

is fate
real?

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Free will vs. fate & foreknowledge

Our first topic today is the oldest challenge to the existence of free will: the challenge to freedom that comes from **fate**.

What does it mean to believe in fate? To believe in fate is to believe that there are now truths about all of the future actions that any of us will undertake.

So, for example, if fate is real then it is already true now that you will marry a certain person. Or, to pick a more grim example, there is already a truth about the exact moment you will die, and how.

We might imagine that all of the facts about your life — past, present, and future — are written down in a dusty book in a library somewhere. So, for example, near the end of the in the first quarter of the book, one might find the sentence '[insert your name here] entered South Dining Hall at 5:46 on 2/13/2020, and filled [his/her] plate with beef stroganoff.'

Of course, there is no such book. But, if fate is real, then there could be. The truths are all there, whether or not they have been written down.

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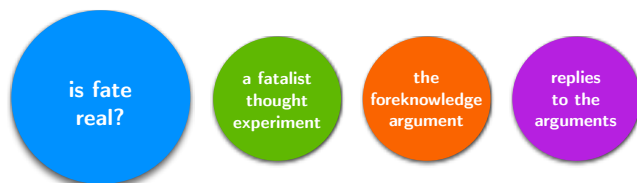
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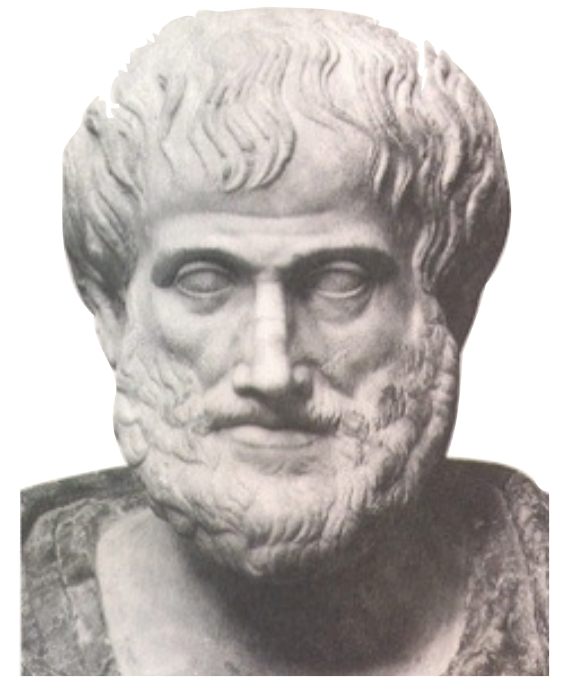
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So let's ask the question: is there such a thing as fate?



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Here is an argument that there is, from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle.



“... if all propositions whether positive or negative are either true or false . . . so if one man affirms that an event of a given character will take place and another denies it, it is plain that the statement of the one will correspond with reality and that of the other will not.

Aristotle's argument begins with a statement of the following logical principle:

The law of the excluded middle
Every proposition is either true or false.

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The law of the excluded middle
Every proposition is either true or false.



Suppose that this is true. Why think that it implies that there are truths about every action that we will perform in the future? Aristotle gives us the following argument:

Again, to say that neither the affirmation nor the denial is true, maintaining, let us say, that an event neither will take place nor will not take place, is to take up a position impossible to defend. ... if an event is neither to take place nor not to take place the next day ... it would be necessary that a sea-fight should neither take place nor fail to take place on the next day.”

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The law of the excluded middle

Every proposition is either true or false.

To see what Aristotle is thinking, let's look at two propositions about a possible future free action of yours.

You will not get married
on June 1, 2027.

You will get married on
June 1, 2027.

If the law of the excluded middle is true, then each of these claims is either true or false. Obviously, both cannot be true, since that is a contradiction.

Could both be false? If they were, Aristotle points out, it follows that you will not get married on that date (the negation of the first) and that it is not true that you will not get married on that date (the negation of the second). But that is a contradiction too.

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The law of the excluded middle

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To see what Aristotle is thinking, let's look at two propositions about a possible future free action of yours.

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So it must be that, if the law of the excluded middle is true, then one of these claims is true, and one of them is false.

But to endorse this is just to believe in fate, since it is to say that there is now a truth about whether you will get married on that day.

And nothing depended on this particular choice of an example. So, for any possible future action of yours, there is now a truth about whether and when you will perform it, and fate is real.

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So a strong case can be made that fate is real. Let's now turn to the crucial question: if fate is real, does this rule out the possibility of genuine free will?

The view that fate rules out free will is called **fatalism**. So it is possible to believe in fate without being a fatalist: one might think that there are now truths about all of the future actions you perform, but that you still have free will.

But many people find fatalism quite plausible. If it is now true that you will perform some action in the future, how could you have a genuine choice in the future about what you will do?

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One of the themes of this class is that you can encounter philosophy in places other than the writings of professional philosophers. Throughout the course we'll discuss various places where philosophy comes into contact with science. But in the reading for today, we see a short example, from the science fiction writer Ted Chiang, of finding philosophy in literature.

Chiang's story begins with the Predictor: a device with a button and an LED light which is equipped with a 'negative time delay' designed to deliver the result that, whenever the button is pushed, the light flashes one second **earlier**.

To get clear about what Chiang is imagining, let's begin with a much more boring device, called the Repeater.

