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## Foreknowledge and Fatalism: Why Divine Timelessness Doesn't Help

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### Introduction

**T**he problem of divine foreknowledge and creaturely freedom or, more generally, the problem of divine knowledge of future contingents, has long been a matter of controversy. If someone—say, God—knows that some event—say, a sea battle—occurs tomorrow, can it be undetermined today whether that event occurs tomorrow, and if so, how? Conversely, if some possible future event is not now determined either to occur or not to occur—in other words, if it is a future contingent—then how can it be either known to occur or known not to occur in the future? It seems that, until it actually occurs, a future contingent lacks the definiteness required to be a proper object of knowledge. At any rate, the problem is especially pressing for theists, most of whom believe both that there are future contingents, especially human libertarian free choices,<sup>1</sup> and that God has always known which future contingents are going to happen. Despite two millennia of active debate, there is still no consensus about whether the problem can be solved, and, if so, what a philosophically and theologically acceptable solution might look like.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I analyze the problem as a specific instance of the more general problem of *fatalism*, and I argue that, as with any (valid) argument for fatalism, there are only two possible solutions. One solution is to say that God's foreknowledge—for purposes of argument I shall assume throughout

that there is God—does *not* single out any possible future, any unique and complete sequence of post-present events, as *the* actual future. This is the “open future” solution. While currently championed by some theists,<sup>3</sup> many believe this solution unacceptable, in large part because it categorically denies the traditional view that God has advance knowledge of everything that ever comes to pass.<sup>4</sup> The other possible solution is to say that God’s foreknowledge is explanatorily dependent upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events.<sup>5</sup> This is the “preventable future” solution, upon which I will be focusing most of my attention. I consider the bearing of this solution on both the doctrine of divine timelessness and matters of temporal ontology. Since Boethius,<sup>6</sup> divine timelessness has often been thought essential to any acceptable solution to the foreknowledge/future contingency problem. I argue to the contrary.

In the next section, I examine the more general problem of fatalism and show that fatalism (the denial of future contingency) follows if and only if there is a fixed or now-unpreventable “future specifier.” Since God’s foreknowledge, as traditionally understood, is a future specifier, traditional theistic anti-fatalists must hold that God’s foreknowledge (in so far as it concerns future contingents) is *not* fixed but, rather, is “explanatorily dependent” upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events. After elaborating on this, the preventable future response, and clarifying the key notion of explanatory dependence, I then consider its implications for temporal ontology. I argue that, given that (contingent) truth supervenes on being, the traditional conception of divine foreknowledge requires an “ontically settled” or linear block future according to which there (tenselessly) exists a unique and complete sequence of future events. Next, I examine the implications of preventable futurism for divine timelessness by engaging with Katherin Rogers’ recent (2008) Anselmian response to the foreknowledge/future contingency problem. Rogers’ proposal combines (1) divine timelessness, (2) an ontically settled future, and (3) the preventable future response. *Pace* Rogers, I argue that (1) and (2) are each incompatible with (3). Hence, divine timelessness doesn’t help the anti-fatalist. While it does not itself entail fatalism, it blocks preventable futurism, which is the anti-fatalist’s only hope for reconciling future contingency with a traditional conception of divine foreknowledge.

## The challenge of fatalism

To set up the problem of foreknowledge/future contingency with maximum generality, we must step back and consider fatalistic arguments in general.

Doing so will give us a clear sense of what our basic theoretical options are for rebutting so-called “theological fatalism,” the contention that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with future contingency.

Roughly, fatalism is the doctrine that there is a precise way the future is going to go and that there is now nothing that can be done about it. In short, fatalism says that the future that is going to be is—to use Prior’s apt expression—“now-unpreventably” going to be.<sup>7</sup> By a “future” I mean an abstract representation of a unique, complete, linear extension of the actual past. For a future to be “now-unpreventable” is for it to be causally necessary, or such that it obtains in all logically possible worlds<sup>8</sup> having the same causal laws and the same causal/explanatory history<sup>9</sup> as the actual world as of the present. Fatalism entails that there is only one causally possible future or, in other words, that the future is “causally settled.” Fatalism thus entails that there are no “future contingents,” no events that occur in some, but not all, causally possible futures. Of course, if humans or other creatures possess libertarian freedom, or if there is genuine causal indeterminism in nature (at, say, the quantum level), then there are future contingents, fatalism is false, and the future is not causally settled, but rather “causally open.”<sup>10</sup>

Only two substantive assumptions are needed to construct valid arguments for fatalism. In terms of my opening characterization, they are simply (1) that there is a precise way the future is going to go, and (2) that there is now nothing that can be done about it. I call these, or rather their precisifications, the “specified future” (SF) and “unpreventability” (NP) theses, respectively.

Concerning SF, since the fatalist’s conclusion is that there is *only one* causally possible future, which future is therefore inevitably going to be the actual future, the premises of any valid fatalistic argument must posit something that singles out a unique possible future as *the* actual one. Let us call that something a “future specifier.” For example, alethic arguments for fatalism (or for what is often misleadingly called “logical fatalism”)<sup>11</sup> begin by assuming or attempting to establish that there is a collection of truths about the future—a complete, true story of the future, if you will—that specifies how the future is going to go. The existence of such a story amounts to the future’s being “alethically settled.” Alethic arguments for fatalism then attempt to show that if the future is alethically settled then it must also be causally settled. Likewise, epistemic arguments for fatalism (or for what is often misleadingly called “theological fatalism”) posit a complete, *known* story of the future. Usually this story is held to exist in the mind of God. The existence of such a story amounts to the future’s being “epistemically settled.” Epistemic arguments for fatalism then attempt to show that if the future is epistemically settled then it must also be causally settled.

