There is a quite general and challenging argument for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom to do otherwise, and a parallel argument for the incompatibility of causal determinism and human freedom. These arguments both rely on a principle which expresses the "fixity" of the past—the fact that we don't have the power to "determine" or "affect," in any way, the past. For instance, it is now not "up to me" (or anyone) whether John F. Kennedy existed, was president, and was assassinated: I have "no choice" about these facts. "History," Steven Daedelus said, "is a nightmare from which I am trying to escape." The past is a shadow which stalks us always. It is like the dog's tail, which follows the dog wherever it goes. The argument for incompatibilism seems to imply that the compatibilist is committed to an extravagant and bizarre claim—that we have power over the past.

But the compatibilist wishes to distinguish between what is bizarre (that we have one kind of power over the past) and what he is committed to (that we have another kind of power over the past). That is, the compatibilist claims that, whereas one can't causally affect the past, one can (sometimes) so act that the past would have been different from what it actually was. Further, certain compatibilists have offered examples which they claim establish that we can have the sort of power in question. They claim (i) that these examples show (in a non-question-begging way) that human agents can have it in their power so to act that the past would have been different from what it actually was, and (ii) that if so, incompatibilism is defeated.

In this paper I shall first set out the incompatibilist's "basic argument." I shall then present the compatibilist's response. I intend to show that the examples do not exhibit the inadequacy of incompatibilism. At best, they show that one version of the incompatibilist's argument is unacceptable.
But I shall develop an alternative formulation of the argument which is not threatened by the examples of “power over the past.” My project is not to argue that the incompatibilist’s argument is sound. Instead, I am simply exposing the failure of a strategy which is widely believed to show, in a non-question-begging way, that the incompatibilist’s argument is unsound.

I. The Basic Argument for Incompatibilism

There is an argument, first sketched by Boethius, which appears to show that God’s foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom. That is, if God exists and has certain properties (plausibly thought to be divine attributes), then it would seem that no human agent is free to do anything other than what he actually does. The argument has been articulated and discussed recently by Nelson Pike. I shall now develop a version of the basic argument; this version is strongly suggested by Pike’s formulations, but it is slightly different.

I shall assume here that “God” is a proper name (rather than a disguised definite description or “title-term”) and that God is essentially omniscient and essentially eternal. God’s eternality here is construed as “semipiternity” or everlastingness—existence at all times. And God’s omniscience implies that, for any proposition P and time T, God believes at T that P just in case P is true at T. Further, God is essentially omniscient. That is, it is necessarily true that God believes that P just in case P is true; in all possible worlds in which God exists, he is omniscient. Of course, God is traditionally thought to have other attributes as well, but for the purposes of this discussion, it is not necessary to specify the complete set of divine attributes.

The incompatibilist introduces a principle which expresses the “fixity of the past.” The appropriate version of the principle, according to the incompatibilist, is:

\[(FP) \text{ For any action } Y, \text{ agent } S, \text{ and time } T, \text{ if it is true that if } S \text{ were to do } Y \text{ at } T, \text{ some fact about the past relative to } T \text{ wouldn't have been a fact, then } S \text{ can't at } T \text{ do } Y \text{ at } T. \]

The basic argument for incompatibilism is as follows. We suppose that God exists and that Jones refrains from performing some ordinary act X (such as mowing his lawn) at time T2. It follows from God’s omniscience and eternality that God believed at T1 that Jones would refrain from doing X at T2. Now, consider the conditional.

(1) If Jones were to do X at T2, then God would have held a false belief at T1.
This conditional must be false. Remember that we have been assuming that “X” names some ordinary act such as an act of mowing the lawn; thus, “Jones does X” is, at least, logically possible. Because the antecedent of (1) is logically possible and its consequent impossible (in virtue of God’s essential omniscience), (1) must be false. (In terms of the possible-worlds semantics for conditionals—to be elaborated below—in the closest possible world(s) in which the antecedent is true, the consequent is false.)

Thus, one of the following conditionals must be true:

(2) If Jones were to do X at T2, then God would have held a different belief from the one He actually held at T1, or

(3) If Jones were to do X at T2, then God would not have existed at T1.

