The Truth about Freedom: A Reply to Merricks

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1. Introduction

In “Truth and Freedom,” Trenton Merricks articulates a truism: “a claim or statement or belief or proposition is true because things are how that claim (or statement . . .) represents things as being—and not the other way around.” Merricks argues that this truism—that truth depends on the world—can help us to see that various arguments for “fatalism” (by which he means to include incompatibilism about God’s foreknowledge and human freedom) are problematic. Indeed, he contends that a proper application of the truism shows that the most plausible arguments for fatalism are question-begging.

In this reply, we argue that mere invocation of the truism, even together with other considerations, does not show that the arguments under consideration are question-begging. At most, the truism helps us to see—what we should in any case have seen before—that the arguments, as regimented by Merricks, are incomplete. But the truism in no way establishes or even suggests that the relevant arguments cannot be supplemented by additional resources that render the arguments at least plausible. Supplemented suitably, the arguments are not question-begging, although they are admittedly controversial in various ways.

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2. Merricks’s Argument

Here is the *Main Argument* and Merricks’s initial reflections on it:

Let time $t$ be just a few minutes in the future from now, and consider the *Main Argument*:

1. Jones has no choice about: *that Jones sits at $t$* was true a thousand years ago.
2. Necessarily, if *that Jones sits at $t$* was true a thousand years ago, then Jones sits at time $t$.

Therefore,

3. Jones has no choice about: Jones’s sitting at time $t$.

In my opinion, the Main Argument is the strongest argument for fatalism; that is, it is the strongest argument that moves from truths in the past to a present or future lack of freedom. But, as we shall see, the Main Argument fails because of considerations arising from truth’s dependence on the world. . . . We shall also see that every initially compelling argument for fatalism—that is, every argument for fatalism free of obvious flaws . . . —fails for the same reason.²

Merricks says that the truism helps us to see that it is question-begging to assume (1). Suppose Jones does in fact sit at $t$. The truism purports to tell us that *that Jones sits at $t$* was true a thousand years ago because Jones sits at $t$, that is, the truth of *that Jones sits at $t$* depends on Jones’s sitting at $t$.$³$

Further, Merricks articulates the following corollary of truth’s dependence on the world: “for all $S$ and all $p$, $S$ has no choice about $p$’s truth presupposes . . . that $S$ has no choice about what $p$’s truth depends on (in the sense of ‘depends on’ in which truth depends on the world).”⁴ So to suppose that (1) is true, that is, to suppose that Jones has no choice about the truth of *that Jones sits at $t$*, appears to presuppose precisely what is at issue, namely, that Jones has no choice about sitting at $t$.

Merricks also contends that the standard argument for the incompatibility of God’s foreknowledge and human freedom is question-begging in a way that is similar to the way in which the Main Argument is (allegedly) question-begging. He considers what he calls the *Divine Foreknowledge Argument*:

². Ibid., 33.
³. We return to a critical evaluation of this contention below.
⁴. Ibid., 37.
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(6) Jones has no choice about: God believed that Jones sits at time \( t \) a thousand years ago.

(7) Necessarily, if God believed that Jones sits at time \( t \) a thousand years ago, then Jones sits at time \( t \).

Therefore,

(3) Jones has no choice about: Jones’s sitting at time \( t \).

About this argument Merricks says:

My objection to this argument builds on an idea that goes back at least to Origen, who says: “it will not be because God knows that an event will occur that it happens; but, because something is going to take place it is known by God before it happens.” [Merricks refers here to Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, bk. 7, chap. 8, sec. 5; also he says, “Molina (Concordia 4, disputation 52, sec. 19) joins Origen in taking God’s beliefs about the future to depend on what will happen, rather than the other way around.”] Similarly, I say that God has certain beliefs about the world because of how the world is, was, or will be—and not vice versa. 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 time \( t \) because Jones will sit at \( t \), and not the other way around.

Admitting that these considerations do not “all by themselves” show that the Divine Foreknowledge Argument fails, nevertheless Merricks builds on what he takes to be “Origen’s insight,” namely, that God’s beliefs depend on the world. He then articulates the following corollary: “For all \( S \) and all God’s beliefs \( b \), that \( S \) has no choice about whether God has belief \( b \) presupposes (in the sense of ‘presupposes’ relevant to begging the question) that \( S \) has no choice about what God’s having belief \( b \) depends on (in the sense of ‘depends on’ in which God’s beliefs depend on the world).” Now Merricks goes on to say:

Recall the first premise of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument:

(6) Jones has no choice about: God believed that Jones sits at time \( t \) a thousand years ago.

