HOW TO KEEP DIALECTICALLY KOSHER: FISCHER, FREEDOM, AND FOREKNOWLEDGE

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Fischer's *Our Fate* is a wonderful book, one that reminds us of just how much Fischer has contributed over the last three decades to the discussion of issues relating to God and human freedom. In this short commentary, I will (for the most part) limit myself to a discussion of the central issue on which the book focuses: a type of argument for theological incompatibilism — i.e., the claim that God's foreknowledge is incompatible with our freedom.

In the introduction, Fischer reminds us that there really is no such thing as *the* argument for theological incompatibilism. Rather, what we find is a family of arguments trying in slightly different ways to show that, since the past is not under our control, it follows that God's having infallible past beliefs about our future actions entails that those actions cannot be free. Fisher focuses much of his discussion on two principles regarding the fixity of the past. Some versions of the incompatibilist's argument, says Fischer, rely on what he refers to as a conditional principle of the form:

(FP)   For any action Y, agent S, and time T, if it is true that if S were to do Y at T, some fact about the past relative to T would not have been a fact, then S cannot at (or just prior to) T do Y at T. (p. 5)

Other versions of the argument, though, rely, according to Fischer, on a possible worlds principle:

(FP*) 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. (p. 6)

A large proportion of the ensuing discussion examines the strengths and weaknesses of incompatibilist arguments built on one or another of these principles (or variations on them[1]).

Despite the centrality of these principles to Fischer's investigations, they are often presented with insufficient care. Consider (FP). By placing the reference to "some fact about the past" in the *consequent* of the embedded counterfactual, it seems to assert that the relevant fact about the past is a fact in the world in which S does Y at T, a world which (for all we know) has a very different past from the actual world. But would-be facts are not the ones on which the incompatibilist wants to base her argument. Her charge is that *actual* facts about the past are fixed—i.e., that if my acting in a certain way would require the falsity of some fact about the *actual* past, then I can't act in that way. A clearer way to formulate (FP), then, would be as

(FP$_1$) For any action Y, agent S, time T, and fact F about the past relative to T, if it is true that if S were to do Y at T, F would not have been a fact about the past, then S cannot at (or just prior to) T do Y at T.[2]

Another problem with Fischer's discussion of such principles is his failure fully to disclose the logical connections between them. Part of the difficulty, I think, stems from the manner in which the principles are consistently constructed. (FP) has the form of a universally quantified conditional with an embedded counterfactual: "If (if A were the case, then B would be the case), then S cannot do Y." (FP*), on the other hand, has the form "S has the power to do Y only if Z". The structural differences—"If … then" for (FP), "… only if …" for (FP*)—and the linguistic variations—"S cannot … do Y" in (FP),

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1   What is called (FP) on p. 5 occurs on p. 60, though the parenthetical "or just prior to" is absent. The (FP) of p. 100 is almost the same as that of p. 60, but slightly less formal: the "would not" and "cannot" of p. 60 become "wouldn't" and "couldn't" on p. 100. On p. 117, we find an (FP) identical to that of p. 60, except that the upper-case "T" is turned into the lower-case "t"; this version appears on p. 117 as well. Three pages later, on p. 120, the same principle, except that "hard" is added before the first "fact," appears under the label "(FPh)"; exactly the same version is used on p. 204, though there its name is "FPC". On p. 66, meanwhile, another version of the p. 60 version is offered, though here the agent is A rather than S and the principle is stated in terms of individuals' possession of properties. Readers should also note that the principles named (FP) on pp. 186 and 199 are actually variations of (FP*), not of (FP); a very similar variation of (FP*) is offered as (FPpw) on p. 126.

2   Fischer has agreed in conversation that the shift to (FP$_1$) could be considered a friendly amendment to his (FP).

"*S* has it in his power … to do *X*" for (FP*) — camouflage the logical connections between the two principles. Once the superficial discrepancies between the two are eliminated, the relations between them come quickly into view.

