LIT 450 B - Lecture 2: The Foreknowledge Trap

¶ 2.1

The Setup

- Premise: God is all-powerful.
- Assumption: Humans possess free will.



Omniscience → Pre-knowledge

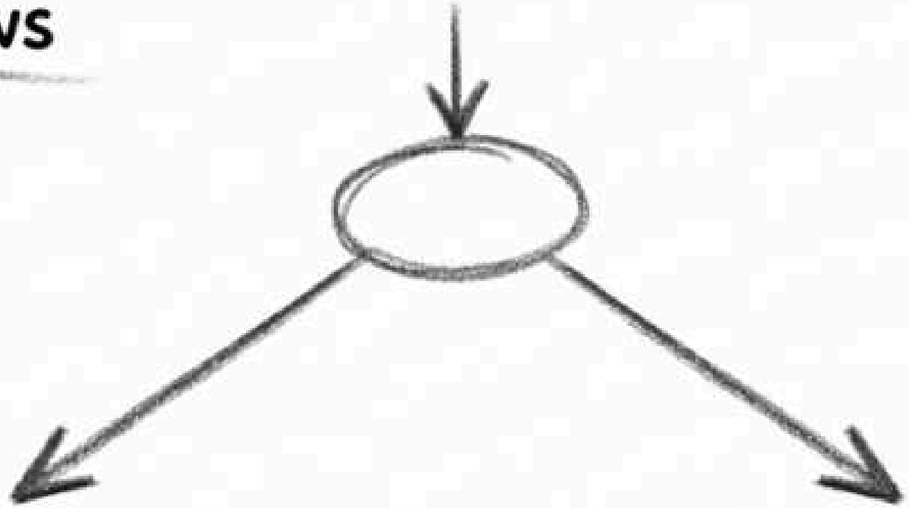
~~Foreknowledge + Free Will~~ = True

The Trap

- If an all-powerful being already knows every future choice, those choices are strictly predetermined.
- Conclusion: Free will must be an illusion (Adams, 2001, p. 12).

Two Escapes, Two Flaws







Escape A: The Self-Limiting God

- **Idea:** God chooses not to look at the future.
- **The Flaw:** Why would a perfectly omniscient being deliberately limit its own knowledge?

Escape B: The Illusion of Choice

- **Idea:** God grants the feeling of free will while retaining perfect foresight.
- **The Flaw:** A deliberately false feeling of freedom is a deceptive, strange gift from a loving God.