Given the above corollary regarding God’s beliefs, we can conclude that this premise presupposes the conclusion of that argument, which is:

(3) Jones has no choice about: Jones’s sitting at time \( t \).

5. Ibid., 51–52.
6. Ibid., 52.
So I object that the Divine Foreknowledge Argument, like the Main Argument... is question-begging. 7

3. Critique of Merricks: The Divine Foreknowledge Argument

We begin by considering Merricks’s critique of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument, given our belief that it, more clearly than the Main Argument, does not beg the question. 8 We shall go on to consider whether the resources we employ in our defense of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument can be applied similarly to the Main Argument. We agree that it would indeed be dialectically infelicitous simply to announce that (say) premise (6) is true without any defense of it. But this would not be the typical approach of the proponent of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument (or similar arguments). 9 Rather, the proponent of the incompatibility of God’s foreknowledge and human freedom (in the sense of “freedom to do otherwise”) would contend that (6) is an instance of the very plausible general thesis that the past is “fixed.” If (6) is an instance of the fixity (sometimes also called the “necessity”) of the past, then (6) would not be question-begging.

But what exactly is the commonsense notion of the fixity of the past? And how does it apply to premise (6)? Merricks himself explores the possibility that considerations pertinent to the “necessity of the past” might help to establish a premise such as (6). 10 Below we shall return to Merricks’s discussion, but before doing so, we shall seek to give a plausible account of the fixity of the past and its relationship to premise (6).

We start with what appears to be a bit of common sense: we have no choice about the past. For instance, we have no choice about the fact that John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas in 1963. We have no choice about the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. These facts seem “fixed” or out of our control, and it is simply too late to do anything about them now.

7. Ibid., 53.
8. Perhaps we should note that the whole notion of “begging the question” is quite vexed. The epithet, “question-begging,” is invoked to point to a range of dialectical infelicities. Here we shall follow Merricks in using the term (and not seeking to define it), and we shall assume that we have a tolerably clear idea of the sort of dialectical impropriety under consideration.
As a first approximation, the claim that the past is fixed—the fixity of the past—is just the claim that we have no choice about such facts. But there are various ways one might wish to “regiment” the claim that we have no choice about the past. One promising way to do so, and the way we shall employ in this essay, uses the notion of possible worlds.

It is widely agreed that an agent can perform a given action only if there is a possible world suitably related to (and thus “accessible from”) the actual world in which the agent does perform the action. While this much is uncontroversial, exactly which worlds are accessible from the actual world is highly contentious. Incompatibilists about the freedom to do otherwise and causal determinism, for instance, contend that an agent can do otherwise at a given time only if there exists a possible world with the same past as the actual world (up to the given time) in which the agent performs the action. In other words, according to the incompatibilist, the only accessible worlds are worlds with the same past as the actual world; the actual past must be held fixed when assessing a can-claim. If a fact obtains in every possible world accessible to one from the actual world, then that fact is fixed for one. The fixity of the past, then, is the thesis (to be qualified shortly) that all facts about the past are fixed.

Of course, it is beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to justify the thesis of the fixity of the past. However, we think this thesis has considerable plausibility. The fixity of the past says that one can do something only if there is a possible world with the same past as the actual world in which one does it. If there is not such a world, then it will be a requirement on one’s performing the given action that the past have been different. Plausibly, however, it’s now too late for the past to have been different, and thus one cannot perform the action in question. In other words, if it is a requirement (or a necessary condition) on one’s

11. Although it is perhaps somewhat unusual to think of possible worlds as accessible to agents (rather than other possible worlds), there is an established tradition of allowing for an accessibility relation between agents and possible worlds in the literature on possible-worlds approaches to “can.” For example, Keith Lehrer says, “The crux of the foregoing is that when we say that a person could have done something he did not do, we should not, and I believe do not, thereby affirm that every antecedent necessary condition of his performing the action is fulfilled. It is enough that there be some possible world minimally different from the actual world restricted in an appropriate way so that the person performs the action and those conditions are fulfilled. We may speak of worlds restricted in the appropriate way as possible worlds that are accessible to the agent from the actual world.” Keith Lehrer, “Can” in Theory and Practice: A Possible Worlds Approach,” in Action Theory, ed. Myles Brand and Douglas Walton (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976) 241–70, esp. 253–54.
performing some action that some fact about the past—the fact, say, that Kennedy was shot in Dallas in 1963—not have obtained, then it is plausible that one cannot perform the action. For Kennedy was shot, and, plausibly, any possible world now “accessible” to one will include this fact. Intuitively, this notion nicely captures the idea that we have no choice about Kennedy’s having been shot: in virtue of being a fact about the past, this fact will obtain in all possible worlds now accessible to us. It thus enjoys a certain sort of necessity.

