

## Timelessness and Freedom

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**Abstract** One way that philosophers have attempted to defend free will against the threat of fatalism and against the threat from divine beliefs has been to endorse *timelessness* views (about propositions and God’s beliefs, respectively). In this paper, I argue that, in order to respond to general worries about fatalism and divine beliefs, timelessness views must appeal to the notion of *dependence*. Once they do this, however, their distinctive position as *timelessness* views becomes otiose, for the appeal to dependence, if it helps at all, would *itself* be sufficient to block worries about fatalism and divine beliefs. I conclude by discussing some implications for dialectical progress.

### 1. Introduction

Consider the following fatalistic argument:

- 1) You had no choice about: it was true 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$ .
- 2) Necessarily, if it was true 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$ , then you read this paper at  $t$ .
- 3) Therefore, you had no choice about: reading this paper at  $t$ .<sup>1</sup>

Some philosophers deny that propositions are true at times, so they respond to arguments like this one by denying that anything “was true 1,000 years ago”—and thus, they think, premise (1) is either *meaningless* or—if a meaningful sense can be given to “was true 1,000 years ago”—*implausible*.

Now consider a structurally parallel argument about divine beliefs:

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of similar arguments, see the introduction to Fischer and Todd (2015). The first premise and the conclusion of this argument include what we might call a “no choice operator” (cf. van Inwagen 1983), which may be read as claiming that a certain fact obtains (e.g., in the conclusion, the fact of your reading this paper at  $t$ ) and that you had no choice about that fact’s obtaining. The conclusion of the argument concerns the freedom to do otherwise; not having a choice about the fact that you perform some action X is roughly equivalent to not being able to do otherwise than X. (As should be clear, there is nothing special about the times and action in question, so the argument generalizes to the fatalistic conclusion that we never have a choice about anything we do.) Arguments like this one rely on a “transfer principle” that allow us to infer (3) from (1) and (2): “you have no choice about what necessarily follows from what you have no choice about” (Todd and Fischer, 2015: 3). I will not evaluate this principle here.

- 1\*) You had no choice about: God believed 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$ .<sup>2</sup>
- 2\*) Necessarily, if God believed 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$ , then you read this paper at  $t$ .
- 3) Therefore, you had no choice about: reading this paper at  $t$ .

Some philosophers deny that God has beliefs at times, so they respond to arguments like this one by denying that anything “was believed by God 1,000 years ago”—and thus, they think, premise (1\*) is either *meaningless* or—if a meaningful sense can be given to “God believed 1,000 years ago”—*implausible*.<sup>3</sup>

Just as these arguments are structurally parallel, the responses I have mentioned are structurally parallel and might be characterized as *timelessness* views (about propositions and

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<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout the paper, whenever a claim about one of God’s beliefs is exactly parallel to a claim about a true proposition, I will use the same number for the claim but will add an asterisk.

<sup>3</sup> As an anonymous reviewer points out, one might worry that a timelessness theorist who took God to be necessarily timeless might reject the validity of the argument. On this timelessness view, God’s believing something at a time is impossible, and since we do not have a choice about anything impossible, this would apparently make the first premise true. Moreover, the second premise would be trivially necessarily true since the conditional would have a necessarily false antecedent. Finally, the conclusion is false (or at least the timelessness theorist hasn’t been given any new reason to think that it’s true).

I believe that this concern can be avoided by stipulating that the “no choice operator” at work in the first premise and the conclusion be factive. The recipe for this alleged counterexample to the validity of the argument requires that you have no choice about the “fact” that God believed 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$ . But, according to our timelessness theorist, it is not a fact that God believed 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$ . So if it is impossible that God believed 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$  (because, say, God is necessarily timeless), then the first premise of the argument is false, and thus there is no counterexample.

If one finds this response unsatisfactory, one could replace the second premise, which is a conditional, with the following biconditional: Necessarily, God believed 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at  $t$  iff you read this paper at  $t$ . Even if (contrary to what I’ve just argued) God’s being necessarily timeless would render the first premise true, this modified second premise would be false on this view, and thus the alleged counterexample would disappear. (Thanks to the same anonymous reviewer for suggesting this solution.) As nothing in what follows hangs on which of these versions of the premise is used, I will keep the original formulation of the premise.

