

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOREKNOWLEDGE

Patrick Todd and John Martin Fischer

In this paper we critically evaluate Trenton Merricks's recent attempt to provide a "new" way of defending compatibilism about divine foreknowledge and human freedom. We take issue with Merricks's claim that his approach is fundamentally different from Ockhamism. We also seek to highlight the implausibility of Merricks's rejection of the assumption of the fixity of the past, and we also develop a critique of the Merricks's crucial notion of "dependence."

1. Introduction

In his paper "Truth and Freedom," Trenton Merricks contends that the best argument for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom begs the question.¹ In our initial reply to Merricks's paper, we argued that, once properly formulated, the argument does not beg the question.² In an interesting reply to our paper, however, Merricks in fact agrees with us that the argument, as we understand it, is not question-begging.³ The problem with the argument, Merricks claims, is simply that it has a false premise—or anyway a premise we have been given no good reason to accept. As Merricks sees it, the argument fails to take account of the particular way in which God's beliefs depend on the world.

In our original reply, our aim was to show that the argument does not beg the question—and our discussion focused primarily on the question of how the argument is ultimately meant to work. Here our aims are (1) to clarify the debate and (2) to provide arguments for the conclusion that the sort of dependence Merricks has identified is in fact not the sort of dependence needed in order to provide a proper reply to the argument. Rather, the sort of dependence needed is more plausibly the sort implicit in the distinction—much scorned by Merricks—between so-called "hard" and "soft" facts about the past.

First, we present and motivate the divine foreknowledge argument. Next, we summarize Merricks's reply to the argument, taking account of

¹Trenton Merricks, "Truth and Freedom," *Philosophical Review* 118 (2009), 29–57.

²John Martin Fischer and Patrick Todd, "The Truth about Freedom: A Reply to Merricks," *Philosophical Review* 120 (2011), 97–115.

³Trenton Merricks, "Foreknowledge and Freedom," *Philosophical Review* 120 (2011), 567–586.



his most recent paper, and explain how it differs from the “Ockhamist” reply. We point out that Merricks is committed to what we take to be an implausible denial of the fixity of the past. We then develop two additional difficulties for Merricks’s approach.

2. *The Divine Foreknowledge Argument, the Fixity of the Past, and Ockhamism*

We begin with what (suitably qualified) seems like a bit of common sense: we have no choice about the past. If Kennedy was shot (as he was) in 1963, there’s nothing any of us can now do about his having then been shot. If Kennedy believed (at a given moment) in 1963 that Russian nuclear power was a threat to the United States (as he did), then there’s nothing anyone can do about his having had this belief at this moment. The thesis that we have no choice about the past is the thesis of the fixity (sometimes also called the “necessity”) of the past. As we noted, there are various ways one might wish to more formally “regiment” the thesis that we have no choice about the past, and the way we do so involves the notion of possible worlds.⁴ The basic idea (to be qualified shortly) is this: one *can* perform a given action at *t* only if there is a possible world with the *same past* as the actual world (up to or just prior to *t*) in which one performs it. The past must be *held fixed* when evaluating a “can-claim”; we have no choice about the past in the sense that facts about the past obtain in all worlds now “accessible” to us.

But it is not the past characterized any which way that (on our view) must be held fixed. Rather, it is more plausibly only the past characterized *intrinsically* that must be held fixed. And here we come again to the distinction between “hard” (temporally intrinsic) and “soft” (temporally extrinsic or relational) facts about the past. For instance, it is a hard fact about the past that Kennedy was shot in 1963. However, it is a soft fact about the past that Kennedy was then being shot (roughly) 48 years prior to our writing this paper.⁵ (We return to this distinction below.) With this distinction (roughly put) in hand, we can state our construal of the fixity of the past as follows:

(FP) For any action *Y*, agent *S*, and time *t*, *S* can perform *Y* at *t* only if there is a possible world with the same “hard” past up to *t* as the actual world in which *S* does *Y* at *t*.

In our initial reply, we did not attempt to motivate FP at any length; our point was simply that if the divine foreknowledge argument relies on FP in the right way, then the argument does not beg the question. But we think it is important to briefly motivate FP here, since, as we will see, Merricks himself rejects it. Behind FP lies a certain picture of our powers and our place in the world. Here we borrow a slogan from Carl Ginet: *our freedom*

⁴Fischer and Todd, “The Truth about Freedom,” 101.

⁵The categorization of the two facts in the text as “hard” and “soft,” respectively, is uncontroversial. Of course, not everyone will agree with us that *all* of the hard facts about the past need to be held fixed now.

is the freedom to add to the given past.⁶ That is, our freedom is the power to *add* to what has happened before us; all we can do *now* is to make the world-as-it-has-gone-up-to-now include one thing or some other thing. Consider again the fact about Kennedy's having believed in 1963 that Russian nuclear power was a threat to the United States. And suppose you are deciding whether to sit (a few minutes from now) at *t* or to stand then. Intuitively, if you *can* either sit or stand, then your power consists in this: to make the world-in-which-Kennedy-had-the-belief-in-1963 now include your sitting, or now include your standing. Your freedom is the freedom to *extend* the past in one way or the other. Or, at the very least: anything you *can* do must be *capable* of being an extension of the actual past.⁷

