Suppose we offer an argument for \( p \), which consists of two premises, \( q \) and \( r \), a defense of those two premises, and a defense of the claim that those two premises together entail \( p \). If you think our argument goes wrong in some way, and you feel inclined to engage us in philosophical conversation (rather than, say, laugh in our faces and walk away, which would also be a “response” to our argument in some sense), you might object in any of the following ways:

1. “One of the premises of your argument is false. Here’s why…”

2. “Your premises may be true, but your defense of them is inadequate. Here’s why…”

3. “Your premises don’t actually entail your conclusion. Here’s why…”

4. “Your premises may entail your conclusion, but you haven’t shown that they do. Here’s why…”

In other words, you might object that our argument is unsound (because it has a false premise or is invalid), or at least that we have failed in our attempt to defend its soundness (because our defense of its premises or its validity is faulty in some way).
Note, however, that in order for us to have a genuinely constructive conversation about the argument, the “Here’s why…” part of your objection is crucial. To simply respond by asserting, say, that \( q \) is false, without further explanation, is to stop the conversation altogether. But certain ways of filling in the ellipsis after “Here’s why…” will also fail to engage constructively with our argument. Suppose you respond to the argument as follows: “One of the premises of your argument is false. Here’s why: the two premises together entail \( p \), but \( p \) is false.” This objection may be correct, of course, but it’s not a constructive way to respond in the dialectical context. At best, it’s a way of saying simply that although you are suspicious of our argument, you’re not really sure what to say in response. And that’s fine; it just doesn’t help us to make any progress.

Recently, however, three authors have, independently, given something like this “response” to an old and venerable skeptical argument, mistakenly thinking that they are defeating the argument in the process. The argument in question is one purporting to show that divine omniscience is incompatible with freedom, and the authors are Storrs McCall (2011), Trenton Merricks (2009; 2011), and Jonathan Westphal (2011). In what follows, we first situate the incompatibility argument in its appropriate dialectical context, and then we explain why the supposedly distinctive way of responding proposed by these three authors is not only not distinctive, but also not even a proper response.

1. The old and venerable argument in question is one that purports to establish the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom from certain plausible suppositions about the nature of God and the nature of humans. It goes back thousands of years, but in our time the argument was given new life by Nelson Pike (1965). Here’s an initial rough statement of the argument that we will make more precise below:

Suppose that God exists and is both essentially omniscient (he knows all true propositions and can’t believe anything false) and sempiternal (existing “in time” rather than “outside of time”, as Boethius and Aquinas thought). From these two (controversial but widely-accepted) suppositions it follows that God truly believed, 1000 years ago, that we would be writing these words. But if God truly believed, 1000 years ago, that we would be writing these words, then it looks like we

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1 As will become clear below, it turns out that McCall is responding to a slightly different argument than are Merricks and Westphal, but it will be instructive to consider all three responses together.
were not free to refrain from writing them, since such freedom would amount to our being able to do something (namely refrain from writing) such that God would not have truly believed, 1000 years ago, that we would be writing these words. But such an ability is either logically impossible (if its exercise is understood as having the consequence that God would have believed something false) or metaphysically impossible given the nature of human freedom (if its exercise is understood as having the consequence either that God didn’t exist or that God believed something different 1000 years ago). Thus, if God exists and is both essentially omniscient and sempiternal, then we did not freely write these words—and, more generally, no human has the freedom to do otherwise.

To make this statement more precise, and to clarify exactly what premises and inferences are needed and how one might go about defending them, we’ll now examine the reasoning more carefully. (It will be important to keep in mind, however, that the resulting argument consists not only of the numbered propositions we display in what follows, but also of the commentary on those propositions.) We will identify possible legitimate responses to the argument as we go along, which will put us in a good position to understand how the “responses” of McCall, Merricks, and Westphal are meant to fit in.

The argument begins with God’s omniscience, which is a notoriously difficult concept to articulate precisely. We can avoid all of these complications, however, since all the argument requires is this claim:

1. For any true proposition describing a human action, God believed that proposition even before the relevant human was born.

This is clearly not a statement of full-blown omniscience, and this more minimal claim might be defended in any number of ways. Here’s one natural way: to be omniscient is, at the very least, to believe everything that’s true and nothing that’s false. Moreover, there is, and always has been, a comprehensive and unchanging set of truths about the past, present, and future. God, then, if he exists, believes and

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2 Cf. Peter van Inwagen’s remarks about his argument in chapter 3 of his 1983, p. 69.

3 In fact, an even more minimal claim would arguably serve just as well, namely: (1*) For any action any human performs, God has always believed that she would perform it. This is closer to the way Pike (1965) himself formulated the premise, and it has the virtue of not committing the proponent of the argument to any controversial theses about whether propositions can change their truth value over time. (Thanks to Patrick Todd for bringing this to our attention.) But (1) will serve our purposes.
always has believed all of these truths, including those that describe human actions.

The argument has just begun, but already some will want to get off the boat, and it will be worthwhile to pause for a moment to see why. We made (at least) three controversial claims in the last paragraph: (a) that God believes everything that’s true, (b) that there is and always has been a comprehensive set of truths about the past, present, and future, and (c) that the set of truths in question is and always has been unchanging. We also presupposed a fourth controversial claim, namely (d) that it makes sense to talk about God’s past beliefs. Each of these four claims corresponds to one possible legitimate way of responding to the incompatibility argument that we are constructing.