God's beliefs, respectively). As I am using the label, timelessness views maintain that propositions are not true at times (or that God does not have beliefs at times). This type of view may be contrasted with the view that propositions are true at times but never change in truth-value (e.g., on this view, the proposition that you read this paper at  $t$  is true at all times, including  $t$  but also all times earlier and later than  $t$ ). Such a view may seem to posit the timeless truth of propositions, since, on this view, propositions do not change in truth-value from time to time; however, this type of view is not a timelessness view in the sense at issue here, since it does not allow for the denial of the premise (1) of the fatalistic argument by putting the truth of propositions "outside" of time.<sup>4</sup>

A worry for timelessness views, however, is that slightly modified versions of the original arguments appear to threaten our freedom (i.e., what we have a choice about) even if propositions/divine beliefs about what we do are timeless.<sup>5</sup> Here's a modified fatalistic argument:

- 4) You had no choice about: it is timelessly true that you read this paper at  $t$ .
- 5) Necessarily, if it is timelessly true that you read this paper at  $t$ , then you read this paper at  $t$ .
- 3) Therefore, you had no choice about: reading this paper at  $t$ .

Whereas (1) entails that propositions are true at times (which the timelessness view denies), (4) avoids this implication by accommodating the timelessness view of propositions. Nevertheless, from this modified premise, in conjunction with (5), the same fatalistic conclusion follows.

Similarly, here's a modified, structurally parallel argument about divine beliefs:

- 4\*) You had no choice about: God timelessly believes that you read this paper at  $t$ .

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify. As this reviewer also points out, it is difficult to see the difference between these two views, and this may suggest that endorsing a timelessness view is insufficient to escape the fatalist's worry, a point that I will defend with a different argument in what follows.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of a similarly modified argument, see Zagzebski (1991, chapter 2).

- 5\*) Necessarily, if God timelessly believes that you read this paper at  $t$ , then you read this paper at  $t$ .
- 3) Therefore, you had no choice about: reading this paper at  $t$ .

Whereas (1\*) entails that God has beliefs at times (which the timelessness view denies), (4\*) avoids this implication by accommodating the timelessness view of God's beliefs. Nevertheless, from this modified premise, in conjunction with (5\*), the same fatalistic conclusion follows.

In this paper, I argue that, in order to respond to these modified arguments, timelessness views must appeal to the notion of *dependence*. Once they do this, however, their distinctive position as *timelessness views* becomes otiose, for the appeal to dependence, if it helps at all, would *itself* be sufficient to block worries about fatalism and divine beliefs. To show this, I begin with a brief sketch of the alternative response to worries about fatalism and divine beliefs that, like timelessness views, aims to defend freedom without denying that there are true propositions/divine beliefs about what we do.<sup>6</sup> According to this alternative, such propositions/divine beliefs are no threat to freedom because their truth *depends* on what we do. Next, after a brief discussion of two timelessness views, I argue that the timelessness response to the modified fatalistic argument must be committed to an exactly parallel claim about dependence (that the truth of certain timeless propositions depends on what we actually do)—a claim that renders the *timelessness* aspect of the response unnecessary. (The argument extends to timelessness views about divine beliefs as well.) I conclude by discussing some implications of this result.

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<sup>6</sup> There are other responses to both worries, but these deny that there are now true propositions about future contingents, or that God has exhaustive foreknowledge. These are sometimes called the "Aristotelian" and "Open Theist" responses, respectively. There are also certain compatibilists (*semicompatibilists*) who need not respond to these arguments since, on their view, we can be free in the sense required for moral responsibility even if we lack the freedom to do otherwise, which is the freedom that is at stake in these arguments.

## 2. Dependence, Fatalism, and Divine Beliefs

Of those who reject fatalism while granting both that propositions are true at times and that there are true propositions about future contingents (such as a proposition about your reading this paper at  $t$ ), all share a common response to fatalistic arguments like the first one introduced above: they deny premise (1). Now, there are various ways to deny that premise, but, as Patrick Todd and John Martin Fischer argue in the introduction to their volume on these topics:

What is common to all such ways is that they employ, in their own particular way, the notion of *dependence*. Those who deny premise (1) will (in general) emphasize the following sort of point: what was true 1,000 years ago concerning what you do at  $t$  depends on what you do at  $t$ . Since what was true 1,000 years ago concerning what you do at  $t$  depends on what you do at  $t$ , this points to the possibility that you, even now, have a choice about what was true 1,000 years ago. (Todd and Fischer 2015: 4)

What are some ways that this appeal to dependence might go? On the weakest version, *counterfactual* dependence is sufficient. On a slightly stronger (but nevertheless relatively weak) version, the dependence involved in the *entailment relation* is sufficient. Arguably, even though these accounts appeal to dependence in some sense, the notions of counterfactual dependence and the dependence involved in the entailment relation are too weak. Consider a case discussed by Todd and Fischer: “Circumstances may be such that, had Jones stood at  $t$ , he wouldn’t have been locked up in chains (as he was) just prior to  $t$ . But this would hardly show that Jones had a choice about whether he was locked up in chains” (2015: 7). Examples like this show that an agent’s having a choice about some fact is not guaranteed by that fact’s counterfactual dependence on what the agent does, so counterfactual dependence is too weak a relation on which to mount a denial of premise (1). Although a more popular suggestion, similar

considerations count against denying premise (1) by appealing to the dependence involved in the entailment relation. To use an example from Todd (2013), suppose that God has decreed, long ago, that you will sit at  $t$ . Your sitting at  $t$  is entailed by the fact that God decreed that you would sit then, but, of course, it does not follow that, because your sitting then was entailed by that fact, you therefore have a choice about sitting at  $t$ . Arguably, such things as whether an agent is in chains—or whether God has decreed that she perform some action—should be held fixed when evaluating what she now has a choice about.