Suppose we stick with the structure and language of (FP). We could reformulate (FP*) as:

(FP*$_1$) For any action *Y*, agent *S*, time *T* and possible world *w*, if *S* can at (or just prior to) *T* in possible world *w* do *Y*, then there is a possible world *w** with the same past as that of *w* up to *T* in which *S* does *Y* at *T*.

Consider now the contrapositive of (FP):

(FP$_2$) For any action *Y*, agent *S*, time *T*, and fact *F* about the past relative to *T*, if *S* can at (or just prior to) *T* do *Y* at *T*, then it is not true that if *S* were to do *Y* at *T*, *F* would not have been a fact about the past.

Let's isolate the consequent of (FP$_2$) — i.e.,

(C1) It is not true that if *S* were to do *Y* at *T*, *F* would not have been a fact about the past.

Clearly, (C1) entails:

(C2) It is not true that, necessarily, if *S* were to do *Y* at *T*, *F* would not have been a fact about the past.

From (C2), it follows that

(C3) It's possible that both (*S* does *Y* at *T*) and (*F* is a fact about the past).

And (C3) implies

(C4) There is a possible world *w** in which both (*S* does *Y* at *T*) and (*F* is a fact about the past).

So the consequent of (FP$_2$) entails (C4). Hence, if (FP$_2$) is true, then so is

(FP$_3$) For any action *Y*, agent *S*, time *T*, and fact *F* about the past relative to *T*, if *S* can at (or just prior to) *T* do *Y* at *T*, then there is a possible world *w** in which both (*S* does *Y* at *T*) and (*F* is a fact about the past).

Now, (FP$_3$) places no limit upon the extent of *F*, the fact about the past relative to *T*. This fact could be quite specific and limited, or it could be quite exten-

sive. Indeed, it could be equivalent to a large conjunctive fact including *all* facts about the past relative to T. In other words, F could be equivalent to the entire history of the world (call it H) relative to T. So, from (FP$_3$), it follows that

(FP$_4$) For any action Y, agent S, time T, and history H relative to T, if S can at (or just prior to) T do Y at T, then there is a possible world w^* in which both (S does Y at T) and (H is the history relative to T).

The antecedent of (FP$_4$) implicitly makes reference only to the actual world. But presumably the proponent of such a principle would see it as having general application. Hence, anyone who endorsed (FP$_4$) should also accept

(FP$_5$) For any action Y, agent S, time T, and possible world w with history H relative to T, if S can at (or just prior to) T in possible world w do Y, then there is a possible world w^* in which both (S does Y at T) and (H is the history relative to T).

Obviously, though, if w has history H relative to T, and w^* also has history H relative to T, then w and w^* have the same past relative to T. So we could rephrase (FP$_5$) as:

(FP$^*_1$) For any action Y, agent S, time T and possible world w, if S can at (or just prior to) T in possible world w do Y, then there is a possible world w^* with the same past as that of w up to T in which S does Y at T.

And (FP$^*_1$), as we saw above, is simply equivalent to Fischer's (FP*).

The moral of this woefully long and pedantic argument can now be drawn. As we have seen, no one could reasonably accept (FP) without also accepting (FP$_5$). But (FP$_5$) is equivalent to (FP$^*_1$), which is simply a rephrasing of (FP*). Therefore, no one could reasonably accept (FP) without also accepting (FP*). Fischer's two principles, then, are linked more closely that he acknowledges: while (FP*) *doesn't* (as Fischer notes) entail (FP), (FP) *does* (as he doesn't note) entail (FP*).[3]

Though Fischer is surely correct in claiming that either (FP) or (FP*) could be used to formalize a version of an incompatibilist argument, several consid-

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3   Or at least it all but entails (FP*). Not every move in the argument I have offered is one that the proponent of (FP) is logically required to accept. Still, I cannot imagine a reasonable incompatibilist balking at any point in the argument.

