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Against Synchronic Free Will: Or, why a personal, free God must be temporal

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1 Introduction

This paper offers a partial defence of an argument for the conclusion that a personal God must be temporal. In broad outline, the argument runs as follows:

1. To be a personal being, God must have free will.
2. Free will requires choice-based agency; that is, it requires being able to choose from among alternatives.¹
3. Choice-based agency must be understood diachronically (i.e. extended over time), not synchronically.
4. Therefore, if God is a personal being, God possesses diachronic free will, and therefore God is temporal.

I will not discuss premise 1. In section 2, I motivate – but do not present a full defence of – the second premise as it pertains to God. The bulk of the paper defends premise 3, the claim that choice-based free will must be construed diachronically. After outlining the choice-based view of free will and the difference between synchronic free will and diachronic free will (3.1), I argue that the necessity of the present precludes possession of synchronic free will (section 3.2). I then show why various replies given to this kind of argument by defenders of synchronic free will fail (section 3.3). In section 3.4 I defend the diachronic account of free will from two recent critiques.

If the arguments of section 3 are successful, they support premise 3 of the above argument, from which follows this conditional: necessarily, if God has choice-based free will, God is temporal. Instead of being used as part of an argument for the conclusion that God is temporal (as above), one might employ my defence of premise 3 in an argument for the conclusion that God cannot have choice-based free will (since God is atemporal). My sympathies lie with the former use of premise 3. Either way, the defence of premise 3 I offer here poses a direct challenge to atemporalist accounts of God's choice-based free will (such as those offered by Rota (2015: 95) and Grant (2019)) and an indirect challenge (given the assumption that being personal requires being free) to the idea that an atemporal God could be a personal being.

2 God's freedom requires alternatives

¹ The 'from among alternatives' is added for those philosophers who think that a person can have and make a choice without selecting from among two or more alternatives. I am unable to make much sense of the idea of choosing but not from among alternatives, but readers who think this possible are invited to append 'between alternatives' as they see fit to all instances of 'choice' and its cognates.

In this section I briefly motivate the second premise of the argument as it applies to God. The premise reads:

2. Free will requires choice-based agency; that is, it requires being able to choose from among alternatives.

There is of course a huge literature on the question of whether free will should be understood as involving a choice between alternatives. Here, however, I briefly survey the primary reason why many thinkers are drawn to the view that God's freedom involves having a choice.

This reason is that God is *a se* or entirely independent of everything else that exists. The flip side of this idea is that creation must be contingent in some strong sense and thus dependent on God for its existence. The attractiveness of God's aseity is straightforward enough to appreciate: God's being God seems to demand that God is not dependent on creation for anything. If God were dependent on creation, that would appear to be a diminution of God. And, as Dolezal puts it, one might well think that "in order to maintain God's absolute self-sufficiency and independence of the creature it seems incumbent upon the Christian theologian to uphold God's freedom not to create" (Dolezal 2011: 212 fn. 10). In other words, it must have been possible for God to not create. If that were not possible, then the existence of creation will be a necessary emanation from some aspect of God's being. It is on such grounds that Berkhof affirms that God's act of willing to create the universe must be seen as free *and not necessary*, lest the existence of creation itself become necessary:

[I]t is not possible nor even permissible for us to look for some deeper ground of things than the will of God, because all such attempts result in seeking a ground for the creature in the very Being of God, in robbing it of its contingent character, and in making it necessary, eternal, divine (Berkhof 1971: 78).

God's aseity demands, in other words, that it was possible that God create and that it was possible that God not create.² But how else to secure this other than by affirming that God faced a choice about whether to create? Certainly, we don't want to say that it was possible that God create and possible that God not create because God's creating was *a matter of chance*. But to avoid that and still maintain that these were genuine possibilities, it seems that we must affirm that God had a choice about whether to create. We must hold, as Frame affirms, that "God's free decision [to create or refrain from creating] was not determined by any of his attributes" (Frame 2002: 236) (cf. a similar affirmation by Erickson (1998: 384) to the effect that God's decisions aren't determined by anything).³ Recognising the importance of divine choice-based

² The question concerning the contingency of creation (as a whole) must not be confused with the issue of whether creation operates according to deterministic laws: creation might be a necessary emanation from God but operate according to indeterministic laws; alternatively, creation might be contingent because the result of God's free choice but nevertheless "deterministic as a clock" (Helm, as cited in Velde (2013: 687)). I take it that the question at issue among the thinkers cited here is whether *the existence of* creation is contingent or necessary.