Suppose we change the Kennedy example. Suppose we say that Kennedy believed something about the *future*: that the forty-fourth president of the United States would sit at *t*, a few minutes from now. Intuitively, what Kennedy believed about the future is no less part of the past than what Kennedy believed about the Russians of his own day. And, intuitively, if Kennedy had the given belief, all we can do is add to the world in ways that are consistent with his having had it. However, there may indeed be something someone can do about whether Kennedy's belief was *correct* or not. In particular, perhaps Obama—the forty-fourth president—can add to the world in such a way that Kennedy's belief was *correct* or *incorrect*; perhaps Obama has it in his power to sit or to stand at *t*. What Obama *cannot* do is to add to the world in a way that would entail that Kennedy never had the belief in the first place; how could he do something like that? The *correctness* of Kennedy's belief, however, is no part of the past, *intrinsically considered*. Rather, it is only "part of the past" considered *extrinsically* or relationally; that Kennedy's belief was correct or incorrect is relationally determined by whether Obama in fact sits. But, again, what people in the past simply *believed* about the future is as fully "in the past" as anything could be. Thus, it seems that all we *can* do is extend the past in which such beliefs were held in ways consistent with their having been held.

But suppose we (gratuitously) stipulate that it is metaphysically impossible for Kennedy ever to have had a false belief, and that Kennedy's

⁶See Carl Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 102–103.

⁷Ginet's slogan is potentially ambiguous between two possible readings, a stronger and a weaker, both of which we endorse, but only the weaker of which we need. On the one hand, it could be read as saying this: if you *can* perform an action, all you *would* be doing, were you to perform it, is adding to the actual past. If you can perform an action A, then what we would get, were you to perform it, is the world-as-it-has-gone-til-now, plus A. Or: your freedom consists in acting in ways that *would* be extensions of the actual past, were you to act in those ways. Though we endorse this principle, all we need is a weaker reading: that if you *can* perform an action, your performing it at least must be *consistent* with the actual past—regardless of whether or not it is true that, were you to perform it, you would be adding to that past. Perhaps you can act in a way such that, were you to act in that way, you *wouldn't* be adding to the given past, but to some other past. Nevertheless, if you *can* act in that way, your acting in that way must at least be *consistent* with the actual past. For more on this issue, see the distinction between FP and FPC below.

beliefs about the future were *comprehensive*. Given Kennedy's beliefs, there will now only be one future consistent with the actual past—even *intrinsically* considered. But here we've simply made Kennedy relevantly similar to God, on the assumptions (operative in this debate) that God is in time, has comprehensive beliefs about the future, and cannot be mistaken. So divine foreknowledge—or, more particularly, divine *forebelief*—is incompatible with human freedom.

And now we come to the "Ockhamist" reply to the argument. The Ockhamist *agrees* with the fixity of the past, but she contends that God's past beliefs about our future decisions are not part of the past in the relevant way. Rather, on the best account of the distinction between what goes into the past, intrinsically considered, and what does not, God's beliefs do not really belong to the intrinsic past: the fact that God once had a given belief about the future is a *soft* fact about the past.⁸

An aside, now, about the hard/soft fact distinction. Merricks, to put it mildly, is no fan of the distinction. As he says, he is "dubious about the very distinction between 'hard facts' and 'soft facts'" and writes that he is "not sure what exactly a 'hard fact' is supposed to be," even suggesting as a possibility that since "'hard fact' and 'hard past' are so poorly defined, no sentence using either 'hard fact' or 'hard past' expresses a proposition."⁹ Further, Merricks contends that it is an advantage of his view that he is not committed to and does not need to make "sense of" the distinction. But Merricks is mistaken about this. For consider this passage from "Truth and Freedom":

Or, if [Jones] is an incompatibilist about freedom and determinism, Jones's worry [that he cannot refrain from sitting] might come from his suspicion that his sitting is the inevitable result of the laws of nature combined with the state of the distant past.¹⁰

Here Merricks speaks of the "state of the distant past." But what, exactly, is Merricks referring to here—and what should go into the "state of the

⁸Ockhamists have uniformly maintained that something like *entailment* is the proper guide to what goes into the "intrinsic" past and what does not. Roughly, if a fact at a time *entails* a certain sort of fact about the future relative to that time, then that fact is a soft fact at that time. And, on this criterion, God's beliefs turn out "soft," since they entail the relevant sorts of facts about the future. But we think this is an implausible way of making the hard/soft distinction; just because a fact entails a certain sort of future fact should not in itself imply that it is no part of the intrinsic past. We agree that any soft fact at a time will entail something about the future relative to that time, but we deny that it is in virtue of having such entailments alone that these facts count as soft. (There is also a danger here of just picking some feature all paradigm soft facts will have in common, noting that God's beliefs also have that feature, and thus claiming that God's beliefs too are soft.) For a trenchant criticism of the entailment view of soft facts, see David Widerker, "Troubles with Ockhamism," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), 462–480; also, see Patrick Todd, "Soft Facts and Ontological Dependence," *Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming. The latter argues that the soft/hard distinction, like other distinctions and relations involving asymmetrical dependence, cannot be captured modally.

