

METAPHYSICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENTS OFFERED IN DEFENSE OF UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Introduction

Anyone reading Romans or Ephesians encounters the term and concept of “election,” and if one takes the Bible as inspired, then the meaning of “election” has eternal implications in regards to salvation, evangelism, worship, and our view of God. James Boice and Philip Ryken note, “As long as we believe that God exercises *any* control over history or the lives of his people, then we must come to terms with the doctrine of election.”¹ Loraine Boettner corroborates this statement, “Every Christian must believe in some kind of election; for while the scriptures leave unexplained many things about the doctrine of Election [sic], they make very plain the FACT that there has been an election.”² Within Reformed³ circles, however, “election” has historically been viewed as the lens in which theology is studied. Thomas Nettles notes, “The doctrine of unconditional election, perhaps more than any other biblical doctrine, inspires a marvelous awe before the almighty God and humbles his creatures.”⁴ How does it do this? “The

¹James M. Boice and Philip G. Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 94 (emphasis in original).

²Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1954), 87 (emphasis in original).

³“Reformed” is being defined as that branch of Evangelicalism that has held to the theology of John Calvin. The system set forth by Calvin, and codified by Theodore Beza, is usually called “Five Point Calvinism” after the acrostic T.U.L.I.P. TULIP stands for: Total Depravity (T), Unconditional Election (U), Limited Atonement (L), Irresistible Grace (I), and Perseverance of the Saints (P).

⁴Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 267.

doctrine of election states that - before the foundation of the world - God chose certain individuals to salvation and ordained the means by which they are saved.”⁵ R. C. Sproul comments, “From all eternity, without any prior view of our human behavior, God has chosen some unto election and others unto reprobation. The ultimate destiny of the individual is decided by God before that individual is even born and without depending ultimately upon the human choice. . . . A human choice is made, . . . but the choice is made because God first chooses to influence the elect to make the right choice.”⁶ This view is understandably controversial, and its implications far reaching. If one is chosen by God from all eternity to salvation, then what part does one play in ones own salvation?

The importance of “unconditional election”⁷ cannot be overstated. “This doctrine of eternal and unconditional election has sometimes been called the ‘heart’ of the Reformed Faith. It emphasizes the sovereignty and grace of God in salvation.”⁸ Boettner adds, “No aspect of this elective choice [to salvation] is more constantly emphasized than that of its absolute sovereignty.”⁹ Since God’s very sovereignty is at stake it is important to understand what is being taught. Indeed, one must come to grips with “election” some how. Boice and Ryken note, “Every Christian has to believe in some kind of election. The concept appears too frequently to

⁵ibid.

⁶R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 136-7.

⁷“Unconditional election,” for the purposes of this project, will be defined in the historic Reformed sense. That is, “unconditional election” is an independent choice on the part of God with no other influence than by His determining will. This is not to neglect other understandings of “unconditional election,” such as that in the moderate Calvinistic approach.

⁸Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 96.

⁹ibid., 83.

deny it.”¹⁰ Though this topic is undoubtedly a multi-volume subject this study will be limited to two philosophical axioms and their implications to God and man.

Philosophical Arguments Offered For Unconditional Election

As with most theological problems the issue is not only hermeneutical but philosophical as well. One does not come to the text without some preconditions, but that does not mean one cannot be objective if we base our study (whether Theological or Philosophical) on first principles.¹¹ Unfortunately, many take as “first principles” axioms that may or may not be true. Those in the Reformed tradition usually have at-least two axioms that are merely assumed, but seldom defended or explained. These two foundational axioms are “that which brings God the most glory is true” and “God cannot know that which He does not determine.” The latter is perhaps more foundational to the overall issue, but the former is usually the first cited as the guiding principle of interpretation.

That Which Brings God the Most Glory is True

Boice and Ryken state, “It is right for God to be glorified. God *is* glorious. He should be recognized as such.”¹² And who should argue? *That* God receives the glory (all of it) is not disputed. What is disputed is *what* exactly brings God glory. Nettles states, “What brings the

¹⁰Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 99.

¹¹First Principles undeniably apply to reality. They are self evident and foundational to all thought and knowledge. See Norman Geisler, “First Principles,” in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999) 250-53.