But clearly the mere existence of a future specifier is not enough to warrant fatalism. A future specifier ensures that the specified future *will*

happen, but fatalism makes the stronger claim that it *must* happen in the sense of being now-unpreventable. To see how the fatalist must try to bridge this gap, consider that some facts are unquestionably fixed or now-unpreventable such that we no longer (and perhaps never did) have any say about them. Plausible candidates include the laws of logic, mathematical truths, the laws of nature, the basic principles of moral law, and the actual past. What the fatalist proposes is that the fixed facts, whatever they are, collectively constitute a future specifier. If so, then there is not merely a specified future (SF) but an unpreventably (NP) specified future. From that, fatalism follows.

To see that fatalism follows from SF and NP, let us sketch out the reasoning. Given SF, there is a future specifier, S, the existence of which entails a specific future, F, that is,

$$(1) \Box(S \supset F).$$

Given NP, S is now-unpreventable, or such that it will obtain no matter which causally possible future eventuates. Using N(X) to stand for <In all causally possible futures, X>, we can write

$$(2) N(S).$$

Since the entailment in (1) is also unpreventable—if it is *logically* necessary that  $S \supset F$ , then there cannot be a future in which S obtains and F doesn't—we can rewrite (1) using the N operator:

$$(3) N(S \supset F).$$

Finally, we can represent the fatalistic conclusion:

$$(4) N(F).$$

(4) says that *all* causally possible futures are F futures, or equivalently, that F is the *only* causally possible future.

All that remains is to show that (4) follows from (2) and (3) in virtue of the following transfer of necessity principle:

$$(5) [N(p \supset q) \wedge Np] \supset Nq.$$

The validity of this principle can easily be established by comparison with the transfer of logical necessity, that is,  $[\Box(p \supset q) \wedge \Box p] \supset \Box q$ . The latter is an axiom in every standard system of modal logic, and for good reason. If *all* possible worlds are ones in which  $p \supset q$  is true, and if *all* are ones in which p

is true, then there are *no* worlds in which *q* is false. Exactly parallel reasoning underwrites (5) by substituting “causally possible futures” for “possible worlds.” Hence, the inference from (2) and (3) to (4) via (5) is demonstrably valid.

What we have here is a minimal valid recipe for fatalism: simply establish that there is a future specifier among the fixed facts. Different fatalistic arguments posit different future specifiers and use different strategies to establish their fixity, but, in so far as they are valid, they all follow this basic recipe. Since the inference from (2) and (3) to (4) is logically impeccable, anti-fatalists have but two options for rebutting any given instance of this fatalistic argument schema. The first is to deny SF, that is, to deny that any future specifier of the posited type exists. This was Aristotle’s response to the alethic argument for fatalism,<sup>12</sup> in which a complete, true story of the future plays the role of the future specifier. To deny SF in this context is simply to deny that there is any such story. The future, in this view, is not alethically settled, but alethically open. Likewise, in response to the epistemic argument for fatalism based on God’s foreknowledge, one might deny SF either by denying God’s existence, denying or restrictively qualifying God’s omniscience, or by arguing, as some theists do, that the content of an omniscient God’s knowledge does not constitute a future specifier.<sup>13</sup> The future, in any of these views, is not epistemically settled, but epistemically open. Analogous “open future” or SF-denying responses can be given to any valid argument for fatalism.

The anti-fatalist’s second option is to deny NP. This was Ockham’s response to both alethic and epistemic arguments for fatalism.<sup>14</sup> Ockham conceded to fatalism the existence of at least two future specifiers: (i) a complete, true story of the future, and (ii) God’s having knowledge of such a story. *Contra* fatalism, however, Ockham maintained that because there are future contingents, the truth of that story and God’s knowledge of it are still *preventable* in virtue of there being causally possible futures in which some things actually true about the future are not true and in which some things actually foreknown by God are not foreknown. Analogous “preventable future” or NP-denying responses can be given to any valid argument for fatalism.

In this chapter I will not have much more to say about open future responses. While that is the type of response that I prefer,<sup>15</sup> my primary goal here is to explore the tenability of a preventable future response to the epistemic argument for fatalism, so to that task I now turn.

## Preventable future specifiers and explanatory dependence

Since the existence of an unpreventable future specifier entails fatalism, anti-fatalists must either deny that there are any future specifiers or maintain that those which exist are still preventable. But what is it for a future specifier to be preventable? More specifically, given that divine foreknowledge is a future specifier, what is it for such knowledge to be preventable?

Let us begin by clearing away one possible misconception: *unpreventability* does not entail temporality. The fatalistic argument schema outlined above only requires that an unpreventable future specifier *exist*. Whether it is temporally situated or not is a further, and tangential, question. Thus, the epistemic argument for fatalism does not depend on God's literally having *foreknowledge* (i.e., temporally prior knowledge of events), but rather on God's having unpreventable knowledge of the future, that is, of what *we* temporally situated beings would regard as the future. While I will continue to speak of God's "foreknowledge," as is customary in the literature, this should be understood in the latter, knowledge-of-the-future sense, which is neutral concerning God's relation to time. Consequently, the foreknowledge/future contingency problem cannot be solved *simply* by appealing to divine timelessness or to creaturely power of some sort—counterfactual, causal, or otherwise—over the past.<sup>16</sup> One major virtue of approaching the epistemic argument for fatalism by first considering fatalistic arguments in general is that it allows us to sidestep complications like the notoriously vexed "hard fact"/"soft fact" distinction,<sup>17</sup> which is relevant only to fatalistic arguments that rely on the fixity of *the past*.

