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4 The Truth about Freedom: A Reply to  
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6 Merricks  
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13 **1. Introduction**

14 In “Truth and Freedom,” Trenton Merricks articulates a truism: “a claim  
15 or statement or belief or proposition is true because things are how that  
16 claim (or statement . . . ) represents things as being—and not the other  
17 way around.”<sup>1</sup> Merricks argues that this truism—that truth depends on  
18 the world—can help us to see that various arguments for “fatalism”  
19 (by which he means to include incompatibilism about God’s fore-  
20 knowledge and human freedom) are problematic. Indeed, he contends  
21 that a proper application of the truism shows that the most plausible  
22 arguments for fatalism are question-begging.

23 In this reply, we argue that mere invocation of the truism, even  
24 together with other considerations, does *not* show that the arguments  
25 under consideration are question-begging. At most, the truism helps us  
26 to see—what we should in any case have seen before—that the argu-  
27 ments, as regimented by Merricks, are *incomplete*. But the truism in no  
28 way establishes or even suggests that the relevant arguments cannot be  
29 supplemented by additional resources that render the arguments at  
30 least plausible. Supplemented suitably, the arguments are *not* question-  
31 begging, although they are admittedly controversial in various ways.  
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35 We are very grateful for comments from Neal Tognazzini, Derk Pereboom, Philip Swen-  
36 son, and an anonymous referee for the *Philosophical Review*.

37 1. Trenton Merricks, “Truth and Freedom,” *Philosophical Review* 118 (2009): 29–57;  
38 the quotation is p. 29.

1 **2. Merricks's Argument**

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

3  
4 Let time  $t$  be just a few minutes in the future from now, and consider the  
5 *Main Argument*:

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

8 (2) Necessarily, if *that Jones sits at  $t$*  was true a thousand years ago, then  
9 Jones sits at time  $t$ .

10 Therefore,

11 (3) Jones has no choice about: Jones's sitting at time  $t$ .

12 In my opinion, the Main Argument is the strongest argument for fatal-  
13 ism; that is, it is the strongest argument that moves from truths in the  
14 past to a present or future lack of freedom. But, as we shall see, the Main  
15 Argument fails because of considerations arising from truth's depen-  
16 dence on the world . . . . We shall also see that every initially compelling  
17 argument for fatalism—that is, every argument for fatalism free of  
18 obvious flaws . . . —fails for the same reason.<sup>2</sup>

19 Merricks says that the truism helps us to see that it is question-begging to  
20 assume (1). Suppose Jones does in fact sit at  $t$ . The truism purports to tell  
21 us that *that Jones sits at  $t$*  was true a thousand years ago *because* Jones sits  
22 at  $t$ , that is, the truth of *that Jones sits at  $t$*  depends on Jones's sitting at  $t$ .<sup>3</sup>  
23 Further, Merricks articulates the following corollary of truth's depen-  
24 dence on the world: "for all  $S$  and all  $p$ ,  $S$  has no choice about  $p$ 's truth  
25 presupposes . . . that  $S$  has no choice about what  $p$ 's truth depends on (in  
26 the sense of 'depends on' in which truth depends on the world)."<sup>4</sup> So to  
27 suppose that (1) is true, that is, to suppose that Jones has no choice about  
28 the truth of *that Jones sits at  $t$* , appears to presuppose precisely what is at  
29 issue, namely, that Jones has no choice about sitting at  $t$ .

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

35  
36  
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38 2. Ibid., 33.

39 3. We return to a critical evaluation of this contention below.

40 4. Ibid., 37.