First, one might think that there are some true propositions—specifically, true propositions about future free actions—that God fails to know (Hasker 1989; van Inwagen 2008). Second, one might think that some truths about the future lack truth values altogether (as Aristotle allegedly argued in a disputed passage of *De Interpretatione*), and hence that God doesn’t necessarily foreknow truths about free actions since there are none to know (see Rhoda, et al. 2006). Third, one might think that truths about what will happen in the future are liable to change depending on what happens in the present, and hence that there may be some truths describing human actions that have only become true relatively recently, so that God did not foreknow them in the remote past (Geach 1977; Fischer, et al. 2009; Todd 2011). Finally, one might think that God is “outside of time”, and hence his beliefs stand in no temporal relationship at all (whether before, simultaneous with, or after) to human actions (as Boethius and Aquinas thought; see Stump and Kretzmann 1991). All of these views provide a platform from which to develop an objection to (1) above because they are all ways of rejecting that God has the relevant sort of foreknowledge needed to drive the argument.4

For those still left “in the boat”—that is, for those who take a standard view of God’s omniscience and are happy to construe it as

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4 Each view rejects the foreknowledge claim for a different reason, of course, though we find it helpful to think of the first three views as versions of open theism, since each will have to say something rather complicated and surprising about God’s omniscience in general (surprising, at least from the perspective of traditional thinking on omniscience). Peter van Inwagen (2008, p. 81), for example, explicitly says that he will “engage in some permissible tinkering with the concept of omniscience”. The Thomistic view according to which God is “outside of time”, on the other hand, denies foreknowledge, strictly speaking, but need not say anything surprising about God’s omniscience more generally.
genuine foreknowledge—we can continue with the argument. If God’s omniscience is taken, as it usually is, to imply that necessarily, God believes $p$ only if $p$, then some particular instance of (1) will entail the occurrence of some particular human action. Now think about the particular human—Eva, say—and ask whether she is able to do otherwise than perform the action that God truly believed, before she was born, that she would perform. What would it mean if she were able to do otherwise?

2. If Eva is able to do otherwise, then (given the entailment relation between God’s past belief and her action) that means she is able to do something such that, were she to do it, either: (1) God would have believed something false before she was born, (2) God would have had a different belief before she was born, or (3) God wouldn’t have existed before she was born.

The reasoning that supports this premise is relatively straightforward. If Eva is able to do something other than the action God in fact believed, before she was born, that she would perform, then there must be some world accessible to her in which she does that other action. But what would that world look like? Well, given that God’s actual past true belief entails her actual action, this other world must have a different past, in some sense. Either God’s past belief in this world is false, or else God believes something different, or else God isn’t around to believe anything at all.\footnote{As Pike points out, it’s hard to see what other alternatives there could be. He says that this premise is an “analytic truth” (1965, pp. 34–35).}

But now the question becomes: are any of these alternative worlds accessible to Eva as she deliberates about what to do in her actual circumstances? Let’s take the cases one by one. First, is Eva able to do something such that, were she to do it, God would have held a false belief? Clearly not; at least, not if we accept the relatively uncontroversial claim that omniscience is one of God’s essential properties—i.e., that God can’t believe anything false. So:

3. Eva is not able to do something such that, were she to do it, God would have believed something false before she was born.

So far, if you were still “in the boat” after premise (1), then you’ll likely still be in the boat after premises (2) and (3), as well. But the next case is trickier.
Second, is Eva able to do something such that, were she to do it, God would have had a different belief before she was born? There’s good reason to think not, and it has to do with the fact that God’s belief about Eva’s action lies in the past relative to her action itself (and her deliberations about whether to act). The basic idea, to be spelled out more below, is simply that we can’t so act that the past would have been different, because the past is already “over-and-done-with” (Pike 1966, p. 370). And in fact, this same reason—that the past is fixed—will help us to see why Eva is also unable to do something such that, were she to do it, God wouldn’t have existed before she was born. So what is this idea that the past is fixed?

As a first approximation, the idea here is simply that when Eva is deliberating about what to do, she has to take for granted that her choice will not affect what has already happened, since what has already happened is now completely out of her control. For example, she can’t now do anything about the fact that JFK was assassinated in 1963. The idea that we can’t change the past seems obviously true if it’s just the idea that we can’t do anything that would cause the past to be different than it in fact was. But the fixity of the past is even stronger than this, according to the proponent of the incompatibility argument we are constructing: Eva can’t even do anything which is such that, were she to do it, the past would have been different. In other words, the idea of the fixity of the past tells us that if the only worlds in which Eva does something other than the action that God in fact, before her birth, believed that she would perform are worlds with a different past than the actual world, then Eva can’t do otherwise. In (still) other words: to figure out which actions Eva can (now) perform, we need to hold fixed the actual past. Any alternative actions that require a different past are now beyond her control.

If it’s true that the past is fixed (and we’ll see a couple of objections to the idea below), then we get two more premises of the incompatibility argument:

4. Eva is not able to do something such that, were she to do it, God would have held a different belief before she was born.

and

5. Eva is not able to do something such that, were she to do it, God would not have existed before she was born.

And here’s where more people will get off the boat. Not with premise (5)—whether God existed before Eva was born does clearly seem to be
something outside of her control\textsuperscript{6}—but with premise (4); or, more specifically, with the defense of premise (4) that appeals to the fixity of the past. It will be instructive for us to look at the dissenting views here, especially because this is where all of the authors we criticize below abandon ship.

