FISCHER'S FATE WITH FATALISM

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Abstract. John Martin Fischer's core project in *Our Fate* (2016) is to develop and defend Pike-style arguments for theological incompatibilism, i. e., for the view that divine omniscience is incompatible with human free will. Against Ockhamist attacks on such arguments, Fischer maintains that divine forebeliefs constitute so-called hard facts about the times at which they occur, or at least facts with hard 'kernel elements'. I reconstruct Fischer's argument and outline its structural analogies with an argument for logical fatalism. I then point out some of the costs of Fischer's reasoning that come into focus once we notice that the set of hard facts is closed under entailment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Our Fate (2016) collects some of John Martin Fischer's most influential and indeed most brilliant essays about the time-honoured question of whether divine foreknowledge is compatible with human freedom.[1] He argues that the prospects for a positive answer are bleak. Inspired by Nelson Pike's seminal paper 'Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action' (1965), Fischer defends various versions of what he calls the 'basic argument' for theological incompatibilism. Yet (like most authors) he rejects structurally similar arguments for logical fatalism. I reconstruct the Fischer-Pike argument, then formulate an analogous argument for logical fatalism and outline how, given Fischer's machinery concerning hard and soft facts, he could respond to this latter argument. However, the set of hard facts, I argue, is closed under entailment, at least when we restrict the consequents to contingent facts. The consequence is that on Fischer's approach facts that are intrinsically the same turn out hard in theistic worlds but soft in non-theistic ones. How could this be? Fischer owes us an explanation.

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1   Fischer has co-authored some of the papers with Patrick Todd or Neal A. Tognazzini.

2. INFALLIBLE FOREBELIEF, THE FIXITY
OF THE PAST, AND FATALISM

Perhaps the most convincing version of the Fischer-Pike argument is the following possible-worlds version. Let 'God' denote the individual who necessarily has the divine attributes, where these include essential sempiternal eternality (or everlastingness) and essential omniscience (Fischer 2016: 2; cf. also 54, 84, 164–165, and *passim*; Fischer 1989b: 3–4). Moreover, we may say that "a person is [sempiternally, C. J.] omniscient just in case for any time T and proposition P, he believes that P at T if and only if P is true at T. Further, a person is essentially omniscient … if … he is omniscient in every possible world in which he exists" (Fischer 1989b: 4; 2016: 66, 100).[2] Theological sempiternalism is controversial, as is the claim that we can ascribe truth- or falsity-at-times to propositions. But I shall go along with these assumptions here.

Specifically, Fischer contends "that 'future contingents' are determinately true (or false) prior to the times they are 'about'. So if Robert cooks dinner on Tuesday, then it is true on Monday that Robert will cook dinner on Tuesday, etc." (2016: 67; cf. 1989b: 4). It is natural to think (and Fischer agrees) that the reverse holds as well, so the general point may be captured in the following disquotational principle:

(D) Necessarily, S does X at T_2 iff 'S will do X at T_2' was true at T_1. ($T_1 < T_2$)

(D) is not uncontroversial either. Peter Geach (1977: 47) has argued that we can 'change the future' in the sense that we can prevent things that were once going to happen and that would have happened had we not prevented them.[3] If Geach is right, the fact that 'S will do X at T_2' was true at some prior time T_1 does not entail that S does X at T_2. But let us put this view to one side as well and assume that (D) or some similar principle is correct.

Fischer's final preliminary step is to introduce a principle about the fixity of the past. His possible worlds version reads:

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2   Since predicating truth of a sentence or proposition is a meta-linguistic activity, the third occurrence of 'P' here should be put in inverted commas.
3   'Geachianism' has recently been rediscovered and helpfully discussed by Patrick Todd (2011).

(FP-1) "An agent S has it in his power at (or just prior to) T in possible world w to do X at T only if there is a possible world w^* with the same past as that of w up to T in which S does X at T" (2016: 17, cf. 84, 111).