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

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

5 Therefore,

6 (3) Jones has no choice about: Jones's sitting at time *t*.<sup>5</sup>

7 About this argument Merricks says:

8 My objection to this argument builds on an idea that goes back at least to  
9 Origen, who says: "it will not be because God knows that an event will  
10 occur that it happens; but, because something is going to take place it is  
11 known by God before it happens." [Merricks refers here to *Commentary*  
12 *on the Epistle to the Romans*, bk. 7, chap. 8, sec. 5; also he says, "Molina  
13 (*Concordia* 4, disputation 52, sec. 19) joins Origen in taking God's beliefs  
14 about the future to depend on what will happen, rather than the other way  
15 around."] Similarly, I say that God has certain beliefs about the world  
16 because of how the world is, was, or will be—and not vice versa. For  
17 example, God believes *that there are no white ravens* because there are no  
18 white ravens, and not the other way around. And God believed, a thou-  
19 sand years ago, *that Jones sits at t* because Jones will sit at *t*, and not the  
20 other way around.<sup>6</sup>

21 Admitting that these considerations do not "all by themselves" show that  
22 the Divine Foreknowledge Argument fails, nevertheless Merricks builds  
23 on what he takes to be "Origen's insight," namely, that God's beliefs  
24 depend on the world. He then articulates the following corollary: "For  
25 all *S* and all God's beliefs *b*, that *S* has no choice about whether God has  
26 belief *b* presupposes (in the sense of 'presupposes' relevant to begging  
27 the question) that *S* has no choice about what God's having belief *b*  
28 depends on (in the sense of 'depends on' in which God's beliefs depend  
29 on the world)." Now Merricks goes on to say:

30 Recall the first premise of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument:

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

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

35 (3) Jones has no choice about: Jones's sitting at time *t*.

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39 5. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

40 6. *Ibid.*, 52.

1           So I object that the Divine Foreknowledge Argument, like the Main  
2           Argument . . . is question-begging.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Critique of Merricks: The Divine Foreknowledge Argument

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5           We begin by considering Merricks's critique of the Divine Foreknowledge  
6           Argument, given our belief that it, more clearly than the Main Argument,  
7           does *not* beg the question.<sup>8</sup> We shall go on to consider whether the  
8           resources we employ in our defense of the Divine Foreknowledge Argu-  
9           ment can be applied similarly to the Main Argument. We agree that it  
10          would indeed be dialectically infelicitous simply to announce that (say)  
11          premise (6) is true without any defense of it. But this would not be the  
12          typical approach of the proponent of the Divine Foreknowledge Argu-  
13          ment (or similar arguments).<sup>9</sup> Rather, the proponent of the incom-  
14          patibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom (in the sense of  
15          "freedom to do otherwise") would contend that (6) is an instance of the  
16          very plausible general thesis that the past is "fixed." If (6) is an instance of  
17          the fixity (sometimes also called the "necessity") of the past, then (6)  
18          would not be question-begging.

19          But what exactly is the commonsense notion of the fixity of the  
20          past? And how does it apply to premise (6)? Merricks himself explores the  
21          possibility that considerations pertinent to the "necessity of the past"  
22          might help to establish a premise such as (6).<sup>10</sup> Below we shall return  
23          to Merricks's discussion, but before doing so, we shall seek to give a plau-  
24          sible account of the fixity of the past and its relationship to premise (6).

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

32           7. *Ibid.*, 53.

33           8. Perhaps we should note that the whole notion of "begging the question" is quite  
34           vexed. The epithet, "question-begging," is invoked to point to a range of dialectical infel-  
35           licities. Here we shall follow Merricks in using the term (and not seeking to define it), and  
36           we shall assume that we have a tolerably clear idea of the sort of dialectical impropriety  
37           under consideration.

38           9. John Martin Fischer, "Recent Work on God and Freedom," *American Philosophical*  
39           *Quarterly* 29 (1992): 91–109; and John Martin Fischer, ed., *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*  
40           (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

40           10. Merricks, "Truth and Freedom," 40–42.

1 As a first approximation, the claim that the past is fixed—the fixity of the  
2 past—is just the claim that we have no choice about such facts. But there  
3 are various ways one might wish to “regiment” the claim that we have no  
4 choice about the past. One promising way to do so, and the way we shall  
5 employ in this essay, uses the notion of possible worlds.