Before we can give a fully perspicuous account of the fixity of the past, however, we must make the crucial distinction between so-called “hard” and “soft” facts about the past. The distinction between hard and soft facts (although not the terminology) traces back to William of Ockham.12 Ockham employed this distinction to give a certain sort of response to the Divine Foreknowledge Argument, but the distinction is crucial also in providing a proper interpretation of the argument itself. Hard facts are (in some way that is hard to characterize precisely) temporally nonrelational as regards the future (relative to the time they are about). More specifically, a hard fact about some time \( t \) is genuinely about \( t \) and not also genuinely about some time after \( t \). In contrast, a soft fact is temporally relational as regards the future (relative to the time it is about); that is, a soft fact about some time \( t \) is at least in part genuinely about some time after \( t \).

For instance, it is a hard fact about 1963 that John F. Kennedy was then shot in Dallas. However, from the fact that we are presently writing this essay, standard assumptions have it that it was true in 1963 that we would write it. Thus, it follows that Kennedy’s assassination had the property of taking place (roughly) forty-six years prior to our writing this essay. But this is plainly a soft feature of Kennedy’s assassination; it has this feature simply in virtue of its temporal relationship to a future time, namely, the present time at which we are writing this essay. So, whereas it is a hard fact about the past relative to now that Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, it is a soft fact about the past relative to now that Kennedy was assassinated forty-six years prior to our writing our essay.

Now, as a first approximation, the defender of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument merely wishes to defend the claim that all hard

facts about the past are fixed, but he or she grants (or may grant) that some soft facts are not fixed. Here, it is important to note that if all soft facts about the past are fixed, then (given our assumptions) logical fatalism would immediately follow. On our assumptions, from the fact that we are writing this essay, it follows that it is a fact about the past that Kennedy was shot forty-six years prior to our writing the essay. But suppose this fact was (prior to our writing the essay) fixed for us. Then any possible world accessible to us included this fact. Thus, any possible world accessible to us included our actually writing the essay, and hence we could not have done anything else than write it. Generalizing, we can never do other than what we actually do. While this result clearly follows from the claim that all soft facts are fixed, it does not follow from the weaker (and more plausible) claim that all hard facts are fixed. And, as we will see, this is arguably all the proponent of the Foreknowledge Argument needs.

With the distinction between hard and soft facts under our belts, we can now state the thesis of the fixity of the past slightly more carefully 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 $t$.\(^{13}\)

We contend that (FP) is both plausible and captures the intuitive idea that the past is beyond our control. And we are now in a position to see why the Divine Foreknowledge Argument is not in fact question-begging. As we said above, it would be incomplete if it were left as developed by Merricks, unsupplemented by further considerations. But that is not the best way to understand the argument. Rather, the proponent of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument should (and typically would) invoke the fixity of the past to support the crucial premise (6).

That is, the proponent of the argument would first contend that the fact that God had a belief a thousand years ago that Jones will sit at $t$ is a hard (temporally nonrelational) fact about a thousand years ago. The thought here is just this: God’s being in a certain mental state at a time does not exhibit the temporal relationality essential to soft facthood. God’s being in such a mental state at a time is a temporally intrinsic, hard feature of that time. That is, it is not relevantly similar to Kennedy’s

having been shot forty-six years prior to our writing this essay. Rather, God’s having a certain belief at a time is relevantly similar simply to Kennedy’s having been shot.

Next, given the above claim about God’s beliefs, the proponent of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument would point out that it follows from (FP) that Jones can do otherwise than sit at \( t \) only if there is a world with the same “hard” past as the actual world—in particular, a world in which God believed a thousand years ago that he (Jones) sits at \( t \)—in which he does not sit at \( t \). However, there is no such world since, given God’s essential omniscience, there is no world in which God believes that Jones will sit at \( t \) and in which Jones does not in fact sit at \( t \). In other words, given God’s past belief, it is a necessary condition of Jones’s doing otherwise that some hard fact about the past have been otherwise. Plausibly, then, Jones cannot do otherwise than sit at \( t \). Thus, considerations pertaining to the intuitive and commonsense notion of the fixity of the past—as regimented by (FP)—provide the requisite support for premise (6). This shows that, whatever its flaws, the Divine Foreknowledge Argument is not question-begging.