The problem with both of the notions of dependence just considered is that they imply nothing about the *order* of explanation (from, say, your reading at  $t$  to its being true 1,000 years ago that you read at  $t$ ). What is needed, then, in order to mount a denial of premise (1), is a stronger (more demanding), asymmetric notion of dependence, and here are two popular proposals. (Since we are interested only in the structure of these views, we need not delve into the details.) Trenton Merricks (2009) offers a stronger notion of dependence than the one involved in entailment: just as *that Jones is sitting* is true because Jones is sitting (i.e., truth depends on the world, not the other way around), so too, according to Merricks, it was true 1,000 years ago that you read at  $t$  because you read at  $t$ . Alternatively, there is the Ockhamist view (discussed in Todd and Fischer 2015) that certain facts about the past aren't *only* about the past but rather are temporally relational (or extrinsic, or soft) facts. Whether or not the proposition about what your reading at  $t$  counts as true 1,000 years ago depends on (or is determined by) whether you read at  $t$ . On each of these proposals, nothing that depends on what you do (even if

it's a proposition that was true 1,000 years ago) should be held fixed when evaluating what you have a choice about, and thus proponents of these views deny premise (1).<sup>7</sup>

Some proponents of these views (including Merricks) extend the response to fatalistic arguments to the problem of freedom and divine beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Not only do certain propositions that were true in the distant past depend for their truth on (or are determined to be true by) what you do, but, these proponents claim, certain of God's past beliefs depend on (or are determined to be what they are by) what you do and thus should not be held fixed when evaluating what you have a choice about now. On each of these structurally parallel responses, nothing that depends on what you do (even if it's a belief that God had 1,000 years ago) should be held fixed when evaluating what you have a choice about, and thus proponents of these views deny premise (1\*) of the structurally parallel argument about divine beliefs introduced above.

### 3. Timeless Propositions

In contrast to these views, *timelessness* views are not associated with the claim that nothing that depends on what you do should be held fixed when evaluating what you have a choice about. For example, Penelope Mackie says:

...some theories that attempt to avoid fatalism by appeal to the “timelessness of truth” may be regarded as denying [claims like “it was true 1,000 years ago that you would read

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<sup>7</sup> Not all authors use the “having a choice about” locution in articulating this view, but, for reasons I explained in note 1 (about the sense of “having a choice about” in the argument for fatalism), I do not think these differences in articulations amount to a real difference in views. For example, in developing his version of this view (which appeals to explanatory dependence), Swenson's “principle of the independent past” refers to what an agent “can” do: “An agent *S* can (at time *t* in world *w*) do *X* at *t* only if there is a possible world *w*\* in which all of the facts in *w* up to *t* that do not explanatorily depend on *S*'s choice(s) at *t* hold and *S* does *X* at *t*” (2016: 662). What an agent *can*, *is able*, or *is free* to do in a certain world and at a certain time is precisely what is at stake in evaluating what an agent *has a choice about* (in the sense relevant to the argument for fatalism).

<sup>8</sup> This move is also developed by Swenson (2016) and Westphal (2011).

this paper at  $t'$ "]. I have in mind theories that deny that it is appropriate to speak of anything's being true or false 'at a time', and hence regard the claim that it was true [1,000 years ago] that [you would read this paper at  $t$ ] as illegitimate, and perhaps even unintelligible. (2003: 673)

In a similar vein, consider Merricks's presentation of timelessness views and the way that they are meant to count as a response to fatalistic arguments:

A. J. Ayer (1963) and Peter van Inwagen (1983, 35) claim that propositions exist "outside time." As a result of existing outside time, so Ayer and van Inwagen argue, propositions are not true at times. So, they would agree, no proposition was true a thousand years ago. So they would say that (1) is false. In fact, Ayer and van Inwagen see the claim that propositions are not true at times as a way to block arguments like the [fatalistic argument]. (2009: 34)

What is distinctive about timelessness views is their denial of the original fatalistic argument's claim that a certain proposition was true at some (past) time, and this is what is emphasized when such views are mentioned. Notice that neither of these presentations of timelessness views makes reference to the claim that nothing that depends on what you do should be held fixed when evaluating what you have a choice about.

