

OCKHAMISM

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Penultimate draft

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Ockhamism, so named because it was developed and defended by the 14th century philosopher William of Ockham, is a long-enduring response to fatalist arguments. *Fatalism*, the thesis that it is impossible for anyone to act freely, comes in two varieties: logical and theological. Logical fatalists begin their argument with the assumption that no matter what anyone does, it has *always been true* that she does it, while theological fatalists begin by assuming that no matter what anyone does, *God has always known* that she does it. Fatalists go on to argue that since no one can change what has always been true or what God has always known, no agent can ever do anything other than what she does; hence, no agent ever acts freely. The Ockhamist response, in brief, is that arguments for fatalism trade on a failure to distinguish between changing the past, on the one hand, and its being up to an agent what the past was like, on the other. Once the relevant distinction is drawn, Ockhamists contend, it is clear that fatalist arguments are unsound.

Though Ockham himself was primarily concerned with theological fatalism, his argument may just as well be formulated as a response to logical fatalism. In general, there are many formulations of the Ockhamism, just as there are many formulations of the fatalist argument.

1. Omniscience

Arguments for theological fatalism depend on the thesis that God is omniscient. How are we to understand this notion? It is easy enough to say that an omniscient being “knows

everything," but the present context requires a more detailed account. We should acknowledge, first, that the objects of God's knowledge are *propositions*, where propositions are typically thought of as the contents of sentences. So, for example, the content of a sentence like 'Carrie marries Harry at 9 a.m. on August 21, 2074' is the proposition that Carrie marries Harry at 9 a.m. on August 21, 2074. Further, propositions correspond to *states of affairs*, and so the preceding proposition corresponds to the state of affairs of *Carrie's marrying Harry at 9 a.m. on August 21, 2074*. The idea is that a state of affairs is "something's being a certain way," and the corresponding proposition is a statement of how that something is. Of course, given that some propositions are true and some false, there must be some relevant distinction between the states of affairs that correspond to the former and those that correspond to the latter. We will say that true propositions correspond to states of affairs that *obtain*, and false propositions correspond to states of affairs that do not. Moreover, we will adopt the standard practice and refer to states of affairs that obtain as *facts*.

Having discussed the objects of God's knowledge, we ought now to consider that, as an omniscient being, God has *always* known which propositions are true and which are false. And in order to consider the notion of *always*, we must focus on the notion of a *time*. One might imagine a timeline, and define a time as the complex state of affairs that obtains at some moment, or point, on the line. Or, one might define a time more precisely as a complex state of affairs that includes all and only states of affairs that obtain simultaneously with one another.

With these discussions of propositions and times in place, we may offer a sufficiently precise definition of omniscience:

The thesis that God is omniscient is, by definition, the thesis that for every proposition p and every time t , God at t knows the truth value of p .

If one objects that God exists *timelessly* rather than *at times*, it is easy enough to replace 'at t ' with 'timelessly.' In the present context, nothing substantive hinges on whether God exists timelessly or at times.

With this, we may move on to consider the argument for theological fatalism itself.

2. The Argument for Theological Fatalism

The first premise of the argument for theological fatalism is the *principle of the fixity of the past*, which is the thesis that it is not *now* up to anyone what has already happened. More precisely, it is the thesis that:

(1) For any time t and any state of affairs O , if O obtains earlier than t , it is not up to anyone at or after t whether O obtains.

In addition to the principle of the fixity of the past, the fatalists' argument depends on a *transfer principle*. Though many transfer principles have been formulated (see Kapitan 2002 for discussion), there is no need, in the present context, to enter into the debate about the strengths and weaknesses of each. This formulation will suit the fatalists' purposes:

(2) If (i) some state of affairs O obtains, and it is not up to anyone at time t whether O obtains, and if (ii) it is impossible for O to obtain unless some other state of affairs O' obtains, then (iii) O' obtains, and it is not up to anyone at time t whether O' obtains.