erations suggest that the real question concerning the viability of such an argument is with (FP). First, as we have just seen, (FP*) comes along for the ride if (FP) can be defended; no separate argument for it is needed. Second, it's hard to see how one could justify (FP*) if (FP) were denied. Fischer usually presents (FP*) as an alternative to (FP), but typically doesn't try to make a case for accepting the former without the latter.[4] There's nothing necessarily wrong in his approach; his concern is usually to show that there is an alternative route to the incompatibilist's conclusion, not to defend that route. On the rare occasions where he does try to *defend* (FP*) as a separate principle, though, his argument strikes me as either question-begging or surreptitiously dependent upon (FP).[5] Finally, the incompatibilist's argument is supposed to be based on the general intuition that the past is fixed. But it's (FP), not (FP*), that seems to represent a genuine attempt to formalize that intuition. Suppose one embraces (FP*) but denies (FP). Indeed, suppose one denies (FP) in a rather dramatic (and implausible) way: by saying that, for *any* agent, time, and fact about the past relative

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4   An exception occurs in his discussion of his famous "salty old seadog" example. A sailor who was told at 9:00 that the weather would turn bad at noon and hence decides (as he always does when bad weather is forecast) not to sail at noon nevertheless, one might claim, *could* go sailing at noon, even though he *would* go sailing only if the forecast had been different. Fischer wavers on the extent to which such an example constitutes a counterexample to (FP), but he insists that the "could go sailing" claim is plausible only if we contend that it was at least possible for the seadog, even in the wake of the weather forecast, to have acted out of character by going sailing. But to grant this is to say "that the seadog can actualize a possible world whose past relative to noon is just like that of the actual world but in which he goes sailing at noon. If the world which he can actualize had a different past from the actual one, then it wouldn't be true that the seadog can act out of character" (111). Obviously, the seadog can actualize the world in which he goes sailing only if there is such a world. And so, according to Fischer, in saying that people such as the seadog can act out of character, we are in effect endorsing (FP*). The argument here is interesting, but unconvincing. The seadog's ability to act out of character may well require that he have access to a world in which much of the past stays constant (in particular, where the factors that we would deem psychologically relevant remain the same), but this gives us no reason to think he has access to a world in which all of the past remains unchanged, nor that there even is such a world. So the seadog example offers scant support for the claim that (FP*) remains unquestionable even if (FP) is called into doubt.

5   See, for example, the attempt on p. 185 to defend a near relative of (FP*) — one that, alas, is labelled as just (FP) on p. 186. The defense strikes me as rather opaque, but seems to rely crucially on the claim that "Plausibly … it's now too late for the past to have been different … Kennedy was shot, and, plausibly, any possible world now 'accessible' to one will include this fact." If this claim is not equivalent to our friend (FP), it's hard to see how the argument here isn't blatantly question-begging.

to that time, there's something that agent could do such that, were he to do it, that fact about the past wouldn't have been a fact. This radical denier of (FP) seems to be rejecting, in about as clear and wholesale a manner as one could, the notion that the past is fixed. Tacking on an endorsement of (FP*) changes this rejection not a jot. Hence, from a serious incompatibilist's stance, it's (FP), not (FP*), that's truly of interest.

But why accept (FP)? Why think that our vague prephilosophical intuition that the past is beyond our control warrants a claim as broad as (FP)? After all, as Fischer (and many others) have noted, if we accept a principle as sweeping and unrestricted as (FP) appears to be, then logical fatalism seems right around the corner. If it was true a hundred years ago that I will buy an iguana tomorrow, then, since that fact about the past wouldn't have been a fact were I to refrain from iguana-buying, it follows from (FP) that I can't do other than buy the iguana tomorrow. Or so says the fatalist. If we are to block such an argument, as Fischer clearly wishes to do, then we need to put *some* limitations upon how we specify our intuitions regarding the fixity of the past.[6] And once we start down this road, it becomes at least questionable that (FP) has sufficient plausibility to undergird an argument for the incompatibility of foreknowledge and freedom.