³ Note that Frame denies that God possesses "libertarian freedom" (Frame 2002: 234) but this is not because Frame thinks God's choice is determined by one of God's attributes (as the quote in the text makes clear). Rather, it is because Frame erroneously understands "libertarian freedom" as involving the power to choose something "contrary to every motivation" – i.e., the power to choose something for no reason at all (Frame 2002: 138). On this understanding, choices would be irrational by definition. Clearly, this is a tendentious understanding of libertarian freedom and no proponent of free will who considers it incompatible with determinism would accept it.

free will for the contingency of what is created, Grant (2019) has presented a detailed account of God's agency which explicitly construes all of God's actions (or God's one timeless act, depending on how one wants to count the acts of God) as undetermined free choices.

One prominent alternative view is that God's freedom consists in the unimpeded realisation of something like an intention or will to create. If God's will to create flows from his very being (instead of being the result of a choice), then it will be false that God's willing to create could have been otherwise, and so false that there might not have been a creation at all. Couenhoven, who advocates such a view of divine freedom, accepts this conclusion: creation, he says, is the result of a "volitional necessity" in God and so creation is itself necessary (Couenhoven 2012: 409, 411). There are good theological reasons for endorsing this view of divine agency; for instance, it enables one to see how it makes sense to praise God for all God's perfections and actions, even though they could not have been any different. But it is noteworthy that Couenhoven himself does not seem entirely happy with the position; he claims, for example, that even though creation emanates necessarily from God's perfections, it "could [have been] different in a variety of ways" (Couenhoven 2012: 412). Now, this could be the case if God's (necessary) will determined *the existence of creation*, but God's (necessary) will *did not specify how every detail of creation would unfold*: creation could emanate necessarily from God and yet operate according to probabilistic causal laws, the results of which God does not settle (see fn. 2). But it is not clear that compatibilists such as Couenhoven can consistently (or would be happy to) make this move; typically, compatibilism is endorsed because it facilitates a straightforward account of a doctrine of providence that encompasses *every detail of what comes to pass*. But if God's will encompasses every detail of what comes to pass, it is entirely opaque how to construe Couenhoven's claim that things "could have been different in a variety of ways". In any case, my purpose here has not been to mount a full defence of the idea that God's free will must be construed in terms of God's possessing a choice, but only to illustrate that there are strong theological considerations that speak in favour of this position. For further points in favour of construing God's freedom as involving a choice, see Kittle (2016). Couenhoven (2012; 2016) makes the case against the idea.

3 Free will must be understood diachronically

3.1 Choice-based accounts of free will

All choice-based views of free will hold that if an agent, N, is to be free, then (at least) two statements with something like the following form must be true:

- (1) Agent N is able to A, and
- (2) Agent N is able to refrain from A-ing.

In addition, choice-based theorists think that it must be *up to* the agent which alternative is realised and that this "up-to-us level control" is exercised through the making of a choice. (In the literature on alternative possibilities, these two presuppositions are often left unstated, but I think it helpful to highlight them).

With respect to at least some statements which affirm that a human agent is able to perform some action, two temporal-indices are needed. This is because most actions take time to

perform; moreover, some actions are referred to using the name of an event type which implies that the performance takes time. For example, the statements 'I am able to run 5km' or 'I am able to write a letter' refer to non-homogeneous temporally extended activities. They are, in Vendler's system of verb classification, *accomplishments* (Vendler 1957). For all such action types, if an agent who can perform such an action exercises that ability at t_x , the time at which the action is completed must be after t_x . It is not clear whether all ability ascriptions have two temporal-indices, but if they do, the second temporal-index does not always refer to the *completion* of the activity. This is because not all ability ascriptions ascribe pertain to accomplishments; some pertain to what Vendler calls *activities*, and in such cases no clear ending for the activity need be in view. For example, with the statement 'I am able to go running', the activity described has no specified end, so if such a statement admits of a second temporal-index it would (presumably) refer to a time at which the activity would be underway – perhaps something like 'I am able (now) to make it the case that I'll be running in 2 minutes'.

This latter complication need not detain us because decisions are not activities in Vendler's sense. What the above illustrates, however, is that since ability ascriptions might specify either kind of temporal-index, we must clearly distinguish between temporal-indices which pertain to when the ability *is possessed* and those which pertain to when the action is *underway* or *completed*. In the case of decisions, the diachronic free will theorist says that the two temporal-indices will be different, the second temporal-index referring to the instant after the first temporal-index. Thus, the diachronic theorist says that for an agent to be free with respect to a decision, two or more statements with the following form must be true of the agent:

Diachronic free will

(3) Agent N is able at t_x to decide to A at t_y , and

(4) Agent N is able at t_x to decide to B at t_y , where the options A and B are distinct (though B may just be deciding to refrain from A-ing) and where t_y is later than t_x .