⁹Merricks, "Foreknowledge and Freedom," 575, 576, and 577.

¹⁰Merricks, "Truth and Freedom," 31.

distant past," as referred to here by Merricks? A moment's reflection will show us that, unless Merricks can make some difficult distinctions here, his characterization of determinism will be utterly trivialized. In particular, note that Merricks is explicitly committed to the view that propositions can be true *at times*.¹¹ Further, suppose we were to begin by saying, as would seem natural, that the "state of the world in the distant past" is given by what propositions were true in the distant past. According to Merricks, however, it was true in the distant past that *Jones will sit at t*—and so on for everything else that will happen at *t*. Thus, if the fact that such propositions were true in the distant past counts as a part of the "state of the distant past," then everything about *t* will be entailed by "the state of the distant past" *by itself*, irrespective of the laws of nature.¹²

Obviously, what Merricks had in mind here is some *restricted* sense of "the state of the distant past," where the fact that such propositions were true in the distant past does not go into the "state of the distant past." Restricted how? Obviously, restricted to the state of the distant past, *intrinsically considered*—or the *temporally intrinsic* state of the world at a time in the distant past; what is relevant in deciding whether determinism is true is whether the *temporally intrinsic* state of the world at a past time (together with the laws) entails a unique future.¹³ What is required, then, is precisely the distinction between *hard and soft facts about the past*.¹⁴ Now, here is a prediction. If Merricks begins to try to articulate the restricted sense of the "state of the distant past" he had in mind, then he will soon be invoking all the "fancy machinery" ("Foreknowledge and Freedom," 581) the difficulties with which have given the literature on the hard/soft distinction such a bad name, and which have reduced us in characterizing it to various unlovely hedges, caveats, and "admittedly rough" characterizations, and which furthermore explain Merricks's own (understandable) delight at apparently having avoided the mess. But unless Merricks will now maintain that the doctrine of determinism is an incoherent doctrine, since it relies on the hard/soft fact distinction, he hasn't avoided it—only left it for another day.¹⁵

But back to Ockhamism. Now, whatever one makes of the Ockhamist reply, one can at least appreciate the Ockhamist *strategy*. The Ockhamist

¹¹See Merricks, "Truth and Freedom," 34.

¹²Of course, Merricks writes "is the inevitable result of." But the standard definition here uses "entails."

¹³The restriction in question is simply to get the definition of determinism correct; it does not in itself imply that all temporally intrinsic facts about the past are to be considered fixed. We contend that it is part of common sense that all temporally intrinsic (hard) facts about the past are now fixed, but this is admittedly not uncontroversial among philosophers. See, for example, note 17 below.

¹⁴That properly defining determinism requires the distinction between hard and soft facts has been recognized before. See, for example, Ginet, *On Action*, 102n9.

¹⁵Most philosophers attempting to define determinism *do* leave it for another day. See, e.g., John Earman, *A Primer on Determinism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1986), 15, and Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 83–84 n20.

tries to *keep* the intuitive picture of our powers articulated above, the picture on which our freedom is the freedom to add to the given past, while also keeping the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom; this forces her to say that God's relevant past beliefs are not really parts of the "given past." In his new reply, however, Merricks makes clear that he *rejects* this Ockhamist strategy. As he says, he thinks foreknowledge and freedom are compatible, "even if God's having a belief in the past is located only at a past time and is constituted by God's then, at that past time, having an intrinsic property."¹⁶ That is, Merricks is committed to the claim that human agents can have a choice about whether God held a certain belief in the past, where God's holding a belief at a past time is "located only at [that] past time." Thus, Merricks must contend that our power is (or, at least could be) the freedom to add, not to the given past, but to some other past—a past in which someone who as a matter of fact held a given belief in fact never held that belief. Interestingly, this contention puts Merricks in the camp of certain compatibilists about freedom and *determinism*.¹⁷

It is an interesting question, however, whether any other *incompatibilists* about determinism and free will reject FP. As Tom Flint has suggested to us, Plantinga is a possible candidate. In his famous "Paul and the ant colony" case, Plantinga concludes that Paul could have the power to perform an action such that, were he to perform it, ants would never have moved into his yard last week.¹⁸ Thus, it would seem that Plantinga indeed maintains that one could have a choice about an uncontroversially "hard" fact about the past. So it would seem that Plantinga denies FP, despite being an incompatibilist about free will and determinism. So it would appear that Merricks has company.

¹⁶Merricks, "Foreknowledge and Freedom," 573–574 n3. See also 577–579.

¹⁷Fischer calls this camp "Multiple Pasts Compatibilism." See Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 79–83.

