BRIEF REMARKS REGARDING THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE *ΠΡΟΝΟΙΑ* IN MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

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Abstract

The intention of this paper is to discuss the question: How can God actually know the future with the emphasis on Maximus the Confessor. Foreknowledge is generally regarded as one of the typical attributes of God's divine nature. That is because once someone even speaks of God, he must allow God to know the future, otherwise, God would appear to hesitate in his decisions, to waver as he would not be able to be certain about the outcome of his choices, even to have been surprised by the prevalence of evil in the world he created. All these are obviously not worthy of God. Roughly, according to Maximus' response, the key to the solution of the problem lies in the proposition that God is eternal namely, that God is not subject to time. His response also provides us with a clear and defensible explanation of divine knowledge of future occurrences, and eventually succeeds in reconciling divine foreknowledge and human free choice that seemed to be through and through inconsistent.

Forethought or foreknowledge is generally regarded as one of the main attributes of God's divine nature. He knows the future thanks to some mysterious power that we, humans, do not possess, and, hence, we cannot be aware of. Once someone speaks of God, it is imperative that he allows God to know the future. If this is not the case, God could hesitate in his decisions, to waver as he would not be able to be certain about the outcome of his choices, even to have been surprised by the prevalence of evil in the world he created; and all these are obviously not worthy of God.[1] As assuaging as this assumption may appear to be, however, it does not blunt the problem of forethought at all; for as we shall see in the course of this paper, the problem is in fact still more complicated.

Hence, it is not without reason that John of Damascus includes foreknowledge among the attributes of divine nature.[2] Besides, we shouldn't forget that already in the Old Testament, in the words of Susanna, God appears to know all things *"before they*

happen", that is to say, in advance of their occurrence.[3] But how can God actually *know* the future?

In the Old and the New Testament one can find passages that are bound to bewilder the reader. One such passage comes from the beginning of the prophetic book of *Jeremiah,* where God appears to speak to the prophet in the following words:

> "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations".[4]

Understandably, to assert here that Jeremiah was sanctified before his birth, raises many and plausible questions. The only interpretation that seems to make any sense at all is the one suggested by John Chrysostom[5] and eagerly adopted and repeated by Theodoret of Cyrrhus in his own Commentary On Jeremiah.[6] Their interpretation, which I believe to be a very plausible one, is that the selection of Jeremiah on the part of God has not been unjust and arbitrary, for knowledge has preceded it; in other words, God sanctified Jeremiah precisely because he *foreknew* his future virtue.

Another perplexing passage comes from Paul's *Epistle to the Romans.* More specifically, Paul writes something both amazing and queer about Jacob and his twin brother Esau, namely, that God loved Jacob and hated Esau... before they were even born.[7] In Paul's words, *"the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil".*[8] Apparently, suggests Maximus the Confessor, God knew in advance what kind of person each one of them would turn out to be and, knowing this, he already loved the former and hated the latter.[9] At any rate, it is noteworthy that Paul concludes his reference to Jacob and Esau with the following words: *"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid!"* [10]

Now, according to Didymus the Blind, another outstanding Christian thinker, by ruling out the possibility of unrighteousness with God, Paul practically urges us to search carefully and systematically in order to arrive at a clear and defensible explanation of what at first sight seems to be both queer and unrighteous, namely, that God may love or hate someone before this person is even born.[11]

The problem of divine foreknowledge, that is in a way outlined in the two passages cited above, has many aspects. One of the central aspects around which the debate revolved in early Greek Christian philosophy is the alleged causal relationship between foreknowledge and the object of foreknowledge, and the related problem of predestination.

Allow me to give here an example in order to illustrate this subtle issue: Suppose God foreknows, for instance, that George, who has not yet been born, will become a thief. This, however, raises a question: Is it perhaps possible that George may act differently and not become a thief after all? Manifestly not, for God is infallible and cannot be contradicted. Thus George who, let's not forget it, has not yet been born, after coming to life and growing up cannot refrain from becoming a thief once this is foreknown by God. This, however, prompts the reflection that divine foreknowledge causes in a way George's becoming a thief, and that George is not free to make his own decisions after all.