One complaint about the idea that the past is fixed is that, if it is stated in full generality, we have no reason to believe that it’s true, and thus the proponent of the incompatibility argument loses his only defense of premise (4). The main reason for thinking that the past is fixed, as we saw above, comes from reflecting on aspects of the past like the assassination of JFK, which just seems to be something we can’t now do anything about. But not all aspects of the past are relevantly similar to the assassination of JFK. Consider, for example, the fact that the assassination of JFK occurred 49 years before we wrote this paper. Given the operative assumptions—in particular, the assumption that there is and always has been a comprehensive set of truths about the past, present, and future—this fact relating the assassination of JFK to our writing this paper was true even 49 years ago. And yet it seems like we did have control over this fact: in particular, if we had waited until next year to write this paper, then although it was (and is) a fact that JFK was assassinated 49 years before we wrote this paper, it wouldn’t have been a fact.

So, reflection on examples like the assassination of JFK doesn’t allow us to conclude, in full generality, that the past is fixed. Rather, all we are entitled to is the idea that certain aspects of the past are fixed—in particular, those aspects of the past that are not related to the future in the way that the fact relating JFK’s assassination to our writing this paper seems to be. It’s a vexed question how to articulate this distinction precisely, but one way to put the point is to say that only \textit{temporally intrinsic} features of the past are fixed. Or, to use more technical terminology, only \textit{hard facts} about the past are fixed. Fortunately, we don’t need to give a full account of the distinction at work here (i.e., the distinction between temporally intrinsic and temporally extrinsic features of the past, or between hard facts and soft facts) in order to see how it helps some people to reject the incompatibility argument.

So, let’s not use the fully general claim that the past is fixed to support premise (4). Instead, let’s use the restricted claim that the \textit{hard
past is fixed. So long as God’s belief, before Eva was born, that she
would perform the action in question is more like the assassination of
JFK than it is like the relationship between the assassination of JFK
and our writing this paper, then even the restricted fixity of the past
idea will allow us to assert premise (4). But is God’s past belief a hard
feature of the past?

This is where Ockhamists resist the incompatibility argument. After
helping the proponent of the incompatibility argument refine it by
restricting the idea that the past is fixed, the Ockhamists maintain, nev-
evertheless, that although the hard past is fixed, God’s past beliefs are
not hard, and thus even the restricted fixity of the past idea fails to
support premise (4). But why think that God’s past beliefs fail to be
hard? There’s a huge literature on this question, but again, we need not
go into the details. The basic idea here is just that God’s past beliefs
are, after all, beliefs about what will happen in the future, and it is in
virtue of this (together with the fact that God’s beliefs must be true)
that they are not intrinsic features of the past but instead bear some
sort of relation to the future, as well.

But there’s another way to get off the boat at this point. Whereas
the Ockhamists grant that the hard past is fixed and deny instead that
God’s beliefs are hard, the multiple-pasts compatibilists maintain that
even the restricted fixity of the past idea is false: there’s no need to
hold even the hard past fixed when evaluating what Eva can do. This
is the same strategy of response employed by some compatibilists about
causal determinism and the freedom to do otherwise, and it relies on a
particular (and particularly controversial) way of understanding abili-
ties, but again, we need not go into the details. If you are willing to
allow that Eva is able to do something such that, were she to do it,
even the hard past would have been different, then you can block the
incompatibility argument under consideration.

Now, for everyone still left in the boat—that is, for those who
accept the traditional view of divine foreknowledge and who reject Oc-
khamsim and multiple-pasts compatibilism—we come, finally, to the
conclusion:

6. So, Eva is not able to do otherwise than what God actually
believed, before she was born, that she would do.

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7 For a start, see the essays in Fischer 1989.
8 See Fischer 1994 for discussion.
And, of course, the conclusion generalizes to all human action. The passengers who remain on board, then, might understandably have a sinking feeling at this point.

2.

It is this argument—or, at least, a version of this argument—that McCall, Merricks, and Westphal claim to defeat, and though they all state their objections in slightly different ways, the objections are structurally similar. Each author appeals, in his own way, to an idea that was articulated by Luis de Molina (in his *Concordia Liberi Arbitrii*):

> It was not that since He foreknew what would happen from those things which depend on the created will that it would happen; but, on the contrary, it was because such things would happen through the freedom of the will, that he foreknew it; and that He would foreknow the opposite if the opposite was to happen (Mourant 1954, p. 426).9

The idea here is that God’s beliefs depend in a particular way on what happens in the future. And these three authors think that this basic idea can help us construct a new way of responding to the incompatibility argument. We will argue, however, that although the basic idea might well be right, it either doesn’t help at all in responding to the argument, or, at the very least, it doesn’t help in any new way.

We’ll start by considering Merricks, simply because he develops the idea in most detail. After our critique of Merricks, we’ll show how the same critique applies to McCall and Westphal.

In his recent paper, “Truth and Freedom”, and in a follow-up reply to critics, “Foreknowledge and Freedom”, Trenton Merricks has argued that the incompatibility argument fails for two reasons: first, it begs the question, and second, it has a false premise. We won’t discuss the first objection here (but see Fischer and Todd 2011, with whom we agree), and instead will focus on the second.10 The premise Merricks objects to, at least on our way of regimenting the argument, is premise (4). In particular, Merricks appeals to Molina’s idea that God holds his beliefs because of what happens in the future to argue that Eva does have a sort of control over God’s past belief. Let’s look at what he says.

