

“Omniscience, Time, and Freedom” by Linda Zagzebski

Joe Schmid | [Majesty of Reason](#)

Is divine foreknowledge incompatible with human freedom? This is a deeply significant question. God’s existence, after all, might be on the line:

1. If God exists, then God enjoys infallible foreknowledge.
2. If God enjoys infallible foreknowledge, then no human acts freely.
3. Some human acts freely.
4. Therefore, God doesn’t exist. (1-3)

Zagzebski explores premise (2) in the above argument, a premise committing to *theological fatalism*.

The argument rests on the conjunction of four theses:

- (i) *Infallible foreknowledge*: God is infallibly omniscient (i.e., God cannot be wrong) and knows every truth about the future in advance.
- (ii) *Necessity of the past*: The past is fixed and unalterable—it enjoys “now-necessity”, which is “the type of necessity that the past has just because it is past” (4).
- (iii) *Principle of alternative possibilities (PAP)*: Acting freely requires the ability to do otherwise.
- (iv) *Transfer of necessity*: If $\Box(p \rightarrow q)$ and p is now-necessary, then q is now-necessary.

For if (i) is true, then for any proposition p reporting S’s action ϕ performed today (or in the future), God believed p in the past. Since God is infallibly omniscient, God’s believing p in the past necessarily implies p . By (iv), it follows that *if* God’s believing p in the past is now-necessary, then p is now-necessary. By (ii), God’s believing p in the past—precisely because it *occurred in the past*—is now-necessary. Hence, p is now-necessary. But if p is now-necessary, then clearly S cannot do otherwise than ϕ today. By (iii), it follows that for any S and any action ϕ , S is not free in doing ϕ today. Therein lies the (purported) incompatibility between human freedom and infallible omniscience.

Zagzebski proceeds to consider how each of (i)-(iv) might be weakened or modified while preserving validity.

- Regarding (i), all that’s required is the mere *possibility* of infallible belief in the relevant proposition(s) (6-7).

- Thesis (ii) might be modified to preserve the argument's force even if God is timeless, since the timeless realm seems equally determinate and fixed as the past (7-8). Just as there's no use crying over spilled milk, there's no use crying over timelessly spilling milk!
 - o PvI's stone monument case
- Regarding (iii), the argument for fatalism can be re-cast in agent-causal terms without PAP, since—as Zagzebski argues (8-11)—alternate possibilities (unlike agent causation) are subsidiary to what's required for free will.
 - o If it's now-necessary that S do ϕ , then S does not agent-cause S's act of ϕ -ing
- Regarding (iv), Zagzebski derives a *transfer of contingency principle* from the transfer of necessity principle.
 - o p is now-contingent $=_{\text{def}}$ p is now-possible and $\sim p$ is now-possible
 - o *Transfer of contingency*: If $\Box(p \rightarrow q)$ and p is now-possible and q is now-contingent, then p is now-contingent
 - This follows from the transfer of necessity principle.
 - If $\Box(p \rightarrow q)$ and p is now-necessary, then q is now-necessary.
 - Suppose q is now-contingent.
 - o So, q is *not* now-necessary.
 - o So, either $\langle \Box(p \rightarrow q) \rangle$ is **false** or $\langle p \text{ is now-necessary} \rangle$ is **false**.
 - o If $\langle p \text{ is now-necessary} \rangle$ is **false**, then either p is now-impossible or p is now-contingent.
 - o So, either $\langle \Box(p \rightarrow q) \rangle$ is **false**, or p is now-impossible, or p is now-contingent.
 - o Now suppose $\langle \Box(p \rightarrow q) \rangle$ is **true** and p is **now-possible**.
 - So, p is now-contingent.
 - So, if q is now-contingent and $\langle \Box(p \rightarrow q) \rangle$ is **true** and p is **now-possible**, then p is now-contingent.
 - So, if $\Box(p \rightarrow q)$ and p is now-possible and q is now-contingent, then p is now-contingent
 - QED
 - o Zagzebski then develops a *counterfatalist* argument that employs the intuition that the future is now-contingent in conjunction with the transfer of contingency principle to derive that the past is likewise now-contingent. Both arguments are equally forceful, which, Zagzebski argues, “should make us suspect a problem in the notion of temporally relative modality” (13).

Zagzebski then argues that an essentially omniscient foreknower (EOF)—which, I will assume for ease of exposition, necessarily exists—is incompatible with the modal asymmetry of time

(14-15). For if the past is now-necessary, then EOF's past beliefs are now-necessary. Now, for any p , either EOF believed p , or else EOF believed $\sim p$. Since EOF's past beliefs are now-necessary, it follows that either it is now-necessary that EOF believed p , or else it is now-necessary that EOF believed $\sim p$. But since $\langle \text{EOF believed } q \rangle$ is logically equivalent to q (for any q), it follows that either it is now-necessary that p or else it is now-necessary that $\sim p$. But this entails that it is *false* that both p and $\sim p$ are now-possible—in which case, now-contingency is utterly vanquished. (This is because (i) p is now-contingent just in case both p and $\sim p$ are now-possible, and (ii) the aforementioned argument universally quantifies over any p .) The modal asymmetry of time is therefore incompatible with essential divine omniscience. Zagzebski then shows that the argument can equally be run with a given contingent proposition p and a being that is 'essentially epistemically matched' to p —i.e., a being such that, necessarily, the being believes p if and only if p (15-17).