6 It is widely agreed that an agent *can* perform a given action only if  
7 there is a possible world suitably related to (and thus “accessible from”)   
8 the actual world in which the agent *does* perform the action. While this  
9 much is uncontroversial, exactly which worlds *are* accessible from the  
10 actual world is highly contentious. Incompatibilists about the freedom  
11 to do otherwise and causal determinism, for instance, contend that an  
12 agent can do otherwise at a given time only if there exists a possible world  
13 with the *same past* as the actual world (up to the given time) in which the  
14 agent performs the action. In other words, according to the incompati-  
15 bilist, the only accessible worlds are worlds with the same past as the actual  
16 world; the actual past must be *held fixed* when assessing a can-claim. If a  
17 fact obtains in every possible world accessible to one from the actual  
18 world, then that fact is *fixed* for one.<sup>11</sup> The fixity of the past, then, is the  
19 thesis (to be qualified shortly) that all facts about the past are fixed.

20 Of course, it is beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to *justify*  
21 the thesis of the fixity of the past. However, we think this thesis has  
22 considerable plausibility. The fixity of the past says that one can do some-  
23 thing only if there is a possible world with the same past as the actual  
24 world in which one does it. If there is not such a world, then it will be a  
25 requirement on one’s performing the given action that the past have  
26 been different. Plausibly, however, it’s now too late for the past to have  
27 been different, and thus one cannot perform the action in question.  
28 In other words, if it is a *requirement* (or a *necessary condition*) on one’s  
29

30 11. Although it is perhaps somewhat unusual to think of possible worlds as accessible  
31 to *agents* (rather than other possible worlds), there is an established tradition of allowing  
32 for an accessibility relation between agents and possible worlds in the literature on possi-  
33 ble-worlds approaches to “can.” For example, Keith Lehrer says, “The crux of the fore-  
34 going is that when we say that a person could have done something he did not do, we  
35 should not, and I believe do not, thereby affirm that every antecedent necessary condi-  
36 tion of his performing the action is fulfilled. It is enough that there be some possible  
37 world minimally different from the actual world restricted in an appropriate way so that  
38 the person performs the action and those conditions are fulfilled. We may speak of worlds  
39 restricted in the appropriate way as possible worlds that are *accessible* to the agent from the  
40 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.

1 performing some action that some fact about the past—the fact, say, that  
 2 Kennedy was shot in Dallas in 1963—not have obtained, then it is plau-  
 3 sible that one cannot perform the action. For Kennedy *was* shot, and,  
 4 plausibly, any possible world now “accessible” to one will include this  
 5 fact. Intuitively, this notion nicely captures the idea that we have no  
 6 choice about Kennedy’s having been shot: in virtue of being a fact  
 7 about the past, this fact will obtain in all possible worlds now accessible  
 8 to us. It thus enjoys a certain sort of necessity.

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

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

34 Now, as a first approximation, the defender of the Divine Fore-  
 35 knowledge Argument merely wishes to defend the claim that all hard  
 36

37  
 38 12. William of Ockham, *Predestination, God’s Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents*,  
 39 trans. and ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Norman Kretzmann (Indianapolis: Hackett),  
 40 esp. 46–47. For discussions of Ockham’s views and contemporary versions of Ockham-  
 ism, see Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* and Fischer, “Recent Work.”

