Boethius

“There seems to be a considerable contradiction and inconsistency between God’s foreknowledge and the existence of any free will.”

Good question!
Boethius is a very significant thinker in the history of Christians struggling to make sense of difficult questions. He was perhaps the first Christian to deal with the problem of God’s omniscience, human freedom and evil and wrote a great deal about it. We have to deal with his thinking about God, foreknowledge and eternity.

What does the OCR Exam Specification require?
In the section on the NATURE OF GOD, it says that candidates should be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the views of Boethius in his discussion of eternity and God’s foreknowledge in Book 5 of *The Consolations of Philosophy (TCOP)*. There is a Penguin Classics edition of TCOP from 1969 with a good introduction by V.E. Watts, 0-14-044208-1 and an OUP edition from 1999. It is also something that can easily be found online. Candidates should be able to discuss these areas critically along with their strengths and weaknesses. The rest of the section on the Nature of God is concerned with omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence and the philosophical problems arising from these concepts. In addition you will need to study the question of whether or not a good God should reward or punish.
Limited coverage at present

Because this is new material to A-level study, few textbooks have caught up with the specification. The exceptions are Libby Ahluwalia’s *Understanding Philosophy of Religion*, Folens, 2008, p307-8, Matthew Taylor’s *OCR Philosophy of Religion for AS and A2*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, 2009, pp 412-414 & 425 and Wilkinson & Campbell’s *Philosophy of Religion for A2 level*, Continuum, 2009, pp95-103. There is also a nod in the direction of Boethius in Tyler and Reid’s *Religious Studies*, 2nd Edition, Philip Allan, 2008, p9-10. Older textbooks written for A-level are largely silent on Boethius. The major work by Brian Davies, *Philosophy of Religion: a guide and anthology*, Oxford, 2000 contains some important original works including Boethius, Aquinas, Wolterstorff and Helm on God’s knowledge and the question of eternity. The definitive study is Henry Chadwick’s *Boethius*, Oxford, 1981. These notes are designed to supplement Ahluwalia, Taylor and Tyler & Reid. It is not a substitute for looking at some of them!

Boethius: Biography and Context

- named Anicius Manlius Severenus Boethius

- c. 480 - 525/6 A.D.

- Major league polymath who wrote about music, arithmetic, logic, philosophy and theology.

- Roman patrician of high standing, accused of treason and imprisoned. It was in prison that he wrote *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (542-5).
His place relative to other great minds
Boethius will be remembered as one of the major thinkers who bridged the thought worlds of the ancient Greeks and their successors, in particular Aristotle, the Stoics and Neoplatonism, to the Medieval Latin writers and the movement that came to be known as Scholasticism. At the risk of oversimplification, Boethius took Aristotle and Augustine, developed their ideas and passed them on the Aquinas.

With the ancients or the medievals?
This bridging role is helpfully discussed in Lerner et al’s Western Civilisations, Volume 1, 12th Edition, Norton, 1993, p 222,3:

“Because Boethius lived a century after Augustine he could see far more clearly that the ancient world was coming to an end. Therefore he made his first goal to preserve as much of the best ancient learning as possible by a series of handbooks, translations and commentaries.... Since Latin writers had never been interested in logic, even in the most flourishing periods of Roman culture, Boethius's translations and commentaries became a crucial link between the thought of the Greeks and that of the Middle Ages.... Although Boethius was an exponent of Aristotle's logic, his worldview was not Aristotelian but Augustinian. This can be seen both in his several orthodox treatises on Christian theology and above all in his masterpiece, The Consolation of Philosophy.... In it Boethius asks the age-old question of what is human happiness and concludes that it is not to be found in earthly rewards such as riches or fame but only in the ‘highest good,’ which is God. Human life, then, should be spent in pursuit of God. Since Boethius speaks in the Consolation as a philosopher rather than a theologian, he does not refer to Christian revelation or to the role of divine grace in salvation. But his basically Augustinian message is unmistakable.”

