


Omniscience, Free Will, and Religious Belief

Emmanuel Nartey

ABSTRACT In this paper, I examine a standard foreknowledge argument and some interesting ways of handling it, along with some criticisms. I argue that there are philosophically interesting notions of free will that are compatible with determinism. These are the notions of free will that matter to ordinary life, and I argue that these generate a way for a philosophically interesting understanding of free will to be compatible with belief in God's infallible foreknowledge. I discuss two key questions—the empirical question and the divine interference question—that are often neglected in the contemporary debate on foreknowledge and free will. Finally, I provide some answers to these questions that I hope can advance the debate.

KEYWORDS compatibilism; free will; incompatibilism; omniscience; Principle of Alternate Possibilities; religious belief; science

Contemporary incompatibilist arguments about God's foreknowledge and human freedom seek to show that if an essentially omniscient being (God) has infallible advance knowledge of any given action we perform then we (humans) cannot be said to act freely. The concern is that the infallible belief of an essentially omniscient being and the authentic exercise of human free will are mutually exclusive. Determinism is a view of the universe according to which the past and the laws of nature are completely sufficient to necessitate in every detail that for any given state of the universe at any given time there is only one possible future state. Thus—since there is

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© *FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM* 21 (2016) no. 2, 135–155
ISSN 1426-1898 E-ISSN 2353-7043

SUBM. 6 March 2017 Acc. 30 June 30 2017
DOI:10.5840/forphil201621210

only one possible future—someone who knows all the laws of nature and the state of the universe would be capable of accurately predicting every detail of future development. Since God’s omniscience is unconstrained by time and space, the implication for human action would be that it be, from God’s perspective, infinitely determined, meaning that the realm of human action would fall under the rule of determinism. I return to this topic in more detail below. That God’s omniscience is unconstrained by space and time is one of the standard claims in Kant’s practical philosophy.¹ Whether or not we are free to act and make our own decisions has profound implications, and the stakes are high. But is it true that divine foreknowledge means that no human action can really be free?

In what follows, I examine a standard foreknowledge argument and some interesting ways of handling it, along with some criticisms. I argue that there exist philosophically interesting notions of free will that are compatible with determinism. These are notions of free will that matter to ordinary life (so to speak) and these notions generate a way for a philosophically interesting understanding of free will to be compatible with belief in God’s infallible foreknowledge. I discuss two key questions—the empirical question and the divine interference question—that are often neglected in the contemporary debate on foreknowledge and free will. Finally, I provide some answers to these questions that I hope can advance the debate.

1. A STANDARD FOREKNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT

Traditional theism defines God as a maximally perfect being, and the property of being omniscient is partly constitutive of a maximally perfect being. Since the property of omniscience is thus necessarily part of God’s essence, then God cannot possibly fail to be all-knowing. It follows that it is necessarily true that God is omniscient in every possible world in which He exists. By definition, an omniscient God necessarily knows all propo-

1. In Kant’s words, “I cannot even make the assumption—as the practical interests of morality require—of God, freedom, and immortality, if I do not deprive speculative reason of its pretensions to transcendent insight. For to arrive at these, it must make use of principles which, in fact, extend only to the objects of possible experience, and which cannot be applied to objects beyond this sphere without converting them into phenomena, and thus rendering the practical extension of pure reason impossible. I must therefore abolish knowledge, to make room for belief.” Immanuel Kant, “Preface to Second Edition,” B XXX, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

sitions that are true at any given time t and He can never believe anything that is false.

At the core of contemporary foreknowledge arguments² is the claim that if God foreknows your future actions then those actions cannot be voluntarily performed. A standard foreknowledge argument for the claim that God's infallible foreknowledge makes it impossible for us to act freely looks roughly like this:

- (1) One thousand years ago God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* this coming Sunday.
- (2) If one thousand years ago God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, then—because that doxastic fact lies in the past—nobody can do anything today to change the fact that a thousand years ago God believed that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.
- (3) So, nobody can do anything today to change the fact that a thousand years ago God believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.
- (4) Necessarily, if a thousand years ago God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, then you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.
- (5) If nobody today can do anything to change the fact that a thousand years ago God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, and it is necessary that if a thousand years ago God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday then you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, then nobody today can do anything to change the fact that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.
- (6) It follows that nobody today can do anything to change the fact that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.
- (7) If nobody today can do anything to change the fact that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, then it is false that you can do otherwise than watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.
- (8) Therefore, it is false that you can do otherwise than watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.
- (9) If it is false that you can do otherwise when you do an act, you do not act freely.
- (10) Therefore, when you watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, you will not do it freely.