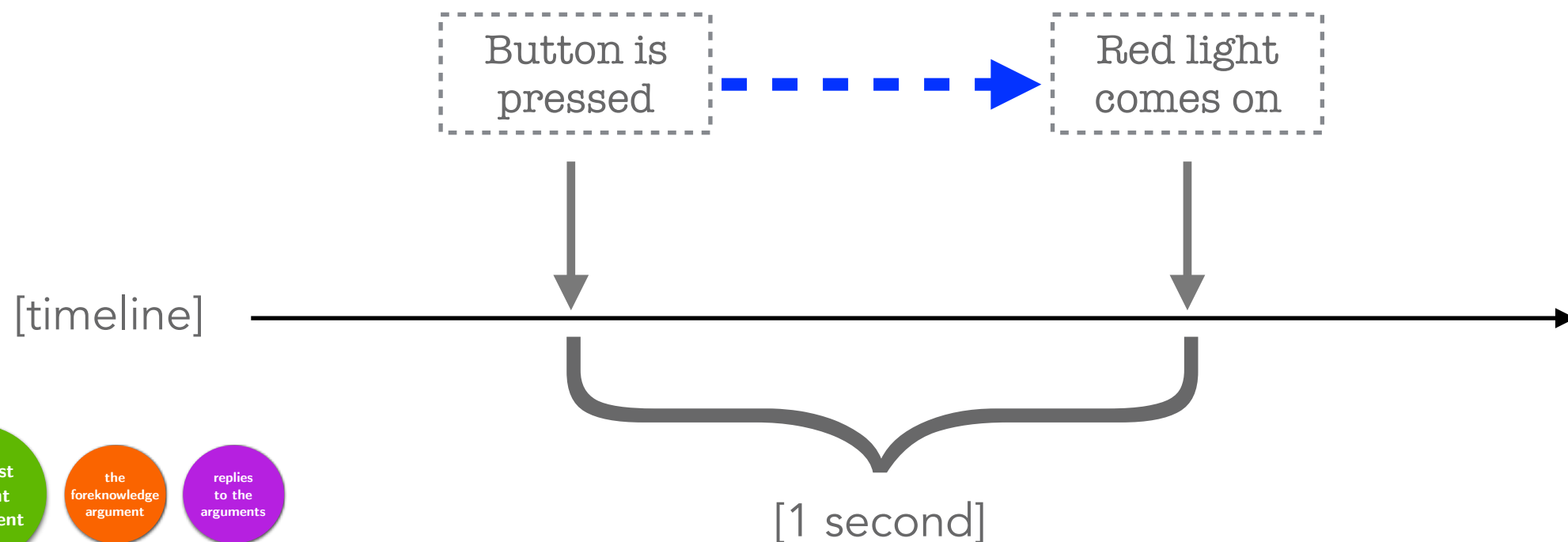


To get clear about what Chiang is imagining, let's begin with a much more boring device, called the Repeater.



The Repeater has a button and a red light. And it is designed to do just one simple thing: when you press the button, the red light blinks 1 second later.

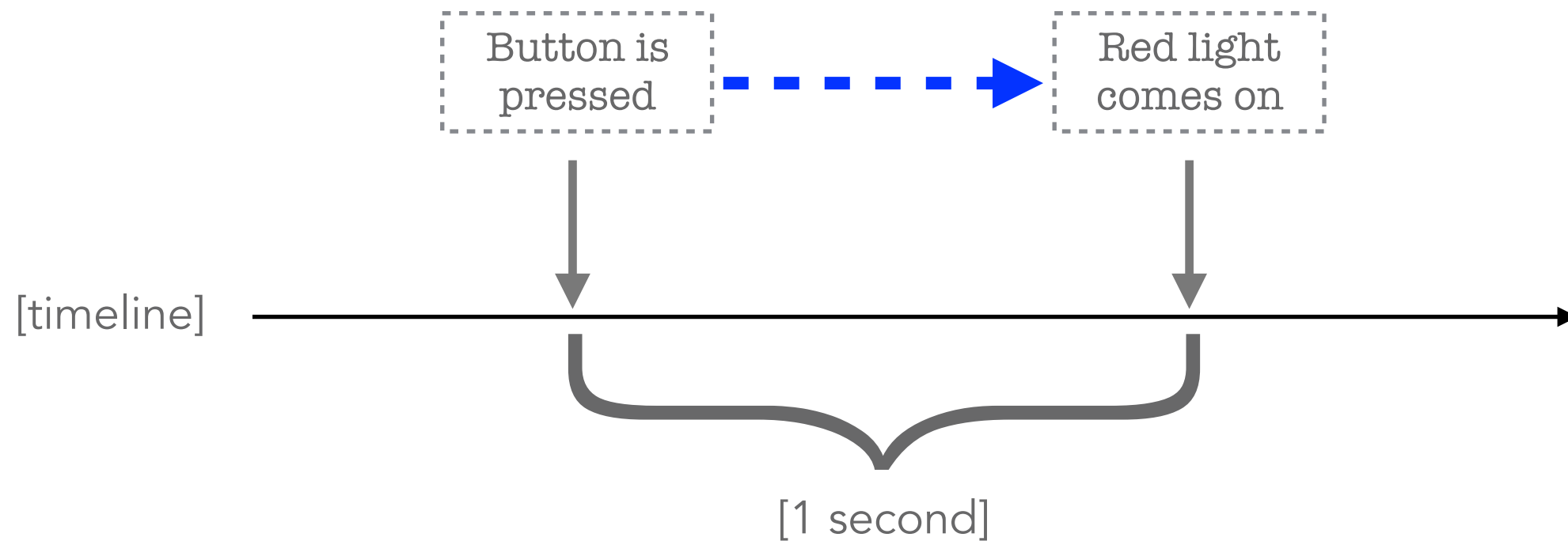
So its behavior might be diagrammed like this:



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The Repeater has a button and a red light. And it is designed to do just one simple thing: when you press the button, the red light blinks 1 second later.



