

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 14 | Issue 3

Article 10

7-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Hughes, Charles T. (1997) "Belief, Foreknowledge, and Theological Fatalism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol14/iss3/10>

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BELIEF, FOREKNOWLEDGE, AND THEOLOGICAL FATALISM

Charles T. Hughes

David Hunt has recently developed a new strategy, called the "dispositional omniscience scenario," or (DOS), which is designed to defeat theological fatalism by showing the *compatibility* of divine foreknowledge and human (libertarian) free agency. But I argue that Hunt fails to establish his compatibility claim because (DOS) is based on a defective analysis of dispositional belief that is too weak to sustain *any* divine foreknowledge of future free actions.

I

Theological fatalism is the position that the existence of a divine being who is eternally and essentially omniscient is *incompatible* with human (libertarian) free agency. The incompatibility claim arises because such a divine being would possess immutable and infallible knowledge about all human future free actions *prior* to the realization of those actions. And such divine knowledge is thought to be incompatible with human free agency because it deprives humans of the power to act otherwise, which is the chief element of libertarian freedom.

Theists have responded to the problem raised by theological fatalism with several different strategies. Those theists who accept the incompatibility claim have resolved the problem by denying either (libertarian) free agency¹ or else divine foreknowledge of future free actions.² Theists who reject the incompatibility claim have developed various strategies to show that divine foreknowledge and human (libertarian) free agency are compatible with one another.

Some compatibility strategies depend upon a particular understanding of the *hard facts* (which are immutably "fixed" in the past) and the *soft facts* (which are not immutably "fixed" until some later time) about free actions which make up divine forebeliefs. Thus, the "Ockhamist" strategy claims that divine forebeliefs about future free actions are *not* hard facts *before* the free actions take place, otherwise those facts would be freedom annihilating. Instead, such divine forebeliefs become hard facts only *after* the free actions in question have taken place, thus preserving free agency.³ Another compatibility strategy denies that God has *any* beliefs at all that mediate reality to him, because divine knowledge implies unmediated awareness of reality. That strategy escapes the incompatibility problem insofar as the problem is generated by the sup-



posed existence of divine forebeliefs.⁴

But both previously mentioned compatibility strategies have been charged with committing the fallacy of special pleading when it comes to divine cognitions. And if that charge is true, then those strategies are flawed and so may not resolve the problem of theological fatalism.

However, David Hunt has developed a new compatibility strategy, called the *dispositional omniscience scenario* or (DOS), which cannot be charged with special pleading concerning divine cognitions.⁵ Hunt contends that God has beliefs and that divine cognitions are relevantly similar to human cognitions. One consequence of the similarity is that the charge of theological fatalism fails because its success is shown to depend upon an *equivocation* between divine *occurrent* and *dispositional* beliefs. So, if (DOS) works, it offers theists a compatibility strategy that does not depend on any “special pleading” about divine cognitions in order to succeed.

My purpose in this essay is to argue that Hunt’s (DOS) is based on a defective analysis of *dispositional belief* that prevents it from resolving the incompatibility problem raised by theological fatalism. More specifically, I will argue that Hunt’s claim, that dispositional beliefs need not be “located” in the mind of the believer, is unpersuasive. If I am right, then Hunt’s view of dispositional belief is too weak to sustain *any* divine forebeliefs about future free actions and so cannot reconcile divine forebeliefs and human (libertarian) free agency. But what is Hunt’s compatibility strategy?

II

In order to understand how (DOS) allegedly shows the compatibility of divine forebeliefs and human (libertarian) free agency, I must first review Hunt’s definitions of *occurrent* and *dispositional* beliefs, and hard and soft facts. After that, I will review Hunt’s analysis of *dispositional belief* and then summarize the main elements of (DOS).

- (1) *Occurrent belief*. Agent *x* has the *occurrent belief p* at *t* if agent *x* consciously affirms *p* at *t*.
- (2) *Dispositional belief*. “[F]or *x* to have at *t* the nonoccurrent or *dispositional belief* that *p* is for *x* to be such that, *were* certain conditions to obtain at *t* (e.g., the conditions involved in *x*’s considering whether *p*), *x would* at *t* have the *occurrent belief* that *p*.”⁶

Hunt does not try to develop precise definitions of hard and soft facts because he does not think such definitions are required for his argument to work.

- (3) *Hard facts*. Hard [propositional] facts are immutably “fixed” prior to the realization of the actions or events they describe.
- (4) *Soft facts*. Soft [propositional] facts are immutably “fixed” at the time the actions or events they describe are realized.