The synchronic theorist by contrast holds that the two temporal-indices must be the same, such that for an agent to be free with respect to a decision (at least) two statements of the following form must be true of the agent:

Synchronic free will

(3*) Agent N is able at t_x to decide to A at t_x , and

(4*) Agent N is able at t_x to decide to B at t_x , where options A and B are distinct.

Both the diachronic theorist and the synchronic theorist take these to be necessary (not sufficient⁴) conditions on the agent's being free with respect to the decision in question; naturally, both the diachronic and the synchronic theorist allow that the agent may face a decision between more than two options.

One can see immediately that defenders of God's atemporality who hold that God has choice-based freedom will be strongly attracted to the synchronic version of choice-based free will.

⁴ Rogers presents one argument against diachronic free will which relies on mistakenly construing these as sufficient conditions; see below for details.

More precisely, something like the following seems true: necessarily, if God is atemporal and God possesses choice-based free will, God's free will is akin to synchronic free will. Of course, if God is atemporal, then God's free will won't be indexed to *temporal* moments; instead, God will possess and exercise the ability to choose in the atemporal realm. But the present point is just that, since synchronic free will only involves one temporal moment, and since by definition there is only one "moment" in the atemporal realm, atemporalists will be attracted to the synchronic view of free will because it looks like references to the temporal moment could be replaced by references to the atemporal realm. On this line of thinking, if God is atemporal and has choice-based free will, two statements of the form of (5) and (6) must be true of God:

(5) God is able in the atemporal realm to decide in the atemporal realm to A

(6) God is able in the atemporal realm to decide in the atemporal realm to B, where options A and B are distinct and B may just be refraining from A

I have used the phrase "in the atemporal realm" to refer to God's mode of atemporal existence. Some defenders of divine atemporality refer to the "eternal 'present'" (Rogers 2007) or the "eternal now" (Rota 2015: 95). This, it seems to me, is an attempt to make the atemporalist view more palatable by applying to it temporal notions to which it is not entitled. And since it is unclear what 'present' or 'now' could mean when applied to the atemporal realm (despite the various attempts to explicate it), I prefer to employ the label 'atemporal realm'.

3.2 Against Synchronic Free Will

In this subsection I argue that it is impossible for any agent – human or divine – to possess (anything akin to) synchronic free will. The impossibility in question arises from the necessity of the present (or the atemporal realm), which makes it impossible for any agent who has at T *decided to A* to be able at T *to decide at T to B* in the sense required for free will.

In making the case against synchronic free will, I wish to begin by making two preliminary observations about ability ascriptions. Understanding ability ascriptions is vital because the issue turns on what sort of ability or power is required for free will. But ability ascriptions are difficult to get clear about. The first observation is this: it is standard in discussions of alternative possibilities to refer to the *ability to do otherwise*. But in everyday English the term 'ability' is usually reserved for intrinsic abilities: the ability to run, to play the piano, to program in Haskell, and so on. The sort of ability required by free will, however, is not an intrinsic ability – not, at least, according to any incompatibilist. At a minimum, the ability or power required by free will requires an intrinsic ability *and the opportunity to exercise it*. And because *having the opportunity* is an extrinsic matter, *being able* to do something in the sense relevant to free will is an extrinsic matter. In the free will literature, this sense of 'being able' is routinely reified and referred to as an ability, which has led to much confusion. It is vital to remember throughout that our target is the property ascribed by the use of 'able' relevant to free will; any use of the noun 'ability' should be considered a technical usage which latches on to the extrinsic property ascribed by the appropriate use of 'able'.

The second preliminary observation is this: for any given action type, F, there is not just a single sense of 'is able to F'. To see this, consider the following example, which I have discussed in more depth elsewhere⁵:

(Mary and Marty) Mary can memorise a shuffled pack of cards, but only if she's listening to heavy metal music (and nothing else), which she uses to create a 'memory palace' to aid her; Marty can memorise a shuffled pack of cards, but only if he's listening to classical music (and nothing else), which he uses to create a 'memory palace' to aid him. Neither can perform the feat of memorisation in silence, nor while listening to multiple kinds of music at once.

In this example, both Mary and Marty have abilities which pertain to the same action-type, namely, *memorising a shuffled pack of cards*. However, their abilities are not tokens of the same ability-type. Mary's ability only "pertains to" situations where there is heavy metal music playing; Marty's only "pertains to" situations where there is classical music playing. One way of understanding this "pertaining to" is to recognise that ability ascriptions express a form of relative modality which varies along two dimensions: the kind of modality in question and the strength of that modality. Very roughly, and employing a scheme derived from Kratzer's (1977; 1981) informal presentation of her formal semantics for 'can' – arguably the *de facto* standard semantics for such modals – we could gloss the claim made by the ascriptions of a memorisation ability to Mary and Marty like this:⁶

(7) In view of some of her intrinsic properties, and assuming that there is heavy metal music playing, Mary is able to memorise a shuffled pack of cards.