As I argue in this section, however, in order for the timelessness view to respond to the *modified* fatalistic argument—and, in particular, in order to deny (4)—it must endorse exactly that claim (the claim that nothing that depends on what you do should be held fixed when evaluating what you have a choice about). (In the next section, I extend my argument to the timelessness response to worries about divine beliefs.) Let us begin, however, with a brief discussion of A. J. Ayer and Peter van Inwagen's versions of the timelessness view.



On Ayer's view, propositions that *concern* times are not themselves true *at times*.

According to Ayer:

There is a time at which a given event occurs, and a time, which may be the same or different, at which it is discovered to occur, but there is no second dimension of time in which its occurring at a time occurs. Correspondingly, there may be a time concerning which a statement is true, and a time, which may be the same or different, at which it is discovered to be true, but there is no time at which it is true and no stretch of time during which it is true. In this sense truth is timeless. (Ayer 1963: 235)

Right away we can see that Ayer's view that truth is timeless constitutes a denial of premise (1) of the original fatalistic argument. Recall that it says:

1) You had no choice about: it was true 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at *t*.

But (1) implies that a certain proposition was true *at* a certain time (1,000 years ago), and Ayer denies this. Ayer later summarizes his position, adding a claim about the prevention of what will happen:

So I maintain that if such and such an event is going to happen, then it is true that it is going to happen. It is not true at any special time, whether now or in the future, but just true. To ask *when* it is true is to put an improper question. And if it is true that the event is going to happen, it is also true that it will not be prevented. It will not be prevented, no matter what else happens. (Ayer 1963: 237)

If it is (timelessly) true that you read at  $t$ , then your reading at  $t$  will not be prevented. But if there are truths about what events will occur in the future, and if these events will not be prevented, no matter what else happens, how has Ayer secured freedom?<sup>9</sup> More on this below.

According to van Inwagen, claims containing phrases like “it was true 1,000 years ago” are either meaningless or, when given a meaningful sense, do not help in establishing fatalism. Imagine that someone says: “Consider the proposition that municipal bonds are a good investment. *This very proposition* used to be true but is no longer true” (van Inwagen 1983: 35). In response, van Inwagen says that he has grave problems understanding what is meant. On his view, when we say things like “that used to be true” or “that was true 1,000 years ago”:

...we are in fact saying of a certain propositional name that it used to denote, or of a certain sentence that it used to express, a proposition that is true, just as when we appear to say of a certain number that it used to be odd [as, e.g., in the phrase: “the number of committee members used to be odd”], we are in fact saying of a certain descriptive phrase [e.g., the number of committee members] that it used to denote a number that is odd. (van Inwagen 1983: 37)

Because fatalistic arguments rely on a claim about some proposition (that concerns our actions) being true *at past times*, and because van Inwagen thinks that such claims amount to our saying of some propositional name that it *denotes* a true proposition (that is not true *at a time*), van Inwagen concludes that claims like the one made in premise (1) of the original fatalistic

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<sup>9</sup> The answer, I argue below, is that the account must be supplemented with an appeal to dependence. As it turns out, Ayer goes on to endorse a weak notion of dependence (namely counterfactual dependence) to secure freedom, indicating that he saw the need to say more than that propositions are outside of time. In my view, Ayer was right to see that a claim about dependence was needed, though, as we have seen, counterfactual dependence turns out to be *too weak* to do the job.

argument are implausible—there is no reason to think that we have no choice about the truth of the timelessly true propositions that concern our actions. But why exactly is there no reason to think this, given that there are timelessly true propositions concerning all of our actions?

While Ayer and van Inwagen have escaped the fatalistic worry codified in the original fatalistic argument, that argument is not the only manifestation of the fatalistic worry. Recall the modified version of the fatalistic argument:

- 4) You had no choice about: it is timelessly true that you read this paper at  $t$ .
- 5) Necessarily, if it is timelessly true that you read this paper at  $t$ , then you read this paper at  $t$ .
- 3) Therefore, you had no choice about: reading this paper at  $t$ .