Indeed, even a version of (FP) limited to *hard* facts about the past is not beyond doubt. Alvin Plantinga implicitly calls such a principle into question via his much-discussed example of Paul and the ants. Suppose that some ants moved into Paul's yard last Saturday. Were Paul to mow his lawn this afternoon, the colony of ants would be destroyed. For some reason or other, though, God wishes the colony to survive. As God knows, Paul in fact will not mow this afternoon. But if he were to mow, God would have foreseen his so acting, and (to save the ants) would have prevented their moving into Paul's yard last Saturday.

> So if Paul were to mow his lawn this afternoon, then the ants would not have moved in last Saturday. But it is within Paul's power to mow this afternoon. There is therefore an action he can perform such that if he were to perform

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it, then the proposition [that the colony of carpenter ants moved into Paul's yard last Saturday] would have been false.[7]

Clearly, Plantinga's story offers us an alleged counterexample to (FP), and hence a way of fending off the incompatibilist's argument. Fischer, though, is unimpressed. Though, he reports, many philosophers ("typically at or connected with Notre Dame!") find Plantinga's example convincing, he "has always been puzzled by this":

> it is obviously contentious whether (in the specific circumstances in question) Paul does indeed have the power to mow his lawn this afternoon!… The whole point of a skeptical argument — such as the Consequence Argument (in the context of causal determinism) or Pike's argument (in the context of God's foreknowledge) is to put into doubt whether we have the power to do otherwise with respect to ordinary actions — actions with respect to which we typically assume that we can do otherwise (apart from special assumptions, such as that causal determinism obtains or a certain sort of God exists). It is obviously not dialectically kosher simply to assume, in Plantinga's example, that Paul has the power (in the relevant sense) to mow… [O]ne cannot simply import ordinary views about our powers into the philosophical context of an evaluation of the argument for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom — a skeptical argument that explicitly challenges these ordinary views about powers. Plantinga is simply not entitled to assume from the outset that Paul has the power (in the relevant sense) to mow his lawn. (125-126)

What are we to make of Fisher's criticism? Has Plantinga transgressed the bounds of the dialectically kosher? I don't think so. His suggestion, it seems to me, is simply that it's *reasonable* to think that his story is a possible one — that is, it's reasonable to believe that Paul could have genuine alternatives and those alternatives be related to past events in the way the story suggests. The story, I think, is much more part of a *defensive* strategy than an *offensive* one. Despite his well-known evangelical credentials, Plantinga's endeavor here is (or at least should be) merely apologetic. His story isn't (or at least needn't be viewed as) part of a missionary endeavor to convert the incompatibilist; he's not saying "*Anyone* can clearly see that Paul has the power to mow, and if he were to do so, … ". Rather, he's saying (or can be read as saying) something far more modest, something along these lines:

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7   Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out", *Faith and Philosophy* 3, no. 3 (1986): 235–69. doi:10.5840/faithphil19863322.

> Look, I know that *you* (the incompatibilist) don't think Paul in my story has
> the power to mow. But I'm inclined to think that he does. And if he does, and
> if the rest of the story were true, then he'd have the power to do something
> such that the ants wouldn't have moved in. I think this is a possible story.
> So I think I'm fully within my rights in denying (FP), and thus in rejecting
> your argument. The story may not move *you* to abandon your theological
> incompatibilism, but that's not what it was intended to do. Its aim was to
> show how one who's *already* a theological compatibilist can coherently (and,
> I think, plausibly) maintain that view when threatened by your (FP)-based
> argument. And in that respect, the story succeeds.

For this reason, the charge of being dialectically unkosher strikes me as fun-
damentally misguided.