(8) In view of some of his intrinsic properties, and assuming that there is classical music playing, Marty is able to memorise a shuffled pack of cards.

The crucial point is that the contents of the 'In view of ...' clause *partly determines* what is expressed by the occurrence of 'is able to'. More precisely, the 'In view of' clause specifies what Kratzer calls the *modal base* of the ability. If we were formalising the semantics, the modal base would determine which possible worlds are used in the assessment of the modal. Significantly, the kind of modality such modals can express is not limited to what might be thought of as the standard modalities: logical, metaphysical, physical, and so on. Pretty much anything can be placed in the modal base, as the above example illustrates.

Now, suppose that Mary is in a completely silent room with no way of playing any heavy metal music. Mary still possesses the ability ascribed by (7). The assessment of (7) requires consideration of Mary *on the assumption that* there is heavy metal music playing. If we make that assumption, Mary can memorise, so Mary has this (intrinsic) ability. And this is so even when Mary is currently in situation where she is unable to memorise. The sense in which it is correct to say that Mary is *unable* to memorise because she is currently in a silent room is plausibly thought to be given by something like:

(9) In view of some of her intrinsic properties, but given that there is no heavy metal music playing, Mary is unable to memorise a shuffled pack of cards.

⁵ See Kittle (Forthcoming) and Kittle (n.d.).

⁶ I discuss the form of such ascriptions further in Kittle (n.d.).

The important point here is that it would involve no contradiction if both (7) and (9) were true of Mary at the same time because the statements make different modal claims, with the modal content being determined by the respective 'In view of...' clauses. But to say that there is no contradiction here is *not* to say that each statement is equally relevant to Mary's free will – as we will see, this is far from the case. The point I've sought to establish here, then, is this: for a given action-type, F, there are multiple senses in which an agent may be said to be able to F. I've made this point with respect to one mental action: memorisation. But it's plausible to think the point also applies to decisions. Different people vary in their decision-making capabilities. Some people can make decisions when under extreme stress, subject to numerous distractions, in a lot of pain, on a stage in front of 100,000 people, and so on. Other people cannot. When we affirm that someone is able to decide to A, therefore, we must recognise that this claim is underdetermined until more is said about the modality in question. This point is not normally noticed because for common action-types (like decisions) we tend to presuppose a set of "ordinary" or "typical" circumstances, but for the problem of free will, the point is vital.

One might agree that the above point seems sensible enough with respect to human agents but that it does not apply to God. After all, one might think, nothing can constrain God's power. Thus, when 'is able to' is said of God, the modality expressed will always be of the same kind and won't exhibit any variation. But this is mistaken. Even if it is true when referring to God's ability to create that there can be no conditions *external to God* which might be included in the modal base, one might nevertheless include or abstract away from different aspects of God's character in the modal scope of 'is able to' and thereby express different things. Moreover, the results of God's actions may be put into the modal base, thus yielding a sense of 'able' which takes into account the fact that God has decided a certain way. And indeed, the dispute between synchronic and diachronic theorists topic turns on whether the relevant use of 'able' is one which holds fixed facts about what exists.

With these preliminaries in place, we can now formulate the objection to the synchronic view of free will. Suppose that agent N decides at T to A. The synchronic theorist is committed to the truth of the following three statements:

(11) N decides at T to A.

(12) N is able at T to decide at T to A.

(13) N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing. (For ease of presentation I switch to considering the refraining from A, rather than deciding to B where B is distinct from A).

Now, assume to begin with that the present is *necessary* (objections to this are considered below). The claim here is not that the present is "absolutely necessary", whatever that is meant to mean. Rather, the claim is that since the present *exists* and is part of *concrete, determinate reality* it is thereby settled and fixed. As such, the present cannot be changed: it is impossible to remove an existing entity or event from the present and replace it with something else, just as it is impossible to remove some entity or event from the past and replace it with something else. If that's right then (13) can only be true if the modal claim it expresses *abstracts away from* N's having decided at T to A. That is, given current assumptions, if (13) is to be true it must express something like:

(13*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, but abstracting away from N's having decided at T to A, N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

Statement (13*) abstracts away from N's having decided at T; in other words, (13*) does not put N's deciding at T to A into the modal base of 'is able to'. Understood in this way, (13*) ascribes a legitimate ability to N at T. More to the point, (13*) is true. Nevertheless, the truth of (13*) does not bestow on N the control required for free will at T. Why? Because even though (13*) is true it is also the case that the following is true of N:

(14*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, and given N's having decided at T to A, N is unable at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

Statement (14*) asserts that N is unable at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing. This assertion *takes into consideration* the fact that N has (already) decided at T to A.⁷ That is, the modal claim expressed by the 'unable' in (14*) *holds fixed that aspect of the ontologically determinate present which consists in N's having already decided at T to A*. Statement (14*) denies that N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing because, given that N's decision is part of determinate reality, to have the power expressed by the sense of '(un)able' in (14*) would require removing an existent entity from the present moment and replacing it with another entity. But this is impossible. So N is unable to decide in that sense.