What matters for fatalism is not the temporal relation between future specifiers and future events, but the *explanatory* relation between them. The central issue is whether the posited future specifier is fixed *independently* of the actual occurrences of future contingent events or whether it is fixed (in part) *by* their occurrences. Thus, the preventable futurist must say that if tomorrow I make a libertarian free choice between, say, vanilla and chocolate ice cream, and choose vanilla,<sup>18</sup> then God will have always (or eternally)<sup>19</sup> known that I was going to choose vanilla, and he will have known that *in virtue of* my so choosing. And if I should choose chocolate instead, as by hypothesis I have the power to do, then God will have always known that I was going to choose chocolate, and He will have known that *in virtue of* my so choosing. Hence, my free choice to do this (rather than that) brings about God's having always known that I will do this (rather than that) in the future.

As Figure 12.1 shows, if it is a future contingent whether I choose chocolate or vanilla ice cream tomorrow, and if it is causally necessary that I do *exactly one* of those two things, then the set of causally possible futures

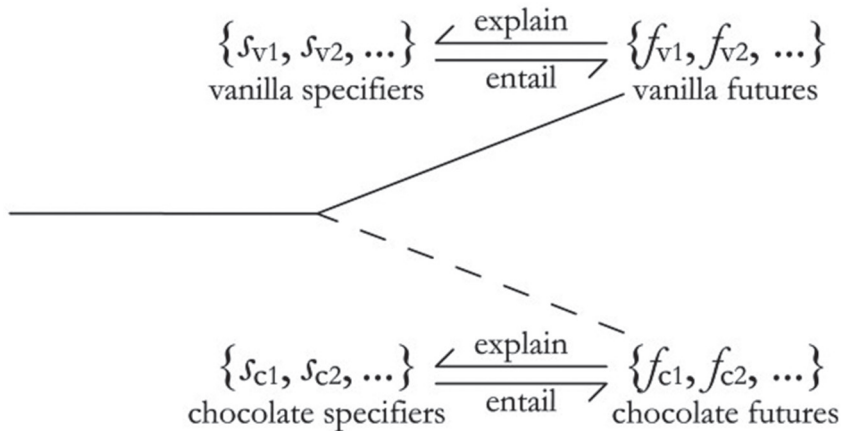


FIGURE 12.1

can be partitioned into “vanilla futures,”  $\{f_{v1}, f_{v2}, \dots\}$ , and “chocolate futures,”  $\{f_{c1}, f_{c2}, \dots\}$ . Since a future specifier entails the coming to pass of its corresponding future, if a future specifier exists then it must specify either a vanilla future or a chocolate future, and so it must either be a “vanilla specifier,”  $\{s_{v1}, s_{v2}, \dots\}$ , or a “chocolate specifier,”  $\{s_{c1}, s_{c2}, \dots\}$ . But since which type of future comes to pass—vanilla or chocolate—is *up to me* and is brought about in part *by* my free choice, which type of specifier exists—vanilla or chocolate—is also *up to me* and is brought about in part *by* my free choice. And, clearly, if something is brought about in part by my free choice, then it is explained in part by my free choice. The core of the preventable future response to fatalism is, therefore, simply this: for any given future specifier, its existence is explanatorily dependent on, and brought about by, the actual occurrences of the future contingent events that it specifies.<sup>20</sup>

The whole point of NP, the fatalist’s unpreventability assumption, is to block this response by ensuring that the existence of the posited future specifier is explanatorily *independent* of, and thus not even partly brought about by, the actual occurrences of future contingent events. Consider, for example, the openly fatalistic position of theistic determinism, the view that God is the ultimate sufficient cause of all creaturely events. In this view, if God knows that I will choose vanilla tomorrow, God does so *not* in virtue of anything I do tomorrow, but in virtue of God’s having sovereignly decreed that I choose vanilla and God’s having set in place causes sufficient to bring that about. In this model, God’s knowledge is *borne out by* creaturely events, but never *brought about by* them. The explanatory arrow runs from God to creaturely events, and there is no explanatory arrow running in the other direction.

But despite what the example of theistic determinism may suggest, “explanatory independence” is simply a *denial* of explanatorily dependence.

What is essential for fatalism is that the future specifiers *not* depend explanatorily on future contingents. It is not necessary that future events depend explanatorily on the future specifiers for, as Jonathan Edwards famously pointed out, “Infallible Foreknowledge may prove [i.e., establish] the Necessity of the event foreknown, and yet not be the thing which causes the Necessity.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, if a future specifier is explanatorily independent of the actual occurrences of any future contingent events, then it entails the unpreventability of the future that it specifies even if it doesn’t itself render that future unpreventable.

Finally, while the explanatory dependence of future specifier *S* on future event *E* licenses a counterfactual, namely, <If *E* were not to occur, then *S* would not have existed>, explanatory dependence is *not* reducible to counterfactual dependence. In the first place, explanatory dependence is transitive and (at least) anti-symmetric and non-reflexive,<sup>22</sup> whereas counterfactual dependence is non-transitive,<sup>23</sup> non-symmetric, and reflexive. In the second place, if explanatory dependence were reducible to counterfactual dependence, then preventable futurism would fail as a counter to fatalism. After all, fatalists themselves would insist that future specifiers are counterfactually dependent on the events they specify. It follows from theistic determinism, for example, that if (counterfactually) I were to choose chocolate over the divinely predestined vanilla, then God would have foreknown (because he would have predestined) that I was going to choose chocolate. The presence of a counterfactual arrow running from future events to a future specifier is thus compatible with the fatalist’s insistence that no relevant explanatory arrows run in that direction.

Having clarified both the core structure of fatalistic arguments and the preventable future response, we are now in a position to consider what sort of temporal ontology could underwrite the epistemically settled future that God’s foreknowledge has traditionally been thought to entail.

