FISCHER ON FOREKNOWLEDGE AND EXPLANATORY DEPENDENCE

Philip Swenson
College of William and Mary

Abstract. I explore several issues raised in John Martin Fischer's *Our Fate: Essays on God and Free Will*. First I discuss whether an approach to the problem of freedom and foreknowledge that appeals directly to the claim that God's beliefs depend on the future is importantly different from Ockhamism. I suggest that this dependence approach has advantages over Ockhamism. I also argue that this approach gives us good reason to reject the claim that the past is fixed. Finally, I discuss Fischer's proposal regarding God's knowledge of future contingents. I suggest that it may be able to secure comprehensive foreknowledge.

John Martin Fischer has been providing groundbreaking contributions to the literature on freedom and foreknowledge for over 30 years. I have learned a great deal from the essays contained in *Our Fate* and it's exciting to see them all collected in one volume!

1. OCKHAMISM AND EXPLANATORY DEPENDENCE

The traditional Ockhamist defense of *foreknowledge compatibilism* (the view that comprehensive divine foreknowledge is compatible with the ability to do otherwise) involves distinguishing between 'hard' and 'soft' facts about the past. Hard facts about a time are supposed to be, in some sense, temporally non-relational, intrinsic facts about that time, while soft facts about a time are also about some future time. For example:

Hard fact: Kennedy was shot

Soft fact: Kennedy was shot 53 years before I wrote this paper

PP. 51–62
DOI: 10.24204/EJPR.V9I4.2034
AUTHOR: PS804@SCARLETMAIL.RUTGERS.EDU

EUROPEAN JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
Vol 9, No 4 (2017)

Ockhamists claim that God's beliefs about the past are soft and thus need not be held fixed when evaluating what an agent can do. Thus God's past belief that you will do A is not held fixed when evaluating whether you can avoid doing A. My preferred defense of *foreknowledge compatibilism* eschews any appeal to the distinction between hard and soft facts. Rather I appeal directly to the claim that God's beliefs explanatorily depend on future free choices. I'll call this approach the Dependence Solution.

Ockhamists normally endorse this principle:

> Fixity of the Hard Past (FHP): An agent S can (at time t in world w) do X at t only if there is a possible world w* with the same "hard" past up to t in which S does X at t. (See Swenson 2016)

The debate then hinges on whether God's beliefs count as "hard" facts about the past. As I've developed it, the Dependence Solution instead takes the past to be fixed only in the sense captured by this principle:

> Fixity of the Independent Past (FIP): An agent S can (at time t in world w) do X at t only if there is a possible world w* in which all of the facts in w up to t which do not explanatorily depend on S's choice(s) at t hold and S does X at t.

On this approach, so long as God's beliefs depend on our future free choices, we can avoid arguments for *foreknowledge incompatibilism* that depend on the claim that the past is fixed.

At points Fischer appears to be skeptical that moving away from Ockhamism and endorsing something like the Dependence Solution really breaks much new ground. In their discussion of Trenton Merricks' defense of the Dependence Solution (or something quite like it), Fischer and Patrick Todd express this sort of concern:

> It is best to think of Ockhamism as involving two distinct "steps." The first step is to give an account of why the past relation-ally or extrinsically considered need not be held fixed... this account crucially involves the notion of dependence; soft facts about the past need not be fixed for us precisely because they sometimes depend (in a particular way) on what we do. The second step—the step that receives nearly all of the attention—is to contend that God's past beliefs in fact do not belong to the intrinsic past, but instead are "soft facts" about the past. This second step makes sense only against the (often unstated) background of the first. So we object when Merricks writes that "when it comes to divine foreknowledge's compatibility with hu-

> man freedom, the fundamental question is not the Ockhamist's question of whether God's beliefs about what an agent will do in the future are 'hard facts.' Rather, the fundamental question is whether God's beliefs about what an agent will do in the future depend on what that agent will do in the future." But our point is that the issue of dependence and the issue of hardness are intertwined. So Merricks's claim is a bit like saying, "The fundamental question is not whether God's beliefs depend (in particular way) on what happens in the future (such as the actions of human agents). Rather, the fundamental question is whether God's beliefs about what an agent will do in the future depend on what that agent will do in the future." (*Our Fate*, 207)

The worry seems to be that Ockhamists were already concerned with dependence (as well as temporal relationality), so the Dependence Solution isn't really breaking new ground. I think there is something right about this thought. Ockhamists are concerned with both *dependence* and *temporal relationality*. Ockhamists think that the temporally relational past need not be held fixed because it *uniquely* depends on the future, in a way that the hard past does not.