Theologian or Philosopher?
From the above passage the answer seems to be a theologically informed philosopher. Recall the two contrasting, and some say complementary, approaches to thinking about God. One is based
on inferences from what we know from the so-called natural order. The other focusses on what
God has more directly revealed of Himself. The former is often called Natural Theology and is
based on General Revelation. The latter is Dogmatic Theology which accepts it premisses from
Special Revelation, usually located in Scripture and that to which it testifies. Hence the widely
used distinction, which is passionately expressed in Pascal for instance, between the God of the
Philosophers and the God of Living Faith. Some thinkers want to fuse the two as best they can.
Others refuse to countenance Natural Theology - Barth being a classical example here. A third
group like to speculate about the nature of God but have little regard for the notion of a God
who reveals himself specifically in divine acts in the world other than as the author and sustainer
of the cosmos. It is probably best to see Boethius as a philosophical thinker working within the
Christian tradition, whose speculations about the relationship between God and time and
eternity and knowledge are indebted to both philosophers and theologians and have influenced
both in turn.

The question of eternity

What does it mean to call God eternal?
Two main answers have been given to this:

[1] ‘God is eternal’ means that God is non-temporal or timeless
[2] ‘God is eternal’ means that God has no beginning and no end; God has always
    existed and will continue to exist forever.

Boethius is a representative of the first position. God lacks beginning and end for Boethius. He
also lacks a life lived from moment to moment. God’s life is utterly without successiveness. No
‘before’ and ‘after’. No history or biography. God just ‘is’. This Classical view of eternity has been
defended by generations of philosophers including Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes,
Calvin and Leibniz. Anselm famously said of God and time, in a manner that Davies describes as
‘a Boethian perspective’:

“Yesterday and today and tomorrow are completely in time; however, You,
though nothing can be without You, are nevertheless not in place or time
but all things are in You. For nothing contains You, but You contain all
things.”

In his article on Boethius in the eminently useful Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion,
Anthony Thistleton summarises things well:

“One of the most important conceptual influences bequeathed by Boethius
for the philosophy of religion was his formulation of the logic of Eternity.
Eternity was not to be conceived as ‘human’ time stretching out in both
directions. Boethius recognised that it belonged to God. Eternity is a mode
of reality that grasped ‘the whole’ of past, present, and future as a whole.
Eternity constituted most especially God’s own mode of existence. This is
‘the complete possession all at once (tотum simul) of an illimitable life.’
Although strictly eternity is not ‘everlastingness’ in the human sense of this
term, because God is ‘infinite’, eternity remains ‘illimitable’, and in this special, qualified sense, ‘endless’.”

There are three main senses in which the word Eternal is used in theology and philosophy. All of them draw a contrast between the change and decay that is a feature of the world as we know it and the Being of God as ‘eternal’. Each one has well documented problems attached to it and summarised in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Problems</th>
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<td><strong>ETERNITY AS TIMELESSNESS</strong></td>
<td>In the tradition of Parmenides, Plato and nondualist advaita Hindu philosophy, eternity is seen as timelessness or a Being without change. Modern defenders of this view include Nelson Pike and Paul Helm.</td>
<td>How can God or any being beyond this world order experience duration, periodicity, sequence or progression? Biblical theology pictures God in more personal and purposive terms than this position seems to accommodate.</td>
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<td><strong>ETERNITY AS INFINITELY EXTENDED TIME</strong></td>
<td>Eternity embodies temporal sequence, but without limits of beginning or end. God pre-existed Creation; there was not time at which He did not exist. He is both ‘backwardly eternal’ and ‘forwardly eternal’ to use Richard Swinburne’s language. Another modern proponent of this position is Anthony Kenny.</td>
<td>Does this not mean that God’s being is conditioned by time, rather than God being the Creator of time? Or should we accept that God as it were had his own ‘Godtime’ - dynamic experience before the Creation of (our) space-time, which he now, being omnipresent, inhabits at every point.</td>
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<td><strong>THE TOTAL SIMUL VIEW OF BOETHIUS</strong></td>
<td>Eternity denotes ‘the complete possession of all at once (totul simul) of illimitable life.’ God’s infinite timeless awareness comprehends all at once what from a human standpoint is spread out in time as past, present and future. Aquinas is the big name advocate of an essentially Boethian position.</td>
<td>Might this not impose a static mode of being onto God, who then cannot act, or interact, purposefully as the living and promissory God? Against Aquinas, who developed Boethius’s view, God’s perfection does not entail immutability. There is a ‘temporality’ in God which is a condition (Heidegger) for the possibility of (our) time.</td>
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Like many non-Thomist Biblical theologians in the modern era such as Cullmann, Gunton, Moltmann and Pannenberg, Thistleton is keen to recognise that the God of the Judaic-Scriptures is active in the world and has an inner Trinitarian life which is far from ‘static’. He puts it nicely (Op cit p79):