This problem is a live issue in contemporary philosophy of religion. Nelson Pike has recently argued that God's omniscience is thoroughly incompatible with human freedom, because it is incompatible with anyone's having the power to refrain from acting as God has foreknown.[12] Besides, the problem in question can be justly argued to pertain to the theory of knowledge as well, though of course the subject of knowledge here is God and not man.

Apparently, perplexity arises above all when we try to speak of foreknowledge with regard to *free* deeds and choices of persons. For God, as Eusebius of Caesarea and John Chrysostom maintain in almost identical words, need not await to learn someone's virtue or wickedness from the outcome of the things.[13]

But this brings us directly to the crux of the problem: How can God actually know in advance someone's future virtue or wickedness, if these two result from our own free choice? We can understand perfectly well how a meteorologist can forecast tomorrow's weather, or how an astronomer can predict a lunar eclipse, or how a doctor can foretell a development in a patient's condition. Didymus even ventures to say that it would make sense to contend that it can be known in advance that someone "ἀρρενοτοκήσει", namely, that he will have a male child, no matter how impossible this may appear to be, whereas it would be thoroughly different to speak of foreknowledge with regard to

someone's future virtue or wickedness, for these two, unlike having a male or a female child, pertain to our own free choice.[14]

Free choice that we speak of here is of the utmost importance for moral philosophy. This is a point we should lay much emphasis on. If there were no free choice on the part of man, then whether someone were good or wicked, he would be this against his will, that is to say, without having chosen it; and if such were the case, then neither virtue could ever be praiseworthy, nor wickedness blamable; and, consequently, there could neither be any reward for virtue, nor any punishment for wickedness. In effect, it would not be an exaggeration to say that unless we secure free choice on the part of man, the very foundations of moral philosophy will be fatally undermined.

So here is the question: If I am free to choose tomorrow either a or b, how can God know from today, or even worse, before my birth, that tomorrow I will choose b? Or else, as Anthony Kenny phrases it, "if you and I are free, it looks as if what you and I decide to do today is what determines what's going to be the future tomorrow, but if God already knows what you and I are going to do tomorrow how can we be free to decide that today?".[15]

In short, the problem is a problem of inconsistency between two things equally asserted in Christian philosophy, divine foreknowledge on the one hand, and human free choice on the other. This is roughly the problem, and now we will look at some responses to this issue.

One possible response to these queries, that was actually given by some representatives of early Greek Christian philosophy, is the one that we could name "the Origenist response".

According to the Origenist response, the key to the solution of our problem lies in the well-known Origenist hypothesis of the pre-existence of the souls in an incorporeal state.[16] For indeed, if a person's soul has existed prior to his birth, then it makes perfect sense to read, for instance, that God knew Jeremiah before forming him in the belly and sanctified him prior to the prophet's birth. Furthermore, argues Origen in his commentary *On St John's gospel,* in this very hypothesis we can find the solution to the "notorious", as he very characteristically calls it,[16] problem of Jacob and Esau. More specifically, Origen writes the following:

> "If, then, we don't look back to deeds prior to this life, how can it be that there is no unrighteousness with God [as Paul explicitly maintains], whereas the one brother [sc. Esau] ¼ is being hated before doing anything to deserve this?".[17]

This is roughly the Origenist response that, goes a long way towards securing human free choice. Besides the several other inconsistencies, that made the Fifth Ecumenical Council denounce Origenism, the ultimate problem with the Origenist response is that it practically passes over foreknowledge in silence. Instead of trying to explain, for example, how it is possible that God may know in advance Jeremiah's future virtue, the Origenist response proposes an alternative interpretation that simply assumes no foreknowledge on the part of God at all. Still, Origen himself asserts in his commentary *On Genesis* that God knows all things long before their occurrence.[18] And, obviously, the Origenist response fails to explain how this is possible with regard to free deeds and choices of persons.

Another possible response to our problem, a response that can be viewed as a diametrical opposite, an antipode to the Origenist response discussed above, is the one that we could call "the Stoic response".

Roughly, according to the Stoic response, the key to the solution of our problem would be to accept, in precisely the way the Stoics did, that there is an inescapable *"heimarmene"* or fate that governs the world, pervades everything in it and, in effect, predestines everything. If so, the future would be fixed irrespective of our attempts to affect it, and it would suffice to follow the threads of this inescapable *"heimarmene"*, or fate, or causality, in order to arrive at a secure knowledge of the future.