Hunt’s analysis of *dispositional belief* includes three conditions that

play important roles in identifying an agent's occurrent and dispositional beliefs at some time. They are:

- (5) *The Access Condition*. Were circumstance C to obtain, x would occurrently believe at t that p.⁷
- (6) *The Secure Access Condition*. This is a special case of the Access Condition, where "having access to p" and "being in command of p—having access to p at will, free (within limits) from frustration or delay," entails belief.⁸
- (7) *The Location Condition*. The mechanism by which the obtaining of C would lead to x's occurrently believing that p involves x's accessing at t a representation whose content is p and whose location at t is [metaphysically] internal to [the mind of] x.⁹

Hunt claims that a proposition need not satisfy the Location Condition to qualify as a dispositional belief. For, he claims, "there appear to be clear cases of knowledge that fail to satisfy [the Location] condition."¹⁰ To establish that claim, Hunt first analyzes three scenarios to determine how the proposition, "Today is Monday," could become the occurrent belief of an agent if he were to consider what day it is. The scenarios Hunt considers are as follows:

- (a) The closest nonactual world in which I consider what day it is, is a world in which I *remember* that it is Monday.
- (b) The closest nonactual world in which I consider what day it is, is a world in which I *find out* that it is Monday (e.g., by checking today's newspaper).
- (c) The closest nonactual world in which I consider what day it is, is a world in which I *figure out* [by inference] that it is Monday.¹¹

Hunt allows that the Location Condition correctly identifies (a) as a case of *intra-mental* dispositional belief, which rises to the level of occurrent (conscious) belief when retrieved from an agent's memory. But he claims that what is sufficient to qualify both (a) and (c) as dispositional beliefs is the agent's *Secure Access* in both cases to the proposition "Today is Monday," rather than its location in the agent's mind. So, according to Hunt, (c) is a case of *extra-mental* dispositional belief. He then classifies (b) as a scenario of *nonbelief*. Why? Not because (b) violates the Location Condition, as it clearly does, but rather because the agent has no *Secure Access* to the proposition in (b) and so may not be able to discover it.

Thus, Hunt rejects the necessity of the Location Condition because it excludes allegedly legitimate cases of extra-mental dispositional belief, like case (c). He claims that (c) is a scenario of extra-mental dispositional belief because the agent has *Secure (Inferential) Access* to the proposition in (c) and so (with only limited delay) can make it an occurrent belief at will. So, if Hunt's analysis of (a)-(c) is correct, then the *Secure Access Condition* alone is sufficient for determining an agent's intra-mental and extra-mental dispositional beliefs.

The good news here for Hunt's (DOS) is that an eternally and essentially omniscient divine being has *maximally Secure Access* to the content and truth-values of *all* propositions, including future free contingents. Therefore, on Hunt's view, all true future free contingent propositions count as the content of divine extra-mental dispositional beliefs. And, as extra-mental dispositional beliefs, they qualify as *soft facts* about the past rather than as *hard facts* about it. But how is human (libertarian) free agency protected if God has extra-mental *dispositional* forebeliefs about future free actions?

Free agency is protected by (DOS) because the problem of theological fatalism depends crucially upon divine *forebeliefs* about future free contingent propositions being located *in the mind of God*. Thus, only divine intra-mental forebeliefs are freedom annihilating *hard facts*. Why? Because their contents and truth-values would have been immutably "fixed" in the divine mind *prior* to the future actions they depict, thus denying human agents the power to act otherwise.

So, Hunt's (DOS) allegedly protects free agency because God's *dispositional* forebeliefs about future free contingent propositions are *not* located in the divine mind. Instead, as divine *extra-mental* dispositional beliefs, they are *soft facts* about future free actions. And, as soft facts, they are *not* immutably "fixed" as beliefs in God's mind *prior* to the realization of the actions described in the future free contingent propositions. Therefore, according to Hunt, if God possesses only extra-mental dispositional beliefs about future free contingents, then the problem of theological fatalism is generated only by equivocating between divine occurrent and divine extra-mental dispositional beliefs.

(DOS), then, may be summarized as follows:

- (A) God has *maximally Secure Access* to all true propositions, even if he has never before considered them. These include future free contingent propositions. Thus, if God wished to form true occurrent beliefs about future free contingent propositions, he could do so.
- (B) But God has *never* formed occurrent beliefs about the relevant future free contingent propositions. If he had, those divine beliefs would be *hard facts* about the past, *prior* to the realization of the actions described in those propositions, and so freedom annihilating.
- (C) Therefore, since God could but never has accessed the content and truth-values of future free contingent propositions, beliefs in those propositions qualify only as divine extra-mental dispositional beliefs. As extra-mental dispositional beliefs they are *soft facts*, which means that their truth-values are not "fixed" as beliefs in God's mind until the actions described in the propositions actually take place. Thus, God's extra-mental *dispositional* forebeliefs about future free contingent propositions are compatible with human (libertarian) free agency.