Crucially, I claim that the sense of 'able' in (14*) is *more relevant to N's free will* than the sense in (13*). Why think this? Because it holds fixed more of the circumstances in which N makes the decision. Agents make decisions in ontologically determinate circumstances. These circumstances can and often do affect what can happen going forward, thus, they can affect what agents are able to do. And therefore, senses of 'able' which hold fixed more of the ontologically determinate reality in which an agent decides are more relevant to free will. And the sense which matters most is the sense which expresses a modal claim that takes into consideration all of the agent's current ontologically determinate situation. This is why the sense of 'able' in (14*) takes precedence over (13*) when it comes to the N's free will. If there were a further sense of being able at T to decide to refrain from A-ing at T which held even more fixed than (14*), that would take precedence over (14*). But if we suppose that (14*) holds everything fixed, then we must conclude that N does not satisfy the conditions which the synchronic theorist lays down the free will. Therefore, N doesn't have free will.

Philosophers who are incompatibilists about free will and causal determinism will – or at least, *should* – agree with the basic point being made here. Just as the incompatibilist contends it is mistaken, when articulating an account of the sense of 'able' relevant to free will, to abstract away from antecedent causal factors which determine an agent to X (for example), so we should maintain that it is illegitimate to abstract away from entities which have determinate existence, since those too affect how things can unfold. Since the present is necessary or fixed, those entities which have determinate existence in the present affect what agents can and cannot do. (For further elaboration on how this thought provides an argument against classical compatibilism see Kittle 2015: 3029–34). In resisting this thought as it applies to the

⁷ My treatment thus diverges from Hasker's (2011; 2012) defence of diachronic free will. Hasker charges the synchronic theorist with holding a contradiction; I do not think the synchronic theorist is committed to contradictory statements; the problem, rather, is that the only use of 'able' they can affirm is irrelevant to the agent's free will.

ontologically determinate present, synchronic theorists risk undermining their reasons for holding to incompatibilism.

3.3 Objections defused

The straightforward denial that the present is necessary or fixed

The first objection rejects the idea that present is necessary or fixed in any sense which precludes being able to change it. Consider again agent N who decides at T to A. I claimed above that while the synchronic theorist can affirm:

(13*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, but abstracting away from N's having decided at T to A, N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

the synchronic theorist must also affirm:

(14*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, and given N's having decided at T to A, N is unable at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

The present objection denies that the present is necessary or fixed in any sense which undermines free will. On this view, possessing a power which involves changing the present is no problem. The synchronic free will theorist who endorses this objection thus affirms (15*):

(15*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, and given N's having decided at T to A at T, N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

This reply to the argument I will label the *straightforward denial of the necessity of the present*. And I agree that if one rejects the necessity or fixity of the present one can affirm (15*). I would argue, however, that anyone who holds that the present is not necessary or fixed must also hold that the past is not necessary or fixed. This is because the thought that the present is fixed derives from the same source as the thought that the past is fixed, namely, the ontological determinateness of reality. The present, after all, just is the leading edge of the past (cf. Rogers 2007: 33). If one accepts that neither the past nor the present is fixed, then the argument I presented above against synchronic free will won't have any force.

But denying the necessity or fixity of the past and present in this straightforward manner is a significant cost to any theory. For (15*) to be true, N must have the power to remove an event from determinate reality and replace it with another event. And it is widely agreed – even among those who deny the present is necessary – that possessing such a power would be impossible. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any philosopher has any advocated this straightforward denial of the necessity of the present. Those who explicitly deny that the past/present is fixed in any sense which precludes someone having ability over the past/present typically augment their denials of the fixity of the past/present with an appeal to a so-called *counterfactual power over the past/present* (see below). And so while affirming (15*) would allow the synchronic theorist to affirm N's free will, affirming (15*) can and should be seen as a *reductio* of the view.

