

An Alternate Possibility for the Compatibility of Divine  
Foreknowledge and Free Will

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## An Alternate Possibility for the Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will

### Abstract

In this paper, I articulate a solution to the argument for theological fatalism which renders divine foreknowledge and free will compatible without rejecting, as David Hunt does, the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), which I take to be essential to our natural conception of freedom. There are three steps. (1) I explain and utilize Hunt's analysis of the foreknowledge problem. This solution is chiefly motivated by Harry Frankfurt's refutation of the PAP, a move which blocks the argument for theological fatalism. (2) I utilize an insight essential to Frankfurt's denial of the PAP as in his Jones and Black cases; namely, the intuition that whatever bears no *causal relation* to myself or my circumstances does not diminish my freedom. However, Kadri Vihvelin's critique of Frankfurt raises the following question: why should we believe that something that bears no causal relation to myself or my situation could deprive us of alternate possibilities? This raises a similar question concerning the foreknowledge problem: does foreknowledge really imply "cannot do otherwise?" I think not. (3) I advance a better solution to the foreknowledge problem which, while preserving the insight shared by Frankfurt, Hunt, and Vihvelin, also has the advantage of preserving the PAP now understood in terms of ability, in light of this same intuition. I apply this revised understanding of the PAP to the argument for theological fatalism and show that the argument consequently goes wrong earlier than Hunt thought, and the fatalistic conclusion thus fails to follow.

### Introduction

Arguments for the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will have focused primarily on arguments about God and time or the nature of future contingent truths; however, I contend that there is a worrisome ambiguity contained in the phrase "cannot do otherwise" (or "able to do otherwise"), which is essential to the argument for theological fatalism, and

that when this ambiguity is cleared up, we realize that the conclusion of the argument, i.e., that I am not free, fails to follow. To this end, I will draw from Kadri Vihvelin's critique of Harry Frankfurt. The motivations behind her critique reveal the ambiguity of the phrase "cannot do otherwise" (or "able to do otherwise") and, in tandem with a rather ingenious Augustinian solution to the foreknowledge problem offered by David Hunt, provide us with a way that we should interpret that phrase in relation to claims about free will. However, contrary to Hunt, I argue that we need not reject the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP) in order to provide a solution to the foreknowledge problem. I take it that we should only reject the PAP as a last resort, since it would require us to deny the maxim "ought implies can," which seems essential to our natural conception of moral responsibility and free will (Finch). I conclude that divine foreknowledge, in light of the insights gleaned from Vihvelin's critique and Hunt's Augustinian views, is neither a threat to free will or ability to do otherwise, even provided the strongest argument for theological determinism.

#### The Argument for Theological Fatalism and David Hunt's Assessment

Therefore, let us first examine the standard argument for theological determinism which is necessary for the theological compatibilist to challenge. With the help of David Hunt's views, I will then assess the argument and give reasons for doubting the argument's conclusion. An example of the basic form of the argument runs as follows: suppose that God knew 3000 years ago that I would finish this paper. Suppose also that the events of the past are fixed, set in stone, and can no longer be altered. Therefore, since the event of God's knowing that I will finish this paper on time is an unalterable fact about the past, so it must be that the object of God's past knowledge, i.e., my finishing this paper, is unalterable. It is thus necessary that I finish this paper, and nothing I could ever do can render it otherwise. Therefore, it would seem I am not free, since no doubt God's foreknowledge in the past would extend to every other event of my life also.

An argument like this can be formalized as follows (Zagzebski):

- (1) Yesterday God infallibly believed  $T$ . [Supposition of infallible foreknowledge]
- (2) If  $E$  occurred in the past, it is now-necessary that  $E$  occurred then. [Principle of the Necessity of the Past]
- (3) It is now-necessary that yesterday God believed  $T$ . [1, 2]
- (4) Necessarily, if yesterday God believed  $T$ , then  $T$ . [Definition of “infallibility”]
- (5) If  $p$  is now-necessary, and necessarily ( $p \rightarrow q$ ), then  $q$  is now-necessary. [Transfer of Necessity Principle]
- (6) So it is now-necessary that  $T$ . [3,4,5]
- (7) If it is now-necessary that  $T$ , then you cannot do otherwise than  $T$ . [Definition of “necessary”]
- (8) Therefore, you cannot do otherwise than  $T$ . [6, 7]
- (9) If you cannot do otherwise when you do an act, you do not act freely. [Principle of Alternate Possibilities]
- (10) Therefore, when you do  $T$ , you will not do it freely. [8, 9]