Indeed, those who consider the matter carefully are likely (especially, per-
haps, if they're at or connected with Notre Dame) to feel a Plantingean *tu
quoque* coming on. If *anyone* is making unwarranted assumptions here, one
might think, it's the one brandishing the incompatibilist argument, not Plant-
inga. After all, why think it's dialectically kosher to assume *from the start* that
(FP) is true? Plantinga's story could be seen as a way of showing that it's not.
For we could easily imagine his rewording the final lines of the paragraph
above in the following way:

> … if Paul were to mow his lawn this afternoon, then the ants would not have
> moved in last Saturday. But *for all we know — we can't at this point in the dis-
> cussion just assume anything one way or the other* — it is within Paul's power to
> mow this afternoon. So we can't assume that there isn't an action he can per-
> form such that if he were to perform it, then the proposition [that the colony
> of carpenter ants moved into Paul's yard last Saturday] would have been false.
> *And this means that we can't just assume that (FP) is true. But if it's not kosher
> to assume (FP), then the incompatibilist argument doesn't get off the ground.*

Fischer might respond to such a *tu quoque* by pointing again to the prephilo-
sophical backing for (FP) — as he puts it, "the intuitive idea that the past is
fixed" (117). And surely most of us do feel *some* tug connected with that
intuition. But, again, precisely where that tug should take us — precisely what
philosophical principles we should see it as mandating — has been a much-
debated issue in philosophical circles for a very long time. To suggest that
the vague intuition most of us have regarding the fixity of the past obviously
commits us to anything quite so controversial as (FP) is surely not plausible.

Fischer's complaint about the unkosher quality of Plantinga's response
to the theological incompatibilist is especially surprising given the fact that

Fischer endorses exactly the same type of response to the logical incompatibilist — i.e., to the fatalist. As noted above, the fatalist can offer an argument structurally parallel to that of the theological compatibilist, though with a version of (FP) not restricted only to hard facts. But Fischer (in a paper coauthored with Neal Tognazzini) finds such an argument wanting.

> Consider, for example, the fact that the assassination of JFK occurred 49 years before we wrote this paper… this fact relating the assassination of JFK to our writing this paper was true even 49 years ago. And yet it seems like we did have control over this fact; in particular, if we had waited until next year to write this paper, then although it *was* (and is) a fact that JFK was assassinated 49 years before we wrote this paper, it *wouldn't* have been a fact. (219)

But it's easy to imagine a fatalist, tutored by Fischer's response to Plantinga, replying to Fischer (and Tognazzini) in a parallel fashion:

> it is obviously contentious whether (in the specific circumstances in question) Fischer and Tognazzini do indeed have the power to wait until next year to write their paper! … The whole point of the fatalist's argument is to put into doubt whether we have the power to do otherwise with respect to ordinary actions — actions with respect to which we typically assume that we can do otherwise. It is obviously not dialectically kosher simply to assume, in Fischer and Tognazzini's example, that they do have the power (in the relevant sense) to wait until next year to write. They appear to import ordinary intuitions about our powers into a context in which they are not entitled to bring such intuitions.

Unless, then, Fischer is willing to accuse *himself* of not keeping kosher in his response to the fatalist, he had best not level such a charge against Plantinga with respect to his reply to the theological incompatibilist.

Suppose one were to ask what specific principle, if not (FP), *is* underwritten by our vague intuition that the past is fixed? It's not clear that the theological compatibilist is under any obligation to concoct a replacement. After all, it's the incompatibilist who's offering an argument here, an argument purporting to show that we *can't* be free given divine foreknowledge. If that argument fails because the principle upon which it relies is questionable, why think it's the *opponent* of the argument who's obligated to repair it?

So the dialectical burden rests squarely with the incompatibilist. Still, many compatibilists would probably feel somewhat uneasy about letting matters rest at this point, for at least two reasons. First, natural philosophical curiosity should goad us, if (FP) falls short of adequately specifying our inchoate sense that the past is fixed, to wonder how that vague intuition *should*

be specified. Second, many compatibilists with respect to foreknowledge and freedom are *not* compatibilists with respect to causal determinism and freedom. And many are inclined to defend metaphysical incompatibilism by appealing to some version of the Consequence Argument — an argument that relies crucially on the assumption that facts about the past state of the world and the laws of nature are not under our control. How, one might wonder, can the Consequence Argument be defended once (FP) has been jettisoned? For that Argument to be offered convincingly, don't we need to find a plausible replacement for (FP)?

