OMNISCIENCE AND DELIBERATION

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The theological doctrine of divine omniscience has occasioned a number of problems. Recent literature has focused on both the relation between omniscience and human freedom and the relation between omniscience and immutability. There is another issue respecting omniscience, suggested by Richard Taylor, which I would like to address in this paper, that is, the relation between God's omniscience and deliberation, both divine and human. Two problems arise: can a God who is omniscient foreknow any future actions or events which result from deliberation, and can a God who is omniscient act intentionally in the world?

God and intentional acts

Before we develop the problems, let us first say something about God and intentional acts. Theists generally hold that God performs intentional actions. He acts purposively, in a goal-directed manner, to bring about what he desires. Many examples from biblical writings can be cited: he created the universe, he brought plagues on the Egyptians to get them to free the children of Israel, he responds to prayers, he reveals himself to particular persons.

God can also act non-intentionally, i.e. know what will happen, act in such a way that it happens, but not intend that it happen. This is the case where the bringing about of certain evils (pain and suffering) is a result of the performance of a good action. Though God intends and acts to bring about the good, the action is such that evil also results. The evil is foreseen but not intended. For example, God performed the good act of creating human persons. One can also say that God created human persons who do evil. But though God intended to create human persons and foresaw that they would use that freedom to do evil, he did not intend to create human persons who do evil. That is, though his creation of persons was intentional, his creation of persons who do evil was non-intentional.

A further question concerns whether God can act unintentionally, i.e. act in such a way that something happens but neither know that it will happen nor intend that it happen. Examples of this sort of action include actions done acci-
dentally, inadvertently, or mistakenly. For example, suppose that in reaching for the salt shaker I knock over my water glass. Knocking over the glass was an action that I performed, but it was not the result of an intention to do that; it was done accidentally, because of my clumsiness or lack of attention to what I was doing. Or suppose that while walking down the sidewalk, I trip over a raised section and begin to fall. I extend my arms to break my fall. It can be said of my extending my arms that it was an action, for it was a movement over which I have control under normal circumstances. Yet it was unintentional, for it was a reflex action in response to my tripping. Or suppose that in dialing your telephone number, I “go on automatic” and dial my home number and get my wife instead. Though I dialed intentionally, I dialed her unintentionally. Now since God is perfect, there would be no actions of his which would result from divine fraility. And since he is omniscient, nothing unexpected can happen. He cannot be surprised by what occurs, though of course he can react to events that take place.4 Neither can he do anything by mistake or ignorance. But if he cannot be surprised or mistaken or unknowledgeable, there is no action which proceeds from ignorance, and if there is no action which can proceed from any divine deficiency, there can be for God no unintentional actions.

In sum, the theist rightly ascribes to God intentional and non-intentional actions, but not unintentional actions.

Deliberation

What is it to deliberate? Consider a couple of examples.

(a) I deliberated about whether to vote for Adlai Stevenson in 1956.
(b) I deliberated whether to buy my wife candy or flowers for our anniversary.
(c) She deliberated about taking the bus downtown (as over against driving her car).
(d) She deliberated whether to accept his marriage proposal.
(e) She says she is deliberating about when to ask the question.
(f) He is deliberating when to set off the firecracker to frighten the unsuspecting guests.

Several things emerge from these examples. First, I do not deliberate now about my voting for Adlai Stevenson in the past or about my accepting a marriage proposal already made and acted upon. One can reflect on the past (should I have voted for Adlai Stevenson?), evaluate the past (should I have accepted the marriage proposal?), ponder whether such an action was appropriate (should I have taken the bus, considering all the packages I intended to buy?), but one does not deliberate about the past.5 Secondly, in each of these cases the person deliberates about what the person himself or herself is going to do. That is, one deliberates about one’s