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

16 With the distinction between hard and soft facts under our belts,  
17 we can now state the thesis of the fixity of the past slightly more carefully  
18 as follows:

19 (FP) For any action *Y*, agent *S*, and time *t*, *S* can perform *Y* at *t*  
20 only if there is a possible world with the same “hard” past up  
21 to *t* as the actual world in which *S* does *Y* at *t*.<sup>13</sup>  
22

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

31 That is, the proponent of the argument would first contend that  
32 the fact that God had a belief a thousand years ago that Jones will sit at *t*  
33 is a hard (temporally nonrelational) fact about a thousand years ago.  
34 The thought here is just this: God’s being in a certain mental state at a  
35 time does not exhibit the temporal relationality essential to soft facthood.  
36 God’s being in such a mental state at a time is a temporally intrinsic,  
37 hard feature of that time. That is, it is not relevantly similar to Kennedy’s  
38

39 13. See, for example, John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on*  
40 *Control* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 90.

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

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

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

33 Merricks does in fact consider whether the Main Argument (and  
 34 also presumably the Divine Foreknowledge Argument) might rely on  
 35 the notion of the fixity of the past. He considers three ways one might  
 36 understand the claim that the past is necessary (or fixed). One is to  
 37 say that there cannot be "backward causation." Another is to say that  
 38 the past cannot be changed. We agree with Merricks that these notions  
 39 do not capture what it is for the past to be fixed, though those claims  
 40



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1 certainly are *prerequisites*, so to speak, of the past being fixed.<sup>14</sup> Merricks  
2 presents—and criticizes—a third interpretation of the necessity of the  
3 past as follows:

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

11         And if this is all the necessity of the past amounts to, the objection  
12 just considered [that the past is necessary] fails. For that objection takes  
13 the assertion that the past is necessary to be a reason for the claim that no  
14 one now has a choice about what the past was like. But that claim cannot  
15 be a reason for itself.<sup>15</sup>

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

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

37  
38         14. In other words, if we can causally affect the past or directly change it, this would  
39 certainly call (FP) into question.

40         15. Merricks, "Truth and Freedom," 40.

1 To summarize, we can interpret the proponent of the Divine  
 2 Foreknowledge Argument as first arguing for (FP) itself. Next, he or  
 3 she contends that facts about God's beliefs a thousand years ago are  
 4 hard facts about a thousand years ago. He or she concludes that the  
 5 fact that God held a given belief a thousand years ago is now fixed; no  
 6 one has any choice about this fact now. None of the steps of this more  
 7 extended argument appears question-begging. Many—including the  
 8 present authors—think the arguments on behalf of (FP) are persuasive.  
 9 At any rate, we do not see in Merricks's argumentation any reason to  
 10 conclude that (FP) is unmotivated, implausible, or that its invocation  
 11 by itself begs the question.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, we wish to point out that (FP)  
 12 (along with a similar premise concerning the fixity of the natural laws)  
 13 is a lynchpin in the importantly parallel argument for the incompatibility  
 14 of causal determinism and freedom to do otherwise, and is thus widely  
 15 accepted amongst incompatibilists. It would thus come as some surprise if  
 16 employing (FP) begs the question. Of course, as above, one could (with  
 17 Ockhamists) object to the contention that God's past beliefs are hard.<sup>17</sup>  
 18

19  
 20 16. We think Merricks has perhaps missed the force of considerations arising from  
 21 the fixity of God's past beliefs due to a subtle shift in what the relevant fact about the past  
 22 is supposed to be. Note: there is an important distinction between *God's having believed*  
 23 *p*, on the one hand, and *what God believed* (namely, *p*), on the other. According to the  
 24 proponent of the Foreknowledge Argument, what is fixed is the former thing—that is, it is  
 25 fixed for Jones at *t* that God believed thus and so a thousand years prior. It is God's having  
 26 been in a certain *mental state* that is over and done with and a putative hard fact about  
 27 the past. It is *not* (in the first instance, at least) *what God believed* that is the putative hard  
 28 fact. But we note that Merricks seems to have missed this distinction. In stating that he  
 29 takes it that the Foreknowledge Argument has a false premise, for instance, Merricks  
 30 (“Truth and Freedom,” 54) says, “I think [premise one] is false even if God really did  
 31 believe, a thousand years ago, *that Jones sits at t*. I think that Jones, even now, has a choice  
 32 about what God believed a thousand years ago.” But the proponent of the Foreknowledge  
 33 Argument ought to complain that Merricks has unfairly shifted the dialectic here. For it  
 34 is more counterintuitive to suppose that Jones could have a choice about *God's having*  
 35 *believed p* than it is to suppose that he could have a choice about the *content* of God's  
 36 belief, namely, that he sits at *t*. It is, in other words, comparatively easy to see how one  
 37 could have a choice about sitting at *t*, but much harder to see how one could have a choice  
 38 about someone's having believed something a long time ago. Indeed, how *could* one have  
 39 a choice about something like that? For some discussions of this issue, see John Martin  
 40 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.

