

Medieval Philosophy Term Paper

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An interesting dilemma of Christian theology is the Problem of Future Contingents. The problem debates whether human freedom can exist alongside divine foreknowledge, which is the belief that God knows —without any doubt— all human actions of the past, present, and future. Philosophers like St. Augustine of Hippo and Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, whose views will be discussed in this essay, both expressed their struggle to understand how divine foreknowledge and freedom can coexist. If God knows future actions, these actions must be predetermined and if they are predetermined, the individual is not choosing their actions; therefore, human freedom does not exist. Based on that belief, St. Augustine claimed individual sin could not be justly punished because sinful actions would not be the fault of humans (Augustine, p. 77-78) and Boethius claimed religion had no point because all actions, religious or vain, were concrete so they did not matter in the end (Boethius, p. 7). Since both philosophers were religious, claiming God did not have true divine foreknowledge was blasphemy and the idea of sins or actions going unpunished was reprehensible. St. Augustine and Boethius both argued that human freedom and divine foreknowledge coexist without opposing each other; however, Boethius' depiction of God was more concrete than St. Augustine's, making Boethius' defense stronger.

St. Augustine started his defense by establishing that human free will exists. This was important because he believed sins are “committed by the will” (Augustine, p. 78). If human will is free then it removes God from the blame of human sin. He explains for one to complete a task, the individual's power and will must be present. If they fail at completing the task, then it shows lack of ability and presence of will because an attempt was made. As well, it is impossible to will without free will and humans can will, so all human will must have free will. He furthers the argument by claiming God is aware of all humans' future wills, but God does not affect the wills of humans; therefore, the wills are free because God does not determine them (Augustine, p. 77). To explain why God can see future events without forcing a result, St. Augustine compares God's future vision to our ability to look back in time. Our memory can recall what has happened, but us recalling it does not change the past. God has the same recall but forwards in time. God only avenges the act of evil by punishing sin, they do not affect the will of sin. Since humans have free will, they can choose to commit sin; therefore, God can justly punish sin (Augustine, p. 78). St. Augustine closes off this excerpt saying do not hate the sinful, as God's grace has created them. Their punishments and suffering are bad, but only in comparison to those who are closer to the Lord through religion (Augustine, p. 79).

Boethius' defense of human freedom and divine foreknowledge explains how independent judgement exists proven by rationale. Independent judgement is judging something on your own and, in this context, is equivalent to free will. Rationale is the ability to distinguish and reasonably assess the things to avoid and the things to approach. If rationale exists, independent judgement has to exist because rationale is a form of independent judgement. It is clear that rationale exists because in the material world rational beings avoid danger and approach comfort (Boethius, p. 3). Boethius goes on to clarify that there is a sense of necessity around future events that stems from divine foreknowledge. Every event causes a definite result that cannot be forced into fruition from independent judgement. Every human has differing judgments and there is only one result, so the necessity has to come from the divine foreknowledge. However, foreseen events do not directly cause necessity. If a hockey player were

to pass the puck, God knew that the pass was going to happen before it did and the recognition that it was to happen is the reason it happened, but God did not directly force the player to pass the puck (Boethius, p. 9). This statement becomes clearer when put next to a modified version of Boethius' sitting man example. If a person observes a man sitting in a chair, it is necessary for the man to be sitting in the chair because it was observed, but the observation is not the cause (Boethius, p. 5). To tie this back to divine foreknowledge, Boethius explains that the necessity derived from God's observations works in a similar way. Since God perceives the universe in a different and higher manner than mortals, God sees signs that mortals cannot see. These signs explain future events (Boethius, p. 11). It is easier to describe this difference of perception by comparing cognitive states of beings below and equal to that of human perception. Motionless animals, like sea cucumbers, are able to sense, but they cannot perceive the world any further than that. Animals with motion, like dogs, can sense and can also imagine. Their imagination is essentially simple rationale; they remember what is safe and what is not. Human perception has sense, imagination, and reason. Reason entails determining why something is safe and why something else is not. God encapsulates all these perceptions and more (Boethius, p. 13). Boethius then adds, God's perception of mortal time is considered a moment for God because they are eternal. Therefore, one can assume, God's divine knowledge and perception also allows them to observe all human actions after they have been decided by the humans. This perception ignores any indecision leading up to the chosen action because all human actions are done in God's present. Boethius emphasizes this to ensure God's divine foreknowledge stays as a true knowledge, one that does not have uncertainty (Boethius, p. 16). Boethius concludes this excerpt by stating God's divine knowledge is boundless but does not affect our independent judgement. Therefore, they can look down upon humanity and use their boundless knowledge to pass fair judgement on human actions. Thus, following religion is the ideal lifestyle because God passes judgement and gives consequences to the sinful (Boethius, p. 18-19).

Both philosophers say human free will exists and both adequately argue it. The difference in defenses is clear when you look at their depictions of God. St. Augustine weakens his own defense of human free will when he tries to strengthen his original point. He says God has knowledge of our wills, but it is not clear why God can see our wills. St. Augustine says God has foreknowledge of everything, but it is never clear what this foreknowledge is (Augustine, p. 77). Boethius' description of God's foreknowledge is more expansive and even claims God cannot see our wills, with an explanation that does not leave the reader guessing (Boethius, p. 13). The same vagueness appears when St. Augustine explains why God's foreknowledge does not affect free will. He explains how God looks into the future by comparing it to humans' recollection of the past, and because God does not cause everything, God can punish sin. The argument, again, is missing an explanation of why God does not cause everything (Augustine, p. 78). Boethius' explains a complex time compression to describe why God does not cause every action or will and, even though it is very abstract, readers feel like they understand a bit of what God is (Boethius, p. 16). Lastly, St. Augustine basically undoes his reason for punishing sin. He says sinners are living beautiful lives because their existence is a grace from God. He does say sinners' lives look worse compared to religious and sinless folk, but that does not matter. If living and sinning is a good life, then people would not want to live sinless lives because sins are alluring and pleasurable (Augustine, p. 79). Boethius' explanation of sin punishment is hard to follow but does make sense. Boethius explained individual sins are punished by God. Humans receive the punishment(s) throughout their lives (Boethius, p. 18-19). One could argue God should not be able to do this because he does not perceive time the same way mortals do, but God can do this, and it can be explained by using Boethius' levels of

perception. A human, a being with reason, cannot understand what it is like to live without reason, like a dog. Nonetheless, humans train dogs by performing actions that speak to dogs' senses and imaginations. Humans came up with those actions whilst being reasonable. Therefore, God, who is higher up on the same spectrum of perception, should be able to create punishments that can "train" humans into being sinless.

Overall, St. Augustine's argument follows logic, but does not clearly depict God. St. Augustine could have been vague about God to avoid saying anything blasphemous. Boethius' extensive explanations and examples left nothing to guesswork, even when put under scrutiny. Both St. Augustine and Boethius successfully explained how human freedom and divine foreknowledge exist in harmony, with Boethius having a stronger defense.