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### *Usbek to Rhedi in Venice*

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You would never have imagined that I had become more of a metaphysician than I was ; yet that is the case, and you will be convinced of it after you have put up with this outpouring of my philosophy.

The most sensible philosophers who have contemplated the nature of God have said that He was a supremely perfect Being, but they have enormously abused this idea ; they have made an enumeration of all the different perfections which man is capable of having and imagining, and accumulated them onto the diety, [1] not reflecting that often these attributes are mutually exclusive, and cannot subsist in a single subject without negating each other.

Occidental poets say that a painter wishing to make the portrait of the goddess of beauty assembled the most beautiful Greeks and took from each her most graceful trait, and made from them a whole which he thought was a likeness of the most beautiful of all the goddesses. [2] If a man had hence concluded that she was blond and brunette, that her eyes were black and blue, that she was docile and proud, he would have been held ridiculous.

Often God lacks a perfection that could give him a great imperfection, but he is never limited except by himself ; he is his own necessity. Thus, though God is all-powerful, he cannot violate his promises nor deceive men. Often even the powerlessness is not in him, but in relative things, and that is the reason why he cannot change essences.

Thus there is reason for being surprised that some of our doctors, having dared to deny God's infinite foreknowledge on the basis that it is incompatible with his justice. [3]

However audacious this thought, metaphysics lends itself wonderfully to it. According to its principles it is not possible for God to foresee things that depend on the determination of free causes, because what has not occurred does not exist, and consequently cannot be known : for nothing, which has no properties, cannot be perceived ; God cannot read into an intention that does not exist, and see something in the soul that is not there ; for until it has determined something, that act which determines it is not in it.

The soul is the maker of its determination ; but there are occasions where it is so indeterminate that it does not even know on which side to determine itself. Often it even does so only to make use of its liberty, and so it is that God cannot see this determination in advance, neither in the action of the soul nor in the action which objects exert upon it. [4]

How could God foresee things that depend on the determination of free causes ? He could see them only in two ways : by conjecture, which is contradictory to infinite foreknowledge ; or else he would see them as the necessary effects that would inevitably follow from a cause which would similarly produce them, which is even more contradictory. For the soul would be free by supposition, and in fact would be no more free than a billiard ball is free to change position when it is struck by another.

Do not believe, however, that I wish to limit on God's knowledge. As he causes creatures to act as he wishes, he knows all he wants to know. But although he can see all, he does not always make use of this faculty ; most of the

time he leaves to the creature the faculty of acting or not acting, in order to leave to it also the faculty of meriting or not meriting. It is at that moment that he renounces the right he has to act on it and to determine it. But when he wants to know something, he always does, because he has only to will for it to happen as he sees it, and determine creatures in accordance to his will. That is how he derives what must happen from the number of things that are purely possible, fixing by his decrees the future determinations of minds, and depriving them of the power which he gave them to act or not to act.

If we can invoke a comparison in a matter which is above comparisons : a monarch does not know what his ambassador will do in some important business ; if he wishes to know, he has only to order him to conduct himself in such and such manner, and he can assure that the thing will take place as he projects it.

The Qur'an and the Jewish books rise up constantly against the dogma of absolute foreknowledge [5] ; there God always seems to have no knowledge of the future determination of minds, and that seems to be the primary truth that Moses has taught to mankind.

God puts Adam in the earthly paradise on condition that he not eat of a certain fruit, an absurd precept in a being that knows the future determinations of souls : for after all can such a being place conditions on his favors without making them pathetic ? It is as if a man who had known of the capture of Baghdad had said to another : I will give you a thousand écus if Baghdad is not captured ; would he not be making a very bad joke ? [6]

*Paris this last day of the moon of Chahban 1714*

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[1] Chardin reports (see for example VII, 61 and VII, 236) the significant role played in Islam by lists (1001 is a classic number) of the attributes of God.

[2] A well-known anecdote, found for example in Bayle (*DHC*, article "Zeuxis") ; he relates that, in order to paint the portrait of Helen, that painter chose five girls from Crotona and borrowed the most beautiful traits of each.

[3] These are the Socinien theologians who hold that God "does not know whether peace will be made in a year or four years. And how could he since that depends on the whim and will of men, which God cannot have foreseen" (Pierre Jurieu, *Tableau du socinianisme où l'on voit l'impureté et la fausseté des dogmes des sociniens*, La Haye 1690, p. 34).

[4] Jurieu relates that the Socinians "believe that wills act by themselves and determine themselves without even God knowing in what direction they will determine themselves" (*op. cit.*, letter 2, p. 88 et 128).

[5] In both cases, many passages affirm the contrary (the Biblical prophecies ; cf. Qur'an, 6:73) ; but Usbek probably means that things happen as if God did not know the future.

[6] Edition D carries this additional paragraph : "My dear Rhedi, why so much philosophy ? God is so lofty that we do not even perceive his clouds. We know him well only in his precepts. He is vast, spiritual, and infinite. May his greatness bring us back to our weakness. To be ever humble is to worship him always."