17. For some such Ockhamist arguments, see, for example, Marilyn McCord Adams,  
 “Is the Existence of God a ‘Hard’ Fact?,” *Philosophical Review* 76 (1967): 492–503,

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

#### 6 **4. Critique of Merricks: Ockhamism and Dependence**

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

13 Unlike the Ockhamists, I rely on neither a distinction between "soft facts"  
14 and "hard facts" nor on a distinction between what propositions are about  
15 with respect to "wording" and about with respect to "subject matter." So I  
16 do not have to make sense of these distinctions at all, much less in a way  
17 that delivers certain results, results like: for each soft fact about the past,  
18 someone or other now has (or will have) a choice about it.<sup>18</sup>

19 But the Ockhamist does *not* hold that for each soft fact about the past,  
20 someone or other now has (or will have) a choice about it. For example, it  
21 is a soft fact about early this morning that the sun rose twenty-four hours  
22 prior to another sunrise, but presumably no one now has a choice about  
23 this fact since no one can prevent the sun's rising tomorrow. This fact is  
24 thus fixed now, although it is not fixed in virtue of the fixity of the *past*. It  
25 is best to draw a bright line between the two distinctions: hard versus soft  
26 facts and fixed versus nonfixed facts. The Ockhamist (as opposed to the  
27 Multiple-Pasts Compatibilist) argues that all hard facts about the past are  
28 now fixed, whereas *some* soft facts about the past are *not* now fixed.<sup>19</sup> An

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31 reprinted in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, 74–85; Joshua Hoffman and Gary  
32 Rosenkrantz, "Hard and Soft Facts," *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 419–34, reprinted in  
33 Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, 123–35; and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Accidental  
34 Necessity and Logical Determinism," *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983): 257–78, reprinted  
35 in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, 136–58.

36 18. Merricks, "Truth and Freedom," 48.

37 19. The Multiple Pasts Compatibilist replies to the "Consequence Argument" for the  
38 incompatibility of causal determinism and freedom to do otherwise by contending that  
39 even hard facts about the past need not be fixed now. For a development of the Consequence  
40 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*.

1 Ockhamist does *not* assert that *all* soft facts about the past fail to be fixed  
2 now—just those that depend on our free decisions.

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

5 I object that the Main Argument begs the question. But Ockhamists  
6 would not thus object to the Main Argument. For Ockhamists do not  
7 invoke the idea underlying this objection, the idea that truth depends  
8 on the world.<sup>20</sup>

9  
10 But we believe that Ockhamists do indeed invoke the idea that  
11 truth depends on the world. At any rate, Merricks's claim that they do not  
12 is at best superficial. For, as we now wish to argue, precisely what makes the  
13 difference for the Ockhamist between soft and hard facts about the past  
14 is that soft facts—the paradigmatic instances of which are facts incorpo-  
15 rating past *truths* about the future—are (in a particular way) dependent  
16 on the future, and thus (sometimes) within our control. That is, those soft  
17 facts about the past that we have a choice about are precisely those that  
18 depend on our free decisions. Thus, we think the central contentions that  
19 have motivated Merricks are (perhaps ironically) fundamentally the same  
20 as those that have been motivating Ockhamists all along.

