The Popular Solution to the Problem of Freedom and Foreknowledge
and Some Implications for Freedom and Determinism

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Introduction

My aim in this paper is to articulate and defend a response to standard arguments for theological incompatibilism, the thesis that human freedom is incompatible with divine foreknowledge. The response I develop is in not intended to be novel; I claim only to be fleshing out a perennially popular reply to worries about the seemingly fatalistic implications of the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. That reply can be (and often is) expressed in a single sentence: “God’s foreknowledge does not cause me to act as I do.” In this simple form, the reply is probably the oldest response to worries about theological fatalism, and it seems to have continued widespread appeal as a common-sense response.

However, this reply is not taken seriously in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, where theological incompatibilism has been vigorously debated for fifty years. Indeed, what I am calling “the popular response” is typically brought up by theological incompatibilists only to be summarily dismissed as irrelevant to their arguments, on the grounds that those arguments are in no way based on the idea that God’s foreknowledge causes my actions. For example, both Arthur Prior and Nelson Pike, the two incompatibilists whose work in the 1960s

1 Throughout this paper, “compatibilism” and “incompatibilism” will be used to refer to theological compatibilism and incompatibilism, rather than to the theses that typically go by those labels.
gave rise to the current debate, dismiss the response in this fashion; so does William Hasker, who has for three decades been the most forceful proponent of incompatibilism. Among theological compatibilists (surely the majority of philosophers writing on this topic) there is little consensus about how to respond to incompatibilist arguments; any survey of the state of the debate lists a number of proffered objections or “solutions” (many are associated with the name of a philosopher—there are, for example, the Boethian, Ockhamist, Molinist, and Frankfurtian solutions) whose merits continue to be disputed. But none of these “standard” solutions intends to develop or uphold the basic thought expressed by the simple popular response, “God’s foreknowledge does not cause me to act as I do.”

In this paper, I argue that if we examine the popular response, and suppose that it does not spring from a misunderstanding, we can discern in it a forceful and intuitively compelling objection. I then demonstrate the mettle of this objection by showing that it provides a forceful and intuitively compelling basis for objecting to a sophisticated incompatibilist argument that is representative of the versions of the argument currently debated in the literature.

The plan of the paper is as follows: I begin by stating an unsophisticated version of the argument for theological incompatibilism; then I draw out what I take to be the intuitions behind the popular response and combine these to formulate what I regard as a clear and compelling reply, which I dub “the popular solution.” In section 2, I spell out a more sophisticated incompatibilist argument, due to William Hasker, that is representative of the versions of the argument that prevail in the literature. I then identify the component of this argument that is challenged by the popular solution: a thesis about what an agent can and cannot have the power to do. Section 3 is the longest section of the paper; there I critically examine Hasker’s argument that the crucial thesis about power is essential to the libertarian conception of freedom that the
compatibilist aims to reconcile with divine foreknowledge, and hence not negotiable for the compatibilist. I close, in section 4, with some brief reflections on implications the popular solution may have regarding conceptions of freedom and determinism.

1. The popular solution to the problem of freedom and foreknowledge

The doctrine that God has complete and infallible knowledge of the future can easily seem to be incompatible with human freedom. Suppose God knows what I am going to do tomorrow. If God cannot be mistaken, then it seems I cannot possibly do otherwise. If I cannot possibly do otherwise, then I am not free with regard to the actions in question. Hence, if God knows what I am going to do tomorrow, then my actions of tomorrow will not be free. Similar reasoning will apply to all human actions; therefore, if God has complete and infallible knowledge of the future, then no human actions are ever free. Call this the argument for theological incompatibilism.

My aim in this paper is to vindicate an often mentioned, and often dismissed, response to this argument, one that William Hasker says “has always been the most popular response”:2

The popular response: God’s knowledge that I will perform some action does not cause me to perform the action; hence, God’s foreknowledge makes no difference to my freedom.

Incompatibilists typically allege that this response is misplaced. For the incompatibilist argument does not contend or assume that divine foreknowledge causes me to do what I do. It contends only that any foreknown action is in fact unavoidable, since it is impossible that what God foreknows should not come to pass. It is true that the argument neither identifies any cause from

which the foreknown action unavoidably results, nor offers any explanation of what prevents the agent from doing otherwise. But, the incompatibilist maintains, it is one thing to show that an action is in fact unavoidable, and quite another to identify the causes that make it so, and the incompatibilist argument claims to do only the former. Hasker, who attributes the point to Jonathan Edwards, puts it this way: “Even if divine foreknowledge doesn’t make our actions necessary, it shows that they are necessitated, which is just as bad for (libertarian) free will.”

This reply seems to regard the popular response as springing from a misunderstanding—a failure to appreciate what the incompatibilist argument purports to show. But perhaps we should give the popular response more credit. Given its perennial popularity, it is surely worth considering the possibility that this response derives not from an obvious error but from a forceful and widely held intuition that represents a serious challenge to the incompatibilist argument. Let us then suppose, for a moment, that the response does not derive from a mere misunderstanding, and see whether we can discern in it some compelling basis for objection.

Two things about the popular response merit our attention: one concerning what the response says and the other what it does not say. Consider first the response’s assertion that foreknowledge does not cause me to act as I do. Why is this supposed to qualify as a reason for rejecting the incompatibilist conclusion? The implicit suggestion seems to be this: if my action were causally determined by a prior state of affairs, that would show that it is not in my power to

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3 ibid., p. 99. In fact this reply goes back at least as far as Boethius: “What I am trying to show is that, whatever the order of the causes, the coming to pass of things foreknown is necessary even if the foreknowledge of future events does not seem to impose the necessity on them.” And again: “Even if it is not the same as predestination of the future, foreknowledge is a sign that the future will inevitably happen.” (The Consolation of Philosophy, tr. V. Watts (London: Penguin, 1999), Bk V, iii, p. 120, and iv, p. 124.) This retort to the popular response serves Boethius as a way to clarify the point of the incompatibilist argument; in the end he rejects the claim that God’s knowledge of future events shows them to be inevitable.
refrain, and hence that the action is unavoidable in the desired sense; but if there is no evidence that my action is thus causally constrained, there is no reason to conclude that I lack the power to refrain. This claim surely has strong intuitive appeal, and we have good reason to regard the intuition it expresses as one that underlies the popular response. For then we can see why the assertion that foreknowledge does not cause my action is supposed to be relevant to the argument for incompatibilism: the implication is that since divine foreknowledge does not reveal my action to be causally necessitated, it does not show my action to be anything but free. Showing that would require a premise having some bearing on the causes of my action—such as the supposition that my action is causally determined by God’s foreknowledge.