“Can a ‘perfect’ God act in ongoing, dynamic, purposive ways which express God’s own nature, whether we conceive of this as occurring ‘within’ this-worldly time, or in a ‘non-human’ sphere, such as ‘after’ the general resurrection? To express it in a different way, does the heavenly or eschatological realm in the biblical writings seem more akin to a crescendo of glory than to a constant, static, everlasting fortissimo? Can God no longer do ‘new’ things, as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, without thereby forfeiting ‘perfection’?

Options on God and space-time

There are two basic views that are widely canvassed in discussions of God’s relationship to time. You should consider the relationship of these to the two understandings of God as eternal that are mentioned above (page 4):

[1] God is outside of time and as it were sees (our) past, present and future simultaneously. This is often called the BLOCK UNIVERSE view.

[2] God is involved in (our) time, simultaneously present to it, and engaged with it. Call this the UNFOLDING UNIVERSE view.

This is a lively debate in our own day and one which is now informed by modern physics. Within physics there is no consensus about the nature of time. What we do now appreciate more fully is that the insight of Augustine that God made the universe “with time” (cum tempore) rather than “in time” (in tempore) was astonishingly prescient. Einstein’s work on Relativity resulted in modern science talking about space-time, a conjoined concept where space and time are inseparable. They form a single integrated system. Thus, to paraphrase Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God made space-time and mass-energy.” Theologically this allows us to talk about God being “outside” of time as we understand time. For some this implies position [1] above. Others however, point to the involvement of God in his universe and the notion of God’s immanence as well as His transcendence. It is possible to talk of God as present to every moment in space and time and in that sense [2] is a better model for our understanding. Those theologians who favour [1] tend to see God as impassible, meaning that he is not affected by the goings on in the unfolding life of the cosmos. Push this position to its extreme and you can end up with a kind of deism. Those theologians who favour [2] tend to speak of a God who is passible, able to be influenced and affected by events in the cosmos, not least the relationship with sentient creatures that He freely enters into. Push this position too far and God can be seen as less than sovereign. Process Theology is the arena in which this idea has been most fully explored, though you may see similar themes in panentheism and ‘Open Theology’.
A really good treatment of these issues, for the keen student, is the latest book by John Polkinghorne called *Theology in the Context of Science*, SPCK, 2008, pp 33–45.

He makes the important point that the choice between the views we have labeled [1] & [2] above is not one that can be decided by the relevant sciences. They are what philosophers of science call ‘underdetermined’ theories. The choice between them is a metaphysical one. Polkinghorne puts this well,

“Physics constrains metaphysics, but it no more determines it than the foundations of a building determine the precise form of the building erected on them.”

Einstein famously was a fan of the block universe point of view. Indeed, there is a story that he sought to console the widow of an old friend by the thought that because the past and future are essentially as real as the present, her husband’s life was still “there”, though no longer accessible to her! Polkinghorne is not at all convinced by this view and finds the standard arguments for the block view far from convincing and offers rebuttals of both. Against it he also cites our basic human experience and understanding of the directional passage of time, saying

“If physics cannot represent the present moment, so much the worse for physics.”
Polkinghorne is unusually well equipped to speak about these matters in that he used to be the Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge and is now an ordained Anglican minister. He is widely regarded as one of the leading experts in science and religion in the world and was the founding president of the International Society for Science and Religion. It is worth quoting his piece on the theological implications of our view of space-time at some length (ibid p 40f):

“The block universe corresponds to the way in which the concept of divine knowledge of the created world was classically expressed in the writings of Boethius, Augustine and Aquinas. They understood God to be wholly outside of time, looking down from eternity, so to speak, onto the whole of created history, with the space-time continuum laid out before the divine gaze totum simul, all at once. In other words, what God sees is indeed the block universe. Theologically, one must surely believe that God knows all things absolutely truthfully, that is to say, in full accord with their actual natures. This would then seem to imply that classical theology implicitly endorsed the metaphysics of the block universe, though the claim is seldom, if ever, made in the theological literature.

