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# The Openness of God: A Logical Position?

reviewed by Hollibert E. Phillips

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Does God know everything that's going to happen to me? Can God foresee all my actions and decisions? With these questions, Richard Rice introduces his "open view" of God, the central thesis of which is that "reality itself and . . . God's experience of reality are essentially open rather than closed;" that "God experiences the events of the world . . . as they happen"; and that "not even God knows the future in all its details" (p. 8).

Rice's open view of God, certainly reminiscent of Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (Humanities Press, 1929), bears many striking resemblances to Edgar S. Brightman's notion of a finite God, which he argues very strongly for in his *A Philosophy of Religion* (Prentice-Hall, 1940). For example, Brightman claims that the idea of an absolute God "removes all incentive to moral reform" and "denies the reality of time." Rice similarly argues that "absolute foreknowledge . . . excludes creaturely freedom," and acceptance of it "results in the ultimate collapse of all temporal distinctions." But enough of resemblances.

Perhaps the main strength of the book is that its central thesis is kept very much alive throughout. In this regard, not even chapter titles are overlooked. Every title, with the exception of the first, incorporates the phrase

"the openness of God." But its weaknesses are scarcely less pervasive.

Given the contentiousness inherent in the nature of the thesis the author undertakes to defend, one is led naturally to expect not only a certain logical rigor, but a tentativeness that at least recognizes the diversity of relevant published opinion. Rice promises something of the former, but hardly lives up to it — at least not enough to sustain his central contention. The latter does not appear to have been a consideration. Indeed, one senses quite early that the work is much less an inquiry into intractable difficulties than it is a series of claims and the assertion of their resolution.

The crucial turn in Rice's reasoning occurs in his first chapter in which, on purportedly logical grounds, he rejects the conventional and "widely accepted view" of God's omniscience and installs in its place the open view which, he claims, "is more faithful to the biblical portrait," and, paradoxically enough, represents "a way of looking at God that most Christians take for granted."

But just what is this turning point, this bit of logic, upon which so much is made to depend? It is the claim that "the idea of absolute foreknowledge excludes creaturely freedom." That is to say, according to Rice's reasoning, the idea of absolute foreknowledge and the idea of creaturely freedom are related to each other as logical contradictions: if the one is true then the other is false; they cannot both be true, and they cannot both be false — to affirm the one is to deny the other. On the strength of what he calls

common human experience and human intuition, and a metaphysical claim about what can or cannot be known about the future, Rice affirms creaturely freedom, and by immediate inference, denies the proposition that God is omniscient. A serious flaw at this point, however, is Rice's overreliance on logic to settle matters of fact. That, logic cannot do. Whether the reality called God is or is not omniscient is obviously a matter decidable neither by inference from intuited or empirically derived premises, nor by the analysis of concepts.

**B**ut more on the presumed contradiction. Why does Rice perceive the two ideas as contradictories? Because, he reasons, creaturely freedom by *definition* entails an indefiniteness of sorts, whereas absolute foreknowledge — especially of human actions and decisions — presupposes a definiteness about the future that contradicts creaturely freedom. But does not this conclusion come all too easily?

As Alvin Plantinga notes in his *God, Freedom, and Evil* (William B. Eerdmans, 1977), "the claim that God's omniscience is incompatible with human freedom is based upon a confusion." God's foreknowledge, or anyone's for that matter, imposes no causal necessity whatever on any state of affairs that is foreknown. All that the claim to foreknowledge entails is that if it is true of any individual, say John, that that individual will in fact choose to do and follow through in doing some certain something, say purchase a 1985 blue Lincoln, that whoever foreknows that state of affairs to be true, *necessarily knows* it to be true, merely by virtue of *its* being true. But it certainly does not follow from this that causal necessity is thereby imposed

on the state of affairs so that John *necessarily buys* a 1985 blue Lincoln. Put another way, we may say, in the case of John, that God *necessarily knows* what John will in fact choose to do and follow through in doing, and not that God knows what John will *necessarily choose* to do.

To reason as Rice does that John is not free since the fact of foreknowledge *a priori* guarantees that John cannot change his mind and buy, for instance, a 1985 brown Rabbit, is entirely irrelevant to the issue of creaturely freedom. The fact that John cannot change his decision in 1985 no more denies creaturely freedom than the fact that having chosen to buy a Lincoln yesterday, I cannot today choose *to have done* differently. The logic is precisely the same in each case.

The remaining chapters of the book deal with creation, evil, the future, providence, prophecy, predestination, and personal religion. In these discussions, Rice attempts many reinterpretations (a revisionist exegesis?) in an effort to show how they are illuminated by the open view. On these matters, his greatest difficulty arises when he attempts to reconcile his view with certain quite specific prophetic utterances. The reconciliation at times appears uncomfortably forced, if not downright implausible. Since foreknowledge of free acts is "logically impossible," Rice leaves God drawing very heavily on His experiences and working out, albeit well-founded, probabilities. True, Rice does concede that "God knows which of the available options a person will likely select," but a little reflection suffices to show that this is an empty claim.

All in all, the book makes for quite interesting reading. But one may be excused for wondering whether God knows that He knows so little.