## From epistemically to ontically settled

I have already introduced three senses—causal, alethic, and epistemic—in which the future may be thought of as either “open” or “settled.” By way of review, the future is *causally* settled just in case *only one* future is compatible with the causal laws plus the causal/explanatory history of the actual world as of the present, and it is causally open just in case *multiple* futures are compatible with those constraints. Likewise, the future is *alethically* settled just in case only one future is compatible with the complete collection of truths about the future, that is, just in case there is a complete, true story of the future. And



the future is alethically open just in case multiple futures are compatible with the collection of truths. Finally, the future is *epistemically* settled just in case only one future is compatible with all that is *known*, and it is epistemically open just in case multiple futures are compatible with the sum of all knowledge.

I now want to introduce a fourth sense in which the openness/settledness of the future may be understood. Let us say that the future is "*ontically* settled" just in case only one future is compatible with the concrete totality of future events. In other words, the future is ontically settled just in case a unique, linear, and complete sequence of future events *exists*. Conversely, the future is "ontically open" just in case multiple futures are compatible with the concrete totality of future events. Thus, if there are *no* future events—as presentists and growing-blockers would have it—or if there exists a branching array of future events—as McCall (1994) would have it—then the future is ontically open. Contrastingly, if some non-branching version of eternalism is correct, such as the "moving spotlight" version of the A-theory or a linear block version of the B-theory, then the future is ontically settled.

I introduce this distinction in order to ask whether an ontically settled future is needed to underwrite an epistemically settled future. As is well-known, God is standardly conceived to be essentially *omniscient*. While there is some debate about precisely how to analyze omniscience,<sup>24</sup> I shall take it to be the view that God essentially believes all and only truths, believes them infallibly, and is immediately and fully acquainted with all of reality. It follows that if there is a complete, true story of the future, then God knows it. An alethically settled future, therefore, entails an epistemically settled future. Conversely, since knowledge entails truth, if the future is epistemically settled it is also alethically settled. Given an essentially omniscient God, then, alethic and epistemic settledness/openness necessarily go hand in hand. Hence, we can replace the question about whether an ontically settled future is needed to underwrite an epistemically settled future, with the question of whether it is needed to underwrite an alethically settled future. If it is necessary for the latter, then it is necessary for the former. And if it is sufficient for the latter, then it is also sufficient for the former.

The supposition that the future is alethically settled raises a question: "What makes *this* story of the future the true one?" Truth, it is plausible to suppose, supervenes on being.<sup>25</sup> What is true is true in virtue of what is real. This is especially plausible for logically contingent truths,<sup>26</sup> of which truths about future contingents are obviously a subset. If  $\langle I \text{ freely choose vanilla ice cream tomorrow} \rangle$  is true, it seems proper to ask *why* that is true when *ex hypothesi*  $\langle I \text{ freely refrain from choosing vanilla ice cream tomorrow} \rangle$  has (we may assume) just as good a chance of being true instead. Since contingent propositions cannot be true in virtue of themselves, *something else* must be different about reality in virtue of which the first is true and not

the second. Hence, if there is a complete, true story of the future, then we need an ontology robust enough to explain why *this* story is true as opposed to any other that might otherwise have been true.

One way to ground an alethically settled future is to suppose that the future is causally settled. If it is, then a God who knows the causal laws plus the causal/explanatory history of the actual world as of the present will be able predict with certainty exactly how the future will go. So a causally settled future, given an omniscient God, entails an epistemically settled future. And since knowledge entails truth, it also entails an alethically settled future. But it does so at the cost of giving up future contingency. If we want future contingency, we need another way to ground an alethically settled future.

So let us suppose that the future is causally open. In this case, the causal laws plus the causal/explanatory history of the world as of the present leave underdetermined which future is to be the actual one. Hence, if we want to ground an alethically settled future, we will need something more in our ontology. An obvious thought is to suppose that the future is ontically settled, that is, to suppose that a unique, linear, and complete sequence of future events exists. If that is so, then, since an omniscient God is fully acquainted with all of reality, God would be fully acquainted with all actual future events, and so the future would be epistemically and, therefore, alethically settled. So unless there's some deeper incompatibility between a causally open and an ontically settled future, this looks like an effective way to ground divine foreknowledge of future contingents.

If, however, the future is neither causally nor ontically settled, then it is unclear how an alethically settled future could be grounded. Assume that the future is ontically open. In presentist and growing-block models, future events and entities do not exist and so are not available to do any grounding,<sup>27</sup> whereas in a branching-future model like McCall's, too many future events and entities exist to single out any one future as actual. So given ontic openness, *future* events and entities don't suffice for grounding an alethically settled future. Let us now factor in *non-future* events and entities while assuming that the future is causally open, that is, that there are future contingents. As just noted, the causal laws plus the causal/explanatory history of the world as of the present do not suffice for grounding because they underdetermine which future is to be the actual one. But that underdetermination remains even if we add in past, present, and even timeless events and entities that are *not* part of that causal/explanatory history. Because such events and entities have no explanatory bearing upon which future events occur, they don't substantively contribute toward *this* causally possible future's coming to pass rather than another, and so they don't suffice to explain its being *true* that this causally possible future comes to pass rather than another. In sum, then, given both causal and ontic openness, neither future events and entities

nor explanatorily relevant non-future events and entities nor explanatorily irrelevant non-future events and entities suffice, either individually or collectively, to ground an alethically settled future. But then what else is there that could provide such grounding?<sup>28</sup>

I conclude that, unless we are prepared to jettison the highly plausible principle that (contingent) truth supervenes on being, our best hope—indeed, our only hope—for reconciling an alethically and epistemically settled future with a causally open one is via an ontically settled future. I now examine a recent proposal along these lines.