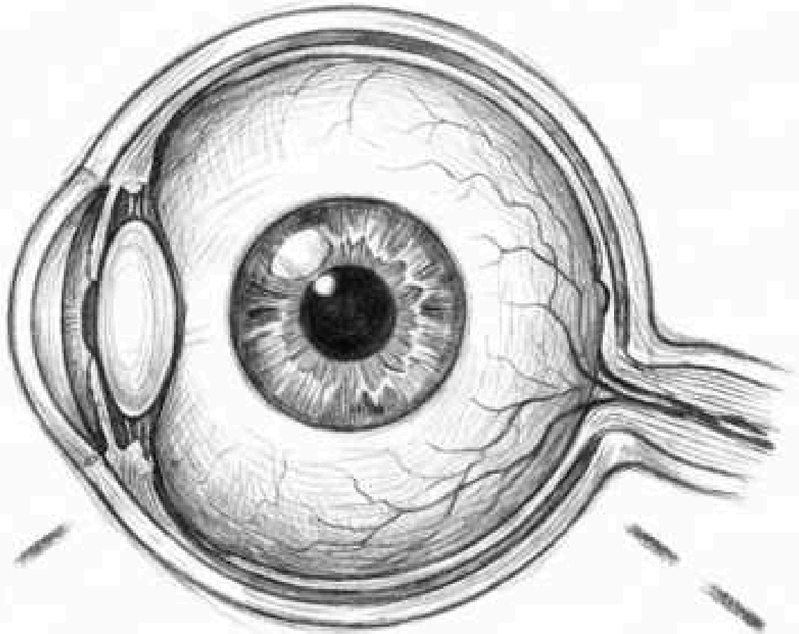
Boethius & The View from Outside Time

¶ 2.3

The History

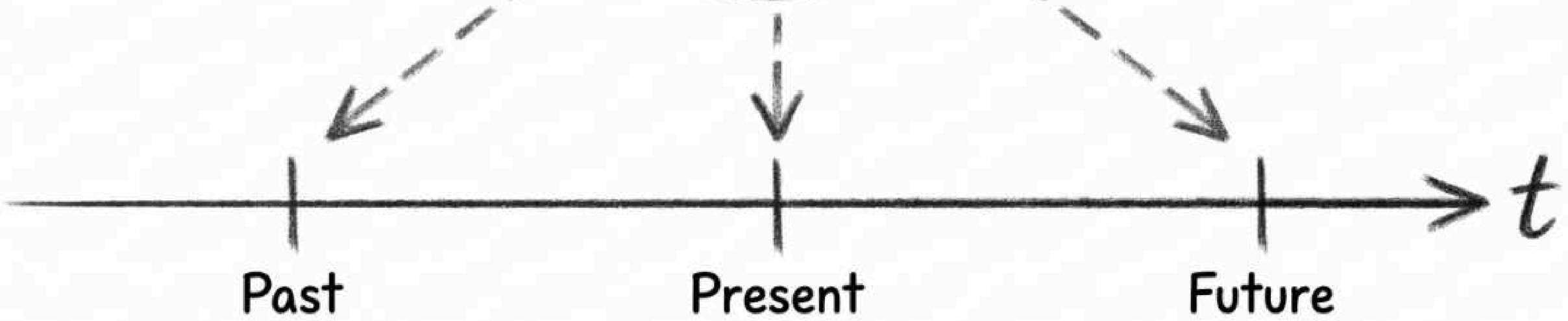
- **Origin:** Boethius, writing in prison (c. 524 AD), The Consolation of Philosophy, Book V.

- **Legacy:** Adopted by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century.

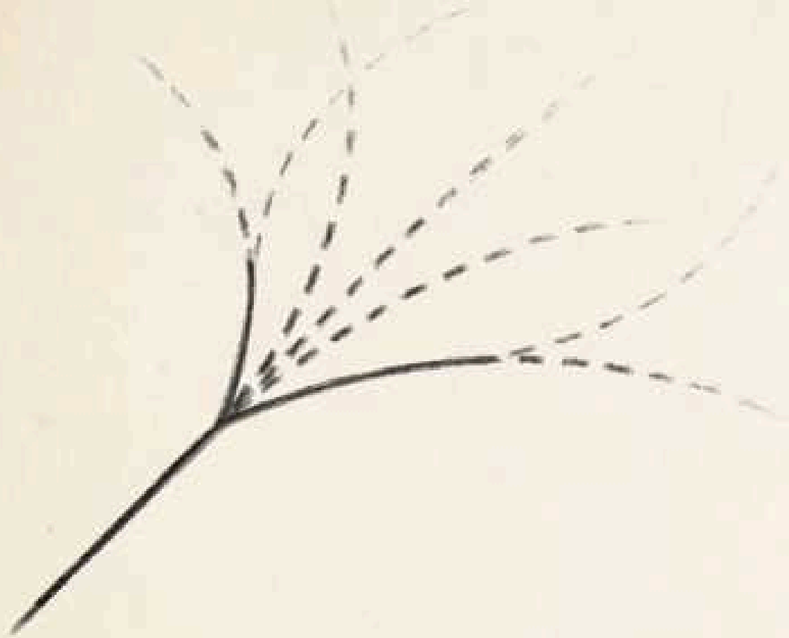


The Solution

- God stands entirely outside of God stands entirely outside of time, seeing every moment at once as a scene laid out below.
- **Insight:** Seeing an act does not force the act. Observation preserves human freedom.

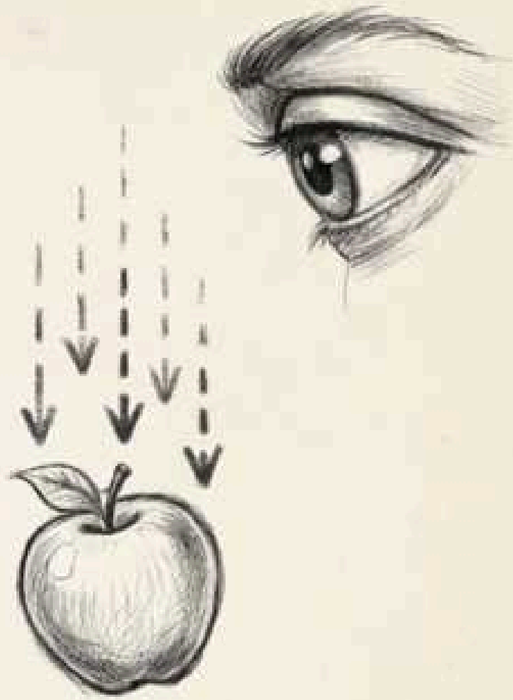


Modern Philosophical Replies



Open Theism

- The future does not yet exist to be known.
- God knows everything that can be known, without knowing free choices in advance.