But does (DOS) successfully rebut theological fatalism? I do not think so.

III

The chief problem for Hunt's (DOS) is that it is based on a defective analysis of dispositional belief. To make my case against (DOS), I argue in this section that it is plausible to think that the Location Condition is a necessary condition for belief and, in the next, that Hunt's case to the contrary is unpersuasive. But why should we think it plausible that the Location Condition is a necessary condition for belief?

One reason that the Location Condition is often accepted as a necessary condition for belief is its intuitive appeal. But what support is there for that intuition? The answer becomes clear when the *cognitive dimension* of the Location Condition is identified. A minimal statement of the cognitive elements the Location Condition requires for an agent to believe that *p*, either occurrently or dispositionally, is as follows:

- (i) the agent *understands/understood* the propositional content of *p*, and
- (ii) the agent *assents/assented* to *p* (explicitly or implicitly) because he thinks (or thought) that *p* is true, or is probably true, or may be true (even if *p* is false).

So, what the cognitive dimension of the Location Condition makes clear is that an agent's belief-relevant functions can take place only in his *mind*. But the Location Condition also seems to imply an *order* of belief-acquisition that it is important to sketch in order to facilitate discussion in this section and the next. The implied order of belief-acquisition seems to be as follows: First come occurrent beliefs, understood and assented to (explicitly or implicitly) by agents *via* a rich network of belief-acquisitional channels. In the case of humans, occurrent beliefs are acquired and then fade from consciousness to the status of dispositional beliefs within memory, though some beliefs may be forgotten (i.e., not recorded, or recorded but erased, or else recorded but unretrievable), or nearly forgotten, (i.e., recorded but retrievable only in special circumstances). And, those dispositional beliefs that are accessible within memory, may again rise to the level of occurrent belief when retrieved from memory.

But even this brief and provisional characterization of belief-acquisition/statuses invites an apparent counter-example that, if true, undermines the necessity of the Location Condition for dispositional belief. The counter-example begins when we ask agent *x* at *t*₁ if she believes that

(P1) The world wasn't created five minutes ago,

and she claims that she has *always* believed (P1).¹² And let us suppose that (P1) has never occurred to agent *x* before *t*₁. Would it then follow that (P1) nevertheless qualifies as a long-standing extra-mental dispositional belief of agent *x*'s? If it does, then the Location Condition is not a necessary condition for dispositional belief because, in this case, (i) and (ii) have been bypassed. But does the counter-example work? To answer that question, let us examine the counter-example carefully.

Clearly, agent *x* *would* understand (P1) if she considered it. Does it follow, then, that agent *x* *does* understand (P1) if she has never before *t*₁ considered or assented to it? No. What follows is that agent *x* has a strong *disposition to believe* (P1), and so *would* understand and assent to (P1) *if* she were to consider it. So, it does not follow that she already understands and assents to the propositional content of (P1) before *t*₁, for she never considered (P1) before *t*₁. Thus, it also follows that (P1) is not a longstanding (extra-mental) dispositional belief of agent *x*'s.

But that may seem to be a *prima facie* odd conclusion. For, surely, one might claim, agent *x* has always believed (P1) regardless of whether she has considered and assented to it before *t*₁. However, as we will see, the apparent counter-example does not work despite its *prima facie* plausibility. In order to identify where it goes wrong, several points about the *status* and *genealogy* of beliefs must be clarified and briefly considered.

What is clear in this case is that (P1) is a *necessary presupposition* of, and/or an immediate and necessary inference from, agent *x*'s beliefs about what happened more than five minutes ago. But does the fact that (P1) is a *necessary presupposition* of many of, or an immediate inference from, agent *x*'s beliefs mean that (P1) is one of agent *x*'s dispositional beliefs? No. For, there are no doubt many propositions agent *x* has never thought of or assented to which are necessary presuppositions of, or immediate inferences from, her explicitly held beliefs. But it does not follow that such propositions are, for that reason, to be counted as her beliefs. To see why, consider (P1) again. (P1) is a proposition agent *x* will understand and affirm immediately when she considers it. It is also very likely that she will claim that she has "always believed" (P1). And she may make that claim even if she has never before thought of (P1) or assented to it. But does that mean that agent *x* is right, or that we are therefore warranted in positing (P1) as one of agent *x*'s dispositional beliefs? No. In what follows, I try to show that there is a more plausible alternative understanding of the *status* of agent *x*'s belief that (P1).

