

# THE INDIRECT RESPONSE TO THE FOREKNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT

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**Abstract.** This paper develops an indirect response to arguments for theological fatalism of the sort defended in John Martin Fischer’s *Our Fate: Essays on God and Free Will*. The presentation is intentionally crafted in such a way as to engage directly with several key aspects of Fischer’s work, though it should be of more general interest. New details of the indirect response are supplied, and the dialectical value of the response is addressed.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

Among John Martin Fischer’s principal aims in *Our Fate* (2016) is to develop and defend an argument for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom to do otherwise based on the notion of the fixity of the past. I’ll call this argument the “incompatibility argument.” The bulk of Fischer’s defense of the incompatibility argument involves responding to objections to the argument which attempt to show that a particular premise or supposition of the argument is false or question-begging. In the rather different case of Fischer’s engagement with Molinism, his aim is to expose Molinist “responses” to the argument as pseudo-responses, as their truth is utterly irrelevant to evaluating the argument. My concern here will be with an entirely different response to the incompatibility argument, one which does not focus on objecting to any particular premise or supposition in the argument, but rather attempts to challenge the argument as a whole in an *indirect* manner. It is a response developed in my (2014) with which Fischer engages very briefly in the new introductory essay of his book (41). My primary purpose will be to develop the indirect response here in a way that interacts directly with central aspects of Fischer’s work and will provide him with an excellent opportunity to weigh in at greater length on its merits.

## 1. THE INDIRECT RESPONSE PRESENTED

The indirect response to the incompatibility argument begins with the uncontroversial observation that all versions of this argument are attempts to prove a conditional: that *if* God has exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge, then no human person is able to do otherwise than what she does.

The next step of the indirect response is to highlight something else that must be true if this conditional is to be true: namely, that God's having exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge requires the existence of *something* which explains why it is that no human person is able to do otherwise than what she does. The motivation for this claim is as follows. Those who defend the incompatibility argument do not (and should not) wed their defense of this argument to the view that the ability to do otherwise is intrinsically impossible. Instead, defenders of the incompatibility argument aim to show that, granting that the ability to do otherwise is intrinsically possible, God's having exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge would render it impossible. Divine foreknowledge and the ability to do otherwise are not *compossible*. But, once it is granted that the ability to do otherwise is intrinsically possible, there is considerable pressure to affirm that if it does not obtain, something *explains why* it doesn't obtain. Otherwise we are left claiming that there is no explanation for why things that could have obtained don't — an unfortunate commitment for a defense of any argument to require. If we grant this — that if no person has the ability to do otherwise, then something explains why this is so — then it will follow that every version of the incompatibility argument is committed to the claim that God's foreknowledge requires the existence of something that explains why no human person has the ability to do otherwise. For, every version of the incompatibility argument is committed to the conditional that if God has exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge, then the ability to do otherwise doesn't exist; and our argument here has provided reason for thinking that if this ability doesn't exist, there's an explanation for why it doesn't; so, every version of the incompatibility argument is committed to the claim that God's foreknowledge requires the existence of something that explains why no human person is able to do otherwise.

The third and final step of the indirect response is to challenge the claim that God's having exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge *does* require the existence of something that explains why no human person has the ability to

do otherwise (hereafter, “the requirement claim”). Challenges to this claim may come in varying degrees of strength. For example, one might challenge the claim by arguing that we are not in a position to know that it is true, or by arguing that we are in a position to know that it is false. And there are various other degrees of strength imaginable.

Regardless of the strength of the challenge one wishes to urge against the requirement claim, my suggestion has been to develop the challenge by ruling out the best candidates for what could fulfill the role it specifies. That is, my suggestion has been to attempt to show that for each of the best candidates for that which could be both required by divine foreknowledge and could explain why no human person can do otherwise, there is significant reason to doubt that this candidate in fact *is* both required by divine foreknowledge and *would* explain why human persons cannot do otherwise. The best candidates, in my view, are the truth of God’s beliefs, the beliefs themselves, and the truth of causal determinism. I’ll conclude this section by offering strategies for arguing that none of these candidates fulfills the role specified by the requirement claim. In the process, I’ll be engaging with relevant work from Fischer’s book. I’ll also address two additional candidates I have not previously discussed that readers will recognize from Fischer’s work — the “fixity” of God’s beliefs, and God’s being in a “knowledge conferring situation.”