## An Anselmian solution?

Katherin Rogers (2008) has recently endorsed and defended what she cogently argues to be Anselm's response to the problem of divine foreknowledge and future contingency. Her objective is to describe a model of reality and of God's relation to it that makes clear how the future can be both causally open and epistemically settled (for God). She summarizes as follows:

Anselm's solution rests on three premises: (1) the sort of "necessity" which follows upon divine foreknowledge need not conflict in any way at all with the most robust libertarian freedom because (2) God is eternal and (3) time is essentially tenseless. (Rogers 2008: 146)

Each of these points requires some unpacking. I will take them in reverse order.

By (3), the idea that time is essentially tenseless, Rogers means to endorse a B-theoretical version of "eternalism," which she prefers to call "four-dimensionalism" (Rogers 2008: 158) so as to reserve "eternal" and its derivatives for God's timeless mode of being. More precisely, Rogers must intend to endorse by (3) a "linear block" version of eternalism, such that the future is ontically settled. She must intend this because eternalism alone, in either an A- or B-theoretical interpretation, is not sufficient for her purposes. This is because eternalism—the idea that all past, present, and future events (tenselessly) exist—is compatible with a non-linear or *branching* future. In a "branching block" version of eternalism, there would be no *unique* future for God to know as *the* actual future. Hence, the future would be neither alethically nor epistemically settled.

By (2), God's eternity, Rogers means that God is essentially timeless (cf. Rogers 2008: 146–7). From this it follows that God's existence is essentially beginningless and endless, that God essentially lacks any temporal

properties, and that God is essentially immune to intrinsic change. Rogers is far from alone in thinking that divine timelessness is essential for rebutting the epistemic argument for fatalism. One common motivation behind this thought is that divine timelessness allows one to sidestep fatalistic worries about the “fixity” or “accidental necessity” of the past since a timeless God’s knowledge isn’t *in* the past. In addition, divine timelessness is often thought to afford a model of how God can know future contingents in that God, from a vantage point “outside” of time, is able to survey all at once the entire sweep of history. Nevertheless, as I argued above, divine timelessness is not sufficient for rebutting epistemic arguments for fatalism.<sup>29</sup> And while one might take it to be necessary on the grounds that a temporally situated God couldn’t possibly survey the actual occurrences of all future contingent events, it is not immediately clear why a temporally situated God couldn’t have the requisite access to future events. In an A-theoretical version of eternalism, for example, such as the “moving spotlight” theory,<sup>30</sup> all future events (tenselessly) exist and so are available for a transcendently temporal God to be acquainted with.<sup>31</sup> In sum, *pace* Rogers, (2) is at most an optional commitment of an Anselmian solution to the foreknowledge/future contingency problem.

Finally, in (1) the sort of necessity which “follows upon divine foreknowledge” is, says Rogers, merely a conditional or “consequent necessity” (Rogers 2008: 158). It is the kind of necessity by which God foreknows <X happens in the future> *if and only if* X happens in the future (i.e., in what we temporally situated beings think of as the future). This necessity “need not conflict” with future contingency because it is compatible with the explanatory dependence of God’s knowledge upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events. As Rogers repeatedly stresses, the arrow of dependency runs from future contingent events to God:

It is the fact that the agent actually chooses what he chooses that produces God’s knowledge of the choice, and so the consequent necessity involved in divine knowledge is ultimately produced by the agent making the choice ... Anselm’s position entails that God “learns” from us. He knows what we choose, *because we choose it*. (Rogers 2008: 175–6)

In summary, Rogers (following Anselm) proposes to solve the divine foreknowledge/future contingency problem by supposing a linear block model of time and a God “outside” time whose knowledge of future contingent events “in” time is quasi-perceptual and thus explanatorily dependent upon the actual occurrences of those events. One merit of this proposal is that it directly challenges the epistemic argument for fatalism based on divine foreknowledge by offering, in effect, an NP-denying or preventable future

response to fatalism. Another merit is that it provides us with a reasonably clear model for how the future could be epistemically settled for God, specifically, through God's being acquainted with an ontically settled future. Unfortunately, as I will now argue, Rogers' solution does not work, for divine timelessness and an ontically settled future are each incompatible with a preventable future response to fatalism.

I develop my argument in three stages. First, I raise an objection against divine timelessness based on the idea that divine choices entail intrinsic change, and thus temporal sequence, in God. While the objection is not conclusive, it is instructive, for—and this is the second stage of the argument—parallel reasoning shows that preventable future specifiers cannot be atemporal. Hence, divine timelessness, when coupled with the traditional idea that God's foreknowledge constitutes a future specifier, not only does *not* help solve the foreknowledge/future contingency problem, but actually entails fatalism. Finally, in the third stage, I show that if an ontically settled future must be temporally invariant, then it too is incompatible with a preventable future response, and thus entails fatalism.

### ***First stage: A problem for divine timelessness.***

Most theists have believed that God makes choices, including choices about whether to create, about which (type of) world to create, and how to respond to creaturely actions. But perhaps, as some have argued, the inherent diffusiveness of divine love ensures that God creates some world or other. And perhaps, as others have argued, God must create the best type of world or at least one from among the class of best strongly actualizable world types.<sup>32</sup> Still, even if we grant all that, most theists would be inclined to think that God must have had *some* "open options"—for example, the option to create one more or one fewer hydrogen atoms in some far-flung corner of the universe, or the option to make it such that humans perceive an inverted color spectrum. For present purposes it does not matter what the options are. As long as God has at least one open option requiring at least one choice on God's part, essential divine timelessness is ruled out. This is because choices are inherently temporal events essentially involving both a "before" state of contemplating the options without as yet having settled upon any of them, and an "after" state of having decided upon one of the options over the others. The relation between the two states cannot be understood as one of *merely logical* priority, for the states are mutually incompatible—one cannot be concurrently both undecided and decided with respect to the same option—whereas relations of merely logical priority can obtain only between things that are *mutually compatible*, such as the