The crucial premises of this argument³ are (1), (2), (4), (5), (7), and (9). Someone who accepts the conclusion of this argument might want to simply grant the truth of (1) and (4) as the facts about God that pretty much generate the problem in the first place. It appears, then, that unless you accept (1) and (4) as true, the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom simply doesn't get off the ground. Obviously, a theist can intelligently disagree with either (1) or (4). Someone who endorses the atemporal or timeless view (Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas) might deny (1) by saying that God exists *atemporally*—outside the framework of time—rather than *sempiternally*—at every given moment—and that He cognizes the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, as opposed to successively, from one moment to another. God is outside of time, such that God doesn't believe things in advance. So God did not believe, one thousand years ago, that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday. The metaphorical way of thinking of it is that God knows what we do because God watches us do it—atemporally. Stump and Kretzmann articulate a good defense of the eternity view.⁴

However, some have objected that God is a person and the existence of a timeless person is impossible.⁵ Others claim that divine timelessness has the absurd consequence that if all events are eternally “present” to a

2. Foreknowledge arguments can be found in St. Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* (Book 3, ch. 3); Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Book 5); Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), Part II, Section XII; Nelson Pike, “Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action,” *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 27–46, doi:10.2307/2183529; Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); John M. Fischer, *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Linda Zagzebski, “Foreknowledge and Free Will,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2017 Edition), accessed July 12, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/>; Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Patrick Todd, “Prepunishment and Explanatory Dependence: A New Argument for Incompatibilism about Foreknowledge and Freedom,” *Philosophical Review* 122, no. 4 (2013): 619–39, doi:10.1215/00318108-2315315.

3. Zagzebski calls this kind of argument the “Basic Argument for Theological Fatalism.” See Zagzebski, “Foreknowledge and Free Will.”

4. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 8 (1981): 429–58, doi:10.2307/2026047.

5. Cf. Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

timeless God, then temporally different events are not in fact temporally different at all.⁶ Still others deny that a timeless or atemporal conception of God would resolve the concerns pertaining to the foreknowledge argument.⁷ They hold that an analogous argument could still be derived for why we might worry about divine foreknowledge. For example, several years ago, it was true that God eternally believed that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday. Because it was true then, it is now accidentally necessary that several years ago God eternally believed that you would watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday. This shows that divine eternal knowledge is just as inconsistent with human freedom as divine foreknowledge. So we cannot solve the problem of divine foreknowledge and voluntary actions by invoking the eternity of God. A similar view is expressed by Zagzebski:

Surely, the timeless realm is as ontologically determinate and fixed as the past . . . we have no more reason to think that we can do anything about God's timeless knowledge than about God's past knowledge. If there is no use crying over spilt milk, there is no use crying over timelessly spilt milk either.⁸

Suppose we accept premises (1) and (4). God is “infallible” in the sense of (4): If He believes something, then it is impossible for Him to be wrong about it. That means that if in the actual world at time *t* God believes *p*, then in no possible world in which at time *t* God believes *p*, is *p* false. For instance, even though at the present time you correctly know that X is president, there is a possible world in which you wrongly believe that X is president, since X was assassinated an hour ago and vice president Y has just been sworn in. So God is essentially different from us, His beliefs are “infallible” in the sense of (4), while our beliefs—even those that amount to knowledge—are not.

6. Cf. Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

7. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out,” *Faith and Philosophy* 3, no. 3 (1986): 235–69, doi:10.5840/faithphil19863322; David Widerker, “A Problem for the Eternity Solution,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29, no. 2 (1991): 87–95, doi:10.1007/bf00133807; Linda Zagzebski, “Recent Work on Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 45–64; Linda Zagzebski, “Omniscience and the Arrow of Time,” *Faith and Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2002): 503–19, doi:10.5840/faithphil200219443; Peter van Inwagen, “What Does an Omniscient Being Know about the Future?,” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1:216–30.

8. Zagzebski, *Dilemma*, 43.

I suppose one could attempt to deny premise (1) by holding that true belief about the future is impossible because propositions about the future cannot (yet) be true or false.⁹ But I think it is plausible to construe “belief P is true” as “belief P is true at the relevant time.” And in order to know P all one has to do when it comes to truth—setting aside justification and other factors—is to have a belief that is true at the appropriate time.¹⁰ For a belief about next Sunday, the appropriate time is Sunday.