Now manifestly it does not follow from an argument’s not being question-begging that it is uncontroversially sound! Ockhamists, for instance, will call into question the contention that God’s prior beliefs are hard facts about the past; indeed, the point of Ockham’s introduction of the distinction between hard and soft facts was to argue that God’s beliefs are soft facts about the relevant times. (As we emphasized above, the distinction itself is not “owned” by the Ockhamist, and it is needed in order to formulate the Divine Foreknowledge Argument in a plausible way. What is distinctive to Ockhamism is the categorization of God’s prior beliefs as soft facts about the relevant times.) We certainly do not wish to argue here that the Divine Foreknowledge Argument can in the end be defended against the Ockhamist objection (and others). We simply seek to show that, contra Merricks, the argument (properly interpreted) is not question-begging.

Merricks does in fact consider whether the Main Argument (and also presumably the Divine Foreknowledge Argument) might rely on the notion of the fixity of the past. He considers three ways one might understand the claim that the past is necessary (or fixed). One is to say that there cannot be “backward causation.” Another is to say that the past cannot be changed. We agree with Merricks that these notions do not capture what it is for the past to be fixed, though those claims
certainly are *prerequisites*, so to speak, of the past being fixed.\textsuperscript{14} Merricks presents—and criticizes—a third interpretation of the necessity of the past as follows:

Suppose that that claim [the necessity of the past] is just another way of saying that no one now has (and no one in the future will have) a choice about what the past was like, not even about which propositions were true in the past. If this is all the necessity of the past amounts to, then arguments for Jones's having no choice about sitting at \( t \) that start with the necessity of the past truth of *that Jones sits at* \( t \) just are the Main Argument, put in other words.

And if this is all the necessity of the past amounts to, the objection just considered [that the past is necessary] fails. For that objection takes the assertion that the past is necessary to be a reason for the claim that no one now has a choice about what the past was like. But that claim cannot be a reason for itself.\textsuperscript{15}

Above, we contended that the necessity (or fixity) of the past amounts to no one’s having a choice about hard facts about the past—that such facts obtain in all worlds accessible to us. Note that Merricks saddles the proponent of the fixity of the past with the claim that we have no choice about what propositions (quite generally) were true in the past. But proponents of the fixity of the past are in no way committed to this general claim since such propositions may have expressed soft facts about the past.

Moreover, Merricks contends that the claim that the past is necessary (or fixed) is supposed to be a *reason* for the claim that no one now has a choice about what the past was like. But this response is confused. For, as we have noted, the claim that the past is fixed—(FP)—*just is* this claim (as applied to hard facts). However, while *what it is* for the past to be fixed is for us to have no choice about hard facts about the past, one may *support* (FP) by invoking considerations having to do with the temporal non-relationality of hard facts, and their attendant lack of dependence on what we now do, or by some other means. That is, arguably (FP) *follows* from deeper facts about our powers, time, and dependence. (Again, it is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full defense of (FP).) On this picture of the structure of the dialectic, (FP) is not supposed to be a *reason* for thinking we have no choice about the past but is meant to *capture* this claim.

\textsuperscript{14} In other words, if we can causally affect the past or directly change it, this would certainly call (FP) into question.

\textsuperscript{15} Merricks, “Truth and Freedom,” 40.
To summarize, we can interpret the proponent of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument as first arguing for (FP) itself. Next, he or she contends that facts about God’s beliefs a thousand years ago are hard facts about a thousand years ago. He or she concludes that the fact that God held a given belief a thousand years ago is now fixed; no one has any choice about this fact now. None of the steps of this more extended argument appears question-begging. Many—including the present authors—think the arguments on behalf of (FP) are persuasive. At any rate, we do not see in Merricks’s argumentation any reason to conclude that (FP) is unmotivated, implausible, or that its invocation by itself begs the question. Indeed, we wish to point out that (FP) (along with a similar premise concerning the fixity of the natural laws) is a lynchpin in the importantly parallel argument for the incompatibility of causal determinism and freedom to do otherwise, and is thus widely accepted amongst incompatibilists. It would thus come as some surprise if employing (FP) begs the question. Of course, as above, one could (with Ockhamists) object to the contention that God’s past beliefs are hard. 16