¹²*ibid.*, 109-10.

greatest glory to God? Nothing tends so significantly toward that end as the true praising of his grace and the proper understanding of the freeness of his gift of salvation.”¹³ God is not only glorified in saving humans, but also, according to Nettles, in having His creation recognize His attributes.¹⁴

However, in the Reformed system there is one thing that cannot bring God glory, thus, it must not (indeed cannot) be. Nettles gives insight to what that one thing is, “Such a scheme [where God foreknows free choices] can offer no means by which all events will reflect the power and glory of God.”¹⁵ Boice and Ryken add, “[for] if we have a part in salvation, however small, then our love for God is diminished by just that amount. If it is all of God, then our love for him must be boundless.”¹⁶ Thus, in this line of thought, not only is our love for God diminished, but any diminishment would not bring glory to God - which is not possible. To counter such an unthinkable idea as God not receiving all of the glory, Reformed thinkers cultivated the idea of “Unconditional Election.” Nettles notes the purpose of unconditional election is, “to give sole glory to God.”¹⁷ As such, Boettner notes the obvious consequence is that God should save anyone at all.¹⁸ The implications of this, though, are not without controversy. Wayne Grudem remarks, “Reformed theologians say that God deems *his own glory* more

¹³Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 273.

¹⁴Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 109.

¹⁵Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 276.

¹⁶Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 111.

¹⁷Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 267.

¹⁸Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 97.

important than saving everyone, and that (according to Rom. 9) God's glory is also furthered by the fact that some are not saved."¹⁹

Many have objected on this very point, that the salvation of God electing individuals apart from *any* type of condition on man's part is arbitrary. Boettner responds, "God is truly sovereign, but this sovereignty is not exercised in an arbitrary way. Rather it is a sovereignty exercised in harmony with His other attributes, especially His justice, holiness, and wisdom."²⁰ God's justice reigns supreme in Reformed theology. "As Ruler and Judge, God is at liberty to deal with a world of sinners according to His own good pleasure. He can rightfully pardon some and condemn others; can rightfully give His saving grace to one and not to another. Since all have sinned and come short of His glory, He is free to have mercy on whom He will have mercy."²¹ Because everyone deserves nothing except hell, "grace is given to one [sinner] and withheld from another as He sees best."²² And since God is eternal Boettner logically concludes, "If it is just for God to forbear saving some persons after they are born, it was just for Him to form that purpose before they were born, or in eternity."²³

This view has been rejected by many for various reasons, but Reformed scholars have attempted to deal with objections head on, in various ways. To the question "Should not God show mercy to everyone?" Boice and Ryken answer, "The operative word in the question is

¹⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2000), 684 (emphasis in original).

²⁰Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 128.

²¹ibid., 95.

²²ibid., 115.

²³ibid., 117.

‘should’ . . . but as soon as we use that word we are back in the category of justice and are no longer dealing with mercy. If there is any ‘should’ in the matter, the issue is no longer mercy. We are talking about justice, and . . . justice can do nothing but send every human being to hell. It is not justice that we need from God; it is grace.”²⁴ “Justice” is appealed to as “justification” for their view. Nettles notes that God is not obligated to show grace to anyone because it would not be grace if He had to.²⁵ However, God must (indeed, He is obligated to) act out of justice. For Boice and Ryken comment, “He glorifies his name in displaying wrath toward sinners and the riches of his glory toward those who are being saved because this is the only right thing for God to do. It is his very justice, not his injustice, that causes him to operate in this fashion. If we object to this, then our objection only shows that we are operating by a different and therefore by sinful standard.”²⁶ Notice, God “glorifies His name in showing wrath” because it is “the only right thing for God to do.” But if that is the only *right* thing for God to do then He should not show mercy as He does. Justice is obligatory, grace and mercy are not. Could not God get glory if He *were* to show grace and mercy to everyone as well?²⁷ Boice and Ryken would likely comment that God *does* get glory in mercy and they link it in the above quotation. What they are having to defend, though, is the idea that God must somehow receive glory for everyone *not* being saved. The most obvious route in defense of this idea is through God’s justice. Nettles

²⁴Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 108.