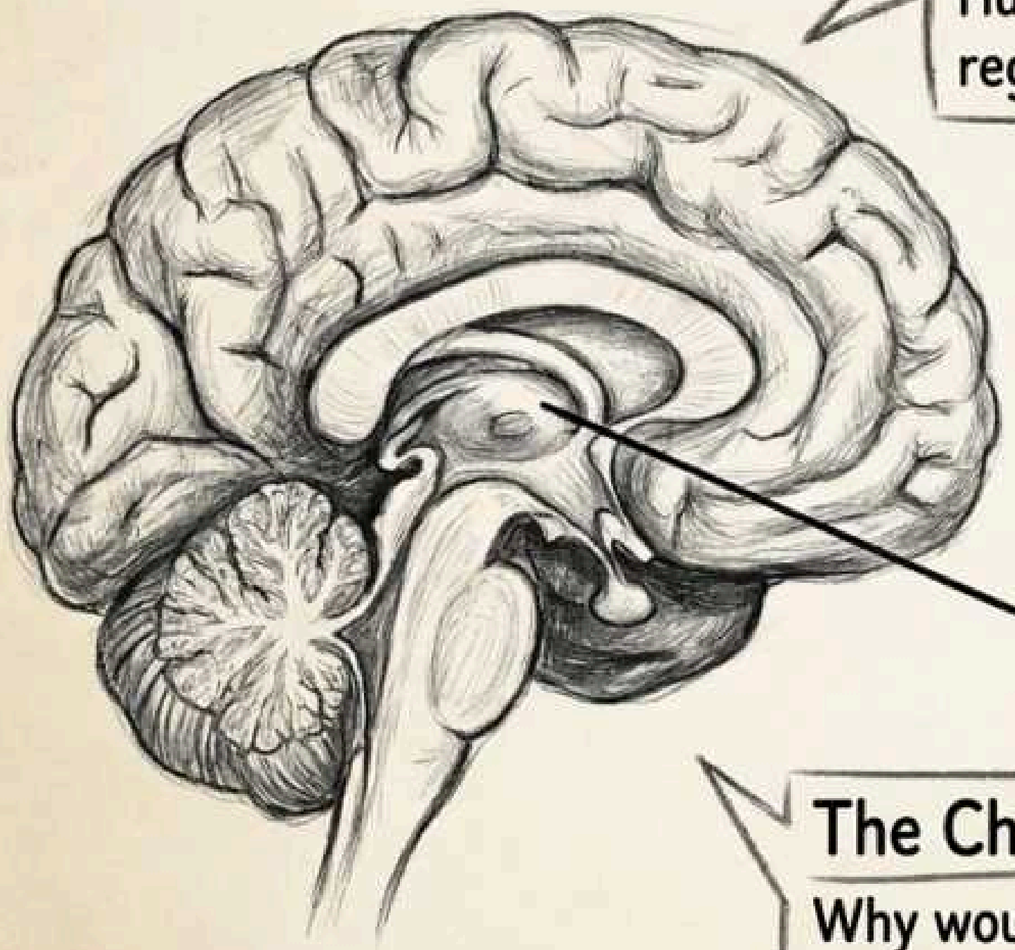
Observation ≠ Causation

- Knowing what a person will freely choose does not equate to causing them to choose it.

The Old Man's Tactic

He ignores these routes to force a dramatic, bleak conclusion. Philosophers of religion continue to debate the costs of each reply.

The Biology of Divine Love



The Premise

Human love depends on specific brain regions; injury can instantly erase it.

$$\text{Love} = f(\text{Brain Activity})$$

A clump of cells.