Let’s assume the truth of (1) and (4). Premise (2) looks like a necessary fact about time: We cannot change the past; it is fixed, unpreventable, done and over with. So it looks like (2) is okay as well, even if it may be violated by some bizarre subatomic particles in a black hole or something similar, and irrelevant to human action. I am not intimating that it is so violated; the point is that even if it is, this counterexample is irrelevant to us. Furthermore, even if humans could change some things about the past, this does not mean that we can change the past facts about God’s beliefs. Some have objected to (2) on some sort of Ockhamist basis, which relies on the hard / soft fact distinction and our ability to exercise some sort of counterfactual power over the past. In Plantinga’s words,

Ockham’s way out gives us the means of seeing that neither Edwards’s nor Pike’s argument is successful. Edward’s argument fails because, essentially, God’s having *known* certain propositions is not, in general, a hard fact about the past; but only hard facts about the past are plausibly thought to be accidentally necessary. Pike’s argument fails for similar reasons: if God is essentially omniscient, then the facts about what God believed are not, in general, hard facts about the past; but then there is no reason to suppose that none of us can act in such a way that God would not have believed what in fact he does believe.¹¹

9. This is basically the Aristotelian-Strawsonian view according to which future contingent propositions are neither true nor false. This view is rooted in Aristotle’s famous discussion of the sea-battle tomorrow in his *De interpretatione* (chapter 9) and is one philosophical motivation for denying bivalence—the thesis that all propositions are either true or false. There is, however, a Russellian alternative, according to which future contingent propositions all turn out to be false, rather than all being either true or false. It is not, however, within the scope of this paper to delve into contemporary debates about propositions.

10. I am grateful to Bryan Frances and Meghan Griffith for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

11. Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out,” 250–1; for Jonathan Edward’s incompatibilist argument, see Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*. Edward’s argument is similar in form to Peter van Inwagen’s “consequence argument” against compatibilism in his *Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 55–105.

In any case, I will here simply assume the truth of (2), at least until we get to (4). This leaves us with premises (5), (7), and (9). The problem I see with those premises lies with their uses of “can.”

- (5) If nobody today *can* do anything to change the fact that, one thousand years ago, God infallibly believed that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, and it is necessary that if a thousand years ago God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday then you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday, then nobody today *can* do anything to change the fact that you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.

I take it that the intuitive attractiveness of (5) is supposed to require the univocality of its two uses of “can.” Furthermore, in order for the whole argument to be valid, the antecedent of (5) has to be the consequent of (2). This point is very important because the meaning of “can” in (5) has to be the same as the meaning of “can” in (2), or else we cannot validly infer (6). So the meaning of “can” in (5) is the same as the meaning of “can” in (2). Hence, (5) amounts to the following:

Suppose for the moment that nobody can do anything at a later time to change the fact that a thousand years ago, God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.

Suppose further that nobody today “can” do that in the sense that you cannot change the past.

Suppose also that it is necessary that if a thousand years ago God infallibly believed you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday then you will watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.

If these three suppositions are true, then nobody today can do anything to change the fact that you watch *Star Trek Beyond* on Sunday.

Since God is essentially omniscient, He cannot have false beliefs; His beliefs are invariably the case. God having a belief about your future action means that God knows what you will do before you in fact do it. Since God knows what you will do it means that what God knows must be true. But if it is true that you will perform a certain action before you in fact perform it, in what sense do you have free will?

In a classic paper, Nelson Pike argued that if an essentially omniscient God foreknows that you will do something in the future, your action cannot be voluntary.¹² In virtue of the property of essential omniscience, God cannot have false beliefs. Thus, his belief at t^1 that you would watch *The Theory of Everything* (henceforth, TOE) at t^2 entails that you would do so at t^2 . Pike argues that if it were within your power to refrain from watching TOE at t^2 —notwithstanding God’s prior belief eighty years ago—this yields the following trilemma: (a) It was within your power at t^2 to do something that would have brought it about¹³ that God held a false belief at t^1 ; or (b) it was within your power to do something at t^2 which would have meant that God held a different belief at t^1 , or (c) it was within your power at t^2 to do something that would have brought it about that God did not exist at t^1 . However, none of these disjuncts is actually a viable option to you. Here is why.