After all the Stoics themselves, on Cicero's account, explicitly maintained that "whoever grasps the causes of future events must also grasp everything which will be." As they very illustratively said, "the passage of time is like the unwinding of a rope, bringing about nothing new".[19]

This is roughly the Stoic response that, as we see, goes a long way towards securing the possibility of foreknowledge. The problem with the Stoic theory of *"heimarmene"* or fate, however, is that it hardly seems to leave any choice to man. Therefore, it is no

coincidence that all Christian thinkers and philosophers have always vigorously opposed all fatalistic beliefs, including the doctrine of *"heimarmene"*, for these beliefs eventually question human free choice that is the cornerstone of Christian moral philosophy.

We thus conclude that both the Origenist and the Stoic response fail to resolve our problem, namely, they both fail to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human free choice; they merely secure one of the poles of the contradiction at the expense of the other. Indeed, the Origenist response secures free choice at the expense of foreknowledge; the Stoic response, on the other hand, succeeds in securing foreknowledge through an elaborate theory of *"heimarmene"*, but in doing so it practically renders free choice impossible. In effect, it must be conceded that foreknowledge and freedom seem thoroughly irreconcilable and, consequently, the problem of divine foreknowledge seems to defy solution.

Next, an attempt will be made to briefly delineate the response that could finally resolve the problem by reconciling divine foreknowledge and human free choice. This response is proposed by Maximus the Confessor, "one of the greatest theological minds in Orthodox Byzantium" according to George Dion Dragas,[20] in an early work of his that is known under the title *Questiones et dubia*. It should be noted that the issue in question here is nowhere discussed in the existing bibliography on Maximus, though the work of Maximus has been extensively studied by such great scholars as von Balthasar, Völker, Sherwood, Riou, Dalmais, Loudovikos and Matsoukas in Greece, Farrell and others; the last one, Farrell, has even written a monograph entitled *Free choice in St Maximus the Confessor*, [21] and yet nowhere discusses the problem of the inconsistency between divine foreknowledge and human free choice.

Roughly, according to Maximus' response, the key to the solution of our problem lies in the proposition that *God is eternal,* namely, *that God is not subject to time.* On this proposition there is a full consensus of all theists, all Christian thinkers and philosophers, which is of course no coincidence. For if God were subject to time, he would consequently be subject to the limitations imposed on him by the mere existence of time, and then time, that would impose limitations on God, would prove to be superior to God and in a way god of God, which of course would be absurd to hold. Hence, if God actually exists, it is self-evident that his existence will be eternal, and

therefore atemporal, or, as Gregory of Nazianzus phrases it, *"like an infinite and unlimited ocean of substance that transcends every concept of time and nature"*.[22]

Now, the concept of divine eternity has been adequately presented by Boethius[23] whose definition of eternity was a *locus classicus* for subsequent medieval philosophers. As Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann notice in their excellent essay entitled "Eternity",[24] the very concept of "eternity" *"makes significant difference in the consideration of a variety of issues in the philosophy of religion, including, for instance, the apparent incompatibility of divine omniscience with human freedom"*.[25] This difference is abundantly clear in the way Maximus deals with the problem of divine foreknowledge.

More specifically, granted that God is not subject to time, Maximus argues as follows: God knows in advance, the "*τέλος τῆς ἑκαστου κατὰ τήν κίνησιν διαθέσεως*" This roughly means that He knows in advance how each person is going to freely move in the future. He knows this, as Maximus puts it, because there is no time or eon to divide man's movement in the eyes of God, but for Him even the future is like present.[26]

The following example will probably illustrate how Maximus actually succeeds in reconciling divine foreknowledge and human free choice. Suppose we have a walker who walks on a full of turns mountain path through the woods. If he has never been there before and he has no other knowledge of the place, it seems impossible for him to know what is further before him along the path. But suppose we have another person, an observer, who is not on the path himself but somewhere above it, supposedly on the peak of a mountain, from where he can see the path and our walker on it. This observer will be able to see precisely what was impossible for our walker to know, for example, that half a mile further in front of the walker by the path there is a spring.