With these principles in place, we may return to the state of affairs of Carrie's marrying Harry at 9 a.m. on August 21, 2074. Let us assume that this state of affairs obtains and, thus, that the corresponding proposition is true; let us use the term ' p_A ' to designate this proposition. If we stipulate that ' t_{-1B} ' designates a time 1 billion years prior to Carrie's birth and that ' t ' designates any (arbitrary) time after Carrie's birth but before 9 a.m. on August 21, 2074, a relatively clear formulation of the fatalists' argument is available. To premises (1) and (2), we may add this assumption:

(3) p_A and God is omniscient.

Next, we may invoke the definition of omniscience:

(4) God at t_{-1B} knows p_A .

From premise (1), the principle of the fixity of the past, and (4), we may derive:

(5) God at t_{-1B} knows p_A , and it is not up to anyone at t whether God at t_{-1B} knows p_A .

And given the definition of knowledge, it is trivial that:

(6) If God at t_{-1B} knows p_A , p_A (is true).

But then if premise (2), the transfer principle, is true, (5) and (6) lead to:

(7) p_A (is true) and it is not up to anyone at t^* whether p_A .

And so we arrive at the conclusion that there is no time between Carrie's birth and her wedding to Harry such that it is up to Carrie, at that time, whether she marries Harry at 9 a.m. on August 21, 2071. Moreover, this argument may be formulated using any time prior to t in place of t_{-1B} .

What matters is that given the definition of omniscience, God knows which actions every agent performs before the agent ever performs them. Further, this argument can be generalized to any action performed by any agent at any time over the course of this agent's life.

With this, fatalists claim to have reached the conclusion that no one acts ever acts freely if an omniscient God exists.

3. The Ockhamist Response: Hard and Soft Facts

As Ockhamism is usually presented, its central thesis is that there is a distinction between so-called *hard facts* and so-called *soft facts*. While it is notoriously difficult to draw the distinction precisely, various characterizations are available. For instance, "A hard fact about the past is entirely about the past whereas a soft fact is not: a hard fact about, say, t_{-1B} is a fact whose

obtaining is entirely independent of whatever might happen after t_{-1B} , whereas a soft fact about t_{-1B} somehow depends on, or involves, or includes events that take place at later times." (See Finch and Rea 2008)

We might also say that a soft fact is a state of affairs that obtains and is future-directed, and a hard fact is a state of affairs that obtains and is not future-directed, where a state of affairs O is *future-directed* just in case either O 's obtaining entails that some contingent thing will exist or O 's obtaining entails that no contingent thing will exist." (See Finch and Rea 2008) Of course, whether a fact is hard or soft is relative to a time.

The Ockhamists' response to the fatalist argument amounts to the claim that just as we must distinguish between hard and soft facts, we must distinguish between the principle of the fixity of the hard past:

(FHP) For any time t and any state of affairs O , if O is a hard fact at t , it is not up to anyone at or after t whether O obtains.

And the principle of the fixity of the soft past:

(FSP) For any time t and any state of affairs O , if O is a soft fact at t , it is not up to anyone at or after t whether O obtains.

The argument for fatalism, Ockhamists contend, seems sound only if the distinction between these principles goes unnoticed. And while the former principle is obvious, the fatalists'

argument is sound only if the latter principle is true. Moreover, Ockhamists insist, (FSP) is false.

In arguing for the importance of this distinction, Ockhamists ask us to examine the principle of the fixity of the past more closely. To be more specific, they ask that we look more closely at the notion of *its not being up to* someone whether a state of affairs obtains. Within the free will literature, two definitions have been offered, and it is implausible that there is a satisfactory definition that is not a variation on one of these:

(W) The thesis that *O* obtains and it is not up to anyone at *t* whether *O* obtains is, by definition, the thesis that *O* obtains and there is nothing anyone at *t* can do such that, if she were to do it, *O would* not obtain.

Or:

(M) The thesis that *O* obtains and it is not up to anyone at *t* whether *O* obtains is, by definition, the thesis that *O* obtains and there is nothing anyone at *t* can do such that, if she were to do it, *O might* not obtain.