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

26 Although, as we shall see, the detailed articulation of this position [Ockha-  
27 mism] is rather complicated, the intuition which grounds it is the famil-  
28 iar, but often misunderstood, claim that a future-tense proposition is true  
29 now *because* the appropriate present-tense proposition or propositions  
30 will be true in the future.<sup>22</sup>

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

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

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37 20. Merricks, “Truth and Freedom,” 46.

38 21. William of Ockham, *Predestination*, 46–47. Indeed, Merricks quotes this passage  
39 from Ockham on p. 49 of “Truth and Freedom,” and, arguably, this amounts to precisely  
40 what Merricks wants.

22. Freddoso, “Accidental Necessity,” in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*, 143.

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

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

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

31 It should come as no surprise, however, that Ockhamism cannot  
32 be so easily vindicated. For while it is the hallmark of a soft fact that it  
33 depends on the future, dependence comes in different sorts (as many  
34  
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36 23. For discussion of the manner in which Ockhamists rely on the notion of dependence,  
37 see John Martin Fischer, Patrick Todd, and Neal Tognazzini, "Re-Reading Pike's  
38 'Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action'," *Philosophical Papers* 38 (2009): 247–70. See  
39 also Alicia Finch and Michael Rea, "Presentism and Ockham's Way Out," in *Oxford Studies*  
40 *in Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (New York: Oxford University Press,  
2008), 1–17.

1 philosophers have recently argued<sup>24</sup>), and it is not at all obvious that the  
 2 sort of dependence facts about God's past beliefs exhibit on the future  
 3 is the sort relevant to soft facthood. In other words, it is not enough that  
 4 the fact that God has a certain belief about the future *in some sense* de-  
 5 pends on the future. This fact must depend on the future *in the right way*.

6 We can begin to see the challenge of specifying the relevant notion  
 7 of dependence as follows. Some philosophers working on the notion of  
 8 ontological dependence have suggested that the notion be analyzed  
 9 in terms of a primitive relationship of *objective explanation*.<sup>25</sup> Similarly,  
 10 Merricks has repeatedly insisted that God had the relevant beliefs *because*  
 11 of what we do. Thus, perhaps we should try:

12 (BC) A fact *F* about at a time *t* is soft if and only if it is a fact at *t*  
 13 because of how the future is relative to *t*.

14  
 15 (BC) certainly seems to be on the right track. But consider a well-known  
 16 story from Alvin Plantinga:

17 Let us suppose that a colony of carpenter ants moved into Paul's yard  
 18 last Saturday. Since this colony has not yet had a chance to get properly  
 19 established, its new home is still a bit fragile. In particular, if the ants were  
 20 to remain and Paul were to mow his lawn this afternoon, the colony  
 21 would be destroyed. Although nothing remarkable about these ants is  
 22 visible to the naked eye, God, for reasons of his own, intends that it be  
 23 preserved. Now as a matter of fact, Paul will not mow his lawn this after-  
 24 noon. God, who is essentially omniscient, knew in advance, of course, that  
 25 Paul will not mow his lawn this afternoon; but if he had foreknown instead  
 26 that Paul *would* mow this afternoon, then he would have prevented the  
 27 ants from moving in.<sup>26</sup>

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

29 (1) That colony of carpenter ants moved into Paul's yard last  
 30 Saturday.

31  
 32  
 33  
 34 24. See, for example, Kit Fine, "Ontological Dependence," *Proceedings of the Aristote-*  
 35 *lian Society* 95 (1995): 269–90; E. J. Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford  
 36 University Press, 1998), 136–53; and Fabrice Correia, *Existential Dependence and Cognate*  
 37 *Notions* (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2005).

38 25. See Correia, *Existential Dependence*; and Benjamin Schnieder, "A Certain Kind of  
 39 Trinity: Dependence, Substance, Explanation," *Philosophical Studies* 129 (2006): 393–419.