Here the timeline represents the time passed between the two events — 1 second — and the blue arrow represents the direction of causation. (The button pressing causes the light to come on.)

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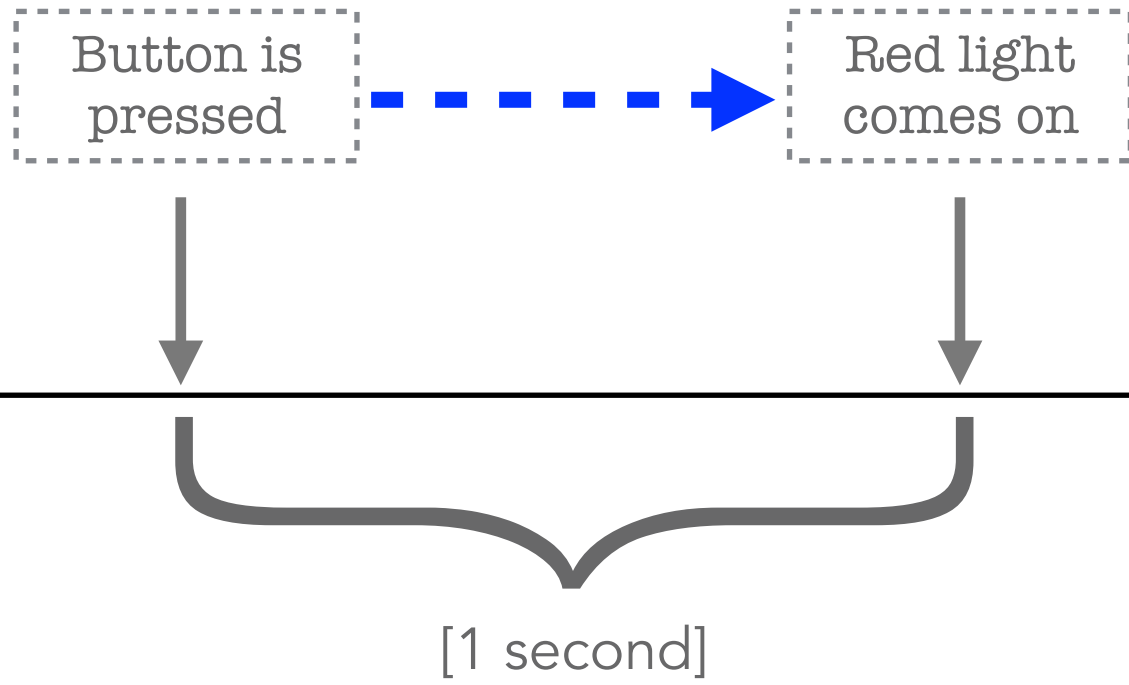
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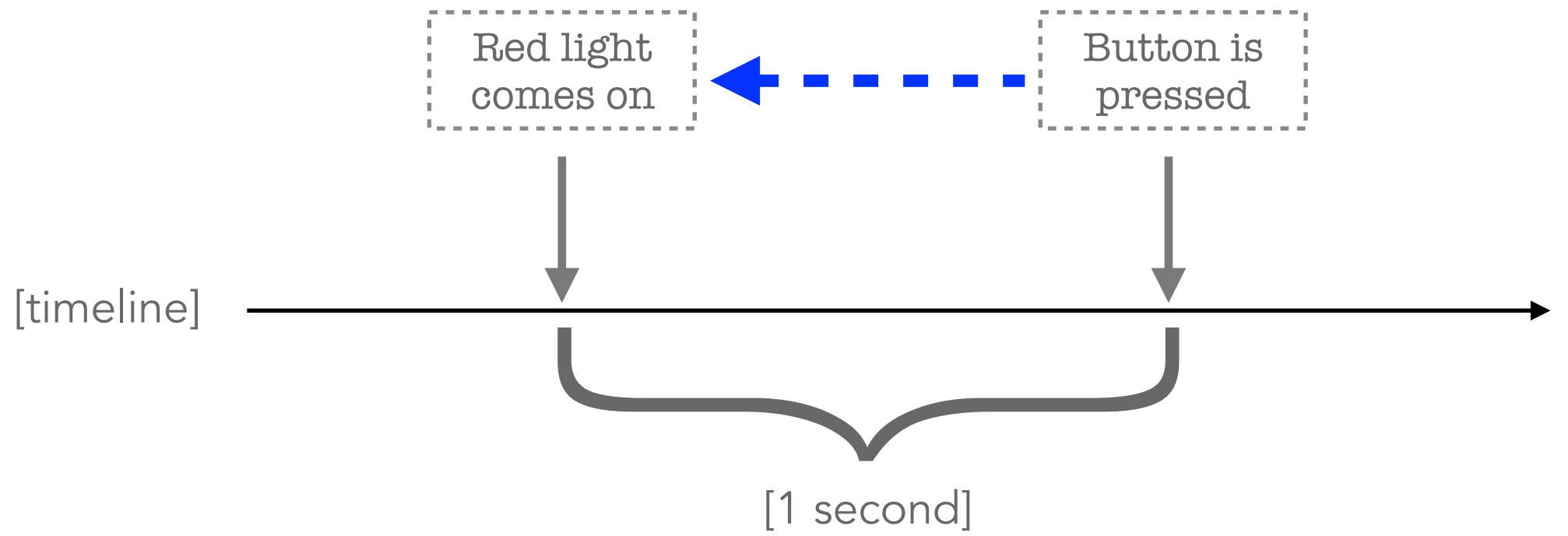
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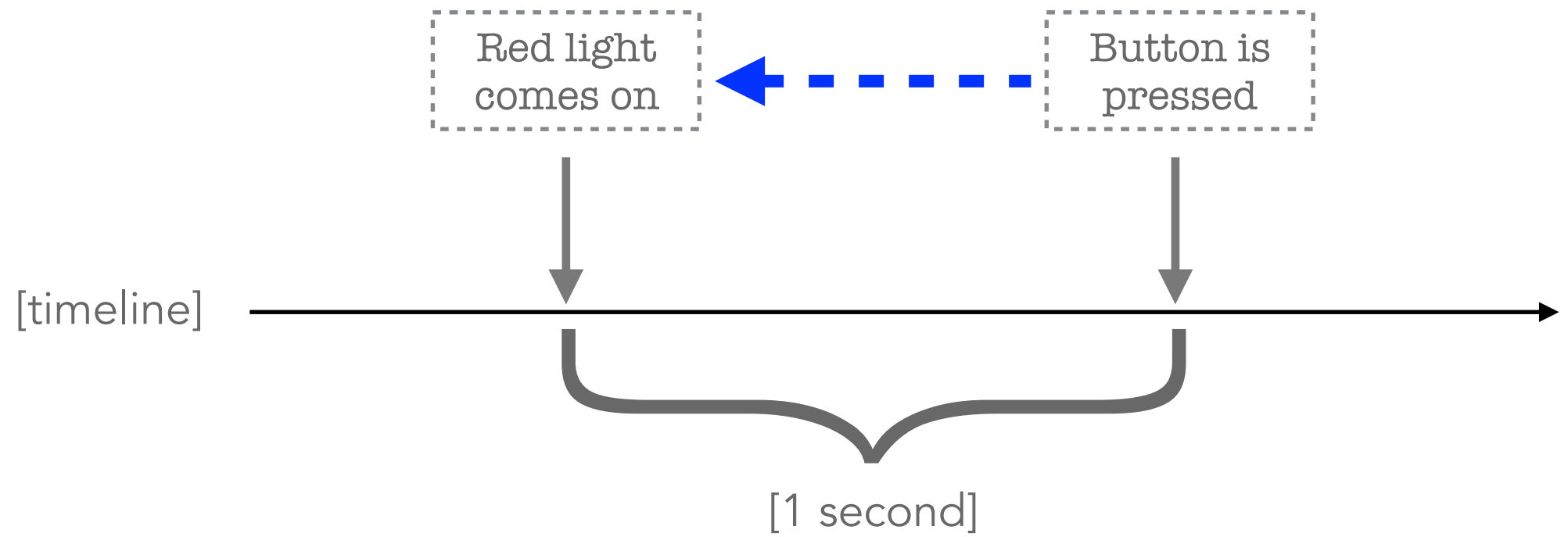
[timeline]