²⁵Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 279.

²⁶Notice that to disagree with their assessment is to bring the charge that one is operating on a sinful standard. Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 110.

²⁷I am not advocating Universal Salvation. The point is to show that merely defining whatever God does is glorious, and that it is glorious because God does it is circular reasoning.

comments, “God is strictly just in condemning those who reject him and continue in unbelief, while he shows mercy and compassion on those who are placed by his Spirit in the beloved one.”²⁸ One may reply, the reason one continues in unbelief is because God has not elected them. The causal agent, in this scenario, for active unbelief and refusal to repent is actually God. Thus, the issue is not really about God’s justice but His love (or lack thereof).

Thus, “justice” is seen as the ground for people not being saved. Boice and Ryken comment, “*All human beings deserve hell, not heaven. . . . If any individual is to be saved, it must be by mercy only, and mercy falls in an entirely different category from justice. . . . Even if God should save people on the basis of something in them - faith, good works, or something else - this would actually be an injustice, since individuals and their backgrounds are unequal.*”²⁹

Here Reformed theologians “turn the table” on the questioner. How can it be just of God to elect someone based on something in them? All people are different and come from various backgrounds that may not be conducive to reception of the gospel. For them not to be saved and others to be saved would be an injustice. And that is simply unacceptable. Thus, the only alternative is God “justly” condemns people that really cannot do otherwise.

Some have modified the question to the Reformed theologian, “why does God not show mercy to everyone?” Boice and Ryken answer, “[This question is] more difficult than the [previous question] posed . . . since it asks about God’s reasons for doing something, and there is no way we can know those reasons unless God reveals them to us. . . . A perfectly legitimate answer to our question is that the ‘why’ is none of our business! God does not owe us an

²⁸Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 274.

²⁹Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 107 (emphasis in original).

answer.”³⁰ Boettner agrees, “That belongs to His secret counsels.”³¹ The answer to the question, then, is “we don’t know.” Again, appeal to God’s justice is made, “man cannot measure the justice of God by his own comprehension, and our modesty should be such that when the reason for some of God’s works lies hidden we nevertheless believe Him to be just.”³² But why cannot God be considered unjust for condemning people for something they literally cannot control (e.g., sinning)? Nettles answers, “He cannot be considered unjust for condemning those who justly deserve condemnation yet never come to him in repentance nor even desire it. They cannot be considered guiltless when they repent only if omnipotent power causes them to do so.”³³ In this view, people are justly condemned as sinners (even though they cannot help *but* sin out of necessity) because the only alternative would be to say God is unjust, which is unthinkable.

But what of the elect? How does God choose them? Sproul answers, “though the reason for choosing us does not lie in us but in the sovereign divine pleasure, we may rest assured that the sovereign divine pleasure is a good pleasure.”³⁴ Why is it a good pleasure? Because God said so? No doubt the divine pleasure is good, but why does this “good pleasure” not extend beyond the elect? Again, God’s justice is appealed to, but what does it mean for God to be just? Boice and Ryken ask, “how are we to understand God’s justice? We can start with the fact that God is

³⁰ibid., 108-9.

³¹Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 96.

³²Ibid., 124.

³³Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 274.

³⁴Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 158.

just, as well as with the fact that he elects some persons to salvation and passes by others.”³⁵ So they understand God’s justice - by what? This is what is called in logic *begging the question*: “What is just? That which God does. What does God do? That which is just.” This is obviously circular. No doubt God is just, but not merely because God says He is just. He is just because He does what is right. And the basic question is, “is it right for God to elect some persons to salvation and pass by others?” There may be multiple answers to this question, but the important point is that the standard of “justice” is defined as God punishes sinners (no doubt a just action), not because God does what is right, but because that is what God does. This is voluntarism at its finest.³⁶ Boice and Ryken then go on the offensive, “[election] *is* just, and God is right in choosing some and passing by others. But - and here is the important thing - election is the *only* thing that is just. Election alone starts with all people at the same point and on the same level, all of them deserving hell. Then it saves some and passes others, entirely apart from anything in the elect or reprobate persons themselves.”³⁷ Boice and Ryken just changed the rules! Previously they stated election is a display of God’s mercy *not* justice, but now *election* demonstrates God’s justice. Just say the words “God is just” and who is to argue? Of course God is just, and Reformed thinkers have used the statement to cover any situation that contradicts their system.