But if (2) is true, then (via (FP)) Jones can’t at T2 do X at T2. And similarly, if (3) is true, then Jones can’t at T2 do X at T2 (again, in virtue of (FP)). This completes the incompatibilist’s argument; the conclusion is that if God exists, then Jones can’t do other than he actually does at T2, and the result is obviously generalizable to any human action.

There is an argument which is structurally similar to the one just presented which purports to show that causal determinism rules out human freedom. The argument also employs a fixity-of-the-past principle. I shall not explicitly set out this argument here. Rather, I shall concentrate on the argument from God’s omniscience. I believe, however, that exactly the same sort of analysis will apply to the use of (FP) in both the argument from determinism and the argument from divine omniscience.

One sort of reaction to the basic argument denies one of its assumptions—that God is temporal. If God is atemporal, his omniscience isn’t foreknowledge, and the basic argument doesn’t get off the ground. I shall not discuss this “Boethian-Aquinean” strategy here. Also, one might deny that “future contingents” are determinately true or false. Thus, a temporal, omniscient God wouldn’t have foreknowledge (of contingent propositions), since these are not true (prior to the times they are “about”), and thus there is nothing to be known (in advance). I shall not discuss this “Aristotelian” strategy here.

Also, one might follow William of Ockham in claiming (i) that (FP) only applies to a sub-class of facts about the past: the “non-relational,” “genuine,” or “hard” facts about the past, rather than the “relational,” “spurious,” or “soft” facts; and (ii) that such facts as God’s actual belief at T1 and even God’s existence at T1 are mere “soft” facts. This sort of attack on incompatibilism might be called “Ockhamism,” and I have criticized it elsewhere.
I shall not discuss Ockhamism here. Rather, I shall assume that God's belief (and his existence) are "genuine" or "hard" facts about the past. The sort of compatibilist strategy of response to the basic argument which I shall be discussing here claims that (FP) is unacceptable (even as applied to hard facts); thus, it would be a cogent response (if it works) to incompatibilism, even if the Ockhamist were wrong and God's belief (and God's existence) turn out to be hard facts. (Further, the incompatibilist about causal determinism and freedom uses (FP) with respect to indisputably hard facts; Ockhamism clearly cannot support the compatibilist response to this argument).

The basic argument for incompatibilism is quite general and powerful, and there is a parallel argument for the incompatibility of causal determinism and freedom. In the next section I shall develop a kind of example which has been brought forth to challenge the fixity of the past principle (FP), and in the following sections I shall evaluate this challenge and discuss its relationship to incompatibilism.

II. The Salty Old Seadog

In order to refute (FP), we need an example in which an agent can at T so act that the past relative to T would have been other than what it actually was. That is, we need an example in which both a "can-claim" and a "backtracking conditional" are true—it is both true that A can at T do some act X and if A were to do X at T, then some (hard) fact about a time prior to T wouldn't have been a fact.* And in order for the example to establish that (FP) and also the incompatibilist's argument are to be rejected, it must be uncontroversially true in the example that both the "can-claim" and the conditional are true. We cannot, for instance, simply presuppose compatibilism in asserting the "can-claim" without begging the question at issue. I shall present my own example which purports to be a counter-example to (FP), and then compare it with various similar examples which have been proposed.

Consider the salty old seadog. Each morning at 9:00 a.m. (for the past forty years) he has called the weather service to ascertain the weather at noon. If the "weather man" says at 9:00 that the weather will be fair at noon, the seadog always goes sailing at noon. And if the weather man says that the weather won't be fair at noon, the seadog never goes sailing at noon. The seadog has certain extremely regular patterns of behavior and stable psychological dispositions—he is careful to find out the weather forecast, is not forgetful, confused, or psychologically erratic, and whereas he loves to go sailing in sunshine, he detests sailing in bad weather.