The incompatibilist might object that even if divine foreknowledge does not cause my action, my action might yet be causally determined—by some other cause. Is it not then a shortcoming of the popular response, as I have interpreted it so far, that it proceeds as if foreknowledge were the only possible candidate for a determining cause of my action? I contend that this objection misrepresents the dialectical situation. The aim of the response is not to establish conclusively that my action is not causally determined; the point is rather that the incompatibilist argument provides no reason to think that my action is causally determined. The response singles out foreknowledge, pointing out that foreknowledge in particular does not cause my action, only because the argument for theological incompatibilism mentions no other possible candidate. But the true point of the popular response is more general: God’s foreknowledge does not make me act as I do—and it may be that nothing else does either, for all that the incompatibilist argument tells us.

This is not to say that no possible argument could show that every foreknown action must be causally determined. One could argue, for example, that God can have present knowledge of a
future event only by knowing some present cause from which the event will result as a matter of 
causal necessity. It follows from this substantive assumption about how God has cognitive 
access to the future that only causally determined future events can be foreknown. But the simple 
argument for theological incompatibilism being considered here does not include any such 
assumptions. Indeed, it is supposed to be one of the argument’s virtues that it does not depend on 
any particular theory of foreknowledge but requires only the bare supposition that God has 
infallible foreknowledge.

The second noteworthy point about the popular response is what it does not say: the 
response does not deny or call into question the assumption that is central to the argument for 
incompatibilism, namely that it is logically impossible that an event be foreknown by God and 
yet not take place. It may be tempting to suppose that the response simply overlooks this 
assumption. But if we suppose instead that the response grants this assumption, this proves 
illuminating, for we can then see exactly where the popular response parts ways with 
incompatibilism. Since the response rejects the incompatibilist conclusion, if it accepts the 
necessary connection between my actions and God’s foreknowledge, then it is committed to

4 Jonathan Edwards seems to hold a view like this. He asserts that “‘tis impossible for a thing to be certainly known to any intellect without evidence” (Jonathan Edwards, Freedom of the Will, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press: 1957), p. 258). In particular, certain knowledge of a future event requires present evidence in light of which that event is certain to occur. And so the only way for God to have certain knowledge of a future event—supposing that, as Edwards puts it, its future existence is not self-evident—is for that future event to be necessarily connected to something that already exists. It seems plausible to read him as saying that if the future occurrence of some event is not knowable in itself a matter of logical necessity, then God can have present knowledge of that future event only insofar as its occurrence is causally necessitated by presently existing conditions. (See Freedom of the Will, section 12, observation II, for Edwards’ discussion of the point.)

5 Nelson Pike, a staunch proponent of theological incompatibilism, explicitly makes this point. He says that the foreknowledge problem “is generated by a single claim, viz, that God holds infallible beliefs about future human actions. How God comes to hold such beliefs would thus appear to be irrelevant.” (Nelson Pike, “A Latter-Day Look at the Foreknowledge Problem,” Philosophy of Religion 33 (1993), p. 153.)
denying that this necessary connection rules out the freedom of my actions. Granting that I will do what God foreknows that I will do, in other words, the response implicitly denies that this shows my action to be anything but free.

That denial makes perfect sense in light of the intuition, already identified as underlying the popular response, that unless the incompatibilist can show my future action to be causally determined, there is no reason to think that I lack the power to refrain. We need only add the obvious truth that even if it is logically necessary that I will act in accord with divine foreknowledge, it does not follow that my action is causally determined. These two points together imply that even if it is logically necessary that I will act in accord with divine foreknowledge—which guarantees that I will not refrain from the action God foreknows—there is no reason to think that I lack the power to refrain, and hence no reason to think that my action is less than free.

We can thus discern within the popular response a pair of related ideas that together constitute a reasonable objection to the argument for theological incompatibilism, an objection I will henceforth call “the popular solution.” It can be summed up this way: If an action of mine is causally determined by some prior circumstance that is outside of my control, this implies that I cannot do otherwise. By contrast, the logical necessity that I will act in accord with divine foreknowledge has no such implication. Precisely because the bare foreknowledge that I will perform some action implies nothing about the causes or prior conditions of the action, it implies nothing at all about whether I have the power to refrain—only that I will not, in fact, refrain.

I do not claim that everyone who voices what I have called the popular response has explicitly in mind the fully developed solution I have presented here, but I do think it is entirely reasonable to see this solution as the worked-out articulation of intuitions that underlie the
popular response. Thinking of the response in this way helps to make sense of its perennial popularity by revealing that it is not irrelevant to the incompatibilist argument. The assertion that divine foreknowledge does not cause me to act as I do implies that the central assumption of the incompatibilist argument falls short of what is needed to establish its intended conclusion, by means of a contrast with something that would suffice to establish that conclusion.

Thus the popular response to the argument for theological incompatibilism should not be dismissed as misplaced. Rather, this response represents an intelligent and forceful objection. It sheds light on the debate by directing our attention to the distinction between showing that I cannot and showing merely that I will not do anything other than what God already foreknows I will do. This distinction serves to clarify just what the burden of the incompatibilist argument is: namely, establishing that I cannot do otherwise, in the sense that I lack the power to do otherwise. The response implies that this burden cannot be met solely by appealing to the logical relationship between infallible divine foreknowledge and my actions. For although that relationship underwrites the conclusion that I will do what God foreknows and will not do otherwise, it does not entail that I lack the power to do otherwise, as incompatibilism requires.

2. A sophisticated argument for incompatibilism

According to theological incompatibilists, what I am calling the popular solution to the argument for theological incompatibilism is mistaken on the essential point. For they contend that it does follow from the necessity of agreement between divine foreknowledge and human actions that I lack the power to do anything other than what God already foreknows that I will do. Here I will consider an attempt by William Hasker to demonstrate that foreknowledge does in fact rule out an agent’s having the power to do otherwise in the sense of “power to do
otherwise” required for libertarian freedom. My goal is to identify a component of Hasker’s argument that is called into question by the popular solution.

To begin, let me state two of Hasker’s key background assumptions and explain briefly why they make divine foreknowledge seem like a serious threat to human freedom. First, there is the assumption of divine infallibility, which Hasker frames as follows: it is necessary, in the broadly logical sense, that God holds only true beliefs. Stating this assumption in terms of belief, as Hasker does, rather than in terms of knowledge, helps us to see why divine foreknowledge is supposed to be a threat to freedom even though ordinary human foreknowledge is not: if you foreknow, for example, that I will show up for work tomorrow, what you really have is a belief about my future actions. If I act as you expect, your belief will turn out to be true. But if I do otherwise, then you will turn out to have been mistaken. By contrast, it is impossible that God should hold a false belief. Therefore it is not in my power to act in such a way that God would turn out to have been wrong.