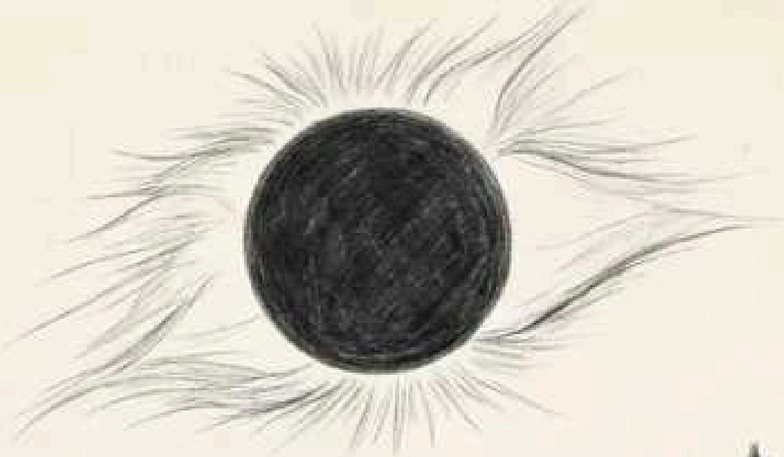
The Challenge

Why would an all-powerful God be limited to feelings produced by biological cells?

Anthropomorphism

- The Target: The human habit of picturing God in strictly human terms.
- The Believer's Rebuttal: Assuming that because a trait requires a brain in humans, humans, it represents a universal limitation.

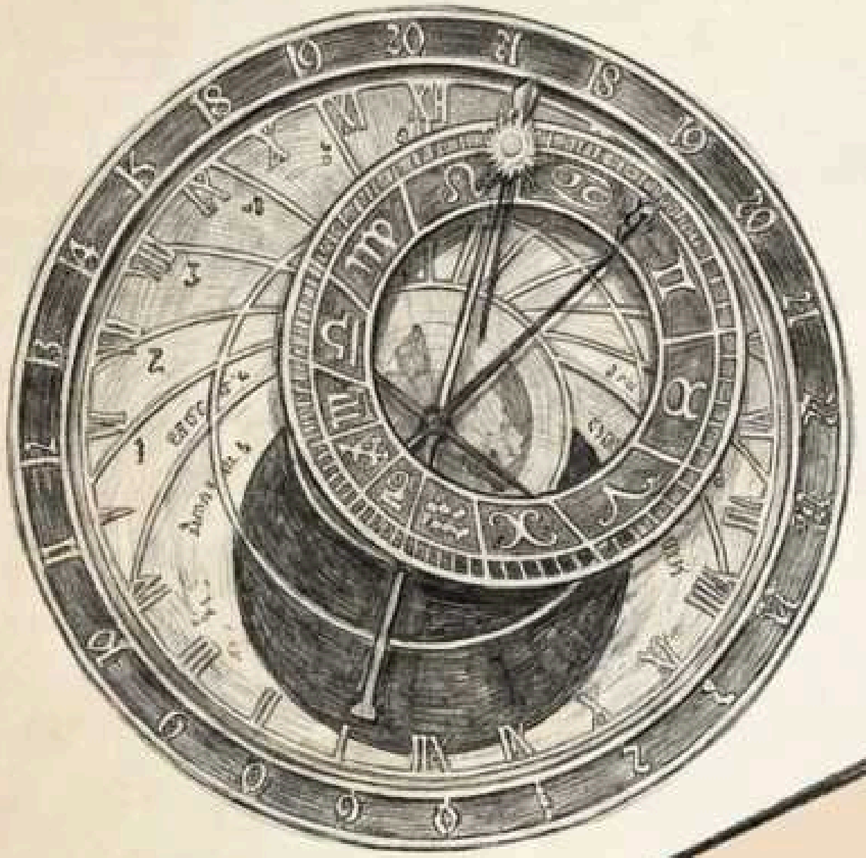
Theology's Defense Against the Human Lens



Maimonides (Jewish Philosopher)	Thomas Aquinas	The Old Man's Departure
- Method: Via Negativa (Negative Theology). - Stance: We can only describe what God is not.	- Method: Analogy. - Stance: Human words like "love" or "wisdom" apply to God only metaphorically, never literally.	- Method: Total Rejection. - Stance: While theologians qualify language to maintain faith in a personal God, he drops the personal picture altogether.

The Design Argument vs. The Magician

¶ 2.7



The Narrator's Stance:

A universe so perfectly ordered and fit for life must have a designer. (Argument from positive features).