The Predictor looks much the same as the Repeater. But it works a bit differently.



Some things are the same. There is still a one second interval between the button pressing and the red light coming on; and the button pressing still causes the light to come on. But now the button pressing causes the light to come on one second **before** the button is pressed.



Here is how Chiang describes the experience of using a Predictor.

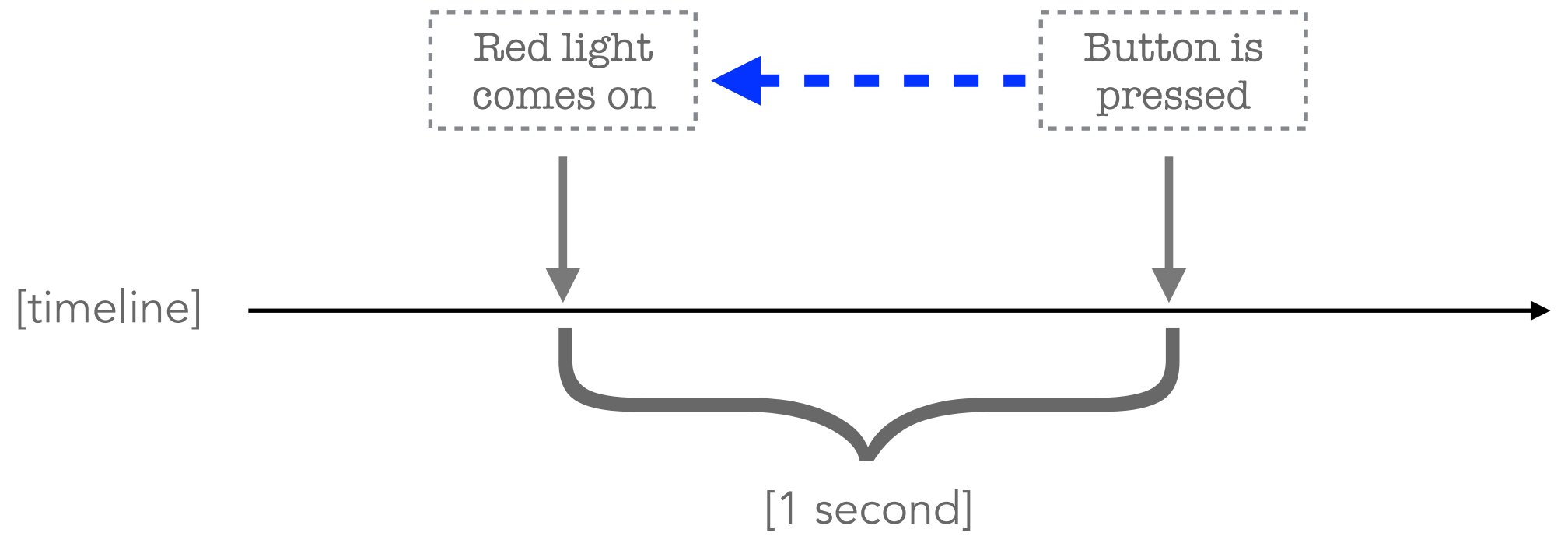
Most people say that when they first try it, it feels like they're playing a strange game, one where the goal is to press the button after seeing the flash, and it's easy to play. But when you try to break the rules, you find that you can't. If you try to press the button without having seen a flash, the flash immediately appears, and no matter how fast you move, you never push the button until a second has elapsed. If you wait for the flash, intending to keep from pressing the button afterwards, the flash never appears. No matter what you do, the light always precedes the button press.