First, option (a) is impossible because an essentially omniscient God cannot have false beliefs: God cannot be wrong because He is infallible and you lack the power to falsify His beliefs. Thus, God’s belief about you watching TOE at t^2 is necessarily true and cannot be otherwise. Second, option (b) is ruled out because one cannot obliterate God’s past beliefs or change those beliefs retroactively such that God believed something else at t^1 other than you watching TOE at t^2 . God’s belief at t^1 is fixed and unalterable and therefore beyond your, or anyone else’s, control. Third, it is impossible for you or anyone to make it the case that an essentially omniscient God whose very essence is existence did not exist at t^1 because neither God’s existence nor His having a particular mental state at t^1 depends on you or on any human volition. What God believed at t^1 must inexorably come to pass at t^2 : you cannot but watch TOE at t^2 . Clearly, if Pike’s argument is sound, one cannot act freely. The real problem is not that God’s foreknowledge—of which you have no awareness—causes what you do or forces you to make a particular choice. Rather, it is that God’s

12. Pike, “Divine Omniscience.”

13. Some have objected to Pike’s argument on the grounds that he uses the locution “have the power to bring it about that p ” relies on a “power entailment principle.” See Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, “On Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom,” *Philosophical Studies* 37, no. 3 (1980): 289–96, doi:10.1007/bf00372450; Thomas B. Talbott, “On Divine Foreknowledge and Bringing About the Past,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46, no. 3 (1986): 455–69, doi:10.2307/2107315. Others have argued that Pike’s argument can be formulated without reliance on any such power entailment principle or any related principle. See for instance John M. Fischer, Patrick Todd, and Neal A. Tognazzini, “Engaging with Pike: God, Freedom and Time,” *Philosophical Papers* 38, no. 2 (2009): 247–70.

infallible foreknowledge appears to make it impossible for you to do otherwise. If so, then it seems that God's infallible foreknowledge determines what you do. Subsequent Pike-type arguments draw on the notions of accidental necessity, fixity of the past, closure under entailment, transfer of the necessity principle, and inalterability of propositions reporting an event in the past.¹⁴ The conclusion is ineluctably the same: if God foreknows your action, you cannot act voluntarily.

The foregoing incompatibilist arguments seem to indicate that God's foreknowledge and voluntary actions are jointly inconsistent. But compatibilists about divine foreknowledge and human free will disagree. Some interesting strategies that compatibilists have deployed in responding to arguments about the incompatibility of divine omniscience and free will is to identify the sense in which God's past beliefs supervene on our actions, distinguish between hard facts and soft facts (Ockhamism), or provide the atemporal, simple foreknowledge, Molinist, open theist, multiple-past compatibilist or some other alternative reply.¹⁵ The proposed compatibilist solutions, some of which line up pretty well with the kinds of compatibilist views we see in the current free will and determinism debate, others of which are really only applicable due to the unique nature of the problem as involving knowledge, all seem to have downsides. I will focus on two key questions below.

2. FREE WILL AND SCIENCE

There are two important questions to be raised about the foreknowledge argument. First, does neuroscientific research establish that we don't have free will? Second, if we have free will, can we be significantly free in exer-

14. For a lucid and interesting contemporary discussion of this type of argument see Edward Wierenga, "Omniscience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129–44.

15. For an interesting contemporary Ockhamist reply, see Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out"; a contemporary defense of the timelessness or atemporal solution can be found in Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity"; Widerker identifies and discusses problems that confront the atemporal and eternity solution in his "A Problem for the Eternity Solution"; Fischer offers an interesting multi-past compatibilist reply in *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*; for a detailed discussion of various compatibilist and noncompatibilist replies, see Zagzebski's *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*; for a clear and concise discussion of the problem of foreknowledge and contemporary replies, see Wierenga's "Omniscience" and Todd's "Prepunishment"; and for a Molinist account of how God knows future contingents, and a theory of divine providence, see Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, Part IV of *Concordia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

cising it regardless of God's omniscience and omnipotence? It seems that the first question can only be settled by empirical research. If there is no room for free will, then the claim that God's foreknowledge rules out our ability to act freely becomes otiose: if you lack the capacity to act freely, then it makes no sense to say that God's prior beliefs rules out your exercise of a non-existent capacity. Conversely, if we do in fact have free will and a given person is free to exercise it voluntarily, then the second question is obviously legitimate.

The main philosophical and neuroscientific arguments against free will appeal to determinism, randomness, undercutting objections, or rebutting objections.¹⁶ The first type of argument claims that if determinism is true, then every single choice you have made has already been determined, rendering free will a mere illusion. But saying that every single choice you have made is predetermined by prior events only means that your decisions are not the products of your free will. The randomness argument is predicated on the idea that even if determinism is false, we still do not have free will. Your choice is not completely predetermined by prior events and the laws of nature. Your decision to do X was nevertheless a brain event that was not caused by prior events; it just happened, randomly, but nothing caused it to occur. If a decision is uncaused, then it is completely random. For any given state of the universe, there is not exactly one possible outcome because there is no factor that determines one possible result. If there had been a factor, Z, that produced X instead of Y, then Z would have determined the occurrence of X. But since your actions just happened without any necessitating cause, you do not bring them about; they are beyond your control. Because nothing really caused your decision, it follows that your decision was unfree. Thus, you cannot be accountable for what happened. It would therefore not make sense to say that you chose to do X of your own free will, since you had no control over the choice. So either your choice is determined, or it is random. If it is determined, then your choice was caused by prior events, which means that your choice was not of your own free will. If, on the other hand, your choice was uncaused by prior events, then it occurred randomly, in which case it is not the result of your free will. So both the random argument and the predetermined argument yield the same conclusion: either way, you lack free will. The approach of undercutting objections usually endeavors to identify the basis of our common-sense beliefs in free will and then try