(Here talk about 'doing X' is obviously meant to cover refraining from doing X.) Fischer then summarizes the basic argument as follows:

> Suppose that God … exists, and that S does X at T_2, where X is some ordinary act such as raising one's hand. It follows that God believed at T_1 that S would do X at T_2. Given God's essential omniscience, God's belief at T_1 entails that S does X at T_2. Thus, in all possible worlds in which God believes at T_1 that S will do X at T_2, S will do X at T_2; so in any world in which S does not do X at T_2, God doesn't believe at T_1 that S does X at T_2. It seems to follow from … [FP-1] that S does not have it in his power at or just prior to T_2 to refrain from X-ing at T_2 (2016: 84).

It may be helpful to have a somewhat more schematic presentation of this argument to hand. In the present case, we can safely (re)translate talk about possible worlds into talk about things being possible and necessary. Thus, we may employ the principle:

(FP-1*) An agent S has it in his power at (or just prior to) T to do X (or to refrain from X-ing) at T only if it is possible that: a past obtains relative to T that is identical to the actual one relative to T and S does X (refrains from X-ing) at T.

The Fischer-Pike argument may then be formulated as follows.

Argument A: the basic argument for theological determinism

Suppose that S does X at T_2, and that God exists and is essentially sempiternally omniscient (assumptions). Then:

(1) God believed at T_1 (the proposition that can be expressed, in English, by) 'S will do X at T_2'.

(2) Necessarily, if (1), then S does X at T_2.

(3) The state of affairs described by (1) belongs to the actual past relative to T_2.

(4) S has the power, at (or just prior to) T_2, to refrain from doing X at T_2, only if it is possible that: God believed 'S will do X at T_2' at T_1, but S refrains from doing X at T_2.

(5) It is not possible that: God believed 'S will do X at T_2' at T_1, but S refrains from doing X at T_2.

(6) Therefore, S does not have the power at or just prior to T_2 to refrain from doing X at T_2.

Given the present assumptions, premises (1) and (2) are unproblematic. (3) follows from (1) and the stipulation that T_2 occurs after T_1. (4) follows from (3) and (FP-1*); (5) is just another way of expressing (2); and (6) follows from (4) and (5) by *modus tollens*.

Next, consider the following argument for logical fatalism:[4]

Argument B: an argument for logical fatalism

Suppose again that S does X at T_2. Then:

(1*)   'S will do X at T_2' was true at T_1.

(2*)   Necessarily, if (1*), then S does X at T_2.

(3*)   The state of affairs described by (1*) is part of the actual past relative to T_2.

(4*) S has the power, at or just prior to T_2, to refrain from doing X at T_2, only if it is possible that: 'S will do X at T_2' was true at T_1, but S refrains from doing X at T_2.

(5*)   It is not possible that: 'S will do X at T_2' was true at T_1, but S refrains from doing X at T_2.

(6*)   Therefore, S does not have the power at or just prior to T_2 to refrain from doing X at T_2.

If we accept that future-tensed propositions can be true or false at times, then premises (1*) and (2*) are unproblematic; they follow directly from the as-

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4   In various places, Fischer compares the basic argument for theological fatalism with arguments for logical fatalism. Yet, so far as I can see, he does not consider the present version. Cf., e. g., Fischer (2016: 131, 151, 194f.), Todd and Fischer (2015), and Fischer (1989b: 12–14). For different formulations of fatalist arguments see also Finch and Warfield (1999), Mackie (2003), Finch and Rea (2008), and Finch (2017).

sumption and from (D). (3*) follows from (1*) and the stipulation that T_1 occurs before T_2. (4*) follows from (3*) and (FP-1*). (5*) is equivalent to (2*), and (6*) follows from (4*) and (5*) by *modus tollens*. How can one, as Fischer wishes, coherently reject Argument B but accept Argument A?

3. HARD AND SOFT FACTS

Fischer accepts the Ockhamist distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' facts about the past.[5] Ockhamists claim that (i) facts of the form: "'S will do X at T_2'" is true at T_1' as well as (ii) facts pertaining to the occurrence of divine beliefs at T_1 about future human actions are soft facts about T_1. However, Fischer accepts (i) but rejects (ii). He argues that in this way logical fatalism can be avoided while the argument for theological incompatibilism goes through. Should we concur?