On the other hand, if the unfolding universe is the right metaphysical picture, then the truthful character of divine knowledge will surely imply that God knows the world according to its developing nature. In other words, God will not simply know that events are successive (occurring in the before/after ordering corresponding to the lightcone structure of space-time), but God will know them in their succession (the becoming of the present that continuously turns future potentiality into past actuality). This would require the divine acceptance of a genuine experience of temporality, a concept that corresponds to what has come to be called by some, ‘open theology’. The question of what time is God’s time is not as perplexing as one might first suppose. The likeliest answer would seem to be that time, already mentioned, which the cosmologists use in their accounts of cosmic history. However, whatever is the true divine time axis, problems of simultaneity do not arise for God, since for the omnipresent divine Observer there is no such thing as a distant event. The Creator will know every event of creation exactly as and when it happens.”
Does this revise our view of God?

In some ways the answer depends on what image of God you began with! An important theme from work on the Problem of Evil is immediately obvious here, once you start to think about God along the lines of ‘open theology’. Consider the notion of kenosis. This refers to the self-limitation of God who, out of love for His creation, freely suspends part of the exercise of his divine powers. Polkinghorne lists three that are particularly helpful to our discussion:

1. God’s absolute eternity is qualified by the acceptance of a complementary temporality.

2. God’s almighty power is qualified as creatures are allowed to be themselves and, through evolutionary processes, to make themselves. The history of the world is not so much the unfolding of a predestined score written in eternity but rather an unfolding improvisation in which the Creator is seamlessly at work to bring about a harmonious resolution of the great multi-part fugue of creation.

3. God’s omniscience is qualified by the acceptance of temporality. It is seen as a current omniscience (knowing all that it is possible to know now) rather than an absolute omniscience (knowing all that it will ever be possible to know). Polkinghorne makes the point that this is not a divine imperfection, in that in an unfolding world of true becoming, the future is not yet there to be known.

Many scientist-theologians take this view and emphasise that it fits more easily with the God who is portrayed in the Judaic-Christian scriptures, not least in Jesus.

In his famous 1975 paper “God is ‘everlasting’, not ‘eternal’, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues for a non-classical view of God along the lines of ‘temporality’ outlined above. A trenchant point he makes is that the Christian tradition has been too often wedded to Greek understandings of God’s eternity derived from Plato and others and not taken seriously enough the Biblical picture of God. Indeed the only three references that are cited to support and eternal God, namely Exodus 3:13, Malachi 3:6 and Psalm 102:27 hardly do what the Classical position requires of them. They simply do not teach that God is ontologically immutable. Wolterstorff’s final paragraph begins:
“Though God is within time, yet he is Lord of time. The whole array of contingent temporal events is within his power.... It is not because he is outside of time - eternal, immutable, impassive - that we are to worship and obey God. It is because of what he can and does bring about within time that we mortals are to render him praise and obedience.”

If God foreknows everything, are we free?

Stating the problem

The difficulty is clearly outlined by Davies in his aforementioned book (Op cit p.442):

1. If X knows that p, it follows that p. For example, if you know that John is a thief, then John is a thief.

2. So if God knows that something will come to pass, it will come to pass.

3. But what if God knows that I will freely perform some action tomorrow? What, for example, if he knows that tomorrow I will freely brush my teeth?

4. From 1. and 2., it looks as though it is already settled that I will brush my teeth. For if God knows I will brush my teeth tomorrow, then it is certain that I will brush my teeth tomorrow.

5. But freely occurring actions are ones which people might or might not perform. They are contingent (as opposed to necessary). They are not events which are certain to come about.

6. In that case, however, how can God know that I will freely brush my teeth tomorrow? How, indeed, can he know about any future contingent event?

In other words, if God knows what it to come, how can the future be anything but predetermined or unpreventable? How might we respond to this question? Is the most we can confidently claim is that God knows all possible futures, but until the future happens He does not know the actual future? But where (or when?) is God in respect of our unfolding spacetime?