¹⁸Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), 235–269; reprinted in *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, ed. John Martin Fischer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 178–215. It might be useful to have Plantinga's example here:

Let us suppose that a colony of carpenter ants moved into Paul's yard last Saturday. Since this colony has not yet had a chance to get properly established, its new home is still a bit fragile. In particular, if the ants were to remain and Paul were to mow his lawn this afternoon, the colony would be destroyed. Although nothing remarkable about these ants is visible to the naked eye, God, for reasons of his own, intends that it be preserved. Now as a matter of fact, Paul will not mow his lawn this afternoon. God, who is essentially omniscient, knew in advance, of course, that Paul will not mow his lawn this afternoon; but if he had foreknown instead that Paul *would* mow this afternoon, then he would have prevented the ants from moving in. The facts of the matter, therefore, are these: if Paul were to mow his lawn this afternoon, then God would have foreknown that Paul would mow his lawn this afternoon; and if God had foreknown that Paul would mow this afternoon, then God would have prevented the ants from moving in. So if Paul were to mow his lawn this afternoon, then the ants would not have moved in last Saturday. But it is within Paul's power to mow this afternoon. There is therefore an action he can perform such that if he were to perform it, then the proposition [that the colony of carpenter ants moved into Paul's yard last Saturday] would have been false. (200–201, in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*)

But the issues here are delicate. Note first that Plantinga spends considerable time in “Ockham’s Way Out” arguing that God’s relevant past beliefs are not hard facts about the past; as Plantinga (we think implausibly) maintains, “no proposition that entails [that Paul will mow his lawn in 1999] is a hard fact about the past.”¹⁹ But why does Plantinga *want* or *need* the result that God’s past beliefs are “soft” facts about the past, if he thinks that we could have a choice about even the “hard” facts about the past? What would be the point of arguing for this (deeply controversial) claim at such length? We submit that the answer is to be found by distinguishing two versions of the Fixity of the Past: the possible worlds version (as given by FP above), and the counterfactual version:

(FPC) For any action *Y*, agent *S*, and time *t*, if it is true that if *S* were to do *Y* at *t*, then some hard fact about the past (relative to *t*) would not have been a fact, then *S* cannot do *Y* at *t*.²⁰

Though we accept both FP and FPC, we submit that Plantinga *denies* FPC but *accepts* FP. That is, on Plantinga’s view, FPC is false: one could act in such a way that, were one to act that way, a hard fact about the past would as a matter of fact have been different. But he accepts (or *could* accept) FP: anything you can do must be *capable* of being an extension of the actual past. This then requires Plantinga to contend that descriptions of God’s past beliefs do not belong in a statement of the “actual past.” In Paul’s case, for instance, the contention would be this. There is a certain possible world that is needed in order for it to be true that Paul *can* mow: this is a possible world with the same past as the actual world (up to the relevant time) in which he mows. (And, Plantinga may say, there is no reason, given his story, to suppose that there is no such world; that the ants were in his yard [a hard fact about the past] is in itself *consistent* with Paul’s mowing. As Plantinga says, Paul’s mowing “does not *entail* the falsehood of the proposition that the ants did move in” [207].) However, this is not the world that *would* be actual, were Paul actually to exercise his freedom to mow; rather, the world that would be actual is a world with a different past from the actual world, *viz.*, a world in which ants never moved into his yard. Thus, the given possible world that is required for the “can-claim” to be true (a world with the same past) is not the world that would be actual were that power to be exercised.²¹

Plantinga later remarks:

The Ockhamite bystander might make another suggestion: what Pike needs here . . . is the distinction between hard and soft facts about the past. What

¹⁹Plantinga in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, 193. For why this is implausible, see note 8 above.

²⁰Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will*, 62. (Note: what we’re here calling “FPC” was there labeled “FP.”)

²¹For more on the distinction between FP and FPC, see Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will*, especially pages 87–110; also, see John Martin Fischer, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Fixity of the Past,” *Philosophia* 39 (2011), 461–474, esp. 472–473.

we should say, he suggests, is that I have the ability to do X if and only if there is a possible world that shares its hard facts about the past with the actual world in which I do X. (214)

Now, we agree with Plantinga that the “sufficiency” claim is false: as Plantinga says, that there is such a world “does not . . . suffice to show that it is within my power to do X” (214). But what about the “necessity” claim—which is, of course, a (more or less) exact restatement of FP? Notably, Plantinga does not contend that the necessity claim is *false*, but instead that “it is of no use to Pike,” since “a pair of worlds can have histories that are indistinguishable prior to *t* even if the one but not the other contains an essentially omniscient God who prior to *t* believes that Jones will mow at *t*” (214). In other words, the necessity claim is of no use to Pike because God’s beliefs are soft facts about the past.

In sum: Merricks, unlike Plantinga, is perfectly content to grant that God’s past beliefs are “fully in the past” or are “hard facts about the past,” and therefore that the relevant worlds mentioned by Plantinga are indeed “distinguishable prior to *t*.” Merricks, then, seems perfectly willing to give up FP. Plantinga, on the other hand, wants God’s beliefs to turn out “soft,” and this is presumably because he *accepts* FP, and feels the force of the intuition that anything you *can* do must be *capable* of being an extension of the actual past (even if it *would not as a matter of fact* be such an extension). On our view, the problem for Plantinga is that FP is indeed of use to Pike, whereas the problem for Merricks is that he must deny it. So whether Merricks indeed has “company” among other incompatibilists about determinism and freedom in denying FP is ultimately unclear, at least as regards Plantinga.²²

3. Merricks, Dependence, and Merricks-dependence

But why is Merricks content to admit that God’s past beliefs are “hard,” and therefore to give up FP? The basic idea behind Merricks’s reply to the divine foreknowledge argument is simple: God’s beliefs depend on the world. Merricks does not seek to give an analysis of the sort of dependence at issue. Instead, he gives examples:

For example, God believes *that there are no white ravens* because there are no white ravens, and not the other way around. And God believed, a thousand years ago, *that Jones sits at t* because Jones will sit at *t*, and not the other way around.²³

Because God’s beliefs depend on the world in this way, it follows that God’s believing, a thousand years ago, that Jones sits at *t* depends—in the sense of dependence just illustrated—on exactly Jones’s sitting at *t*.