Start with the truth of God’s beliefs. The proposal here is that it is the truth of God’s beliefs that is both required by exhaustive and infallible divine foreknowledge and explains why no human person could do otherwise than she does. For example, if we suppose that Jones does  $X$  at  $T_2$ , the proposal will have it that God’s exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge requires it to be the case that, at past times, it was *true* that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , and the fact that it was *true* at past times that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$  explains why Jones cannot do otherwise than  $X$  at  $T_2$ . I have argued (2014: ch. 2) that this is a poor candidate for fulfilling the role specified by the requirement claim, because it is implausible that the truth of God’s past beliefs explains why human persons lack the ability to do otherwise. For example, it is implausible that the fact that it was true at past times that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$  explains why Jones cannot do otherwise than  $X$  at  $T_2$ . We can see why this is implausible by attending to the explanatory relationship between Jones’s doing  $X$  at  $T_2$  and it’s being true at past times that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , where the kind of explanation with which we are concerned is the kind that figures prominently

in many of the discussions in Fischer's book — a relation of metaphysical dependence that is asymmetric and transitive.<sup>1</sup> There are four options regarding this explanatory relationship: either the past truth explains Jones's doing  $X$ , Jones's doing  $X$  explains the past truth, there is a common explanation for both the past truth and Jones's doing  $X$ , or there is no explanatory relationship between the two. I've argued in my (2014: ch. 2) that only the second and third options are plausible, and that the third would imply that if anything, something *other than* past truth explains the absence of the ability to do otherwise. Thus, all that is left is the second option; and, notably, in his comments about the nature of soft facts, Fischer appears happy to grant that this option is correct (186, 191–2). He appears happy to grant, that is, that Jones's doing  $X$  at  $T_2$  explains why it was true at past times that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . However, once this is granted, we can also see why it cannot be that the fact that it was true at past times that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$  explains why Jones cannot do otherwise than  $X$  at  $T_2$ . For, given that the relevant explanatory relations are transitive — something Fischer also appears ready to grant (208–9) — it would follow that Jones's doing  $X$  at  $T_2$  explains why Jones cannot do otherwise than  $X$  at  $T_2$ . And this is something that the defender of the incompatibility argument, as we said above, should not want to maintain. It is tantamount to saying that the ability to do otherwise is intrinsically impossible. So, the truth of God's past beliefs is not a good candidate for fulfilling the role specified by the requirement claim.

For very similar reasons, neither are God's past beliefs good candidates for fulfilling the role specified by the requirement claim. The idea on this second suggestion would be that infallible divine foreknowledge requires past divine beliefs, and it is these that explain why human persons cannot do otherwise than what they do. For example, it is God's past belief that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$  that explains why Jones cannot do otherwise than  $X$  at  $T_2$ . Notably, an argument paralleling that in the previous paragraph can be employed to show that past divine beliefs are not good candidates for fulfilling the role specified by the requirement claim, either. Again, focusing on the example of Jones, we can see this by attending to the explanatory relationship between God's past beliefs that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$  and Jones's doing  $X$  at  $T_2$ .

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<sup>1</sup> And so it is neither simply logical entailment nor counterfactual dependence. For Fischer's discussion of it, see ch. 1 and chs. 9–12.

Either God's past beliefs explain why Jones does *X*, Jones's doing *X* explains God's past beliefs, God's past beliefs and Jones's doing *X* share a common explanation, or there is no explanatory relationship between God's past beliefs and Jones's doing *X*. Again, I've argued (2014: ch. 2) that the only plausible views here are the second and third, and that the third would imply that, if anything, something other than God's beliefs explains why no person can do otherwise. Moreover, again, in various places in his book Fischer appears prepared to grant that this second option is correct.<sup>2</sup> That is, he appears prepared to grant that Jones's doing *X* at  $T_2$  explains why God believed in the past that Jones would do *X* at  $T_2$ . However, once this is granted, we can also see why God's past beliefs cannot fulfill the role specified by the requirement claim. For, if they were to do so, it would again follow from the transitivity of explanation that Jones's doing *X* at  $T_2$  explains why Jones cannot do otherwise than *X* at  $T_2$  — something a defender of the incompatibility argument will not want to maintain.

A third candidate for fulfilling the role specified by the requirement claim is the truth of causal determinism. On this proposal, God's possession of exhaustive and infallible foreknowledge requires the truth of causal determinism, and the truth of causal determinism explains why no person is able to do otherwise than what she does. I have argued elsewhere (2014: ch. 2) that the truth of causal determinism is in fact the best candidate for that which is both required by divine foreknowledge and would explain the absence of the ability to do otherwise.

Very interestingly, Fischer has himself provided reason for rejecting the truth of causal determinism as that which fulfills the role specified by the requirement claim. This is because he thinks that infallible foreknowledge does not require the truth of causal determinism. Indeed, by articulating his "bootstrapping" view of divine foreknowledge (36–39), he offers an account of the mechanics whereby God might secure infallible foreknowledge without causal determinism being true. So, unless he is prepared to surrender the bootstrapping view and the more general point he wanted to employ it to defend — that infallible foreknowledge can be achieved in an indeterministic world — Fischer cannot endorse this third candidate.