40 26. Alvin Plantinga, "Ockham's Way Out," in Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Free-*  
*dom*, 201.

1 The problem (1) poses for (BC) is that (1) is, on Plantinga’s story, a fact  
2 because of how the future was relative to last Saturday. More particularly,  
3 the fact that there are ants in Paul’s yard on Saturday is a fact because of  
4 how the future is relative to that time—in particular, it is a fact because  
5 Paul will not mow his lawn this afternoon.<sup>27</sup> However, (1) is plainly a hard  
6 fact about last Saturday—as Plantinga says, (1) is “about as good a candi-  
7 dinate for being an exemplification of [hard facthood] as we can easily  
8 think of.”<sup>28</sup>

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

17 The lesson here is that any proper account of the hard/soft fact  
18 distinction must thread the needle between the fact that (in the story)  
19 ants moved into Paul’s yard last Saturday and a fact such as that John  
20 F. Kennedy was assassinated forty-six years prior to our writing this essay.  
21 Both facts are facts in virtue of, or because of, how the future is. Yet only  
22 one—the latter—is soft. Thus, we still need a sense in which the JFK fact  
23 depends on the future but (1) doesn’t. Both depend on (or hold because  
24 of) the future *somehow*, but only one is soft. Notably, the failure of (BC)  
25  
26

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

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

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

39 However, it is crucial to note that the denial of (FPC) is entirely compatible with the  
40 *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).

1 would show that one cannot simply invoke the idea that God has the  
 2 relevant beliefs because of what we do in order to show that these facts  
 3 do not fall under the fixity of the past (as regimented by (FP)).

4 In this section, we have first pointed out that, despite his state-  
 5 ments to the contrary, Merricks relies on the same ideas about depen-  
 6 dence as those that have been motivating Ockhamists all along. Our  
 7 discussion also shows that it is not at all easy to specify the sort of depen-  
 8 dence relevant to soft facthood. It is, of course, comparatively much easier  
 9 simply to *say* that God's beliefs depend on our decisions, as does  
 10 Merricks, without wading into the difficulties surrounding in just what  
 11 sense God's beliefs so depend and whether this sense is intuitively rel-  
 12 evant to fixity. Our point here has not been to argue that God's past  
 13 beliefs are *not* dependent in the right sort of way on the future. Nor  
 14 have we offered any particular account of the sort of dependence relevant  
 15 to softness.<sup>29</sup> Further, we believe that it is not obvious that God's beliefs *do*  
 16 depend on the future in the right way. Thus, unsurprisingly, it turns out  
 17 that the mere invocation of a truism does not lay to rest the Divine Fore-  
 18 knowledge Argument.

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

### 30 **5. Critique of Merricks: The Main Argument**

32 Thus far we have sought primarily to argue that invocation of Merricks's  
 33 "truism" does not circumvent the thrust of the Divine Foreknowledge  
 34 Argument. Here we briefly consider whether it nevertheless *does* cir-  
 35 cumvent the thrust of the Main Argument. It is often thought that the  
 36 relevant premise of the Divine Foreknowledge Argument,  
 37

38  
 39 29. One of us, however, is independently working on precisely this project. See  
 40 Patrick Todd, "Soft Facts and Ontological Dependence" (unpublished manuscript).



1                   (6) Jones has no choice about: God believed *that Jones sits at t* a  
2                   thousand years ago,

3  
4 is more plausible than the parallel premise in the Main Argument,

5                   (1) Jones has no choice about: *that Jones sits at t* was true a thou-  
6                   sand years ago.

7  
8 That is, some have thought that the embedded clause in (6) arguably, at  
9                   least, expresses a hard fact about a thousand years ago, whereas in (1) it  
10                  does not.<sup>30</sup> But some philosophers would argue that the status of (1) is  
11                  not significantly—or relevantly—different from that of (6). Such philoso-  
12                  phers would begin by arguing that “truths require truthmakers.” They

13

14

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

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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 character-  
istic 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.”

