Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 15, Divine Providence

This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 15, Divine Providence.

Okay, the next issue we'll talk about here is that of divine providence. The doctrine of providence pertains to the notion that God cares for or controls the world.

This is philosophically interesting because it raises a number of questions related to human freedom as well as the problem of evil. The questions we will consider are, or that any particular doctrine of providence aims to address, how complete is God's control of the world? Does God predetermine human events? And how does divine providence square with human freedom and the presence of evil in the world? So let me start by briefly explaining each of the major views of providence, starting with the Augustinian Calvinist view that God ordains all things that come to pass. So, in this view, God's control of the world, including human lives, is absolutely complete.

Providence is meticulous, as it's sometimes said, controlling all of the details of the cosmos, including human beings. Simple divine foreknowledge is the view that God only foreknows all of the things that will occur. He does not predetermine them.

So those who defend simple divine foreknowledge do so in order to protect a certain conception of human freedom, as we'll see. There are different views on human freedom that are involved in each of these views. Divine middle knowledge, also known as Molinism, is the view that God knows all things that free creatures would do, and he decrees accordingly.

I'll explain that, as well as these other views, in more detail as we go. And then, finally, there's open theism, which is a less orthodox view of more recent vintage, that God does not know the future in its entirety, and he might even be surprised that certain things have happened. And God takes risks in making humanity, not knowing what the outcome of many events and human choices will be.

So those are the four standard views. Now, I mentioned that each of these views assumes a particular view on freedom. So, let's clarify the three major views of human freedom, beginning with Hard Determinism, which is a view that affirms universal causation and denies human freedom.

The Hard Determinist says that every effect and every event in the world has a sufficient cause, and that includes the human being who makes choices; every choice that a human being makes, according to the Hard Determinist, is determined by prior

causes. Even if he or she is not aware of this, there's always some sort of sufficient cause for every choice that a person makes. And because of this, the Hard Determinist says human beings must not be free.

We're not free, and we don't have moral responsibility. The Libertarian takes, in a sense, the opposite view. The Libertarian affirms human freedom, but to do so denies universal causation, saying that the human will is an exception to this law of causal determination.

And then, the Compatibilist view, as the name would suggest, maintains that human freedom and universal causation are logically compatible. All human choices must be caused. They agree with the Hard Determinist on that point.

But nonetheless, human beings enjoy significant freedom so long as the causes of our choices are within us. The choice that I make is a consequence of my immediate psychological state, desires I have, and motives I have. So long as I'm not being compelled from without, my hands aren't being tied, I'm not being locked in a room, I am able to act according to my choice, and that secures my freedom, according to the Compatibilist.

Sometimes, this view is known as Soft Determinism. When it comes to Christian orientation on this issue of views on freedom, I think it's safe to say that one of these three views that the Christian should steer clear of is Hard Determinism, and that's because it's clear in Scripture that human beings are morally responsible, so there has to be some significant sense of freedom there to account for that, and that would contradict Hard Determinism. So, for the Christian, our choices boil down to some kind of Libertarianism, some kind of Compatibilism.

One of those two views, as we'll see with these different views of Providence, is that most of them are premised on a Libertarian conviction, opting for a Libertarian view of human freedom. One of them is Compatibilist, which is the Augustinian Calvinist view. Calvinists are Compatibilists when it comes to human freedom.

So, let's talk just a little bit about each of these views on Divine Providence and unpack these ideas a little bit, beginning with Open Theism, a view that's also been known as Free Will Theism. It's been defended by people like David Bassinger, Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and William Hasker. Those were four of the five authors who produced a book in the early to mid-90s called The Openness of God, and that really launched a lot of interest in scholarly discussion of this.

It was considered a new view of Divine Providence that, well, really wasn't new. There were versions of this in Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, and Process Theology earlier in the 20th century. But Open Theism was unique, at least insofar as

the proponents of this view were confessed believers in the absolute authority of Scripture, and even maintained that the Scriptures are infallible.

So, they have a high view of Scripture in many cases. So the question is, well, can this really be squared with the Scripture, this view? Well, what is the view? Open Theists, as I mentioned, believe that God does genuinely take risks in creation. They deny that God has exhaustive foreknowledge.

He doesn't know all of the future. They would say that the future cannot be known even by a perfect being, that is, God. They propose this idea that God does not have exhaustive divine foreknowledge because they're concerned with protecting and preserving a libertarian view of human freedom and also help work through the problem of evil and try to square the reality of extreme evil suffering in this world with the reality of God.