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2 See his statement that such a claim "seem(s) just fine (223)." Cf. 221.

While I cannot discuss the reasons here, I myself think that Fischer's bootstrapping view is ultimately incoherent. Nevertheless, his attempt to articulate a way whereby infallible foreknowledge can be achieved without causal determinism being true *does* illustrate the kind of strategy I advocate for resisting this third candidate. The strategy I have advocated (2014: ch. 3) involves disjoining what I call "conciliatory stories" about the mechanics of divine foreknowledge. These are accounts of how God achieves infallible foreknowledge without causal determinism being true that have a non-zero epistemic status. If there are enough such stories, and their epistemic statuses are high enough, they can present a considerable challenge to this third candidate.

Since I'm not optimistic about Fischer's own conciliatory story, the reader might wonder what other stories I am more optimistic about. I'll briefly mention a few. By doing so, I aim to highlight the widespread appeal of the indirect response.

First, consider Molinism. As Fischer himself sees it (40), the aim of Molinists is precisely to provide an account of the mechanics of infallible divine foreknowledge that does not require causal determinism. Thus, to the extent that Molinism is an epistemic possibility, it can contribute to the indirect response. For this reason, I think Fischer's arguments for the irrelevance of Molinism for assessing the incompatibility argument are too strong. Molinism *is* relevant, if employed as part of a defense of the indirect response.

Second, consider divine timelessness. Specifically, I am thinking of versions of divine timelessness which also affirm that God became incarnate in the past, and that God's past beliefs are explained by God's timeless beliefs (e.g., Rota 2010). On this sort of picture, Jones's undetermined act  $X$  at  $T_2$  explains God's timeless belief that Jones does  $X$  at  $T_2$ , and God's timeless belief that Jones does  $X$  at  $T_2$  explains the incarnate God's past infallible belief that Jones will do  $X$  at  $T_2$ . To the extent that this kind of picture is an epistemic possibility, it can contribute to the indirect response.

Besides these more well-known conciliatory stories, there are others. I have myself developed a time-ordering account of divine foreknowledge (2014: ch. 4), Jonathan Kvanvig (2013) has articulated an account of "Philosophical Arminianism," and some Thomists (e.g., Grant 2010) have attempted to provide accounts according to which God more directly controls our acts and thereby acquires foreknowledge of them, without this implying that these acts are causally determined. Altogether, these conciliatory stories present a

considerable challenge to the claim that infallible divine foreknowledge requires the truth of causal determinism.

Turn finally to two additional candidates for that which fulfills the role specified by the requirement claim. First, consider the proposal that it is the *fixity* of God's past beliefs that does the trick. God's having infallible foreknowledge implies that God's past beliefs are *fixed*, and his past beliefs being fixed explains why human persons cannot do otherwise than what they do. The problem I see with this approach is that, on Fischer's view (188, 231), the fixity of God's past beliefs is a feature they have simply in virtue of their having the more fundamental feature of being past (in the sense of "past" operative in the principle of the fixity of the past). However, it is a plausible principle that if something *X*'s having feature *F* explains why *P* is so, and *X* has *F* in virtue of *X* having more fundamental feature *F'*, then *X*'s having *F'* explains why *P* is so.<sup>3</sup> It follows from this principle that if the fixity of God's past beliefs explains why no human person can do otherwise than what she does, then God's past beliefs themselves explain why no human person can do otherwise. Yet, we've already seen why it is problematic to maintain that God's past beliefs explain why human persons cannot do otherwise.

A fifth and final candidate is suggested by what Fischer says about God being in a "knowledge conferring situation" (a KCS) in his defense of the bootstrapping view (39–40). Fischer proposes that, just as human beings can have fallible knowledge of the future by virtue of believing claims about the future in the context of a KCS, God can be in this very same kind of KCS with respect to claims about the future. Of course, God can be in an even better quality of KCS than human knowers as well. In particular, Fischer endeavors to show that even in an indeterministic world, God can bootstrap himself to having infallible total evidence regarding the future by virtue of knowing his own beliefs and omniscience. For our purposes here, we are interested in evaluating the proposal that it is God's being in a KCS with respect to claims about what human persons will do in the future that is both required by infallible divine foreknowledge and explains why human persons cannot do otherwise.

I think it is important to distinguish two different interpretations of this proposal. On one interpretation, the proposal is focusing exclusively on what is common between God's KCS's and human knowers' KCS's. On this in-

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3 See (Lange 2013).

terpretation, the proposal is that it is God's being in the position of having fallible first-order evidence regarding what human persons will do that explains why they cannot do otherwise. Interpreted in this way, the proposal is not promising. For, the proposed explanans will not adequately predict the explanandum. God's possession of *fallible* evidence regarding what human persons will do is not an adequate enough predictor of what human persons will do for it to explain why they cannot do otherwise. Indeed, it is perfectly consistent with them doing otherwise.