The supposed distinction between power over the present and counterfactual power over the present

Some have argued that denying the necessity or fixity of the past/present can be made more palatable by noting that a distinction exists between two ways of being able to do something. The distinction is that between having a straightforward *power over the past/present* (as described above) and having a so-called *counterfactual power over the past/present*. The distinction supposedly pertains to two different ways of understanding (15*):

(15*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, and given N's having decided at T to A at T, N **is able** at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

The first "straightforward" way of understanding (15*) is the way sketched above: possessing this power requires being able to change the present (something which looks to be impossible). But, proponents of synchronic free will may point out, there is a second way of understanding the power ascribed by (15*) according to which it ascribes only a *counterfactual power over the present*. According to this view, what (15*) requires is only that, *had* N decided to refrain, *it would have been true all along* that N decided to refrain. Some remarks by Rota⁸ suggest that he might endorse this objection, or something close to it. He considers the following proposition which (he thinks) might be endorsed by some critics of synchronic free will:

At T, it is too late for N to exercise a power to refrain from [deciding to A] at T (Rota 2015: 92).

As Rota sees it, critics of synchronic free will might find this plausible because of "the thought that humans do not have the power to change or undo what is already settled" (Rota 2015: 92). Rota suggests that this worry involves a "subtle confusion": N's being able to decide to refrain does not imply "a power to change the present or undo anything that is already done"; rather, it's the case that "if N did exercise at T a power to refrain from [deciding to A] at T, then it *would have been false all along* that "N [decides to A] at T" (Rota 2015: 93 my emphasis). I assume here that in the passage of Rota's just quoted, the antecedent of the conditional should be in the subjunctive mood. Given that assumption, Rota is suggesting that we should distinguish between:

(Power-over-the-present) N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing and this would involve changing the present.

(Counterfactual-power-over-the-present) N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing and this power is such that, were N to exercise it, the present would have been "different all along".

The synchronic theorist contends that the argument against synchronic free will only goes through if (15*) is understood as a power-over-the-present, but that the proponent of synchronic free will only needs to maintain that (15*) ascribes a counterfactual-power-over-the-present. As such, (15*) doesn't ascribe a power to change a piece of determinate reality, it only requires the power to act in such a way that, had one so acted, things would have always been different.

⁸ Rota has written several articles arguing in favour of synchronic free will (Rota 2010; 2012; 2015). Here I focus on the presentation in Rota (2015) since, as he notes there, his earlier presentations "raise[ed] unnecessary difficulties, and ... [don't] accurately represent" the position he now wishes to endorse Rota (2015: 88).

This line of thinking has been frequently deployed as a reply to arguments for the conclusion that God's foreknowledge is incompatible with free will. I believe, however, that its popularity stems primarily from a failure to pay close attention to the nature of ability ascriptions. Once we recognise that ability ascriptions express modal claims pertaining to a variable form of relative modality, we can see that both (14*) and (15*) must be assessed by considering those worlds where N decides at T to A. That's just how such modal claims work. (14*) and (15*), understood properly, include the assertion that N's deciding at T to A exists. This means that the possibility of *N's deciding at T to refrain from A* must be assessed *holding fixed N's decision at T to A*. It follows from this that (15*) cannot be understood as a counterfactual power over the present, because counterfactual powers over the present are such that, if they were exercised, the present would have been "different all along". To put the point another way, the assessment of a counterfactual power over the past/present involves something similar to what Fischer (2008) has called "world hopping": the ability ascription is assessed using a set of possible worlds which do not include the actual world. But since we're ascribing an ability which is supposed to be *exercisable in the agent's current conditions*, the ability must hold those conditions fixed, just as (15*) does. But this condition precludes (15*) being understood as a counterfactual power over the past.

Now, the ability ascribed by (13*) *could* be construed as a counterfactual power over the present. But as already argued, the ability ascribed by (15*) (and denied by (14*)) is more relevant to N's free will than that ascribed by (13*). In other words, being able in the sense of (13*) doesn't bestow on N the control required for free will; the sense of 'able' in (14*) and (15*) takes precedence over that in (13*). So understanding (13*) as a counterfactual power over the past is no help to the synchronic theorist.

The upshot of all this is that appealing to the distinction between straightforward powers over the present and counterfactual powers over the present leads nowhere. Once we understand the nature of the modal claims expressed by 'is able to', we see that this distinction is of no help whatsoever to those who argue that free will is compatible with the necessity of the present. (The point being made here also applies to attempts to reconcile God's foreknowledge with human free will by appealing to the distinction between a power over the past and a counterfactual power over the past, as I've argued elsewhere Vicens and Kittle 2019: 19–21). I submit that this should be entirely unsurprising, since all counterfactual powers over the past/present do is to break the causal connection between the agent's act and the event to which the necessity/fixity is attached – they don't obviate the need to remove the necessitated/fixed event from reality and replace it with something else.