Hasker’s second key assumption is that God’s past beliefs are genuinely part of the past history of the world. If God believed 1000 years ago that I will perform a specific action $A$ at a

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6 Hasker’s argument is concerned with the view that God has temporal foreknowledge, as opposed to the timelessly eternal knowledge advocated by the likes of Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas. Although I think the conception of God as timelessly eternal has much to recommend it over a conception of God as temporal, an appeal to divine timelessness does not by itself provide a satisfactory response to Hasker’s argument, for two reasons. First, what is timelessly eternal would seem to be just as fixed and settled as what is past; certainly it is no more capable of change. Thus to suppose that God has eternal rather than past knowledge of events that are (from our perspective) still in the future would seem to leave untouched what Hasker insists upon, namely the settled and unalterable nature of God’s knowledge of those events.

A second and more basic reason for dissatisfaction with the appeal to divine timelessness as a response to theological incompatibilism is this: the claim that an appeal to timelessness constitutes the decisive response seems to concede that divine foreknowledge alone would be incompatible with human freedom, if it were temporal foreknowledge. If we wish to preserve the fundamental intuition that foreknowledge does not have the right kind of connection to my actions to show that they are unfree, we should not make that concession.
given time tomorrow, then it is now a settled and unalterable fact about the past that God believed this. Note that this makes the argument based on divine foreknowledge more threatening than the argument based on past truth, i.e., the argument for logical fatalism.

Suppose it was true 1000 years ago that I will do A tomorrow: arguably this is really only a fact about tomorrow, masquerading as a fact about the past. There is little reason to think that its being true 1000 years ago that I will do A tomorrow reflects a fact about the already-written past history of the world, and hence little reason to think of it as already settled. By contrast, if God believed 1000 years ago that I will do A tomorrow, this fact about God’s past cognitive state would seem to belong to the settled past history of the world, just as facts about the past beliefs of human beings surely do.

The upshot of these two key assumptions is this: if God believed long ago that I will do A tomorrow, then there is an already-settled and unalterable fact about the past—what Hasker terms a “circumstance” for short—which entails that I will do A tomorrow. And so there seems to be no way I could do otherwise; for it is impossible that this world, with its actual past, should turn out to be a world in which I do not do A tomorrow. We may of course consider a counterfactual scenario, in which I perform some other action, incompatible with A, at the time in question. Hasker grants that in such a scenario, the past would have been different, in that God would have believed all along that I would do something else. But it is now too late for that. In light of the actual circumstances—that is, given what God actually believed long ago—such alternate

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7 To use terminology common in the literature, it is a hard fact about the past that God held a particular belief at some time in the past. For a discussion of the distinction between “hard” and “soft” facts, see William Hasker, God, Time, and Knowledge (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chapter 5.
scenarios are out of the question; to use a locution of Hasker’s, “it is in no way possible that I
will in fact perform such an action.”

From here it is only a short distance to Hasker’s intended conclusions: that I lack the
power to do anything other than what God believes I will do, and that my actions are hence not
free. Hasker provides precise specifications of the two key notions freedom and power, and
these, in combination with the assumptions already discussed, suffice to establish his desired
conclusions. He provides a formal definition of free will:

(FW) $N$ is free at $T$ with respect to performing $A$ =df It is in $N$’s power at $T$ to
perform $A$, and it is in $N$’s power at $T$ to refrain from performing $A$.  

And he clarifies just what sense of power is at issue in (FW):

It should be noted that the power in question is the power to perform a particular
act under given circumstances, and not a generalized power to perform acts of a
certain kind. (Thus, if Thomas has the skill to perform on the parallel bars, but at
$T_1$ his arms are tied behind his back, we shall say that he lacks the power at $T_1$ to
perform on the parallel bars.) In general, if it is in $N$’s power at $T$ to perform $A$,
then there is nothing in the circumstances that obtain at $T$ which prevents or
precludes $N$’s performing $A$ at $T$. Here “prevent” applies especially to
circumstances that are causally incompatible with $N$’s performing $A$ at $T$, and
“preclude” to circumstances that are logically incompatible with $N$’s doing so.

The condition on power stated in this passage I will call “CP”:

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8 God, Time, and Knowledge, p. 134. Hasker uses this locution in connection with a scenario that does not involve
foreknowledge, but his point is that the same thing can be said in connection with a scenario involving
foreknowledge, like the one described in this paragraph.

9 God, Time, and Knowledge, p. 66; restated on p. 136.

10 God, Time, and Knowledge, pp. 66-67; restated on p. 134
(CP) If it is in \(N\)'s power at \(T\) to perform \(A\), then there is nothing in the circumstances that obtain at \(T\) which prevents or precludes \(N\)'s performing \(A\) at \(T\).\(^{11}\)

Hasker intends (FW) and (CP) together to capture a robust libertarian conception of freedom.

Clearly, divine foreknowledge does rule out both the power to do otherwise and freedom, if we define our terms in accord with (FW) and (CP). If God believed in the past that I will do \(A\) tomorrow, this fact qualifies as a circumstance that already obtains. Given divine infallibility, this circumstance is logically incompatible with my refraining from \(A\), so it precludes my refraining. By (CP), then, it is not in my power to refrain, and so, by (FW), I am not free with respect to performing \(A\).\(^{12}\)

(CP) is the element of Hasker’s argument that I want to scrutinize. This condition plays a vital role in Hasker’s argument; it provides the link between the logical necessity that any action foreknown by God will be performed, on the one hand, and Hasker’s conclusions about human power and freedom, on the other. My reason for focusing on this particular premise is that Hasker’s condition on power (CP) is called into question by the popular solution to theological incompatibilism. According to the popular solution, there is a crucial difference between

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\(^{11}\) Hasker has recently issued a minor correction to this characterization of power: he now says that the last two words, “at \(T\),” should be deleted (William Hasker, “Theological Incompatibilism and the Necessity of the Present: A Response to Michael Rota,” Faith and Philosophy 28.2 (April 2011), p. 225). This correction was prompted by Michael Rota’s discovery that the original characterization of power quoted here, when combined with Hasker’s definitions of free will and hard fact, would imply that no agent is ever free with respect to any action (Michael Rota, “A Problem for Hasker: Freedom with Respect to the Present, Hard Facts, and Theological Incompatibilism,” Faith and Philosophy 27.3 (July 2010), pp. 287–305). I believe this correction makes no difference to my argument.

\(^{12}\) This is the simplest version of the argument for theological incompatibilism that I can extract from the pages of God, Time, and Knowledge. Hasker himself never presents the argument in exactly this way, but he does present a nearly identical formulation in the paragraph spanning pp. 130-131. The only difference is that Hasker there omits the intermediate conclusion that I have stated as “it is not in my power to refrain.” In effect, he merely combines the two steps I justify by appeal to (CP) and (FW) into a single inference.
establishing that I cannot refrain from doing $A$ and establishing merely that I will not refrain, and
the logical connection between God’s foreknowledge any my actions supports only the weaker
conclusion that I will not refrain. To put the point in terms of “preclusion” and “prevention”: If
circumstances (logically) preclude my refraining, we can conclude, with certainty, that I will not
refrain. But in order to draw the stronger conclusion that it is not in my power to refrain, we
would need some information that bears on my abilities—such as information that some
circumstance (causally) prevents me from refraining. In short, the popular solution contends that
circumstances which prevent me from performing an action are clearly incompatible with my
having the power to perform the action, but not so for circumstances which merely preclude my
performing it. This of course directly contradicts (CP), which says that circumstances which
preclude my performing an action are incompatible with my having the power to perform it, just
as preventing circumstances are.