Constraints of space preclude my giving these questions the attention they deserve. Let me, though, at least sketch a response. First, if natural philosophical curiosity is all we are trying to satisfy, then many theological compatibilists will probably contend that their overall philosophical positions provide them materials sufficient to fashion replacements for (FP), even if others who don't share their starting points will find such replacements wanting. For example, if one endorses the Molinist views on which Plantinga's ant example is ultimately based, one might well endorse a replacement for (FP) that makes explicit reference to middle knowledge. Needless to say, any such alternative to (FP) will be a non-starter for non-Molinists. But, once again, if one's aims are non-missionary — if one's goal is to soothe one's own curiosity, not to silence one's opponents — this limitation on it need not be seen as lethal.

On the other hand, if one's goals are more ambitious — if using the Consequence Argument to convert others to metaphysical incompatibilism is one's aim — then such sectarian principles will likely be of little use. It hardly follows, though, that *no* replacement for (FP) can be found that will do the job. For example, Michael Bergmann has noted that some facts about the past (e.g., God's past beliefs about our current actions) are plausibly seen as being facts *because* of what we do in the present; such facts, he suggests, are reasonably seen as subject to our counterfactual control. With other facts about the past, though, it's the other way around. For example, if causal determinism is correct, then I act as I do in the present *because* of how things were in the past (given the laws of nature). Past facts of this sort, says Bergmann, are *not* plausibly seen as under our control. Discriminate the facts about the past correctly, then, and one can fashion a version of (FP) that defuses the theological incompatibilist's ar-

gument while empowering the Consequence Argument.[8] Of course, even such a version of (FP) will not gain universal acceptance. But that, I suspect, is true of any principle the advocate of the Consequence Argument might propose.[9] What Bergmann's considerations show is not that the Argument is irresistible, but that one can reasonably formulate a non-(FP)-based version of the Argument that might well convert at least some opponents.

The mention of Molinism above leads me to a final (and somewhat peripheral) point. Fischer argues (in the delightfully titled "Putting Molinism in Its Place") that, whatever its virtues as a theory of providence, Molinism is of no use in responding to the theological incompatibilist's argument; it *presupposes* that there is an answer (of the Ockhamist, or Boethian, or some other variety) to the incompatibilist's challenge rather than itself endeavoring to provide an answer. Molinism offers a "nuts and bolts" account of how God knows the future: combine his middle knowledge (concerning what creatures would freely do in various situations) with his creative decisions (regarding which creatures will exist in which situations) and foreknowledge is the result. Such a "nuts and bolts" account may well be invaluable in building our account of providence, but it is not even intended to address the incompatibilist's worry.

While I think there is some truth in what Fischer says here, I fear that his remarks oversimplify the dialectical situation, and thereby underestimate the role that Molinism can play. After all, there are clearly two directions one can go in responding to the incompatibilist: show that foreknowledge and freedom are compatible, or show that their incompatibility hasn't been demonstrated. Suppose one is engaged in offering the second, more modest kind of response, and suppose one has pursued this strategy by, say, offering reasons to doubt (FP). Taken by itself, such an approach gives one only modest reason to think that freedom and foreknowledge *are in fact* compatible. All it tells us is that the *possibility* of an adequate "nuts and bolts" explanation as to how God might know our future has not been ruled out. But suppose one can come up with no such "nuts and bolts" account; every option one considers seems clearly and woefully inadequate. This would not *prove* that

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8   Fischer presents Bergmann's position on pp. 93-94; he replies on pp. 95-96.
9   For reasons to think that no version of the Argument can be expected to convince fully committed metaphysical compatibilists, see my "Compatibilism and the Argument from Unavoidability," *The Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 8 (1987): 423–40. doi:10.2307/2027000.

incompatibilism is correct, but it should give one concern. By offering an attractive (well, attractive to many) "nuts and bolts" account of how fore-knowledge could co-exist with our freedom, Molinism can at least help to allay that concern. It's "place" in the overall discussion of the incompatibilist's argument might thus be somewhat more exalted than Fischer allows.