Merricks puts the point slightly differently elsewhere:

²²We thank Tom Flint for helpfully pressing us on these issues; indeed, Flint reports that he at least is one other incompatibilist about determinism and free will who doubts FP.

²³Merricks, “Foreknowledge and Freedom,” 572, citing Merricks, “Truth and Freedom,” 52.

God's having—even a thousand years ago—the belief *that Jones sits at t* depended on Jones's sitting at *t*.²⁴

God believed, a thousand years ago, *that Jones sits at t* because the proposition *that Jones sits at t* was true a thousand years ago.²⁵

For now, however, we can take the “canonical illustration” of the relevant sort of dependence to be the following:

(M) God believes that Jones will sit at *t* because Jones will sit at *t*.

Call the sort of dependence in (M) “Merricks-dependence,” or M-dependence for short. Now, Merricks's basic point is this. Once you see that God's beliefs M-depend on what we do, then you'll see—or you *should* see—that they pose no threat to our freedom. For it would be perverse to contend, in short, that God's past beliefs must be held fixed when evaluating what we can do, when those very beliefs were held because of what we do, in the sense captured by (M). That is, Merricks claims that once one sees that the indicated kind of dependence holds, one will not see any strong reason to hold onto the fixity of the past (since Merricks is willing to grant that God's beliefs are “in the past” in the relevant sense). Of course, more could be said here, but that's the basic idea, and enough for our purposes.²⁶

We agree with Merricks that establishing that God's beliefs depend (in a certain way) on what we do is the key to providing a proper response to the argument. As we noted, however, and as Merricks agrees, it is not enough that God's beliefs depend *in some sense or other* on what we do; they must depend on what we do in the *right way*. For instance, everyone would agree with the following: Necessarily, God believes that Jones will sit at *t* *only if* Jones sits at *t*. And that certainly seems like *one* sense in which God's beliefs depend on what we do. Very plausibly, however, it isn't the relevant sense. For consider God's past *decrees*. By the same token, necessarily, God has *decreed* for Jones to sit at *t* *only if* Jones sits at *t*. Thus, in these respects, God's past determining decrees will depend on what Jones does no less than do God's past beliefs. Moreover, such decrees will also *counterfactually* depend on what Jones does; plausibly, then, mere counterfactual dependence is *also* not the right sort of dependence.²⁷ The question thus becomes: what is?

It is worth pointing out that the Ockhamist *also* agrees with this claim about the importance of establishing a certain sort of dependence of God's beliefs on what we do. It is best to think of Ockhamism as involving two

²⁴Merricks, “Truth and Freedom,” 54.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶In fairness to Merricks, he does motivate this contention by appeal to certain “parody” arguments, which, roughly, appeal to *future* truths and *future* beliefs (rather than *past* truths and *past* beliefs). For reasons of space we cannot address Merricks's parody arguments here. Readers interested in Merricks's full case for the compatibility of foreknowledge and freedom should thus consult “Truth and Freedom” and “Foreknowledge and Freedom.”

²⁷For a development of these points, see Todd, “Soft Facts and Ontological Dependence.”

distinct “steps.” The first step is to give an account of why the past relationally or extrinsically considered need not be held fixed. As we maintain in our first reply, this account crucially involves the notion of dependence; soft facts about the past need not be fixed for us precisely because they sometimes *depend* (in a particular way) on what we do.²⁸ The second step—the step that receives nearly all of the attention—is to contend that God’s past beliefs in fact do not belong to the intrinsic past, but instead are “soft facts” about the past. This second step makes sense only against the (often unstated) *background* of the first. So we object when Merricks writes that “when it comes to divine foreknowledge’s compatibility with human freedom, the fundamental question is not the Ockhamist’s question of whether God’s beliefs about what an agent will do in the future are ‘hard facts.’ Rather, the fundamental question is whether God’s beliefs about what an agent will do in the future depend on what that agent will do in the future.”²⁹ But our point is that the issue of dependence and the issue of hardness are intertwined. So Merricks’s claim is a bit like saying, “The fundamental question is not whether God’s beliefs depend (in particular way) on what happens in the future (such as the actions of human agents). Rather, the fundamental question is whether God’s beliefs about what an agent will do in the future depend on what that agent will do in the future.”