Whereas Ayer and van Inwagen have provided reason to deny (1), they have given us no reason to deny (4), which, in conjunction with (5), supports the very same fatalistic conclusion. I will now argue that, in order to block the fatalist's worry, these views must deny (4) by relying on a claim about the dependence of (timelessly) true propositions on what we actually do.<sup>10</sup>

Suppose that there are timelessly true propositions about what we will do but that no timelessly true proposition depends on what we do. It follows that it is timelessly true that you read at  $t$  but that this does not depend on your reading at  $t$ . Question: Do you have a choice about your reading at  $t$ ? Well, if you did have a choice about it, then the timelessly true proposition would depend on what you do at  $t$ —your reading or not reading—for it would be implausible to suggest that you could have a choice about something that did not depend on you.<sup>11</sup> If something

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<sup>10</sup> In section 2, I mentioned a few ways that responses to fatalistic arguments might appeal to dependence, and I noted that the notions of counterfactual dependence and the dependence involved in the entailment relation are arguably too weak. In what follows, I use 'dependence' to refer to one of the stronger notions of dependence mentioned in section 2, at least as strong as Merricks's notion of dependence.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this is why van Inwagen (1983) uses "has a choice about  $p$ " and "can render  $p$  false" interchangeably throughout.

does not depend on you, then intuitively you have no choice about that thing. So if the timelessly true proposition mentioned above does not depend on what you do at  $t$ , then you do not have a choice about your reading then. More generally, if you have a choice about the truth of some proposition, then the truth of that proposition depends on you (or on what you do). Thus, in order for (even timelessly) true propositions about our actions to be innocuous with respect to our freedom, it must be the case that the truth of those propositions depends on what we do.

Less informally, then, here is my argument for the claim that, even on the timelessness view, timelessly true propositions must depend on what we do in order for us to have a choice about what we do:

- 6) There are timelessly true propositions about what we will do, we have a choice about some of what we do, but no timelessly true proposition depends on what we do.  
(Assumption for *reductio*)
- 7) For some action, X, that you have a choice about and perform at time  $t$ , there is a timelessly true proposition, P, according to which you perform X at  $t$ , but the truth of P does not depend on your doing X at  $t$ . (From 6)
- 8) If the truth of a proposition about your doing X at  $t$  does not depend on what you do at  $t$ , then you have no choice about doing X at  $t$ . (Premise)
- 9) You have no choice about doing X at  $t$ . (From 7, 8)
- 10) But you do have a choice about doing X at  $t$ . (From 7)
- 11) Therefore, (6) is false. (*Reductio*, 6, 9, 10)

(6) is a conjunction of three claims, two of which are essential to the timelessness view and the other of which denies that timelessly true propositions depend on what we do. If this claim leads to a contradiction, as I argue it does, then the timelessness theorist must (in order to remain a timelessness theorist) accept that timelessly true propositions depend on what we do. (7) follows from (6), (9) follows from (7) and (8), and (10) follows from (7). All that is left to consider, then, is (8).

To my mind, (8) carries considerable intuitive force.<sup>12</sup> In addition, however, it is supported by the following argument:

- 12) The truth of a proposition about your doing X at *t* does not depend on what you do at *t*. (Assumption for conditional proof)
- 13) You have a choice about doing X at *t*. (Assumption for *reductio*)
- 14) At *t*, it was possible for you to do X then and possible for you not to do X then. (13, definition of “having a choice”)
- 15) If it was possible for you to do X at *t* and possible for you not to do X at *t*, then the truth of a proposition about your doing X at *t* depends on what you do at *t*. (Premise)
- 16) The truth of a proposition about your doing X at *t* depends on what you do at *t*. (From 14, 15)
- 17) You have no choice about doing X at *t*. (*Reductio*, 13, 12, 16)
- 8) If the truth of a proposition about your doing X at *t* does not depend on what you do at *t*, then you have no choice about doing X at *t*. (Conditional proof, 12, 17)

(12) is an assumption for a conditional proof, and (13) is an assumption for *reductio*. Given the way that “having a choice” is used in the argument for fatalism, we are concerned with whether we are ever free to do otherwise, whether it was possible that we did something else instead of what we actually did, so (14) follows from (13). (16) follows from (14) and (15). (17) is the negation of (13), which we may infer since the assumption of (13) led to a contradiction, namely of (12) and (16). And (8) completes the conditional proof from (12) to (17). All that is left to consider, then, is (15).

Like (8), I find (15) intuitively compelling, but it can be supported by considering a dilemma that would arise if we denied it. Suppose (15) is false. Well, then either your doing X at *t* depends on the truth of the proposition about your doing X at *t*, or else neither depends on the other. If the former, then intuitively you are not free. (Additionally, this runs counter to the “truism” that truth depends on the world, not the other way around.) But if your doing X at *t* and

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<sup>12</sup> An alternative way to motivate (8) would be, first, to consider examples of actions that someone putatively has a choice about and, second, to show that the truth of propositions about that person’s actions therefore depends on what she does. I set aside this strategy here.

the truth of the proposition about your doing X at  $t$  are such that neither depends on the other, it is utterly mysterious why there is such a correlation between what you do and what the proposition says about what you do (and not just between your doing X and that proposition, but between all actions and propositions about them). Surely such a correlation cries out for an explanation, and the obvious explanation for this correlation would be that the truth of the proposition about your doing X at  $t$  depends on what you do then.<sup>13</sup> So we should accept (15).