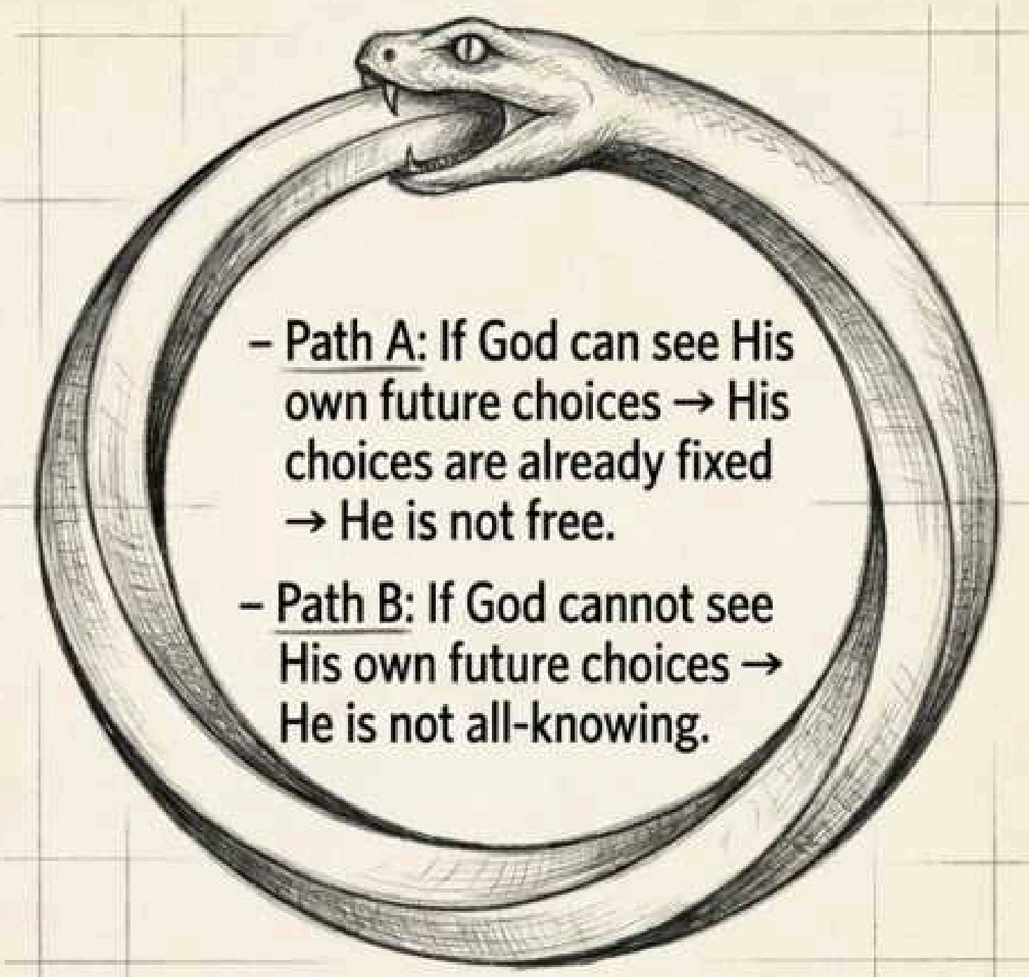


The Old Man's Counter:

Inability to explain a vanishing tiger doesn't prove "real magic" exists.

- Logical Fallacy: Failing to find an explanation is not evidence that none exists, nor is it evidence for a specific divine one.