16. See the collection of useful papers in *Free Will and Modern Science*, ed. Richard Swinburne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

to undermine the evidence or basis by showing that they are incapable of yielding true beliefs. Finally, rebutting objections relies on research findings in the empirical sciences to impugn our belief in free will. In what follows, I will consider this last—rebutting—argumentation, which has arguably been at the heart of contemporary arguments against free will.

Free-will skeptics in the contemporary free-will debate allege that there are positive reasons against belief in free will.¹⁷ They thus shoulder the burden of proving that we lack free will. Free-will skeptics contend that scientific empirical research threatens our belief in free will by impugning the causal efficacy of our conscious phenomena. Prominent in these discussions are neuroscientific experiments conducted by Benjamin Libet, Daniel Wegner, John-Dylan Haynes, and others.¹⁸ Their findings seem to provide strong evidential support for the claim that our propositional attitudes and actions are completely caused by non-conscious events that we have no control over and that we become cognizant of only after these non-conscious events have been triggered.

According to free-will skeptics, since—as the complete physical causes of your actions—unconscious neuronal events have already been initiated before any conscious awareness of your decision to move, this shows that your conscious will or decision to act was not the triggering cause of your action. That is, if it is the case that the experience of conscious decisions or your conscious will—which you take to be the cause of our actions—do, in fact, occur seconds after the unconscious neuronal activity that reliably predicts your behavior has been set in motion, then it makes no sense to say that your conscious decisions make any causal difference in eventuating your actions. The proximate causes—unconscious processes—are completely and exhaustively sufficient to explain your action or behavior.

17. For excellent introductions to the problem of free will, see Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012); *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and its Alternatives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), and Mark Balaguer, *Free Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

18. Benjamin Libet, Curtis A. Gleason, Elwod W. Wright, and Dennis K. Pearl, “Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential): The Unconscious Initiation of Freely Voluntary Act,” *Brain* 106, no. 3 (1983): 623–42, doi: 10.1093/brain/106.3.623; Benjamin Libet, “Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 8, no. 4 (1985): 529–66, doi: 10.1017/s0140525x00044903; Benjamin Libet, “Consciousness, Free Action, and the Brain,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, no. 8 (2001): 59–65; Benjamin Libet, “The Timing of Mental Events: Libet’s Experimental Findings and Their Implications,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 11, no. 2 (2002): 291–99, doi:/10.1006/ccog.2002.0568, and Daniel Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

This entails that your conscious choosing is not responsible in determining what you do. If your conscious choosing stands outside the chain of causation then it only means that it has no causal efficacy on your physical world, including the etiology of your behavior. Your conscious choosing is, in other words, epiphenomenal. But if we are essentially epiphenomenal agents then we cannot act freely. There is no point then in saying that we cannot act freely because God foreknows our actions: we are beings whose nature is such that we cannot act freely.

Notwithstanding the fact that Libet-type research findings raise very interesting questions about the concept of free will, this does not mean that they have established that we lack free will. There is something troubling about the view that just because your unconscious processes are causally responsible for your choosing to watch TOE last weekend, you therefore didn't choose to watch that movie. Alfred R. Mele is probably right in impugning the hermeneutics of Libet-style experiments.¹⁹ According to Mele, the *readiness potential* (RP)—the physical brain activity associated with our decisions—could correlate with a number of things, including being the cause of an intention rather than the intention itself. Mele's reaction-time experiments show that it is considerably faster (about 231 milliseconds) to transition from intention to muscular contractions than Libet-style experiments (around 550 milliseconds) have shown. Moreover, it is fallacious to reason that because unconscious brain processes are set in motion seconds before our conscious decision to act or move it follows that conscious intention plays no role in our actions. According to Mele, if you light the fuse on a firecracker, and the fuse burns and the firecracker explodes, it would be wrong to say that because the burning of the fuse happens after the lighting of the fuse, the burning is epiphenomenal or has no role in the firecracker's exploding. The charge then is that Libet et al. have misunderstood the temporal order of activity, or simply omitted one of the steps.

