

Do God's Beliefs Depend on the Future? On the Importance of the Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge

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Abstract: Trenton Merricks, among others, has recently championed in a series of papers what he takes to be a novel and simple solution to an age-old problem concerning the compatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom. The solution crucially involves the thesis that God's beliefs about the future actions of human persons asymmetrically depend on the future actions of those persons. I show that Merricks's defense of this thesis is inadequate and that the prospects for improving his defense of it would require him to enter the fray of articulating and defending a view about the mechanics whereby divine foreknowledge is achieved—something he and other advocates of the strategy he advances had hoped to avoid.

In his much-discussed recent series of articles, Trenton Merricks (2009, 2011a) has championed a solution to an age-old problem concerning the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom which crucially involves the dependency thesis that God's beliefs about the future actions of human persons asymmetrically depend on the future actions of those persons. Storrs McCall (2011) and Jeremy Westphal (2011) have defended similar approaches which also feature such a dependency thesis, though my paper will be focused on Merricks's approach. While Merricks's solution (as well as those of Storrs and McCall) has been criticized for a variety of reasons,¹ no one has yet criticized it for this dependency thesis which is at its heart. In fact, those who have criticized his view have granted that this dependency thesis "seem(s) just fine" (Fischer and Tognazzini 2012: 11). But the dependency thesis is not just fine. Or, more exactly, Merricks's defense of it is not just fine. What Merricks says in favor of the dependency thesis is clearly inadequate on its own. And, while there are some prospects for attempting to remedy the inadequacy in his defense of this thesis, these prospects are ones which would involve him in the project of articulating and defending theories about the mechanics whereby divine foreknowledge is achieved. This result is important because it is very natural (see more below) for one to get the impression from Merricks's writings that the solution he offers to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is supposed to be adequate quite independently of the success of some theory of the mechanics of divine foreknowledge. What I am

¹ See Fischer and Tognazzini (2012), Fischer and Tognazzini (2013), and Garrett (2012).

arguing here is that one should not give in to this impression. Despite Merricks's efforts, the question of how God's foreknowledge might be achieved should remain at the forefront of discussions of the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

Merricks appeals to the dependency thesis in response to the following argument for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom:

- (1) Jones has no choice about: God believed *that Jones sits at t* a thousand years ago.
- (2) Necessarily, if God believed *that Jones sits at t* a thousand years ago, then Jones sits at time *t*.
- (3) So, Jones has no choice about: Jones's sitting at *t*.

Since there is nothing special about Jones here, the argument can be generalized to present a threat to human freedom *simpliciter*. In response to the argument, Merricks writes:

My objection to this argument builds on an idea that goes back at least to Origen, who says: ' . . . it will not be because God knows that an event will occur that it happens; but, because something is going to take place it is known by God before it happens.' Similarly, I say that God has certain beliefs about the world because of how the world is, was, or will be—and not vice versa. For example, God believes *that there are no white ravens* because there are no white ravens, and not the other way around. God believed, a thousand years ago, *that Jones sits at t* because Jones will sit at *t*, and not the other way around (2009, 52).

After appealing to this dependency thesis that God's belief *that Jones sits at t* depends upon Jones's sitting at *t*, Merricks employs the thesis to offer two objections to the argument represented in (1)-(3). First, given the dependency thesis, he argues that claim (1) is question-begging. It is question-begging because the claim that Jones has no choice about God's belief *that Jones sits at t* presupposes that Jones doesn't have a choice about that on which God's belief depends. But, given the dependency thesis, God's belief *that Jones sits at t* depends upon Jones's sitting at *t*. So, claim (1) presupposes claim (3)—that Jones has no choice about Jones's sitting at *t*. Second, claim (1) is false, since Jones *does* have a choice about Jones's sitting at *t* and, given the dependency thesis, God's belief *that Jones sits at t* depends on Jones's sitting at *t*.

Unlike other authors, I do not wish to challenge the use to which Merricks wishes to put the dependency thesis. I instead wish to challenge his justification for appealing to the dependency thesis in the first place. Certainly Merricks's objections to the argument of (1)-(3) are only as plausible as the dependency thesis. My concern is that Merricks has not shown this thesis to be plausible, and that any attempt on his part to show that it is plausible would require entering the fray with those who wish to articulate and defend an account of the mechanics whereby

divine foreknowledge is achieved—something Merricks appears to think is unnecessary.

Merricks says shockingly little in defense of the dependency thesis. Insofar as he provides any defense of the dependency thesis at all, it seems to come in the paragraph already quoted above. Attempting to understand this passage as presenting a defense of the dependency thesis rather than simply a statement of the thesis without a defense, the best I can do charitably reconstruct Merricks's reasoning is the following:

- (4) Either God's beliefs about what human persons do at future times depend on what human persons do at future times or what human persons do at future times depends on God's beliefs about what human persons do at future times.
- (5) What human persons do at future times does not depend on God's beliefs about what human persons do at future times.
- (6) So, God's beliefs about what human persons do at future times depend on what human persons do at future times.