Look at it this way. In characterizing Ockhamism, Merricks merely says the following:

The obvious question is: *why* does Jones have such a choice? . . . The Ockhamists now among us have an answer to this question. . . . It is that the past truth of *that Jones sits at t* is, when *t* is not itself past, a “soft fact” about the past; because it is a soft fact about the past, someone even now has a choice about it.³⁰

Merricks leaves it at that. But this answer is doubly defective. First, the Ockhamist *does not* say that because something is a soft fact about the past, someone has a choice about it—indeed, as we point out in our reply, there will be any number of soft facts about the past that no one has a choice about, facts such as that Kennedy was being shot (roughly) 48 years prior to tomorrow’s sunrise (which, we assume, none of us can prevent). More importantly, suppose one of your undergraduates has become worried about the venerable problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. And suppose you said to her, “Not to worry: God’s beliefs are *soft* facts about the past.” And suppose you left it at that. How would this even begin to help your student? Clearly, it would not. Obviously, more would have to be said for the above reply even to make *sense*. And, clearly, if one wanted

²⁸Recall that the correctness of Kennedy’s past belief is *determined by* whether Obama sits; this is certainly an important sense in which the correctness of Kennedy’s belief depends on what Obama does at *t*. For more on this notion of determination and its relevance to the soft/hard distinction, see Todd, “Soft Facts and Ontological Dependence.”

²⁹Merricks, “Foreknowledge and Freedom,” 567.

³⁰Merricks, “Truth and Freedom,” 47.

accurately to represent Ockhamism, one would here begin by saying that soft facts about the past depend in a particular way on the future, and thus (sometimes) on what we do. (This, then, points to the possibility that we have control over the facts in question.) So Merricks radically undersells Ockhamism. In particular, he undersells it with respect to how Ockhamists rely on the same general ideas about dependence as he does.

That Merricks rejects the fixity of the past is, we believe, in itself a significant cost of his approach. In what remains, however, we develop two further problems for Merricks's view, in addition to his having to give up the fixity of the past.

4. Human Beliefs and M-dependence

Again, Merricks contends that "God's beliefs depend on the world." God believes that grass is green because grass is green, and not the other way around. And God believes that Jones will sit at t because Jones will sit at t , and not the other way around.

However, *our* beliefs can seemingly depend on the world in just the same way. In any case, if they do not, then we need to be told more about what it is for someone to believe that p because p , as in Merricks's constructions. In other words, it seems *prima facie* open to say that we (the authors) believe that grass is green because grass is green. At least, it certainly isn't the case that grass is green because we believe it is. That grass really is green arguably somewhere appears in the full explanation of why we believe that grass is green; is that sufficient for us to believe that grass is green because it is? Frankly, we don't really know. *Prima facie*, then, it seems open to contend that *our* beliefs can depend on the world in the sense Merricks has identified.

And this seems like a problem for Merricks's view. First, one might suppose that in whatever sense God's beliefs depend on the world that is relevant to responding to the foreknowledge argument, *our* beliefs won't depend on the world in the same way. This may be right. But this issue points to perhaps deeper problems. Again, for Merricks, God believes that Jones will sit at t because Jones will sit at t . But now suppose that God whispers to Diego, "By the way, Jones will sit at t ." Now, in one sense, it seems right to say that Diego believes that Jones will sit at t because God told him that Jones will sit at t . But it also seems right to say that Diego believes that Jones will sit at t because Jones will sit at t . After all, *prima facie*, "because" seems transitive: it's because Jones will sit that God believes he will, and it's because God believes he will that God told Diego that he would, and so it would seem that Diego too believes that Jones will sit because Jones will, in fact, sit.

But now Merricks would seem committed to the jarring result that Jones could have a choice about what a mere human being believed in the past.³¹

³¹Well, *we* think this is a jarring result. But if you already agree with Plantinga (as we do not) that Paul could so act that, were he to act that way, ants would never have been in his

Further, suppose we added the following: and it is because Diego believed that Jones would sit that Diego decided to cause the explosion, thereby killing 5 innocents. So it is because Jones will sit at t that yesterday 5 people were killed in an explosion. So Jones has a choice about whether yesterday 5 people were killed in an explosion.

To us, this seems clearly to be a bad result. We aren't claiming that there aren't ways Merricks could extricate himself from these difficulties; perhaps Merricks would wish to deny the transitivity of his sense of "because." (However, Merricks seems committed to the transitivity of his sense of "because.")³² Our point would then just be this: Merricks needs to further explain his sense of "because," and the related notion of "believing that p because p ."³³

yard, and if you think that is sufficient for his "having a choice about" whether ants were in his yard, then perhaps this result won't strike you as all that jarring. However, it is worth noting that Merricks seems committed to something stronger than does Plantinga in this regard. Since (so the thought goes) Diego believes that Jones will sit "because Jones will sit," Merricks is committed to maintaining that Jones *has a choice about* whether Diego had that belief. But all Plantinga says (and all he is committed to) is that Jones could so act that, were he to act that way, some human being (say) would not have had a given belief. But surely not everything that *would* be false, were one to act in a given way, is something that one "has a choice about," if one can act in that way. (Merricks himself emphasizes just this point; see "Truth and Freedom," 49). Of course, these issues harken back to difficult debates about the analysis of "having a choice about" and "bringing it about that," and associated "power-entailment principles." For more on such issues, see: William Hasker, "Foreknowledge and Necessity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), 121–157; Philip L. Quinn, "Plantinga on Foreknowledge and Freedom," in *Profiles: Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 271–287; Thomas Talbot, "On Divine Foreknowledge and Bringing about the Past," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46 (1986), 455–469; and Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will*, esp. pp. 248–249. But we set these issues aside here.