The necessity of the present is nothing more than the necessity of composition

The final objection to consider charges the critic of synchronic freedom with committing a modal fallacy. Once this fallacy is exposed, the defender of synchronic free will says, any threat from the alleged necessity of the present dissolves. As I've characterised it above, the synchronic theorist is committed to the truth of (13) and (14):

(13*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, but abstracting away from N's having decided at T to A, N is able at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

(14*) In view of N's decision-making powers, current knowledge, etc, and given N's having decided at T to A, N is unable at T to decide at T to refrain from A-ing.

I argued that the ability expressed (but denied of N) in (14*) takes precedence – i.e. is more relevant to N’s free will – than the ability ascribed by (13*). But what is the force of the ‘is unable to’ in (14*)? Rota doesn’t consider (14*), since I have framed the issue in slightly different terms to the way he approached it, but he does consider the following which is very similar:

(R6⁹) Given that N performs C at T, N can’t refrain from performing C at T (Rota 2015: 89).

Rota claims that the truthmaker for this statement is:

(R3) \Box (if N performs C at T, then N does not refrain from performing C at T)

Rota stresses that the necessity operator here scopes over the entire conditional. It is what Suarez calls the *necessity of composition*, and it is distinct from the following:

(R2) if N performs C at T, then \Box (N does not refrain from performing C at T)

Rota says that if the synchronic theorist were committed to (R2) there would be a problem; but the synchronic theorist is only committed to (R3) and since (R3) doesn’t say that N’s not refraining from C is necessary, but only affirms the necessity of the entire conditional, there is no problem (Rota 2015: 87–8). And according to Rota, where the argument against synchronic free will goes wrong is in construing (R6) as (R2) instead of as (R3).

I accept, of course, that there is an important distinction between (R2) and (R3). But I contend that the argument against synchronic free will does not need to affirm (R2) and so does not commit the modal fallacy which Rota outlines.

The first point to make is that if one tries to formalise the issue – either the argument against synchronic free will or replies to that argument – using the \Box operator (which we are presumably to read as absolute or metaphysical necessity?), one is likely to run into trouble. This is because the argument against synchronic free will does not deal in absolute necessity: it deals, as Rota himself notes, in the kind of necessity that arises from ontologically determinate reality.

The second point worth noting is that, contra Rota, (R3) cannot be the truthmaker for (R6) since (R6) – at least as understood on the standard semantics of ‘can’ – asserts the existence N’s performing C whereas (R3) does not. That is, the modal ‘can’t’ in (R6) should be understood along the lines I’ve outlined in section 3.1: it expresses a form of relative modality where the kind of modality in question is determined by the contents of the ‘Given that...’ clause (or using the terminology I’ve employed, the ‘In view of...’ clause). And in (R6), the ‘Given that...’ clause asserts the occurrence of N’s performance of C. The conditional (R3), by contrast, does not assert the occurrence of N’s performance of C. So Rota is incorrect when he claims that (R3) is the truthmaker for (R6).

The third and final point is this: having shown that (R3) cannot be the truthmaker for (R6), we can see that Rota’s claim that (R6) is “in fact true only insofar as it expresses” (R3) is mistaken. (R6) is actually the general form ability ascriptions take (as I argued in 3.1). What Rota misses is

⁹ I have employed Rota’s numbering here prefixed with an ‘R’.

that the contents of the 'Given that...' clause he employs in (R6) – which parallels the 'In view of...' clause I have used – is what determines the kind of modality in question. When the 'In view of clause...' is populated by propositions which assert the existence of entities in the present, the modality in play is a form of relative modality according to which the modal claims (in our case, 'is able to') are made relative to the existence of these entities - i.e. N's actual decision. In other words, the force of the modality comes from the ontologically determinate existence of N's decision. The argument against synchronic free will does not need (R2) to go through, and so does not commit a modal fallacy.

3.4 In defence of diachronic free will

In recent work, Rogers (2007) has presented two scenarios which she claims the diachronic account of free will cannot accommodate. I will consider each in turn, showing why they miss their mark.

Rogers (2007: 39) begins by asking us to consider the following sort of case, which is supposed to show that the abilities posited by the diachronic theory are not sufficient for free will:

Imagine deliberating about some issue. You come to the end of your deliberation. You are able at T1 to decide at T2 to X; and you are able at T1 to decide at T2 to Y (where X and Y are different). But now suppose that at T2 God causes you to "decide" at T2 to X and God does so via an exercise of his free choice which is simultaneous with what he causes (such that there are no antecedents to your decision).