1 will further argue that if it was true a thousand years ago that Jones would  
 2 sit at *t*, then there must have been some temporally nonrelational truth-  
 3 maker that existed a thousand years ago in virtue of which this was true,  
 4 the existence of which entails that Jones sits at *t*. Given this claim, it can be  
 5 argued that (1) is indeed supported by the fixity of the past. For Jones's  
 6 ability to do otherwise than sit at *t* requires that the relevant truthmaker  
 7 not have existed a thousand years ago, and the fact that it did exist then is  
 8 a hard fact about the past relative to *t*.<sup>31</sup>

9 Of course, it must be admitted that the above argument relies on a  
 10 further controversial premise in addition to the mere premise that truths  
 11 require truthmakers. It relies on the premise that truth at a time is made  
 12 true by the world at that time. That is, it relies on the claim that if *that Jones*  
 13 *sits at t* was true a thousand years ago, then there must have been some-  
 14 thing temporally nonrelational about the world *a thousand years ago* in  
 15 virtue of which this was true. We do not here seek to *argue for* this premise.  
 16 And we note that Merricks has denied that truths require truthmakers in  
 17 the way envisaged in the argument.<sup>32</sup> However, it is enough for our pur-  
 18 poses to note that these theses have considerable plausibility and cannot  
 19 be dismissed out of hand. Given these points, it would seem that one  
 20 could not dismiss the Main Argument without considering precisely  
 21 the same sorts of issues concerning the fixity of the past one must address  
 22 when evaluating the Divine Foreknowledge Argument.

23 Merricks invokes the truism that truth depends on the world in an  
 24 attempt to undermine the fatalist arguments. But the fatalist will in no  
 25 way contest the truism. Rather, he or she will point out that the truism has  
 26 to be *properly applied*: if we are to be free, truths about what we do must  
 27 not only depend on the world but must depend on the *right part* of the  
 28 world—a part of the world under our control. But if the thousand-years-  
 29 ago truth of *that Jones sits at t* was made true by a hard feature of the world a  
 30 thousand years ago, then whereas this truth depended on the world, it  
 31 depended on a part of the world outside Jones's control at *t*, namely,  
 32 how the world was a thousand years prior! Thus, features of the world  
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37 31. Some philosophers have rejected a truthmaker approach and have instead  
 38 adopted the thesis that truth supervenes on being. Exactly the same analysis would  
 39 apply to a supervenience view; nothing in our critique depends on accepting a truthmaker  
 40 view as opposed to a supervenience view.

32. Trenton Merricks, *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

1 beyond Jones's control entail what he does. Arguably, in this way he is  
2 rendered unable to do otherwise.<sup>33</sup>

### 3 4 **6. Conclusion**

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

12 We have pointed out that the Main Argument and Divine Fore-  
13 knowledge Argument both depend (in different specific ways) on con-  
14 siderations of the fixity of the past. We have not attempted to argue *for* the  
15 claim that God's beliefs are hard facts about the times at which they are  
16 held or the claim that truth at *t* depends on the world at *t*. These are  
17 contentious claims. In order to offer decisive support for the Main Argu-  
18 ment and the Divine Foreknowledge Argument, one would need to pro-  
19 vide arguments for these claims. But here our project has been different.  
20 Here we have shown, *contra* Merricks, that mere invocation of the truism  
21 does *not* show that the arguments are question-begging. It is thus neces-  
22 sary for a critic of the parallel arguments to address the vexing traditional  
23 questions about the fixity of the past—many of which have been explored  
24 at some length in the pages of this journal.

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37 33. Indeed, it would seem as if the truism is a driving force behind the intuitive  
38 *appeal* of fatalism. For when a fatalist hears that it was true a thousand years ago that he  
39 or she would sit at *t*, he or she applies the truism: truth depends on the world. Thus,  
40 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?