In my view, by replacing the dual focus on dependence and temporal relationality with a single minded focus on dependence, we can secure freedom in cases where Ockhamists would like to but cannot. As a result God will have more providential control on the Dependence Solution than on Ockhamism. These differences reveal that the distinction between the two approaches is significant. I will try to illustrate these points by examining a case in which Fischer has perhaps been willing to grant too much to the Ockhamist.

2. THE DEPENDENCE SOLUTION, OCKHAMISM AND PROVIDENTIAL CONTROL.

Consider the following case offered by Alvin Plantinga:

> Paul and The Ant Colony: "Let's suppose that a colony of carpenter ants moved into Paul's yard last Saturday. Since this colony hasn't yet had a chance to get properly established, its new home is still a bit fragile. In particular, if the ants were to remain and Paul were to mow his lawn this afternoon, the colony would be destroyed. Although nothing remarkable about these ants is visible to the naked eye, God, for reasons of his own, intends that it be preserved. Now as a matter of fact, Paul will not mow his lawn this afternoon. God, who is essentially omniscient, knew in advance, of course, that Paul will not mow his lawn this afternoon; but if he had foreknown instead that Paul would mow this afternoon, then he would have prevented the ants from moving in." (Plantinga 1986, 254)

Intuitively, this is the sort of case in which, by Ockhamist lights, Paul has the ability to mow. (And indeed Ockhamists have claimed that he does, see Plantinga 1986.) Furthermore, it is providentially advantageous for God if this story is consistent with Paul having the ability to mow his lawn. God would then have the ability to ensure more outcomes while still giving us the ability to do otherwise.

Fischer seems willing to grant (at least for the sake of argument) that the Ockhamist can maintain that there is a world with the same "hard" past in which Paul mows (See *Our Fate* 126-7 and 203-5.). But it is not clear that this is plausible. The conjunction of the following two facts appear to entail that Paul does not mow:

(a) God intended (for reasons independent of Paul) to keep the ants away from all mown lawns.

(b) The ants were in the lawn.

Since there are no worlds where (a) and (b) both hold and Paul mows his lawn, Ockhamists would have to say that either (a) or (b) is a soft fact. But neither are obvious candidates. On its surface (b) looks like a paradigm case of a hard fact. (b), rather than 'Kennedy was shot', could have served as our initial example of a hard fact. The only feature of (b) that makes it look different from 'Kennedy was shot' is that (b) is plausibly explained by Paul's future choice to refrain from mowing. At any rate, Fischer and Todd appear inclined to grant that (b) is an "uncontroversially "hard" fact about the past." (*Our Fate,* 204)

Perhaps things are better with regard to (a). (a) entails (given plausible assumptions about God) a future fact, namely: (c) 'the ants avoid all mown lawns'. And, as Fischer suggests regarding God's decrees (*Our Fate*, 27), it is perhaps somewhat plausible that (c) is a conjunct or constituent of (a). So (a) appears to be temporally relational in some interesting sense.

However, it seems clear to me that (a) is the sort of fact about the past that should be held fixed in determining what agents are able to do. This is because (a) is not explained by any future fact. Rather, if there is an explanatory connection at all, the fact that the ants avoid mown lawns is explained by God's intention that they do. Intuitively, past facts that are not explained by any future fact should be held fixed. As Fischer and Todd put it, "soft facts about the

past need not be fixed for us precisely because they sometimes depend (in a particular way) on what we do." (*Our Fate* 207. See also Todd's (2013) discussion of divine decrees.) Facts that do not depend on any future facts (and thus do not even potentially depend on what we do) are not soft facts.