This example applies to space. If, now, we apply the same example to time, we have the solution to our problem as follows: We, humans, move on the path of time where we freely choose, and our free choice renders foreknowledge impossible either for us or for anyone else who moves with us on the path of time. God, however, who is not like us on the path of time himself but outside it like the observer of our example, can see "simultaneously" (that is to say, eternally) all points on the path of time; he thus sees

"simultaneously" both our past and present and our future choices without therefore annihilating our free choice.

Closing this paper, one last point needs to be made: Literally, it is not accurate to ascribe "foreknowledge" to God. Indeed, the kind of knowledge God has of our future choices may be foreknowledge from our point of view (as God knows *our* future), but it is not foreknowledge from God's point of view (for God is atemporal and hence knows nothing future *to him*); instead, we should rather speak of God's *eternal knowledge* of all temporal occurrences, past, present and future alike.

Thus, Maximus' response provides us with a clear and defensible explanation of divine knowledge of future occurrences, and eventually succeeds in reconciling divine foreknowledge and human free choice that seemed to be through and through inconsistent.

Notes

1. John of Damascus, *Κατὰ Μανιχαίων*, ed. B. Kotter, 80. 2-6.
2. John of Damascus, ***Exposition fidei***, ed. B. Kotter, 14. 28-31.
3. *Susanna*, 42-43.
4. Jeremiah, I: 5.
5. John Chrysostom, ***Fragmenta in Jeremiah (in catenis)***, ed. J.P. Migne, PG 64, 748. 47-50.
6. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Interpretatio in Jeremiah*, ed. J.P. Migne, PG 81, 497. 28-30.
7. Genesis xxv:21ff.
8. Romans ix:11
9. Maximus Confessor, *Questiones et dubia*, ed. H. Declerck, Qu.38. 3-6.
10. Romans ix:14.
11. Didymus the Blind, ***Commentarii in Psalmos*** 40-44.4, ed. M. Gronewald, 322.10-16.
12. Pike, Nelson, "Divine omniscience and voluntary action," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 27-46; "Of God and freedom: A Rejoinder," *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966), 369-379); "Divine foreknowledge, human freedom and possible worlds," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977), 209-216.
13. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentaria in Psalmos*, ed. J.P. Migne, PG 23, 525. 3-6.
14. Didymus the Blind, *Commentarii in Psalmos* 40-44.4, ed. M. Gronewald, 322.7-9A.
15. Kenny, A. 1988. "Medieval Philosophy" in Bryan Magee, *The great philosophers.* Oxford University Press, Oxford. New York. p.73.
16. Origen believed in the pre-existence of the souls, but he did'nt accept the transmigration or the incorporation of rational souls in animal bodies.
17. Origen, *Commentarii in evangelium Ioannis* (lib. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 13), ed. C. Blanc, II: xxxi: 192. 1-5.
18. Origen, *Commentarii in Genesim* (fragmenta), ed. J.P. Migne, PG 12, 57.4-15.

19. Stoicorum veterum fragmenta, ed. J. von Arnim, vol.2, fr.944 (Cicero, *De Divitatione* I:56, 127).
20. Dragas, George Dion, "The Church in St. Maximus," *θεολογία* 56 (1985), p.386.
21. Farrell, J.P. 1989. *Free choice in St. Maximus the Confessor*. St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canan, Pennsylvania.
22. Gregory of Nazianzus, *In Theophania* (Orat,XXXVIII), ed. J.P. Migne, PG 36, 317.26-28.
23. Boethius, *The consolation of philosophy*, V:6:422.5-424.31 (ed.E.K. Rand, in H.F. Stewart, E.K.Rand and S.J. Tester, 1973. *Boethius. The theological tractates and the conslation of philosophy*, Heinemann, London. Cambridge. Harvard.
24. Elenore Stump and Normann Kretzman, "Ternity," in Elenore Stump and Michael J. Murrey (eds), 1999. *Philosophy of Religion. The Big Questions*. Blacwell Publishers, Oxford. pp.42-53.
25. Op.cit., 42.
26. Maximus the Confessor, *Questiones et dubia*, ed. J.H. Declerck, Question 121.3-12.