The Paradox of God's Own Freedom



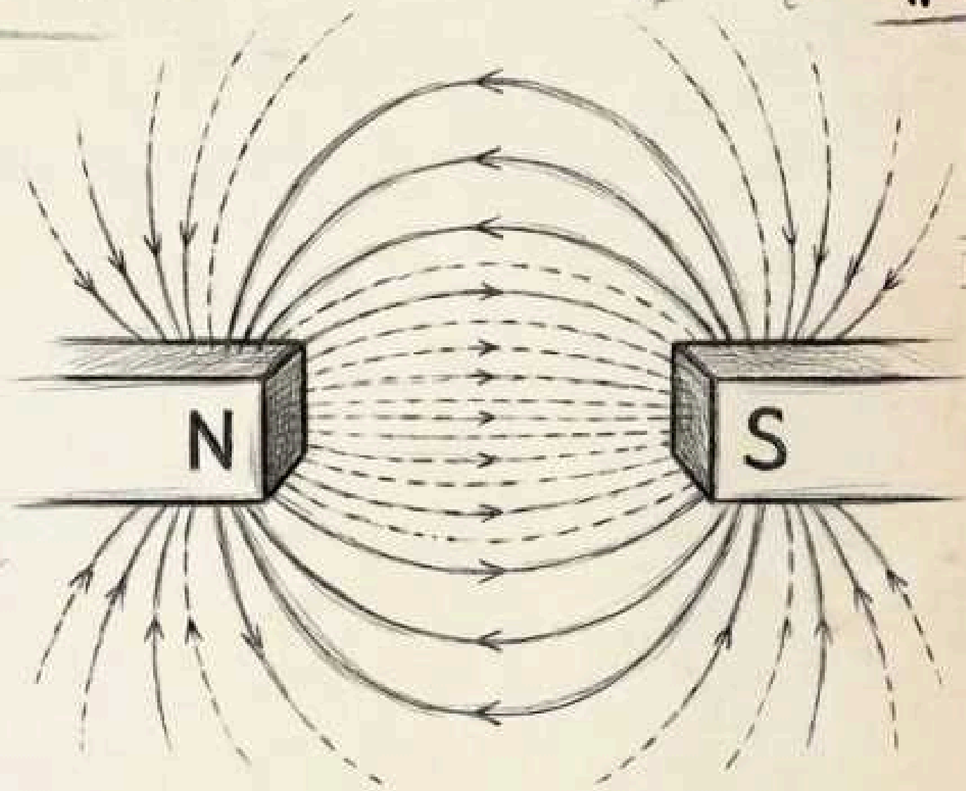
The Theological Resolution

– True divine freedom is not the ability to choose randomly.
– It is the freedom to act wholly and perfectly from His own fundamental nature.

Critiquing the Language of Science

¶ 2.9

$$F = G\frac{(m_1 m_2)}{r^2}$$



The Attack

- Science uses words like 'field' or 'gravity' to name effects across empty space without actually explaining them.
- Isaac Newton (1713): Admitted he "would not invent hypotheses" about the ultimate cause of gravity.

The Pushback

- The old man claims scientific terms are mere covers for ignorance.
- Flaw in the Attack: Even without ultimate explanations, scientific language allows for precise, testable, and reliable predictions.

The Location of Choice & The Interaction Problem

The Soul Hypothesis

An immaterial source of true choice.

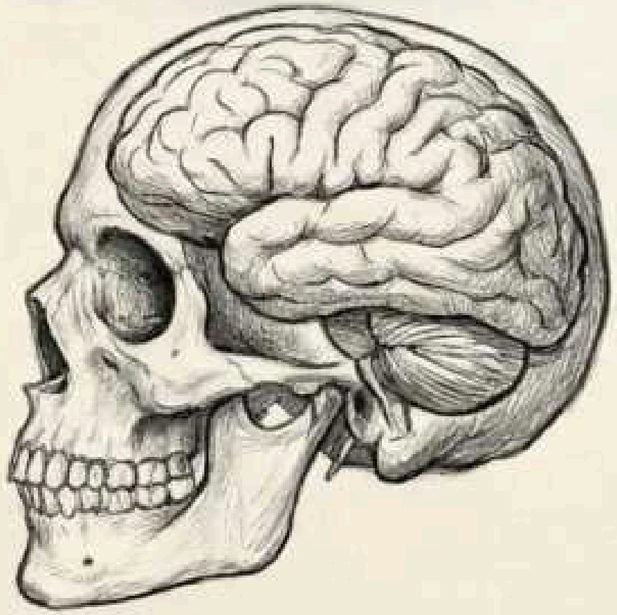




The Unsolved Problem

- Descartes & Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1643):
  If the soul is not physical, by what mechanism could it possibly move a physical brain?