premises and conclusion of a valid argument. Moreover, the transition from not yet having decided to having decided constitutes an *intrinsic change* in the chooser. Hence, the relation must be one of *temporal* priority, of before and after. Because intrinsic change is impossible for a timeless being, it is impossible for a timeless God literally to choose and to remain timeless.<sup>33</sup> An essentially timeless God therefore must not face open options. Rogers seems to realize this. Affirming essential divine timelessness, she follows Anselm in denying that God ever faces open options because “God, being the best, does the best” (p. 185). This assumes, however, that there is such a thing as a unique *best* that God can do—a best strongly actualizable world type (cf. Rogers 2008: 195). Rogers defends this seemingly implausible claim with vigor, though in the end she claims only that it is not “wildly implausible” or “obvious madness” to suppose that ours is the best type of world God could have actualized (Rogers 2008: 205). Be that as it may, the incompatibility of divine timelessness and open options vitiates Rogers’ preventable future response to fatalism.

### ***Second stage: Open options and future contingency***

As with choices, future contingency entails open options (of a sort), namely, the different types of causally possible futures that hinge upon future contingent events. The actual occurrences of future contingent events are in fact analogous to—and in some cases are—decisions between open options. My freely choosing vanilla ice cream tomorrow over chocolate is a case in point. Prior to my choice, both chocolate-futures (in which I choose chocolate) and vanilla-futures (in which I choose vanilla) are causally possible. Both are open options for me. But even when there is no agent *per se*, as in the case of quantum-level indeterminism, we can still think of future contingents as providing open options for a physical system, or even for reality in general. Somehow—we need not know how—reality “chooses” to go one way rather than the other.

Now recall our discussion of fatalism. If we admit future specifiers, then we avoid fatalism only by saying that which token future specifiers exist is explanatorily dependent upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events. This is the “preventable future” response to fatalism, which Rogers endorses. But now we run into another problem for divine timelessness. For if the existence of some token future specifier is explanatorily dependent upon, say, my choosing vanilla ice cream tomorrow, and if my so choosing is now a future contingent, then there are causally possible futures in which that future specifier exists and causally possible futures in which that future specifier does not exist. In other words, *future specifiers that are*

*explanatorily dependent upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events are themselves future contingents*—they obtain in some, but not all, causally possible futures. This is a crucial point. It implies that nothing can be *both* timeless *and* explanatorily dependent upon future contingents since the temporality of the latter is inherited by anything explanatorily dependent upon them. Hence, far from helping to solve the foreknowledge/future contingency problem, divine timelessness *precludes* a preventable future response to fatalism.

This consequence is one that Rogers sometimes seems to be on the verge of grasping. Thus, as she puts it in one passage, “Anselm’s position entails that God ‘learns’ from us. He knows what we choose, *because* we choose it” (Rogers 2008: 176). Later, in a footnote, she writes that “God must ‘wait and see’ what created agents actually choose” (Rogers 2008: 195n. 29). In the preventable future response, this is exactly right, but if God “learns” from us and must “wait and see” what we choose, then this introduces temporal sequence into God. Just as divine choices entail a before–after sequence in God, consisting of a not-having-yet-decided state followed by a having-decided state, so also the explanatory dependence of God’s knowledge upon future contingents entails a before–after sequence in God consisting of a not-having-yet-learned state followed by a having-learned state. Rogers comes closest to realizing this when she writes that “God cannot know what the created agent chooses ‘until’ (logically, not temporally) he chooses it” (Rogers 2008: 150), but she wrongly supposes that the sequence can be merely “logical” and not “temporal.” As explained above, merely logical sequences, such as obtain between the premises and conclusion of an argument, require that the termini be mutually *compatible*. In the case of learning, however, as in the case of choosing, they are mutually *incompatible*. One cannot both have learned something and not have learned it, either at the same time, or even at the same timeless “moment.”

### ***Third stage: Implications for temporal ontology***

The future is ontically settled just in case a unique, complete, and linear sequence of future events exists. If such a sequence does exist, it is a future specifier. Hence, to avoid fatalism, the ontically settled future must be preventable, such that whether *this* sequence of future events exists or not is explanatorily dependent upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events. But if a unique, complete, and linear sequence of future events exists, it cannot exist *now* (because the events are future), and so presumably it must exist tenselessly or *sub specie aeternitatis*. But then for the same reason that divine timelessness (plus omniscience) precludes a

preventable future, it seems as if an ontically settled future does so too. As we have seen, preventable future specifiers are themselves future contingents. It is doubtful, however, whether a tenselessly existing sequence of events can be a future contingent. Future contingency seems to be an inherently tensed status because there invariably comes a time when the event in question is either no longer future, or no longer contingent. The proverbial sea battle tomorrow may *now* be a future contingent, but it won't be one after tomorrow. At any rate, if a future specifier is explanatorily dependent upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events, then *whether* a token future specifier exists is something that reality must, so to speak, "wait and see" to find out. Just as with the case of God's foreknowledge, there is a before–after sequence: the "before" state of reality's not being yet determinate with respect to whether a sea battle occurs tomorrow, and an "after" state of reality's being determinate in that respect. And since these states are mutually incompatible, the sequence must be temporal, not merely logical. This, however, seems to be incompatible with the supposition that the sequence of events constituting the ontically settled future exists tenselessly—at least it does if "existing tenselessly" entails either atemporality or temporal invariance.<sup>34</sup> If this is right, then an ontically settled future cannot be a preventable future, and thus entails fatalism.

