In recent years a vast literature has been added to the historical discussions concerning theological fatalism and free will. Theological fatalism is the view in which divine foreknowledge is incompatible logically with any openness to the future, particularly the kind of openness resulting from the free will of human beings. In recent discussion compatibilists, those who oppose theological fatalism by arguing that foreknowledge and freedom are compatible, have exploited a response to logical fatalism in defense of their view. Logical fatalism is the view in which the mere existence of past truths about the future implies the unavoidability of the future and hence the impossibility of free will. The logical fatalist holds that all truths about the past are beyond anyone’s control, so that the truth of the proposition yesterday it was the case that Joe will mow his lawn tomorrow makes it unavoidable that Joe mow his lawn tomorrow.

An attractive response to this argument distinguishes between hard and soft facts about the past. Hard facts are understood to be facts about the past over which no one (any longer) has any control, such as the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. Soft facts on the other hand are facts which obtain in virtue of what will occur in the future rather than what has occurred in the past. So, if we have any control over the future, we have similar control over the “soft” aspects of the past (since what is responsible for these aspects of the past is not something that occurred in the past but rather something which will occur in the future). It is important to note that the issue here is not one about altering the past by making something true which was not true; instead, the issue is one of direction of explanation: does the fact obtain because of elements in the past or because of features of the future? If such a distinction is available, one can respond to the fatalist by claiming that certain regions of the past will be no more beyond our control than the
future is, for it is the future which explains (though not, of course, in a causal way) the “soft” features of the past.

Compatibilists then exploit this response to logical fatalism in addressing theological fatalism. They argue that any reasons for thinking that claims like God believed yesterday that Joe will mow his lawn tomorrow express hard facts about the past are reasons for thinking that claims like yesterday it was the case that Joe will mow his lawn tomorrow also express hard facts. They argue, that is, that any reasons for theological fatalism amount to reasons for logical fatalism. On the other hand, incompatibilists, those who believe that foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom, are usually equally suspicious of logical fatalism and thus have resorted to arguing that the best way of clarifying the hard/soft fact distinction implies theological fatalism without implying logical fatalism.

Recent discussion of these issues has become labyrinthine in its complexity, but the most accessible defense of incompatibilism is by William Hasker. Perhaps surprisingly (and then again perhaps not), his is also, by my lights, the best defense of incompatibilism presently available. He has argued that any adequate interpretation of the hard/soft fact distinction implies theological fatalism, and he believes and is committed to the position that theological fatalism is logically independent of logical fatalism. I will argue, to the contrary, that his account fails to maintain the logical independence of theological and logical fatalism and that he fails to offer convincing grounds for thinking that any adequate account of the hard/soft fact distinction will imply theological fatalism.

The heart of any adequate account of the hard/soft fact distinction is found in specifying what counts as a future-indifferent proposition, a proposition which “leaves the future open” in some sense. A hard fact will be construed then as that which is expressed by a true, future-indifferent proposition. According to Hasker, a future-indifferent proposition will be one which is consistent both with there being no times after the present and with there being times after the present.

Once we accept this account of future-indifference, the crucial issue, according to Hasker, is how to understand the claim that one proposition is consistent with another. Hasker gives two possible interpretations. He says,