So, the Open Theist appeals to libertarian human freedom to try to deal with these problems. They say that if humans are genuinely free in this sense, libertarian free will, then even God cannot know in advance what we will choose. This is something that even an omniscient God can't have access to, that is, knowledge of what a libertarian free creature will choose in the future.

And evil is the result of our abuses of libertarian free will. So that's all on us. God is not responsible for any of the bad things that human beings do.

So that's how the Open Theist deals with the problem of evil. It's pretty straightforward. Open Theists like William Hasker and David Bassinger have given some intensive arguments aimed at showing that libertarian freedom is inconsistent with exhaustive divine foreknowledge.

So, here's the basic logic to that claim: human freedom entails the power of contrary choice. That when it comes to the moment of choice if I choose the chocolate cake over the bread pudding, and I did so freely, that means that if you rewound it and put me in that same circumstance, I genuinely had the power to making the contrary choice and going with the bread pudding. All of the same causal conditions could be obtained at that moment of choice, and I still had the power to go one way or another.

I could have made any of a variety of choices. That's the power of contrary choice. Well, exhaustive divine foreknowledge of a chosen action entails that that action can't be otherwise.

If God knows that I'm going to choose the chocolate cake, then when the moment of choice comes, I really can't choose the bread pudding, can I? Because I can't make God's apparent knowledge mistaken. If God really knows it's going to happen, then it

can't be otherwise. Exhaustive divine foreknowledge, therefore, entails that there is no power of contrary choice.

I am really going to choose the chocolate cake. I can't really choose the bread pudding if God knows in advance that I'm going to choose the cake. Exhaustive divine foreknowledge entails that there's no real freedom to choose a certain thing, and that applies to all human actions.

Therefore, human beings have no freedom given exhaustive divine foreknowledge. Now, all of this notice has been premised on a libertarian view of human freedom, which is, you know, the view that we have is a kind of power of contrary choice, and the will is not completely determined. But given the assumption of libertarian freedom, the Open theists can make this argument against exhaustive divine foreknowledge.

They make some further points regarding this doctrine of exhaustive divine foreknowledge. If God foreknew that X would happen, then X is already guaranteed to be true. So, what kind of providential work does God have left to do if he already knows what's going to happen? In fact, it would seem to bind God in terms of his future actions.

If he knows in the future he's going to do something, then he must do it, and he can't do otherwise. It seems to eliminate even divine freedom. Furthermore, exhaustive divine foreknowledge, Open theists will sometimes note that eliminates divine emotion.

Genuine divine emotion is only possible if God doesn't know all of the outcomes in advance. They would say God does not know all the outcomes in advance. He must not know all the outcomes because human beings have libertarian free will, and that is why he can genuinely be surprised, frustrated, or angry.

Any emotion or emotional response he has to human action is indicative of the fact that he really didn't know what was going to happen or what a particular person was going to do in advance of their doing it. William Hasker worked out this doctrine of divine omniscience from an open theistic perspective. He makes a parallel between divine omniscience and divine omnipotence, as it's usually defined.

So, omnipotence is a standard definition of omnipotence, going back at least as far as Thomas Aquinas, is that God can do anything that is logically possible and consistent with perfection. Omniscience, Hasker says, can be defined in a way that's parallel to that, that God knows everything that can be known, but it is, as he says, logically impossible for God to have foreknowledge of creaturely actions that are truly free. So that's why, just from a logical standpoint, God can't know everything that you're

going to do tomorrow because it's logically impossible for any being to know that because we have libertarian free will.

That's Hasker's view, and that represents the Open theists pretty well, generally as a group. So, since God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge, Open theists maintain that God takes genuine risks in creating human beings. He did not know in advance how things would turn out.

He did not know for sure that human beings would fall into sin, and he did not know in advance how any given human being was going to respond to his offer of salvation by grace through faith. And that God can be surprised, frustrated, even mistaken in his beliefs, hopes, and expectations about the future. And this is obviously controversial, once you start talking about God making mistakes, you're treading into some forbidden territory, some serious theological problems.

But the Open theists, at least in most cases, remain steadfast in this conviction. William Hasker has a three-fold approach to predictive prophecy that I think is pretty innovative. This is a question that naturally arises when thinking about Open theism and the idea that God can be mistaken about the future and doesn't know the future; it's hidden from him, and that, you know, there's just certain things he can't know because of libertarian free will.