To begin with, it is reasonable to assume that agent *x* acquired as one of her early beliefs, (first occurrent and then intra-mental dispositional), that

(P2) The earth is old,

or some near relation to that proposition. So, if agent *x* ever considered the temporal implications of (P2), she might have thought of (P1) or some proposition with an equivalent meaning to (P1), assented to it, and then forgotten it. In that case, she would have briefly believed (P1) occurrently and then (P1) would have been forgotten, or nearly forgotten, by agent *x*.

So, agent *x* might *affirm* (P1) at *t*₁, convinced that it is a proposition she has always believed, even if she has never considered or assented to it before *t*₁. Thus, agent *x* may be acquiring (P1) as a *new* belief at the moment she understands and assents to it. And her subsequent claim to have believed (P1) all of her life may be a mistake on her part. But it would be an easy mistake to make, if (P1) is a necessary presupposition

of, and/or an immediate and necessary inference from, other beliefs agent x does hold. In that case, the *strength* of agent x 's *disposition to believe* (P1), which is a function of (P1)'s relation to her other beliefs, makes it easy for her to mistake a new belief for an old belief.

But what if (P1) is now an *unconscious* belief of agent x ? Does that suggestion shed any light on the question of the necessity of the Location Condition in matters of belief? No. For the current unconscious status of a belief does not entail that it was originally acquired apart from the constraints of the Location Condition. So, it may well be that unconscious beliefs are beliefs about propositions we have understood and assented to in the past, but have since nearly forgotten.

Of course, if an agent could provide a dependable *genealogy* of his belief-acquisitions, which excludes the requirements of the Location Condition, then the Location Condition's necessity for belief would be undermined. But so much about the true genealogy of belief-acquisition has been lost to agents that, in controversial cases, they cannot determine which of their beliefs are *new* beliefs and which are older (dispositional) beliefs. That is so because the set of an agent's explicit beliefs provides him with strong dispositions to believe numerous propositions that he has never before considered or assented to. Therefore, given the serious limitations one faces here, it seems rash to identify an agent's actual beliefs apart from the sensible requirements laid down by the Location Condition.

That concludes my brief case for the position that it is plausible to think that the Location Condition is a necessary condition for dispositional belief. But can Hunt's arguments, nevertheless, provide plausible support for his claim that some dispositional beliefs are not located in the mind of the believer?

IV

In section II above, I reported Hunt's claim that the following scenario describes an instance of extra-mental dispositional belief:

- (c) The closest nonactual world in which I consider what day it is, is a world in which I *find out* [by inference] that it is Monday.¹³

Part of Hunt's justification for the claim that (c) is a scenario of extra-mental dispositional belief is made clear when he says: "Here there is preoccurrent knowledge that *today is Monday* without this propositional content being represented in a memory trace or other mental state that satisfies the Location Condition."¹⁴

What should be noticed about Hunt's claim, however, is that *preoccurrent* knowledge could be either a *dispositional belief* that p or else a *disposition to believe* that p . But the Location Condition's requirements make it intelligible why (c) identifies only an agent's *disposition to believe* a proposition that he later *infers* from other beliefs he does have. Why? Because in the case of (c), the agent who "figures out" that p , "Today is Monday," rather than retrieving p from memory, is one who has *acquired*

a *new* belief through an inferential process. For, if an agent has already believed that *p*, then the agent will not have to “figure out” by inference that *p*.¹⁵ The proposition “Today is Monday” is not a proposition to which any explicit or implicit *assent* was given by the agent in (c) prior to thinking about the question “Which day is it today?” Thus it does not count as the agent’s belief (dispositional or otherwise) prior to his inferring or intuiting that “Today is Monday.”

Further problems plague a notion of belief that excludes the Location Condition as a necessary condition for dispositional belief. Suppose, for example, that no one has yet discovered the fact that my wife murdered her first husband. Suppose further that I know all of the relevant facts about the event such that, if I were to consider the matter seriously, I would (with only limited delay) make an inference to the truth of the matter. In other words, if I have *Secure (Inferential) Access* to the true proposition that

(P3) My wife murdered her first husband,

does it follow that (P3) is an *extra-mental* dispositional belief of mine? No. It makes no sense to claim that (P3) qualifies as my dispositional belief simply because I have *Secure (Inferential) Access* to the truth of (P3). For, if I never assent to the truth of (P3), it cannot count as my belief. What does make sense is that I have a *disposition to believe* (P3). So, to admit that I have *Secure (Inferential) Access* to *p* does not confer upon *p* the status of a dispositional belief of mine. Such *Access* identifies only my *disposition to believe* that *p*.