Further, let us not make any assumptions about God's existence or any special theological assumptions. Also, we assume that causal determinism does not obtain. (These assumptions will allow us to avoid begging the
question against the incompatibilist.) That is, let us imagine that various factors (values, desires, beliefs, etc.) “explain” or “rationalize” the seadog’s choices and actions, but do not causally determine them. (We may even assume that there is universal causation without its being deterministic causation.) Of course, an incompatibilist should be able to accept the denial of determinism at least as a coherent possibility: even if he believes that determinism actually obtains, he should be able to imagine a world in which it doesn’t obtain (and the seadog’s behavior is “based on” or “explained by” values, etc. in a non-random way).^  

It is now noon, and at 9:00 this morning the seadog called the weather service and was told that the weather at noon (and after) would be horrible, that there would be torrential rains. The seadog is healthy and alert, and his sailboat is ready to go. Bearing in mind the weather forecast, he decides at noon not to go sailing. But can he at noon go sailing this afternoon? Given that the seadog is not coerced, hypnotized, manipulated electronically, deceived, etc. (and causal determinism is false), it seems that the seadog certainly can go sailing at noon. It’s just that he doesn’t go sailing: he makes a rational choice not to do something which he, nevertheless, has the power to do. He has the freedom, as it were, to be crazy (or at least to act crazily).

In order to have a counterexample to (FP), not only must the “can-claim” be true, but also the relevant backtracking conditional must be true. It might be suggested that

(C1) If the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then the weather man would have told him at 9:00 that the weather would be fair at noon.

is true in the example. If so, then (given that the weather man actually told the seadog at 9:00 that the weather would be bad at noon), we would have a counterexample to (FP). But it is not so clear that (C1) is true in the example. After all, if the seadog were to go sailing at noon, it might have been the case that the seadog misunderstood the weatherman at 9:00, or that he forgot at 9:30 what the weather man had said at 9:00 (and falsely believed that he had said that the weather would be fair at noon), etc. That is, if the seadog were to go sailing at noon, any of an indefinite number of things might have gone differently (from the way they actually went) prior to noon. We might say that a conditional with an indefinitely long disjunctive consequent would be true in the example:

(C2) If the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then either the weather man would have told him at 9:00 that the weather would be fair at noon, or the seadog would have (incorrectly)
understood the weather man to have said at 9:00 that the weather would be fair at noon, or . . .

(C2) can be expressed as follows:

(C2) If the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then some fact about some time prior to noon wouldn’t have been a fact.

Of course, (C2) is just as menacing to (FP) as (C1), given the truth of the can-claim. If (C2) is indeed true in the example, then it would seem that we have a non-question-begging counterexample to (FP)—an example in which it would have to be conceded (even by a libertarian) that both the pertinent can-claim and the backtracking conditional are true.

But it is not even clear that the example is a case in which (C2) is true. After all, it seems that it might be the case that if the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then, whereas the past would have been exactly as it actually was, he would be acting “out of character” at noon. That is, what is alleged to underwrite the truth of (C2) is the seadog’s stable psychological disposition—given that he believes at noon that it will rain at noon, he is strongly disposed to refrain from sailing at noon. But it could be one’s view that if he were to go sailing at noon, then he might be acting contrary to his normal inclination—perhaps he would be exhibiting a temporary insanity or some sort of temporary bout of irrationality. (Remember that, in the example, the seadog’s choices and actions are not causally determined by his values, dispositions, etc.) At least, it seems that (C2) cannot be uncontroversially asserted as true in the example; rather, we need to replace it with:

(C3) If the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then some fact about the past relative to noon might not have been a fact.\(^\text{10}\)

(C3) seems to be true in the example. And of course, in contrast to (C2), (C3) does not straightforwardly support the claim that the example of the seadog is a counterexample to (FP). Does the weakening of (C2) to (C3) provide an adequate defense of (FP) and thus the incompatibilist’s argument? Many might think so, but I believe that the answer is no. The example seems to me to threaten the intuitions which support (FP). That is, if one accepts that it is a conceptual truth that (FP) is true, then it seems to me that one must also accept that it is a conceptual truth that

\((FP')\) For any action \(Y\), agent \(S\), and time \(T\), if it is true that if \(S\) were to do \(Y\) at \(T\), some fact about the past relative to \(T\) \(might\) not have been a fact, then \(S\) can’t at \(T\) do \(Y\) at \(T\).
Whatever intuitions about the “fixity” of the past (the fact that the past is “fully accomplished” and “over-and-done-with”) lead one to accept (FP) should also lead one to accept (FP’). Whatever makes one think that the “backtracking would-conditional” is inconsistent with the can-claim should also make one think that the “backtracking might-conditional” is inconsistent with the can-claim. (C3)’s truth in the example, then, constitutes a threat to (FP) in virtue of the following: if one accepts (FP), one must also accept (FP’), and (C3) together with the can-claim which is true in the example provide a counterexample to (FP’). Thus, the example of the salty old seadog poses a problem for the incompatibilist, even if only (C3) and not (C2) is true in the example.