It is significant that each of these definitions includes a *counterfactual conditional*, a conditional such that (i) its antecedent is false, and (ii) the consequent states what would (or might) be the case if the antecedent were, contrary to fact, true. So, the antecedent corresponds to a state of affairs that does not obtain (and, hence, is not a fact), while the consequent corresponds to a

state of affairs that would (or might) obtain if, contrary to fact, the antecedent were true. A straightforward example of a counterfactual conditional is the claim that, "If she *were* to fire the gun (which she has not yet fired), he *would* incur a gunshot wound."

The Ockhamists' strategy is, in effect, to emphasize the counterfactual conditional embedded in the definition of its *not* being up to someone whether a state of affairs obtains, and to formulate an analogous definition of its being up to an agent whether a state of affairs obtains. In so doing, they offer definitions similar to this:

(U) The thesis that *O* obtains and it is up to someone at time *t* whether *O* obtains is, by definition, the thesis that *O* obtains and there is something that someone at time *t* can do such that, if she were to do it, *O would* (might) *not* obtain.

At this point, they suggest, the distinction between (FSP) and (FHP) becomes salient. To deny the latter is to claim that it is possible for someone to change the past, which is absurd. But to deny the fixity of the soft past is to make the far more plausible claim that it is possible for someone to do something such that, if she *were* to do it, the past *would have been* different than, as a matter of fact, it is. With this, let us return to p_A , the proposition that Carrie marries Harry, at 9 a.m., on August 21, 2074. And now let us suppose for the sake of argument that Carrie marries Harry *freely*. As we have said, God knows, at t_{-1B} , that p_A . The Ockhamist's position, then, is that at some time prior to 9 a.m. on August 21, 2074, Carrie is able to perform some action such that, if she were to perform it, p_A would be false. But it is trivial that if p_A were false, God never would have known it. Therefore, insofar as Carrie is able to perform some action

such that, if she were to perform it, p_A would be false, she is able to perform some action such that, if she were to perform it, it would be false that God knows, at t_{-1B} , that p_A .

In short, the claim is not that Carrie is ever able to change God's beliefs; the claim is that Carrie is able to ensure that God never had certain beliefs in the first place.

4. The Ockhamist Response: Dependence

Of course, Ockhamists have not yet provided a satisfactory response to the fatalists' argument. For they have not yet explained how Carrie (or anyone else) might have power over beliefs held one billion years prior to her birth. In order to understand their explanation, we might first revisit the characterization of soft facts that I offered earlier: "A soft fact about t_{-1B} somehow depends on, or involves, or includes events that take place at later times." The notion of *dependence* (or involvement, or inclusion) is at the heart of the Ockhamists' position. This becomes clear when we consider that Ockhamists do not claim merely that there is a necessary correlation between, for instance, God's knowledge of p_A and Carrie's marrying Harry at 9 a.m., on August 21, 2074. Rather, they claim that it is *because* Carrie marries Harry that God knows that Carrie marries Harry, but it is *not because* God knows that Carrie marries Harry that she marries him. Likewise, they insist that Carrie's marrying Harry *explains* God's knowing that Carrie marries Harry, but God's knowing that Carrie marries Harry does *not explain* that the wedding takes place. Ockhamists thus emphasize that God's knowledge of p_A somehow *depends on* whether Carrie marries Harry, while Carrie's marrying Harry does not depend, in the same way, on God's knowing p_A . Moreover, they contend that this asymmetry of dependence justifies the acceptance of the principle of the fixity of the hard past, on the one

hand, and the rejection of the principle of the fixity of the soft past, on the other. In considering the former, Ockhamists point out that if a state of affairs O is already a hard fact at time t , its obtaining does not depend on anything that anyone does at or after t . In this case, there is nothing anyone at t can do such that, if she were to do it, it would be false that O has obtained; as such, the principle of the fixity of the hard past is true. But if a state of affairs O is merely a soft fact at time t , it is necessarily the case that its obtaining depends on what happens after t . If a state of affairs' being a fact did not depend on what happens after it obtains, it would not be a soft fact.