I have argued that timelessness theorists must appeal to dependence (and, in particular, they must admit that nothing that depends on what you do should be held fixed when evaluating what you have a choice about). If timelessness theorists must do this, however, then the distinctive appeal to the *timelessness* of propositions serves no purpose in responding to worries about fatalism, for, as we saw above, the appeal to dependence, if it works, is *itself* sufficient to block worries about fatalism and divine beliefs.<sup>14</sup> But suppose someone objects to my argument by offering the following line of reasoning:

You have argued that the timelessness view's distinctive appeal to the timelessness of propositions is otiose, but timelessness views are motivated by a robust notion of the fixity of the past. Intuitively, what is past is "over and done with," so if it was true 1,000 years ago that I would read this paper at  $t$ , then there is nothing that anyone can do about that now. Unlike the rival view (which says that certain propositions that were true 1,000 years ago nevertheless depend on what we do), timelessness views can maintain a robust

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<sup>13</sup> Whether there is any *further* explanation for this dependence relation (or whether it is brute) is a separate question; I am only claiming that the correlation between the content of certain propositions, on the one hand, and what you do, on the other, calls out for explanation.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to say, of course, that there are not reasons *independent of worries about fatalism* for preferring a timelessness view of propositions to the view that propositions are in time. All I have argued is that appealing to timelessness is otiose in responding to worries about fatalism.

principle of the fixity of the past, so the timelessness view's distinctive appeal to the timelessness of propositions is not otiose.<sup>15</sup>

This line of reasoning is misleading, however, since not even timelessness views can maintain such a robust principle of the fixity of the past. To see why, suppose that, sometime before  $t$ , I claim that you will read at  $t$ , and suppose that my claim is in fact true.<sup>16</sup> Even proponents of the timelessness view will deny that the truth of such a claim would imply that you have no choice about your reading at  $t$ .<sup>17</sup> But notice that my claim about your reading at  $t$  is “over and done with” at  $t$ , and thus a robust principle of the fixity of the past would imply that you have no choice about your reading at  $t$ . Not even timelessness views, then, can maintain such a robust principle of the fixity of the past, so the timelessness view's distinctive appeal to the timelessness of propositions is otiose.

To put my response to the objection somewhat differently, everyone must grant that certain facts that are about the past (such as the fact that I correctly claim, prior to  $t$ , that you will read at  $t$ ) should not be held fixed when evaluating what you now have a choice about. On some views, this is because, even though such facts were true in the past, they nevertheless depend on what you do. Even on the timelessness view, however, facts about what has been correctly claimed (or believed) should not be held fixed despite their being in the past. Both types of view,

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<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Andrew Law for helpful discussion of this potential objection to my argument.

<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, you could suppose that I form a true belief about what you will do at  $t$ . See Merricks (2009: 35) for this suggestion.

<sup>17</sup> Suppose someone says: “No, your claim is not true/false, since only propositions are the bearers of truth/falsity, and these are outside of time. Instead, your claim merely expresses a timelessly true proposition, which is not true in the past.” In response, I would ask, is it true that my claim expresses, before  $t$ , a timelessly true proposition? Clearly it is, but that fact about the past (the fact that my claim expressed, before  $t$ , a timelessly true proposition) does not imply that you have no choice about reading at  $t$ .

then, need a modified principle of the fixity of the past according to which these facts should not be held fixed when evaluating what agents have a choice about. Whether propositions are true at past times or are timelessly true is orthogonal to the required revision to the principle of the fixity of the past.

#### 4. Timeless Beliefs

Just as appealing to the timelessness of propositions serves no purpose in responding to worries about fatalism, neither does the appeal to the timelessness of God's beliefs. Timelessness views about God's beliefs deny premise (1\*) in the original, parallel argument introduced above.<sup>18</sup> Recall that it says:

1\*) You had no choice about: God believed 1,000 years ago that you would read this paper at *t*.

According to the timelessness view, because (1\*) implies that God existed 1,000 years ago and had a certain belief at that time, and because God exists "outside of time" rather than at all times, it is strictly speaking meaningless to say, as (1\*) does say, that God believed anything 1,000 years ago. Now, of course, it does not follow from this that if someone had claimed, 1,000 years ago, that God exists, then that person would have been wrong. Nor does it follow that if someone had claimed, 1,000 years ago, that God believes that you read this paper at *t*, then that person would have been wrong. On the timelessness view, the problem with (1\*) is that locates God, and God's beliefs, in time. But if we were to modify (1\*) such that it referred to God's *timeless* beliefs, the result, according to the timelessness response, would be an implausible claim.