Rogers contends that in such a scenario we should judge that you do not freely choose at T2 because your choice is caused by God; but, Rogers says, the diachronic theory cannot give this result:

Alternatives in the past, as you deliberate between options, are not sufficient to ensure libertarian freedom, if your deliberations terminate in a 'choice' in the present which is caused by something outside of you (Rogers 2007: 39).

In other words, an agent may possess the powers which the diachronic theorist says are sufficient "to ensure libertarian freedom" and yet still not choose freely because of interference at the very time of choice, so the diachronic theory stands refuted.

This argument is unconvincing. The diachronic theorist can and should deny that they are committed to the claim that possessing the abilities relevant to free will is *sufficient for the successful exercise of the agent's free will*. The defender of diachronic free will is an incompatibilist and, like all incompatibilists, holds that the *mere possession* of the powers which constitute the agent's free will is an extrinsic matter – that is, the agent doesn't even *possess* the relevant abilities if the agent has no opportunity to exercise them (and possessing an opportunity is an extrinsic property). Well, even more so for *the actual exercise* of the agent's powers of free will: the successful exercise of the agent's power of choice is also an extrinsic matter, depending as it does on the persistence of the universe, the continued ordered functioning of the world in the agent's vicinity, as well as lack of interference with the agent. Roger's first scenario, then, need not worry the diachronic theorist one jot.

Moreover, I would suggest that Rogers's own assessment of the scenario, far from highlighting a benefit of synchronic free will, actually establishes the diachronic theorist's main contention

concerning the necessity of the present. The point is this: the synchronic theorist explains our judgement that your choice to X in the above scenario is not free by saying that if God causes you via simultaneous causation to decide at T2 then the conditions which the synchronic theorist places on free will – viz. your being able at T2 to decide at T2 to Y – are not satisfied. But *why* does the synchronic theorist make this judgement? After all, the synchronic theorist holds that it is possible for you to be able at T2 to choose at T2 to Y even given that you have already decided at T2 to X, since the present is not fixed and can, therefore, be undone or (for those who think counterfactual power does some work here) be made to “have been different all along”. But then why doesn’t the synchronic theorist similarly hold that it is possible for you to be able at T2 to choose at T2 to Y even given that God causes at T2 you to decide at T2 to X? Isn’t God’s causing at T2 you to X also something that could have “been different all along”? Any attempt by the synchronic theorist to explain this difference by appealing to the special character of God’s causing would be a mistake, since the scenario can be modified to have the external cause be another finite agent. Rogers’s judgement that you are not free in this scenario thus amounts to an implicit concession that presently existing entities or relations are capable of ruling out an agent’s possession of the abilities relevant to free will.

Let’s now consider the scenario Rogers uses in attempting to show that the abilities posited by the diachronic theorist aren’t *necessary* for free will. Rogers (2007: 39) only advances this argument “tentatively”, but it is nevertheless worth considering. We are asked to imagine someone who believes they have free will and believes that free will is incompatible with causal determinism but who is in fact causally determined. Suppose that the person is engaged in deliberation which ends at T1. At T2 the decision is made. But “now imagine that God steps in at T2 and bestows genuine libertarian freedom on [the person] (or ‘lifts’ the causal determination from [the person]), still at T2, so that [the person’s] actual choice – the termination of deliberation – at T2 is not causally determined” (Rogers 2007: 39).

Rogers concedes that this “example is hard to grasp because the bestowing of libertarian freedom and [the person’s] free choice happen simultaneously”, but nevertheless thinks that “this seems a possible scenario and one which shows that alternatives at T1 are not absolutely necessary for free choice at T2” (Rogers 2007: 39).

Should this scenario worry the proponent of diachronic free will? No, not at all. The following dilemma can be posed: does God’s “stepping in” and “lifting” the determinism from T2 mean that what occurs at T2 was itself not causally determined? Or does it mean only that what happens after T2 is not causally determined? If the former, then the diachronic theorist will point out that there was at T1 an open future, such that it’s no longer clear that the agent didn’t have the abilities the diachronic theorist affirms are needed for free will; if the latter, then the diachronic theorist will argue that since what occurs at T2 was determined they are under no pressure to concede that the person freely chooses. Put slightly differently, unless one is already committed to synchronic free will, one will simply deny that the agent in this scenario freely chooses.

Both sorts of counterexample that purportedly cause problems for diachronic free will, then, have been seen to miss their mark. That serves to establish diachronic free will as a live option in the philosophy of free will. This, together with the argument against synchronic freedom which I presented in sections 3.2 and 3.3, should lead us to conclude that diachronic free will is the preferable position. And as stated above, this conclusion could either be used as part of an

argument for the conclusion that a personal God must be temporal (because a personal God must have free will) or as part of an argument for the conclusion that God doesn't have choice-based free will (because God is atemporal).

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