So the Ockhamist is faced with two facts: (a), which is (arguably) temporally relational but is not explained by future facts, and (b), which may be explained by future facts but is not temporally relational. If the Ockhamist wants to say that Paul has the ability to mow, then it looks like they must say that either dependence (of a sort that does not involve temporal relationality) or temporal relationality (of a sort that does not involve dependence) is sufficient (all by itself) for softness. But this is incompatible with the dual concern for both dependence and temporal relationality which Fischer and Todd correctly attribute to the Ockhamist. So it is not clear that Ockhamism secures the (desirable by Ockhamist lights) result that Paul has the ability to mow.

The best way to respond, I think, is to say that all the business about temporal relationality was beside the point. What matters is dependence. The Dependence Solution allows for the claim that Paul is free to mow his yard. This is because 'the ants were in the yard' is plausibly explained by Paul's choice. Thus it need not be held fixed. Its lacking temporal relationality is neither here nor there.

In addition to securing Paul's freedom to mow, the Dependence Solution has the following advantages: (1) it avoids having to give an account of the distinction between hard and soft facts. (We hold fixed only independent facts, whether hard or soft.) (2) it avoids the worry (raised by Fischer) that, even if God's beliefs are soft facts, they may contain 'hard kernel elements' which ought to be held fixed (See Chapter 7 of *Our Fate*.). (The Dependence solution is not committed to holding fixed these hard elements.) (3) in virtue of securing Paul's freedom to mow, the Dependence Solution secures a greater amount of providential control than does Ockhamism. (This feature will be attractive to at least some theists.)

Note that, if the Dependence Solution is combined with the plausible claim that explanatory circles are impossible, it will still impose significant limits on providential control. God will not be able to use foreknowledge in ways that generate explanatory circles. For example, God will not be able to causally contribute to Jones's being in C because he believes that being in C will cause Jones to freely sit. Since God's belief that Jones will sit depends

on Jones's sitting, God's putting Jones in C for this reason would generate an explanatory circle:

Jones's sitting→God's belief→Jones's being in C→Jones's sitting

Thus the ways in which God could put foreknowledge to use are somewhat curtailed. (See Hunt (1993) and Zimmerman (2012) for helpful discussions of such limitations on the usefulness of foreknowledge.)

3. DEPENDENCE AND THE FIXITY OF THE PAST

In addition to worrying that the Dependence Solution doesn't break new ground, Fischer also argues that dependence solution proponents lack good grounds for rejecting principles like FHP. Fischer and Neal Tognazzini press the worry as follows:

> But how exactly does the dependence point in any way vitiate—or even address—the point about the fixity of the past? That is, if a hard fact about the past is now fixed and out of our con- trol precisely because it is 'over-and-done-with', why is the dependence in question relevant? If fixity stems from over-and-done-with-ness, and over-and-done-with-ness is a function of tem- poral intrinsicality, both of which seem plausible, then it would seem more reasonable to con- clude that even the dependent hard facts are fixed. (*Our Fate*, 231)

I have responded to this worry elsewhere (See Swenson 2016). But since this is perhaps the most important objection Fischer raises to the Dependence Solution, it is worth discussing here. I maintain that if the "hard" past can depend on the future, principles like the *Fixity of the Hard Past* (FHP) should be rejected in favor of the *Fixity of the Independent Past* (FIP). In my view, the intuitions that the past is "fixed" or "over-and-done-with" (in a sense that places it beyond our control) depend on the belief that the past is independent of the future.

Returning to Paul and The Ant Colony, Insofar as I take on board the thought that the ants being in his yard is explained by Paul's decision to refrain from mowing, I lose the intuition that Paul's options are constrained by the location of the ants. It seems to me that Paul has the option to mow despite the location of the ants. In general, dependent facts have a derivative status which seems incompatible with their constraining one's choices. Cases

in which one comes to accept the possibility of time travel motivate the same point. Elsewhere, I've argued as follows:

> Imagine that you have come to believe that you are sitting in a working time machine. (Set aside the issue of whether time travel is genuinely metaphysically possible.) You believe that the machine is programmed so that, if you push the button in front of you, then you will travel to the year 1492. Furthermore, you believe that the past and the laws entail that you will travel to 1492 if and only if you push the button. Note that, by accepting the possibility of time travel, you have dropped the assumption that the past must be explanatorily independent of the future.