But what if I am self-deceived about (P3)? Would that shed any light on this matter? No. For, if I am self-deceived about the truth of (P3), then I have already assented to its truth but then *repressed* my newly acquired belief in some way. Or, instead, I may have managed somehow to withhold my assent to (and so my belief in) (P3), despite the strength of my disposition to believe it. Thus, even if I have engaged in self-deception about the truth value of (P3), I have done so in conformity to the requirements set forth by the Location Condition.

There is another unwelcome consequence that comes with Hunt’s claim that (c) identifies an instance of extra-mental dispositional belief, rather than a disposition to believe. For if we include as extra-mental dispositional beliefs all those propositions to which we have *Secure (Inferential) Access*, then where do such dispositional beliefs end? Do they end at propositions that are immediate inferences only? No, they do not. In fact, such a restriction seems arbitrary. But if we can be said to believe propositions that could be securely inferred from our other beliefs (if we made the effort), then these can include propositions that could be inferred by complicated and drawn-out chains of reasoning. And, since more and more beliefs could be inferred from these new beliefs, the consequent chain of “beliefs” would grow exponentially. We might thus find that our supposed finite set of beliefs turns out to be *infinite* at the dispositional level.

V

If the Location Condition is accepted as a necessary condition for dispositional belief, the consequences for (DOS) are grim. For, Hunt's notion of extra-mental dispositional belief violates it and so does not identify *dispositional* beliefs for humans or for God.¹⁶ Instead, Hunt's description of divine extra-mental dispositional belief identifies only a divine *disposition to believe* that *p*, where *p* is some future free contingent proposition. This means that Hunt's view of extra-mental dispositional belief is too weak to sustain *any* divine dispositional forebeliefs about future free contingent propositions.

Of course, the objection could be raised that my previous analysis of Hunt's view applies only to the *Secure Access Condition* with respect to human beliefs (which are fallible) but not to divine beliefs (which are infallible). After all, God has *maximally Secure Access* to all propositions, including future free contingents. So, is it not the case that even those propositions not considered by God count as divine extra-mental dispositional beliefs? No.

The Location Condition makes it clear that it is not sufficient for God to have *maximally Secure Access* to all future free contingent propositions in order for them to count as his dispositional beliefs. For, unless God has *understood* and *assented* to the propositional content and truth-values of the future free contingent propositions *prior* to their realization, he cannot be said to possess them as *forebeliefs*. Instead, they would have only the status of propositions God has a *disposition to believe*. Therefore, because (DOS) withholds the content and truth-values of future free contingent propositions from the divine mind, God cannot be said to possess *any* forebeliefs about future free contingents.

I have argued that (DOS) is based on a deficient analysis of dispositional belief that prevents it from resolving the problem raised by theological fatalism. Thus, when (DOS) dispenses with the Location Condition as a necessary condition for belief, it ends up denying God *any* forebeliefs about future free contingent propositions. And, while the *incompatibility* strategy that denies God such forebeliefs does avoid theological fatalism, (DOS) is meant to show the *compatibility* of divine forebeliefs and human (libertarian) free agency. Therefore, (DOS) fails.¹⁷

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NOTES

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Bk. III, Chapters XXI-XXIV.
2. William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
3. Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy*, 2, (1986), pp. 235-269.
4. William P. Alston, "Does God Have Beliefs?," *Religious Studies*, 22,

(1986), pp. 287-306.

5. David P. Hunt, "Does Theological Fatalism Rest On An Equivocation?," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, 2, (1995), pp. 153-165.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

11. *Ibid.*

12. William Wainwright suggested that I deal with this apparent counter-example to the necessity of the Location Condition in his criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.

13. Hunt, "Does Theological Fatalism Rest On An Equivocation?," p. 160.

14. *Ibid.*

15. It could also be the case that the inferential process *reminds* the agent that he has believed that *p* for some period of time although he has nearly forgotten that he does so. But cases of this sort satisfy the Location Condition.

16. Hunt hints that even if the Location Condition is taken to be a necessary condition for belief (human or divine), the God of (DOS) can satisfy it, (*Ibid.*, p.162). If that is correct, then it may be the case that the arguments offered against (DOS) in this essay can be undermined. When Hunt publishes a paper defending that thesis, I will be able to analyze how (DOS) could satisfy the Location Condition and still avoid theological fatalism.

17. I wish to thank David Hunt, Joseph Runzo, two anonymous reviewers for *Faith and Philosophy*, and especially William Wainwright, for their criticisms and suggestions made in response to an earlier draft of this paper.