Libet-style experiments seem to be committed to the view of the self according to which you are distinct from all the unconscious processes that operate in the background of your brain. Daniel Dennett is right to argue that restricting our conception of the self to the particular region of the brain in which conscious awareness occurs seems to be a mistake.²⁰

19. Cf. Alfred R. Mele, *Effective Intentions: The Power of Conscious Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Alfred R. Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Alfred R. Mele, *Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

20. Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

On the narrow conception of the self that Dennett repudiates, you reside within this region of the brain—what he calls the “Cartesian theater”—from where you make conscious decisions and become cognizant of your environment.²¹ Dennett thinks that the self should be broadly construed as an entity that is spatiotemporally spread across the brain and necessarily includes both conscious and unconscious processes within the brain, which are all causally responsible for our behavior. Given this expanded view of the self, it would be wrong to think of the unconscious brain activities as alien causes of our behavior, since the unconscious brain processes that constitute the proximate cause of our actions are unquestionably as an integral part of the self as any of our conscious decisions. But Dennett’s extended view of the self—while offering a plausible way out of the threat posed by epiphenomenalism to free will and moral responsibility—does not engage the question whether or not we have free will, an issue that is still up for grabs.

3. ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES AND WHAT WE CARE ABOUT

As noted above, the real problem of the foreknowledge argument is that God’s infallible foreknowledge appears to make it impossible for one to act otherwise. According to premise (9) of the foreknowledge argument, if it is false that when you act you may have acted otherwise, then you do not act freely. If you cannot do otherwise than as determined by God’s infallible foreknowledge, then you do not have the capacity to act voluntarily. This conclusion supports the validity of the Principle of Alternative (or Alternate) Possibilities (PAP), according to which an agent acts freely (and is morally responsible) only if he could have done otherwise. Here, “could have done otherwise” simply means that although you in fact did X, you had the ability to do something else, say Y.²² PAP requires that you are morally praiseworthy or blameworthy only if you could have done something other than what you actually did. As Galen Strawson has observed, “[i]t is a matter of historical fact that concern about moral responsibility has been the main motor—indeed

21. In recent years, John Cottingham has quite convincingly argued that this picture of Descartes in contemporary philosophy is mistaken. See his collection of useful essays in John Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections: Essays on Descartes’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

22. I am here side-stepping the wonted conditional analysis of “could have done otherwise” according to which “could have done otherwise” means “would have, if . . .” and the supposed hidden “if” is filled in with the choices, desires, or efforts of the agent.

the *ratio essendi*—of discussion of the issue of free will.”²³ But does moral responsibility actually require having alternatives? More specifically, is premise (9) of the foreknowledge argument true? If Frankfurt-style cases, which seem to falsify PAP, turn out to be waterproof, then the answer to this question is most probably “no.” I shall now consider these so-called Frankfurt-style counter-examples or thought experiments that seem to show the untenability of PAP. Harry Frankfurt²⁴—who gave these examples and experiments their name—has argued that an agent can act freely even when she lacks alternate possibilities:

Suppose Joe, an evil neurosurgeon, really wants to kill Norah. However, he doesn’t want to do it himself, so Joe figures out a way to kill Norah indirectly, via Rose, who has a wonderful opportunity to kill Norah. Joe secretly implants a device in Rose’s brain. This device can monitor and report what Rose plans to do or control Rose’s brain activity and enable Joe to know whether or not Rose decides to kill Norah. If the neurological activity in Rose’s brain signals that she is about to decide not to kill Norah, the device will switch from its monitor mode to control mode, thus intervening and causing Rose to kill Norah anyway. If, on the other hand, Rose decides to kill Norah voluntarily, the device will simply remain in monitor mode and not intervene. Now suppose Rose killed Norah on her own, without any intervention from the device. Because the device would have intervened to make Rose kill Norah regardless, we are right to say that she was unable to do otherwise. Rose is going to kill Norah whether she wants to or not.²⁵

The question then is, is Rose responsible for killing Norah? It seems that we should blame Rose for taking the life of Norah: she wanted to kill Norah and she killed her by her own volition and we hold her accountable for what she did. But Rose may also be morally responsible regardless of whether she could have acted otherwise. For, in the words of Frankfurt, “there may be circumstances that constitute sufficient conditions for a certain action to be performed by someone and that therefore make it impossible for the person to do otherwise, but that do not actually impel

23. Galen Strawson, “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility,” *Philosophical Studies* 75, no. 1–2 (1994): 5–24, doi:10.1007/bf00989879.