Because issues of causality and issues of temporality are logically independent, there is no clear link between the view we take of the relationship of God to the universe and the question of determinism or indeterminism. Temporal issues are to do with the nature of time itself. Causal issues relate to the kind of relationships between events located within space and time. Again Polkinghorne is about as clear as anyone on this issue:

“Aquinas emphasised that his ‘block-universe’ understanding of divine knowledge was perfectly compatible with the exercise of free choice by human agents. While divine foreknowledge might seem a threat to that freedom.... for the God who perceives the whole of history totum simul there is no such foreknowledge, since all events are equally contemporaneous to the atemporal divine gaze.”

There are a range of viewpoints in the literature and the MindMap below outlines some of them:
On the benefits of using many sources

A useful scholarly technique when faced with a new and challenging idea is to read a range of sources. In a similar way to good teachers being able to explain something in more than one way, it is often the case that a new slant from a new author illuminates what was hitherto a little cloudy. Refer to the A-level textbooks if you have not already done so. See what you make of the different ways that Copleston in the next section, and Knowles here, introduce the question of whether God knows our supposedly free choices beforehand. Knowles’s extract is from his entry in the massive eight volume Macmillan Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1967, vol 1, p 330. The word ‘aeviternity’ means eternity, thought of as a past and future totality, in which events are contained in a matrix, like flies in amber:

“.... the eternity of God, (is) defined as the full and perfect possession of endless life always present in its entirely, and the ‘aeviternity’ of the created universe, without beginning and end but existing in the ever-changing succession of time. On the basis of this definition, Boethius tried to solve the problem raised by God’s prevision of free human acts. God in eternity has a simultaneous vision of all temporal reality, and he sees acts as free.”
Copleston’s commentary on Boethius

Frederick Copleston (1907-1994) did more than argue with Russell about the Cosmological Argument! He was one of the great historians of philosophy and theology and his work has an enviable clarity to it. Here is part of his exposition of Boethius’s Consolation on the question of how we might relate our perceived freedom of choice and the notion that God knows all things.

It is taken from Volume 2 of his eight volume History of Philosophy, page 118:

“In the third book he at least mentions the rational argument for the existence of God as unmoved Mover, while in the fifth book he treats of the apparent difficulty in reconciling human freedom with the divine foreknowledge. ‘If God beholdeth all thinks and cannot be deceived, that must of necessity follow which His providence foreseeth to be to come. Wherefore, if from eternity He doth foreknow not only the deeds of men, but also their counsels and wills, there can be no free-will.’ To answer that it is not that future events will take place because God knows them, but rather that God knows them because they will take place is not a very satisfactory answer, since it implies that temporal events and the temporal acts of creatures are the cause of the eternal foreknowledge of God. Rather should we say that God does not, strictly speaking, ‘foresee’ anything: God is eternal, eternity being defined in a famous phrase as interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possitio (the completely simultaneous and perfect possession of interminable life), and His knowledge is the knowledge of what is eternally present to Him, of a never-fading instant, not a foreknowledge of things which are future to God. Now, knowledge of a present event does not impose necessity on the event, so that God’s knowledge of man’s free acts, which from the human viewpoint are future, though from the divine viewpoint are present, does not make those acts determined and necessity (in the sense of not-free). The eternity of God’s vision, ‘which is always present, concurs with the future quality of an action’.

And there we must leave Boethius. There are possibly as many unanswered questions today as there were in the 6th century. The advantage we have over the great man is that we have subsequent thinkers to engage with. A warning: as a student, never do the personal thing in the final paragraph of your exam essays! For the record, I tend to favour a non-Boethian view, and side with the likes of Polkinghorne and Wolterstorff for what it is worth! An intriguing issue within this framework of understanding is how one might construe the Creation of the universe of space-time and mass-energy. What does it mean for an everlasting but not eternal God to create space-time? Where, metaphorically, does the universe exist? Is the panentheistic notion of the universe being ‘within God’ the best model we have? Does this further inform the immanent pole of theism’s insistence on both God’s transcendence and immanence? Is (our) time a creature whose existence is made by God as somehow and something analogous to what I have variously called ‘Supertime’, ‘Godtime’ and ‘Trinitime’ - the temporality that is part of the essence of God and from which flows our talk of him as everlasting?

Adrian Brown, July 2009