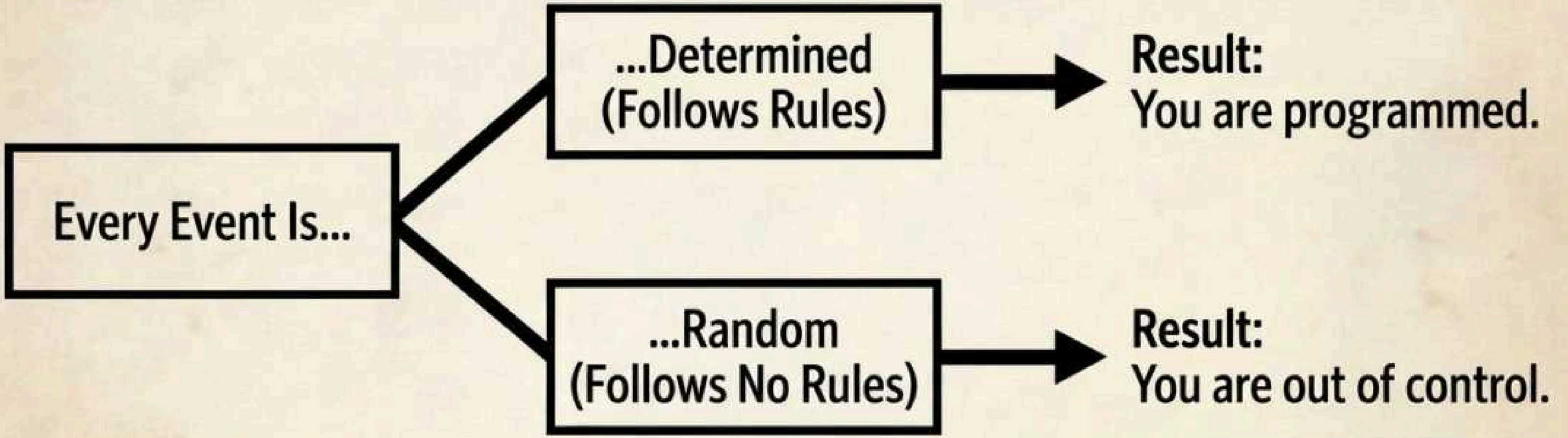
Cole of physical & chemicals following strict physical laws.



The Brain Hypothesis

Made of physical cells and chemicals following strict physical laws (Input = Output).

The Narrow Choice: Rules or Randomness



- Neither path leaves room for genuine choice.
- Considered the most elegantly simple and strongest case against deep free will.

The Critique Label:

Is the strict binary between 'rules' and 'randomness' too narrow to capture how human reasoning actually functions?

Three Philosophical Frameworks

Hard Determinists

- Stance: Agree with the old man's dilemma.
- Conclusion: Free will simply does not exist in any meaningful sense.

Libertarians (Philosophical)

- Stance: Reject the strict binary.
- Conclusion: Some choices are entirely authored by the agent—neither fixed in advance nor merely random.