Nettles states, “to deny unconditional election on the basis of an apparent ‘unfairness’ assumes that God is under some just obligation to grant all men the same measure of grace.”³⁸

³⁵Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 106-7.

³⁶Voluntarism states that something is good because God wills it to be such. This will be discussed in the section below on “Response to That Which Brings God the Most Glory is True.”

³⁷*ibid.*, 108.

³⁸Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 279.

Boice and Ryken add, “as soon as we begin to think that God owes us something or that God *must* do something, we limit him and diminish his glory.”³⁹ It is true God does not owe us anything, but saying God *must* do something does not necessarily diminish his glory. For several pages the point has been belabored that God *must* do something: demonstrate justice. Is God’s glory diminished because He must show justice? God is free and all those in the discussion believe God will, and should, receive all of the glory. But simply not agreeing with Reformed thinkers is enough to bring the charge that one is diminishing God’s glory. Reformed thinkers have hedged the debate in their favor. To say “that which brings God the most glory is true” is usually to be agreed by everyone. All they must do, then, is assert any other system or thought as not bringing God glory (whether the assertion is true or not) and they win the debate.

God Cannot Know That Which He Does Not Determine

In hedging the debate in their favor, Reformed theologians have made a philosophical error that is at the heart of the discussion. Boice and Ryken assert, “when the Bible speaks of divine foreknowledge, it has in view the gracious doctrine of unconditional election.”⁴⁰ Even though the Bible actually does not use the term *unconditional* in relation to election this is added since, as noted above, election is from eternity and since God does not change it follows election does not change. And since it is solely of God and no part of man it is unconditional. Boice and Ryken assert, “if election is based on what God foresees an individual might do, what could he possibly foresee in a spiritually dead sinner other than rejection of the gospel? To suppose that

³⁹Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 105.

⁴⁰*ibid.*, 101.

God could see something that is impossible apart from his determining will is irrational.”⁴¹

Some non-Reformed theologians have espoused a doctrine known as “conditional election.” In this scenario, election is based on the foreseen faith of the individual. Boice and Ryken counter, “[conditional election] means that God bases his election of an individual on foresight, foreseeing whether or not a particular individual will have faith. This destroys the very meaning of the word [election], of course, for such election is really not election at all. It actually means that men and women elect themselves, and God is reduced to a bystander who responds to their free choice. Logically and causally, even if not chronologically, God’s choice follows man’s choice.”⁴² Since God’s determining purpose is in eternity it cannot be the case that “man elect themselves” as Boettner explains, “all of the decrees [of God] are eternal. They have a logical, but not a chronological, relationship.”⁴³ Since there is no “chronological relationship” Boice and Ryken argue, “election cannot rest on foreknowledge of what might happen, because in the sovereignty of God, the only things that can be foreknown are those that are predetermined, and this means that election must be prior to faith.”⁴⁴ Boettner, likewise, understands God’s foreknowledge as resting on His pre-arranged plan.⁴⁵ Why must it be this way? Boettner explains, “foreordination [election] in general cannot rest on foreknowledge; for only that which is certain can be foreknown, and only that which is predetermined can be

⁴¹Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 100.

⁴²*ibid.*, 99.

⁴³Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 129.

⁴⁴Boice and Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace*, 100.

⁴⁵Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 99.

certain.”⁴⁶ Boettner (and most Reformed theologians) take “predetermine,” “foreordination,” “chosen,” and “elect” as synonymous. When Boettner’s statement is put in logical form it looks like this:

1. All that is predetermined is certain.
2. All that is certain is foreknown.
3. All that is foreknown is predetermined.

This is an invalid argument. It commits the fallacy of illicit minor.⁴⁷ However, most Reformed theologians have held this exact line of reasoning in support of their view that God cannot know that which He does not determine. Yet, this has become the standard call among Reformed defenders. There is, however, one more option in relation to divine election that Reformed theologians must deal with: the claim that election is in *accordance* with foreknowledge?