How is it then that he can make predictive prophecies hundreds, even thousands of years into the future that turn out to be perfectly accurate? So, Hasker says we need to break it down into different kinds of prophecies. There are conditional prophecies, he says, those which are contingent on the action of human beings. If you do X, I'll do Y. So, there's conditional prophecies.

There are predictions based on existing trends and tendencies. So he can make predictions based on that. And then there are announcements of what God himself intends to bring about.

He can guarantee that those things happen. So, it depends on a particular prophecy. If we find it really unlikely or surprising that he would predict, say, that the Messiah would be born at a certain time and place, it's because God made sure that that would happen.

He didn't just, that's one of the things that he didn't just let run on its own. He intervened to ensure that would happen. Here's what I'd say to this three-fold categorization of prophecies that Hasker makes. I think that those first and third categories make sense, certainly when he's talking about conditional prophecies and announcements of what God intends to do, for sure.

We need to grant that. It's that second category that I think is problematic. If human beings have libertarian freedom, then existing trends and tendencies will be insufficient for even an omniscient being, at least on the open theist view, to reliably predict the future, especially hundreds of years into the future.

That's just not going to work. And in so many of those cases, you know, they're not conditional prophecies. So, if the second category won't work and they're not conditional prophecies, then they must all be cases of what God himself intends to do.

But now you've got so much divine interference with human freedom and libertarian free will that that seems to be damaging to what the open theists want, which is to preserve human libertarian freedom. You have a God who's that intrusive, making sure that things work out. For all of these prophecies to be fulfilled, there is a lot of interference with human freedom.

So, I think, on the face of it, this analysis might seem to be compelling, but it ends up being pretty problematic given the open theist commitment to libertarian freedom. Another problem: how can God guarantee that his plans for history will be accomplished, again, given libertarian freedom? Hasker says that God is tremendously resourceful and can adapt his plan to all human responses to achieve his purposes. So, that's open theism and some of the ideas and concepts that have been developed there by some leading open theists, as well as some of the problems with the view.

The most significant of which, again, is the suggestion that God is sometimes mistaken in his views, just the idea that God does not know the future entirely. It seems foreign to a biblical portrait of God, at least in my reading of Scripture. However, proponents of all three views on providence would be strong critics of open theism.

So, let's talk about the other views on providence, all of which I would say are orthodox options for the Christian with a high view of Scripture. One of these is simple divine foreknowledge, and a major proponent of this view is David Hunt. Hunt defends simple divine foreknowledge against criticisms by open theists that the doctrine of exhaustive divine foreknowledge provides no providential benefits.

Would a God with exhaustive divine foreknowledge be greater than a God without it? Hunt says yes, and he constructs a kind of thought experiment where let's let E represent an event, God's knowledge of E, and then God's action and God's objective are all elements involved in this thought experiment. Hunt understands simple divine foreknowledge in the sense that God can see, as it were, what is temporally distant in something like the way that we can see what is spatially distant. So, according to Hunt, K of E, or God's knowledge of E, is explanatorily dependent on E. He calls this

view complete, simple foreknowledge because God takes in the entire future at once.

This is distinct from what he calls incremental simple foreknowledge where, you know, God would be gaining, or his knowledge of the future would sort of grow by increments. With complete simple foreknowledge, God knows it all at once. That's Hunt's version of the view.

So, Hunt imagines a rock-paper-scissors game between God and Satan to illustrate God's use of complete simple foreknowledge to achieve an objective, in this case, winning the game. Hopefully, this isn't too silly of an idea, but it illustrates what he's getting at. God knows in advance what Satan will choose, and God uses this to make his own winning decision.

So, that's how God's simple foreknowledge is useful in a particular situation. That rock-scissors-paper game with Satan could be representative of any number of human situations. John Sanders argues that Hunt's view is problematic because it implies that God can't really prevent something from happening, which he knows will happen.

If God knows in advance that I'm going to have a car accident tomorrow, then because he knows it, he can't prevent it. And certainly, any prayers for my safety in that regard are going to be useless because God is bound by his own advanced knowledge of the event. Hunt responds by noting that prevention is not the only kind of providential activity.

There's prevention that God can use his complete, simple foreknowledge for, namely to prevent Satan from winning that rock-paper-scissors game. However, Hunt seems to miss the point of Sanders' criticism, at least, since complete simple foreknowledge does not seem to rule out the power of contrary choice. I'm sorry. It does rule out the power of contrary choice when it comes to God's actions in the future.

That was a point I was making earlier. This is why Sanders says that in Hunt's view, God would then know what he's going to do before he makes up his mind, and God would be unable to plan, anticipate, or decide regarding his own actions in a given case. If he knows in advance what he's going to do, then he has no grounds for deliberation or planning.