How should we assess this argument? David Hunt contends that this argument should be understood as an aporetic problem since, despite the validity of the argument, the conclusion seems obviously false given the innocuous premises of the argument (Hunt 20-21). It is a problem which causes in us a deep sense of confusion, since facts about the nature of God’s knowledge and beliefs do not seem to justify a conclusion that I am not free. The only things that seem relevant to my freedom are things that are causally related to me or my situation in some way, things that could influence my actions (17). God’s knowledge is not like that. I act as I do for my own reasons (most of the time); I seem to be free insofar as my actions proceed from myself, from my will informed by my thoughts and desires. Facts about God’s knowledge change none of that, so it seems we should reject this conclusion on the basis that the necessity of God’s foreknowing seems irrelevant to human freedom. Hunt aptly quotes William Lane Craig in asserting how we ought to react to this philosophical puzzle that the argument creates: “Fatalism posits a constraint on human freedom which is entirely unintelligible. Therefore, it must be false. Somewhere there is a fallacy in the argument, and we need only examine it carefully to find the error” (20).

#### The Key Intuition

The key intuition in Hunt's assessment that we should keep in mind is this: that whatever is not causally related to me or my situation in any way does not affect my freedom in any way (Hunt 17). However, Hunt concludes that, while human freedom is compatible with divine foreknowledge, we are not free to do otherwise since what God foreknows I will do must infallibly come to pass since God is himself infallible (Hunt 17-18). Hunt is therefore rejecting premise (9) of the argument; however, if God's foreknowledge presents no threat to my freedom because it isn't causally related to me or my situation in any way, why should we think it prevents us from doing otherwise? After all, the only things that could prevent me from doing otherwise seem to be things that are causally related to me or my situation. I therefore contend that Hunt's key intuition, while helpful, is not taken far enough.

Contrary to Hunt, I argue that the real problem with this argument is the essential ambiguity of the phrase "cannot do otherwise" present in premises (7) and (9). In order to understand how we should understand "cannot do otherwise," I will turn to Kadri Vihvelin's critique of Harry Frankfurt's rejection of the PAP (Principle of Alternate Possibilities), which states: "A person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise" (Vihvelin 1). Hunt himself is inspired by Frankfurt in his rejection of premise (9) in the argument above, as Frankfurt's reasoning for rejecting the PAP is akin to Hunt's key intuition. Moreover, Vihvelin is motivated by an intuition similar to Hunt's key intuition in her rejection of Frankfurt's argument, but takes it a step further in a way Hunt does not. This leads her to her conclusion that we are able to do otherwise in circumstances similar to those in the foreknowledge problem. Vihvelin's critique thus helps us to better understand how the ambiguity of the phrase "cannot do otherwise" can be cleared up as well as reveal where the argument for theological fatalism goes wrong.

#### Vihvelin's Critique of Frankfurt

Frankfurt contends that we can retain moral responsibility even in situations where we cannot do otherwise than some action X. This is a notable claim since, traditionally, by holding someone to be moral responsible we typically mean (among other things) that he or she could have done otherwise than X. After all, why should we blame someone for something they could not have refrained from doing? Consequently, we ought to be leery of rejecting this traditional understanding of moral responsibility so quickly. Indeed, for the purposes of this paper, I am understanding free will (i.e., the ability to perform actions that are at least sometimes free) in terms of ability to do otherwise. For it would seem that by saying that an action is free or not, we mean to convey whether or not said action was freely performed, and for an action to be freely performed one must have alternate possibilities open to them in order to act. By this understanding, we can also see the intimate connection between freedom and moral responsibility, since if an action is not free, it is quite clear that one is not morally responsible for said action insofar as we think of moral responsibility in terms of “could have done otherwise.” With that said, let us begin examining Frankfurt’s argument against the PAP.