16. We think Merricks has perhaps missed the force of considerations arising from the fixity of God’s past beliefs due to a subtle shift in what the relevant fact about the past is supposed to be. Note: there is an important distinction between God’s having believed $p$, on the one hand, and what God believed (namely, $p$), on the other. According to the proponent of the Foreknowledge Argument, what is fixed is the former thing—that is, it is fixed for Jones at $t$ that God believed thus and so a thousand years prior. It is God’s having been in a certain mental state that is over and done with and a putative hard fact about the past. It is not (in the first instance, at least) what God believed that is the putative hard fact. But we note that Merricks seems to have missed this distinction. In stating that he takes it that the Foreknowledge Argument has a false premise, for instance, Merricks (“Truth and Freedom,” 54) says, “I think [premise one] is false even if God really did believe, a thousand years ago, that Jones sits at $t$. I think that Jones, even now, has a choice about what God believed a thousand years ago.” But the proponent of the Foreknowledge Argument ought to complain that Merricks has unfairly shifted the dialectic here. For it is more counterintuitive to suppose that Jones could have a choice about God’s having believed $p$ than it is to suppose that he could have a choice about the content of God’s belief, namely, that he sits at $t$. It is, in other words, comparatively easy to see how one could have a choice about sitting at $t$, but much harder to see how one could have a choice about someone’s having believed something a long time ago. Indeed, how could one have a choice about something like that? For some discussions of this issue, see John Martin Fischer, “Freedom and Foreknowledge,” *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 67–79, reprinted in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, 86–96; and Eddy Zemach and David Widerker, “Facts, Freedom, and Foreknowledge,” *Religious Studies* 23 (1988): 19–28, reprinted in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, 111–22.

But we fail to see how the contention that they are hard begs any pertinent questions (we return to this claim below). So we fail to see how Merricks has established that the Divine Foreknowledge Argument begs the question.

4. Critique of Merricks: Ockhamism and Dependence

Before considering whether the Main Argument can be saved from Merricks’s objections, we wish to highlight our belief that Merricks has fundamentally misunderstood Ockhamism, both with respect to its technical details and its very heart and soul. Merricks wishes to distinguish his own views from those of Ockhamists. He says,

Unlike the Ockhamists, I rely on neither a distinction between “soft facts” and “hard facts” nor on a distinction between what propositions are about with respect to “wording” and about with respect to “subject matter.” So I do not have to make sense of these distinctions at all, much less in a way that delivers certain results, results like: for each soft fact about the past, someone or other now has (or will have) a choice about it.\(^\text{18}\)

But the Ockhamist does not hold that for each soft fact about the past, someone or other now has (or will have) a choice about it. For example, it is a soft fact about early this morning that the sun rose twenty-four hours prior to another sunrise, but presumably no one now has a choice about this fact since no one can prevent the sun’s rising tomorrow. This fact is thus fixed now, although it is not fixed in virtue of the fixity of the past. It is best to draw a bright line between the two distinctions: hard versus soft facts and fixed versus nonfixed facts. The Ockhamist (as opposed to the Multiple-Pasts Compatibilist) argues that all hard facts about the past are now fixed, whereas some soft facts about the past are not now fixed.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^{19}\) The Multiple Pasts Compatibilist replies to the “Consequence Argument” for the incompatibility of causal determinism and freedom to do otherwise by contending that even hard facts about the past need not be fixed now. For a development of the Consequence Argument, see Peter van Inwagen, An Essay on Free Will (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). For a discussion, including an evaluation of Multiple Pasts Compatibilism, see Fischer, Metaphysics of Free Will.
Ockhamist does not assert that all soft facts about the past fail to be fixed now—just those that depend on our free decisions.

We think Merricks has misunderstood Ockhamism at an even deeper level. He says,

I object that the Main Argument begs the question. But Ockhamists would not thus object to the Main Argument. For Ockhamists do not invoke the idea underlying this objection, the idea that truth depends on the world.20

But we believe that Ockhamists do indeed invoke the idea that truth depends on the world. At any rate, Merricks’s claim that they do not is at best superficial. For, as we now wish to argue, precisely what makes the difference for the Ockhamist between soft and hard facts about the past is that soft facts—the paradigmatic instances of which are facts incorporating past truths about the future—are (in a particular way) dependent on the future, and thus (sometimes) within our control. That is, those soft facts about the past that we have a choice about are precisely those that depend on our free decisions. Thus, we think the central contentions that have motivated Merricks are (perhaps ironically) fundamentally the same as those that have been motivating Ockhamists all along.

Note that Ockham himself says, concerning what are now called soft facts, “Other propositions are about the present as regards their wording only and are equivalently about the future, since their truth depends on the truth of propositions about the future.”21 Consider also, for example, Alfred Freddoso’s way of putting the point:

Although, as we shall see, the detailed articulation of this position [Ockhamism] is rather complicated, the intuition which grounds it is the familiar, but often misunderstood, claim that a future-tense proposition is true now because the appropriate present-tense proposition or propositions will be true in the future.22

Indeed, Freddoso explicitly invokes the notion of dependence in order to motivate his Ockhamism.