Various compatibilists have presented examples structurally similar to my example of the seadog. They have all claimed that, in the examples, the backtracking would-conditionals are true. That is, they have claimed that the analogues of (C2) and not merely (C3) are true in the examples. I have pointed out that this sort of claim is not obviously true. Nevertheless, I have claimed that all that’s necessary in order to threaten (FP) (in virtue of threatening a principle one must accept if one accepts (FP)) is the truth of (C3) (or its analogues). Since all the compatibilists who have offered such examples have claimed that the analogues of (C2) and not merely (C3) are true in the examples, I shall begin (in Section IV) by agreeing, for the sake of argument, that such conditionals (the backtracking would-conditionals) are true, and developing the incompatibilist’s response. I shall then point out how a similar response can be given, on the assumption that only (C3) and its analogues (the backtracking might-conditionals) are true. I shall thus begin by making an assumption extremely congenial to the compatibilist and developing the appropriate response, and then I shall make the assumption less controversially licensed by the examples and develop a parallel response. But before I develop the response by the incompatibilist, I wish (in Section III) to locate my example within a tradition of compatibilist attempts to undermine (FP). I claim that the examples share a common structure—the structure of the example of the salty old seadog.

III. Other Counterexamples to (FP)

John Turk Saunders offers a number of examples which purport to be counterexamples to (FP). Here is his presentation of one such example:

Suppose that I know that my friend believes that I will do X, and that I am the sort of person who, in a situation like this, would not want to let down, and would not let down, a friend who believes that I am going to do X. Suppose that I am the sort of person who, in a situation like this, would want to refrain from X, and would refrain from X, only if my friend had not believed that I was going to do X. Then we may properly say that I would refrain from X only if the past had been different, i.e., only if my friend had not held a belief that in fact he
did hold. I have the power to refrain from X, and this is a power that I would want to exercise, and would exercise, only if the past had been different in that a belief that was held had not been held. So my power to refrain from X is a power so to act that (to perform an act such that if it were performed) the past would have been different in that a belief that was held would not have been held. And what is contradictory in this?^{11}

It is clear that this example—Saunders' example of the "solicitous friend"—has the same structure as the example of the salty old seadog. Saunders is clearly saying that both the can-claim, "I have the power to refrain from X," and the backtracking would-conditional, "If I were to refrain from X, then the past would have been different in that my friend wouldn't have had the belief he actually had" are true in the example. It would follow that (FP) must be rejected. Just as above, it is unclear whether the would-conditional is true in the example, rather than only the might-conditional, "If I were to refrain from X, then the past might have been different." But as above, I would claim that even the might-conditional poses problems for the incompatibilist.

Consider also Saunders' similar example of the "careful historian":

Suppose, for example, that Ben Franklin would have been President of the United States only if George Washington had not existed. Suppose that I am the sort of person who, in a situation like my current situation, would assert that Franklin was President only if Washington had not existed. I have the ability (know-how and resources) to make this assertion and the conditions for its exercise are quite normal. So it is in my power to make this assertion. I therefore have the power to perform an act that I would perform only if the past had been different in that a person who did exist had not existed. Thus it is proper to say that I have the power so to act that (to perform an act such that if I were to perform it) the past would have been different in that a person who did exist would not have existed.^{12}

It is obvious that the example of the careful historian is similar to those of the solicitous friend and salty old seadog. Saunders' cases are alleged to be clear cases in which a human agent can so act that a belief which was actually held in the past wouldn't have been held, or a person who actually existed in the past wouldn't have existed. If these claims really are true in the examples, then the argument for the incompatibility of God's omniscience and human freedom would be blocked. Robert Young presents two examples which closely follow Saunders' examples: Young's examples are those of the "solicitous husband" and his own "careful historian."^{13}