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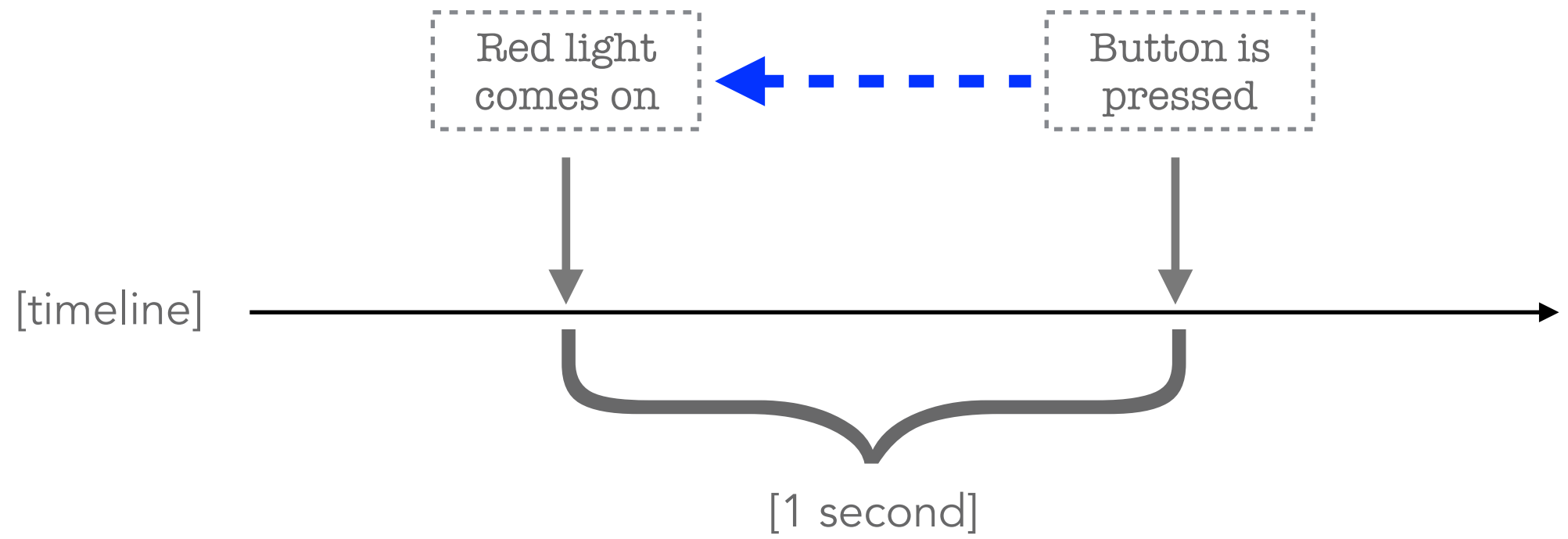


Chiang thinks that people in possession of a Predictor would come to believe that they have no free will. Do you think that he's right about what such people would think?

Do you think that the people would be correct that they lacked free will?

Now, one might reasonably point out that there are no Predictors — the story is fiction, after all. But a reasonable case can be made that this fictional example poses a challenge to our free will.





Begin with a question: is it possible for the Predictor to exist?

This would require two things. The first is fate: there must now be a fact about what you will do 1 second from now.

The second is the possibility of **backward causation**: later events causing earlier ones. This is a possibility which has been taken seriously in physics. One way in which you might think of certain kinds of cases of backward causation is as mini-instances of time-travel: a signal travels back in time from the pressing of the button to cause the red light coming on at a prior time.

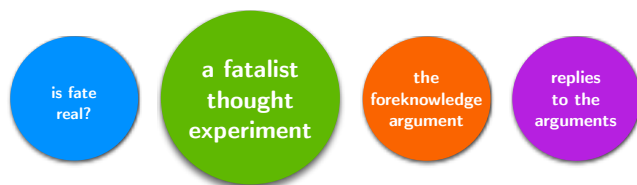


So now consider a possible scenario in which someone exactly like you would get a Predictor. By the above line of thought, this person would lack free will. But that Predictor did not **take away** their free will; it just shows them that they never had any.

So they lacked free will before getting a Predictor.

But this person was stipulated to be exactly like you. So you don't have free will, either.