My point, then, is that the popular solution provides a prima facie case—one that is, I
think, supported by widely-held intuitions—for rejecting (CP). More precisely, it provides a case
for rejecting half of this two-part condition, the half which says that power to perform an action
is incompatible with circumstances that preclude the performance of that action. It is just this
half of (CP) that is essential to Hasker’s argument for theological incompatibilism, since it
provides the sole link relating God’s past belief about my future action, considered as a
circumstance that precludes my doing otherwise, and the intended incompatibilist conclusion that
I lack the power to do otherwise. Thus the viability of Hasker’s argument depends on the case
that can be made for the contested portion of (CP).
3. Hasker’s argument for (CP)

3.1. Preliminaries: power to bring about the past

In the course of considering various responses to the argument for theological incompatibilism in God, Time, and Knowledge, Hasker considers the rejection of (CP) as part of a compatibilist response; he then argues that this rejection has an implication that the theological compatibilist cannot tolerate: to deny (CP) is, in effect, to abandon a libertarian conception of free will. But his discussion of (CP) comes up in a roundabout way. The compatibilist responses that Hasker considers do not explicitly and directly reject (CP); instead, Hasker concludes only after lengthy examination that a response due to George Mavrodes—one of the two compatibilist responses to which Hasker devotes the most attention—is committed to a rejection of (CP). Because of this, Hasker does not discuss the rejection of (CP) as a stand-alone compatibilist response. He treats this rejection only as implicit in Mavrodes’s response. It will be helpful therefore to explain the context that prompts Hasker’s discussion of (CP) before delving into the details of his defense of that principle. (Readers who wish to skip directly to the argument regarding the viability of rejecting (CP) may pass over the remainder of this section.)

Much of Hasker’s own presentation of the case for theological incompatibilism centers on questions about “power to bring about the past.” I think it is fair to summarize his approach to this issue of power over the past by saying that he argues for two principles:

(i) Anyone who has the power to refrain from a particular action foreknown by God must have the power to bring about a past state of affairs that did not in fact obtain—

13 The relevant section of the book is the latter portion of chapter 7, pp. 134-143.
specifically, to “bring about that God, in the past, held some belief different from the one he actually did hold.”

(ii) No one could have the power to bring about a past state of affairs that did not in fact obtain.

From these principles it immediately follows that no one could have the power to refrain from a particular action that is foreknown by God, and Hasker’s intended conclusion is established.

The two compatibilist responses that Hasker regards as most formidable are due to Alvin Plantinga and George Mavrodes, each of whom directly challenges one of these principles.

Plantinga’s response amounts to a rejection of (i): on his view (i) should be replaced by

(i’) Anyone who has the power to refrain from a particular action foreknown by God has the power to do something such that if she were to do it then the past would have been different, in that God would have held a belief different from the one God actually did hold.

Plantinga’s point is that a course of action of which the italicized counterfactual is true—a course of action such that if it were to be performed, the past would have been different in some way—should not be assumed to be a course of action that would cause the past to have been different.

The expression “bring about” employed in (i) has, Plantinga thinks, “strong causal associations,” so that (i) is naturally read as asserting that it is in my power to refrain from a foreknown action only if it is (now) in my power to cause the past to have been different. But all

14 The quotation is from God, Time, And Knowledge, p. 119. Hasker argues for this principle at the end of chapter 6 (pp. 108-115), by stating a number of “power entailment principles” that he contends are “unassailable” (p. 114) and that entail (i).
17 Plantinga, personal communication to Hasker, quoted in God, Time, And Knowledge, p. 101.
that is really implied by my having the power to refrain from a foreknown action, according to Plantinga, is that I have a power of the unproblematic sort described in (i’).

Mavrodes, on the other hand, grants (i), even allowing that “bring about” has the strong causal associations that concern Plantinga. But he argues that (ii) is false—or rather, he argues that there is no compelling basis for accepting it. He examines some considerations that might be held up as grounds for (ii), and argues that none of them justify accepting it. For example: it is often said that the past is unalterable, and this may seem to support the idea that no one could have the power to bring about a past state of affairs that did not in fact obtain, as (ii) asserts. But Mavrodes argues that the unalterability of the past is actually irrelevant to the question whether this sort of power is possible; for such power is not the power to effect a change in the past. If I were to exert such power by refraining from a foreknown action $A$, the past would always have been just one way: in that scenario, as a result of my refraining from $A$ at the relevant moment, God would always have believed that I was going to refrain then. This is a counterfactual scenario, since by hypothesis God in fact believes that I will do $A$, but it involves no transition, no change, from one version of the past (in which God believes that I will do $A$) to another (in which God believes that I will refrain). Thus this is not, as Mavrodes puts it, “a case of changing the past, but rather one of determining or affecting the past. And that is a different matter.”18

So the pertinent question is: could someone (now) have the power to determine or affect (or bring about, prevent, etc.) the past? Such power is of course possible only if backwards causation is possible; but Mavrodes says it is hard to see what reason we could have for denying the very possibility of backwards causation. Even if experience shows that ordinary

18 “Is the Past Unpreventable?” p. 137.
spatiotemporal events are invariably caused by earlier events, it would be rash to regard this as compelling evidence that God’s past beliefs about the future, which are certainly not ordinary spatiotemporal events, can be caused only by earlier events. Hasker is willing to concede the point: despite what he regards as serious conceptual difficulties facing the thesis that backwards causation is possible, Hasker says that “for present purposes, this possibility will be conceded… we shall assume that power to bring about past events that have in fact already occurred is philosophically unproblematic.”