By invoking the notion of dependence, then, Ockhamists claim to offer a principled distinction between hard and soft facts, and, in turn, a good reason to reject the principle of the fixity of the soft past.

5. Objections

There are several objections to the Ockhamists' argument.

First, one might assume that when Ockhamists offer that soft facts *depend on* hard facts, they are positing some sort of backward causation, so that later states of affairs cause earlier states of affairs to obtain. But if this were the case, Ockhamism would be susceptible to all the objections against backward causation, of which there are .

In fact, Ockhamists qua Ockhamists are *not* necessarily committed to the possibility of backward causation. However, if the dependence is not causal, Ockhamists must explain what

the relevant sort of dependence is. A promising suggestion is that of *ontological dependence* or *grounding*, (see Todd 2013), a concept that has recently received a great deal of philosophical discussion (see F. Correia and B. Schneider 2012). According to those discussants with broadly Aristotelian leanings (e.g., Koslicki 2012), the world is structured such that some kinds of objects or states of affairs are more fundamental, or basic, than others, where less fundamental objects are ontologically dependent on those that are more fundamental. This notion of ontological dependence has been said to correspond to Aristotle's notion of ontological priority, which may be distinguished from his notion of temporal priority.

A new set of objections confronts the Ockhamists if they appeal to the notion of ontological dependence. For unless they can explain what it is for one fact to ontologically depend on another, they fail to complete their response to the fatalist. Moreover, serious objections have been raised against the very possibility of providing such an account (again, see F. Correia and B. Schneider). On a related note, one might object that there is no principled distinction between hard and soft facts. It has, after all, been extremely difficult to define either notion, which suggests that Ockhamists might be relying on nothing more than the intuitive plausibility of their being such a distinction. One might object that intuitive plausibility or not, Ockhamists must provide a satisfactory explanation of the distinction if they are to provide the rigorous argumentation they need to defeat their fatalist opponents; if they offer nothing more than vague gestures at what is intuitively plausible, they fail to meet their argumentative burden.

A related objection concerns the distinction between hard and soft facts. As I said earlier, it is notoriously difficult to define either notion; as such, it is difficult to draw the

distinction in question. Some objectors conclude that Ockhamists rely on nothing more than what is intuitively plausible, and that until they provide some principled way of distinguishing between hard and soft facts, they have not met the argumentative burden imposed by their fatalist opponents.

One might also object that no matter what Ockhamists say, it is a hard fact, from t_{-1B} forward, that God knows p_A . God is, after all, omniscient, and, hence, God does not believe propositions unless God knows that they are true. Moreover, one might say, God's *believing*, at t_{-1B} , that Carrie marries Harry is a hard fact. In general, someone's being in a particular mental state is independent of which contingent objects *will* exist. And there is certainly no incoherence in the claim that someone believes that some state of affairs will obtain although it never does. But if it is a hard fact from t_{-1B} forward that God believes p_A , and if God is omniscient, then it is hard fact from t_{-1B} forward that God knows p_A . If the objection is expressed in this way, Ockhamists might respond by drawing a distinction between the state of affairs of God's believing p_A and the state of affairs of God's knowing p_A , and contend that the former but not the latter is a hard fact. However, it is not clear how this strategy might serve the Ockhamists' purposes (see Todd forthcoming).

6. References and Further Reading

Adams, M. (1967) 'Is the Existence of God a 'Hard' Fact?' *Philosophical Review* 76: 492-503.

Reprinted in Fischer (1989). (Adams argues that the existence of God is a hard fact and that the theological fatalists' argument fails).

Conee, E. (2005) 'Fatalism', *Riddles of Existence: A Guided Tour of Metaphysics*, Oxford: Oxford

UP. (An accessible presentation of various formulations of the argument for logical fatalism (which Conee calls “metaphysical fatalism”). Conee considers objections to the argument and presents a brief discussion of omniscience.