He just does, when the moment comes, what he knew in advance he was going to do. And that seems to take away a certain divine rationality or deliberation, which seems counterintuitive. So, there are problems with this view as well, the simple divine foreknowledge view.

Ironically, the way it inhibits divine freedom, even if it seems to protect human libertarian freedom, it seems to handcuff God. The third view, divine middle knowledge, also known as Molinism, was devised in the 16th century by the Jesuit priest, Jesuit theologian Louis de Molina. That's why it's called Molinism.

Craig begins his discussion of this issue in many cases by considering the question that Ebenezer Scrooge asks one of the spirits that visits him in A Christmas Carol. I guess it's the ghost of the future of Christmas. And Scrooge wants to know, you know, are these events which will come to pass or might come to pass? Closely related to that idea of might or could is the idea of what would happen given certain conditions that could be obtained.

That's where Molina focuses on the idea of so-called middle knowledge, God's knowledge of what would be. It isn't just what will be, it isn't just what could be or what might be, but what would be the case given certain conditions. These are counterfactual conditionals that lie between what could and what will be the case.

They provide the key to solving the riddles of providence, according to people like William Lane Craig. Here are some examples of counterfactual conditionals. If I were rich, I'd buy a Mercedes Benz.

That's not really true, but I guess maybe it's true of William Lane Craig. It's not true of me. If Goldwater had been president, then the U.S. would have won the Vietnam War. It's counterfactual.

If you ask her out, she'll say yes. Those are all counterfactual conditionals. The antecedents are not true.

I'm not rich, Goldwater was never president, and in this case, the person has not asked that girl out. But if those things had happened, if they did happen, the idea is that these other things would follow. That's a kind of counterfactual conditional, and knowledge of such things would be a kind of middle knowledge.

It has to do with the logical order of God's creative decrees. So, Molina notes that God has these two kinds of knowledge: natural knowledge and free knowledge. Natural knowledge is God's knowledge of all necessary truths, including all the possible worlds that he could create.

He has that knowledge, and he has free knowledge, and that's his knowledge of all contingent truths about the actual world, including past, present, and future. He has that kind of knowledge, but he also has something that falls in between those two. Molina suggests that God's natural knowledge is prior to any of his decrees, and his free knowledge results from his decrees.

He has knowledge prior to divine decrees and then knowledge God has as a consequence of his decrees. His knowledge of counterfactual truths lies in between those two things. It's in between his natural knowledge and his free knowledge, and that's why it's called middle knowledge.

It's God's knowledge of what libertarian free creatures would do in various circumstances. So, regarding Peter's denial of Christ, God knew what Peter would do when faced with this temptation, and God decreed the world in which Peter would face this temptation. That's why Jesus knew that he was going to deny him.

He had that middle knowledge. But God did not decree Peter's actual choice to deny Christ. So, that creates a buffer between God and evil.

God can decree a world in which he has all this middle knowledge without decreeing the actual evils in that world. Does that really work is the question of keeping God from being responsible for either inhibiting or violating human freedom or for the occurrence of evil. Craig goes on to criticize the alternative views on providence regarding the Augustinian Calvinist view.

He says that he appears to make God the author of evil by making God's foreordination of all things prior to his foreknowledge. That simple divine foreknowledge is problematic because it trivializes divine foreordination since the future can't be changed. If God knows it, then his decrees have nothing to accomplish.

That's a point that the open theist made against simple divine foreknowledge. And then, with regard to the open theist view, Craig says that's just radically unbiblical. Proponents of the other orthodox views would heartily agree with Craig on that point.

So, is divine middle knowledge a satisfactory view? There are certain objections that have been consistently made in criticism of divine middle knowledge, but the most significant of those is something called the grounding objection. And that problem is this: given a libertarian view of freedom, God cannot know what free creatures will choose or what they would choose in various situations because there's nothing that exists to make them true or to ground their truth. On what basis can God know that Peter will deny Christ if he's in that situation? That's the grounding objection.

Now, Craig replies by claiming that the grounding objection assumes what he calls the truth maker theory, which says that for any truth, there must be something that causes it to be true. However, according to Craig, the relation between a proposition and its truth is not a causal relation. Does that really overcome this problem is the question.

Is that an adequate response to the grounding objection? I don't think that the grounding objector has to assume the truth-maker theory. Any version of the correspondence theory of truth will do to make the grounding objection work. The question I think could be put like this: What exactly do the counterfactual truths in divine middle knowledge correspond to? That really begs for an answer.