But power to bring about what has already taken place is one thing; Mavrodes is defending (and Hasker’s principle (i) requires) the possibility of something more: power to bring about a past state of affairs that did not in fact obtain. Hasker regards this notion as genuinely paradoxical. Mavrodes, contending that the air of paradox about it is apt to dissipate upon examination, presses his question: can any reasons be given for asserting that no one could have such a power? One likely thought is this: no one has ever done such a thing, i.e. no one has ever brought about a prior state of affairs that did not already actually obtain. Surely that provides compelling evidence that no one has the power to do such a thing? We might think so, Mavrodes says—until we note that a parallel point holds regarding the future: no one has ever brought about a future state of affairs that did not later actually obtain, either. Surely this reflects only the truism that if a possible state of affairs did not obtain, then no one did in fact perform an action in advance sufficient to bring it about. But that no one did bring it about does not show that no one had the power to bring it about. In the same way, if a particular state of affairs did not obtain

19 “Is the Past Unpreventable?” pp. 142-143.
20 God, Time, And Knowledge, p. 129.
at a given time, if follows that no one \textit{in fact} brought it about by their subsequent actions. It does not follow that no one had the \textit{power} to bring it about by their subsequent actions.\footnote{“Is the Past Unpreventable?” p. 141.}

Mavrodes concludes that there are no compelling reasons for denying the possibility of power of this sort; that is to say, there are no compelling reasons for accepting principle (ii). Hasker is forced to concede that Mavrodes’ position is consistent: the assertion that we can have the power to bring about past states of affairs that did not actually occur is strikingly counterintuitive, but there is nothing contradictory about it. So Hasker takes a different tack to reply to Mavrodes. He asks: what notion of \textit{power} is implied by Mavrodes’ compatibilist response?

\textbf{3.2. (CP) as required for libertarian freedom}

Hasker begins by pointing out that a compatibilist such as Mavrodes, who asserts that I may have the power to refrain from performing a particular action in spite of God’s having always believed that I will perform it, must be using a notion of power different from the one Hasker has characterized in terms of (CP):

\begin{equation*}
\text{(CP) } \text{If it is in } N\text{’s power at } T \text{ to perform } A, \text{ then there is nothing in the circumstances that obtain at } T \text{ which prevents or precludes } N\text{’s performing } A \text{ at } T.
\end{equation*}

For given the precluding circumstance of God’s belief, I do \textit{not} have the power to refrain if “power” is understood in accord with (CP). How then shall we understand Mavrodes’s assertions about power? Hasker offers the following answer:
There is a way of speaking about powers according to which a person’s powers are thought of not primarily as powers to perform a specific action on a specific occasion, but rather as general abilities that one has and that remain more or less constant although the possibilities of their exercise come and go… These powers—and this is the important point—are not powers that one cannot have, on a given occasion, if there are precluding circumstances present. I may perfectly well have a power of this sort to do something even though it is either logically or causally impossible that I exercise the power under the circumstances that obtain at a particular time…

Now if we interpret “power” in this way, Mavrodes’s claims about what is in our power immediately become clear and make perfectly good sense. (I am inclined to think that this is the only way in which they make sense, but it is rash to rule out the possibility that someone might give yet another interpretation.)

Elsewhere, Hasker draws the same conclusion about Plantinga’s use of “power”:

What I have been saying about Mavrodes in this connection will apply to other compatibilists as well. Take Plantinga, for instance… does he really think it possible that the actual world, the world which in fact contains God’s belief that Jones would do X at T₂, should also contain Jones’ refraining from doing X? Assuredly not, for this would mean that a belief of God’s would be false… But how then can Jones have the power to refrain [as Plantinga maintains]? The answer is that Plantinga, like Mavrodes, is using ‘power’ in a general sense here.

Hasker immediately adds: “And what is true of Mavrodes and Plantinga will, I believe, turn out to be true of other compatibilists as well.”

Hasker’s position, then, is this: theological compatibilists cannot consistently affirm that I have the power to refrain from performing a specific action on the very occasion when God has always believed I will perform it. It is, after all, impossible that I will in fact refrain on that occasion. The compatibilist can consistently attribute to me at most a general ability to refrain from actions of that sort—that is the conception of power that is implied by rejecting (CP).

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Hasker goes on to argue that this generates a serious problem for the compatibilist: since power to refrain on the specific occasion in question is precisely what libertarian free will requires, the compatibilist’s “power to refrain” is insufficient for libertarian freedom. Recall Hasker’s definition of free will:

\[(FW)\text{ } N \text{ is free at } T \text{ with regard to performing } A =_{df} \text{ It is in } N \text{’s power at } T \text{ to perform } A, \text{ and it is in } N \text{’s power at } T \text{ to refrain from performing } A.\]

In order for this definition to capture what libertarians contend is required for free will, “power to perform” and “power to refrain” must both be understood in the sense of power to do so on the very occasion in question. Power in the sense of “general ability” is not sufficient, Hasker says:

The conception of power we have attributed to Mavrodes, as “general abilities which one has and which remain more or less constant although the possibilities of their exercise come and go,” fails to yield a libertarian conception of free will when combined with (FW)…

This is not to say that the conception of power under consideration fails, when combined with (FW), to yield any conception of free will at all. On the contrary: This combination, when suitably supplemented, is entirely capable of yielding a soft determinist conception of free will—a “Compatibilist” conception in the usual sense of that term, when it has not (as in this book) been preempted for a narrower use…

But of course, this is not at all what the compatibilist wants! Compatibilists claim, and intend, to uphold a libertarian conception of free will and to show that that conception is compatible with divine foreknowledge.\(^{24}\)

Hasker concludes:

The situation for [theological] compatibilism has now become extremely grave, as indicated by the following thesis: *The compatibilist on foreknowledge cannot*
consistently affirm libertarian free will. If this is true, then incompatibilism is triumphant.²⁵

To sum up: Hasker’s stated case against compatibilism hinges on his distinction between two senses of “power”—on the one hand, “powers to perform a specific action on a specific occasion,” and on the other hand, “general abilities that one has and that remain more or less constant although the possibilities of their exercise come and go.” Concerning these two senses of power, Hasker affirms both of the following points:

- On a libertarian view of freedom, I am free to perform a given action on a given occasion only if I have the power to refrain in the “specific occasion” sense—that is, only if have the power to refrain from performing that specific action on that specific occasion. It is not enough that I have the “general ability” to refrain from actions of that sort.

- When a compatibilist affirms that I have the power to refrain from a given foreknown action, we must understand this only in the “general ability” sense of “power,” not in the “specific occasion” sense. For it cannot be consistently maintained that I have the power to refrain from performing a specific action on that very occasion when God has always believed I will perform it.

Hasker concludes that the compatibilist cannot consistently affirm libertarian free will with respect to foreknown actions.

3.3. Power and possibility: a critical examination of Hasker’s argument

The element of Hasker’s reasoning that deserves further scrutiny is the second of the two points listed above, and in particular the italicized assertion within it. Just what is supposed to be

²⁵ God, Time, and Knowledge, p. 139.
inconsistent about attributing to an agent the power to refrain from a foreknown action in the “specific occasion” sense of power? Hasker clearly supposes that (CP) holds for the “specific occasion” sense of power—that is to say, he supposes that I do not have the power to refrain, in this sense, if anything in the circumstances precludes or prevents my refraining on the occasion in question. If this supposition is granted, then we have our answer: God’s past belief constitutes a circumstance that precludes my refraining on the given occasion, and this is inconsistent with my having the power to refrain in the relevant sense. But our present question is really asking for justification of the supposition just mentioned. The question can be restated as follows: What reason is there for thinking that (CP)’s requirement of “no precluding circumstances” holds for the “specific occasion” sense of power? Why should we think, in other words, that, if an existing circumstance precludes an agent’s refraining from a given action on a particular occasion, then the agent lacks the power to refrain from that specific action on that specific occasion? The intuition behind the popular solution is that circumstances that logically preclude my refraining show that I will not refrain but have no bearing on whether I have the power to refrain. As the compatibilist does intend to uphold an agent’s power to refrain from a foreknown action in the “specific occasion” sense of power, surely we should demand some justification for Hasker’s thesis that precluding circumstances do rule out one’s power to refrain in this sense.

