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WHY CAN'T GOD KNOW SOMETHING BUT NOT EVERYTHING?

Abstract. The paper is concerned with John Martin Fischer's *Bootstrapping View* of God's foreknowledge, which is intended to reconcile God's foreknowledge with genuine contingency of the future. We argue that this view has two major faults. Firstly, its main theses are incoherent and lack a proper justification. Secondly, the *Bootstrapping View* doesn't address the problem of future contingents it was designed to solve.

Keywords: infallibility; the problem of future contingents; bootstrapping view; God's foreknowledge

1. Introduction. 2. Square of prescience. 3. Bootstrapping to certainty. 4. Omniscience and other perfections. 5. Troubles with justification. 6. Conclusion: bootstrapping and contingency of the future.

1. INTRODUCTION

John Martin Fischer's *Bootstrapping View* of God's foreknowledge (BV) is intended to reconcile God's foreknowledge with genuine contingency of the future by limiting foreknowledge to humanly knowable truths and insisting that God's "mind contains 'news of the future,' but not via the future" (Fischer, 2022, 69).

We argue that this view is untenable, as we find in it two major faults. Firstly, its main theses lack a proper justification. Secondly, and more importantly, we indicate that Fischer's account doesn't provide a solution to the problem of future contingents.

2. SQUARE OF PRESCIENCE

Future contingents are future events (or statements about them) that, as of now, are not determined, that is they are neither impossible nor necessary. A typical example of a future contingent statement

is Aristotle's: "There will be a sea-battle tomorrow." (Note, that, if tomorrow's sea-battle is contingent, then "There may be a sea-battle tomorrow" is not). God may have no knowledge, comprehensive knowledge or partial knowledge of future contingents. The first view was endorsed, most recently, by Open Theism (OT).¹ According to Classical Theism (CT), God knows all future contingent truths.² Both views are expressed by universal sentences, respectively affirmative and negative. As such, these views cannot be both true but can be both false. From (CT) and (OT) (together with the assumption that there are some future contingent truths) easily follow particular sentences: 'God knows some future contingent truths' follows from (CT), and 'there are some future contingent truths God doesn't know' follows from (OT). Obviously, the following sentences are pairwise contradictory: (1) a particular affirmative sentence and a universally negative sentence; (2) a particular negative sentence and a universally affirmative sentence. That is, exactly one sentence from each pair is true.

The BV on the scope of divine prescience is expressed by a conjunction of particular sentences: affirmative and negative sentences. According to this view, God knows some, but not all, future contingent truths. This is true precisely when both (CT) and (OT) are false. Thus, as far as the scope of divine foreknowledge is concerned, BV is a viable option and the only viable option apart from that of (CT) and (OT).

1 To stay focused on the main topic of this paper, our characterization of the views is rather sketchy. The reader interested in a more thorough account of Open Theism is advised to consult other sources. For instance: Hasker, 1989; Hasker, 2004; Rhoda 2024.

2 That doesn't preclude the set of future contingent truths to be empty, in which case it is vacuously true that God knows all future contingents.

3. BOOTSTRAPPING TO CERTAINTY

What are, then, according to BV, the future contingent beliefs that God holds? The confines of God's foreknowledge are determined by an interplay of His perfections: (what Fischer calls) essential omniscience (we will come back to that later) and epistemic responsibility.

Consider all future contingent beliefs. Some of them are true while others are not, and some of them are such that at a given time there exists evidence in their favor, while others are not supported (at that time) by any evidence. From among the true beliefs, God believes at a given time all and only those that are supported by (sufficient) evidence and from among those supported (at that time) by evidence, He believes all and only the true ones.

God's believing only true future contingents is secured by His essential omniscience: "The explanation then, of God's not forming a belief in this kind of context [when a belief in question is false] would be that He is essentially omniscient" (Fischer, 2016, 44). Restriction to evidence-supported beliefs is granted by His epistemic responsibility: "...God, so far as He is a perfect being, does not engage in epistemic irresponsibility. His beliefs must be generated via epistemically responsible paths" (Fischer, 2022, 70).

Evidence constitutes a positive constraint for God's belief-forming process, whereas truth constitutes a negative constraint. In the presence of sufficient evidence, God immediately forms the relevant belief: "The first order evidence explains God's 'coming to believe that' p " (Fischer, 2017, 43), unless the belief is false, in which case His attribute of infallibility comes into play, preventing Him from forming a false belief.