It turns out to be surprisingly complex to provide a precise characterization of hard and soft facts, and the controversies about this task persist. For present purposes, we may begin by noting that, intuitively, an (atomic, elementary) fact F about some time T is hard if and only it is only 'about' T and not about any future time relative to T; that is, a hard fact is *future-indifferent* in the sense that its obtaining cannot be affected by any future event.[6] In Fischer's words, hard facts are 'temporally nonrelational' (2016: 12). Soft facts about a time T, by contrast, "may be genuinely about T but are also (in some genuine sense) about times after T" (*ibid.*). Todd (2013: 839) tries to capture the idea by saying that F is soft about T iff it "specifies an entity E as having a property P at T, and whether E counts as having P at T is at least in part determined by whether there exists an event or events in the future relative to T." In their introduction to Fischer and Todd (2015), these authors prefer to capture the distinction by saying that soft facts about T are facts about T 'considered extrinsically', whereas hard facts about T are facts about it

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5   The modern classics here are Adams (1967) and Plantinga (1986). See also, in addition to Fischer's work on the topic, the discussions in Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1980), Hasker (1989, ch. 5), Widerker (1989), Todd (2013), and Pendergraft and Coates (2014).

6   Atomic facts can be construed as true atomic propositions. Following Hasker (1989: 83–89), we could say that truth-functional propositions are future-indifferent iff their constituent propositions are future indifferent, and that quantified propositions are future-indifferent iff each of their pontential instances is future-indifferent.

'intrinsically considered' (Todd and Fischer 2015: 12–13). The fact that Donald Trump won the US election on November 8, 2016, is a hard fact about that time. (Indeed, it may constitute a *very* hard fact for the years to come.) By contrast, the fact that he won the election 30 days prior to my writing this sentence is a soft fact about November 8, 2016.

I have been talking about 'facts' as well as about 'propositions'. Time does not permit a foray into the metaphysics and semantics of facts and propositions. But I shall adopt a proposal from Hasker (1989: 89) and say that any future-indifferent proposition that is true is a hard fact. Soft facts about a time are true propositions about it that are not hard. Given this terminology, we may also talk of 'falsifying' or 'rendering false' a fact.

There is a second distinction in this context that we need to get under our belts, the distinction between facts that are 'fixed' and those that I'll call 'open'. A fact is fixed, roughly, if it is fully accomplished, or beyond anyone's control. It can no longer be falsified — no crying over spilled milk. It is open if and only if it is not fixed. Hard facts about the past are fixed. Yet, this must not lead us to think that all soft facts are open (see Fischer 2016: 13, 134, and *passim*; 1989b: 45). Soft facts can be fixed, too. For example, the fact that Trump was elected 30 days prior to the sun's going down today is a soft fact about November 8, 2016, but it is nonetheless beyond anyone's control. Some soft facts about the past are beyond our control for reasons other than the fixity of the past. Other soft facts, by contrast, are open. By refraining from writing I could have rendered it false that Trump was elected 30 days prior to my writing.

Now, Ockhamists relegate facts such as (1*) as well as facts such as (1) to the subclass of soft facts that are open. Fischer accepts the 'first half' of this claim, but rejects the other half: He denies that facts such as (1) are soft and open. His principal reason for this move is that divine beliefs, just like human ones, should be construed as cognitive states the nature and occurrence of which is not determined by what happens in the future. In the above example one and the same fact, Trump's election, can count as the fact of Trump's being elected 30 days prior to my writing these passages or as Trump's being elected 30 days prior to my not writing them, depending on what I do at the relevant time. Similarly, Fischer argues,

> [t]he only way in which God's belief at T_1 about Jones at T_2 could be a soft fact about the past relative to T_2 would be if one and the same state of God's

mind at T_1 would count as one belief if Jones did X at T_2, but a different belief (or no belief at all) if Jones did not do X at T_2 (2016: 14).

Of course, God's prior belief that S will do X at T_2 entails that S does X at T_2. However, if some human being H believes at T_1 that S will do X at T_2, then the "state of H's mind that counts as his belief would *not* count as a different belief (or no belief at all), if S were to refrain from doing X at T_2" (2016: 138). And Fischer sees "no good reason to deny that the property of believing exhibits this sort of resilience [to the future] when possessed by God" (2016: 139).

