

## Handout 7

### Merricks (cont.); Fischer and Todd: Critique

**THE MAIN ARGUMENT IS QUESTION-BEGGING?** Merricks proposes to argue that the Main Argument is a *petitio principii* fallacy: its premiss (1) rests on the conclusion. That is, we are apt to accept (1) only because we *already* accept the conclusion, though implicitly so.

To drive the point home, Merricks helpfully constructs a Parody argument about the future. The argument begins with the premiss that Jones has no choice over some *future* truth about a *present* fact and finishes with the conclusion that Jones has no choice over that present fact. This sounds, in the first place, like sophistry. Merricks, however, thinks that the argument is intuitively bad because it has a *petitio principii* in its minor premiss—namely, the same ‘Truism’. He then formulates a ‘general corollary’, that we have no choice over *p*’s truth presupposes that we have no choice over what *p* depends on (this last coy expression reflects the difficulties we saw before with formulating the ‘Truism’ in general terms.)

*Remark 1.* To pause for a moment: I want to lodge two unfriendly complaints. (i) How does the premiss ‘presuppose’ the conclusion? There is, of course, no question about the premiss entailing the conclusion. So presumably we must say something like this: we should accept the premiss only because we accept the conclusion first. So Merricks should argue that we may only accept (1\*) having accepted (3\*) and ‘Truism’ first. But that’s not clear. It may be that you accept (1\*) on the intuitive grounds that are no worse than the grounds for ‘Truism’. (1\*) may be a truism as good as the truism ‘Truism’.

(ii) Throughout the paper (of course, along with many other authors) Merricks talks about ‘not having a choice about *X*’. But this talk is perverse. I do say things like:

- (7-1) a. I can choose (whether) to drink coffee or tea.
- b. I have chosen to drink coffee.

But I don’t say:

- (7-2) I can choose about:  $\llbracket$ SB DRINKING COFFEE $\rrbracket$  is true.

This is gammon. As Aristotle observed, the object of choice is a practical action of the subject. This limits the range of legitimate locutions involving ‘choice’. If (7-2) means anything at all, it must be paraphrased along the lines of (7-1a). But then the Main argument or the parody argument can’t take off.

In any event, Merricks’ question-beggingness objection to the Main Argument is just this: we must think that Jones has no choice about the past truth of  $\llbracket$ JONES SITS AT *t* $\rrbracket$  (premiss 1) because we must *also* think that Jones has no choice about sitting at *t* (the conclusion 3). And why would anyone think *that*?

Merricks also considers replacing (1) with (1\*\*) in which case the Main Argument is not question-begging, but then becomes invalid. Here I note that you could construct a valid argument:

- (1\*\*)  $\llbracket$ JONES SITS AT *t* $\rrbracket$  will be true a thousand years from now.
- (2\*\*) Necessarily, if  $\llbracket$ JONES SITS AT *t* $\rrbracket$  will be true a thousand years from now, then Jones has no choice about  $\llbracket$ JONES SITS AT *t* $\rrbracket$ .
- (3) Jones has no choice about  $\llbracket$ JONES SITS AT *t* $\rrbracket$ .

This argument *is* valid, but now (2\*\*) is not intuitively plausible.

**THE MAIN ARGUMENT HAS A FALSE PREMISS?** The Main Argument is directed primarily at those who believe in free will, at least in the free will of ordinary sitting. Then *these* theorists should find (1) false. Why?

Merricks’ objection is rather compressed. Every proposition is either true or false (bivalence). Suppose that we believe that Jones is freely choosing whether to sit at *t*, and that he actually chooses to sit at *t*. Then ask: was  $\llbracket$ JONES SITS AT *t* $\rrbracket$  true a thousand years ago? Well, plainly it was. But this means that he did have a free choice about the truth of  $\llbracket$ JONES SITS AT *t* $\rrbracket$  a thousand years ago.

Fischer and Todd consider this objection at length. Their criticism, made in the context of discussing divine foreknowledge, appeals to the distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ facts that they attribute to Ockham. Hard facts are temporally non-relational, soft facts are temporally relational. So we can say that (1) was true a thousand years ago, if indeed it was, because of some hard fact existing a thousand years ago. But if so, then the past is fixed in exactly the sense required by the fatalist, and Jones can’t choose freely to sit at *t*. 102 114

The same sort of distinction may be used to block the question-beggingness objection.

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