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<sup>18</sup> For developments and defenses of this view, see Stump and Kretzmann (1981; 1991) and Leftow (1991).



While the timelessness view escapes the worry codified in the original, parallel argument about divine beliefs, that argument is not the only manifestation of the worry about divine beliefs. Recall the modified version of the parallel argument about divine beliefs:

- 4\*) You had no choice about: God timelessly believes that you read this paper at *t*.
- 5\*) Necessarily, if God timelessly believes that you read this paper at *t*, then you read this paper at *t*.
- 3) Therefore, you had no choice about: reading this paper at *t*.

Whereas the timelessness view of divine beliefs provides reason to deny (1\*), it gives us no reason to deny (4\*), which, in conjunction with (5\*), supports the very same fatalistic conclusion. I will now argue that this view relies on a claim about the dependence of God's (timeless) beliefs on our actions.<sup>19</sup>

Suppose that God has timeless beliefs about what we will do but that these do not depend on what we do. It follows that God timelessly believes that you read at *t* but that this does not depend on your reading at *t*. Question: Do you have a choice about your reading at *t*? Well, if you did have a choice about it, then God's timeless belief would depend on what you do at *t*—your reading or not reading—for it would be implausible to suggest that you could have a choice about something that did not depend on you. Again, if something in no sense depends on you, then intuitively you have no choice about that thing. So if the truth of God's timeless belief does

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<sup>19</sup> In my own view, my conclusion should be welcomed by timelessness theorists, for it seems the most natural way to explain their frequent appeal to God's "awareness" of what occurs in time. In fact, Stump and Kretzmann (1991: 418-419) come very close to endorsing a dependence account when explaining how God's timeless beliefs are innocuous with respect to the freedom of human actions:

For God, who timelessly sees contingent events future to us when and as they are temporally present, those events have the sort of inevitability that accompanies presentness, and only that sort. For us, relative to whom they are future, those events are as evitable now as the presently occurring contingent events were evitable when they were future. Nothing in God's relationship to those events determines them in advance any more than our observing [some human agent's] present actions would render those actions of hers unfree.

not depend on what you do at  $t$ , then you do not have a choice about your sitting then. More generally, if you have a choice about the truth of some (timeless) belief of God's, then the truth of that (timeless) belief depends on you (or on what you do) in some sense. Thus, in order for God's timeless beliefs about our actions to be innocuous with respect to our freedom, it must be the case that the truth of those beliefs depends on what we do.

Less informally, then, here is my argument for the claim that, even on the timelessness view, God's timeless beliefs must depend on what we do in order for us to have a choice about what we do:

- 6\*) God has timeless beliefs about what we will do, we have a choice about some of what we do, but none of God's timeless beliefs depends on what we do. (Assumption for *reductio*)
- 7\*) For some action, X, that you have a choice about and perform at time  $t$ , God has a timeless belief, B, according to which you perform X at  $t$ , but the truth of B does not depend on your doing X at  $t$ . (From 4\*)
- 8\*) If the truth of God's belief about your doing X at  $t$  does not depend on what you do at  $t$ , then you have no choice about doing X at  $t$ . (Premise)
- 9) You have no choice about doing X at  $t$ . (From 5\*, 6\*)
- 10) But you do have a choice about doing X at  $t$ . (From 5\*)
- 11\*) Therefore, (4\*) is false. (*Reductio*, 4, 7, 8)

(6\*) is a conjunction of three claims, two of which are essential to the timelessness view and the other of which denies that God's beliefs depend on what we do. If this claim leads to a contradiction, as I argue it does, then the timelessness theorist must (in order to remain a timelessness theorist) accept that God's timeless beliefs depend on what we do. (7\*) follows from (6\*), (9) follows from (7\*) and (8\*), and (10) follows from (7\*). All that is left to consider, then, is (8\*).

To my mind, (8\*) carries considerable intuitive force, just as (8) does, but here is an argument for (8\*):

- 12\*) The truth of God's timeless belief about your doing X at  $t$  does not depend on what you do at  $t$ . (Assumption for conditional proof)

- 13) You have a choice about doing X at *t*. (Assumption for *reductio*)
- 14) At *t*, it was possible for you to do X then and possible for you not to do X then. (11, definition of “having a choice”)
- 15\*) If it was possible for you to do X at *t* and possible for you not to do X at *t*, then the truth of God’s timeless belief about your doing X at *t* depends on what you do at *t*. (Premise)
- 16\*) The truth of God’s timeless belief about your doing X at *t* depends on what you do at *t*. (From 12, 13\*)
- 17) You have no choice about doing X at *t*. (*Reductio*, 11, 10\*, 14\*)
- 8\*) If the truth of God’s belief about your doing X at *t* does not depend on what you do at *t*, then you have no choice about doing X at *t*. (Conditional proof, 10\*, 15)

