Merricks: Truth and freedom II; Fischer and Todd: Critique

TIMELESSNESS. How credible is the idea that propositions change the truth values? Not very. Merricks says: `34`
'First, for each ... without qualification.' How to understand these ideas? Perhaps thus:

(i) For each way w things are, there is a proposition p_w representing w.
(ii) But some ws undergo change.
(iii) For every w undergoing change, for every p_w: p_w also undergoes change.

This is problematic: if a certain 'way' changes, it must remain the same way. That's why we talk of a *change of* that way. But of course, that's not so: when the way changes, *another* way emerges. We say:

(13-1)   Yesterday things looked good (one way), now they don't look good (another way).

Indeed, Merricks himself doesn't talk of ways changing. What's changing are individual objects: at t, O was F. Then at $t' > t$, O was $\sim F$. Fair enough: that's how we speak in (13-1), too. But isn't this just a paraphrase of saying that a different way came to be? At t, the world was one way—namely, O was F. At t' it was another way—namely, O was $\sim F$.

In other words, as long as you link (conceptually) propositions to ways of the world, there is no reason to think that propositions change their truth value (because of the changes in the world). Ways are snapshots of how the world is at a particular time, so are the corresponding propositions. Taken differently, this is an argument for evaluating only dated propositions. From an undisputed fact of changes of the world you can't directly infer that propositions change their truth values.

Merricks then concludes, presumably by some kind of abduction: `35`

(i) Either all propositions exist in time, or none does.
(ii) But some propositions clearly do exist in time.
(iii) Therefore, all propositions do.

For a proposition to 'exist in time' is simply to have its truth value to be assigned at a particular time. Some propositions change their truth values, others don't. So also the proposition ⟦SB SITS AT t⟧ exists in time, though its truth value does not change. I have claimed, however, that (ii) is dubious.

THE MAIN ARGUMENT IS QUESTION-BEGGING? Merricks proposes to argue that the Main Argument contains `35ff` 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 constructs a Parody argument about the future. The argument begins `35` 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 like sophistry. Merricks concurs: the `36` argument is intuitively bad, because it has a *petitio principii* in its minor premiss—namely, the same 'Truism'. We want to say that you have no choice over the truth of P precisely because you have no choice over P (i.e. over the fact expressed/described by P).

Merricks then formulates a 'general corollary': having no choice over A's truth presupposes having no choice over what A 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. That's what Merricks says in footnote 10: 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:

(13-2)   a. I can choose (whether) to drink coffee or tea.
          b. I have chosen to drink coffee.

But I don't say:

(13-3)   I can choose about: ⟦SB DRINKING COFFEE⟧ 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 (13-3) means anything at all, it must be paraphrased along the lines of (13-2a). But then both 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 ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ (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*? 37

Merricks also considers replacing (1) with (1**) in which case the Main Argument is not question-begging, but becomes invalid: 38

(1**) ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ was true a thousand years ago.
  (2) Necessarily, if ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ was true a thousand years ago, then Jones sits at t.
  (3) Therefore, Jones has no choice about sitting at t.

Question 2. Explain why this argument is invalid.

Finally, note that you could construct a valid argument:

(1**) ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ will be true a thousand years from now.
(2**) Necessarily, if ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ will be true a thousand years from now, then Jones has no choice about ⟦Jones sits at t⟧.
  (3) Jones has no choice about ⟦Jones sits at t⟧.

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

Question 3. Examine (2**).

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 an action like sitting. Then *these* theorists should find (1) false. Why? 39

  (1) Jones has no choice about: ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ was true a thousand years ago.

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 we ask: was ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ true a thousand years ago? Well, plainly it was. But this means that he did have a free choice about the truth of ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ a thousand years ago. 39–40

Fischer and Todd consider this objection also briefly. Their criticism appeals to the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' facts that originates with Ockham (under a modern interpretation). 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

As Fischer and Todd also observe, the fatalist need not reject 'Truism'. He need only insist on its proper application. That is, if a proposition ⟦Jones sits at t⟧ was true at t, then 'Truism' requires that some hard fact $\mathfrak{F}$ also existed at t to explain the proposition's truth. But then Jones has no choice over sitting at t: to have such a choice means to be able to change $\mathfrak{F}$. But to be able to do so means to change a hard fact about the past—an impossibility. 114

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

FOREKNOWLEDGE. We begin with a thesis parallel to 'Truism': 51

Origenism. The truth of a propositional belief B_P depends on (is determined by): how things are with regard to P (?? the case that P?? the world described by P??)

Therefore, we can also say:

'*No choice.*' Having no choice over B's truth presupposes having no choice about the 'truthmaker' of B.

Consider now the Lucky Guess argument. Let Smith believe that Jones sits at t. Then: 50

  (4) Jones has no choice about: Smith's belief B was true ten years ago.
  (5) Necessarily, if Smith's belief B was true ten years ago, then Jones sits at t.
  (3) Therefore, Jones has no choice about sitting at t.

But because of 'No choice', this argument is question-begging.