

BOETHIUS

## God Is Timeless

In this selection, Boethius (c. 480–524) presents the most widely accepted view of God’s eternity in Christian theology: God lives completely outside of time, in a changeless “eternal Now” that contains all of time within itself. Boethius argues that this view of divine timelessness affords an answer to the dilemma of foreknowledge and freedom discussed in the previous selection. God, according to this view, does not know *beforehand* what humans will do, for this would place God in the time-sequence, and God is not in time. Rather, God knows what humans do *eternally*, in his “eternal Now,” which is simultaneous with every moment of time at which they act. And just as our freedom is not taken away by others knowing what we do when we do it, neither is it taken away by God knowing this in his “eternal present.”



“Since . . . everything that is known is apprehended not according to its own nature but according to that of the knower, let us examine now, so far as we law-

*From The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. James T. Buchanan. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1957.

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fully may, what is the state of the divine substance, so that we may be able to learn also what its knowledge is. The common opinion, according to all men living, is that God is eternal. Let us therefore consider what eternity is, for this will make clear to us at the same time the divine nature and the divine knowledge. Now, eternity is the complete possession of an endless life enjoyed as one simultaneous whole; this will appear clearer from a comparison with temporal things. For whatever is living in time proceeds in the present from times past to times future; and nothing existing in time is so constituted as to embrace the whole span of its life at once, but it has not yet grasped tomorrow, while it has already lost yesterday. In this life of today you are living in no more than a fleeting, transitory moment. And so it is with everything that is subject to the condition of time: even if it should never have begun and would never cease to be—which Aristotle believed of the universe—even if its life were to be co-extensive with the infinity of time, yet it could not rightly be held to be eternal. For, even granted that it has an infinite lifetime, it does not embrace this life as a simultaneous whole; it does not now have a grasp of the future, which is yet to be lived through. What is rightly called eternal is that which grasps and possesses simultaneously the entire fullness of an unending life, a life which lacks nothing of the future and has lost nothing of the fleeting past. Such a being must necessarily always be its whole self, unchangingly present to itself, and the infinity of changing time must be as one present before him. Wherefore they are mistaken who, hearing that Plato thought this world had no beginning in time and would have no end, think that in this way the created universe is co-eternal with the Creator. For to pass step by step through an unending life, a process ascribed by Plato to the universe, is one thing; to embrace simultaneously the whole of an unending life in one present, an act manifestly peculiar to the divine mind, is quite another thing. And, further, God should not be regarded as older than His creations by any quantity of time but rather by the peculiar quality of simplicity in His nature. For the infinite motion of temporal things tries to imitate the ever present immobility of His life, does not succeed in copying or equalling it, sinks from immobility into motion, and falls from the simplicity of the present to the infinite stretch of future and past; and since it cannot possess its life completely and simultaneously it seems to emulate, by the very fact that it somehow exists forever without ceasing, what it cannot fully attain and express, clinging as it does to the so-called present of this short and fleeting moment, which, inasmuch as it bears a certain resemblance to that abiding present, makes those to whom it comes appear to exist. But, since this present could not be abiding, it took to the infinite journey through time, and so it has come to pass that, by journeying on, it continues that life the fullness of which it could not grasp by staying. Thus if we would apply proper epithets to these subjects we would say, following Plato, that God is eternal, while the universe is perpetual.

"Since, then, every judgment comprehends the objects of its thought according to its own nature, and since God has an ever present and eternal state, His knowledge also, surpassing every temporal movement, remains in the simplicity of its own present and, embracing infinite lengths of past and future, views with its own simple comprehension all things as if they were taking place in the present. If you will weigh the foresight with which God discerns all things, you will rightly esteem it to be the knowledge of a never fading instant



rather than a foreknowledge of the 'future.' It should therefore rather be called *provision* than *prevision* because, placed high above lowly things, it looks out over all as from the loftiest mountain top. Why then do you demand that those things which are translucent to the divine mind's light be necessary if not even men make necessary the things they see? Because you can see present things, does your sight impose upon them any necessity?"

"Surely not."