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9 As Merricks (2009: 52) notes, this point goes back to Origen’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*.

10 Given what Merricks says in his 2011, it is clear that he would not accuse the version of the argument we presented above with begging the question, since we have made explicit appeal to the idea that the past is fixed. In his 2009, the argument he accuses of begging the question did not explicitly appeal to this idea.
Merricks starts by drawing our attention to “a truism about truth,” namely that truth depends on the world, not the other way around. He says:

Despite the many controversies surrounding truth, it should be uncontroversial that a claim, if true, is true because the world is the way that claim represents the world as being, and not vice versa. Again, it should be uncontroversial that that there are no white ravens is true because there are no white ravens, that dogs bark is true because dogs bark, that there were dinosaurs is true because there were dinosaurs, and so on (Merricks 2009, p. 31).

Merricks claims that if we give this truism its due, and supplement it in certain ways, then we can construct a “new way to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom” (Merricks 2011, p. 568). Briefly, here is how that “new way” is meant to go.

First, we extend the truism about truth to God’s beliefs, as well. The basis of Molina’s insight from above, in fact, seems to be the idea that God’s beliefs (and beliefs more generally) depend on the world just as truth depends on the world. So, we can say, as Merricks does:

...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. And God believed, a thousand years ago, that Jones sits at t because Jones will sit at t, and not the other way around (Merricks 2009, p. 52).

Now we take a corollary of the truism about truth—“for all S and all p, if S has a choice about what p’s truth depends on, then S has a choice about p’s truth” (Merricks 2009, p. 42)—and we extend it to the case of God’s beliefs as well, so we end up with this: for all S and all God’s beliefs b, if S has a choice about what God’s having belief b depends on, then S has a choice about whether God has belief b (Merricks 2009, p. 53).

According to Merricks, these two elements—the truism and its corollary, both extended to the case of God’s beliefs—give us a way to resist incompatibility arguments like the one presented at the beginning of this paper. Here’s how we do it: first, we say that Eva has a choice about performing the action that God in fact believed, before she was born, that she would perform. Then we observe that God’s belief that Eva will perform a certain action depends on whether Eva does in fact perform that action. Finally, we invoke the corollary to conclude that Eva therefore has a choice about God’s past belief. In other words, premise (4)—the claim that Eva is not able to do something such that,
were she to do it, God would have held a different belief before she was born—is false.\footnote{Merricks does not word things exactly as we have here, but it is clear from what he says that our wording captures his reasoning (Merricks 2009, pp. 53–55). This same sort of reasoning, Merricks claims, also shows that a crucial premise in the argument for \textit{logical fatalism} is false (Merricks 2009, pp. 39–45).

Note, too, that we here equate having a choice about God’s past beliefs with having counterfactual power over them. In “Truth and Freedom”, Merricks denies that having counterfactual power over a past event is sufficient for having a choice about that past event. He says:

\begin{quote}
Suppose that I cleaned my house yesterday because my brother is going to visit tomorrow. Suppose that my brother’s visiting will be done freely. Suppose that in the ‘nearest world’ in which he does not visit tomorrow, he never intended to visit. And suppose that, in that world, he never told me that he was going to visit. So in that world I did not clean the house yesterday. And so, if my brother were not to visit me tomorrow, I would not have cleaned the house yesterday.
\end{quote}

Given these suppositions, my brother is now able to do something (namely, not visit me tomorrow) such that, if he were to do it, I would not have cleaned the house yesterday. That is, my brother has ‘counterfactual power’ over my cleaning the house yesterday. Some might conclude that my brother now has a genuine choice about whether I cleaned the house yesterday. But, for what it is worth, this seems to me to be the wrong conclusion. I conclude, instead, that having counterfactual power over a past event is not sufficient for having a genuine choice about whether that past event occurred (Merricks 2009, p. 49).

But we do not see any argument here—just an assertion. Why exactly does Merricks think that the conclusion in question is the “wrong” conclusion? On the contrary, we do not think it in any way problematic to suppose—as is standard—that having counterfactual power of a past truth is indeed sufficient for having a (genuine) choice about that past truth. Nothing in Merricks’s remarks gives any reason to depart from standard usage here—a usage that seems entirely reasonable.

This argument for the falsity of premise (4) invokes three crucial claims: first, that Eva has a choice about performing the action in question; second, that God’s belief that she will perform that action depends on her actual behavior; and third, that if Eva has a choice about performing the action that God’s belief depends on, then Eva has a choice about God’s belief. The second and third claims seem just fine: there does seem to be some relevant sense of ‘depend’ according to which God’s beliefs about Eva’s future actions depend on those very actions, and having a choice about what God’s beliefs depend on does plausibly seem sufficient for having a choice about God’s beliefs. But notice that the plausibility of the last claim—the “corollary”—derives from more than just the dependence relation between God’s belief and Eva’s actions. It \textit{doesn’t} say merely that if God’s belief depends on Eva’s action, then Eva has a choice about God’s belief—and it \textit{doesn’t} say this because this is false. If Eva doesn’t have a choice about the action in question—if, say, the action was produced through some
manipulation or electronic stimulation of her brain—then although God’s belief would presumably still depend on her action, she wouldn’t have a *choice* about God’s belief. So, Merricks’s argument for the falsity of premise (4) requires the claim that Eva has a choice about performing the action in question.\(^{12}\)