Rejection of “Determinately Knowing”

In *Chosen But Free*, Norman Geisler has attempted a moderating view of divine election.⁴⁸ Geisler attempts to relate the work of election and freedom from a metaphysical perspective. He shows that in God, since He is simple in His Being, His attributes are simultaneous with one another, one not preceding another. In an attempt to understand this

⁴⁶ibid.

⁴⁷The argument could be valid, however, if the conclusion were “All that is predetermined is foreknown.” But that is *not* what Boettner wants to prove. Boettner wants the desired conclusion, but the only way this can be valid is if the premises were changed:

1. All that is certain is predetermined.
2. All that is foreknown is certain.
3. All that is foreknown is predetermined.

However, Boettner, and most Reformed theologians, are not likely to accept this argument because premise 1 is not deterministic enough. For premise 1 could allow that God predetermines on a basis other than divine will.

⁴⁸Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1999).

relation he uses the phrase “knowingly determine and determinately knowing.”⁴⁹ But this has produced controversy in the Reformed camp. James R. White states, “it is somewhat startling that generations of Christian theologians could have missed such a simple truth and as a result have needlessly argued over this issue for centuries. But does the simplicity of the Being of God necessitate that there really is no logical relationship between foreknowledge and predetermination? It is at this very point that Geisler’s thesis is subject to devastating criticism.”⁵⁰

White then goes on to approvingly quote John Feinberg from a debate he and Geisler participated in that was later published.⁵¹ Feinberg charges, “Geisler treats God’s thoughts as part of his essence and/or attributes, and since God’s essence is simple, Geisler concludes that God’s thoughts must not be distinguishable into sequential parts. That is a mistake of the first order!”⁵² Feinberg’s takes issue with the idea that God’s thoughts are part of his essence. He continues, “such things [as God knowing all at once] are true of God not in virtue of his simplicity but in virtue of his omniscience and sovereign will.”⁵³ One wonders what Feinberg means by omniscience if not knowledge. He continues, “Geisler’s fundamental problem stems

⁴⁹This view will be discussed below in the section “Response to God Cannot Know That Which He Does Not Determine.” *ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁰James R. White, *The Potters Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler’s “Chosen But Free”* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), 57.

⁵¹David Basinger and Randall Basinger, ed., *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

⁵²John Feinberg, “John Feinberg’s Response,” in *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 86.

⁵³*ibid.*

from his understanding of God's attributes as they relate to his actions. To say that God is simple means that his *being* is not divisible into parts. But God's thoughts and mental acts such as decreeing, foreknowing and so on are *not* part of his essence or attributes any more than his acts in the world, such as creating or preserving the universe, are part of his essence or attributes."⁵⁴ Thus, Feinberg puts God's knowledge in the same category as God's actions. Feinberg further notes that even granting God simple knowledge does not mean there is no logical order to what He foreordains.⁵⁵ Feinberg supplies this illustration to support his point, "God always knew that Christ would be born and would also die. But he also understood that logically (as well as chronologically) one of those events had to precede the other. That does not mean that God knew one of those events before he knew the other. It only means that in *knowing* both simultaneously, he knows the logical and chronological relation between the two events."⁵⁶ Feinberg proceeds, "God foreordained both events simultaneously, but that does not mean he did not recognize the logical point that no one can be foreordained to die who has not been foreordained to be born. Making such claims as I have only eliminates the simplicity of God if one confuses his being and attributes with his acts (mental)."⁵⁷ Feinberg, thus, bifurcates God's knowledge and being. Since Feinberg considers these separate he continues as though Geisler has not even contributed to the conversation on relating divine foreknowledge and human

⁵⁴ibid.

⁵⁵ibid.

⁵⁶ibid.