(12\*) is an assumption for a conditional proof, and (13) is an assumption for *reductio*. As we saw above, given the way that “having a choice” is used in the argument for fatalism, we are concerned with whether we are ever free to do otherwise, whether it was possible that we did something else instead of what we actually did, so (14) follows from (13). (16\*) follows from (14) and (15\*). (17) is the negation of (13), which follows from the fact that the assumption of (13) led to a contradiction, namely of (12\*) and (16\*). And (8\*) completes the conditional proof from (12\*) to (17). All that is left to consider, then, is (15\*).

Like (8\*), I find (15\*) intuitively compelling, but it can be supported by considering a dilemma—exactly parallel to the one considered above—that would arise if we denied it. Suppose (15\*) is false. Well, then either your doing X at *t* depends on the truth of God’s belief about your doing X at *t*, or else neither depends on the other. If the former, then intuitively you are not free. But if your doing X at *t* and the truth of God’s belief about your doing X at *t* are such that neither depends on the other, it is utterly mysterious why there is such a correlation between what you do and what God truly believes about what you do (and not just between your doing X and that true belief, but between all actions and God’s beliefs about them). Surely such a correlation cries out for an explanation, and the obvious explanation for this correlation would be that the truth of God’s belief about your doing X at *t* depends on what you do then. So we should accept (15\*).

## 5. Implications

If I am right that timelessness views must appeal to a claim about dependence, here are two implications. First, mere appeals to timelessness (whether of propositions or of God's beliefs) are insufficient to block worries about fatalism in general. This obvious implication gives rise to a question for each of the timelessness responses:

- Q1) Is it plausible that the truth of timeless propositions could *depend* on what we do?
- Q2) Is it plausible that the truth of God's timeless beliefs could *depend* on what we do?

Concerning (Q1), you might think that a proposition's being "outside of time" (and presumably space), as such things as abstract objects are, makes it impossible for its timeless truth to be dependent on something temporal, like an action. In other words, you might worry about the possibility of a dependence relation between timeless and temporal things. Concerning (Q2), in addition to the worry about a timeless-temporal dependence relation just mentioned, it may well be the case that the timelessness view of God's beliefs inherits objections to rival (sempiternalist) proposals that appeal to dependence—objections that have not previously been applied to the timelessness view.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it may be difficult for the theist to reconcile her other theistic commitments with the claim that God's timeless beliefs depend on what we do.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For some of these objections, see Todd (2013) and Fischer and Tognazzini (2014). I argue in an unpublished manuscript ("Atemporalism") that the timelessness view about God's beliefs is vulnerable to exactly these objections.

<sup>21</sup> In particular, classical theists may deny that God depends in any way (even perhaps in what he knows) upon anything else. In addition, according to certain views of divine providence (such as Molinism), God's knowledge of our behavior is in some sense "prior" to our actual behavior (and so does not depend on what we actually do). Of course, such theists will need to address the threat to freedom from divine beliefs, but perhaps they will not be inclined to take either the sempiternalist nor the timelessness version of the view that appeals to dependence. (Insofar as they reject certain alternatives, such as Open Theism, however, such theists may, in the end, need to give up the type of freedom at issue in this paper.) I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for raising these points.

The second implication is that it would be better to conceive of the dialectic differently than it is typically presented.<sup>22</sup> If we have a choice about what we do and there are true propositions/divine beliefs about what we do, then the latter must depend on the former whether or not those propositions/divine beliefs are timeless. In other words, *all* responses to worries about fatalism and divine beliefs that aim to defend freedom (without denying that there are true propositions/divine beliefs about what we do) must appeal to dependence.<sup>23</sup> Since, as we have seen, the appeal to dependence, if it works at all, is sufficient *on its own* (apart from the appeal to the timelessness of propositions/divine beliefs) to respond to worries about fatalism and divine beliefs, these worries do not provide us with any reason for opting for timelessness views (though, of course, nothing that I have said here precludes the possibility that there are other, non-fatalistic reasons for preferring this view over its rivals). Given this, dialectical progress will be made (in debates about fatalism and divine beliefs) by focusing on claims about *dependence* rather than claims about the *timelessness* of propositions/divine beliefs.

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<sup>22</sup> Again, see Mackie (2003) and Merricks (2009) for typical presentations.

<sup>23</sup> Again, as I noted in note 6, there are alternative responses to these worries (the "Aristotelian" and "Open Theist" positions) that deny that there are now true propositions about future contingents, or that God has exhaustive foreknowledge, but we have set these aside here.

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