

What does God know, and how does He know it?

By Fred Chay

Introduction:

In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, Scrooge asks the spirit of Christmas future, "Answer me one question, are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they shadows of things that may be only." The ghost answers, "These shadows are merely scenes of things that could be." Hence, Scrooge may have been comforted by this because he could have concluded that almost anything *could* happen and the spirit did not say that these are the things that *will* be.

However, Scrooge's problem was that he was asking the wrong question. He had failed to exhaust the alternatives, because what lies between "what *could* be" and "what *will* be" lies the question of "what *would* be if..." What the spirit was revealing to Scrooge was what would happen if Scrooge did not repent and change. In philosophical terminology, the spirit was revealing to Scrooge a bit of what is called "counter-factual knowledge."

We need to ask – how does God know and what does God know?

I. How does God know?

A. Temporal Succession – NO

He does not know in temporal succession, for He knows everything in an eternal now since God is simple and a unity.

B. Logical Succession – YES

He knows some things prior to other things logically understood by facts. However, they are not in coordination with time. This apparent logical succession is how God accommodated to mankind how He appears to think or make decisions. But God is not trapped in time (Ps. 90). See *Beyond the Cosmos* by Hugh Ross for a detailed examination of the issue of dimensionality.

II. What does God know?

A. Natural Knowledge: What could be...

This includes all possible knowledge. He does not depend upon the free acts of people or any created being in knowing anything. He simply knows all possibilities of any actions. He also knows all possible acts of contingent beings and He knows what the free agents could do under any circumstance.

B. Middle Knowledge/Counter-Factual Knowledge: What would be if...

1. Definition:

Christian theologians typically affirm that in virtue of God's omniscience, God possesses counter-factual knowledge. They are conditional statements in the subjunctive mood. For example, He knows what would have happened if He had spared the Canaanites from destruction, or what Napoleon would have done had he won the battle of Waterloo. Hence, He knows what any free agent would do in any situation, not because the circumstances caused the choice, but this is how free creatures would have chosen. Therefore, God knows if He sets up a situation, what contingent effects would occur. Illustration – God does not determine what counter-factuals of creaturely freedoms are true or false.

Thus, if it is true that if some agent "S" were placed in circumstances "C" that he would freely perform action "A", then even God in His omnipotence cannot bring it about that "S" would refrain from "A" if he were placed in "C". However, on the other hand, middle knowledge is unlike natural knowledge in that the content of his middle knowledge is not essential to God. True counter-factuals of freedom are contingently true. "S" could freely decide to refrain from "A" in "C" so that different counter-factuals could be true and be known by God than those that are. Hence, although it is essential to God that He have middle knowledge it is not essential to Him to have middle knowledge of those particular propositions which He does in fact know.

2. The History:

This theory of middle knowledge was brought to the philosophical scene by a Jesuit Priest named Luis de Molina (1535-1600). Molina maintained that God's counter-factual knowledge is logically prior to His creative decree. Hence, Molina's view makes room for human freedom and yet affords God a means of choosing which world of free creatures to create. For by knowing how persons would freely choose in whatever circumstances they might be, God can by decreeing to place just those persons in just such circumstances brings about His ultimate purposes through free creaturely decisions. Thus by employing His counter-factual knowledge, God can plan a world down to the last detail and yet do so without annihilating creaturely freedom. Since what people would freely do under various circumstances is already factored into the equation by God since God's counter-factual knowledge lies logically in between His natural knowledge and His free knowledge Molinists call it God's middle knowledge.

Review: By natural knowledge God knows the total range of possible worlds (what could be). By middle knowledge God knows what subset of events and worlds to create to allow any possible world (would be if). Therefore, His third type of knowledge is called

“free knowledge” (will be).

C. Free Knowledge: What will be

Given God’s free decision to actualize the world, in the third and final moment God possesses knowledge of all remaining propositions that are in fact true in the actual world. Such knowledge is denominated as free knowledge by Molina because it is logically posterior to the decision of the divine will to actualize the world. The content of such knowledge is clearly not essential to God since He could have decreed to actualize a different world. Had He done so, the content of His free knowledge would be different. Hence, logically prior, if not chronologically prior to God’s creation of the world is the divine deliberation concerning which world to actualize.

Conclusion: In terms of the doctrine of election, men are entirely free to reject God’s grace, but were they to do so, God would have had different middle knowledge and they would not have been predestined. Similarly, those who are not predestined have no one to blame but themselves. It is up to God whether we find ourselves in a world in which we are predestined but it is up to us whether we are predestined in the world in which we find ourselves.

III. Proofs for Middle Knowledge

Biblical Argument/Example:

1 Samuel 23:6-10 – David uses a divining device (an ephod) to inquire of the Lord whether Saul would attack Keilah where David was and whether the men of Keilah would deliver David over to Saul. In both cases the device registered an affirmative answer, whereupon David fled the city so that the predictions did not in fact come true. What the device had mediated to David was not therefore simple foreknowledge but counter-factual knowledge. God was letting David know that if he were to remain in Keilah then Saul would come after him and that if Saul were to come after David then the men of Keilah would deliver him over to Saul. The answers given by the divining device were correct answers even though the events did not come to pass since the answers were indicative of what would happen under certain circumstances.

Conclusion: The philosophical concept of middle knowledge, instead of simply being a philosophical escape hatch from the tension of the compatibility of free, contingent beings and a sovereign God, under closer scrutiny reveals the fact of the greatness and omnipotence of the God of the Bible. Middle knowledge simply states that God is so complex, so complete, that He is totally able to think through, to in fact intuitively know as one eternal now, every potential contingent situation in which any created being could freely act, might act, or would act, in such a way that He orchestrates all things without destroying the freedom of any of His creatures, and yet orders all things to happen according to the counsel of His will. Therefore, God freely determines to determine freely based on His total and complete natural, middle and

Grace Line

free knowledge of all necessary and contingent elements and essences. Our God is truly an awesome God.

This material was adapted from William Lane Craig.