

# Foreknowledge and Free Will

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**Abstract:** We contend that since what is true cannot be false, foreknowledge is transparently incompatible with free will. We argue that what is crucial to the conflict is the role of truth in foreknowledge and that the identity of the one who foreknows is irrelevant.

**Keywords:** foreknowledge, freewill

There is an embarrassingly simple argument, perhaps too simple to be convincing, for the incompatibility of foreknowledge with free will. The relevant factor in the conflict is the role of truth in knowledge. Hence the argument holds whether the possessor of foreknowledge is fallible or infallible. For what is known is true.

Our argument is based on the contention that:

(C) What is true cannot be false.

Not, that what is true *could not have been* false, but only that *it cannot be* false.

(C) is traceable to Aristotle,<sup>1</sup> and is embedded in G.H. von Wright's new system of modal logic (see von Wright 1957). Von Wright refers to

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<sup>1</sup> See Aristotle (1941), jointly with von Wright (1957,121,n2). Aristotle may have also been the first to write about the conflict in his famous passages:

“A sea-fight must either take place tomorrow or not, but it is not necessary that it should take place tomorrow, neither is it necessary that it should not take place, yet it is necessary that it either should or should not take place tomorrow... One of the two propositions in such instances must be true and the other false, but we cannot say determinately that this or that is false, but must leave the alternative undecided. One may indeed be more likely to be true than the other, but it cannot be either actually true or actually false”. Aristotle (1941, 19<sup>a</sup>30-40).

„These awkward results and others of the same kind follow, if it is an irrefragable law that of every pair of contradictory propositions... one must

it as “a truth of the logic of relative modalities”.<sup>2</sup> By holding (C) we contend, that if it would be possible for a proposition to be true while false, it would then be possible for a proposition to be both true and false.

We may motivate the thesis by considering that while Socrates could have been alive while dead he cannot be alive while dead. An unarticulated (C) may be at the root of the discomfort felt in holding on to both free will and foreknowledge. And this holds true whether the conflict is felt in a theological or scientific setting.<sup>3</sup> What perhaps is surprising, and never or hardly felt, is that the very same conflict holds between a friend’s foreknowledge and even one’s own self foreknowledge and free will.

But if what is true cannot be false, then the argument for the incompatibility of free will with foreknowledge in any setting is transparently sound. For if it is true that Bill will raise his hand then it cannot be that Bill will not raise his hand, otherwise it would be possible for Bill while his hand is raised not to have his hand raised. Hence if it is foreknown that Bill will raise his hand then it cannot be that his hand will not be raised.

The dominant role of truth in the felt conflict is most probably overlooked<sup>4</sup> for while we may be wary of an infallible being’s predictions about our future, we have no such fear when it is made by a friend, even if the friend’s predictions turn out to be true. And we may attribute our weariness to the infallibility of the infallible being, which our friend of course lacks. But the infallibility of the infallible being guarantees only that what he believes cannot be otherwise, that is, that it is actually true, not that it could not have been otherwise.<sup>5</sup> The trouble is in the truth of the prediction, and not in the proficiency of the predictor.

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be true and the other false... that all that is or takes place is the outcome of necessity.” Aristotle (1941, Ch. 9,18b:27-32).

<sup>2</sup> He writes: „I would understand Aristotle’s thought thus: relative to the hypothesis (supposition) that it is true, a proposition *cannot* be but true (is necessarily true). Thus *not*: if a proposition is true, then it is (absolutely) necessary. But: if a proposition is *true*, it is *self-necessary*“ (von Wright 1957,122).

<sup>3</sup> Pike (1970) and Rowe (1978) are excellent for the conflict in a theological setting while Van Inwagen’s “Consequence Argument” is the classical demonstration of the conflict in science; van Inwagen (1983, 93-95). Blum (2003) goes further.

<sup>4</sup> As is the case with Westphal (2011).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Pike (1970, 56, 59-60).

But then how are we to explain the ease by which we accept with the utmost equanimity the accurate predictions made by our friends or even ourselves about our future? The answer must be that in the space in which we are free, we predict a future that we intend, or our friends think that we intend to bring about. The stranger and the psychologist do the same on what they consider to be reasonable, given their knowledge of the world.

To get back for a moment to our infallible predictor, can there be an infallible predictor who predicts that Bill will raise his arm at  $t$ ? We see no reason why not. But can there be an infallible predictor who predicts that Bill will *freely* raise his arm at  $t$ ? The answer would have to be “no”. For, given (C), if it is true that Bill will raise his arm at  $t$ , he cannot refrain from raising it at  $t$ .<sup>6</sup>

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