I claim that, once you believe that facts about 1492 depend on your choices, [FHP] would no longer seem intuitive. If you accept [FHP], then you should accept that either you cannot push the button or you cannot refrain from pushing the button. After all, it is either a fact about the past that you appeared in 1492 or it is a fact that you did not. And you believe that there is no world with the same past and laws in which you push the button and do not travel back, or vice versa. (Here, I assume that you accept the fixity of the laws principle.) However, I do not think that this claim about your lack of options would seem true to you. Surely it would seem that you have the option to push the button and the option to refrain from pushing the button. It would not seem that the past was 'over-and-done-with' in any sense inconsistent with your freedom.

This case suggests that [FHP] is intuitive only because we assume that the past is explanatorily independent of future events. If you came to believe that the past depends on your choices, [FHP] would not seem true. Note that the case works even if time travel is impossible. I am relying on your mere belief (in the case) that the past depends on the future to establish that your inclination to accept [FHP] depends on the assumption that the past is explanatorily independent of the future. No assumptions about the possibility of time travel are required. [Swenson 2016, p 664-5.]

So it appears that, so long as it is granted that the past can depend on the future, both time travel cases and cases such as Paul and The Ant Colony motivate rejecting FHP. Thus I do not think Fischer should dismiss the relevance of the claim that the "hard" past depends on the future. Rather, the *foreknowledge incompatibilist* should maintain that the claim is false.

4. FISCHER'S BOOTSTRAPPING ACCOUNT OF DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE

I now turn to Fischer's rather ingenious proposal regarding God's knowledge of future contingents. Although I do not endorse his account, I will suggest that a version of Fischer's account can be developed that is more powerful than the version Fischer presents. Indeed, I will argue that his account could secure comprehensive divine foreknowledge. I will also suggest that Fischer's account renders it plausible that God's beliefs about the future are explained by future events.

Fischer's goal is to provide an account on which God "could know with certainty future contingent propositions in a causally indeterministic world." (*Our Fate*, 38) He wants the result that God could be certain that, for example, you will skip breakfast tomorrow even though your skipping breakfast is not causally determined. Furthermore, he makes things harder by taking on the assumption that "God does not have some "direct apprehension" of the future, and that His [initial] evidence bearing on the future contingent proposition is constituted by facts about the past, present and laws of nature." (*Our Fate*, 32) This might seem like a tall order, but Fischer has a clever proposal.

Fischer begins by noting that it is plausible that we humans can know that p even in cases where our evidence does not entail p. Thus, so long as there are true future contingents, it seems that we could come to know some of them. If I know enough about your character and dispositions, then perhaps I can know that you will skip breakfast tomorrow, even though your skipping breakfast is only 99% probable given current conditions. Fischer then introduces the notion of a "knowledge conferring situation" (KCS). A KCS is a situation such that "When a human being is in a KCS with respect to *p*, and *p* turns out to be true, she thereby has knowledge that *p*." (*Our Fate*, 36)

Fischer imagines a case in which he is in a KCS with respect to the true future contingent such 'Jones will mow his lawn on Wednesday'. Fischer sees no reason to think that God could not also be in a KCS with regard to this future contingent. On Fischer's proposal, when God is able to enter a KCS with respect to a true proposition p, God will go ahead and believe p. But, given the apparent absence of any evidence that entails p, how can God achieve certainty that p? He bootstraps his way:

> God knows on Monday that p...in the same way that an ordinary human being can know this...But unlike an ordinary human being, God knows that if He believes that p, then it follows of necessity that p is true. He knows this via his self-knowledge. He knows that He is essentially omniscient. Thus not only does God know on Monday that Jones will mow his lawn on Wednesday. He knows it with certainty. (*Our Fate,* 37)

So God uses his knowledge of his own omniscience to move from non-entailing evidence to certainty. Here is a natural question to ask about this picture. What happens when God has great evidence for p (based on current circumstances) but p is false? The answer is that God's essential omniscience prevents him from believing p. And of course God will notice that he does not believe p, despite the great evidence for it, and will conclude that p must be false. After all, why else would he have failed to form the belief?

So it looks like Fischer can account for God's certain knowledge of a future contingent p both in cases where there is strong evidence for p and in cases where there is strong evidence against p. (In the latter case God infers p after noticing his failure to believe ~p.) But Fischer does not think he can extend this account in order to generate comprehensive divine foreknowledge of every future contingent truth.