I shall now briefly consider one sort of response to Saunders' examples.^{14} One might deny that Saunders has presented an example in which the pertinent backtracking conditional—even a might-conditional—is true. Take, for instance, Saunders' case of the careful historian. Saunders claims that this is a case in which it is true that if I had said that Ben Franklin was the first President, then George Washington would not have existed. But surely there is a sense in which this is false, even if I am hopelessly sincere and
accurate. There is an interpretation of the conditional on which it is true that if I had said that Ben Franklin was the first President, I would have been wrong! And this seems to be the "dominant" or "standard" interpretation of such conditionals, the interpretation which is germane to (FP). Other expressions would say what the conditional, "If I had said that Ben Franklin was the first President, then George Washington would not have existed," is "trying" to say much more naturally: "I wouldn't have said Ben Franklin was President unless he had been" or "I would have said he was President only if he had been." Saunders, in giving his example, uses the "only if" construction, assuming, apparently, that "P only if Q" is equivalent to "if P then Q." This equivalence may do for some purposes, but it won't do for English. Thus, it might be argued that the backtracking conditional (in either the "would" or "might" form) is not true in Saunders' example.

I am not certain exactly what to say about this response. That is, I do not have a clear view about which conditional is actually true in Saunders' example. Further, it is not clear to me that a similar response (denying even the might-conditional) can plausibly be given to my example of the salty old seadog. It seems to me that it is essentially controversial what to say about the conditionals in these examples. Of course one way to defend incompatibilism would be simply to deny that even the might-conditionals are true in any of the examples. This is a possible strategy, one which has been overlooked by various proponents of compatibilism. But since it is unclear what to say about the conditionals in the examples, it would be useful to have a defense of incompatibilism (against the sorts of examples discussed here) which doesn't depend on denying the backtracking conditionals.

The examples show at least that there might be a sense in which we have power over the past. If we do indeed have such a power, then incompatibilism is threatened. In the next section, I shall take this threat seriously, and I shall develop a response on behalf of incompatibilism.

IV. The Incompatibilist's Response

I have discussed various examples which purport to be counterexamples to (FP) and thus to defeat incompatibilism. In all of these examples, it is claimed that both a can-claim and an appropriate backtracking conditional are true. In developing a response to these examples, I shall focus primarily on the example of the seadog. (I believe that the discussion applies equally to all the examples.) In the example, it is granted that the can-claim, "The seadog can at noon go sailing at noon" is true. Further, I shall begin by making the assumption that the backtracking would-conditional, "If the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then some fact about the past relative to noon wouldn't have been a fact," (C2), is also true.
In order to produce the incompatibilist's response, I shall discuss a way of describing the example in terms of its underlying metaphysics. This discussion will lead to a cogent sort of response to the compatibilist. It is quite obvious that the “can” of freedom expresses a kind of modality, and it is extremely plausible to suppose that can-claims (claims about what an agent is free to do) should be analyzed as, or at least, correspond to, statements about the relationship between the actual world and other possible worlds. That is, very roughly, it is natural to say that an agent can do X just in case there exists a possible world, “suitably related” to the actual world, in which he does X. Of course, there is considerable disagreement about how to specify the “suitable” relationship employed here, but one can agree with the general idea that can-claims, being modal claims of a certain sort, correspond to claims about possible worlds, without further specifying the nature of the relation.

Also, a subjunctive conditional, being another kind of modal claim, is very naturally given a possible-worlds semantics. On this sort of approach, a conditional, “If P were the case, then Q would be the case,” corresponds to the following kind of claim: “In the possible world(s) in which P is true which bear a kind of proximity relation to the actual world, Q is also true.” The proximity relation may be “most similar to,” or “minimally different from,” etc. I shall assume, then, that the semantics for the would-conditional, “If P were the case, then Q would be the case” are: “In all the possible worlds in which P is true which are most similar to the actual world, Q is also true.” And the semantics for the “might-conditional,” “If P were the case, Q might be the case” are: “In at least one of the possible worlds in which P is true which are most similar to the actual world, Q is also true.”