Recall the Ockhamist’s basic contention: whereas all hard facts about the past are fixed, some such soft facts are not. Now, according

to the Ockhamist, what grounds this distinction with respect to fixity? Why is it, in other words, that certain temporally relational facts about the past needn’t be held fixed when evaluating a “can—claim”? After all, given that the relevant soft facts about the past entail our future decisions, it will be a necessary condition on our doing otherwise that these soft facts were different. Why is this no threat to our freedom? Although we cannot fully defend this claim here, we think the Ockhamist literature clearly supports the claim that (on their view) such facts needn’t be fixed because they held in virtue of our free decisions.

Consider again the soft fact about the past that Kennedy was shot forty-six years prior to our writing this essay. On Ockhamism, this was a fact in 1963 because of or in virtue of our writing our essay. According to the Ockhamist, then, to suppose that we had no choice (just prior to writing our essay) about the obtaining of this fact in 1963 would be to suppose that we had no choice about what this fact depended on, namely, our writing the essay. Intuitively, however, according to the Ockhamist, since (apart from any convincing skeptical argument) we did have a choice about writing this essay, we had a choice about whatever facts (past, present, or future) depended on our writing it. In other words, the ultimate rationale the Ockhamist would wish to provide for the lack of fixity of such temporally relational, soft facts about the past is that—as suggested by Merricks—they depend on what we do.23

Given this fact, we think Merricks would have been better served casting his objection to the Divine Foreknowledge Argument in a different way. For, as we have been arguing, the hallmark of a soft fact is that it depends on the future—and, in the case of the relevant soft facts, that they depend on our free decisions. Indeed, given the above construal of Ockhamism, perhaps Merricks would wish to adopt the mantle of Ockhamism and argue that a proper application of the truism shows that God’s relevant past beliefs are soft.

It should come as no surprise, however, that Ockhamism cannot be so easily vindicated. For while it is the hallmark of a soft fact that it depends on the future, dependence comes in different sorts (as many

philosophers have recently argued\textsuperscript{24}, and it is not at all obvious that the sort of dependence facts about God’s past beliefs exhibit on the future is the sort relevant to soft facthood. In other words, it is not enough that the fact that God has a certain belief about the future \textit{in some sense} depends on the future. This fact must depend on the future \textit{in the right way}.

We can begin to see the challenge of specifying the relevant notion of dependence as follows. Some philosophers working on the notion of ontological dependence have suggested that the notion be analyzed in terms of a primitive relationship of \textit{objective explanation}.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, Merricks has repeatedly insisted that God had the relevant beliefs \textit{because} of what we do. Thus, perhaps we should try:

\textbf{(BC)} A fact $F$ about at a time $t$ is soft if and only if it is a fact at $t$ because of how the future is relative to $t$.

\textbf{(BC)} certainly seems to be on the right track. But consider a well-known story from Alvin Plantinga:

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.\textsuperscript{26}

Now, in the context of the above story, consider:

\hspace{0.5cm} (1) That colony of carpenter ants moved into Paul’s yard last Saturday.


The problem (1) poses for (BC) is that (1) is, on Plantinga’s story, a fact because of how the future was relative to last Saturday. More particularly, the fact that there are ants in Paul’s yard on Saturday is a fact because of how the future is relative to that time—in particular, it is a fact because Paul will not mow his lawn this afternoon. However, (1) is plainly a hard fact about last Saturday—as Plantinga says, (1) is “about as good a candidate for being an exemplification of [hard facthood] as we can easily think of.”

Given Plantinga’s story, (1) arguably constitutes a counterexample to (BC). More generally, given God’s presence as an agent who intervenes in the world on the basis of his foreknowledge, it seems that a hard fact can obtain at a time because of how the future is relative to that time. This will be the case whenever God arranges the past relative to a time on the basis of foreknowing that something will happen at that time. Again, in that case, those features of the past will be the way they are because of how the future is.

The lesson here is that any proper account of the hard/soft fact distinction must thread the needle between the fact that (in the story) ants moved into Paul’s yard last Saturday and a fact such as that John F. Kennedy was assassinated forty-six years prior to our writing this essay. Both facts are facts in virtue of, or because of, how the future is. Yet only one—the latter—is soft. Thus, we still need a sense in which the JFK fact depends on the future but (1) doesn’t. Both depend on (or hold because of) the future somehow, but only one is soft. Notably, the failure of (BC)

27. If anyone is concerned that the fact that Paul will not do something is not a proper fact about the future, we could change the story so that the relevant fact is that Paul will do something; for example, that God had ants move in because he knew that Paul was going to take a nap today.