24. Cf. Harry Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 829–39, doi:10.2307/2023833.

25. Adapted from John Martin Fischer, “Responsibility and Control,” *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 1 (1982): 24–40, doi:10.2307/2026344.

the person to act or in any way produce his action.”²⁶ You can still act, even if the circumstances in which you act leave you no alternative. But in so far as these circumstances have no role in producing your action, you are responsible for what you do. If so, then PAP is false: Moral responsibility, which is linked to free will, does not require the ability to do otherwise precisely because an agent may well be morally responsible for an act even if she is unable to do otherwise. If the ability to do otherwise were required, we would not think that Rose was blameworthy, since she could not have done otherwise. This strongly suggests that our notions of free will and moral responsibility ought to be predicated on something other than the ability to do otherwise.

Semi-compatibilism is the view that determinism may be incompatible with the ability to do otherwise, but is compatible with the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility.²⁷ Fischer distinguishes two kinds of freedom: regulative control and guidance control. Guidance control is required for moral responsibility, while regulative control is not. Guidance control is defined in terms of reasons-responsiveness and “ownership.” Fischer argues that freedom to do otherwise (which used to be the standard way to understand freedom) may or may not be compatible with determinism. Conversely, semi-compatibilists like Fischer think that this does not matter because freedom to do otherwise is not required for moral responsibility.

What kind of freedom it is that is required for moral responsibility? Well, Fischer has (sometimes together with Mark Ravizza) worked out a nuanced view based on the idea of guidance control. They hold that the kind of freedom you need for responsibility is freedom to guide your decisions or actions rather than the freedom to do otherwise (which he

26. Harry Frankfurt, “Duty and Love,” *Philosophical Explorations* 1, no. 1 (1998): 4–9, doi:10.1080/10001998018538686.

27. “Semicompatibilism” is attributed to John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); see also John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). Some defenders of the PAP claim that the supposed Frankfurt-style counterexamples are not really counterexamples. They contend that even though Rose may not have had the alternative of “kill Norah” or “do not kill Norah,” she had the option of “kill Norah on my own” or “kill Norah as a consequence of Joe’s manipulation.” According to this view, Rose actually had an alternative and she is accountable. For a good defense of the PAP, see David Widerker, “Libertarianism and Frankfurt’s Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities,” *Philosophical Review* 104, no. 2 (1995): 247–61, doi:10.2307/2185979; Daniel Speak, “Fanning the Flickers of Freedom,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2002): 91–105, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20010059>.

calls regulative control). How do we know if someone has guidance control? For Fischer it is worked out in terms of reasons-responsiveness. You have the freedom you need for responsibility if your actions are suitably sensitive to and guided by the reasons you have for acting. That's what matters, not whether you could have acted differently than you did. A semi-compatibilist on foreknowledge and free will might repudiate the Principle of Alternate Possibilities on the grounds that God's foreknowledge may well rule out alternatives, but that this is no big deal because we do not need alternatives for what we care about, namely the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility. This is the kind of free will that matters to ordinary life, so to speak, and this kind of free will is salvageable even if determinism were true. This notion of free will is neither totally lacking in philosophical interest nor incompatible with determinism. What we really care about is the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility, not the freedom to do otherwise. So even if determinism is true, it should not worry us when we think about freedom and moral responsibility because determinism may not rule out moral responsibility after all. Someone who endorses the semi-compatibilism of Fischer and Ravizza would argue that Frankfurt-style counter-examples show that determinism is false and there is good reason to think that the notion of an undetermined action is probably more problematic than a determined one. On this view, divine foreknowledge poses no threat to the kind of freedom required for moral responsibility, regardless of whether it threatens our ability to do otherwise. The foregoing indicates that the question of whether or not we have free will is an empirical matter, which cannot be settled by *a priori* philosophical arguments alone. Further, scientific arguments against free will have been shown to be indecisive. The jury is still out and until empirical determination is scientifically established beyond reasonable doubt, it looks like we cannot resolve the free-will debate. We simply know too little about the brain at the moment to definitively determine that we have free will. It has also not been determined what—if any—role the brain plays in the matter. Indeed, what is to say that the reason that we have these non-conscious causal neurological activating activities is not because God said it would be thus?