Now, using the sort of apparatus sketched above, let us see how to describe the example of the seadog. The incompatibilist claims that the possible-worlds analysis of freedom must be filled in (partially) as follows: “Agent A can at T do X at T only if there exists a possible world with the same past relative to T as the actual world and otherwise ‘suitably related’ to the actual world in which A does X at T.” This is a crucial claim about the appropriate form of the possible-worlds account of freedom. And it is critically important to note that nothing in the example of the seadog or any of the other similar examples calls this claim into question. What the example purports to show is that it is coherent to suppose that both a can-claim and the relevant backtracking would-conditional are true, but it does not purport to show anything about the account of the can-claim.

Let me explain this point more fully. The compatibilist says, about the example, that it is true that if the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then the past would have been different from what it actually was. That is, in all possible worlds in which the seadog goes sailing which are most similar to the actual world, the past (relative to noon) is different from that of the
actual world. Now the compatibilist also claims that it is uncontroversially true that the seadog can at noon go sailing at noon. That is, the claim is that there is some possible world “suitably related” to the actual world in which the seadog goes sailing at noon. Of course, from the fact that the backtracking would-conditional is true in the example, nothing follows about the way we must “fill in” the notion of “suitably related” in the account of “can.” In particular, nothing about the example (or any of the examples) suggests that from the truth of the backtracking conditional, it follows that the incompatibilist’s way of specifying the account of “can” is unacceptable. Thus, nothing about the examples rules out the incompatibilist’s suggestion that the seadog can go sailing at noon only if there exists a possible world with the same past as the actual world in which the seadog goes sailing at noon.

It is important to notice that the two claims, “In all possible worlds in which the seadog goes sailing at noon which are most similar to the actual world, the past relative to noon is different from the past relative to noon in the actual world” and “There exists a possible world w with the same past relative to noon as the actual world and otherwise suitably related to the actual world in which the seadog goes sailing at noon” are perfectly compatible. Of course, it follows that w is not in the set of possible worlds in which the seadog goes sailing at noon which are most similar to the actual world. That is, it requires more of a departure from the actual world to get to a possible world with the same past as the actual world (relative to noon) in which the seadog goes sailing at noon than it does to get to a world with a different past (relative to noon) than in the actual world in which the seadog goes sailing at noon. The “can” of freedom and the subjunctive conditional are both modalities, but different ones, and they “point us” to different possible worlds; the possible world in virtue of which the can-claim is true needn’t be in the set of possible worlds relevant to the assessment of the conditional.

Of course, I have not established that the incompatibilist’s way of specifying the account of freedom is the correct one, and to simply assert it would clearly be question-begging. All I am pointing out is that the compatibilist’s examples discussed above provide absolutely no reason to think that it is wrong. I wish to explain this claim more carefully. In the example of the seadog, it seems uncontroversial and clearly acceptable (even to the incompatibilist) that the seadog can go sailing at noon, even though he was actually told at 9:00 that the weather would be bad at noon. But what makes us think that this can-claim is unquestionably true is that we believe that the seadog can go sailing despite being told at 9:00 that the weather would be bad at noon. That is, we think that the seadog can at noon act irrationally and out of character, knowingly doing what he normally wouldn’t do. (Of course, we also know that he won’t do so). What is uncontroversially and clearly true, then, is that the seadog can actualize a possible world
whose past relative to noon is just like that of the actual world but in which he goes sailing at noon. If the world which he can actualize had a different past from the actual one, then it wouldn't be true that the seadog can act out of character—that he has the power to act crazily. But this is the sort of can-claim that's uncontroversially true in the example.

Of course, the compatibilist will deny the incompatibilist's account of freedom, but his example doesn't provide any support for the denial. What the incompatibilist will agree to, and what the example provides support for, is that (a) there exists a possible world with the same past relative to noon as the actual world in which the seadog goes sailing at noon, and (b) in all possible worlds in which the seadog goes sailing at noon which are most similar to the actual world, the past relative to noon is different from that in the actual world.

I have given an interpretation of the example using the possible-worlds framework, and this account supports the coherence of the compatibilist's claim that in the example, a can-claim and a suitable backtracking would-conditional are both true. It appears, then, that (FP) should be rejected, and it seems that incompatibilism is in jeopardy. I believe that the example may indeed show that (FP) is to be rejected, and thus, that the incompatibilist's argument, as presented above, is not obviously sound. But the metaphysical interpretation developed in this section suggests an alternative formulation of the incompatibilist's argument. I shall now present this formulation of the argument, and I shall point out that it is in no way threatened by any of the compatibilist's examples.