Hasker does not spell out his reasoning in detail, but I think we can glean from his remarks a line of reasoning that links the notion of power to refrain, in the “specific occasion” sense, with the idea of its being possible that I should actually refrain on a given occasion. Hasker repeatedly emphasizes that if an existing circumstance precludes an agent’s performing some action on a specific occasion then it is not possible that the agent will in fact perform it on
His characterization of the “general ability” notion of power also refers to possibility: powers in this sense “remain more or less constant although the possibilities of their exercise come and go.” This is obviously intended as a contrast with powers in the “specific occasion” sense; the implication seems to be that powers in the specific sense do not exist when the possibilities of their exercise are absent. We might understand this more precisely as follows: we may attribute to an agent the power to perform (refrain from) a specific action on a specific occasion only if it is possible that the agent will perform (refrain from) that action on that occasion.

If I understand Hasker correctly, then, he accepts both of the following assertions: First, if an existing circumstance precludes my performing (refraining from) A at T, then it is not possible that I will perform (refrain from) A at T. And second, if it is not possible that I will perform (refrain from) A at T, then I do not have the power to perform (refrain from) A at T (i.e., I do not have the power to perform (refrain from) that specific action on that specific occasion.)

Putting these ideas together, we can construct what looks like a straightforward argument for Hasker’s thesis that if an existing circumstance precludes an agent’s refraining from some action on some occasion, then the agent lacks the power to refrain from that specific action on that occasion.

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26 For instance, this comes out clearly in his remarks about an example (God, Time, and Knowledge, pp. 130-131):

Why is it that Clarence apparently lacks freedom with respect to eating the omelet? The answer is that there is a circumstance that obtains (namely, God’s always having believed that Clarence would eat the omelet) which logically precludes Clarence’s refraining from omelet eating, and since it is not possible for Clarence to refrain from eating the omelet, it is also not possible for him to be free with respect to eating it.

From the assertion that an existing circumstance logically precludes Clarence’s refraining, Hasker infers that “it is not possible for Clarence to refrain.”
specific occasion. Framed in terms of my power to refrain from performing a given action \( A \), the argument looks like this:

1. If circumstances preclude my refraining from \( A \) at \( T \), then it is impossible that I will refrain from \( A \) at \( T \).
2. If it is impossible that I will refrain from \( A \) at \( T \), then it is not in my power to refrain from \( A \) at \( T \).
3. If circumstances preclude my refraining from \( A \) at \( T \), then it is not in my power to refrain from \( A \) at \( T \).

Now at first glance this argument seems cogent enough: it is impossible that I should in fact do what is logically incompatible with existing circumstances, is it not? And surely I do not have the power to do the impossible! However, we must tread cautiously. Premise 1 says that if an existing circumstance logically precludes my refraining, then it is impossible that I will refrain. But what sort of impossibility is intended here? Clearly, it is not causal impossibility that is intended; no causal considerations have been raised. But if it is logical impossibility that is intended, premise 1 represents a modal fallacy. If circumstances preclude my refraining from \( A \) at \( T \), then what is logically impossible is the conjunction of an existing circumstance (e.g., God’s always having believed that I would do \( A \) at \( T \)) and my refraining from \( A \) at \( T \). It does not follow that it is logically impossible that I will refrain (from which we could conclude that I am unable to refrain and hence not free), but only that I will not refrain. In short, what is logically incompatible with an existing circumstance is not therefore logically impossible in its own right.

Premise 1 is intended to capture a thought that Hasker expresses when he refers to actions precluded by the circumstances as “impossible.” Therefore we should understand it in a way that does justice to what Hasker means by this. Clearly he means that actions precluded by circumstances are “impossible” only in a qualified sense; such actions are not logically impossible in their own right, but only, as Hasker sometimes puts it, “logically impossible …
That locution is natural enough in this context; and it picks out a perfectly intelligible sense in which a precluded action is sure not to happen. But here is the essential point: it does not pick out a species of impossibility that helps to make Hasker’s case.

Consider the argument with the intended qualified notion of impossibility spelled out:

1'. If circumstances preclude my refraining from \(A\) at \(T\), then it is logically impossible under the circumstances that I will refrain from \(A\) at \(T\).
2'. If it is logically impossible under the circumstances that I will refrain from \(A\) at \(T\), then it is not in my power to refrain from \(A\) at \(T\).
3'. If circumstances preclude my refraining from \(A\) at \(T\), then it is not in my power to refrain from \(A\) at \(T\).

An action that is precluded by circumstances is legitimately described as “logically impossible under the circumstances,” as premise 1’ asserts, only in the sense that it is not logically compossible with the circumstances; so let us take that as what the phrase means. In effect, then it merely provides us with another way of saying “precluded by the circumstances.” The good news is that premise 1’ is then trivially true. What about premise 2’? On this reading, it says that if my refraining from \(A\) at \(T\) is logically incompatible with the circumstances, then it is not in my power to refrain from \(A\) at \(T\). But then this premise merely asserts exactly what is in question, and what Hasker needs an argument for. We were seeking some justification for Hasker’s thesis that precluding circumstances rule out power in the “specific occasion” sense; but on this reading, premise 2’ in effect asserts that very thesis, without justification. (Another way to put the same point: on the present reading, premise 2’ says the same thing as the conclusion 3’: both say that if my refraining from \(A\) at \(T\) is logically incompatible with existing circumstances, then I do not have the power to refrain from \(A\) at \(T\).) Clearly then the revised argument can be of no use in countering the intuition underlying the popular response: if my refraining is precluded by

\[27\] *God, Time, and Knowledge*, p. 141; italics in original.
existing circumstances then it follows necessarily that I will not refrain, but it does not follow that I lack the power to refrain; that would require information bearing on my abilities.