## Conclusion

Reflection upon fatalism has significant implications for both theology and temporal ontology. I have argued that fatalism is entailed by the existence of a fixed or unpreventable future specifier and that there are, therefore, only two ways of resisting the fatalist's conclusion. One can adopt an "open future" strategy and deny that any future specifiers posited by the fatalist exist, or one can adopt a "preventable future" strategy and hold that which token future specifiers exist is explanatorily dependent upon the actual occurrences of future contingent events. Traditionally, most theists have thought of God's foreknowledge as a future specifier, and so most theistic anti-fatalists have been preventable futurists. They have thought of the future as being epistemically and alethically settled but causally open. Because (contingent) truth supervenes on being, however, such theists are also implicitly committed to an ontically settled future because only thus would there be adequate grounds for the "complete, true story of the future" that God has traditionally been thought to know. Rogers' Anselmian response to the foreknowledge/future contingency problem embraces an ontically settled future and tries to avoid fatalism by combining divine timelessness with a preventable



future response. Unfortunately, neither divine timelessness nor (arguably) an ontically settled future is compatible with the preventable future response, and thus, far from helping the anti-fatalist actually lend support to fatalism.

If my argument thus far has been successful, then to avoid fatalism we must affirm a causally and ontically *open* future (or find a way to affirm an ontically settled future without countenancing any temporally invariant future specifiers). Given that (contingent) truth supervenes on being, such a future must also be alethically and epistemically open. Hence, the traditional conception of divine foreknowledge, which entails an epistemically settled future, is untenable. My advice to anti-fatalistic eternalists and theists is to be thoroughgoing open-futurists, to hold that the future is causally, ontically, alethically, *and* epistemically open. I close by noting that it is in fact possible to affirm eternalism and divine timelessness while being a thoroughgoing open futurist. Start with McCall's branching model of time, according to which all of the many causally possible futures exist in a branching array, with nodes representing decision points for future contingents. McCall's model is dynamic in that, as future contingents are resolved, unchosen branches drop off or cease to exist. We can convert it into an eternalist model by setting the dynamic component aside and holding that all events that are *ever* causally possible (tenselessly) exist. The resulting static "branching block" model of time would be causally, ontically, alethically, and epistemically open.<sup>35</sup> A timeless and omniscient God could be fully acquainted with the whole branching array of events. Of course, this model requires giving up the traditional idea that God's foreknowledge constitutes a future specifier, but if my argument is sound, that idea will have to go anyway on pain of losing future contingency altogether.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Most theists are deeply concerned to protect God against the charge of being ultimately responsible for human wrongdoing. But this arguably requires that humans occasionally have the ability to exercise libertarian freedom, which in turn requires indeterminism and thus future contingency. Theists who deny human libertarian freedom have a *comparatively* harder time with the problem of evil, for if human moral responsibility is compatible with all human behavior being (ultimately) determined by God, then it is hard to see why an all-good, all-powerful God couldn't have and wouldn't have created a sinless world—or at least a much less sinful one. See Rhoda (2010a).
- 2 Important recent studies of the problem include Craig (1991), Fischer (1989), Hasker (1989), and Zagzebski (1991).
- 3 For example, Rhoda (2010b) and Tuggy (2007).
- 4 For example, Ware (2000).

- 5 This is the gist of Ockham's (1983) response to the foreknowledge/future contingency problem.
- 6 Boethius (1973: bk. V, prose 6).
- 7 Prior (2003).
- 8 It would be more exact to speak of "complete histories" rather than "worlds;" for the common assumption that each possible world essentially includes a complete history (a past, present, and future) is problematic, for reasons given in Rhoda (2010a: 284). Nevertheless, I will stick with the more familiar term "worlds."
- 9 The "causal/explanatory" qualifier is important for two reasons. First, to say simply "same history" would beg the question against anti-fatalists like Ockham (1983) who want to say both (1) that there are multiple causally possible futures, and (2) that only one causally possible future is compatible with the entire actual past. Second, the causal/explanatory order is, at least arguably, not necessarily restricted to the temporal past. If backward causation is possible, for example, then the causal/explanatory "history" of an event may include future events. Alternatively, if there is a timeless God who causally sustains a temporal creation or who provides enabling "concurrences" for creaturely actions, then God's activity is part of the causal/explanatory "history" of creaturely events even though it isn't part of temporal history.
- 10 As I have characterized it, "fatalism" entails that there are not *now* any future contingents. It does not entail either that there never have been any future contingents or that it is metaphysically impossible that there be future contingents. While most historical fatalists would endorse either or both of those stronger claims, my justification for the weaker characterization is that what makes fatalism *disturbing* to most is its implication that we have no independent "say" in what course our own future will take. To learn, after discovering that one's future is fated, that it hasn't always been fated or that it is only contingently fated would provide no existential comfort.
- 11 The terms "logical fatalism" and "theological fatalism," while common in the literature, are misleading because they suggest that these are different types of *fatalism*, when they are really just different *ways of arguing* for fatalism.
- 12 There is some debate about the exact nature of Aristotle's response to the fatalistic argument. See Craig (1988) and Gaskin (1995) for discussion.
- 13 Open theists (e.g. Rhoda et al. 2006, and Tuggy 2007) and process theists (e.g., Viney and Shields 2003) often take this line.
- 14 Ockham (1983).
- 15 I discuss both "open future" and "preventable future" responses in greater detail in Rhoda (n.d.).
- 16 Of course, some formulations of the epistemic argument for fatalism (e.g. Pike 1965) do presuppose that God has temporally prior knowledge of the future. Appeal to divine timelessness clearly undercuts those formulations. Divine timelessness may also have some utility against epistemic arguments for fatalism in general, just in case it is less plausible that a timeless God's knowledge would be among the fixed facts than that the

corresponding knowledge of a temporally everlasting God would be. On this point, see Zagzebski (1991, ch. 2). But this potential benefit of divine timelessness will be nullified below, where I argue that preventability entails temporality and thus that a God whose foreknowledge is a preventable future specifier cannot be atemporal.