Let us stress, furthermore, that the evidence available to God is, according to Fischer, exactly the same as the (non-decisive) evidence available to humans. As Fischer puts it, God's foreknowledge is confined to humanly knowable future contingents. Such knowledge-ascription is justified by analogy with ascription of fallible knowledge

to humans. According to fallibilism, in the case of a justified belief that, although contingent turns out to be true in the future, one can ascribe knowledge to humans. Fischer assumes that knowledge is unified, that is if an epistemic agent is said to know that p in certain circumstances, then any agent in the same circumstances may be said to know that p . Consequently, supposing that fallibilism about human knowledge is correct and human beings can have knowledge without decisive evidence, then any other epistemic agents, including God, can have knowledge, and not just beliefs, without decisive evidence.³

Yet, despite being based on non-decisive evidence God's beliefs concerning contingent future are certain. This is achieved by employing God's self-knowledge of his essential omniscience: "One of His attributes is essential omniscience, and consequently He knows that He has this attribute. In virtue of His knowing this, when added to the direct evidence He has available that a future contingent p is true, God has entailing evidence that p and thus absolute certainty that p " (Fischer, 2022, 67). Also: "... unlike human beings, God is essentially omniscient, and so He has certainty that p , when He knows that p . Whereas a human being can know that p by virtue of being in a KCS [knowledge conferring situation, i.e. having sufficient evidence in favour of p], even though the evidence does not give him certainty, God must have certainty. Unlike an ordinary human being, God knows that if He believes that p , then it follows of necessity that p is true. He knows this *via* His self-knowledge: He knows that He is essentially omniscient. So not only does God know that p , He knows it with certainty. God can thus 'bootstrap' to certainty in this distinctive way" (Fischer, 2022, 68).

³ The underlying assumptions of BV are open to question. For example, one may argue that if p is humanly knowable, it doesn't follow that p is divinely knowable. However, the point we want to make in this paper is that the view is unsatisfactory even with all Fischer's assumptions.

We have thus, that God's belief concerning a contingent future (based on some non-decisive evidence) combined with His belief in His essential omniscience yields immediately certainty with respect to that contingent future.

Let us recapitulate. How does God come to a certain knowledge that p ? Based on the evidence available, at some point in time He starts believing that p . That, on a fallibilist account, would be sufficient to know that p for humans but doesn't provide certainty, that God requires. Knowing that He believes that p , and knowing that whatever He believes must be true, He instantaneously gets that p must be true.

Although this characterization of the bootstrapping suggests it unfolds in stages, Fischer takes pains to emphasize that the stages are logical rather than temporal. This outright, atemporal nature of the bootstrapping allows him to elude potential objections, such as that that God's knowledge (or beliefs) would be at some point liable to error and, consequently, not suitable for bootstrapping.

4. OMNISCIENCE AND OTHER PERFECTIONS

Fischer systematically cites essential omniscience in his descriptions of God's arriving at a certain knowledge, without ever specifying how essential omniscience is to be understood. Although there are several different definitions of omniscience, a minimal account usually includes the condition that an omniscient being x :

if p is true, then x believes that p , for all p (1).

Essential omniscience is a modal notion:

x is essentially omniscient if and only if x is omniscient and cannot possibly lack this property (2), and is thought to imply infallibility: x is infallible if and only if for all p (if x believes that p , then p is true).

Presumably, infallibility is not understood factually, but modally: an infallible being not only does not believe anything falsely, but he could not possibly be mistaken (cf. Wierenga, 2021).

In the BV God is, clearly, neither omniscient nor essentially omniscient, since (as expressly stated by Fisher) He cannot know true future contingent beliefs that are not humanly knowable. Nonetheless, what is required and sufficient for the view to stand is not the property of omniscience, but infallibility: it's a belief that is given and truth is sought for; p 's truth doesn't follow from the definiens of (1) but it follows from the definiens of (2) (provided that God believes that p). (Cf. also: „if He believes that p , then it follows of necessity that p is true”; Fischer, 2022, 68). For that reason, instead of essential omniscience, we are going to refer to the property of infallibility.

5. TROUBLES WITH JUSTIFICATION

A major weakness of Fischer's otherwise ingenious theory is its blithe approach to justification. Let the following theses serve as an example:

- (A) God only forms his beliefs based on first-order evidence;
- (B) God is infallible.

Both theses are central to the viability of BV. Thesis (A) decides the scope of God's foreknowledge and distinguishes, in this respect, Fischer's BV from both CT and OT. Infallibility plays a dual role in God's acquisition of knowledge: it stops God from believing false beliefs on the first logical stage of bootstrapping and allows for an ascent to certainty on the second.

Consider first thesis (A). God only forms His beliefs concerning a contingent future in the presence of sufficient evidence (or, in Fischer's terminology, while being in a knowledge-conferring situation). Fischer explains that this limitation is dictated by God's morals: “God cannot form a belief arbitrarily or by ‘flipping a coin,’ so to speak. If He could, first-order knowledge would be inessential, and it would seem that He might be able to bootstrap to comprehensive knowledge. But God, so far as He is a perfect being, does not engage in epistemic irresponsibility. His beliefs must be generated via epistemically responsible paths” (Fischer, 2022, 70).

According to Fischer, God would act irresponsibly if He formed beliefs without evidence. He is not irresponsible, so He doesn't form His beliefs without evidence. That is a perfectly valid argument, but its first assumption – that it would be irresponsible of God to acquire beliefs with no evidence – is questionable in light of thesis (B) of BV.