I conclude that the initial plausibility of this line of reasoning depends on an equivocation on the notion of impossibility. It is impossible for me to refrain from doing A tomorrow, given that God believed long ago that I would do A, only in the sense that my refraining is logically incompatible with an existing circumstance. That is, premise 1 of the argument as originally formulated (p. 24) is true only if we read “impossible” as expressing the joint impossibility—the non-compossibility—of my refraining with an existing circumstance. But, according to the intuition behind the popular solution, that sense of impossibility does not imply that I lack the power to refrain, only that I will not in fact refrain; so premise 2, which says that impossibility implies lack of power, is false. In order for premise 2 to be true, “impossibility” must be read in a strict sense: if my refraining were itself impossible, either logically or causally, that would imply that I lack the power to refrain in the sense required for libertarian freedom. However, given this strict reading of “impossible”, the first premise is false: if my refraining is logically precluded by an existing circumstance, this does not imply that my refraining is itself either logically or causally impossible. In short, then, the response to this line of reasoning is that there is no single sense of impossibility that will serve to bridge the divide between showing that my refraining is logically precluded by an existing circumstance—which entails that I will not refrain—and showing that I lack the power to refrain. (Notice that this amounts to yet another statement of the insights underlying the popular solution.)

Now to be sure, the argument I have just criticized is not one Hasker himself explicitly puts forward. I may be mistaken in supposing that his remarks about precluding circumstances, possibility, and power suggest something resembling this line of thought. But he does not to my
knowledge provide any other justification for the thesis I am calling into question: that *it cannot be consistently affirmed that an agent has the power, in the “specific occasion” sense of “power,” to refrain from performing a foreknown action.* And that thesis looks doubtful in light of the popular solution to the problem of freedom and foreknowledge. The popular solution contends that although God’s having believed that I will perform a specific action at a specific time and place does entail that I *will in fact* perform the action then and there—that I *will not* in fact refrain—that does not tend to show that I lack the *power to refrain, then and there, from that very action.* In other words, I may well have the power to refrain from that specific action on that specific occasion (i.e., power to refrain in Hasker’s “specific occasion” sense), notwithstanding that there is a circumstance which precludes my refraining.

We seem then to have a found a plausible reason for denying a thesis that plays a critical role in Hasker’s argument against theological compatibilism. It is on the grounds of this thesis, that the “specific occasion” sense of power is ruled out in the case of power to refrain from a foreknown action, that Hasker insists that the compatibilist can only uphold power to refrain in the “general ability” sense. And it is that claim in turn that Hasker presents—in *God, Time, and Knowledge*, at least—as the basis for his ultimate conclusion, that “the compatibilist on foreknowledge cannot consistently affirm libertarian free will.” Insofar as the popular solution provides a reasonable basis for denying the thesis in question, it provides a reasonable basis for resisting Hasker’s case for that conclusion.

4. Coda: Implications for freedom and determinism

Hasker does not quite rest content with his argument that the compatibilist can only affirm my power to refrain from a foreknown action in the “general ability” sense. He actually
has two other (brief) arguments that “the compatibilist on foreknowledge cannot consistently affirm libertarian free will”—one argument that is expressly stated in *God, Time, and Knowledge*, and one that is only hinted at there but articulated in later work. These arguments are extremely brief. Each of them bypasses entirely any discussion about what is or is not in an agent’s *power*, and appeals directly to a widely accepted principle or definition associated with the libertarian view of freedom: one argument appeals to the “principle of alternative possibilities” associated with libertarianism and the other to the accepted philosophical definition of *determinism*. The upshot of Hasker’s arguments is that the popular solution I have defended here cannot be reconciled with certain standard ways of spelling out what a libertarian view of freedom amounts to. I think he is right about this, but we draw different conclusions. I think the conflict between the intuitions underlying the popular solution and conceptions of libertarian freedom based on the principle of alternative possibilities or on the accepted definition of determinism suggests that we should regard that principle and that definition with suspicion. I close here with some brief remarks in to that effect, prompted by Hasker’s arguments.

### 4.1 The principle of alternative possibilities

Consider first “the principle of alternative possibilities.” Hasker says, “The problem of freedom and foreknowledge arises only if we presuppose a particular understanding of free will—roughly, a libertarian view incorporating the requirement of alternative possibilities.”

Given the use he makes of this requirement, it is evident what he takes it to mean: in order for me to be *free* with respect to a given action, it must be possible that I will perform it, and

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possible that I will not perform it—where possible here means that the relevant course of action is both logically and causally compatible with the circumstances. Clearly if we accept this requirement as an essential component of the libertarian position, then Hasker is right about the compatibilist position I have been arguing for. I have urged that I may qualify as free with respect to a foreknown action, on the grounds that I may have the power to refrain, even though my refraining is logically incompatible with the circumstance of God’s foreknowledge. But since my refraining is logically-impossible-under-the-circumstances (i.e. is incompatible with a circumstance), the principle of alternative possibilities, as Hasker understands it, is not satisfied.

Of course one might claim—as indeed I do claim!—that the principle of alternative possibilities as Hasker understands it is not a presupposition of the proper libertarian conception of freedom. Hasker suggests that this claim is implausible given how the debate over theological compatibilism has actually proceeded:

Essentially all of the effort expended by theological incompatibilists has been to show that comprehensive, infallible divine foreknowledge precludes there being alternative possibilities for our actions. And theological compatibilists have invested enormous energy in arguing that foreknowledge does not preclude alternative possibilities. If the principle of alternative possibilities can be simply abandoned, while retaining libertarian free will, then all of this effort was unnecessary… So we have to ask, was the problem really an illusion all along?29

That is hard to believe, Hasker suggests. Now he is rather overstating the case here: it is clear that much of the debate has concerned questions about power rather than about “possibilities” in Hasker’s sense: I take it that Hasker, Plantinga, and Mavrodes, for example, are all agreed that my refraining from a foreknown action is incompatible with existing circumstances and hence I

do not have “alternative possibilities” in Hasker’s sense. But to the extent that the debate has
supposed the question of “alternate possibilities” in Hasker’s sense to be decisive, I think it has
been misplaced.

Indeed, that is one lesson of the popular solution: the kind of “impossibility” at issue in
the foreknowledge debate—which is really, after all, a matter of logical incompatibility between
some course of action and the circumstance of divine foreknowledge—has no implications for
human freedom, because it has no implications for human power. For the libertarian—as for
everyone else, compatibilist and incompatibilist (in the usual sense) alike—free will is in the first
place a matter of what is in my power: is it in my power both to do A and to refrain? (Hasker’s
definition of free will (FW) captures this nicely.) Questions about possibility—are the
circumstances compatible with my doing A? with my refraining from A?—are relevant just insofar as they have implications for what is and is not in my power. And according to the
popular solution, whether my doing A is logically compatible with the circumstance of divine
foreknowledge has no bearing on whether I have power to do A.