Zagzebski then compares the theological fatalist argument with a **simple, logical** fatalist argument. The simple fatalist argument runs as follows:

- (1) Yesterday it was true that B. [Assumption.]
- (2) It is now-necessary that yesterday it was true that B. [Necessity of the past.]
- (3) Necessarily, if yesterday it was true that B, then now it is true that B. [Omnitemporality of truth.]
- (4) If p is now-necessary, and necessarily (if p then q), then q is now-necessary. [Transfer of necessity.]
- (5) So it is now-necessary that it is true that B. [(2), (3), (4), conjunction, *modus ponens*.]
- (6) If it is now-necessary that it is true that B, then B cannot be false. [Definition.]
- (7) If B cannot be false, then you cannot do otherwise than choose tea tomorrow. [Definition.]

She argues that the theological fatalist argument is more plausible than the simple, logical fatalist argument, since a past belief is a better candidate than a past truth for being now-necessary (17-18). She then cautions against trusting untutored intuition in determining modal truths as well as entailment and consistency relations (19).

Zagzebski next examines four responses to her new dilemma between essential omniscience and the modal asymmetry of time (19-20):

- (a) Essential omniscience (or, at least, essential epistemic mapping to future contingents) is impossible;
- (b) God's past beliefs in future contingents are now-contingent;

- (c) The future, like the past, is now-necessary; or
- (d) Temporal modality is incoherent.

She notes that a primary reason people find temporal modality plausible is that they confuse it with *causal* modality (20). However, the two are independent (20-22). Our power over events “has nothing to do with pastness or futurity per se; it depends upon laws of causality”, such as the law that causes precede their effects (22). Preserving this causal arrow allows us to preserve our everyday intuitions that initially led us to believe temporal modal asymmetry.

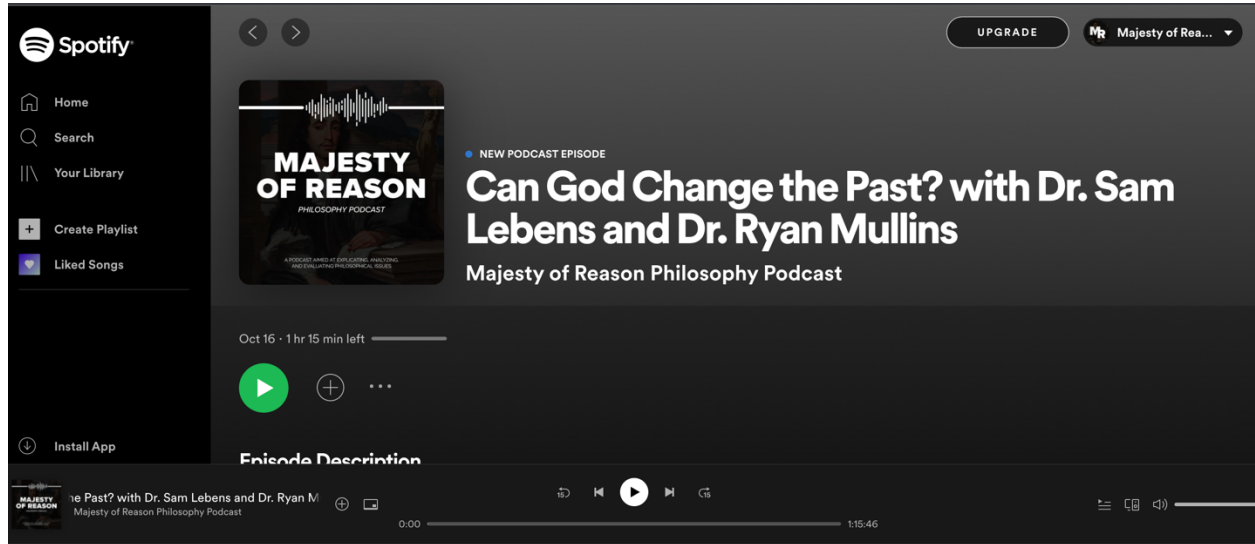
Zagzebski ends the article by emphasizing her core thesis: “either essential omniscience is impossible or time is not modally asymmetrical” (23). Which horn one takes will depend on one’s background metaphysical beliefs.

What do you think? Does essential omniscience conflict with time’s modal asymmetry? Does divine foreknowledge conflict with free will? Lemme know in the comments! ☺

Btw...

- (1) Her article is in the description, as is (i) the interview I’ve drawn clips from and (ii) Zagzebski’s excellent SEP entry on foreknowledge and free will ☺
- (2) Check out my playlists! Full list:
 - a. Kalam Cosmological Argument
 - b. Contingency Arguments
 - c. Ontological Arguments
 - d. Abstract Objects and Theism
 - e. Argument from Change
 - f. Moral Argument
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