But it is puzzling how Merricks thinks he can help himself to such a contention, since Eva’s freedom is precisely what is at issue—it is exactly what is called into question by the incompatibility argument. In this context, the crucial claim that Merricks needs for his objection to premise (4)—the claim that Eva’s action is free—is dialectically unavailable, since it is precisely what the incompatibility argument is seeking to establish. So, the problem with Merricks’s “new way to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom” is simply that it begs the question.\(^{13}\)

Since charges of begging the question are tricky business, it may help to make our worry a bit more explicit by articulating how the dialectical situation looks from our vantage point. (Perhaps this is not how it looks from Merricks’s vantage point, but if not, then we would need to hear why not.) The incompatibilist about foreknowledge and freedom presents an argument, like the one we presented above, which relies crucially on various controversial claims, including the traditional view of God’s foreknowledge, the fixity of the past, and the claim that God’s beliefs are part of that fixed past. An opponent of the argument might reject any of these claims—as open theists, multiple-past compatibilists, and Ockhamists do—but in order for these responses to count as ways of *productively engaging* with the incompatibility argument, as opposed to merely dismissing it, they must be motivated by more than the falsity of the incompatibilist’s conclusion. The open theist, for example, cannot simply say that since Eva is free, God must not have foreknowledge in the traditional sense.\(^{14}\) Without some independent reason to think that God fails to have foreknowledge in the traditional

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\(^{12}\) Merricks himself explicitly admits this point (2011, pp. 571–572): “I defend the claim that it [the above-specified kind of dependence] is the relevant sort of dependence by showing that because some of God’s past beliefs depend in this way on an agent’s future free actions, that agent thereby has a choice about God’s having had those past beliefs.” Note, in particular, that Merricks states that the dependence in question must be on an agent’s future *free* actions.

\(^{13}\) Given that whether Eva has a choice about her action is precisely what is in question, it just might seem totally incredible that Merricks would simply help himself to this claim. Here we stick to what Merricks actually says, but below we consider two interpretations of his argument according to which he does not illicitly assume that Eva has a choice about her action.

\(^{14}\) On this point, see Todd (MS).
sense, such a response would beg the question, since its crucial premise is simply the denial of the incompatibilist’s conclusion.\textsuperscript{15}

But it looks like this is precisely how Merricks responds to the incompatibility argument. He begins with the claim that Eva has a choice about the relevant action, and ends with a denial of the fixity of the past (our premise (4)). Nothing we have said rules out the possibility that the incompatibility argument does fail because premise (4) is false, but to argue for the falsity of premise (4) in the way that Merricks does seems clearly inappropriate in the relevant dialectical context.\textsuperscript{16}

Consider the following passage from Merricks, which is an attempt to motivate his response to the incompatibility argument:

Suppose I said that you have no choice about whether you will eat lunch at noon tomorrow. And suppose I added that you have no such choice as a result of the following: first, at noon tomorrow, God will believe that you are then eating lunch; and, second, you have no choice about what God will believe at noon tomorrow. You ought to object as follows: you have a choice about whether you will eat lunch at noon tomorrow; whether God will believe, at noon tomorrow, that you are eating lunch depends...on whether you will be eating lunch then; therefore, you have a choice about whether God will believe, at noon tomorrow, that you are eating lunch then (Merricks 2011, p. 573).

Merricks is here considering a skeptical argument purporting to show that free action is not constrained by God’s beliefs when those beliefs are contemporaneous with the action, but he thinks the same response applies to our incompatibility argument as well, even though it puts God’s beliefs in the past. Merricks says, “I think that [Eva], even now, has a choice about what God believed a thousand years ago.” And Merricks’s reason for thinking this is as follows:

[My] reason is that, first, [Eva] has a choice about [her action], and, second, God’s having—even a thousand years ago—the belief that [Eva performs the action] depended on [Eva’s] sitting at t. This is in

\textsuperscript{15} Of course, it is perfectly appropriate for one’s response to the incompatibility argument to be motivated by one’s conviction that its conclusion is false. But to engage productively with the argument, one has to take that motivation and find some independent reason that the argument fails.

\textsuperscript{16} We note that Nelson Pike, in his original 1965 articulation of the incompatibility argument, considers and rejects the sort of response that Merricks wants to give, though Pike considers it as it is originally stated by Molina. Pike’s response (pp. 38–40) is essentially the same as ours: the claim that Eva acts freely is both (a) needed for the response to work and (b) inappropriate in the dialectical context. Pike makes this point simply by saying that although the point about dependence is in order, the claim about Eva’s freedom of choice will strike the proponent of the incompatibility argument as gratuitous.
all relevant respects just like the case above, in which you have a choice about God’s believing, at noon tomorrow, that you are then eating lunch (Merricks 2009, p. 54).17

Notice, first, that the proponent of the incompatibility argument we have outlined will think that there is, pace Merricks, a relevant difference between this case and the “case above” (the contemporaneous case). In particular, since the incompatibilist’s worry stems from the fact that God’s beliefs in the past are connected to one’s actions tomorrow, the incompatibilist will think that the timing of God’s beliefs makes a crucial difference. The fixity of the past is, after all, the fundamental “driver” of the incompatibilist’s argument. But second, notice that in both cases, Merricks simply helps himself to the claim that the relevant agent has a choice. This, as we emphasized above, is the very claim at issue in the context of the incompatibility argument. It is thus hard to see how this is a serious and productive engagement with the incompatibility argument.