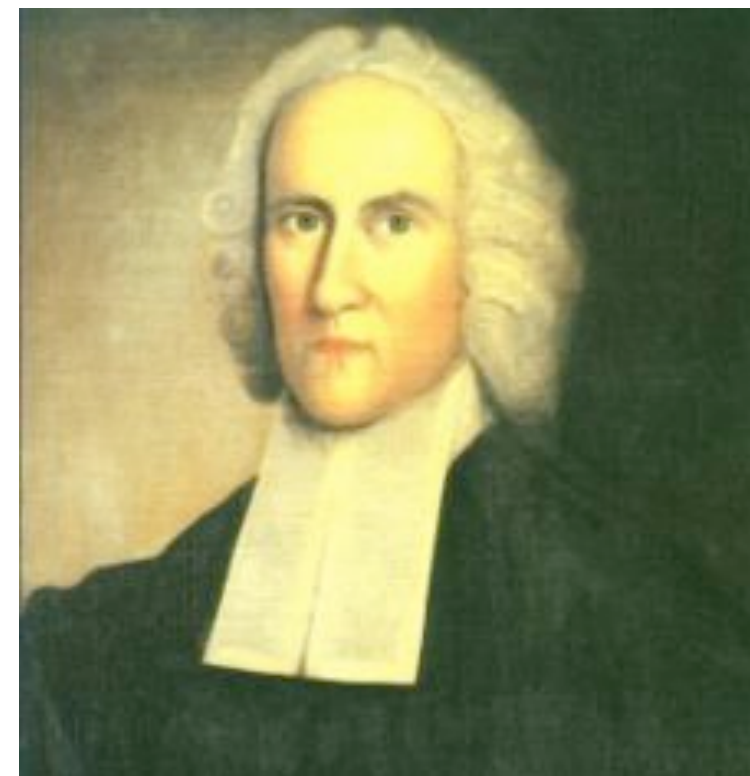
One might wonder: can we come up with an argument which starts with the reality of fate — i.e., the reality of truths about the future — and uses this to show that free will is an illusion?



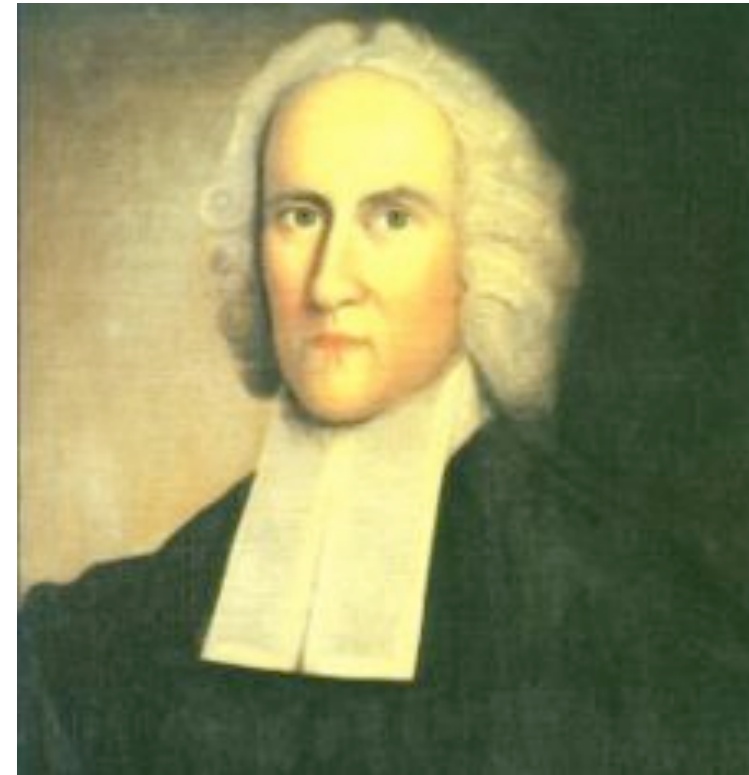
One might wonder: can we come up with an argument which starts with the reality of fate — i.e., the reality of truths about the future — and uses this to show that free will is an illusion?

We can. The best way to see how this argument might work is to start with a challenge to free will which is closely related to the challenge posed by fate. This is the challenge posed by God's foreknowledge of our actions.

The argument we're going to talk about is due to Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was an 18th century American philosopher, theologian and preacher, perhaps best known now for his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God."



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Edwards lays out his argument in four numbered paragraphs, each of which corresponds to a premise in his argument. The first is this one:

“1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect ... ”

In other words:

1. We have no choice about past events.



“1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect ... ”

1. We have no choice about past events.

“2. If there be any such thing as a divine foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that foreknowledge ... is a thing which already has, and long ago had, existence; and so, now its existence is necessary.”

What is Edwards saying here?

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.



“1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect ... ”

“2. If there be any such thing as a divine foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that foreknowledge ... is a thing which already has, and long ago had, existence; and so, now its existence is necessary.”

Premises 1 and 2 of Edwards' argument imply a further claim about the status of God's foreknowledge of our actions.

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)



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“3. It is also very manifest, that those things which are indissolubly connected with other things that are necessary, are themselves necessary.”

As elsewhere, Edwards is using “necessary” to mean, in part “beyond our control” or “something we don't have any choice about.” If we focus on this, then Edwards' point here looks very similar to the principle which we discussed last time:

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

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4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

There is one more premise in Edwards' argument which needs discussion.

“4. It is no less evident, that if there be a full, certain, and infallible foreknowledge of the future existence of the volitions of moral agents, then there is a certain infallible and indissoluble connection between those events and that foreknowledge.”

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Edwards is saying that there is an **indissoluble** connection between something being known, and its being true. An indissoluble connection is one that cannot be broken.

But if the connection between God knowing that I will do X and me doing X is unbreakable, that implies:

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.



1. We have no choice about past events.

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4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

Premise 3 mentions something that we have no choice about.

Premise 5 says that we have no choice about the fact that if that thing occurs, then we will perform some action in the future.

Premise 4 says that if both those things are the case, then we also have no choice about that future action.

But then it seems to follow that:

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions.

And if this is true, we have no free will.



The foreknowledge argument

1. We have no choice about past events.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.
5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

We'll shortly consider some ways of responding to Edwards' argument. But first let's think about how Edwards' argument might be related to an argument for fatalism.