There is a complication. Must we not concede to the Ockhamist that (facts pertaining to) prior divine beliefs about some later human actions are soft insofar as they do concern, at least in part, future times? Against this objection Fischer argues that, even if we grant this, the relevant facts about God retain hard 'baggage'; they have hard 'kernel elements' and thus qualify at least as 'hard-type soft facts' (2016: 136–139). "[I]t seems to me", Fischer says, "… that believing a proposition should be considered a temporally genuine property relative to a time. And so it seems to me that when God believes a proposition at that time, He has a temporally genuine property (of so believing) at that time" (2016: 68).

On the basis of these reflections Fischer develops the following embellished principle about the fixity of the past:

> (FP-2) "For any action X, agent S, and time T, S can perform X at T only if there is a possible world with the same 'hard' past up to T as the actual world in which S does X at T" (2016: 126, 186).[7]

As before, we may also formulate a variant that eliminates possible-worlds talk:

> (FP-2*) An agent S has it in his power at T to do X (or to refrain from doing X) at T only if it is possible at T that: a past obtains that is identical to the actual hard past relative to T and S does X (or refrains from doing X) at T.

It will be evident by now how Arguments A and B fare if we employ (FP-2*) instead of (FP-1*). With (FP-2*), (4) and (4*) cannot, respectively, be derived from (3) and (3*), since the latter do not specify that the states of affairs de-

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7   The 'hard past' relative to a given time T may be construed, roughly, as the conjunction of all hard facts about the times prior to T.

scribed by (1) and (1*) are *hard* facts about T_1. In order to render the two arguments valid, (3) and (3*) must be substituted with

(3_{hard})   The state of affairs expressed by (1) belongs to the actual hard past.

($3*_{hard}$)   The state of affairs expressed by (1*) belongs to the actual hard past.

Let us call the arguments obtained by using (FP-2*) and (3_{hard}) and ($3*_{hard}$) 'Argument A_{hard}' and 'Argument B_{hard}', respectively. Both arguments are valid. However, Fischer argues that (3_{hard}) is true, but that ($3*_{hard}$) is false. Generally speaking, (the occurrence of) God's belief that P counts as a hard fact whereas the mere fact that P is true (but not believed) is not a hard fact. Consequently, Fischer maintains that Argument B_{hard} does not establish logical fatalism but that Argument A_{hard} is sound. What are we to say of this reasoning?

4. WHY DOES THEISM TURN SOFT FACTS INTO HARD ONES?

The discussion thus far puts me in a position to expose a puzzle or some hidden costs of Fischer's account, as well as threads that his account, in order to be viable, must tie together. Note that it follows from Fischer's assumptions that premise (1) in arguments A and A_{hard} (God believed 'S will do X at T_2' at T_1) entails premise (1*) in arguments B and B_{hard} ('S will do X at T_2' was true at T_1). Indeed, if there is an omniscient God, then (1) and (1*) are necessarily equivalent. How, then, could (1) be hard and fixed while (1*) is soft and open? If (1) is hard, then, so it is seems, (1*) is hard as well.[8] However, as we have seen, Fischer rejects arguments concerning *logical* fatalism by maintaining that (1*) is *soft*. So his account commits him to the claim that what is intrinsically the very same fact — its being true at T_1 that S will do X at T_2 — is soft in non-theistic worlds, but hard in theistic worlds. It also follows that Fischer must accept our complete Argument B_{hard} — obtained from Argument B by substituting principle (FP-1*) with (FP-2*) and (3*) with ($3*_{hard}$) — as part of a sound argument in theistic worlds, but as unsound in non-theistic worlds. This is puzzling, and Fischer owes us an explanation (which I do not think his writings on the topic have yet provided).