At the end of the paper, we’ll consider two ways to defend Merricks (and the others) from this charge of dialectical impropriety, but for now we’ll show how our criticism of Merricks also applies to the structurally similar arguments of McCall and Westphal.

3.

McCall frames his response in terms of “the supervenience of truth upon events”, but he makes it clear that he has in mind the same asymmetrical relation of dependence as Merricks.18 He first invokes something like Merricks’s truism about truth when he says that “the truth of true empirical propositions depends on what occurs in space and time, but what occurs in space and time does not depend on what propositions are true” (McCall 2011, p. 502). He then invokes a similar truism about God’s omniscience when he says that “the reason why God knows that X does A is that ‘X does A’ is a true proposition” (McCall 2011, p. 505).

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17 Where Merricks used ‘Jones’, we have used ‘Eva’, just for the sake of continuity with the rest of our paper.

18 One oddity about McCall’s article is that he explicitly begins with the Thomistic, atemporal, conception of omniscience, rather than the sempiternal conception that takes seriously the ‘fore’ in ‘foreknowledge’ (McCall 2011, p. 503). As we pointed out above, this move by itself plausibly undermines the incompatibility argument, since if God’s beliefs aren’t past with respect to the human action in question, the alleged fixity of the past has no role to play. (Though there may still be an analogous fixity principle to drive an analogous argument.) For this reason, we will ignore this oddity of McCall’s treatment. The rest of his response is structurally similar to the response that Merricks and Westphal give, and so is still of interest for our project here. However, perhaps the McCall we are criticizing is not the real McCall.
these two truisms together gives us the following: “The reason why God knows that X does A is that X does A” (McCall 2011, p. 505).

Now, keeping all of this in mind, McCall argues that God’s omniscience thus does not constrain what Eva can do:

The idea that God’s knowing that [Eva will perform the relevant action] should somehow limit what [Eva] can or can’t do runs counter to the supervenience of truth, for what God knows depends on what is true, and what is true depends in turn on what obtains, including what capacities obtain, in the domain of events. To suppose the opposite, and maintain that the way the world is depends on what is true, or on what God knows, violates supervenience by reversing the dependence relation. To repeat, truth depends on events, and events do not depend on truth. I can freely tie my shoelace at noon, and as a result of my free act, God knows from all eternity that I tie it. Truth-supervenience implies the compatibility of free will with omniscience (McCall 2011, p. 504).

We hope it is clear that McCall’s response here is essentially the same as the response that Merricks gives. McCall does not explicitly invoke the claim that Eva’s action is free in order to derive the conclusion that she has control over what God believes, but his response here clearly requires it. For if Eva’s action is not free, then the mere fact that God’s belief supervenes (depends) on Eva’s action will not tell us anything about whether Eva has a choice about God’s belief (as we pointed out above). Again, though, the claim that Eva’s action is free is not available in this dialectical context. Truth-supervenience (dependence) only implies the compatibility of free will and omniscience if we suppose that the action on which God’s belief depends is free in the first place. But that is precisely what we cannot suppose.

Perhaps McCall is misled here by the fact that his reasoning relies on a false dichotomy, namely that either we say that Eva’s action is unfree because “the world depends on what is true, or on what God knows” or we say that Eva’s action is free because “what God knows depends on what is true, and what is true depends in turn on what obtains”. But the proponent of the incompatibility argument need not think that “the world depends on what is true, or on what God knows”. Rather, the proponent can agree with McCall about the appropriate direction of dependence, but simply argue that what God knows nevertheless constrains what Eva can do because of the fixity of the past.19 So it’s not

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19 We note again that we are ignoring McCall’s stipulation that God’s knowledge is of the Thomistic, atemporal variety, since the incompatibility argument as we have presented it requires the falsity of this stipulation in order to get off the ground in the first place.
the case that the proponent of the incompatibility argument must deny truth-supervenience (dependence); it’s simply that truth-supervenience can’t all by itself deliver the compatibility of omniscience and freedom, at least not without supposing—illegitimately—that Eva acts freely in the first place.

4.

We now turn to Jonathan Westphal’s recent treatment of the incompatibility argument. Westphal does explicitly discuss the fixity of the past, but he argues for the following dilemma: suppose, first, that the past is fixed, and that Eva has already performed her action. Well then it follows straightaway that Eva cannot do otherwise, since her action has already been performed and hence is out of her control (by the fixity of the past). Suppose, on the other hand, that the past is fixed, and that Eva has not yet performed her action. (This is the crucial horn for our purposes.) In that case, Westphal says, it is still possible for her to do otherwise, and hence it is false that she has no choice about God’s past belief.

Westphal argues for the latter horn of this dilemma in the same way as our previous authors:

The Argument from Divine Foreknowledge makes us overlook [the] obvious point...that God’s antecedent knowledge of the future is contingent upon the facts that will obtain, rather than the other way around...[Eva’s ability to do otherwise] is not a matter of changing the past, or of ‘control’ in any sense that involves causation. The ‘control’ here is more like the way in which the argument of a function ‘controls’ the image (or output) of the argument under the function, as it is said in mathematics. It is merely a matter of logical consistency (Westphal 2011, pp. 249–250).