Suppose that someone did not believe in God — and hence rejected premise (2) of Edwards' argument — but did believe in fate. Could they give an argument against the reality of free will similar to Edwards' argument?

God only shows up in premises (2) and (5). Let's look at what happens if we replace reference to God's foreknowledge with reference to there being truths about our future actions.



The foreknowledge argument

1. We have no choice about past events.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
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5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions.
(3,4,5)

The fatalist argument

1. We have no choice about past events.
- 2*. In the past, there were truths about all of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.
- 5*. We have no choice about the fact that if it is true that I will perform some action, then I will perform that action.

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions.
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The foreknowledge argument

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- C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

We'll begin by thinking about whether the foreknowledge argument is a good argument. But after we consider some replies to the foreknowledge argument, we'll return to the fatalist argument to see whether those replies also make trouble for it.

It is natural then to reply to Edwards' argument by saying something like this:

“Look, there is a conflict between God making us do something and us doing that thing freely; but there couldn't possibly be any conflict between God just knowing what we will do, without causing us to do it.”

Does this identify a false premise in the foreknowledge argument?



The foreknowledge argument

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- C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions.
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Which premises in this argument look most open to question?

It looks like (5) is tough to deny, and we already discussed (4) in connection with the consequence argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism. So let's think about some ways in which one might reject premise (1) or premise (2).



2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

There are three different ways in which one might reject premise (2).

First, one might deny that God exists. Let's call this the **atheist** reply.

Second, one might agree that God exists, but deny that God knows which future actions we will perform. Let's call this the **open theist** reply.

Third, one might agree that God exists, and agree that God knows what future actions we will perform, but deny that God has this knowledge in the past (or any other time). Let's call this the **timelessness** reply.

The atheist reply is pretty straightforward. Let's discuss the other two.



Let's talk about open theism first.

The central problem facing the open theist reply is to explain why this is not simply a denial of the thesis that God is omniscient.

Here is one reply that the open theist could make:

“To say that God is omniscient is to say that God knows all the facts. To deny that God is omniscient, then, is to say that there is at least one fact that God does not know. But I am not saying that. I am not saying that because, while I **am** saying that God does not know whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song, I am **not** saying that there is a fact about whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song. I don't think that there are such facts; indeed, I don't think that there are any facts (yet) about which free actions I will and will not perform. So, I don't think that there are any facts that God does not know.”

To make this reply is to deny the existence of fate — the existence of truths about future free actions.



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Suppose one thinks that there are truths about the future. Could one still deny premise 2, and say that God does not know these truths, and yet do so without denying God's omniscience?

Perhaps. But to do so, we need to revise our definition of omniscience. One would have thought that omniscience was just "knowing all the facts" or "knowing all the truths." But if we think that there are truths which an omniscient being could fail to know, this is a contradiction.

Maybe we could get some help here from our discussions of omnipotence. Recall that, in response to Mackie's argument that God could have made it the case that everyone freely chose the good on every occasion, one response was to say that there are possible situations that even an omnipotent being could not bring about. This suggests a view of omnipotence according to which omnipotence is not "able to do anything" or even "able to do anything possible" but rather something more like "the greatest possible amount of power."



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One idea would then be that we could say parallel things about omniscience. Perhaps omniscience is not "knowing every truth", but simply "knowing as many truths as possible."

But there are worries with this way of going. For one thing, it just seems weird that there could be facts — out there in the world — which are beyond God's knowledge.

Further, can't **we** sometimes know what someone else is going to freely choose? (Just imagine someone you know really well.) Does this mean that we can do something which God can't?



A second kind of worry about the open theist response comes from some of the more specific claims that are made about God in scripture.

Various passages in both the Old and New Testaments (as well as in the Koran) seem to imply the existence of divine foreknowledge. Consider, for example the following well-known passage from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is speaking to Peter:

“Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”

One who denies divine foreknowledge seems forced into saying either that Jesus did not really know what he said to be true, or that Peter’s denial was not free.



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Neither option seems attractive: it does not seem that Jesus was merely guessing, and we think that Peter was morally responsible for his action, which suggests that it must have been free.

Perhaps there's a way out. One might say that Peter's decision was free, but that the relevant choice had already been freely made prior to Jesus's saying this — so that the choice was free despite the action being determined at the time of Jesus's statement.

It is debatable, however, whether this way of reconciling Biblical passages to the denial of God's knowledge of future free actions is always available.



2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

Let's turn now to the last way of rejecting premise (2): agreeing that God knows what actions we will perform, but denying that God had this knowledge in the past.

On one plausible reading, this was the view of Thomas Aquinas:

“although contingent things become actual successively, nevertheless God knows contingent things not successively, as they are in their own being, as we do, but simultaneously. The reason is because His knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also His being; and eternity being simultaneously whole comprises all time, as said above ... Hence all things that are in time are present to God from eternity ... because His glance is carried from eternity over all things as they are in their presentiality.”

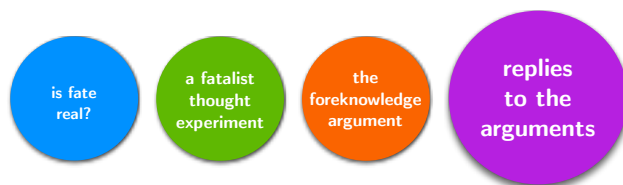
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To get a grip on this, imagine that one learned of another universe, which had its own system of time and space. And suppose one was given all of the information about everything that ever happens in that universe, and the time at which it happens. So, in particular, you know everything about every free action in that universe. But it’s not like you knew of every action **before** that action occurred — you don’t exist in the time of that universe.