³²Merricks writes:

But divine foreknowledge does not require backward causation. The first step toward seeing this is to suppose that God believed, a thousand years ago, that Jones sits at t because the proposition that Jones sits at t was true a thousand years ago. . . . The second and final step is to suppose that, since truth depends on the world, that Jones sits at t was true a thousand years ago because Jones will sit at t These two steps deliver a sense of "because" in which God believed, a thousand years ago, that Jones sits at t because Jones will sit at t . ("Truth and Freedom," 54)

Merricks is, in effect, reasoning as follows: it is true that Jones will sit because Jones will sit, and God believes that Jones will sit because it is true that Jones will sit, so God believes that Jones will sit because Jones will sit. So Merricks seems to be relying on the transitivity of his sense of "because."

³³Merricks may point out that, for God, p entails that God believes that p , whereas this will not be so for any human being. (We thank Thomas Flint for this suggestion.) However, it is not clear how this modal fact (about entailment) in itself establishes (or helps to establish) the "because" claim, viz., that God believes that p because p . After all, on some extreme theological-voluntarist views, p will entail that God *decreed* that p , but this modal fact (were it a fact) would not in itself suggest, of course, that God decreed that p because p —rather, the order of explanation would go the other way around. Finally, it isn't evident to us that the mere fact that p does not entail that one believes that p implies that one does not believe that p because p . What is perhaps more relevant for Merricks's purposes is some claim to the effect that God enjoys "direct access" to the truth of propositions, whereas we do not, and so believes that p "because p " in some sense in which we do not. Much more could be said about this issue, but we must set it aside.

5. Prepunishment

The second problem is this: if Merricks's reply works to reconcile divine fore-belief and freedom, it would also seem to reconcile divine *pre-punishment* with human freedom. But divine pre-punishment very plausibly *does* rule out human freedom. So Merricks's reply is defective.³⁴

Suppose we said the following. Jones will sit at t_{10} , and his sitting at t_{10} will be (for some reason) seriously wrong, and God, of course, knows this. So God punishes Jones *now*, at t_1 , for what Jones will do later, at t_{10} . Further, God punishes Jones for sitting at t_{10} because Jones will sit at t_{10} , and not the other way around; Jones does not sit at t_{10} because he was pre-punished by God for sitting at t_{10} . At least, the proponent of divine pre-punishment will contend that there is not the slightest reason for supposing that this would have to be so. The upshot here is this: divine pre-punishment and divine pre-belief seem to be on a par with respect to M-dependence. Thus, if Merricks is right, the proponent of such pre-punishment could use precisely the same reasoning Merricks employs in "Truth and Freedom" in order to reconcile divine pre-punishment with human freedom. So something has gone wrong with such reasoning.

Our question here is simple. If you have already been (justly) punished by God for doing something, how then could you avoid doing that thing? There would appear to be three different options here, and none seems promising. Suppose Jones's punishment took the following form: spending 10 hours in his local jail. So, 10 days ago, Jones was locked up for 10 hours in his local jail. And he was punished by God in this way because he will sit at t . But Jones *can* avoid sitting at t . How would you explain this to Jones?

Here is the First Answer:

Whereas you were punished 10 days ago for sitting at t —in particular, whereas you spent 10 hours in jail 10 days ago—and whereas you have no choice about *that*, you have a choice about whether that punishment was *just*. For whether it was *just* punishment depends on what you do at t . If you sit at t , then it will have been just punishment *because* of your sitting at t . Indeed, if it was just, it will have *counted* as being just in virtue of your sitting; punishments count as just at least partially in virtue of the person's having committed the crime for which she is being punished. So don't sit at t , and then you will have been punished unjustly. In short, your power to refrain consists in this: to make it the case that, whereas you were punished for sitting at t , you were punished for a crime you never in fact commit.

³⁴We believe that the prepunishment issue is a problem for *anyone* committed to the compatibility of foreknowledge and freedom. For an extensive development of this argument, see Patrick Todd, "Prepunishment and Explanatory Dependence: A New Argument for the Incompatibility of Foreknowledge and Freedom," *Philosophical Review*, forthcoming. Here, however, we simply focus on how these issues bear on Merricks's approach in particular.

Clearly, however, no such explanation will be available when the punisher in question is *God*. For it is *impossible* (we are assuming) that God should ever punish someone unjustly in this way. So the First Answer is eliminated.

It appears, then, that if Jones *can* avoid sitting at *t*, then his power will have to consist in this: to make it the case that he was never in fact punished at all, and so never punished unjustly. But there are, crucially, two ways this might go. Consider, then, the Second Answer:

Whereas you underwent certain activities 10 days ago—in particular, whereas God had you spend 10 hours in jail 10 days ago—and whereas you have no choice about *that*, you have a choice about whether those activities were *punishments*. For whether those activities were *punishments* depends on what you do at *t*. If you sit at *t*, then those activities will have been punishments *because of* your sitting at *t*. Indeed, if they were punishments, then they will have *counted* as being punishments in virtue of your sitting; activities undergone by one *count* as being punishments at least partially in virtue of one's committing the crime for which she undergoes them. So don't sit at *t*, and then you will have spent 10 hours in jail, not as someone undergoing punishment, but as someone undergoing—well, something else. Whether you were being punished is strictly up to you, inasmuch as it is strictly up to you whether to sit at *t*.