Although Westphal does not explicitly use the words ‘supervenience’ or ‘dependence’, it seems clear that he is invoking the same ideas as McCall and Merricks. What God believes depends on what Eva actually does (as the output of a function depends on the input), and so the only thing beyond Eva’s control is the conditional that if God believes that she will perform a particular action, then she will perform it (and its contrapositive). But the fixity of this fact does not go any distance toward showing that God’s beliefs themselves are fixed in any way that

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20 Westphal doesn’t explicitly discuss Pike’s version at all (though he does wrongly attribute a straw version of the incompatibility argument to Pike at the end of his paper), but it seems clear that his response to our reconstructed version would be the same as Merricks’s and McCall’s.
threatens Eva’s control over them (since she has control over her own actions).

Again, though, in order for this line of reasoning to rebut premise (4)—the premise stating that God’s past belief is fixed—Westphal needs to say that Eva’s action is free. Merely pointing to the dependence relation won’t yield the compatibility of omniscience and freedom, since, at most, Eva only has a choice about those aspects of the past that depend on her free actions. So without the illegitimate presupposition that Eva’s action is free, Westphal cannot claim that she has a choice about God’s past beliefs, even if it’s true that God’s past beliefs depend on what Eva does in the future.

5.

In sum: Merricks, McCall, and Westphal each attempt to construct a response to the incompatibility argument by using Molina’s insight that God’s beliefs depend on the world (rather than the other way around), but their responses all fail to respect the relevant dialectical context by presupposing the very thing that is called into question by the incompatibility argument, namely Eva’s freedom. This does not show that God’s foreknowledge and freedom are incompatible—there are, after all, several legitimate ways to respond to the argument we have presented in this paper—but it does at least show that one ought not to respond as these three authors have.

Before we conclude, however, it may be helpful to consider two possible ways of saving Merricks, McCall, and Westphal from our charge of dialectical impropriety, which, after all, is typically just an expository or rhetorical failing. Perhaps there is a way to use their basic insight (that is, Molina’s insight) about the dependence of God’s beliefs on the world to construct a legitimate (that is, non-question-begging) response to the incompatibility argument. We’ll make two suggestions on behalf of these authors, but we will argue that neither suggestion amounts to “a new way to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom” (Merricks 2011, p. 568).

First, perhaps the appeal to dependence is meant to form the basis of a sort of Moorean Shift argument along the following lines:

I am more confident of the fact that Eva (and humans generally) sometimes acts freely than I am of premise (4) of your argument. Moreover, I am also more confident of the fact that God’s beliefs depend on the world than I am about premise (4) of your argument. Thus, I offer my own argument, as follows: (1) Eva sometimes acts freely; (2) God’s past beliefs depend on Eva’s actions; therefore (3) Eva sometimes has a choice about God’s past beliefs. We can now
leaves it to an idealized agnostic to decide which of our competing arguments to endorse.²¹

If this is what Merricks, McCall, and Westphal have in mind, then it is certainly buried deep inside their exposition, which is quite explicitly intended to show how the incompatibility argument makes a logical mistake. Still, perhaps this is, in the end, the way they would want to express their point.

We don’t have any particular objection to this Moorean Shift argument other than that it is rather uninspiring, and goes no distance toward showing that proponents of the incompatibility argument have made any sort of mistake or logical blunder. Moorean Shift arguments are always possible in philosophy—the intimate relationship between modus ponens and modus tollens is part of the charm of philosophical arguments—and we’re not confident that there is anything further to be said once someone gives one. At the very least, they don’t advance a debate in any interesting way (though they do bring up interesting independent issues about philosophical methodology), and they more or less just serve to crystallize a disagreement, rather than reason through a disagreement. So, if this Moorean Shift argument is what Merricks, McCall, and Westphal are up to, then we have no objection, though we feel a bit oversold.

Another possibility is that our three authors are proposing a move similar to the move that the Ockhamists propose. Recall from above that the Ockhamists first forced us to refine the fixity of the past idea, since they pointed out that the strongest principle supported by our JFK example is only that the hard (or temporally intrinsic) past is fixed, not that every aspect of the past is fixed. The Ockhamists then agreed to the modified fixity of the past idea, but argued that nothing about God’s past beliefs could be derived from it, since God’s past beliefs are not hard.

Perhaps Merricks, McCall, and Westphal are taking the Ockhamist move one step further.²² That is, perhaps they are saying that even the restricted fixity of the past idea is implausible, and that all our JFK example really supports is that the independent past is fixed, regardless of hardness or softness. One way to distinguish between the assassina-

²¹ For an insightful discussion of how “idealized agnostics” might help with dialectical issues in philosophical debates, see Van Inwagen 2008, lecture 3.

²² We wish to emphasize that we are here presenting a charitable reconstruction of the views of Merricks, McCall, and Westphal. Frankly, there is nothing in the expositions presented by the three authors that suggests that they are aware of the dialectical issues we have raised or embrace this reconstruction. Indeed, Merricks is at pains to distance himself from Ockhamism, upon which he pours a considerable amount of scorn.
tion of JFK, on the one hand, and the fact that JFK was assassinated 49 years before we wrote this paper, on the other hand, is to say that the former is hard whereas the latter is soft—this is the Ockhamist’s way. But another way to distinguish between the two is to say that the former does not depend on the future whereas the latter does depend on the future, in precisely the sense of ‘depend’ that our three authors invoke. Our authors might then agree to this modified fixity of the past idea, but they will argue, much like the Ockhamist, that nothing about God’s past beliefs can be derived from it, since (some of) God’s past beliefs clearly depend on what happens in the future.

If this is the move that Merricks, McCall, and Westphal are trying to make, then they are guilty of no dialectical impropriety, since this move does not require presupposing that Eva acts freely. Rather, it is simply analogous to the Ockhamist response. In fact, we’re inclined to think that it just is the Ockhamist response, at least on a certain understanding of Ockhamism.