Clearly, it would be irresponsible of humans to accept beliefs with no evidence available. But that is because humans, unlike God, are susceptible to error. In Fischer's theory, God is infallible beyond what is humanly knowable (and He is aware of that). He "finds himself with" some true future contingent beliefs (Fischer, 2017, 84), despite evidence being non-decisive, that is possibly misleading. Yet, He "doesn't find Himself" with some other true beliefs just for want of trying. However, infallibility guarantees that if He tried, He would never believe anything falsely. Perhaps He just doesn't want to set a bad example?

The association of the responsibility of God's infallible foreknowledge with the availability of first-order evidence was questioned by Marcin Iwanicki and Anna Karczewska (2024). They point out that on some fallibilist accounts of knowledge, the reliability of belief-forming processes conjoined with sufficient evidence of this reliability suffices for knowledge ascription. On such accounts (process reliabilism, to cite an example) evidence in favour of p is not required for S to be justified in believing that p , because the processes' reliability provides evidence. Analogically, God's infallibility constitutes the knowledge-conferring situation with respect to all truths about contingent futures. Moreover, Bootstrapping is already committed to ascribing God knowledge of some future contingents with no first-order evidence in favour of them. Namely, whenever the evidence in question is misleading (when evidence suggests that p , but p is in fact false), first-order evidence is explanatorily idle. In such cases God's infallibility commits Him to believing *not- p* , despite *not- p* being a future contingent not supported by any first-order evidence. First-order evidence plays in BV yet another role – that of an incentive

or positive constraint for God's belief formation. However, Iwanicki and Karczevska argue that that role may be delegated to God's desire to maximize His knowledge.

It seems then, that this thesis, which is crucial to Fischer's account, is questionable and requires a proper justification, for it may be argued that if God is infallible, He doesn't need to rely on first-order evidence when acquiring beliefs. Conversely, it is hard to see how a being whose beliefs genuinely derive from non-decisive evidence could be infallible.

Thesis (B) is an ultimate premise of BV, but Fischer doesn't concern himself with providing any justification for it. He concerns himself with coherence. However, as we are going to argue, even if Fischer managed to provide an adequate justification for his claims, if God's foreknowledge is incompatible with indeterminism within CT, it is incompatible within BV as well.

6. CONCLUSION: BOOTSTRAPPING AND CONTINGENCY OF THE FUTURE

The problem with God's foreknowledge is that, together with the assumption of the irreversibility of the past it implies fatalism: no future events are contingent. Thus, one cannot maintain without falling into inconsistency that God is prescient, and that the past is determined whereas the future is not (entirely) determined. The problem arises within CT, while OT eludes it by denying God any knowledge of contingent futures. Fischer contends BV avoids inconsistency despite preserving some qualified foreknowledge: "...the bootstrapping view of God's foreknowledge in an indeterministic scenario is not incoherent, ...it fits well with other doctrines, and perhaps helps to solve important philosophical problems" (Fischer, 2017, 85).

We will show that BV is unsuccessful in providing a coherent account of future contingents and foreknowledge. We think that this view in fact does not address the problem of future contingents at all.

A tentative solution to the difficulty the bootstrapping view presents, amounts to qualifying God's prescience and, additionally, anchoring it in the present: "The Bootstrapping View shows that God does indeed have a crystal ball. His mind contains 'news of the future,' but not via the future. His mental states encode evidence that obtains at a given time about future free human action, and His knowledge of His essential omniscience transforms His belief about the future into knowledge with certainty. He has no crystal ball, taking into account only first-order evidence, but He has a crystal ball, given the totality of His evidence" (Fischer, 2022, 69).

Fischer seems to be convinced that prescience whose origin is not in the future doesn't pose a threat to the future's contingency. He is wrong and fails to recognize the kernel of the difficulty. Both the scope (unless non-empty) and the source of foreknowledge are immaterial to the problem of future contingents.

In order to see that, suppose that p describes some humanly knowable future contingent state of affairs and God somehow comes to know that p before that state occurs. God's knowing that p is a present state of affairs (past from p 's occurrence point of view) and thus it is determined. Moreover, from the assumption that p is humanly knowable we get in BV that God knows that p , if, and only if, p (Fischer, 2022, 70).

Now, we must either agree that p 's occurrence becomes determined as soon as God comes to know that p or that it remains contingent.

In the first case, the inconsistency threat is averted, but this comes at a price: we must admit that a truly contingent future is no less mysterious to God than it is to humans. Were this the route recommended by Fischer, his view would not differ significantly from that offered by OT. However, the intended interpretation of BV is connected to the second alternative.

In the second case, BV faces the same difficulties as CT, for p is at the same time contingent – by assumption – and determined – as a consequence of God's knowing that p together with

the biconditional: God knows that p , if, and only if, p . This biconditional expresses (qualified, in Fischer's case) foreknowledge and allows for the determination to be passed down from the current (or past) state of affairs, i.e. God's knowing that p , to the future state of affairs, that is the obtaining of the state of affairs described by p . We are not suggesting that there is no way out of the difficulty for BV. Fischer can appeal here to a compatibilist solution of his choice, yet this only shows that BV is in no better position than CT, and that it can be consistently maintained only if CT can. BV may be appealing for some other reasons, but, by itself, it does not constitute a solution to the problem of future contingents.

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