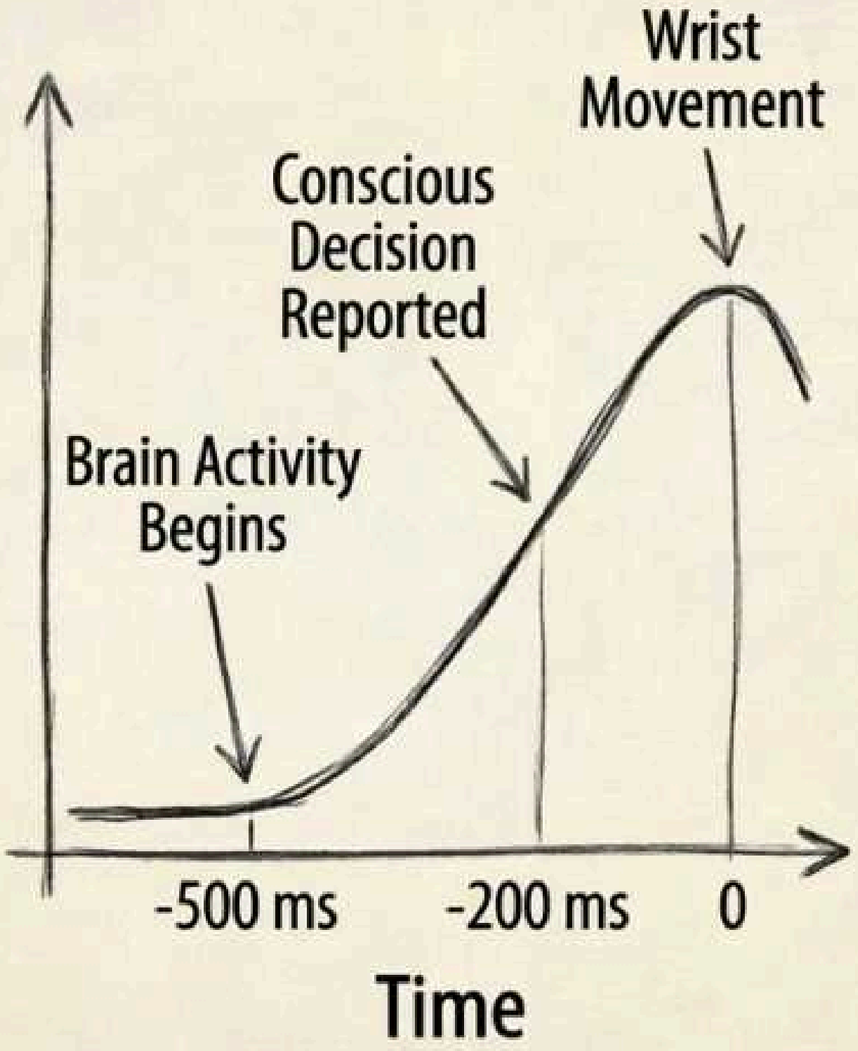
Compatibilists

- Origin: Following David Hume, *Enquiry* (1748).
- Conclusion: Redefines freedom. Freedom means acting on your own reasons and wishes without external coercion—fully possible even in a world governed by cause and effect.

The Neuroscience of Decision

The Libet Experiment, 1983

- Electrical brain activity begins before subjects consciously deciding to move.
- Interpretation: Does the brain decide before 'we' do?



The Critiques

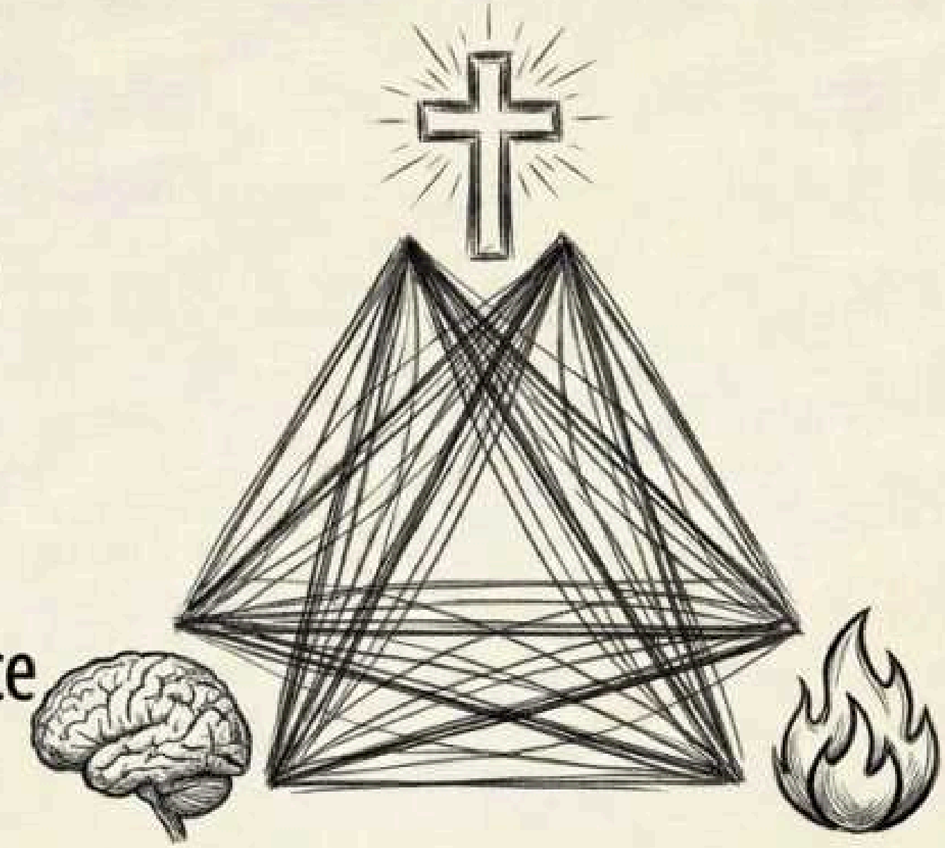
- Movements were trivial (flicking a wrist).
- Self-reporting of exact timing is notoriously unreliable.
- Later studies suggest early activity reflects background neural fluctuation, not a hidden decision.

The Pressure of the Problem

¶ 2.14

What the thought experiment achieved:

Vividly demonstrated that our ordinary, everyday beliefs about God, the soul, and choice cannot easily coexist.



What it did not achieve:

It has not proven free will is impossible (it omits careful philosophical counter-arguments).

The Ultimate Goal

Not to settle the debate, but to make the reader feel the immense intellectual pressure of the paradox—preparing the ground for the reality of belief (Lecture 3).