⁵⁷Feinberg, "John Feinberg's Response," in *Predestination & Free Will*, 86.

freedom.⁵⁸

Evaluation and Response to the Philosophical Arguments for Unconditional Election

Metaphysical Implications if Unconditional Election is True

Implications for Man

Boettner has identified the main implication for man if unconditional election is true. He states, “A man is not saved because he believes in Christ; he believes in Christ because he is saved.”⁵⁹ This is the main implication and the main argument against unconditional election. It is highly questionable that salvation precedes belief. For if man is saved apart from any condition that he does, is, works, or acts then it really does not matter what he does, is, works, or acts. This is because he cannot *do* anything to change that which is already determined as such. This fatalism, while denied by Reformed thinkers, is endemic to the issue and is why many oppose their theology. Nevertheless, Boettner’s statement is perfectly consistent with Reformed theology. The only ones saved are those God chooses, thus they are the only ones who believe.

To counter this fatalism, Boettner puts forward a “positive” theme, “That men are saved only through the unmerited love and grace of God finds its full and honest expression only in the doctrines of Calvinism.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, only Boettner’s brand of Calvinism grants God glory and

⁵⁸ibid., 87.

⁵⁹Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 101.

⁶⁰ibid., 95.

does not diminish God’s love. Since this is the working assumption of all Reformed thinkers, it is very difficult to discuss whether they have the “correct” view of God and man, because their view is correct by definition. To disagree with their conclusions is likely to bring this charge, “Those who oppose this doctrine [of unconditional election] do so because they neither understand nor consider the majesty and holiness of God, nor the corruption and guilt of their own nature.”⁶¹ To simply disagree, with their brand of election is to incur ridicule as one not knowledgeable of Scripture or ignorant of the sinful nature of man, and, of course, render God less glory. This, however, is not an argument it is an *ad hominem* response.

This leads to the last implication for man if unconditional election is true. Boettner explains, “If, as the Scripture and experience tell us, all men are by nature in a state of guilt and depravity from which they are wholly unable to deliver themselves and have no claim whatever on God for deliverance, it follows that if any are saved God must choose out those who shall be the objects of His grace.”⁶² Notice, Boettner only allows “unconditional election” as an alternative to the problem of depravity. That God could be the source and provider of salvation for all and that man could freely receive that gift is not even entertained. It is simply dismissed as man “deliver[ing] themselves.” Whether this is the case or not, does not matter. For Reformed thinkers, the only alternative is an active and independent act of God’s determinative will.

Implications for God

The most important implication for God that unconditional election raises is the issue of

⁶¹ibid., 148.

⁶²ibid., 95.

voluntarism. *Voluntarism* is the view that “something is right because God willed it, rather than God willing it because it is right in accordance with His own unchangeable nature.”⁶³ Most voluntarists state the problem logically:

1. Either God wills it because He knows it, or else He knows it because He wills it.
2. But if God wills it because He knows it, then God is not supreme because there is something outside Him to which He is subject.
3. Hence, God knows it because He wills it.⁶⁴

This, however, is an invalid argument. True, the form of the argument is valid, but it presents a false dilemma. Why can it not be both? Why can God not both know and will something simultaneously? This is not logically contradictory, and so it must at least be a possibility.

Analogously, if God *is* the Good, and not bifurcated, then why not God’s knowledge and will?

Reformed thought reflects this voluntarism. It essentially says, “God does what is just . . . and justice is what God does,” but this is not an argument for one’s position, it is circular reasoning. The Reformed thinker, however, does have one more objection. “It is self-evident that God is just,” just as it is self-evident that God is good. However, while this is true as being self-evident to God, it is not necessarily self-evident to us. In fact, it is this very point that is at issue. All agree that God is just, however, does the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election and reprobation present the idea of a “just” God? Reformed thinkers simply define God as “just” no matter what God does (or more accurately, what they say God does), but as shown this merely begs the question.

⁶³Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 235.

⁶⁴Adapted from Norman Geisler, “Essentialism, Divine,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 218.

The other implication for God if “unconditional election” is true, is the concept of Reprobation. Much of the debate over election deals *not* with the elect, but with the reprobate. Since God alone is the one who decides eternal destinies then the reprobate are punished for something they literally cannot control. Thus, many are repulsed that while God actively chooses the elect, He reprobates others. Whether actively or passively, the results are still the same. People suffer in Hell, not because “they reject God”⁶⁵ (which Reformed thinkers assert), but because they are not elect. This questions God’s omnibenevolence. For if God can irresistibly save anyone, then He could irresistibly save everyone. But He does not. The opponent to the Reformed position states this is not possible for an omnibenevolent Being. An omnibenevolent Being will save all that He can. Opponents to the Reformed position asks, how can the love and grace of God send people to Hell apart from their sin? The Reformed theologian replies God did not! To which the opponent replies that it is little consolation for the person in Hell that they are there *not* because of their sin, but because God did not elect them.