"Yet, if one may not unworthily compare the human present with the divine, just as you see certain things in this, your temporal present, so God sees all things in His eternal present. Wherefore this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature or properties of things: it sees things present to its contemplation just as they will turn out some time in the future. Neither is there any confusion in its judgment of things: with one glimpse of the mind it distinguishes what will happen necessarily and what will happen non-necessarily. For example, when you observe at the same time a man walking on the earth and the sun rising in the sky, although you see both sights simultaneously, nevertheless you distinguish between them and judge that the one is moving voluntarily, the other necessarily; in like manner the intuition of God looks down upon all things without at all disturbing their nature, yet they are present to Him and future in relation to time. Wherefore it is not opinion but knowledge grounded in truth when He knows that something will occur in the future and knows as well that it will not occur of necessity. If you say at this point that what God sees as about to happen cannot but happen and that what cannot but happen happens, and you pin me down to this definition of necessity, I will confess a matter of the firmest truth but one which scarcely any one save a contemplator of the divine can reach: i.e., I shall answer that one and the same future event is necessary with respect to God's knowledge of it but absolutely free and unrestrained when it is examined in its own nature.

"For there are two kinds of necessity. One is simple: for instance, it is necessary that all men are mortal. The other is conditional: for instance, if you really know that a man is walking, he must be walking. For what a man really knows cannot be otherwise than it is known to be. But the conditional kind of necessity by no means implies the simple kind, for the former is not based on the very nature of the thing called necessary but on the addition of an 'if.' For example, no necessity compels a man who is walking of his own accord to proceed, though it is necessary that, *if* he is walking, he should be proceeding. In the same way, if Providence sees any thing as present, that thing must be, though it has no necessity of its own nature; and, of course, God sees as present those future things which come to pass through free will. Therefore free acts, when referred to the divine intuition, become necessary in the conditional sense because God's knowledge provides that condition; on the other hand, viewed by themselves, they do not lose the perfect freedom of their nature. Without doubt, then, all things which God foreknows do come to pass, but certain of them proceed from free will. And these free acts, though they come to pass, do not by actually occurring lose their proper nature, because of which, before they come to pass, they could also not have come to pass. . . .

"But, you will say, 'if it is within my power to change my mind I can make Providence void, for I may change what she foreknows.' To this I will answer

that you can indeed change your mind but, since Providence truly sees in her present that you can change it, whether you will change it, and whither you may change it, you cannot avoid the divine foreknowledge any more than you can avoid the glance of an eye which is present, though you may by your free will turn yourself to various different actions. You will then say, 'Will the divine foreknowledge be altered by my own disposition, so that when I choose now one thing, now another, it too will seem to undergo alternations in its own cognition?' By no means; for the divine insight precedes the future and recalls it to the one present of its own proper cognition. It does not alternate, as you suppose, between this and that in its foreknowledge, but it is constantly preceding and grasping with one glance all mutations. This presence of comprehending and witnessing all things is not based on the actual occurrence of future events but on God's own peculiar simplicity—which fact also resolves that problem which you posed a little while ago when you said that it is shameful to maintain that our future acts are the cause of God's knowledge. For this power of knowledge to take cognizance, with one ever present glance, of all things has itself determined for each thing its mode of existence and owes nothing more to future things. Since this is so, mortal man's freedom of judgment remains inviolate and, because his will is free from any necessity, the laws which propose rewards and punishments are not unjust. God is the ever prescient spectator of all things, and the eternity of His vision, which is ever present, runs in unison with the future nature of our acts, dispensing rewards to the good, punishments to the evil. Hopes are not vainly put in God nor prayers vainly offered which, if they be right, cannot be ineffective. Therefore turn from vice, cultivate virtue, raise your heart to legitimate hope, direct humble prayers to the heavens. If you will only take notice and not dissemble, a great necessity for righteousness is laid upon you, since you live under the eyes of a Judge who discerns all."

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Boethius long ago considered the problem posed by Pike in the previous selection, and he agreed that *if* God knows beforehand everything we will do, our actions cannot be free. His solution is that God is timeless, "outside of time." Explain what this means.
  2. Explain why Boethius thinks that if God *timelessly* knows all human actions (past, present, and future), human free will is not threatened.
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