Related to this is another problem. Maybe it's just an aspect of this grounding problem. It seems to me that Molinism assumes, in a very subtle way, a kind of determinism, a sort of determinism that the Molinist does not want to accept.

Because of this whole idea of what would be the case, when you analyze that, I think what you get is basically if plus must. To say that Peter would deny Christ in such and such circumstances means that if he's placed in a certain situation, then he will do such and such. If he's placed in the circumstance where he's tempted to deny Christ, then he will do it.

He must do it as a matter of necessity. If this is known by God, it's the same problem that faces simple divine foreknowledge. What God knows, whether in terms of simple divine foreknowledge or divine middle knowledge, if he knows it will be the case or would be the case, then given the circumstances, it must follow because God knows it.

So, there's a kind of deterministic aspect to this that Craig would, of course, deny and other Molinists deny, but I think it's really there, and it's a problem for divine middle knowledge. Lastly, there's the Augustinian Calvinist view, which says that God took no risks in creating the world and making human beings and that God foreordained all of the events of nature in human history. As is said in the Westminster Confession of Faith, some proponents of this view include Paul Helm, Steve Cowen, and myself.

I defend this view in a book I wrote called The Benefits of Providence. But there are problems with this view, too. There are problems with all four of these views, and a problem with the Augustinian Calvinist view is that it entails that human beings do not have libertarian freedom and, therefore, are not morally responsible.

That would be a major problem with this view, and I think it would be devastating if that's the case. But while it's true that the Augustinian Calvinist view is not consistent with a libertarian view of freedom, it's still consistent with a view of freedom that is plausible and reasonable, and that's the compatibilist view as we talked about. That's the freedom to act or not according to one's choices.

Even if one's choices are determined by one's psychological state and strongest motives and desires, a person is still free if they're able to act according to their choice. So, it places the locus of freedom in a different place than the libertarian

view. The libertarian view says that freedom has to do with the will not being completely causally determined.

The compatibilist says no; freedom has to do with a certain capacity to act upon the choices one makes, even though one's choices are determined. Some of the strengths of compatibilism include that it avoids the inconsistency problem regarding exhaustive divine foreknowledge, which we talked about, and libertarian freedom. Compatibilism also accords with ordinary language and how we identify the causes of our choices.

If somebody says, well, why did you choose that? Rare it is, someone would say, I don't know. Almost always, a person's able to identify the causes of their own choices, and in doing so, they're not denying their own freedom. In fact, they would say, this is why it was a free choice because I chose it because of this and this and this.

That shows it was a rational choice, and rational choices are free choices. Compatibilism also best accounts for freedom and the assurance of obedience in heaven. How can we make sense of our being free in heaven and that we will consistently obey God forever and ever if God isn't determining that or guaranteeing that we will never sin.

From the libertarian point of view, it seems to be problematic. Wow, you lose your freedom in heaven? For the compatibilist, no, you maintain your freedom in heaven just as you were free here. Just because God hedges you in and determines things in such a way that you never sin in heaven, that doesn't take away your freedom because you still have compatibilist freedom to act according to your choices.

He just guarantees that all your choices will be good ones. So those are some strengths and benefits of compatibilism. Another problem with the Augustinian Calvinist view is that it seems to suffer a more serious problem of evil.

It appears to make God the author of sin. The Augustinian Calvinist will respond to this by saying that, no, it's no worse of a problem on the Augustinian Calvinist view than it is on the other views of providence, which affirm exhaustive divine foreknowledge. The approach to the problem of evil that the Augustinian Calvinist typically takes is the greater good, the odyssey that God permitted evil in this world, even ordained horrific events like the crucifixion of Jesus in order to bring about greater good.

So the greater good, obviously, with regard to the worst evil that ever happened in human history, was the salvation of human beings through the finished atoning work of Christ. If God can redeem that evil for the greater good, he can redeem all the lesser evils as well. So that's typically the Augustinian Calvinist response there.

For more on my own development of this theological paradigm, this Augustinian Calvinist view of providence, check out my book, *The Benefits of Providence, A New Look at Divine Sovereignty*, where I explore the implications of this view of divine sovereignty on the practice of science, on our aesthetic outlook on the world, divine emotion, the problem of evil, as well as issues in Christian ethics and spiritual formation. I begin the book with a couple of chapters critiquing open theism before I launch into those positive benefits of the high view of divine sovereignty. So, that concludes our discussion of divine providence.

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