28. Plantinga, “Ockham’s Way Out,” in Fischer, God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom, 201. Plantinga goes on to say that Paul can mow his lawn, and if he were to do so, the ants would not have been in his yard last Saturday. Thus, Plantinga denies one way some sought to capture the fixity of the past, namely, that “can-claims” are incompatible with the truth of such backtracking counterfactuals. That is, Plantinga denies:

(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.

However, it is crucial to note that the denial of (FPC) is entirely compatible with the acceptance of (FP). For more on the distinction between (FP) and (FPC) and how one might deny the former but accept the latter, see Fischer, Metaphysics of Free Will, 87–110; and Patrick Todd, “A New Approach to Ockhamism” (unpublished manuscript).
would show that one cannot simply invoke the idea that God has the relevant beliefs because of what we do in order to show that these facts do not fall under the fixity of the past (as regimented by (FP)).

In this section, we have first pointed out that, despite his statements to the contrary, Merricks relies on the same ideas about dependence as those that have been motivating Ockhamists all along. Our discussion also shows that it is not at all easy to specify the sort of dependence relevant to soft facthood. It is, of course, comparatively much easier simply to say that God’s beliefs depend on our decisions, as does Merricks, without wading into the difficulties surrounding in just what sense God’s beliefs so depend and whether this sense is intuitively relevant to fixity. Our point here has not been to argue that God’s past beliefs are \textit{not} dependent in the right sort of way on the future. Nor have we offered any particular account of the sort of dependence relevant to softness.\textsuperscript{29} Further, we believe that it is not obvious that God’s beliefs \textit{do} depend on the future in the right way. Thus, unsurprisingly, it turns out that the mere invocation of a truism does not lay to rest the Divine Foreknowledge Argument.

To be a bit more explicit, we have argued that despite Merricks’s claim that it is a virtue of his account that it avoids the hard/soft fact distinction, at a deep level he is committed to precisely this distinction (albeit under a different name or guise). This is because Merricks is committed to the distinction between those facts that depend on the future (in a certain way) and those that do not; the facts that exhibit the distinctive dependence on the future are soft, whereas the facts that do not are hard. Merricks is thus subject to exactly the same difficulties as the Ockhamist’s distinction; as the problems with (BC) indicate, he must say more about what the relevant kind of dependence on the future consists in.

5. Critique of Merricks: The Main Argument

Thus far we have sought primarily to argue that invocation of Merricks’s “truism” does not circumvent the thrust of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument. Here we briefly consider whether it nevertheless \textit{does} circumvent the thrust of the Main Argument. It is often thought that the relevant premise of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument,

\textsuperscript{29} One of us, however, is independently working on precisely this project. See Patrick Todd, “Soft Facts and Ontological Dependence” (unpublished manuscript).
(6) Jones has no choice about: God believed that Jones sits at \( t \) a thousand years ago,

is more plausible than the parallel premise in the Main Argument,

(1) Jones has no choice about: that Jones sits at \( t \) was true a thousand years ago.

That is, some have thought that the embedded clause in (6) arguably, at least, expresses a hard fact about a thousand years ago, whereas in (1) it does not. But some philosophers would argue that the status of (1) is not significantly—or relevantly—different from that of (6). Such philosophers would begin by arguing that “truths require truthmakers.” They

30. We have said that it is at least arguable that a fact such as that God believed a thousand years ago that Jones will sit at \( i \) is hard, whereas it is plausible that a fact such as that it was true a thousand years ago that Jones will sit at \( i \) is soft. But if God is necessarily existent and essentially omniscient, then the two facts would be logically equivalent. But how then could it even be possible that one fact be hard and the other soft? (We thank an anonymous referee for the Philosophical Review for this question.) For the sake of simplicity, we can think of facts as true propositions (although nothing in our essay or in this part of it depends on this particular construal of facts). Now note that it does not follow from two propositions’ being logically equivalent that they are the same proposition. For example, the proposition that two plus two equals four and the proposition that three plus three equals six are logically equivalent, but it is at least plausible that they are different propositions. Thus, there would be no reason to suppose that they must have all the same properties. Similarly, the proposition about God’s belief and the proposition about the prior truth in question are logically equivalent, but it does not follow that they are the same proposition. Thus, there would be no reason to suppose that they have all the same properties. More specifically, it would not follow from their logical equivalence that if one is hard, the other must also be hard. Similar considerations would apply, mutatis mutandis, on other construals of the nature of facts.

