a criterion which now happens to be satisfied. Since no decision is made as I approach the door to go out, the Doxastic Principle is not violated if it happens that I knew yesterday, on the basis of a weather forecast, that I would take an umbrella with me today. But the same argument that leads to this conclusion will work for *any* decision based on a criterion. That means that the only genuine decisions—or at least the only decisions the Doxastic Principle should be construed as governing—are criterionless. This is itself a *reductio* of Kapitan's argument; alternatively, it is proof that the Doxastic Principle is not a principle governing all decisions, but only a special class of decisions (and a rather primitive class at that). There is no reason to think that God makes such decisions—or if He

does, that His providential governance would be jeopardized due to the stultification of such decisions by His complete foreknowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Doxastic Principle cannot be used to impugn foreknowledge of decisions based on criteria, we are free to accept the following picture of how God might satisfy the Strong Thesis. The picture begins with God formulating judgments about what it would be best for Him to do in response to every possible set of conditions He might encounter. These judgments are of the form, "If *X* obtains, it would be best to do *Y*." Two points about such judgments should be noted. One is that they include the blueprints for every exercise of providential control that God might undertake. The other point is that, for some sets of conditions (including those involving the free choices of other agents), the best response is to take action before the conditions actually obtain; thus at least some of these judgments will be such that the conditions set forth in their antecedents are temporally later than the actions referred to in their consequents. Because God's will is directed unshakably toward the best, He relies on these judgments as He develops criteria for divine action. These criteria yield conditional decisions of the form, "If *X* obtains, I will do *Y*." These conditional decisions are independent of any knowledge God might have of the actual world; but once (in the logical order) these decisions are reached, He can draw on His knowledge of the actual world to determine which of these conditionals have true antecedents. Only then does He decide what response to make, and this response always follows the criteria He has adopted (since there could be no occasion for God to change His mind about these). Of course, He cannot act to implement a conditional decision unless He knows that its antecedent is true; in particular, for conditionals whose antecedents are temporally later than their consequents and refer to the choices of free agents, He cannot act unless He has simple foreknowledge. Thus simple foreknowledge allows God to undertake providential interventions that would not otherwise have been feasible, and only *complete* foreknowledge can guarantee that no conditional decision with a true antecedent will go unimplemented. This means that a God equipped with complete foreknowledge can satisfy not only the Strong Thesis, but the Stronger and (perhaps) the Strongest Theses as well.

In conclusion, I do not pretend to have solved all the problems surrounding the traditional view that omniscience can play a useful role in God's providential governance of the world. What I do claim to have shown is that the standard criticisms of the traditional view, based on the Metaphysical and Doxastic Problems, do not succeed. If this claim is correct, the traditionalist is entitled to decline paying the price for divine providence set by the critic: the rejection of foreknowledge, or its assimilation to middle knowledge.

## NOTES

1. Thomas P. Flint, "Hasker's *God, Time, and Knowledge*," *Philosophical Studies* 60 (Sept.-Oct. 1990), p. 103; I borrow the term 'Free-Will Theism' from William Hasker, "Providence and Evil: Three Theories," *Religious Studies* 28 (March 1992), pp. 91-105.

2. William Hasker, "Response to Thomas Flint," *Philosophical Studies* 60 (Sept.-Oct. 1990), p. 118.

3. I have expressed theoretical doubts about Molinism in "Middle Knowledge: The 'Foreknowledge Defense,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 28 (August 1990), pp. 1-24, and practical doubts in "Middle Knowledge and the Soteriological Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 27 (March 1991), pp. 3-26.

4. *Metaphysics*, 3rd edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983), pp. 54-56.

5. (MP) may itself be an instance of a more general principle—e.g., "It is impossible that an event  $e_1$  depend on an event  $e_2$  which depends on an event  $e_3$  which depends on the original event  $e_1$ ." But given that I do not examine or challenge the principle in the present paper, it seems best to leave it in the more specific form that is directly relevant to the issue of divine providence. I hope to take up the truth of (MP) and related principles on another occasion.

6. How *much* more potent is a subject of some dispute. For a variety of opinions on this question, see: David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *Religious Studies* 22 (Sept./Dec. 1986), pp. 407-22; Alfred J. Freddoso, "Introduction," Luis de Molina's *On Divine Foreknowledge* (Part IV of the *Concordia*), trans., with intro. & notes, by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1988); Thomas P. Flint, "Two Accounts of Providence," in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. by Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 147-81; David Gordon & James Sadowsky, "Does Theism Need Middle Knowledge?" *Religious Studies* 25 (March 1989), pp. 75-87; and David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Divine Control: Some Clarifications," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 30 (December 1991), pp. 129-39.

7. For this reason, whenever I refer simply to *foreknowledge* in subsequent pages I should be understood to mean *simple foreknowledge*.

8. *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 59, 57-58. The Metaphysical Problem is also at work, if less explicitly, in Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *op. cit.*, and in William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), ch. 12.

9. Taylor, "Deliberation and Foreknowledge," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (January 1964), pp. 73-80; La Croix, "Omniprescience and Divine Determinism," *Religious Studies* 12 (Sept. 1976), pp. 365-81; and Kapitan, "Can God Make Up His Mind?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984), pp. 37-47.

10. *Op. cit.*, p. 414.

11. For Basinger's most recent (and moderated) position on the providential resources of middle knowledge, see his "Middle Knowledge and Divine Control: Some Clarifications," *op. cit.*

12. *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

14. The idea behind (C<sub>2</sub>) and (C<sub>3</sub>) is that the chain of dependence between acts and events must finally double back on itself, generating the circle constitutive of the Meta-physical Problem. But even this isn't clear, if the set of future events is infinite.

15. "The Paradoxes of Time Travel," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (April 1976), pp. 145-52.

16. The curve hypothesized in this paragraph presupposes that the initial gains in simple foreknowledge as one heads away from 0 along the x-axis are weighted toward future events that are both (1) relevant to providential control (so that there are events over which my control has actually increased) and (2) themselves not within my control (so that knowledge of them doesn't stultify my control over events I would otherwise control, thus decreasing control commensurately with the increase brought about by (1)).

17. Carl Ginet, for example, takes this position in "Can the Will Be Caused?" *Philosophical Review* 71 (January 1962), pp. 49-55. The following remark, for example, may be found on p. 52: "Yet the whole point of making up one's mind is to pass from uncertainty to a kind of knowledge about what one will do or try to do."

18. Robin Small points this out in "Fatalism and Deliberation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (March 1988), pp. 13-30.

19. This response to Ginet's argument may be found in J. W. Roxbee Cox, "Can I Know Beforehand What I Am Going To Decide?" *Philosophical Review* 72 (Jan. 1963), pp. 88-92.

20. E.g., Tomis Kapitan, "Deliberation and the Presumption of Open Alternatives," *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (April 1986), pp. 230-51.

21. "Can God Make Up His Mind?" *op. cit.*

22. "Divine Foreknowledge and Divine Freedom," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (1978), pp. 219-40. The example is on p. 234.

23. Traditionalists who endeavor to evade the Doxastic Problem by denying that divine agency involves decision-making are still threatened by a version of (DP) which ignores decision-making and focuses directly on intentional agency. I rebut this version of (DP) in my "Omniprescient Agency," *Religious Studies* 28 (September 1992), pp. 351-69.