One way to understand Ockhamism is as the general view that, once we figure out how best to distinguish between JFK’s assassination and the fact that JFK was assassinated 49 years before we wrote this paper, we’ll be able to block the incompatibility argument by pointing out that God’s past beliefs are more like the latter than they are like the former. One way to draw the distinction is in terms of temporal intrinsicality, but perhaps another is in terms of dependence. On this way of articulating the Ockhamist project, Merricks, McCall, and Westphal (on our charitable revision of their arguments) are just articulating a version of Ockhamism.

But another way to understand Ockhamism is as the specific view that the best way to distinguish between the two relevant JFK facts is in terms of temporal intrinsicality, and that since God’s beliefs are temporally extrinsic, we can block the incompatibility argument at the defense of premise (4). On this way of articulating the Ockhamist project, our three authors are not Ockhamists. Instead, they would be multiple-pasts compatibilists, itself neither a new nor a terribly attractive position.23

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23 Merricks and Westphal, at least, both say explicitly that they are happy to let God’s past beliefs be hard, or temporally intrinsic. But denying the fixity of the hard past seems deeply counterintuitive; for further development of this point, see Todd and Fischer (MS). Merricks begins “Foreknowledge and Freedom” by saying, “The bulk of my essay ‘Truth and Freedom’ opposes fatalism, which is the claim that if there is a true proposition to the effect that an action A will occur, then A will not be free. But that essay also offers a new way to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom” (2011, p. 567). It remains mysterious to us exactly why Merricks’s approach is new, though we hazard a guess in the next paragraph.
On second thought, someone might think that there is indeed something new here. That is, someone might think that what is new is the contention that when a hard fact about the past depends in a certain way on an agent’s present behavior, then the past fact—even a hard fact—is not fixed. This would then suggest a kind of “defense” of multiple-pasts compatibilism (although only in the context of debates about God’s foreknowledge, not causal determinism). But how exactly does the dependence point in any way vitiate—or even address—the point about the fixity of the past? That is, if a hard fact about the past is now fixed and out of our control precisely because it is “over-and-done-with”, why is the dependence in question relevant? If fixity stems from over-and-done-with-ness, and over-and-done-with-ness is a function of temporal intrinsicality, both of which seem plausible, then it would seem more reasonable to conclude that even the dependent hard facts are fixed. Or, perhaps Merricks, McCall, and Westphal would agree that fixity stems from over-and-done-with-ness, but would maintain instead that over-and-done-with-ness is a function of independence rather than intrinsicality. In this case, though, they would be back to defending a version of Ockhamism, according to which God’s past beliefs fail to be fixed because they are not over-and-done-with. Indeed, the very distinction between multiple-pasts compatibilism and Ockhamism seems to be a slippery one, depending as it does on how exactly the fixity of the past principle is formulated.

For our purposes, it doesn’t much matter how exactly we decide to use the label ‘Ockhamism’. Rather, we would simply make two points in conclusion. First, whatever we call the strategy that (our revised versions of) our three authors use, the fact remains that it is a strategy that involves distinguishing between two relevant sorts of facts about the past, and there’s nothing new about that. Second, we’re inclined to think that the best account of temporal intrinsicality is going to involve the notion of dependence, so that the “two” ways of understanding Ockhamism articulated above will collapse into one.

24 The multiple-pasts compatibilist about causal determinism and freedom denies the fixity of the hard past even when that past does not depend on the future, whereas the suggestion we are now attributing to Merricks et al. is the somewhat weaker view that what fails to be fixed is only the hard, dependent past. This would suggest an interesting asymmetry between the worries about the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom and the compatibility of causal determinism and human freedom. Thanks to Patrick Todd for pushing us to be clear about this issue.

25 For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between temporal intrinsicality and dependence, see Todd (Forthcoming). See also Todd and Fischer (MS) for a discussion of how the sort of dependence needed to vindicate Ockhamism is arguably more robust than the sort of dependence invoked by our three authors.
Our general criticism, then, can be put in the form of a dilemma. On the one hand, we could interpret these three authors in the most natural way suggested by their exposition, in which case they are simply assuming the very thing that is at issue in the context of the incompatibility argument, namely Eva’s freedom. On the other hand, we could interpret these three authors in accordance with one of our two charitable reconstructions. But the Moorean shift response fails to advance the debate in any interesting way, and there’s nothing new or distinctive about Ockhamism and multiple-pasts compatibilism. Not only have McCall, Merricks, and Westphal failed to defeat the incompatibility argument, but they have also failed to identify a new response to it.

References
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26 No less illustrious an authority than Alvin Plantinga has made a similar, and equally egregious, dialectical move. As Fischer (2011, p. 471) has pointed out, in presenting his famous example of Paul and the Ant Colony (1986, as reprinted in Fischer 1989, pp. 200–201), Plantinga is also apparently guilty of exactly the same sort of dialectical infelicity as that of Merricks, McCall, and Westphal. For interesting discussion of these issues and a critique of Fischer, see Flint (MS).

27 We are deeply indebted to Patrick Todd for many conversations and for detailed and extremely helpful comments on various drafts of this paper. The paper is much better as a result of his challenging and thoughtful comments, for which we are very grateful.


—— MS. “Against Limited Foreknowledge.”

—— and Fischer, John Martin. MS. “The Truth about Foreknowledge”.