Response to Philosophical Arguments

Response to That Which Brings God the Most Glory is True

As already noted the problem with the axiom “that which brings God the most glory is true” is that virtually anything can be defined as something that brings God glory. This ushers in, usually, an overt voluntarism. Ironically, this argument can be turned on the Reformed thinker by a deist. For example, a mechanic that creates a machine that does not need “fixing” receives

⁶⁵Indeed, no one can reject or accept God in Reformed theology, since they are incapable of making any choice one way or the other.

more glory than one that needs to perform “repairs.” Analogously, a God that does *not* perform miracles should receive more glory than a God that *does* do miracles. Further, atheists have used similar arguments. For example, if God is all powerful, then He could create a world where no one experiences evil or pain. We *do* experience evil and pain, therefore, God should *not* receive all the glory because He is not worthy of it. While all Christians agree that God should, and will, receive all the glory, the means by which God receives all the glory is what is debated. This strikes at the very heart of the debate. Reformed thinkers are convinced that the *only* way for God to receive all the glory is to be the *only* active agent on His objects of grace. Opponents, note that reprobation (as conceived by Reformed thinkers) does *not* bring God glory and, therefore, cannot be true. So really, both sides think that what brings God the most glory is true. They simply disagree on what actually *brings* God glory.

Response to God Cannot Know That Which He Does Not Determine

C. Gordon Olson, though admittedly not a philosopher,⁶⁶ correctly states, “Not only does that notion [God cannot know that which He does not determine] contradict Peter’s simple statement [1 Peter 1:1-2], but it also makes God’s omniscience a contingent attribute, subject to the activity of His decretive will. This is a highly objectionable view in that it denies the infiniteness of one of God’s essential and necessary attributes. God’s actions always flow from His attributes, never the reverse.”⁶⁷ And this is the problem. Reformed theologians make an

⁶⁶C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive, Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 507.

⁶⁷*ibid.*, 161.

attribute of God (i.e., His knowledge) subject to an activity of God. Since this is understandably problematic, Reformed thinkers must make God's knowledge *also* an activity of God. As Feinberg stated, "God's thoughts and mental acts such as decreeing, foreknowing and so on are *not* part of his essence or attributes any more than his acts in the world."⁶⁸

Is Feinberg correct that God's knowledge is not part of His essence? Aquinas actually answered this charge over seven hundred years beforehand, "It must be said that the act of God's intellect is His substance [or essence]. For if His act of understanding were other than His substance, then something else, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] says (*Metaph. xii*), would be the act and perfection of the divine substance, to which the divine substance would be related, as potentiality to act, which is altogether impossible; because the act of understanding is the perfection and act of the one understanding."⁶⁹ In other words, for God to know something in anyway *other* than in His very being is to have His *being* moved by something else, and this is not possible in God, since He already has every perfection - including knowledge. Aquinas continues, "now in God there is no form which is something other than His existence, as shown above (Q. 3). Hence as His essence itself is also His intelligible species, it necessarily follows that His act of understanding must be His essence and His existence."⁷⁰ That is, God's knowledge is one *with* His essence. It is God's very *being* to know. Aquinas concludes, "In God, intellect, and the object understood, and the intelligible species, and His act of understanding are entirely one and the same. Hence, when God is said to be understanding, no kind of multiplicity

⁶⁸Feinberg, "John Feinberg's Response," in *Predestination & Free Will*, 86.

⁶⁹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.14.4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981).

⁷⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.14.4.

is attached to His substance.”⁷¹ In God, knowledge is not merely an activity, but His very nature.