- 17 For a good discussion of the hard fact/soft fact distinction, see the introduction to Fischer (1989). As Fischer (1994: 115) notes, “[I]t is very important to distinguish two sets of issues: first, temporal nonrelationality and relationality (i.e. hardness and softness), and second, fixity and non-fixity (i.e. being out of one’s control and being in one’s control).” Despite the amount of ink that has been spilled on the former distinction, it is the latter that is the crucial one.
- 18 Suppose these are my only two options, and that they are mutually exclusive.
- 19 In what follows, past tense expressions related to God’s knowing should be understood in a manner that is neutral on the question of whether God is timeless or not.
- 20 A similar point is made by Fischer et al. (2009: 255ff.) and by Finch and Rea (2008: 11ff.). “Explanatory dependence,” in my usage, is a species of what Lowe (2010) calls “ontological dependence” since it is a matter of what accounts for the *existence* of a token future specifier.
- 21 Edwards (2009 [1754]: II.12).
- 22 Unlike asymmetry, which precludes the joint possibility of  $aRb$  and  $bRa$ , anti-symmetry allows for their joint possibility, but *only if*  $a=b$ . To hold that explanatory dependence is asymmetric and irreflexive is to rule out the possibility of self-explanation. Perhaps we should rule that out, but I am unsure about this, and so regard it as safer to view explanatory dependence as anti-symmetrical and non-reflexive. At any rate, nothing in my argument turns on this point.
- 23 Lewis (1973: 32–5).
- 24 For discussion of some of the issues, see Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002: 111–26).
- 25 The truth supervenes on being (TSB) principle is weaker than its close cousin, the truthmaker (TM) principle. TM says, minimally, that for every truth there *exists* something that makes it true, whereas TSB only requires that reality as a whole be appropriately *different* from what it would have been had what is (contingently) true been false instead. The difference between TM and TSB becomes clear in the case of negative existentials. TM requires that for  $\langle$ There are no unicorns $\rangle$  to be true there must *exist* something—a universal unicorn-excluding state of affairs—that makes it true, whereas TSB is satisfied by the *non-existence* of anything (e.g. a unicorn) that would make it false.
- 26 One might suppose that logically necessary truths, and especially analytic truths, need nothing to ground their truth. Or perhaps we should suppose that such truths *are* their own truthmakers. Cf. David (2009: 153).
- 27 Some presentists say that what makes it true now that there will be a

sea battle tomorrow is simply tomorrow's occurrence of a sea battle. Cf. Craig (2000: 213–14). But this is a transparent dodge of the grounding requirement. If the future isn't real (as per presentism), then tomorrow's occurrence of a sea battle doesn't (yet) have any ontological status, and so isn't (yet) *there* to make it true *now* that there will be a sea battle tomorrow.

- 28** It may be suggested that Molinism can come to the rescue. According to Molinism, God's knowledge of future contingents is grounded in God's free decision of which world to create, which decision in turn is grounded in God's "middle knowledge" of what every possible free creature *would* do in any possible causally specified indeterministic scenario. But this merely trades one grounding problem (what makes it true that *this* future is the actual one?) for another (what makes *these* middle knowledge conditionals true?).
- 29** More precisely, divine timelessness may be sufficient for rebutting some *versions* of the epistemic argument for fatalism, specifically, those that assume a temporally situated knower, but it is not sufficient for rebutting epistemic arguments for fatalism in their most general form.
- 30** The *locus classicus* for the moving spotlight theory is Broad (1923: 59ff.).
- 31** Since all A-theoretical models of time admit some tensed facts (e.g., what time it is *now*) as ontologically basic, an omniscient God couldn't know such facts without intrinsic change, and therefore temporal sequence, in God. Thus, when T1 is present, God would know <T1 is present> and not <T2 is present>. Later, when T2 is present, God would know <T2 is present> and not <T1 is present>. Hence, the moving spotlight theory entails divine temporality. But it also requires that the temporal sequence of God's life be distinct from, and transcendent over, the linear block time of creation. Hence, it requires that God be "transcendentally temporal."
- 32** Something is "strongly actualizable" if God can unilaterally cause it to be. If there are future contingents, such as future human libertarian free choices, then God cannot strongly actualize those events, for that would be contrary to their status as future contingents. He can, however, strongly actualize a world *type* by unilaterally fixing everything in it that does *not* depend on future contingents, such as causal laws, initial conditions, and unilateral divine interventions. The notion of strong actualization comes from Plantinga (1974: 172–3).
- 33** A proponent of divine timelessness can say that God eternally *wills* thusly, but not that God *chooses* to will thusly.
- 34** I say "seems to be incompatible" because I am not convinced that my argument here is correct. Nevertheless, I think the reasoning is plausible enough and the conclusion significant enough that the argument deserves a wider hearing.
- 35** I believe this model is more plausible than McCall's. Not only does it fit well with the Everett "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics (cf. Vaidman 2008), but it also avoids an exceedingly odd consequence of McCall's model, namely, that every time an indeterministic event occurs, a huge swath of reality—everything in the branches of all of the "nonchosen" causal possibilities—is thereby consigned to oblivion. (On the oddness of

this, see Miller 2006). To my knowledge, however, no one has yet endorsed a branching block model.

- 36** Portions of this chapter were presented to Notre Dame's philosophy of religion discussion group and at the 2010 Central Division meeting of the Philosophy of Time Society. I benefitted greatly from comments received at those venues.

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