Does the claim that God exists outside of time give us reason to reject premise (2) of the foreknowledge argument?

Let’s look again at the premises which make reference to time.



Let's look again at the premises which make reference to time.

1. We have no choice about past events.
2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

It does look like, if Aquinas' view is right, (2) is false. That is good for the defender of free will.

But here is a challenge for someone who tries to get around the foreknowledge argument by adopting the view that God is outside of time. It looks like we could reformulate the relevant premises as follows:

- 1'. We have no choice about events which are **outside of time**.
- 2'. **Outside of time**, God had knowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

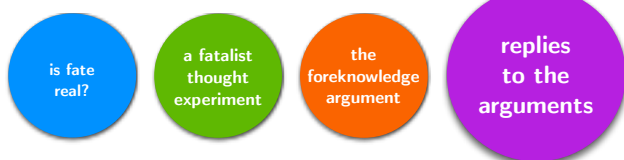


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- 2'. **Outside of time**, God had knowledge of our future actions.
3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)

And from there the argument can just go on as before. So one might wonder whether Aquinas' view gives us one way to block the foreknowledge argument, but not a way to block an argument quite similar to that one.

So far we've discussed three ways to reject premise (2) of the argument. Next we'll look at one way to reject premise (1). But let's first think about whether any of our responses to the foreknowledge argument help with the fatalist argument.



The fatalist argument

1. We have no choice about past events.
 - 2*. In the past, there were truths about all of our future actions.
 3. We have no choice about the fact that there are truths about whether in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
 4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.
 - 5*. We have no choice about the fact that if it is true that I will perform some action, then I will perform that action.
-
- C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions.
(3,4,5)

Our first response to the foreknowledge argument was the atheist reply. That does not help — the fatalist argument says nothing about God.

Another response was God being outside of time. That also doesn't help.

And our other response was open theism. That doesn't help by itself — but recall that one version of that response said that God does not know truths about our future free actions because there are no such truths to be known. Would that help?

It seems that it would, since it would make premise (2*) false. Let's look a little more closely at this option.



2*. In the past, there were truths about all of our future actions.

To deny this is to deny the reality of fate. It is to say that there are not now any truths about whom (if anyone) you will marry, or when you will die.

We started off with an argument for the reality of fate from Aristotle, which rested crucially on this assumption:

The law of the excluded middle
Every proposition is either true or false.

But what if we denied this? Perhaps claims about future free actions — like claims about what you will eat for dinner tonight — are neither true nor false, but simply “undetermined.” They do not now have any truth-value.

This is different than saying that claims about future actions are false — for if you say that some proposition P is false, then you are committed to the negation of P being true. (This is what allowed Aristotle to derive the contradiction in the argument discussed earlier.)

Rather, on this sort of view, we say that both the proposition that you will marry person X and the proposition that you will not marry person X simply have no truth-value.



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Rather, on this sort of view, we say that both the proposition that you will marry person X and the proposition that you will not marry person X simply have no truth-value.

Here’s a challenge to this kind of view. Suppose that you say to a friend, ‘I bet Mariana is going to decide to major in philosophy.’ And then suppose that, a month later, after long (free) deliberations, Mariana does indeed make the obviously correct choice and decides to major in philosophy. We would be inclined to say: ‘What you said about Mariana **was** true.’

Doesn’t this imply that there was already a truth about what Mariana was going to decide, back when you made the prediction?



Denying the law of the excluded middle — and saying that claims about future free actions are neither true nor false — is one view which promises a reply to both the foreknowledge argument and the fatalism argument.

Let's now look at one other view which does this. This is the view that premise (1) of both of our arguments is false.

1. We have no choice about past events.

The denial of premise 1 might, at first glance, seem ridiculous. Absent time machines, how can we have power over the past?



1. We have no choice about past events.

The denial of (1) is often associated with William of Ockham, an English philosopher and theologian who was born about 15 years after Aquinas' death, in 1288. (He's the one that "Ockham's razor" is named after.)

To see why this might not be ridiculous, consider the overlooked philosophical problem of the incompatibility of free will and roommate true belief.

It seems that sometimes, your roommate can have true beliefs about what you will do; for example, the following might be true:

At 10 am today, your roommate truly believed that you would eat a salad for lunch.



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At 10 am today, your roommate truly believed that you would eat a salad for lunch.

Now imagine that at noon you are in the dining hall, about to grab a salad, when you are suddenly overcome with an unlikely desire for a fish sandwich. Do you have a choice about whether you will choose the salad or the fish sandwich? It seems that you do. But then it also seems that you have a choice about whether your roommate's belief, at 10 am, was true. After all, if you had chosen the fish sandwich, your roommate's belief that you would eat a salad would have been false.

But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate's belief was true.



The foreknowledge argument

1. We have no choice about past events.
 2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
 3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action. (1,2)
 4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.
 5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.
-
- C. We have no choice about whether we will perform our future actions. (3,4,5)

Could we now have control over whether in the past God knew something?

Here's a problem with this. God is essentially infallible, so that it is not possible for God to have a false belief. So for God, knowledge and belief are the same thing — everything God believes, God knows. So if I have a choice now about whether God knew something 1000 years ago, I must also have a choice now about whether God believed that thing 1000 years ago. But how could I now have a choice about that?



We've discussed two different, but related, challenges to the belief that we have free will. One is posed by fate; the other by God's knowledge of our future actions.

One can reply to both arguments by saying that there is no such thing as fate, and no such thing as divine foreknowledge. But both of those escape routes face challenges.

If you believe in fate, and/or believe that God knows what you will do with the rest of your life, what you need to think about is which premise of these arguments you reject.