To this end, Frankfurt presents a thought experiment involving an imaginary man named Jones, who has a choice between X and not-X. In the thought experiment, there is a threat of intervention from a third-party, Black, should Jones choose or begin to choose to do not-X. But it turns out that Jones chooses X of his own accord. His action thus remains free since he did it for his own reasons and since Black does not intervene. Therefore, he is morally responsible for his action despite it being impossible for him to accomplish any action other than X due to the threat of Black’s intervention (Vihvelin 4-5).

That being said, Frankfurt has failed to defeat PAP as he intended since Black never actually intervenes; that is to say, nothing is *causally* preventing Jones from doing otherwise until Black intervenes. Vihvelin further explains, “Jones can choose to do otherwise only if

he chooses what Black wants him to choose” (21). So long as Jones freely chooses what Black wants him to choose, Black does not actually intervene and thus bears no relevance to the causal chain of events factoring into Jones’ decision. Consequently, Jones still has the *ability* to do otherwise so long as Black does not intervene, meaning that the PAP has not been disproven.

I contend that Vihvelin’s analysis is quite helpful since it demonstrates that we should interpret “could have done otherwise” in the Principle of Alternate Possibilities in terms of *ability* to do otherwise, rather than in terms of one’s foreseeably actualizing (let’s call this other definition “*actualization* of something otherwise”) not-X (whatever action might be stipulated). Jones can never actually accomplish something other than X, since if he tries to, Black will intervene. But so long as Black is not intervening, nothing is impinging on Jones’ ability to do otherwise, meaning that he retains the *ability* to do something otherwise even while knowledge of factors extraneous to Jones (e.g., Black’s possible intervention) convince us that Jones can never really bring about not-X. To put it another way, this means that one may retain the ability to do otherwise despite not-X being in itself not a potentially actualizable future state of affairs given the threat of Black’s intervention.

Furthermore, Vihvelin is motivated by the key insight shared by Hunt (and even Frankfurt). However, she provides a compelling case which bears out the full-fledged implications of this insight which we find lacking in Hunt and Frankfurt. Her reaction to Frankfurt’s argument is similar to Hunt’s reaction to the argument for theological fatalism as evidence this statement: “What should sound remarkable is Frankfurt’s claim that a counterfactual intervener, however powerful he is, manages to rob Jones of all alternatives without ever exercising his power” (Vihvelin 14). Indeed, given the preceding analysis and this key insight, there seems to be little to no compelling reason as to why we ought to accept an interpretation of “could have done otherwise” in terms of *actualization* of something

otherwise, for this interpretation would lend itself to the absurd conclusion that, despite Black's bearing no causal relation to Jones, he still somehow manages to rob Jones of all alternate possibilities. Therefore, I contend that we ought to interpret "could have done otherwise" in terms of *ability* to do otherwise (and this seems to be a more intuitive interpretation, at any rate). Similarly to the Jones and Black case, in the case of divine foreknowledge, God's knowledge isn't even a potential intervener. So why should we think that God's knowledge affects our ability to do otherwise any more than Black affects Jones' ability to do otherwise?

What do you mean by "cannot do otherwise?"

Returning to the argument for theological determinism, it is similarly unclear as it was with Frankfurt's case, whether "cannot do otherwise" as in premise (9) means being *able* to do otherwise or not-X being a possible future state of affairs. Premise (7), however straightforward it may seem, contains a similar ambiguity. It seems clear here that what the argument intends to imply by my action X being "now-necessary" is that my doing not-X is not a possible future state of affairs, given the infallibility of what God foreknows, i.e., it is necessary that I should do X and nothing else. However, I have previously argued with the help of the key intuition operative in Vihvelin's and Hunt's arguments that this sense of "cannot do otherwise" (or "could have done otherwise") is not the correct interpretation; rather, the sense that is essential is that of ability. God's foreknowledge, which bears no causal relation to myself or my situation does not qualify as the sort of thing which would affect my ability to do otherwise. Given that the sense of necessity expressed by God's foreknowledge is clearly not causal (God's foreknowledge does not make me do anything), I am not deprived of the *ability* to do otherwise even though future states of affairs other than what God foreknows are logically eliminated.