The Reformed thinker may object, that this still does not mean there is not a *logical* order between God’s knowledge and God’s decree’s, thus God must still determine in order to know. Again, Aquinas states, “In the divine knowledge there is no discursion [logical thinking] . . . God sees all things in one (thing), which is Himself. Therefore, God sees all things together, and not successively.”⁷² What this means is that God does not know the *way* we know. We know by logic and succession, but in God all knowledge is intuitive, thus it cannot be logical.⁷³ Thus, while it is false that God cannot know that which He does not determine, there is a corollary that God determines that which He knows.⁷⁴ Of course, God knows chronological truths as well as logical truths. However, God does not *know* the way *we know*. God does not *know* logically, but intuitively, yet God *does* know logical truths. It appears that Feinberg confuses God’s knowledge between logical propositions and *operational* execution.⁷⁵ This is a point Feinberg, and by extension White, miss.

God’s knowledge is the determiner of things not the reverse. Aquinas states, “for the knowledge of God is to all creatures what the knowledge of the artificer is to things made by his art.”⁷⁶ One imagines the potter and clay illustration that is used by Paul (Rom. 9:21). However,

⁷¹ibid.

⁷²Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.14.7.

⁷³This does not mean that God is irrational. It simply means that God does not think in logical sequence.

⁷⁴This does not mean God determines *all* that He knows, for His knowledge is infinite.

⁷⁵Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), 185-6.

⁷⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.14.8.

what is being stated is not that the creator creates something and *then* knows it by how it was created. Rather, the creator *knows* something and then determines to create it as such, to the extent that He wills. Aquinas continues, “It is manifest that God causes things by His intellect, since His being is His act of understanding; and hence His knowledge must be the cause of things, in so far as His will is joined to it.”⁷⁷ That is, while God knows more than He creates, *what* He creates is an act of His will. As such, His knowledge is the cause of things inasmuch as His will determines.

This brings the discussion full circle. It is because of God’s infinite and simultaneous knowledge that Geisler has chosen the phrase “Determinately Knowing and Knowingly Determine.” For the two are not distinct and one does not precede the other. They are both equal and simultaneous. While Geisler may have been the first to propose the phrase “determinately knowing,” the concept has been around since at least Aquinas. The reason Reformed thinkers reject this phrase and subject God’s knowledge to an activity of God and not part of His *Being* is because they perceive (incorrectly) that God must be determiner of everything in order for God to maintain sovereign control. But this line of reasoning has been shown to be invalid. Yet, while it is correct to say “God must be the determiner and sovereign,” the mode in which they understand God’s determination and sovereignty is wrong. God does not determine apart from his knowledge or vice versa.

Conclusion

There is much in the Reformed thought that is to be praised and appreciated. Their

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

staunch defense of God's absolute holiness and glory is of noteworthy respect. Further, they stress a welcome corrective on the sinfulness of man that is lacking in a culture where many deny that humans even sin. Many of the statements themselves made by Reformed thinkers are not inherently incorrect. For example, there is a sense in that which brings God the most glory is true. Likewise, there is a sense in which God does know that which He determines. It is only the meanings they pour into these statements (with the accompanying implications) that are to be corrected. These positive contributions are to be commended and welcomed within theological and philosophical dialogue.

This is not to say that serious problems do not remain. First, their system holds to a voluntaristic view of God to justify their doctrines of unconditional election and reprobation. Second, they have relied on invalid argumentation to justify their voluntaristic view of God. Third, as a consequence man is an amoral being, since he cannot do otherwise than sin. Fourth, God's omnibenevolence is called into question. Since their view of God reprobates man based on nothing they have done, thus God punishes people for something they literally cannot control. Fifth, they deny God's essential nature by bifurcating His knowledge with His being. Sixth, they confuse the primacy of knowledge in the determining will of God. Finally, they confuse primary causes with secondary causes. As Aquinas states, "God gives grace to a person, and pre-ordains that He will give it, because He knows beforehand that He will make good use of that grace . . . But [some] seem to have drawn a distinction between that which flows from grace, and that which flows from free will, as if the same thing cannot come from both. . . . Now there is no distinction between what flows from free will, and what is of predestination; as there is no

distinction between what flows from a secondary cause and from a first cause.”⁷⁸ Thus, it appears that the foundational error in the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election is theologians not understanding the concept of “Determinately Knowing and Knowingly Determining.”

⁷⁸Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.23.5.