On our view, then, one can have pairs of propositions that are logically equivalent but in which one but not the other of the pair displays the distinctive temporal relationality of soft facts. We believe that the pair of facts above might be just such a pair: whereas the fact that it was true a thousand years ago that Jones would sit at \( t \) might display the characteristic dependence on the future, a fact such as that God believed a thousand years ago that Jones would sit at \( t \) nevertheless might not. Similarly, whereas the fact that it was true a thousand years ago that Jones would sit at \( t \) might display the signature dependence on the future, a fact such as that God decreed a thousand years ago that Jones would sit at \( t \) presumably does not. Whereas (on certain assumptions about God) the two propositions are logically equivalent, they arguably, at least, differ with respect to the relevant kind of dependence on the future. After all, intuitively it is clear that God’s decrees about the future do not depend on the future events’ taking place; rather, the dependence is the other way around. There is a development of this sort of example and a discussion of its implications for the hard/soft fact distinction in Todd, “Soft Facts and Ontological Dependence.”
will further argue that if it was true a thousand years ago that Jones would sit at t, then there must have been some temporally nonrelational truthmaker that existed a thousand years ago in virtue of which this was true, the existence of which entails that Jones sits at t. Given this claim, it can be argued that (1) is indeed supported by the fixity of the past. For Jones’s ability to do otherwise than sit at t requires that the relevant truthmaker not have existed a thousand years ago, and the fact that it did exist then is a hard fact about the past relative to t.  

Of course, it must be admitted that the above argument relies on a further controversial premise in addition to the mere premise that truths require truthmakers. It relies on the premise that truth at a time is made true by the world at that time. That is, it relies on the claim that if that Jones sits at t was true a thousand years ago, then there must have been something temporally nonrelational about the world a thousand years ago in virtue of which this was true. We do not here seek to argue for this premise. And we note that Merricks has denied that truths require truthmakers in the way envisaged in the argument. However, it is enough for our purposes to note that these theses have considerable plausibility and cannot be dismissed out of hand. Given these points, it would seem that one could not dismiss the Main Argument without considering precisely the same sorts of issues concerning the fixity of the past one must address when evaluating the Divine Foreknowledge Argument.

Merricks invokes the truism that truth depends on the world in an attempt to undermine the fatalist arguments. But the fatalist will in no way contest the truism. Rather, he or she will point out that the truism has to be properly applied: if we are to be free, truths about what we do must not only depend on the world but must depend on the right part of the world—a part of the world under our control. But if the thousand-years-ago truth of that Jones sits at t was made true by a hard feature of the world a thousand years ago, then whereas this truth depended on the world, it depended on a part of the world outside Jones’s control at t, namely, how the world was a thousand years prior! Thus, features of the world

31. Some philosophers have rejected a truthmaker approach and have instead adopted the thesis that truth supervenes on being. Exactly the same analysis would apply to a supervenience view; nothing in our critique depends on accepting a truthmaker view as opposed to a supervenience view.

6. Conclusion

We have sought to argue that the truism invoked by Merricks does not yield significant benefits in the analysis of the Main Argument and the Divine Foreknowledge Argument. One can fully accept the truism compatibly with acknowledging the force of the parallel arguments; this force is imparted by considerations of the fixity of the past. That is, one can accept that truth depends on the world but still believe that one never has a choice about hard facts about the past.

We have pointed out that the Main Argument and Divine Foreknowledge Argument both depend (in different specific ways) on considerations of the fixity of the past. We have not attempted to argue for the claim that God’s beliefs are hard facts about the times at which they are held or the claim that truth at t depends on the world at t. These are contentious claims. In order to offer decisive support for the Main Argument and the Divine Foreknowledge Argument, one would need to provide arguments for these claims. But here our project has been different. Here we have shown, contra Merricks, that mere invocation of the truism does not show that the arguments are question-begging. It is thus necessary for a critic of the parallel arguments to address the vexing traditional questions about the fixity of the past—many of which have been explored at some length in the pages of this journal.

33. Indeed, it would seem as if the truism is a driving force behind the intuitive appeal of fatalism. For when a fatalist hears that it was true a thousand years ago that he or she would sit at t, he or she applies the truism: truth depends on the world. Thus, something about the world a thousand years ago already settled his or her sitting at t. And how does he or she have a choice about what the world was like a thousand years ago?