

Article



Special Issue: Author Meets Critics: John Martin Fischer's "Our Fate: Essays on God and Free Will"

Precis

Our Fate: Essays on God and Free Will (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016)

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In *Our Fate* I present a family of arguments for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom to do otherwise. The arguments are fueled by the intuitive idea of the fixity of the past. I distinguish different versions of the argument, and I contend that it is important to see that the arguments are different, even though they are motivated by the same basic intuitive ideas. It is also important to see how they are the same in significant ways.

Here's one very informal presentation of a version of the argument. Suppose that God is essentially omniscient and sempiternal (that is, He exists forever in time). Imagine that agent *S* performs some action *X* at time *T2*. It follows that God believed at *T1* that *S* would do *X* at *T2*. *S* has no choice about the past, and thus *S* has no choice at *T2* about God's belief at *T1*. And *S* has no choice about God's omniscience, so he has no choice at *T2* about the fact that if God believed at *T1* that he would do *X* at *T2*, then he will in fact do *X* at *T2*. It follows that *S* has no choice at *T2* about doing *X* at *T2*. (Here *T2* is an interval; alternatively, we could give a slightly more nuanced argument of the same type to the conclusion that *S* has no choice just prior to *T2* about doing *X* at *T2*.) This is an instantiation of the Principle of Transfer of Powerlessness: If an agent has no choice about *P* and

also no choice about "If *P* then *Q*", then the agent has no choice about *Q*. The argument generalizes to any human agent and action: if God exists and is conceptualized as above, then no agent has a choice about any action at any time, and thus no agent is ever free to do otherwise.

Note that the regimentation of the incompatibilist's argument just presented employs a certain modal transfer principle: the Principle of Transfer of Powerlessness. It is, as Timothy O'Connor has written, a kind of modal slingshot that slings powerlessness from one item to another. But we can regiment the fundamental argument in various ways, still employing the driving engines of the fixity of the past and God's essential omniscience. Here's just one (with the same assumptions about God as above.) Imagine that *S* does *X* at *T2*. Thus God believed at *T1* that *S* would do *X* at *T2*. Now an agent's freedom at *T2* to do any action *Y* is the power to add to the given past relative to *T2*. But for any action other than *X*, *S*'s performing that action cannot be an addition to the given past (which contains God's belief at *T1* that *S* would do *X* at *T2*. Thus *S* cannot at *T2* do anything other than *X*. While the two arguments are driven in large part by the fixity of the past, the second argument does not employ a modal principle.

One reason that it is important to distinguish the different members of the family is because we can thereby see that incompatibilism is not defeated, simply in virtue of showing the inadequacy of one particular version of the argument. So, for instance, even if the Principle of Transfer of Powerlessness were shown to be invalid (or not obviously and uncontroversially valid), the fundamental argument for incompatibilism would not thereby have been defeated.

I also consider various important responses to the argument for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom to do otherwise, including responses inspired by (or based on material in) Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Luis de Molina. I criticize these responses, with particular emphasis on "Ockhamism". In the end, I find the argument for incompatibilism about God's foreknowledge and human freedom to do otherwise highly plausible, *albeit* not apodictic.

Additionally I reflect on the relationship between the argument for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom to do otherwise and similar arguments for logical fatalism and for the incompatibility of causal determinism and human freedom to do otherwise. All are structurally similar arguments fueled by the fixity of the past, but they are different in important ways. I consider whether these differences ultimately make a difference to proper evaluation of the arguments.

Many philosophers have thought that God could not have certain knowledge of future contingents in a causally indeterministic world. This is important because it entails that God's foreknowledge presupposes (or implies) causal determinism. If this view were correct, then any problems in reconciling causal determinism and human freedom would also apply to God's foreknowledge, and, indeed, the reconciliation project with regard to God's foreknowledge would depend on the project with respect to causal determinism. But I argue that God's foreknowledge does *not* imply causal determinism, and I give a novel account of God's foreknowledge of future human actions in a causally indeterministic world.

How could this possibly "work"? Many—perhaps most—philosophers have thought it impossible for God to foreknow future human actions in a causally indeterministic world. Here's a sketch of my approach.

Start with the idea that human agents can have fallible knowledge by being in a "knowledge-conferring situation" (a KCS). Different theorists posit different KCS's with respect to a true belief that *B*: having undefeated, justified true belief that *B*; the belief that *B* tracks the truth of *B*; the belief that *B* is caused "in the right way" by the state of affairs *B*, and so forth. We needn't take sides here; I just assume that humans can have fallible knowledge, even about future free actions, in virtue of being in a KCS.

So, suppose that I know today that my wife will go to her Pilates class tomorrow. Assume that I am in a KCS with respect to my wife's going to Pilates tomorrow. If I can be in such a situation in regard to future human actions, then God can too. Imagine that God believes at *T1* that *S* will *X* at *T2* in virtue of being in a KCS. Now God's beliefs, unlike mine, are necessarily true (in virtue of His essential omniscience), and, of course, God knows this. So He has certain, infallible knowledge at *T2* that *S* will do *X* at *T2*, even though the evidence available to anyone (including God) at *T1* would not in itself give anyone certain, infallible knowledge of the relevant proposition about the future. This is a "Bootstrapping Account" of God's infallible knowledge in an indeterministic world. Note that the bootstrapping does not occur sequentially; the various moments I have identified above are "logical" or "analytical" moments, not temporal moments. Thus, God never has a fallible belief about the future (or anything else). If this account, or something like it, is correct, then God's foreknowledge would *not* require causal determinism. This would have significant implications. For example, it would show how an Ockhamist view is coherent (if ultimately unacceptable to many). Also, it would show how we could "extinguish the flickers of freedom" in the famous "Frankfurt-style counterexamples" to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities. That is, it would help to motivate "semicompatibilism". (See, especially, David Hunt's contribution to this symposium, and my response. I thus defend a version of "Augustinianism").

I argue for semicompatibilism about God's foreknowledge and human freedom. Elsewhere, I have defended semicompatibilism about causal determinism and human freedom. Semicompatibilism about causal determinism holds that causal determination is consistent with acting freely, even if causal determination rules out freedom to do otherwise. Obviously,

this commits the semicompatibilist to the claim that acting freely does not require freedom to do otherwise; semicompatibilism is thus an “actual-sequence” theory of moral responsibility. In *Our Fate* I argue for semicompatibilism about God’s foreknowledge and human freedom. That is, I argue that God’s foreknowledge is consistent with acting freely, even if it rules out freedom to do otherwise. In fact, semicompatibilism is easier to defend in this context than in the context of causal determinism, insofar as God’s foreknowledge need not play any role in the actual sequence of events leading to the action in question.

If acting freely is the freedom we really care about—the freedom implicated in moral responsibility (“heaven-and-hell” responsibility, in Galen Strawson’s terminology)—then God’s...

Foreknowledge is consistent with the freedom we really care about. Or perhaps I should say, it is compatible with a central, important kind of freedom, even if it rules out another kind of freedom that is, admittedly, part of our commonsense way of conceptualizing our agency in the world. Even if the future is not a garden of forking paths, we could still act freely and be morally responsible for our behavior. We could still (say) accept God’s grace freely and of our own free will, even though we lack the freedom to reject it. In my view, all the freedom we need to make sense of central religious (and secular) ideas is acting freely (or, in my terminology, guidance control). This appears to be a radical view, but it is rooted in a deep tradition of thinking about freedom and moral responsibility. On this view, moral responsibility is a matter of how the actual sequence unfolds. It is a matter of how we tell our stories.