We have several comments about this Second Answer. The first is this: it relies on the same or similar sorts of intuitions as does the First Answer. That is, *both* try to honor the fixity of the past, as characterized above. In the First, the idea is this: that the punishment was *just* is no part of the past, *intrinsically considered*. Rather, the punishment *counts* as being just in virtue of Jones' sitting at *t*; that the punishment was just is a soft fact about the past. The Second Answer employs the same basic strategy, but in a more radical way. The relevant past activities *count* as having been punishments in the first place in virtue of Jones' sitting; thus, that Jones was even being *punished* is no part of the past, *intrinsically considered*. Rather, that Jones was being *punished* at the relevant time is a soft fact about the past, *i.e.*, it is relationally determined by whether Jones in fact sits.

The problem with this Second Answer, however, is simple. It relies on a seemingly implausible theory of punishment; it seems doubtful that activities undergone *count* as being punishments even partially in virtue of one's doing the thing for which one is punished. If this were so, then it would seem plainly to follow that no one has ever been punished for a crime she did not commit.³⁵ After all, if she underwent certain activities

³⁵Of course, one might object that activities do count as *divine* punishments at least partially in virtue of one's doing the thing for which one is punished. Perhaps this is so. In this we are assuming, however, that when God punishes someone, God is engaged in the very same activity as we are when we engage in punishment. What is unique about God is simply that God cannot engage in *this very activity* unjustly. And one (plausibly) does *not* count as

that were perhaps *intended* as punishments, they were not *really* punishments if she didn't commit the given crime, since activities *count* as punishments (at least in part) in virtue of one's guilt. We don't know how decisively to show that this is the wrong theory of punishment. But our more limited point here can be this: *if* the Second Answer works to reconcile divine pre-punishment with human freedom, then it does so because facts about pre-punishment turn out to be soft facts about the past.

But suppose one rejects this theory of punishment. What we are left with, then, is the Third Answer:

Whereas you underwent certain activities 10 days ago—in particular, whereas you spent 10 hours in jail 10 days ago—well, you have a choice about that. You have a choice about whether you spent 10 hours in jail 10 days ago. For, if you underwent such activities, your having undergone them depends on what you do at *t*. In particular, if you underwent them, you did so because you will sit at *t*. So don't sit at *t*, and then you will have never spent those 10 hours in jail. Whether you spent those 10 hours in jail is strictly up to you, inasmuch as it is strictly up to you whether to sit at *t*.

But we find this highly implausible. As we see it, whether you were in the local jail 10 days ago or not is now completely beyond your control, or *anyone's* control—even God's.

So all three answers considered above seem defective—and these appear to be the only answers on offer. Thus, we suggest, something has gone wrong with the reasoning Merricks employs. In particular, establishing that God's beliefs M-depend on what we do is *not* enough to secure that (other things being equal) we have a choice about God's past beliefs, any more than establishing that God's pre-punishments M-depend on what we do could secure the result that we could have a choice about whether we were once pre-punished by God for something we will do. Something more is needed. And that something more is this: that whether you were prepunished for committing the crime is relationally determined by whether you in fact commit it—that is, that your having been prepunished is a soft fact about the past. This is what you need—but this is also plausibly what you cannot have.

undergoing *this very activity* (i.e., punishment) even partially in virtue of one's committing the given crime. And we would say (or at least we would here assume) something similar about God's beliefs; God indeed does have beliefs—it's just that God cannot be in this mental state mistakenly, unlike us. (Importantly, and similarly, one does not count as *believing* that something will happen partially in virtue of the happening of that very thing, regardless of whether one counts as "divinely-believing" that something will happen at least partially in virtue of the happening of that thing.) In short, we would resist the temptation to say that God does not engage in punishment, but *divine*-punishment (which is not really punishment), or does not have *beliefs*, but *divine*-beliefs (which are not really beliefs), and so forth; down this road lies a certain (we think unattractive) apophaticism, according to which none of our concepts really apply to God. (We thank Tom Flint for raising this issue.)

6. Conclusion

Sometimes in philosophy — though rarely — someone will come along and show that a certain problem can in fact be solved far more easily and with far fewer resources and complications than we had in fact been assuming. That, we think, is the admirable goal of Trenton Merricks's approach to the foreknowledge problem. Merricks takes a simple claim that everyone ought to accept, and argues in interesting ways that it undermines the traditional argument for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. In this paper, however, we have argued that matters are indeed not so simple, and that the foreknowledge argument retains its force, despite Merricks's arguments.³⁶

*University of Innsbruck/Munich School of Philosophy
University of California, Riverside*

³⁶We are very grateful for comments on previous versions of this paper by R. Paul Turner, Andrew Bailey, Neal Tognazzini, and two anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy*. We are particularly thankful for detailed and helpful comments from Tom Flint.