Correia, F. and B. Benjamin, eds. (2012) *Grounding and Explanation*. Cambridge: Cambridge

UP. (An excellent anthology that presents readers with cutting-edge work on the topic of grounding (i.e., dependence).

Finch, A and M. Rea (2008) ‘Presentism and Ockham’s Way Out’, *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of*

Religion: 1. Ed. J. Kvanvig. New York: Oxford UP: 1-17. To be reprinted in *Freedom,*

Fatalism, and Foreknowledge (forthcoming). Eds. J. Fischer and P. New York: Oxford UP.

(The authors argue for the incompatibility of Ockhamism and the theory of time known as *presentism*).

Fischer, J., ed. (1989) *God, Freedom and Foreknowledge*, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.

(An outstanding resource, most of the readings address Ockhamism. The introduction provides a helpful overview of the debate and a particularly thorough discussion of Ockhamism).

Fischer, J. and P. Todd (2011) ‘The Truth about Freedom: A Reply to Merricks.’ *Philosophical*

Review 120: 97-115. (Fischer and Todd respond to Merricks (2009), arguing that

although he denies it, Merricks endorses a form of Ockhamism).

Kapitan, T. (2002) ‘A Master Argument for Incompatibilism?’ *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*:

1. Ed. R. Kane. New York: Oxford UP: 127-157. (Kapitan presents and critically

evaluates various formulations of *transfer*, or *beta*, principles. He concludes that transfer principles are invalid).

Koslicki, K. (2012) ‘Varieties of Ontological Dependence.’ In Correia and B. Schneider. 186-213.

- (Koslicki presents and critically evaluates various analyses of *ontological dependence* (or *grounding*). She concludes that no one has yet offered a satisfactory analysis).
- Merricks, T. (2011) 'Freedom and Foreknowledge.' *Philosophical Review* 120: 587-6. (Merricks responds to Fischer and Todd (2011)).
- Merricks, T. (2009). 'Truth and Freedom.' *Philosophical Review* 118: 29-57. (Merricks argues that the fatalists' argument is unsound and presents a critique of Ockhamism. He offers his own response to the fatalists' argument).
- Ockham, W. (1980) *Ockham's Theory of Propositions: Part II of the Summa Logicae*. Trans. A. Freddoso and H. Schuurman. Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP. Ockham's own discussion of theological fatalism, translated from the original Latin.
- Pike, N. (1966) 'Of God and Freedom: A Rejoinder.' *Philosophical Review* 75: 208-16. (Pike argues against Ockhamism and introduces the expressions "hard fact" and "soft fact").
- Plantinga, A. (1986) 'On Ockham's Way Out.' *Faith and Philosophy* 3: 235-269. Reprinted in Fischer 1989). (Plantinga explains, endorses, and considers the implications of Ockhamism).
- Schaffer, J. (2009) 'On what grounds what.' *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*: 1. Eds. D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman. Oxford: Oxford UP: 347-383. (Schaffer argues that the world is structured according to *grounding* (or *ontological dependence*) *relationships*. He suggests that this metaphysical thesis falls within the Aristotelian tradition).
- Todd, P. (forthcoming) 'Soft Facts and Ontological Dependence.' *Philosophical Studies*. (Todd

develops the objection that God's beliefs are hard facts and offers an extended discussion of the notion of dependence on which the Ockhamists rely).

Van Inwagen, P. (2008) 'What Does an Omniscient Being Know about the Future?' *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*: 1. Ed. J. Kvanvig. New York: Oxford UP: 216-230. (Van Inwagen offers an alternative to Ockhamism, arguing that although God is omniscient, God does not know what free actions agents will perform before they actually perform them).

Zagzebski, L. (2011) 'Foreknowledge and Free Will', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Fall 2011 Edition, Ed. E. Zalta. URL =

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/> (Zagzebski provides an extensive overview of the debate. She considers various formulations of the theological fatalists' argument and provides a survey of available responses, including [Ockhamism](#) She also explores the relationship between theological and logical fatalism).