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8   This claim relies on the idea that hardness is closed under entailment, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Given Fischer's general approach, it is not open to him to deny that future contingents can be true. (Were he to deny this, he could not maintain that soft facts exist in the first place.) One option for Fischer that springs to mind, however, is to develop a theory of grounding that could explain why theism turns (1^*) from a soft fact into a hard one.[9] Perhaps one move would be to adopt the idea that 'truth supervenes on being' and to argue as follows: In theistic worlds the truth at T_1 of the proposition 'S will do X at T_2' is grounded in God's infallible belief at T_1 that S will do X at T_2. This belief turns that proposition into a hard fact because the fact that this belief occurs is itself hard. In nontheistic worlds, by contrast, 'S will do X at T_2' is soft because *at* T_1 there simply is no event or 'fact on the ground' that would ground the truth of this proposition.

However, if truth supervenes on being, there must be *something* that grounds the truth of 'S will do X at T_2' at T_1. A natural suggestion is that this something is some event that occurs at T_2; and the candidate, of course, is S's doing X at T_2. Note, however, that in the context of a truth-supervenes-on-being-account this event can only fulfil a grounding role if T_2, with all its facts and events, already *exists* at T_1. And in that case, it seems to me, it is no longer clear why 'S will do X at T_2' should be a soft fact that is still open at T_1.

Another way to account for the softness of future contingents in non-theistic worlds may be to adopt Geachianism, maintaining that in such worlds we can 'prevent the future' (see Todd 2011) — a possibility that, it may be argued, does not arise in theistic worlds. In non-theistic worlds the truth at T_1 of, e. g., 'S will do X at T_{10}' does not compromise S's power to abstain from X-ing at T_{10} because between T_1 and T_{10} S can still act in a way that falsifies 'S will do X at T_{10}'. The task would then be to explain why in theistic worlds, but not in non-theistic ones, S lacks the power to render this proposition false between T_1 and T_{10}, even though it was true at T_1. The explanation would have to draw on the fact that, for both theological and general metaphysical reasons, God's beliefs cannot change over time. But why should a mere divine *belief* at T_1 to the effect that S will do X at T_{10} prevent S from acting in ways that would allow S to abstain from X-ing at T_{10}, whereas the prior truth of 'S will do X at T_{10}' does not prevent this? We thus arrive at a deeper question about the

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9   Thanks to Alastair Wilson and Robin Le Poidevin for alerting me to the relevance of grounding in this context.

Fischer-Pike argument. What is it that grounds, in some technical sense of 'grounding', the occurrence of infallible divine beliefs about the future?

A classical answer, put forth, e. g., by Scotus, is that the ultimate ground for infallible divine beliefs is the divine will. God, so the idea, infallibly and exhaustively believes what is going to happen because He wills that it will happen, and because He knows His own will and knows that this will and the corresponding decrees are necessarily effective. A plausible picture, then, from the viewpoint of Fischer's theological incompatibilism, might be that it is ultimately the divine will that prevents humans from doing otherwise. The task for the theological incompatibilist then becomes to explain exactly why this would be the case. One explanation would be that, in order to ensure that His will is effective, God creates a causally deterministic world. Note that this approach would have the following interesting feature: By driving a wedge between theological and logical determinism, it ends up claiming a conceptual connection between theological and causal determinism. In my view, the most promising rival, theologically compatibilist, theory — a theory that explains (i) how everything that actually happens is subject to God's will yet (ii) how libertarian human freedom is *not* undermined — is Molinism.[10]

5. HARDNESS CLOSURE

The reflections in the previous section were based on the assumption that, given that (1) entails (1*), if (1) is hard, then (1*) is also hard. Is this assumption tenable? If not, my argument for the critical asymmetry that (given that S does X at T_2) the truth of 'S will do X at T_2' at T_1 is a soft fact in non-theistic worlds but a hard fact in theistic worlds could be rejected and Fischer could maintain that in both kinds of world 'S will do X at T_2' is a soft fact. In other words, one option for blocking the Ockhamist way out of theological incompatibilism without conceding that truths about future human actions are soft in non-theistic but hard in theistic worlds is to deny that the set of hard facts is closed under entailment. Could Fischer coherently deny hardness closure?