In summary, the key intuition that motivates Hunt's position is that whatever bears no



causal relation to myself or my situation does not have any meaningful impact on my freedom insofar as my actions still originate from myself and my own motivations, reasoning, desires, etc. This intuition is also essentially the same in Vihvelin's case, though she takes it even further in order to save not just free will, but also the PAP (which Hunt dismisses). The point here in her critique is that Black (insofar as he is not intervening), bearing no meaningful causal relation to Jones, simply does not affect Jones in any way relevant to his *ability* to do otherwise. The best way to understand the PAP, as I have contended, is to understand the PAP in terms of one's having the power or *ability* to do otherwise, even if it is certain that not-X as a future state of affairs is logically impossible given God's infallible foreknowledge of X. Regarding this foreknowledge case, Hunt quotes St. Augustine as saying "His foreknowledge does not take away my power; in fact, it is all the more certain that I will have that power, since he whose foreknowledge never errs foreknows that I will have it" (Hunt 20). That is to say, God doesn't just infallibly know what I'm going to do, but also what I'm going to do of my own ability or power. That is, it is entirely possible (and sensible) to understand God's foreknowledge in such a way that it does not pose any meaningful threat to our ability to do otherwise.

#### What you mean by "ability to do otherwise?"

The best way to understand what is meant by ability to do otherwise is perhaps best revealed by first considering clear-cut cases of being unable to do otherwise (Finch). Alicia Finch uses the example from Aristotle of "a strong wind's blowing a man from one location to another." She also adds the scenario in which Black does actually intervene and force Jones to do X. Both of these seem clear cases in which the person in question is not free to do otherwise, and this is obviously because of some external factor causally affecting said person in such a way that they are actually prevented from doing otherwise. The best way to understand what we mean by "ability to do otherwise" is therefore the following: "In view of

external forces acting on S, S is able to perform X” (Finch). Taking back up the case of Jones and Black, it would be clear that, insofar as Black does not intervene, there is no external force acting on Jones such that Jones is rendered unable to do otherwise. Understood in this way, we might further add whatever criteria one might find relevant to free actions, e.g., that X comes from me, that X comes from my own desires, that I do X for my own reasons, etc. But ability is essentially concerned with the absence of external forces acting upon me in such a way that I am somehow forced to do X or prevented from do otherwise. God’s foreknowledge is, of course, no such external force.

### A Better Solution

Turning again to the formal argument for theological fatalism, we may consequently substitute our understanding of ability as essential to the PAP into (9) as: “If you are not able to do otherwise when you do an act, you do not act freely.” (7) is reformulated as follows: “If it is now-necessary that *T*, then you are not able to do otherwise than *T*.” Premise (7) therefore seems obviously false given this reformulation, since the kind of necessity imposed by God’s foreknowledge is not relevant to ability to do otherwise, as it bears no relevant causal relation to myself or my situation. From this, (8) fails to follow, and therefore the conclusion (10) no longer follows as well. It seems clear that I retain the *ability* to act otherwise; therefore, PAP still holds as in our reformulation of (9), i.e., I am able to do otherwise. With these misunderstandings cleared up, the foreknowledge argument is no longer a threat to free will or to the PAP.

### Conclusion

This conclusion is largely in line with Hunt’s Augustinian solution to the foreknowledge problem. Hunt quotes St. Augustine in a passage that well sums up how we ought to conceive of divine foreknowledge:

Your foreknowledge did not force him to sin even though he was, without doubt, going to sin; otherwise you would not foreknow that which was to be. Thus these two things

are not contradictories. As you, by your foreknowledge know what someone else is going to do of his own will, so God forces no one to sin; yet He foreknows those who will sin by their own will. (Hunt 8)

Therefore, we have no reason to think that divine foreknowledge impinges on human freedom in any way or ability to do otherwise, as has been argued. The reason we might have been convinced by the argument for theological determinism revolves around the ambiguity of the PAP. In light of the motivations both behind Vihvelin's critique of Frankfurt's counterexamples and behind Hunt's rejection of theological fatalism, PAP is best understood in terms of ability. Ultimately, while Frankfurt and Hunt might have been incorrect in believing that they have refuted the PAP, the key intuition which they share, in the end, helps to clarify those aspects of human identity and action which are truly relevant to human freedom and moral responsibility.

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