We make the same assumptions about God's attributes as before. And again, we assume that God exists and that Jones refrains from performing some ordinary act X (such as mowing his lawn) at time T2. As above, it follows that God believed at T1 that Jones would refrain from doing X at T2. Now the incompatibilist introduces a new version of the fixity of the past principle, (FP*), which embodies the incompatibilist's account of "can" discussed above:

\[(FP*) \text{ An agent can at } T \text{ do } X \text{ at } T \text{ only if there exists some possible world with the same past relative to } T \text{ as the actual world in which the agent does } X \text{ at } T.\]

Given (FP*), if Jones can at T2 do X at T2, then there exists a possible world with the same past as the actual world relative to T2 in which Jones does X at T2. But in any world with the same past relative to T2 as the actual world, God believed at T1 that Jones would refrain from doing X at T2. So if Jones can at T2 do X at T2, there exists a possible world in which God believed at T1 that Jones would refrain from doing X at T2 and in which Jones does X at T2. But, in virtue of God's essential omniscience, there is no such world. It follows that Jones can't at T2 do X at T2. As above, this argument is a quite general and powerful incompatibilist argument.
Let me summarize. An argument for incompatibilism can be made using (FP). But a set of examples appears to undermine (FP). I have granted that these examples might impel one to reject (FP). But there is another fixity-of-the-past principle, (FP*); this principle seems to express the incompatibilist’s conception of the fixity of the past better than (FP), and it generates another version of the incompatibilist’s argument. As argued above, none of the examples discussed here in any way threatens (FP*). They are all cases in which it is alleged that both a can-claim and a suitable backtracking conditional are true. What is uncontroversially true in the examples is that there exists a possible world w with the same past as the actual world in which the agent performs the action in question. And since “can” and the conditional are different modalities, w needn’t be in the class of possible worlds relevant to the assessment of the conditional. It should be apparent, then, that whereas the examples might undermine (FP), they do not provide any reason to doubt (FP*).

Further, it is obvious that (FP*) is not threatened, if it is only the backtracking might-conditional that is true in the examples. If the backtracking might-conditional is true, then there exists at least one possible world, among those in which the antecedent holds which are most similar to the actual world, in which the past is different from that of the actual world, but it doesn’t follow that in the possible world w pertinent to the can-claim, the past is different from what it actually was.

The reformulation of the incompatibilist’s argument is appealing in that it shows that one’s views about free will need not depend on one’s intuitions about certain conditionals. In thinking about the examples presented above, it is apparent that there can be disagreements about whether the backtracking conditionals are true. Some might insist that not even the backtracking might-conditionals are true in the examples. But whereas there can be legitimate disagreement about the conditionals, I believe that one’s views about the can-claims do not depend on one’s views about the conditionals. By using (FP*) instead of (FP), we usefully separate the issue of freedom from the question of the truth of the conditionals.

V. Conclusion

I have set out a general argument which employs a fixity-of-the-past principle, (FP), and which concludes that God’s omniscience is incompatible with human freedom. I claimed that there is a parallel argument from causal determinism to the incompatibility result. I have discussed a class of examples which purport to block incompatibilism by showing that (FP) is unacceptable. I have argued that these examples do not show that the basic argument for incompatibilism is unsound, but only that one formulation of it might need to be rejected. The examples are quite useful insofar as they challenge a very natural and plausible way of formulating the incompatibilist argument. But there is another equally powerful version of the
argument which is not threatened by the examples. This version of the argument employs (FP*), the claim that when one is free to perform some act, there exists a possible world of a certain sort (i.e., with the same past as the actual world) in which one does perform it. It is interesting to note that the examples discussed here show that (FP) and (FP*) are not equivalent; that is, contrary to what might have been thought, (FP*) is not simply an alternative formulation of (FP).