It is perhaps worth noting that the principle that Harry Frankfurt first called the “principle
of alternate possibilities,” is not obviously concerned with “possibilities” in Hasker’s sense at
all. Frankfurt’s principle states that an agent is morally responsible for an action only if the agent
could have done otherwise. Variants on his principle state that an agent is free only if the agent
could have done otherwise. But the same question arises in both cases. What exactly does “could
have done otherwise” mean? Peter van Inwagen notes that the phrase is prone to
misinterpretation:

“Could have done otherwise” is ambiguous and (experience has shown) its
ambiguity has caused much confusion in discussions of free will. … “Could have
done” sometimes means “might have done” (and this “might” is itself ambiguous:
it has both an ontological and an epistemic sense) and sometimes “was able to
do.” This ambiguity in the phrase “could have done otherwise” has led a considerable body of philosophers to think that to say that someone could have done otherwise is to imply something having to do with “alternative possibilities,” … And, indeed, when it means “might have done otherwise” (in the ontological, as opposed to the epistemic, sense of “might have”), that is just what “could have done otherwise” does imply. But those who have defined free will in terms of the phrase “could have done otherwise” were using the phrase in its other sense: “was able to do otherwise.”

The real question about Hasker’s alternate possibilities is whether they are in fact required for an agent to be able to do otherwise—i.e., to have power to do otherwise (in the “specific occasion” sense). As I have argued, the popular solution gives us grounds for saying: they are not.

4.2 Determinism

Here I can do no better than to start with a lengthy quotation from Hasker. “It is abundantly clear,” he says, “that compatibilism is inconsistent with the idea of free will” as characterized terms of the conjunction of (FW) and (CP). Therefore the theological compatibilist cannot consistently maintain that we have free will with respect to foreknown actions in that sense. He continues:

The only recourse, then, for the compatibilist is to claim that this notion of free will is excessive—that this is not libertarian free will as generally and properly understood. Now, it would be a long day’s work to canvass all of the definitions of free will that have been given in the history of philosophy and decide on this basis what “real” libertarianism involves. As a first installment of this task (which, however, I shall leave it to others to complete), I cite three definitions from contemporary philosophers. The first two of the definitions are, respectively, of determinism and indeterminism; this exploits the familiar point that, whatever else a libertarian affirms, the conception of free will he offers is one that is inconsistent with determinism. According to Richard Taylor, “Determinism is the

general philosophical thesis which states that for everything that ever happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen.” And Brand Blanshard says, “By indeterminism I mean the view that there is some event $B$ that is not so connected with any previous event $A$ that, given $A$, $B$ must occur.” Finally, I cite Thomas P. Flint, who gives the following “libertarian analysis of freedom”: “An agent is truly free with respect to an action only if the situation in which he is placed is logically and causally compatible with both his performing and his not performing the action.” It is quite clear that, in the light of these definitions, the views of compatibilists such as Mavrodes qualify as a version of determinism rather than indeterminism.

My interest here is in the two definitions of determinism and indeterminism. Hasker’s point, I take it, is that both definitions seem to imply that if God has complete and infallible foreknowledge of all future events, then determinism is true. (Of course to get that conclusion we have to construe God’s beliefs as “events” or as things that “happen”; but no doubt the definitions could be amended to make that unnecessary.) It is then automatic that libertarianism (and more generally any position that entails the denial of determinism) is incompatible with the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. And so it follows that theological compatibilism—which upholds libertarianism and maintains that freedom is compatible with divine foreknowledge—is untenable. Case closed. (One wonders why, with so compact and conclusive an argument in hand, Hasker found it necessary to spend three full chapters of his book grappling with “power to bring about the past.” All of that laborious argumentation aimed at showing compatibilism to be untenable would seem to fall away as unnecessary in light of this very simple and conclusive argument from the definition of determinism.)

Should we find this argument compelling? Should we be willing to accept the idea that the doctrine of divine foreknowledge entails the truth of determinism? That seems a bit hard to swallow. Intuitively, the doctrines of divine foreknowledge and of determinism are quite different. Both involve the idea that only one possible course of future events is compatible with
the past. But why other events are ruled out is quite different in the two cases. According to the doctrine of divine foreknowledge, God’s past beliefs reflect everything that will ever happen in the future. Divine infallibility provides a guarantee that things will not turn out any other way, but—as the popular response points out—God’s knowledge does not make things happen as they do; future events are not effects of God’s knowledge. The idea of determinism however, does (intuitively) involve the idea that the future course of events is in some sense the effect of the past. The past does not merely reflect the fact that the future will in fact be a certain way; rather, the past is part of the casual chain that produces that future.

Now Hasker is, I think, correct, that this intuitive difference is not reflected in the typical definitions of determinism found in the literature today. Van Inwagen’s formal definition of determinism is, I believe, fairly standard:

If $p$ and $q$ are any propositions that express the state of the world at some instants, then the conjunction of $p$ with the laws of nature entails $q$.\(^{31}\)

Less formally and precisely: the state of the world at any past time and the laws of nature jointly entail the state of the world at any future time. In his Primer on Determinism, John Earman gives what is essentially the same definition.\(^{32}\) Now if we take God’s beliefs at some time to be part of “the state of the world” at that time, then it seems that these definitions confirm Hasker’s claim that the doctrine of foreknowledge implies determinism.

In any case, the similarity between determinism, as defined above in terms of a logical relationship between the past and the laws of nature on the one hand and the future on the other,

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\(^{31}\) To be precise, his definition is the conjunction of this thesis with a second: “For every instant of time, there is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at that instant.” Peter van Inwagen, An Essay on Free Will (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), p. 65.

and the doctrine of divine foreknowledge as understood in the freedom/foreknowledge debate does seem to suggest that strategies for reconciling freedom and foreknowledge might also serve to reconcile freedom and determinism (or vice versa). Consider the popular solution to theological incompatibilism: it contends that the purely logical relationship between the circumstance of divine foreknowledge and my performing some action has no implications for my power to perform the action, and hence no implications for freedom. *From the definition of determinism alone* it might seem that this strategy should work equally well to show that freedom is compatible with determinism. That strategy would have us say: The purely logical relationship between the past and the laws of nature on the one hand and my future action on the other does not tend to show that I lack the power to do otherwise. But I take it that the corresponding one-liner does not seem appropriate: “The past and the laws of nature don’t make me act as I do.” Surely the intuitive idea is that: if determinism is true, the past and the laws of nature *do* make me act as I do! The relationship is not merely one of logical entailment. Something is amiss here. I suggest it is a definition of determinism that does not include so much as a whiff of what is surely the core idea of what determinism amounts to, and the idea that underlies the common-sense view that free will and determinism are incompatible: the idea that the past state of the world is somehow efficacious in bringing about the present state of things. (We are apt to read this into the definition because of the connotations of “laws of nature.” But this is usually not part of the definition of laws either.) Surely that means something is missing?

In short, Hasker is correct that given certain standard philosophical definitions of determinism, the doctrine of divine foreknowledge entails determinism. We should not conclude, as Hasker suggests, that theological compatibilism is untenable. I think we should instead regard those definitions of determinism with suspicion.