Suppose it is currently 60% likely that you will skip breakfast tomorrow. Fischer thinks that God will refrain from forming an opinion on the matter because "it would be epistemically irresponsible for God to believe any proposition He is not in a legitimate position to know." (*Our Fate*, 39) Thus, even if you will skip breakfast tomorrow, God doesn't know it.

I'm not convinced that it is epistemically irresponsible to believe what you are not in a position to know. Suppose I have good, but not overwhelming, evidence that the Yankees will win the world series. It seems somewhat natural to say "I believe that the Yankees will win but I don't know that they will." And I wouldn't think much of the reply, "then you shouldn't believe it." (For more evidence that Fischer is setting the bar for belief too high see Hawthorne, Rothschild & Spectre's 2016)

What is the appropriate threshold for belief? According to Richard Foley "There doesn't seem to be any way to identify a precise threshold." (Foley 1992, 112) But I think there is a case to be made for the following view:

> Preponderance: *It is permissible to believe p if the epistemic probability of p is above 50%.*

William James observed that we are guided by two goals: "Believe truth! Shun error!" (James 1896) I find it plausible that it is permissible to be concerned equally with both of these goals. And if one gives equal weight to both goals, then it seems one would believe p when the evidence favors p even slightly. To refrain from believing p would be to privilege avoiding error over believing truth. (I owe this argument to Kevin McCain.) Thus I find Preponderance plausible.

If God is disposed to believe p whenever the probability of p is above 50% (unless prevented by his essential omniscience), then God could employ Fischer's bootstrapping method much more often. God will *either* believe p and then bootstrap his way to certainty, *or* notice that he hasn't formed the belief despite the evidence and become certain of ~p. There is one tricky case. Suppose the probability of p is exactly 50%. If God wants to achieve comprehensive foreknowledge using Fischer's method, then it looks as though he will have to arrange the world such that no proposition is ever exactly 50% likely given current conditions. Surely God could arrange for this. Thus, if Fischer's approach is successful, comprehensive foreknowledge is within God's grasp.

One final point, on Fischer's view only true propositions about the future make it past the filter of essential omniscience and are thus believed by God. So it is plausible that p's being true explains why p makes it past the filter and is believed. What explains p's being true? Since we are assuming that p is not determined, present facts look like a poor candidates for explaining p's truth. The most plausible candidate appears to be future facts or events (e.g. the future event of Jones mowing explains why it is now true that he will mow.) But now we have an explanatory chain running from future events to God's beliefs:

Jones mowing at t_2→it being true at t_1 that Jones will mow→God's belief at t_1

And this, of course, is grist for the Dependence Solution's mill. Furthermore, if Fischer's account does lead to the view that God's beliefs depend on the future, we might wonder whether we still have reason to prefer it over a less complex account on which God does possess "direct apprehension" of the future. Perhaps God's beliefs can be directly explained by future events, with no bootstrapping required.*

* For helpful comments thanks to Matt Frise, Kevin McCain, Andrew Moon and Patrick Todd.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fischer, John Martin. 2016. *Our Fate: Essays on God and free will.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Foley, Richard. 1992. "The Epistemology of Belief and the Epistemology of Degrees of Belief." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (2): 111–24. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20014406.

James, William. 1896. "The Will to Believe." *The New World* 5: 327–47.

Hawthorne, John, Daniel Rothschild, and Levi Spectre. 2016. "Belief is weak." *Philosophical Studies* 173 (5): 1393–1404. doi:10.1007/s11098-015-0553-7.

Hunt, David P. 1993. "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge." *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (3): 394–414. doi:10.5840/faithphil19931036.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1986. "On Ockham's Way Out." *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (3): 235–69. doi:10.5840/faithphil19863322.

Swenson, Philip. 2016. "Ability, Foreknowledge, and Explanatory Dependence." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94 (4): 658–71. doi:10.1080/00048402.2015.1130731.

Todd, Patrick. 2013. "Soft facts and ontological dependence." *Philosophical Studies* 164 (3): 829–44. doi:10.1007/s11098-012-9917-4.

Zimmerman, Dean. 2012. "The Providential Usefulness of Simple Foreknowledge." In *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. by Kelly J. Clark and Michael C. Rea, 174–96. New York: Oxford University Press.