As we have seen, he says that hard facts about a time T are "genuinely about T and not even implicitly about times after T", whereas soft facts about T "are also in some genuine sense about times after T" (2016: 12). Hard facts,

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10   See Jäger (2011), (2013).

however, entail necessary truths (for example logical or conceptual truths). Since such truths are not about any times at all, it may be argued, they do not qualify as hard facts. Indeed, Fischer himself explicitly argues along such lines when he says in one passage that "hardness does not seem to be closed under entailment" because, "for instance, 'Smith sits at T_1' entails '2+2=4,' and yet the latter fact might not properly be considered a hard fact about T_1" (1989b: 45). It seems, therefore, that there are clear counterexamples to the claim that hardness is closed under entailment.

However, what is at issue in Argument A is a contingent consequent (namely that 'S will do X at T_2' is true at T_1), and if we restrict the consequents to contingent facts or propositions, it seems that hardness *is* closed under entailment. Consider ordinary examples, e. g., (what we will assume is) the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10, 49 B.C. This is a hard fact about that time. It entails a number of other contingent facts, including, that Caesar existed on January 10, 49 B.C.; that the Rubicon existed on January 10, 49 B.C.; that Caesar changed his location on January 10, 49 B.C.; etc. And there is no doubt that these other facts are now hard as well and fully accomplished. Examples of this kind could be multiplied *ad libitum*.

It must be conceded, however, that there are trickier cases, some of which play a central role in Fischer's discussion of hardness and softness. Consider two propositions that he discusses in various places to argue against the idea that softness can be characterized simply in terms of 'entailing facts about the future':

(A) Socrates is sitting at T_1.

(B) It is not the case that Socrates sits for the first time at T_2.[11]

Fischer argues that (B) is a fact about the future, relative to T_1, and that (A), although being a hard fact, entails (B). Hence an unrefined entailment criterion appears to be unsuitable to delineate softness. Many facts that are clearly hard entail facts such as (B), says Fischer. Does not this argument also show that hardness fails to be closed under entailment?[12] To answer this question let us look more closely at (B). The most natural way to understand it, it seems, is as follows:

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11   Cf., e. g., Fischer (2016: 131, 153; 1983: 92; 1986: 593; 1989b: 35-36).
12   Thanks to John Fischer for alerting me to this question (personal correspondence).

(B*)   There is a time T_2 (later than T_1) at which Socrates is sitting, and he
       has been sitting at some time prior to T_2.

According to certain characterizations of softness that Fischer considers sympathetically — namely that soft facts are 'temporally relational' or about past
times 'extrinsically considered' — (B*) may be classified as soft since its second
conjunct is soft (although even this is not quite clear). In any case, (A) does not
entail (B*). The clearest reason for this is that (A) does not entail the first conjunct of (B*). The fact that Socrates is sitting at T_1 does not entail that he is, or
will be, sitting at T_2; it does not even entail that some later time T_2 exists. So this
alleged counterexample to hardness closure fails. I conclude that on Fischer's
account of hardness and softness it is difficult to see how hardness would not
be closed under entailment, provided that (as is legitimate in this context) we
limit the consequents of the relevant entailment relations to contingent facts.

Here is one final point. Fischer is (rightly) eager to distinguish two questions that are sometimes conflated: whether a fact is (i) genuinely or 'intrinsically' about the past, and whether it is (ii) fixed or beyond anyone's control,
i. e., whether no one has a choice about it. In the preceding paragraphs we
have been looking at (i). Yet what we are ultimately interested in in the present
context is (ii). The question is whether divine beliefs about future human actions depend on those human actions, and whether these beliefs are, in some
appropriate sense, under our control if our actions are under our control. And
however complicated it may be directly to establish the closure of hardness if
we construe it in terms of temporal non-relationality, it seems clear that *fixity*
is closed under entailment. If no one has control over, or a choice about p, and
p entails q, then no one has control over, or a choice about q. Fischer himself
states in one passage that "fixity is plausibly taken to be closed under entailment" (1989b: 45). If so, he owes us an explanation as to why certain facts about
the future that are intrinsically the same in theistic and in non-theistic worlds
should be soft and open in non-theistic worlds but fixed in theistic ones.

What's *really* hard about the genuine past, I should like to say, is not its
temporal non-relationality but the fact that it is over-and-done-with once and
forever. The comforting side is that years that have passed as good ones won't
come back as bad ones.[13]

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