Now a compatibilist might reject (FP*) on the basis of a rejection of the general claim that freedom is a modal notion which can be interpreted in terms of statements about possible worlds. But this sort of move would need some kind of justification, in the absence of which it would appear to be ad hoc. Also, a compatibilist might deny that (FP*) specifies the correct sort of possible-worlds account of freedom; after all, nothing which I have said establishes that when a person can perform an act, there must be a possible world with the same past as the actual world in which he performs it. I wish to emphasize that I have not attempted to establish (FP*) and thus to provide reason to accept incompatibilism. Rather, my strategy has been to show that an interesting class of examples which apparently undermine (FP) and one version of the basic argument for incompatibilism do not undermine (FP*) and another version of the argument. Thus, these examples do not decisively defeat incompatibilism.

We might have one sort of power over the past, but it doesn’t follow that we have the kind required by compatibilism. Thus, even if one commitment of the compatibilist is not extravagant, another commitment has been exposed, which, for all that has been said, might be unpalatable. History is a nightmare from which the compatibilist cannot easily escape. The past is like the dog’s tail, and according to the incompatibilist, it is the tail that wags the dog.18

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NOTES

1For a recent development of such an approach, see: Martin Davies, “Boethius and Others on Divine Foreknowledge,” Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 64 (October, 1983), pp. 313–329.


4Implicit here is the principle that if “If A were the case then B or C would be the case” is true, then either “If A were the case then B would be the case” or else “If A were the case then C would be the case” is true. This principle does not hold on all semantics for condi-
tionals. However, the principle is not essential, since “If Jones were to do X at T2, then God would have held a different belief from the one He actually held at T1 or God wouldn’t have existed at T1” can be ruled out directly by (FP).


6Of course, it is controversial whether this really was Aristotle’s view. Prior presents a related strategy in: Arthur Prior, “The Formalities of Omniscience,” Philosophy, 1962, pp. 114–129.


^One might distinguish two styles of “backtrackers”:

(i) If . . . then the past would have been different.
(ii) If . . . then the past would have had to have been different.

I do not believe that it makes a difference to the argument discussed here which style is employed.

8If a theorist believes that the lack of causal determination renders the notion of freedom to do otherwise incoherent, then he will not accept the example, but the example will be uncontroversially acceptable to a broad range of incompatibilists, particularly to “libertarians.” Note that in assuming here that the example is one in which determinism fails to hold, all we are committed to is the coherence of the lack of determinism. This is clearly consistent with believing that determinism actually obtains.

9Of course, the conditional, “If the seadog were to go sailing at noon, then he would be acting out of character” is just as controversial as (C2). It might be one’s intuition that this conditional is true, but it certainly is not evident that it is. If one believes that this conditional is true, then the purported counterexample to (FP) clearly fails. In this paper I shall not assume that it is true, since this would obviously be highly controversial. Rather, my strategy will be to interpret the example in the way most congenial to the compatibilist’s intuitions, and show that, even so, the example doesn’t exhibit the inadequacy of incompatibilism.


11Robert Young, Freedom, Responsibility, and God (London: The MacMillan Press, 1975), pp. 183–184. Alvin Plantinga discusses similar examples in his manuscript. “On Ockham’s Way Out.” He presents such examples as that of “Paul and the ant colony” and an example similar to “Newcomb’s Problem.” I believe that all of these examples—including the class of “Newcomb-type” cases—have the same structure and thus are amenable to the kind of analysis presented below in this paper. Hence I believe that none of the Newcomb-type cases supports compatibilism. That is, the analysis presented in this paper shows that Newcomb-type cases are irrelevant to the free will debate, properly construed.

12Here I am deeply indebted to comments by Robert Stalnaker.


Of course, the sentence, “The seadog can at noon go sailing at noon despite being told at 9:00 that the weather would be bad at noon” is ambiguous. On one reading, the sentence says that, even though he was told at 9:00 that the weather would be bad at noon, the seadog has the “simple” power at noon to go sailing at noon. On the second reading, the sentence ascribes a certain sort of complex power to the seadog, the power at noon to make it the case that (although he was told at 9:00 that the weather would be bad at noon, he goes sailing at noon). On the second reading, the power is a power to make it the case that a conjunction obtains, by making it the case that the second conjunct obtains; the seadog is alleged to have the power at noon to make it the case that “he was told at 9:00 that the weather would be bad at noon and he goes sailing at noon” obtains. Now, what is uncontroversially true in the examples is the second claim, and the second claim is entirely consistent with the incompatibilist’s account of “can.”

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