However, having free will is one thing, and being able to exercise it or act freely is another. Aristotle elucidated this distinction in terms of first actuality and second actuality. A first actuality is an ability, or the possession of something, for instance the possession of free will or knowledge,²⁸

28. Aristotle, *De anima* II, 412a23.

the exercise or use of which is a second actuality. Thus the first actuality of knowledge involves the possession of a skill, i.e., John has the capacity or skill to speak Italian even if he may prefer to communicate with me in English, and thus does not use the skill. When John actually speaks Italian, he is actualizing a capacity, which is the second actuality. Likewise, there is a difference between having free will and actually exercising it or acting freely in much the same way as there is a difference between human organisms having the capacity to think, and actually thinking, say, while solving algorithms.

But even if we assume the truth of our common-sense notions that we do indeed have free will, and can exercise it as free agents, it will still be hard to know whether or not God can interfere in the way in which we actualize it. Of course, any interference from God in what free agents do is bound to create the illusion of free will, since what free agents do will in that case not be up to them. Is it possible that we have been hoodwinked into thinking that what we do is up to us when, in actual fact, we are invariably being manipulated by God to serve his own inscrutable purposes? Most theists are committed to “perfect being” theology and as Descartes has forcefully argued in the *Meditations*, an omnibenevolent God cannot be a deceiver, since deception is a mark of imperfection (AT VII, 22; CSM II, 12–14). If Descartes’s argument is sound, this may be another way to rule out the possibility of manipulation by a veracious and non-deceiving God, and thus that our free will is an illusion.

It seems, then, that even the best philosophical and scientific arguments against free will are not good enough to compel us to jettison our common-sense intuitions that we do have free will and (at least sometimes) act freely. While this does not necessarily mean that we have free will, for the nonce, it is rational to trust our common-sense intuitions and go by our lived experience that human beings have and can sometimes act freely under certain conditions. We have a natural propensity to believe that we can sometimes act freely; our quotidian transactions and lived experiences are predicated on the fact we do make conscious decisions and are responsible for our choices. Moral and legal responsibility, both mundane and eschatological, will make sense if what we do is truly up to us. If human beings are not free because God’s foreknowledge supervenes on causal factors sufficient to determine or necessitate our actions, then moral responsibility and culpability would seem to be precluded. Perhaps we are beings who lack free will in a metaphysical sense, yet *must act as though* we have it. We are the kind of creatures that have the capacity to understand that we lack something, yet must—for the sake of moral-

ity and justice, and other crucial human endeavors—hold onto the sense that we have it. The practical implications of learning that we lack free will in this way would be disastrous: we simply cannot function as a society if there is no accountability, if our acts of omissions and commissions are neither blameworthy nor praiseworthy. It certainly makes more sense to think that we can act freely and be responsible for our decisions and actions. Thus, the burden of proof remains on those who claim that we lack free will.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that contemporary incompatibilist arguments about foreknowledge and free will have not succeeded in establishing that we lack free will or that we cannot act freely given God's foreknowledge of our actions. Proving that there are discernible patterns of nonconscious brain activities that are triggered before decisions are made conscious is one thing. However, showing that our conscious decisions have been made before we become cognizant of them is another. The neuroscientific evidence has not yet succeeded in showing that we make conscious decisions before we become aware of them. Thus, we have good reason to reject those arguments. Conscious activities may not work in exactly the way we are accustomed to thinking they work. We may be endowed with less free will than we are inclined to think, but it is hard to deny human free will if we think about it as a set of capacities for conscious deliberations, rational thinking, planning, and self-control.

There are philosophically interesting notions of free will that we care about and that matter to ordinary life. These notions are compatible with divine foreknowledge. From a scientific perspective, the question of whether or not we have free will is still up for grabs, and given our current knowledge of the brain, we are not yet in a position to provide a definitive answer. The foreknowledge argument may become irrelevant and philosophically uninteresting if it turns out that, scientifically speaking, we lack free will. Showing that we lack free will would also entail demonstrating that we lack the capacities of conscious deliberation, rational thinking, planning, and self-control, or that we do possess these capacities but that they just do not make any causal difference to our behavior. The incompatibilist arguments considered in this paper have failed to demonstrate that either of these scenarios is the case.

The importance of the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom consists not only in its theoretical interest but also in its pro-

found implications for practical reason and the way we lead our lives. It clearly has far-reaching eschatological and soteriological significance: Free choice would seem to play no role in salvation or damnation if God's foreknowledge entails that necessity—and necessity alone—rules. Free will and religious beliefs intersect. Because the issues at stake are so important, many philosophers, for very good reasons, hold strong views on the incompatibility or otherwise of divine foreknowledge and human freedom of action. Consequently, the forecast for a consensus on these issues in the foreseeable future seems to be unlikely.

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