The problem with this reasoning is that claim (4) is a false dilemma. In addition to the possibility that God's past beliefs about future human acts depend upon those future acts and the possibility that these future human acts depend upon God's past beliefs about these acts, there is the possibility that God's past beliefs about future human acts depend upon some past way the world was that provided God with evidence concerning the future occurrence of these acts.

This third option—that God's past beliefs about future human acts depend on some past way the world was that provided evidence concerning these future acts—is well-illustrated by what are widely regarded to be the two leading models of the mechanics whereby divine foreknowledge is achieved (see Kvanvig 2013). First, there are Theological Determinist models of foreknowledge according to which God's beliefs about what human persons will do in the future depend on the state of the world in the past together with the deterministic laws that govern the world. A thousand years ago, for example, God believed *that Jones sits at t* because the world was a certain way a thousand years ago and had deterministic laws ensuring that Jones will sit at *t*. Second, there are Molinist models of foreknowledge, including (interestingly enough!) the Molinist view favored by Merricks (2011b) himself, according to which God's beliefs about what persons will do depend not on what persons will do, but on how the world was in the past. For instance, on Merricks's Molinist view, God's belief a thousand years ago *that Jones sits at t* depends upon (i) the world's having a "subjunctive aspect" a thousand years ago of being such that were Jones in circumstances *C*, Jones would sit and (ii) God's intention a thousand years ago to bring about circumstances *C* at time *t*.

In the series of papers to which this article is responding, Merricks has nothing to say against these Determinist and Molinist models of providence. Nor does he have anything to say about why alternative accounts of the mechanics of divine foreknowledge that do fit into one of the two options in premise (4) are preferable to these Determinist and Molinist accounts. Thus, to the extent that he

offers a defense of the dependency thesis in these papers, that defense is inadequate. Merricks needs either to offer some support for claim (4), or to offer an independent defense of the dependency thesis.

Now, I think there are in fact some options available to Merricks whereby he might both address this false dilemma and improve his defense of the dependency thesis. For, it is open to Merricks to articulate some alternative account of the mechanics whereby God obtains infallible foreknowledge of the future acts of human persons where these past divine beliefs do depend on what human persons will do in the future, and to argue that this account of the mechanics of divine foreknowledge is preferable to the Determinist and Molinist accounts surveyed above. If Merricks were able to do this successfully, then there would be some justification for endorsing claim (4). Indeed, if he were to do so successfully, he would have a straightforward defense of (6) that needn't even appeal to (4). Moreover, there are some prospects for such a defense. For example, Merricks might appeal to a perceptual model of divine foreknowledge according to which God foreknows the future by virtue of being related to the future via something analogous to perception. Or, he might go for a version of Molinism according to which the past truth of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom depends upon what creatures will do in the future.²

There are serious difficulties facing such approaches, of course. For example, the perceptual model seems to commit its proponent to backward causation, as perceiving something plausibly involves a causal relation running from the perceived to the perceiver; and Merricks himself wishes to avoid commitment to backward causation (2009, 54). The version of Molinism alluded to has been charged with explanatory circularity,³ and it conflicts with Merricks's own Molinist views. My goal here is not so much to press these objections, however. My goal is simply to point out that the success of Merricks's project rests upon his successfully defending some such theory about the mechanics whereby foreknowledge is achieved as superior to the Determinist and Molinist accounts surveyed above. He cannot simply appeal to the reasoning of (4)-(6) without engaging in this project and expect his readers to grant that he has found an adequate solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. He must instead defend the dependency thesis by providing an attractive account of how it is that God's beliefs about what persons will do depend on what they will do.

This result is important, as I said in the introduction, for two reasons. First, it is very natural to get the impression from Merricks's work that his solution is supposed to be adequate quite independently of any detailed defense of an account of the mechanics of divine foreknowledge. This seems to be clear from the facts that (i) Merricks's stated thesis is that the truism that truth depends upon the world "undermines a traditional threat to freedom" (2009, 31) and (ii) his argument in defense of this thesis never engages with the question of the mechanics whereby divine foreknowledge is achieved. Assuming that he thinks the defense of his thesis

² For a thorough discussion of Molinist views, including a discussion (though not an endorsement) of this view, see Flint (1998).

³ See, e.g., Adams (1977).

he has offered is adequate, it follows that he thinks that he can adequately show the argument from (1)-(3) to be undermined without engaging in the project of articulating an account of the mechanics of divine foreknowledge. Moreover, in his (2011a), Merricks describes his approach as a “new way to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom” (567); but it is hardly a new way to reconcile these if his approach involves articulating and defending an account of the mechanics of divine foreknowledge such as those described above. Thus, the result is important because it shows that Merricks and any who would be tempted to follow him are incorrect in thinking that his objections to arguments for theological fatalism are adequate independent of providing an account of the mechanics of divine foreknowledge.

The second reason this result is important is simply that it provides just one more reason for us to direct our attention to the mechanics of divine foreknowledge. As has been argued elsewhere (see Byerly 2012 and 2014), directing our attention to this topic is already amply motivated. So, let us indeed focus our efforts there.

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