On a second interpretation of the proposal, we focus on the total package of God's KCS, including not just whatever evidence God would share with fallible human knowers, but the evidence that enables God to have infallible foreknowledge. I offer a dilemma against this proposal. Either the evidence here is evidence provided by the truth of causal determinism, or it is not. If it is evidence provided by the truth of causal determinism, then the proposal is no different from the third proposal evaluated above. If, on the other hand, the evidence is evidence provided in some other way, then it is doubtful that this evidence will explain why human persons cannot do otherwise. For example, suppose the evidence is provided in the way proposed by Fischer's bootstrapping view. Then, part of the evidence will be God's own beliefs about what human persons will do. But, then, the proposal will be claiming that part of the explanation for why human persons cannot do otherwise is that God has past beliefs regarding what they will do. And this proposal will be subject to the same objection as the second proposal above. Thus, this fifth candidate is no better than the first three. As such, there is good reason to doubt the requirement claim. Consequently, there is good reason to doubt that the incompatibility argument is sound, even if we cannot identify exactly where it goes wrong. Notably, the reason provided is based on claims Fischer appears willing to grant.

## 2. THE DIALECTICAL SITUATION

For all the indirect response would appear to have going for it, might it be that it nonetheless merely leads to a dialectical stalemate? Fischer's own brief engagement with the indirect response in his book (41) suggests he may be sympathetic with an affirmative answer. The thought is this. Suppose we grant that the incompatibility argument is sound only if divine foreknowledge requires something that explains why human persons cannot do otherwise.



The project of the defender of the indirect response is to provide reasons for thinking that this requirement claim is not satisfied. However, the defense of the incompatibility argument should not be overlooked. This very defense itself provides reasons for thinking the requirement claim *is* met. So, what we are left with is reasons both for and against the requirement claim. And that is a stalemate.

I think this suggestion is correct in that, to the extent that the premises and suppositions of the incompatibility argument are defensible, this provides reasons in favor of the requirement claim. Moreover, if *all* that an advocate of the indirect response was to do was to defend the indirect response in the manner I have above, and if the reasons she offered in the process of this defense were no stronger than the reasons provided by defenders of the incompatibility argument, then I think we would have an irrevocable stalemate (not to say this would be an uninteresting conclusion!). However, my view is that a defender of the indirect response should not *merely* defend the indirect response in the way I have above. Rather, she should *couple* that defense with direct criticisms of the incompatibility argument that challenge key claims made in its defense. She should aim to expose perhaps several *potentially* problematic features of the incompatibility argument without needing to insist that her criticisms of any particular feature are devastating; and, in addition, she should go on to present the indirect response which provides additional reason for thinking that the incompatibility argument goes wrong *somewhere or other*.

What kinds of direct criticisms of the incompatibility argument might be offered? I'll briefly identify two. First, Fischer's preferred regimentation of the principle of the fixity of the past has it that hard-type soft past facts are part of the "past" in the relevant sense, and so must remain fixed in any world accessible from the actual world (26–31). But, this will imply that the fact that a certain inscription saying that Jones does  $X$  at  $T_2$  was true a thousand years ago is part of the "past" in the relevant sense, and so must remain fixed when we consider what Jones can do. This is because various properties of the inscription, such as its *being an inscription*, are hard features of it, just like God's belief that Jones does  $X$  at  $T_2$  has the hard feature of *being a belief*, on Fischer's view. Yet, the resulting fatalistic consequences of true past inscriptions are not consequences Fischer wishes to wed himself to in the context of defending the incompatibility argument (e.g., 195, note 30). Second, Fis-

cher's defense of the claim that God's past beliefs are "past" in the sense of being soft past facts with hard features relies upon a questionable view of properties: namely, that when God holds beliefs at past times, God possesses the very same property that is possessed by human believers when they hold beliefs — viz., the property of *having a belief* (30). This view will be denied, however, by many who think that properties are particulars and who would maintain, for example, that in each instance in which God holds a belief in the past, he exemplifies a distinct property — the property of having *this particular divine belief*, or *that* one, etc. It is highly questionable whether these latter properties are hard.

These objections illustrate that central claims in Fischer's defense of the incompatibility argument are questionable, even if no knock-down argument can be given against them. When coupled with a defense of the indirect response as presented above, this puts considerable pressure on an advocate of the incompatibility argument. It's far from clear we have a dialectical stalemate here; and, even if we do, it needn't remain this way. There is a rich future discussion to be had about the incompatibility argument, and the indirect response should be an important part of that discussion.

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